Chapter 2

"Columbia, next stop Columbia!"

It was late the next afternoon. With an iron inevitability the Hudson Highlander, northbound out of Grand Central Station, was veering from a trestle out over the Hudson River back onto land. Orville glanced out the right-hand window. At the top of a hill he saw the Persian-turreted mansion named Olana built by 19th century landscape painter Frederick Church, its limestone face a creamy gold against the lowering sun, and felt the bite of nostalgia. Grabbing his backpack from the overhead rack, he walked to the space between the cars. He would be home in a couple of minutes.

No he would not. The train screeched, slowed, re-screeched with a lot more *oomph,* shuddered, and fought itself to a stop.

Orville and the other passengers waited. No information was forthcoming. The air conditioning clicked off. Figures, Orville thought, I come four thousand miles from Orta to Milan to Zurich to Kennedy to Grand Central and then up the Hudson 128 miles, a whole day's journey--and as soon as we poke up into the southern tip of this shit-hole of a town, things break.

Columbia, he knew all too well, was a town of breakage. At public events things would unerringly break. School microphones would consistently give out just after someone said, "Testing, testing." On Memorial Days in Columbian cemeteries, just as the Gettysburg began, viewing stands would collapse. In deep summer at public tennis courts, water fountains were always going dry so that if, after a hot game of tennis on the asphalt courts, when your feet felt like grill-side-down burgers and your tongue like a bun, you went to the water fountain and turned the handle, the one thing you could be

sure would not come out was water. Columbians learned to talk affectionately about past breakages, such as "the Great Breakage of '37," when, in the Thanksgiving Day parade a massive five-axle Universal Atlas cement truck disguised as a turkey exploded in front of the Niagara Mohawk power station, knocking out lights and heat for weeks. Or "the Dinosaur Breakage of '52," when the Paul Jonas life-sized sculpture of the brontosaurus bound for the New York World's Fair broke the back of its barge and sank, its neck poking up out of the Hudson River in the most lifelike way.

After another fifteen minutes Orville had had enough of the sweltering Amtrak car. Figuring it was only a mile or so to town, he decided to walk. He opened the door and jumped down from the car. The wet heat hit him in the face like a big sweaty hand. Shouldering his backpack, he walked along the cinders to the front of the train. There were two tracks.

"Hey pal, you can't do that," said the engineer. "It's illegal."

"So sue me. *Ciao*." He walked away a few steps before being jolted by a tremendous blast—the engineer had blown his horn. Orville picked up an empty can of Budweiser and threw it. It hit the engine with a pitiful *plink*. He walked on.

Feeling good out in the unconditioned world, his Nikes striking the cross ties with soft, firm *thunks,* Orville stretched his arms out to the dome of sky and let his eyes skate the innermost layer from the light blue at its apex, west along its thickening blue to where it met the light-purple cutouts that, so high that at first he thought them clouds, as his eyes followed their smooth undulations north toward Albany and south toward Rhinebeck, he realized were the peaks of the Catskills. Taking a deep breath, he let his eyes ease down the slopes of the mountains through the green, shadowed foothills to the

inlet at Catskill Creek with its oil tanks and red neon sign for MIKES PIZZA and to the river itself, at eye level all silvery, tidal even a hundred miles north of its mouth, running hard in its straight glacial trough to the sea.

He passed under the mile-long Rip Van Winkle Bridge, its belly arched and ribbed like the roof of a yawning cat's mouth. Orville had worked summers as a toll collector up there, the graveyard shift from midnight to eight so that he could play golf during the day and read all night long. Looking down into cars in the dark hours, he'd learned a lot about life, like what goes on in cars and how short the night really is.

A whistle. A train coming toward him, southbound from Columbia. He moved off the inside track to the one next to the river and watched it approach. The engineer was waving at him in what at first seemed a greeting, but as the train screamed past he realized was a warning. He jerked around. The northbound train he'd just left was bearing down on him, its own whistle masked by the other's. Orville jumped feet first into the river. The train thundered past, shrieking like a lunatic.

Orville found his footing in the rocky shallows, feeling the beats of hot air on his face. The train whistles echoed back off the mountains. He looked down, seeing, in an oily slick around his knees, the inevitable river plastic: a Valvoline bottle and a Tampax applicator. His elbow was skinned and bleeding, a surface wound. Otherwise, he was sore but okay. Hauling himself up onto the tracks he caught the acrid scent of creosote.

Creosote. The harsh scent stunned him. All at once he saw himself as a six-year old, one summer's day, lying on his back in a neglected grassy field down the street from his house on Ten Broek Lane. The scent of creosote was strong from the railroad tracks running close by. Alone, he stared up at the clouds passing across the sky and suddenly

had the sense that the world as he was seeing it was only a part of something else. For the first time in his life he saw himself as part of some whole, some whole world to which his own being was seamlessly connected. He felt lighter, aliver, as if something else had clicked on, or in. Leaping to his feet and making his fat legs go as fast as he could, he ran home to tell his mother. He burst into the kitchen and blurted out his discovery, as the screen door slammed-- *bam*!--behind.

She, Selma Ariel Fleischer Rose, a large aproned shape looming over the stove, didn't respond.

He persisted, dragging a chair over, climbing up, telling her again, slowly and loudly, as if trying to get through to a foreigner.

"Something else! Mom, I'm part of something else!"

Selma, startled to find her little boy at eye level, stared at him. He saw a cloud pass across her gaze. She sighed. "Orville-doll, there's nothing else but this. Go get dressed for the Catskill Game Farm."

The boy felt a rough, twisting pain in his chest. He clenched down on it, trying to make it go away. He fought back tears.

"What's wrong, honey-bunny?"

