

Donna D. Vitucci

Mandible

His license named him Manfred, but my little sister and me, we called him “Mandible” from the time he started hanging around. He’d sleep over with Mama, this scary, big-headed, sharp-jawed cartoon guy, who we imagined was made of metal. The guy’s face *was* all jaw. He was too long of arm, with a slick, black pompadour. Who, in the 21st century, still worshipped Elvis? Manfred did, and other guys in Hebron, Kentucky. So me and Jennie nicknamed him “Mandible,” and we cracked up whenever we said to his ugly mug: *Hey Man, yeah, we’re good. How ‘bout you?* He had a shameless smile, and he flashed that grin at us—probably thought he was buddying up with his woman’s wisecracking son and daughter.

“I’m a man can stand his liquor,” Mandible bragged against all evidence otherwise. I moved his bottle and cup from where he set them down, playing a switcheroo game, stumping the bastard when he reached for a gulp. He wobbled over the chair he pulled out to sit in, ended up kissing the floor.

Just keep your hands off my sister, I thought. I knew better than to say it—get knocked across my teeth by someone or another, Mama doing her part because she had her own prospects to harbor, so maybe a double sock-it-to me, right side then left side, lip busted equally, twin black eyes. Not the first time the mirror would have shown me my beat-up self, courtesy of Mandible Jones.

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Mandible brought with him two big dogs, one beautiful German shepherd and one black Lab. When he released the tailgate and the dogs leapt out, he pointed and said, “That one there’s got some Rottweiler in him, so don’t get him riled up,” but he was no fearful thing. The black and the tan, they played like puppies, they *were* puppies, less than a year old. They romped, kicking up tufts of grass with the toenails of the fat paws they’d grow into. They bit each other’s necks but never to hurt, they rolled around in the fenced yard, and they tracked mud through the house when we let them in at night.

Mama ranted about that, but then Mandible murmured at her low and soft, “Could we just lie down?” A tobacco man pitching woo, he led her by clutched, praying hands into the back bedroom, where he evoked from her another, more piteous sound, Mama’s love tumbling down to meet Mandible’s.

Jennie and me sensed what they were doing—we’d watched enough Cinemax and HBO—but we looked off in different directions, la-di-dah humming as we went out to play with the dogs. The dogs were the best things Mandible brought us. At eleven and twelve, we might have been too old for pretending, but it helped when nothing else did, and so we pretended we were canines—me and Jennie galloping around, wrestling with each other, wrestling two against two with Blackie and Tanner. We loved them like brothers.

We tracked as much dirt inside as the dogs, but the adults didn’t rise to chide us or play their in-charge roles. They let us live this disaster. They lived it, too. We were mostly, as the school counselor noted over the phone to Mama, “unsupervised.” Mandible called us each, at different times, “wild child,” but he spoke the words softer and scarier in Jennie’s direction. The alcohol glitter in his eyes could have been poured straight from the bottle.

In kinder, pre-Mandible times, Mama had called me her Guardian Angel. She would scratch my head while we watched TV on the couch together. We’d sit, me in Mama’s lap and leaning back into her soft breasts and gone-soft stomach, and Jennie leaning into me, her big brother, the three of us stacked like cups in a cabinet. Mama had done steady, ill-informed choosing since the day she was born. Her worst choice brought Mandible through our door.

“We aren’t needing a daddy,” I told Jennie because Mama wouldn’t listen, and my sister and me made a pact affirming our battle against Mandible in the gloom of the basement bathroom.

Jennie looked up at me with her brown eyes, the eyes of a small forest animal, and I guess that’s what she was, a hunched, hood-eyed rabbit-girl, wary of anything bigger than herself, submissive, flinching, playing

dead if she had to. And me protecting her.

“We will never take Mandible any more seriously than a cartoon,” I said. “Now you say it,” I told Jennie, and she did, most solemnly, most reverently, before we busted a gut laughing. We crossed hands in the convoluted method I invented from movies I’d seen. I twisted her this way and that by her arms and she let me do it, no meanness in either of us.

When Mandible moved in, Mama demoted Jennie and me to second class citizens. On the couch, with the TV light flickering in Mandible’s glassy eyes, Mama leaned across his chest, covered only by an undershirt. To me and Jennie, wedged on the other side of the cartoon man, she said, “Ain’t this cozy? Like a real live family?” Her hopeful voice, married up with her gin-tilted smile, turned me suspicious. We didn’t need Mandible to make us more than we already, satisfactorily, were.

