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At the End of the Peninsula

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At the End of the Peninsula

by

Jonathan David Fine

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
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Portland State University
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Abstract

In 1865, a settler named James John laid out a small neighborhood at the end of the north Portland peninsula, near the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. For a half century, until its annexation to Portland in 1915, St. Johns was an independent municipality. Factories lined the waterfront, and a full complement of businesses in the small downtown area—grocers, bakers, hardware stores, clothing shops—catered to all the residents' needs.

St. Johns was always a working-class town with a strong sense of identity. But after World War II, as Portland grew, St. Johns began to seem defined less by self-sufficiency than by isolation and neglect. Mom-and-Pop shops had a hard time staying in business. Junkyards and drinking establishments proliferated. Residents began to realize the full extent of decades of industrial pollution on the St. Johns waterfront. At some point, St. Johns officially became the poorest neighborhood in Portland, a distinction it still holds today.

But St. Johns never lost the loyalty of its residents. This thesis is about some of the people and places that embody the neighborhood's eclectic and stubborn character. As St. Johns undergoes a gradual and perhaps inevitable transformation into a trendier, more upscale area, time is running short to meet the old-timers and try to understand the neighborhood through their eyes. This thesis attempts to capture the essence of a neighborhood with a rich past, a colorful present, and a promising but uncertain future.

Acknowledgments

I am the grateful recipient of much generosity.

When I moved to St. Johns in 2003 and began to meet my new neighborhood's cast of characters, I found them unfailingly kind and graciously willing to share their stories with me. I would like to thank Marilyn Korenaga, Pattie Dietz, the late Sandy Barr, and the dozens of other people I interviewed for this thesis. Many of them are quoted here and many are not, but all helped me better understand the neighborhood at the end of the peninsula.

I would also like to thank my writing professors at Portland State University, whose expertise, encouragement, and guidance were invaluable to me as I shaped these stories. I could not have asked for better—or more patient—mentors.

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Climate ideal and healthful.
Distinctively American Population.
Has seven substantial churches.
A future that is most promising.
—*St. Johns City Directory, 1914*

Introduction

On a late spring day in 2007, about a hundred people wearing dark colors and somber expressions gathered in North Portland's Cathedral Park, just down the hill from an old garage. Truck traffic boomed on the St. Johns Bridge directly overhead. It had been raining hard all morning, and now the wet grass shone as the sun broke through the fast-moving clouds. Men who spent their days cutting steel or pumping gas and spent their evenings wrestling in costume in the garage up the hill now gave each other long embraces. A tall wrestler called Kliever the Angry Chef wore a black suit and held a single white rose. Nearby stood Little Nasty Boy, the self-proclaimed "World's Strongest Midget," scowling at the ground. A crowd of sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, and cousins sat on folding chairs closest to the amphitheatre. One by one, guests approached the microphone and spoke. Little Nasty Boy expressed what many were feeling.

"It's like losing a father," he said.

Toward the end, 69-year-old Sandy Barr had been wrestling again. The rural boy from Idaho, who discovered a talent for grappling in his teens and later settled in Portland to become a respected referee, a tireless wrestling promoter, and a successful if somewhat notorious proprietor of flea markets, never lost his love for the clang of the bell and the thrill of sending men to the mat. Kliever the Angry Chef was the last man to step into a ring with Sandy.

"It's an honor to be the last guy to wrestle him," Kliever said, "but that doesn't make it any easier. He taught me so much about the sport. I go to these other promotions and people say, 'Hey, you've got some good moves,' and I tell them, 'It's

all Sandy Barr.”

Sandy had, as usual, been up late in his office, a cramped room just inside the garage’s main entrance. His girlfriend was with him. Sandy could sit up all night in that office, stationed at his desk, chain-smoking and holding forth until friends half his age or younger finally pleaded exhaustion and took their leave. Sandy’s doctor had warned him to slow down and had ordered tests that Sandy never took. Still, the people of St. Johns, who regarded the man as their own local legend, were shocked to hear the news. Sandy had seemed fine until the moment he hit the floor that night, dead of a massive heart attack.

I discovered Sandy Barr’s Tuesday night wrestling matches soon after moving to St. Johns in 2003. A hand-painted sign reading “WRESTLING TONIGHT – 8 PM,” propped up against the garage’s chain-link fence, piqued my curiosity week after week until I finally mustered up the courage to pay my five dollars and go in. Inside, I found snarling men in tights throwing each other around a ring before a small but devoted crowd of fans who were shouting themselves hoarse. It was a world away from the lights and dazzle of televised pro wrestling. Most of the wrestlers here had shabby costumes and mediocre physiques, and the fans were bundled up in unfashionable layers against the garage’s dank chill. At the center of this village ritual was its shaman, Sandy Barr.

Wrestling night embodied the kind of eclectic, old-school grit I was beginning to love about my new neighborhood. One house on my block had green astroturf in place of a front lawn. Another yard served as a makeshift museum for a half dozen rusty old Peugeots. As a new homeowner, I wasn’t immune to concerns about my

property value, but on the other hand, I liked knowing that my neighbors wouldn't glare at me when my grass got too long. Stan, who lived across the street, let his lawn become a meadow of gently swaying, 10-foot-tall weeds every summer.

Besides the occasional stately farmhouse dating back to St. Johns' early days as an agricultural community, most of the houses were modest, two- or three-bedroom affairs that began to replace the neighborhood's apple orchards after World War II. The nice houses had bird feeders and rose bushes. The bad ones had chain-link fences and mean dogs.

Walking down Lombard Street—St. Johns' main drag—felt to me like strolling through Portland's more rough-and-tumble past. A few blocks from Sandy Barr's garage, past the gun repair shop and an old bakery with cakes in the window, the 1950s-themed Pattie's Home Plate Café served up a heavy dose of nostalgia with its greasy home fries. Old-timers gathered at Pattie's to play cribbage and—on the last Friday of every month—discuss the latest evidence of Bigfoot's whereabouts. Further down Lombard, the Chinese-American-owned Jower's clothing store was hobbling toward its one hundredth year of selling work boots and coveralls to the men and women who labored in the factories and rail yards along the river. Lombard Street had more than its share of watering holes, including a few where women on tiny stages competed with video poker machines for patrons' dollars.

I had seen other run-down Portland neighborhoods transform themselves with surprising speed—the avenues of North Mississippi and North Williams, for example, seemed to waste no time in papering over decades of neglect with boutiques and high-end eateries. But though some residents of St. Johns—

particularly the newcomers—have often clamored for their own moment of ascent, something feels resilient and resistant about the place.

Geography is surely a factor: despite being only a 15-minute drive from downtown Portland, St. Johns is literally off some of the maps that cover the city's traditional quadrants of Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest. It is the city's northernmost neighborhood, but it's also a long, westbound haul down the narrow peninsula that separates the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. It's not really on the way to anywhere, which means a limited customer base for businesses. Visitors unaccustomed to the drive invariably comment on the unexpected distance and the charming but faded Main Street vibe of the small business district on Lombard Street. They often say St. Johns feels like a separate town—indeed, like the separate town it actually was for several decades before Portland annexed it in 1915.

While the homes and downtown core of St. Johns were conceived on a modest scale, the neighborhood's natural surroundings loom much larger. The southbound lanes of the St. Johns Bridge, leading away from town, appear from a distance to plunge right into the thick greenery of Forest Park. Fishermen and the occasional intrepid swimmer are still drawn to this part of the Willamette River despite a legacy of industrial pollution so profound the area has been designated a federal Superfund site. On the peninsula's north side, closer to the Columbia River and only five minutes from my house, the Smith & Bybee Lakes Wetlands Area receives flocks of herons and egrets and dozens of songbird species throughout the year. I became an avid birdwatcher over the course of countless visits to Smith &

Bybee, which despite their size—at two thousand acres, they are the largest wetlands in any U.S. city—are still unknown to most Portlanders. The lakes are a thriving parcel of habitat hemmed in by train tracks, manufacturing plants, a defunct old landfill, and an empty, brand-new jail that Multnomah County had the funds to build but not to open. Like the old-timers at Pattie’s Home Plate Café, the landscape itself has stories to tell. I wrote these chapters to help St. Johns tell its stories, while the connection between the neighborhood and its past still felt tangible and unbroken.

Slowly, and not without some grumbling from the old guard, St. Johns is starting to follow the trends of other rising Portland neighborhoods. There is now a farmers’ market in the town square. The population of backyard chickens is soaring. More than 1,500 people are fans of the official St. Johns Facebook page. There is a gourmet pet food store, a smattering of home furnishing shops, and a new restaurant where one can order elaborate cocktails served with the oversize ice cubes that have become fashionable of late.

At the same time, the neighborhood remains among Portland’s poorest. Despite perennial rumors and pleas to the contrary, Trader Joe’s has made no plans to open a store in St. Johns. While the upscale New Seasons Market chain is expanding rapidly in the metro area, lifting the prospects of one neighborhood after another, St. Johns continues to attract discount and convenience stores like Dollar Tree, Grocery Outlet, and 7-11. When Walgreens proposed a new store at the corner of Lombard and Richmond, where a car dealership had recently shut down after decades of operation, a group of progressive-minded residents protested mightily. It

was a prime location at the east end of St. Johns' main drag, they noted, and here was a rare opportunity to do something more forward-looking with the space, like build a modern housing/retail complex, a community center, or a park. Walgreens went away, but so did other interested developers. The old car dealership stood vacant for a few more years until a self-storage magnate knocked it down to build an enormous new facility.

Sandy Barr's garage, meanwhile, came under the control of his youngest son, J.R. What he lacked in talent as a wrestler, J.R. made up for with devotion to his late father and a sense of duty to see his affairs through. He talked about continuing the wrestling promotions in Sandy's honor, but he acknowledged it would be tough. As he began the laborious task of cleaning up his father's piles of scrap metal and long-unsold flea market inventory, he pondered ways to keep the enterprise going. He knew what it meant to people.

"We used to tell my dad, you gotta take care of yourself for a change," J.R. said. "He had friends all over the Northwest. He let people stay with him over the years, in the loft above the office or sometimes on one of the old couches. He wanted 'em to get out of the rain."

With his mentor gone, Little Nasty Boy began to open up about the true extent of their friendship. Besides giving the brawny, four-foot-nine wrestler a starring role at the garage and always making sure to pay him if there was any money around, Sandy had helped pull him out of a downward spiral of heavy drinking.

"He believed in me when there was no reason to," Little Nasty Boy said. "He

made me see what I was doing to my friends, to my family. He boggled my mind.”

A palpable sense of disbelief pervaded the memorial at Cathedral Park. In part, it was because Sandy died so suddenly—it was hard to believe he wouldn’t be there to ring the bell on Tuesday night. Moreover, death seemed a disappointing fate for a man people saw as larger than life.

“Sandy had no fear of any man,” marveled Little Nasty Boy. “He could take you down with two fingers. He knew things about nerves and muscles. All his body parts were dangerous.”

Sandy was ubiquitous in St. Johns—a respected elder in a downtrodden but proud neighborhood that always felt far removed from the hustle and rising affluence of Portland proper. After the funeral, his relatives posted a guestbook online. “I love you sandy barr,” a woman wrote. “We are real sad. i think there is wrestling in heaven. i hope you have a great time up there.”

Chapter 1

Jower's

Customers are lined up ten deep at the front counter of Jower's Store in St. Johns, but Marilyn Korenaga is worried mainly about the cake. Set out on a tattered countertop at the back of her store, past the work boots and vinyl coveralls, the chocolate cake she brought in this morning is still mostly intact. Amid pink frosted roses, the cursive icing is still legible: "100 Years—Thank You One and All!"

Marilyn is seventy-five years old, and she's grown accustomed to finishing the projects she starts. The prospect of a half-eaten cake thus vexes her mightily. So in addition to working the cash register and keeping the shelves stocked on the last day of her long tenure as shopkeeper, she watches the cake carefully and nags customers and employees to eat some before they leave.

One customer reaches the front of the line and makes a confession to Marilyn: "Last time I was here, you only charged me for one jacket—but I bought two."

"Aw, how honest," Marilyn says through her world-weary smile. Even in the hubbub of a busy closeout sale, her buzz-saw voice cuts through the clamor. She glances toward—but not quite at—her long-time customer. "You can have *two* pieces of cake."

It's Halloween morning, and at five o'clock Marilyn, a second-generation Chinese-American with two more below her, will shut down the family store after a hundred years of continuous operation. Jower's has spent that century in the same

building in St. Johns, a 160-year-old community situated near the end of the North Portland peninsula. After decades of stagnation that have seen many of its storefronts boarded up, blue-collar St. Johns is riding a wave of renewal, with new shops and cafés opening and young professionals and families rushing in to snatch up affordable starter homes. If the Jower's building is torn down next year to make way for a fancy new mixed-use development, as many neighborhood watchers expect, newer residents will soon forget there was ever a work-clothes store at 8801 North Lombard. But for the old-timers, the closing of Jower's means the neighborhood's rugged old identity is irreversibly slipping away.

Newcomers are torn, it seems, on how much progress they want in St. Johns. They rejoiced when the state finished its \$52 million overhaul of the majestic St. Johns Bridge, which seemed to pave the way for an influx of new residents and businesses. But they fear for the future of landmarks like Pattie's Home Plate Café, St. Johns' unofficial town hall, where octogenarians scarf home fries on weekend mornings and serve as living reminders that this is a neighborhood whose roots run deep. And they wonder how long Sandy Barr's Flea Mart will continue to occupy the old garage at the foot of the bridge, where semi trucks hauling logs, steel, and toxics rumble by all day. Anyone who's attended Barr's Tuesday night pro wrestling matches has seen the toughness of St. Johns embodied in Barr's rusty old ring.

* * *

The Jower building, boxy and nondescript, its white exterior laced with the fault lines of age, occupies a prime lot in downtown St. Johns. This strip of Lombard Street is home to a number of venerable shops, like Weir's Cyclery, the Man Shop,

and the Tulip Bakery, where Marilyn bought her chocolate cake. The Wishing Well, a World War II-era bar and restaurant directly across from Jower's, is a proud bulwark against the karaoke revolution; it still invites solo entertainers backed by canned drums to take its tiny, tinsel-framed stage on weekend nights. Many old shops have closed over the years, while others opened at various times during St. Johns' long period of economic blight but failed to get a foothold.

It's generally agreed that Jower's is the matriarch of the local economy, having earned the right many years ago to stop going out of its way to attract customers. Judging by appearances, you'd think the store was closed already. The window display has been empty for some time now, save for a few pairs of boots laid out on a plain wooden box. You can't see the store's interior from the sidewalk; indeed, Jower's curb appeal hovers just above none. On the front door, one of several signs warns: "Young people are not allowed in the store unless accompanied by parent or show proof of working!" Even as you watch customers stream into the building on Halloween—men in greasy coveralls and reflective orange vests, lured by slashed prices and the chance to say they were there on the last day—the storefront looks dark, dormant, dejected.

Push the thumb latch on the front door, though, and you enter a scene that's at once melancholy and exhilarating. The store, a drab cement box not much bigger than a racquetball court, is being picked clean by dozens of bargain hunters. The aisles are jammed with guys trying on jackets and stuffing their legs into coveralls, while the small dressing room, lit by a bare overhead light bulb, goes largely unused. Credit card machines continuously spit out receipts. Two cardboard boxes marked

with the Wrangler logo are stuffed with plastic hangers, free for the taking. The air is full of chatter, and the chocolate cake and five-layer bean dip on a table against the back wall makes the store feel like the scene of an upbeat wake.

“Mom, are there any shoelaces anywhere?” Marilyn’s daughter calls out.

Marilyn, rummaging through a box behind a thin curtain at the back of the store, shouts, “We got some sixty-threes and some seventy-twos and that’s it!”

There are lulls, but the stream of customers is fairly constant. Fifty percent off is a powerful draw, and almost everyone seems compelled to express their regrets at seeing Jower’s go. For some of these customers, who came here as children with their parents, Marilyn is still the “new” owner. But watching the diminutive grandmother shuffle to and from the back room of her store, her flat-soled sandals swishing against the concrete floor, no one would argue that she hasn’t earned her retirement. Years of keeping her books balanced and shelves stocked have strained her eyes, rounded her back, and thinned her black bob of hair. She still has a sharp laugh that pierces the air of her high-ceilinged store, and she likes to punctuate her stories (and make sure you’re paying attention) by reaching over and slapping your wrist or knee. But Marilyn is tired. It’s been three decades since she took over Jower’s from her father, who inherited the store from his father. She decided several years ago that she’d see the store to its one hundredth birthday and then call it quits.

“Thank you, and good luck!” a customer tells Marilyn as he takes his receipt.

“I’ll see you in the next lifetime.”

“Yeah,” Marilyn says dryly, already reaching for the next customer’s goods.
“I’ll beat ya.”

Marilyn’s the kind of mildly acerbic old lady who likes to joke about dying. She also enjoys pretending that running the store is an interminable nuisance, and has declared that her first order of business at five o’clock tonight will be to dance a little jig. But despite the dark humor, Marilyn seems primed by both genetics and temperament for a long retirement. Her grandfather, Wan Jower, lived for eighty hard-working years, and her father lived well into his nineties, staying active in the family business until a few months before his death in 1991. Marilyn’s challenge will not be to live a long life, but rather to relax enough to enjoy it. “She’s always telling us to take breaks, to rest,” says Diana Smith, a 14-year employee. “But she never does. She’s stubborn.”

