

Chapter 1
From the police blotter of the
Greater Metropolitan Roopville Shout



Jay Michael Jones

“Great confusion broke out over at the VFW Hall last night and police were called in to quell the potential violence at the scene. Mrs. Viola Hassendoodle was taken down to the Greater Metropolitan Roopville Jail and Visitor's Center for an overnight stay in one of the suites. Police would not comment on the damage reportedly suffered by the VFW, but a full statement will be made when and if the owner files his complaint.”

Well, that is what Dean McGuire wanted to run in the newspaper, but the legal department insisted he not tell the unvarnished truth to avoid a lawsuit. The conflagration began when Mrs. Hassendoodle had more than her share of a bottle of Old Overcoat and decided to perform a table dance to show that upstart Mrs. Ellen Vollinger who was boss. Within minutes of her stripping down to nothing but her high-heeled orthopedic shoes and an overtaxed bolt of Spanx, Mrs. Hassendoodle had the crowd in a stomping, hooting and hollering frenzy. The police took her off to the Jail and Visitor's Center for a cool-down/ drying out, one officer on each arm so she could not escape. It looks like charges will not be too harsh; the fellows at the VFW Hall took up a collection to bail Mrs. Hassendoodle out and peace has at last returned to the community of Greater Metropolitan Roopville.

Here in Greater Metropolitan Roopville, our canny news publisher knows what the public wants, and editor Dean McGuire knows what the public can handle. Dean McGuire wasn't born yesterday; he's a fine technical news man but he also knows his customers. Therefore, the Living section is technically on the first page since nobody really gives a damn what's going on in Atlanta but everyone wants to know what Mrs. Hassendoodle did at the VFW mixer the other night. In a nod toward the national/international scene, the editor chooses an article from one or the other category and places it below the fold on the front page because dammit, technically we're a big-time paper and nobody's

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gonna accuse us of being ignorant! Not when the proof is so apparent according to the Police Blotter section of the third page, where everyone goes to find out whatever happened to their high school classmates of yesteryear.

The comics are comprised of tedious strips like Beetle Bailey and Cathy and the Family Circus, so little Bubba and Little Miss Junior June Bug Festival can learn to read. There is no need to read the serial strips since all the drama and pathos a reader could want can be found if you read between the lines of the rest of the paper.

The Sports section jumps to wherever the hell page its stories want to jump because Football is KING here in the South, and that includes choosing what pages to saturate with testosterone and nachos-on-a-paper-plate. Every autumn in the South especially, it is not simply a ritual of youth; it is the heart and soul of a people whose struggle to succeed is manifested even at play. Much has been written about the dedication of the players and the enthusiasm of the cheerleaders and the determination of the coaches and the fanaticism of the crowds, but very little mention is made of the other, unsung heroes of football: the hometown paper editors.

Dean McGuire both loves and dreads football season. He is the heart and soul of the Greater Metropolitan Roopville Shout - "All the news you need to know, more or less." He was the one who squinted at all the head shots of the graduating seniors every May to make sure the right name corresponded with the right face. Every summer the Garden Party Club sent in photos of people standing all in a row in someone's parlor smiling at the camera, representing their monthly meetings. Dean could never get them to realize that it would make a better picture if they would actually show their members in a garden or doing some sort of yard work, or even stand in front of a bush somewhere. But no, the club that should be called The Society of Tastefully Appointed Dining Rooms insisted on showing their members having a nice time

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indoors, away from any gardens.

Dean also handles the annual Freeze Warning Banner every winter, and school-related stories that are the lifesblood of every small town paper. Summertime is a terrible time for Dean, who had to chase down interesting stories for the paper without the fall-back benefit that schools afforded him. Oh, there are events like the Fourth of July extravaganza and the Hometown Days Festival, but for the most part the summertime Shout was largely car ads until August. That was when Dean ran stories about the upcoming local school sports prospects.

