

CAROL BRUNEAU

Award-winning author of Purple for Sky

GLASS VOICES



A Novel

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*For my father and mother, Art and Naoko Tamayose
and for my daughter, Taylor Novakowski*



*In memory of my aunt, Teruko Tamayose
and my uncle, Seiyei Shimabukuro*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

ONE

STICKY AS GRASSHOPPER MOLASSES, this is the last, the frigging *last* day (put that in your glass and guzzle it, Harry Caines!) anyone *or* their dog should be slaving over a stove. Easy for him, though, upstairs lollygagging as per usual. Rules for one aren't always rules for another. But there it is: make hay — make pickles — while the sun shines. Make whoopee, Harry would say, yes he would, shame, shame, and at his age. But what else is new? Here she is, knuckled down on all fours, searching for the right pot. At least the linoleum's a friend: its coolness, never mind the pain like a spike through each knee! Lordie, she can almost picture the *Herald* headline: Lady found petrified in Armview kitchen, while hubby shaves.

Like Lot's wife in the Bible, how about that? Turned into a pillar of salt — enough to do up ten batches of dills. But first things first: she's got to find that canner. It could be animal husbandry, digging inside the cupboards; what *was* Harry thinking when he installed everything lock, stock, and barrel? It's as if something's curled up and died: the dust!

What the heck's he doing up there? "Harry?" Is he alive? "Better get moving, if you're planning to —"

A burst of song burbles through the ceiling, that quavery tenor, "Oh Danny ... oh *cranky* Boy," through how many layers?

Mopping her brow, she cannot help herself. "Get a move on, mister!"

Typical, so typical. “The pipes, the pipes are ...”

And what does he have against Bick’s, anyway? They’re just as good. But try telling him, waltzing in the other day with ten pounds of cukes. Baby peckers, Rebecca, her daughter-in-law, called them, making even Harry blush. Well. He’s not the one on his knees, is he? And his aren’t full of arthritis, not like hers, stiff and blue as the day she almost died but didn’t.

“Hurry up! If you hope to get there any time soon ...” Trained on the trickling inside the wall, her voice bounces off the plaster.

“... are ca-a-alling.” The words get sliced in two, then drowned out by the lawn mower starting outside. Harry’s no Charlie Chamberlain, and he’s certainly no Mel Tormé.

“Harry? You’ll want to catch the boy before —” She has to scream above the noise, and yet, isn’t it true? There’s always something to be grateful for. The fact that that old bird next door has finally replaced her push mower with a gas one: *que-ching que-ching que-ching* all the livelong day, for how many years? Still, the high-powered roar rocks the jars lined up on the counter. Short term pain for long term gain? Well, at least it’s not winter; it could be snowing, and pickling beats pushing up weeds, or daisies.

“Robert’s going to wonder where on earth you’re at — Harry?”

“From glentoglen, and ...”

“He’ll think you got lost.”

“Dooooown the mouuntain ...”

“If you’re giving him that talking-to, better get your London-derriere over there —” A tower of pots gives, and, lo and behold, with a crash of lids, the canner wiggles free. Something small and cool grazes her fingers, too perfectly round to be a pea. A marble.

“Harry, for heaven’s sake ...”

Neither a cat’s eye nor a pretty, neither a doughboy nor a peewee, it’s somewhere in between. If she stuck it under their son’s and Rebecca’s queen-size mattress, well, that princess would feel it; on that Lucy would place money. In her palm it’s the colour of bathwater, a murky crystal ball, an iris-less eye. The memory that oozes from

nowhere is as golden as cod liver oil: Robert, their grandson, rigging a slingshot when he was little, firing marbles for cannonballs.

“You tell him, Harry,” she mutters above the mower, “stay in school, or else.”

Then, just as unbidden, a parable springs to mind, a bit of Scripture: a woman turning her hovel upside down looking for one measly coin. Well, she and Robert searched high and low that day for a lost glassy, Robert bawling his eyes out. Imagine him bawling now — into a glass of beer, maybe.

Weren't marbles the prime thing for little kids to choke on?

