

COLLECTED EDITION, 2026

ON THE WINGS  
*of My Mind*

*Tales of ghosts, dreams, prairies, & the things that come tapping at  
the window when no one is meant to answer.*

BY SUE ANN MONTGOMERY

# THE HALLOWEEN ANNUAL

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PART ONE · THE HALLOWEEN  
ANNUAL

# VISITATIONS & GHOSTS

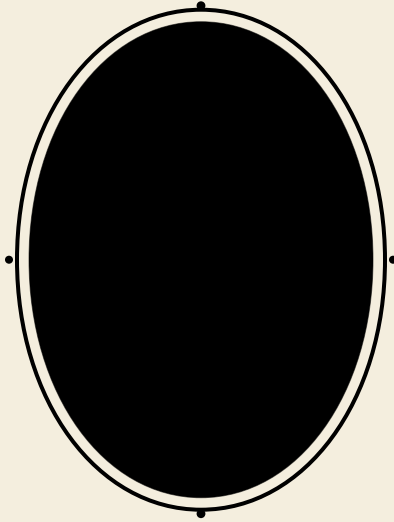


*Stories of the door slightly ajar, the hem disappearing  
through the gap, the room a moment after.*

# WHERE AM I?

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, October 2002*



The Halloween moon fought the clouds for position while the wind blew the night around in hearty punches. A storm was brewing in Kansas. In the basement of a darkened farmhouse, a light was burning. “Yeah, ‘it was a dark and stormy night and as she sat in the old haunted house’—sure beans! It was dark and it was stormy, but haunted? Give me a break!” These thoughts bombarded Janie as she picked another shirt out of the basket. “It was such a stupid thing—just a small thing—not really a lie—more like a joke.” Janie took a swipe at the rough cotton shirt as a big tear slid down her fourteen-year-old face.

Life had been a bad siege, actually. There she was, down in the old basement, ironing a humongous basket of shirts instead of bobbing for apples at the church Halloween party. It had really started when she and Sharon, her best friend since nursery school, had stopped to watch the new arcade being built on Main Street. It was exciting and kind of sleazy with its neon lights and dingy bells on the pinball machines. There were peep machines and even a turbaned dummy who gave fortunes to those with a quarter to throw away. The girls were in the eighth grade at Abbeyville Junior High and the year was 1957. Nothing much ever happened in Abbeyville. There were the games at Abbeyville High, church socials, the Fourth of July picnic, and, oh yes, on Friday night, old Mr. Holt would open up the picture show and the next installment of the Cisco Kid would flash on the screen while everybody threw their popcorn in the air and sucked on their Black Cows. “But really, we’re too old for that,” the girls had complained to their moms just last week. “And now, here we are—being treated like babies.” A sob burped through her chest. “Everybody at school got to go to the Penny Arcade—nobody was going to the movie that Friday night,” she answered that small voice in the back of her head. “It was no use asking Mom. She said only trashy girls hung out in arcades, you know, the ones with the pierced ears?”

They would probably have dropped it except for that stupid Eddie. When he heard that they were going to the movie and not to the arcade, he and all of his stupid friends began calling them goody-goodies and virgin goddesses. She could still see his goofy face. “What a jerk! This is his fault,” she thought. They had to do it then—they simply had to. Their plan had seemed perfect: they would get out of their parent’s car, after being carpooled to the Flag Theatre on Main. They would walk up to the ticket window just like they were going to buy a ticket and then, here’s where it would get tricky—after Dad in his Dodge “Spitfire” drove off, they would

sneak down to the arcade and be back in time to be picked up. It sounded perfect! Except for one thing—they hadn't counted on Mr. Rumsey, who just happened to be walking his dog that evening and just happened to look into the arcade and see them, and then he just happened to mention it to Mom the next day at the grocery store. "And then boy howdy—was she mad!"

"And now," Janie thought, "here I am ironing in the basement of this old house and Sharon is in town sitting in her room. And where is everybody else? Why, at the church Halloween party, of course. Mom and Dad and my 'perfect' big sister, Shirley, are probably bobbing for apples and laughing at poor old Janie, left at home doing the ironing."

