

JOE RAVETZ

Bus Riders #1, 2013
Photographic Collage, 16 x 12 in.



courtesy: the artist

JANE VANDENBURGH

Designing Family

It's a few years back and I'm visiting my family in Salt Lake City when my aunt draws herself up, looks down the long table at me and my cousins, and announces: *I would like for you to go find George.* Janet—now well into her eighties—makes it sound simple, like it was just an oversight, something we just got busy and forgot to do. Like we are all still little children and have come in from playing, absently leaving George out there in the dark and cold.

My younger brother has, at this point, not been heard from in nearly five years.

George, my older brother, Hank, and I are the three members of a tight but unenviable unit formed by a childhood of intricately entwining tragedies: our father, an architect, killed himself when I was nine; our mom, already losing her mind, then exited all sense of shared reality, going first through the door marked Alcoholic Oblivion, then on to spend the rest of the time we were growing up in the locked ward of a mental institution.

Hank, a teenager, was sent away to boarding school while George and I went to live with our aunt and uncle in the San Fernando Valley—Janet and Tom already had four children of their own. This was a few years in advance of his moving us en masse to Utah, where Tom and his partner were introducing their chain of hamburger restaurants to the intermountain states, setting up Big Boy's headquarters in Salt Lake's downtown.

Because we were white; we seemed to exhibit good health, strong bones, straight teeth; and *there were so many of us* who'd come tumbling out of our station wagon or vw bus, we'd be taken for some nice normal Mormon family, an impression that insantly evaporated as they'd hear our surfer slang, riffs of fluent profanity, bursts of raucous laughter. We also spoke a private artfully invented language made up by us for the express purpose of simply annoying anybody else who didn't speak it.

Close as we kids were, we'd been sincerely torn down and patched together by those serial crises and dislocations, concentric waves of disruption causing the term *immediate family* to go wobbly and indistinct. George and I were both troubled and undisciplined and our aunt and uncle's taking us skewed the dynamics of their own family, as adoption of foundlings always will. It may have been the sheer pressure of population—all those children, all

their attendant problems—that worked to swamp the frail craft of that marriage.

My uncle was an orphan too, as I was so keenly aware, having lost his mother, his brother, and his sister in a hotel fire. I saw in him my own likeness, that I too might be mistaken as one of those who were even defiantly radiant and happy, so sick was each of us of life's complicated sets of miseries. It shocked everyone when Janet and Tom's orderly prosperous marriage—seemingly headed for great things—ended in a quiet, well-mannered divorce.

And it was only by the sheer work of her will that our Aunt Janet kept all that together long enough for her to see each of us out of high school and on our way. She was smart, keenly observant, hardworking, devoutly Episcopalian. Her household—a tightly organized model of haute bourgeois efficiency—was the direct opposite of John and Maggie's bohemian existence, the lawless erratic turmoil that my parents, in their confusion, believed to be artistic.

Under my aunt's guidance she saw us go to college, marry, have children of our own, find the work we love to do. If Facebook is essentially Success Propaganda, you'll find me and Hank and our four cousins posting jokes in our fake language, links to music videos, toasts to one another's accomplishments, and now those of our kids as well.

My older brother became a full professor at a university in Massachusetts, his daughter a filmmaker living in London, I'm a well-published novelist. Strewn over wide geographies—the West, the East, European capitals, Hawaii, Mexico—my older brother and my cousins and I check in, stay current.

Why not? George would spit if he saw this. You're all so fucking *successful*.

Success? And this is how that all works in the strange whiplash of a family such as ours, how success's indicators will always solve themselves reductively and backward so that our little brother—a homeless alcoholic—is in so many ways our parents' best and most loyal child. But George, who didn't finish high school and could never keep a job—remains only resentfully related to the rest of us, screaming that we're *toxic* to him, that he *loathes* us, that he's spent a lifetime trying to *divorce* us.

