

How, against all odds, can the Lowrie women thrive or even survive as the last pioneer household living in ghost-town Cliffport, California, the one place they know best and love most?

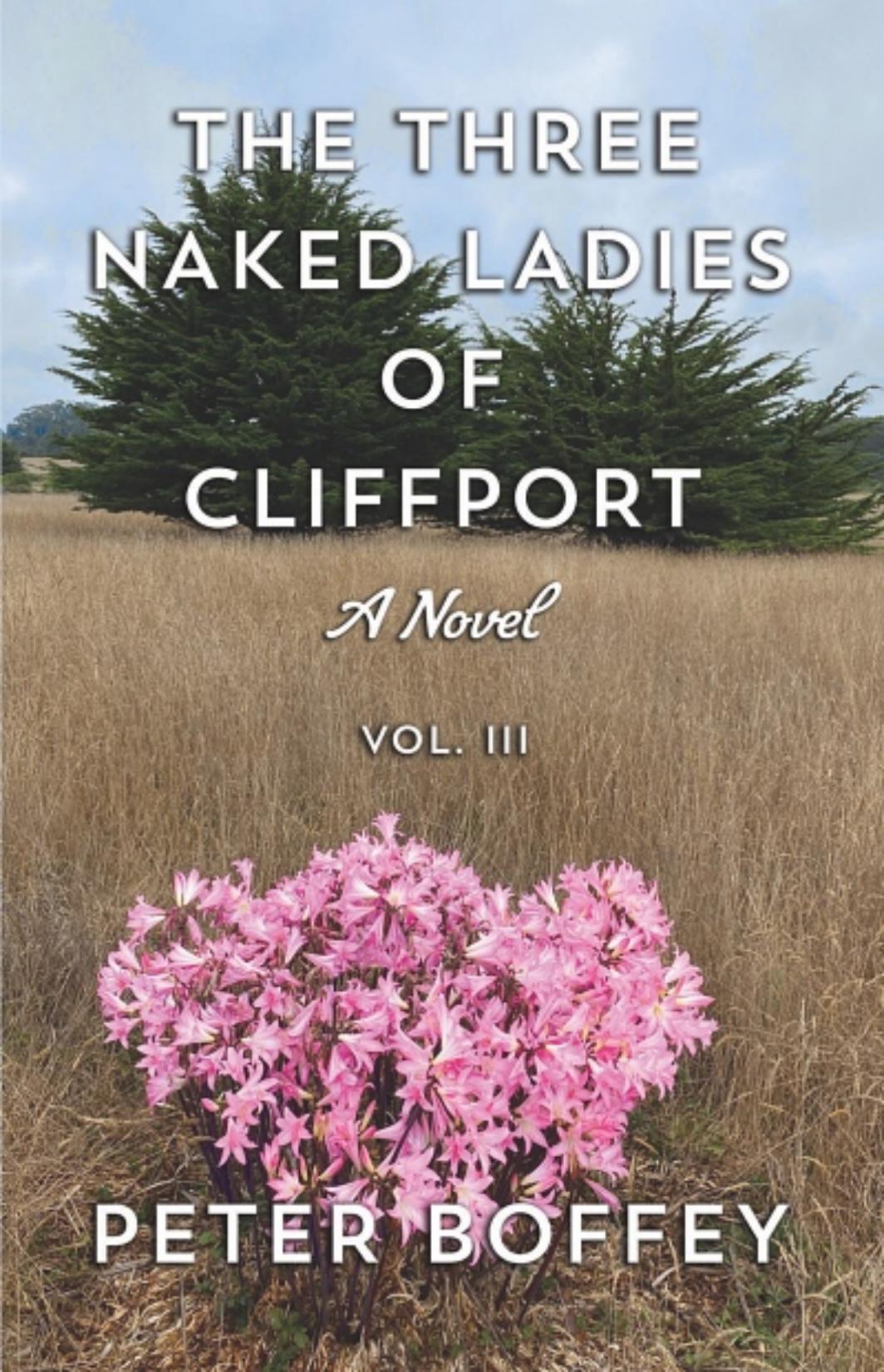
The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport: Volume III

By Peter Boffey

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THE THREE
NAKED LADIES
OF
CLIFFPORT

A Novel

VOL. III

PETER BOFFEY

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport
A Novel in Six Books
Vol. III

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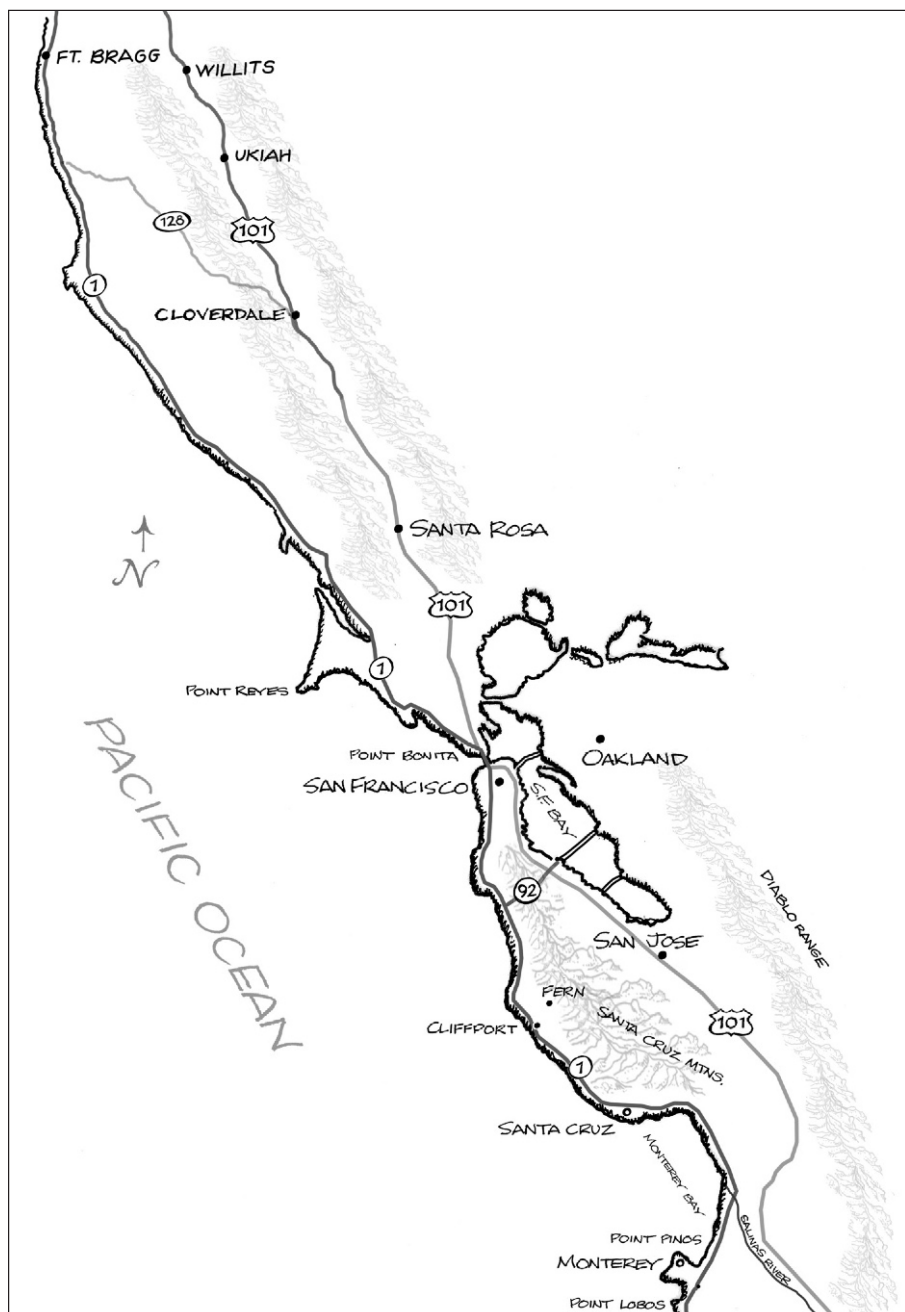
AUTHOR TO READER

Book Five may be read and enjoyed with or without having read Books One–Four.

Starting with Book Five, certain backstories and passages—of perhaps greater technical or procedural detail than every reader may be interested in following—are marked with superscript numbers (^{1,2,3,....}) indicating that they can be found in a section of NOTES placed after the main body of the text. Although enriching, these abridgments are not essential to following the story, and to read or not to read them is entirely the reader's choice.

The length, scope, and structure of *The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport* encourages a recursive approach to reading and re-reading the six books of the novel in part or in whole; lengthier appendages to Chapter 6 (*Verbatim D*) and Chapter 8 (*DD's Dreamlife*) in Book Five can be found under the NOVELS dropdown menu at peterboffey.com.

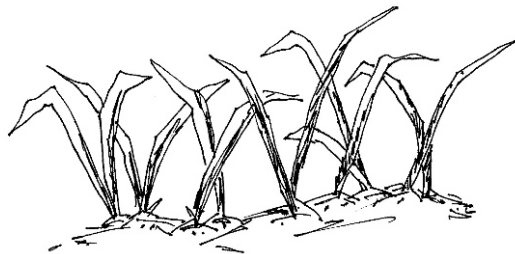
Foreign language words or phrases whose meanings are not immediately self-evident in the text are footnoted • at the bottom of the pages where they first occur.

