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# Junebug in January: A Novel Excerpt

HANNAH CARSON

ENG 4830: Advanced Fiction Writing Seminar, Fall 2023

Nominated by: Dr. Erin Flanagan

**Author notes:**

This section of *Junebug in January* is the beginning of a much longer story that follows eighteen-year-old June and her small family as she attempts to survive the harsh reality of living in the era of the Great Depression and her attempts to survive her Papa's *tasks* for her. This story challenges the boundaries of family loyalty, investigates the concept of "saving yourself," and explores the limits of redemption. June is a character that tells me more about who she is and what she can accomplish as I watch her navigate the world I've created around her. This pursuit is what inspires me to write.

**Faculty notes:**

Hannah's story grabbed my attention from the first line and didn't let go. June is a smart, savvy, and surprising character, navigating a way forward under desperate circumstances. I'm most impressed with Hannah's empathy for her characters and her understanding of what makes good people do bad things. Her ability to move a plot forward is well showcased here, along with her gorgeous writing, and I eagerly await the rest of this story.

## Junebug in January

Momma thinks she cleans an honest home, loves an honest husband, and raises an honest daughter, but she lives in the delusional world that Papa and I have created for her.

Papa is going out to work again this morning. The fog is thicker than usual; Momma asks him to wait until the gray passes, but he insists on being the first man out. His eyes hold the same dusty clouds he stumbles into. He leaves before the sun tries to shine, returns home for a short lunch, then comes back a while after the stars have claimed the night. Momma always waits up for him; she welcomes him home with a smile. She'll then cover his limp body with a musty quilt his mother made as a marriage gift. If she knew what he actually was doing all day, I doubt she would continue this tradition, but I will continue mine and keep this secret. I can't expose her to the dirt that she lives in.

After Papa leaves for the day, Momma tells me to go get myself and Franky, my younger sister, dressed for school. I used to dread school. When I was younger, I felt betrayed every time Momma dropped my hand after walking me to my classroom. Now, I feel betrayed when my father holds one. I go to my room, put on my gray skirt and dirty white blouse, and tie my shoes that I got for Christmas when I was fifteen. Three years old, but they somehow still fit well. Franky wears the same dress as last week, striped button up and her ripping white shoes. I hug Momma goodbye, and when I let go, she buttons up my shirt all the way to my neck.

"Keep this buttoned all day Junebug. It's chilly outside," she tells me with a kiss on my forehead.

"Yes, Momma. Papa will be home with food around lunch. I heard they were giving out pigs in a blanket today at school," I lie. She kisses Franky's cheek and flattens that wild hair. With that, we set off for the day.

"Love you, sweethearts," I hear as I journey down the road seeing all the other mothers wishing their children goodbye for the day.

My Papa meets me in the same alley every day after I walk Franky to school. It's only nine in the morning, but this does not affect our clientele in the slightest. He gives me a name, a place, and a dress Momma used to wear when they first started going with each other. I go fix myself up in the Ralph's Corner store bathroom and set off to Daisy's Door, a bar just two blocks away.

I run my fingers through my half-clean hair and twirl the pieces framing my face. Unbuttoning my top two buttons, white but with red thread, I feel the chill Momma mentioned spill down to my belly button. I do my very best to appear taller; Papa says men like confidence. With my shoulders back, and my chest out, I approach a man sitting alone, but with two drinks. I place myself next to him and cross my bare legs.

"Mr. Meyer?" I speak in a low, smooth voice; Papa says they like that, too.

"You're looking at him. You must be Jane," his words crawl toward me. He turns to me, and I watch as his eyes travel first up my legs, to my bust, and finally land on my eyes. Once they meet mine, I see a ravenous grin break across his mildly wrinkled face. I smile back, without my teeth, and

do my best to let him watch as my eyes fall from his gray, patchy hair down to his new-looking shoes. I'll make him think I want him. He is tall, younger than Papa by probably ten years, so around thirty-five or forty, and keeps his face clean-shaven. He wears a ring, and though he sees my eyes glance and then dart away from his hand, he does not remove it.

"I got you a drink," he tells me as he gestures to the short glass in front of me.

"How thoughtful," I flirt. Papa says that being coy sets me apart from women who give themselves away too soon; he says men like the chase. I do not normally drink, but I know it would be rude to decline after he has already paid for it, which may very well have been the motive for it waiting for me. Nonetheless, I pick it up, making sure to focus on steadying my hand; he can't know I'm nervous. It tastes stale and bitter, so I only sip on it. This little amount still burns a path down my throat. I pretend not to be affected by its sting, but Mr. Meyer notices. He sets his hand on my upper thigh and slightly chuckles. I ignore the condescending act.

