

Three single mothers of three bastard children from three generations claim Cliffport - a ghost town on Santa Cruz County's northern coast - as their home. In letters, phone calls, journals, and conversations, we hear the distinct and disparate voices of these strong-willed women - each tough on the outside yet sensitive within.

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport: Volume I

by Peter Boffey

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THE THREE
NAKED LADIES
OF
CLIFFPORT

A Novel

VOL. I

PETER BOFFEY

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport
A Novel in Four Books
Vol. I

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2018900005

ISBN 978-1-63492-917-2

Chapter 3

The Landlady Pays a Visit

Janice McLoughlin stood alongside the car idling in the turn-around under the oak and, steadying herself with one white-gloved hand atop the open passenger door and her other hand shielding her eyes, appeared to wobble.

“Can she see us?” Katie asked her mother.

“I have no idea.”

The landlady secured her handbag in the bend of her elbow then gazed in all directions before tapping the black half-hat atop her head of gray hair and walking one hand over the other along the top of the door; she closed it and the vehicle drove out the gravel drive. Gathering her winter coat in front, she paused before taking her first step then, as she moved toward the house, the Lowries noticed her limp.

“Why doesn’t she use a cane?”

“Don’t ask me,” Elise replied. “Have her come up the steps to the deck. It’s shorter.”

When Katie reached her, J. McLoughlin was standing still, contemplating her next step, and searching in vain for something against which to lean. Become aware of Katie’s presence, she scanned her up and down through the thick lenses of her spectacles. “You’re the daughter.”

“I am, I’m Katie,” she replied, offering the visitor her forearm.

J. McLoughlin laid her right hand on Katie’s arm. As they headed toward the wooden staircase, Katie noticed the nicotine stains

between the first two fingers of the glove and the yellowed cellophane tape keeping one arm of the elder woman's eyeglasses intact. At the bottom of the stairs, the visitor secured her moss-brown handbag in the crook of her arm, transferred her hand to the rail, then rescanned the figure of her escort.

"Katie, did you say?"

"Yup, that's it: Katie."

J. McLoughlin again sent her fingertips to the half-hat, as if to verify that the simple spring pins fastening it to the back of her head were still in place. Following her up the stairs, Katie noted the worn-out heels of her brown strap pumps and her dress's frayed hemline peeking out from under the coat. Halfway up, both hands gripping the rail, the landlady stopped, regaining her breath while looking in the direction of the lodge before resuming the ascent, her eyes fixing on each next tread.

Elise stood upon the threshold of the pantry; once J. McLoughlin had both feet planted on the deck, the two looked at one another. "Elisabeth Lowrie," the woman stated, matter-of-fact, adjusting her eyeglasses on the bridge of her nose.

"Missus McLoughlin," Elise replied in kind.

J. McLoughlin released the rail and crossed the deck. Elise stepped aside, silently remarking upon the collapsed jowls on the face of the older woman passing into the house.

The landlady sat herself down in the winged, threadbare armchair at the round table and looked around. Katie slipped into one of the straight-backed, cane-bottomed dining chairs.

"Can I get you a cup of tea?" Elise essayed, still standing.

"That'd be fine. Room for milk and sugar, thank you," she said, letting go of her flat-bottomed handbag; its impact on the wooden floor jarred the metal clasp open, exposing to Katie's view paper tissues, cigarettes, a train schedule, and the stubby neck of a chrome flask encased in brown leather. "Be a dear and fetch me an ashtray ... Katie."

“Ahhh....” Elise interjected, pausing between the refrigerator, the stovetop, and the sink. “I’m afraid we don’t smoke in this house.”

When J. McLoughlin removed her gloves—the buttons on each were chipped—and laid one atop the other on the tabletop, Katie saw how the skin on the backs of the woman’s hands, splotted with pink and brown spots among the prominent, empurpled veins, dipped and rose as it traversed the bones; the nails had recently been painted red. “Bring me an ashtray, Katie.”