"Don't mess up my stuff, you little toad," Shirley had yelled as she flounced out the back door earlier in the evening.

Janie sniffed. "Well, there goes my life—stuck here in this creaky old farmhouse. Like that shutter that just started banging—why does anybody want to live on a farm anyway?" And then, as if in answer to her own question: "The floors creak and it's drafty, for Pete's sake. And it's twenty miles out in the sticks! Sharon's family got to move into one of those ranch-style homes in Abbeyville, but not me, oh no! I hate this place, I hate my life!" And with that she kicked the basket full of ironing just as a gust of cold air swirled around her feet. "Somebody must have left the kitchen door open," she thought. "It is kind of spooky down here. Maybe I'll call Sharon." The grounding rules were—absolutely no phone calls. "But really, how would they know?" she thought as she dialed the number.



The phone barely rang once before Sharon whispered, “Hello.”

“Hey Shar, it’s me. Happy Halloween!”

“Don’t remind me,” she whispered.

“Hey, why are we whispering?” Both exploded into gales of nervous laughter.

“I would get sent to the moon if Dad caught me on the phone,” Janie boasted.

“Me too.” The wind crackled down the chimney into the basement, puffing dust into the air.

“Gad, it is Halloween. It is so spooky,” Janie nervously laughed.

“Hey, I’ve got one for you,” Sharon said. “It’s a doozy. You’re gonna flip your wig! Somebody escaped from the loony bin tonight—can you believe it?” The loony bin was Larned State Hospital, a hospital for the mentally ill located in south-central Kansas about thirty miles away from Abbeyville. “I guess this guy is a murderer—honest—he killed his own mother!”

“

*Somebody escaped from the loony bin tonight —  
can you believe it? I guess this guy is a murderer —  
honest — he killed his own mother.*

---

“Geezzz, thanks Shar—just what I was wanting to hear,” Janie trembled.

“Don’t worry,” added Sharon uncertainly, “he’s probably miles away by now—don’t you think?” Janie had always been the gutsy one, dragging Sharon along on her escapades. The house was still as the storm seemed to calm down. The girls sat there thinking of the killer out there wandering through the darkness. “What was that?” A soft breathing sound came over the line.

“Janie, are you doing that?” A nervous laugh.

“Doing what?” Janie’s heart stopped.

“Can’t you hear it?” Both held their breath but there it was. Somebody was on the line.



“Who are you?” This time it was Sharon who took the lead. “Is that you, Jim?” Sharon’s little brother was always playing jokes on the girls—what a squirrel! “Speak up, Jim, if that’s you. This is not funny! I mean it!” Anger mixed with fear shot out of Sharon’s mouth. But the breathing only got louder.

Janie took a breath. “Who is there? Who?”

And then the dreaded answer: “Wouldn’t you like to know, little girlies,” growled an unfamiliar voice. “But don’t worry, old Frank is going to have a little fun with you tonight.” Silence.

From out of somewhere, Janie croaked, “Where are you? I mean, which house?”

“Aha, that’s the catch—I know where you are. Where am I?” With that he let out a screech of laughter and the wind joined in, rocking the old house.

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“

*Aha, that’s the catch — I know where you are.  
Where am I?*

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“Was he here?” Janie couldn’t tell. “Was that him or the wind?”

“Oh, don’t you worry, one of you is going to get lucky tonight. Your kitchen is just full of knives—long, skinny ones and great big sharp ones.”

“

*An idea: the iron. She turned it up as high as she could and backed as far away from the door as the cord would allow.*

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“Whose kitchen?” Janie felt her body go stiff and her voice trembled. “Sharon, is he there?” But Sharon did not answer. The breathing had stopped. The wind picked up and the creaking of the old house drowned out the beating of her heart. An idea: the iron! She turned it up as high as she could and backed as far away from the door as the cord would allow. Time slowly passed. “Was Sharon dead?” The arcade floated away. She loved her life. “Shirley was the best sister ever.” Why, she even took her to drive-in movies when she had a date. “Mom and Dad were old fogies but I love them so much—please, please, somebody help me,” she silently pleaded. A siren sounded from a long way off. “I’m dreaming,” she thought. “I died and they’re coming to take me away.” Then slamming doors and crashing bodies. Shouts and pounding feet echoed through the house as Mom and Dad stampeded down the basement steps. “My baby, my baby, you’re safe!”