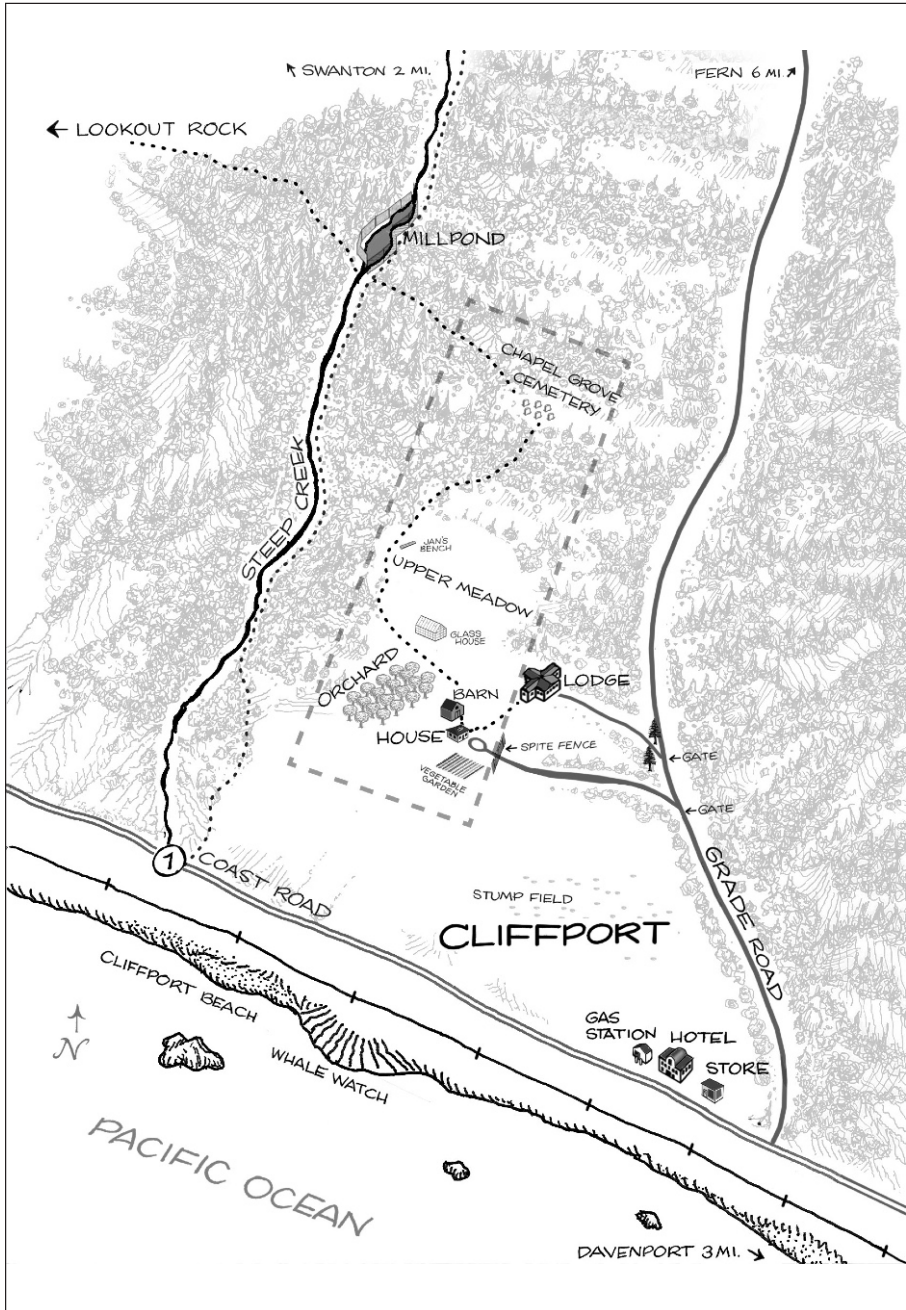


BOOK FIVE

October 1965–December 1975

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Chapter 1

Jan's Estate

- Hello. Lowrie residence.
- *Mom.*
- Hello, dear.

Silence

- Kaitlin, what is it?
- *She's dead.*
- Who's dead? Jan's dead?
- *Jan's dead.*
- Oh my God.
- *I found her in bed.*
- You're absolutely sure?
- *She looked asleep but I took her pulse. Then I saw her cigarettes.*
- Cigarettes?
- *And a bottle of whiskey.*
- Open?
- *Empty.*
- Oh....
- *And her pills.*
- And what did you just say?
- *Her pills spilled all over the place.*

Silence

– So, she did it. She took her own.

Silence

Where are you right now, Kaitlin?

– *In the apartment.*

– No, I mean where in the apartment?

– *In the kitchen.*

– Don't touch anything. When is the nurse due back?

– *This afternoon.*

– You must call the Police Department right away. You realize that, don't you?

– *I guess.*

– Leave things the way you found them and notify the police. Have you told the superintendent?

– *Mister Luen? Not yet.*

– You haven't moved anything, have you?

– *I opened the windows.*

– I suppose that's okay. Oh, I'm so sorry you had to be the one to find her like that.

– *I found her husband, didn't I?*

– Her husband...? Oh yes ... I forgot about that.

– *So, why not her?*

– Kaitlin, listen to me. Call the police right now then tell Mister Luen. Then call me right back.

– *Okay.*

– Are you all right?

– *I'm okay. I'll call you. Bye.*

Katie cradled the receiver and looked around the kitchenette. The wicker basket of Scottish memorabilia and the banker's box of souvenirs were where she had last stashed them back in the hinged benches of the built-in nook—those she would take home to Cliffport. Fatima could have the dishware in the cupboards above the sink. Turning her eyes away from the hospital bed, Katie passed though the former dining

room and stood in the living room. She would dump the foldout sofa bed and armchair but take the items from the display box mounted on the wall: those mementos of Jan's visit to Scotland shouldn't wind up in some Goodwill Store or bric-a-brac shop. Fatima could have whatever other furniture she liked. Katie stepped into Jan's ex-bedroom, where the practical nurse's sparse personal belongings gave the impression that she rarely slept there although Fatima had been present every night—except the last—for two months. On the dresser top, the modest altar to Our Lady of Fatima, a circle of votive candles around the base of a painted porcelain statuette of the Immaculate Heart of Mary: white robe, golden crown, bulbous red heart, pink face, pink hands. Tucked into the mirror's frame, a giant postcard of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary of Fatima with its stamp of authentication from the Chapel of the Apparition in Portugal. Katie opened the freestanding wardrobe closet. Hanging from wire hangers: two long, pleated, gray skirts; four white blouses; a maroon cardigan sweater. At the other end of the rack, dressier specimens of Jan McLoughlin's own design and handiwork leftover from decades as Mary-Helen Belcanto's private couturier; some museum might appreciate receiving those.

Katie returned to the kitchen and dialed the Daly City number taped to the refrigerator; the nurse would have to deal with the morphine. Katie toned down her rendition of the suicide scene, but Fatima gasped as she understood the news. She confirmed that Sunday morning was the last time she had been in the apartment then prayed sotto voce in her native Portuguese. Katie waited for her to finish then told her she would probably be required to give the nurse's phone number to the police but, unless contacted, she ought to stay away another day. Fatima said she had already bought her bus ticket back to the City; Katie insisted that Fatima postpone returning as planned and promised she would pay her back for the ticket and compensate her with full pay for another day off. The nurse's voice trembled: would she lose her job with the agency? Would they take away her license to practice home care, and the permit to store and dispense morphine? Katie reassured her she had done nothing wrong and everything right:

she had been granted thirty-six hours off duty—for the first time in eight weeks—and Katie would take full responsibility for having left Mrs. McLoughlin alone.

Navigating the tools and supplies set aside by the workmen renovating the interior of the building, Katie went downstairs and knocked loudly; Mr. Luen answered his door without enthusiasm, looking like a man who had received all manner of news delivered across that threshold over the years. As usual, tears quaked on the brims of his swollen lower eyelids as if welling up from reservoirs under his eyes, threatening to spill should he dip his face. He was wearing his everyday uniform: suspenders strapped over a plaid flannel shirt, cuffs unbuttoned; Dickey work pants; cloth slippers. He screwed his head about so that his favored ear jutted toward her and waited to hear whatever the familiar figure had to say. Katie raised her voice over the TV and announced that Jan McLoughlin had died in her apartment. He looked toward the ceiling then lowered his eyes without asking how or how long ago. She let him know that unless he wanted to make the call, she was about to phone the police. He shook his head no and again shook his head no when she asked him if he wanted to view the long-term tenant's apartment before any official proceedings. Katie went back upstairs and reported the fatality to the San Francisco Police Department; the dispatcher instructed her to stay put and disturb nothing; the nearest squad car would be arriving within minutes at 999 Zelkova Street.

*

Beep. *So this's the way your story ends in a stinking world you couldn't stand it anymore. How'd you manage to get your hands on a bottle of booze and snag one last pack of cigarettes? This place does stink. You 'took your own' and didn't even bother to put your teeth in **Beep**. The slack jaw. The last gaze. The glazed daze. Those little purple crosses one two three they never got to fire at their targets at least you dodged that bullet you old codger you **Beep** avoided treatment like the cancer evaded detection. Where's the fourth one's*

somewhere down there in the wattles. Who knows where the cancer was besides your throat? Maybe I should've made you do the radiation as if anybody could've made you do anything **Beep**. I could pull that plug and shut that machine down for how long before they get here? So here we are again, Jan, just you and me the day after the night you 'took your own' oh for god's sake Mom could at least say 'took her own life.' What, were you fulfilling a pledge to your brother Glenn or something? That's so weird to think about **Beep**. What about your remains? It'd kill Mom to bury your ashes in Chapel Grove but what remains? Ashes eyeglasses dentures and a rack of clothes. Three framed photographs 'don't touch anything' like now I'm a murder suspect or something **Beep**. Maybe I'll just spread your ashes over the McLoughlin side of the cemetery without even telling Mom and sing The Castle Song oh Jesus Jan, Janice, Janet, Jeanette or whatever you're calling yourself now you crusty old gal you sparkled for me like the light inside your geode **Beep**. It's been a long haul but we can relax now at least you can. Always trying to talk then coughing griping about how the nurse refused to go against doctor's order and amp up the dope **Beep**. God bless that woman I hope she'll say a prayer in Portuguese for me too. Lighting her candle can't hurt either. One last bottle snuggled up against you like a baby 'don't touch anything.' I better call Mom back. Maybe we should've put you in some place against your will oh what am I talking about? It was going to be Nob Hill or Boot Hill for you **Beep** weren't going anywhere else. So, you really did it. Leave you alone one night and you dive headfirst into oblivion. You could've burned the building down you crazy old coot how in hell did you manage to get the booze and cigarettes is what I want to know **Beep** by phoning someone? Or laying twenty bucks on some workman in the hall to go get you your stuff? Oh you were always a tricky one Fatima found that blue coffee can under your bed with old cigarette butts soaking in it when we found out how you had been sneaking your smokes and peeing in the night without getting up. **Beep**. When Fatima moved in she found out right away why it smelled like piss in that room even

