

Jesse Mayo has had voices and visions in her head since she was a child, working at Clipper Mill, in Hampden, just outside Baltimore. In 1907 she watches her father fall to his death, all in a dream, then begins hearing his cries and others from beyond the grave, deep within her mind. By 1979, she is old and frail, and must respond to one voice that demands answers. This voice, of all the ones that have plagued her over years, is the one that went silent when she wanted to hear it the most. Now that they once again commune, mind-to-mind, the old woman is afraid the process will kill her, but she must persevere even if it does.

Her husband, Jim McPherson, has lived with this challenge for sixty years, holding his wife during uncontrollable fits of possession, as she rails at a voice only she can hear. Now, in their last days, she asks him to trust her, to do what she asks before it is too late. He acquiesces, determined to help her, to save her life, even if only for the short time they have left together on this earth. He must identify this voice deep within his wife's mind and placate it, crush it, or do whatever it takes to save her. In this process, he is sucked into a vortex of mind-control and dreams so real that he may die before he awakes, before he can save his Jesse.

If you like a tale of ghosts and dreams, of World War I, of a time and mindset lost to us in our overwhelmed and overloaded today, try *SISTERBABY'S MONKEY*. If you can remember the thrill of reading Edgar Allen Poe for the first time, try *SISTERBABY'S MONKEY*. If you like historical adventure with lots of action, if you ever smelled, touched and tasted using only your memory, if you ever awoke with a dream imprinted upon your retinas that was so real, you weren't sure where or when you were, if you ever coveted the love in an old couple's eyes, if you want to believe in life and love beyond death, you will like *SISTERBABY'S MONKEY*.

SISTERBABY'S
MONKEY

CHARLES COLLEY

CHANA BOOKS

Sisterbaby's Monkey is Copyright © Charles Colley, 2008
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and should not be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For more information e-mail all inquiries to: charles@charlescolley.com.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 0-9817737-0-2

ISBN-13: 978-0-9817737-0-4

Cover Design by: Jeremy Robinson – www.jeremyrobinsononline.com

Visit Charles Colley on the World Wide Web at: www.charlescolley.com

To Nancy, Chana and Ernie. To our time together, may it pass slowly. To the past, may it not seem wasted. To the future, may it, finally, not matter.

SISTERBABY'S
MONKEY

INTRODUCTION

-1907- HAMPDEN, MARYLAND, NEAR BALTIMORE

The skylight splintered with the impact of his body. In slow motion, he twisted and turned through the air, shards of window pane stuck in his face and hanging in the air around him as he fell to earth, sixty feet below.

The trowel in his hand had black tar on it, and his moustache twitched as he looked at it, then let it go. His ice blue eyes, almost white, showed surprise, just a little bit, and then his lips parted in the faintest of smiles. His body hitting the cobblestone floor, face down, made a terrible sound.

Jesse awoke, screaming at the top of her lungs. The windows were thrown open for the slightest breeze on a stagnant, Baltimore night, and she gulped humid, summer air.

Her open eyes saw only the man imprinted upon her retinas, legs twisted and snapped beneath him, blood pooling around his crushed face, the bright lights in his eyes forever extinguished. She had seen everything with his eyes, heard everything with his ears. The acrid smell of tar was in her nostrils and her tiny hand could still feel the weight of the trowel and its rough wooden handle.

She heard quick, heavy steps in the hall. "Jesse, Jesse! Look at me, babe, look at me!" Her mother took Jesse's face in her hands and turned it toward the light from the open door, toward her own face. "It's over, what ever it was, it's over now, babe." She hugged her daughter to her, smashing Jesse's face between un-

bound breasts swathed in a night dress damp with perspiration, and Jesse smelled her mother, breathed her in, and hugged her back.

"He's dead, Mama, Daddy's dead, I just saw him fall!" She said this from within her mother's embrace, her words muffled, and she wasn't sure her mother understood. Jesse Mayo pushed back from her mother's arms, wriggling free from her grasp, and looked up into her eyes. "Mama, he's dead. I just saw it."

Her words, so matter of fact, so drained of emotion, belied the fear and confusion in her eight year old heart. Her mother pulled Jesse in to her again, holding her head with one meaty arm, so that both Jesse's ears were muffled, one by a hand, one by a giant breast. She heard her mother's words come from her chest.

"Daddy ain't dead, little girl, he's in Philadelphia, you know that. Six weeks work and almost done, he'll be home end of the week. You just read his last letter after dinner tonight, remember?" Jesse nodded her head into her mother's chest, struggled to gain her freedom and gave up as her mother held fast and continued talking.

"He's fine, he's sleeping right now, just like we should be, deep asleep in our beds, resting so's we can do a good day's work tomorrow, him, high up on top that building, me at the Mill, you and your sisters in school. You alright now?" Finally she set her daughter free, and Jesse sprang from the bed and ran across the room, her bare feet making footprints on the black pine boards, in the moisture fallen from the sultry air.

"He's not fine, he's dead! He's dead! I watched him and he's dead! Why won't you believe me, Mama, I saw it!"