“It’s that pioneer spirit,” suggests her cousin Wang.

Like Marilyn, Jower’s has stood the test of time. In 1906, the year Jower’s opened, it was common to see paperboys on horseback pass by the front door. The proprietor of the new Currin’s Drugstore liked to set up his Victrola on the sidewalk and fill the block with music. The St. Johns Bridge was still twenty-five years off, and boat captains made a living ferrying people back and forth across the river. Swan Island, now a paved slab home to the likes of Freightliner and UPS, actually had swans on it. Further downriver, Portland was hosting the Lewis & Clark Exposition’s four-month run. The industrial life of St. Johns, situated on the banks of the Willamette, was anchored by companies like Peninsula Iron Works, the Portland

Woolen Mill, and the Oregon Barrel Co. The men who did the heavy lifting at these concerns bought their clothes at Jower's.

* * *

"They've always treated me real well," says C. T. Brownlow softly as he waits on line at the front counter. A dump-truck driver from St. Helens with the physique of a beer-drinking Paul Bunyan, C. T. has shopped at Jower's for ten years. His lower lip bulges with chewing tobacco and his left cheek bears a deep scar, but C. T. is a gentle giant. He clutches four new work shirts in the "hickory" style—black-and-white striped cotton twill, with heavy-duty buttons and zippers. "I'll miss this place. They can order something special if I need it. I can't get this stuff anywhere else."

Jower's sells workwear. Not just the brown and black Carhartt jackets made chic in recent years by hip-hop stars, but real work clothes in many shades of unglamour. On Jower's long shelves you can find quilted flannel shirts, steel-shank boots with toe guards, triple-wide shoes, and Sovereign pocket T-shirts ("Cut for Comfort for the Big Man") in exotic sizes like 4XLT. At the other end of the store, wooden dowels sag under rows of Sitex vinyl coveralls with matching PVC suspenders, Wrangler denim jackets with corduroy collars, and various models of coveralls seemingly designed for strolls through pools of grime and diesel on the South Pole.

Taped to a wall in the shoe section, where Marilyn's cousin Ray is organizing pairs of boots, a cookie fortune reads: "If the shoe fits, it's probably your size." A customer stops to chat. "Closin' out, huh?"

"Uh-huh," says Ray.

“Sorry to hear it.”

“Yeah—shit happens,” Ray says, smiling.

Marilyn has brought in extra help for the store’s last days, including family members and former employees. Her two cousins, Ray and Wang, are here, as are her daughter Gail, who flew up from the Bay Area, and her son Brian, who came down from Seattle. Behind the counter, Diana Smith and Lindsey Peters ring up customers all day. The lucky ones get rung up by Marilyn herself.

Diana’s husband, Bud, is hanging around to help and reminisce. He grew up on nearby Gilbert Street, just a few yards from the railroad cut—a century-old notch between the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Bud’s father, a pipefitter, dragged Bud and his siblings to Jower’s every fall for new school uniforms, which the store carried at the time.

“How you holding up on this concrete floor?” Marilyn asks him.

“Back’s starting to hurt,” Bud admits.

“Yeah—your legs get numb after a while, don’t they.”

Steve Goldstein, a train engineer, takes Marilyn’s hand and kisses it extravagantly. “God bless you, Marilyn,” he says. “I wish you a happy retirement.” Moments later, he stands outside on the sidewalk in a cloud of cigarette smoke and holds open his bag like a proud trick-or-treater. He bought workshirts, a few pairs of pants, and a dozen pairs of “Railroad Socks,” which in his case, it seems worth noting, will be worn by an actual employee of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad. Steve lives in Seattle now, but he heard Jower’s was closing and wanted to stock up and say good-bye.

“I remember when they used to wrap your clothes in brown paper and tie it up with twine,” he says.

This plain, fluorescent-lit store, with its wooden cubbies lining the walls and accidental memorabilia strewn about, invites a quiet reverence for the past. Yellowed signs tacked to the walls alternately warn—“Defective clothes must be washed before returning”—and reassure: “Heel slippage is natural.” Here and there, artifacts from bygone eras poke through the strata like exposed fossils. An old photo on the wall shows Wan Jower, his hair neatly combed back, wearing a severe expression. Another shows the exterior of the building with fresh lettering painted on the wall, long since painted over: “W. JOWER – GENTS FURNISHINGS – HATS, CAPS, AND SHOES.”

A massive brass cash register sits neglected near the back stairwell, its little 10¢ number-plate raised for eternity. With its maximum addition value of \$19.99, the register fell extinct to inflation many decades ago. There is also an old Singer sewing machine here, a relic of the days when the Jowers offered alterations. The Singer is piled high with contemporary detritus: styrofoam cups, AOL trial CDs, Pepsi cans, Swiffer refills. For the most part the store is tidy and organized, but every shelf, every chair, every sign tacked to the wall looks, well, shopworn. Even the 2006 calendar near the front door, “A Tribute to the Heroes of 9/11,” somehow seems ancient.

For weeks now, Marilyn’s been getting phone calls and notes from antique hunters who have spotted treasures in the store and made polite offers. Marilyn has been documenting these requests on yellow Post-It notes torn in half and tacked to

her bulletin board. One woman wonders if the wooden pedestal that used to display goods in the front window is still available. Another wants one of the many large convex mirrors installed around the place to discourage shoplifting. Yet another has her eye on the bronze eagle perched atop the belt rack. Marilyn will honor some requests, but has flatly rejected others. She's utterly mystified by the interest of more than a few people in a dented tin trash can bearing the likeness of the Jolly Green Giant that lives behind the front counter. It's the kind of retro promotional item that goes for a premium on eBay, but Marilyn refuses to give it away. Not because she's attached to it or knows its value, but rather because she didn't shepherd her grandfather's store to its one-hundredth birthday only to let a trash can serve as its enduring symbol.

* * *

Jower's owes its endurance to two simple factors: specialty items and a pragmatic approach to pricing and customer service that Marilyn inherited from her father and grandfather. "I kept prices down so the guys would have some money to spend elsewhere," she explains between customers. "You don't try to take all their money in one gulp! Some of these guys have been here five times in the last week. They must be digging into their piggybanks."

Marilyn is also known for trying to talk her customers out of buying things—a trick she picked up from her father. Picking out an item is only half the battle: you then have to convince Marilyn to let you buy it. When a white-haired mechanic with a prodigious beer gut approaches the counter in a pair of blue coveralls he wants to wear out the door, Marilyn's mouth widens into a pained grin. "Too tight!" she

whispers, putting her hands on both sides of the man's belly, where the fabric strains. The line grows behind the man, who bashfully protests: "Oh, it's okay." Marilyn shakes her head and tells him again: "Too tight!" But he persists, and so Marilyn shrugs, throws up her hands, and turns to the register to ring him up. The teasing exasperation, the overriding concern for the customer, will be Marilyn's legacy.

Like 90 percent of Chinese immigrants to the United States in the late 1800s, Wan Chau came from the Guangdong province, on the country's southern coast. Somehow the name was anglicized to Jower; according to one family legend, Marilyn's grandfather was nervous when he met his first immigration official and answered "Uh—Chau—uh" when asked for his surname, yielding "Jower" on the registry. Wan arrived in Oregon in the 1870s at age fifteen and was hired as a houseboy in Portland by a military officer, who taught him to read and write English. He went home to China for an arranged marriage but already knew that his future was in the Pacific Northwest. So he brought his wife, Ho Sui, with him back to Portland, where he opened a dry-goods shop in Chinatown with a fellow immigrant. In 1906, driven out of downtown Portland by the exorbitant rent, Wan moved his young family to St. Johns and built his store. In the living quarters above the shop, the Jowers raised one daughter (who died very young) and five sons. The boys all did their part to help run the store, but it was Henry—Marilyn's father—who became the store's heir apparent.

The other Jower boys found prominence in their own ways. Beginning in 1929, Jimmy Wan Jower—a.k.a. Ah Wing Lee, a.k.a. "The Chinese Lullaby"—boxed

his way across the Pacific Northwest. Over the next five years, he achieved a respectable 32 wins, 12 losses, and 6 draws, according to one source. But most importantly, St. Johns had a hometown hero—a Chinaman who'd grown up fighting on the tough streets of North Portland and had polished his bruises into hard muscle.

Marilyn chuckles softly when her late uncle's name is raised. "During the Depression, there weren't any jobs—especially for Orientals, let's put it that way. So the guys got into lots of fights. They had to prove themselves. That's the way it went in the old days."

* * *

Earl Lachnite, a fiftyish man in Revo sunglasses, approaches the counter with an armful of jackets. The Carhartt jeans he wears look suspiciously clean, but it's the Bluetooth device hooked around his ear that really sets him apart from the other customers, some of whom are on break from jobs that leave them covered head to toe in dust and grime. Earl makes his living buying and selling foreclosed homes. "I grew up in St. Johns," he tells me, "but honestly I'm glad I left. I wanted to get socially and economically as far away from this place as I could. This was always a neighborhood of hard-working, beer-drinking sons of bitches, but when the industries dried up, the place went to hell."

For the typical Jower's customer, the Carhartt brand has appeal for reasons that have nothing to do with fashion or labor chic. Ken Smelser, a welder at Diversified Marine, says he's spent close to two thousand dollars at Jower's in the last few months, stocking up on Carhartts and hickory coveralls in anticipation of

the store's closing. "I come here for my Carharrts because Fred Meyer only carries Dickies and other brands," he tells me as Marilyn rings up his purchases. "And when I sit down in Dickies, my keys fall out. Every damn time." Ken pauses to make sure Marilyn is listening. "Those companies are run by women, you realize, who don't actually have to wear this stuff."

"Ha!" Marilyn snaps. "Those companies are run by men, and you know it! Listen—you know toilets? Those are designed by men. They've got all these nooks and crannies and indentations on them—to create more cleaning for women!"

Ken and Marilyn share a laugh and he completes his transaction, says his good-byes, remarks sadly on the "disintegration of the industrial infrastructure" in St. Johns, and takes his leave.

Workwear has always been the focus at Jower's, but until Marilyn took over, the store continued to carry kids' shoes and women's clothes. More than a few customers who have come in today can remember being dragged to Jower's by their parents at the start of every school year to buy leather shoes and pants with double-padded knees, while the luckier kids got velour shirts and bell-bottoms at the Man Shop, two blocks down Lombard. The Man Shop was in the business of style. Marilyn's innovation at Jower's was to drop the last pretense of fashion, and so for the last three decades, the two stores existed in a kind of symbiotic harmony.

"In St. Johns, your neighbors are your friends," Bob Leveton, the owner of the Man Shop, says. "When people would come in here for work clothes, we'd send them over to Jower's. And they'd send people over here." Like Marilyn, Bob and his brother Jerry inherited their store from their father. He seems almost ashamed to be

outlasting Jower's. Standing behind the counter of his store in the kind of sweater Bill Cosby used to wear on his eponymous TV show, Bob fights his own quiet battle against age and the challenges of keeping an independent clothing store alive in a city that features both the chain retailers of Lloyd Center and the big boxes of Jantzen Beach.

Whereas Marilyn is stoic, Bob lets his emotions flow. "People don't realize how great that store was," he says, choking up. "They had a concept. Clothes for the working man. When I first heard they were closing, I couldn't believe it. I was so torn up. You know, I went to a trade show once in Washington and gave my card to a guy from Tacoma. He says to me, You're from St. Johns? And I say, Yeah, you know it? And he says, How far are you from Jower's?"

* * *

David Hassin, the developer who bought the Jower's building earlier this year, is mindful of the building's prominent place in local history. Nevertheless, he'll probably tear it down and replace it with a fancy mixed-use development of the kind he's already built in other rising neighborhoods. In Portland's Overlook neighborhood, David took a crumbling building that once housed a grocery, cobbler, and butcher and turned it into suitable space for a microbrew pub. On Mississippi Avenue, salons, clothing boutiques, and artists' live/work spaces have taken the place of wrought iron manufacturers and industrial coating outfits. The size of his St. Johns project will depend on whether he can expand into the brownfield next door, an empty lot on which a gas station once stood.

“St. Johns reminds me of those Central American towns where the whole place revolves around a central plaza,” David told me recently, referring to the brick square in front of Dad’s Restaurant. “Of course, in St. Johns, the plaza’s full of guys standing around and drinking tallboys. But that’s set to change. People are skeptical about St. Johns. I tell them it’s turning the corner. They say it’s been turning the corner for thirty years. But I think now the time has really come.”

Not everyone shares David’s vision of progress. Some locals, who have shuddered at how quickly a swanky 110-unit condominium development sprang up this year just a block off Lombard Street, would rather see Jower’s turned into a museum. A place to celebrate the blue-collar history of St. Johns and the industry that grew up on its shore. David Hassin finds the idea charming but gently makes it clear that it’s a financial loser. More likely than not, we’ll soon see the contemporary mixed-use model of condos above, retail below.

Marilyn knows what’s coming, David says. “A lot of people would be really sad and have a hard time letting go of something like Jower’s. But Marilyn seems to be at peace with the changes.”

* * *

At five o’clock, Wang flips the front door’s sign to “CLOSED” and stands by the door as Marilyn and Diana begin ringing up the remaining customers. Ten dwindles to five, and five to one. Marilyn’s daughter Gail pulls a video camera out of a bag and starts rolling tape. “Next,” says Marilyn, and Trent Marsh, a maintenance worker for the Housing Authority of Portland, steps toward the counter and hits his mark. He

looks slightly nervous, or maybe just reverent. “I guess I’m the last official customer,” he says. Behind him, Gail half-jokes: “Yes—do you want to say anything?”

Trent turns to face her camera. Is he a little misty, or is it my imagination? “Well, I’m just sad to see the place go,” he says. “I’ve been coming here since I was a kid. Now I’ll have to go to the big names. You guys are the last of the Mom and Pops.”

“Finish this guy up,” Marilyn tells Diane abruptly, and without another word walks to the back of the store, through the door, and up the stairs to her office. The store has never seemed so quiet. The beeps of the barcode scanner have never sounded so loud. You can sense everyone’s disappointment, including Trent. The star of the show has left the stage before the curtains have fallen on the final act, and nobody seems to know how to fill the emptiness.

But then Marilyn ends the interminable delay and returns, shuffling toward the front counter, toward her last customer, with a green baseball cap in one hand and a white T-shirt in the other. They both bear the logos of manufacturing companies. “Turn around,” she tells Trent, and she lays the shirt across his back, checking the fit. “Good,” she says. Trent thanks her, collects his bag, and is gone.

Wang locks the door, and the store falls quiet again. As promised, Marilyn performs her desultory jig, drawing subdued chuckles. Her son Brian, daughter Gail, cousins Ray and Wang, and long-time employee Diana watch her expectantly. Finally, Marilyn speaks.

“Did you guys get any cake?”

Chapter 2

Gas & Coke

The Gasco building, an abandoned concrete edifice built in 1913 by the Portland Gas & Coke Company, somehow manages a century later to be both grandiose and invisible. At first sight, it provokes double-takes. Three stories of poured concrete rise up with Gothic features to a clocktower that broadcasts a blank, mute circle where hands once spun and kept factory workers on task. Moss has won the red slate roof, and grass and ferns have transformed the capacious copper gutters into lush planter boxes. The several dozen first-floor windows, as tall as a man, are boarded up with plywood streaked with dirt—or perhaps it is mold. But higher up, many of the sash windows still have their panes—some unbroken, most jagged with holes. Behind these windows lies unfathomable darkness.

Enclosed by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, the building seems built for a thousand-year occupancy. Now surrounded by newer, featureless industrial buildings, the Gasco building has retained its aura of ambition. Portland Gas & Coke erected this building ostensibly to house administrative and lab workers, but also, it seems, to serve as a monument to itself.

The building sits almost directly under the St. Johns Bridge, which today dominates the landscape on this part of the Willamette River. But the Gasco building predated the bridge by nearly 20 years and would easily have been the most impressive structure on this stretch of Highway 30, which follows the Willamette and then the Columbia River to the coastal town of Astoria. Watching the building

recede in your rear-view mirror, you might entrepreneurially daydream about what the building could someday be: an art museum? an industrial-chic concert venue? a new location for the McMenemy's restaurant chain, which reinvents unwanted old buildings as pubs and second-run movie houses?

The Gasco building seems to invite myth-making even though there's plenty of evidence—presented anew every few years in local newspapers—that it is simply the abandoned main building of a utility company's riverside plant. But it has a powerful draw. Admirers of the building, from skate punks to film location scouts, try and fail to get inside. Rumors of asbestos or worse swirl around the property. The only sanctioned visitors it receives today are the security guards employed by the company that Gasco eventually became: Northwest Natural.

Despite its imposing profile, one tends to stop seeing the Gasco building after a while. Once a destination for workers who watched the landmark of fresh concrete and glass grow larger as they approached by train from downtown Portland, today the building is glimpsed from cars at high speeds, if indeed it is seen at all. Coated in decades' worth of dust and grime, the building has gradually taken the hue of the air around it. You may find yourself remarking one day that although you've driven past the site countless times, it's been a long while since the Gasco building registered in your consciousness. You wonder, was the old place finally razed? But when you make a point to look for it the next time you drive by, you find that it is still there, standing tall and still bidding for respect in the face of its own obsolescence.

