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Power

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ANDREW JOSEPH KANE

POWER

WHEN THEY SHOT Sailor Boy, Juney McKittrick left the road and walked straight into the White Bear Lake, and it wasn't till sunset the Mahoning Police caught her wading up to her earlobes. And it was sad to see her brought in like that, her dress dark even under that blanket the deputy put on her—not wrapped in, just laid on her shoulders so it hung like a sort of cape—though with all the ruckus she kicked up some of us might've shook our heads, knowing what we knew.

Juney'd say it started with the UpTownElectric man, but we knew it probably went back further to her husband Pat McKittrick—some used to call him Paddy McKittrick. Pat, or Paddy, he worked, like all the old guys, up in the mines, and then, like all the old guys, collected disability. His check wasn't from black lung like most (though he had it). His was from when the mines were still open. In the end, in the '60s, Number 9 it must've been, down in Lansford, he had some terrible accident, and they had to take his foot and half his leg. He'd married Juney before this, but now he only had the one leg so she had to fend for the two of them, the disability only covering so much.

So Juney went and got work with the church, the rectory, and cleaning too at the school, sweeping and scrubbing after the kids. Soon enough they put her out to digging graves with the men, miners her husband Paddy'd worked with, all of them wheezing with pleurisy and cigarettes bobbing down there in those holes. She went down there swinging a pick and let the men scoop out the diggings. Afterwards the men set to filling them. Men burying men till most of them were gone.

Back at home, down in their little rancher on White Bear Road, Pat was there feeling sorry for himself like all the old guys (and maybe jealous too, his wife in the graves with his buddies). And the story's the same as it is now, except then it was just drink and not things like oxy and heroin and all that. And sure he was nasty, and no they never had kids, but the point isn't about what he did to her. It's about how she got sent out into the world cause of what happened to him. Most women in those days, they just made the supper and pressed the shirts and on and on. So when he died up in the house—congestive heart failure or whatever it was—Juney didn't step out like some Cinderella looking for a prince. She knew what it was in the world, how under every sawdust pile there's a puke slick.

Sure, she'd play basket bingo and get her hair done at Lizzie's like the rest of us, but she was also going out. She'd go to Atlantic City. Bus trips to New York to see a show. Leave from the church parking lot, all crumbled to gravel. He never would've gone, Pat. Too embarrassed about his leg or who knows. Couldn't stand straight even if he was sober (that's terrible I know). And there Juney goes by herself. She ate out at least a couple nights a week

too. Said she didn't like to keep cooped up. She'd put on a nice top and do her makeup—she was always picking some new outfit up—but she wasn't looking for any husband, she'd say. Lizzie's nephew Bruce got Juney Sailor Boy 'cause he thought she was lonely. She took him anyway, Sailor Boy, little Yorkie mix. She'd put little sweaters and things on him. Silly things.

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BUT THAT WAS before any of this. Before Juney was out there in the tent, half in the woods, all bundled up, three jackets and a sleeping bag, living like a gypsy. God it was terrible to see. But the UpTownElectric man, when he showed up, it all hit the shitter as they say. These folks—electric companies, energy providers, whatever—they call all day and all night if you let them. We had a landline with the ringer off, thirty-some missed calls in a week one time. I bet half were these folks.

So one day the man comes to the door—talk about old-fashioned—and he's a nice-looking young guy to hear her tell it. She probably was flirting with him probably. And who cares? Good for her. She's been alone down there in the house thirty-some years now. Young guy comes to the door, and he's from UpTownElectric. New company, he says. Are you happy with your bill? he says. Well, she doesn't know. So he asks to see it, and sure, she brings it. And look at this, he says, we can do better. Cheaper by the month we can do, these regulations lifted now. Good for everyone 'cause the little guys like us can buy the runoff electric from the big guys. And the big guys

are just out to scalp you anyway, and when was the last time they were quick to fix you during a blackout and all this. So blah blah-blah blah-blah. Talks her into it—signs her up. And why not, yeah?

Juney started bragging about this. It's so sad to think now, how it all went. Poor woman, she just couldn't be frugal. And so a cheaper utility, she thought it's buried treasure.

First month, take a look at this, she says. I don't know why you girls don't switch too. These UpTownElectric boys should have lines round the block, folks wanting to switch.

