

# TRICKSTER



## CHAPTER ONE

---

# VOWS

MY FATHER IS doing that peculiar one-step that brides are supposed to do. My legs are a lot longer than his, so I'm almost running in place beside him. We're like two pistons, bobbing and misfiring down the center aisle of Holy Succour Church.

Glancing up toward the front of the church, I spot something no skittish 1960s' bride should see before her marriage. A banana boat. On the altar. I'd guess the scale of the model is about 1:15, maybe 1:20. On the right, the Epistle side, there's my beaming groom, Francis, his jaw suddenly set a little too possessively for my liking. On the left, the Gospel side, there's the boat. It floats seductively, advancing and receding in the May heat. I can hear its happy crew and bohemian passengers. I can smell its tropical cargo.

This is not a vision; the Catholic Church frowns on its members having unofficial visions. Anyhow, I'm not a vision person. Miss Science, that's me. About to become Mrs. Murphy, not that I'm changing my name. No one else seems to notice the boat: not my teary father, not the groom, and apparently not the scrubbed Irish-Americans in the pews. Not even Mrs. Anzivino's son Jimmy, the Youngstown Mafia's community outreach person. My father and I finally arrive at the altar, and the boat sails off into the vestry. Without me. Francis grasps my elbow firmly.

At the reception afterwards in my parents' partly-converted basement, bowed and wiry men who work in the mill with my father tell me he never stops talking about how smart I am, doing that PhD at the University of Pittsburgh. Anthropology. Scholarships galore. My professors can't do without me. Someday I'm going to be a college professor. "He's real proud of you," they all say. "Never talks about nothing else."

The groom's florid uncle, triple whiskey in hand, joins us. "Yeah," he says, "but can you iron a shirt?" How much Francis's jaw looks like his! I've never noticed this before. He doesn't wait for an answer from me; he's hailing Father Jim, or Father Bob, or one of the many Fathers at the altar that

day, all of them Friday-night card-pals of the Murphys'. "I was just saying to the blushing bride here..."

Father Jim-Bob raises his bloodless hand magisterially and calls the group to attention. "The Murphys will be off, soon," he says. "But before they go, let us offer up a little prayer for their safe trip."

Instantly, heads bow over highballs. It takes a few seconds before I realize that Francis and I are now the Murphys. Or, rather, Francis is the Murphy, and I am the extra "s".

Prayer over. Awkward little silence. The uncle downs his drink. "Ahhh," he breathes, looking heavenward toward the cold and hot air ducts in the basement ceiling, "Bushmills. 'Tis like an archangel pissing on your tongue."

The groom's father hastily proposes a toast: "To Francis and Eileen. To a happy honeymoon, and then Francis will be off for reserve officer training at Fort Monmouth, and Eileen will be waiting for him in..." He trails off. "To Francis and Eileen!"

Where I'll be "waiting" is mentioned in the last line of my wedding announcement, the next day's lead story on the *Vindicator's* society page. Although we are more than a pickle fork away from "society," my uncle works for the newspaper and has brought a pile of advance copies to put beside the bar. The female guests pounce, read the announcement, and quickly move away, drinks in hands, loudly loving each other's hats.

### ANCIENT RING FEATURED AT KANE WEDDING

**A double ring ceremony featuring the traditional Irish wedding ring, two hands clasping a crowned heart, was performed Saturday morning in Holy Succour Church, Youngstown, uniting in marriage Miss Eileen Máire Kane, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur L. Kane, and Francis Thomas Murphy, son of Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Murphy.**

**The bride, an Andrew Mellon Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh, and a graduate of Youngstown University, is presently working on a doctorate in anthropology. The bridegroom, also a Youngstown University graduate, is a chemical engineer with the Ford Company.**

**Carrying a colonial bouquet of white and pink roses and forget-me-nots, the bride wore a full-length lace and taffeta tiered gown and an illusion veil held by**

**white roses and forget-me-nots. The maid of honor, Miss Anne Kane, sister of the bride, and bridesmaid Mary Agnes Kane, a cousin, wore sea mist taffeta gowns with turquoise trains and matching picture hats, and carried baskets of pink and white carnations and violets. Patrice Kane and Alice Murphy, sisters of the bride and bridegroom, were flower girls in tiered sea mist gowns with empire waists, and carried small wicker bird cages. James Leone was best man.**

