

The Case: a detective story

Senior Creative Writing Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Creative Writing at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2009

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1 THE DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIOUS INCIDENTS THAT OCCURRED
IN THE PAST BUT WHEN INVESTIGATED
PROMISE A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Jones was a Detective for the Department of Mysterious Incidents That Occurred In the Past But When Investigated Promise a Better Future, a small but—in Jones’ mind—important division in the state government. The focus and goal of the D.M.I.T.O.P.B.W.I.P.A.B.F. was to investigate those mysterious incidents, however large or small, that occurred in citizens’ pasts, that were responsible for tainting their present lives. For many, the past was much happier than the present. The future of each citizen who had a case investigated was guaranteed to be much brighter than their rather bleak present, which was overshadowed by memories of a happier past. In some instances, citizens had a future to look forward to that would actually be brighter and happier than their happy pasts.

Jones believed he was meant for the job. As a child, he dreamt of how great it would be to be a Detective for the D.M.I.T.O.P.B.W.I.P.A.B.F., and he worked towards it behind his house. He would walk out into the woods wearing one of his father’s old jackets and a fedora hat. One jacket pocket held a magnifying glass, the other a notebook and pen. He’d press a candy cigarette between his lips, pull out the magnifying glass and look at sticks with it. He’d jot down notes while he investigated and from the notes he’d try to figure out what kind of happy past the dead, dried sticks were connected to. He’d

try to figure out what went wrong and caused them to become dead, dried-up sticks lying on the ground in the woods.

Eventually, Jones did become a Detective. As a Detective for the Department of Mysterious Incidents That Occurred In The Past But When Investigated Promise A Brighter Future, he dreamt of the happiness he would feel when he solved a case. Jones worked on each assignment with zeal and intensity until another came along. The new assignment would distract Jones, and he would forget about the previous one and direct his enthusiasm towards the new project.

Despite his enthusiasm, while working on each assigned case, Jones couldn't help but feel a nostalgic twinge that he may have been happier sniffing and staring at sticks in the woods as a child.

Luckily, though, Jones was easily distracted and uncompromisingly optimistic, so when that nostalgic twinge started to twang inside his gut like a guitar string, it never lasted long. His spirits would quickly brighten and he would begin to dream of the cases he would solve in the future. It was this dreamy tendency towards distraction that first led Jones to The Case.

2 THE OLD LADY'S MISSING GARDEN GNOME

Jones reported to work one morning and saw a new report on his desk. A pink Stick-It Note with his name written on it had been stuck on the front page. He picked it up and read quickly through it. An old woman had called to the Department with the disappearance of a garden gnome. Jones' borrowed a Department Vehicle and drove to the old lady's house.

When he arrived, an old woman wearing a purple terrycloth bathrobe answered the door. She had her grey hair wrapped tightly around large plastic curlers and her hands held the handles of a walker.

"Hello, ma'am," said Jones. "I'm Detective Jones from the Department of Mysterious Incidents That Occurred In The Past But When Investigated Promise a Brighter Future. Are you Mrs. Calloway?"

"Yes, sir." she said. "I am."

"I'm aware that you filed a report with us," said Jones. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about it." He held up his badge and looked into the woman's eyes, which were magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses.

"Oh, do come in," she said. "I'm so glad you're here."

The aroma of cat urine and shower mold struck Jones when he stepped into Mrs. Calloway's house. On the way into the living room, he counted six cats. He counted five more once in the living room.

“Won’t you have a seat?” said Mrs. Calloway. She directed Jones by rattling her walker in the direction of the couch.

“Thank you,” said Jones. He pulled a notebook from his trench coat and tried to brush away the cat hair and crumbs that covered the couch. A large cloud of fur and dander blossomed into the air. Jones swatted it like Babe Ruth would a baseball. With the cloud sailing safely across to the other side of the room, Jones looked down. The blanket of debris was hardly diminished. He sat in it, crossed his legs and pulled out a pen.

Mrs. Calloway smiled at Jones. It looked like a struggle for Mrs. Calloway to pull the smile across her face. Jones concluded she must be out of practice. He smiled back politely and thought that the missing gnome probably made it difficult for her to smile. He then thought about how much more difficult it would be for Mrs. Calloway to keep her dentures in her mouth once he cracked the case. She wouldn’t be able to stop smiling.

“Would you like some tea and cookies?” asked Mrs. Calloway.

“That would great,” said Jones.

“I’ll be right back with them,” she said. “You just sit here and make yourself comfortable.” Mrs. Calloway rose and a cat hopped onto the back of the sofa. It wrapped its tail around Jones’ face so that it rested between his nose and upper lip like the mustache of Wyatt Earp.

Jones struggled with the cats while Mrs. Calloway prepared the snacks in the kitchen. He pushed the mustache cat from the back of the sofa. Just as its paws hit the floor, a different cat hopped into his lap. He pushed that cat to the floor and felt another rubbing its face on his hand. He brushed it away and the mustache cat returned with a

friend who kneaded Jones' left shoulder blade with its claws. Jones shook his head and shoved both cats to the floor.

So it went with the cats until Jones heard Mrs. Calloway's walker scraping across the floor. A tray with a plate of cookies and two cups of tea, cream, spoons, and sugar wobbled on top of the walker. Jones rose to his feet to help the old woman carry the snack tray and three cats fell from his lap to the floor.

"You're so sweet," she said as they sat down. "Albert, God rest his soul, would have adored you."

"Let me ask you about that garden gnome, Mrs. Calloway," said Jones. He picked up a cup of tea and a cookie from the tray. "When did you first notice its disappearance?" He bit down on the cookie with his front teeth. The cookie held firm. He looked at Mrs. Calloway. Her eyes were closed and her mouth had gone slack. Jones bit the cookie again, this time with his back teeth, and a chunk broke off. He moved it around the inside of his mouth with his tongue and let it rest between his teeth. It tasted like Play-Doh. Jones tried to chew the cookie, but it was like trying to chew a jawbreaker with jellybeans for teeth. He bit down hard and a crunch sounded. Pain shot through Jones' mouth and he groaned. Mrs. Calloway opened her eyes.

Jones reached for a napkin from the tray.

"It had to be some time ago," she said. "It always seemed to be there before Albert's passing. So, less than seven years ago."

"Mmhmm," said Jones. He spat into the napkin and saw a piece of his molar beside the chunk of cookie. He tucked the napkin into his jacket and took some notes in his notebook:

*Gnome gone now
- Husband - Albert - Dead
- 7 years
- Gnome gone less than
7 years

★ GO TO DENTIST ★

“Bryan used to call every Sunday,” said Mrs. Calloway, “and Mandy called Fridays. I never noticed the garden gnome missing then, either.”

“Interesting,” said Jones. “Are those your children?”

Jones jotted down a note while an orange cat swiped at his pen.

“They are, but I haven’t talked to either of them in...what is it, three years now?” said Mrs. Calloway. “Yes, three years. So it was probably three years ago—give or take—I first noticed it had gone.”

Jones scribbled in his pad and said, “You haven’t seen the gnome since?”

“I haven’t,” said Mrs. Calloway.

“When was the last time you remember seeing the gnome?” He looked into his teacup and noticed little swollen white things that looked like bread crumbs floating in the tea. Dry crust lined the rim of the cup. Jones frowned and put it back on the tray.

“I don’t know,” said Mrs. Calloway. “But I remember things being so good when it was around. I didn’t always pay the best attention to that gnome, because it was hidden behind some bushes, but I was fond of it.”

“We’re all fond of something, Mrs. Calloway,” said Jones. “But you can’t be everywhere all the time. I understand.”

“You’re so sweet,” said Mrs. Calloway. She reached for another cookie and offered it to Jones. He declined, saying he didn’t want to spoil the dinner his wife was making that night.

“What does your son Bryan look like?” he asked.

“Oh, he’s so handsome,” said Mrs. Calloway. “He was a cute little boy, too.” She rose from her chair and hobbled over to a bookshelf. She picked up a silver picture frame and handed it to Jones.

“That’s Bryan there on the left,” she said. “Beside him is Albert, and that’s Mandy beside Albert.”

Jones studied the family portrait. It had been taken some time ago. In the photograph, Albert appeared no older than 40, and Mandy and Brian were both in their teens. Bryan was obviously the younger brother. He looked uncomfortable in the suit he wore. The sun reflected off his heavily greased and combed hair, and the pimples on his cheeks looked like they may have been the source of some childhood trouble. Mandy was thin and looked as if she could have been a ballerina. Albert smiled at the camera. A pen stuck from his jacket. The family stood outside the house Jones now sat in. Behind them grew a well-trimmed but thin and spotty hedge. Between a gap in the bushes, a garden

gnome smiled at the camera. A pointy red hat rested on top of its head and its hands held a wooden hammer.

“A handsome family,” said Jones. “And is this the garden gnome that’s disappeared, Mrs. Calloway?” He pointed to it and Mrs. Calloway sighed.

“That’s the one, Detective Jones,” she said. “I miss it. I really do feel like things were just so much better before it went missing. I blame the disappearance for the way things are now.”

Jones nodded.

“I’m not a young woman, Jones,” said Mrs. Calloway. “I’m not pretending to be. I don’t know if I’ll ever see it again. But it would just be so nice to know where it went. Just so I could live the rest of my days in peace.”

