Jane's Hat

BACK WHEN STOCKING caps were in fashion, those long knit caps of bright yarn with tassels on the end, back when my friend Jane had the best stocking cap in school, Mr. Overton Underhill came biking up behind us and snatched Jane's cap right off her head.

It was February 1968. Just that afternoon, Mr. Underhill, who was the principal, had lectured our class on earthquakes. "The ground opens up in a sneer," he had said, and thus I had learned the word *sneer.*

And now he had stolen Jane's hat.

"Ha!" he said and pedaled away with it, his face—with its stubbly cheeks and eyebrows like check marks—swiveling back to gloat at us, the cap rippling in his grasp.

Jane and I were on bikes, too, and we gave chase, pumping our legs hard as we could, keeping him in sight, once getting near enough to see that one of his shoes was untied. He was too

burly for his bike, but he was so fast. Sweet wind blew through the broom sedge on either side of the road, and the overarching trees were rusty with winter. Yet it was a warm, fine day.

He beat us to the railroad tracks, where a train came by. It was such a long, long train. Jane and I stood straddling our bikes in its smoky breeze, and when it was past, we rolled across the tracks, but he was gone. He wasn't at the grocery store or the post office or on the porch of the old hotel—the public parts of Glen Allen—or if he were, he'd hidden the bike and gone inside. He must have been far down Mountain Road by then, or off on one of the side roads that still felt like country.

"Where's your hat, Jane?" her mother asked when we burst into her house.

"Mr. Underhill's got it," Jane said, but her mother wasn't listening. She was fitting a cowgirl dress on Jane's sister Tammy.

"Where's my boots?" Tammy demanded.

"Mr. Underhill's got 'em," I said, and we all laughed, even Jane's mother with her mouth full of pins. Tammy giggled, but carefully because of her lipstick. In my mind I heard what Mama always said about Tammy: *Five years old and lipstick on, and the way she dances.*

Jane never did get her hat back. From then on, whenever we couldn't find something, we'd say, "Mr. Underhill's got it!"

But hadn't he given us something, too—the beautiful chase with the sweet wind and the trees overhead and only the three of us on that empty road almost too narrow for two cars to pass? The intervening train was only fate, and the world was about to change anyway, so why worry about a hat?

"Have you ever seen a blackbird fly with a dove?" Mr. Underhill asked everybody, in assembly, the day after he stole Jane's stocking cap. "No, and you never will. Still, we must

accept the decisions the government makes for us, however misguided."

I thought of the earthquake lecture, how he had interrupted Miss Stancil in the middle of her math lesson to deliver the information about the earth opening up like a sneer. "I must ask you to make them welcome," he said, turning to address the teachers, who sat very straight in the aisle seats of the auditorium as he strode back and forth on the stage, "but I don't ask you to fly with them."

The blackbirds would not come in a flock, just a few at a time, we learned: a trial period. There would be a girl, Dorothy, in the sixth grade, and her brother, Herman, in Miss Stancil's fifth-grade class—Jane's and my class.

Mr. Underhill said, "Any questions?"

How vast the silence was, with a hundred children and six teachers thinking about blackbirds and doves. I stood up and said, "What about Jane's stocking cap?"

But the instant I spoke, the bell rang, just as the train had hurtled between Mr. Underhill and Jane and me on our bikes, twenty-three hours earlier. So nobody heard me. They just got up and shuffled out the double doors at the rear of the auditorium.

Back in the classroom, Miss Stancil announced that she had intended to give us a quiz on earthquakes. "But I forgot to write it up!" she said.

Jane laughed, with Miss Stancil joining in. So did everybody but me. I felt vaguely disappointed, for I loved mimeographs, if not quizzes: purple sheets of paper with that chemical scent. No quiz. And it was time to go home.

But I was marking time by the theft of Jane's hat. I had loved it, the knotty, holly-green expanse of it and the ball of yellow fringe on the end.