**Following a reception held at the home of the bride's parents, the couple will leave for a trip to Rehoboth Beach. Mr. Murphy will enter the Army as a second lieutenant, and the bride will continue her studies in Pittsburgh after three months of anthropological research on an Indian reservation in Nevada.**

Does it sound like I entered the church in bad faith that day, given the vision of the boat, my refusal to change my name, my heading for the Indian reservation so soon after the wedding? In fact, I am among the group—myself and the groom's little sisters, mainly—who think the whole idea of the wedding is rather nice.

"Why are you getting married?" my own little sister, 15 years younger than me, asked the night before.

How do you explain these things to a child? "Last year, I dreamed I was getting married to someone, I don't know who, and when I looked back I saw Francis in the back of the church, looking very sad. And I felt sad, too."

Because I believe in scientific evidence, it would be foolish for me to ignore this message from the subconscious. Of course, as a scientist I also recognize that earlier that day I could have heard Eddie Fisher on the radio singing "I'm Walking Behind You," his ballad about a heartbroken lover watching his lost love go up the aisle.

"I'd feel sad, too, if I was marrying someone I didn't know," my sister said. "But if you have to marry a stranger, I want you to pick a tall dark one. Francis is medium and pink."

We older girls know from movies and books that tall dark strangers can end up beer-bellied and undershirted in seedy faded towns—faded towns even worse than Youngstown—swatting at dirty, diapered swarms of kids. I am sensible: Francis is the Boy Next Door. Not literally—his family lives a few blocks away—but in every other way he qualifies for that role. He's quiet. Skinny. Reliable. Safe. Familiar. Freckled.

Medium. Pink.

Enough of reason. Who knows why people marry? The fact is I *have* to get married. I'm not pregnant, but this is Youngstown, 1964, and I'm 23. Our families are vigilantly anti-cohabitation. Contemplating sex? Either marry or send your mother to an early grave. It's our cultural custom.

And Francis and I *have* to leave because Youngstown, Ohio, population 160,000 and falling, has no place for us—the outdated mills, the dark department-store counter, and the typing pool are there for people who can't get to college, and only a tiny range of professions exists for the few who can. After his Army service, Francis, with his Master's in chemical engineering, will have to leave town to find work. And so will I, if I'm to work as an academic, an anthropologist. But to get that work, I have to finish my PhD, and to do that I have to learn how to do fieldwork. Leaving on my own for summer training on an Indian reservation four days after the wedding is not customary, but it's necessary. We're the first in our families ever to go beyond high school; we financed our educations through scholarships and tough family sacrifices. Francis can't stop now, and I won't. The University of Nevada in Reno is running the training program I need, and I'm going.

"I saw the most amazing thing this morning, going up the aisle," I tell Francis as we drive away for our few days' honeymoon in Rehoboth Beach, New Jersey. It's nice to be able to share ridiculous experiences with someone comfortable, someone who has known you and your family for eons, which is another reason a tall dark stranger can't work out as husband material.

"I know, Father Tony wore the wrong color chasuble—you see that? His was for Laetare Sunday. You only wear that on the middle Sunday of Lent."

So he didn't see the banana boat. I say nothing. Maybe there are some things you can't share with a new husband.

We take the country route to Enon Valley and beyond. White wooden gas stations, corn-on-the-cob stands, hex signs on Amish barns, the ice machine in East Palestine that people say is run by the Mafia. We watch for our favorite signs: "Backhoe Work by the Grace of God," hand-painted on a broken board, and "Fin 'n' Fur Kennels and Bible School."

"You know," he says as we pass through New Galilee, "I've been thinking—it's really time we settle down."



"I EXPECTED MORE." I'M stretched out beside Francis on the hotel bed.

He sits up, surprised. "What?"

"I mean New Jersey. I expected a lot of casinos, violence, cocktail lounges. I thought it would be more colorful."