“But, Missus McLoughlin,” Elise protested, carrying a tea tray to the table, “we really don’t allow smoking in the house. Katie quit years ago and we—”

“Och! Just whose house do you think this is, Elisabeth?”

“Why, what do you mean?”

“Who do you think you are, telling me not to smoke in the house where I was born and raised?” Elise collapsed into the closest dining chair, bent her elbows on the table, and cradled her forehead in her palms. “Don’t tell me you haven’t understood the nature of my business here,” J. McLoughlin continued, shaking her head and dragging her purse up into her lap to extract a cigarette before seeking out the younger woman’s eyes. “And along with that ashtray, a drinking glass with some ice. Please.”

Elise’s labored breathing became audible before she took her hands from her forehead, nodded acquiescence to her daughter then closed her eyes, lowering her forehead back into her palms. Katie fetched a glass with ice and an empty saucer and set the quilted cozy squarely over the brewing teapot.

“Then you tell me. What is the nature of your business here?” Elise inquired, plainly startled by the sight of the landlady taking hold of her flask to pour a generous double-shot of amber liquid over the ice and lighting a cigarette.

“You must’ve read Mister Hudson’s letter, Elisabeth. So you must know I’m expecting Mister Greenbrier to arrive any moment now. He’s going to help me find out what this place is worth.”

“On the real estate market, you mean.”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Jan stated.

“I can’t believe you’d considering selling your family place,” Elise replied.

“And the buildings on it,” J. McLoughlin said and repeated, “and the buildings on it.”

“But how?”

“How what?”

“How could you, I think my mom means,” Katie said.

“That’s exactly what I mean! How could you? Didn’t you just say this is where you were born and raised? This is where your people are buried.”

“By that you don’t mean Mister William McGrath, I hope,” J. McLoughlin quipped. “Listen, Elisabeth, at some point it will become clear to you that this whole place is mine: this house, the old lodge, the store, the hotel, all of it. And I intend to sell all of it, ‘from sea to summit’ as the drummers used to say. I’m going to turn it all into money and enjoy one last fling at a grander style of living than you can probably even imagine. I certainly don’t intend to spend the end of my life sliding any farther down the skid road than I already have, I can tell you that much right now.”

“But it’s the McLoughlin family place. It’s your family’s history.”

“And I hope you’ll remember that as we proceed. McLoughlin’s my last name, not yours. My lan’! To think that for as long as I’ve been off this place, you’ve been on it.”

“Yes, I have!”

“And because you’ve lived here longer than I ever did I suppose ... och! I halfway expected this to happen.” J. McLoughlin brought the glass to her cracked, dry lips. Katie rose, raised the sash of the double-hung window over the sink, and propped it open with a wooden stirring spoon. Returning to the table, she poured tea for two.

“But what will we do?” Elise cried out, the back of her hands splayed out on the tabletop, her palms to the ceiling, her head thrown back, her eyes rolling.

“If you mean after the sale, I can’t tell you. If you mean today, I assume you’ll be available to answer any questions that may arise when Mister—”

“NO! Haven’t you a heart? This is our home! Don’t you understand? I raised Kaitlin here. She’s raising her son here. My son is buried here. This place is all we have.”

“Not for long,” J. McLoughlin remarked, draining her glass and tapping the first ash off her cigarette. “And in the meantime there’s the glaring matter of back rent for your use of the store. I have reason to believe that you’ve been responsible for the unauthorized occupation of that building for Lord knows how long.”

“Since 1950, as a matter of fact, ever since we started the Guild.”

“What ‘guild’ is that, Elisabeth?”

“What guild?”

“Yes. What ‘guild’ are you talking about?”

“Our North Coast Potters Guild.”

“She’s the executive director,” Katie volunteered.

“Then your mother knows perfectly well about such things as leases and rent. 1950. That’s almost fifteen years, isn’t it? All without paying a dime. I believe that’s what’s called ‘squatting’ in common parlance.”