It had smelled of Jane's mother's perfume, ancient precious stuff from France that smelled like cider and roses, the perfume that Tammy wore for her Little Miss Virginia pageant rehearsals—where who would preside as chief judge but Mr. Overton Underhill? Tammy was doused with the fabulous perfume, whereas Jane and I had to steal it, drop by drop.

The day of not-flying-with-blackbirds wasn't over, not even after the assembly and the canceled quiz. As Jane and I set out on our bikes, we encountered Mr. Underhill again, but this time he was on foot, beside the chain link fence of the playground, on the path we sometimes took through the woods—the alternate way to Jane's house. The previous day, he had addressed us both, or maybe just Jane, with the one word, the syllable, "Ha!"

There on the path, he raised his palm and spoke only to me, as if we'd been talking for a long time. "Laurie," he said, "don't ever let anybody know *how* easy it is for you."

"What's easy for you?" asked Jane, as we hurtled pell-mell through the woods, leaving him behind. "Math?" she said. "What did he mean?"

My mouth opened, and the answer came out: "Forgiveness."

Jane stopped her bike so fast she fell off it. "What?"

And I said it again.

"I DON'T remember that," Jane says of the stolen hat, as we eat bistro fare at a restaurant in downtown Richmond, a restaurant that used to be a train station. Its great round clock still hangs on the wall. The ticket counter is a salad bar. Jane wears thin, elegant black clothes. Her fingernails shine; her scarlet lips purse when she smiles. Her rich husband is a bad, bad man who will gain your trust in a real estate deal and take you down with him. Jane never wants to leave her house. She

will talk on the phone, but it's hard to get her to come out to lunch. Unless I go visit her, I rarely see her. She spends her days watching rented shoot-'em-up videos and laughing, laughing when the bad guys win. Or the good guys, either one. Just as she laughed when Miss Stancil said, "No quiz!"

Yet isn't there understanding in that laugh, of a kind I haven't got yet?

"Do you remember Dorothy and Herman?" I say.

"Dorothy and Herman who? Hey, leave me some of that goat cheese, Laurie."

THEY HAD their parents' eyes. They had known longer than we had about the integration: I read it in their faces.

"Get away from the raisins!" boys yelled from the monkey bars at recess that first day, while Dorothy and Herman held hands in silent counsel on the playground. I watched as a sixth-grader—Andrea was her name, a preacher's daughter—lured Dorothy and Herman to a seesaw. The arch in Andrea's neck should have warned them. Once they were seated on the seesaw, decorously rocking up and down, Andrea reached out and punched Dorothy in the back, fast as a blink.

Dorothy felt it. Of course she did, but she didn't show it. She kept riding the seesaw, slowly, her eyes on her brother's. Herman lowered the seesaw to the ground. Together, he and Dorothy retreated to the edge of the playground, to the spot where Mr. Underhill had spoken to me. Andrea, with her best friend Marge, chased them and chanted, "Blackbirds! Mr. Underhill says you're blackbirds!"

Their mother did cleaning sometimes for my mother. Mama had praised her for the way she could iron a shirt. Their father had helped my father tear down a tiny old house in our backyard, and Daddy had let him have some of the lumber.

Jane and I had stood out back, watching the house come down, and I think Herman was out there too, helping his father.

"Who used to live there?" Jane asked my father.

"Oh, servants," Daddy said cheerfully, stacking the weathered green-painted wood, "servants for people long ago, people who had money. Not like us. We're poor folks."

So the old house came down. It was a fire hazard, Daddy said. He called the Negro man "Joe." Joe called him Mr. Spires. But even now, wouldn't that be all right, when one man employs another?

Seesaw, Margery Daw. How does the rest of that rhyme go? Was Andrea's friend really named Marge, or am I getting it mixed up with the rhyme?

"Go away," Andrea said after she hit Dorothy, and again after Herman led his sister away from the seesaw. Marge echoed, "Go away!" But Herman and Dorothy had already gone as far as they could, without running away from school. They ignored the taunts from the swingsets and the jungle gym, where children cavorted and hung upside-down.

I was with Jane, of course. I said the dumbest thing: "I bet Dorothy and Herman would like to climb the monkey bars, but nobody'll let them."