CHAPTER 1

-1979-HAVRE DE GRACE, MARYLAND

Old Jesse knew where she was, but didn't. A part of her felt the attic around her and the things she had stored there over a lifetime. A part of her, from moment to moment, felt the things she touched, as she moved about the cold space in the dark, careful from habit not to bump her head against the sloped ceiling. Her left hand stretched out before her into the gloom as she bent her neck and dipped her left shoulder in the cramped space. Her right hand reached upward of its own volition, the old oak, tongue and groove roofing boards and water stained chestnut rafters pressing dry splinters into her palms. The tips of aged roofing nails pricked her fingers, leaving bloody smears next to ones she'd left on the boards decades before. She was oblivious as she moved blindly onward, stepping on the hem of her nightgown, almost falling, stubbing her toe.

She'd fought hard against it over the past months, but it was going to happen tonight, just as it used to when she was young, when she relished it, when she encouraged it to come. Back in the day, in between the wars, the one to end all others and its bastard child, she'd assigned herself a lifetime's penance. Folks came to need her, depend upon her and then to take advantage. She traveled around Baltimore caring for sick relations at first, taking food she had cooked in her own kitchen, cleaning their homes for them when they could not. Jim earned enough that he encouraged this sense of purpose in her, and never minded when she arrived home later than he did, having walked across the city because the

last street car had come and gone. Later, she'd begun to bring home the dying, her family's or Jim's at first, to clean up their puke and shit, to breathe their corruption as she bathed their parts as they lay in her guest room, to hold their hands, or if need be, to hug their wasted selves to her breast and whisper lies into their ears as they expelled their final gasps and evacuated one last time in her bed.

Jim, finally demanding aloud to know what compelled her, put his foot down, forbade any more of this horror within his walls. It was improper. It was unseemly. Vitriol spewed from his bride's sweet lips, as her tears flowed and she struggled to breathe while stating that it was in deed, her or them, his choice. His shock at her vehemence caused him to relent and just suffer. She was funny in the head since the War, changed, and so was he. Jesse had a need and that would have to be enough. He loved her without condition.

When she began bringing home strangers, a friend made on the street car, or the mother of that new friend, he, at first, soldiered in silence, cooking meals for himself, Jesse and even the dying after a fourteen hour day. He washed and hung his own wet clothes on the line before bed when he saw that Jesse had failed, again and again, to do them. Retrieving them in the morning, wearing them still sodden from the summer night's humidity or frozen as a board in winter, half thawed over the kitchen stove, went on for way too long. He finally said enough was god damned enough, and moved her here, to this house, her Haven of Grace where the Susquehanna spilled into Chesapeake Bay, so far from Baltimore. He thought he was protecting her, fixing her, by moving her away and she never told him otherwise.

Her life had once been about traversing most of Baltimore, helping people, not thinking, rather doing, justifying. Here in Havre de Grace, her life resorbed by her guilt and pain, she languished. Pacing within these old walls, futzing with flowers in window boxes or tiny planting squares either side of the front walk, cleaning and cooking replaced speaking to and touching people. Her atonement had been stolen from her, surely God's will or somebody's, so she sentenced herself to a lifetime of

speaking only to herself. Waiting each day for what she knew to be inevitable was far worse than the tasks she had once proscribed for herself, and that was only just and true. Whether Jim came home each night on the train from Baltimore, or whether he was away on business which seemed to happen more as they aged, her fate and state of mind went unchanged.

Now, as she touched an old wooden chest, her finger tips telegraphed not dry cedar with beaten copper hinges and unopened latch, but desiccated clothes within, still in tissue paper as she wrapped them after applying the final stitch, a handful of coffee beans strung together on black thread to make a bracelet, an egg shaped piece of blue glass and three smooth pebbles, four of her hair clasps from when she was young, one tortoise shell and one enameled gold, two in cheap brass. She saw letters penned in long ago script so flowing and fine, no one today would know it as her own. The letters, ivory with age and browned at the edges, were like the Vanilla Wafer cookies she used to love with her coffee. She knew all the words in the letters by heart and felt the lace borders on the frilly dresses with her mind.

Then, the head rest of an old, upholstered rocker was beneath her palms, its memories telegraphing themselves through the antimacassar she had crocheted and pinned there with her young, strong hands. The wooden arms of this chair, its flowery wool covering faded from red to pale pink, its horse hair stuffing sprung forth from numerous tears and punctures, transmitted so many unrealized dreams and un-allayed regrets, like electric shocks from her finger tips to her brain. Long ago, she had pondered, stewed, aggravated and agitated herself in this chair until she'd been unable to sit here a moment longer, and had run to her bed, time and again, screaming into her pillow as she clawed at her hair and cried. She'd always run cold water on her face and made herself presentable before Jim came home from work, all those many years.

Jesse snatched her hands away, spitting into each palm, gobs of white phlegm, softening the blood already drying there. She slapped her own cheeks, left, then right, then smeared the pinked mess over her face and into her long, white hair. This night was

not about that chair and the junk that surrounded her. Her brain, some piece of it, some minor office within its greater bureaucracy, told her she was safe, she was fine, that the slow, relentless slipping away of her faculties was just and proper recompense for what she had done. She knew it was going to begin this night and she relished it after decades of longing for it to stop, and then decades more where she wished that her wish had not come true.

Jesse fell to the floor, writhing, knocking her head, rolling through the thick dust. A low moan began in her throat and became a keening wail, a shriek that went on and would not stop.

