

## TALKING HEAD

*This is paradise.*

That's what my old man used to say.

On your way up here – winding this way and that up the mountain road – you'll notice a few ranch-style houses cantilevered over the valley, most with yard-jockeys set out like bookends to mark the abbreviated driveways. But the higher you drive, the richer it gets. It makes your eyes and ears pop. Especially when the houses turn into mansions, and the driveways wrap around in crescents as big as the moon. The only strange thing is the Wax Museum at the very top.

The Wax Museum is constructed of brick and has four towering white columns that go up a full three stories, giving it that ante-

bellum look of a fraternity house at one of the bigger universities. ✧  
Swinging monkeywise – like a great pendulum from the high porch ceiling – is a motorized wax figure dressed like a college kid, going back and forth like he’s on a rope-swing over water. Monkey-boy raises hell on a daily basis, attracting mostly tourists who exclaim: “Look at that crazy fool up there!” But on second glance, they realize he’s part of the museum and that they are the ones who’ve been fooled. The gruesomeness of a wax black slave who used to swing there by the neck, years ago, has been replaced by the playfulness of this paraffin figure. French Boone, waxcrafter-in-chief and owner of the museum, turns him off at night so monkey-boy just hangs there for dear life.

Inside, even in the daytime, the museum is pretty spooky – windowless and cool as a cavern. It’s made up of twelve rooms in which various scenes are portrayed. There’s a tavern scene in the first room on the left, and when you walk in you see George Washington sitting there cracking a walnut in one hand, showing off his strength to other fake founding fathers. In the second room, you got Robert E. Lee sitting on top of Traveler, his wax horse. In another, you’ll find the three minutemen: a drummer, a flag-carrier, and the fife player – who looks a lot like his creator, French Boone, with that same perverted twinkle in his eye and the same billy-goat beard minus the moustache. My mother has always had a mistrust

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for a man who wears facial hair. She was right about old French, because he keeps a pointed little goatee that hangs down like a corn tassel. There are other wax figures that resemble French – Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln being two more.

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The wax figures on display occupy twelve stalls that wrap around like a maze inside the museum. All of the scenes are spotlighted during the day, but at night, in total darkness, the museum is downright eerie. What's even weirder is that French Boone has asked local people to pose for him. So if you're from town you recognize people you know instead of the famous people they're supposed to be.

Ever since I was about fifteen, about the time my father drove off the mountaintop with his new girlfriend, people have remarked how much I favored him. Well, folks had also said that my father was the spitting image of Thomas Jefferson, whose features French Boone had been trying to immortalize in wax. It only made sense that French would ask me to pose for him, seeing that I looked as much like my father as my father had looked like Thomas Jefferson. So I agreed. I was in tenth grade when I met French after school at his workshop in the valley to sit motionless while he fashioned my likeness in wax.

"Damn Hawk, that thing gives me the creeps. It looks just like you, only older," Ailie Flippo said at the unveiling.



I have known Ailie Flippo and her brother Tate since fifth grade – that year they moved up on the mountain. I’ve spent a lot of time with both Tate and Ailie; moments with the two of them will always stand out in my mind – cold, cloudless days and hot, starry nights, memories from every season, some bad, but mostly good. Several winters back – the year after my father drove off the mountaintop – we took Tate’s Jeep all the way up in a foot of snow. I talked Ailie into coming along to watch me show off, my plans being to sled down a three-mile stretch of Parkway which had been closed off.

“Hawk, you’re nuttier than squirrelshit,” Tate told me, his thick, cloudy breath catching the morning sun. Ailie’s cheeks were like plums and her green eyes were shiny from the cold.

“Good luck,” she said, letting her long, black hair hang to one side.

I had driven 16-penny nails through the toes from the inside to out of some old work boots. I did look a little bit crazy – like some creature from a science fiction movie – with those nails poking out like weird claws. They were supposed to serve as cleats to help slow me down whenever I dragged my feet, but my design was flawed from the get-go.

