

Fair-Skinned Brunette with the Porcelain Shine

By John Bare

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*There is a fair-skinned brunette, who grows her own okra
She wears a big hat, to keep her cheeks soft*

*Her shoulders get red, in the Halifax sun
She appears in my dreams, when angels carry me off*

*She hangs jeans on her hips
And sheets on the line
The fair-skinned brunette
With the porcelain shine*

Monday night in October. Sitting at the bar at Pig Farm Tavern in Chapel Hill. 11:57 p.m.

Fats just walked into the bar.

I can smell the lavender in her hair. Most of all, I feel the crackle, as if her skin is spitting electric charges into the air. She walks into a room, and everything goes static. Even with my back to the place, I know she's here.

I had been in deep conversation with the bartender, Siler, who is also the tavern owner and a very old friend. We were debating biscuits and gravy. These nouvelle cuisine chefs just don't get the pepper seasoning right.

Now Siler is looking past me. Red flush runs up his neck, through his cheeks and into his temples. He picks up my glass of Bulleit Rye and finishes it.

I hear Fats racking up the pool table, rolling the nine-ball set back and forth over the felt.

“Siler,” she calls out, as casual as if she’d never left. “Pour me one of those.”

The *crack* of the break.

“In fact,” she goes on, “pour one for yourself. And a fresh one for Lassie. On me.”

There’s not another soul in the place.

Her cue pops again, and balls scramble around the table.

I am Lassie. My birth certificate, signed by a New Orleans doctor a half-century ago, reads Lassiter James Battle. Students at my high school in Saluda, on the edge of the Nantahala National Forest, knew me as James Battle. Later, that became my byline at the *Post*.

Fats, Siler and a handful of old friends from Chapel Hill dubbed me Lassie James. These were the folks who rode out the blistering heat of freshmen orientation week, which unfolded without air conditioning or inhibition.

Feels like that was a hundred years ago.

I guess it was closer to 30. Or 32? Useless to work out the math. We’ve all lost the energy for precision at this point. All that matters now is that we’re all rolling up on age 50, closer to death than to freshman year.

Last time I saw Fats she was naked as a baby. We had just graduated from the University of North Carolina. We were scheduled to leave Chapel Hill that day to elope, ready to drive to Vegas to start the rest of our lives as husband and wife.

In hindsight, I can tell you we were both hungover that morning. At the time, I didn’t know what a hangover was. Every morning felt that way, the only way.

We fell asleep after making love on the floor of apartment number Z-4 in the Old Well complex. Fell asleep right there on the shag carpet, tangled up in legs, wetness and a cotton quilt.

When the sunrise brought us into consciousness, Fats stood up, reached her hands toward the ceiling to stretch out the cramped muscles.

“My wedding day gift to you: I’m going to get biscuits,” she said.

Not a stitch of clothing on her. Long dark hair, light fair skin. Her nipples soft. Her ribs poking out. Eyes the color of brass cymbals. Freckles on her shoulders. Bright red lips wet like cranberry sauce against her pale skin. Her lips looked painted on.

As she stretched out her five-foot-two frame, uncoiling like a spring, I laughed a little to myself – noting yet again the grooming between her legs. Her attempts with the razor to trim the hair into a little strip were never spot on. The resulting artistic creation was a kind of crooked polygon.

On a similar morning a couple of years before, I couldn't get over how the styling took the shape of the state of Minnesota. Which led to my calling her Fats. Which she took as me mocking her skills at the pool table.

I let her think that. The name stuck, at least among our intimate clutch of four or five college friends, Siler included.

So she became Fats.

And on that long-ago morning, I watched her beautiful naked ass walk around the corner to grab her jeans. Her skin seemed lit from underneath, some sheath of white light draped over her muscle and bone and her skin fitted over the illumination. I heard the door close and her car start. She was headed to Sunrise Biscuit Kitchen, a source of something both nutritional and medicinal. A bacon-egg-and-cheese biscuit and cinnamon roll were the only things that could sop up the booze still percolating through us.

I never saw her again. At least not in person. When Time magazine put Fats on the cover, claiming her medical research promised to save America, I saw her then. Plenty of times I saw her on TV. Then I saw her on red carpets with celebrity business partners.

She never came back to Z-4 that morning.

Three days later I received a package in the mail.

Inside was a bacon-egg-and-cheese biscuit and a cinnamon roll. Stale, banged up and beyond the sell-by date. But edible. So I sat alone in Z-4 and ate the days-old meal and stared at her note.

"I can get you the biscuit. I can't marry you. I miss you, but I need to make a new adventure. On my own, for now. Let's take the summer. Then meet up in the fall and watch the leaves change. I love you, Fats."

That was the note. I threw it into the lake. We never met up. We never again watched the leaves change.

Fats was always the smart one.

I was crazy enough that I really would have eloped. She figured out we had been living in a bubble of undergraduate exuberance, delusion and indulgence. All of which was magical but none of which indicated we should or could build a life together.

So she ran away from me. And she made a life better than I could have given her.

I had probably done better, also – that is, better than I would have with her. I bopped around the globe on reporting assignments, without every worrying about a trailing spouse, and ended up with a Pulitzer citation on my wall. When the journalism business shrank, I moved on to free-lance writing and relocated back here to Chapel Hill to take a Ph.D. in sociology.

So no hard feelings, right?

The taste of stale biscuit rose in my throat.

Now she's in Pig Farm with me, 10 feet behind me. Working the pool stick around the table and buying me rye whiskey.

Siler poured his. Poured mine. He came around from behind the bar and walked over to the pool table and set her glass down on a high-top table cluttered with chalk and postcards promoting live music shows.

I didn't turn around. I could hear them speaking. Pausing to hug. Heard their glasses clink. Heard Fats be profane and Siler laugh loud enough to cover the music.