Jesse slammed her fists into the floor, bloodying her knuckles. The voice in her head was that of an old woman, now weakened by age and pain, an older version of the same voice Jesse had shut off, stopped hearing of her own volition, in 1931, right after moving here from Baltimore. The words were garbled, coming in fits and starts like bad radio.

"Tell me again!" Jesse screamed into the darkness. Her nose began to bleed and her stomach lurched.

"Why did we stop?" Jesse cried, as tears wet her face and spitfle flew, grime clinging to the blood running from her nose. As she rolled back and forth across the attic floor, images flashed within Jesse's brain, sounds and smells assaulted her mind.

Black and White. More than just images. The pictures, the scenes were absent color, flipping, flipping like their original TV used to in 1954, flickering like old time movies in a theater, packed with hushed, expectant viewers. Black and White meant more, much more. The place, the circumstance, the condition Jesse watched with loathing and love in the same instant. Everything screamed Black and White, but still she didn't understand.

And then she did.

"Jesse, Jesus Christ, Jesse!" The light snicked on and it interfered with Jesse's visions. The sounds in her mind were competing with this new voice calling to her, shaking her body, cradling her in strong, familiar arms.

"Jesse, for the love of God, say something to me!" Jim McPherson, Jesse's husband, held her in his arms as he sat on the floor. The bare flesh of his skinny, old man legs was goose

bumped and cold, his underwear bunched at his crotch. His arms were shaking as he held his wife and watched her blank stare begin to change.

Her eyes had been rheumy and clouded, sightless, her lips pulled back in a snarl, her voice unrecognizable. She still would not speak, so he waited, holding her, giving her his own feeble body warmth. Saying prayers in his mind, Jim pleaded for this not to be the end. Not yet, please, not yet.

She shifted her weight in his arms, and, like that, she was back. Her gaze seemed normal, her breathing slowed and she wiped the vomit from her chin. She looked up into his eyes. "You remember how it was, after the Great War, after we first married?" Jim nodded, not sure, but nodding because he could not make his throat find words.

"You put up with a lot in those early years, thought I was crazy, and believed me when I promised I wasn't. It's been calm for a lot of years now, but before I go, you have to help me." Jim's tears dropped onto her face and he tried to respond.

"You, you're not going anywhere, not right now," he said to her, and cried harder. "It's back, isn't it, after all these years?"

Jesse looked up at her husband, her childhood sweetheart, her partner for more than sixty years. "I don't have long. Don't say no, or ask why. We've always trusted each other and we can't stop now." Her heart pounded in her chest as she heard herself describe the lie that had been her life.

Jim squeezed her, and despite his desire to hold her, stiffened his back, signaling Jesse that she had to move, that he could no longer support her. She sat upright, there on the cold attic floor, and took Jim's hand in hers as he unkinked his back and massaged his arm.

"Remember the place you delivered all the coffee to, back in the 20's?"

"I had a route with a hundred stops in a week, back then," Jim managed to say. He was sure, with this question, that Jesse was failing, that her mind was going, as the doctors predicted after listening to some of her dis-jointed tales. They said that long ago

memories would supplant the here and now, that she'd live more in the past than the present.

"The big stone place, I can see it in my mind, the way you described it, out in the country. The nuns' place," Jesse said, her voice failing on the word nuns, averting her eyes from Jim after that.

"Yeah, I remember." Jim touched her face with his finger tips. What did this have to do with anything, fifty years later?

"Take me there. To live. Both of us." Jim started to object and she cut him off.

"Trust me, if you want me in your life, as long as possible. Soon I won't know you, won't be able to talk or do anything for myself. Get me there before that. And trust me."

CHAPTER 2

-1979-LONG GREEN VALLEY, MARYLAND

Movement through the halfhearted flurries caught Jim's eye. A car turned into the end of the lane leading from the main road back to Sweet Acres. As he watched, a hearse, an old '57 Cadillac, made its way up the lane coming toward him. It shined, even in the grey, winter light, and looked new. A twenty year old Chevy followed in its tracks, all glass and fins and rust.

Jim McPherson was on the second of four floors in this mausoleum of a building. The "home" as his cell mates referred to it, sat high on a hill, with the land falling away. The elevation gave him a good vantage point from which to follow their progress. This is where Jesse had wanted to be. The old convent had been turned into a warehouse for old people to die in. How had she known?

The lane turned directly in front of the building, and two stories below, the automobiles passed directly beneath him. Past his building, the main and oldest one in the complex, the lane forked left and right. Every car he had watched out this window the past four months had always veered to the right, toward new apartments and offices. As Jim looked down, the hearse and Chevy took the left fork, heading back down hill toward the road again, to a small cemetery with low stone walls defending its boundaries.

Jim knew before he and Jesse moved in, that Sweet Acres had once been the convent. He recognized it, even with all the changes. He remembered this place, when, as a young man, he'd delivered coffee and tea, all the way out here from his uncle's

roasting plant near Baltimore's docks. That was in the 20's, right after the War, soon after he and Jesse had been married.

The orphans that co-habited with the ancient, near silent nuns were, by and large, flotsam from the flu epidemic that had savaged Baltimore, that had washed away countless millions across the world. He pictured Baltimore's sidewalks piled high with coffins, the port's docks so clogged with the dead in their boxes that cargo could not be off loaded from the world's ships. How had they endured that horror on the heels of The Great War?