*after she'd give you a bath and change the sheets and air the place out. Maxwell House yum yum, 'good to the last drop.' **Beep.** Okay Missus McLoughlin with an o not an a so where's the note? 'Please don't hold this against me.' Last Monday you said that or the Monday before maybe that was your suicide note delivered in advance. The last Cliffport McLoughlin lying dead right before my eyes. I wish the cops'd just get here and get over with whatever they do next. **Beep.** Whatever you do KT don't break down weeping for the whole world in front of any fucking cops won't care but they'll be interested in that morphine in the fridge. Fatima knows it's all there thank God that's her business not mine. **Beep.** 'I'm more or less just marking time' you said last week for sure that was last Monday I was sitting right here asking you one last time what you wanted me to do with your ashes. 'O Katie, so many have left that ghost town before me and died and been **Beep** buried somewhere else, what difference does it make? The unclaimed remains area in the first cemetery you come across, you can dump my ashes there.' Then laughing, coughing. 'The unclaimed remains area.' I never heard of that before. Then sitting listening to the radio sitting right here with you one last time listening to this damn **Beeping** machine and the radio playing Jo Stafford duets. I wonder what they're featuring on your favorite Monday radio show today oh there they are now okay I'm coming okay okay don't break the fucking door down yet boys I'm coming **Beep.***

A pair of policemen commandeered the two-bedroom apartment. One placed a radio call; the other summoned Mr. Luen from downstairs and had him and Katie sit down on the broken sofa before questioning them. Three other men from the Coroner's Division arrived then two detectives in civilian clothes from the Bureau of Inspection; lastly, carrying a camera, a man barged in. With an occasional glance through the glass panes of the closed sliding doors, Katie saw the detectives directing the photographer what to shoot before tagging and bagging evidence in the immediate vicinity of the bed. Prepared to

handle the body, two coroners stood by. When the detectives emerged from the death room, the older man took over the interrogation as the younger one went about the rest of the apartment, opening closets and drawers. She overheard something about dusting for fingerprints. The senior detective, supervising coroner, and one of the patrolmen held a meeting behind closed two-way doors to the kitchenette and—out of her earshot—used the telephone. The junior detective informed Mr. Luen that he was free to retire to his apartment but should remain on the premises until further notice. The senior detective encouraged Katie to accompany the two uniformed patrolmen back to her own vehicle then follow their car to Bryant Street where someone wanted to speak with her. Katie followed orders, relieved that Fatima had been spared this first brush with officious insensitivity.

“May I please have a look at your driver’s license?” the young man asked. His nametag read Jason Drew, Student Assistant. He was stationed at the smaller of two stainless steel desks backed by a bank of black, vertical, four-drawer file cabinets. Dressed in khaki pants and a long-sleeved, light-blue denim shirt with a narrow black tie, he struck Katie as more postal clerk than policeman. His short creamed hair was parted to one side and illuminated by the desk lamp’s horizontal fluorescent bulb. “Thanks. You can have a seat,” he added, indicating an armless office chair; Katie swiveled her jeans up by the belt loops and remained standing, crossing her arms.

Once Jason had the sheets of carbon paper and onionskins aligned in his gray IBM Selectric typewriter, he flipped a lever, hit the carriage return button, and started transferring information from the license.

“Are you booking me or something?”

“Oh no, ma’am,” he replied, leaning his face outside the lamp’s glare. “I’m just getting down some information. Cliffport? I’ve never heard of any Cliffport, California. Where’s that?”

“Down near Santa Cruz.”

“Oh, Santa Cruz, I’ve been there. You know, you can sit down. I don’t know how long before Lieutenant Morrissey will come out,” he volunteered, glancing toward a wall with three interior doors of frosted glass. When he returned to his two-fingered typing, he found the middle sheet of onionskin askew and yanked out all the pages, replacing them in triplicate and starting over.

“Can I use that payphone in the hall? I want to make a call.”

“Sure, that’s what it’s for. Need any change?”

“No.”

“Go right ahead but ... ma’am...?”

“Yeah?”

“Better not, you know ... walk off anywhere. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

Katie smirked. Still within his sightline, she dialed home and explained how she had been led to the Bureau of Inspection by a patrol car as well as tailed by plainclothesmen in an unmarked car following close behind. She reassured her mother that she wasn’t under arrest and was well aware of her right to remain silent. Elise Lowrie volunteered to call Gerald Hudson in order to see if he was available—although it was Labor Day—to join her daughter at the police station. Katie said she would attempt to reach Jan’s lawyer the moment she felt she was being treated unfairly or threatened in any way; she promised to keep her mother posted on developments and returned to the adjoining room.

“Here you go, Missus Lowrie.” Jason passed back her license as she neared his desk. “Shouldn’t be too much longer now.”

Once she was occupying the freestanding chair, he poised his two hands over the keyboard. “Relation to the deceased?”

“What’d you just say?”

“How would you describe your relation to ... where is it now? Missus Janice McLoughlin. I’m sorry, ma’am, but I have to fill out this form.”

Katie crossed one leg over the other, thigh on thigh, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm just a sub for the holiday, you know, I—"

"... I was her only friend in the world."

"Oh, I see...." he responded, lowering his voice and his eyes.

"And I had power of attorney."

"... p-o-w-e-r-o-f-a-t-t-o-r-n-e-y..." he spelled aloud in sync with his hunting and pecking of the keys.

"And in her will she left me everything she had left," Katie added, switching the cross-over of her legs.

The student assistant paused then resumed: "I-n-h-e-r-i-t-o-r ... or should I put down heiress? I really don't know." He tried to catch her eye, but she deliberately kept staring at the bobbing tip of her cowboy boot; he hit the carriage return. "You were the one to discover the body, right? I mean, I'm not putting that down but that's what I heard."

"Yeah?"

"That's all. I heard it from the guy who brought Lieutenant Morrissey the field report just before you got here."

"So?"

"So, that was on the report, is all. He said—"

"... I don't care what you heard or what he said," she interrupted, "or what they wrote down. I know what I said."

"Ahh, Missus Lowrie...?" he said, lighting up a Marlboro and shallowly puffing. "I'm just a student called in to work the holiday swing shift ... get it?"

"How old are you, Jason Drew?"

"Twenty. It's Jay, call me Jay. Almost twenty-one."

"Are you studying to be a cop?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean I don't know yet. I'm study criminology at an academy in San Bruno but I don't know where it will go, exactly."

His cigarette halfway to his lips, he paused, apparently confused by her lack of response.

"Right, that's what I meant," Katie concluded, placing the soles of both boots on the linoleum floor.

J. Drew tapped his cigarette on the rim of a square glass ashtray then left it there. He sat back in his chair and raised one scuffed brown oxford shoe, placing his ankle on the opposite knee. “Ma’am ... ah, Missus Lowrie?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I say something off the record? Yeah, I’m going to. I really wouldn’t advise you taking any sort of ... ‘attitude’ let’s just say. With Lieutenant Morrissey I mean. He’s one of the big shots in Homicide Detail and he’s pretty serious, at least every time I’ve worked for him he is.”

“Is that him up there?” she inquired, raising her eyes to a framed portrait on the wall: a black-and-white photograph of a police officer in full SFPD regalia.

“That’s his father, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, his dad. Okay, Jason Drew—”

“Call me Jay, come on,” he pled, reclaiming his cigarette.

“So, tell me, Jay. Am I a murder suspect or something? Is that the deal? Is whatshisname going to put the cuffs on me? Or am I already under arrest?”

“Oh jeez, ma’am, you’ve gotta be kidding. I couldn’t put you under arrest if I wanted to. And I don’t. You came in here of your own accord—”

“... I did?”

“And you can leave of your accord.”

“I can, really?”

“But I really wouldn’t recommend it, if I was you.”

“Because I’m a suspect, you mean.”

“You’re an informant, Missus Lowrie.”

“An informant? What the hell is that?”

“That’s what it’s called. Technically speaking, you’re the key informant in the case.”

“I don’t like the sound of that very much, Jay,” she stated, shifting her weight on the chair.

"Don't you see?" When he tilted the lamp's angle so they shared an unobstructed view of each other's faces, Katie saw the baby skin and wondered if the youth even had to shave daily to keep his cheeks and chin so smooth. "An elderly lady dies in her bed. The death is discovered by the inheritor or whatever. And there are no other witnesses—"

"... and I called the cops right away."

"So, don't worry about it!" he burst out, slapping the forefingers of his free left hand on the edge of his desk. "The lieutenant only wants to interview you, that's all. Then you can make your statement."

"You mean my confession?"

"No, I don't." He took a short drag. "I didn't say that, you did."

"I didn't commit any crime."

"Nobody said you did. I never said you did."

"Well, everybody acts like it. The cops at the apartment sure acted like it."

"That's their job. They've got to be suspicious in a situation like that. And another thing. Whatever you do when you're done here, don't go back into that building until you get the green light."

"From who?"

"Somebody'll contact you. I don't know who. I'm just saying, I really recommend you don't try to re-enter that apartment. One, you won't get away with it. Two, you'll be in serious violation of the law if you break the seal."

Katie reassessed his countenance. "Where'd you say you're from, Jay?"

"Stockton. I'm studying down here but my family's in Stockton. My people are all on the force."

"Everybody?"

"Yeah, even my big sister." He grinned. "Out in the Delta, in Sacramento, not around here."

"Have you got a girlfriend down here? Is that why you're studying here instead of there?"

He blushed, grinned, and extinguished his cigarette: "I think I still do," he mumbled, reorienting himself to the typewriter. "I hope I still do. But I better finish this up fast. Marital status?"

"Single."

"Children?"

"One."

"Sex of child?"

The student's hands hovered above the keyboard.

"A boy. A boy becoming a young man."

He lowered his head and typed.

"His name?"

"Donald Duncan Lowrie."

"His age?"

"Fourteen."

"Does your son reside with you at ... let's see.... One Grade Road, Cliffport, California?"

"He does. At least for the time being. Who knows?"

J. Drew opened his mouth to question her, but Inspector Morrissey entered the room, acknowledging them with a nod of his head—the hair cut to a short, uniform length—before plopping a manila folder onto an empty desk blotter and ignoring them while he surveyed the interior before sitting down. He wore a navy-blue jacket and brown slacks with cuffs breaking over black lace-up business shoes. His red tie was knotted loosely at the top of his unbuttoned white dress shirt. He reached across some file cabinets, grabbed hold of a turning rod, and adjusted the angle of one set of aluminum window blinds, then he peeled off the top sheet from Jason's papers and left the carbons and onionskins on his assistant's desktop before sitting down in the padded swivel chair behind the larger steel desk.