Once the school year began, Dean and his small team of stringers canvassed the local games and reported all the sweat and mayhem of Friday nights in autumn. Then he rushed back to the press room to write the story and slap it on the paste-up boards before the guys in the print room had a conniption fit. Dean takes particular pride in his work and I am pleased to relate that despite his rush and the excruciating time constraint, there is rarely a typo to be found in any of the Sports section stories come Saturday morning. This is not true of the rest of the paper. When a paper's Saturday front page is used in the Whitetown fifth grade as a search puzzle for the students to circle the typo as a start-of-class exercise, it only means Dean was out chasing down the game highlights instead of hovering over the pasteup boards. Proofreading? What's that?

Dean's action shots depend entirely upon the quality of the photographer at the games, but he always managed to find people who either genuinely loved football, or genuinely loved the chance to report and did not mind the feeble pay. Neither of my sons played football and frankly, I did not see how one photo of a dressed-out player running down the field differed from any other similar photo. Still, I suppose the number on a jersey is a magical thing and it matters very much to the family of that number.

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Rain or shine, sticky late summer or bone-chilling snowy winter, Dean McGuire delivers the goods to a pleased readership. I won't say that I never heard him complain; he is human and susceptible to those human failings of cold and hunger and discomfort. More than once his car broke down on the way home from a game and he had to flag down a fellow Roopvillain in order to get back to the news desk to write the story. Still, he said it sure beat having to drum up a story to run when the Greater Metropolitan Roopville Jail and Visitors Center suffered a crime deficit, or some Hassendoodle wrote their own wedding announcement.

He had to cut a sixty-four-inch wedding monologue describing in agonizing detail, everything from the number of delicate bugle beads on the wedding dress to the exact shade of dusty rose pink floral arrangements, to what the mother of the groom wore to the reception as opposed to what she wore to the wedding itself. Somehow Dean managed to cut and wrestle all that back to a readable thirty inches of column type. Oh, he caught hell from the bride and her mother but he did not care. He told them he would gladly run the other thirty-two inches if they wanted to pay for the thirty-two inches' worth of advertising space.

I've seen him drag himself to city council meetings knowing they were usually three hours' worth of dull commentary with perhaps a handful of bullet points' worth of usable news story. I've seen him patiently help a photographer set up a group shot, only to have it ruined by little kids who thought pushing up the end of their noses to look like pig noses, or older kids slyly giving the finger at the last second. Dean's method of problem solving in those cases was to completely pull the offender out of the picture entirely, even if it meant the focal point of the picture would not be in it. Either the kid relented and allowed an ordinary photo to be taken, or the picture wasn't going to make the paper at all. Dean

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said there was no point in being an editor if you couldn't use editorial power, and the coaches always backed him up.

Greater Metropolitan Roopville has turned out some mighty fine young men through their football program, as have the other towns of the county. Sometimes they turn out to be like Dean McGuire of the Class of 1985, one of the finest tailbacks you ever saw.

Yes, the Greater Metropolitan Roopville Shout: most of the ink goes into printing the name and the truth is all there if you know which lines to read between.

Chapter 2
Flowers in the South



Jay Michael Jones

Azaleas are a very big deal in the South. Don't ask me why; personally I don't care for them. Oh, they are gorgeous when they are all in bloom but when they are not in bloom they just look scraggly. Comparing a non-blooming azalea bush with a nice ordinary hedge is like comparing a man who can't grow a decent beard, with an entire Amish community.

But you have to have azaleas if you live south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and it's a good bet there will be roses around somewhere too. Some people like to grow the stately long-stemmed roses that are coddled and coaxed into delivering a single divine rose per branch. Far too often I see rose bushes covered in cat's-butt roses. You know cat's-butt roses - they are roses left to grow at will on bushes and do not get trimmed back for long stems. Instead, all the buds crowd together and completely bloom out until they look the aft end of a forward-bound cat.