"Than what? Youngstown?" Francis asks. According to the cover of last September's *Saturday Evening Post*, Youngstown is "Crime Town, U.S.A." and "Bomb City, the Murder Capital of the U.S."

We put on our few specially bought honeymoon clothes and set out for the boardwalk, a leaden sea churning on one side and on the other rows of chairs filled with gamblers' wide backsides and racks of unidentifiable orange and turquoise postcards.

"You know," Francis says suddenly, "if you kill someone, I'll be the one who'll be executed for it." Almost moment by moment this man I've married, usually mild and easygoing, is sounding more like a bullfrog, loud and rumbly. Marital responsibilities seem to be overwhelming him.

"That's ridiculous. It means the only person I can be punished for killing is you."

"And I found out the day before the wedding that you won't be able to open a charge account without me signing for it, or take out a loan. And they'll make you use my last name to vote or renew your driver's license." He's reproachful, as if I'm a little faulty.

"Who told you this?"

"My father. The other day, when he gave me The Talk." His father is a marriage counselor.

"Aren't you too old for that?"

"He asked me if I knew everything, and I said yes, so he filled me in on the legal side. Good thing, too. For example, you can't sue me if I injure you by driving carelessly."

"Well, doesn't that lift your heart a little?"

"And if you pick a fight in the streets, it'll be me who has to take over and handle the situation."

"Your father said that?"

"No, my mother." Until the final "I do's," Francis's mother had been hoping he'd become a priest.

"How likely is it I'll pick a fight in the streets on my honeymoon?" At 100 pounds and just under five feet five, trussed up in my new lacy clothes (including, still, my wedding garter), it seems a stretch.

“I don’t mean that you’d pick a fight.” He pauses, reflecting. “As such.” Clearly, his mother’s comments have got to him. “I mean if you get into trouble when I’m around, I’ll have to handle it.”

We’ve been going out together for seven years and I’ve never noticed this deeply chivalrous streak before. I lower my eyes demurely when we encounter other shy honeymooners on the boardwalk. I wonder if they, too, although looking so carefree and happy, are also suddenly plunged into this Paleolithic gender divide.

It’s not just Francis who’s having second thoughts. For my part, I begin to see him as a sperm landmine. He’s the eldest of 11 children; now that we’re married, he can probably impregnate me simply by sharing a soda straw. The fact that our previous sexual experiences had non-eventful outcomes doesn’t matter. The marriage license makes me feel far more permeable. I don’t want children yet, nor does he, so I insist that he use three condoms together.

“I can’t feel anything,” he complains, gamely, as he approaches me, swathed in rubber. We both end up laughing.

After that it seems a good idea to stay apart at night: I pass the time reading in our room, and he goes out gambling. This way, I can’t get into a fracas, and he can’t knock me up. We both agree this is the safest approach. The honeymoon passes quietly.

We barely mention what we’ll be doing during the months ahead when we’ll be apart, but we know the time will test each of us: Francis, pacific, non-athletic, and nervous, serving his time in the Army. And me, shy and socially inept, living on an Indian reservation.

“Your mother is worried about you,” he says.

Translation: Francis is worried about me.

“She thinks you’re unconscious most of the time.”

This conflicts sharply with my own notion that very little gets past me.

“Well, maybe not unconscious, exactly. More like oblivious. Hapless.” Francis minored in English. “And you don’t mingle well.”

“What has mingling got to do with fieldwork?” I snap.

He rolls his eyes.

On our last morning, we drive to La Guardia Airport for my flight to Reno. At my gate, we hug, promise to write each other daily, and kiss good-bye, just in time for Francis to drive the 40 miles to Fort Monmouth and report for duty. He plans to fly out and join me in Nevada in September, when we’ll drive back together across the country. I have a one-way ticket.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

# At Home on the Range

I RIDE INTO YERINGTON, Nevada at noon, down the deserted main street, past the dusty bar, the courthouse, the faded stage-set wooden storefronts. A couple of tough-looking men in Stetsons and boots squint at me, giving nothing away. One spits at a loping yellow dog.