She used to carry the bill around with her. In her pocketbook. Right here, she says, in black and white. And we did think about it and look at it and nod our heads. Good for her, we thought, widow that she is. Saving something here and there. She deserves it. We all liked Juney.

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NEXT COUPLE MONTHS, same story. She stopped carrying each new bill 'cause we were sick of it, but still she'd bring it up at Lizzie's, waiting to use the dryer. How much she was saving per month thanks to the UpTownElectric boys. Like there was an office of sharp young fellas just waiting to take care of her. We sure didn't have any office of fellas waiting on us.

Anyway, all of a sudden one day Juney shuts up. Shows up at Lizzie's for her appointment, and she don't say a peep. There were four chairs in Lizzie's, two for cut-and-wash, two for dry. Sarah Nowak (she can be a real

pip), she's not drying, but she's sitting in one anyway, kind of kicking her knee over her leg watching Juney get a touch up. She decides to ask how the UpTownElectric boys are.

Oh don't get me started, Juney goes.

Oh yeah?

The last bill went up. Way up.

Oh? Sarah goes.

Yeah. Oh.

That's the last appointment Juney showed up for. Turns out Lizzie'd been taking checks from Juney, for her hair, and they were bouncing. Heard that through Sarah Nowak not Lizzie. Lizzie'd never tell such a thing, except now maybe. Lizzie, she's a saint and anyone'll say so, she didn't say one peep with everyone there. She still called to check in though, Lizzie did. But next time she went to call Juney, the line's disconnected.

A couple of us went over after that. Down to the rancher on White Bear Road. I hadn't been to her place in some time. The fence posts were wanting paint. The siding had all that green gunk that needed to be power-washed out. With the lake and the mildew, I worried for her. I pointed at it, and Sarah tut-tutted, but Lizzie said hush. We knocked on the door, said we're just checking in, making sure everything's ok. We even brought a little cake Christine Fronheiser baked. Juney's in there. Sailor Boy's in there. Yapping like mad. Not a light on in the place. She had an old coal oil lamp—must've been Pat's or her mother's or father's. She didn't look happy to see us, even though we're smiling and offering her cake. She didn't look unhappy either.

It was like she didn't care if we came or went.

Well, after sitting around the table in the near dark, not having the cake (Christine didn't push it, just set it on the counter by the Mr. Coffee), Juney didn't tell us anything. Acted like this was just the usual routine. It took Lizzie going back by herself and finally it came out. Turns out the bills went up, three, four, five times the original amounts. Each one getting bigger and bigger even though she said she's using less and less. And she's calling them, and they're telling her about the contract. So Lizzie asked to see the bills, and if I know her, Lizzie probably wrote her a check too. Saint.

Sarah Nowak brought Juney's bills to her Ronny. Ronny ran the bills in that house. Lizzie gave them to Sarah, and Sarah brought them to Ronny. He's the one came back with all the answers. How they swindled her—UpTownElectric—they're pirates, he says. Variable rates and all this. They can swap it at the drop of a hat. First you pay one price, looks nice so they can lock you in, then they jack the rates. You can't keep up, so they cut the cord. He makes calls, Ronny, and he comes up with: There's nothing much to do. She signed it. They're allowed to do it. Free market.

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FINANCIAL FRAGILITY IS what Lizzie said. Turns out Juney didn't have anything saved. Burned through Paddy's life insurance, through her earnings from the church. Living off Social Security, a fixed income like all of us. But these bills start throwing the whole thing off. So dominoes, yeah?

Electric goes, obviously cable goes, she lets the heating go, she can't afford the trash collection. Lizzie and Christine, they'd take a trip and pick up her bins—mix her trash with their trash for the trash men. What a fiasco! City sewer, city water, shut them down. She can't pay, turn them off. Well then she still has to go to the bathroom. I don't even want to think about it. She must've been cooking on the grill, or I don't know what she was eating. Maybe they were bringing her meals too. She liked to eat out, so who knows? Folks were treating her maybe. Folks liked Juney.