My iPhone was sitting on the bar. I punched up the TouchTunes app that let me control the juke box remotely.

Alejandro Escovedo's voice boomed through the speakers. How he likes her better when she walks away.

"Lassie," I heard her call out.

She waited. I drank my rye. I didn't turn around. I didn't speak.

Fats yelled: "Wanna hang out 'til sun up and watch the leaves change?"

It was turning into a long night.

*There is a fair-skinned brunette who curses in French
She winked at me once, from an old white Corvette*

*I showed her the stars, and she cried at Orion
We poured Lagavulin and sang Tammy Wynette*

*She hangs jeans on her hips
and sheets on the line
The fair-skinned brunette
with the porcelain shine*

Escovedo's song stopped. Pig Farm was quiet.

Siler was back around the bar. He took up his usual spot, leaning on his right elbow. Drink in his left hand. Dumb look on his face. He believed patrons drank more from a bartender who was non-judgmental. Siler was the smartest dumb-looking guy I had ever seen.

Fats took up the stool beside me.

Clinked her glass into mine. She drank. I drank. Siler drank.

We all sat there and let the rye do the talking.

After 30 years, the extended silence seemed appropriate. The silence was more comfortable than conversation. One long moment, making the transition from then to now, from young to old, from old to new, from bulletproof to fragile, from looking out dreamily toward life's horizon to walking up to the edge of life's cliff.

"Thanks for the biscuit," I said, finally turning toward her and catching my breath at the way she had aged into a captivating beauty. Fats was shimmering. Still.

"Play me one of yours," she said, nodding toward the iPhone on the bar.

In the old days, I had been writing songs with several local bands. She always liked the secret knowledge of a lyric she had inspired.

I had kept at it over the years. For a long time, it was like I was playing a joke on myself. Kept writing songs on the side, but no one in the music business showed interest.

Then in the last 10 years or so, I started to get nibbles from the young bands and songwriters working East Nashville. The songs bounced around, and a couple of legends found them. I was beyond thrilled. I had written or co-written a dozen songs that

made the final cut of some albums. But the agate print on songwriting credits is pretty abstruse stuff. Surprised Fats knew.

Siler was aware I was writing some songs, but I don't think he could tell you much about which tunes were mine and which weren't. Mostly, he liked the road trips to Nashville.

My song writing credits were under the name they both knew, Lassie James.

I worked the app and dialed up a Lyle Lovett tune I had co-written, "Brownsville Tonight."

*Buenos dias, mi amigo, have you seen my friend?
Have you seen the pretty girl who taught me how to sin?*

*Mexican topaz, she shimmers at night.
Her skin is electric and gives off white light.*

*How many stars in Boca del Rio? How many stars in old New Orleans?
How many stars in Nuevo Laredo? How many stars in Sweetwater Springs?*

*How many stars can fit in the sky?
How many stars in Brownsville tonight?
How many stars in Brownsville tonight?*

"Congratulations," Siler said, looking at Fats. "The ceremony tomorrow?"

"It's Thursday," she said. "Big la-di-da at McCorkle Place. Academic gowns, bunting and the works. Mostly an excuse to get back here. I've been away a long time."

Every October 12th, the University celebrates the anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of Old East Dorm, the oldest building at the oldest state university in the country. On the day of the annual celebrations, the university also presents awards to distinguished graduates.

This year, Fats would be among the alums up on stage being recognized.

Chancellor Sanders Mallette, who had been one of the great journalism professors before taking the administrative role, would be presenting the honor to Fats. The event would double as Mallette's inauguration. He'd been named chancellor a couple of months back, put in place to clean up the world-class academic fraud scandal driven by an athletic department that had become a professional subsidiary of the university.

I had known Mallette since my sophomore year, when I was in his intro newswriting class. Then he had served as my doctoral adviser for the past three years, and he was still chairing my dissertation committee. I was scheduled to defend the dissertation next

week. Assuming a successful defense on Monday, I would be in position to secure a Ph.D.

In between the old undergraduate days and returning to campus for grad school, Mallette became a friend and mentor, and something more. When I was on top – when I received the Pulitzer, when my name was above the fold in papers across Europe – I would get a call from Mallette. Always with gentle reminders to focus on service to others, ways I could give back.

Whenever things turned sour – when my fiancé ditched me in London, when the shrinking industry sent me packing – he would always call with a boost. A new lead, a new opportunity. Somehow he knew. The man was blessed with timing.

When the *Post* offered another round of buyouts, another step toward self-immolation, Mallette called again, even before the news hit the wire. He knew. He always knew.

“We’ve got a spot for you here in Chapel Hill,” he said. “Come do the Ph.D. program, and then join us on faculty.”

I could teach and do free-lance writing gigs, he said.

“And you’ll have more time to write those hit songs,” he said. “You’ll be a man of letters, like Kristofferson.

Still waiting on the hit song. Otherwise, his forecast was true. With the buyout, the free-lance writing income and the surprise of modest songwriting royalties, I could afford a few luxuries. And a Ph.D. was a luxury. I never expected to teach sociology – or anything else. But I could check it off the bucket list.

Fats reached over and squeezed my hand.

“I love ‘Brownsville Tonight,’” Fats said. “I heard Lyle sing it at the White House last spring. The mandolin piece is incredible.”

Siler kept his dumb look. Bartenders don’t care about name dropping.

“But I was thinking of another one,” she said. “You know I always got weak in the knees when you wrote a line about me.”

I finished my rye. The bottle of Bulleit was draining. The whiskey was down below the bottle’s green label. Siler poured me more. Put a fresh bottle on the bar as back-up, the way a gunnery sergeant might set a spare magazine nearby when he senses the machine gun running low.

“You know the one,” she said, leaning her body sideways and bumping her shoulder into mine.

“There I am at the White House for a celebration of the American arts, and I have to hear it from John Prine. A woman needs to hear about that kind of song from the source.”