* * *

On a warm Saturday in May, the only sounds near the Gasco building are the rush of traffic on Highway 30 and the strident, unmusical calls of a pair of Stellar's Jays carrying on in a maple tree near the train tracks. The building's details reveal themselves as you approach: The fire escape so dilapidated you can see the rough texture of the rust. The front door partially obscured by a shrub last pruned during the original run of *Leave It to Beaver*. The colossal building seems almost secretive in its silence, and it's easy to imagine there's more activity inside those concrete walls than around the perimeter. Surely, mice scurry. Maybe even larger animals come in from the river and take refuge in the building. And perhaps rusted light fixtures give way, on occasion, to decades of gradual metal fatigue and come crashing to the floor like proverbial trees in the forest.

Signs posted on the chain-link fence make clear that Northwest Natural wants the public to keep its distance: "Facility uses 24 hour security cameras." "Unauthorized presence constitutes a breach of security." But the hidden steps leading down the steep embankment from Highway 30 are difficult to resist, and it's possible to hop a set of train tracks and get close to the building.

Even the security guard's booth, about 20 yards due east of the building, is devoid of life, but signs of recent habitation suggest the guard is simply out on rounds. A dingy plastic chair and standing ashtray are chained to the fence to prevent them from blowing away in the winds that come down the river. The booth's small window reveals a small TV and microwave, a can of Taster's Choice coffee, a bottle of Febreze air freshener, and—touchingly, somehow—a bran muffin

in a ziploc bag. From this quiet station, a guard watches over a building that once housed up to 50 workers, with hundreds more on the surrounding grounds.

Previous generations of guards had more to do here. There were credentials to check, deliveries to sign for, fights to break up. They would even open the gate, at their discretion, for worried parents who harbored the folk-medicine belief that the strong fumes emanating from the plant could cure their sickly children of everything from hay fever to whooping cough. With the guards watching over them, the parents would lead their children to an inspection port on the outer wall of the gas generating plant, where the unfortunate kids were instructed to lean in and take the fumes deep into their lungs.

Before the 1940s and 50s, when utility companies figured out how to produce usable fuel from underground deposits of naturally occurring gas, it took a process called destructive distillation to create the gas people used to heat their homes, cook their meals, and light their streets. For 42 years, Portland Gas & Coke took the countless tons of coal that arrived at its plant by rail and superheated it in oxygen-starved chambers until it broke down into two basic parts: the product, and a bewildering array of hazardous byproducts with no commercial value. The product—"town gas," as it was called in those days—fueled the growing city. The byproducts were simply a consequence of doing business with which Portland Gas & Coke, or "Portland Gasp & Choke," as it was known to its own workers, was in no hurry to come to terms.

By 1956, it was clear that the future of town gas lay in underground reserves, not the dirty work of destructive distillation. Portland Gas & Coke shuttered its

Gasco plant in 1956 and abandoned, after only four decades, an administrative edifice built to last for centuries. It also left behind about 30,000 cubic yards of tar waste—enough to fill the beds of 15,000 pickup trucks, a convoy that, bumper to bumper, would stretch for nearly 50 miles. Portland Gas & Coke had allowed this waste to run into the river from various low-lying ponds and drainage channels. Over the years, the unwanted byproducts of spent coal—benzene, naphthalene, and phenols, to name a few—oozed into the water and, in time, the central nervous systems of the river's inhabitants.

In a polluted river, being at the top of the food chain is more of a liability than an advantage. Contaminants in the water or in river sediments find their way into the cells of plants and small organisms, which are eaten by small fish and, in turn, larger fish, which ultimately are consumed by predators and scavengers like eagles, raccoons, and people. The fish might taste fine. But children born to mothers who ate contaminated fish while pregnant face a host of potential problems—lower IQ, impaired learning ability, compromised immune system performance. The State of Oregon blesses the consumption of no more than eight ounces of carefully cleaned fish per month. That's for healthy adult men and healthy women past childbearing age. For the weak, the young, and the pregnant, resident fish from polluted sections of the Willamette are to be considered a clear and present health hazard.

Gasco had plenty of company along the banks of the Willamette. Two companies making DDT and, later, the ingredients of Agent Orange dumped their waste into a once-pristine pond in the cool shadow of Forest Park. That pond slowly drained into the river, as it always had. Next door, a facility stripped car batteries,

smelted lead, and produced zinc alloys for four decades, leaving behind nearly ninety thousand tons of battery casings and enough lead acid to fill ten Olympic-size swimming pools. Across the river, the McCormick & Baxter Creosoting Company subjected wood to a cocktail of preservatives that included pentachloro-phenol, arsenic, and chromium, sending waste oils to ponds that leaked like sieves into the river. After thriving for half a century, McCormick & Baxter closed up shop and declared bankruptcy, leaving behind “a post-apocalyptic wasteland of the highest order,” according to a website that claims to catalog “the worst places in the world.” During World War II, two shipyards—one upstream from Gasco and one downstream—employed tens of thousands of workers who built more than a thousand “liberty ships” between 1941 and 1945 and sent them off to the theaters of war, leaving toxic oils and residue behind.

Together, these and other activities produced enough contamination to qualify the Portland Harbor—stretching 10 miles, from the Broadway Bridge to Sauvie Island—as a federal Superfund site. In receiving this designation, reserved for the most contaminated grounds in the United States, the Portland Harbor joins New York’s Love Canal, where a housing development project released into the community 21,000 tons of toxic waste that a chemicals and plastics manufacturer had buried years before, in addition to nearly 1,300 other sites across the country. The Environmental Protection Agency is empowered to compel “responsible parties” to fund the cleanup of Superfund sites, but many of them have gone bankrupt or simply disappeared. It’s a long, litigious process, and before even a single truckload of polluted earth can be hauled away, millions of dollars are spent

on studies documenting the precise scope and enormity of the damage, giving residents plenty of time to lament what's happened to the neighborhood and to daydream about a rehabilitated landscape to hand down to the next generation. But in many Superfund sites, the damage is invisible—dystopic scenes like the 1969 fire on Ohio's Cuyahoga River are the exception, not the rule—and the landscapes still look inviting.

* * *

On a brisk and foggy Sunday morning the week before Halloween, Bud Hartman gently guides his 17-foot SmokerCraft fishing boat into the Willamette River from the Cathedral Park boat ramp, under the St. Johns Bridge. It's late in the season for warmwater fishing, and Bud suspects it's a bit over-optimistic that he's brought along a large cooler for his quarry. But for the 75-year-old former electronics salesman, who co-founded the Oregon Bass & Panfish Club half a century ago, the pleasure is simply in plying these familiar waters. At the club's next monthly meeting at the East Portland Community Center, he'll be able to either boast about what he caught today or complain about what he didn't.

Bud's cratered face and yellow, crooked-gravestone teeth betray his age, but he carries himself like a younger man with energy to spare. He's the proud, competent kind of old man who would be loath to hire someone else to wash his car or mow his lawn. His blue nylon jacket bears his name in cursive on the lapel, and his baseball cap reads, "Life is short—fish hard."

With his boat idling and drifting away from the dock, he flips up the lenses of his clip-on sunglasses and makes a quick inventory of his essentials. He has two

fishing poles and several small jars of bait. He pats his shirt pocket to confirm the presence of a pack of discount-brand cigarettes. He unfolds and briefly studies a map of the area to remind him where his favorite fishing spots are. Not exactly designed for sportsmen, the map is a color print-out from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality called “Portland Harbor Upland Cleanup Sites.” It’s a comprehensive list of the polluted sites along the river, color-coded by degree of contamination and labeled with the names of companies responsible for the damage.

“We catch a good number of your warmwater species out here,” Bud says. “Most times I’m out here looking for crappies,” which rhymes with *poppies*. “But there’s also large-mouth bass and small-mouth bass, bluegill, pumpkinseed, warmouth—you don’t see many of those—yellow perch, your channel catfish and your bullhead catfish, and walleye, of course. Some are good eating and others are for sport. I eat the largemouths, but the smallmouths are too valuable. I throw them back so I can catch them again and again.”

Bud tucks the map into his pocket and is soon speeding downriver in the cold air at 35 miles per hour, his fleshy earlobes flapping in the wind. He’s heading for the first slip at Terminal 4, one of his favorite crappie fishing spots. Like most warmwater species, crappies seek out the shelter of whatever kind of structure they can find: logs, rocks, concrete pilings, wrecked boats, and so on. Sometimes the fishing club will tie up old Christmas trees, dip the stumps in concrete, and dump them in the river. Thus, while the industrial activity along this stretch of the Willamette, as on most urban waterways, has delivered a severe environmental

blow to the ecosystem, it has also created plenty of artificial habitat for adaptable creatures. And so Bud and his friends keep coming back.

Bud's boat passes and is dwarfed by docked barges. There is the Spruce Arrow and the Dependable, and, at Toyota's dock, a Panama-registered barge called the New Century, which disgorge dozens of shiny new Priuses, fresh paint glinting in the morning light. The superefficient hybrid vehicles descend a steep ramp at the hands of unseen drivers. Near the Texaco plant on the western bank of the river, a mature bald eagle perches on a steel railing. A bit further downriver, four Canada Geese fly inches above the water, honking as they pass the weatherbeaten Empress of the North, a dignified-looking paddlewheeler registered in Juneau and, it would seem, docked here for repairs.

As Bud turns into Terminal 4's first slip, he quickly cuts the engine and gazes at the water ahead, twisting his mouth in disapproval. A barrier, fashioned from logs lashed together end to end, has been installed across the entire length of the slip's entrance. "By God, they have it blocked!" Bud says. "That's one of our prime fishing spots. Damn them anyway."

Bud wears the air of grievance as comfortably as his old fishing hat. The state of this slip has long been a touchy subject. One of the Superfund cleanup plans being considered for the harbor is to install a wall, roughly where the makeshift log berm has been placed, that runs to the bottom of the river and many feet underground. Then the entire slip will be back-filled with contaminated sediments removed from other spoiled parts of the harbor. It will essentially be a on-site toxic-waste dump, and a more cost-effective way to deal with the waste than to haul it to distant

landfills. Bud sighs. “Their idea is just plain dumb, I tell you,” he says. “But what do I know—I’m no scientist.”

The Port of Portland owns and operates Terminal 4, but as with all areas of the Portland Harbor, fisherman are allowed here as long as they stay in their boats and don’t tie up to the concrete pilings or venture ashore. But the security guards—“rent-a-cops,” Bud calls them with a whiff of contempt—often assume the fishermen are trespassing and issue threats to call the police. The fishermen, who know their rights as well as they know their lures and poles, nonchalantly tell the guards to go ahead and call, knowing that nothing will come of it.

Barred from entering the slip, Bud again consults the Portland Harbor Upland Cleanup Sites map. He points a tobacco-stained finger at the spot marking the Schnitzer steel operation (color-coded red for heavy contamination), and points his boat downriver.

“I’ve been fishing down here for the better part of 40 years,” Bud says over the whine of the boat’s engine. “It actually used to be a lot dirtier. You’d see raw garbage and watermelon rinds and all manner of things. Then it got better, but not better enough. It’s a crying shame. People are afraid to come down here. They say, ‘You don’t fish in the harbor, do ya?’ And we say, ‘Why, yes we do!’ And look at me: I’m 75 years old and I’ve still got all my fingers and toes, and I don’t glow in the dark. That’s because we know how to clean these fish properly. They build up these materials in their organs and spine and what-not. They’re not like the salmon who just use this place like a highway and come in once a year when they’re doin’ their he-in’ and she-in’. Our warmwater fish, you’ve got to fillet ‘em and remove all those

parts where the heavy metals accumulate. Now, the ethnic groups that fish down here, they cook their fish whole. Especially the Orientals. They don't fillet 'em the way we do."

And it's not just the Portland Harbor. The medical and scientific literature is full of alarming evidence from around the country about the subsistence fishing practices of immigrant groups. Writing in *Environmental Research*, the authors of "Contaminated profiles in Southeast Asian immigrants consuming fish from polluted waters in northeastern Wisconsin" concluded that Hmong immigrants have alarmingly high levels of PCB exposure from locally caught fish. In another issue of the same journal, the authors of "Catfish consumption as a contributor to elevated PCB levels in a non-Hispanic black subpopulation" approached the subsistence fishing issue as largely defined by racial health disparities, noting that black anglers—one million of them nationwide, by the authors' estimation—"are more likely to fish in watersheds with high PCB contamination." In many places, like the lower branches of Washington State's Duwamish River, you can find a veritable United Nations of subsistence fishermen: Samoan, Vietnamese, Tongan, Russian, Hmong, and Lao. The groups often lack the language to speak to each other, let alone to the officials who periodically show up to warn them about the dangers of eating the fish they catch.

Bud glides into the Schnitzer slip, passing under a massive blue crane used for lifting containers off ships. A blue heron perched on a piling takes flight as the boat encroaches into its comfort zone. Scrap metal lines the bank in massive heaps, with tangles of rebar and cable piled so high that the strands look unexpectedly

delicate. On the steep slopes that tumble down to the water, house sparrows have the blackberry brambles to themselves. When Bud cuts the motor, silence rushes in and is then replaced by the background sound of an industrial harbor on a Sunday: the lapping water, the hum of utility buildings, the occasional beep-beep-beep of a large vehicle in reverse.

“On a weekday, you can’t hear yourself think down here,” Bud says as he settles into a swivel seat at the front of his boat. “The clamor and the clanging is just incredible. But even with all that, it’s amazing how much wildlife we see. I’ve seen beavers and otters right here, and sometimes osprey come down to fish.”

Bud casts his fishing line into the water, the lure and sinker dropping gently through an iridescent sheen and into the depths. He uses a foot-powered electric motor to maneuver the boat along the rocky bank, where the crappies are most likely to be resting. In this fashion, Bud takes a slow tour of the slip’s perimeter. He points out an outflow pipe issuing milky-looking water into the river and recalls a time when he saw bright yellow foam surrounding the very same pipe. That raised his hackles enough to call the news desk at *The Oregonian*, and though a photographer came out to investigate, the paper never ran a story. Bud suspects nefarious interference from the powerful Schnitzer family. Or perhaps the paper’s response would have been the Portland Harbor’s version of “Forget it, Jake—it’s Chinatown”—perhaps the most oft-quoted movie line for expressing the futility of fighting for justice in a place that’s long been down on its luck.

When the Gasco plant first fired its kilns in 1913, the settlement of St. Johns—a short ferry ride across the water—was already accustomed to the smoke

and smells rising from its industrial waterfront. St. Johns was platted in 1865 as a small town center surrounded by orchards and fields, but its riverfront soon became a place of heavy industry. Pollution accumulated. When factories folded, others took their place. For 50 years beginning in 1940, Portland sent its garbage to St. Johns, where 14 millions tons of it were packed into a former wetland lake, wrecking the habitat of Western painted turtles and migratory great egrets. When 3,500 tons of lentils fell off a barge in the Columbia River in 2003, the whole waterlogged load was sent to a compost facility in St. Johns. There the lentils rotted, sending a leguminous stink over the entire neighborhood. The residents' protests carried a whiff of weary familiarity. For most of Portland, St. Johns is out of sight and out of mind—but just conveniently close enough to situate the dumps, junkyards, and malodorous plants and factories that keep an urban area functional.

Bud's heart does not bleed for environmental causes. Indeed, the fact that he can fish productively in these waters despite the abuse they've taken seems to enhance both his enjoyment of the river and his admiration for the critters in it. Bud himself worked in the industry along the river here in the early sixties. He spent the better part of a year laboring at Oregon Steel, a producer of enormous steel ingots and poles. Workers shaped these objects on rollers that needed constant lubrication; when that lubricant was spent and began to stiffen up, men would gather it up in 55-gallon drums. Bud is unclear on the details of what happened next, but he knows for sure that the drums were brought down to the river and did not return.

* * *

“Diesel, biodiesel, asphalt, polystyrene, rubberized stuff, we got all kinds of crap,” said Charlie Finger, a millwright and boiler operator at McCall Oil & Chemical, upriver from Oregon Steel and Schnitzer. It was a Friday afternoon, close to quitting time, and Finger—he goes by his surname only—was standing by a bungalow-sized container of asphalt and frowning at the viscous black goo seeping out of a crankshaft. McCall began distributing gasoline and heating oil in 1936 and continues to deal in all manner of petroleum products. Its slogan: “We’ve got you covered.” If you wanted to, say, take a barge of American wheat to China, you could dock at McCall Oil and draw ship fuel from one of its huge containers, some of which hold 250,000 barrels. If you wanted to repave Interstate 5 from Portland to Seattle, McCall Oil could help you with that, too.

Some of McCall’s products, particularly the asphalt blends, have to be agitated and heated continuously at more than 300 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent them from becoming unbudgeable solids. That kind of heat requires a steady supply of steam, produced by massive boilers whose maintenance has been entrusted to Finger. He also rebuilds failing pumps and other equipment, some of which dates to the Second World War.