"You get it all, Jason?" he asked, glancing over the sheet in his hand.

"Yes, sir. I mean, not yet, sir," he answered, wincing a smile. "I didn't get to the last lines at the bottom yet."

"Get those when I'm done here."

"Yes, sir." Jay winked at Katie and relaxed against his chair's back.

The detective set the page aside, interlaced his fingers, and placed his clasped hands on the blotter, leaning slightly forward and lowering his head as if about to say a prayer. Katie thought the buzz cut made the older man's hair resemble a schoolboy's stiff fuzz sprouting straight out on all sides.

"Missus Lowrie, how are you?" the man asked, raising his face and laying his eyes upon hers.

Lieutenant Morrissey had looked about fifty until she saw his eyes, when he looked closer to seventy-five.

"I'm okay."

"Do you know why we asked you here?" he continued, altering the arrangement of his fingers so that the left thumb was now uppermost.

She remarked to herself how closely a five-o'clock shadow followed the shape of his wide lower jaw. "I guess so."

"Then let me get right to the point. I know the officers have already gathered information from you. And young Jason here has started a file. Now I would like to have a brief conversation with you then give you the opportunity to make a statement, just for the record."

Katie realized that the tension in his speech partially derived from his habit of barely opening his mouth so that an exaggerated movement of his lips had to compensate for the broad, clenched jaws.

"Okay."

"Okay," he echoed, releasing his hands, pushing his chair from the desk, and tilting back in order to cross one leg over the other before brushing real or imagined crumbs from the raised pant leg.

"How long will this take?"

"What, your statement?"

"No, this whole thing. How soon before I will be able to get back into the apartment and carry out my duties there?"

"Well, Missus Lowrie," the inspector replied, lowering his foot back to the floor, pulling the chair in toward the desk, interlacing his fingers again, and staring right at her. "That all depends—"

“... on...?”

He altered the order in which his fingers were interwoven: the left thumb was on top again. “If your story checks out—“

“... it’ll check out,” she interrupted then shut her lips upon noticing the crow’s feet to the outside of his narrowed eyes and the pulsing muscles of his jowls. “Sorry....”

“And as soon as the medical examiner makes a final determination....” he resumed. “Say, Jason. Would you go find out if the superintendent of the building showed up yet?”

“Mister Luen?” Katie essayed.

“I know his name, Missus Lowrie.”

“What’s he coming here for?”

The lieutenant squared off some loose sheets of paper inside the folder on his desk and took a deep breath. “He’s not coming here. We have asked Mister Luen to visit the morgue, to identify the body.”

“Oh God,” she groaned, dropping her chin toward her chest. “Is that really necessary?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“What else do you have to do?”

“What else?” The lieutenant closed his mouth and kept his eyes upon his guest while addressing the student. “Jason.”

The youth scooted forward from the back of his chair. “Sir?”

“Kindly tell the lady here what’s customary in a situation like this.”

Katie couldn’t tell if the older man was genuinely smiling, but a hint of white teeth appeared between the thin lips in the U-shaped mask affixed to his square skull; he seemed to relish popping a quiz on his holiday assistant.

“Well, the evidence goes to the forensic lab for an identification of fingerprints and ... other things. Then the toxicology report—”

“... do you really need a toxicology report?” Katie blurted out. “It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? The lady killed herself. She somehow lined up some booze and cigarettes and swallowed her pills and she had no business doing any of that if she wanted to stay alive.”

The inspector inhaled and held his breath, placing both palms on his desk and staring straight at her, apparently debating how to handle his outspoken guest. Instead of speaking, he pushed himself up onto his feet. “Jason, Mister Luen, go!” The young man jumped to his feet and rushed out of the room while his superior went to a second set of window blinds and increased the amount of light coming into the room. For a split second, Katie spotted the fracture lines that spread over the man’s entire face: a map of fine, shallow wrinkles like the crinkly finish of the discarded onionskin paper now illuminated in a slice of sunlight crossing Jason Drew’s desk. Standing, leaning his weight back against the front of a file cabinet, he spoke: “It’s our job to rule out foul play in cases like this. Or don’t you realize that?”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“Then please let me answer your first question. You asked how long it will take and I was trying to answer you, Missus Lowrie.” He sat back down, glancing at his wristwatch then raising his arms—elbows out—studying his subject while cradling the back of his skull in his palms. Katie looked for signs of a shoulder holster strap she thought might be exposed by the loosened jacket front, but all she saw were an assortment of pens clipped to a black vinyl penholder in the inside pocket of his jacket. Jason Drew reentered the room. “Well?” the lieutenant asked, lowering his arms and sitting forward.

“He’s there now, sir.”

Katie sighed aloud.

“So, as I was about to say—have a seat, Jason—if the medical examiner determines it was suicide, the death certificate will read that way.”

“What way?”

“Jason.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You’ve read a number of certificates by now. Tell Missus Lowrie how it might read if ... you know ... give her an example.”

“Well, Part 1, line A—that’s the part that cites the immediate cause of death—it might read acute barbiturates or whatever and alcohol intoxication.”

“And line B...?” the detective prompted him.

“Line B is where they put the cause, like due to the consequence of—”

“... suicide,” Katie interjected.

The apprentice looked to his master for help but got none. “Yeah, I’ve seen that: suicidal.”

“Is that all it’ll say?”

“Personal particulars about the deceased get filled in by the Funeral Director,” J. Drew replied.

“How will some funeral director know anything about Jan McLoughlin?” Katie asked.

“Isn’t that the case, sir?” the young man replied, again turning for help.

“Usually,” Lieutenant Morrissey concurred, “which leads me to my next question,” he added, derailing her counter-investigation. “Besides the individuals already identified in here,” he said, tapping his finger on the file, “the superintendent, the lawyer, the nurse.... Is there anyone else we should know about?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“So, I gather Mrs. McLoughlin was quite the recluse.”

“Toward the end of her life she was. When she became bedridden. It got down to me ... and the nurse,” Katie added, leaning forward with her forearms on her thighs. “There’s nobody else.”

“Missus Mariano?” the inspector asked, glancing at the folder on his desk.

“Fatima. She’s been living in the apartment the last couple months.” Katie kept her back rounded and her eyes downcast. “Seems like I was the last station on Jan’s line....”

“So, might that explain how, as you claim, you would inherit her estate?”

“You know,” she shot back, straightening in her seat, “you could contact Mister Hudson, her lawyer, for that personal information you were just talking about.” She glanced back and forth between the two

of them. "He knows as much or more than I do about her statistics and all."

"I see...." the detective stated vaguely, rising from his chair and working his way back to the first set of window blinds then the second, readjusting the louvers of each in order to admit more of the changing daylight. It seemed to Katie that his voice was carrying from a great distance when he next spoke from a position taken up again between two stacks of metal files, his back turned, his elbows propped on the cabinet tops. "Would you like to make a statement now, Missus Lowrie?"

"Do I have to?"

"No. No, I suppose you don't have to," he replied, leaving his temporary post and returning to stand by his desk. "I'm sure you know your legal rights."

"Yeah, I guess. Even if I don't watch much TV."

The two men exchanged glances suggesting puzzlement over her declaration.

"So I can go home now if I want to, you mean?"

"Your choice," Lieutenant Morrissey retorted, sitting down and laying his palms on the blotter. "You drove your own vehicle here, to the best of my understanding." He looked over to the other desk; Jason nodded confirmation. "So, you can drive your own vehicle away. It's your call, Missus Lowrie."

"Well, on the way here I sort of had a little police escort."

The inspector didn't respond except to interweave his fingers and begin a rhythmic rearrangement of their positions relative to one another: first the right thumb on top then the left then the right again. In the silence, Jason reached for the pack of cigarettes on his desk but, when his superior shot him a glance, the student retracted his hand and sat still.

"I will say, if you make a statement today, Missus Lowrie, it could save you from having to come back some other afternoon soon. You know, it's not an affidavit. It's not a deposition. Do you see any lawyers in this room? Jason, you're not a big San Francisco D.A. yet, are you?"

Katie saw the young man lower his eyes and blush.

"Take as long as you like," the veteran policeman continued, rising to his feet and stepping to a metal cart on which a boxlike shape was draped by a cloth; when he lifted the cover, Katie saw the reel-to-reel Wollensack GM tape recorder.

"You're not going to try to trip me up with any trick questions, are you?"

He gave his subordinate the signal to ready the machine. "No, no I'm not."

While J. Drew repositioned the cart within easy reach, the detective regained his swivel chair. "Missus Lowrie, I know this isn't easy. But a statement from you now should speed the whole process up quite a bit. Examining the evidence, identifying the fingerprints, interviewing the attorney and whatshername, the nurse—"

"... Fatima Mariano," Katie interjected.

"That's right: Missus Mariano. So, once the medical examiner's office does its thing...."—he paused, apparently gauging the impact of his facetious slang but not detecting any appreciation from the younger pair—"we may be able to wrap this up in no time."

Katie heaved a sigh. "What am I supposed to talk about?"

"Whatever you like. Express yourself...." His smirk displayed more frustration with their indifference to his sense of humor. "Just please try to keep on topic, the topic of today. Try to make it ... Jason, what is it the journalists keep saying these days? Help me out ... no wait!" A hint of white showed between his lips. "Relevant. Make it relevant if you don't mind."

"I've got nothing to hide."

"Then take as long as you need. This young man here doesn't like hearing me say that, do you, Jason? He'll probably end up having to type it all." The student assistance placed his finger on the recorder's green button. "Anytime, Missus McLoughlin," Lieutenant Morrissey mis-spoke.

"It's Lowrie," she snapped. "I'm Katie Lowrie, remember?" She averted her eyes from the man and scowled at the colorless linoleum floor.

"Oh, that's right. It's been a long weekend. Excuse me, would you? Of course, it's Missus Lowrie. Go ahead, Jason," he concluded, watching the feed- and take-up reels start to turn.

"I don't know where to start."

"Start with today," the detective suggested.

"Are you going to ask me questions?"

"Just start, Missus Lowrie. We'll see how it goes." He tilted back in his chair, crossed his legs—ankle on opposite knee—and jutted out his elbows, cupping the back of his head with his palms. "I suggest you start with when you arrived at the apartment."