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I got a running start, like those guys in the Olympics who race toboggans. About halfway down the straightaway I was going so fast that those nails just combed the ice and snow. My peripheral world was blurred by speed, as gravity brought me down faster and faster. I must've been going about sixty or seventy miles per hour as I whisked around the first big curve about a mile down the mountain, when out of nowhere about a dozen deer leapt over me, kicking up snow, snorting and stomping – their hooves chopping all around me like hatchets in the ice.

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Ailie and Tate thought I'd been trampled. But I was unscathed until I came to the next curve, that is. I took it way too wide, and due to my momentum, my long legs fish-tailed out and snapped me over the edge. I went flying off into the wild blue, plowed through snow-laden pineboughs, then dropped hard in a deep-enough snowbank to break my fifty-foot fall with only my breath to regain.

People around here usually equate that incident with my name, Hawk Fravel, Jr., and they laugh. Folks say I'm suicidal, just like my father. What they mean is that I'm as wild as he was. Of course, my old man never meant to kill himself. At least it doesn't seem likely. Decapitation is not your standard means of suicide. Still, my mother likes people to think he did himself in, seeing that he had run off with a young girl. My mother would have you believe that my father's bad conscience had literally sent him flying off the

mountain top with his new teenage girlfriend who was only a few years older than me. He must've been drunk out of his skull to put the gas pedal to the floor, flying so fast around that top curve that they busted clean through the guardrail. And his pickup must've been airborne for a right good spell because it landed so far down the mountain. It's a wonder that the rescue workers ever got to them and cut their bodies out of the pancaked truck. The rusted-out body lies at the base of the wild north slope – all the glass shattered, the seats sprung, and the floorboards rotted out – the chassis sprouting ferns and saplings, its hull inhabited by lizards and chipmunks. And in its bed, a cornered puddle of black slop reflecting dark leaves, bright sky.

I hike down to it now and then, drawn down through the trees by gravity until I'm running. All the way down into the hollow, pulled down through layers of cooler air, running through spider webs, thrashing through thistle, briars and brambles, only my feet barely slapping the ground preventing me from actually flying. I am drawn down there to catch my breath and ponder, sitting atop that stump the rescue team had to cut away to extract my father's headless body. I sit there thinking about gravity and about how we are bound here, prisoners of the earth. Even the giant red oak has succumbed – now a bridge across the hollow. Its stump measures over a yard wide. I've counted the rings; sat here enough over the last five years that I've worn it down smooth to a polish.

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*"Hawk!"* I hear my dead father's voice clear as day, beckoning me. I look around for his head. It's getting late as the sun slips behind Snipe's Peak. The blue shadow of the mountain slides over me like a glacier. Covered in gooseflesh, I crane my neck, look around. I spot an owl about thirty feet away, watching me from a hickory branch. He blinks his yellow eyes judiciously, then he twists his head back around and hops into the air, spreading his giant wings, swooping down, disappearing through the trees.

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French Boone never did pay me, nor did he give me the original clay bust of myself (what he called his 'prototype') that he promised me for sitting for him. So Tate and I broke into his log cabin workshop in the valley on a cloudless June morning. The sky was bright and blue as Tate and I snuck up on our shadows, creeping up onto the porch. Looking over our shoulders to make sure no one was around, we jimmied open the front door to the cabin. Inside, there were wax and clay heads everywhere – most of them bald and eyeless on work tables and shelves. There were a few who looked finished, with hair and eyes and teeth and everything, looking like they might wink at you, or stick out their tongues, or wiggle their ears, or something.

In a cupboard on the back wall, I discovered my own head on a shelf. Snatching it down, I tucked it under my arm like a football and ran out of there, high-tailing it up Bull Ridge with Tate somewhere behind me. ✧