He doesn't communicate except to ask for money, makes no affectionate gesture, no birthday wish, no con-

gratulations on a wedding or child being born, yet we are helpless to do anything but—like my aunt—continue to care about him, loving, if not the man he's become, then the sweet and impish kid who once lit any room he entered. If, in the weird calculus of a family such as ours, George is our parents' most perfect child, it is precisely because of the outcast he's become.

A computer search for my brother will have him popping up in such towns as Pismo Beach on the California coast or Encinitas in northern San Diego County and as far north as Fort Bragg. When the police pick him up, they may divert him from criminal justice into community mental health, where George—like so many homeless people—more properly belongs.

Seen my brother lately? Hank asks, calling the police down the roster of towns where George is known, and whoever's answering the phone at the front desk that day might say, Matter of fact, we did have him in here on public intoxication last week, or Right, let me check. Yup, George was in here on vagrancy and property crime, took a bat to a newspaper stand last month—didn't like *that* headline, evidently. He seemed a little more disorganized than usual, so we took him on up to Oak Crest.

Oak Crest is the mental hospital in Windsor, near Santa Rosa, where our brother's been placed on a seventy-two-hour hold, remanded under the California statute 51-50, "posing a threat to yourself or others." He'll be kept long enough to clean up, dry out, and begin to do what my aunt calls *getting arranged and corrected*, and it's exactly then when the powers that be turn him loose to live on the street again.

Because he's the oldest, it's Hank who has most diligently monitored our younger brother's comings and goings. Hank and I also share the most acute case of survivor's guilt, that undertow of grief that overcomes you in sneaker waves, where everything attendant to the settled-down life—this warm bed, that good meal, every pop and click of hard-won happiness, each act of grace that allows you a safe place to work or raise your children—is accompanied by the gut knowledge that your little brother is out there peering in through your bright window, judging the shallow materialistic American existence you've worked so hard to emptily construct.

In this portion of the complicated spiritual equation,

there's only the subtractive function, wherein every creature comfort you enjoy becomes the exact measure of what your brother is currently doing without.

* * *

But it's now eerily been five years without word, which is strange and unsettling. Hank says he knows George isn't dead—if he were, we'd all get the vibe of it, as the universe would be altered. My aunt now feels powerfully that she's coming to the end of her own earthly existence, so would the six of us get busy, please?

Each of us brings a different talent: I chronicle, take notes, keep hold of the various reins of this or that piece of narrative. My cousin Peter, who was a sheriff in Salt Lake County, asks for help from his law enforcement buddies. Carolyn—his sister—is in finance and knows her way around any banking system, figures we can hack the blind account into which Hank has deposited checks for George over the years—George's money derives from an inheritance from our maternal grandparents.

We have what we need, as Carolyn says: George's mom's maiden name, his birth date, name of his first pet, first street address. She's guessing we know him well enough to figure out his password. Then, once in, we'll set up electronic banking with her and Hank as cosignatories and from now on be able to see exactly where and when George conducts withdrawals.

But you cannot—as it turns out—guess the password of a person you haven't really known in decades, a man as psychotic as our brother has become. And none of us says aloud to my aunt what each of us is thinking:

If and when we do find George, what exactly are we then to *do* with him?

* * *

It's Hank who discovers where he's been by doing an online sweep of the census of California prisons: George has been locked up in Santa Barbara County on the most serious charge yet, convicted of assault with intent to commit grave bodily injury.

And it was this growing propensity in our brother for violence that so long ago became the final untenable element in maintaining relationship with him, that an unseeing black rage would descend unexpectedly to blind

him, obliterating all sense in him of who we were, or who he was, either. It is because of this that my older brother must act alone as trustee of the estate, as Hank's a tall and imposing man, trained by the U.S. Army as a sharpshooter, who has made it clear to our younger brother that he has in his personal arsenal not only a PhD but a shotgun.