"I've been coming up from Santa Cruz to spend Mondays with Jan. As soon as I get there, Fatima takes off. Monday's been her only day off in the week. Otherwise she's been there fulltime for about two months. Do I have to say exact dates and all?"

"Don't worry about that. If anything's missing, I'll stop you, or have young Jay here make a note along the way to follow up later. You just go right ahead," he coached her, uncrossing his legs, lowering his arms, and pulling the chair closer to the desk where he resumed his standard pose, hands clasped atop the closed manila folder.

"At first Fatima went to Jan's once a week, then it was every other day except Sundays." Katie paused, noticing the detective was squeezing and releasing and squeezing his hands. "You know how it goes."

"How what goes?"

"Cancer. She got worse and worse. Throat cancer was diagnosed but she was in bad shape overall. So, Fatima moved in. I guess she'd been staying with her sister's big family in some crowded little house in Daly City."

"How did you meet Missus Mariano? In the first place, I mean?"

"Through an agency. They're super expensive but she's been worth every cent we've paid her."

"Every cent who's paid her?"

"I wrote checks to the agency from a special account the lawyer set up. I mean, it was Jan's money, but I signed the checks. But I also

gave her cash bonuses from the slush fund on a regular basis. I mean, it was still Jan's money, but I've been free to spend it as I see fit. Mister Hudson and I have been handling all her finances for like half a year."

Katie saw the older man raise his eyebrows toward the student and lift the pointer finger away from the rest of his right hand; Jason glanced at the tape recorder's counter and wrote a note on his pad.

"And how did you first come into contact with this Mister Hudson?"

"He's been her lawyer ever since I met her. I got to know him during a real estate deal with her property. She was our landlady. You knew that, right?"

"What real estate deal was that?"

"When Jan split up her Cliffport property, she ended up giving us the twenty acres with the house on it."

The inspector cleared his throat, which J. Drew took as a sign to note the counter and mark his pad. "Did you say Missus McLoughlin gave you and someone else twenty acres of land in Santa Cruz County?"

"Me and my mom, yeah. A couple years back we carved a new twenty-acre parcel out of her hundred and she sold the remaining eighty. Made out like a bandit on that deal."

"Who made out like a bandit?"

"Jan did. That's the pile of money we've been working down the last few years."

"Well, that was very generous of Missus McLoughlin, wouldn't you say?"

Katie stared back at the man; her nostrils flared as she inhaled and exhaled. "So now you'll want to see the binding agreement that Hudson drew up for us to stay on the lease for one hundred and one years or something stupid like that. By the time we got to signing that it was a joke. My mother and I were there to stay, and Jan knew it."

"Jason."

"Sir?"

"Get the realty office contact information from Missus Lowrie, after we're done here. And the lawyer's."

"Yes, sir."

"Please, Missus Lowrie. Go on."

"That's all. If you don't believe me you can go to the Office of County Records in Santa Cruz. And Hudson has all the documents showing how the twenty-acre deed passes to us ... upon her death."

The tape recorder's reels turned in a sustained silence.

"Were you always so ... close with your landlady?"

"Like I told Jay, I was her last and only friend in the world. She was like an aunt to me. Not a blood aunt but still. We got pretty close, yeah."

"I see. But in the beginning she was just your landlord. Is that correct?"

"That's right. We didn't even know her until 1965 or maybe it was '64. Yeah, 1964. When her estranged husband died, Jan showed up ... out of nowhere ... actually, she showed up like a bat out of hell," Katie corrected herself, directing her last words right at the recorder. "At first she wanted to sell the place on us—lock, stock, and barrel. She needed money bad and wanted to turn her property into cash."

"To liquidate it...?" the man suggested.

"Yup, I guess that's the term. At first my mother and Jan fought like cats and dogs, but I learned how to keep the peace. For some reason I always got along with the crazy old coot. Eventually I took to socializing with her, you know, like visiting her here in San Francisco."

"Even before she got sick, do you mean?"

"Yeah, before. Every couple of months then every month then you know how it goes. She just needed more and more help to keep it together."

"Missus Lowrie. Were you ever reimbursed for your services?"

"For services rendered you mean?" Katie smiled to herself. "If you mean, did she ever pay me, no. You don't get it yet. I got a kick out of her. She got a kick out of me. And the Lowries wound up with a house on twenty acres, a place to live, raise my kid, run a small business."

"What kind of business is that?"

“A nursery. A plant nursery. For growing containerized ornamentals if you know what that means.”

“I see.” The inspector raised his eyebrows and shot Jason a glance. “And the name of the business?”

Jason poised the pencil point above his pad.

“The Redwood Coast Nursery. And my best friend and I have been running a summer music camp there for years. For a while, my mom and I tried to run a daycare center for kids after school, but we had to give that up. My mother’s not getting any younger, you know? Anyway.... So, is this really what you want to hear about?”

“Yes, Missus Lowrie. Please, go on.”

“What else? I got Jan placed on the waiting list at the Hillside Towers, for a suite there.”

“Which is—“

“Condo apartments, in the Lower Nob Hill district, I guess they call it.”

Inspector Morrissey cleared his throat; Jason jotted down another note.

“It would definitely have been a step up from 999 Zerkova Street. Literally and figuratively. In the meantime, I got her apartment fixed up. Bought her new furniture, new appliances, had it painted. She had money to burn after selling those eighty acres. And my mom and I were already paying the property taxes and utilities and taking care of the repairs on the old house and the twenty acres. It’s funny....”

“What’s funny?”

“How I never did get around to replacing that broken-down sofa I used to sleep on when I got stuck there overnight.”

“Oh, I see.... And how much did Miss McLoughlin make on that property sale if I may ask?”

Katie furrowed her brow, tilted her head sideways, crossed her arms, and stared back at him, lips sealed.

“About how much?” he added.

“Maybe you better talk to her lawyer or the bank or somebody else about that, you know what I mean?” Without any obvious signal

from his superior, Jason Drew made a note. "Tell you the truth, I'm not sure much money will be left after the medical bills get paid and all. And I know what you're thinking."

"Tell me what am I thinking."

Katie uncrossed her arms and shifted her weight on the chair. "You know what you're thinking," she retorted. "I don't have to tell you."

The detective shifted his weight in his chair and crossed his arms. "Jason."

"Sir?"

"Why don't you get us few sodas from the vending machine downstairs? I'll take a Coke. Missus Lowrie?"

"I don't want anything."

"You sure?"

She didn't bother to reply.

"Well, get me a Coke and get yourself something, Jason."

"I have change, sir."

"Pay you back, thanks."

The youth left them alone in the room.

"From the report I looked at, I understood that the nurse oversaw Missus McLoughlin's medication regimen. Is that correct?"

"Yup. I never wanted to have anything to do with any morphine. Too freaky for me."

"Yes, well, Missus Mariano must have a special permit and—"

"... oh god, can I just say something right now?"

"Please, by all means, be my guest."

"Fatima is a living saint. I'm not bull ... kidding you. Actually, she was a Catholic sister in the Philippines when she was young, before she came to the United States. Anyway, when Jan needed constant company, let's say, I just couldn't do it anymore. I was taking care of my kid—especially with him messing up in his first year at high school. And my mom, when her back goes out. Then there's the nursery. You can't turn your back on container-grown plants and expect them to make it on their own. I'm not complaining. I'm just saying Fatima

saved my life. Leave her out of this investigation, can't you? She made Jan's life more livable and mine too. When it came time to put Jan in the hospital bed we got it set up in the old dining room—Jan would never agree to being relocated to a nursing home—so Fatima moved into Jan's old bedroom. She set up a little camp there. You know what the first thing she did was?"

"What's so funny?"

"Funny?"

"You just looked like you were about to laugh, Missus Lowrie."

"The first thing she did was sanitize everything. Whenever she wasn't doing something else, you never saw that woman without her blue gloves on, a box of baking soda in one hand and a squirt bottle of vinegar in the other. She scrubbed that place down to the bone. 'You'll scrub all our sins away!' I'd tease her and she'd smile her big old smile. She's just a little thing and I love her to death." Katie paused then looked downward as she spoke, shaking her head. "I sure hope you don't have to drag her in here too."

The detective didn't react. Jason returned with two bottles of Coca-Cola. Lieutenant Morrissey reached into his pants pocket, extracted some coins, and pressed them into the youth's hand. Jason took a furtive glance at the informant and retreated to his seat.

"You don't need to know the blow-by-blow on Jan's declining health, do you?"

"Not today, Missus Lowrie."

"Good. The important thing is, she was the one who decided not to go into any nursing home. I lost that argument every time. So, she just stuck it out to the end at '999.' She could be ornery. Tell you the truth, I can too." Neither the inspector nor the student assistant revealed their reactions. "Maybe that's why I dug her so much."

The detective finished off his bottle of Coke in several chugs and wiped his lips with a folded white handkerchief. "Missus Lowrie," he resumed. "You've said you managed Missus McLoughlin's money—"

"... only under Mister Hudson's supervision."

"Oh, of course."

"Jan used to say to me, Remember, Lady Katie—she'd call me that, just to kid me—whatever you and Hudson spend now is money coming out of what you'll get later."

"So, Missus McLoughlin had told you in no uncertain terms that whatever financial assets were left at the time of her decease, you'd be the beneficiary. Is that correct?"

"Not just the financial stuff. Her whole estate. It's in her will. She had me go back and forth between her and the lawyer to get it all straightened out. There was nobody else."

"And your mother?"

"What about my mother? Jan deeded the property to me but that was fine. The lawyer, Hudson, he thought that was the easiest arrangement at the time. No, nothing to my mom. Those two never got over some pretty deep personal feud."

"I see."

Lieutenant Morrissey lifted two pointer fingers like a pair of pistol barrels held parallel in his hands and aimed them at the tape recorder; J. Drew took note of the counter's number.

"Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"Tell you the truth, it's sort of a relief. No more endoscopies and biopsies and all those lab tests. Poor Jan was pretty much in pain all over then we took her only pleasures away from her—her whiskey, cigarettes. After the diagnosis we had to. A couple times in there she told me she'd rather be dead. When the medical morphine kicked in she finally got some relief. Fatima was administering that, following the doctor's orders to the letter. Jan definitely got hooked on that stuff, but as long as she was out of pain, that was fine by me."