I was way ahead of Tate so I stopped for a breather and a drink. It was cool and beautiful, climbing upward through the shady stretches of mountain laurel – but out under the bare sun, it was intense. So, with my head wedged under my arm, I followed a tributary trickle of spring water that purred into the main creek. I followed it in reverse, higher, to its source at the top of the mountain. Climbing over the uppermost lip of lichen-bearded rock that jutted up at the peak like some fossilized whale, I set my head down and pulled myself up, peering over the humped outcropping to see Tate’s sister Ailie. She was face-up, laid out naked, all sacrificial-like, her breasts flattened and oily under the near-noon sun. She looked like an Indian princess. J  
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I tried to be quiet, but I lost my footing in the loose shale, and I accidentally kicked my head down the mountainside where I could hear it bouncing and thumping and thrashing through the forest on its return journey to French’s cabin. Immediately, I dipped out of view and hustled back down the path, hoping Ailie had not seen me. Tate was still somewhere down the mountain trail when my head went sailing by. Or so he said later. G  
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But at that moment, he yelled, “Hawkins!”

“Hawkins!” I heard his voice yell again, far away, circling back from another mountain.

I climbed out onto a big flat cantilevered rock so I could look down into the valley. Way down there, I could make out the little matchbox-sized log cabin where we had been, toward which my head was still rolling. I could hear Tate, my accomplice, moving closer below the sure sound of dead twigs snapping underfoot.

From above came Ailie’s voice, “Is that you Hawk?”

I looked up, and there she was, now in a white t-shirt and faded, frayed cut-offs. Her long hair was braided into a thick black snake that hung over one shoulder. I was still leaning out on that rock down below her.

Two small white butterflies were weaving a sunlit column of air, fluttering up to a height of about thirty feet – until they were at eye-level with Ailie – then they slowly unraveled, flickering back down to where I stood smiling up, frozen on that rock like a lizard, under the spell of Ailie’s downcast emerald eyes. I just smiled up at her and blinked, now in a state of natural hypnosis, but deep down, I was sorry to have lost my head.

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Ailie is the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. With all that long dark hair and a tan to make her glowing green eyes jump out at you, it only made sense that French would ask her to pose as Pocahontas. I even encouraged her. But the second or third day she sat for that perverted old bastard, he tried to get her to take off her shirt for the sake of realism. And when she finally consented, he asked her if he could feel her breasts so he might get a better idea of how to sculpt them.

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When she told me about this, I was prepared to break old French Boone over my knee like a piece of kindling. Ailie told me what had happened over the phone after supper one night and I stormed out, jumped in my truck, and tore out after him.

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*"Hawk, don't go,"* a voice told me.

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My mother chased me outside, having no idea what was going on. But I paid her no heed, knowing that French was likely to be hanging out with the boys up on Wally's Knock, pitching horseshoes and drinking shine. So that's where I was headed, driving recklessly up the mountain. With my windows rolled down, I could make out the clang of horseshoes from a mile away. And further off, I could also hear someone playing the banjo.

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When I got there, I braked broadside in a cloud of dust and strode through the twilight of drunken old men, snatching a tossed horseshoe clean out of mid-air, interrupting their game.

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“Where’s French Boone?”

Junius Ketchum stepped forward, holding a mayonnaise jar half-full of shine. “What the hell’s your problem?”

“I need to speak with French Boone.” I noticed a lightning bug crawling up the moist side of his jar, blinking weakly as Junius pointed with his drinking hand down the mountain, sloshing a little shine over the rim, washing the dim, stunned bug to the ground. He pointed down to where the darkness had settled, down the mountain to where my father had died, down to where the low twang of a banjo flowed like a creek over cobbles. I headed down on foot.

“Hey!” Junius yelled after me. “Move your goddamn truck!” But I kept walking.

“What you got, son...?” Farley Snipes chimed in. “A damn hole in your head!?”

I didn’t pay him any mind either.

As I strode down the mountain, the picking of the banjo got louder, droning like cicadas. French Boone was all the way down the mountain sitting in the culvert under the railroad trestle. He liked it there for the acoustics, I’m told. Anyway, he was playing my father’s favorite song, “Ring of Fire.” Gravity took me down, but the clang of horseshoes from above intermingled with the lonesome twanging of the banjo and the combined music did something

to me. All of my anger drained right out through the slapping soles of my feet and I got this haunted feeling jogging up my spine. I was there at the wreck, at the stump in the twilit hollow.

*Hawk, don't go losing your head, son.*

It was my father's voice I heard.