He shook his head to forget all that, as the Chevy stopped behind the hearse, leaving room to extricate its contents.

Other memories came to him, of nuns in long black habits, always quiet and rarely making eye contact with him, as he off loaded hundred pound sacks of fresh roasted coffee beans, still warm and aromatic from the roaster. He remembered the feel of the burlap in his hands, the weight of the sacks, pulling against his forearms and shoulders, as he watched these six, now seven old nuns, creak and hobble toward the grave site. He remembered carrying those hundred pound sacks, one in each of his vice like mitts, down long dark corridors, into the bowels of this very building, over fifty years ago.

A priest, younger, by his ability to move across the slick, snow covered grass, took one nun's arm, then another, helping them toward the grave. The two drivers removed the plain casket from the hearse and carried it, hands set wide on the handles, facing each other, sidestepping across the snow with it, and placing it upon the pipe framework above the grave. Their cheap grey top coats flapped in the wind. One set his side of the coffin down in a hurry, so he could grab his hat before it blew off his head.

The red clay and rocks from the hole contrasted sharply with the snow specked grass. The old nuns' habits and black rain coats swirled, as a gust of wind blew through the graveyard. The walls, likely built with stone taken from the fields surrounding, by farmers long dead but not buried here, were not tall enough to block any wind. Jim thought he saw the old ladies shiver as the young priest began the funeral liturgy.

The priest's lips moved, the nuns' heads moved up and down, oblivious now to the storm, as they crossed themselves. In only a few minutes, it was finished. All but one of the nuns began moving back toward the cars. She moved toward the grave, pain evident in the way she held her back, bent forward, and in her steps, like she was limping on both feet.

She placed her hands upon the cold coffin, leaned forward and gently kissed the steel. She turned, as the young priest spoke to her, then took his arm. The cars, re-filled with their ancient cargo, moved slowly back along the lane the way they had come, passing beneath Jim's window on their way out. The casket stood alone. Snow began to lay upon it, and the dirt pile was already obscured under snow.

He'd been wrong, Jim said to himself. Maybe this weather will turn into something after all. Good to see some snow. Jim watched Charlie Testani move toward the grave, from the garage and tool shed, about a hundred yards from the little cemetery.

Charlie was not old by Jim's standards, fifty six years young, and still full of piss and vinegar. He was the all around fix it man, and he got a free apartment with a few bucks thrown in. Jim felt a bit guilty for watching, as Charlie cranked the casket down and removed the pipe frame. Charlie looked downward for some moments and then began filling in the hole by hand.

The snow and cold, and especially the shovel pushing looked appealing to Jim. He wished he was out there next to Charlie, flinging dirt, wished he was able to do anything physical these days. As he turned from the window, Jim could hear the occasional thud of dirt hitting the casket, as the changing wind brought that unmistakable sound to him.

He turned his back on the window and surveyed the few pieces of furniture they had brought from home. The tiny, stone walled cells of the nuns had been combined, two or three rooms at a time, into apartments for old couples like Jesse and Jim. He lifted his arms, touching the stone walls on both sides of the narrow hallway, as he stepped into their bedroom.

The stones were warm, their thermal mass capturing, then radiating heat back into the rooms, as the monstrous old furnace in

the belly of the building belched heat that old limbs and torsos gratefully absorbed. The walls reminded him of the old barn in Parkton, on the farm where he was born, how the stone walls felt on a hot summer's day.

Jesse was sleeping, what she did most of the time these days. She'd been right. It hadn't taken long for her to lose most of her language, most of her waking life, after they'd moved in. But she seemed happy when she was awake, and she still knew him. He watched her sleeping peacefully, and felt the need to lay down next to her, even though lunch was just over and he'd slept late that morning. He felt so tired.

He leaned against the stone wall, rough against his old hands, no longer calloused, now thin skinned like a baby's, as he lowered himself to the bed, careful not to wake Jesse. The stone's texture made him think of his childhood, as he unlaced his shoes and lay on the outside of the covers. He closed his eyes and dreamed.

1908-The bank barn stood forty feet tall at the roof peak. A roof of hand split cedar shingles covered one hundred year old chestnut beams. Thousands of rocks, large and small, round, angular or flat, rose out of the ground to form four walls, each nearly five feet thick at the base, two feet thick at the top.

Generations of McPhersons had plowed these hilly, Parkton fields not far from Pennsylvania, unearthing stones as their forebears had in Ireland. The original structure, banked into the hill and facing south, had risen one story, its roof only slightly above ground on the up hill side. A generation of rock accumulating allowed a second story hay loft, rising the full forty feet on the south side, about twenty five on the north.

"Jim, fetch your old Da that small one, there by the mortar bucket, and bring us both the water pail while you're at it. You as thirsty as me?"

The wall, west facing and sunk into the bank, sagged in at the bottom and bowed out at the top. It had been " On the list!", as Jim's Da had said, for years. A seeping spring in the bank behind the wall had trickled through the stones since before his Da was

born, and when it rained, the surface water turned it into a torrent. Years of freezing soil in winter, expanding against the stones and mortar, gave this wall and the section of roof above it a drunken list.