"You've said you had nothing to do with the morphine. Did I hear that right?"

"That was the nurse's gig. She has the knowhow. She had some permit. Fatima took care of the prescription and that beeping machine that delivers the dosage automatically."

"Missus Lowrie. I'm confused. How do you suppose the deceased gained access to alcohol and tobacco? Prescription pills were on hand,

I imagine, but you said you had denied her the other and she was bedridden. Am I correct?”

“You’re right. How did she get a hold of her stuff? That’s what I’d like to know. I figure one of the workmen got it for her at the corner liquor store.”

The inspector’s eyebrows lifted; Jason made a note.

“Didn’t your men tell you the inside of the building is being renovated? Tradesmen have been coming and going at 999 Zelkova for like a year. Tearing down the inside walls, changing out plumbing, redoing floors. Every time someone moves out—or dies, is more like it—they move in and redo the unit from top to bottom. In between they leave their stuff in the hallway. Or work in the hallway. They always remind me of vultures waiting for the next tenant to croak. I guess they’ll be happy when they find out about Jan. That was another reason I wanted to get her out of there: the noise and the dust. Those guys have the radio blaring every time I arrive. I kept asking them to keep it down but the next Monday, it’s as loud as ever.”

“Did the superintendent—Mister Luen—did he have a key to the apartment?”

“Sure, he did. They knew each other for years. He did things for her in her place. Tell you the truth, I think they were quite the drinking buddies once upon a time.”

“Is it possible that Mister Luen—”

“... no. No, I don’t think so. He’s too spooked out. Nowadays he just hides in his room. The new building owners will probably be happy when they sweep him out with the old plaster. He’s just another bump in the road where developers are concerned.”

“So, you don’t think it’s even remotely conceivable that Mister Luen provided Missus McLoughlin with—”

“... no, I don’t, okay? He’s been avoiding her apartment for a long time now. I think it was just her way to end it all. An opportunity, not an impulse.”

“An opportunity?”

"Yeah, with Fatima gone overnight, Jan could've got one of those guys out in the hall to fetch her stuff for her. No, I don't think the old man would've honored her request even if he had been communicating with her, which he wasn't. I think they kinda said goodbye for good—on good terms—quite a while back."

"Could you tell me what you did immediately after you entered the apartment? You found Missus McLaughlin in bed and...."

"I thought you said you weren't going to be asking me questions."

"I didn't say that."

"I told the policeman who grilled me. I called my mom. I called Fatima 'cuz I didn't want her showing up and going into shock. Then I called ... no, first I told Mister Luen than I called the...."

"... cops," the lieutenant inserted.

"Yup. You know, I hope you guys will let Fatima collect her personal stuff, settle with the morphine man, and go away in peace. I'm not expecting her to pick up the pieces in that place. I'll take care of that, when I can get back in, that is."

The inspector took his customary pose: leaning back, one leg crossed with the ankle on the opposite knee, his interlaced fingers cupping the back of his skull. "Shouldn't be too long. You'll be notified, Missus Mc—Lowrie."

The trio sat in silence. The reels turned. Katie studied the scuffed floor around her boots and wondered if she had blabbed too much. She realized she didn't care what they thought about how she felt or looked or spoke, as long as they let her go and left Fatima alone. Did it sound to them that she was disrespectful of them or of Jan? Behind his thick armored vest of procedural protocol, the veteran lawman concealed whatever he thought or felt. And Jason? Katie glanced at the twenty-year-old aping his mentor—arms lifted, elbows out, hands behind his head—and when she didn't take her gaze away, he lowered his arms and blushed, fixing his eyes upon his pack of cigarettes. Jay looked to Katie as if he could handle certain information, so she stayed turned toward him while she spoke: "Funny how the old lady got her

way in the end. She didn't want to go through any treatment. The cancer was spreading into her windpipe and her vocal cords—it got pretty hard to listen to her talk. They already had the targets for their x-ray guns marked off on her throat, but she didn't want any x-rays. Or chemo. Or surgery. No way was she going to some center in Palo Alto to get one-minute doses of cobalt once a day, Monday through Friday for seven weeks. She said she'd rather die first, so she did."

Katie lengthened her legs and crossed them at her ankles.

"Yes, she did," the inspector echoed, clearing his throat and folding his hands.

"Think about it. It was perfect timing for her to make her move. They were ready to start the treatment but that had to be postponed because she was suffering from peritonitis."

"Which is what?" the detective asked. "I'm a policeman, Missus Lowrie, not a physician."

"I think I said it right: per-i-ta-ny-tis. Inflammation of the inner abdominal wall. They were waiting for her to get over that but she checked out first. Game over."

After a pause, Lieutenant Morrissey spoke: "You were saying that Missus Mariano was the only person authorized to administer the morphine."

"Yes, and Jan kept begging her to amp it up, turn it up."

"What about the suicide note?"

"What suicide note?" Kate replied, gripping the outside edges of her chair's seat and drawing in her lower legs. "There was no suicide note I know about."

"There was no note?"

"I just told you. Your men in blue asked me that too, more than once."

"Aren't you a little surprised that Missus McLoughlin left no note?"

"Not really. Why should she? Her twin brother never left one either."

The two men exchanged a glance.

"Missus McLoughlin had a twin brother?"

"Who also took his own, if you want to put it that way."

"Jason."

"Yes, sir!" he shot back, lifting his eyes, noting down the counter, pencil point hovering over his pad.

"Missus Lowrie. Are you saying that the deceased had a twin brother who ... you seem to imply ... committed suicide?"

"Yes."

"And when was this?"

"After World War One."

"Oh, I see...."

"Some people said he had 'brain fever'—whatever that is. Others said he was shell-shocked. His name was Glenn." Turning toward J. Drew, she spelled it out: "G-l-e-double n. Glenn McLoughlin."

All three parties looked back and forth between one another several times, then the older man spoke: "Now, is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"I guess not," Katie said.

"Jason, turn that thing off," Lieutenant Morrissey said, rising to his feet. "I'll ask Jason to go over his notes with you, to fill in some information. Otherwise I think we're done for today."

"For today?"

"Were you planning on going back to Santa Cruz this evening, Missus Lowrie?"

"I was planning on it."

"Well, we hope you won't go too far from home for a while. Jason can go over our exact expectations about keeping yourself available. We need to be able to contact you."

"Right."

"And if you do think of anything else after you leave this office," he added, pulling a business card from a holder on the desk, lodging it between two fingers and extending it toward her, "you can always contact me. I want to thank you for your ... forthrightness, Missus Lowrie."

“Okay...” she muttered, taking hold of the crisp white paper stock and examining the embossed, gold-filled, seven-point star of the badge and the blue ink lettering on the card.

“Our job would be one helluvah lot easier if everyone said what’s on their mind instead of clamming up on us.”

“Oh, I’m pretty good at talking too much, if that’s what you mean. But then I’ve got nothing to hide. I’m sure some people do, coming in here.”

“Oh yes, they do. Some people certainly do. Now I’ll leave you in the hands of this able young man.” He stepped to the other desk and passed back the sheet of typing paper he had previously detached from the rest. “Finish this one off and get her to sign the release. And, Jason, be sure to get her to sign off on the guidelines on witness availability.”

“Yes, sir.”

Without looking her in the eyes or shaking her hand, Lieutenant Morrissey picked the manila folder off the larger desk and exited the room via an interior door other than the one by which he had entered.

Katie cancelled accounts with the home care agency and utility companies, and notified the Hillside Tower, where property management required legal proof of Mrs. McLoughlin’s decease before they would return 50% of the first year’s lease paid in advance; as per contract, the initial \$200.00 application fee was forfeited. In the last week of September, Gerald Hudson telephoned to inform her that, if she would kindly come to his office and go over the Last Will and Testament with him, she would be free to enter the premises at 999 Zelvova Street and attend to her tasks. Katie never heard back from the SFPD and never inquired about the ultimate disposition of Jan McLoughlin’s physical remains; she found she could sing the Castle Song in Chapel Grove without spreading ashes, and she did sing it there, more than once, alone. ¹

She coordinated the timing of her first trip back to San Francisco

with Fatima—who had already signed off on the controlled substance so that when the medical supply company sent personnel to reclaim the hospital bed, the pharmaceutical agency retrieved the remaining supply of morphine and the dispensing machine—for the nurse still needed to dismantle her shrine and gather her personal effects into a single suitcase. Yet Katie wouldn't let Fatima leave without also taking possession of whatever dishware, linen, and furniture which she could distribute however she pleased among her extended family. The two women carried cartons of housewares to the curbside, and Katie paid two workmen to load the pickup with the wardrobe closet, coffee table, bedroom dresser, and wooden bed with its headboard and box springs. When they arrived at Fatima Mariano's sister's home in Daly City—one of Malvina Reynolds' many ticky-tacky little boxes—nephews and cousins offloaded the booty while Katie gave Fatima a \$50 cash bonus. Fatima blessed her in Portuguese, recited a prayer in Latin, and invited her to eat supper with the family. Katie, exhausted, begged off; Fatima expressed her understanding, and they crushed themselves in each other's arms, weeping goodbye.

Katie proceeded south on Route One. The Ford Fleetside's bed was empty, but the familiar Scottish basket and banker's box were lodged in the passenger side's foot well, and other precious cargo sat on the bench seat beside her: Jan's three framed photographs wrapped in kitchen towels; a colorless, threadbare velour pouch; a sealed shoebox. By the time she reached the coast, where the summer evening fog had socked in Half Moon Bay, Katie turned off the highway and parked at the taqueria on Main Street where the cook always welcomed her as a familiar stranger, if not as a personal acquaintance. The place was closing but his wife served their last customer of the day chips and salsa, ladled out a bowl of chili, told Katie to grab a beverage from the cooler, indicating that she could stay seated and eat her meal while she and her husband cleaned up. Katie scarfed down the first food she had eaten since her 6:00 AM breakfast fourteen hours earlier, drained the bottle of cerveza, and left four dollar bills under the empty bowl. In the 7-11 next door, she bought a cup of coffee to go but, before

restarting the Ford, she sat in the parking lot's shrill lighting, staring at the velour pouch knotted with a string tie and the shoebox closed with yellowed cellophane.