“We’re not criminals!” Elise protested. “Mister McGrath knew about it and he never asked us for a dime. Not once did he object to our using the building. We have always paid for the utilities and the upkeep and we even added on—”

“—well well well,” J. McLoughlin interrupted, snuffing out her half-finished cigarette. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard of any agreement as sweet as that one. But the fact is that so-called ‘guild’ of yours is in serious arrears.”

“You wouldn’t!” Elsie snapped.

“Ma-aaam!”

“But we haven’t been hiding anything from anybody, Katie. The whole North Coast knows our pottery studio and sales room have

been operating out of that building for years, making and selling arts and crafts. We've been advertising in *The Sentinel* for the last decade, for goodness sake!"

"The last decade? Then there's some accounting to be done, isn't there? Not to mention the unheard-of low rent you've been paying on this place since the beginning of time. Time to pay the piper I'd say."

"Time to pay the piper...?"

"Yes, Elisabeth Lowrie. There's such a thing as 'the going rate,' I'm sure you know. And to have the run of the store for absolutely nothing for fifteen years! I wish I could've been living that long for a song. That's one free ride coming to an end."

"Free ride' indeed! You sit here, land rich—"

"—and cash poor. Were you about to say 'cash poor,' Elisabeth? I hope that's what you were about to say."

"Turning your back on the place for I don't know how long!"

"It'd be about forty-five years since I bid old Cliffport adieu. Forty-four years, to be exact."

"And never came back once in all that time!" Elise declared.

"Oh, that's not so," Jan rebutted. "I came back once or twice—"

"When?"

"When Mother died. When we first met, Elisabeth."

"And then when it came time to bury your father—"

"Ma-aaam!" Katie interrupted. "Come on! You said you wouldn't—"

"BUT I WILL!" Elise declaimed, slamming both palms down on the tabletop. "Your mother and your father, Aunt Thea and Uncle John, both of whom I took care of until the very end, both of whom I—"

"—WHY YOU...!" J. McLoughlin spat out. "I'll have you and your daughter and all your goddamn tinkers and potters evicted overnight if you ever DARE raise your voice at me like that again!"

Elise raked the legs of her chair backwards and came to standing.

“Ma-aaam! Cool it!” Katie pled, also rising to her feet.

“Curse us if you like, Janice McLoughlin, but believe you me: Sherriff Pendleton would never in a million years force us off this place!” Elise declared.

“Oh, criminy!” J. McLoughlin grinned. “Did you say ‘Sherriff Pendleton’? I’m glad I’m not the only one who gets confused. Why, that old dodger was already old as Methuselah when I was growing up. He can’t still be kicking up dust.”

“I think he’s the nephew,” Katie chimed in.

“Maybe the great-great-nephew,” the landlady countered. “I see the acorn didn’t fall far from that tree.”

All three became aware of a black Mercedes-Benz sedan plowing down the driveway leading in from Grade Road.

“I think this is absolutely monstrous of you and I never want to speak to you again!” Elise declared before stomping through the kitchen and slamming the door on her way out the pantry. Katie started to chase after her but turned back upon realizing the importance of someone being there to represent their interests.

Mr. Greenbrier knocked on the front porch door. Admitted into the large main room, the realtor stepped right over to the landlady and shook her hand, his eyes simultaneously assessing the interior and the younger woman present. He seemed relieved to find himself in an informal situation, for he loosened his tie, draped his navy blue blazer over the back of a straight back chair, and sat down at the round table with his creased brown slacks crossed at ease. While conversing with his client, it became apparent to Katie that the pair had never met in person, however often they may have corresponded by mail or spoken over the telephone.

In the course of their exchange, Mr. Greenbrier volunteered that he judged an outing to the neighboring Cummings’ home ranch to be an occasion of such significance that he himself would participate, once the date were set; after all, he concluded, the Cummings Land and Cattle Company did boast the greatest acreage of any farm or ranch operation in North Santa Cruz County and would likely take a serious look at close-by property for sale.