“I’ve had third-degree live steam burns,” Finger said, peeling back a sleeve to reveal a quarter-sized white scar. “That’s not a lot of fun. Not to mention smashed fingers and hands, cuts, staples, stitches. The steam goes through work shirts, coveralls, and Kevlar sleeves. You don’t fuck with steam. It just cuts right through.”

Finger produced a pencil and spiral-bound notepad from his coveralls and jotted a brief note about the condition of the crankshaft. He wore coveralls that may

have once been blue, and orange earplugs dangled on a cord around his neck. He had a silver mullet: short and coarse on top, with a long gray ponytail tied with several black elastic bands, giving him a vaguely raccoonlike appearance. His Long Island accent, with its dropped r's and g's, remained as strong as the day he headed west for basic training at Camp Pendleton thirty-five years ago.

Continuing his rounds, he came to the engine of the McCall operation: roaring boilers and the feedwater tanks that supply them with fresh water. The biggest, loudest boiler—the one that produces the steam for McCall's largest container—consumes eight hundred gallons of fresh water per hour. Under intense pressure, the steam enters an elaborate piping system that makes arterial paths through the containers of oil. The best place to learn about the mechanics of McCall's largest boiler is right next to it, with Finger shouting the salient details into your ear.

Finger checked in on his workshop, a small building next to the dock at the edge of McCall's property, where a barge slowly sucked in thousands of gallons of fuel and a dozen Canada Geese pecked at the scrubby bank that ran down steeply to the water. Finger liked being close to the water. It reminded him of his time caulking the wooden hulls of the *Lady Washington*, a sailing vessel he helped build when he was in his twenties. He soon became an expert rigger, gathering mast, sails, and crew and setting out to sea. Finger found the experience mind-opening. He began attending college, but around the time he ran out of money, he got a call from an acquaintance about a job—not on the open sea, but with a petroleum products distributor on the Willamette River. Finger took the job.

In the workshop, a broken pump was laid out on a wooden table, covered with two oily shop rags like a patient who had been prepped for surgery and then forgotten. Tools, brushes, and solvents were strewn about the room. Finger reached into his coveralls and produced a silver cigarette case from the pocket of a fringed leather vest.

“This is basically just a tin shed,” he said, lighting up. “When it’s humid in here, condensation forms on the ceiling and it starts raining. When it’s ninety degrees out, it’s ten degrees warmer in here. That ain’t easy for a goon. The conditions here are tough. You got guys out here in the middle of the night, with the rain blowing sideways, crawling under rail cars to unload asphalt. You hear a lot of talk these days about alternative energy, and that’s all well and good, but what are they gonna do—stop paving roads? Our whole society is based on oil. Sometimes it occurs to me I’ve been involved in petroleum in some fashion practically my whole life. I’ve built refineries, worked on tankers, towed barges. This is my ticket to retirement. We’re all addicted to oil and that’s not gonna change—until we run out.”

* * *

Bud Hartman hasn’t given up on the Schnitzer slip yet, though it does appear his inkling was right: the day is too cold and short to expect good fishing. He holds the cork handle of his pole gingerly in his age-spotted right hand and lets the line sink into the water. With his left hand, he gathers just a bit of slack. The water laps against the boat, and he occasionally steps on the foot pedal of his electric motor to keep the boat from bumping into the pilings.

He's accustomed to fishing alone, though he often sees friends in neighboring boats and invites "the wife" to come along. His son, described by Bud as an unambitious but upright character who eased his family's worries years ago by securing a steady job as a warehouse worker, grew up fishing in Oregon's lakes and rivers with Bud. Trophy photos taken over the years show an endless lineage of fish in the grip of a boy who slowly turns into a man. But Bud will outlive his son, who needs round-the-clock care at home as a cancerous tumor in his brain expands beyond the reach of treatment.

"This is the first year he hasn't gotten his annual fishing license," Bud says, his voice betraying no emotion.

The end of Bud's fishing pole takes an almost imperceptible bow toward the water. He figures he's snagged his hook on a rock or piece of wood. But there is motion in the line. He has a bite. He turns his crank a dozen times, and an immature yellow perch, barely two inches long, breaks the river's surface. The hook is lodged not in its mouth but in its tender gill. Bud extracts the hook and the little perch wriggles out of his hand and falls to the floor of the boat.

Bud makes a small, exasperated sound. He bends down on 75-year-old knees and fumbles around for the fish, which keeps slipping through his cold fingers. The situation calls for unsentimental tenderness. Too loose a grip, and the fish will simply wriggle away; too tight, and Bud might crush it. He tries to gather the fish in his two rough palms, but it's too small, too slippery. He tries to corner it in the small spaces where the floorboard meets the sides of the boat, but the baby perch will not

cooperate. Bud persists. By the time he finally, dutifully gets the fish back into the water, it has almost given up the fight.

* * *

A few months earlier, in summer's prime, Emily Melina, a 31-year-old swim coach, walked down a boat ramp and into the river under southeast Portland's Sellwood Bridge. It was seven a.m., and the water was in the chilly mid-sixties. Direct sunlight wouldn't arrive here for a couple more hours. Men in fishing boats, getting an early start on the river, looked at Emily like she was crazy. Even the ducks, she felt, seemed suspicious of the human body in their midst. Above her, the cracked, 85-year-old span of the Sellwood Bridge, rated 2 out of a possible 100 by a national agency that tracks bridge safety, rattled with vehicle traffic. An air horn sounded, and Emily began swimming downstream.

As she swam, her body began to limber up and shed its chill. She settled into a steady cadence, turning her head to the right to breathe and watch the Willamette River's eastern bank slowly scroll by as she worked her way further north. A friend kept pace in a kayak alongside her. Nearby, small splashes issued from 15 other swimmers who shared Emily's goal: to pass under every bridge on the river within Portland's municipal boundaries. Over the past month, she had put in a few hours at the pool every day to prepare for the 2011 Portland Bridge Swim. She had energy to burn.

Two and a half miles from the start, Emily passed under the Ross Island Bridge. The bridges arrived faster now, about one every half mile. She was entering the most developed part of Portland's waterfront, with landscaped esplanades on

both banks and tall hotels and office buildings off to the west. She swam under the Marquam Bridge, the Hawthorne Bridge, and the Morrison Bridge, with its spiraling on-ramps to Interstate 5. She learned to expect a chill under each bridge as she passed through their narrow bands of perpetually shadowed water. Soon she arrived at the Burnside Bridge, famous for the once-illicit, now-city-sanctioned skatepark it shelters on its east end. Just shy of the dismal, grimy-looking black span of the Steel Bridge, the river began a gentle turn to the northwest. Emily turned with it. On the river's eastern bank, a grain storage facility filled her vision.

“Everything looks different from the water, and you have a lot more time to see it,” Emily says. “You know intellectually that these structures are huge when you drive by them, but it’s another order of magnitude when you’re swimming. I felt very small out there.”

But she didn't feel unsafe. She knew that Portland's sewer system sometimes overflowed into the river after a heavy rain, and she knew that she'd be swimming through a federal Superfund site just a few miles ahead, but she felt satisfied that she'd done her due diligence before committing to the race. She was a frequent visitor to a website that provides real-time reporting of the fecal coliform bacterial levels in the river, and she had carefully read the page on the Portland Bridge Swim's website titled, “Are You Crazy?” The website confronted the stigmas and the hazards of the river head-on. Yes, there is toxic waste in the river. But in typical summer conditions, which are typically more calm than turbid, the contamination is bound up in the sediment and not floating freely in the water itself. Yes, there are sharp objects and large pieces of garbage on the river bottom. But the water is high

enough in July that swimmers will float far above the hazards. Yes, there are toxic algae blooms, but these typically occur much later in the summer. Finally, yes, there are large fish in the water—you might encounter a sturgeon or two—but they will leave you alone.

Five miles into her race, Emily swam under the brick-red Broadway Bridge, and in another half-mile reached the soaring Fremont Bridge, a structure tall enough to accommodate, without a drawbridge, even the biggest ships. Though Emily was only halfway through the course, she was reassured to see the St. Johns Bridge in the distance. *I can do this*, she thought. But the scenery soon became desolate. She could no longer see any of the other swimmers. The human scale of the downtown waterfront, where the river is narrow and people go about their business on the esplanade, was replaced with industrial features—barges, heavy equipment, and huge, windowless structures bearing the unfamiliar corporate logos of entities that deal in noxious chemicals and the thankless components of infrastructure.

Emily swam a mile without seeing another bridge, then another mile, and another. Coming close alongside a docked ship, she was at first glad for the landmark. But she was pitifully small beneath it and could not perceive her progress; she nearly despaired she would never have the gratification of passing the ship. Her arms no longer felt fresh. Fatigue was setting in. Early in the race, with energy to spare, she had swum through the wakes of passing boats. Now she stopped paddling and let the wakes wash over her, waiting for the calm to return.

When her neck began to ache after more than three hours of breathing to the right, she switched sides and a new scene came into view. Beneath the tall hills of

Forest Park, one industrial facility after another squatted on the river. One building was unlike the others: a hulking mass of weathered concrete, bearing architectural details that belonged to another time. Emily attracted her share of curious looks along the course of her 11-mile swim, but it was nothing compared to the scandal that may well have erupted if she'd gasped and choked her way through this stretch of water 80 years ago. She had already taken several inadvertent swallows of river water on her swim, to no ill effect. She took it as a given that she would, at a minimum, feel a bit queasy after the race. PCBs aside, she figured that the bacteria, at least, would find her at some point. But Portland Harbor water in July is cleaner than one has a right to expect.

There has been in recent years a flowering of organizations with a stake in the river's rehabilitation. The Lower Willamette Group, Willamette Riverkeeper, and the Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group all meet regularly to track the progress of the Superfund damage assessment and cleanup plans, and at least five Native American tribes, from the Umatilla to the Grande Ronde, have seats at the table of the Portland Harbor Natural Resource Trustee Council, which has legal authority to sue the dozens of companies and individuals identified as onetime or current polluters. A group called North Portland Greenway seeks to build a trail system for walkers and cyclists that cuts through the Superfund sites and connects St. Johns to downtown Portland.

The river attracts scientists, for whom the harbor is a real-world laboratory to study all the things they wrote their dissertations about—the polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, the PCBs, the benzene. And it attracts dreamers, who imagine a post-

cleanup river restored to its former pristine condition and bordered by native plants, the way Meriwether Lewis and William Clark found it when they stopped near St. Johns during the winter of 1803-04—more than a century before Portland Gas & Coke began cooking coal here. For Lewis and Clark, not to mention the two hundred native people they found living near present-day Terminal 4—Bud Hartman’s favorite spot for catching crappies—the industrial age was so far in the future as to be nowhere close to conceivable at even the farthest edges of the imagination. Lewis and Clark were primarily concerned that winter with how to survive the cold, interminable rain.

Somewhere between the Fremont and St. Johns bridges, Emily Melina nearly bonked, in the parlance of endurance athletes. Her liver and muscles had burned through their supply of glycogen and begun to attack her slow-burning fat stores instead, leaving her depleted of energy—literally out of fuel. But she was close enough to the finish to get there on fumes. Passing under the St. Johns Bridge, she navigated a series of pylons and finally reached the Cathedral Park boat ramp—the same boat ramp Bud would descend on a brisk fall day three months later. She had the numb and disoriented feeling of an astronaut returned to land. She stumbled up the boat ramp toward a crowd of two dozen people, who applauded her arrival. A medic gripped his kit, ready to check her vital signs. Only at the finish line, with the sun now shining almost directly above and Superfund water still dripping from her body, did Emily realize that after four hours and nineteen minutes of continuous swimming, she had won the race.

Chapter 3

The Home Plate

Pattie Dietz wants me to keep an open mind about Bigfoot. I went to her diner recently for a tuna melt and left with *Bigfoot Lives*, a DVD documentary about the ongoing search for the Sasquatch. Pattie also loaned me a CD called *Bigfoot: Alive in '82*. “I haven’t listened to this one yet,” she told me. “I think it has a lot of spooey songs on it.” A quick glance at the track list supported her impression. “Big Foot Boogie.” “Funny Lookin’ Tracks.” “Where Only the Sasquatch Goes.” Pattie says one of her customers was kidnapped by Bigfoot as a child and taken to a cave on the Oregon coast, where she spent the night with a Bigfoot family. She passed out but was able to remember the experience the next day when Bigfoot returned her to her parents. Pattie’s own encounters have been less direct, but she demurs on the details.

“My last husband was a hunter, and I went with him all the time,” she said. “I’ve had a lot of unexplained experiences, I’ll put it that way.”

Pattie doesn’t claim to be a serious Bigfoot enthusiast. Nevertheless, the International Bigfoot Society—which, puzzlingly, is the local chapter of the Western Bigfoot Society—has long held its monthly meetings at her Home Plate Café, a 1950s-themed diner in the working-class neighborhood of St. Johns. A massive Toledo scale sits near the front door, and 45-rpm records dangle from the ceiling on strings. Signs above the grill read, “No sniveling” and “I’ve got friends in low places.” Two years ago, in recognition of Pattie’s longstanding hospitality on the fourth

Saturday of every month, the Society honored her as their Bigfoot of the Year, adding her name to a handsome plaque.

Pattie is sixty-two but looks ten years younger. Her diner is ten years old but looks forty years older. She is a restless proprietor: the pink slippers she wears at work mean only that she's comfortable, not relaxed. She is short and stocky and always on the move. She has two tattoos: what she calls a "dancing lady M&M" below her clavicle, and a bouquet of tropical flowers covering one entire calf. Both of these tattoos, done by a grandson in lieu of repaying a loan, are less than a year old. She plans to get a raven next but hasn't yet decided where she wants it.

"I don't want to put it next to my M&M lady, but I don't want it here on my old lady arm, either. You know the old lady arm, right?" She jiggles her grandmotherly flab.

Pattie likes to stay busy, which is why, in addition to inviting the Bigfoot Society to hold its meetings here, she dedicates Mondays to craft night. Ladies gather at closing time, when the air is still thick with grill smoke, to work on sweaters and crochet projects. Thursdays are for the St. Johns Cribbage Association. And on the first three Saturdays of the month, Pattie pushes the tables aside for the Home Plate's signature event: a bona fide sock hop, complete with Elvis songs and poodle skirts borrowed from the extensive costume shop in the back corner of the diner.

"Tuesday and Wednesday are the only nights when we don't have anything happening here," Pattie says.

"Yeah," says her husband, Gene. "On Wednesday, me and her fight."

Politicians always seem to put in an appearance at the Home Plate when they visit St. Johns. When former mayor Tom Potter and his staff stopped by during his campaign, Pattie led the candidate to his table herself, menu in hand. She gave him the seat against the wall, facing the diner. “I like to see what’s coming at me,” she told the one-time police chief. “I figured you would, too.”

The grill, counter, jukebox, booths, and tables make up only about a third of the interior space at the Home Plate. The rest is a captivating maze of tchotchkes and textiles that provide a year-round venue for Pattie’s packrat inclinations. Pattie was famous for her yard sales long before she opened her diner—she’d hold them several times a summer, always netting at least a thousand dollars each time. The diner continues the tradition, with half-unpacked boxes strewn about and a mysterious logic governing what makes it onto the shelves.

“Every time you come in here, you’ll find something new,” Pattie says. It takes time for a shopper to get a reasonably complete picture of the inventory here. The more laps you make around the aisles, the more you notice. There are jigsaw puzzles and paperbacks, birdhouses and yarn, chintzy candelabras and Native American figurines rendered with dubious levels of respect. There are dream catchers, toe rings, and an extensive display of collectible dolls in a glass case. If you disturb the lid of the Cookie Cop Cookie Jar, a stern male voice will admonish you: “Stop! Move *away* from the cookie jar.” On the next shelf over, a ceramic bulldog wearing a shower cap sits in a bathtub mounted on a base that reads, “Even good girls get dirty sometimes.” A countertop display, out of children’s reach, offers

cloyingly perfumed incense sticks in such adult scents as “Sex on the Beach” and “Dragon Blood.” This is as unwholesome as it gets at Pattie’s Home Plate Café.

In fact, with its poodle skirt-wearing mannequins, faux-vintage Coca-Cola napkin dispensers, and life-size cutout of James Dean, the diner serves as a paean to a bygone era. “We’d all go back if we could,” says Pattie. “Ask any of these people. It was a fun time and we didn’t have no problems. We just wanted to have fun, and we did.”

But in the years that followed those simple times, Pattie had a rough go of it. She had her first child at age fifteen and married the baby’s father, her brother’s best friend. He was still young when alcohol ruined him, and she got a divorce. Her second husband died of cancer. She’s now been married for fourteen years to Gene Dietz, a Vietnam veteran with heart trouble and only one foot, having lost the other one to an aggressive strain of flesh-eating bacteria. If Pattie would slow down for a minute, she’d probably notice she has health problems of her own. Gene swears that the diner—not to mention the moonlighting as an Avon cosmetics rep and the occasional catering job—is starting to wear her down. Between them, they have 7 children, 22 grandchildren, and 7 great-grandchildren to look after. Sometimes, for want of a big enough space, they have Christmas at the Home Plate.