In all her visits to '999' Katie had never been permitted to view the contents of the discolored pouch or look inside the shoebox; now they were all hers. She used her pocket knife to cut the knot of the discolored velour bag and slid out a gray, dented, rectangular cookie tin. Inside lay an old-fashioned 11" × 7" album. Black electrical tape had been used to reinforce its brittle binding; its black cover's paper was separating from the brown backing. Traces of inlaid golden paint remained in the recessed word PHOTOGRAPHS, and the interior page borders were frayed and torn. White crayon had been deployed in a legible longhand similar or perhaps identical to the handwriting gracing Jan's older sister's wildflower folio to caption the photos systematically arranged on black background: eight-up to sheets with 2" × 3" prints and two-up for the 6" × 3" size. Katie suspected that Mary McLoughlin may have dutifully volunteered or at some point been charged with assembling these heirloom images beginning with the McLoughlin family's arrival in the New World. The sequence was chronological: The Maritime Provinces followed by pictures from Ontario then British Columbia and finally California. The images brought home to Katie a vanished Cliffport from which Jan had run and into which—half a century prior—her orphaned mother had stepped. She replaced the album in the tray and the tin box in the velour bag, cinched its string tie, and turned on the ignition, glad she knew the rest of the highway home by heart as she re-entered the nocturnal fog. Katie sensed she would find the occasion to go over all these pictures with her mother. ²

She brought her son along on her final trip to the San Francisco apartment and paid a pair of workers on site to drag the sofa, armchair, and mattress down to the sidewalk where she could get them hauled away—or not. Donald coveted Jan's radio, and together

they carried the TV set and kidney-shaped vanity table down to the pickup. She had DD heap Jan's footwear and used undergarments into grocery bags and make multiple visits to the contractor's dumpster located where the service elevator gave onto the alleyway out back. Katie decided to give the collection of swizzle sticks to Mr. Luen as a token of gratitude for services rendered to the deceased, as well as a gesture of recognition of the mutual affection between him and his former drinking partner. She used the kitchen's padded stepstool to reach the three pint glasses on the cupboard's top shelf; he could have the stepstool, too, if he liked, or else she would leave it for the tradesmen. Various canes and umbrellas, a pair of wooden crutches, an aluminum walker—these were piled into the back of the Ford, to be dropped off at any Goodwill or St. Vincent de Paul's on their way out of the Tenderloin; she could let them know some furniture was also available for pickup in front of 999 Zerkova Street.

Facing the rack of Jan's vintage clothes, Katie knew her mother would have nothing to do with them, but she couldn't see donating or consigning them to some secondhand boutique. Unable to leave them behind, she sandwiched the clothing between two blankets that she and her son carried downstairs and out the front door, reminding her of transporting a body to a morgue or out of the woods after a rifle accident during hunting season—or a suicide.³ She weighted the bundle down in the Fleetside's bed and went back for the purse full of costume jewelry and the carton jammed with half-a-hundred different perfume bottles from the half-bath's glass shelves.

"Can I have the key?" her fourteen-year-old asked, fiddling with the radio knobs on the dash.

"Here, but don't you dare turn on that ignition, Donald D."

"Come on, Mom!" he protested as she turned to reenter the building. "Can't we just go?"

"I'll be right back. I've got to let Mister Luen know we're done."

The building manager answered the door as if he had been standing behind it, waiting for her knock. As usual, tears teetered on his lower eyelids, threatening to spill. She gave him the pint glasses

with the swizzle sticks and surrendered the door keys. He said nothing then or when she offered him the stepstool, so she leaned it against the wall outside his door. Katie was preparing to reach out and shake the man's hand goodbye when he turned, lifted a cardboard box off a chair, and thrust it into her arms. Inside the open carton, Katie saw a utilitarian folding file holder and a hand-painted black-and-gold lacquered chest that looked as if it might have been a music or jewelry box designed to rest on a stand.

Katie shifted the carton in her arms and listened as he explained that four or five years earlier, clearing out the last sellable antiques from the tenant's basement storage bin, these two items had remained. Mrs. McLoughlin would not have them in her apartment, yet he wasn't to throw or give them away. He said that there was no key to the little chest—at least he had never possessed one—and Mrs. McLoughlin had made him vow never to investigate the contents of the sturdy, gusseted file holder. Not knowing what else to do, he had held onto both objects and assumed that their rightful owner had eventually forgotten their existence. Katie had never known the man to speak so many words in such a short span of time. She thanked him, reclutched the carton, and turned away. Donald begged his mother to let him break open the Chinese box right away and to cut the cord around the file holder with his pocketknife, but she forbade him more than once and drove off, on the lookout for the first-come charity shop.

At the crest of Highway 92, Katie impulsively turned onto Old State Route 5 even though following the ridgeline through the Northern Santa Cruz Mountains would double their travel time. As a reward for his patience, she promised Donald Duncan that they would stop in La Honda for burgers, fries, and shakes. Both mother and son fell into silence as she navigated the truck through a staccato rhythm of shadow-and-light within the tunnel-like corridors of oaks and bays. She turned the headlights on while passing through the perpetual darkness of the solid redwood stands. More than two hours later, dropping back down onto Highway One, the teenager was excited to land upon a strong radio signal broadcasting acid rock from Pacific Grove across

Monterey Bay. For as long as the reception lasted, his mother repeatedly lowered the volume, and he repeatedly turned it back up, bobbing his head.

Scanning the two items on the bench seat between them, Katie rehearsed some rainy winter day ahead when, she knew, she would insist upon absolute privacy in order to deal with these unique hand-me-downs. She realized there was no one with whom she could explore the material with any degree of curiosity approaching her own. Donald was too young to care about what he called “all that old stuff” and, unless her dead rival’s relics were directly related to John and Dorothea McLoughlin, Elise Lowrie would never look into this surviving evidence of Jan McLoughlin’s life. Despite Jan’s moody monologues and disclosures when under the influence of alcohol or morphine, Katie had never been told of the banished, rectangular-shaped Chinese chest or the accordion file. If the woman had been so adamant about sequestering their contents, why had she not directed the building superintendent simply to toss them in the incinerator out back? Or had Jan planned to reopen the files someday? Or had she left them intact so that once she was gone someone else—who turned out to be Katie—could pry open the lacquered chest and cut the string around the files? Would Jan have been capable of forgetting the existence of the files and the refined, diminutive Chinese box—misplacing or discarding its key? Perhaps, Katie thought, she should carry the little chest—no larger than a one pound box of chocolates—up to Chapel Grove and bury it unopened in the McLoughlin’s family plot. Yet if she consigned the box to the cemetery soil, Katie might never learn answers to questions she felt she had the right and the desire and the need to know.

Besides confirming that the property deed had been updated and recorded correctly with Santa Cruz County, Katie pondered what else was left to be done so she could finalize the affair. She had yet to hear what Mister Hudson was billing the trust and, after more than five years of loyal, courteous, competent, and trustworthy service to a decidedly difficult client, the man probably deserved to be paid twice

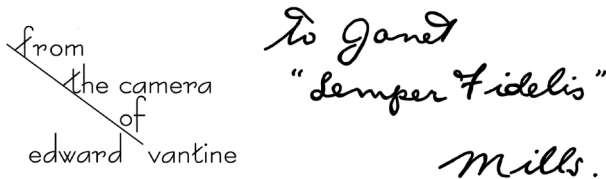
over. She wondered if, for his last quarterly invoice, the old fashioned lawyer would present a lump sum figure for half-a-decade's retaining fee or provide more detailed billing; if so, she would probably not even scrutinize the line items and instead let him have his due—no questions asked.

Katie was granted exclusive use of the rearmost room to house Jan's things and, that fall, periodically opened the door and peered inside. Her mother and her son—at first between themselves then, tentatively, with Katie—referred to the spare bedroom at the end of the hall as the "Memorial Chamber." Elise trusted that, in Katie's private process of grieving, her once wild child was somehow assuming stewardship of the McLoughlin clan's afterlife on the North Coast and, by extension, Elise's own; to her friend Suzanne, Elise confided that her daughter was engaged in "a spiritual reckoning."

Atop the bed, Katie had set Mary McLoughlin's oversize wildflower folio compressing loose sheets within its wooden covers bound by brass hinges. This homemade heirloom had long rested on the fireplace mantle so that, while sipping morning coffee or fighting off sleep at the end of the day, Katie could peruse its pressed flowers and colored-pencil illustrations while studying Jan's older sister's annotations. As the Redwood Coast Nursery had grown, Katie's appreciation of the enduring charm of this by-product of Mary's home schooling had also grown, and her appetite for the knowledge between those thin boards of madrone—kept to a soft sheen by Katie and Elisabeth Lowrie's handling—was never satiated. Elise had understood when her daughter requested taking the wildflower folio to the Memorial Chamber, and she had also allowed Katie to remove the wooden box with Dorothea McLoughlin's handwritten recipe cards from its normal place of residence above the refrigerator—out of sight but within easy reach.

Katie gradually started drifting back into the rear room, closing the door, sitting at the simple wooden desk, glancing back and

forth between Jan's memorabilia and the purple amethyst geode on the windowsill. On a narrow redwood plank attached by redwood brackets, where a row of books had once been shelved against the wall, Jan's three framed photographs were now propped side by side. The full-length portrait of Mary, less than twenty years of age, standing on the house's front porch steps—"all dressed up in Cliffport Town and nowhere to go;" the double portrait of Mills as an awkward adolescent standing straight beside his mother, the boy in his Thetford Academy navy whites and Mary-Helen Belcanto decked out in an elegant linen outfit of Jan's making with accessories to match; the 6" × 8" photograph of Mills set in a 12" × 16" gold-finish wooden frame. Even Katie could be mesmerized by this softly lit, airbrushed head shot of the love of Jan McLoughlin's life: Mills Belcanto, aged twenty, Hollywood handsome, with its signatory's dedication: To Aunt Janet—Semper Fidelis, Mills, 1940—written in florid penmanship above the staggered lines of a fanciful font recessed in the matting board:



from the camera
of
edward vantine

to Janet
“Semper Fidelis”
Mills.

These images had passed in and out of Katie's sight for the last five years, first when Jan had displayed them in her bedroom and later, when Jan had been moved into the hospital bed set up in the erstwhile dining room, the three photographs traveling with her.