"It's scotch, honey. I understand if it's too strong," I smell its stench in his breath. I shyly laugh, making sure to maintain his masculinity in admitting that it is indeed too strong for a young, small woman like myself. Papa says it's important to know when I should let the man win; I don't want to appear *too* headstrong and stubborn. I must appear steady, but also in need of a man to depend on. Confident, but meek and seeking approval.

He waves down the bartender and orders me a Coca-Cola. I have only ever had this drink a couple times before, even when Papa had a job other than combing the streets for high-profile men who were willing to share their rare wealth for an hour with me. He makes deals with them not only for money as payment, but he makes them feed me, too. I know he wants to do good for me and for his family; he just doesn't have the means to do it right now.

I sip on the Coca-Cola, trying to make it last because I don't know if we will be here long enough for Mr. Meyer to buy me another. We talk for a bit, but he bores me. He tells me of his stressful job, stressful home, and stressful life. But, none of the problems he describes seem worthy of such time spent complaining about them. He speaks of having to rise early for work, coming home to a table that is not set for dinner, and seeing poor people "cluttering the streets." He says that it annoys him when they beg him for money. Does he not see that I am one of the beggars? It's humorous: Mr. Meyer finds the poor *disgusting* and *grimy*; however, he is paying one of them to share a bed with him.

He pays the bill, holds out his hand to help me down from the tall bar stool, and walks me out of the bar. His fake chivalry is sickening. It reminds me of the first customer that Papa had for me.

He would open doors for me, be gentle in the beginning minutes, but as soon as we were in private, I was simply an empty body to him. But it's better this way, he doesn't deserve to know how truly wrong he is about me. -doesn't get to see the independent, intelligent, tough woman before him. I don't believe that gallantry is dead, but it certainly does not live within the men that I know.

Once we are in the bedroom, he shows no hesitation. As the lights go off, so do his clothes. He orders me to strip to my delicates and lay on the bed. His sheets are so much softer than my naked mattress. Once I feel his cold hands on my waist, I take my mind elsewhere. I focus on

anything but the things he is doing to me. His walls are white and covered with photos of his wife and two children. They really were a beautiful family. I imagined my family that happy, with clean clothes and washed faces. I bet their hair smells fresh. Maybe he will let me bathe after, since he didn't give me anything to eat.

...

I don't know how long it's been when he finally unmounts me and clothes, but he offers the bathroom to me and gives me a towel. I know he's doing it as an act of charity, but I accept gratefully; Papa told me to always be grateful.

The warm water surrounds my bruised body so smoothly that you cannot separate my tears from its flow. I never look at my body when they are done until I can clean it from their slime. The bar soap is almost out, so I don't use it. But there is plenty of hand soap on the sink; I remember seeing it when I walked in. I gently glide the privacy curtain back and find Mr. Meyer sitting on the toilet, watching my shape through the curtain.

He laughs when I jump backwards and immediately cover my naked body.

"Hey," he says in playful disbelief as he opens the curtain all the way, "I'm paying for this. Show me what I did to you."

I reluctantly remove my hands from my body and walk across the bathroom to retrieve the soap. He watches me wash myself and get dressed. Once my shoes are back on, I wait for him to lead me to the door and pay me what he and my father agreed upon. He makes the bed and gestures towards the door.

"Here you go young lady; you earned it," he remarks as he makes one last up and down of me.

"Thank you, sir. Have a good day." He shuts the door behind me.

I know these streets well and walk myself back to the alley by Ralph's with ease. My father looks as if he is going to hug me, but instead his brow furrows and he offers a smile that looks as if it sits on a face it does not know. He holds out his hand, and I deposit the money.

"Thank you, honey," he pats my shoulder. I do not tell him his gesture hurts.

We walk into Ralph's and get dinner for tonight.

"I told Momma we'd have pigs in a blanket," I tell him. They are my favorite supper, even when they are cold.

He buys them and some milk, and he walks back home to put them in the fridge. I entertain myself with a book my friend Shirley lent me, while I wait for Papa to come back.

Shirley told me *Pride and Prejudice* was eye-opening, that it taught her what a true lady was. Well, I have almost finished it, and I can fully agree with Shirley. Elizabeth says what she means and is not afraid of consequences. She is smart and proud, but not overbearing. Those qualities are ones

that live in me, June, but I am not June when I am with Papa's customers. That's why I started asking him to tell the customers my name is Jane because the identity that I have when I work cannot be the identity that follows me home. When they call me Jane, it reminds me that I need to be Jane here and now. Quiet and shy and loyal. However, Elizabeth awakens as soon as I leave the men behind.

Papa returns and has a new name for me, "Mrs. Ruby." I try not to display my confusion and fear, but my eyes betray me. A woman?

"Sweetie, it's no different from your usual customers. She is willing to pay a handsome amount for you darling. Wouldn't you like something new, anyways?"