"It's too hard, anyway," Jane said in the reasonable way that I loved, "and it's not that much fun."

"Think of something fun," I said, feeling sick as I watched the brother and sister, severely composed, keep up a semblance of conversation with each other, out of earshot of the rest of us.

"I can't," Jane said. She was watching them, too.

"It was fun when Daddy tore down the old house," I ventured.

"No, it wasn't." Jane turned on me, her eyes flashing. "That could have been a great big doll's house for us, if your father had let us have it."

"He was afraid it would fall down on top of us," I said.

"And how would that have felt?" Jane asked accusingly, as if a caved-in house would have been my fault.

Tammy's pageant was the same week as the hat theft and the integration, and at the last minute she changed her mind about what to wear.

"I want to be a hula dancer," she told her mother, who had lost so much weight in anticipation of the pageant that she looked like the praying mantis on Miss Stancil's desk at school, a dried mantis that a boy had found in a field, its hard, plated face all anxious. "I want a grass skirt and flowers in my hair."

Tammy's mother said, "But you'll have to learn a whole new dance, a hula dance, in just three days."

"I will," said Tammy.

And she did. Jane and I were her audience, while their mother played "Aloha Oe" on the thumpety piano and Tammy swayed her hips, shook her silvery curls, and minced around barefoot.

"You're really good," I couldn't help but tell her.

"Thank you," Tammy said, but she was accustomed to compliments. She had won beauty prizes before, but they were small-time ones. Little Miss Virginia was major.

"And it can't hurt that we know Mr. Underhill," Tammy's mother said for the thousandth time, with a rippling chord on the piano keys.

"Mr. Underhill," I said, his image lurching into my mind, the green stocking cap a pennant in his hand.

"Don't tell," Jane hissed at me.

"Play it again, Mama!" cried Tammy. "And this time, make it sound more like Hawaii."

She pronounced it "Ha-*wah*-yah."

The pageant was held at the Miller and Rhoads Tearoom. The tearoom had a real runway, where on weekdays, at lunchtime, stylish models showed off the store's latest fashions. Jane, her mother, and I watched in disbelief as Tammy was knocked out in round one, not even making the semifinals, despite the presence of Mr. Underhill with his bald head bowed beneath the lights of the runway and the fact of his chiefness in the whole row of famed, prominent judges.

A redheaded juggler from Norfolk got the judges' unanimous vote. I could swear she had breasts, though she was only seven. She looked dumb: her tongue poked out from her teeth. Yet she won.

Afterwards, heading back to the car, Tammy tore loose from her mother's handhold. She shredded the grass skirt so that her green panties flashed to all the other parents and contestants, many of whom sobbed as they raced to the sanctuary of their cars. Tammy's face was a wrecked palette of mascara and rouge.

During the ride home, while a last gardenia blackened in Tammy's hair, a conviction lodged itself in her mother's mind: the belief that Mr. Underhill wanted to kidnap Tammy.

"You stay away from him, you hear?" her mother said.

"I never even see him," said Tammy, who would not start first grade until September.

"I'm afraid he might try to get you," her mother said. "I have good instincts for this sort of thing."

In the back seat of the car, Jane widened her eyes at me. I thought she was incredulous, as I was, at her mother's remark.

Instead, she was gazing raptly past me, at an old downtown bridge with stone arches.

She said, "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"No more pageants, Tammy," their mother declared, "not when the judges are kidnappers and crazies."

"But Mama," Tammy bawled, "I want to be Cleopatra next time."

Jane let her head fall back and stared at the bridge as we drove beneath it. "Beautiful," she whispered.

JANE STARTED finding beauty everywhere: the toilets, for example, in the school restrooms, toilets which were cracked porcelain affairs from the nineteen-teens. Their design was so graceful, Jane said. There was beauty in the amber light of afternoon when we rode our bikes, and she used the word *amber* proudly. Miss Stancil's voice was beautiful, Jane said, when she led the class in the Pledge of Allegiance. "Notice it, Laurie," she said, "such a pretty, clear voice, with the same local accent that you and I have got."