The wicker basket sat under the bed. Katie was familiar with its mementos of Jan's 1932 trip to Scotland, as well as the commemorative platters, spoons, and ribbons of tartan salvaged from Jan's display box on the apartment wall. She had already been through the banker's box containing miscellaneous trinkets and printed matter from the Pan-Pacific International Expo in 1919, the 1938–9 World's Fair on Treasure Island, and the opening days of the Golden Gate Bridge.

She felt no more need to review the items and articles from a 1938 flight on Pan American Airway's China Clipper seaplane or the tokens and pamphlets from Jan's numerous trips on "the most talked about train in America"—the legendary California Zephyr. So, she initially eased into her new investigation by flipping through the recipe cards, browsing the names and ingredients of the many baked and roasted dishes that her mother had cooked, following one or another of Dorothea McLoughlin's instructions written out in an untutored hand. But what about the shoebox?

Even as Katie had become intimate with Jan's possessions at "999" she had been forbidden to disturb the sealed shoebox. Once off-limits, the box was now hers to explore. Slicing through the toughened tape, she opened the lid and found a wad of postcards Mills had sent to his "Aunt Jeanette." The cards picturing landmarks from the far corners of the world still carried eccentric postmarks and cancelled stamps, and Mills had usually addressed some brief, jokey lines to his substitute mother. A history buff might have been turned on by reconstructing the chronology of the postcards; a novelist, by spinning yarns. But Katie felt she could just as well be killing time at Logos Books & Records on the mall in Santa Cruz or at some gift shop counter at the end of the wharf, empty of tourists on a rainy winter's day; she soon lost interest in the contents and closed the box.

When "Aunt" Suzanne and "Uncle" Mike Crogan, the Lowries' long-time family friends, drove down to Cliffport for Thanksgiving, they took away Jan's vanity and mirror as well as an armload of the vintage garments. Suzanne planned to refinish the table and donate the wardrobe to the ladies' fashion show being mounted as part of Cloverdale's Volunteer Rural Fire District's annual fundraiser of which her husband, Mike, was the chief organizer. Three weeks later she reported back that an executive decision had been made not to piece out the collection; a keen-eyed St. Helena boutique owner had

bid \$350.00 for the entire lot. The presentation of dresses, coats, and wraps continued through the evening but without further bidding, while the women in attendance—except the buyer—wondered aloud if the guest from Napa Valley had not spent far too much.

As January rains arrived, Katie's outdoor work moved to the interior of the largest of her three makeshift hoop houses. There she set up a station where she could hack, slice, and whittle away at piles of bamboo poles—their leaves shriveled, the wood dry—sawn from the grove and brought under the polyethylene to cure. Come true spring she would need tall, thick poles for tenting the open beds of sunflowers with protection from the migrating grosbeaks and the ever-present finches. She would need long, stout lengths of bamboo for staking vines and shrubs as she shifted the plants up from 1- to 3- to 5-gallon-size containers. She would use longer, thinner, more pliable lengths to arc under low row covers shielding the seedling broccoli and tomatoes from cabbage moths. And she could always use pencil-length pegs as markers while tending to hundreds of 2- and 4-inch pots. Plus, the work would go easier if all these bamboo lengths received pointed ends in advance. When she could work on the dirt pile outside, she repotted the ivy geranium mother plants with new soil and, before netting the stock plants against the budworm moth, she covered the used soil—with its pupae pests—in a mound kept composting at a distance. As the rains came down in earnest throughout February, Katie's activities were increasingly confined to her propagation bench. Keeping herself warm enough within the aura of a kerosene heater, she spent long hours perched on her tall stool, attending to baby plant starts and daydreaming to the ceaseless gamelan of precipitation overhead. Below the curved, low-ceilinged plastic, she reconstituted wooden seed flats, disinfected the tables, and spent hours dibbling seeds into her mix of perlite, vermiculite, and horticultural sand. Starting in March, she took daily cuttings of the first sprouts from the dahlia bulbs heeled into shallow trays and wooden lugs.

“Thank you for the delicious meal, dear. That was simply the best Mother’s Day brunch I’ve ever had.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes, it really was. And this....” She picked up the rustic frame with the McLoughlin family’s Short Cake Crust recipe rendered on watercolor paper in a calligraphic style resembling the original 19th century handwriting. “I so love the way you left it just the way it was written on the card:

4 cupfulls sifted flour
1 teaspoonfull salt
3 teaspoonfulls baking powder
1 tablespoonful lard and butter
Sweet milk.

—roll out soft dough sheets ½ inches thick, bake hot oven—
The only ingredient not listed there is love, but it’s clearly included. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, Mom. You’re always such a stickler for correct grammar and spelling, I considered correcting it.”

“Oh, heaven’s no. Those cards originated with Dorothea’s mother even before the 1870’s when the first McLoughlins first settled in California. We must never amend those.”

“Here’s your tea.”

Katie helped her mother shift from one of the straight-back chairs into the red armchair pulled closer to the dining table.

“Kaitlin, I get the impression that you slept in the back room last night. Am I right?”

“I did. I conked out on the bed.”

“While you were looking at more pictures...?”

Katie put the last dry dish in the cupboard and faced her mother. “You’re right, I was. That’s about all I ever do lately, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t mean it derogatorily. You know I support your ... project all the way.”

“But?”

“Well, come sit down for a moment.”

Her daughter brought a mug of hot coffee to the table and took a seat.

"If I may speak honestly—"

"... that's a laugh," Katie chuckled. "Do you ever speak any other way?"

"I am beginning to worry, no ... to wonder.... I'm beginning to wonder if you aren't over thinking this thing."

"Over thinking...?"

"I was remembering when your father bought me the first electric wheel, how many pieces I ruined by pressing the clay too hard or spinning the wheel too fast. Of course, that was when I was—"

"... young and stupid like I am now?"

"No one ever said you're stupid, Kaitlin Lowrie. Whenever will you get over that?"

"And no one can say I'm young anymore."

"Oh, don't be silly. Thirty-three's young."

"Mom, remember how long you slept up in the attic?" She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "You lived up in that rat's nest for a couple of months."

"Was it that long? I forget." Elise wagged her head. "What a time that was!"

"So, what's the big deal if I crash down the hall sometimes? I need to do this at my own pace."

"I know you do, dear."

Mother and daughter both turned to gaze toward Donald Duncan, heard groaning as he switched positions on the couch, his eyes glued upon the TV screen.

"Could you turn that down a notch, DD?" After no response, Katie raised her voice: "I said turn it down, DD!"

"In a minute," he muttered, showing no sign of moving anytime soon.

"You know, Kaitlin, your right eye is beginning to squint again." Katie got up to turn down the TV and returned to her place. "Have you noticed that or not, dear?"

“Yeah, a little, so?”

“Isn’t that usually a sign that you’re looking too long and too hard—I mean, literally? At those old photographs, this time.”

“Probably.”

“I know business is dead in the nursery right now, but we’ll have a run of false spring days soon and when we do, please go back outside. Leave everything in that room the way it is. Nobody here will disturb any of it. Please, dear, give yourself a break. Call Josie and take the boys for a hike.”

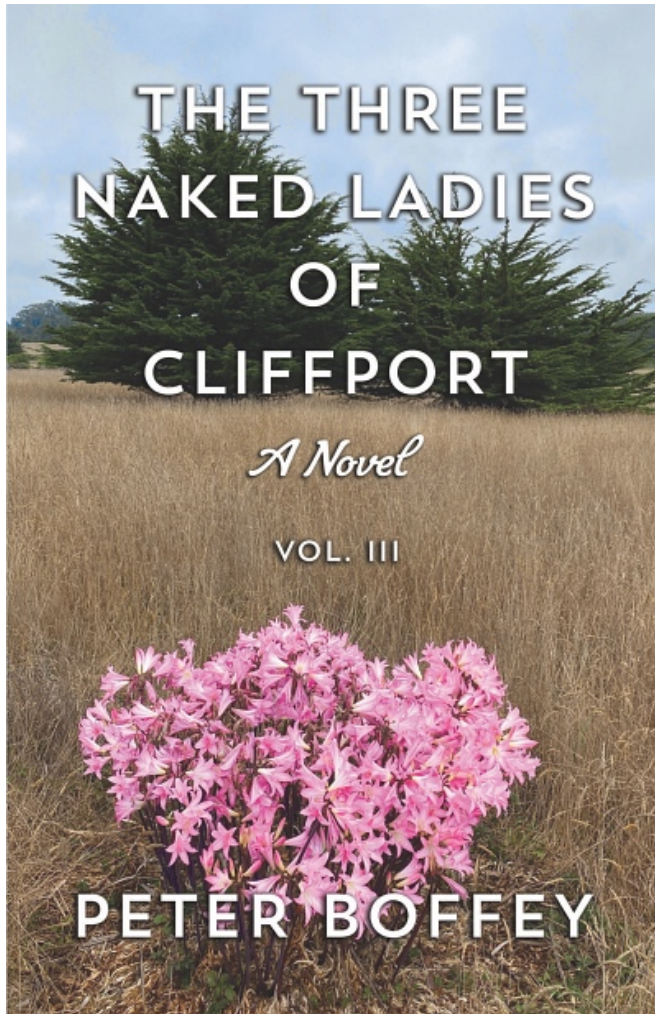
“Oh, Mom, you’re dreaming. Those guys aren’t going on any hikes with their mothers anymore. They don’t want to be seen dead with us.”

“Oh, that’s always so frustrating,” Elise said, glancing toward her teenage grandson. “In any case, please try to sleep in your own room. It’s only two doors down, for goodness sake. Is the bed in that back room even properly made up?”⁴

About the Author

In *The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport*, as well as in his first novel, *Two Half Brothers, or Separating Out* (2014), Peter Boffey has drawn upon his experiences while traveling—with brief residences—in France, Israel, and Morocco. Fifty years of living in Northern California and Oregon, with a career in applied horticulture—gardening, landscape design, nursery production, and the seed trade—have also informed his narratives.

When not out exploring the West, particularly throughout the Pacific States, with a focus on flora, fauna, geology, and cultural history, Peter—a grandfather—lives with his wife, Ophira, in the San Francisco Bay Area, often volunteering as a docent at the Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek. For more of his writings—including poetry, translations, interviews, and essays—and to contact the author, visit **peterboffey.com**.



How, against all odds, can the Lowrie women thrive or even survive as the last pioneer household living in ghost-town Cliffport, California, the one place they know best and love most?

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