“Well, Mrs. Calloway,” said Jones. “I can tell you this: I’ll do everything I can to help you in regards to the gnome.” He placed the portrait on the coffee table and rose. A cat jumped into the spot where Jones had sat. It clawed at his pants and Jones kicked it. “I need to run down to the Department to work on some leads. Thanks for your time, Mrs. Calloway. We’ll be in touch soon.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” said Mrs. Calloway. She followed Jones to the door. “You really don’t know how much it means to me that you’re doing this.”

“Well,” said Jones, “You’ve got things to look forward to, Mrs. Calloway. Have a good day.” Jones waved to Mrs. Calloway as he walked down the driveway. He waved once more as he drove off towards the Department in the Department Vehicle.

3 THE ARCHIVES FELT LIKE A CATHEDRAL

Jones felt certain that a case like Mrs. Calloway's might have occurred in the past. He thought he'd check The Archives to see when he returned to The Department.

The entrance to the Archives Room was in the back of the low-ceilinged D.M.I.T.O.P.B.W.I.P.A.B.F. Every time Jones stepped through the door of the Archives Room, he felt as if had been transported to a different place. The room felt like a cathedral. Stone walls rose to meet a vaulted ceiling. High, stained-glass windows filtered in the sunlight. Sometime in the past, someone had planted a grove of apple trees in the back of the Archives. Birds nested in the twisted branches. The limbs of the trees drooped, heavy with the weight of fat red apples. Through the grove wound a stream. Silver minnows darted in and out and around the stream's smooth stones.

Jones entered the Archives and stopped. He opened up his arms. Bits of dust sparkled in the golden shafts of sunlight. The gurgle of the stream and the chirps of birds echoed through the hall. A smile crept over his face. He began to wander through the Archives and every footstep echoed. The *clack clack clack* of leather soles on the decorative tile floors mingled with the tweets of birds and the trickle of the stream.

Jones wandered through the rows of dust covered filing cabinets with wide eyes. He ran his fingers along them as he passed by. He stopped when he came to a cabinet that said Missing Pets and Other Objects With Eyes That People Attribute Value To. He opened the cabinet and the smell of old paper rushed into his nostrils.

A bird landed on his shoulder.

“Tweet, Tweet, Chirp,” it said.

“Cock-a-doodle-do,” said Jones. He smiled and the bird flitted away.

His scanned the tabs of the files. They said things like Cat In Barn, Dog House, Deer Head with Marble Eyes, and Donkey Stew.

Jones’ mind began to wander as he flipped through the dusty folders. He began to imagine the first Detective that had solved the first case similar to his. Then he began to imagine how he would solve Mrs. Calloway’s case. First, he would collect clues that led to the missing garden gnome. In his daydream, the clues led him to a gang’s lair.

4 I BELIEVE YOU'VE GOT SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T BELONG TO YOU

The rest of Jones' daydream went like this:

The lair was in the basement below a back-alley Chinese takeout place. The night was dark and the streets were glazed over with fresh rainwater. Light from cars and windows and neon signs sparkled on the slick pavement. Jones walked down the alley and his shoes splashed in dirty puddles. He saw the basement entrance next to a dumpster. A rat scurried by. Jones opened the door and lit a cigarette. A fluorescent light flickered and hummed above him. He peered at the stairs and stepped down.

At the bottom, Jones came to a black metal door. Taped to it was a sign with a skull and crossbones drawn on it that read "Keep Out!" He puffed on his cigarette, held his ear to the door and heard muffled laughter and loud music. Jones tried to turn the doorknob but it was locked. He took his hand from the door, lifted his leg, grunted, and kicked. The lock shattered. The door flew open and crashed against the wall. Bits of the busted lock fell to the floor.

Jones looked into the room. The music screeched to a halt. The gang members had been cleaning their guns and sharpening their knives. They stopped and looked up. Jones dropped his cigarette onto the carpeted floor and stubbed it out with the toe of his shoe. On a coffee table in the center of the room, next to a bowl of cheese balls, stood Mrs. Calloway's missing garden gnome.

"I believe you've got something that doesn't belong to you," said Jones.

He spat onto the floor and squinted his eyes.

The leader of the gang, a 300-pound man with a shaved head and a voice as high and glassy as a canary's, who was known only as 'T-Bone Slim,' stood up. He cracked his knuckles and said, "*Motherfucker, you must be crazy. I'll give you five seconds to get out of here or I'm gonna kick your ass!*"

"Not without the thing I came for," said Jones. He nodded his head towards the garden gnome. "There's a special old lady who forgot to feed her goldfish last night because of your crime."

T-Bone Slim's neck tensed and bulged.

"*Now you've got three seconds, fool,*" he said. "*Three...Two...One.*"

Jones stared at T-Bone Slim. "The gnome," he growled.

"*I'm gonna fuck you up,*" said T-Bone Slim.

Thunder cracked and the roof of the lair caved in. Rain fell into the room in sheets. Lightning flashed and sizzled through the sky.

The gang members rose and rushed Jones. Jones pulled out a bullwhip. He cracked it once and a battle ensued. In four minutes time, Jones single handedly whipped and hog-tied every gang member. He piled their bodies up in the corner of the lair and took the garden gnome from the table. Outside, sirens wailed.

"That's the Paddy Wagon," said Jones. He reached down, grabbed a handful of cheese balls and tossed them into his mouth. He began to chew and said, "You won't see the sun shine for a long time boys."

"*I want my Mommy!*" cried T-Bone Slim.

The other gang members—the ones Jones had left conscious—whimpered and groaned.

Jones lit another cigarette and brushed the orange cheese coating from his fingers.

“See you scumbags in the slammer,” he said as he walked out of the door and up the stairs to the alley.

5 THE CASE IS NEVER CLOSED UNTIL IT'S SOLVED

Jones' daydream ended with him returning the garden gnome to the grateful Mrs. Calloway and declining to have cookies with her. He stopped flipping through the files and looked down at the one he had landed on. The folder was marked: The Case. Over 'The Case,' the word UNSOLVED had been stamped in bright red ink. The word UNSOLVED had been stamped over the word CLOSED.

Jones pulled the file out, flipped quickly through it, and stuck it under his arm.

"The Case is never CLOSED until it's SOLVED," he said.

He thought he should show Lieutenant Quincy.

Jones shuffled through the corridors of the Archives Room, picked an apple from a tree, and headed back into the main suite of the Department. He waved a quick hello to the secretary Miss Veronica and stopped in front of Lieutenant Quincy's office. Jones took a bite from his apple and stuck the rest in his pocket. He pounded on the door's frosted glass window and said, "Lieutenant, I've just come across something I think you should have a look at."

The office door opened and the plump, pink, piggish Lieutenant Quincy stared at Jones. "This better be good Jones," he said quickly. "I was just on the phone with my wife. She had trouble buying lettuce at the grocery store today and is quite upset about it. If she doesn't calm down by the time I get home, it's going to be a long, ugly night for me."

“Well, Lieutenant,” said Jones. “I was looking through the Archives—doing a little research for the old lady’s missing garden gnome case I’ve been working on—when I came across this thing here.” He shook the folder that contained The Case so it flopped around like a fish in his hand and threw it onto Quincy’s desk. It landed with a plop and a little mushroom cloud of dust puffed up into the air.

“This one—The Case—it hasn’t been solved,” said Jones.

Quincy sighed. “Jones...” he said.

Jones interrupted. “I think we should re-open it. It’s only right. The Case is never closed until it’s solved, Lieutenant.”

Quincy’s phone rang and he said to Jones, “Jones, get back to the gnome case. Work on it for that little old lady. Put that file back where you found it and don’t worry about it, okay?”

Before Jones could answer, Quincy pushed him out of the office and shut the door in his face. Jones walked back over to his desk and picked up the garden gnome file. He tucked both files under his arm and walked out of the Department.

6 LILA WOULDN'T MIND A GOOD GOING EVER EVERY ONCE IN A
WHILE

Jones spent the entire night looking over The Case. The pages were all carbon copies of original documents and much of the writing had been smudged. To Jones, the nearly indecipherable pages made it even more appealing. He held each one up to the light to see if he could make out what had been typed on it. He sifted and shuffled for hours.

His wife, Lila, had gone out with friends when she left work. It was good that she wasn't there. The clutter and concentration on The Case would have annoyed her.

For a moment, Jones imagined what she might say to him when she walked in that night.

"What are you looking at now, Jones?" she'd ask.

"A file," he'd say.

"How long have you been at it?"

"All evening."

"What's it about?"

"Top secret," he'd say.

Lila would get angry when Jones said this. She'd cross her arms and sigh. "All you do is obsess over these things, Jones. I'm your wife, you know. I wouldn't mind a good going over every once and a while, too."

Jones would look up from The Case.

“Don’t tell me that stack of papers is Top Secret, Jones,” Lila would say. “I know it’s not. It’s just one more random, trivial thing some fool has gotten sentimental about.”

“It’s important,” Jones would respond.

“It’s not important, Jones. It’s silly—these desperate people and you involving yourself. You tell them you can make it better. You can’t. You can’t even solve the cases. It’s useless.”

Jones realized he’d let his mind slip into the daydream. “Back to work,” he muttered. He lit a cigarette and picked up another carbon copy.

Hours passed. Jones got up to pour a cup of coffee. He looked at the clock. The bars had closed over an hour ago and Lila still hadn’t come home. The fact that Lila was still out past closing time reminded him of when they met.