It's been over five years since he sailed off the mountain top. I guess I'll never get over it because I have this recurring dream in which his head appears and talks to me – just my father's head, hovering in unlikely places, sometimes perched on the big limb where my little sister's swing is hung in the backyard – a head at twilight, all by itself, sitting up there on that big branch, as wise as an owl. I'm looking up at it when it slowly opens its eyes. I look close at the head and it's like looking into a mirror. The head belongs to me.

I have other dreams where Ailie Flippo is made of wax – her whole body. In these dreams, Ailie is naked, laid out like she was on that rock at the top of Bull Ridge, for me to do with as I please. But then comes my head, having sprouted wings, and it hovers over me, watching while I'm unbuckling my pants. It pesters me into waking.

My head is rife.

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Some nights, I wake up from dreaming about my head and I stand in front of mirror, expressionless, just staring at my face. One night, I reached into the top drawer of my dresser and pulled out my .45. I cocked back the hammer, held the barrel to my temple, and said flatly to my head, "Leave me alone." Then I slowly squeezed the trigger, watching the black chamber revolve one notch in the mirror. I didn't even wince when the hammer snapped down – all the while knowing the gun wasn't loaded.

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This leads me to the second time I saw Ailie naked.

Late one evening last August, a small tornado ripped a path across the mountains and, in its wake, strew across the hillsides a thousand cords of potential firewood for the coming season. Summer had been dry until that night, when the rain came hard and made me dream things I could just barely remember after Momma told me to get up and go on over to the Flippos'.

Tate and his father were out of town, fishing, and wouldn't be home until the next day, so Mrs. Flippo called first thing that morning and asked my mother if I was available to cut up a lightning-struck oak that had fallen onto their house.

Momma woke me up and fed me eggs and biscuits, fried apples and sausage, like she knew it was going to be our last breakfast to-

gether. When I asked her to fry up two more eggs, she said, “You sound just like your father.” Then she turned away to wipe off a counter, trying to hide the tears in her eyes, I guess knowing that I was bound to leave her, too.

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After I sopped up the yolk with the last bite of biscuit, I gave Momma a kiss and slammed the door behind me. I threw my chainsaw into the bed of the truck, along with my bow-saw, a big can of gasoline mixed with oil, and some separate oil for the chain. I double-checked that my hex key – for tightening up the chain – was snug in my pocket, then I set off toward the Flippos' house a few hills over, chasing the cloud shadows as they floated up and down over the mountains like great, playful whales bobbing over the waves.

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Ailie was standing outside at the foot of the driveway, pushing around gravel with her bare toes, waiting for me to show up. Her long silky black hair was brushed out down her back and it swayed when she leaned one way or the other. With tiny white toenails and long brown legs, she was wearing white shorts and a sky-blue tank top. She led me around back to where her mother was sitting in a lawn chair, staring at the big tree that had tried to squash their house. I immediately pulled off my shirt and set to work, first by

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climbing onto the roof by means of a ladder and then by lopping off all of the limbs so I could get at the main trunk. Ailie helped out down below by dragging off all the leafy branches that I sailed down to her. I watched her toting off a big branch, raking it across the grass, then I looked down at the toothed chain whirling round the paddle of steel, faster and faster when I gave it the juice, and its cranky noise filled the air.

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By noon, my pants, socks, and boots were sopped from sweat; my ears were buzzing; and the lightning-struck oak had been butchered down to two-foot logs that Ailie helped me stack alongside their garage.

“You must still be lifting weights,” she said when I humped a big section of bottom trunk from the house to the garage by myself.

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“Shoot, that only weighs about two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. That ain’t nothing,” I bragged. “We’ll use that as a chopping block and split all this up.”

“Let Tate split it, Hawk. You’ve already done more than your share,” Ailie said, wiping at the glisteny hollow of her throat. “Anyway, Momma has lunch for us by now. We can make a picnic of it, if you want? Maybe go swimming. I’m burning up.”

Mrs. Flippo put about several ham sandwiches into a big shopping bag and gave us a thermos of sweetened iced tea and a big

quarter slice of pound cake. She offered me twenty dollars for all my work, but I told her the truth.