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FROM THE AUTHOR

The girls and the houses and the man are all true parts of the story. When I was fourteen, I went to church camp back in the woods in Salina, Kansas. The girl's dorm was on the second floor of an old lodge. It consisted of one big room filled with metal bunk beds. Two girls cried in the night and were unable to sleep without the lights on. One was the girl I call Janie in the story. The previous year, an escaped mental patient—the man in the story—was apprehended in the farmhouse with a butcher knife in his hand while the girl stood ready with her iron in the basement. Her friend Sharon, who lived in town, had crawled out of her bedroom window, run next door, and called the police.

Interestingly, the other girl was the one who had found the Clutter family. They were the family of “In Cold Blood” fame, a true story written by Truman Capote about a family who were killed in their home by a couple of drifters, whose bodies were discovered on a Sunday morning by the daughter's best friend—this girl who couldn't sleep in the dark.

*Happy Halloween*

*Love you*

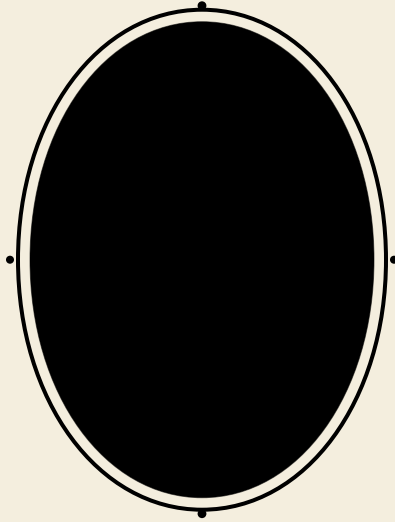
*Mom*

VISITATIONS & GHOSTS

# HALLOWEEN

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, October 2003*



**A**nother Halloween was gone. The children had been transported in their costumes to every relative, every family friend, and all of our neighbors who were known to provide treats, and now we were back. The house was quiet inside, with the children sleeping under their cozy quilts while the ice storm raged outside. I sat in Tom's comfy chair and gazed at the fire in the fireplace, listening to the crackling of the logs as they harmonized with the wind and the ice clinking against the window panes in my old farmhouse. Tom had taken a job four hours away in order to hang onto the farm and couldn't make it through the bitter storm to come home for Halloween. All

was quiet up the creaky stairs and the children were sleeping while clutching their treat bags, which I would soon remove and place on top of the fridge for doling out later. I was frazzled. My car had grunted and strained over the icy roads but I was determined to celebrate for my kids, if for nothing else.

Tom was my sweetheart. We had met in the fourth grade and had never considered the possibility that we would not spend the rest of our lives together. When his grandmother left him the family farm in her will, we stepped up to carry on, but times were tough. With three small children, my getting a job was out of the question. There wasn't much I could do that would make enough money to cover child care, and besides, Tom and I wanted the children to be cared for by at least one parent at all times. He was such a good father! And when it was clear that farming wasn't the answer, he took the job that was offered in Kansas City and came home on the weekends. His voice was so troubled when he called early in the afternoon, just as the storm was showing its ugly face. "Anna, this will be the first Halloween that I'll miss with the kids." No matter—all was well, I thought, gazing into the flickering flames.

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*I heard a tapping at the window and, turning my head, I was taken aback by a figure looking in at me. Was I dreaming?*

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As I sat there musing, I heard a tapping at the window and, turning my head, I was taken aback by a figure looking in at me. Was I dreaming? I pulled myself out of the comfort of the chair and walked to the window. It must have been the reflection of the fire, I thought, as I felt my heart begin to beat in my chest. But no—a man looked back at me. My God, a traveler must have been stalled on the highway! My first thought was to throw open the front door and take him in. But just as I looked into his eyes, he grinned a grin that stopped my heart, and then he flashed the knife. I was frozen by his gaze and just as I caught my breath, a thought flashed through my mind—check the back door! He must have heard my thought, for he ducked and ran toward the back of the house. As I rounded the corner of the kitchen, I heard the glass break and saw his hairy arm reach through and grab the knob.