7 A FRIEND OF JONES IS A FRIEND OF MINE

One night four years earlier, Jones sat drinking in a smoky basement dive he frequented. Regulars filled the stools most of the night, until around 11:30, when a group of people Jones had never seen before entered. Lila stood in the middle of the group. She caught Jones' eye. The group went to a table behind the bar and as Jones sipped his drink he glanced at Lila from time to time through the bar mirror.

A while later, Lila walked up to the bar and stood beside Jones, waiting for the bartender. Jones looked over at Lila. She watched the bartender take drink orders at the other end of the bar.

“What're you drinking?” asked Jones.

Lila turned and looked at him. “Vodka tonics,” she said.

“It's a good evening for it,” said Jones.

The bartender approached them. Before Lila could speak, Jones said, “Harry, my friend here will have a vodka tonic and I'll take another whiskey.”

“You got it, Jones,” said Harry. He smiled at Lila and extended his hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you,” he said. “The name's Harry. And you're...”

“Lila,” said Lila. She shook his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Lila,” said Harry. “A friend of Jones is a friend of mine.” He smiled and went to pour the drinks. Jones smiled at Lila.

“That was pretty slick there, Jones,” she said. “I could've ordered my own drink.”

Jones smiled and lit a cigarette.

“Well, at least this one’s free,” he said.

Harry returned with the drinks and said to Jones, “Both on your tab, Jones?”

“Yes sir,” said Jones.

Harry went to mark the drinks on the tab and Lila picked hers up, nodded at Jones and went back to her friends. Jones took a long sip from his drink. He looked at the mirror and saw Lila laughing with her friends. She glanced up at him and their eyes met. She looked away and Jones went back to his cigarette.

The next time Lila approached the bar, she didn’t stand next to Jones. Jones watched her talk to Harry. Harry went to make drinks, handed them to Lila, and Lila walked over to Jones.

“Whiskey for you, right?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Lila handed him the drink.

“Thanks,” said Jones.

“I owed you one.” She smiled. “Jones,” she said. “What’s your first name?”

“They just call me Jones,” said Jones. He swirled the liquor around the glass and lifted it. “Cheers.”

Jones and Lila clinked their glasses and drank. She took the stool next to Jones and, three drinks later, her friends had left the bar. She stayed behind with Jones. He told her that he was training to be a Detective. When Harry turned up the lights, the bar was empty.

“Can I walk you home?” Jones asked Lila.

“That would be nice,” she said.

They told Harry goodnight and left the bar. On their way home, Jones invited her for another drink at his apartment. For the next three weeks, Jones and Lila were inseparable. Six months later, they were married.

8 CIGARETTE BUTTS AND ASHES

Jones sighed. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps Lila was in trouble. He remembered that Lila was tough, though. She knew how to take care of herself. Besides, she was probably still out having fun with her friends—more fun than she'd have with Jones while he sat at the kitchen table smoking and sorting through the dusty pages of an old file.

The worry slipped from Jones' mind and he picked up a few more pages of The Case. He fell asleep at the kitchen table with the papers in his hand. The clank of dishes in the sink woke him in the morning. Jones took a deep breath and lifted his head from the table. A page of The Case stuck to his cheek. He peeled it off and looked at Lila. She turned around.

“What are you doing sleeping at the kitchen table?” she asked.

He grunted.

Lila set a cup of coffee down in front of Jones. “You knocked your ash tray over,” she said. Jones looked at the table. He had. Cigarette butts and ashes covered a good portion of the table. Some cigarette butts were scattered over and rubbed into the pages of The Case.

“God damn,” he said. He picked up a stack of papers and shook them. Ashes flew through the air. Lila grabbed Jones' arm.

“You’re making a mess, Jones,” she said. “What were you working on, anyways? A new assignment?”

“Well, sort of,” said Jones. “This one’s been closed for a while. I was doing a little research yesterday for my new case and I came across this file. It’s been closed for a few years. But it’s unsolved. I’ve been looking over it and I think it’s important. It’s only right to reopen and solve it. Someone cared enough to file The Case in the first place. We should care enough to solve it.” He picked up the file and began to look over it and his notes.

“Whatever,” said Lila. She rolled her eyes and walked out of the room. “I’ll be out late again tonight,” she said as she walked away. “Good luck.”

9 THE BAGEL SHOP!

The morning fog lifted as Jones walked towards the Department. At a crosswalk, he looked at his watch and decided he had enough time to search for a few leads related to The Case before he reported to work.

“The Case said something about a boy with short dark hair,” he said. He stopped walking and put The Case under his arm.

“I’ve seen a boy with short dark hair somewhere,” he said. “Where was it?” He lit a cigarette. A tall woman with broad shoulders walked towards him. A red sequined purse dangled from her fingers.

The woman looked at Jones as she passed. She gave a slight nod and her eyes wandered to the folder tucked under his arm.

“The bagel shop!” shouted Jones. “I think a boy with short dark hair works there.”

He turned around and headed the other way. When he passed the woman, she turned and looked at him.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” she hissed.

Jones ignored her and quickened his pace. Cigarette smoke puffed from his mouth like soot from a southbound steam engine as he chugged towards the bagel shop.

10 INTERESTING DECORATIONS YOU'VE GOT HERE

The bagel shop was only a few blocks down from the apartment Jones lived in before he married Lila. Though it had been a year or so since he'd been there, he thought he remembered seeing a boy with short dark hair there. Maybe he still worked there.

A string of bells tinkled on the glass door when Jones stepped into the bagel shop. He took his hat off and looked around. The only person in the shop was a teenage girl. She stood behind the counter. Headphones covered her ears and her head bobbed from side to side as she chewed a piece of gum and flipped through a celebrity magazine.

"Morning, ma'am," said Jones.

The girl kept her eyes on the magazine. She flipped a page and blew a bubble. It popped with a snap.

Jones looked at the pictures on the walls. On the left wall hung a framed map of the city. It had been matted with an empty flour sack. The little silhouette of a man stood in the center of the map. It waved a sign that said "You Are Here" over its head and jumped up and down on a black dot. A cardboard cutout of a wolf wearing King Tut's burial mask leaned against the right wall. Whenever Jones glanced at it, it winked at him. Behind the register, under a black velvet painting of wild horses galloping through a meadow, hung a framed One Dollar Bill.

Jones stepped up to the register and said, "Interesting decorations you've got here."

The girl looked up and removed her headphones. “Welcome to the Bagel House, where everyday the bagels are as fresh as the day they were made,” she said. “Can I take your order, or do you need a second to decide?”

“I said those were some interesting decorations you have on the wall.”

“Oh yeah,” said the girl. “I guess so.”

“Okay,” said Jones. “Let’s get to business.” He pulled a pen and tapped the countertop.

“What will it be?” asked the girl. “Blueberry?”

“Do any boys work here with you?” said Jones.

The girl raised her eyebrows and looked at Jones as though something smelled funny. A pink bubble blossomed from her lips and popped. She sucked the gum back into her mouth and frowned.

“There are three,” she said. “Why you asking?”

“Interesting,” said Jones. He wrote in his notebook.

“Sure,” she said. “Do you want a bagel? They’re pretty good today. Good as the day they were made.”

“These boys that work here,” said Jones. “What do they look like?”

“Why do you want to know?” asked the girl. “You some kind of creep?”

“Just interested.”

“Well, I can’t tell you.” The girl put her hands down the counter. Her fingernails clicked on the marble top. Jones noticed they were painted black.

“Do any of them have short dark brown hair?” he asked. “Short dark brown hair, about five and a half feet tall.” He held his hand in the air, moved it up and down a bit to demonstrate the height he meant. “Maybe around 17 years old?”

“Nope,” said the girl.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think you are,” said Jones.

“Are you going to get any food or not?” asked the girl. “If not, you’ve got to leave. This place is for customers only.”

Jones stared at the girl for a moment. She won’t crack, he thought. He rubbed his chin, clicked his pen closed on the countertop and tucked the notebook under his arm.

“Thanks for your help,” he said. He put his hat on and walked out the door.

Jones muttered to himself as he walked down the street. “That girl either lied to me or told me the truth. If there are no boys that work there with short brown hair, I’ve got to find another lead. She didn’t look like she was lying, but you can never be sure.”

He pulled the pen from his pocket and wrote in his notebook:

- BAGEL Store - No Response.
* LOOK FURTHER!*

Jones put the pen back into his pocket, lit a cigarette and headed towards the Department.

11 A HOT DOG TOPPED WITH KETCHUP, MUSTARD, AND CHOPPED
ONIONS

The tails of Jones' trench coat whipped behind him as he approached the entrance of the Department. He leaned into the wind and held his hat to his head with one hand. The other hand held a hot dog topped with ketchup, mustard, and chopped onions. The wind howled through the streets. As he rounded the corner of the block, about a dozen onion dices peeled up from the ketchup and mustard. They took flight in the wind, drifted swiftly and silently over the concrete sidewalk, and slapped against the windshield of Quincy's car.

Jones finished the hot dog as he stepped into the Department. He crumpled the piece of paper his snack had been served on and tossed it behind his shoulder. It struck a woman's shoulder as she walked out of the Department. The paper bounced from her shoulder to her red sequined purse.

"Umph," she said and picked the hot dog tray out. She wound her arm back like a quarterback and threw the paper at Jones, who had stopped to lick the ketchup and mustard from his fingers. It popped against the back of Jones' neck. He grabbed his neck and twisted around.

"Watch it, lady," said Jones. He stuck a cigarette between his lips and stared at the woman. She was the one he'd passed on the sidewalk that morning. Jones struck a match and lit the cigarette.