George could never be given any large sum of his own money directly because he'd inevitably use it to score something he could then use to do harm: cars, trucks, drugs, motorcycle, a shotgun of his own. When he had a fistful of cash, he'd go drink in biker bars, bragging to his new meth-connected friends about the *truly huge* amount of money, wealth beyond all dreams of avarice, he'd inherited from his rich banker grandfather. In fact, our grandfather's bank failed during the Great Depression; he spent most of the rest of his life lying on his back on the davenport reading Charles Dickens aloud. The estate was modest, but balance sheets with real numbers done in double entry accounting held no interest whatsoever for our little brother, George.

Money was magic, money was power, money was what we all had that this one child of seven did not. Money was what had been taken away from him by that shitass brother and sister of his, now diabolically in league with the authorities, and all of us, *all*, were evil.

When I was in grad school and living on my own, I'd occasionally open my front door to find my brother, together with looming, menacing strangers, having come to *liberate*, in the parlance of the age, whatever of it was of George's that he now remembered belonged to him. Once it was the Persian carpet our great uncle gave me, then lying beneath the couch on the floor of my living room. I stood there fearful, helpless, frozen in anger as George and his newfound Hell's Angel's friends rolled my rug up and loaded it into the back of a rusted camper van. You had it long enough, my brother said. This rug's mine now.

These junkets of our brother's—when he'd simply show up where you were living or working—were at least one subliminal reason Hank and I each moved from California during the mid-1990s, me with my husband to live in Washington, DC, Hank to Austin, Texas, to finish graduate school.

And it's why, when we were younger still, Hank and I hired a lawyer to go to court to try to gain some kind

of legal standing that might allow us to have a say in the course of our brother's medical treatments. Our grandparents had just died, George's inheritance was still largely intact, and— for the first time in a very long while—he was in custody and likely to stay that way for longer than a weekend.

George had been arrested and was charged with having beaten up some college kids he thought were looking at him funny. He was being held for arraignment in the city jail in San Francisco. Hank and I got a lawyer—a family friend—hired a psychiatrist too, and all went there together to appear, dressed as models of middle-class respectability.

Our attorney was Norman McLeod, Scottish, a lawyer here, a barrister there, Oxbridge educated, and speaks in such a lovely upperclass British accent that he's hired to do voice-over work on commercials.

We were there, as Norman was trying to explain to the distracted judge, to ask the court to look at all this holistically, for someone to simply collate what was going on with Mr. Vandenburg, to observe his long record, to see how this young man was bouncing back and forth between criminal justice and community mental health time and time again. His clients—Hank and me—were Mr. Vandenburg's entire immediate family. Might they not be offered legal standing in an effort to try to find George safe harbor?

The judge stopped shuffling his papers and looked up. A hearing such as this one would normally take less than five minutes. Who are you again? he asked, then stared meaningfully at everyone concerned—prosecutor, public defender, bailiff—as if to ask, Who *are* these people and why are they wasting my time?

Please try to understand what my clients are asking, our attorney went on. We have a young man here with an escalating history of physical violence, we have him in custody; his brother and sister, here present, constitute his entire immediate family. Can't we charge the defendant with the more serious offense, keep him, and have him remanded to a medical facility to have him looked at by the psychiatrist his brother and sister have brought to court with them today? Mr. Vandenburg, though without fixed address, is a man of some means, and it was here that everyone turned to look at him.

Our brother, wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and soft jail paper slippers, stood well over six feet tall. He was bearded, emaciated. His long hair was curly and tangled. He was deeply tanned, freckled, and in the florid brightness of his face his eyes glowed turquoise. He looked at neither Hank nor me.

Because the defendant has *money*, our lawyer was going on to say—and it was here that everyone in the court had stopped what they were doing to pay attention. Now they were looking at George. With Mr. Vandenburg's *money* we can work together—city, county, state, with the cooperation of the family—to find a way to place him in long-term care. If we can get him a longer hold, we can begin to get him a thorough psych workup.

