

## Chapter 4 Excerpt from *Forty Ways to Square a Circle*

With the rain taking a rest, and the sky dark enough to hide beneath, Merriman emerged like a zombie with his guitar to sit in the cool air of the balcony. The seat of his deck chair was wet with rain, but (as his pants were marked for the hamper) rainwater did not deter him. He plucked random chords to toughen his fingers to the frets. His sleeve inadvertently deadened the bass strings. His mother had judged his singing voice to be respectable, but he had never allowed anyone else to hear it. Only the two raccoons who watched with curiosity from the holly tree heard his song. As his fingers warmed, he shifted from a careless, unadorned strum to a church-lick pattern. However he approached a song, he was likely to end up with some variation of the “Carter scratch”—a tribute to his fondness for the Carter Family.

The Columbia River rolled in rhythm with the up-and-down of his tortoise-shell pick, flowed past the stands of giant Sitka spruce trees in Coboway, hammered the rotting cannery pilings (stained to olive green with perpetual ebb and flow), ducked under the bridge in Astoria. Just beyond the town, the river swelled like a snake swallowing a rabbit into Youngs Bay on the south and Bakers Bay on the north. It rocked the sleepy fishing boats in Hammond, Chinook, Ilwaco—rolled, swirled, dipped all the way to Cape Disappointment and the sea. There, after all the hardship, the river was greeted with a fierce, inhospitable pounding. That’s life, Merriman observed. Life outside the Garden gate.

As a child, he had fished the river with his father in a twenty-six-foot gillnet boat. He had mounted crests of thirty-foot sea swells without anxiety. The exhilaration was still with him—romanticized but, in some dimension, authentic. He had known no fear then. He had not imagined there was anything *to* fear. What

can a ten-year old know of a river's scandalous reputation?

Merriman peered into darkness and, from memory, reconstructed his river. It was out there. Hungry Harbor way over there on the opposite bank. He did not need to see it. It was all there. He thought of breakfast at Praeger's. All the fisherman came to Praeger's after a night on the river. He could still taste (to whatever extent the memory can reproduce taste) the Luden's wild cherry cough drops his father would buy him as a sweet reward for polishing off a mountain of scrambled eggs. Two invisible sea lions barked incessantly. In memory-vision, he could see them bobbing on a buoy. They were holding their heads up, searching in vain for a moon. Their howling was hoarse and off-key, but they were doing the best they could with the instruments they had been given. He sang with them instructively. In a brief flash of moon glow, patches of snow on the highest peaks on the Washington side became almost visible; but, try as he might to clear his mind of clutter, he could not dispose of Eric. Eric. Long-dead-and-gone Eric, for all he knew. Must be. "She still feels love." It made him sorry to think so. He wanted to believe that the pangs of love dissipate eventually, that time heals all wounds; but his aunt still whispered Eric's name when she thought no one would hear. Even sick and spoiled by age, she dreamed about love.

The river rolled on under its clouds. One darkness. No distinct line of demarcation.

He strummed and hummed an old Welsh folk song—the prettiest song he had ever heard. He could never remember all the words.

“With sorrow, deep sorrow . . .”

He sang the bits he knew and hummed the broken parts. The church lick was

trying to find its way in the dark.

“All day I go mourning . . .”

Downstairs, his aunt might have been sobbing reflexively in her sleep. Even in her sleep.

"Ye echoes, oh tell me,  
Where is the sweet maiden?  
She sleeps 'neath the green turf  
Down by the ash grove."

He raised his gaze to the four points of lights that were the eyes of the two raccoons in the holly tree. Their alert eyes had trapped most of the brightness of his bedside lamp. “What are you guys staring at?” he chided. “You could wind up the same way if you’re not careful.” A crucial amendment to his caveat occurred to him, and he eagerly passed it along to his bright-eyed pupils. “And maybe—maybe also if you’re too careful.”