Siler looked like he might doze off.

I knew the song.

She knew me, still. How to get inside my head.

My fingers worked the app.

Prine growled on the juke box, singing about the “Fair-Skinned Brunette With the Porcelain Shine.”

My back shivered as Prine sang the lyrics I had imagined and written about the sexy girl I knew so long ago. I felt the hum of her heartbeat even from a distance and knew art was imitating life imitating art again.

“Welcome home,” I said, turning back her way and this time holding her eyes with mine. “I’d love to watch the leaves change with you.”

Fats reached for the bottle and emptied the rye into her glass.

“What are we gonna do ‘til sun up?” she asked.

Siler yawned.

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*She wears two shades of lipstick and never waits in line.
She carries mini-bottles, and a knife to cut up limes.*

*She’s the Queen of Whiskey Glam. Jack Daniel’s meet Kate Spade.
She always wins at Twister. She played the Turf back in the day.*

The rest of the world knew Fats as Dr. Holly Pike, the face of a new generation of scientists ready to transform global health.

After Fats walked out of Z-4, she moved to New York and began taking graduate classes at Columbia. As she had been at UNC, she was a star there.

At Columbia, Fats ultimately took a Ph.D. in chemistry and also a law degree. In her summer law firm work, she specialized in intellectual property.

My old girlfriend with the crooked bush started figuring out how to design and program cells to behave differently. She took patents on every innovation.

The big pharm companies all wanted her, and the law firms were fighting to get her. Federal agencies and global NGOs that fund scientific research wanted her to set up a lab that would focus on breakthrough public-health research.

She set up a lab at Columbia and created a one-of-a-kind center of applied research, intellectual property and public health.

At first, all of this made Fats a minor celebrity within a highly specialized, arcane field.

Then she designed a drug to grow hair. She became as famous as a Kardashian.

It wasn't exactly a drug, she explained.

Siler queued up the juke box with Merle, George, Waylon, Kris and more Merle. The live version of "Yesterday's Wine" always made Siler cry.

The FDA puts inventions into different categories.

First, there are devices. This includes everything from a Q-tip to a penile implant. Medical devices must be approved by the FDA, and the government tracks problems, recalls and so on. Huge business.

Second, there are drugs. Crestor, for example, is a one of the big-time drugs docs prescribe for folks who need assistance in lowering cholesterol levels. Another huge business.

Third, there are biologics. This is a kind of medicine built from living cells or biological source – not man-made chemicals. Humira, the arthritis medicine advertised on TV, is a biologic. Vaccines and gene therapy are examples of biologics. Over the next generation, this will become bigger business than devices and drugs combined.

"When I was a doc student, we would hang out at a pub in New York and laugh about the riches coming to the first person to find a cure for male-pattern baldness," Fats said.

"Given that erectile dysfunction drugs are all over the market, a cure for baldness was the last cash cow out there for quality-of-life drugs. It seemed like a lark at the time.

Then when I started the lab, I was grinding away on solutions for diseases in developing countries and seeking funding for cancer research and more. We have this incredible untapped potential to improve health – if we just had the funding. Up late one night, it hit me: Stop applying for funding and generate my own. So I pulled together a team and spent a year figuring out male pattern baldness.”

Once through the clinical trials, FDA red tape and so on, Fats was printing money. She owned the intellectual property and the rights to the science and was the sexy face of a cure millions of men wanted – and millions of women wanted for men.

From our old UNC connections, Fats linked up with Michael Jordan as the first pitchman. They created a Jennie Craig-style before-and-after campaign.

The most famous, richest, sexiest bald athlete on the planet emerged in the “after” TV commercials with a head of hair that could have landed him on *The Mod Squad*.

The treatment – a biologic – was marketed as Air Hair, through a new company that Jordan and Fats launched together.

On the day of the IPO, she became a billionaire, for the first time. Jordan became a billionaire again.

“I went from a prestigious but little-known research lab to TMZ cameras following me around with MJ,” she laughed. “Columbia didn’t know what to do.”

Through a series of trusts, private firms and publicly-traded companies, Fats organized a wealth-management strategy to fund a combination of public-health research and highly profitable designer medicines. Through what Time magazine called a virtuous spiral, Fats was making money faster than she could spend it – in the literal sense.

Money from putting hair on heads and other designer treatments was funding work that would rein in Ebola and was showing promising signs with cystic fibrosis and uterine cancer.

“It was like we kept having hit records. One biologic would hit, then another, then another. I started living well, even with whole streams of revenue carved off to fund my lab and the trusts. Crazy as it sounds, I outgrew Columbia.”

Fats described how she created a corporation with a sister organization – a foundation – with labs in Tokyo, Budapest, Lima, Cape Town, New York and Atlanta. Her ventures became so profitable she invited three rounds of debt and equity funding. She was over-subscribed each time.

Forbes doesn’t know where to put her on the list, but she’s in the top 400. And expected to be the top woman on the list next year.

Siler was wearing a ball cap with the logo from Goody's headache powder. He lifted it and winked at Fats. He had a good half-inch of hair on the top of his head, bristly from a brush cut.

"And I thank you," Siler said.

We were well into the second bottle of Bulleit.

A Tammy Wynette tune rolled up on the juke box. We both looked at Siler.

He shrugged.

"Guess we need to go check out Orion," she said.

Fats opened the door and stepped out onto the back deck. The fall night had turned cold in Chapel Hill. Sky was clear. She pointed to the north.

Fats was in a short sky-blue dress with tights underneath. Knee-high white boots. A leather jacket was on a hook by the pool table.

Her black hair hung past her shoulder blades. Until the wind blew it sideways.

"What do you have to eat around here these days?" she asked, putting the question to the heavens.

"Biscuits. I'll go get some biscuits," Siler said, heading down the back stairs to Time Out for a supply of chicken-and-cheese biscuits.