The trickling in the wall piddles out. Heaving the canner up and onto the counter like a medicine ball, she rocks back to rest. Smoothing her hem over her knees, she rolls the marble in the valley of her skirt; it clouds a printed violet. Sunday best, this dress was once; it's still her favourite. The colour, robin's egg blue, makes her think of early summer when she was small, and the world more tender, maybe, and softer on the eyes. Clingy and damp, the filmy polyester keeps riding up: those knees of hers look as if she's kneeled in grease.

Do they go to this much trouble at Heinz? Dragging herself up, she drops the marble into a glass of geranium slips. Safekeeping, a keepsake. Now she'll get down to business: rinsing cukes, nipping off stems like cords. Pouring vinegar, measuring salt. The concoction coming to a boil sounds like a distant train.

Never mind what Robert's dad says about him staying out all hours, sleeping till noon — as if Rebecca doesn't. Bucky, she calls him. His own mother. That nickname as bad as gum stuck to your shoe. “Harry? You don't catch him now, no telling what he'll choose,” she yells, half to herself, half to the ceiling. “Go on, while Jewel's at work and her majesty's putting on her face.”

The trouble is, she can already picture it, Harry raising his hands like Festus on *Gunsmoke*: “I'm not interfering. Just offering advice.” The trouble with Robert, with kids today, as far as she can see, is the parents, all the pussyfooting and kid-gloves handling. When Jewel, their son, was a boy ...

Packed into clean jars, the cukes wink back: specimen frog princes. Sweat tickles her sides as she ladles in liquid. Harry loves garlic, so at the last minute she minces some and throws it in; wouldn't have bothered, once. Nasty, that smell on her fingers, as the princes swim in their brine.

The sun and the burbling roar pour in, but not a twitch of a breeze.

Next step, the boiling bath. The water on a roll, she roots out tongs to lower in the jars. Steam curls up like the girl on *I Dream of Jeannie* leaving her magic bottle, and the flowers on Lucy's dress shimmy. What'll she do with all these pickles, anyway? Palm them off on Rebecca, after Harry's had his fill — or the women's league; they're always after donations. God willing, Robert'll be around to make short work of some, though lately he's talking about going west — that's after he's moved out, quit school, bought a car, got a job: security at the yacht club, watching boats. Like watching paint dry, it would seem. Though not to Harry, who loves making reason play second fiddle, just to get her goat: "What've you got against a kid making money? Okay, okay, so I'll talk to him."

All the same, since retiring Harry's slowly begun waking up to the future, what's left of it. Never mind his bad eye and the bad leg that's plagued him since the shipyards, with Robert he has, or should have, a project, when there's nothing on TV and he's bored with his accordion. "Pardon me, Lucy. It's a Don Noble, not just any old 'cordine."

Never mind. *We live in hope*, the pale, greeny blue of her dress still whispers, from the swish of its slippery weave. But what is keeping the man? Today's Harry's day for watching wrestling, enjoying a sandwich and his weekly Keith's in front of the tube; playing along with the ads keeps him in practice. "Practice, Lucy, practice," he's always saying. Funny how cradling the instrument doesn't remind him of cradling a child, or anything else for that matter. It reminds her.

The first batch of jars jiggles in the canner; the rest wait, lined up on the counter. "Harry?" Trudging to the stairs, out of patience, she

hollers up: the last straw. “If you don’t get moving NOW, you’ll miss your show.”

Next door, the lawn mower scrapes something and cuts out. In the sticky silence just before it restarts, something prods her — like a hand — at first gentle, tapping her shoulder, then gripping her. She has the presence to turn off the stove, letting whatever it is propel her back to the stairs without stopping to drop the tongs. Knees and all, her body reacts, climbing, flying past the landing, the way a car remembers driving. It’s “automic,” as Rebecca calls her washing machine. Despite its stickiness, the air prickles her arms, bringing things back: air thick as lava, but icy too. Harry’s name in her throat, wedged there like a picket. Drawn upwards, her feet barely touch the plastic treads. The flash in her skull almost like lightning as the walls virtually dissolve.