“No thanks. It was my pleasure.” I smiled at Ailie.

Mrs. Flippo tucked it into my hip pocket anyway.



On the way to Crater Falls, I stopped for a six-pack at Benny’s Store. Benny has been selling me beer since I was fourteen. He’s so old and frail his suspenders have bowed him over. Every time he sees me, he inevitably will say, “Son, you got a wild streak. Just like your daddy.” But today he has better things to talk about.

“Helluva storm, wad’n it? How’s your momma and your sister?”

“They’re fine. We rode it out pretty well. Better than most,” I say, knowing that old Benny really does care.



By the time we got to Crater Falls, Ailie and I were a little dizzy from both the heat and the beers we had guzzled. Evidence of the tornado was all around us – huge trees broken in half like matches, the greenery of leaves littering the ravines and ditches. I was thankful there were no other cars at the culvert where we parked to walk up.

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“Hey, I forgot my bathing suit,” Ailie laughed. She was squatting down, urinating on the other side of my truck. I didn’t say anything at first, checking my pulse through the thickening weight of my shaft. I splattered some poison oak leaves that gleamed and nodded in the sunlight.

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“That’s all right. I forgot mine too.”

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Only halfway up the falls, I had already wolfed down a sandwich and was working on another beer. Ailie’s face was flushed and there was perspiration on her upper lip and her eyes were astonishingly green. I was wondering if she had an all-over tan as we made our way up the left side of the falls. Rainbows and dragonflies were floating around our heads in the mist. Scrambling up the last part of the trail, ducking under a spider web and a low branch, I climbed up to the pool at the top where there’s a rope-swing. I turned around to give Ailie a hand up over the final boulder and I noticed the wet spots on the blue tank top between her breasts and under her arms when she stretched in the high breeze. I was worried about my head. So I crumpled my empty beer can in one hand and with the other I started to unbuckle my pants when a camouflaged rattlesnake made himself evident by jiggling his tail like a little maraca, and we both jumped back off the path. I slid my belt-strap out of the loops and popped it at that old snake’s head.

He jerked back in one swoop then hovered there for a few seconds, shaking his rattle at me, but for some reason he chose not to strike, suddenly wheeling off into the undergrowth. I stripped down immediately, then leapt into the stream with a hoot. The water – even in the heat of summer – was always so cold it would make a man shrivel up. But I didn't give a damn. I burst up out of that icy pool and yelled, "Watch out for that snake! He's hungry for an apple!" Ailie screamed and leapt in, fully-dressed.

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The turtles that had been sunning themselves on rocks and logs plopped off and disappeared downward. Before Ailie surfaced, I scurried up a cedar that had fallen into the water – leaning just like that oak tree had leaned against the Flippos' house – and I laddered up its shredded, broken-off limbs to the rope-swing that hung from a sycamore that leaned out over the water as if it would fall in, too. I stood up there on the bank in full view of Ailie and kind of flexed my muscles, then I stretched out my whang and danced around like a show-off.

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Ailie looked up at me like I was crazy and smiled, "Good God, Hawk, have you lost your dang head!?"

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Now why did she have to go and say that?

I grabbed the big frayed knot on the rope that's wrapped around that sycamore and swung myself out, back and forth like a big ape. Finally, I let go and made a tremendous explosion about

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two feet in front of her. When I came up, I grabbed her and she squealed, but she let me hold her, and eventually she moved up against me for warmth. I peeled off her top then held her tight. I could hear her little white teeth chattering. The icy water soon lost its effect on both of us as she shivered up against me. I wanted to tell her that from the very first moment I had laid eyes on her back in fifth grade, I had loved her. But I didn't. We just stared at each other with heavy, wet lashes and hugged and kissed and smiled.

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I pulled off her shorts and she wrapped herself around me and I was about to make love to her, when three kids I had never seen before appeared above us at the top of the path. The least of the three made a snorting sound then blew a wad of spit off the back of his tongue. It landed smack on the surface of the water right in front of us. Well, I got up out of that water and chased their smart asses down the mountain until I lost my hard-on.