* * *

“What number am I?” a teenage granddaughter asks on a recent Friday afternoon. With a mouthful of braces and a schnauzer pendant around her neck, Brittani is scarfing french fries and slurping Mr. Pibb through a straw as Pattie pores over the contents of an Avon shipment that arrived earlier in the day. It’s been a few

years since she realized that even though she no longer had the time to travel the neighborhood circuit and host Avon parties at her house, she didn't need to give it up. Now she maintains a cosmetics display at the diner and invites new and long-time customers to stock up on Plumping Lipcolor (with "double the retinol") and Floral Wire Motif Hoop Earrings.

"Well, let's see," Pattie says to Brittani, looking up from her work. "There's Jason, Nick, Mikey, A.J., Christopher, Heather, Marie, Shawn, and then you. So you're number nine, honey."

Pattie still knows the phone numbers of friends she hasn't called in years. She remembers her own childhood number here in St. Johns: Avenue 6-5140. And she enjoys many sense memories of the neighborhood, too, like the smell of cookies that often emanated from the house next door. "That lady would cook with gas, and we could smell it. It was different, not like today. We'd smell the gas, and then the cookie smell would come in over that."

Her family has lived in St. Johns since the early 1900s, when her grandfather arrived from North Dakota to study watch making. For years, he would return home every spring to thrash wheat and then come back to St. Johns after the harvest. When Pattie's father died, she became, at fifty-five, the oldest person in her immediate family. "That felt weird," she says. "I was talking to Bob and Jerry over at the Man Shop—those two are older than me, you know—and I told them that when I was thirty, I'd see a woman who's my age now and I'd say, look at that old lady! But I sure don't feel old."

Before Pattie opened the Home Plate in 1997, the building housed a sporting goods store; before that, a Rexall drugstore occupied the space for decades and boasted what Pattie believes was Portland's first Orange Julius machine. The oldest of the old-timers in town remember when the building was a car dealership. Pattie has tended bar, operated a trailer park near the Oregon coast, sold motorcycle parts and fishing gear, and run her own business refilling propane tanks, but the diner is her biggest challenge.

"When Gene and I saw that the place was for sale, we thought, what an opportunity!" Pattie recalls. "But now he hates it, because it takes up too much of my time."

Gene's position on the Home Plate is unambiguous. "It's ruined our lives," he says evenly. "We had a day off together not long ago—that never happens no more. But what can I do? She loves it here. They say if you want to know anything about what's happening in St. Johns, just ask Pattie. She's always the first to know. And she loves the people. I tell her, 'Sweetheart, your heart is as big as your ass.'"

Gene has close-cropped white hair and small, watery blue eyes. Before his body failed him, he was a truck driver, hauling anything metal—steel plating, I-beams, beer cans. Now he collects social security and disability benefits and wishes Pattie would spend more time at home. "She's like her father—always on the go. She'll be like that 'til the day she dies. I'm trying to talk her into selling the place, though, 'cause she's got too many pokers in the fire. It's wearing her down, and when she crashes, she'll go down hard."

The Home Plate is the unofficial living room for many of St. Johns' elderly, and Pattie is their caring attendant. When her friends and family gently complain that Pattie gives too much, that's what they have in mind. In a few days, she'll cater yet another funeral reception for a departed longtime customer and friend, Pat, whose death is the latest in an ongoing series. "I knew her from my yard sale days," says Pattie. "Then there was Hazel; she was ninety-one and died in her sleep. Hugh had cancer. Bill and Virginia were married fifty-three years—he died after Valentine's Day and she died before Easter, so even at the end they never spent a holiday apart. Betty was in her seventies—she had cancer in her kidneys. Fern was in her nineties when she gave up the ghost. I think it was depression, mostly. It wasn't too bad until her grandson got a DUI and couldn't drive her here no more. It was kind of downhill after that for Fern."

"Don't forget George," a customer calls out.

"Mouthy George!" Pattie says.

"He said words he shouldn't have been saying."

"Yeah, like really graphic words—about his condition. We'd have to remind him this is a family restaurant."

It takes Pattie the better part of the afternoon to get through her Avon shipment, because of the constant interruptions. Around 3 p.m., three female students from a nearby private Catholic university find three sombreros in the back of the store and approach the cash register. They're getting ready for a costume party. Another customer needs a key made. The Home Plate may be the only business in Portland where omelets and spare keys are made within five yards of

each other. Over the grinding rattle of the old machine, Pattie asks Brittani to ring up the college students.

“If you ever need any Hawaiian,” she calls out to the girls, “I’ve got lots of stuff. Leis, shell bras, grass skirts—”

“Okay—next time we’ll have a luau.”

* * *

On Saturday night, June and Lewis Rose watch from their booth as the weekly sock hop gets underway. Someone has loaded up the jukebox with Elvis selections. It’s a sock hop in only its most nominal sense—I’ve seen photos showing the room crowded with dancers, but tonight it’s just a couple of families sitting at tables and watching a little girl make her poodle skirt twirl. June grew up in St. Johns and returned to Oregon with Lewis, a former welder and truck driver, thirty years ago. He is eighty-five years old; she turns seventy-nine tomorrow. June is blind in her right eye and Lewis is deaf in his left ear, so when they slide into a booth together at Pattie’s, only one seating configuration will work. “At least we match,” June says.

June has wispy, snowy-white hair and a cheerful disposition. “What I like about Pattie’s is that families come in together,” she says. “There aren’t many places like that anymore. You know, family places. And everybody likes Pattie.”

Lewis looks up from his milkshake, showing a thin white milk mustache. “Gene says that when she gets home at night, she’s still going.”

“St. Johns has a nice small-town atmosphere,” June continues. “Everybody talks to each other. I don’t like what they did to the movie theater, though. They

serve beer and the wine now. That's not family-friendly. That theater used to have a cry room—I know, because I used to cry in there all the time when I was a baby! And now they've got all these condominium things in town, and it's so congested. I call 'em 'people storage,' because you only have room to stand up in there."

"Yeah—like in San Francisco," Lewis offers.

"They're not family-type homes."

"Can I get out?" Lewis says, nudging his wife. "I gotta see a man about a canary."

Madison, the young girl with the poodle skirt and a pink chiffon scarf, stands on her cousin's feet and together they shuffle across the floor. Her mother and grandmother watch from a nearby table piled high with jackets, snacks, and a bookmarked copy of *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*. Madison and her cousin make a nice pair. Phil is a tall, round-shouldered sixteen-year-old with an embattled complexion and dyed black hair hanging over his eyes. Skull designs decorate his black hooded sweatshirt.

"I'm into stuff like Korn and Marilyn Manson," he says, "but I like the stuff they play in here. I'd listen to it if I had the CDs." Phil and his sister, Meghan, live in a rural town in a neighboring county. Her black sweatshirt bears a patch that reads, "The International Noise Conspiracy." The two of them plan to move to St. Johns when they're old enough.

A blond toddler stumbles onto the dance floor, stomping his feet to Elvis. Lewis Rose grins at the boy. "I used to be a towhead like that. Swing it, baby, swing it!"

* * *

A few years ago, Pattie had to resign from her pool league, because she's burdened with enough skill that she'd find herself in fierce matches that would go late into the night. "Besides," she says, "I don't drink, and it's too dark in there to crochet or cross-stitch, and I don't want to sit there and do this." She twiddles her thumbs. Her hands are unhappy when they're empty, which is why every Sunday night, Pattie occupies them with bingo at the North Portland Eagle Lodge on Lombard Street, next to a Shell station and across the street from a Les Schwab Tire Center. A sign on the front of the long, boxy building promises "dinner, dancing, music," but on Sunday nights there is only bingo.

Inside, about twenty-five people are dispersed evenly throughout a gloomy room that could easily hold ten times that number. They sit at long tables, shrouded in cigarette smoke, their heads hung low. It's deadly quiet except for the muted popcorn sound of the bingo balls tumbling in their Plexiglas drum and the female announcer's bored monotone: "G-43. B-6. N-35." It would be easy to take the mood in here as one of desperate unhappiness. But in fact, there's no mood to speak of—the atmosphere is beside the point. The players are highly focused on the task at hand. No one plays just one card at a time, and they don't use the obsolete cardboard squares with the red translucent sliding windows, though those are still available for anyone who wants to play a few extra cards. Instead, each player has two newsprint-thin sheets with nine squares on each one. They play eighteen squares concurrently as the announcer calls out the number. Their gaze travels a

two-way path between their sheets and the black-and-white monitors mounted near the ceiling that show the next numbers.

Pattie and two friends sit at a table not far from the announcer's platform. The ladies seem hunkered down for a tornado or perhaps an apocalypse. They have laid out cans of Diet Pepsi, bags of potato chips, leftover Valentine's Day chocolates, sour cream, cottage cheese, peanut butter crackers, lollipops, and coffee in Styrofoam cups. There are also balls of yarn and knitting projects in various stages of completion. Each player keeps at arm's length a row of colorful upright tubes, standing at the ready like a cohort of pawns. These are daubers. Bingo players no longer use chips to mark their numbers. Every player in the ball holds a dauber above her bingo sheet, and when a number is called, you can hear a soft chorus of moist thunks as the daubers are lowered, leaving round inky blots to mark the spot. Pattie's dauber is hot pink. Polly uses green. Sandra uses orange.

"Bingo!" calls a woman from the other end of the hall.

"Dang it!" cries Pattie's friend Polly.

"Who was that?" Pattie asks, craning her neck.

A speed round begins, and the numbers come every few seconds. There is a flurry of daubers. "Bingo!" Pattie calls out, holding up her card for the announcer to see. It's heavy with pink blots still wet from the ink. "Six dollars I just won," she says, smiling. "They don't pay a lot here, but we have fun."

"We don't go to the places where they shush you," says Polly.

"I'm on a roll tonight," says Pattie.

"We're gonna roll you right out of here," replies her friend Sandra.

Dozens of rounds take place on bingo night, and there's no reason to skip any, as nothing in the environment here warrants leaning back in one's chair to take it all in. Some of the more seasoned players play extra squares beyond the usual eighteen. They build up a tolerance, and it takes more and more busywork to stay engrossed. Between rounds, there is a break of about thirty seconds. Pattie rests for five of these seconds and knits for the duration. Tonight she's halfway through a red, white, and green Christmas stocking for a grandchild. Christmas knitting projects are a year-round responsibility when you have twenty-two grandchildren and seven greats.

When the caller announces a fifteen-minute break halfway through the evening, a handful of players look over a shopping cart full of food, donated by Safeway and Winco, near the front of the hall. There are overripe zucchinis and bananas, a waxy flat of bruised mushrooms, expired loaves of bread, and jumbo bags of cauliflower florets. Pattie heads for the snack counter, where she spends the intermission scooping ice cream from two five-gallon containers, as she does every Sunday. She is an incorrigible volunteer.

"It's nerves," Sandra diagnoses. "She keeps saying, 'I want to get rid of the restaurant' and so on, and I tell her, you're never going to get rid of anything. She's one of those types that can't stop."

Pattie is an example of what the writer Malcolm Gladwell called a "connector" in his book *The Tipping Point*—a hub in the neighborhood wheel, someone who knows everyone. "I used to go to her Avon parties, her yard sales, her Tupperware parties," says Polly in her quiet, coarse Georgia drawl. "I was one of her

biggest buyers. She's a special person. I'll tell you one thing, though. I don't know how to put it. She's too good to folks. I tell her she's never gonna get rich, because she does too much for people."

* * *

Back at the Home Plate, Larry Lund wants to know how many of the assembled members have actually seen Bigfoot with their own eyes. Two hands go up. "I envy you folks," he says. "You've had these chance meetings, and those of us who have been looking for years haven't seen anything."

Deanna shakes her head. "It's not chance. You have to look at your methodology and your consciousness. Bigfoot won't show itself if all you want to do is capture it."

Ray Crowe leans forward in his wheelchair and smiles sideways at Deanna, who seems to know what's coming. "No, you can't capture it," says the International Bigfoot Society's founder. "You gotta shoot it!"

"I just need to see one to believe it," says Larry. "I don't need science to tell me it's real—I just need to see it with my own eyes."

"Science," says a woman with an aluminum cane, bristling. "I don't give a *whoop* about *science*."

"What I want to know," says one man, "is why we don't have any new photos of Bigfoot, now that everyone has got the cell phones with the cameras on 'em."

It's the last Saturday in February, and Pattie has pushed three tables together for the Bigfoot Society's monthly meeting. About a dozen Bigfooters have gathered to talk about knee joints and dermal ridges and footprints and all the other

evidence, new and old. And there is always the perennially vexing issue of “Blobsquatches”—purported photos of Bigfoot in which the image is so blurry or dark that only true believers can discern the beast. Tonight they pass around laminated copies of decades-old correspondence between U.S. Forest Service Officials and Bigfoot hunters from the academic-sounding Hominid Research Group.

People are talking about last month’s meeting, when Tom Biscardi, the self-promoting mastermind behind the “Bigfoot Lives” DVD that Pattie loaned me, appeared in front of this group as the featured speaker. The video, which promises to “take you deeper into the world of Bigfoot than ever before,” consists mainly of interviews with credulous rural folks intercut with low-angle “hero shots” of Biscardi on hilltops gazing into the valleys below and pledging that “the hunt will go on.” Larry, a meticulously groomed man with silver hair, asks the group what they made of Biscardi.

“He seemed like a huckster,” says the woman with the cane. “It was all showbiz.”

“He thinks he’s going to catch one and put it in a cage,” says Deanna. “Some of us are repulsed by that idea.”

Ray’s daughter, Pam, dissents. “I thought he was very charismatic. He seemed genuine to me. He says this is the year we’ll find Bigfoot!”

“Tell them the rest, Pam!” calls out a woman who is videotaping the meeting.

“Oh, you shut up,” Pam says, embarrassed.

“She thinks he’s cute.”

Ray Crowe makes another joke about “blasting” Bigfoot. Deanna is not amused. “I’m usually a fence-sitter here,” Ray says, “but tonight I’m giving Deanna a little trouble. She’s our tree-hugger.” Indeed, Deanna harbors some unconventional beliefs about Bigfoot, even by the Society’s standards. She insists that the creature travels in and out of our space/time dimension, appearing only to the enlightened. The Bigfoot Society is on record as welcoming all beliefs, but Larry Lund shakes his head. “Sorry, I can’t go for supernatural,” he says. “It’s bad enough I believe in a big hairy monster, you understand?”

Larry takes the Society’s Bigfooter of the Year plaque out of its protective bubble wrap and announces this year’s honoree: Tom Biscardi. There is a smattering of polite applause. As the formal part of the evening ends and the evening subsides into chatter, Deanna passes around several photographs that she claims to have taken of Bigfoot during a recent communion in the woods. “Right there,” she says, pointing to a space between two underexposed trees. People squint at the image, but it’s a classic Blobsquatch. Status: undetermined.

Ray Crowe used to run a bookstore in St. Johns and go on frequent Bigfoot hunts in the woods until he had his heart attack. He later lost circulation in a leg and had to have it amputated. He’s philosophical about his forced retirement from the expeditions he loved. “I don’t go into the field anymore, except as bait,” he says. Today he stays home and publishes *The Track Record*, the Society’s monthly newsletter. Ray has known Pattie since she bartended at Dad’s restaurant, a run-down pub a block down Lombard Street with a brown and white atomic-age façade.

The Society used to meet there, but when Pattie opened the Home Plate, it followed her there.

“Pattie’s been very accommodating to us over the years,” Ray says. “And she’s had a Bigfoot experience herself, you know.”

“You shush,” Pattie warns from behind the counter.

* * *

It seems likely that when Pattie’s Home Plate Café closes—as eventually it must—it will be the last iteration of a certain kind of gathering place for St. Johns. The Home Plate’s core demographic—aging native Portlanders of modest means—is on the wane. St. Johns is now well into its first real wave of gentrification, and the neighborhood now includes significant numbers of young people who don’t drink Folgers, not even ironically, and who don’t play cribbage.

For Pattie, the sound of the bell ringing as her front door swings open is like a small reward—a validation of what she’s created and a reminder that people are counting on her being there.

On a quiet Friday afternoon, toward the end of the lunch rush, Nita appears in the doorway of the Home Plate. A small woman in a gray Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, Nita is, at age ninety-three, Pattie’s most senior customer. To get here, she makes an hour-long bus trip from her home in Northeast Portland, involving a transfer from the #8 to the #75. It’s her main outing of the day, and one she makes five times a week unless the weather is prohibitively cold and rainy. By the time she takes her usual seat, the counter stool closest to the front door, the cook has already poured her coffee.

Nita's voice is still strong as she describes her lunch routine. "I bring an apple and a banana. They give me a knife for the apple and I cut it, like this. And then I have my banana for dessert. And that's my lunch."

"And every now and then you have a hot dog too, right, Nita?" says the cook.

"That's right."

Nita is an avid Trail Blazers fan and doesn't miss a game on TV, but she hasn't been to the Rose Garden to see them play since her husband died a decade ago. She'd love to go again, but each time she considers it, she can't figure out how she'd get home after the game. Her world has gradually narrowed to the well-worn corridor between her home and her red vinyl stool here at Pattie's. She seems at peace with the changes.

"I've met so many nice friends here," she says between bites of her peeled apple. "I think all the friends in here are wonderful."

