

THE YEAR OF WEIGHTLESS HOUSES

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Canon City had mostly forgotten the Tornelli sisters by the year they started to die. "They've been erased," Mae said, "Wiped from the slate like everything else in this town. Now it's all about the prisons and their awful families at Walmart. No one remembers the sodas, or the afternoon candy smell from the hills. Or the trucks on shipping Saturday, trundling down Main like a circus parade. They don't remember the parties at the Elks, the long lines to get in, the dance bands they hired from Kansas City. It's been erased. Wiped clean with a single mean swipe. It's sad, it truly is. They were so much of everything and now...no one recalls..." She plucked a doily from a side table, working the knots through her fingers like a rosary as she circled the room. She glanced down the hallway toward the back bedrooms then over at the kitchen. She stopped again at the center of the living room, talking mostly to herself, soft and dramatic, as she often did when coming to conclusions. "Just chalk dust in

a tray. Erased and pounded out." Mae set the doily back in place, propped her hands firmly on her wide hips, meaty arms akimbo, scanning the living room of Aunt Ruth's home, deciding where to begin.

Clifton took the same stance, a few steps behind his grandmother as he considered the size of the door and the width of the furniture, wondering how it all had once come in and how he would now manage to take it out. He stood that way often: thinking with hands on his hips, elbows out. The old man chorus sitting in front of Canon City Market said he did this because he was slow. The chorus thought there was something wrong with him, how he would stand so quiet, not moving, like a brainless old woman waiting for direction. Mae told them they were wrong, Clifton was not slow, he was simply methodical; he took time to find the best method, the best solution for what puzzled him.

"If it takes him longer than most of you to work through things," Mae said, pointing down the line of old men sitting beside the fifty-cent rocket ship ride, "that's because he's discovering better ideas than any you could find from all your chatter and complaint. He's considerate, my grandson. He's quiet and thinks before he speaks, which is a virtue. One you all would be lucky to acquire. Clifton takes his time. That's a good thing, especially nowadays with

everyone rushing everywhere, phones squawking like magpies. And to be clear, there's no such thing as a brainless old woman. As for brainless old men, well...that's another matter entirely."

Clifton was single, twenty-seven, and lived in the apartment attached to his grandmother's garage. He worked in the elder care center at the end of the street, where his primary job was lifting the residents from their beds or from their chairs into wheelchairs and onto buses and vans for a doctor's visit or to head downtown for a show. He followed the frail but determined ones as they cat-stepped with their walkers through the long hallways. Clifton kept his hands free, always ready to grab hold in case they stumbled. He cleaned and arranged the meeting room for Center parties and for families visiting on holidays. Everyone said Clifton was a wonder at cleaning and had the patience of God—willing to wait upon the slowest residents, sharing their separate track of time, moving so much slower than everything else around. Between tasks he liked to sit bedside watching his favorite residents sleep or reading to them from the morning paper. Clifton had worked at the Center for eight years, and before that served at the high school as a locker room assistant for the football team.

Mae didn't believe in calling things what they were not. She didn't believe in saying people were "big boned," "ample," or "plus sized," when those words deflected from what was right before you. Mae said straight out that Clifton was fat, tall, strong, simple and sweet. All those things were true and had been true his entire life. At the hardware store, the gas station, and the bowling alley, the young men working behind the counters always called him Hoss, or sometimes Boss if he had asked a question. Mae told him that since those men didn't know his name, it was their way of being friendly to a stranger, especially to someone bigger than themselves.

"Men enjoy using nicknames," she told him when he asked about it as a boy. "I don't know why. Maybe it's simpler for them. Cutting people to size. It's what men do to one another."

Clifton noticed this didn't happen only in Canon City—men in stores talked to him that way everywhere. "Here you go, Hoss." "That's a good question, Boss." He didn't think they used those nicknames to be mean, but he still didn't like it. *Hoss* made him feel like a cow, and *Boss* was wrong because it was not true—he was never anyone's boss. At the Center no one called him Boss or Hoss. Instead they called him Cliff as they slowly explained new procedures and tasks to him two or three times to be sure he understood what had

to be done. Mae told him that he should insist the other workers at the Center use his full name to be more respectful of his age and position. "Cliff makes you sound like a boy, but you're not a child, Clifton. You're a nursing assistant, which is not a job for a child. It's the job of a full grown man." But *Cliff* made him sound like everyone else. He liked the name and never considered correcting them because that would be rude. Mae wouldn't want him to be rude.

Clifton decided Aunt Ruth's couch would be a problem. It was too deep to go through the door right side up and too wide to pass on its side. He stared at the couch while he turned it in his mind, moving it through the doorway one way, then the other. The cushions needed to be removed, and maybe the stubby wooden legs. If turned halfway forward at an angle, it might squeeze through the front door. He couldn't do that on his own, though. They would have to call the church again to see who could come over, and that meant not moving anything until Saturday when men were off work. The biggest things would go last so they could start with the small things today, boxing the knick-knacks, the kitchen goods, the bedding, the clothes in the dresser.

Without saying a word, Mae came to the same conclusion and decided everything in the living room would go to the Goodwill, but the kitchen goods would go to the family house run by the church—they were always in need of

dishes, plates, and cooking utensils. Ruth had once loved to bake and had many drawers holding her neatly organized tools for decorating, cutting, and shaping. Mae hoped someone else would make good use of those now, maybe even decorate a child's birthday cake. Clifton returned to the front porch and began assembling the smaller boxes for the day.

