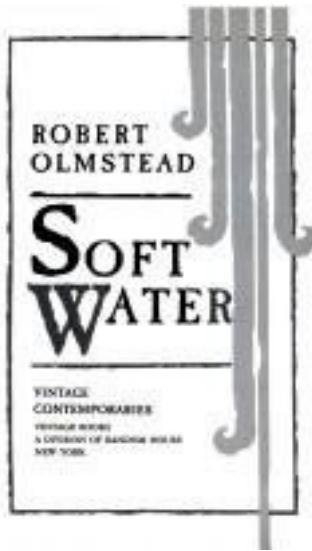


SOFT WATER



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出版者:Vintage

出版时间:1988-03-12

装帧:Paperback

isbn:9780394757520

E L watches wrestling on Saturday nights. He likes Verne Gagne goes for the sleeper hold. He jumps off his chair and slaps his thighs with both hands. Then marks his arms around one across his chest and the other with the hand cupped as if it's on someone's skull. He's doing it himself. He imagines that it's him putting Blackwell into slumberland and that it's his partner Dog Vachon lying outside the ring blood running down, ce and pooling on the concrete black and shiny. "hoebel come here," Asel says. "Verne's going for the er." "it Phoebe can't hear him. She's in the kitchen with her phones on. They are the kind that wrap around the head have tiny speakers that fit inside the ears. She has a song: eeps playing over and over again. It's an Emmylou Harris. She hears something new every time she plays it. She's something new about how hard it is to kill off the ghost no-good man. At certain times in the song she presses fingers into the palms of her hands and at other times spreads them wide and tilts her head back her braid so that

it curls up at her feet— snug and warm on the floor.
erne Gagne lets go his hold on Jerry Blackwell and whips into the ropes. Everyone at the Hartford Civic Center their feet. Asel can hear them. He wishes he were there so his voice could join the others in urging Verne on to glory. Verne gets his hands on the chair that Blackwell used to pen up Mad Dog's head. He holds it in the air and turns and round. It's a folding chair made of steel and wood. It will make quite a dent in Jerry's noggin when it comes crashing down. But Verne isn't that kind of guy.
Break it!" Asel whispers and Verne does. He breaks it to his knee and drops the halves over the side where they

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