Young Jim McPherson bent his ten year old frame around "that small one", a fifty pound rock, one of hundreds, piled just outside the stone walled barn yard. The water would have to come next trip. Shuffling forward with the boulder in his lap, pretzel bent around it, using even his chin, he could see only the dust poofing around his bare feet.

A ghastly cracking sound, followed by "Oh, Christ!" from his father's lips, the thunder of tons of stone no longer content to be a wall, and his Da was gone. Jim ran into the barn yard, into the billowing dust and small bits of mortar still falling to the ground.

"Da, Da! Oh, God! Please!" His ten year old fingers scrabbled through the dust and mortar chunks, dislodging and flinging away the smaller rocks. His bare feet were cut by shards of mortar, and his blood pocked the rubble as he screamed at the top of his lungs for his Da. Soon, he realized the task was beyond him.

Running. And screaming. Hot lungs on fire, wet eyes streaming trails through the dirt on his face, he ran down hill toward the house. Mama and brother were outside converging upon him. Neighbors could be heard far in the distance, yelling at teams, "Giddap horse, you!" The collapsing wall had gone off like a shot in the surrounding silence, and many were coming to help.

"Mama, the wall! Da, he's under it all! I tried! I tried!" By the time they got back up to the barn, two neighbors were just turning in the lane, their spring wagon nearly tipping as they whipped their team through the turn. Both jumped down before the team had even stopped and, by habit, the team halted upon seeing their owners afoot.

"Over here! My Da! He's under them rocks!" They needed no further explanation as they began to heave the great stones down from the pile. As they progressed downward, a dozen more neighbors appeared, fresh from fields and kitchens, all anxious to help and afraid of what they would find. More than an hour passed as they had to walk stones past the first pile they created in

order to continue. The roof overhead creaked menacingly, as women and children backed outside the barnyard.

All talking ceased as they neared the bottom of the pile.

"Missus, take your boys from here and turn your back now. Ain't gonna be pretty in a minute. Go on now, like I say." Jim's mother, eyes red with tears, her face a smear of fear, complied, a sturdy arm about each boy and two neighbor ladies encircling the three of them.

The sound of retching invaded the silence of three dozen people, standing as still as the rocks surrounding them.

"Dave, get your wife to take her down the house now. No, Missus, please stay over there. Jim's gone to The Better Place now, you know that. Oh, please! Dave, keep her over there now!" Dave, still wiping vomit from his grey chin stubble with his red bandanna, stepped in front of Jim, his brother and his Mama, to block their view.

"He's my husband! Get away! Let me see him! I have to know!" Her screams became shrieks, as she bulled her way past Dave and stood before the rock pile and her James.

Big Jim, he had been after their first son was born, no longer plain Jim. He had stood a clean six feet, with deep set, small, grey eyes, wavy carrot colored hair always mashed beneath the sweat stained, wide brimmed hat he never removed. His sun leathered hands were long, with tapering fingers like a pianist, not a farmer, and hung from long, ropy arms that were lily white, beneath long johns and long sleeved shirt, winter and summer.

Now his hat was gone somewhere and his torn shirt showed the white skin of chest and arms that never saw sunlight during life. Black blood was on his clothes, on the rocks and on his pretty white skin. Sightless eyes showed surprise and horror. His mouth was still open, his final scream still upon his lips. He'd raised one arm to shield his face, only to have it snapped overhead and back, pinned beneath him as he fell. The shoulder socket, dislocated and splintered, protruded obscenely through his shirt.

As Jim's mother kneeled over his Da, her oaths subsiding to a keening wail, her palms caressed his battered face and her fingers

straightened his matted hair. A new bout of shrieks caused Dave to grab her and pull her back. Her fingers, now drenched in blood and brains, had reached the back of his skull, which was no longer there.

"Jim, come on. You look fine and we're going to be late as it is," Jim's ma called up the curving, steep stairway of the old farmhouse. Her voice was hoarse and weak.

He looked at himself in the mirror one last time, trying not to cry. The first funeral of his life time, all ten years of it, lay just minutes ahead and it was for his Da. He dragged his hand across the top of the dresser, scooping up the things he always carried with him. Before shoving them deep in his pockets, he stopped and placed them back on the scarred pine, to examine them like they were new to him.

A pocket knife that had been his Da's, had one blade sharpened so much that it was a fraction of its original size and shape. His Da had given it to him a year ago, Christmas, the instant he'd opened his gift from Jim and little brother, a brand new knife. Jim's was about four inches long, black Bakelite grips, two blades, one folding from either end. The big blade was ground down from use, the smaller one never used, lightly sharpened, still stiff upon its hinge. The one that his Da had used for whittling and cutting twine and every other damned thing, would flop out with a jerk of the wrist, its hinge so worn out that it would not hold itself back where it belonged.

Jim caressed, then folded a red handkerchief, one of several he had inherited from his Da, so pink and faded from the sun, its cotton so thinned from use and shrunken from washings and dryings on the line that it was of little use anymore to a man. His Da would carefully fold one from point to point into a long strip about an inch and a half wide, then tie it around his forehead to soak up the sweat that seemed to come, winter or summer from beneath the old hat that he always wore. Jim got the old ones when they had shrunk too much to circumnavigate Da's head and leave room to knot them at the back. Da always kept a second in

the back right pocket of his overalls for nose blowing or wrapping up a cut hand or swiping at an eye that had captured a filament of hay or a scrap of sawdust or a phantom kernel of airborne grit.