Turning, I knocked over a glass and heard it shatter as I raced through the hall and up the stairs. My mind was working ahead of me: go into your room—he will come after you and not the children. As I threw myself through the doorway into the room, I heard him curse as he slid across the broken glass in the kitchen and screech like a wounded animal as he came crashing up the stairs. I pulled the dresser in front of the old door and, as I grappled with the window, I heard his high-pitched gleeful laugh as he smashed through the bedroom door. It was black as pitch outside. The ice bore down on my head as I pushed myself out onto the roof, and hanging onto anything that stuck out, I slid and crashed over the roof until I reached the chimney and hung on. My heart pulsed hard in my temples and my lungs burned with the harsh coldness of the night. The wind and sleet suddenly ceased and the moon came out from behind the clouds for a moment. In the moonlight, I saw him climb onto the roof, wildly swinging the knife in one hand as he tried to steady himself with the other. I watched in horror as he found me with his eyes. He was a giant with mangy black

matted hair. His face carried a wildness within it as though he was hungry and looking for a kill. The air carried the heaviness of his breath and the stillness emptied the earth of all but us. What would happen to my children once he had finished with me? Where was God?

“

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*He was a giant with mangy black matted hair. His face carried a wildness within it as though he was hungry and looking for a kill.*

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Just then I heard the sirens and, within seconds that seemed like hours, the sheriff's car appeared through the storm followed by an ambulance. Two small objects in the darkness with flashing lights—coming to save me! But then a strange thing happened. They stopped out on the road and seemed to wait. For what? “Help!” I screamed through the storm. “Help me!” My throat ached from the scream. I turned toward the giant just as Tom climbed over the edge of the roof. He was there! My cry stuck in my throat. Tom, my hero—of course, how could I have doubted? My heart cried with joy. He gave me a look and then turned with perfect grace toward the beast. I couldn't see because of the darkness except for the reflection of the emergency lights. “Help him!” I screeched towards the lights. And then it was over. The giant gave an awful groan and was thrust backwards over the edge of the roof. But where was Tom? He must have fallen! My heart stopped. Oh my God—no! I eased myself over the rough icy roof and through the window. Throwing myself down the stairs, I heard a pounding at the front door.



The sheriff stood there coated with ice, his breath coming out in frosty puffs.

“

*Tom is dead, Anna. I am so sorry. He must have been on his way home when he crashed on the road.*

“Anna, may I come in?”

“Where have you been?” I cried. “Tom fell off the roof—there was a man—he tried to kill me,” I babbled.

He guided me to the couch. “Tom is dead, Anna. I am so sorry. He must have been on his way home when he crashed on the road. Somebody saw the truck. He must have been there for at least an hour. What are you talking about?”

## FROM THE AUTHOR

My Uncle Carl was a short, heavyset, mentally challenged man with large lips and a mysterious gleam in his eye, who lived with my grandmother Ritt (short for Rittenoure). It was said that he had been a beautiful four-year-old boy who had lived with his older brother and two older sisters in a dugout out on the western prairies of Kansas when he was struck with “infantile paralysis,” which was later called polio. There were no medicines or treatments for this rare disease back then. For weeks he sustained a horribly high fever and neighbors rallied to help Gram keep him alive. After the fever broke, the little boy was left with a crippled leg and a mind that worked, but ever so slowly.

When he turned six, a baby girl was born (my mother) who was given the responsibility for his well-being and protection. It was an awesome task. She was a painfully thin, feisty tomboy who took on the meanness of the other children as she bravely put Carl on the bus for his cross-town journey to the school for the disabled and then raced home after school in order to meet him as he got off the bus. Their father was ill in a hospital far away and, after their farm had been auctioned off, Gram had brought the children into Wichita and got a job mending clothes at a cleaners. Mom’s older siblings had then had to drop out of school and get jobs. There were many nights when Mom and Carl waited on the steps of their home in the darkness for the others to return, a memory that to this day brings tears to Mom’s eyes. She is still afraid of the dark and won’t venture out alone

after sundown. Who knows what lurked in the dark back then and what befell those two vulnerable children? Perhaps we will never know.