“You’re the one who should be careful,” said the lady. “Or you’re in for a letdown.” She snapped her purse closed. The red sequin sparkles shot like lasers through Jones’ cigarette smoke. “You just wait and see,” she said and walked out of the Department.

Jones shook his head and walked through the Department. “I wonder what that was all about,” he said.

“Hi, Jones,” said Veronica when he passed the Secretary Desk. She put her nail file down and smiled at him.

“Afternoon, Miss Veronica” said Jones.

“Any interesting leads on the old lady’s garden gnome this morning?” she asked.

“Interesting leads...” said Jones. He scratched his chin and puffed on the cigarette. “Yes, interesting leads on the garden gnome. Mrs. Calloway has nothing to worry about, Mrs. Veronica, only things to look forward to. Always working towards the point. Always.”

Miss Veronica smiled at Jones. “She called this morning,” she said. “She went on and on about how excited she was that you’re working on this case for her, Jones.”

“Mhmm,” said Jones. His notebook rested in his hands and he read over some notes he’d made about The Case the night before. One of the notes said:

GRANDMOTHER.

“Well, maybe she’s not excited that it’s you working on it,” said Veronica, “but that the case is being worked on. She told me she couldn’t stop thinking about hearing

what you find out about that gnome. She forgot to feed her goldfish Sparkles again last night she was so preoccupied with the gnome. She told me that her husband, if he were still alive, would be so happy to know.”

Jones flipped a page in his notebook. He made a note while Veronica talked.

- WORK ON GNOME
CASE

He underlined the note and drew a star beside it. “Miss Veronica, that old lady has a bright future ahead of her, even if it is short. Progress. That’s what we’re about. We’ll give her peace.”

Veronica smiled and picked up her nail file.

Jones nodded and walked to his desk. He sat down and made a few notes to himself:

* Gnome Case
→ Old Lady → Mrs. Callaway (?)
* The Case
* Grandma
* Possible Connections?
* Mrs. Callaway → Grandma? (!)
* INVESTIGATE !!! *

He tossed the notebook to the corner of his desk, spread out the pages of the garden gnome file and The Case, and looked for possible connections. Mrs. Calloway had children. She had the dead husband Albert, of course, and no fewer than 11 cats, but her file mentioned nothing about grandchildren. Jones couldn't discount the possible connection, though. He'd have to go to her house for further questioning. But before he went over to Mrs. Calloway's house prying about The Case, he needed an excuse to go there. He needed information on her case.

Jones made a list of different possibilities that might have led to the disappearance of the garden gnome. Of the possibilities he came up with, these were the Top Four Most Obvious Possibilities:

- a.) One of Mrs. Calloway's children threw out the garden gnome.
- b.) Mrs. Calloway threw the gnome out herself and then forgot.
- c.) Beneath the glow of a full moon, the garden gnome came to life, realized it had grown tired of living behind a bush, and reacted by walking off under the moonlight to roam new territories in search of a better way of life.
- d.) Someone stole the garden gnome from Mrs. Calloway.

Of the four logical possibilities, Jones decided that two could be used to investigate the disappearance of the garden gnome while subtly working on The Case.

Jones didn't want Mrs. Calloway to know if her children did throw out the gnome. They already ignored her. To add to the stress of dealing with a dead husband, an army of cats, and a missing garden gnome would be cruel. He decided against possibility "a.)".

To find out if Mrs. Calloway had thrown the gnome out herself, or possibly given it away, would be as useless as blaming her children. If she had, she would remember.

If she had forgotten, it would be counterproductive to help her remember. It wouldn't help him investigate that lead on The Case.

With the first two possibilities nixed, Jones concluded that someone had either stolen Mrs. Calloway's garden gnome or that it had come to life under a full moon, decided it was tired of living behind a bush, and walked off under the moonlight in search of a better way of life in new territories.

Jones considered why someone would want to steal a garden gnome. Money always existed as a motive for theft. He would have to look up the value of a garden gnome. If it had come to life and walked off, Jones would have to find out more about inanimate objects coming to life beneath full moons. Either way, each Possibility required research. With adequate information, Jones could return to Mrs. Calloway's house and find out if she was the Grandma in The Case, or if she knew of the Grandma in The Case.

Before Jones packed his things and left the Department to research, he made two more notes in his notebook:

-LOOK UP BLACK MARKET
GNOME TRADE

~~RESEARCH ANIMATE~~

- RESEARCH ANIMATE
OBJECTS COMING TO LIFE
NEATH THE LIGHT OF
A FULL MOON

12 MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT, FULL MOONS, AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO GARDEN GNOMES

Jones researched at the Central Public Library for the next two days. He researched magic, witchcraft, full moons, and their relationship to gnomes. He tried to find support for his hypothesis that the gnome came to life under the light of a full moon and left Mrs. Calloway's yard in order to roam new territories in search of a better way of life. To Jones, this hypothesis had the greatest possibility of yielding information about The Case because when he looked through his notes from the previous day he'd run across one that read:

MYSTICAL MOONLIT
FOREST

Just to be careful, he researched organized crime. If the gang that he dreamt about earlier did have anything to do with the gnome's disappearance, Jones wanted to be prepared. He tried to find out if any Black Market Gnome Trade Syndicates existed within the city. The library yielded little evidence of this possibility, though. This information, Jones decided, would need to be learnt on the streets, so when he went to buy cigarettes, he also bought a copy of nearly every publication with classified ads. He picked up free publications that might have had classified ads in them from racks outside of restaurants and shops.

Jones also researched what he could for The Case. From the library he picked up books on mystical beasts and enchanted forests. He read through anthropology books in search of studies on the culture of fish vending. He broke down the dynamics of fishing, from boat to plate. Jones bought a world atlas to pinpoint possible locations of interest. The Case, it seemed from his studies, stretched further than the downtown area.

13 YOU'VE NEVER MENTIONED SAMANTHA BEFORE

After the library closed, Jones took his work home. He spread books, files, maps, and notes across the kitchen table, drank coffee, took notes, and smoked.

The hours of the night drifted away in frantic haze of page flipping and progress. Jones failed to notice the time slip by until Lila returned home after sunrise. Her absence had gone unnoticed until she walked through the front door with knotted hair and smeared makeup. Jones looked up from his work when he heard her drop her keys on the foyer table.

"I thought you were asleep in our room," Jones said. "I got home late and I didn't want to wake you up so I stayed out here."

"I stayed at a friend's house," said Lila.

"Who's?"

"Samantha's."

"You've never mentioned Samantha before," said Jones.

Lila raised her voice. "If you ever listened to anything I said maybe you would have."

"You never say much," said Jones.

"Well," said Lila, "Samantha's new at work. I don't know if she has a lot of friends, so I thought I'd show her around town. We went out and had a few drinks. She lives closer to where we were than here, so I slept over there. How's that for you, Jones?"

“Oh,” said Jones. He nodded his head and stuck his lower lip out a bit to indicate that he approved. “Makes good enough sense to me. Did you have fun?” He took a sip of coffee and looked back to his notes.

“Yes,” said Lila. “Thanks for caring.”

“Sure,” said Jones.

“Asshole,” said Lila. She turned around, picked up her keys and slammed the door as she walked out of the house.

Jones stood up and looked at the closed door. He lit a cigarette and walked to the coffee pot. When he sat back down, he took a sip of coffee and went back to his research.

14 YOU HAVEN'T FUCKED ME SINCE OUR HONEYMOON

Jones spent the entire day at the kitchen table doing research. He felt that one more day would produce enough information on the garden gnome and The Case to go over to Mrs. Calloway's house. With the information he'd gotten, he could direct questions about The Case so they seemed like they were about the garden gnome.

Lila asked Jones if he'd like to go to dinner or a movie when she came home from work.

"Too much to do," he said. "I'm getting close to where I want to be."

"Goddammit, Jones," said Lila. She threw her purse onto the counter. Tubes of lipstick, change, and receipts spilled onto the floor. "You sentimental son-of-a-bitch."

Jones cocked his head to the side and scrunched his face up.

"Look at me!" she said. "I haven't slept here in days and you haven't noticed once you're so far gone into your little dream world."

"That's not true," said Jones.

"You're always dreaming of something else," said Lila. "Looking for that brighter future that will never be there. I'm fucking sick of it, Jones."

"It's my job," said Jones. He looked at Lila with steady eyes. The cigarette between his fingers shook above the ashtray. "These people need me. It's important. I can give them better futures."

“Look at what’s in front of you, Jones.” She held out her arms. “Me,” she said. “I used to think it was endearing, how you thought you could put a little hope into some sad sack’s life, but Jesus Christ, Jones. Sometimes I need you too.”

“I’m there for you,” he said. He flicked an ash into the ashtray and blew a smoke ring.

“Oh, fuck you,” said Lila. “I don’t remember the last time I had a conversation this long with. You probably haven’t fucked me since our honeymoon.”

Lila grabbed a coffee mug from the sink and flung it across the room just as Jones said, “That’s a lie.”

The coffee mug struck the wall and left a hole in the plaster. It fell the floor and shattered into bits. Lila stormed out of the room.

“Whoa,” said Jones. “Must be that time of the month.” He stood up, lit another cigarette and cleaned up the pieces of the mug. He sat back down at the table and continued to research after he put the shards of porcelain in the trash.