Chapter 4

On the Ropes

Sandy Barr remembers when Portland, Oregon, was a wrestling town. For almost forty years—from Eisenhower through the first Bush—Portland Wrestling drew thousands of fans every week to a converted bowling alley in North Portland, where they hoisted homemade signs and shouted themselves hoarse. Thousands more watched the local TV broadcasts, every Saturday night at eleven on KPTV Channel 12. Kids collected autographs, compiled scrapbooks, and pulled the mattresses off their beds to practice headlocks and body-slams. Dutch Savage, Stan Stasiak, and Bull Ramos were hometown heroes, and even the referees, like Sandy Barr, became local celebrities. “Rowdy” Roddy Piper got his start at the Portland Sports Arena, and big stars like Andre the Giant and Jesse Ventura came here to compete. Portland’s show was one of the best in the country. But in the late eighties, Portland Wrestling began to feel the strain of rising production costs and falling ratings. The ascendant World Wrestling Federation—a national enterprise fronted by the ambitious and media-savvy promoter Vince McMahon—had become a corporate juggernaut, crushing regional wrestling outfits with the ease of Wal-Mart taking out a five-and-dime. Then the recession of the early nineties hit. Tom Peterson, Portland Wrestling’s main sponsor, declared bankruptcy and had to pull out. In 1992, KPTV finally tired of its losses and canceled its show.

Fifteen years later, Ferrin C. “Sandy” Barr is still a big name in Portland—in some households, anyway. The growing city is now full of newcomers who never

knew the man, but in St. Johns, a working-class neighborhood near the end of the north Portland peninsula, Sandy remains in the public eye. Most days he can be found in a cavernous former garage near the foot of the St. Johns Bridge, where trucks hauling cars, logs, and hazardous chemicals rumble by all day. Every morning, Sandy raises the garage doors, puts signs out on the sidewalk, and opens Sandy Barr's Flea Mart for business.

Inside the Flea Mart, a musty smell of old furniture and damp concrete pervades the big room. Sandy keeps careful watch over his inventory, eager to move it out the door but unwilling to let it go for less than he thinks it's worth. There are rows of avocado-green kitchen appliances, tangled heaps of cassette-based telephone answering machines, ratty couches, mattresses piled to the ceiling and tables full of bric-a-brac. One vendor believes there is still a market for Beanie Babies. Another sells crushed boxes of breakfast cereal, repaired with clear packing tape.

Amid the relics, one central object dominates the room: Sandy's well-worn wrestling ring. It's 15 feet across and weighs about one ton. Four feet off the ground, a dusty blue canvas is lashed to the steel frame with yellow nylon cord. Duct tape marks the spots where the fabric has frayed. Four steel ringposts support the frame, each of which has three padded turnbuckles where the "ropes"—actually plastic-coated steel cables—are anchored. Countless wrestlers have climbed atop these turnbuckles to flatten their opponents from above, the men falling to the mat together in booming thunderclaps. But when the Flea Mart is open, the ring is silent. It broods like a dormant volcano, a mountain of potential energy barely noticed by

the bargain hunters picking through the stuff that surrounds it. In the muted gray light filtering in from the street, the ring looks wholly ordinary, like just another hunk of junk. But this ring is why Sandy Barr is here. He built it himself thirty years ago, and has torn it down and set it up more times than he cares to count. It's been hauled to wrestling shows all over the western states. And for as long as it can keep taking the abuse, Sandy will keep using it.

In a cramped, smoke-filled office near the entrance to the building, not much bigger than a motel bathroom, Sandy lights one unfiltered cigarette after another as friends and associates stream in and out, making various demands on his time. Gary needs help fixing a rearview mirror. Venus wants to know how much Sandy's asking for the black leather recliner. Randy storms in looking for Sheila, a meth-addicted flea market vendor who owes him thirty bucks. Sandy presides over his domain like a gentle godfather, generous with his time and patient with his big family. His raspy laugh trails off in a phlegmy cough. Stuck to the side of a small TV set that flickers in the corner, an American Lung Association sticker reads: "Kiss Me, I Don't Smoke."

It's been a long road to this grimy sanctuary. By the time Portland Wrestling began fading into obscurity, Sandy had already discovered that catering to Portlanders' love of thrift paid the bills far better than wrestling did anymore. With a stubborn work ethic that never flagged, he took control of a series of cheap, large spaces that did double-duty as flea markets by day and wrestling venues by night.

But trouble followed Sandy from one venture to the next. In the early 90s, his flea market in North Portland became so popular that weekend attendance rivaled Portland Wrestling's in its prime. Nearby residents complained about traffic and

noise and watched, horrified, as strangers knelt on their front lawns to slaughter and pluck chickens they'd bought from street vendors drawn to the market's crowds. Portland City Council shut Sandy down, but he reopened elsewhere. He began holding weekend dances at his new location, but a fight broke out one night and a man was stabbed to death. A few years later, an FBI task force teamed up with the Portland Police to arrest four people who, for years, had been selling stolen goods out of Sandy's flea market.

Eventually, Sandy found his garage in St. Johns and turned once again to his proven formula—flea markets and wrestling matches—albeit on a smaller scale. Almost seventy, he is still strong and capable. His decades of hard work and adversity are engraved in the deep creases that traverse his forehead and jaw. His brown hair is slowly, reluctantly, going gray, and his narrow blue eyes—hard to find between the bushy gray eyebrows and the puffy bags below—are clear and alert as he holds forth on the prospects of a comeback for wrestling in Portland.

“Well, the truth is, I don't know,” he says. “My gut hunch is that we're on a good track right now. Whether it'll be as good as it once was, I'll never know. We don't have Andre the Giant, we don't have Roddy Piper. But there's always other stars coming up. And I think we've got a couple now. Some of these guys have a lot of charisma.”

Every Tuesday night at eight, a small crowd gathers in Sandy's building to watch his wrestlers hurl themselves off the squeaky ropes. This isn't Vince McMahon's WWF—there are no steroid-enhanced physiques or fake tans, no tawdry ringside girlfriends with inflated chests and tiny dresses. What Sandy offers is a

pure, stripped-down version of the sport: backbreakers, spinning toeholds, Japanese wristlocks, and all the rest of the classic moves that he is handing down to the next generation of grapplers. When he takes his seat at the ringside announcer's table and rings the tarnished iron bell, the dilapidated building is no longer Sandy Barr's Flea Mart: it's the St. Johns Sports Arena.

St. Johns makes a fitting home for a pastime clinging to survival. When Sandy's building was erected a hundred years ago to house dairy cows, St. Johns was a rural community worlds away from bustling downtown Portland. The sidewalks were wooden planks laid across timbers, and children ran barefoot through fields of white trilliums, wild roses, and hazelnut bushes. They clipped branches from pussy willow trees and brought them home to their mothers. St. Johns soon became a busy industrial center as mills and factories situated along the banks of the Willamette River. Men earned five bucks a day at the port to hand-load sacks of grain onto oceangoing ships. But after World War II, the St. Johns boom fizzled, city government turned its attention elsewhere, and the neighborhood slid into gradual, unrelenting decay.

In the last few years, gentrification has crept inexorably along the peninsula, and St. Johns has become desirable again. Young professionals arrive every day to snatch up starter homes and one of the modern, Ikea-chic condos where the old Safeway once stood. But the neglect will be hard to undo. The waterfront is a Superfund site. The St. Johns Bridge, a gothic architectural masterpiece that was once the longest suspension bridge west of the Mississippi, was nearly allowed to crumble into the river before the state agreed to restore it. Still, St. Johns residents

have always clung to a stubborn pride. They know their neighborhood was an independent town until its annexation to Portland in 1915. At the lunch counter of Pattie's Home Plate Café on Lombard Street, half-serious calls for secession can still be heard. St. Johns is poor, but it has never lacked for character.

* * *

"You ever seen a midget with guns like these, baby?"

It's a Tuesday night in January at the St. Johns Sports Arena. In the ring, flexing his massive biceps for a crowd of about twenty fans sitting on metal folding chairs, stands a barrel-chested man all of four foot nine. His gravelly baritone defies his short stature. When he speaks, his words form little clouds of vapor in the frigid air that leaks into the building through gaps in the wall.

The vendors and shoppers are gone, the garage doors closed. The old ring, an almost pitiful sight during the daylight hours, now looks vibrant under bright lights clamped to the wooden beams that support the high A-frame ceiling.

Danny Campbell wears vintage black-and-white boots, red spandex briefs, and a pink feather boa around his neck. He likes to enter the ring a few minutes before his matches start; it gives him time to work his way around the perimeter and trade insults with the crowd. Most forty-year-old guys who work long days punching holes in sheets of copper would rather head home for a beer than put their bodies through hell in a wrestling ring. But Danny doesn't care what his aching bones tell him. He's spent nearly two decades cultivating the persona of Little Nasty Boy, the world's strongest midget, and that persona still craves attention.

"Nasty sucks!" shouts a boy of about eight from the front row. Nasty spins on

his toes and homes in on his heckler. "Shaddup!" he yells at the boy, who's thrilled to have successfully baited the wrestler. Now the boy's friends join in the taunting. Nasty screams again, but he can't hide the trace of a smile on his lips. His own son is their age, after all. In fact, there's Kristopher now in the front row, chanting "Nasty sucks" along with the others. Nasty turns to the center of the ring, does a few perfunctory stretches, and waits for his opponent to appear from the dressing room in the corner of the building, the door obscured by a stack of old mattresses and box springs.

"How you guys doin' tonight!" shouts Hoquiam Man, announcing his presence on the floor. The nipple-pierced Latino from Hoquiam, Washington, young enough to be Nasty's son, does a quick lap around the ring, high-fiving the kids in the front rows.

Across the distance of the ring from the blue corner to the red one, Hoquiam Man and Nasty Boy stare each other down as the referee cursorily pats down their boots, pretending to check for knives. At the sound of the bell, Hoquiam rushes toward Nasty, but Nasty retreats to the ropes, leaning over the edge of the ring and waving his hands in Hoquiam's direction as though shooing a skunked dog. Hoquiam tries to peel him away, and Nasty cries foul: "Get him offa me when I'm on the ropes!" he yells at the ref. Nasty always warms up this way, cocksure arrogance giving way to cowardice. The crowd jeers.

Nasty steels himself and moves to the middle of the ring, where the two men "tie up," locking hands high in the air and pushing forward with all their weight in a battle for dominance. Nasty finds his fighting spirit, as he always does, and

overpowers Hoquiam, sending him crashing to the mat. With Hoquiam laid out flat on his back, dazed by the fall, Nasty goes airborne and falls to the mat himself, his elbow coming down hard on the young wrestler's chest.

Hoquiam struggles to his feet, and for the next twenty minutes he and Nasty unload their arsenals of pain. Bouncing off the ropes, jumping from the turnbuckles, and running from corner to corner, Nasty Boy and Hoquiam Man launch powerbombs, kneedrops, forearm smashes, hammerlocks, dropkicks, gutbusters, and chokeholds. When Hoquiam finally pins Nasty for a 1-2-3 count, the ref calls the match and Sandy Barr rings his old bell. A confirmed poor loser, Nasty continues to punch, kick, and shout as the crowd below picks up the taunts they started with. Nasty finally swaggers to the dressing room, and the building goes quiet in the intermission between matches.

Backstage, Nasty Boy catches his breath and grimaces. His body hurts. But wrestling has claimed too much of his heart to let him quit. As a kid in Vancouver, British Columbia, he saw Jimmy Snuka and Dutch Savage wrestle on TV, and he was hooked. His father wanted him to be an engineer, but Nasty felt destined for a different life. So at twenty-two, he scraped together a few hundred dollars and took a thousand-mile-long bus ride to Calgary, where he enrolled in the Dungeon, a rigorous wrestling camp run by the legendary Hart Brothers. Nasty entered the Dungeon with fourteen other aspiring wrestlers. After the first week, seven had dropped out. When the eight weeks were over, Nasty was one of two guys left. The experience left him with confidence in his strength and an unusual ability to tolerate pain. He's wrestled plenty of other midgets; in fact, he still gets called from time to

time by the Micro Wrestling Federation, a traveling show that puts on matches in bars and casinos throughout the Midwest and East Coast. It's easy money for Nasty, but to him it's nothing more than a circus sideshow. The real wrestling is here in Portland.

"He says he's the world's strongest midget," says Sandy. "I believe that's true."

Sandy, too, was hooked on wrestling at an early age. Growing up in Idaho Falls, he got into fights with other boys and beat them every time—not with punches but with wrestling moves. Moves he didn't even know he had. He was a natural. Sandy started wrestling in pro matches at the age of fifteen, and his life has centered on wrestling ever since. He switched to refereeing long ago, but he still gets in the ring from time to time. In fact, he and Nasty had a match not long ago, a chapter in the long-running feud between the two men that's a key component of the Nasty Boy persona. When they squared off in the ring together, Sandy used maneuvers of a vintage as pure as the twist and the jitterbug. For his part, Nasty Boy complained bitterly to the ref that the old man's toenails were illegal weapons and thus grounds for disqualification. During a staged ringside argument a few weeks later, Sandy slapped Nasty Boy hard on the mouth, drawing real blood.

Little Nasty Boy is Sandy's star wrestler ("He's got a lot of persona," Sandy says, rhyming the word with *Donna*), but the fans also come to see Kliever the Angry Chef, a fit, bald-headed wrestler who stands several inches over six feet tall and is covered in tattoos. And Critter, a former high school linebacker wearing an orange jumpsuit with "San Quentin Inmate" stenciled on the back. And Pitman, a balding

Canadian with a dirty-blond mullet, a half-shirt exposing his not-quite-washboard abs, and red tights with a maple leaf on the front. Hoquiam Man, Carl Peterson, Kodiak, Brother John, Iron Man, and J.R. Barr—Sandy's son—round out the cast.

The wrestlers aren't here for the money—there is none. If the door receipts are good enough, Sandy might give them some gas money, but they usually go home with nothing but bruises and the hope that one Tuesday night they'll arrive to find a house packed full of fans, cheering them into the ring. Some wrestlers keep coming back because Sandy is their mentor; he and Nasty conduct training sessions on Friday nights, and wrestling for Sandy on Tuesdays is how the guys pay for that education. And other guys come because they simply feel compelled to wrestle—their Tuesdays aren't complete until they give and get a good beating.

* * *

And sometimes the wrestlers come to Sandy's place not to get in the ring, but to get healed.

"Inhale," says Sandy late one night in the windowless dressing room behind his office, lit by a single bank of fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling. Six broken vacuum cleaners have taken over one corner. The industrial carpet is an indeterminate color. Sandy speaks quietly, drawing out his words. "And exhale."

On a narrow padded table, Kliever the Angry Chef lies on his back with his hands clasped behind his head, his elbows raised to the ceiling. His biggest tattoo, a stylized lobster rendered in geometric wedges of black ink, fans out across his chest. His right shoulder has been killing him, making it hard to lift things at his steel-mill job. He doesn't know how he hurt it, other than that it happened in the ring.

Standing behind Kliever, Sandy cups his hands around Kliever's triceps. He repeats: "Inhale . . . and exhale." Kliever breathes in deeply through his nostrils and exhales through pursed lips. Sandy yanks Kliever's arms back with considerable force. There's a popping sound.

Sandy feels around the base of Kliever's skull with his thick fingers, prodding the vertebrae. "Yeah, I got it," he says with a soft chuckle. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful," Kliever replies.

In fifty years of wrestling, Sandy has seen hundreds of injuries, from broken necks to separated shoulders, and he's paid close attention to them all. He might have been a doctor if he hadn't grown up so poor. He knows that a chiropractor would take one look at his improvised technique and call him a reckless amateur. But he's never hurt a wrestler yet, he says, and he's helped plenty of them.

"I know what pain can do to you," Sandy says. "Sometimes pain will knock a man out, and he'll continue to live when he should have died. I know a guy who was cutting paper in a shop, and he got stuck in the machine and cut both his hands off. He was alone in there, and the door was locked. Couldn't dial a phone. You know what he did? He went over to a big cardboard drum full of paper cuttings, stuck his arms all the way in there, and waited for 'em to coagulate. Then he found something real heavy, picked it up with his arms, and broke a window, setting off the alarm."

Sandy helps Kliever to his feet and turns him around to face the opposite wall. "Now fall into me," Sandy quietly instructs. "Bend those knees a little bit." Kliever leans back against the shorter old man, his head falling gently on Sandy's shoulder. He faces the ceiling, closes his eyes, and lets his mouth fall open. Sandy

wraps his arms around Kliever's chest and holds them there. Long seconds pass in stillness. Then Sandy squeezes hard and leans back. The air goes out of Kliever's lungs.

"There we go," Sandy says, rubbing the wrestler's broad shoulders. "How do you feel?"

Kliever tilts his neck from side to side and smiles. "Wonderful."

Sandy fathered five sons and three daughters and has twenty grandchildren, but he has no clear heir to his wrestling enterprise. It wasn't always so. One of Sandy's sons, in fact, was such a talented and appealing wrestler that he not only made a name for himself in regional wrestling, but also made the leap to the national broadcasts and was beginning to make some real money when things went terribly wrong.