When the realtor learned that the elder Lowrie would not be available, he became all business, focusing his attention on the lean twenty-nine-year-old in blue jeans, a flannel shirt, and cowboy boots. Acknowledging that she had been the one to discover the corpse of Mrs. McLoughlin's late husband, Katie recognized that Greenbrier had done his homework and would be comprehensively pursuing his case on the landowner's behalf. He asked if the long-term tenants had come across any documents referencing the property per se: contracts, deeds of sale, as-built drawing plans, etcetera. Katie reported that anything like that was probably destroyed years prior when several boxes of Cliffport memorabilia from the old dairy, the Cliffport Store, and the Mackenzie Lodge had been lost to water damage in the attic. Mr. Greenbrier requested that any locks blocking access to the property be opened then mentioned, as if in passing, that some sort of art gallery and store appeared to be in business at the bottom of Grade Road; those premises should also be opened for his inspection, for he planned looking inside them on his way out. Katie explained that if they expected to go all the way up to the property's ridgeline, there were indeed gates that would need unlocking, but the fire road to the millpond would not be passable in the man's low-slung luxury sedan. Indicating his slacks and tasseled loafers, Mr. Greenbrier assured her it was not his intention to turn their outing into an expedition. "I'll have my people do the Sierra Club hike in the future. Surveyors will be on site to update the lot lines. And other qualified professionals will need to inspect the property. And then tradesmen to make repairs, of course. You can expect plenty of visitors in the weeks ahead."

Once Katie understood that her presence would not be required, or even welcomed, during the realtor's cursory tour, she excused herself to unlock the lowermost gates. Mr. Greenbrier rose to his feet, his eyes sizing her up—transparently undressing her. "And do lock up any big guard dogs," the man joked, glancing at the beagle who rose from the rug as Katie prepared to take her leave, "and Ferdinand the Bull. We won't be carrying our guns and swords." He suddenly dropped his smile as he asked Katie if she were in position to give his

client a ride to the San Jose station in time for the five o'clock train back to San Francisco; apologizing for the imposition, he professed that he had another pressing engagement. Katie agreed to be back by three-thirty and exited, leaving the two strangers alone in the house.

After failing to find Elise at the store, Katie fetched her son from Josie's and drove back home. The Mercedes was gone and the landlady was alone, seated in the leather club chair staring at the fireless hearth, a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"Oh, good, you're back. Mister Greenbrier left a few minutes ago."

Katie presented Donald Duncan Lowrie then sat at the table while the nine-year-old boy got himself a snack.

"I'm sorry Elisabeth is so upset," J. McLoughlin said, raising her voice without turning to look at them. "I am sorry. But I'm afraid I have to go through with this. I've come to a hard pass."

"My mom can get pretty emotional."

J. McLoughlin gripped the front of the broad armrests and twisted her head to locate the speaker before settling back into the deep seat. "Well, for everyone's sake, I hope your mother's not determined to make this thing harder than it needs to be. The whole legal folderol is one helluva long drawn out process as it is. I'm only doing it because I have to. I have nowhere else to turn. What'd Elisabeth have to say anyway?"

Katie walked over to the hearth and noticed the bruises and pale pallor of the backs of the woman's bare forearms resting on the armrests' cracked leather. "I never found her."

"I'd like to keep this whole damned thing civil but I've made up my mind. I've been driven to the threshold of the poorhouse and I'm not crossing over. Och, I'd die in peace tomorrow if anybody'd let me."