The five Tornelli sisters—Mary, Julie, Ruth, Anne, and June—lived in four imposing red brick houses on Rose Avenue, one house per block from 2nd to 5th. Mary, Julie and Ruth lived alone, Anne and June—the twins—lived together. Mary and Ruth lost their husbands early, the other sisters never married. Mary had the only child among them: Mae. The houses were built for the sisters at the same time, with identical designs, using the same red brick. Their baby brother, Rocky, a confirmed bachelor, lived by himself at the other side of town at the back of his tailor shop.

For many years, the Tornellis were an institution in Canon City as the richest Italian family in town, having come over with many others after the First World War. Instead of working in the mines or running orchards like the other Italians, their father went immediately to work building the largest soda pop bottling company in Colorado. When he died in 1963, the business was

transferred to the sisters, and by then the rainbow-colored Tornelli soda bottles were offered at every grocery in the state. The bright Tornelli soda signs were plastered on baseball diamonds, football stadiums, and little league t-shirts. Tornelli soda billboards stood at the entrance to nearly every small town on the Eastern slope, and their cartoon ads for new fruit flavors were taped into grocery store windows and decorated Sunday supplements in the local papers. Mae's third graders loved to cut out the Tornelli ads with their rows of soda bottles for use on their shoebox collages and textbook covers. At the start of school every fall, her students were delighted to discover that Mae was one of the soda pop ladies and would be their very own teacher for the entire year.

Canon City grew, turning miles of orchards into apartments and housing tracts for commuters to Colorado Springs. The open-pit coal mines were filled and huge county, state and federal prisons appeared, attracting defeated men from the shuttered steel mills and automotive plants in the Midwest, now re-trained as prison guards. The older Italian families broke apart and moved away, their stores and restaurants closed. The Italian-American friendship clubs disbanded, the Elks hall was sold. There were no more town dances. The Mexican families from the orchards and farms moved to Albuquerque and Phoenix. Not able to compete with the larger companies, the last Tornelli soda

bottle was filled in 1992 with a brief ceremony covered by the TV news, followed by the company gates closing for the last time. All the Tornelli trucks were sold to a brewery in Cheyenne and were painted a dull white and gray. The town shifted, becoming younger, rougher.

Every time Mae went to Walmart, which she only did with great reluctance and deliberation, some parent would hit a son or daughter while standing in line at the cashier. Last year a mother slapped her tiny daughter hard enough to knock the girl to the floor and no one said a thing, didn't even look. That shocked Mae more than anything—no one taking notice. Ever the teacher, Mae immediately checked on the child, bending to the girl's level, asking if she was all right. The mother stepped in.

"Hey lady, fuck off. She's just fine. Get away from my kid." No one paid any attention; they were staring elsewhere, busy with their own distractions.

Without looking at the mother, focusing on the girl, Mae calmly, firmly said, "You should never strike a child. There is no reason to hit a child like this." The girl—who could not have been more than seven or eight—pulled herself from the floor with no tears, no whimpering, and backed quickly away from Mae. She rubbed her head where her mother slapped her and moved behind her mother's legs.

"Get away from my kid," the mother said again. Mae knew there was nothing to be done. She had learned the hard way about this kind of parent. She turned, left her full basket sitting on the counter, and walked out through the sliding doors into the vast parking lot, which had once been a stream, an alfalfa field, and row after row of lustrous peach trees. She sat in her car, listening to herself breathe, trying to calm down. She switched the radio on, then off, then back on, but to a low murmur. She put the car in gear, pulled out of the lot, and for the first time in her life got lost driving home. Everything in town seemed to be in a different place, as if the houses and streets she knew so well, even the hills in the distance, were cardboard cutouts sliding past one another atop a bed of slowly shifting sand.

The Tornelli sisters would not move from their matching brick houses. They were determined to stay inside, sequestered, attending to themselves and each other until that final year when they began to fall ill and, one after the other, started to die. Mae called it the year of weightless houses, which didn't make sense to Clifton since the houses were so solid, square castles of red brick surrounded by broad green yards and walkways set with river stones from the Arkansas south of town. There was nothing weightless about the Tornelli homes.

As the sole Tornelli offspring, Mae became the executor of their wills and manager of the remaining estate. In her retirement, care of the sisters was her full-time job. Mary, the youngest sister, died first of pneumonia at the hospital in February. Mae brought Clifton with her to clear her mother's house, which took nearly two weeks as Mae lingered on every object, deciding what to keep, what to give away. She had never packed and emptied someone else's home before. Clifton was no help; he wanted to keep everything.

Julie was second, passing less than two months later. She was a drinker and had long ago removed herself from the family. She was dead a full week before Mae found her in the back room, slumped on the couch with an open bottle tipped flat on the coffee table spilling tea-colored liquor into a puddle that dripped deep into the carpet as a thin, sticky syrup. That cleanup was hard and exhausting.

Clifton and Mae kept coming across fits and starts from Julie's life: letters of apology nearly complete but unsent, books and lecture notes from her unfinished biology degree at Western State in Gunnison, uniforms from different jobs with the county and bottles secluded everywhere as if she were tucking her desires into dark corners, hiding the poison and promise far from herself. No one in the family had crossed her front doorstep in twenty years. Mae left

groceries on the porch. Clifton maintained the lawn. No one had gone inside until those final days after she was taken away.