He is trying to minimize the severity of me sleeping with a woman, trying to convince me it is the same as every other client. I have never *known* another woman. God's word says it is not right. Papa tells me that He will see it as the same as when I sell myself to men; it is me providing for my family. Papa says He will not punish me for feeding my sister and mother. He gives me a different dress and combs his flaky hands through my freshly washed hair.

"Did you wash at Mr. Meyer's?" He sounds jealous and shocked.

"Yes Papa, he offered, and I thought it would be rude and ungrateful to reject," I explain with my eyes on the ground beneath my feet. He orders me not to again because Momma will notice. I apologize and consent. He then tells me the address where Mrs. Ruby will be and again shares that unsettling smile, but this time he does hug me. Our bellies do not touch and my head doesn't rest on his shoulders, like when I hug Momma, but I happily accept it anyways. It lasts a few seconds before I wish he wouldn't let go.

## Chapter Two

I recognized the address when Papa showed me, but I do not remember it looking like this. Doc's used to be the bar where all the railroad workers would meet up for a drink after a long day on the tracks; it was loud and chaotic, and women never ventured inside. It was made evident that the...*establishment* was meant for men. When Momma used to see her friend Diana, we had to walk down Lyle Dean Lane, the road where Doc's is, and the men would whistle at her. She would not look anywhere but the pavement in front of her, clutching my hand and walking faster than my small legs could manage to keep her pace.

But now the lights are brighter, there is clean carpet, and women and children are in there. The glass isn't covered with handprints and places where men had kissed and licked at women outside. I walk up the three steps, now with a handrail, and open the new wooden door. It is nearly after two, past lunch, but still quite busy. Soft music welcomes me from the record player, jazz, I think. I see a young woman sitting in a booth. Her petite frame is covered with a thin white dress and a thick scarf that does not do its job, as it is draped haphazardly around her shoulders. The bright blonde hair on her small round head falls no further than the base of her defined jawline. She wears ruby red lipstick. As she is the only woman sitting alone in here, I guess this is Mrs. Ruby and begin to walk up to take the seat across from her in the green booth.

I am five steps away from her when an annoyingly handsome man slides easily in beside her and pulls her close to kiss her cheek. I can only watch in embarrassment. I can feel my face turning the color of her lips and quickly find the bathroom. Once I'm in the solitude of the stall, I sit and breathe in slowly. My face falls into my shaking hands, and I feel a familiar lump in my throat. I need to make it go away before it rises and pushes out the tears welling in my eyes. I swallow hard and lift my face. *Papa says to never keep them waiting*, I think. I use my hands to smooth my dress and open the stall door.

I walk to the mirror and see a face staring back at me that is not mine. After the initial jump, I laugh shallowly, apologize, and turn towards the door.

"Jane? You are Jane, right?" she asks, ignoring my apology. I turn around and face her.

"Who's asking?" I push my right hip out and place my hand on it. Papa says I am not to talk to people that he doesn't know, but if they approach me, I am to act rude and self-assured. He says this usually turns them off.

She laughs and walks closer to me. She smells of stale cigarettes.

"Mrs. Ruby. Now come," she opens the door that leads out of the ladies' room, "we have things to discuss."

She picks the last booth in the corner of the place and sits down. She gestures for me to sit opposite her. Immediately, a boy walks up to us and hands us each a copy of the menu.

"I'll have a Southside, and you can get a Cola for the girl," she tells him without looking up at him once. He nods and walks off.

Mrs. Ruby pulls out something from her bag and starts smoking from a long wooden stick with one hand and adjusts her breasts with the other. Then she looks up at me quizzingly. Her eyes mimic Momma's when she finds Papa asleep on the couch after she puts Franky to bed. I don't like that she looks at me this way. I know Papa says to be polite to all his customers, but she is rude and bossy and simply a nuisance. And since I have already been rude to her, I really don't see the reason for changing my attitude towards her now.

"What? Why are you looking at me like a stray puppy you just found in an alley and are deciding if you should take him home or not?" I say in frustration at her lack of words.

"Because you *are* a stray puppy that I just found in an alley, and I *am* deciding if I should take you home or not." Mrs. Ruby's eyes don't leave mine.

This quick reply leaves me stunned for a moment, and the only thing that breaks my stare is the waiter returning with our drinks.

He sets the cold drinks in front of us. I watch the condensation slowly creep down the side of the glass. I guess Mrs. Ruby sees me eyeing it because of what she says next.

“Do you watch sweat drip down the temples of your clients like you watch that glass sweat?” My head jerks up, and my heartbeat lacks its normal rhythm-but not out of fear, more like rage. This woman has paid my father so she could embarrass and mock me? I am capable of escaping many of my feelings and thoughts, but this is unacceptable. My character will not be bruised like my body.