J. McLoughlin took a swallow from her glass; Katie remained silent; standing beside the fridge, Donald ate some bread.

“Her Aunt Thea and Uncle John indeed! I don’t know why Elisabeth thinks she can get on her high horse and ride all over me about me and my people. Does she know what I was going through when I left here? Or after? That’d be another story now wouldn’t it? Anyway, she’s gotten what she needed for a good long spell. So what if I’m not going to die and be buried in the family plot, what of it? She doesn’t have any power of attorney over me or any say about this place at all. Let her buy it from me, ha! How about that? If your mother wants this place so badly, let her make a business proposal. I’m sorry but she’ll have to pay me for it like anybody else. I’m not going to be cut out of this one too, not after all what’s happened to me in the last ten years. My lan’! Coming back to the homeplace and being treated like an outsider. What an insult! Who does she think she is? Oh nuts to her, I say. She’s the interloper around here, not me. Let’s just go, shall we? Take me to San Jose.”

“My mother thought you might want to visit Chapel Grove before you leave.”

“She did, did she?”

“We have time.”

“Can we drive there?”

“Not all the way.”

“Forget it then. With these hips of mine? Anyway, I can die without seeing that cemetery again. Oh, I know I know. I sound like some monster to you too. Young man? Yes you, Donnie boy. Do I sound like a monster to you?” The boy looked at his mother. “Oh, never mind. But let anybody who asks know this: just because I was born here doesn’t mean I have to die here, does it? What do you think, Mister Donald?”

“About what?”

“Do I look like I have horns and a tail?”

“What?”

“Never mind, never mind, let’s just go now. Here,” she said, offering Katie a business card, “Mister Greenbrier left this for you.”

“Can you give us your phone number, Missus McLoughlin? I’ll write it on the back.”

“My phone number? What for?”

“In case we need it ... for any reason.”

“Oh, I see. Well ... just now ... no, I can’t....” she mumbled. “There’s been some mix-up with the telephone numbers in San Francisco, you see. When it all gets ironed out I’ll be assigned a new one. I just don’t know what it will be ... or when....”

Studying the stained fingers of the glove in the woman’s grip, the taped eyeglasses, and the worse-for-wear handbag lodged in her lap, Katie detected a material poverty, as chronic as their own, and deduced that their landlady simply could not afford a phone.

“You can contact me through Mister Hudson, if you must.”

“Sure. And you just call us when you want,” Katie concluded, jotting down their house phone number on a scrap of paper. “Here’s our number, in case you don’t have it already.”

The two women looked into each other’s eyes.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Katie replied. “Now get your Giant’s cap, DD. You’re coming.”

“What’s this?” the woman asked, surveying the weathered patina of the banged-up ranch truck. “We’re not going over the hill in this old workhorse, are we?”

“That’s all there is, Missus McLoughlin.”

Dickens the Dog stood on alert, tail raised, poised to hop onto the flat bed, but Katie told her son that the dog would stay home. Donald climbed up into the cab and left the passenger door open.

“Slide over, DD.”

“Oh, my my,” the passenger declared, assessing the cab’s side step. “With this old jalopy and that goat and those chickens, looks to me like not much has changed around here. Pretty soon you’ll have an old milk cow named Betsy bawling at the back door. OK. Better give the old lady a hand ... up we go!”

At the end of the driveway, Katie turned downhill. “You’re taking me to San Jose, aren’t you? Why aren’t we going up through the curves and out of Ben Lomond?”

“Bear Creek, you mean?” Katie replied, raising her voice above the engine noise. “Highway 17’s the best way over the hill nowadays. Unless you want to get stuck in the mountains in this rig and miss your train.”

“Oh no you don’t! You just get me there the best way you know how. Right, Mister Donald? Say, scoot on over, would you?”

“Move closer to me, DD. Watch your legs!”

Katie cruised past the gallery and store at the bottom of Grade Road and, without coming to a stop, steered the vehicle onto Route One. “Oh my, oh my,” J. McLoughlin spoke, “once upon a time I loved it in the mailroom inside there better than anywhere. All the magazines and newspapers. The Hearst newspaper. The Chronicle and Collier’s and McCall’s. Sunset. There were rod and gun magazines and the fishing news, sure. But so many more interesting things came through than those.”