Jones only got up to pee and refill his coffee that day. That night, he fell asleep at the kitchen table again. Despite lack of sleep, he felt refreshed when he woke. He hopped from the wooden chair he’d slept in, stretched his arms, and yawned. After downing a cold cup of coffee, Jones gathered his papers and rushed out the door. He’d done enough research to go to Mrs. Calloway’s house and pry into The Case with the disguise of working towards solving the mystery of her missing garden gnome.

15-21 AUTHORIAL INTERRUPTION, pt. 1: The Future Holds
Brighter Promises

At this point, dear reader, I hope that you have begun to realize the importance of the future. I hope you've begun to realize the promise that it holds. You may have also noticed that this chapter, Chapter 15-21, consists of seven chapters. I have done this intentionally for you so that we can head straight into that twinkling starlit future.

In order to do so, we must ignore Jones' fruitless visit to Mrs. Calloway and the consequent lack of interest he had for her missing garden gnome. We must skip Jones' neglect of assigned D.M.I.T.O.P.B.W.I.P.A.B.F. work. Lila's frustration with Jones continued to grow.

Don't worry, though, dear reader, because though we skip parts of the narrative, we also rocket ourselves into that brighter future.

The future begins like this:

Lieutenant Quincy calls Jones into his office to talk about The Case. The call elates Jones because, more than once, Quincy had told Jones not to work on The Case. Jones dashes into the office and sees that Quincy has a file on his desk.

Now, the future becomes the present.

22 THIS WAS NEVER A BUS STATION or, GO TO YOUR DESK, PACK YOUR THINGS AND GET OUT OF HERE, YOU'RE FIRED

Jones slammed Quincy's office door hard enough to shake the snow globe on the desk. Hunks of glitter snow billowed up inside the glass and a flurry swirled around the fireman inside. The fireman waved his hat in the air and smiled out from the storm.

Quincy looked at Jones. Jones grabbed the photograph Quincy held in his hands.

"You should have seen this place when it was still a bus station," said Jones. He stared at the picture and lit a cigarette.

Lieutenant Quincy squinted at Jones. "Jones, this was never a bus station," he said.

"It used to be a bus station," said Jones. "You should've seen it."

"Jones, this was never a bus station." Quincy shook his head, took his temples between his fingers and sighed.

Jones flicked his cigarette, stared at the picture, rubbed his chin. He raised his head to meet Quincy's gaze.

"Never a bus station?" said Jones.

"Never a bus station," replied the Lieutenant.

"Never a bus station," said Jones. "Huh..." He cocked his head to the left and a perplexed look wrinkled across his face. The clouds of confusion quickly cleared, though. Jones' lips curled into a smile.

“What about the paint peeling off the walls?” asked Jones. “And you see here Lieutenant,” he said, pointing towards the photograph with his cigarette. “That’s a door. Those things over there—they’re computers. That’s how people issue tickets nowadays.”

Quincy’s hands balled into fists. “Jones,” he said. “I know what a bus station looks like.”

“I figured you did,” said Jones. He chuckled. “Glad you came around.”

Quincy’s face started to turn red. “This is a photograph of the Valencia C. Jones Elementary School,” he said. “7th Ward. It says so on the bottom of the photograph.”

Quincy pointed to the caption at the bottom of the picture. Jones’ eyes followed.

“Well I’ll be god-damned,” he said and stubbed his cigarette out in the glass ashtray on Quincy’s desk. “Makes perfect sense. I had my doubts about the bus station. There were too many flaws, like that alphabet hanging on the wall. You know what? That explains the school desks, too.”

He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his grey trench coat, shook a bent one into his hand, and tapped the photograph with it. Sweat beaded around Quincy’s hairline.

“I understand this is not a bus station, Lieutenant,” said Jones. “But let me ask you this: Why are we looking at a photograph of a school when we’re working on The Case?” He lit the cigarette and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke. Quick, heavy breaths whistled in Quincy’s nose.

Quincy’s face turned the deep purple of raw meat. His jaw pulsed. His teeth grated against one another.

“You okay, Lieutenant?” asked Jones.

“Jones,” said Quincy. “We’re not working on The Case. *We* were never working on The Case. *You’ve* been working on The Case. I called you in here to talk about The Case.”

“I know you called me in here to talk about The Case,” said Jones. “I saw the photograph, thought it was a lead, and one thing led into the next. I thought, ‘Geez, the Lieutenant really is a standup guy. He’s been looking over this thing too, doing his own work. He understands the importance of solving The Case.’”

“Jones,” said Quincy. “I clipped that photograph you’ve been dawdling over from a magazine.”

Jones flicked at the butt of his cigarette. Ashes spiraled to the floor like snowflakes. The vein in Quincy’s neck grew like a mole trail.

“It has nothing to do with The Case,” Quincy continued. “That folder isn’t for The Case. It says ‘Magazine Clippings’ on it, if you would have looked.”

Jones looked at the folder. Quincy was right. The photograph did come from a folder. Jones saw that it did, indeed, have ‘MAGAZINE CLIPPINGS’ printed on it in black block letters.

“Lieutenant, you’re right again,” said Jones. “I respect that in a man. But remember, everything must be treated as a possible lead. When solving The Case, anything could be a clue.”

Quincy began to shake. His cheeks puffed up and he blew a stream of air through tight lips. The thick hairs of his mustache bristled. Quincy lifted his hands. Swollen fingers opened and closed like the jaws of a hydraulic machine.

Jones stepped backwards.

“I called you in here to tell you that you had one more chance to give up The Case and do your assigned work. The Case has been closed for years. You’ve been assigned to the old lady’s missing garden gnome. She’s called here six times a day about the goddamn gnome for over a month.”

Jones stared at Quincy without making a sound,

“And what have you done about it?” said Quincy. “Shit. You’ve done shit. You’ve been working on The Case. The fucking Case.”

“Quincy,” said Jones. “I’ve got to solve The Case.”

Quincy grunted. His nostrils flared. “The Case is Closed, Jones. It’s over.”

“I’m getting closer every second,” said Jones.

“I said The Case was over, Jones. And so are you. You’re done.” Quincy’s hands touched Jones’ neck. Jones flinched. He tried to move further back.

“Lieutenant,” said Jones.

“Go to your desk, pack up your things and get out of here, Jones. You’re fired.”

“What are you talking about,” said Jones. His back bumped the handles of Quincy’s steel filing cabinet. A wire basket on top of the cabinet rattled.

“You stupid son-of-a-bitch,” said Quincy through clenched teeth. His grip around Jones’ neck tightened. His thumbs moved over Quincy’s prominent Adam’s Apple. He’d started to squeeze Jones’ neck when the hinges of the office door creaked.

23 OH GOD! MISS VERONICA!

The blinds in front of the door's frosted windowpane rattled and Miss Veronica stepped into the office.

"Oh God! Miss Veronica!" said Jones.

The young secretary stood in the doorway, smiling. Quincy jerked his head around and said, "Hi Veronica." He slid his thumbs down to Jones' tie and straightened it a bit.

"It's a good tie, Jones," said Quincy. "But you've got to learn to tie it straight. Doesn't the Missus check you over before you leave in the morning?"

Veronica stood in the doorway with a smile plastered across her face. She was the niece of Quincy's wife. Had his wife not put him up to it, she would never have been hired.

"It is a nice tie, Jones," she said. "Very moderate. But your wife couldn't check it before you left, could she? I heard she left you for that dentist last month?"

The thought of Lila crushed the relief in Jones' chest so that it tore down into his stomach and settled sharply in his gut.

"Yes, she left, Miss Veronica," muttered Jones. He looked down at his scuffed shoes and tried to swallow the lump in his throat. His fingers reached for the tie. "I guess I always did forget to floss."

24 I'M LEAVING YOU FOR THE DENTIST

Jones' wife had left him six weeks earlier. He'd worked on The Case the whole day. He'd been thinking about how to sort out the clues he'd come across that afternoon as he walked home. When he approached the house, he saw that Lila stood on the front stoop in a yellow sundress. The fabric rippled in the breeze so that it pressed and rolled over her body like the ocean. A black velvet pillbox hat had been pinned to her head. Jones remembered picking it out for her the previous Christmas. Four suitcases rested at Lila's feet.

Jones put his foot on the first step. Lila crossed her arms and looked up the street.

Jones opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, a new Cadillac pulled up to the curb. A man stepped out of the car. He wore a new tweed coat with leather patches on the elbows and wire-framed glasses. His polished shoes twinkled in the sunset. Jones looked down at his own shoes and back to Lila. The man appeared to be in his mid-fifties and was aging well. He walked past Jones and kissed Lila on the lips.

Jones couldn't move.

Lila kissed him back.

"Ooo, you sweetheart," she said. "Save the sugar for later."

Lila and the man turned towards Jones.

"This is Max," she said. "He's a dentist. Max, Jones."

Max stuck his hand out for Jones to shake.

“Jones, I’m leaving you for Max,” said Lila. “Not that you’ll notice I’m gone, with your head always wrapped up in figuring out that pointless Case.”

Max’s hand hovered in front of Jones. He flashed a smile, revealing a mouthful of white teeth. Jones stood in his threadbare coat and scuffed shoes and looked at the hand. He looked up at Max and back down to the hand. He scrunched up his eyebrows, and looked at Max.

Lila bent down and grabbed one of her bags.

“Jones must not want to be friendly,” she said. “He probably hasn’t realized I’m leaving him yet. I’m surprised he noticed you. I mean, really, it’s a miracle he can find his way home some days he’s so preoccupied with The Case.”