To cope with the sadness, Mae and Clifton developed a job-like methodology for each day of cleaning, collecting, reviewing and discarding. They followed their procedures step by step. Mae went to the church to solicit help moving the larger furnishings, which were included in a community sale for the Sunday school, and hired two Mexican women to assist with the cleaning. Clifton arranged for a pallet of flat boxes—all sizes—to be delivered from the hardware store, along with wrapping materials, tape, markers and garbage bags. Each day they cleaned and sealed a different room. All the Tornelli houses contained a living room, a kitchen, a dining room, three bedrooms, and a back room used as a study or for arts and sewing. Each home included a basement; some were finished and included another set of rooms for guests, and some were undone like Julie's. Her basement took two days because there was so much to move up the stairs, and so many make-shift shelves with boxes, suitcases and bags that Julie had nested tightly together. On the morning of the second day in the basement, Clifton discovered a cardboard suitcase Julie had apparently used when traveling between Canon City and Gunnison. The

suitcase had her parent's Canyon City address written into one front panel and Julie's college address stamped on the other. It was held shut with a cloth belt.

Clifton brought the suitcase to the kitchen table, where Mae unstrapped it. As she pulled away the top she gasped and took a quick, embarrassed step backward. "There's something moving in there," she said. "Startled me." The suitcase was stuffed with an abundant collection of Beanie Babies, each one with the red heart tag pinched on the ear. Many of the dolls were sealed in archival plastic bags or in their original boxes. Mae and Clifton hadn't come across any mice or rats thus far, although they discussed the possibility. Mae admitted she was frightened of being bitten, which surprised Clifton; he didn't think Mae could be scared of anything. Maybe an animal was in there nibbling at the stuffing. Clifton nudged the suitcase, and again something moved, separate from the dolls. He tugged his work gloves tighter onto his hands, grasped the sides of the suitcase and shook it, ready for something to leap out and scamper away. The stuffed dolls shifted. Clifton and Mae heard something distinctly metal roll and clink together. Clifton began removing the dolls and quickly realized the bottom of the suitcase was filled with loose bullets of many different calibers and a few shotgun shells. After removing more dolls,

he came to a handgun draped in a piece of blue felt, secured by rubber bands around the grip.

Clifton handled a gun once before, but even then he was not sure how they worked. A group of boys took him plinking with their rifles at an abandoned farm when he was twelve. They had him hold the rifle, placed his finger against the trigger and encouraged him to shoot off one round. When Mae found out, she forbade him from ever seeing those boys again and made him promise to never pick up another gun. He kept his promise.

Mae removed the gun from the suitcase and scooped up the bullets, which she poured from her hands into a nearby fruit bowl. She stood the three loose shotgun shells beside it. Mae lifted the gun and realized it was loaded, a bullet waiting in every chamber. She felt as though she were handling a live rattlesnake and quickly set it away from them on the table.

They sat in silence, staring at the suitcase overflowing with Julie's hopeful Beanie Baby investment, the bowl of bullets, and the revolver. Mae reached over and with one finger cautiously turned the gun until the barrel pointed away from them. They would need to call someone now, but Mae wasn't sure whom.

"Well," Mae said, thinking what was next, "at least she didn't use the gun. That would have been awful, and cruel." For the first time, Clifton fully realized this was a weapon. With all the dolls huddled around it, he had been thinking about it as a heavy toy, but was quickly overcome with flashes of his Aunt Julie clutching the pistol in her quivering hand, raising it to her head, an explosion, blood. He started shaking, and tears welled in his eyes.

"Oh God. Oh God," Mae said, noticing what she had done. "I'm so sorry, Clifton. I wasn't thinking. I'm so sorry, that was a terrible thing to say. A horrible thing to..." She stretched her arm halfway across his huge shoulder and let him tip his head down onto hers as she nestled into him. "I'm so sorry. This is a terrible day."

"Yes," he said. "It's a terrible day."

Mae called Rocky. Julie was his sister after all, and perhaps it had been his gun. He apologized for not being there and said he was unaware they were packing Julie's house on their own. When Mae mentioned the gun, he was quiet for a moment. She thought he may have put the phone down.

"No, it's not mine," he said finally. "I don't know where she...maybe she bought it when the prisons came in. I would leave it alone for now. Shouldn't we call the police about this kind of thing?"

"I imagine so," Mae said.

"Did you find any others? More guns? You said there were more bullets."

"We haven't come across anything else, yet. But we still have a long way to go."

"I should be there to help. Bless you both for doing this. Clifton has been a big help?"

"Yes, he's been a trouper." Mae looked at her grandson who was arranging the bean bag dolls by type, color, and theme. He had removed them from their containers and was fluffing the nap with a brush from Mae's purse to bring them back to life. Clifton was comforted by order and structure. He kept adjusting the dolls slightly to ensure they were perfectly aligned in three rows at his side of the table. Mae arranged one of the city's disability vans to collect Rocky at his home. He volunteered to call the police while he waited, which Mae thanked him for. Rocky then made a few additional calls.