All along Greater Metropolitan Roopville's Rebel Street, azalea bushes line up along the sidewalks like tough little sentries, willing to endure the everyday onslaught of bored children and pissing dogs and visitors making shortcuts. In the springtime, their riotous offerings of red and white and pink burst forth upon the world. They make you forget all about how lousy they look the rest of the year, when their spindly branches and haphazard leaf coverage reminds me of a dog with the mange.

But that is just my take on the matter; it's no secret that I don't like azaleas. Maybe it's because I don't like the spindly branches or mangy leaves during the non-flowering seasons. Maybe it's because everybody and their cousin has azaleas in their yards and the South is just sick with them.

No. I must confess it is for none of those reasons although they could stand up to scrutiny. It's because of Sally Dimity. It's all her fault I don't like azaleas.

When I first met Sally, she was hunkered down behind the

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row of blazing bright red flowering bushes along the sidewalk outside the Dimity home. I didn't notice her gardening there at first; my eyes were drawn to the flowers since that year they came in good and thick. Uncharacteristically for me I said, "Niiiiice" out loud, whereby Sally lifted her head up sharply like a prairie dog watching for a coyote on the horizon. She looked like dewdrop on a leaf, so delicate and fragile at barely five feet two inches tall. She had high sharp cheekbones and big blue eyes and her blonde hair was styled in a short retro upturned flip. I looked forward to meeting this little pocket angel until she opened her mouth to speak.

"I'll thank you not to pass judgment on my butt," she told me sternly.

"I beg your pardon. I was passing judgment on your azaleas," I said with a polite bow.

"Well, of course you were. Everybody knows my mama has the best azaleas in town. And just who are you to judge azaleas?"

"It's my job down at the Feed and Seed," I said, and prepared to properly introduce myself.

"The Feed and Seed!" she interrupted in a voice just a shade under contemptuous. "The Mortons owned that place ever since I can remember, ever since my mama and daddy can remember, and then some damn Yankee or other just swoops in and buys them out! I'm not going to go down there and buy one seed more from them! I want the Mortons back."

"It is my understanding that Mr. and Mrs. Morton genuinely wanted to retire."

"Retire? Nobody believes that! You know what it was; it was that old Fable jerk who bought the place, that's what it was! He came in wavin' his Yankee dollars around and talked them out of something that's been a part of this community for the past - well, since the turn of the century."

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“Have you ever met him? The Fable jerk?”

“No, and I hope I don't. I'm afraid of what I would say to him.”

“Why, what would you say?”

“I'd tell him what swindler he is, and that he can take his fancy-assed out-of-towner ways and hit the road!” she fumed, stabbing at the dirt with her trowel. I was glad I was on the other side of the azalea bushes from her.

At that moment her brother Jim Dimity, whom I met at the Court Cafe earlier that week, waved at me from the front doorway. “Hey, Fable! Come on in, you're just in time!”

“I don't know that I should,” I called back. “I might have my fancy-assed out-of-towner self run out of town.”

“Huh?” He trotted down the brick path to where I stood.

Sally meanwhile had turned a sudden dusty red from the embarrassment of the moment. She did not let it curb her tongue, however. “You should have told me who you were instead of letting me hang myself.”

“What? And be accused of being a pushy, overbearing stranger who didn't know his place as an outsider to the community?” I retorted. “Please; I lived in Cobb County for a year; I know how this southern shtick works. And for your information, Ma'am, I am not a true Yankee. I am a Westerner. There is a difference as big as the one that separates a sorority deb from a stripper.”

“Good Lord, Sally!” Jim snorted even as he reached to shake my hand, “When are you going to stop being such a hothead? Come on in, Truman. Don't pay Sally no mind. She likes to put men through their paces.”

“I can only imagine the sort of trials and tribulations one must endure.”

“No more than what women endure from men,” Sally said, on

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my heels like a terrier ready to strike a mailman where it counts.

