

*Wanting peace and never finding
always reaching, always striving
Cycle.*

*Sitting home, yet always leaving
always seeking, always questing
Cycle.*

*Always leaving, never lasting
always searching, never ending
building this, yet always yearning
wanting peace and never finding
Cycle.*

*Always lonely, always tearful
always waiting, always fearful
always watching, never seeing
wanting peace and never finding
always hiding, always seeking
Cycle.*

M.I.J.

Chapter One

April 2023

Mary Irene Jones shone like a rare supernova; her brilliant poetry admired from every point on Earth. My own writing light glowed more faintly, detectable only if you knew where in the universe to search. That her name was my name too was pure coincidence — life imitating art, if you considered the kiddie song “John Jacob Jingelheimer Schmidt” art.

As *that* Mary Irene Jones once did, I taught college-level English literature, but only part time. To afford health insurance, I also worked as a part-time pet sitter. Dogs terrified me, though, which seriously cut into my client base. (Blame an overly affectionate Great Dane, aptly named Kissy, who tackled me every time I visited my godparents as a little girl.)

Just to be clear, I had never traveled to Northern Ireland, whence that Mary Irene Jones emigrated in the late 1990s as the Troubles were winding down, more or less. And though she settled in the Philadelphia area and was a longtime professor at the same Catholic liberal arts college in the suburbs where I now worked, we had never overlapped on campus. She stopped teaching several years before I started there, and we didn’t move in anything like the same poetry circles.

That Mary Irene Jones was famous, yet extremely private. She declined all interviews while maintaining a grueling schedule of classes, conferences and symposiums for two decades. Unlike her, I would have welcomed any recognition, even a regular instructor’s post, as opposed to the patchwork of courses typically offered to me, often with little notice. It was assumed I would be available, and of course I was.

If you believed the campus lore, I might not have gotten my gig at the college at all if it hadn’t been for the same-name thing. According to the legend, the human resources folks thought they were rehiring *her* five years ago and pushed through the paperwork without noticing such discrepancies as my age (MIJ was more than twenty-five years older) and my job references (MIJ had not previously taught SAT prep classes, as far as anyone knew). The college administration officially debunked the story, yet it lived on because of new English lit students disappointed to learn who was actually teaching them: *this* Mary Irene Jones, not that one.

Full disclosure: My obscure, yet respected, poetry had been published only under the name M. Irene Jones, the one listed on my driver’s license as well as my Master of Fine Arts degree. In my family, we were all Marys, so none of us used the name. My mother, for instance, was M. Catherine “Call me Cass” Jones. My younger sister was M. Patricia “Call me Trish” Jones.

None of this would have made any difference to anyone but the aforementioned ticked-off students if the U.S. Postal Service hadn’t delivered a box of previously unpublished Mary Irene Jones manuscripts to my house while I was out pet-sitting two guinea pigs. When I realized what was inside — MIJ hadn’t put out anything new in years — I returned the box to my neighborhood post office. Which promptly redelivered it to me three days later.

That, I sort of expected. I didn’t expect the police.