By the time an officer arrived, Rocky had been sitting on the front porch with four other men from the chorus for most of the afternoon. Mae knew the men would not come inside, even though it was chilly, the men were also too broken down to be of any help. That's why she hadn't called Rocky in the first place—she knew wherever he went, the chorus would follow. As she feared,

the old men became one more thing she had to manage. As they started arriving around noon, she took time to serve them lemonade (emptying the cooler she had brought just for herself and Clifton), gave them light blankets to cover their legs and ordered extra sandwiches to provide them a late lunch. The policeman was young. He paused to acknowledge the old men on the porch, then came into the house cautiously, aware of the particulars based on the coroner's notes and photos from earlier in the week. He explained that it wasn't really his place to take the gun, as they didn't have a program for that kind of thing at the station. Perhaps Mae and her grandson would consider selling it? The policeman told them there was a good chance the gun was a collector's item.

"We are not going to sell it," Mae said, annoyed he would recommend such a thing. "If possible, I would like to see it melted down. I don't want it to hurt anyone. Can you do that? And take the bullets too?" He sighed, started to explain the limitations again and glanced over at Clifton for help. Clifton met the policeman's eyes but quickly turned away to focus on the countertop he was cleaning.

The young policeman adjusted the volume on the radio at his hip, attempting to appear officially distracted. "As I said, this isn't actually..."

Mae, knowing a man's age to be more permissive than his position, slowly pushed the gun across the table at the officer, followed by the bowl of bullets. "It would be so helpful if you were able to take these away and dispose of them properly. I can find you a bag for the bullets. Clifton? Could you please get us one of the plastic bags from the red box?"

"Ma'am...I'm sorry, we can't...it's just..."

She stared directly up at the officer, not letting him look away, stepping in until she was inches from him with her hand lightly pressed to his chest, following the technique she developed for correcting older, taller students during her last years at school. "It's the right thing to do. It would be such a generous offer. I know you have had a busy day, and we do greatly appreciate you coming here to help us before you head home."

Clifton handed Mae a large Ziploc bag. She moved back to the table and awkwardly tugged open the seal. "Oh my darned hands," she said, then asked the policeman to help her hold the bag as she struggled to tip the bowl in. He relented and retrieved the bowl from her, filling the bag himself. He unloaded the gun and dropped its bullets in with the others. As he left, he offered his condolences again to Mae, Clifton, and Rocky, said goodbye to the men on the

porch, then stood beside his car for a while, writing in his notebook and talking on his radio. The policeman placed the gun, the felt and the bullets into a locked box in the trunk and drove away.

The chorus out front was fascinated by the entire process. They chatted about the policeman, speculated on gun prices and began listing their recent ailments in a competitive fashion while also talking about the confused young women who worked at the Walmart pharmacy. By the end of the day, Canon City crime and the outrageous price of medication were the central topics of chorus discussion as their families arrived to collect them. Mae and Clifton worked in the kitchen until late. They filled eleven large garbage bags with discards and stacked the boxes of Julie's usable belongings around the kitchen table. Clifton set aside the cardboard suitcase, restocked with the Beanie Babies for himself. They marked everything else for Goodwill.

When summer came to a close—the hottest and driest on record—Anne and June succumbed to the diabetes that had afflicted them since childhood. The twins had been getting worse with longer stays at the hospital for the last few years. Mae always imagined Anne and June's home would be the first one she had to pack away. Against everyone's recommendations, Anne and June

adopted an energetic brown and white basenji called Tommie. Clifton sometimes stayed at their home for weeks at a time to take care of the dog and attend to whichever sister was not in the hospital. He slept in the guest room with a hand-carved, gruesomely detailed crucifix gazing over one end of the bed, Tommie fitfully dreaming in his catcher's mitt basket at the other.

June occasionally played the church organ and gave piano lessons after Sunday school. Anne made paper flowers and delicate butterfly mobiles, which were in high demand at community fundraisers. Every year they decorated their house for Christmas (giving directions from the porch) using a life-sized, illuminated manger scene at the center of the yard, glowing five-foot candy canes along the drive and lights outlining the house and front yard trees. The display attracted visitors from all over town. Canon City would have to take notice of the twins' passing.

Soon after Anne and June went into the hospital for the last time, the cards and gifts began to collect at their home and Mae first mentioned the year of weightless houses. Everyone nodded when she said this phrase, assuming there was some common-knowledge story behind it, or that maybe it was a Tornelli family aphorism transposed oddly from Italian into English. No one asked her

to explain what she meant. Clifton puzzled over it, thinking weightless houses had to do with gravity, about keeping hold of things, or maybe letting go.

Clifton knew it was the spin of the earth that endowed everything with weight. This was due to Dr. Rosenbloom, who taught Clifton physics in ninth grade. Dr. Rosenbloom demonstrated his lessons with models and games. To show how gravity functioned, Dr. Rosenbloom took the class to the football field, where he asked Clifton to stand before the other students and swing a bucket filled with water in a giant arc. Clifton held tight to a wooden handle connected to the bucket with a white rope. The handle insistently tugged at his body as he swung the bucket faster and faster. Every other swing he glanced up to see the water suspended above him, impossibly tranquil and concave in the upside down bucket. In all his other classes, teachers made Clifton sit in the back at the special table, but Dr. Rosenbloom never did. He liked Clifton, and from the first day asked him to sit up front with the best students. Dr. Rosenbloom called on him for nearly every demonstration because (Clifton reasoned) he was big and strong and could hold on to important things. Maybe that's what Mae meant, that this year the Tornelli houses were pulling away from her, spinning into space, becoming weightless as each sister passed on.