"Put on some hot water, too. I'd like to get some green tea going," she said.

Fats came in off the porch, closed the door and picked up the pool cue. Her face was flushed from the wind, her eyes watery and sparkly. She leaned on the cue, using it as a cane to stabilize her from the whiskey, the cold and the memories.

"I have a job for you," she said.

4

*Too old to please the pretty girls, too young to take the needle.
I'm stacking time with Crestor, and a heart that's growing feeble.*

Green tea and green label,

keep my mind alert, my liver stable.
Doing less than I am able.
I've become The Displaced Man.
I've become The Displaced Man.

We switched from rye to green tea. Organic tea, Genmaicha. A green tea blended with toasted brown rice.

“Listen,” I said. “I can’t quite describe what it’s like to see you again – or see you in person. I can’t turn on the TV these days without seeing you. “I know the old days are long ago and far away, like the song says, and neither one of us wants to revisit who did what way back when. I’ve been blessed beyond my imagination – blessed more than anyone I know, other than you, to be honest. And it’s like having lightning strike for you to walk in here tonight. I knew you would be in town, for University Day. But I didn’t expect to see you. And I certainly didn’t expect to be up drinking whiskey with you – “

“Tea,” she interrupted. “We’re drinking tea.”

“and to be eating biscuits with you again,” I said, the sentence trailing off.

I was drunk. I was rambling. I didn’t have a point, and I couldn’t talk my way toward one. So I did what smart drunks do. I shut up. I drank tea.

Ray Wylie Hubbard came on the juke box, then Hayes Carll and Shooter Jennings. Then Patsy Cline.

“So...” I started in again. Goddammit, I was going to find a point to make. I’m not that smart a drunk, after all.

“So, welcome home. Glad to see you. Glad you’re here, Tar Heel born and bred and all that. Glad we’re drinking whiskey. Glad Siler is getting biscuits.

“But I have a job. Or I don’t need a job. Or I don’t need a job from you. Or I don’t know why you need me to do a job. Or don’t care.”

A long pause. Siler came back in. Closed the door to the cold blast.

“Let’s just eat the fucking biscuits,” I said, as triumphantly as I could sound.

Fats chomped off big bites of gooey cheese, fried chicken and warm biscuit.

“I have a job for you,” she said again.

Before I could swallow and reply, Siler jumped in.

“Cool. What you need him to do?” he asked.

“It’s an inside job,” she began.

Fats explained that her company, which she had named Gimghoul Research Labs, was a kind of hybrid. It included some pharmacology labs, with many scholars leading basic research, and a network of centers that were unifying genetics and pharmacological research. There was a product innovation department figuring out how to translate the R&D into consumer products – both the designer products driving the profit and the products promising to improve the human condition.

While many of the phases of the work required proprietary research and trade secrets, there were also parts of the work that required transparency and full disclosure. GRL, as her firm was known, had built its own publishing unit to create, vet and publish findings from its research efforts and the research run by others. There was special emphasis placed on publishing findings that built bridges from the basic research to the applied research. This created a public record of evidence that helped make the case for consumer products.

“It’s all bigger than I can manage – or anyone could manage. It’s what keeps me up at night,” Fats said, starting in on her second biscuit.

Siler poured her more tea. He had one glass of whiskey and one cup of coffee, alternating sips from one to the other.

“OK, you’re running a multi-national corporation that’s making you billions of dollars,” I said. “Seems fair you’d have some headaches. Nothing I can do about that. If you don’t want the nightmares, sell the business. I’m sure Dow or Pfizer or somebody would give you a few billion for it. You can buy another house in the islands.”

“I’ve bought a house on Gimghoul Road,” she said.

That threw me.

“I’m moving home,” she said. “I told you we would meet up in the fall to watch the leaves change. Well. It’s *this* fall. I’m not here for the week to get some kind of award on University Day. I’m back in Chapel Hill to see you.

“And I have for job for you,” she repeated.

“Hey, take the job,” Siler said, sipping the whiskey, then the coffee, then the whiskey again.

The rye was still escalating in my system. The genmaicha couldn't knock down the alcohol. Fats never needed sleep. She was flying. My brain was whirring. My eyes were tired, and I could see a headache just ahead. I was overmatched.

"What's the job?" I asked, surrendering.

"I know you won the Pulitzer for uncovering the LIBOR fraud that helped create the financial crisis," Fats continued.

She was referring to the conspiracy among financial institutions to cook the numbers on the London Interbank Offered Rate. The LIBOR lending rates sets the number on what it costs banks to borrow money from other banks, covering 10 currencies and more than dozen periods of time for loans. This trickles down the entire global financial system. If you're a newlywed in Little Rock looking for a home mortgage loan, you ended up paying a higher rate than you needed to when banks cooked the LIBOR numbers. Same if you're running a French apparel company that needs to borrow money to expand factories. You ended up paying too much in interest.

"You have a talent for finding needles in haystacks," Fats said. "GRL is publishing haystacks of research studies. I've been getting anonymous emails claiming there's fraud in my publishing units. I don't know if this is sour grapes from someone who didn't become the star researcher they wanted to be. Or if it's legitimate. But I know who can find out. You can find out.

"I'll hire you to run an investigative journalism project – an independent project. No oversight from me. I will have no editorial input. No approval rights. You can publish anything, anywhere. You get full access to everything in my shop that is not protected as a trade secret."

Siler spoke first: "How much does the gig pay?"

"We'll start with a year-long contract for \$5 million," Fats said. She moved from the biscuit to a cinnamon roll.

"He'll take it," Siler said, and the two of them shook hands.

5

*I dreamed of San Francisco but wound up in Millbrae.
I used to want a book deal, but now there's nothing left to say.*

I've mostly made my peace, don't wonder too much why.