On weekday mornings, before Mama left for the day shift at Care Crest Retirement, she wrote our list of chores in the margin of the home-delivered coupon magazine and left it on the counter by the cereal box. *Get yourselves off to school; pick up the house; feed the dogs and yourselves; clean your clothes.* Jennie was good at the household stuff, and I’m not being prejudiced or whatever they call it when guys admire girls for doing girly things. She was simply better at keeping the whites white and the colors from bleeding, expert at cracking eggs without having to fish out pieces of shells. She remembered to switch off the oven when the fries were crisp.

I once left the oven lit all night and Mandible threw me down the basement steps, railing about “burning the goddamn house to the ground with all we know and love in it.”

Mama said, “You know that ain’t happening.”

Mandible yelled, “And stay down there,” which I was glad to do.

Mama’s voice, muffled through my ceiling, told him, “Go find some other food.”

No one brought a meal to me, while I touched bruises.

I heard Jennie refuse to eat if I wasn’t. “All’s I want is water,” her voice bleated.

“Well, get from this table then,” Mandible said.

Her chair erupted, her feet pounded above my head, she slammed the door to the room we shared. I could hear dishes fall into the drying rack of the sink.

“That boy’s on my bad side,” Mandible said.

“Not your bad side,” Mama said, “just your opposite side.”

“What’s opposite good other than bad?”

“No-account?”

I knew they’d been drinking, probably since noon. That night and the whole next day I huddled on the concrete floor of the basement shower because it was the farthest I could slink away and still be housed. I was mapping an escape for me and Jennie, assembling evidence and the intelligent kind of pleading that might free us but also wouldn’t have Social Services tossing us from the frying pan into the fire. They missed me at school until the third day Mama wrote an excuse note claiming I’d had a headache, and sent me back.

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After the stair-pitch, I carried my Swiss army knife with me always, got kind of hooked on knives in general, checked them out at flea market stalls—the pointed and the pearl-handled, the dull, the ebony, and the rusted. *The long and the short of it*, I imagined Mandible saying, his sharp jaw-jutting jeer. Well, he could wait and see, how long or how short.

With my eyes I bored devil ray-thoughts into Mandible when we’d come upon him after school, leveled flat out on our couch watching or dozing through ESPN, smoke-bombing the house with a lit cigar or spilling potato chip crumbs into creases between the cushions because he was too hung over or too drunk to find the

gaping stink-hole he called a mouth. I hoped my evil intentions would open up flames in his gut. Thirteen-going-on-fourteen, I was deep into horror films—chainsaw massacres, possessed souls, dead back to life, death or the devil incarnate, blood curdling fear paired with maximum blood letting.

The few knives I had I worked at nailing into our storage shed from across the backyard. What a clean, clear thwack when they wedged into the wood with the force I'd manufactured. Mrs. Lowen, our next door neighbor, watched me from our mutual fence. I felt her gaze from over my shoulder. Finished with one round, I turned and demanded, "What?!"

She said, "Is that your daddy I've been seeing?"

I snorted, guessing she was referring to Mandible. "Hell, no." I was a proud, tough delinquent cussing in the face of this beautiful woman, who'd been mostly abandoned, I'd noticed, by her traveling husband in the three months they'd occupied the house.

Mrs. Lowen dragging cans to the curb on garbage night or pinching dead tops off flower stems were snapshots my mind had lingered over. Without my being aware, Mandible had helped sharpen my focus. I'd heard "Let's Give Them Something to Talk About" drifting from Mrs. Lowen's upstairs window onto the roof of our prefab ranch house. Her crying, too, was part of what rained down.

I said to her, "Jennie's and my dad, he's either dead or run off." I wondered at the flat October sky. "Or maybe we're the runners-away." If Mrs. Lowen could only see the burning in me, the smolder, she would know me in a way more pure than Jennie or Mama, who were diverted from me by Mandible's stumpy fingers at their jaws, insisting, "Look. You're two peas in a pod," him pointing out their pretty, look-alike faces in the mirror next to each other.

Within a few days of our fence conversation, Mrs. Lowen actually stepped inside our chain link, fending off the dogs with hands held out in front of her.

"Mrs. Lowen, you're awesome with knives," I said, after she helped herself to my collection and threw them. Only two of her five stuck anywhere on the shed door, but I'd learned from observing Mandible how to build a girl with praise.

She blew on her fingertips like they were the hot end of a just-fired gun, and smiled. "Call me Allison. And you are?"

"Whit."

"What?"

"Whit. Whitley. Named after my grandma's side, all dead now."