This is the life I imagined: the big sky and me, alone out on the range, maybe sleeping under the stars at night, up with the dawn and out into the crystalline desert air. Free—my only possessions my hat and boots, and maybe my horse, although I'm not all that keen on horses. No steel mills, no mud-colored snow, the only gunshots those of honest cowboys with no known links to the Mafia.

With me in the university van are a professor of anthropology, an archeologist, a Paiute-speaking Swedish linguist, two teaching fellows, and four other wide-eyed trainees en route to their own placements. In my bag, along with a packet of letters from Francis, are a new compass, an engineer's scale, a camera, a tape recorder, some soil conservation maps, blueprint materials, a water canteen, and a snake-bite kit, not one of which I can use with any confidence and for all of which I paid \$95.80. I also have four cans of meatballs, three months' worth of tampons, hair curlers, a solid girdle with suspenders, some squashed Hostess Snoballs (these last two items smuggled in by my mother), and, most important, carefully wrapped in waxed paper, my beautiful prized copy of Harold E. Driver's *Indians of North America*, which cost me nearly as much as my wedding dress.

It's a hot day in mid-June. I'm fresh from almost three weeks' fieldwork training at the university in Reno, and itching from Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever inoculations. The drive is spectacular: a high desert river valley stretches to the Desert and Singtase Mountains, the landscape a mix of gray-brown scrub and, surprising to me, rich green fields of grass, alfalfa, onions, and garlic. Yerington, 80 miles away from Reno, is a place designed for northern Ohioans: flat. The bonus is that, although it's flat in the right

places—the roads and lawns—it’s piped like a piecrust at the horizons with spectacular copper and lavender mountains.

The town, 1,800 people, has a moonscape copper mine, 47 small businesses serving the vast hinterland, and two Paiute reservations. One, the two-acre “Colony” of 130 people, is built on a traditional camping place near Yerington’s main street. The other, “the Ranch,” 10 miles out of town, has 1,000-plus acres of arable and grazing land, home to eight families of about 40 people. Another 100 or so Paiutes live in the area.

“It’s deserted, like a ghost town,” I marvel to the professor, as the van rumbles down the wide main street past a cozy-looking diner, the Lyon County Courthouse, the Crescent Garage, an imposing post office, and a few bars.

“Lunchtime. Rotarians have their monthly lunch today.”

Both reservations are tribal property, restricted to legally recognized American Indians. I can’t live on either, so the professor has found me accommodation in an eccentrically converted garage in the white part of town. Entrance by overhead door only. No sleeping out under the stars for me.

We all pile out of the van to inspect the interior: a rough bunkhouse bed partnered with a dainty white-and-gold reproduction French bedside table, one drawer missing; an old Kelvinator icebox, red Formica table, and two-burner camp stove; and in the office corner, a battered tool bench, legs cut down to make a desk, and a tufted blue armchair. Most of my clothes will hang behind an old curtain stretched across a corner of the room, and some can go on the tailor’s dummy beside the tiny green bathroom. No lamps, just a bare overhead bulb.

But how will I meet Paiutes in the middle of a white town? Indians aren’t allowed in bars. Actually, I’m not either; in the 1960s, “No Ladies Without Escorts” signs are still posted in many places around the country. If I go in, I could get Francis arrested.

Admittance to the two reservations is only with permission of the Paiutes, and my three letters to the Tribal Chairman, James Kelly, haven’t been answered. I’m nervous that he hasn’t replied; gone are the days when the anthropologist just appeared, like the Angel Gabriel unto Mary, and the locals, like Mary herself, were surprised but honored by the visit.

“In a few days, we’ll find a car for you and send it down so you can get between the two reservations,” the professor says. “Now, first thing tomorrow we’ve set it up for you to go over to the Colony and meet old Delaney

Jack. He knows everything. He'll take you out to the Ranch to the Tribal Chairman, James Kelly. Be sure you go see Mr. Kelly."

Some of the other students will be working in pairs; I want to work alone. Despite the accomplishments of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Ruth Bunzel, Ernestine Friedl, and many others, the issue of how women will fare in the field still amuses some men. I want to be sure I can do it and prove yet again that women anthropologists are as capable as men.