“Really,” KT mused aloud, working the truck up through its gears. “Like what?”

“Harper’s was one. The Atlantic. The London Illustrated News. Imagine! Of course, those all went right up to Mackenzie’s Lodge. I didn’t get a chance to read those, mind you, but just handling them opened my eyes. That’s where I first saw the advertisements for Mister David McConnell’s California Perfume Company,” she added.

“You don’t say....” Katie murmured, exchanging glances with her son.

“Have you got enough room for your two stilts there, Donnie boy?” the elderly woman asked.

“Yeah, I guess....”

“Then how about giving me some?”

“Move over more, DD,” Katie said. “More this way.”

“Thank you, young feller. Say, have you ever ridden on a locomotive?”

“What?”

“A locomotive, a train. Oh come on, you know what I mean.”

“I think so...”

“Well, I’ve ridden on lots of ‘em and some of the nicest.”

“I took the train across Canada once,” Katie volunteered.

“Across Canada, did you say?”

“Saw a lot of beautiful countryside.”

“Did you find it to be true or didn’t you, how civilized a way to travel it can be on a Canadian train? The British-born people we met in Victoria, they were all very nice. They were surprised the boy was so very well behaved. Such a little gentleman for an American boy of nine or ten or...”

“I’m almost ten.”

“I think she’s talking about somebody else, DD.”

“I’m talking about another boy, Mister Donald. They didn’t know he’d had his manners drilled into him by yours truly. Some of the most civilized people we met in Victoria had some silly idea that San Francisco was just a cow town. And Oakland? Why, they thought Oakland was where the horse manure was shipped across the Bay. And they were partly right about that, I suppose. Did you say you’ve never been on a train, young man?”

“I forget.”

“Oh ... I see. You forget, do you?”

“Mom, have I?”

“When you were little, there was a train in the park and at the zoo....”

“She means a real train, Mom.”

“I guess not like the ones she’s describing, no.”

J. McLoughlin fell silent, removing her glasses and slipping them into a cloth pouch before closing her eyes. While ascending Laurel Grade, she resumed speaking aloud yet—with her eyes still closed—as if to herself. “When I came back after Mother died, I was surprised to see Elisabeth on the place. I learned from Dad how she’d

nursed Mother through the cancer. And I must admit, I was relieved he'd have a companion to help him through his grief and last years. Then sure enough, your mother accompanied him the whole way, right up until the very end. I don't deny that. I'd like to tell her ... but ... well, right or wrong, I was off on another track and Elisabeth took my place, when you get right down to it. She just took my place."

Donald looked at his mother then stared up at the lady to his right.

"Don't know what I'm talking about, do you, you little Hielandman? It's your grandmother I'm talking about, my mother, my father, and your grandmother. Och, Katie! When I left Cliffport I left forever. I only came down to visit that once or twice, really. I know that must sound coldhearted but that's just the way it went. I had to be absolutely sure that William McGrath would not be anywhere nearby when I was here. There was plenty else driving me off the place but my marriage to that animal was the last straw. No, becoming his wife and all, that was the straw that broke the camel's back." She coughed, used a tissue paper, and put on her eyeglasses, gazing out the window. "We're about as close to the summit as we get, aren't we?"

"Yup."

"Could you pull over up ahead?"

"In that lot there?"

"Yes, over there, if you think we have time."

"We have time. It's all downhill from here."

Katie drew the pickup close to a knee-high mortared rock wall running the perimeter of an unpaved lot offering a panorama vista of redwoods and Douglas firs cloaking the ridges and slopes in waves of green trending westward toward the Pacific Ocean. "Give me a minute, just a minute," J. McLoughlin said, pushing hard on the door handle and, unassisted, stepping down. Katie turned off the engine and watched her passenger favoring one leg as she walked along the wall then turned her back, bending over her handbag—obviously getting at her flask before straightening up and turning back around to light a cigarette.