"Jeez, Whit," she said, full of the right kind of sympathy.

I wanted to hug her for taking time out of her life just to say my name. Instead, I shrugged, threw my slew of knives at the big "X" on the shed door. Standing beside Allison caused a humming in my ears, a humming that commenced in other parts of me as well. For the first time in my life, worry did not occupy the center of my day. And neither did Jennie. Allison had displaced them both.

Mama watched us, nose-twitchy from behind the kitchen curtains, Jennie said.

"Your sharp knives are cutting up my backyard." She was supposedly mimicking Mama, but Jennie herself had elbow-thrusting in her voice.

How I wished Mama would take the time to step outside and wrench me back from Allison, ground me, even beat me like before, as she did under Mandible's influence. I could imagine the man's powerful jaw biting off the words: *Make that boy behave, wrangle him back from the lure of the neighbor woman twice his age.*

Though for Mandible, age was no matter.

"I'm mostly hitting the mark," I said to Jennie. She'd report back to Mama whatever I said.

Before Allison, I could have walked off into the sunset without notice. Suddenly everybody seemed to hone in on Whitley Holcombe, including Allison's husband, whose latest business trip ended at my front door.

"I'm not threatening to break your arm here," Mr. Lowen said—my arm that had steadied his wife's pale one and tried to show her how to throw a knife. As he made his wishes flat-out known, Allison stood at the fence line, on her side, squinting at us. Mr. Lowen was no Mandible-bully, but a husband had rights, he said. And I was just a punk, he said, who better steer clear. Embarrassment crawled across my skin, not because of Mr. Lowen's murky accusations but because with Mama at work, Mandible sagged in the recess to the living room, playing the half-hearted role of stand-in parent. While Mr. Lowen rattled on, Mandible eyed the TV, his mind focused, I'll bet, on returning to the couch where Jennie sat sipping a Coke. In no way did he defend me, but he didn't snake up and hit me either.

I trawled the fence line where Allison pretended to dig dandelions during Mr. Lowen's next out of town jaunt.

She said, "What're you gonna do?"

It wasn't a question concerning my next move, since there was no next move. She'd said it as an expression, the way people do, her voice jokey and full of resignation. Until then, we'd barely touched, except when handing the knives to each other. I grasped the chain link fence. Allison passed her muddied, weed-green fingers across my knuckles, then went into her house. With dandelion juice drying my skin, I stood there until Blackie and Tanner nudged my knees and inserted their big bodies between me and the fence.

Mandible powered down our storage shed with a bobcat he'd borrowed from a buddy. He turned the shed to a pile of rubble and rotting lumber. Then he poured gasoline and lit a match to it. When the flames shot up to eyebrow level, Mandible rubbed salt in my wound, said, "Addie, rustle up the weenies and the marshmallers," in his best hill country accent.

Adalyn is Mama's name, which he never used full and lovely in the way it should have been spoken, the way I'd spoke "Allison" when the occasion arose. He had the nerve to wink at me. *What you going to do about that, boy?* his wink seemed to dare.

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Because of Mama, because of Allison, because of Mandible—oh, who the hell knows why? maybe just the passage of time and boredom with the pose—the all-black-wearing boy-of-death I'd been for almost a year cleaned up, straightened up, secured a summer job at Video Village at the Silver Grove Market, which was just a strip of stores: Guardian Bank, Donray's TV Repair, the video rental, and the Quick Mart with its gas pumps and beer cave.

I grew beyond knife-throwing, stored the knives in a shoebox under my bed. A *phase*, Mama termed it, discounting my time spent with Allison. She sometimes sounded like a social worker when she'd try categorizing me or diagnosing me, but sooner or later she'd quit and light a cigarette, increase the volume on the *Court TV*. This cued up her next line, "Whit, you're beyond hope," which she had declared countless times.

Toward the end of her Mandible Period she didn't even bother with speaking, she let the cigarette flame and the television knob do her talking. By then she was divorcing us—she'd taken up with a guy named Roger and was in the process of moving her most important possessions little by little whenever Mandible was out cashing his disability check. When Jennie and me saw her wedge the hot rollers against the plastic tub of her nail polishes in the back seat of the Fiesta, we knew it was her last trip.

As we watched her mincing steps up and down the concrete slab to the front of the house, halfway slipping in her slip-ons, loading up her valuables, she said, "A mother can be as no-account as a son."

She had several pithy sayings that erased the snappy comeback I'd maybe been planning, robbed it right from my mouth, left me vacant as a cleared-out bank vault.