“Oh, well,” said Max. He withdrew his hand and said to Lila, “Shall we, then?”

Lila nodded her head. Max bent down and grabbed Lila’s suitcases. Jones watched as they walked down the stairs. He watched Max put Lila’s suitcase into the trunk of his Cadillac. He watched Max open the passenger door for Lila, watched him lead Lila into the leather seat with his hand on the small of her back. He heard the doors close. The V8 engine revved and the taillights came on. Before they faded in the distance, Jones noticed a sticker on the back of the Cadillac with a giant tooth holding a toothbrush. From the tooth’s mouth, which was full of sparkling white teeth, came a dialogue bubble. The tooth said, “A Healthy Smile Is A Happy Smile!”

“...for a dentist,” said Jones. He shook his head and pulled out his last cigarette. He threw the crumpled pack onto the sidewalk, kicked it, and walked to the liquor store. He bought two pints of whiskey and a pack of cigarettes. By the time he returned home,

the first bottle had been emptied and tossed into the street, and Jones was singing a song between hiccups.

25-30 AUTHORIAL INTERRUPTION, pt. 2: Reaffirmation of a
Rather Bleak Present

I must interrupt the narrative once again, dear reader, to assess the situation of our Detective Jones. Earlier, we found ourselves rocketing forward through space and time to what we believed would be a brighter future. But that brighter future turned into a rather bleak present moment. Jones' past seems to be the only thing that shines at this point in the narrative, because the past held the promise of a brighter future. That promise of a brighter future made the past much happier than the rather bleak present moment for Jones. Time goes on, though, and I, for one, would like to adopt Jones' uncompromising optimism for the future.

In order to find out, I suggest we skip over the depressed days Jones spent alone staring at the wall. We should pass over the days he neglected The Case. Let these idle days pass. We find that Jones' enthusiasm slowly returned. He began to investigate The Case again. He made progress. The progress restored his faith. His belief in the importance of his work reached an all time high. We'll resume just after the belief peaked.

Jones felt as if he'd found a monumental clue—the missing piece to the puzzle, if you will. That piece was hidden in the city's fish market.

31 THE FISH MARKET

Friday was the busiest day at the fish market. The busiest part of the busiest day at the fish market was Friday evening. The fishermen arrived at the docks in their boats mid-afternoon. They pulled their catch from the wells and threw them to the docks, where they packed the fish in ice to carry to the market.

Hundreds of people flocked to the market to eyeball the freshly killed and frozen fish at the end of the workday.

Jones arrived to the market at dusk. Swarms of people throbbed and thrust like ants in a colony. Jones cut through the crowd with a cigarette dangling from his lips. Shouts from fishmongers, ice cubes shifting, tape peeling and tearing from rolls, laughter, and the steady hum of motors formed a wall of noise in his ears.

He puffed on his cigarette and looked at the people. An old lady leaned over a mackerel and stared into its eyes. She ran her fingers over its brow like a mother hushing her child. Jones thought he saw the mackerel wink at the old lady, like its playing dead was their inside joke. She lifted the fish from the ice and weighed it in her hands. Its mouth fell open and she rubbed her finger over its teeth and gums. After a few minutes, the old lady sat the fish back into its bed of ice and moved to the next stand, where she did the same thing with another mackerel. Another few minutes had passed between the fish and the old lady when Jones realized he needed to find what he had come for. He

passed the lady as she finished her mackerel ritual. She looked up and their eyes met. Thick lenses magnified her eyes. Jones thought he'd seen them before. He took in her face clearly for the first time since he'd begun watching her caress the mackerels and realized he'd been observing Mrs. Calloway. He jerked his head away and tried to sneak off, but Mrs. Calloway recognized Jones.

“Where’s my god damned gnome?” she hissed.

Jones pretended he'd not noticed her and sped past in a cloud of cigarette smoke. His gaze locked on something in front of him. The quickness of his footsteps increased.

A few stands down, the Lieutenant’s wife haggled with a fish seller. “This one’s too much,” she said. “I’m not paying that much for fish. It’s not worth its weight in gold, you bloodsucker.”

“That’s the price,” said the vendor.

“That’s absurd,” she said.

She looked over just as Jones approached. “Jones!” she said. He flicked his cigarette onto the pavement. His gaze was still locked ahead of him.

“Jones!” said the Lieutenant’s wife.

Jones set his path towards a short man selling fish a few booths away. A greasy comb-over stretched across his bald spot like a threadbare shroud. This fishmonger fit the description, the description he'd deciphered from a certain lead he'd come across.

“Jones!” said the Lieutenant’s wife a third time. “Jones, I saw Lila the other day.”

He flinched and kept forward.

“Isn’t that dentist of hers just lovely? I met him when I saw her, too. He’s not an airbag like you, Jones. Are you listening?”

Mrs. Quincy followed Jones through the crowd. She held the tilapia she had been looking at in her hand. The vendor she took it from followed her.

Jones lit another cigarette and flicked the match into a puddle.

“Do you even hear me?” she said to Jones.

“Lady, get back here with my fish!” said the vendor.

“I said that dentist Lila got sure is a catch. He’s sweet. He pays attention. And those teeth he’s got, they’re perfect. You should take note, Jones. He’s got his wits about himself. Knows what a good thing he found.”

“Give me my fish back, lady,” said the vendor.

Jones pulled his hat over his brow and blew out a lungful of smoke.

“That dentist would’ve listened Quincy when he said to stop obsessing over that case. He would’ve listened to Quincy when he said to keep up with the garden gnome.”

Mrs. Calloway stood a few booths back. She perked her head up. “Garden gnome?” she said. She let go of the mackerel tongue she’d been pulling at with her fingers and followed the vendor, Mrs. Quincy, and Jones.

“He wouldn’t have lost his job over a case that was closed, unsolved years ago,” Mrs. Quincy. “How stupid.”

Jones spat on the ground.

“You need to get your life together, Jones,” said Quincy’s wife. “Look at you, you’re a wreck. Those holes in your jacket are as big as potatoes. You light one cigarette off another. You spend so much time dreaming about the future that everything around you falls apart.”

“Lady, last chance,” said the vendor. “Get back here with my fish!”

Quincy's wife turned around and looked at the vendor. "Enough!" she said. She shook the fish by the tail. "Here's you're stinkin' fish. It's not worth half of what you're asking." She flung the fish at the vendor. It caught him in the middle of the chest. He grabbed it and stepped back. "Check the market price," she said.

"Where's my garden gnome?" said Mrs. Calloway.

Jones reached the booth he'd been staring at and stopped. Quincy's wife came up behind Jones and kept fussing. Jones ignored her. He grabbed a red snapper by the tail and dangled it in front of the fishmonger.

"Jones," said Mrs. Quincy. She tapped him on the shoulder.

Jones turned around.

"Shut up, you hag," he said. "Has anybody ever told you that? Be quiet. All you do is nag. Quincy, that rotten son-of-a-bitch, is going to have a heart attack if you don't stop badgering all the time."

Quincy's wife's jaw dropped. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Jones turned back to the fishmonger. Quincy's wife shook Jones' shoulder. "Now you listen to me," she said.

"Where's my gnome?" said Mrs. Calloway.

"Don't have these in Romania, do you?" Jones said to the fishmonger. His voice was rough with cigarette smoke and his red eyes glistened in the dusk.

"He's a nut," said Quincy's wife.

"They're \$1.75 a pound," the fishmonger said to Jones.

“I said you don’t have these in Romania, do you?” said Jones. “Didn’t think so.” He tossed the fish back onto the ice. “I know what you do have hidden in those forests though: Unicorns. Seen any lately?”

“You want the fish?” said the vendor.

“How long have you been here?” said Jones. “How long have you been in this country?”

“\$1.75 a pound,” said the vendor.

“This isn’t about the fish,” said Jones. “I asked you how long you’ve been in this country. You moved here for a brighter future, right? Did you get it? Did you?”

“You’re crazy,” said the man. “You want the fish or not?”

“You’ve gone over the edge, Jones,” said Quincy’s wife.

Jones reached into the inside pocket of his trench coat and pulled out his wallet.

“A dollar seventy-five a pound, you say,” he said to the man. He flipped the wallet open and held a badge in the fishmonger’s face.

“Jones is the name,” said Jones. “Detective Jones.”

“What do you want from me?” said the fishmonger.

“I want answers,” said Jones.

“You’re crazy,” said the fishmonger. “You want to know how much this fish weighs?” He grabbed the snapper from Jones and tossed it onto a scale. “Six pounds.”

“Tell me about those forests,” said Jones.

“You want the fish or not?”

“Unicorns. Grandmother.” said Jones. “Does that ring a bell?”

“The bell of a coo-coo clock?” said the fishmonger. He twirled his finger around his temple and rolled his eyes. “We don’t sell nuts here. You have to go to the farmers market for those. I bet you’d fetch a good price there.”

“What did you do with the Unicorn?” said Jones. His breaths wheezed in and out of his mouth. “Take its horn? Hang its skin on your wall?”

“Get out of here,” said the fishmonger.

“You know there’s an special place in hell for scumbags like you,” said Jones. He leaned into the fishmongers face so that their noses nearly touched. “You tell me what I want to know or I’ll make sure you find your way there.”

The fishmonger pushed Jones. He stumbled backwards.