Some interesting rocks, worn smooth by a thousand years in the creek, a piece of pretty blue glass that Jim had found in the woods and scraped along a big boulder to smooth its rough edges went into his pocket followed by the pink bandanna.

Finally he held the peach pit in his little hands, turning it this way and that in the light. His Da had sat on the porch some years back after breaking a leg and needing something to do rather than go crazy while the leg itched and mended. He read for awhile until his glasses hurt his eyes. He wrote down things he wanted to do come spring, when he hoped he'd be walking again. Lists of seed, repairs to be attempted, like the stone wall of the barn, sections of fence to be repaired, a note to visit with a neighbor about breeding rights to his Percheron stud were accomplished in a day.

Da was a man who used his hands everyday, all day long. He hobbled into the kitchen and found the peach pits he had forced Jim's ma to save, now dry after months in the sun. Jim remembered sitting next to his Da, as he made his first cut upon the peach pit with the old penknife. Jim asked what it was going to be and his Da quietly asked him to just wait and see, already absorbed in his task. Jim watched for awhile, then went out to do his chores and the ones his Da could not do. Some things that only Da could do would just have to wait until he walked again.

Days passed and Jim watched the small pile of peach pits, the failures, grow. Da did not want Jim to sweep them up and throw them in the woodstove. "No," he said, "They remind me to have patience and persistence. In all things, from this whittling I do to keep from going stir crazy, to watching you grow up, my Jim, to carrying out plans for this old farm, I have to have patience and to persist when I believe I will just stop and give up. That little pile of pits is talking to me as I carve upon the latest one, telling me to learn from my mistakes and to be aware that I have only so many left, so I better make one of them just right."

As Jim continued staring at the creation in his hand, he felt his Da's phantom hand upon his head, as he had tousled his hair, then clapped him on the back.

Ultimately, Big Jim had prevailed. A finely carved spider monkey lay in Jim's little hand now, its tiny hands gripping its tail midway, while the tail's tip was firmly implanted in its mouth. Its little head and eyes and lips were perfectly formed at the top point of the peach pit. Its rounded spine and expanded rib cage, as though it was holding its breath, flowed down the side of the pit, until its tail began, just before the bottom point of the pit. Its rear leg muscles were clenched so that the hind feet also held onto the tail, which ran up the other side of the peach pit until it passed through the tiny hands and found its way into the tiny monkey's mouth.

It was perfect from every angle, not just a relief but a fully carved sculpture, with open space beneath little arm pits, and in the angle formed by the elbows, the upper arms and forearms as they grasped the tail. Jim was fascinated all over again at the tiny face that his Da had achieved with only this old knife. It seemed surprised, yet satisfied, to have its own tail in its mouth.

He remembered the day that Da had finished it, not long before his leg had healed, after a long winter in the cold sun of the front porch, and lots of hours just sitting next to the kitchen stove when it was snowing outside. Jim had walked past his Da, on his way out to milk one afternoon. His Da had grabbed his forearm and halted him in his tracks.

"Give me your hand," he'd said, then planted this monkey in Jim's. Nothing more, no sermon about patience followed. Jim remembered looking at it in awe, amazed that his Da had created such a thing.

Now he ran his thumb across the little body, this time, consciously, examining its every detail. He knew it by feel now better than by sight, as, daily, without realizing it, he smoothed, turned and squeezed the creature while deep in his pocket.

The past three days had been horrible, with his father laid out in the cramped parlor, dressed in his Sunday best, hair slicked over, hiding the crushed rear of his skull. Even with his pallor so

apparent, Jim had waited, unconsciously holding his breath, for his Da to open his eyes, inhale and say, "Where am I? What happened?"

But it didn't happen. His Da's bristly moustache didn't move, his eyebrows didn't rise and fall, his eyelids didn't twitch as they did when Jim studied him during a nap after the Sunday afternoon meal. He really was dead, and each time the thought sunk in, he cried all over again.

"I'm coming, Ma," he yelled, as he raced down the stairs, two at a time, hands pressed against both walls.

His new brogans, shined a dark brown and yet to trod in mud or manure, served as dress shoes until his old boots were out grown or worn out. Then the one pair would have served double duty, going to school in cold weather, performing barn chores and chopping wood for the stove and fireplace, then being cleaned and shined each Saturday night for church on Sunday. Barefoot six days a week in spring, summer and fall had been acceptable these past ten years, but he doubted that would continue after today. He wondered what city shoes would be like and then was surprised at himself for having that thought.

Perched on the edge of the canvas seat, Jim hunched forward, reigning the horse and buggy slowly into line behind the Percherons and spring wagon carrying his father. His Ma sat next to him, stiff and distant, while his brother rode in the box behind, facing backwards.

As he drove, he thought back to his Da, buried by the stones of the old barn, his skull crushed, his body smashed. Da had threatened to point up the mortar in that wall for years, but never gotten to it. Jim knew that if they had just been able to dig the new footers and build the retaining wall that his Da had planned everything would be different. Tears spilled down onto his hands as he drove. His tears and sweaty palms caused black dye in the reins to stain his fingers. Jim, with shorter arms than his Da, had to grip the reins longer, not the well worn tan spot his Da would never grip again.