The church was half full for Anne's funeral in August. There were only two pews of mourners a month later for June's service. The women from the church helped Mae with every aspect of clearing the house. They cleaned, sorted, organized, gave rides, took trips to the dump, kept everyone fed, and toward the end of it, all agreed with Mae that they should run an estate sale and donate the money to Mae's old elementary school. The church husbands helped Clifton with the furniture, which they moved onto the porch the night before so they could shift the large items more easily into the yard the morning of the event. The church women warned Mae and Clifton about pushy Craigslisters, who would appear days before to wheedle deals from anyone answering the bell. One of the church women wrote large signs that she taped on the front and back door (and on the post by the mailbox), saying there would be no early dealing, all sales were for that coming Saturday, starting promptly at nine, closing at six.

The Craigslisters appeared in the morning dark. The first one arrived in a large green pickup around four-thirty. Three more arrived at five: two couples in vans and a young man and his mother in a small truck pulling a trailer. The green truck woke Tommie with its loud country music on the radio and sputtering engine. The dog startled at every following arrival. Tommie scampered

across the empty living room and jumped each time he ran past the windows framing the front door.

By five-thirty, Clifton stopped trying to sleep. He deflated his camp mattress, stuffed his sleeping bag into its sack and moved to the living room, where he assembled a folding chair and table by the bay window. For the next hour, Clifton and Tommie watched the Craigslisters shift just beyond the gate as anxious silhouettes, their faces lit occasionally by cell phones. The man from the green truck kept peering over the fence with a pair of binoculars and a strong flashlight aimed at the house, trying to see what was collected on the porch. Clifton didn't like that man at all. The flashlight sweeping the porch scared Clifton, reminding him of prison camps in black-and-white war movies, although he wouldn't say that to anyone.

At six-thirty, Mae arrived with a huge box of doughnuts. As they opened the box and set out paper plates and napkins for the helpers, Clifton told Mae they shouldn't sell anything to the rude man with the flashlight. She saw how important this was to Clifton so, without asking anything, she quickly agreed. When the church husbands arrived to move the furniture onto the lawn, Mae pointed out the man's truck. The sun began to rise, and the men kept an eye on the truck as more people gathered. When Mae dropped the rope line across

the drive to let everyone in for the sale, the man emerged from his truck. In the morning light, Clifton was now able to see him in detail—he was much older than Clifton expected. The man was dressed in torn overalls, with a weedy white beard and patches of black hair that stuck straight out, making him look like a startled cartoon character. The binoculars swung from his neck. A few of the larger, younger church husbands walked over to tell the man he wasn't welcome and should leave. Shouting ensued. The older man's voice became sharp and angry as a few more men joined ranks in front of him, not letting the man approach the gate. From the porch, Clifton heard the man shout about his rights as an American, that he could go wherever he damn well pleased, and they needed to get the hell out of his way. The church husbands didn't move.

"Goddamnit!" the man shouted. Everyone stopped what they were doing to look over. "I've been here all goddamned morning. I got here first for fuck's sake. I drove all night to find this shithole! This is my right, goddamnit. It's my right as an American! I was here first! You can't stop me."

The men still didn't move. One of them pointed at the man's truck, suggesting quietly that he go home. In unison, the husbands stepped toward the

man, forcing him to take a step back. He stopped shouting. Everyone stood quietly for a moment, waiting to see what would happen.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" the man shouted as he ran his hand through his hair, stomping his feet with each exclamation. The church husbands still didn't move. The man ran his hand into his hair again, this time rubbing hard at the back of his head. He took a good look around and realized everyone was staring at him like a roadside accident. His puffery and indignation collapsed. The man's shoulders dropped, and he spat a wad of something dark and gelatinous into the dirt. He returned to his truck, cussing, kicking gravel. Everyone started clapping. The man jutted his hand out his window and gave them the finger as he drove off. A few people laughed, shouted good riddance, and the sale began.

All five Tornelli sisters had the same tastes, so their homes bulged with golden ornamentation, room-length wallpaper murals of Venice and Florence, gilded dinner plates, thick Roman-style glass goblets tinted red and blue, crucifixes of all description and framed images of every recent Pope. There were also many late 1970s furnishings like plastic scoop chairs, Scandinavian-style tables and large collages of peacocks with rhinestones and plastic jewels for tail feathers. The casual artifacts of the sisters' lives were back in fashion and were

quickly snapped up. An hour into the sale, the chorus established itself on the front porch—a full contingent of six old men this time—where they commented on who was buying what and how surprising it was that this junk was valuable again. They heard about the commotion with the man in the green truck and were convinced he would return with a high-powered rifle. Rocky stopped Mae a few times to recommend they call the police and have them send the young officer to consult. Mae told Rocky to stop being ridiculous.

"You're fabricating fear just to amuse yourselves, giving you something new to worry over," she said. "He's not going to shoot us. That sad little man and his finger are long gone. We don't need the police. They have far better, far more important things to do. Would you please, please, talk about something else? Pick another topic you know nothing about. Any topic will do. Try sports. Politics. Or women."

Regardless, the chorus fixated all morning on the possibility of the angry man returning with a gun. They talked about how easy it would be for him to kill everyone there, about how maybe one of them should have a gun just in case, how it was a mistake to give up the revolver from Julie's house and how comforting it would be to have it now. Mae noticed Clifton lingering by the porch, listening as the men shared elaborate theories of what could happen

with the man and his gun. She told Clifton he was needed in the yard, where the church husbands were asking for help lifting furniture. She gently shooed him off the porch with a backhanded wave, "Go on Clifton, they need you over there. Go on."