But I still dream of Gimghoul Road, and the Pilgrim's Progress makes me cry.

*Green tea and green label,
keep my mind alert, my liver stable.
Doing less than I am able.
I've become The Displaced Man.
I've become The Displaced Man.*

It was somewhere between 3 and 4 a.m.

Fats had a high-end Tesla waiting outside. There was heat. There was a driver. The car was space-age.

We both got in the backseat.

"Nice ride," I said.

"It's new," she said, without humor, focusing on her phone. "A car designed for a scientist. It promises to text me weekly data. I'll be able to track its operations the way Delta can with its jet planes. And I can use an app to turn on the car and heat up the seats before I walk out the door in the morning."

The Tesla was a like a magic carpet. No engine. No sound. Wheels turning at the direction of a computer chip, not a combustion engine. I was riding inside a PowerPoint presentation.

All through the ride, Fats was swiping and poking the phone, wide awake, answering email from her employees around the world and exchanging texts with her friends from the Today Show. Lars Rapson is a real smart ass with his texts. Who knew?

The green tea was starting to give me a second wind, or a third. I had a 9 a.m. appointment with Mallette to discuss my upcoming dissertation defense. How to manage the stagecraft, the egos on the committee and the methods discussion. No sign of trouble. Just the kind of statistical conversation that scholars pursue. For the work, I was using a kind of time-series analysis. I appreciated the chance to hear any questions that had come up, ahead of next week's defense. It was coming up on Monday. Given that we were in the pre-dawn hours of Tuesday, that meant my defense is less than a week away.

And now I was apparently a millionaire, thanks to Siler's negotiating skills.

“You dropping me off. Have the driver head down South Columbia to Westwood,” I said, figuring I could grab a couple of hours of sleep, take a boiling shower and get to my meeting without too much damage.

“We’re headed to my new place,” she said. “I’ve got a guest house out back. It’s yours for now.”

Fats didn’t frame this as an invitation. Sounded more like a directive.

This was the CEO side of her that I had read about but never seen in person. Dr. Holly Pike had turned into an executive. The spontaneous girlfriend I knew, Fats, lived on mostly in my imagination.

The driver turned down Gimghoul and pulled into the drive of a sprawling Queen Anne home that had been expanded over the years. There was indeed a guest house out back.

Fats locked up her phone and exited the car.

“Come inside with me. Want to show you some things,” she said.

The driver opened my door for me. I got out and followed Fats through the stone pathway, past the dogwoods and laurels and red tips. Up the porch and through the double doors of heavy, dark wood.

The living room was lit up and humming. Two laptop computers were open and alive. The TV was on CNN and muted. A Tumi computer case was on the sofa.

An attendant came in with a tray. There was a pot of coffee. There was a teapot with genmaicha steeping. She poured a cup for Fats.

“Thank you,” Fats said to her staff. “You can head home now. Appreciate you getting us settled.”

The attendant went back through the kitchen. I heard a back door open and close. I saw Tesla lights come on in the driveway. The driver was ferrying the attendant home.

“The day shift will come at 6,” Fats said, seeing me watch the car pull away and assuming I was wondering who would brew the next pot.

Fats and I were alone. For the first time in 30 years.

I sank into the sofa. Numb from booze and caffeine and the thought of hiring an accountant to figure out the taxes on \$5 million.

“I’ll have a contract sent over to you by noon and a first check of \$1.25 million,” Fats said. “Quarterly checks for the same amount will follow, until we wrap the year. You can quit or I can fire you – with 30 days’ notice required either way. Everything you learn, everything you hear, everything you write – it’s all yours, as I promised. The only thing off limits are the trade secrets that I’m bound by legal agreement to protect.”

She handed me a leather folio.

“Take a look at that and then hand it back. When I get the signed contract back from you, I’m making those files and more – several boxes, actually – available to you in the guest house out back. It will be your office.”

The folio was soft and buttery. Money may not be able to buy happiness, but it sure buys better leather.

Inside were 5 pieces of pager, each 8.5 x 11 – just like what you’d get out of the copier at Kinko’s.

On each page was a printed copy of an email sent to Fats, alleging fraud. On each email, the sender’s name showed as “Bootstrap.”

The mails were brief and accusatory without offering details. But the tone was serious, the sender’s persistence added to the gravity. The sender claimed that many peer-reviewed articles from GRL were fraudulent, that findings were being tweaked to enhance the professional standing of the authors and to enable individual researchers to profit.

“Those are the five most recent. It started back in the summer. Came once a week, maybe twice. Lately, it’s been heating up,” Fats said.

Each email was time stamped at 4:17 a.m. There was an email a day, for the past five days.

A buzzing interrupted the silence.

Fats reached for her phone. I looked at my watch. 4:17 a.m.

“Bootstrap is on time, once again,” Fats said.

She read the email silently. Then out loud to me.

Shame on UNC and Sanders Mallette for honoring the founder of a company tolerating fraud. Let’s see what SM has to say when I reveal the fraud to him.

6

*Sweet Carolina Sunshine,
Touches gentle on your mind.
It's always home again, In Carolina.
Ghosts still touch the land,
They'll lead you by the hand.
You can go home again, In Carolina.*

A generation after she promised, we watched the leaves turn.

We walked down by Hippol Castle. The morning fog and the wetness of sunrise put a matte finish on the leaves. Dogwoods and maples were smeared with color, set off against the evergreens that filled in the spaces overhead.

We looped off the castle property down into Battle Park. We moved along the same trails used by Kemp Plummer Battle, who was president of the university nearly 150 years ago. I had searched my family tree for a connection to Kemp but never found one. Still, the park had always felt like my personal place.

Fats could have been sprinting the trails. The hills were getting to me this morning.

I had held my college weight, 180 pounds, and at six-feet tall still presented an illusion of fitness. Yet somehow the pounds were no longer distributed the way they had been back in college, and the lungs weren't as robust. I was chasing Fats and Father Time on that trail.