“You don't have anything to worry about from me,” I told her. “I got your message loud and clear. You don't want anything to do with me.”

“I never said that!”

“You most certainly did!” I countered, turning to face her so quickly that she plowed into me headfirst.

“Well, if I'd known you were a friend of Jim's, I'd have at least been a little nicer.”

“Even though I was evil enough to buy the Morton's store?”

“Well... did they really want to retire?” The way she twisted back and forth from front to back was appealing in concert with the way she turned those eyes on me.

I held up my right hand. “If I'm lyin', I'm dyin',” I assured her.

“Well, that remains to be seen.” A sly playful smile came to her face at last, and I felt a little more comfortable about my visit. Perhaps I would leave the dying part out of future conversations. Southern women have a way of making you keep your word.

I usually do not have that sort of trouble meeting women. I first met Nancy Sweetanall at the Greater Metropolitan Roopville Mayday Festival when we both bought sno-cones at a food booth. It was an unusually hot day for that time of year, the kind that makes you wish you could peel off your shirt and walk around bareskinned. I have never liked going shirtless in public, particularly around food. It just seems kind of gross. As it was, I was sweating through my golf shirt and my feet were imprisoned in shoe-shaped saunas. Only my cargo shorts brought me any relief, but they were loaded down with phone, wallet, pocketwatch and the little datebook I carry around to remind me what to do.

Nancy took in my disheveled state and the three young children tagging after me, and smiled. “Yours?”

“Yes.”

“They're adorable,” she said as she lifted her sunglasses to peer at me without a dark filter. She had startlingly blue eyes. Her golden hair was arranged in a charmingly careless pile on the crown of her head, held in place by a large plastic hairclip, while a curtain of neatly trimmed bangs came down to just above those blue eyes. She wore a little sundress that looked practical and cool. What color was it? – I am not sure. It was a light shade that I can best recall, and little sandals underscored the fact that the lady knew how to dress for the weather. To be honest I took all the rest in peripherally, because those eyes held my attention.

“Thank you,” my daughter Taylor piped up. At ten years of age she never missed a thing.

“My daughter Taylor; my son Fletcher and my youngest, Sage,” I said, waving a hand over each small head as I called roll. Eight-year-old Fletcher gave Miss Sweetanall a savory glance, and six-year-old Sage stopped idly twisting from side to side at the waist long enough to give her an earnest grin.

Her smiling eyes danced in appreciation, and then she gave the most fleeting of glances at my left hand. There was the absence of a ring. Southern women are practiced at this sort of reconnaissance and she did not miss a beat. “Do they go to the city schools or the county?”

“County. I have a little farm outside town and run the Feed and Seed just off the Square.”

“Oh, you're Truman Fable! Nancy Sweetanall.” She offered her hand, and I shook it.

“Hello, Nancy. Word gets around about the store.”

“Well, it is right off the Square. Maybe next year you could have a tent here at Mayday.”

“That's an excellent suggestion; I might do that.” I had to quickly grab Sage before he darted off to another booth. “Oh no

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you don't. You wanted a sno-cone, so we're going to wait and get a sno-cone. Nothing here is going to disappear between now and when we get it. I, I guess." It was my first year at the Mayday Festival and there were an awful lot of lines in front of the food stands. I hoped these things moved quickly. I had only just met Jim and Sally and they had not completely covered what to expect at this event.

The Square had been invaded for the occasion and on all four corners of the intersection, temporary tent booths had been set up in front of the buildings so local artisans, businesses and causes could be on display for visitors to peruse. I gazed wistfully at O'Paddy's, which disdained the use of a booth and simply expanded their outdoor patio to encompass the spot allotted for them.

"Daddy!" Sage hooted. "Let's go to O'Paddys and get a hat." O'Paddy's was giving out green paper derby hats as a gimmick and so far it was working. People all over the Square sported the things. It was like watching multiple Charlie Chaplins emerge from a gigantic copy machine.