When I got back, Ailie asked me to fetch her her clothes from the rocks so she could put them back on underwater. It was getting late. The sun had already started to slip behind the trees.

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We didn't go home that evening. I know my mother must've been worried sick while Ailie and I sat at the bar, dumping quarters

into the jukebox, eating from a basket of potato chips and drinking a large pitcher of draftbeer. We ran into a good friend, Haskell Chittum, who had gone to school with us. ✧

“Hey, that was one hell of a storm last night, hunh? Where’s Tate?” Haskell said.

“Fishing with my father – if they didn’t blow away,” Ailie said. J

Haskell slid in beside me and bought the next couple of pitchers, providing us a plan of action. Later that night under a new moon, smiling, Haskell and I broke into French Boone’s Wax Museum where I became like a lunatic plastic surgeon. Using my acetylene torch, we rearranged the faces and bodies of many of the waxworks inside with the blue tip of flame. Of course, I itched to get at monkey-boy on the pendulum, but he was out of reach. O  
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Ailie was parked out back in my truck for a fast getaway while Haskell, and I carried out my mission. I had first dibs on using the torch, seeing that it belonged to me, so I sparked off the blue point in the dark, while Haskell looked on anxiously, craning his head over my shoulders. I commenced by elongating noses of famous people until they’d wobble down over their mouths. But the famous people didn’t look much like themselves to begin with. P  
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They looked more like the townsfolk who posed for them. To name a few, George Washington looked more like the realtor, Habe McDougal; Robert E. Lee resembled Nutsie Piesoot, a drunk bum

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from Snipe's Peak; Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, like the fife-player, probably were modelled on French himself; JFK was my elementary school principal, Miss Sykes (she looked just like him); Elvis was Elvis with a weird, waxy sneer; and Thomas Jefferson was, well ... me, the guy we had come for. I went into the room with the three minutemen and attacked the goat-bearded fife player first.

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"Hurry up with that thing, Hawk. We ain't got all night!" Haskell whispered harshly, as I worked the blue jet of flame around the nose – clockwise, then counter-clockwise – slowly, until the painted-in color rivered away and the bone-white wax began to sag, and the fife player who once looked like old French gradually assumed the likeness of a Proboscis monkey. Turning that man into a monkey was just my way of biding time because I was saving my own face for last. Haskell kept acting spooked, claiming that he heard something. Like maybe the wax figures in the other rooms were moving around, coming to life.

"Don't you mess with Pocahontas!" I said, passing the torch to Haskell because I didn't know exactly what to do next. Haskell was less than creative. He attacked the noses that I had already worked on, ruining my handiwork because he torched them one step too far so they'd actually dribble away, leaving long stalagmites in their stead. He made the monkey faces I had created look like pointy-nosed evil goblins.

After Haskell destroyed a few of my noses, he pulled down a barmaid's low-cut white-fringed blouse to discover that she was nippleless. I watched him across the way, highlighted in the eerie blue torch light. I had already experimented on the fife-playing minuteman, Jeff Davis, and Abe Lincoln because they all resembled French Boone enough to make me feel justified about my handiwork.

I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do to Thomas Jefferson. He was like a big doll that I was going to perform voodoo on. The first thing I did was to pull down his knickers. It bothered me that Jefferson possessed no privates – just a smooth Ken-doll crotch. So I went to the vault of the Parts Department – which was not locked. From a shelf full of arms, I snatched a child's – about nine or ten inches long.

It suddenly dawned on me that it wasn't really my head that was haunting me, nor was it my daddy's. It had been my body all along.

I approached Haskell, grabbing the torch out of his hand, then I melted the little arm into place in the crook of Thomas Jefferson's hairless pubic region. It stood up like a giant hard-on. It was clearly waving goodbye.

Being wild, like my father, was just the way I was, so I left Haskell then and there, running out to the truck where I scooted

✧ Ailie's sweet ass over and jumped in, taking the wheel. As I slipped it into neutral, we coasted off without headlights, tempted by gravity down the dark mountain, leaving paradise behind.

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