"So what does 4:17 a.m. mean?" she asked.

"You tell me. You've got a global enterprise," I said. "That number could be tied to anything. Or it could be just a time zone thing. Say, Bootstrap is in London. Every morning at 9:17 UK time, he or she has a free moment to send you a note.

"Could be at precisely this moment every morning scary voices appear in his or her head and compel the action. Sometimes crazy is just crazy. May be nothing rational or real about it all."

"Or," Fats picked up, "I could be getting scammed. Some disgruntled researcher could be cooking numbers and publishing the fraudulent work through GRL."

"No way to tell," I said, casually. I was more worried about the hills than the question.

“Yes, there is a way to tell. And you’re going to find it. Because I’m paying you \$5 million,” Fats said, using her CEO voice.

“What if I solve this before the year runs out?” I asked, trying to poke at her a bit. “The deal Siler negotiated just gives me an incentive to collect the quarterly payments. If I solve it tomorrow, I’m leaving money on the table?”

“Ok, genius,” she said. “You solve this in the first 30 days, and you get a \$1 million bonus.”

We were a few minutes away from the trail head at Park Place, where we would exit Battle Park for the residential street. This would leave us a good walk back to Gimghoul Road. I needed carbs more than I needed a longer walk.

The sunrise was burning off the morning haze. We covered the trail in silence. A couple of steps behind Fats, I was watching her ass toggle left and right like a metronome. She was in all black – black lululemon pants, black Patagonia jacket. Black gloves, black fleece hat. Black hair pulled back into a pony tail. Black Merrell boots. The white of her neck was visible above her collar. Just a few dots of sweat. Bright as a China serving dish.

Fats had stocked up the guest house for me with personal items, a wardrobe and a laptop loaded with GRL data and information. I was now a GRL contractor, so I had a GRL email address, password and identity. She offered to have the company deliver boxes of hard copy files, but there was no need. Everything else was virtual. Beyond the work items, she had stocked the place with my genmaicha tea, protein bars and all of the personal items that you’d find in a fancy hotel. She’d loaded in bunch of trail shop clothing, so I was in a blue North Face jacket, gloves and hat. Khakis from last night were taking a beating, and the lack of sleep was heightening my senses and dulling them at the same time. Then she had included bowties, jackets and slacks from Alexander Julian’s store.

“How are your Mom and Dad?” she asked. Her first personal question. After all these years. After they thought Fats would be their daughter-in-law, a lifetime ago.

“Retired,” I said. “Both in pretty good health.”

“Did they ever move back to Saluda?” she asked.

Mom had been an English teacher and Dad a math teacher when Fats knew them. Teaching middle school and high school in Hillsborough. Was surprised Fats remembered that they once had been so focused on retiring to a second home in Saluda, in the southwestern North Carolina mountains. I had forgotten that myself until that moment. Reminded me how malleable our dreams really are.

“Not Saluda,” I said. “In the Ukraine, in fact.”

That stopped Fats for a moment. She turned and looked again, measuring my face to see if I was bullshitting. Raised her eyebrows.

“No lie,” I continued. “In Kiev. They are missionaries for a progressive, faith-based organization. They’re feeding hungry kids, saving orphaned girls from being sold into the sex trade.”

“Damn,” Fats said, and she was back to leading me through the trails.

“It’s the real thing. Communication there is iffy. We try to check in around the first of each month. Sometimes they can get a phone line out. Sometimes not,” I said.

“So they traded Saluda for Kiev,” Fats said.

“Now there’s a country music song.”

“Hey, send me a link to their group. I’d like to make a donation,” she said.

“That would mean a lot to them. I will,” I said.

Her ass kept toggling. Left. Then right. Then left. I was gonna be hypnotized.

I turned the conversation back to GRL.

“Who hates you?” I asked.

Fats turned her head and cut her eyes at me.

“Really. Who hates you? Someone is trying to do you harm – either through fraudulent research or by sending you harassing notes to cause you grief. So who hates you?”

“Hate is a word for freshman dorm,” she said. “In my world, the only word is *money*.”

“I have a lot of it. GRL makes lots of it. Nobody hates me. Nobody loves me. People just see a chance to make money through me – and through GRL. In most cases, this motivation is a good thing. Honest researchers know they can do good and do well at the same time. They can design a medical treatment that helps people enjoy their lives. Or they can find a cure for a disease that will extend lives in developing countries. And they make money along the way. My business depends on that. And 99 percent of the time, it works.”

She paused.

“Even when it doesn’t work,” she continued, “people want to keep open the chance to do business in the future. There’s always another deal around the corner. So keep the relationship positive.”

“Then what’s new? Something has changed. There has been a trigger,” I said.

“Lots of new things. The interesting new things are, for now, covered by that ‘trade secrets’ designation I mentioned,” Fats said, turning back again to peek at me. “You’re going to have to work for your million-dollar bonus.”

“So how do I factor in ‘trade secrets’ when I’m solving this riddle?”

We were out of the trail and into the clearing by the lane.

“Watch the Today show Wednesday morning,” she said, this time without looking back.

Fats waved at a black car idling on the gravel. It pulled over. She opened the door and nodded for me to get in.

“The car will take you by your place. Pick up whatever you need and get settled in at Gimghoul. I need you in the guest house.”

I slid over to make room for her. Fats chuckled and shook her head.

“The car is all yours. I’m going for a run now. I can’t drag your ass around these trails all morning. Oh, and your 9 a.m. with Mallette has been moved to Gimghoul Road. He’ll meet you in the guest house. I’m meeting with him at 11 to talk about a GRL partnership with the university.”

She whipped the car door shut. She stretched down to touch her toes, then took off on a fast run, heading down South Boundary to Cameron Avenue. The black pony tail was bouncing.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“Sunrise Biscuit Kitchen. God bless you,” I said.