"I wonder if there's any way to cross a sno-cone with a nice cold beer," Nancy sighed. I turned to reply and got my first glimpse of Mrs. Viola Hassendoodle.

Mrs. Viola Hassendoodle wore a bright red tank top covered by a gauzy white shirt with shirttail ends tied in a knot in front. A tight khaki skirt highlighted a remarkably shapely pair of legs below but did nothing to improve her incongruous high-heeled blue orthopedic pumps. Mrs. Viola had a wide generous mouth with full lips and small white teeth that smiled with malicious intent. Like Nancy, she had a distinctly Southern drawl which she expertly wielded to charming effect.

"I understand you did some renovation on the Martin's store." It was not quite a statement but not exactly a question either. It more like was a hunting trip.

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“Yes m'am. The front of the store just got some cosmetic upgrade; new paint and refinishing the hardwood floor. But the back I cleared out and – “

“Lord knows if you gut the Martin's store, this town will never forgive you,” she challenged.

“I have no intention of such a thing. If it isn't broken, don't fix it.”

“It's, 'if it ain't broke don't fix it.’” Mrs. Viola’s correction was imperious.

“I'm not one to use ain't very often,” I said, and explained more to Nancy than Mrs. Viola, “My family is something of a stickler for grammar and composition.”

“College boy,” Mrs. Viola said with mockery tinting her words.

“Guilty as charged. I don't believe I've had the pleasure.”

Mrs. Viola Hassendoodle frowned, her arching brows knitting together over her nose in concentration. “The pleasure of what?”

“Oh, I'm sorry. This is Mrs. Viola Hassendoodle,” Nancy offered.

“I'm pleased to meet –”

“If you're one of those Grammar Nazis, let me tell you right now that I passed all my English classes and don't need any further instruction,” Mrs. Viola interrupted.

“Dad, why is this lady shouting at you?” Fletcher asked as he protectively edged closer to my right side. “You didn't do anything.” He had as stony a gaze as I've ever seen, peering critically at Mrs. Viola as if inspecting damaged goods. “My dad is a gentleman,” he boldly informed the women, “he's not a Nazi.” Fletcher was uncertain at the time just what a Nazi was but he knew it had to be something bad by the tone of her voice.

Taylor and Sage also took up positions around me, Taylor to my left and Sage taking my right hand behind his brother. Anytime

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we went out in public, I stressed safety and insisted they stick near me in public. It trained them to be aware of their surroundings and in a less intended way, taught them to take up for each other and me. We were all we had, a small group of Fables miles from the nearest relative.

Nancy and Mrs. Viola noticed the instinctive closing of ranks – it was hard to miss – and took in the wary regard and defiance in those small serious faces. Nancy's lips parted as she smiled widely at my trio. “Of course he's not,” she agreed. “I'm afraid my friend Viola is just hot and fussy.”

“Hot and fussy!” Viola began but Nancy's darting glance stopped her.

“Viola.” Nancy turned back to us, her smile returned. “Yes, we can see he's a gentleman.” This statement appeased my guards, who relaxed.

“Sno-cones!” the vendor called out. Our turns had come. I ordered six cones and treated the ladies.

“Thank you ever so much,” Nancy said.

“Well,” Mrs. Viola said. With that word I heard acknowledgment, apology and awareness.

“I suppose we'd better have a go at O'Paddy's before they run out of hats,” I said. “Ladies, I'm glad we met.” It was a moment that in other times a man would have tipped his hat and bowed, and they in return might have curtsied. All I could manage was a lift of the hand to my temple and a gesture to indicate that had I in fact owned an actual Derby, it most certainly would have been tipped.

“So am I,” Nancy said with ease.

“Mr. Fable,” Mrs. Viola returned stiffly. It was plain that she did not like to be crossed but it was also evident that she was not about to start a squabble with three adorable children who closed ranks around their single dad better than a phlanx of Spartans at Thermopylae.