It was important for me to focus on the consequences of her move and how they affected me and Jennie.

"We're not changing schools again," I said.

She shrugged. "Have it your way."

To me and Jennie, Mama said, “You can stay, but keep up the place or it’ll never sell.” All her last week she avoided eye contact with Mandible; probably she didn’t have the guts to tell him to “get,” so she was gettin’ instead.

He didn’t appear to care if she was present or gone. You could still find Mandible Jones, squat and tough and smelly, rooster-ing around our house, even after Mama moved with Roger to his farm down in Union. One thing you could say about Mama, she ever preferred abandoning a mess to tackling it. With her out of the picture, on paper, Mandible—get this—was the responsible adult.

To Jennie and me he said, “Just because your bitch of a ma’s gone don’t mean I’m moving on. Place is home to me now.”

What could we do? It was where we lived, the three of us, uncomfortably through my freshman winter—Jennie, me, Mandible, and the two dogs, until Blackie jumped out of the moving truck bed and got hit on the Blue Rock Highway.

Mandible again said, partly as homage I think to the dog in his half-froze grave, which, to Mandible’s credit, he dug in our backyard: “Place is home to me now.” This repeat drifted until it sounded like he bit off the ends of the words. He patted the door jamb more fondly than he’d ever petted the dogs, implying Blackie in our ground sealed the deal. Implying that, same as with Blackie’s bones, we could never unearth the scaly roots Mandible had managed to set down here.

For a while I’d strayed from my devotion to Jennie, but under examination, it’d been less love for my neighbor lady than thirst for the whole big world out there to kiss and kiss off, including Allison Lowen, Jennie, Mama and even Mandible Jones, also all the social workers, counselors, jailors, and parole officers I’d yet to meet.

“Wisdom,” Mandible often said, “lies in knowing where to stick your dick.”

Jennie turned a beautiful thirteen while Mama was gone. I marked counting on the calendar so I wouldn’t forget how long we’d been motherless, because ours was a house prone to forgetting. Blond Allison, in the pink and grey track suit she wore when she threw knives with me, had already blurred to a silver spot in my mind.

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I turned fourteen and Video Village took me on again for the summer, pay always under the table since I didn’t have a work permit. Getting Mama, or God forbid Mandible, to vouch for my age and status wasn’t worth the aggravation or the allegiance either would demand. It was hard enough tracking Mama down when official school forms needed signing. We all played a role keeping up the “family” charade for district officials who might drive by the house, investigating, hoping to declare once and for all our residency and our family configuration, narrowing down exactly who was in charge. We qualified for the school’s free and reduced meals, though by then Jennie was working on skinny and refused everything but the lunch line applesauce.

The part in her blonde hair, when she stood up straight, reached Mandible’s nipple. Yes, the man insisted on walking around without a shirt on, especially in summer. Yes, Jennie took to leaning against him, her back to his front, when he stood at the screen door observing the fireflies and the occasional snake curled on top of Blackie’s grave he had to rush out and take a hoe to. Jennie, standing there with him, wore collapse in her body’s attitude. My sister could make it so she had no backbone and you didn’t fault her for it, as she’d been watching and learning from Mama all her life.

I used to bask in Jennie’s sweet weight against me. We’d walked to school countless times when it would be raining and us with one umbrella to share. As the taller one, I held it, more to cover her than me, my arm unbent for maximum stretch and tiring terribly from sheltering her.

“Lean with the umbrella,” I’d say. That meant lean in to me, too, and she did. So few joys, but this was one.

Now her and him, and I was to stop it?

Movie channel visions of sex plagued me, but I was scheduled for the late video shift so I spit what rose to my tongue. “I’ll leave you two to console each other about Blackie, or Mama, or whatever you’re using tonight for an excuse.”

“Gonna bust your mouth, boy, you talking to your sister like that.”

“Talking to you,” I muttered.

Mandible spun me around and punched before I’d even had a next thought. Jennie pulled at his arms until he let her hold me and he drifted to the other room.

“Go to work,” she whispered, swiveling her attention from him to me and back, her shoulder a barricade between us. She insisted, “Please, just go.” Her loose and untied hair had crossed her lips in the tussle, and some caught there, looked like she was eating straw.

I said, “Gladly.” But there was no gladness, and there had been none for me since the glimmer of Allison winked out. I shoved past them and through the doorway. Loyal Tanner tried following, but I yelled, “Stay!” and locked his bewildered face inside the fence.