"You sure about this?" the professor asks, as I contemplate my new home.

"Of course."

"You call us, any time, day or night. That goes for the rest of you, too," he says, herding the other students back into the van for the trip to their own field sites.

On my own at last. I already have an "informant" lined up, and I know what I want to ask him: a local "Indian Messiah," Jack Wilson, died here 30 years ago, promising to return. He preached that while people wait for him, they should take up a new religion, although he didn't specify any in particular. Are there intriguing and logical parallels between their old religious beliefs and the new ones? If not, why not? I can almost see the journal article I'll write and the later respectful references to it: "Kane, in her seminal work, notes that..." Neophyte anthropologists who don't know what they're doing are told to make a map, take a census, or collect kinship terms. Not me. I'm on top of things.



THE NEXT MORNING, I make tea on the garage's camp stove, get my notebook, and set out for the Colony. My studies have equipped me to describe every known form of pre-white American Indian habitation, but the image in my head is the tent my sister and I used to make out of damp blankets slung over clotheslines in our backyard, with us hunkered down beneath it eating Ritz crackers. I know the Paiutes won't be living in traditional housing today; in fact, they're among the few groups in the world who never had much permanent housing at all, living as nomads, sheltering in windbreaks or light reed houses in the bitterest winter weather.

Neither my studies nor that image prepare me for my first sight of the Colony: a line of 26 closely packed but very neat unpainted wooden houses along a parched, dirt, tree-lined lane. The houses are tiny; some have trailers parked alongside. I look for the front steps of a respectable widow, Jennie

Mann, which I recognize from the description the professor gave me: dozens of flowerpots, flowering tin cans, flowering tires. Jennie, a substantial lady in her early 60s—short, pillowy, and serene—is waiting for me.

“You are welcome,” she says. “This is your man.” She nods toward an elegant, silver-haired man sitting alone on the rickety steps, head down. He’s about 70, whip-thin, dressed in carefully ironed, faded blue work clothes. A scribbled net of wrinkles outline features that belong on an ancient coin.

“*Ipabwá,*” he mutters.

Ah ha! I *know* this word. Weeks of training are already paying off; I can use Paiute greetings with the best of them.

I extend my hand politely. “*Pab wá.*”

He looks up. “No, no, write it down,” he says irritably, patting the step. “I was practicin’ for you. Delaney Jack’s my name.” He holds out his hand. “Your teachers said you better start with kinship terms. *Pab wá*’s the Paiute name for the father’s sister.”

He taps my notebook. “*Pyní?i,* that would be younger sister.” He shoots his upper denture in and out reflectively, behind closed lips. “*Pa wá.* Mother’s sister. *Pi tu uu.*”

I scramble for my pen, trying to capture Delaney’s words in the International Phonetic Alphabet I’ve been taught. *Pi tu uu,* I write carefully.

Gradually three of what may be Jennie’s teenaged grandchildren—a girl and two boys—and three generic yellow dogs join us. They arrange themselves on the steps and stare.

“Aren’t you s’posed to be on your honeymoon?” Delaney asks.

“Yes. No. I was on it three weeks ago.”

“You left it to come here to us?”

“It’s part of my training.”

“You miss your husband?” a large, burly girl demands.

“Course she does,” Delaney says, shocked. “Sooner I help her, sooner she’ll see him again. *Ha má ? a,* elder sister.”

I’m not much good at the Phonetic Alphabet; if I have to list kin terms, I’m more interested in finding out what these kin do, what their roles are. Among Irish-Americans in my town, for instance, sisters live near each other to help cushion the effects of poverty and their husbands’ mill strikes, injuries, and deaths. Who is supposed to do what among the Paiutes?

Somewhere in my notebooks I have a set of questions given during training, something called a Role Profile Test. I can remember only a few and

ask, “Which relative is most likely to help you if you need it? Who most often comes to you for help? Which relative nags you the most? Which one is most likely to refuse to help you even if you need it pretty badly?”

“Your elder sister’d help you if you needed it.” Delaney reflects on this morosely. “And maybe she wouldn’t help you at all. I remember the time she deliberately. . .” His voice trails off. According to the professor, the widowed Delaney lives with his sister out on the Ranch; I hope he lives with the younger one.