Next thing you know, the township's knocking on her door. She's got to keep up or clear out. This is what they told her. Trash collection and maintaining the property and all. They mention the sewer situation. And yeah, there's buckets out back. God forgive me. Juney, she went on about UpTownElectric. The township guys didn't want to listen, but off she went. Juney said the debt she owed—credit cards she took out to pay credit cards she took out to pay credit cards—they've sent the debt collectors and the agencies. Can you imagine? Lizzie Colson said some van came and they took things from Juney's living room—the TV and the radio and whatnot. What's an old radio to them? It's not doing Juney any good, not without power. But the township guys, they didn't care about the vans coming to take her stuff. They're just giving the notice. Taped a sign to the door. Big letters. Yellow paper.

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WE ALL OF US visited again. Daytime so at least we could see. Brought some more food, tried to cheer her up maybe. That old rancher, if it looked bad that first visit, now it was something else. After the debt collectors came and went, there were all the indents left in the carpet—here’s where the stereo was, here’s the marks from the TV stand.

Lizzie Colson had tried to warn us about the state Juney was in. She said Juney hadn’t done the wash, that she needed to do the wash. That’s how Lizzie said it. What I would’ve said was Juney had a real stink going, the poor woman. Hair limp without the perm, house dress just sticking to her. It was more than just “doing the wash.”

Lizzie was going around sweeping things up. Christine Fronheiser was cutting up a little casserole she made. Sarah Nowak and me were sitting at the table with Juney.

What are you going to do? I asked her.

Why don’t you see if you can get some hours at the church again? Christine said. Maybe sweep up on the weekends or who knows? Father Dalton might need someone, so why don’t you ask?

I ain’t never shoveling shit again, Juney said.

What about some other part time job? Sarah Nowak said.

What about Wal-Mart, what about the Dollar General? I knew they were always hiring.

But Juney wouldn’t hear it. It’s like none of this had anything to do with her.

It’s the UpTownElectric man, she said.

The UpTownElectric, Sarah said.

God knows he ain't gonna help! I said.

What did I ever do? Juney said. The same sad story.

Sarah rolled her eyes. I got hard then. Someone had to, I figured. Only so much could get done with cakes and visits and picking up a grown woman's trash.

What would Paddy think? I asked.

Juney just stared for a while.

Paddy? Juney said.

What I mean is, wouldn't Paddy think it a real shame? Sitting here feeling sorry for yourself?

And what did *he* ever do but that? Juney said.

Ok. So why do it yourself then?

Is that what you think I'm doing?

What else would you call it? You've got all of us running around here, taking care of every last thing, while you go on pouting in the dark—

Maude, Lizzie said, giving me the look. She had rubber gloves on and was wiping up the sink.

Lizzie Colson, I said. You're too good for your own good. You're certainly too good for Juney's good.

Don't you speak for me, Maude, Lizzie told me. Juney's our friend. She'd do the same for us if we needed it.

Would she? Sarah Nowak said.

All I know is you got to do something, I said.

If that's all you know—Juney said. But then she stopped.

Juney was quiet the rest of the time, and we didn't prod, just ate the casserole off paper plates then left.

So at this point, Lizzie Colson was the only one helping out Juney. We didn't talk about it at our hair appointments. Didn't bring it up with Lizzie at all. The township was coming to evict Juney, ready or not. I just know Lizzie told Juney to move in with her. Juney's so damn proud, what do you think she said?

So what did they do? They evicted her. From her own house! The Mahoning Police came to escort her out, lock up the door. Juney was out with some bags of clothes and Sailor Boy on his little leash. This was March. It's still cold up here in March. Juney don't care. She just set up out there. A little tent, a little fire going. It's just like camping for her. A regular adventure!

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JUNEY STARTED SHOWING up at the township meetings then, oh Lord. Sailor Boy under her arm. She hadn't "done the wash," but she put on a nice outfit, combed her hair, in she strolled. She sat there through the meeting, and when the question session came at the end she started in.

How come no one looks out for no one no more?

What? these township fellas are saying.

How come these UpTownElectric guys are even allowed in the county?

Who? they go.

How come it's OK to kick an old lady out of her house but not say no to these pirates? (Pirates is what Ronny called them.)

The fellas in there just sort of blinked at her, didn't know what to do. Even though she's trying, she did still look like a kind of hobo. Someone you'd see down Philly or Allentown or somewhere. Pushing around grocery carts. Wild but tired.