“Who is that weird lady, Mom?”

“Don’t know everything about her, DD. She was born in Cliffport a long long time ago. She married Bamboo Bill when they were young. She grew up in the house.”

“What house?”

“Our house. Her house.”

While J. McLoughlin was heading back toward the truck, Katie jumped out and waited by the passenger door, wondering whether the alcohol or the “bum hips” had the greater influence upon the woman’s irregular gait.

“That little boy I was talking about a while ago, he was nice to be with, Donald,” the landlady said, using Katie’s support to work her way up onto the bench seat.

“He was?”

“Like you.”

“Like me?”

“Sure, like you.”

“Can I ask you somethin’?”

“Go right ahead, young feller. You ask away.”

“Was there really a camel in Cliffport?”

“A camel? No, no, there was no camel. But there were men who gave off odors far worse than any camel ever did.” She turned her eyes toward him. “They say Mac’s Store’s first owners used to keep a bobcat inside.”

“A bobcat?”

“What they say. Kept it in a cage by day and let it out at night.”

“Why’d they let it out?”

“To do the mousing, I suppose. And scare away the thieves.”

“There were thieves?”

“Thieves, robbers, burglars, you know. They’re always some of those around.”

“Did you ever see it?”

“See what?”

“That bobcat.”

“No and I’m glad I didn’t. I never did like cats, Donnie. I grew up frightened to tears by all the cats living in the barn and in the egg room below the store. Say, maybe they were descendents of that bobcat or a mountain lion.”

“There was a mountain lion?”

“When was that?” Katie inquired, stamping on the starter pedal after her passenger had shoved her cigarette into the ashtray and Donald had flipped it closed so that its chrome-plated front was flush with the rest of the paneled portion of the dash.

“That was a long time ago.”

Once they were in the flow of downhill traffic, J. McLoughlin spoke again. “Katie, I can’t tell you. This has been quite a shock.”

“What has? Your husband’s death?”

“Oh no no no, not that. This visit I mean. You see, after Dad died in twenty-nine, for years I thought Cliffport was just another ghost town on the coast. I assumed the place was deserted, gone all to hell. Figured the buildings had been deeded to the termites or hobos lived in them or they all just burned down, you know how it always goes. It was only later, when that Missus Perkins started calling on Bill, that’s when I learned Elisabeth was still living on the place and that her husband’d left her. Up till then I had no idea she’d stayed on all those years and raised a family there. She married some difficult man named Karr. Karr—wasn’t that his name?”

“My father, you mean?” Katie asked.

“Oh, good Joseph! There I go again. He was your father, wasn’t he?”

“Who was whose father?” Donald piped up.

“Your grandfather, laddie. Oh, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary! I’m sorry, Katie.”

“That’s OK.”

“Missus Perkins told me your mother went back to her maiden name after the divorce. That’s why I...”

“Yup, she did that. Changed my last name at the same time too.”

“I only learned bits and pieces from the little notes Missus Perkins felt compelled to send me every year or so. Everything I heard about Cliffport I got from her. How after the Korean War that crazy old coot moved down into the basement of the lodge. I thought, Holy mackerel! He’s finally gone off his rocker! Of course, your mother would never believe me if I told her I had no idea it would turn out this way, me being the sole surviving heir and all. I’m not sure you believe me either but it’s absolutely true. No idea in the world.” She pulled another cigarette from her bag; Donald flipped the ashtray open and punched in the cigarette lighter. “There was never any reason for me to go back to Cliffport. Why would I? Once you’re off a place long enough, people don’t even know you. They treat you like an out-of-towner, not a member of the one of the pioneer families. The sons and daughters of the people who marry in or move in, they just don’t know a thing about it.” She used the lighter and cleared her throat. “Anymore I don’t believe there’s an old timer left who’d even remember who I am. People like me from the way past? I doubt it. Katie?”

“Yeah?”