Harry’s sprawled on the bathroom floor, eyes open, his good one pale and frozen. The shock is like a clap of wind. Something leaks from his blue pajamas. The instant of seeing, she launches a prayer. His cheeks glow as if he’s been on the worst tear ever. A dribble of spit, a thread of blood where he’s nicked himself. One hand — his left? — jumps like a mouse on the tiles. Slowly, slowly, rising, falling: his chest works like the Don Noble’s bellows, and in a blink, she sees herself young once more: her mouth open in a scream, gums pink as the felt edging the accordion’s keys.

“HARRY!” Her cry flies off the fixtures, bleaching the room of light and sound. She’s kneeling, the tongs splayed like forceps. Her fingertips stuck to his pulse; the hint of garlic a memory, stinky-sweet as kerosene.

His lips squirm: nothing more than a gurgle comes out.

Downstairs, she hears herself dialing, giving the address. The voice inside her is like her son’s, ordering: *Start the car*. Foolish, since she’s never learned to drive. She should call Jewel at work, or even Rebecca. But she can’t think, racing upstairs again, ripping the spread off the bed. Blue, it’s been washed almost white. She tucks it around him, right up to his chin. Wild with panic, that eye gobbles

her up. Suddenly she's freezing, the house is freezing, her dress clammy, wet. His cheek burns beneath her kisses. Another lightning memory: sheets dropped like moths on a harder floor.

Below, in the kitchen, the lids on the jars pop, one by one. Each sound is like a period dropped from space. Just this summer, didn't those crazy Yanks put men on the moon? Mr. Armstrong, Mr. Aldrin. The pickles seem as alien. Then, at last, the wail of a siren, and the doorbell chimes, the bell which Harry just got around to replacing last year.

The men climb the stairs like plumbers, that unhurried and businesslike, murmuring as they probe and poke. It's as if they don't see her, as if she's been vaporized, beamed upwards or drawn inside somewhere dark and airless, lured by crumbs. Prayer. A voice louder than theirs: hers. *Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy Name. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy ...* As he's lifted onto the stretcher, the crumbs form Harry's name.

"Please don't hurt him!" the same voice begs. The ambulance throws light the colour of marigolds up the stairs, and all around her goes quiet again, so quiet there's only the maple breathing out front. The men load Harry like a loaf into an oven. Doors slam shut.

Only as they scream away does she realize she's been left behind, leaning against the fence in her old dress and apron, the fence Robert keeps promising to paint. In a second, it too could collapse, disappear, pickets and rails blown all over creation. For now, its splintery sag is a comfort.

She should phone Jewel, but can't think of the number. Remembering, though, to check the stove — still there, yes, the burner cool — she peels off the apron, steps into the nearest shoes, ancient espadrilles caked with dirt. The number for the taxi's right there, though, from all the times Harry's been off someplace, unavailable. She even remembers her purse and to lock up, going out to wait on the veranda. Clutching her bag, though all that's there is the five for Robert's down payment. "I'll do it whenever," he's fond of saying.

As the cab cruises up, she can't help imagining a huge, greasy cloud filling the sky, and her legs feel weak, as if every single bone has been wrenched, then slammed against dirt. Yet, there are her shins mapped with veins, otherwise pale and smooth as a baby's arse, Harry would say. When she blinks, looking up, the sky is blue, of course.

SQUEAKY, AVOCADO-COLOURED SEATS, ashtrays and germ-ridden magazines. The waiting room's packed: everything feels contagious. Someone offers a chocolate bar, even a cigarette, but she can barely reply, sinking there, anchored by her purse, her calves freezing. To pray — earnestly — would mean hitting bottom: kneeling on the speckled linoleum, certain tears amid pacing feet. *For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever and ever ...* Limping to a phone, she rummages for change. There's something reassuring about the dime's tiny Bluenose as she inserts it, something almost portentous. Like the feel of the marble. The first boat had sunk, but then been replaced, as if nothing bad had ever happened.

Rebecca answers, music blaring behind her. A noise like screeching tires: Robert's music, a racket that makes her want to hang up.

"Is Jewel home?" She has to shout.

"That you, Ma? You don't have to take my ear off. He can't come to the phone right now, he's just got in and he's ..." A snicker. "Can he call you back?" That voice burns her ears. "Everything okay?"