“Let’s try ‘wife’s brother’s son.’”

“Huh.” Delaney mulls this over for a while. He turns to Jennie. “Remind me to tell him I expect that bail bond money back.” His teeth slip, and he retrieves them with a smack. “*Na ná kwa*, he certainly wouldn’t help you. More like you’d have to help *him*.” He thinks, chewing on some tiny thing.

Jennie seems familiar with the antics of this particular *na ná kwa*. She pats Delaney’s hand. “Now, you don’t be so hard. You remember he cured you that time you tried to kill yourself.”

“I *didn’t* try to kill myself,” Delaney grumbles. “People want to kill themselves, they eat wild parsnip. I was brushing my teeth with a rabbitbrush twig. What kind’a witch doesn’t know a twig from a wild parsnip? He was too young, he had no spirit helper.” He spits. “Matter of fact, I didn’t even have my teeth *in* at the time. Not that many try to commit suicide rubbing their false teeth with wild parsnip.”

“Well, I can’t speak against him. He cured my mother when its feathers fell out,” Jennie says in Paiute. Or maybe she says something else; my ear isn’t that good yet.

I’m delighted. *This* is what anthropology is supposed to be about: de-feathered mothers and the dignified Delaney besieged like Job by feckless relatives and incompetent witches as he cleans his dentures. Paradoxes, conundrums, phantasmagoria, and completely conflicting accounts of the same event are fine by me—people who grow up in big families are used to them. As a would-be anthropologist, I know that people who are considered mentally ill in one culture can be model personality types in another. As an Ohioan, it makes perfect sense to me that the Mafia runs Youngstown better than the elected officials do and that sometimes the elected officials *are* the Mafia. And, as an Irish-American, it doesn’t surprise me that my teen-aged brother Patrick is currently president of the local Bosnian Club and its elderly members.

A mounted rider appears suddenly on the dirt road in front of Jennie's, his horse rearing and bucking. From the back, he's the picture of a perfect movie cowboy, Stetson, jeans, chaps, and all. From the front, he has perfect Indian features. My mental elasticity has its limits; I stare in confusion.

"Mickey Kelly," Delaney points with his lips pursed in the Paiute way. I've been warned that finger pointing may invite a good witching, so it's best not to point at all. "One a the best Paiute speakers around."

Delaney loses whatever he was chewing on and fishes around for it under his upper lip with his tongue. He takes a twig and draws a circle in the sand with it. "See that?" He points to some track marks inside.

"Dog prints?"

"Nope." He's pleased. "Dogs leave all four paw prints. See, this is a line of two prints. Old Man Coyote, that's what this guy is."

"Isn't a coyote dangerous?"

"Yes and no. Coyote's as much a danger to himself as anyone else. And a great man for the ladies. I could tell you..."

"Delaney," Jennie reproaches.

"Okay, okay. Well, here's a different one. Long ago, before any people were here, Coyote went across the ocean, maybe to Europe, and he married a woman there." He glances at Jennie, who gives the slightest nod. "She had a litter of children and Coyote decided to bring them back to the U.S."

"The U.S.?"

"Yes. And whoever was over there in Europe told him he should put them into a kind of a willow bottle, and put a cork on it, and not let them out till he got back here. But you know Coyote, he couldn't do that. When he hit the east coast he took a peek inside, and they all ran out and scattered everywhere. He tried to catch them, but he only got two. Those two became the Paiutes and the Shoshone. The rest went all over the country and became the other tribes.

"Same with the animals. I'll tell you that one some other day. But he accidentally let them all out, too."

I was taught not to impose my own cultural interpretations on what I heard but to allow conclusions to emerge naturally from informants, so I wait now, poised to write.

"Just shows you," Delaney concludes. "He was a terrible babysitter."

One of the teenaged boys sniggers.

“Well, next time I’ll tell you how a fella from here, Jack Wilson, turned a white horse into a cloud in the sky. Old lady I knew saw it. I know all about it.”