Sailor Boy started yapping. They told her the dog has to go.

Cowards, she called them, cowards!

That was the March meeting, but she kept showing up. April. They're ready for her now. They made her tie Sailor Boy to the streetlight. She wouldn't do it, so someone called Lizzie Colson for her, and down Lizzie went. Saint, she took the little dog for the meeting. Sat with him or took him for a walk (how sweet). In the meeting, at the questions at the end, they got the notice and the paperwork, they're ready, and they talked her through it calm as a cucumber. She still didn't understand.

True, they said, we never had to evict anyone before, but no one has let their responsibilities go like you have.

Responsibilities? She started screaming.

And they just leaned back and looked at each other.

May now, it's like both sides had been waiting all month just for this. June, meantime, she's still living like a wild woman. Sometimes folks'd see her in the Dollar General buying who knows with money she got from wherever. If you saw her walking past while you were driving, God you just

rolled up the window and stared straight ahead. May meeting came, Lizzie's ready to take Sailor Boy. Juney's wearing a dress, pretty blue flowers, eye shadow like she's going out to eat. Question session comes, they had the Mahoning Police there, an officer wearing a gun belt. Juney started in just like always. They told her they'd put in a complaint, registered a complaint on her behalf, as a courtesy to her, to the Better Business Bureau against UpTownElectric. And turns out this UpTownElectric, they've got maybe one star—worst rating you can get. What they'll do, UpTownElectric, the township fellas said, they predict they'll fold. No more UpTownElectric is what they think. But they'll probably just rebrand, start again, different name, get the same deal up again.

Juney asked what about her home.

What about it?

The officer with the gun belt wouldn't even look at her.

They started to take other questions, and there were one or two old folks in there who wanted to ask about the noise in Rankin Park after sunset hours and electronics recycling, but Juney wouldn't quit.

She started howling, Give me my house back. Give me my house back.

The township fellas tried to quiet her down, they tried to shout her down. She kept on.

The officer took her out. Outside Sailor Boy's there with Lizzie Colson. Sailor Boy saw the officer and Juney screaming, he jumped up, latched onto the officer's hand. Officer's cussing now, Sailor Boy wouldn't let go. Officer started swinging the little dog around, still wouldn't let go. Well then you

know the rest. Took out his pistol.

After that, she walked, didn't even say nothing to the man who just killed her dog, walked down the hill, down through the trees, straight into the lake. Lizzie's yelling at the police, people were yelling in the street, a real crowd was forming. Sarah called me when she heard and we went down and saw Juney out there in the water, waist deep, wading slow, staring at the other shore. We were all of us shouting to her, and when she was no more than a little head bobbing, the Mahoning Police finally showed up to collect her. She let them. You're not allowed to drown yourself in the lake.

I saw her being brought in from that, wet from the neck down, shaking like the old woman she was. Going up the pebbles to the cruiser idling, the blanket they put on her dropped, and you could see the reason they put it on her was because her dress had ripped, split straight up the back, and now you could see her underwear there beneath it. I won't describe it, but it made us all gasp, and I ran then, or moved as quick as I could, to try to cover her up, with that blanket or her dress or my own self, but when I got to the men helping her into the back, someone else had lifted it to her shoulders and held the door to let her in.

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MY BOY JAKE and his boy Jakey, they go down to that lake, White Bear Lake, and they ride around on the boat, whipping the inner tube off the back. And me and Jake's wife Celine and their little girl Amber, we'll watch them

in the boat, and we'll talk about this and that. I'll tell them how I used to burn every meal I cooked when I first got married, and how my husband Big Jake used to like to sit on the porch after dinner no matter the weather, no matter the season. And what it was like before they flooded all this to make the lake. Not that I remember, but I heard the stories. And there's things I won't tell them. About how I got drunk off the holy wine in eighth grade with my friends Peg Rothermel and Mary Ryan, how one night I lit a fire in my uncle Frank's coal shed and nearly burned half the mountain down, how it felt to push a pin into the place on my leg Skip Turley kissed the night we went up the Switchback, and other things. The boat'll keep buzzing. We'll keep watching. They'll listen to what I have to say. When I tell them what Juney'd done.