Anne and June collected crystal and porcelain clown figurines, which were arrayed in cases in the living room and along window sills throughout the house. Mae didn't want to break apart the collection. She packed most of it for the church into a few padded boxes, but left the larger crystal clowns in the windows to bend and divide the day's sunlight across the empty floors.

By late afternoon the long window facing west cast a large, harp-like arc of lines across the living room. Every time she went outside to monitor the sale, Mae stepped around the strands of sunlight since crossing the lines felt like courting bad luck. Clifton spent most of the day in the yard and along the drive, loading large items into different cars and trucks. Toward the end of the sale, he cut his palm on a ragged piece of metal and kept wiping blood on his jeans. Mae had him sit down so she could clean him up. She told him the blood was disturbing everyone and spreading it on his pants did not make things better. She washed his wound and pressed down a large medical pad, having

him hold it in place while she swaddled his hand with layers of gauze. When she finished, he appeared to be wearing a glove.

"If that man comes back, it will be my fault. I wanted him to go away. He was angry because of me," Clifton told Mae as she tied the tail ends of the gauze together.

"No, Clifton. No, Sweetie. That will not happen. That man was already angry about a great many things. Don't listen to the chorus, they don't know what they're talking about. And no matter what, something like that would never be your fault."

"He could hurt everyone. Because of me."

Mae cupped Clifton's bandaged hand in hers. "I promise you, nothing of the sort will happen. We're perfectly safe. You did the right thing by sending him away. Forget the old men. They just need something to worry over to feel important again. It means nothing."

He nodded and knew she was right, but watched for the green truck nevertheless. That night, in his own bed, Clifton dreamed of the wild man's truck punching through the front gate and skidding to a stop in the yard. A gun barrel poked out the window, pointed toward the house. There was the loud thump, thump of gunfire, flashes of red light, everyone was running and

screaming. Clifton woke sweaty and disoriented, struggling with his bedsheets that had twisted tightly around his legs. He gripped the edge of his mattress and gazed around the room to place himself, then saw Tommie sitting beside the bed, studying him. Tommie's tail thumped loud against the dresser as a steady wooden heartbeat. Clifton tugged the sheets into order, then pulled them slightly aside and tapped the mattress. The dog hopped in. Clifton stroked Tommie behind his ears and along his neck until they both fell asleep.

Throughout that year, they had been checking regularly on Ruth. She seemed capable and stubborn, as always, but slower. Mae offered to arrange a full-time aide from the Center, but Ruth was adamant about remaining on her own. She lost most of her sight a few years back and confined herself to home, where she knew the location and distance of everything. Of all the Tornelli houses, Clifton liked Ruth's home the most because everything was so carefully arranged. Unlike her sisters, Ruth didn't cover every countertop and shelf with keepsakes and clustered collections. Ruth kept the flat spaces clear and only placed around herself the few things she used every day. Her house felt open and clean.

The only time Ruth left home all year was for services at Easter and for her sisters' funerals. Each brief journey drained her for days following. A week

before Christmas, Clifton brought Ruth her mail from the post office box downtown, along with a few bags of groceries. He rang the bell three times, peered in the windows, then tried the screen door, which was locked. He knocked, rang the bell again and decided she must be sleeping. Clifton opened the screen using Ruth's key from the ring containing keys for all the Tornelli houses. He unlocked the main door, but then couldn't get through. Something was jammed on the other side. He pushed hard, and the door opened slightly. A thick breath of hot air blew at him. Ruth always had her heat turned to a tropical setting—everyone complained when they came inside, immediately peeling off coats, sweaters and hats. He heard Ruth's TV in the living room turned up loud, playing a game show with applause, an announcer, then more applause.

"Aunt Ruth. It's me, it's Clifton. I'm coming in. I have your mail."

He pushed again, putting his shoulder and full weight against the door. The hinge cracked at the frame, something snapped then the door swung in. With his first step inside, he felt glass crunch underfoot. One of Ruth's large lamps with the stained glass shade had fallen and wedged itself behind the door. There was broken glass everywhere. The lamp stand was now bent in two by the door.

"Aunt Ruth?"

He heard a wheel clicking through stoppers on the TV and recognized it as the *Wheel of Fortune*. Everyone at the Center watched that show, and he sat with them sometimes in the big TV room, helping guess the letters.

"Aunt Ruth, it's me. Your lamp fell down."

The lights were off, as usual, and the window shades were drawn. The house was lit by the TV. Clifton stumbled into a book on the floor, then another dumped from the bottom two shelves of the bookcase. He turned on the overhead light then saw the blood on the white carpet, elongated puddles spread past him into the kitchen. The wheel clicked around again, more applause. Ruth's recliner had fallen hard to its side, knocking over the small table where she kept her remotes and snacks. A glass of orange juice had spilled into the carpet. Fruit slices were scattered beside a white china dish crossed by a spike of dried blood.

Clifton followed the blood trail into the kitchen, where he found Aunt Ruth, face-down on the kitchen floor beside her old black dial phone that she had yanked from the counter, the cord clutched through her fingers. Both her hands were soaked with blood. Ruth was starkly pale on the floor. A long line of blood smeared away from her legs on the linoleum. Clifton had seen a lot of

death at the Center. Most of it clean and clinical. None of the Center's residents left alive—during his time there, every resident he knew had died. Mae said the Center, and places like it, had become waiting rooms for the beyond, dismal dental purgatories forestalling the inevitable with an officious staff and stacks of boring magazines.

