

## **Randi Ward**

### **Shade**

Slung  
over the fence,  
a headless black  
snake the shade  
of approaching  
rain.

### **Snapping Turtle**

What is an ocean?  
I'm just a snapping turtle.  
It's hard to let go.

## **Lowell Mick White**

### **Worthless**

By spring, Brandy and Liza were back being friends again. One evening, after she got off work at the Foodland in Glenville, Brandy drove back up through the college, where Liza was waiting at the campus bookstore for a ride back to Burnt House. Brandy found her standing just inside the door, talking to a couple of boys. She honked the horn. After another minute or so, Liza came on out and got in the car.

“You took long enough,” Brandy said.

“You took longer,” Liza said. “I’ve been waiting, I don’t know—hours, at least.”

“Waiting won’t hurt you any,” Brandy said. “Anyway—you wouldn’t believe what Ronnie had me doing today.” Ronnie was the manager at the Foodland, a fat baloony snob. “He wanted me to mop the floors! He wanted me to take out the trash! Wanted me to clean the whole store! He thinks he’s so important, bossing me around like that.”

“Yeah, he’s awful big-feeling,” Liza said. “Hey—let’s go by Naked’s, see what he’s doing.”

Brandy shook her head but didn’t say anything. Naked Jackson. Liza was supposed to be broke up with him again. But still Brandy drove down the hill and through town and then up Sycamore Run. She slowed a bit when she got to Naked’s trailer.

“His truck’s not here,” Brandy said.

“Nope,” Liza said. She craned around in her seat, looking over the trailer as they passed. “I didn’t think it would be.”

“Then why—”

“Maybe he’s over at Ace’s,” Liza said. “We should probably stop there.”

“I don’t know,” Brandy said. “I should probably get home.”

“You *hate* going home!” Liza was laughing. “You hate going home but you’re always in a hurry to get back to Burnt House. You’re just really crazy. You know you are.”

“No,” Brandy said. But—no. That was true, sort of: Brandy hated going home. There was nothing there except people being mad all the time. Mom, Daddy, Jessica, all of them mad about something all the time and arguing and complaining. Daddy gone a lot and half the time threatening to not ever come back, which would be a good thing, but it was mostly all big talk because he always did come back, sick and drunk and mad. There wasn’t any place else for him to go. There wasn’t any place else at all, it seemed like, for any of them. Daddy

should have left a long time ago, taken them all along so they could live decent, but now it was too late and they were all stuck in Burnt House hating each other. And Mark—it wasn't too different over at the Talbot's. Brandy would go over there to see Mark, and Old Man Talbot would gripe and grouch and pout and be hateful to everybody. He lived in that house sixty years or more and it got him nothing but being mad. He should have moved on, too—he even said so, once, he said he should have moved to Weirton and worked in the steel mills, he should have moved to Detroit and built cars. But he stayed in Burnt House, like a damn fool, and spent his time being mad at people. But Mark—Mark wasn't a fool. Mark was going to leave. Mark wasn't going to stay in Burnt House.

“It won't take long to stop by there,” Liza said. “And it's on the way home, too.”

“What?” Oh—Ace's place. Liza wanted to get high. Of course.

“You won't be late,” Liza said.

Brandy thought of her mother getting mad about taking so long to get home from work, like it was any of her business. I can't *stand* that, Brandy thought, people talking and spying and gossiping, watching each other like a hawk.

“It's not right,” Brandy said.

“Huh?” Liza asked. “What?”

“Nothing.”

And that Ace Everett, he was just like all the other boys she knew—stupid. Good for nothing. Worthless, all of them. All the men—the ones who drove slowly up and down the road in their pickups, the ones who sat around loafing at Butchie's store or Page's store, the ones in town who pretended to go to college, or sold dope. Her daddy, too. And her uncles. All worthless. Old Man Talbot was smart and he'd worked hard, but he was so mean he was worthless. Mark was smart, too, and he worked hard—even though his mom was from Burnt House, he'd grown up in Minnesota, and so he was different. Smart, not worthless, he'd been to a real college, he was going to do something once he got away from that old man. Poor Mark, he just didn't get how worthless and stupid everyone else in Burnt House was. Once, she'd tried to explain how her daddy had lost his eye and dropped the baby off the roof at the same time and busted the baby's head, but it was frustrating.

“He was up on the roof working and a nail hit him,” Brandy said.

“A *nail* hit him?” Mark asked, amazed. He was so out of it, sometimes. Smart but still not knowing. “How did a nail hit him?”

“I don't know,” Brandy said. “I wasn't up there, too. All I know is a nail hit him in the eye, and they had the baby up there—”

“The *baby*?”