“Thanks for the cola and condescension, but I really must be going,” and with that I stand to my feet and start towards the door. She is stealthy for I do not hear her behind me until she whispers in my ear, “Let me help you.” I am startled, I will admit, but not enough to make me stop.

...

Evening is on its way; goosies flood my skin. I wrap myself with my arms and clench my jaw to stop the chattering. My mind knows not to, but I think back to the warm bath I took earlier today. I wish for that warmth again. I close my eyes to transport myself there in the tub. I feel my eyebrows raise and my mouth open. I sigh and open my eyes. My breath visibly lingers in front of me.

I can't go back to the house yet. Momma thinks I am studying with Shirley until six tonight; it is only four. Plus, Papa is waiting for me at Ral-ugh. A flood of worry starting in my belly pulsates through to my chest, head, and then down to my feet. My legs start to give out and reach out to steady myself with the icy brick wall to my right. I breathe in, inviting the cold this time.

Once my brain slows down, I think of what I am going to tell him. Ruby probably told him already of my disrespectfulness and rude exit. I am not scared of my father; I am scared of disappointing him. Even though I am the means of providing for our family, I would not be able to find customers like he does, would not know how to act or what to wear or anything. He does this for us. Momma and Franky need me to perform well and today I failed us. This realization draws tears from me. I quickly find an alley to recoup in.

I slouch to the ground with my back not touching the wall so as not to rip Momma's dress. My head rests on my knees that soon become drenched with my silent tears. I have a talent for quiet crying. I share a room with my sister, and the wall between our room and our parents' is thin. When all I have for company is Franky's soft snore and the wind outside, my face is wet with liquid conflict. Much as it is now.

I feel as though I should lie to Papa about how my...date with Mrs. Ruby went. I am very able to tell lies convincingly. It is something I am proud of. So, it is decided. If Mrs. Ruby has not already unashamedly spurted out the truth as she has done before, then I will cover it up like Momma does Papa with that old and tattered quilt.

I gather my crumpled self off of the asphalt and march to Ralph's. I must have been in the alley for quite some time because when I arrive, Papa is already there, waiting for me.

“You are late. Did she pay you extra?” Shoot. I worry for a second, but then I confidently lay the quilt down.

“No, she paid you for the correct amount of time. I just went down the wrong street and got a little turned around, sorry Papa,” I told him while looking him straight in the eyes.

“Oh, alright. Well here, go change back into these, and then we will go home for dinner.” I take the clothes and go into the bathroom at Ralphs.

As soon as I step in the bathroom, a stench fills me. A familiar and gruesome smell. I see her shoes underneath the stall door and hear her unclick the lock. I turn on my heels and try to leave, but this time she is too quick, surprising, considering her obvious old age.

“June, stop.” June? How does this woman know my real name.

“Get out of my way. My father is right outside. He will hear me shout and-”

“I am not afraid of your father or of you. How could anyone fear such a coward as him? Or such a stray puppy as yourself?”

“You need to stop it with the stray puppy talk,” I say while still trying to maneuver past her to my only exit.

“Then you must stop it with the stray puppy act,” I am alarmed at the harshness in her voice. Then once more when she pushes me back. Hard.

“What is your problem, woman? I don’t know you or what you want from me, but if it is not to pay my Papa for pleasure with me then I cannot help you!” And with that, I make a last advance, and she simply moves out of my way.

I rush out to Papa with wide eyes. I want to be held and told I am safe and okay. He mimics my outward disturbance. I expect him to ask what happened but instead he asks, “Why are you not changed? We are already late to dinner. Momma will be worried. Go.” I do not move; I am shocked at his response.

“Hurry!” I rush behind the dumpster in the alley we are standing at the entrance of and begin to undress. I shiver furiously. I am slipping into my school dress when I hear talking and see three figures sauntering in this direction. I cover my mouth, pin myself to the frigid side of the dumpster, and listen.

I am half bare and completely stone. I can only think *Papa, please, please*. They are nearly here, and I cannot entirely hide myself from the moonlight beaming down. I hear a bottle being continuously kicked down the alley and then see it; the glass bottle rests four steps from my figure. It is as still and cold as I am. *Please just leave it*. The shadow I have been watching on the wall glides forward, closing the distance between it and the dumpster. My chest catches when his eyes find mine.

His dark eyes seem almost wider than mine, despite this, they do not wander. His gaze does not shift direction until he turns around with the bottle in his hand.

“My Pops is home now. I gotta go, see you fellas tomorrow?” I am stunned.

“Yeah, alright Ernie, tell Pops and Ma we said hello,” and then they turned and left.

With the men gone, I hastily dressed and gathered all my belongings, yearning for the privacy of my home.