Someplace in her imagination, the sky oozes. "I'm all right," she says resolutely, almost ashamed, "but Harry isn't."

When Jewel finally comes on, he grills her with a barbed gruffness. Then, "Hang tight — you hear me?" As if she's a little girl. "I'm on my way."

Putting down the receiver, she trembles, anger a slow but sudden pulse inside. There's a rawness she hasn't felt in years, not since Jewel was a boy, when, on occasion, truthfully, she could've slipped Comet into Harry's beer, for pity's sake. Chopped up a dumb cane plant and

put it in his salad. All those times she'd ridden out, done her best, of course; and now look.

Dumb, dumb as dirt. Dumber than the little white numbers peeling off the phone ...

Someone touches her arm: a nurse. She can go in. The corridor clatters and hums. *Hurry hard*, the voice inside her croaks, like the curlers Harry watches on TV when there's absolutely nothing else.

Lucy barely recognizes the body in the railed bed, a tube taped to its mouth, a string of saliva like a cobweb.

Harry's eyes are closed, mercifully, sparing her that stricken look, and his chest moves gently up and down under the sheet, though who can tell if he's asleep or awake? Sporting a tartan cap, the doctor speaks through a spreading fog, and in the back of her head an alarm sounds. A foghorn, its moan not a warning but a reminder, always a reminder; and suddenly it's no longer summer, not even summer's close or the cusp of fall, but winter, as if cold, wet snow is veiling everything.

"Left hemisphere. Fairly major. Right side paralysis. Three to five days. Ab-so-lutely critical."

"Is it very bad?" is all she can ask. The tube in Harry's mouth makes her look away; it's as if he's been invaded by a large plastic snake. Useless, his hands are pale gloves lying on the snowy sheet.

"Too early to tell," the doctor says, much too succinctly. "Possibly a clot ... The brain swells ... Survival depends, Mrs. ..."

Survival? She gazes at the ramparts of Harry's knees, the steep slope of his belly: like a gull's view of Citadel Hill in the middle of town, just after a blizzard.

"All depends on how he comes through the next four or five days."

That measurement of words: a louder blast. "Is he in pain?"

The doctor smiles, the brackets around his mouth matching those around his eyes.

"He seems to be resting comfortably, Mrs. Caines."

Another curl of memory, neither golden nor white: Rebecca's

mother slurring at her husband's wake: "He's up there resting where no more shuffling can give him grief," when anything that fellow'd suffered had been his own doing, and those two not properly married. Others suffered: women losing children, people with horrible diseases and any number of wounds — Jewel, for instance, suffering the daily insult of his wife.

"Can he hear us?" Her whisper is almost babyish, blotted up by the cubicle's green curtains. "Harry?" she croaks, stroking a limp wrist.

"He's aware of what's happening," the doctor murmurs. "His hearing doesn't seem affected. A good sign. Though, as I said, the next few days ..."

Watching Harry's face, she slides her fingers over his. They jerk at her touch, but they're warm. The feeblest squeeze, it feels like the first time a child twitched inside her.

"His injuries?" the doctor interrupts, and to her embarrassment her face is wet. There's the tiny cut on Harry's jaw from the razor.

"His eye." The doctor pats the breast pocket of his greens. "His chest?"

The blue crescent above Harry's nipple.

"Your husband's a vet? First or Second World War?"

Fixing on the snake — Harry's breathing tube — she's confused. How can anyone, especially a doctor, not know?

"How did he lose it?" His mildly curious look. "The eye?"

"It was an accident," she manages. "That's what they say."

"Well. He's a trooper then. As I said, the next few days will determine — wish I could tell you more, Mrs. Caines, but ..."

How does he know her name?

A nurse appears; apparently the family's outside — what family? Whose? It's as if the room's an aquarium and she's swimming through greenish water as someone guides her out into the hall, and, oh yes, there they are. *Her* family. Their faces bob like pale buoys, three of them. Jewel, Rebecca, and oh Lord, it must be dire because even Robert's here. Jewel drapes his arm around her; it feels warm

and heavy, clammy in this watery atmosphere. Rebecca looks scared, her thin little brows arched in a way that makes her appear to be holding her breath; they're all holding their breath, even Robert, who watches a spot on the floor as if it's a sculpin.