“When you get back, tell your mother I’ve decided to postpone doing anything about the back rent owed on the store. Or raising the house rent either.” She looked at the driver. “Did you hear what I just said?”

“I sure did.”

“They’ll be no increases for now. I can’t touch that money yet anyway and I can see you’re not exactly the Rockefellers. We’ll just leave it as is till my next visit. I’ll be down again, you know, after I hear from Mister Greenbrier and his people. I’ll have to see how it goes in the San Francisco court. We can settle up on the rent money and all that later. You tell her that.”

“OK.”

“And tell her maybe I’m not such a monster after all.”

Donald stretched up to whisper into his mother’s ear.

“Speak so we can all hear you, Donald Duncan,” J. McLoughlin declared, staring off. “No need for secrets, far as I can see.”

Donald settled back in the bench seat, staring at his knees.

“I’ll be sure to tell her,” Katie concluded.

J. McLoughlin reseated her handbag in her lap. “Tell her I do have a heart, even if it’s been broken more than once. Oh hell’s bells, Katie! I’m at the end of my rope and I’m dangling there till McGrath’s Social Security payments kick my way. Those are being held back by the Administrator too and the courts and all those lawyers, goddamn their eyes! I’ve about run out of things to sell. My storage downstairs at Nine-ninety-nine is almost empty. When I get back up to the City, I sure hope to find out my man in Maiden Lane has found a buyer for the last chinaware. That would put me in some cash.”

“Nine-ninety-nine?”

“Nine-ninety-nine Zelkova Street, where I live.”

“Oh. I see.”

“And where very soon I’ll run out of anything else to put up for sale. Don’t you have any idea what I’m talking about?”

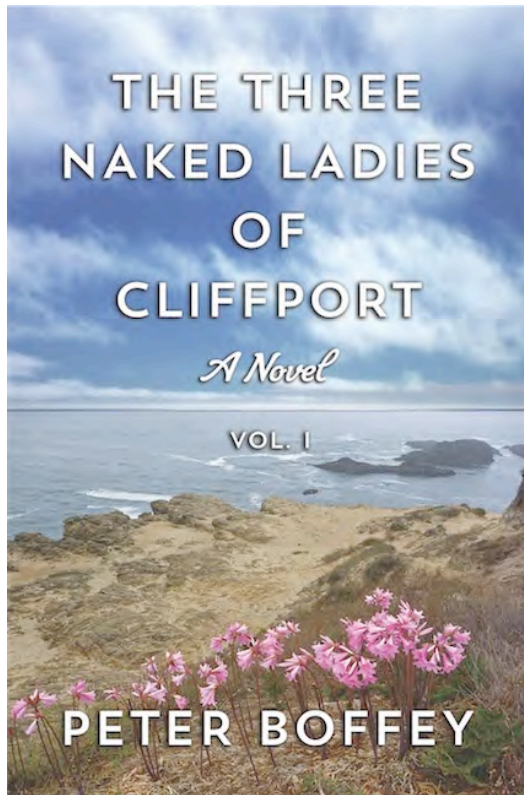
“I think I do.”

“The rent checks, his Social Security checks—those are just a trickle of what’s to come.”

“What do you mean?” Katie asked.

“What do I mean? Moneywise is what I mean. When the estate is mine and the property sale proceeds, that’s when the dam breaks, Katie. That’s when I come into some real dough! And one helluva long time comin’ too. Say, are we almost there or not?”

Reaching over Donald’s left leg to wrestle with the stick shift, Katie glanced sideways at the woman’s gloved fingers fidgeting with the old handbag’s clasp. “Almost there,” she replied, eyeing the first expressway exit signs into downtown San Jose.



Three single mothers of three bastard children from three generations claim Cliffport - a ghost town on Santa Cruz County's northern coast - as their home. In letters, phone calls, journals, and conversations, we hear the distinct and disparate voices of these strong-willed women - each tough on the outside yet sensitive within.

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