Art Barr was a 22-year-old steel worker and sometime wrestler when "Rowdy" Roddy Piper dragged him in front of Portland Wrestling's cameras, dumped flour on his head, daubed some black paint onto his face, and christened him "Beetlejuice." The name stuck, and Art developed a twitchy, mentally unhinged persona for his new character that proved to be a big hit with the swarms of screaming kids who piled into the Portland Sports Arena every weekend. But his quick ascent was halted one night by deputies of the Umatilla County Sheriff's Department, who arrested Art on rape charges following a match in Pendleton, Oregon. A 19-year-old woman said Art forced himself on her in a dark, hidden corner of the Pendleton Armory.

No one in Art's circle believed her story, his father least of all.

“That was a real farce, because I knew he was going to sleep with that girl before it even happened,” Sandy says. “He told me all about how she said her parents were on vacation, and why don’t you come and spend the night. But Art had to drive back to Portland, so they do it in the building instead. Then at four in the morning, she calls the police to tell them he raped her. Never mind that she had sex with her fiance only three days before.”

But prosecutors thought they had a strong case. Art took a plea bargain, avoiding jail time, and still managed to get an offer from World Championship Wrestling in Atlanta—but news of the rape conviction followed him, and he was fired almost as fast as he was hired. With his options dwindling, Art moved to Mexico and unveiled a new character—“The American Love Machine”—in *Empressa Mexicana de la Lucha Libre*, the world’s oldest pro wrestling promotion. It was here in Mexico, where matches could draw as many as 18,000 fans, that Art enjoyed his greatest success. But he was homesick. Drugs and alcohol were plentiful. A fan hit him over the head with a metal folding chair at a match one night, and the injury plagued him. In 1994, back home in Springfield, Oregon, he was found dead one morning in bed, with his five-year-old son sleeping by his side. The papers said it was an overdose, but Sandy doesn’t see it that way. He thinks his son died of pain.

* * *

Soft-spoken backstage, Kliever sports a sadistic grin in the ring. One Tuesday night, he gets Iron Man against the ropes and punishes him with brutal backhanded slaps across the chest. When you hear the loud smack of flesh on flesh, the question of whether the matches are “fake” becomes irrelevant. The outcomes may be

predetermined, but Sandy's guys leave the ring with real pain etched on their faces. And even in the 40-degree chill, they head for the dressing room soaked in sweat.

A young, bleached-blond woman in the front row decides to taunt Iron Man, a long-haired wrestler with a goatee and black leather pants. "Aw, whatsa matter, Iron Girl? Can't take it?"

Standing in the audience near the corner of the ring, a slender, angular man glares at the woman. Dressed in a vintage black suit with a candy-apple-red shirt, his jet-black hair slicked back in a perfect fifties pompadour, he's an anomaly in the shabby St. Johns crowd. His eyes dart between the action in the ring and the blonde in the crowd, who keeps up her abuse. He waits for the right moment, and seizes it.

"LADY, I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE, BUT WHEN IRON MAN'S IN THE RING, YOU'D BETTER SHUT YOUR MOUTH!"

People turn to look. Even the action in the ring seems to stop for a moment. The well-dressed man breaks into a wide, self-satisfied grin. He leans over to a middle-aged woman sitting nearby and, still beaming, cups a hand around his mouth. "That's my wife," he tells her, sotto voce.

Wrestling night is always more entertaining—and unpredictable—when Wendell Cunningham is there. A youthful forty, he has the makings of a successful entrepreneur—lots of energy, an impulse to talk, and a charming, animated personality. But he's been hobbled by a taste for alcohol and methamphetamines, and his status as an ex-con doesn't exactly open doors for him. His pride and joy was Booty, his vintage clothing store, but he couldn't make it work, and now his inventory languishes in storage until the day he can try again. Wendell has three

kids, but he doesn't live with them. Instead, he lives here, in Sandy Barr's Flea Mart, in a loft above the kitchen that he shares with Venus, his new twenty-eight-year-old wife, and Boozer, a friendly black pit bull.

It's a temporary arrangement. One afternoon last fall, Wendell and Venus were walking down "Alcohol Row," the main drag of St. Johns where nearly every corner is marked by a tavern, when they saw a man riding a kids' scooter on the sidewalk, laughing as his friends looked on. Wendell recognized the man immediately.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked Venus. She did not.

"That, Venus, is Mister Sandy Barr."

In the heyday of Portland Wrestling, when the bleachers were full, Wendell and his friends spent many Saturday evenings at the Portland Sports Arena making noise and looking for trouble. Adolescent guys need idols, and Sandy Barr and the other men in the ring seemed larger than life. Wendell's memories of those Saturdays are still packed with the headiness of the nights themselves.

"One night," Wendell recalls, "Roddy Piper sticks his head out the dressing room door and says to my friend Larry, 'Hey kid, c'mere.' Now, Roddy was a huge star! You never talked to these guys, you just looked at them in awe. We were stunned. So Larry walks over, and Roddy gives him some money. And then he says"—Wendell lowers his voice to a Clint Eastwood whisper—"Go get me a green sno-cone. And get one for yourself.' It was amazing."

Wendell approached Sandy Barr on that fall day last year and introduced himself. He and Venus saw him again at Slim's Tavern, where they walked in to find

him singing karaoke to a country-western tune. “There are those who are very good at karaoke, and those with a lot of heart,” says Wendell. “Sandy’s got a lot of heart.”

At the time, Wendell and Venus were living in an apartment a few blocks from the Flea Mart. Through the open garage doors, Sandy would often see them walking by and wave them over to chat. Wendell became close with him. When things were rough with Venus, he went to Sandy for advice. Sometimes they stayed up late in Sandy’s office reading from the Bible together. And when Wendell learned that his apartment had been condemned and that he and Venus would have to move out, he told Sandy not to be surprised if he didn’t see them for a while. They’d have to stay in a motel, Wendell said, while they looked for a new place. But Sandy wouldn’t hear it. They moved into the Flea Mart a few days later.

Wendell is in recovery now, and he earns his keep at Sandy’s place by calling high schools across the state, trying to book them as hosts for Sandy and his wrestlers. Sandy offers a three-way split between himself, his wrestlers, and the school. It’s a formula that’s worked well over the years. He makes better money in places like The Dalles, Hood River, Toledo, and Siletz than he does in Portland; it’s not uncommon to see a few hundred people show up for those matches. Sandy’s guys spend an hour tearing down the ring and two hours setting it up at the host school. And then there’s another tear-down, plus the long drive each way.

Wendell and Venus have a new apartment lined up, and until something better comes through, they’re both working for a telemarketing company that sells home-security systems. Wendell has dazzled his managers with his selling skills. He hates the work, but he can’t help it: he’s an achiever. It was the same way in prison,

where he was such a standout in his compulsory ethics class that he was appointed as a teacher's aide, making him, he claims, the highest-paid inmate in the Oregon penal system. He wants to do his best for Sandy, too. But Wendell's a culturally astute guy. He's realistic about the prospects of old-school wrestling in Portland.

"Sandy's from an era that's gone by," he says. "You have to move ahead or get left behind, and I'm afraid Sandy's getting left behind. I hate to say that, because he is truly a hero to me."

* * *

In late January, an unexpected development gives the Flea Mart a jolt of excitement: Little Nasty Boy makes the cover of the *Portland Mercury*, an alternative weekly paper aimed at twentysomething urbanites. Under a close-up photo of Nasty with his fists cocked and his face wrenched into his best scowl, a headline poses the question: "Is a midget wrestler from St. Johns the best entertainer in Portland?"

It's not the first time the irony-soaked rag has come to St. Johns in search of camp. Two years ago, it focused a whole issue on the community, calling it "the Burt Reynolds of Portland neighborhoods." The logic went: "First, Burt was sexy. Later, he was just gross. But sooner or later he always gets really sexy again! That's Burt Reynolds, and it is also St. Johns."

Nobody at the Flea Mart seems ever to have read the *Mercury*, but when the issue comes out, Nasty drives all over North Portland looking for it. At the Flea Mart, someone tacks the cover to the bulletin board in the office. Sandy's people have long held out hope that Portland would one day wake up to the fact that local wrestling didn't disappear in 1992, and neither did Sandy Barr. After some negligible media

coverage from *The Oregonian* and a local TV news channel, the *Mercury* cover story is a big, tantalizing splash of publicity.

The Nasty Boy issue comes out on a Thursday. On wrestling night five days later, the St. Johns Sports Arena is jammed with paying customers. At eight o'clock, seventy people are there. And it's not a St. Johns crowd. These are cool people in hip shoes and retro eyewear. Sandy's guys have had to fetch extra folding chairs to create two more rows. Unlike the regulars, who usually don't wake up until the first match is well underway, tonight's crowd is lively and talkative. They're eager to see the mercurial midget for themselves.

After two matches, Little Nasty Boy finally appears from backstage and climbs into the ring, to huge applause. He knows all these people are here to see him. The crowd begins to chant: "NAS-TY! NAS-TY!"

Nasty Boy makes a slow tour around the ring, pausing to flex his now-famous biceps and gyrate his hips for the ladies. His opponent, J.R. Barr, enters the ring—a young, average-size guy in black tights who knows his moves well enough, but whose appeal lies mainly with his last name.

At the bell, Nasty and J.R. meet in the middle of the ring and tie up, pushing hard with locked hands. Nasty gets the advantage, knocking J.R. off balance and flipping him to the mat. The fans roar their approval as J.R. dutifully writhes in agony. Nasty struts over to the announcer's corner and flexes for Sandy Barr. "All muscle, baby!" he yells. Sandy stares blankly at him.

The match goes on, with Nasty in charge one minute and J.R. dominating him the next. But Nasty raises the intensity when he lifts J.R. into a vertical suplex,

drawing howls of amazement from the crowd. Nasty is holding J.R. in a complete inversion, with his head on Nasty's shoulder and his feet high in the air. Nasty then falls backward like a felled tree, slamming J.R. (and himself) to the mat. The crowd thunders. J.R. rolls onto his stomach, his face contorted with pain.

Little Nasty Boy then proceeds to earn his moniker. He straddles J.R.'s back, reaches forward, and grabs the sides of the young man's mouth, pulling them apart with both hands. Nasty laughs crazily, baring his gray teeth. The newcomers in the audience raise their hands to their own mouths in enchanted disbelief.

Leaving J.R. to squirm on the mat, Nasty makes another trip to Sandy's corner, where he strikes a bodybuilder's pose. "You afraid of this, old man?" he shouts triumphantly. But grandstanding is Nasty Boy's fatal flaw. As he plants a tender kiss on one of his beloved biceps, J.R. approaches him from behind. In a flash, J.R. grabs Nasty, flips him backward, and pins him to the mat as the tiny wrestler kicks helplessly at the air. The ref drops to the canvas and pounds out a quick 1-2-3 with his palm. It's over.

Nasty jumps to his feet and bickers with the ref on an imaginary technicality, but the crowd overwhelms him with boos. Nasty climbs atop a turnbuckle and waves a clenched fist. "Y'all shut up and show me some respect!" he roars before descending from the ring and stalking off to the dressing room, insults and applause following him the whole way. He emerges later to pose for Polaroids with the fans, which the house is selling for five bucks apiece. The crowd stays through the rest of the matches and leaves happy.

This is what Tuesday night should be. The cash box is full, the snack bar did a

brisk business all night, and the building pulsated with noise in a way it never has before. Even after the last fan has gone home, the building is still suffused with the rosy glow of acclamation—the kind of glow that Sandy Barr, Dutch Savage, and Jimmy Snuka basked in for years at the Portland Sports Arena. The wrestlers and fans at Sandy’s place have been waiting for a night like this. Sandy is pleased, too—to a point.

“I don’t mean this as anything against Danny,” he says later in his office, “but I think they wrote that article about him because they like freaky people.”

For Venus, this goes without saying. “Well, yeah! He got that cover because he’s a muscle-bound midget with a pink feather boa who likes to wrestle! People eat that shit up!”

Wendell tries to explain more gently. “It’s just a humor magazine, Sandy. But it’s publicity, right? It sure filled the house. Biggest crowd you’ve had since you opened up here.”

Sandy shakes his head. “No. We’ve had more in here.” He mumbles something about a Tuesday several months ago. Nobody can remember the night Sandy’s talking about. But nobody presses the matter, either.

* * *

On a cold, rainy Saturday, Wendell’s got a bad case of cabin fever. Home isn’t quite so homey, it seems, when there’s a flea market going on in your living room. When the rain finally lets up, he grabs Boozer’s leash—a length of chain—and lets the pit bull pull him downhill to the river.

The City says it has big plans for improving the St. Johns waterfront, but

those are clearly long-term plans. Household garbage is strewn across the dirt path that runs alongside the railroad tracks, and bald tires, concrete chunks, and piles of rusty rebar have been dumped in the tall weeds. Still, it's peaceful here, in the melancholy way of forgotten places.

Wendell reaches a patch of wet sand at the edge of the quiet river, framed by the Burlington Northern railroad bridge to the left and the St. Johns Bridge to the right. A chemical plant sprawls along the opposite shore. Wendell throws a big stick into the water for Boozer to fetch, and he lets his thoughts drift, as they often do, to his vintage clothing store and all those precious artifacts that are stuck in storage while he puts his life back together. He loves the rush of looking through thrift-store bins and racks and discovering a mint-condition shirt made long before he was born. When he runs his fingers over the elaborately embroidered tag, yellowed with age, he feels touched—even humbled—by the workmanship. And he feels a strong connection to the past.

As much as Wendell loves being under Sandy Barr's wing, it frustrates him, too. He wants badly for Sandy to succeed, and he's honored that Sandy asked him to help him book shows. But the old man's resistance to change puts success just out of reach. Wendell's tried to suggest different ways of doing things, ways to grow the audience and bring in a little more money. Getting bands to come play would be a start. And Wendell doesn't mean dime-a-dozen bar bands playing the same old Top 40 or classic rock. No, he imagines a seriously kicking band in that ring, rocking the house after the wrestlers have finished. A band like that comes with its own fans. Easy money.

Sandy listens politely, but that's all he'll do. In his God-fearing eyes, wrestling is family-friendly entertainment; rock music is not. And besides, Sandy has promoted shows for years without biting his nails over whether his marketing plan is contemporary enough. He knows whom to market wrestling to: wrestling fans. He's not about to let his matches piggyback on some inferior form of entertainment, nor is he willing to sully his arena with the kind of immoral, anything-goes behavior you see on nationally televised wrestling shows.

And the truth is that after fifty years in the business, Sandy's hunger for achievement has waned. He has nothing left to prove. More, he knows he's losing the battle for the soul of pro wrestling. The business today is infected with all the things Sandy hates— gratuitous sexuality, drugs (alcohol and cigarettes excepted), and a mean-spiritedness that spills over the boundaries of the ring. But he still hears the call to do the work he loves. Once in a while, when a good match is underway and the wrestlers he's trained are working especially hard, weaving their moves together in a seamless dance, you can see in Sandy's eyes the wonderment of a teenage boy from Idaho Falls. In these moments, Sandy leans forward in his ringside chair, his flannel shirt stretches taut across his strong back, and the heavy lines that mark his face almost disappear. The sport that's been the focus of Sandy's long life still has the power to enthrall him.

Wendell watches as Boozer chases down his stick, brings it to shore, and lies down to shred it in his powerful jaws. Wendell checks for mushrooms at the base of the trees that line the riverbank, but it's late in the season, and the few oyster mushrooms he finds have gone by.

Despite the decades of abuse, beauty endures on the St. Johns waterfront. The gently flowing Willamette is dignified and serene. Small birds flutter in the leafless trees, working what's left of their habitat. As Wendell walks back along the train tracks, with Boozer running far ahead, he passes a cluster of pussy willows, their new downy buds gleaming in late winter's rain.

* * *

"I just can't figure it," says Sandy's cashier dejectedly at his table near the door of the Flea Mart. "We had a lot of people here, and they were ooh-in' and ahh-in' pretty good, but none of 'em came back."

It's the week after Nasty Boy packed the house with *Mercury* readers, and tonight only the regulars have returned. Last week seems like a year ago. The St. Johns Sports Arena is not only mostly empty, it's also eerily quiet, and a sense of disappointment akin to being jilted hangs over the ring. No one suspected that the shouting, laughing, cheering people who pumped life into the frigid building last week were there only to satisfy a fleeting curiosity.

Eight o'clock passes. Then 8:05, and 8:10. The delay is pointless. The hip kids aren't fashionably late—they're fashionably somewhere else. Maybe they'll be back when the nights are warmer. Maybe they'll bring their friends. At 8:15, Sandy sits down at the ringside table and finally rings the bell. The high note reverberates for what seems like minutes. "You can hear a pin drop," someone says.

Nasty Boy emerges from the dressing room and heaves himself up into the ring, entering between the bottom and middle ropes. Stretching his stiff body, he looks over the sparse crowd and scratches his head. Last week his entrance was

heralded by lusty cheers from dozens of brand-new, star-struck fans. Tonight he sees only bored, familiar faces looking back at him.

Nasty is joined in the ring by Carl Peterson, an older wrestler of average ability with blue tights, shiny black boots, and a scraggly beard. The men tie up and Carl moves in for a headlock, but Nasty bails to the ropes. "He pulled my hair!" he screams to the ref. Carl, of course, has done no such thing. A fan finally makes some noise: "Shut up and wrestle, Nasty!"