“Yeah,” Brandy said. The baby—her little cousin Jojo. They dropped him off the roof and busted his little head. Brandy took a deep breath. Sighed. It was almost too hard to explain. “See, they was all up there on the roof with the baby, and they was all drunk, and they're just all *stupid!*”

Mark looked at her, appalled.

It made her mad, that look. Stupid innocent superior look. But at least Mark wasn't worthless, he was going to take her along when he left Burnt House, he wasn't anything like Ace Everett or Naked Jackson or her daddy or her uncles or any of the others, who were all worthless with nothing to look forward to but smoking dope and living up some holler somewhere and raising chickens and going on welfare or whatever.

“Aw, nothing,” Brandy said again to Liza. “Nothing's right.”

Ace lived in a pale brown trailer wedged in a holler off of Sleeth Run. Naked's truck wasn't out front, but Ace's old Chevy Nova was there, and Brandy parked behind it and the girls got out and went up the steps. Liza banged on the door, and after a minute or so Ace stuck his shaggy head out.

“What?” Ace asked. Then, “Oh.”

“We came looking for Naked,” Liza said. “Thought we'd say hello.”

“Well,” Ace said. He opened the door and let the girls in. “He was here, now he's somewhere else.”

Somewhere Else was the name of a beer joint over in Gilmer Station. When Brandy was younger—fifteen, sixteen years old—and would go out at night her mom would make her check in every now and then, call home from a pay phone, and Brandy would call and say, “Oh, we're going somewhere else,” which was vague enough and also true, and her mom never caught on, or didn't want to catch on, or if she did catch on it didn't matter too much.

Liza sat down on the couch and Brandy sat next to her. Across the small room a television with the sound turned off was tuned to the Mr. Cartoon show, and next to the TV was an aquarium with guppies and goldfish floating around the water with a real-looking human skull. Ace sank down into a sagging chair, looking tired.

“You girls looking for something?” Ace asked.

“Maybe,” Liza said. “Looking for Naked, at least.”

Ace brought out some weed and some papers and rolled up a joint, and then another.

“Never know where people are going,” Ace said. “Naked, he left here a while ago.”

Ace always sounded kind of stupid and bad-tempered—and

maybe he was kind of stupid and bad-tempered. People said he was afraid of girls, that he might be a homo, but sometimes he'd be around and he'd smile at her with his snaggly ugly teeth, smiled like he was sweet and sick at the same time. Whatever he was, he was worthless. Brandy never wanted to be around him unless she had to. He was Naked's friend, and Naked was Liza's boyfriend, at least some of the time. The pot passed around, and Ace talked about his mother's cat that got hit by a car and died and how she cut it open to see what was busted inside, and he talked about some guy Brandy didn't know who broke off with his girlfriend, and he talked about how he went to Clarksburg last week, and Liza talked about Naked some, and she talked about her classes at Glenville State, and a couple more joints went around. Brandy only half-listened. Ace and Liza were both big talkers, they acted like they knew something nobody else knew, something secret and all important, and knowing things made them big. Brandy's daddy was like that, too. A lot of people were, they thought they were big. "Ford Mustang—1965 Ford Mustang—is the best car ever made," they'd say, for example—and daddy said stupid shit like that all the time—and then the big talker would *nod*. That nod—that was the sign that they knew the secret, that the big talker was important, that you couldn't argue against them. Just about everybody did it, all the men, some of the women, all the big talkers—Old Man Talbot, Ace, Butchie at the store, Page at his store, everybody. "Now, you see I know," daddy would say, and *nod*. And he never knew a damn thing, ever, not even when he was sober. None of them ever knew anything, all talking so big. Just look at Ace, Brandy thought, thinking about him and trying to ignore him at the same time. Big talker, and he's got nothing worth talking about.

"You ever see Dan Morris shoot a rifle?" Ace asked. Brandy didn't even know who Dan Morris was. Or care. Ace said, "He can dot an *I* on a printed page at three-hundred yard." The nod. "Three-hundred yard. I stepped it off myself."

*Nod.*

"Wow," Liza said. She was stoned.

But—Brandy realized—she was stoned, too. Oh *shit*, she thought. Oh *well*. She was really only half-listening, and maybe even that was too much since the big talkers weren't saying anything worth hearing. She looked at the TV with the sound turned off—Mr. Cartoon showing a Bugs Bunny, Elmer chasing Bugs. Just like everything else in the world but Bugs would be okay. Elmer was stupid like all those men. He knew it all. He was another worthless nodder. In the aquarium next to the TV a little catfish came swimming out the eye-hole of that skull and nosed around a bit and went swimming back inside the skull.

"Man," Brandy suddenly said. "That skull's freaking me out."

Liza and Ace stopped talking and looked at the tank.

"Why do you even *have* that thing?" Brandy asked.