Jim clutched both reins in his right hand, swiping his nose and eyes with his left sleeve. His Ma hadn't seen. She was staring to

the right, knees together, still ramrod straight, and his brother was watching where they'd been, all three lost in their tears and separate emptiness.

Standing in the front pew of the church with his Ma and brother, Jim turned and watched his father's casket muscled inside by six strong neighbors, some dressed well, others just in from the fields in work boots and overalls, a suit coat over top and Sunday hat for the occasion, mud dropping from their boots in clumps as they trudged up the aisle of the old country church.

The rest of that day was a blur for Jim. The closed casket, and the preacher droning about those remaining being the unlucky ones, not the dear departed who had already received his reward. Hymns were sung hesitantly by neighbors thinking, "Thank God it wasn't me or mine." The wake at the house later, food everywhere, faces in his face, farmers' big hands upon his young shoulders. People telling him to come back and visit anytime and that they knew, being Big Jim's boy, he'd make good in the city and come back home some day.

He remembered his last look around the old family farm before climbing into the spring wagon that had carried his father's body just the day before. Sitting among suitcases, bed springs, his Da's old rocker and the residue of a country life going with them into Baltimore, he watched his Ma and little brother finally come out of the old house, she, crying silently, and he, excited to be off.

Jim's uncle clucked to the matched black mares, now his, as was the wagon. He'd also bought the livestock that Jim had cared for each morning and evening of his young life.

"Take a good look, Jim. You'll be able to come visit these horses over to my place, anytime. But this old place ain't gonna be yours no more. Just hope your ma knows what she's doing, moving into Bawlamer like this."

"Hush you, Terrence McPherson, I'm doing what I have to do for my children and myself," Jim's Ma said. "You know well's I do, we can't make this tired, rocky place pay our way. Jim couldn't have made it without the timbering he done and that's all gone. Anyway, me and these boys can't do it. These hills can't support us and with my James gone to his reward, I say good riddance to

this place. Looking forward to the city, I am. How about you, my Jim?"

"Don't know, Ma, guess so," Jim answered out of his daze, as he watched the Bentley Springs Station of the North Central Railroad slowly approach.

Jim's uncle pulled on the reins for the horses to stop. They were not used to his voice. Jim's Da would have just called, "Hoa, girls", in his deep voice, for them to do his bidding.

Little Jim, all ten years of him, got down from the wagon and walked to the front of the team. He looked up into the faces of the mares who had been his best friends, tears streaming from his eyes. As he reached up to caress one, then the other, they both dropped their heads as they always did for him, and nuzzled his face and neck, like book ends, one on either side, wickering softly.

The earth and rocks thudding on his father's casket still rang in his ears as he boarded the train for Baltimore. He smelled the horses on his face and hands, as the train moved south, wondering how long it would be until he smelled their smell again.

Old Jim's mouth was a hard, straight line, his eyes clamped shut, as he slept and watched himself, so small, so alone, looking out that train window. He told himself it was a dream of long ago, to wake up, but he could not. He slept on, as the winter afternoon lost its light, and the tiny bedroom darkened.

Next to him, Jesse's sleeping eyes moved rapidly beneath their lids. Such a horrible thing to happen to a little boy. She wanted to hold the little boy as a mother would, then as a wife would her troubled husband. Jim changed now, from boy to man and back again as Jesse added to Jim's dream in her own mind, feeling what the little boy felt, feeling what the old man next to her felt as he watched himself from so long ago.

Jesse had known this story of his father's accident. Jim told it when asked, but never the details, never the feelings of a little boy, seeing his father's body smashed like that, never the small boy memories scabbed and callused over in an old man's mind, still so vivid.

For the first time in decades she replayed her own father's violent death. Feeling his big body inside her own tiny one, his pain, his complex emotions that she would never fathom with a child's memory, for a child's memory was all she had of that horrific night, she saw again through his eyes as he fell. That fall had replayed in her dreams each night as a child, and then as a young woman, her father's voice ringing in her ears as she awakened, his mind pleading with hers, to help him find the peace that death had promised but not supplied. She had shut him out of her mind and her dreams so long ago, but she had never helped him, she knew this. How could she?

Jesse let herself go, ready to dream, to remember as asked, and felt surprise. She was there at the edges. She had entered Jesse's dream, and made Jesse purposefully aware of Her presence. She hadn't done that in Jim's dream, just watched.

"It's OK," Jesse told herself, and in so doing, told Her. "That's what I'm here for, to let you see. All of it, Sisterbaby, all of it."

Jesse dreamed for Her, dreamed of Hampden and work.

1915-"I'll see you tomorrow," Jesse hollered to the girl alongside her. They both looked haggard, and the dirt that clung to their faces made them look older than their sixteen years.

Jesse moved easily, accustomed to the huge, canvas sack at her side, its shoulder strap cutting into her neck with the weight. She walked toward the far end of Clipper Mill, as her friend continued to stoop, picking up spent bobbins that forever cluttered the floor. Jesse climbed the steps to the boss's door, dropped her sack filled with bobbins, and marked herself out on her time card.

