

Mission Flats

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Maurice Oulette tried to kill himself once but succeeded only in blowing off the right side of his jawbone. A doctor down in Boston was able to construct a prosthetic jaw, with imperfect results. The surgery left Maurice's face with a melted appearance, and he went to great lengths to hide it. When he was younger (the accident happened when Maurice was nineteen), he wore a bandanna around his face like a bank robber in an old western. This gave Maurice, who was otherwise a mousy and unromantic sort of guy, a dashing appearance he seemed to enjoy for a while. Eventually he got tired of the bank-robber mask, though. He was always lifting it up to catch a breath of fresh air or to take a drink. So he simply discarded the thing one day, and since then Maurice has been about as unself-conscious as a jawless man can be.

Most people in town accept Maurice's deformity as if it were no more unusual to be jawless than to be nearsighted or left-handed. They are even a little protective of him, taking care to look him in the eye, call him by name. If the summer people stare, as even the adults invariably do, you can bet they'll catch an icy stare right back, from Red Caffrey or Ginny Thurler or anyone else who happens to be around, a look that says, Eyes front, mister. Versailles is a nice town that way. I used to think of this place as an enormous Venus's-flytrap with glue-sticky streets and snapping wings that snared young people like me and held us here until it was too late to ever live anywhere else. But these people have stuck by Maurice Oulette and they've stuck by me too.

They appointed me chief of police when I was twenty-four. For a few months I, Benjamin Wilmot Truman, was the youngest police chief in the United States, or so it was assumed around here. My reign was brief; later that same year, there was a story in USA Today about a twenty-two-year-old who was elected sheriff in Oregon somewhere. Not that I ever enjoyed the distinction anyway. Truth be told, I never wanted to be a cop at all, let alone police chief in Versailles.

In any event, Maurice lived in his late father's white clapboard house, subsisting on SSI checks and occasional free meals from the town's two competing diners. He'd won a settlement from the Maine Department of

Social Services for negligent monitoring of his case while he shot the jawbone off his head, so he was comfortable enough. But, for reasons no one understood, the last few years Maurice had ventured out of the house less and less. The consensus in town was that he was becoming a little reclusive and maybe even a little crazy. But he had never hurt anyone (except himself), so the general view was that whatever Maurice Oulette did out here was nobody's business but his own.

I tended to agree with that position too, though I drew one exception. Every few months, with no warning, Maurice decided to use the streetlights on Route 2 for target practice, to the great distress of motorists traveling between Millers Falls, Mattaquissett township, and Versailles. (The name is pronounced Ver-sales, not Ver-sigh.) Maurice was usually lit on Wild Turkey on these occasions, which may account for his poor decision-making and poorer aim. On this night - it was October 10, 1997 - the call came in around ten, Peggy Butler complaining that 'Mr Oulette is shooting at cars again.' I assured her Maurice wasn't shooting at cars, he was shooting at streetlights, and the odds of him hitting a car were actually very slim. 'Ha ha, Mr Comedian,' Peggy said.

Off I went. I began to hear the shots when I got within a mile or two of the house. These were sharp rifle cracks at irregular intervals, once every fifteen seconds or so. Unfortunately it was necessary for me to go up Route 2 to reach the house, which meant passing through Maurice's crosshairs. I lit up the wigwags, the light bar, the alley lights, every bulb that truck had - it must have looked like a Mardi Gras float - with the hope that Maurice would hold his fire a minute. I wanted him to know it was only the police.

I parked the Bronco with two wheels on the lawn, lights flashing. At the rear corner of the house, I shouted, 'Maurice, it's Ben Truman.' No response. 'Hey, Rambo, would you stop shooting for a second?' Again there was no response, but then, there was no shooting either, which I took to be a positive sign. 'Alright, I'm coming out,' I announced. 'Now, Maurice, don't shoot.'

The backyard was a small rectangle of scrub grass, sand, and pine needles. It was scattered with detritus of various kinds: a skeletal clothes-drying rack, a street-hockey goal, a milk crate. In the far corner an old Chevy Nova lay flat on its belly, the wheels having been transplanted to some other shitbox Chevy Nova years before. The car still had its Maine license plate, with the picture of a lobster and the motto VACATIONLAND.

Maurice stood at the edge of the yard with a rifle in the crook of his arm. The pose suggested a gentleman hunter on a break from shooting quail. He wore boots, oil-stained work pants, a red flannel jacket, and a baseball cap pulled low over the brow. His head was down, which was not unusual. You got used to addressing the button on his cap.