

# HUMTOWN

In a place as small as this one, miles away from any other, we do live in one another's pockets. The town, like most around here, has an official name, but most people call it Humtown. A few Chamber of Commerce types have tried to sell our community by skewing its name to Hometown, but nearly everyone, not only the notorious wags, knows Humtown suits us perfectly. You can stand on a street corner and practically hear the subterranean chatter of gossip. We know something of everyone, including all the dogs and most of the cats. Our information is not always correct, but once we own it, it's ours and very hard to relinquish. Yes, we keep track of who drives what vehicle and when and where that vehicle might be parked, particularly in the early morning. We observe and note the conditions of one another's houses: the progress and abundance (or lack thereof) of vegetable gardens, the proliferation of roses, the trees we have labeled not according to type but by the family who shares space with them: the Duffy Yews, the Kendall Willow, the late lamented Malonardi Monkeypuzzle, felled only months before in the Columbus Day storm. We keep track of each other's relatives and are well-acquainted with numerous strands of family lore: black sheep who have fled town, black sheep who stayed and reformed, black sheep who have gone underground. Long-lasting grudges between cousins and neighbors and, yes, cats. We know who is stepping out in a marriage, what bastard raises his hand to wife, whom not to leave alone in a room with an open purse or child, where to carefully count your change. Those we don't quite know, we still surveil and categorize. Newcomers are given nicknames that sometimes stick for years. Nicknames are actually our key identifiers, linked as they often are to occupation. Rick the Fish runs the cannery market, of course. Dandy Dan is our barber. Sparky Hipps,

the electrician. Thunder Bob used to drive the heavy quarry truck. Now he manhandles garbage cans in the dawn route as if determined to keep earning his name. Each week, the newspaper chronicles the doings of the town elite, such as they are: the higher-ups at the mill, the business owners, the school principal, the doctors, and the elected members of the numerous civic societies that keep up the pretense that we are a vibrant community burbling with events.

The week before the Big Walk is an exceptionally newsworthy one in the dulled environs of the local paper. The school board holds an annual dinner and presents awards to one another. Reports warn of a man and woman, posing as a pair of missionaries, going door-to-door out in the county, soliciting donations for “heathen conversions.” Another visiting sailboat lost its mooring and went aground behind the old cannery. *Dial M for Murder* and *The Manchurian Candidate* have finally arrived at the theater.

Two paragraphs are given to the discovery of a steel box, which appeared on Gold Egg Beach. So much has washed up since the Big Storm, the Columbus Day Storm, the “Storm of the Century.” And so much is still missing, lost in the storm surge that engulfed the boat haven and part of downtown. Suddenly being a scavenger isn’t for the faint of heart. Closer to Seattle, for instance, a child’s body washed ashore. But some are still compelled to roam the beach, remembering the last time real valuables had been swept up. A box, wood and iron, reputed to be part of the much-sought-after treasure from an old shipwreck. Inside, gold eggs, a baker’s dozen. That was back in 1941, the war years, when honesty was patriotic. The gold eggs, according to old stories, were swiftly delivered to the heirs of the embossed name on that box, who, astonished and grateful, donated one—lucky number 13—back to the town museum, where the curator promptly locked it away in a drawer. It was years before most of the town realized the artifact wasn’t an egg at all, but a dumpy, flattened sphere, possibly a primitive figurine, its waist encircled by a deeper gold band, as if the object were meant to be opened. Did anyone make the attempt? Was the object hollow, and did they find more treasure inside? Was it indeed gold? The same museum curator, still guarding the treasure in 1963, albeit with less constancy, was reluctant to allow examination. Wasn’t the glorious story enough? The true legacy of

the shipwreck and gift turned out to be the renaming of the old brickworks beach, still the most popular for scavenging, especially after winter storms. The original native name, long subsumed into white-people translation, was discarded without a second thought.

Hopes for this newly discovered box on Gold Egg Beach, however, are dashed only a paragraph into the newspaper article, because all this new container holds are a few dusty bottles of undrinkable port.

If you'd happened upon Humtown that particular week, you might have mistaken our tiny burg for a bustling hub—underpopulated but soaked in curious happenings. In truth, we are the end of the road, immeasurably bored, enlivened only by gossip. Our key source has, for so very long, emerged from the telephone. Almost the entire town has been on a party line—more accurately, a series of party lines—so that often you are not quite sure whose conversation you're hearing when you lift the receiver. One could spend an entire day cradling phone to ear, of course, locked in place by the kitchen wall or hall table. More commonly, a housewife would pick up the handset to call in an order to the market or reach her sister across town, and before she could ask for the Operator, she'd hear a conversation already underway. Rarely have these overheard fragments been interesting, but occasionally an event occurs that is so perplexing or shocking or thrilling that it seems the whole town wants to weigh in, to piece each stolen nugget of information to another to create a near-seamless narrative, the silent story told in whispers or in the bedroom or better yet on the goddamn phone.

So the big news, the truly stunning news of this tremendous week, is the upending of this pastime due to the long-planned-for switch to dialup. Now, you wouldn't have to be rich or important to get a direct number. No longer would you have to involve the Operator. Nearly a full page in the weekly newspaper is given over to timetables and logistics. If *The Recorder* could have printed the entire new phone book, it would have. That is the nature of public news, the dry obscuring the sensational while other better fodder circulates away from the printed page and its guardians.

As the countdown to dialup begins, gossip burns the wires, as if all must be laid bare at last. Conjecture becomes possible, slides right into certainty. Every lift of the receiver offers a shocking sliver that must be shared again

and pieced together with all the others until the full picture emerges. Affairs aren't uncommon, but they are only intimated over the phone. Hard to keep such assignations a secret, though, once a breath of rumor has begun. The next town is a forty-minute drive away, and even there, you might be recognized. Even the most circumspect of illicit lovers has to know how quickly their trysts will become common knowledge, common *currency*. But all that is changing. If you have a secret, well, well, what a marvelous convenience, of course, that dialup is going to be. A real boon!