Stay. Or I could leave for work and not come back. The moaning I did to Mama about not switching schools had been for Jennie’s benefit because she had little knack for making friends, and I’d wanted to spare her starting over, but I could see it spooling out: she was going to quit school and set up house with Mandible. Little details were accumulating, beginning with her sipping Coke while Mandible let me twist in the wind of Mr. Lowen’s tirade, neither of them coming to my aid.

I projected the scene in my busy head until the details of their flirtation made me sick. I used to imagine flames opening holes across Mandible’s middle, but they traveled south to burn up my belly instead.

At Video Village I poured popcorn and hot oil into the old fashioned popper we had for the customers. It was our gimmick—giving away a free tub of movie theater popcorn with the rental of five videos. I was a popcorn popping, movie scanning robot. I smiled a robot’s smile.

While the popcorn popped, inside my head the gears were whirring and clicking. This is how the counselor in juvie explained it to me: Kids in strung-out circumstances will adapt to survive. They imagine themselves as other children, tended by other, good, people; they invent characters to save them. They fabricate scenes other than the ones stuck to them—golden scenes, truly. She knew my history, the circumstances, it was all there in the file. She tailored her interpretation to me. “The kids,” she said, “romp around like dogs, dumb things provided food and shelter, who aren’t kicked too much, who sometimes get a scratch behind the ears that draws their mouths up in satisfied doggy grins, teeth showing. In their imaginations, these kids—kids like you—they manufacture a better life, a life that cancels out the one scraping up their knees and their knuckles.”

I know it’s where I lived half the time, an imaginary place where Jennie had the knife in her hand and she was going to use it, where she was still on my side. In my dream I would take it from her, but first she’d pretend to fight me, as our hands slipped into that twisting, turning memory of our childish handshakes from the ‘hood that we’d invented to affirm our solidarity. She’d grunt as she fought me and I’d hold her in a wrestling lock, shielding her body from the blade with my own hand, my voice calm but my muscles screaming, hate urgent and rising inside me so much I could taste what the knife was made of. Yes, urgent, because the moment required urgency. If I didn’t act now I’d lose my nerve.

I’d swallow my metal-tinged spit and shush into Jennie’s ear: “You’ll wake him. Is that what you want?” We hadn’t been this close since Mandible, in the absence of Mama, folded Jennie under his wing.

Every pop of the popcorn popper was a gunshot, but we had no guns I knew of, only my knives resting under my bed. When I got home I checked on their storage. An empty box waited for a pair of shoes. In fact, our whole pitiful place housed emptiness and expected fulfillment. Blackie’s bones in the ground out back shifted. Tanner howled for his lost brother. Jennie had a knife in her hand and she was going to use it unless I moved to stop her. It was a long walk down the hall to Mama’s bedroom—now Mandible’s set-up—and I didn’t know if my legs would carry me there. Angels helped, I guess; *a Guardian Angel*, I heard Mama say. Her hand in my memory closed down on my head; I felt her fingernails tickle my scalp. We’d been okay before Mandible, and we’d be okay once he was gone. His elimination was a given, a must-do, but I wouldn’t let Jennie take the blame for sticking the knife in him, because it was my eyes razoring holes in his gut, just as I’d imagined from the day we’d been introduced.

I took my time walking that hallway, put my fingers to the bumps on the wall where hairs from the paintbrush had stuck and dried on with the paint, ahead of me sounds that could have been sex or dying, and Jennie taking care of it either way. I lived in the minutes of not knowing, which I wished would tick on

forever, the way a brother-sister bond could last a lifetime, but they quit.

Donna D. Vitucci lives and works in Cincinnati, Ohio, helping raise funds for local nonprofits. Since 1990, her stories have appeared in dozens of print and online journals, and in a few anthologies. Her stories can be found, or are forthcoming, online in *Storyglossia*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Insolent Rudder*, *Juked*, *Night Train*, *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*; in print in *Meridian*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Turnrow*, *Faultline*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*, among others. She's pleased to say that "Mandible" is her second story to appear in *Front Porch Journal*.

"My favorite front porch is actually the side porch of the two-family house where we grew up. Since the downstairs family 'owned' the house's front door, they also got dibs on the 'front porch.' The entrance to our second floor was from the side porch, a small, enclosed-on-three sides space one step up from the driveway. This porch had the smoothest, coolest cement, cool on even the hottest Cincinnati day. Our friends called us out from there with sing-songy voices: 'Oh Donna, Oh Denise!' Our noises, when we played Barbies and jacks on the porch, echoed. I like to imagine the concrete absorbed our voices, our childhoods now part of the porch as beetles are part of the amber that preserves them."