"Surrounded by paid strangers, moving you from room to room to make you feel productive and occupied, but they're only counting down, waiting for you to clear a room. You become a number with nothing of your own. No family, no place that's truly yours. Just numbers moving around. It's so empty. So impersonal." Mae came to this conclusion after spending part of an afternoon at the Center's tiny library, waiting on Clifton while watching the residents shuffle by. "At least the ones you watch over are not numbers. They have names and have stories they tell you. I'm sure they're grateful for you."

He stood at the edge of the kitchen floor, looking at Ruth's body, then at the blood leading behind him to her toppled chair. Clifton worked out that Ruth had fallen in the living room and crawled on her hands and knees to the kitchen to reach the phone. That's how he explained it to Mae when she arrived.

"Oh, Clifton, I'm sorry you had to witness this. This is overwhelming. It's too much." He nodded, sweat dripping from his forehead because his jacket was zipped tight and he was still wearing his wool cap. He fiddled with the Tornelli house keys in his hand.

"This is...this is," Mae had no idea what to say. "It's a woman's...this is...oh dear." Mae led Clifton to the front porch, took the keys, sat him on the bench and went back to open the windows and make her calls. It was a warm day for December, but still cold enough with a light breeze to sweep out the scent of blood and musty heater. Mae had the entire procedure set for these houses now and knew exactly what would happen. In Ruth's housecoat pocket, Mae found the cell phone she had given her aunt, fully charged but unused. The emergency call button on Ruth's necklace was not activated; her only impulse had been to use the old kitchen phone. Mae realized Ruth must have been in so much pain, so disoriented by the bleeding, she needed something familiar to call for help.

A few hours later, Mae explained to Clifton that Ruth had suffered a massive hemorrhage down below and lost too much blood too quickly. There was nothing anyone could have done. She also knew the way Ruth died would make men uneasy and was not surprised when two women paramedics arrived

first, followed by women from church who helped for the rest of the day. The only man to enter the house during the cleaning and packing was her sweet and simple grandson, Clifton. He never wavered.

Rocky arrived mid-week by taxi, while Clifton was assembling the last set of packing boxes on the porch. Rocky insisted on ascending the ramp to the porch under his own power, struggling with both his canes and watching for ice. Clifton followed close behind then helped Rocky onto a cushioned seat by the front door. The old man was prepared for the cold with thick rubber boots, gloves, a huge winter coat, and a scarf stuffed inside his hood. "I'm here to help," he kept saying, as every woman who entered or left the house stopped to greet him, worried he would catch his death. "I'll be just fine. The sun's out. I'll be fine. Thank you for coming today. It means so much to us, to our family."

With the last box taped shut and everyone gone, Clifton stepped onto the porch, enjoying the cool air with a few deep breaths. A car drove by. Clifton held onto the railing, leaning over slightly to stare at the empty flowerbed.

"How's it going, Boss? All done in there?"

Clifton turned to face Rocky, rubbing his hands together for warmth. "Yes. We're finished. We called the Goodwill. They'll come tomorrow to take the boxes and furniture."

"That's good. Nice work." Rocky adjusted his coat and fiddled with his glove. Clifton stepped over to help, but Rocky gently pushed his hands away. "I've got it. I've got...it's just this damned..." He pried a plastic tag from under the edge of the glove and settled himself differently into his seat. "Nasty business inside, wasn't it, Boss? A huge wet mess?"

"My name's Clifton."

"What?"

"My name, it's Clifton."

"Well, yes, I know that. We all know that."

"I don't like Boss. My name's Clifton. You called me Boss."

"I did?"

"Yes, I like my name. It's Clifton."

Rocky didn't see the difference, but had never had this kind of conversation with his nephew and wanted to be fair. "That's fine, son. Clifton. Didn't mean anything by it. You've been doing a lot of good work in there, so...anyway, I apologize. Didn't mean anything. I don't know what we'd do without you. You've been a great help to your grandmother."

"We're done now. I need to go home to feed Tommie."

"You love that dog, don't you?"

Clifton nodded, thinking how Tommie would dart from one side of the backyard to the other when he heard their car in the drive, how the dog's tiny heart raced like a bird's, and his whole body quivered with pleasure when gathered into Clifton's arms.

Mae closed the front door, locked it, then secured the screen. "I'm done," she said, knocking the wood frame twice in confirmation. "Finished. Last one." She rubbed lightly at Rocky's back, not sure where he actually was under the thickness of his coat. "I called the city van for you. I can't believe you've been here all day. All by your lonesome. I'm certain you've caught your death."

"I will be just fine."

"The van should be here soon. Then we can all go."

Two children appeared on the road, cutting big circles with their bikes, another following on a scooter. They shouted numbers and names at each other in some kind of game.

"What's a weightless house?" Clifton asked, watching the children circle one another.

"A what?" Rocky asked.

"A weightless house," Mae explained to Uncle Rocky. "It's something I said, that this is our year of weightless houses."

"Does it mean letting go of the rope?" Clifton asked.

Mae and Rocky looked at each other. "What?" Mae asked. "What rope?"

Clifton explained about Mr. Rosenbloom's demonstration, the bucket, the white rope, gravity.