“Wuddn’t Jack Wilson did that,” Jennie objects. “It was The Man Who Became Thunder, thousands of years ago, and that cloud of Jack Wilson’s, it was really a block of ice.”

“Yeah. Coulda been.”

“He called the ice out of the sky and people ate it. A little like the Christian Communion. Some say Jack Wilson’s the great Indian Messiah.”

“Yeah, and some people, not me, say he was just a great man for being around at mealtimes,” Delaney says. Jennie points her lips at my notebook, warning him.

“Well,” he says, rising, and now I can see the slight bow in his back, the extra second it takes him to straighten up, “I’ll get a fellow older’n me from out at the Ranch to come talk to you this afternoon. Come back around 4:00.”

“Shouldn’t I see the Tribal Chairman before I do much more?” I ask.

“Oh, you can do that later.”

I put the notebook away, relieved and happy. It all seems so easy. Jack Wilson is my man; he’s the reason I’m here in this little desert town rather than in any of the other field-training sites on offer. It could be said—and probably will be—that I left Francis for Jack Wilson.

The three teenagers are sitting on the curb in front of my garage when I return from Jennie’s.

“Don’t you want to write about us?” the girl asks. “Aren’t you supposed to write down our names, too?”

“Of course.” I’ve already written some quick notes about them, though not their names: *Girl, large, stocky. Boy, pale, thin, lank-haired, watchful. Boy, Dean Martin.*

The girl hangs over me while I match up the names, shielding the labels from her view. One of the boys strikes a few muscle-building poses; the other hides behind a curtain of fair hair. I take down their stories: Thomasina is 15, hates school, hates her teacher, hates everybody in her class, hates Larry. Larry is also 15 and very pale; he mutters answers to my questions while shyly fingering the books in my bag. Last, draped elegantly against my door, laughing and lazy-eyed, is the boy I dub the Paiute Dean Martin. He could be anything up to 30 years old, but in fact is 17. He impales a lizard with a pen that looks like one of mine. Is one.

“You think you don’t need our names,” he challenges.

“I do, of course.” We’re supposed to talk to children because, we’re told, children are honest, straightforward, excellent observers. Often they will tell you insightful things they don’t even understand themselves.

“Eddie’s my name,” he announces, flinging the limp lizard in my direction. “My guess is about 34–22–36. Right? Not my type, though.”

The other two pretend to be deliciously horrified and run off, screeching and hooting. Not Eddie, though. Somehow, Eddie just disappears.



WHEN I ARRIVE at Jennie’s house for the afternoon interview, Delaney and a woman in her 40s are struggling to unload something awkward from the back of a flatbed truck.

“Archie Jim,” Delaney announces and orders the woman, “Pull!”

Archie lies spread-eagled and face-up on the truck bed, looking delighted with himself, not seeming to mind being scraped across a floor of grit.

“Now!” Delaney and the woman sling him out and down under Jennie’s tree, a big cottonwood, where he sprawls like a starfish. “This here’s Archie’s niece Doreen, Doreen Williamson,” Delaney says. “And Archie here is 90 years old, the man that knows everything.”

“Don’t know enough to close his fly,” Doreen mutters. Delaney edges delicately to block the view and make an adjustment. Doreen shakes her head, swings up into the driver’s seat, and roars off, wheels spitting gravel.

Delaney and I sit down under the tree, me with notebook and pen at the ready. I spot Larry watching from the brush, advancing and then shying back like a nervous cub. And isn’t his friend, the smooth Eddie, the young Dean Martin, there too? A second ago, I thought so, but he’s gone now.

“This girl’s teacher,” Delaney says, addressing Archie, “told me all about how she’s supposed to study Jack Wilson. Good thing, too. Never got the credit he deserved, Wilson.”

“No, sir,” Archie agrees. He waves a near-empty fifth of bourbon to punctuate his point. Everything on his face is arranged to accommodate his glorious pumpkin grin: cheeks draped in rich folds around it, laughing eyes in soft hammocks. Like Delaney, he’s wiry, presumably from a life of hard ranch work. “No, sir. Jack Wilson near wiped out half the western U.S.”

“Well,” Delaney cautions.