Helen Hubka, who runs the telephone service almost singlehandedly, would beg to differ. The real news, what folks really needed to know, you couldn't find that in *The Recorder*. Take the latest, not a whiff of which appeared in print, but which, thanks to Helen Hubka, is circulating, gaining substance with each round:

For instance, what isn't mentioned in that article about Gold Egg Beach is an unnerving coincidence, the stunning revelation that the museum's own gold treasure, the non-egg, the mysterious sphere, is missing, replaced by a poor facsimile, spray-painted a lurid mustard color. How? When? No one has answers. The switch might have happened days or months or even a year ago. The last time anyone pulled out the treasure was almost two years ago for a twenty-year celebration. The distraught curator vividly remembers the ceremony that accompanied the object's return to a vault. The sheriff's office seems stumped, which sadly doesn't surprise anyone. Talk is going round of a private detective, an insurance investigation. In whose pocket has that treasure landed? Keep an eye out, the whispers go, for a sudden journey, say, a curious need to visit a sick, out-of-town relative.

Also . . . a man shot on his own boat. Knocked into the water. But he survived. He wasn't local, this fellow, although the man who shot him was. One of the Cravens. Had a woman been aboard? Had they all been drinking? A debt had gone unresolved, threats issued and delivered. That wasn't all. The boat had run aground after the shooting and all the hullabaloo that followed. Wouldn't it have been Craven Hauling that used a kedge anchor to tow it to the boat haven? They claimed

it, of course. Salvage rights, they declared. Just as they had with that doomed Canadian sailboat last fall, the one that took away Jay Weller. The real owner of this new snakebit boat might have raised a ruckus, but hadn't. The sheriff himself escorted the stranger straight from the hospital—superficial wounds—to the bus station, a debt possibly settled. And the older Craven boy walked into the courthouse and right out again, uncharged in the end. He was back at the café having breakfast before you could say “boo,” and the Cravens, taking no chances this time, had their new vessel hauled out and into dry dock where they could keep an eye on it.

Something hinky was going on at the courthouse, anyway, wasn't it? An outside auditing agency had been called in to comb through the last few years' worth of books. Now, what was the story there? Someone should ask the sheriff's own wife, Peggy. Wasn't she the gatekeeper of the courthouse books? Or maybe look into one of the newer employees, especially one suddenly dressing to the nines and acting haughty, as if she'd just come into a much-awaited inheritance.

And this one: months before, only the day before the calamitous Columbus Day storm, a sheep farmer named Remy Gussie, leaving his barn after a middle-of-the-night emergency with a sick ewe, claimed to see the lights of the family car retreating down the dirt driveway. His young girl-wife often drove their daughters—a toddler and nine-month-old baby—to her parents on the other side of town, those trips usually following a night of what the farmer called “spats,” but not in the middle of the night. And nothing like that had happened for days, he said. By the time he'd finished seeing to the sick animal, it was dawn, and he carried on, watering and feeding the sheep before returning to the empty house for breakfast. The car and his family were still gone at suppertime as the storm came up, and all hell broke loose. He'd lost four ewes that night, and hardly cared that his family still wasn't back the next morning. In fact, he was, he claimed, damn tired of her moods, so he waited another day before showing up at her parents', who said they had not seen her for a full week (as he well knew, they wanted to add). The parents called

the sheriff, who so far had found no sign of the wife, the children, or the car. An odd duck, that Remy Gussie. A swaggerer, convinced of his own charm, unpredictably brutal with everything from farm animals to borrowed tools. He shot wandering neighborhood dogs on sight and darn-near killed that kid last year, the one picking blackberries on a nearby property line. No one would blame the young girl-wife if she had fled, but then who could believe a word that man breathed? No real investigation had taken place, but rumor had it that now, four months later, one of the wife's brothers had engaged a real detective, a move most of the town, if not the recalcitrant sheriff, would certainly applaud.

Of course, that rumor might have been conflated with another, the detective might be one of the FBI agents who had supposedly returned to town, undercover, and not because of the jailhouse still or a boatyard smuggling ring. They had a local informant, apparently, and were following his lead that one Richard James Young, age thirty-four, one of the FBI's ten-most-wanted criminals—a real bank robber—had found seasonal employment repairing furnace ducts throughout the county and, speculation had it, might still be around, waiting out the winter before fleeing by boat, just another pleasure-seeker or fisherman.

If the Operator, Helen Hubka, were in charge, you could imagine exactly what she'd do. She'd set up a regular roadblock at the edge of town and interrogate everyone who attempted to venture past town limits, because certainly more than a few would be on the run. She'd shake out that stolen egg and the fugitive and the squirrely secrets of those Cravens and scour out the wheres and whys of the farmer's girl-wife and that bank robber, too. They might even be all together, now that you think about it. But who listens to Helen Hubka? They *hear* her. Her whispered insinuations (*Have you heard?*) lie in the shadows of every conversation, but do they listen? Who could blame her for sometimes simply taking things into her own hands, as she has time and time again?

Yes, in a town as small as this one, miles away from another, we slip into one another's minds, as surely as the Operator herself waits in our homes, coiled within the black cradles of our hall table telephones, listening, fol-

lowing along until we nearly breathe together and speak for one another, ventriloquists all, until suppositions twine and, enthralled, we pass off a story to one then another and another, until a fulsome shape emerges, until at last we can claim the terrible truth of the mischief at hand.