"This is all of you?" a voice interjects, a kindly voice, the doctor's.

"Yup," Jewel replies tersely, as if to say what did you expect, a little league team?

Lucy nods, nods in time to their pale bobbing faces, an old feeling swarming round her, settling in. A regret she's had for most of her life now, like a phantom pain, the ghost of a missing limb.

"This is us, our little clan." All of us, but ... Instinctively, as if this regret might be the thing that pulls her under, that fills her lungs finally so that she *can't* breathe, Lucy reaches for a hand. Robert's. For once he doesn't pull it away, staring at the windowless door that's like a hatch between this side of the fish bowl, and the other, off-limits one where Harry is.

"So granddad makes five," the doctor says and she nods weakly, because it's easier than having to explain: Yes, all but ...

"One visitor at a time, sorry," says a nurse whisking by, then to Lucy, more gently: "Why don't you go home now, Mrs.? Try to relax, rest." She'll need it, in other words. It's the same as being told not to worry.

When they finally leave, all together, a tiny pack, shadows stretch across the hospital grounds, the sun a dusky bloom over the buildings. People scurry past as Jewel helps her into the car, Rebecca leaning to buckle her up before sliding in. She's hemmed between them, Robert alone in the back. But who has the energy to object? Creased with dread, Jewel's face looks old, as old as his father's. How can it be? The boy she nursed and bounced on her hip. Thinking back to his birth, no hospital then, only the cold and a nursing sister's touch. For most of the drive nobody speaks. It's gotten chilly and, shivering, she tugs her skirt over her knees. Her whole body feels icy now, the way she would after an ocean dip; cramped and trapped there on the seat that's as hard as a berm and feeling every

bump, she might as well be dragged along the pavement.

Finally, Rebecca breaks the silence. "All we can do is hope, Ma."

Her throat tightens, and all she can say is the obvious, which sounds mawkish, trite: "And pray, I guess. Jewel. Rebecca, you too. And Robert." Under any other circumstances they'd laugh and make jokes, and when they don't it sinks in how bad this is. Jewel flicks at his nose. Robert's voice is halting, a shaky hum behind her so low she asks him to repeat himself, a request she instantly wishes could be sucked back like toothpaste up a tube.

"My girlfriend? When her grandpa nearly croaked?" Why, why, do kids speak in questions? The more so when all that's asked, and offered, is a simple declaration. "Well, they brung him back, and he seen angels, and they had feathers."

"Bucky!" Rebecca's tongue is like one of those fancy choppers advertised on TV.

Still, he doesn't have the sense, poor little bugger, to just leave it; in that respect, Lucy supposes, he rather does take after his mother.

"But he seen them, white feathers." As if the colour is proof. His sigh a swallowed cuss.

"It's all right, dear," Lucy says through the brick in her throat, eyes fixed on the cardboard pine tree swinging from the mirror. A deodorizer, Rebecca's idea no doubt, since to Rebecca's nose everything stinks. Try as she might, Lucy can't detect a single odour, except maybe the smell of Robert's hair, the smell of unwashed jeans.

"It's all right," she hears herself murmur again, clearing her throat. It's expected of her, of course. "I almost lost him once, you know," and as she twists toward Jewel a little despairing laugh escapes. "Well, more than once."

Rushing by, buildings, trees and pedestrians make a lush, greenish blur, and with a shock she's picturing herself alone in the house. Preparing herself, sort of, the way Mr. Armstrong must've for his first giant steps. Jewel must sense it; maybe he can smell it off her the way she can pick up the scent of teenage trouble no matter how many showers a kid takes a day.

“Come home with us,” he says. “Becky’ll rustle something up for us — won’t you, Beck?” As usual, next comes the buttering-up, never mind that it’s as though Rebecca’s deaf. “She made meatloaf the other day. From scratch.”

“Congratulations,” Lucy volunteers; what else can she say? The poor darling, as if housekeeping’s an Olympian feat.