7

*Is today Monday, or could it be Sunday.
I really don’t know how to find out.
Am I drunk now or sober? Is the week over?*

*The days and the nights are still jumbled about.
Maybe it's Sunday. It feels more like Monday.
Where's a newspaper with a date that will tell.*

Tuesday morning in October. Sitting at the bar at Pig Farm Tavern in Chapel Hill. 11:57 a.m.

Siler was in the position. Leaning his right elbow on the bar. Coffee in his left hand. Dumb look on his face. Carly Simon on the juke box, the volume turned down to a whisper.

I was half-way through a takeout container of soup, split pea with ham. On my second heavy mug of genmaicha tea.

A scorching shower put some life back in me. Then I had wrapped the meeting with Mallette. We spent 15 minutes discussing the defense and more than an hour talking about life. It was always like that with Mallette.

“James,” he said, “the doctoral defense is a custom, a ritual. We honor our history through these kinds of rituals. So on the one hand, it’s busy work. The quality of your dissertation is unquestioned. On the other hand, it’s a ritual that celebrates the commitment to creative contributions to a body of knowledge.”

Mallette was flipping through my music CDs and pulled out a Hasil Adkins selection and put it in the spinner. The crazy West Virginian’s voice peeled paint off the wall. Mallette lowered the volume.

“I’ve always believed the university should conduct doctoral defenses as public events,” he continued. “We are the people’s university. We should post bills across campus. Invite the public to fill the auditorium. To be part of our tribe as we honor years of work that add one more piece of knowledge to our collective understanding of the world. Taken alone, any individual dissertation seems meaningless. Taken together, all the dissertations from a discipline cover a whole lot of what we know about the world.”

“I’m good with a public event,” I said. “The comprehensive exams were the tough spot. The dissertation defense should run fine.”

A little Hasil goes a long way. Mallette kept flipping through the CDs while we talked. He swapped out Hasil for an Iris Dement CD. Hymns.

“I’ve Got That Old Time Religion,” scorched through the speakers. Mallette raised the volume.

“Something I’ve never asked you,” I said. “All those times. When I was sinking in London. When I was in trouble in St. Pete. How did you know to call? Your timing was spooky.”

Iris kept singing. I refilled our mugs of hot tea.

“I’d love to tell you that I had some kind of line in to the angels,” Mallette said. “I knew mountain women who had a kind of intuition that intrigued me. And frightened me. I used to dream that the mountains would make me a mystic.”

“And they did?” I asked.

“No. The mountains filled me with empathy,” he said. “Taught me how small we are in the world and how big we can be in the moment. If we choose to be. If we look outside ourselves. I’ve spent my life trying to identify those moments. Those moments when I could do something big, when probably nobody else was going to do anything. It haunts us when we miss them.”

Made sense. He always found moments when my life was suspended in mid-air. Moments when my stomach felt like it does when the roller-coaster crests the very tip-top of the steepest rise, in the split second before gravity pulls everything down. When weightlessness made me feel sick and magical at the same time.

“However you did it,” I said, “I’m grateful. Something more than grateful. It’s difficult to express. I believe the mountains made you generous, also. A generous man in a world folding inward on itself, sucked into a black hole of tweets and selfies.”

Mallette laughed. He hummed along with Iris. Lined up the edges of the row of CDs.

“Generous at moments, perhaps,” he said. “More and more, I’m selfish with my time. It’s like water running through my fingers. Time. I just need quiet moments, time. To read and think. I used to have hours. Now I steal away minutes.”

He picked up his coat.

“Well, you found another moment,” I said. “The University needs you in South Building, running things. We all need your time.”

I shook his hand.

“The defense is a ritual,” he repeated. He covered my hand in both of his. “Remember. We’re like the third little pig. We build slowly. But with brick.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said. “I’ll look for moments to put all of this research to some good.”

“Monday is a moment for you,” Mallette said, “and you’ll have plenty more moments to come. The trick is not to have them haunt you. To be big in the moment.”

He walked over the stone path to the big house, to see Fats. The hymn from Iris matched his steps on the rocks.

Right then, nearly every cell in body had wanted to nap. I overcame the urge and grabbed my backpack. Headed out across campus. Walked right into this barstool at Pig Farm. For soup. And tea. And Siler’s conversation.

I didn’t feel like a millionaire. But I felt something. Fats had left me a company iPhone. There two numbers were programmed in. One was her private cell. The other was the black car. I now had a driver. I now had two phones.

Siler was settling up winners and losers from his weekly NFL pool.

I met Siler when we were both 18 years old. He was tall and skinny and carried a tennis racquet on campus and a joint behind his ear. He strutted into Chapel Hill from the far western mountains of North Carolina, a math major who got most of the answers right.

Tough thing is, most of the answers isn’t good enough when you come down from the mountain.

By sophomore year, Siler was a music major. He carried a harmonica in his pocket and a guitar strapped over his shoulder. The tennis racquet was on the roof of Cobb Dorm, home to 363 girls. Siler had a thing for a girl living on the fourth floor of Cobb Dorm. In an instance lacking his usual genius, he was trying to get her attention late one night by tossing a pebble up to the window. When the pebble didn’t reach that distance, he tried a tennis ball and then his tennis racquet. It landed on the roof and stuck. She never emerged at the window. He was a Romeo left wanting for his Juliet on the balcony.

Siler was pretty good at a lot of things.

He had found success as a roadie for various Texas musicians and troubadours. He became a master carpenter during a stay in New York, making fancy cabinets for rich folks. Now, besides Pig Farm, he has a small side business rebuilding engines for old BMWs. Very private, word-of-mouth referrals only. If he decided to take your case, Siler would rebuild the engine with the same care of a mama doting on a newborn.

8

Yes, dear. Yes, dear.