How did Jane at ten know about local accents, our accents, apart from the way other people talked?

And Herman's face. Herman was beautiful, Jane said: "See the way his cheeks are round, but the rest of his face is thin."

"I'm going to tell him you said so," I said.

"I already did," she said. "I love Herman. I told him that, too."

We watched as he tossed a ball to Dorothy, a blue ball they had evidently brought from home, their wrists poking out of their coat sleeves. Dorothy was as tall as a grown woman.

I said, "Does Herman love you back?"

"I'm not telling you," she said. "I know better than that."

Beyond that day, I have no clear memories of Herman, and only one more of Dorothy. She was in my home ec class in high school. I can see her bent over her sewing machine, feeding bright cloth to the needle, her foot working the electric pedal.

In the restaurant, twenty years after saying she loved Herman, Jane smiles as she says, "Tell me the rest of the story, Laurie, but fast, because I have to get on home."

"I hated Mr. Underhill," I said, "because of Herman and Dorothy. I never spoke to either one of them. That was my fault."

"I just don't remember that," Jane says. "I do remember that pageant, when Tammy didn't win." And she chuckles.

Mr. Underhill did one other extraordinary thing.

This was at Christmastime of my junior year, when Jane and I were going to the big high school that served the whole county. By then, Mr. Underhill and Miss Stancil were far, far behind us. Mr. Underhill never kidnapped Tammy. He quit his job as principal and was teaching geography at a small private school. He lived at the old hotel, which hadn't been a hotel for about fifty years and was instead a rental property for the humble, just a few families in the big drafty building—though Mr. Underhill surely had enough money to live somewhere else had he wanted to. He'd gotten funny over the years, as my mother put it, getting so very quiet, he who had once burst into classrooms and held assemblies.

Back in the glory days of the hotel, so the legend ran, a deer park had surrounded it, and sure enough, the descendants of those deer were still around, shy creatures living in the nearby forest. Walking very quietly in the woods, you might glimpse one. Somehow, Mr. Underhill captured two of

them and put them in a homemade wire pen outside the old hotel, a large comfortable pen equipped with hay and a water trough and strung with Christmas lights. A sign said, "Santa's Reindeer."

I loved the deer. I went every afternoon to visit them, to reach through the pen and pet their noses if they'd let me. They were magical, splendid, and amazingly tame—two small does. They smelled like the woods, and their eyes, when they met mine, were so gentle that I wanted to cry.

Everybody went to look at them, feeding them carrots and apples and sugar cubes and calling them reindeer, even though they didn't have antlers. Their pen was the center of Glen Allen in those days before Christmas.

Every morning when I rode the bus to school past the old hotel, I saw Mr. Underhill out front tending to them. Jane didn't ride the bus. She had a wild boyfriend, Dave Becker, who drove her to school and back. Some days they didn't make it to school.

Jane and I led busy lives. We had "school spirit." We sang in the glee club and had parts in the class play. We were cheerleaders, even though we thought our orange uniforms were ugly. We brushed our long hair flat and wore thin black ribbons around our necks. And all the boys were after Jane.

Even the young, handsome history teacher, Mr. Wells, seemed to have a crush on Jane. I was madly in love with Mr. Wells. I dreamed of going to the prom with him, of sneaking kisses, of having as many babies as he wanted.

He pointed out that our neck ribbons were not a new fashion. "During the French Revolution, aristocratic ladies tied red ribbons around their necks to mock the guillotine," he said, stopping Jane and me in the hallway one day, as people rushed around us.

I grinned at him, waiting for Jane to flirt back. She always knew what to say. But she snapped, "Don't talk to *me* about death."

She grabbed my arm and hustled me down the hall with her. "I just can't stand it, is all," she said, pulling the ribbon off her neck and throwing it to the floor.

"What's going on, Jane?" I said.

"It's stupid old Dave," she said. "He said how much fun it would be to shoot those reindeer. He's got a bow and arrow. I broke up with him this morning, but it's all I can think about—that he might do it."