The world's strongest midget stomps over to the announcer's corner, but Sandy Barr, concentrating on his notes for tonight's matches, doesn't see him coming. Nasty kicks the ropes, startling the old man. The fans erupt in laughter. The Tuesday night ice is broken. Little Nasty Boy turns and moves to the center of the ring, where he and Carl Peterson, arms outstretched, slowly circle each other, waiting to pounce.

Chapter 5

Wapato

When Captain Bobbi Luna meets me at the front gate early on a fall morning, the commander of Wapato Jail is not who I expected. Instead of a humorless law enforcer in a starched uniform, I'm presented with a warm, pleasant woman wearing high-waisted jeans who seems to have all the time in the world as we stroll through the prison together. The corridors are clean and white with powder-blue accents, and even the corners where the hallways right-angle into each other are unscuffed. The stainless steel railings bear no oily blemishes. In the silent and spotless dormitories, mattresses are rolled up on the bunkbeds and the ceiling-mounted televisions broadcast nothing. At round tables, where you might expect to see guys in prison blues playing chess or arm-wrestling or telling boastful tales of past misdeeds, there are only overturned plastic chairs, their legs pointing to the ceiling. There are no guards in sight.

"This place is mothballed," Captain Luna says with a sigh. "I'm in charge here, but I don't come that often."

"Who watches after the building?" I ask.

Captain Luna shrugs. "Very few people want to break into a jail."

Wapato Jail has always been empty. After spending \$58 million to build the prison in 2004, Multnomah County realized it had no money to operate or even open it. It was one of those ill-considered civic projects that become an immediate and enduring monument to government folly. Almost every candidate for the

Multnomah County Commission in the intervening years has at least given lip service to opening the jail, sometimes even offering sensible proposals, but nothing has come to pass. And so the gleaming state-of-the-art penal facility—a squared-off pile of steel, concrete, and razor wire overlooking the two thousand-acre Smith & Bybee Wetlands Natural Area at the edge of St. Johns—remains unoccupied.

“A working jail is like a small city,” says Captain Luna. “You’ve got your laundry, your plumbing, people milling about. None of that has ever happened here.”

But there are a few signs of human activity. A few flak jackets hang over the backs of chairs, left by sheriff’s deputies who sometimes use the jail for training exercises. One room has gymnastics mats, and a few pieces of exercise equipment are strewn about. But the predominant feeling is one of a model home—cold and devoid of life, but functional and furnished and ready for habitation at a moment’s notice. In the darkened main control room, sixteen LCD monitors glow with closed-circuit images of deadly-still hallways and parking lots. The cubicle area, built for administrative staff that were never hired, has been pre-stocked with morale-boosting motivational posters; beneath multiracial handshakes and long-exposure photographs of mountain streams, inspiring mottos are writ large: *Success Is a Journey, Not a Destination*, posits one. Another reads, *Communication: Build Bridges, Not Walls*.

It’s so quiet at Wapato Jail that even skittish animals like bunnies and coyotes find their way under the fences and browse upon the jail’s well-kept front lawn. The county spends several hundred thousand dollars a year to keep up appearances at Wapato, and it does look lovely here, with shrubs and ornamental grasses softening

the entrance and juvenile evergreen trees ringing the perimeter. Without landscape maintenance, invasive ivy would smother the building and rapacious weeds would reclaim the grounds. There is art here, too, commissioned specially for the Wapato facility under Portland's "Percent for Art" program, which directs tax dollars toward public art installations. In a landscaped area near the jail's entrance, concrete logs lashed with steel cables evoke the marine artifacts found in the nearby Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Inside the facility, recycled glass tiles adorn the stairwells, and light panels have been installed on the windows, creating camera obscura projections against the glass—inverted images of what exists just outside the prison.

Where the jail now stands, there was once a grassy field, which itself used to be a seasonal wetlands—wet and marshy in the winter, walkable in the summer. Years ago, the Port of Portland filled in the marsh with dirt dredged from the bottom of the Columbia River in order to deepen that channel for oceangoing barges. In Wapato Jail's preparatory phase, an archaeological dig turned up evidence of human habitation going back thousands of years: fire-cracked rocks, pottery shards, arrowheads. No one lived on this parcel of land year-round, but in the summer and fall months Chinook Indians would have come here for easy fishing in the slough and the shrinking pools, and they would have dug into the mud with their feet to free the tubers of *Sagittaria latifolia*, or *wapato*.

The plant grew so reliably here that the Indians essentially farmed it, with ownership arrangements governing certain patches, giving rise centuries later to a lot of talk among anthropologists about the semantic middle ground between agricultural and hunter/gatherer societies. Wapato was abundant but finicky, and

when dams and irrigation demands on the Columbia resulted in the year-round flooding of these wetlands, the plant lost its shallow footholds and disappeared. For decades it was gone from Smith & Bybee Lakes, along with migratory birds like egrets that depended on the shallow, fish-filled autumn waters. After a lengthy citizen-review process, the jail got the Wapato moniker to commemorate the plant and the people who once thrived on it. It was a respectful nod to the distant past. But in a surprising turn, wapato has returned. Through the artificial means of a water-control fixture which lets slough water in and out of the lakes, local government has re-created Smith & Bybee's native conditions with the aim of habitat restoration. It worked. Flocks of egrets again stop here every fall, and wapato, dormant and underwater for decades, has reestablished its presence at the soft edges of the shallow basins.

* * *

It was from the shore of Smith & Bybee Lakes, the country's largest urban wetlands area, that I first noticed Wapato Jail through my binoculars. It didn't necessarily look out of place. This part of Portland, a narrow peninsula jutting westward like a thumb between two major rivers, is hemmed in by steel mills, train tracks, and vast yards of shipping containers in various states of disrepair. I began making regular visits to Smith & Bybee soon after moving to St. Johns in 2003 and have seen bald eagles brooding atop electrical pylons, owls being mobbed by robins, migratory songbirds moving from tree to tree in large flocks, osprey diving for carp, and shy black-tailed deer peering out from the forest.

One thing I haven't seen much of is people. Avid birdwatchers know Smith & Bybee well, but otherwise the wetlands are like St. Johns itself: an interesting destination if that's what you're looking for, but not on the way to anywhere. Occasionally, something unusual occurs at Smith & Bybee—a sighting of a rare merlin, for example—and the park gets an uptick in attendance as birders travel considerable distances to check the species off their “life list.” This happens to be the year of the Great Egret at Smith & Bybee. One birder, equipped with a spotting scope and a clicker, recently counted 512 of the tall white birds before rushing home to email his findings to a local birding listserv. That's how I learned that five minutes from my house, the Great Egret—the enduring symbol of the Audubon Society, a bird with feathers so desirable it was once poached to the brink of extinction before staging a remarkable recovery—had appeared at Smith & Bybee in record numbers to feed in the shrinking, sun-warmed pools.

On an unseasonably warm October afternoon, I'm standing at the muddy north shore of Smith Lake, binoculars to my eyes, when I hear a rustling sound come from the bushes behind me. I take it for a ground-foraging bird—a towhee, perhaps—and focus on the task at hand. It's easy to miss egrets when they're at a distance, but suddenly the shapes appear, and where you saw none a moment ago you now see hundreds. Against a backdrop of willow and ash two hundred yards away, the egrets look like floating white teardrops. Even at this distance, you get a sense of their size. Great Egrets stand as tall as a kindergartener, but with five-foot wingspans and long yellow bills that serve as lethal harpoons. They are mainly resting now, it seems, but occasionally I see one lunge for prey.

The rustling sound returns, and I turn around to see, emerging from the underbrush, a man dressed in the excessive layers of a person accustomed to living outdoors. He is a wiry man in his fifties, with curly gray sideburns and beads of sweat under the rim of his black wool hat. A scar begins at his left ear and makes a deep crease down the length of his cheek. He produces a piece of cardboard, carefully lays it on the sodden shore of the lake, and settles in to contemplate the view.

Ron Arquette has been coming to these lakes all his life, he tells me, and continues to ride his bike here often to enjoy what he calls “critter time.” He glances cautiously at his old ten-speed Peugeot parked against a tree, a green plastic bag hanging from the handlebars. Ron grew up in North Portland and recalls days spent flushing pheasants for kicks, frog-gigging with a bamboo rod, and tracking his favorite bird, the red-tailed hawk. He found work where he could: scrubbing dishes at the county hospital, hauling cargo at the Swan Island shipyards, toweling off cars at the Rub-a-Dub carwash. And he did a lot of wandering.

“Once I found a river otter on the road, freshly killed by a car,” he recalls. “I wanted that thing’s pelt so bad! But I didn’t know how to skin it. I had to leave it. I went back later, but it was gone. I still feel bad about that.”

Today Ron lives in a concrete overhang near the water treatment facility on the north bank of the Willamette River in St. Johns. He’s been homeless since 1994, shortly after his mother passed away. He had been the executor of her estate, and he regarded his \$11,000 inheritance as a major windfall that would last for several years. He ran through it in six months and was soon on the streets. He hints at

trouble with the law but says he loves being homeless—“no one to answer to,” as he puts it. “And I don’t mess around with women anymore. Been there, done that. That frees me up for other things—like this,” he says, gesturing with a sweeping arm over Smith Lake.

Sandpipers come in low over the water, announcing their arrival with loud calls. They stand in the inch-deep water just off the shore, pecking for food with their long, slender bills. Gulls circle and cry above. A Lufthansa jet roars overhead toward the Pacific. I raise my binoculars and focus again on the opposite shore.

“There used to be only a few egrets around here,” Ron says. “I’d sneak through the trees to get a look at ‘em. Now there’s *lots* of ‘em.”

* * *

What is perhaps most extraordinary about the return of wapato to the wetlands of North Portland is the original ordinariness of the plant. When Lewis and Clark arrived in the Pacific Northwest two hundred years ago, they couldn’t escape it—neither the word nor the thing itself: a swamp-loving weed with arrowhead-shaped leaves and, most important, an edible potato-like tuber submerged in the mud. Wapato was so widespread—it covered entire waterways and bogs in undulating fields—that Lewis and Clark gave the name *Wapato Valley* to the entirety of the lower Columbia drainage basin. The Chinook Indians who harvested it became the Wapato people. The island on which it formed its thickest and most sprawling stands was Wapato Island. Lewis and Clark’s journals contain scores of references to the plant, rendered in their famously idiosyncratic spelling as *wappetoe*, *wapto*, even *pappato*:

In this pond the natives inform us they Collect great quantities of pappato, which the womin collect by getting into the water, Sometimes to their necks holding by a Small canoe and with their feet loosen the wappato or bulb of the root from the bottom from the Fibers, and it imedeately rises to the top of the water, they Collect & throw them into the Canoe.

Even with competition from the canvasback ducks that dove for the tubers all winter long, the Chinook Indians gathered wapato in huge quantities, returning to their villages with canoes full of the stuff, which they roasted on embers for dinner. They stored bushels of it under their bed platforms and under the floors of their houses, and traded the rest for beads and cloth. During a long, wet winter at Fort Clatsop on the Pacific Ocean, Lewis and Clark's party found that wapato had "an agreeable taste and answered well in place of bread"—a welcome change from the spoiled elk they'd been living on. If they ever tried gathering it themselves, the journals don't mention such an attempt. Instead, they ate their way through each bushel they bought or traded for, and then entreated the Indians to give them more.

A century later, Chinese immigrants to the Portland area recognized wapato as a relative of an Asian plant, and they adopted the decimated tribes' tradition as their own. In fact, Chinatown had a bad case of wapato fever. In 1899, the *Morning Oregonian* reported on a notable incident at a downtown intersection:

A score of excited Chinamen chattering and gesticulating over a lot of sacks on Alder Street near Second, attracted the attention of passers yesterday. . . . The cause of the rumpus found that it was over a lot of 'wapatoes,' some six or eight bushels which a Chinaman had brought in from somewhere down on the river bottom. They were in

great demand and there was a regular row about who should have them at 2½ cents per pound.

The days of wapato riots are long gone. You can still find a ceremonial dish of roasted tubers at the Chinook Nation's annual winter gathering, but wapato isn't really a food anymore. It's a reference. Along with all the other Indian words on our maps, wapato is a nominal nod to the past. It's the name of an impoverished town in Washington State and a lake in Tacoma known mainly for its toxic algae blooms. When the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office conducted a "name the jail" contest for its new facility, the Wapato name was again called into service.

* * *

With each new trip I've made to Smith & Bybee, Wapato Jail has remained the same. Stationed on the edge of the protected wetlands, it vigilantly watches the seasons pass. I've met Captain Bobbi Luna and satisfied my curiosity about what her empty prison looks like on the inside, but its namesake remains an abstraction for me. I haven't seen the plant up close. I don't know the texture of its leaves or the taste of its tubers. If wapato was once so important around here that Lewis and Clark gave its name to the whole region, I reason, then it deserves a little more recognition than it's received of late.

So on a hot spring day I drive west on Highway 30 to Sauvie Island, where I've heard wapato still grows in impressive stands—and is more accessible than the specimens at Smith & Bybee. I'm determined to gather, cook, and eat the plant.

This part of Highway 30 is wedged between Portland's west hills, tumbling precipitously down to the road, and a battered section of the Willamette River lined

with chemical plants and steel mills and bearing the stigma of its designation as a federal Superfund site. Once I cross the short bridge to the island, though, the land turns picturesque. A narrow, gently twisting road takes me past the houseboats and sun-grayed wooden pylons of Multnomah Channel and into the island's agricultural interior. The pavement turns to gravel, and I find Crane Lake. It's a quiet, still lake—more like a big pond—with the blunted peak of Mt. St. Helens looming on the horizon.

I'm carrying a mental image of *Sagittaria latifolia* and a permit from the Oregon State Department of Fish and Wildlife that entitles me to collect “up to two gallons of wapato per day, *for personal use only*,” which seems generous enough. I've been told Crane Lake is a good place to find wapato, but I'm realizing, as I stumble along the tree-tangled shore, collecting scratches on my ankles and a faceful of spider webs, that the plant isn't necessarily going to announce itself. I try rolling up my pant legs and walking a few feet into the languid water, as though a more participatory bearing might improve my prospects. It doesn't.

Remembering an offhand comment from a wildlife biologist at the Fish and Wildlife office, I decide to drive to a narrow slough on the other side of the island, several miles away. I'm scanning the slough for arrowhead-shaped leaves, and suddenly there it is: unambiguous clumps of wapato crowded around a corrugated metal pipe that passes under the gravel road. I park in a cloud of my own dust and scramble down the hillock, and it is then I realize that if I want wapato, I have no choice but to walk into the slough.

Marshy, swampy lands have long been at odds with human progress. Settlers came to the Northwest in search of arable lands and found large tracts of this frustrating, seemingly useless ground, begging to be drained and filled in with dirt, to be made solid and useful. These wetlands flooded in the winter and dried out in the summer and existed for the rest of the year in a limbo state between land and water. Even in the comparably arid summer, wetlands can be muddy and lousy with biting insects. Wapato is born of the mud.

I commit to entering the slough, but it's complicated. There's a surface layer on the water of fallen branches and dry, gray biomass that sags under my feet like a trampoline. I hear a squishing sound underneath, and the water bleeds upward through its cover and oozes over my feet, releasing a boggy smell that is part life, part death. The wapato grows through the layer of twigs and leaves, giving the illusion of being rooted in it, but I tear away that detritus and plunge my hands into the cool water underneath. I feel the plant's leggy roots. A foot down, I reach another layer of solid matter, a fibrous network of tangles. This, too, I rend and separate, finally reaching smooth, thick mud, which I filter through my fingers until, at length, I feel something smooth, slippery, egglike—like buried treasure. The tuber. It snaps easily from the stem that conveys nutrients to and from the leaves, and I pull it to the surface. It glistens in the sun. I throw it in a plastic Fred Meyer bag and dig my hands in to find another, and then another. Their size ranges from brazil nut to hen's egg. I feel the grimace of distaste fade from my face as I settle onto my haunches and acclimate to the task.

Later, at home, I leave my fetid sandals on the porch and rinse my wapato tubers in a colander before roasting them in the oven. Cooked wapato smells uncannily like creamed corn, but the taste and texture are more like potato. Wapato is airier than a potato, though, and while it has an innocuous enough flavor with a bit of sea salt and an olive oil drizzle, I can't help detecting a funky note of stagnant slough—but this could be a kind of olfactory hangover from the gathering experience. The taste is beside the point, though. It's a good meal because I gathered it myself, and because wapato is now real to me.

* * *

Back at Wapato Jail, Bobbi Luna is still waiting, and with each passing year she becomes less hopeful that the jail will ever open. It's a dubious honor to be the commander of an empty jail. She'd prefer to see the place do what it was designed to do. County jails are generally mellow places, peopled not with violent criminals but mostly by nonthreatening types stuck in whirlpools of downward mobility. They're not bad to have around, in other words.

Captain Luna knows these people, but she hasn't had the pleasure of knowing them at Wapato. She hasn't watched the dormitories come to life each morning with stretches and lazy games of chess. She hasn't seen inmates poring over books in GRE prep classes or heard their shouts echo down the hallways. She hasn't broken up their arguments or discovered, under their bunkbeds, private stashes of prison moonshine made of hoarded fruit, sugar, and bread.

"It's a nice jail—you'd think they'd want to use it," Captain Bobbi Luna says.
"Maybe someday."

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