"It's a decoration," Liza said. "I guess."

"It's a real skull, too," Ace said.

"No!" Liza said.

"Off a real human being," Ace said. He nodded. "Off an old dead lady."

*Nod.*

So there.

Brandy had been slouching down on the couch, stoned, but now she sat up straight, shrinking back from the damn skull. What an ignorant big-talker. A skull in the fish tank. A real skull. Disgusting.

"That's not real," Liza said. "How'd you get a real skull?"

"Found it," Ace said. *Nod*. "Over on Pike Fork. You know that cemetery up there? Part of it must've washed away in the high water last winter."

"No way," Brandy said.

"Found a bunch of bones," Ace said. "Only one skull, though."

"What were you doing up there?" Brandy asked.

"Found some arm bones, found some ribs—"

"Stop!" Liza said. "I don't want to hear this!"

"Had some skin on that skull," Ace said. He had a crooked smile, with those snaggly teeth. "Had some hair on it, too. So I brought it home, put it in a bucket of water and boiled it down—"

"Stop!" Liza covered her ears.

"—boiled it right down." Ace nodded.

"You're making me sick," Liza said.

"Made it clean."

"Stop," Brandy said.

Ace sat there smiling with his bad teeth, lank brown hair framing his puffy fat face. It was just big talk to him—showed how important he was, with some old dead lady's skull in his fish tank. Somebody's old dead Gramma. The room was silent for a moment and they all stared stoned at the skull and listened to the tank bubble. The guppies and goldfish floated around and did their fish things, and then the little catfish came careening out an eyehole again. Brandy looked away.

"Ow!" Liza yelled. "No!"

"I hate that thing," Brandy said.

Ace sat back looking pleased.

"We have to go," Brandy said. "I have to get home."

The girls ended up buying a half-ounce of weed and they trooped out to the car and got in. Ace stood in the doorway of the trailer, smiling at them, leaning against the doorjamb, his arms crossed

in front of his chest. Brandy thought he looked like he was about to nod, the rat.

“I was getting freaked out in there,” Liza said.

“He thinks he’s so big,” Brandy said. She started the car and shifted into reverse, and then stopped. “Shit,” she said. “I hate to drive through town stoned like this—the cops’ll see us.”

Liza thought. “Well, just go over the top of the hill, here.” She pointed up the road past Ace’s trailer. “This comes out on Alice Road. We’ll be almost home.”

“It’ll be all muddy,” Brandy said. Ace was still leaning in the doorway, all high-looking, staring at them. “We’ll get bogged down.”

“It’s fine,” Liza said. “I drive it all the time.”

“You do not!” Brandy said. “Your mom never lets you drive her car.”

“When I sneak out I drive this road all the time!”

“You do not,” Brandy said. But she went ahead and backed the car out of Ace’s driveway, not looking up at Ace, and she didn’t go back through town but headed up over the hill. She was aware she was loaded, really loaded, high, stoned, and she drove slowly with both hands on the wheel. Trees closed in around the car but the road itself wasn’t too bad, mostly gravel with a few muddy spots going up through the woods. Brandy had a cassette deck in the car, and Liza fumbled around with the tapes and then stuck Peter Frampton’s live album in and turned up the sound. Brandy thought it sounded worse loud on her blown-out speakers but she drove slowly on and they came out near along the top of a ridge with woods above them on the right but a view to the left of well-fed cows grazing in pastures with more woods in the distance, and more woods.

“This is the Westfall place,” Liza said over the music. “You know that Danny Westfall?”

Brandy thought for a moment. “I know Sara.”

“Yeah, Danny’s little sister,” Liza said. She made it her business to know everyone. “This is their cousin’s place. This is a nice farm. They got some money.”

Then they were back in the woods again. Brandy gripped the wheel tight, focusing. Driving. Trying to stay on the road. Frampton wanted to know if she felt like he did, and she figured she probably didn’t. When they came to wet places in the road, Brandy slowed up even more and eased the car through the mud.

“You need to speed up,” Liza said. “You need to hit that mud fast and just get through it!”

“No!” That was crazy. Slow through mud holes—that’s what old man Talbot said, and for once he probably knew what he was talking about, he drove trucks over the muddy mountains working in

the oil fields all those years. “That’s crazy.”

“Go faster!” Liza said. “That’s the way I always drive this road!”

“You do not,” Brandy said. Even if she did, it was stupid. “Elizabeth Marie, you’re such a liar.”

“What?”

Just then a jeep came barreling around the curve straight at them down the middle of the road. Brandy hit the brakes and Liza screamed and the car swerved over into the shallow ditch and thudded up against the bank. The jeep skidded past them and then stopped back down the road.

“Oh,” Brandy gasped. She held onto the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. “Oh.”