"He better not," I said, my stomach lurching.

"Let's go check on the deer," Jane said, "right now."

"How? We don't have a car."

"We'll get Mr. Wells to drive us," Jane said, as if this were routine.

We found him in his empty classroom, eating lunch from a paper bag. He listened gravely to Jane's story, and then he did drive us, cutting out of school in mid-day to take us back to Glen Allen in his van. Snow was falling, but melting as it hit the windshield. Jane sat up front with him and I sat in the back, thinking, even through my fear for the deer, how fascinating Mr. Wells was, how much he knew. He pointed to a sweet gum tree and said that during the Civil War, with candles in short supply, Southerners soaked the round green seedpods in lard and used them instead, lighting the stems for wicks.

Jane said, "But still, they lost."

"You could have said *we* lost, Jane," said Mr. Wells, "but you didn't. Interesting."

"Oh, it was so long ago," Jane said, "and war is so boring."

"Not really, on either count," he said, pulling up in the yard of the old hotel.

"They're gone!" I cried.

We tumbled out of the van. The pen was empty, its chicken-wire walls and log corner-posts stripped of the Christmas lights and hay. The dirt floor was covered with hoof prints, as if the deer had danced there, or struggled to get away from Dave Becker and his bow and arrow, but there was no blood.

"Where are they?" said Jane.

"I let them go," said a voice behind us. We turned and found Mr. Underhill standing there, burly as ever, his arms crossed over his chest. "They were restless," he said. "It was never my intention to make them unhappy. I took them back to the woods."

Jane burst into tears and hugged him, while his arms dropped to his sides and his checkmark eyebrows rose up and up. How long had it been since anybody hugged him?

"I'm so glad," Jane said. "Thank you."

"I've got to get back to school. We all do," said Mr. Wells. "Laurie, Jane, let's go."

"I'm not going back," I said.

Jane released Mr. Underhill, wiped her eyes, and said, "Laurie, we've got cheerleading practice!"

"You go on," I said, turning away from her. "I'll call you tonight."

"Aren't you glad about the deer?" she said. "What's the matter, Laurie?"

"Of course I'm glad," I said, and I was. A sob of relief hovered in my chest, right by my heart. So what was I mad about? "Go on."

And she and Mr. Wells rolled away in his van.

"I REMEMBER now, I do!" Jane's eyes meet mine fully, her mouth an O of surprise. She counts out a big tip for the

waitress. "I remember Mr. Wells driving us out there. So what happened next? Did you call me that night?"

"No," I say. "I had too much on my mind. I kept wondering if you and Mr. Wells had pulled over in that van and, you know, taken advantage of it. He was damn good-looking."

"Laurie!" she hoots, swinging her head over her empty plate of cream cake. "He was never my type. Look, I've got to go."

She hugs me and takes off, shrugging a black shawl around her shoulders, shaking back her blonde hair. On the table is the little Styrofoam box that the waitress brought for Jane's leftover sun-dried-tomato ravioli. "Jane, you forgot something," I call after her, but she's gone—fast—just like she and Mr. Wells had left, once they knew the deer were safe.

In retrospect, in make-believe, I confront Mr. Underhill. I say, "Stocking cap," and he grovels. I ask how he caught the deer, and he tells me a secret, that all he had to do was step into the woods and open his arms. I say, "Blackbirds," and his confession is ringing and passionate.

But I was sixteen, and melodrama was too tempting, too everlasting, to resist. The van was far down the road, Jane's waving hand still visible. I knew Mr. Wells was talking to her in his urgent way, and that they would not miss me one bit. My anger fell in on itself like the little torn-down house.

"I'm never going back to school," I told Mr. Underhill.

"Sure you will, Laurie," he said, as if we talked about this all the time, "and it'll be grand."

The sun came out as I turned and left him. I headed home, telling myself I was letting him off easy because it was Christmastime, that another day I would punish him as he deserved. Sunlight caught in the trees, and I was the only one on that old, narrow road, so how could I help but be happy?