It was late in the day, the judge seemed to have eye-strain, we also seemed to confuse him, and this seemed to hurt his brain.

Wait a moment, the judge said, taking his glasses off, squinting through them, finding a speck, then rubbing at it with a large handkerchief he was elaborately unwrapping, before placing his readers back on three-quarters of the way down his nose. He stared down at our attorney over the top of his rimless readers.

You mean to say the defendant here has adequate money to hire himself a defense attorney, but you are not that person?

Yes, your honor, but . . .

And that you, instead, are here to represent the defendant's brother and sister, who'd like to have him declared incompetent?

Because, your honor, he *is* incompetent, our lawyer stated.

Which is not for you to say, the judge told him, then asked the prosecutor and the public defender to approach, while asking Norman and Hank and me, as well as our own very expensive psychiatric expert, to keep our seats.

It was then, exactly, I knew it was over. I looked at Hank. He shrugged, he knew it was over too. We'd lost not only the ongoing battle for our brother's custody but probably the war.

Maybe it was Thatcher who was in power and the judge had never liked the Brits, or that my two brothers and I carry a surname that—while some believe it's Jewish—speaks to others of old WASP privilege. Maybe it was

that we were the troublemakers we'd always been, showing up in the wrong place at the wrong time, wasting this judge's time, ungrateful, unwilling to go ahead and make anything of ourselves though we'd come from people who left us a little money and should have been able to do something with our advantages.

The judge then spoke to Norman sternly, if informally and off the record. His clients were going about this in entirely the wrong way. We needed to partner with George to get him help, to persuade him to work with us, for him to go in for his own good.

His incapacity was a civil matter and did not belong in a criminal proceeding; we needed to enlist the help of mental health professionals. He then asked Norman to approach because he wanted to issue him a warning before ordering our brother to spend thirty days in county, during which time he would be evaluated by a court-ordered mental health professional and given the MMPI as well as a battery of other tests. George answered A B A C A D A A B A C A D A B A all down the electronic test sheet.

When being interviewed by the mental health professional—as we later learned—our brother refused to utter a word.

What did he whisper to you, we asked Norman as soon as we were outside in the hall.

Well, he said, rather the worse news of all. That in the learned opinion of the Honorable So and So in there, the brother and sister of the defendant appear to be what's known in legal parlance as *a designing family*.

* * *

A designing family? Hank and me? This meant our little brother had money and we were trying to get him declared incompetent in order to get a hold of it.

We laughed until we wept. No one who was not completely *insane* would want to get between our little brother and anything he thought was his.

We not only did not want George's money, we'd been trying to give it away to some court-appointed conservator who'd take care of it for him, someone who—we hoped—worked in a locked office behind a metal detector, staffed by armed guards.

It wasn't safe for George to believe you were willing to give him money. For this reason you couldn't simply lend

him \$20 or mail him a check, by which its return address might allow him to track you.

When Hank moved away to finish his doctorate, he put his new phone number on the check but left the same street address printed on the checks from when our grandparents were still alive. When he wrote checks for George's share, he sent these by mail to the blind account that had been established by probate in George's name alone.

This account was at Great Western Savings, the bank chosen by the probate administrator, as there seemed to be branches all over California in all the kinds of towns where my brother might light. Great Western was, however, one of the banks that failed during the economic meltdown of 2008. Its assets sold, the bank was summararily taken over, reopening over the course of a single weekend under canvas banners declaring a completely different name. Great Western vanished, never to be seen again.

Our brother was released from Lompoc and given a bus ticket into town, where he discovered that the only bank he'd ever done business with had disappeared.

I'm guessing it was that last financial confusion, that his account—we can now see that thousands of dollars float there in an eddying pond—seemed to have vanished over the time he was in prison. Maybe it seemed that this bank was the tether by which he felt connected to those who'd known and loved him so long ago.