*I fixed the screen door, and I called the man.
I hooked up the wi-fi and rinsed off the pan.*

*Yes, dear. Yes, dear.
I bought a card for your Mom and fixed the hinge on her gate.
Your hair looks good, and I see you've lost weight.*

Siler found his true calling in real estate. He did one deal, got in and got out. And got set up for life.

A great aunt had left Siler 53 acres in Randolph County, North Carolina. It was an uninspiring parcel of clay and rubble in the rural Piedmont region of the state.

Because the land wouldn't perc, it could not accommodate a septic system.

"No perc, no house," the guy at the county office said.

So Siler couldn't build on it. He couldn't sell it to a developer. All he could do was pay the fucking taxes every year and curse his great aunt for leaving him the burden. The neighboring property owners laughed at him.

Liquored up one night, Siler found the solution.

He would start a pig farm. Or at least announce that he was starting a pig farm. With the waste lagoons, oppressive stink, noise and environmental hazards, pig farms had become the ultimate NIMBY villain.

No one, and I mean no one, would tolerate talk of a pig farm in their part of the Randolph County. It didn't matter that the county may never issue a permit for such an enterprise. Siler banked on the idea that simply announcing his intent would so outrage the neighbors that they would buy his land – just to get him out of the county.

Give him credit. Siler made the play in a big way. He got the high school band out to his property by pledging to contribute to the booster club. He catered the event – pork barbecue, of course. He invited the county commissioners and the extension agent.

And on one sticky hot morning in August, Siler announced that he was bringing a pig farm to his Randolph County land.

Someone threw a trumpet at him. Siler erected a tent on the land and began sleeping there nights. He bought three little pigs and fenced them in on the property. Put up a big sign announcing the arrival of Three Little Pigs Farm – "coming soon."

The sheriff had to post a car by the property out of concern for Siler's safety. The Greensboro newspaper heard about the kerfuffle and sent a photographer down. Siler sold the idea hard, focusing on the "job creation" opportunities in a depressed area of the state.

Then the big pork politicians in DC – the men and women paid by the pork lobby to fight for every pig farmer in America – heard about the story and adopted Siler as their celebrity case. Why, they argued, any private landowner oughtta be able to make an honest living raising pigs. Lee Greenwood showed up at Siler's pitch of clay and sang "Proud to Be an American" for the cameras.

Within 60 days, an attorney representing a collection of neighboring landowners came out to the tent to see Siler. It was 3 a.m. on a Tuesday. Very quiet. Very serious. Delivered a one-time, take-it-or-leave-it offer: End the media circus. Take down the signs, and sell the property on the spot. Sign on the dotted line without taking a breath, right there under the tent. Or get ready to face legal bills that would bankrupt him.

Siler signed. The attorney handed over a check for five times what Siler had been hoping for.

Forty-eight hours later, Siler had purchased a spot in Chapel Hill. Within a month, he opened Pig Farm Tavern.

There was a small stage at one end of the bar. Siler hosted open-mic nights and student bands a few times a month. He also did exclusive shows with musicians coming through town. He would sell 100 tickets for anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000 per, using the event as a fund-raiser for the labor association representing the housekeepers on the UNC campus. Those housekeepers have always been the most abused, put upon employees on campus. Siler had a soft spot for the housekeepers, based on his tenure in Connor Dorm. Over the years, his events spun off millions of dollars in donations for the men and women who clean up after the kids.

At the other end of the bar there were three booths.

In the middle was the pool table.

The place was long and relatively narrow, like a shotgun house swollen up to the size of a bar. There were 17 stools running down the patron side of the bar.

Siler, a man of simple brilliance, stocked seven varieties of beer, seven choices of liquor and seven options for wine.

He claimed it was a religious requirement. He usually had about a dozen pimento cheese sandwiches in a beer cooler, ones he picked up from Merritt's store around lunch time. For friends of the bar. Then Time Out was the catering choice for late-night patrons.

During the right time of year, he kept a tin of persimmon pudding in the beer cooler by the sandwiches. Siler's wife made the deserts by hand, including the pudding. She used fresh Chatham County persimmons.

Siler was on his third marriage. All to the same woman. Siler and Carla both had roving eyes. Gave each other a lot of leeway. So it was never clear just where the line might be found.

When Carla crossed the line enough, Siler divorced her. It was five years into the marriage.

Within 18 months, they were married again. A decade later, Carla filed for divorce. Wrote in the court papers that Siler was "deficient as a man, beyond what can be captured by English language sentences." No one disputed that.

Two years later, they re-united at a Merle Haggard show. Siler was hanging backstage with the guitar techs and invited Carla along for the evening. Story was they fell into a deep kiss when Merle was singing "Yesterday's Wine." They seemed to have found some equilibrium. No one forecast a third divorce.

Today, he was settling up the NFL betting pool from the past week.

"You know, Lassie. This is supposed to be a friendly little pool. Everybody kicks in two bucks, and the winner gets \$50. Where's the harm in that?"

I saw no harm. He continued.

"But I've got a fucking degenerate ruining our setup. Maximillian Whitehall, some stats professor. He showed up at the start of the season and talked his way into the pool. Took a spot that opened up when Mallette pulled out. Fucking stats guys all think they've figured out a system.

"Now he's running all these side bets and parlays with my guys. Five of them pulled out of the pool last week. Said they couldn't take the pressure. Pressure? How is two bucks pressure? They told me they had gotten tangled up with Whitehall on these wacky bets. Most were winning money off him, but it was ruining the games for them. He's relentless in begging for the action, but then he won't pay up. Apparently owes money all over town."

My soup was done. "So you banning him?" I asked.

"Yep. Today. Getting ready to send out an email to everyone on my list Putting the scarlet letter on Whitehall. He'll never place another bet in this town again," Siler said.

And like that, Whitehall was toast.