But Rebecca stares stubbornly ahead, her lip twitching slightly. Better to say nothing, nothing at all, so Lucy closes her eyes, the better to hear the tires hissing, a sound like summer rain. Oh please God, *let it rain*, she thinks wildly, longing for its softness, the way it has of blurring edges. Rain makes it easier to stay inside and concentrate, which she’ll need to do. Her work is cut out now; it digs in sharply, like a little knife poking into her stomach. Nothing for it but to start her vigil, petitioning God, or somebody, to give Harry back. She’s had some practice, and the thought tightens her hope a notch or two, never mind its slippery hold. She might even call the priest as well as the women’s league, have Harry added to the prayer chain. *Right*, she can just imagine his voice, imagine him rising up, sitting in that chilly chrome bed: *Now you’ve got me where you want me, on a frigging chain gang.*

Never mind that Father Whasisname doesn’t look old enough to shave. *Wherever two or more are gathered*, he says ...

As she thinks it, her hope floats, and Jewel pulls up the street slowly, turning in.

“You’re sure you won’t come over’t the house?” Rebecca peers at her, and is that a glint of tears?

“Becky’ll have my head later for droppin’ you off.” *Heeead*, Jewel says, a word halfway between *hid* and *heed*. Instead of glowering, Rebecca strokes Lucy’s arm. Now she really can’t wait to get out of the car; they mustn’t see *her* cry, any of them.

“Another time, my dears.” She’s careful to add the *s*. Always this game of including; sometimes she feels like the president of America, keeping the peace.

Jewel tugs on her arm, walking her up to the door. “Come on,

Ma.” But she knows what she’s up against, needing to be alone. It’ll take all her wits, every ounce of concentration, to retrieve Harry this time, to pluck him back from wherever he’s slipped to. Jewel must know. His eyes swim, that blue a mirror of his father’s good one, a blue so familiar it’s a pearl inside her, no, a sapphire. Her little Jewel, her gem. People aged, of course; the world changed by the minute, they said on TV, but people didn’t, not themselves, not deep inside.

Hunkered there in back, Robert looks up at her through his mop of hair and setting his jaw, nods. A man-to-man sort of nod that under any other circumstance would touch her funny bone.

“Well. Don’t forget to eat,” Jewel was bossing her, tender now but cocky, always cocky, towering over her; or was it Rebecca talking through him? “The old man,” he hesitates, “he’s gonna pull through.”

But that’s the thing with hope, part of her wants to argue: no one can presume.

“Jeez, Ma ... that bloody fence.” Unlocking the door, he doesn’t look at her. “Listen, I’ll get that kid over here if it kills him. Even if I gotta drag his arse out of bed.”

“It’s okay,” she murmurs, sick of saying so, as an image flits through her head of Robert the last time he let himself be photographed: a school picture, his gawky smile at, what, thirteen? He has Harry’s looks, too, though Jewel denies it. Kid’s got Marryatt written all over him, he’s always insisted, and Rebecca would say amen to that, if amen were in her vocabulary. But she knows different: there’s the bridge of his nose, that grin, and Harry’s build. Harry when she first met him. That loose, loping tautness, though Harry’d been on the short side, lacking the boy’s height. Something about their movement, though — body language, Rebecca calls it — makes it impossible to picture one without seeing the other. Which will make it harder, banish the thought; or easier, she realizes, glimpsing Jewel in the hall mirror. Depending on whether the glass ends up empty, or full.

He can’t seem to leave, lingering as if she’ll change her mind and come home with them after all, then finally saying he’ll be by first

thing, and they'll go in. "Early. Unless something ..." His voice trails off; then that brusqueness again, so much closer to what she's used to. "You call me, okay? You need anything, gimme a shout." As if she would do that: stand on the verandah and bellow till the neighbours phoned the cops, the pigs as Robert calls them. So little respect ...

His breath is sour as he pecks her cheek, and then he's getting back in and they're driving off. The shapes of their heads the last thing she sees as the car purrs down the little street. Three: such an odd, awkward number, but with a symmetry all its own, a rightness, she supposes, if one likes triangles.