“I want my goddamn gnome,” said Mrs. Calloway. She’d caught up with the crowd and watched Jones and the fishmonger. Jones put one foot on the ground and before he gained his balance, Mrs. Calloway shoved her walker under his legs. Jones fell to the dirty gravel.

“Serves you right,” she said.

“You’re all worthless idiots,” yelled Jones. “What I’m doing is important. I’m trying to help.” He sat up brushed fish scales from his elbows and spat. The phlegm slapped against the back of Mrs. Quincy’s leg and she screamed.

“Now you took it too far,” said the fishmonger. He grabbed the biggest fish in his stand and lifted it above his head. “You mess with me, fine. I handle it. But now you bring these ladies into it. You don’t do that.” He swung the fish in circles above his head.

“I’ve been here long enough to know baseball,” said the fishmonger. “In baseball, you call this a grand slam.” He swung the fish like a bat at Jones’ head. It struck the side

of his face and he flew back into the gravel. Mrs. Quincy picked up a fish and slapped Jones while the fishmonger drew back for another swing. Mrs. Calloway retrieved her walker and scooted to the stand for her a fish of her own.

“I want in on this,” she said.

32-33 AUTHORIAL INTERRUPTION, pt. 3: It's For Your
Own Good

What follows is a brief account of what happened to Jones next. A play-by-play account may be too gruesome for some. The fishmonger, Mrs. Quincy, and Mrs. Calloway continued to beat Jones with fish while a crowd gathered round to watch. The beatings went on long after Jones had lost consciousness. From the fire in their eyes, I'd say it's likely they would have beat Jones far past death if not for one person. A woman with a red sequined purse tore through the crowd to spare Jones' life. Her fight was difficult as well, but in the end, she managed to carry Jones from the fish market to her apartment.

The story continues from there.

34 HELLO, I'M BUNNY

Jones blinked his eyes. He lay surrounded by a down comforter and pillows in a double bed. Dusk fell behind the open blinds of the wood paneled room. The clouds floating across the sky looked like bruised fruit, the sinking sun a burning marshmallow being dipped into the ocean. He blinked his eyes again. A match struck and a lamp was lit.

Jones looked around the room. A vanity held two mannequin heads with blonde wigs. Tubes of lipstick and compacts of blush were scattered the wigs. Clothes hung from the back of the vanity chair and the top of the mirror. A red sequined purse sat on the dresser. In the corner of the room, by an inn table, crouched a tall woman.

Another match struck, another lamp lit, and the woman turned around. Jones sat up in the bed and patted his chest, his fingers searching for cigarettes. The woman turned towards Jones and approached.

She sat in a chair by the bed and pulled two cigarettes from a metal case. She lit them and handed one to Jones. Jones took a drag and exhaled a cloud of smoke. He rubbed his chin, felt a welt on his cheek, and ran his fingers through his hair. He stopped at a bloody spot on his head and winced.

“Where am I?” he asked.

The woman let her cigarette dangle from her fingers. She drew it to her lips and inhaled. Ribbons of smoke wrapped around her powdered face, curling up her rouged

cheeks and high plucked eyebrows. It curled around the top of her slicked back, short brown hair.

Jones' host smiled and stood. She spread open her arms and chuckled. "Hello, Jones," she said. "This is my apartment."

"Who are you? How did I get here?" he asked.

"I'm Bunny," she said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure's mine," said Jones gruffly. He pulled on his cigarette and leaned forward. "How'd I get here?"

"I took you here," said Bunny. "From the market. Those two old ladies and that fishmonger nearly beat you lifeless with half frozen fish after you started in about unicorns and spat on that that lady. You'd be dead on ice yourself if I hadn't seen you from across the street."

Jones stubbed his cigarette out on a bedside ashtray. A sparkle had returned to his eyes.

"I didn't need your help," he said to Bunny.

He threw his bare legs over the side of the bed. Broad bruises and scabbed cuts covered them. He tried to stand but doubled over when his feet touched the floor. He wrapped his arms around his stomach. Bunny looked down and frowned at the dark, lumpy welt on Jones' back. They looked like blueberry yogurt. Small lacerations ran through the welt. The shape of the bruise perfectly outlined the tail of a blackfin tuna. It revealed the brutal beating Jones had received at the hands of the enraged fishmonger and the two old ladies.

Jones coughed a few times into his hand. "Do you have a tissue?" he asked.

Bunny got up and grabbed a tissue from her vanity desk. She handed it to Jones. He wiped his mouth and hands. Bunny returned to the vanity and pulled a flask from a drawer.

“I didn’t need your help,” he said.

“They would have killed you,” said Bunny. “You were already bleeding from the ears by the time I got over to you. It took almost all I had to get them off of you, and even then they didn’t want to give up.” Bunny took her lower lip between her thumb and forefinger and pulled it down. The inside of her lip was split open, the red flesh spread apart like a canyon.

“They almost beat me,” said Bunny. “Luckily, I’m trained in self-defense. It took two smoke bombs and a whirlwind of heel-busting, ankle turning spin kicks to get those animals off you.”

“I’m so close to solving that goddamn case,” said Jones. “Who do you think you are? What makes you think you have the right to interfere with a professional? I was this close!” He held up two fingers about an inch apart to indicate how close.

Bunny took a nip from the flask and handed it to Jones.

“I was this close to solving The Case!” he said. “Don’t get involved where you don’t belong.”

Jones took a long drink from the flask.

“There, there,” said Bunny. “Did that calm you down a little?”

“I was this close,” said Jones.

Bunny handed Jones another cigarette and lit it.

“I’m going to solve The Case,” he said. He leaned back against the headrest.

“I know about The Case,” said Bunny.

Jones took a drag from the cigarette and squinted his eyes. His back stiffened and he leaned forward. “What do you know about The Case?” he said.

Bunny motioned to Jones for the flask. He handed it to her. She unscrewed the cap slowly and took a pull. “It’s a long story,” she said.

“You’ve got my attention,” said Jones. “And you’ve got cigarettes. I think I’ve got a few broken ribs here to keep me still, too. Let’s hear it.”

35 GRANDMA HAD A UNICORN

“It all started years ago,” Bunny began. “I’m not originally from this country. I spent my early childhood in Romania. I guess you could say it all started when I was five years old. That’s as far back as I remember. I visited my grandmother most days while my parents worked. She spent the time between naps telling me stories.

“Before I tell you about her stories, you must first understand how full of sadness my grandmother was. Her life had not been easy and it made her sorrowful. But she had not always been that way, Jones.

“Once, her life was filled with joy. Her stories were about that time. She said the moments in her stories were the only time she remembered true happiness. It was when she was a child.”

Bunny uncrossed her legs and stood. She stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and walked over to the dresser. A small mirror stood atop the dresser. Bunny’s reflection looked at Jones in the eye. She unhooked the clasps of her brassiere and it slid from her arms to the floor.

“My grandmother told me that when she was a child, she had a unicorn,” said Bunny. “Together they laughed and danced and sang in the woods.”

Jones watched Bunny remove her clothes. He raised an eyebrow at her developed back muscles. Bunny turned around and Jones looked at her well-sculpted abdomen—pectorals that could have been chiseled by Michelangelo and flat abs. His eyes wandered down to the wisps of hair that curled around the center of her chest and bellybutton. Jones reached for another cigarette and muttered, “The Unicorn...”

Bunny slung a bathrobe around her body and sat back down. She lit Jones’ cigarette.

“Yes, the Unicorn,” said Bunny. “You were on the right track, Jones—closer than any Detective before. My grandmother told me all about the Unicorn. How its eyes shone silver in the dim forest light, how its fur smelled of fresh soap and acorns, the soft twists of its golden horn, how its silver tail flowed like a river. Every time I went to her house she had another story about her and the Unicorn. The good times, she called them, the good times.”

Jones nodded his head. “So, it was true. My leads were right.”

Bunny smiled. “Not long after I turned seven, my parents told me that in one week, we were moving to this country. When I heard the news, I ran to my grandmother’s and cried into her lap.”

36 THE FINAL STORY OF THE UNICORN

“She let me cry for a long time,” said Bunny. “When my sobs quieted, she whispered into my ear. ‘Let me tell you the final story of the Unicorn.’”

“I sat at the edge of her bed and listened. She went into the woods one day to play with the Unicorn and it wasn’t there. She waited for hours, but the Unicorn never arrived. Dinnertime came and she had to help with chores, so she left the woods. The next day, she returned. Still the Unicorn was not there. She waited and it never came. So she came back the next day and the next. The Unicorn had disappeared. This went on for months until my grandmother finally gave up on the unicorn. It had disappeared.

“When she finished her story, she said, ‘Sometimes late at night I still think I can hear the Unicorn snort and scrape its hooves in the leaves at the edge of the forest. I go to my window and look, but the Unicorn is never there. It hasn’t been seen since that last day in the woods long ago when I was a child. All I’ve ever wanted was to see the Unicorn one last time, if only to find out where it went, why it left me. I guess it will not happen.’”

37 IT WAS ALL A LIE

Tears fell down Bunny's face. She rose to get a tissue. She looked at Jones when she returned and said, "I vowed to find out where the Unicorn went. For years, I wondered about it, looked for clues, hints, signs... anything, but no luck. When I became a citizen of this country, I found out about the Department of Mysterious Incidents that Occurred in the Past But When Investigated Promise a Brighter Future and thought mine was a good case. I filed and the Department opened The Case. I waited hopefully for an answer. The prospects seemed so great. But the answer never came.