"Oh no, Dear, that's not gravity. That's centripetal force. It's why things orbit. Everyone gets them confused. Mr. Rosenbloom was showing you about satellites, how they circle the earth. You've seen that, right?"

"Oh, I think so," Clifton said, sad he had misunderstood. "What's gravity then?"

"It's the force between everything. It's what holds us in place, pulls us together. It's the rope. Scientists know what it does, but they don't actually know what it is. Gravity isn't the earth moving. It's a puzzle when you get to the particulars. It's a bunch of ideas."

"So, if the earth stops spinning?" Rocky asked.

"We stay in place. We'd still be here," Mae said. "Mass pulling mass. The earth is larger than we are, it has the bigger pull. That's our weight—the pull downward. It's why we stay put."

Clifton gazed at the empty flower bed again. "So, when Goodwill comes tomorrow to take the boxes? And carries away the furniture?" He was working

it out in his head as an experiment, like sliding letter blocks around to spell something long and important. He saw all the sisters' belongings leaving through their doors in the hands of the church women; their furniture jumbled into the trailers of the Craigslisters; the Beanie Babies heading down the stairs with him across the yard to the car, his hand gripping the suitcase handle the entire way home; the handgun traveling its own direction, into an oven, becoming liquid flowing down into a glistening cube. He saw every room in the red brick houses emptying one after the other, the fragments of family history floating through other living rooms, onto bedroom shelves and into display cabinets. Clifton even saw the sisters contentedly floating from their houses, across their lawns to the mortuary to the church to their graves tucked under headstones by the river, leaving windows behind, bright and bare, curtains gone, nothing crossing their floors but sunlight and shadow. "The Goodwill takes the center—moves the mass—then it all goes away."

"And becomes weightless. It's what we've been doing this year, Clifton. Sending the weight away."

"Is this what you two talk about?" Rocky looked up at them, confused and slightly annoyed. "Science?"

Mae squeezed what felt like Rocky's shoulder, "Yes, sometimes. We talk about things we don't understand, like the City Market chorus." The van arrived. Mae waved at the driver. "Okay, let's go." The children stopped playing for a moment to watch Mae and Clifton settle Rocky in a wheelchair, roll him onto the lift, strap him tight, then step back as the platform rose and pulled the old man into the van. They began circling again as Clifton and Mae climbed into her car, but when she looked for the children before backing up, they were gone, their bikes and scooter abandoned in the yard across the way. There were twisted lines of traffic stalled around Walmart, forcing them to stop at every crossroad. The cars were impatient, steaming in the cold, inching forward then pausing in stutter-step, brake lights flaring with each cessation.

"I'm done, Clifton. We're done."

"Done with what?"

"Houses, packing houses. Tending the Tornellis. All of it."

"Why?"

"It's just too much, Clifton. Don't you think? It's been too much this year, for me, for us. I need to be around children again. We need to be somewhere different. Would you like that? Somewhere fresh?"

"Where?" The idea of moving made Clifton nervous. He wanted to know where things were going to go, how they would be arranged and put away. But he could also see this was important to his grandmother. She looked so much lighter and younger as she talked about it.

"I don't know...not here." The light turned green and Mae pulled onto Main, heading to their run-down, quieter side of town. They began picking up speed with no lights to stop them. "Somewhere with young people. Portland. I hear a lot of stories about Portland on the radio. What do you think about Portland? We don't know anyone there. It would be brand new for you and me. There are mountains and forests and a big river. The ocean is close."

Clifton wasn't sure where Portland was. It sounded far away. He had never seen an ocean. Mae was captured by the idea. She was smiling. "Can we take Tommie?" he asked.

"Of course, he'll love it. Dogs love woods and oceans."

"Portland," Clifton said, considering the word, thinking it through to give it a shape, a size, a color, a sound. "Portland," he said quietly, tasting the place as he said the word, breaking it into two simpler pieces, making it smaller, manageable: port and land.

The rest of the way home he boxed their house in his head, folding and wrapping their things, taping, marking, sending their life box by box to this land of ports and oceans, rivers and forests. He thought of their belongings flying ahead of them over the Rockies, following rivers and roads northwest like a V of spring birds gliding away from Canon City. Mae was so happy with her idea of Portland she tapped her fingers in rhythm on the steering wheel, driving faster and faster. She rolled down her window to let the cold December air gust between them, making them both shiver. Clifton saw Julie's cardboard suitcase filled with its collection of cheerful dolls, swinging in a long slow arc over farms, cities and towns, a white rope tied around the case strung down through the sky directly into the car, urging Clifton up and away. He gripped his hands, felt his toes and arms rise, his feet lift from the floorboards. He closed his eyes, holding tight as the rope tugged him off the seat, above the clouds. A row of tall evergreen trees and a flat silver ocean rushed toward him from the horizon. The wind was cold, roaring in his ears as an invitation. "It's time to go," he said. "It's time."

David Gillette was born in rural Colorado into a family of schoolteachers, ranchers and hard rock miners. He has lived most of his life in small towns in the USA and abroad, and those towns often serve as the basis for his fiction. In the last year his stories have appeared in *cahoodaloodaling*, *The Summerset Review*, and the *High Desert Journal*. He teaches media theory and writing at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, where he also directs the Liberal Arts and Engineering Studies program. He lives in Arroyo Grande, California, (population 17,800), with a backyard lined by lemon and orange trees.