“Damn,” Liza said. She craned around and looked out the back. “That’s little Kenny Woofter.”

Brandy saw that the Frampton cassette was halfway out of the deck. Must have ejected itself. The car was off, too. Did it turn itself off? Brandy didn’t remember switching it off. Behind, the jeep reversed and backed up until the driver’s window was opposite Brandy’s. He was just a kid. Brandy rolled down her window.

“I’m sorry!” Kenny Woofter said.

Liza leaned across Brandy. “You about killed us!” she said. “You need to watch where you’re going!”

“I’m sorry!” Kenny Woofter said again. “I was out practicing. . . .” He was just a kid. Eyes wide and mouth slack.

“Wow,” Brandy said. She shook her head. Crazy. She didn’t even remember turning the car off, unless it turned itself off. No matter. She shifted into park and turned the key and it started right up. She pulled the transmission into drive and the car gave a little lurch but didn’t go anywhere, and when she pushed the gas the wheels just spit leaves and mud. Little Kenny Woofter just sat in his jeep staring open-mouthed. Worthless as any grown man.

“We’re stuck,” Brandy said. “Damn.”

Liza leaned over Brandy out the window. “Kenny, get out and push.”

“He can’t push us out,” Brandy said. “He’s too little.”

“Uh,” Kenny said. “I’ll go get my dad—he’s got a winch on his pickup.”

“That’s great,” Brandy said. She just sat staring up the muddy road to where it curved into the trees.

“Well, hurry up!” Liza said. “We’ve got places to be!”

Kenny backed his jeep up and made an eight-point turn to get around and head back to his home.

“Worthless stupid,” Brandy said. Stupid! Worthless.

“He’s okay,” Liza said. “He’s only fourteen? Fifteen? He’s young.”

“He’s an idiot.”

Liza settled back in her seat and pulled a joint from inside her shirt and lit it. “Might as well have some fun,” she said.

“Some fun.” Brandy inhaled. “All these boys are stupid.”

Smoke was filling the car despite Brandy’s open window. Liza rolled down her window, too. She said, “Some of them I guess are.”

Brandy said, “I’m thinking I might get pregnant.”

Liza coughed, stared at Brandy. “What?”

“Yep,” Brandy said. She took a hit off the joint and passed it to Liza.

“No—really? You don’t want a baby.”

“Maybe not,” Brandy said. She exhaled. “I don’t know. But I’m thinking maybe Mark will take me with him if I have a baby.”

“No!” Liza said. “He’ll run away, is what he’ll do.”

Brandy didn’t say anything. She sat there looking straight ahead, waiting to get pulled out of the mud.

## **Jordan Farmer**

### **Renovation**

Benny and Ralph were stuck in traffic because some dumb hick on a four wheeler had pulled out in front of a semi. They called me from the road, shouting against a weak signal and the sound of twenty-five angry rednecks stuck in the hundred degree summer heat, all honking and snarling because the paramedics couldn’t blot the guy off the pavement fast enough. “It’ll be awhile,” Benny said. “Keep the beer on ice.” I hung up knowing they’d never arrive and I’d have to renovate the crack house alone.

As for the beer, I was already on number three and it wasn’t quite noon. That morning I’d placed the cooler full of Old Milwaukee in the truck bed with the promise to myself that I wouldn’t crack one open until lunch. It was supposed to be a gesture to the guys for coming out to help. It wasn’t something just anyone would do after a week of overtime at the mine. I did well at first and staved off the urge, but sweating alone in the kitchen where the mist of drywall dust floated in a cloud, I’d popped one open. The beer was good and cold. Just the feeling of the can’s condensation on the palm of my hand made things tolerable. It was reassuring the way alcohol always is. It told me I wasn’t in over my head, told me I could transform ruin into something habitable.

I had purchased the crack house in a state auction for ten thousand dollars. I don’t think anyone ever truly smoked crack there, although the occupants had been known to cook a little meth. Meth hadn’t quite eaten its way through southern West Virginia the way it had the Midwest, but local junkies were starting to see it was easier to make their own high than it was to drive south to the pill mills and complain about their fabricated aches. The trouble most local addicts had with meth wasn’t the difficulty in cooking, it was the effect. Mountain men don’t particularly want that speed feeling that has you rushing headlong into everything without caution. They want the slow numbness that draws existence down to a crawl and allows you to examine every speck of life. They require the sort of high that calms you enough to pause and smell the odor of fresh cut grass, but still leaves you too far gone to feel the shredded blades between your fingers. At least that’s what I wanted back when I was really drinking.

The house was repossessed after a joint raid between the West Virginia State Police and the DEA found several thousand dollars’ worth of prescription meds and all the makings for a meth lab. One of the women in the house had rolled on the rest. She’d been busted