Or maybe it was that he, who'd turned fifty, had simply grown too old to live without shelter. George did in fact get enough money to live in one of the single-room-occupancy hotels that our more downtrodden rural towns still have, being for those who seem to have arrived at the edge of nowhere. He had money for an SRO and to buy himself food, but not enough to live in a rooming house and to eat, and then to also drink and take drugs, and those were so often his choices. George once told me that those who live out-of-doors call alcohol their antifreeze.

George called Doug in Hawaii, who called Peter in Salt Lake, where Gordon picked up the phone as he was visiting. George asked to borrow money. Once, whoever it was would have simply sent it, but now Gordon called me and I called Hank, who wrote a check on the trust account, sending it to George via the Mail Boxes Etc. in a strip mall in Lompoc. I stare at a photo of it on Google Street View off and on for weeks as if it's really a spycam

instead of a still image, as if one day, magically, my brother might appear.

That was February, ten months or so after Aunt Janet had asked us to search. The check was delivered. Then—eerily—nothing.

The following July, early on a Thursday, my phone rings in Northern California. It's my brother Hank, in up-state New York, saying he's just got off the phone with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff.

George, Hank says. They've found his body.

What? I ask. How?

He hanged himself.

Hanged himself? I ask.

In a field, Hank said. Parked his bike. Put the rope up, sat down beside a tree.

How do they know it was him, I say, not saying, Instead of some other nobody?

He had the check on him, Hank says. He never cashed it. That's how they knew to call me.

He hanged himself, I'm thinking. I am physically shocked but in no other manner surprised.

Oh my God, Hank, this is terrible, I whisper. Are you all right?

Shocked, he says. Not surprised.

He still had the check? I ask. I thought he needed money.

Maybe he found no way to cash it—no ID, no Great Western anymore, that kind of thing?

Jesus, I say. The rude cold shock of our brother's death splashes over me in waves, but there is no wonderment at all that his life would end this way.

Graham Greene says a sliver of ice lies in the heart of every writer—this is what we use as our weapon, as I've always known, to be able to survive what we must live through. I feel that ice, the clear calm pain that centers me. I feel no sense of loss, no sorrow, no other feeling that I can name.

The story of our father's death had run on the front page of the *L.A. Times*. He was an architect; his family, long in California, was prominent in real estate development. Graduate of Cal, brother of Janet, husband of Margaret, father of three.

Our brother George had been a vagrant, one of those human-shaped barely moving shadows in the corners of

freeway underpasses living that way for three-fifths of his life. I want to write him up in order to proclaim him but it's hard to imagine the paper where this obituary might run.

I want to say he was singular: my brother, my parents' son, my aunt's nephew, my cousins' cousin, the uncle to three children he never met. I want to say too that over the course of adulthood we have come as a nation to calmly step over the bodies of three-and-a-half million American men and women, most of whom suffer from severe mental illness. We accept that they live as we would not allow domesticated animals to live, in the heat and cold, nowhere to rest, without food and water.

Maybe this is the truth of what happened at the end—that our brother, whose family has been in this country since 1644, had become an undocumented illegal and lacked the ID that might have allowed him to cash that check. Or maybe it was this: George put what was his, this check, to the best use he could, by using it to send him back to us, so we'd know how his travels had turned out.

The word *obit* means the simplest thing in Latin: *he died*. But this is that truth's corollary: my brother—our cousin, son, nephew, uncle—was someone who lived as well.

Jane Vandenburg's most recent book is *The Wrong Dog Dream: A True Romance* (Counterpoint Press, April 2013). She is also the author of two novels, *Failure to Zigzag* and *The Physics of Sunset*, as well as two nonfiction works, *Architecture of the Novel: A Writer's Handbook* and *The Pocket History of Sex in the Twentieth Century: A Memoir*. She has taught writing and literature at UC Davis, the George Washington University, and Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. She lives in Point Richmond, California.

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Photographic Collage, 16in x 20in.



courtesy: the artist