Dread was rising, the pain was going. He felt himself numbing up, like his mouth when he was at Basch the dentist's. He broke eye contact. Feeling her fearful concern, he said, "Nothing." He turned and ran back out the door.

Now, standing on the tracks, he realized that that moment had been one end of the thread that had unspooled all these years in a life spent running, a life restless with questions. And now she's dead? What the hell does that mean?

Realizing that now there would be a breakage--the train arriving, Penny and Amy meeting it and not finding him on it--he hurried on. As he passed the rotting two-story brick lighthouse and rounded Mount Pecora, the vista north opened up. There across the rust and purple wash of wildflowers and golden cattails that furred the skin of the marsh, starting at Parade Hill—a high cliff over the river—and then riding up the spine of a hill eastward to the heights of Cemetery Hill, was his hometown, Columbia.

A shiver swept over him. How beautiful, the muted pallet of the summer marshland and the shifting reflections from the town. How tiny Columbia looked, no more than a few glitters of the lowering sun off the church spires and metal roofs and the green copper dome of the courthouse and the glass windows of the abandoned factories and the nine-story housing project and, nicely adjacent to the cemetery, Kinderhook Memorial Hospital. So small, so innocent and needy, as if you could cup it in the palm of your hand and hold it there happily, a live thing, say a kitten, it and you safe there for the rest of your life. With a stab of excitement, he walked toward it.

But then the day attacked. Not having been back in Columbia for over two years, Orville had misjudged the distance badly, imagining things to be closer than they actually were, as if he were seeing his past in a passenger-side rear view mirror. He had miles yet to go. The sun, sinking behind the soggy clouds snagged on the peaks of the Catskills, was soon a reddish ulceration. The marsh turned to swamp. Mosquitoes began to work his flesh, even through his shirt. Tumorous red lumps appeared, and itched wildly. To smoke them off, Orville lit a cheap stumpy Italian cigar, a Parodi, which had the virtue of not staying lit, so it lasted forever. He put on Celestina's going-away gift, an Italian Woman's Swim Team sweatshirt in the red, white, and green of Italy that to him always

signified the tomato, cheese, and basil of a pizza. He flipped the hood over this head and drew the string tight, leaving just an opening for his eyes. Soon he was roasting. His pants clung wetly to his thighs, rubbing together as he walked. Sweat oozed down from the hollow of his throat onto his chest and belly and pooled in his crotch. It was now past midnight in Italy. His adrenals were depleted for the day, and waves of fatigue swept over him.

Cursing, panting, hooded, puffing smoke like a steam locomotive, Orville at last rounded a turn and saw the old train station. A rusted crane rose close by the tracks, a forgotten sentry, its hook dangling down. The station was in shambles, paint peeling, brick crumbling. A sign read

OLU B A

Some pestilential Caribbean outpost, perhaps? In the murky dusk, the shapes seemed spectral. Orville looked around, hoping someone had stayed to meet him.

No. No one was there to meet him.

In the waiting room he found a water fountain. Thirsty, he stared at it, at first hopefully, then superstitiously, and then, with each slow, stalking step he took toward it, accusingly. He pulled the handle. Nothing.

He walked out of the station and up the hill to the main street, Washington. How small everything seems, he thought, as if it's a toy town for a child. A banner spanning the mouth of the town featured a spouting grinning whale and the message

WELCOME TO COLUMBIA

A WHALE OF A TOWN

SPOUT (Society to Preserve Our Unbelievable Town)

As he walked up the dead-straight backbone of the town, he saw, on brand-new signs announcing each cross street, the same grinning, spouting whale. Why whales? He vaguely recalled being taught in school that Columbia had been a whaling port, with whales caught in the Hudson River. But wait a second. Whales live in sea water. The Hudson is fresh water. Whales in a fresh-water river?

In the haze of this last leg of his journey up Washington, one sight stopped him.

Just above Third Street, across from the neglected Painted Lady Lounge, was the General Worth Hotel. Once grand, it was now falling down. It was three stories tall, nine windows wide, made of brick, and now all the windows were boarded up or broken, graffiti and bullet holes were prominent, and the classic portico held up by four Doric columns was sagging badly to the right. An old sign read GENERAL WO HOT . Oville had a vision of his mother, wearing a dazzling cobalt-blue satin gown, as President of the Hospital Auxiliary at the annual 'Spring Fling' Benefit, flanked by her beloved Candy Stripers as she made her grand entrance down the majestic staircase to the ballroom of the Worth.

In front of the hotel was a three-person picket line, each person carrying a sign that said "WORTH SAVING**."** They were circling a yellow plastic pail for donations. One of the picketers was old, white-haired, and walking with a cane. Another was a boy with dazzlingly bright red hair, straight red hair that whirled like water as he hopped and twirled. The third was a woman about his own age with slightly darker straight red hair. She wore a work shirt and jeans and a purple scarf. She was limping. As a doctor, Orville could not help but read bodies, as farmers read land and weather, or sailors weather and seas. Dimly, through his exhaustion, he took it all in at a glance—the

muscular upper torso, the built-up shoe, the asymmetric pelvic tilt—all of which told a story of a chronic deformity maybe childhood injury or illness. Despite the heat he shivered. Why, he wondered, as he had wondered more and more lately, why do I have such trouble now with the deformed?

Through the gauzy dusk the three circled silently.

He walked on. In the town of his childhood, the walk all the way from lower Washington up to Fourth and then a long stretch up Harry Howard past the Fireman's Home had been a great distance. Now, in the toy town of his less expansive vision, it was not far at all. Soon he was on the outskirts, in a development of ranch houses, and at the door of his sister Penny's ranch.

Wet and bruised and bleeding, smelling like creosote and bitten all over by ferocious insects, several weeks late for his mother's funeral and dressed like a pizza, on August 14, 1983, Dr. Orville Rose arrived home in Columbia.