She descended the stairs, hung her sack on a nail for the next girl to use it, and moved back onto the broad, oak floor. Huge machines, driven by canvas and leather belts looping down from a main drive shaft at the ceiling, were operated by women, concentrating upon their work.

Some made cotton into endless strings. Others made those strings, wrapped upon the bobbins Jesse and her co-workers were

forever picking from the floor, into cotton canvas duck, the stuff of sails for ships, and tents for soldiers. Now, the canvas duck was even used in the manufacture of the new rubber tires on automobiles.

The noise was deafening, as she made her way toward her mother, who operated one of the giant machines. She waived at Miss Bertha, who stood for a moment, pausing to stretch her neck and swing her arm over her head. Miss Bertha waved back, lifting the stump that had been an arm, until her machine had mangled it years before. Her good arm was already re-engaging the levers that made strings into duck. She smiled at Jesse for an instant, one side of her mouth turned down, one eye opaque and blinded in the same accident that took her arm. Jesse kept walking.

She waited for her mother to see her out of the corner of her eye. The last thing she wanted to do was distract her mother, cause her injury. "Mama, I'm going home and I'll stop at the store and get what's on the list." Jesse shouted this, inches from her mother's face. Her mother nodded without speaking, the din of the place too difficult to talk over, and turned to her work.

Jesse walked out of Clipper Mill, an hour and a half earlier than the end of her twelve hour shift, and looked up at the grey, winter sky over Baltimore. It was four thirty in the afternoon, and already nearly dark, but she appreciated any daylight she got to see, any rain she felt upon her face, any sun that baked her back.

She walked down the edge of the dirt road, avoiding mud puddles, hesitating as a horse drawn wagon went by, so as not to be splashed. She entered and left the company store, depositing the chit she'd signed on top the meager groceries in her satchel. The meat was grey, the apples were brown, she knew the flour would have weevils, but such was winter.

She passed wooden, clapboard houses, all alike, until she found her own side yard, the rusty gate hinge squealing as she closed it behind her. She climbed the back steps and entered a tiny kitchen, laying her bundle on the table.

"Hey, sweet girl," her Grampa Schwertner greeted her as he always did. "You work hard today? Silly question, eh?" She pulled

a chair from beneath the old table and sat wearily upon it. She pulled off her shoes and then her woolen stockings. Grampa took one of Jesse's bare feet in his heavy hands and began their ritual.

As he massaged, he said to her what he said most days, for days on end, but Jesse didn't mind. He was her grandfather, who had taken them in after her father died, and he rubbed her feet every day like this, so the repeated story was a small price to pay. It seemed like his mind was going since Gramma had died. Now Jesse, her mother and sisters cared for him, as he had cared for them all these years.

"You look more like your Gramma every day, Jesse. Why, your auburn hair, your pretty green eyes, even your nose is just like hers. I remember when I met her, not much older than you are now, after I moved in here from Railroad Row, after the War Between the States."

He stopped rubbing her feet and flexed his left hand. Jesse knew why. She'd heard it so many times. She wanted to nod off, but felt a chill. Her clothes were soaked, as usual, from sweating at Clipper Mill. She hunched her chair closer to the cook stove, as her Grampa began the tale again.

"Hurt this hand April 19, 1861, when we rioted against the 6th Massachusetts Regiment moving through Baltimore. We was throwing bricks and bottles, anything we could lay our hands on, when them boys opened fire on us. That's a brick sliver, deep down, from a ricocheting musket ball. Never did get it all out. I was scared of being arrested, and even more afraid my Ma would see my hand. Kept it wrapped in an old hanky and stuffed in my pocket for quite a spell.

"But it brought me luck, caused me to meet your Gramma. Later, I was working for B&O Railroad, they had me fixing track and bridges, wrecked by the Confederates between here and Washington. I sure didn't say nothing about hating them Union Army boys, the pay was too good.

"I was walking up this street right here, Merryman's Lane, trying to find the house of a buddy, and she bumped into me in the dark. She actually smelled my hand all festering, and brung me in here, this very house, wouldn't take no for an answer. She and her

ma cleaned it up good, pulled most of the brick out and made me promise to see a doctor or come back to them.

"Well, you know what I did." He smiled. "It was the perfect excuse to see her again and again." The old man looked at Jesse, hunched as close to the stove as she could without getting burned, slumped in a pile across the table, sound asleep.

"Poor child," he muttered to himself. "Working since she was nine in that godawful place, since her drunken father dove off that building." He picked up her coat and draped it over her shoulders, then quietly stepped into the front room.

"She's wore out, mother," Grampa Schwertner said to his dead wife's picture, on the table next to his chair. "She'll be there a life time, like you would've been if I hadn't come along and saved you. Like her mother is going to be unless something changes. Talk to Him for us, will you, Gertie, old girl?" He picked up the picture and kissed it, as he did most days, after he told Jesse about his dead wife, after Jesse fell asleep in the kitchen.



To the left of Charles Colley is Charlie Chan Father Horse and to the right is Andy Chan Number One Son, Charlie Chan's little boy, only 17 and a half hands tall. They both have roles in *The All Girl Hunt* and *Goodbye Harry, Hello Harry*, coming soon from Chana Books. Charles and his family live with copious animals on Menagerie Farm in Maryland.