"One day, years ago, a letter came in the mail that said The Case had been closed—unsolved.

"Then my grandmother died. I went and saw her on her deathbed. In her final moments, she closed her eyes. Her breathing became shallow. 'I've looked for the Unicorn, grandma,' I said. Her breath stopped for a long time and I thought she had died. But then her lungs sputtered back to life and she opened her eyes. She moaned and motioned for me to come closer. I leaned next to her face and she whispered into my ear, 'It was all a lie, my little Bernard. I made up those stories to entertain you.' She died a few moments later and I came home and tried to forget about The Case."

Jones sat rapt through Bunny's whole story. Once she finished, Jones muttered, "Wow..."

“So, Jones,” said Bunny. “The Case is nothing but a lie. It’s an innocent childhood dream—like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny—which I believed in for too long. The Case can never be solved, Jones, because The Case was never real anywhere but in our minds.”

38 YOU LIE, YOU LIAR!

Jones' eyes widened. His nostrils flared and his eyebrows crinkled together.

"You lie," he said to Bunny. He got up from the bed and paced around the room in his white boxer shorts.

"You lie," he repeated. "You lie."

He stopped and looked at Bunny.

"I'm sorry, Jones," she said.

"You lie!" said Jones.

Jones picked up a tube of lipstick from Bunny's vanity and threw it across the room. It struck the opposite wall and fell to the floor. He picked up a compact of concealer and threw it at the floor. It shattered to pieces. He picked up one of Bunny's mirrors and struck it against the edge of the desk. Shards of glass spread out over the room.

"Jones," said Bunny. "Stop."

"YOU LIAR," said Jones.

He crossed the room and grabbed a lamp. He flung it across the room and it broke to pieces. Flames spread onto the floor. Bunny screamed and Jones slipped a pair of Bunny's flip-flops onto his feet.

"Shit!" he said.

He stomped frantically at the flames until they died away.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that last one, you liar.” He pulled the door open and left the apartment.

Bunny watched from the window as Jones’ bruised body and white underwear passed under streetlights. His trench coat rippled behind him in the wind and the flip-flops flapped against the pavement.

39 A FAMOUS BENDER

The first place Jones stopped after leaving Bunny's apartment was a hot dog stand. He ordered his favorite, a hot dog with ketchup, mustard, and diced onions. He took a bite and chewed. He chewed and chewed until dog, bun, ketchup, mustard and onions became a paste in his mouth. For some reason though, his throat would not let him swallow the bite.

He spat the mouthful of food into a trashcan and continued to the liquor store. The whole way there, he held the hotdog in his hand and muttered, "It can't be true. A lie. But... The Case."

Jones bought two pints of whiskey at the liquor store. Though his throat had not allowed the passage of the hot dog, whiskey was another matter. The first few sips were a bit rough, but after that, they went down easily.

Thus, with a hotdog and two pints of whiskey, Jones began a famously ugly three-day bender. In those three days, Jones managed to spend all but 24 cents of his savings, which had not been large in the first place. The bender led him through karaoke bars and honky tonks. He spent a night in a stranger's house snorting lines of cocaine off of a dinner plate until the sun came out. Jones left the stranger's house at 10:30 AM and drank two more bottles of wine. He met a woman named Patsy who took him on a motorcycle ride.

By sunset on the third day, Jones had managed to clothe himself with a pair of stained khaki pants, a pink mesh tank top, and black leather jacket. He stood under a streetlight in a quiet neighborhood and peed on the wooden post as the lights flickered on. He sang in gibberish. An old man came to his window and yelled, “Shut up, you heathen!”

Jones zipped up and shouted back, “EH!” He wandered a few blocks and attempted to collect clues for The Case. Each clue he sniffed and rubbed between his fingers before stuffing into one of his pockets.

40 THE UNICORN AND THE PEPPER SHAKER

Jones walked to a park and sat down on one of the benches. He stared ahead and stuck his hands into his pockets. He pulled the clues out one by one and placed them on his lap. Just as he reached for the last clue, his eyes fell closed and he sank into the park bench. He began to snore.

That night, Jones dreamt of a Unicorn curled up in the corner of a young man's dining room. It stared at the table and tapped a hoof against the hardwood floor and neighed.

"I've got shit coming out of my mouth," said the Unicorn. Outside, autumn leaves fell from the trees underneath a grey sky.

"It's a matter of the heart," replied the Pepper Shaker on the table.

"It's not a matter of the heart," said the Unicorn. "It's a matter of unruly bowels." He propped himself up on his front two hooves. "My nose is kind of stuffed up with dried shit flakes, but from the sound of it, I'd say the boy is cooking breakfast."

"Once you get yourself into these kinds of things, it's hard to get back out," said the Pepper Shaker "Stop skirting the subject."

"The shit has no trouble coming out of my mouth," said the Unicorn. "Seems about all I can do right now. My rectum's the one who backed out."

The Unicorn hadn't defecated from the rear in nearly eight days. He'd brushed his teeth over 16 times a day since it started. But, despite his efforts, the taste stayed on his tongue.

The gum bleeding started on the third day. Gums. On the fifth day, the Unicorn bought a new toothbrush. He bought a three-pack of toothbrushes on the eighth day, and single toothbrushes on the tenth, eleventh, and thirteenth days. We're only in eight days, though.

The Pepper Shaker had never taken a shit. It had no orifices, other than three holes in its top. It had no living parts, although it could speak. This was the work of The Boy. Eight months ago, on his 20th birthday, he'd blown the candles on his birthday cake out and made a wish. "I wish everything could speak," he wished. When the birthday wish ascended to the heavens, The Unicorn descended upon the house and granted the wish by dropping a velvet sack full of flower petals onto the dining room table.

The entrance through the front door was The Unicorn's fatal mistake, for, as everyone knows, only a baked pastry should enter through the front door to grant a wish. All other wish-granting creatures must do so from outside or by entering uninvited through an open window. Thus, The Unicorn was a captive in the boy's wish.

The Pepper Shaker had been the first to come alive. Slowly everything The Boy spoke to learned to talk.

"Why does it always have to be about black and white?" the Pepper Shaker said to the Unicorn. The Pepper Shaker was nothing more than hollow white porcelain filled with ground black pepper. "What about shades of grey. It's enough to make one go crazy."

“Look outside your situation,” said the Unicorn. “What about me? I’m white on the outside and red in, like an inverted apple. What about me? What about half digested bits of broccoli, coffee grounds and mushrooms squeezing through the gaps of my teeth every 15 minutes?”

“You’re not alone,” said the Pepper Shaker. “There’s red pepper. There are green peppers. There are jalapeno peppers.”

“Does no one ever listen!?” cried The Unicorn.

“We listen!” said the two microphones in the corner.

“I listen,” said the telephone on the table. “But I never keep a secret.”

“Let me out of here!” said the Unicorn.

The Boy walked out of the kitchen and into the dining room. He carried a breakfast plate in one hand. In the other he held onto a cup of coffee. He sat down at the table and lifted up his fork.

“Now this asshole is going to pick me up and use me like a Frisbee,” said the Pepper Shaker.

“Please don’t mention assholes,” said the Unicorn.

The telephone and the two microphones kept quiet. The boy did not look up from his plate as the Unicorn leaned over. He’d long since grown bored with his granted wish, so he seemed not to notice the Unicorn’s closed eyes. He seemed not to see, hear, or smell the stream of shit that flowed from the Unicorn’s mouth.

As the mess leaked into the heat vent, the Unicorn put his left-front hoof on the table and slid the Boy’s napkin off. He tried to wipe up the shit that had yet to leak through the vent, but failed to do anything more than spread it out in a cloverleaf pattern.

The Unicorn hiccupped and a shit bubble floated from his nose. The boy looked up.

“I need a napkin,” he said and stood up.

The Unicorn hiccupped again.

“You’ve gotten lucky so far,” the Unicorn said to the Pepper Shaker. “Don’t expect it to last forever.”

41 SWEEPING AWAY THE DUST

Jones woke up on a park bench. His jacket had soaked up the dew overnight, and the cold, wet leather weighed down on his body. The skin underneath his damp clothing made him feel as though he were wrapped in a wet dishtowel. Birds chirped in the trees around him. He heard acorns fall from tree branches and land on the ground with a soft thud. He opened his eyes and coughed. Jones spat and a wad of phlegm landed on a flower petal.

The few clues he'd come across the past three days lay on top of his jacket: a sepia toned photograph that came in a picture frame bought at a super store, an empty foil bag of Cheetos, and a broken soda bottle.

A street cleaner roared through the streets. Its yellow and orange lights flashed and flickered in dawn's light. The engine whined and the sweep's bristles scratched the pavement.

The Case would never be solved because it wasn't real. He thought about the past, about the excitement the prospect of solving The Case and smiled. Even if he could never solve it, it was worth the shot for the happiness it brought him.

Across the street, a kid swept the floor of a shop. He imagined opening the door of a Janitorial Closet and pulling out a broom himself. He imagined placing it on the tiles and pushing. The broom caught the dust that settled in the past and pushed it forward. The dust went into a dustpan. Jones imagined walking over to a trashcan and dumping the

dust. He'd slap his hands together and look at the floor. The clean tiles sparkled. The broom went back into the closet. Job done.

Jones smiled. He sat up on the bench and lit a cigarette. The smoke slid down his throat and into his lungs and emerged in a big blue cloud. Jones rose from the bench and left the park.