Uncle Carl, as I knew him, was an adult who delivered prescription drugs on his bicycle for the drugstore on the corner, not far from Gram's house. He was grumpy and walked with a limp. Marjane, my older cousin, and I—and later my little sister Barbara—were afraid of him, and when we saw him coming we would run and hide. On Gram's back porch was a huge old broken-down armoire that was absolutely filled to overflowing with Carl's collection of comic books. (Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, was my favorite, or Fire Hair, a red-headed Indian she-ro.) There were comic books of all kinds—classics—including horror comics! These were Uncle Carl's only entertainment except for the cowboy movies on the old movie screen down the block. I spent countless afternoons lying on the porch swing, or under the trumpet vine in the backyard, or in the middle of Gram's feather bed reading, reading, reading those comics. I was the bookworm in the family. And while I was sometimes punished at home for spending so much time reading, I could read to my heart's content at my beloved Gram's.

I remember the picture in one of those comics of the hairy monster on the roof, eyes gleaming, coming for the terrorized woman who was clinging to the chimney—as clear as if I were seeing it this moment for the very first time. I have filled in around that image, but here it is: a story about the power of love. Hope you like it!

*Happy Halloween*

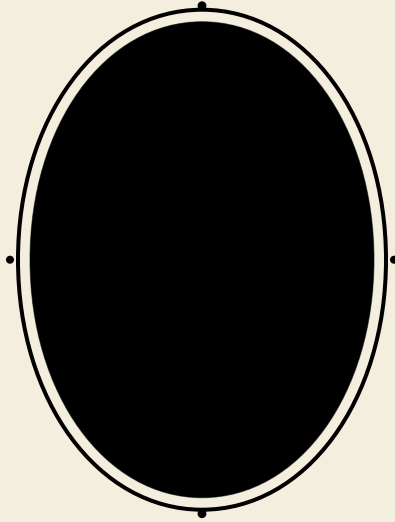
*Love you*

*Mom*

# SATURATED

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, October 2004*



**W**aiting, waiting. Sounds filled the deep dark night—the hoot of an owl, the whir of bat wings, the screech of wild things, the crackling of branches in the air, a frog croaking bass while cicadas sliced the cold night air with their ancient soprano. Where WAS Roy? Something big was about to happen. Something big and strange and terrifying and we can't wait—we gotta hurry, hurry, hurry! Ira stood in the shadows of the sycamore by the old pump waiting. He was a wiry boy of ten with black hair and a sparkle in his eyes. Eyes that usually belied a huge laugh—one that came from down deep and cracked like lightning as it exploded. Not tonight. Tonight, the

sparkle had given way to a gleam that was dark and the eyes from which this phenomenon resided were intense and wary. This was to be a night that young Ira would remember until his dying day.

“

*Something big was about to happen — something big and strange and terrifying. This was to be a night that young Ira would remember until his dying day.*

Ira, Roy, and Ben were the infamous rascals of the town and the surrounding Oklahoma hills. They were a threesome swaggering about, fishing poles slung over their shoulders, laughing at some inside joke or heads together devising new schemes of torment. Teachers shuddered and took a deep breath at the beginning of school as the trio bounded into class (late) and didn't exhale until school let out in May. These three attended school only on occasion—much to their teachers' relief and to their mothers' worry—because they had better things to do: namely, fishing for the granddaddy that lurked elusively somewhere in the muddy waters under every rock for miles around. They knew every puddle of water that stuck out at different angles. But now, fishing was not on the mind of this young boy—no, not even close. Something else filled his thoughts.



When had he noticed a difference, he wondered, as he stretched his mind through all of its nooks and crannies. Was it at the school picnic when Ben didn't want to chase the girls with a garter snake, or was it before that? Stretch, stretch. His mind reeled in a memory of last August. It was the absolute hottest day of the year—106 in the shade at least, maybe 107! The three of them lay in the stream out by Black Hawk's place, listening to the water splash over the smooth rocks and looking up high through the tall sycamores to the blue, blue sky. When the afternoon got old and their stomachs began to rumble, the three got up and started up the bank heading for home, already smelling dinner in the pot. That's when he first noticed that Ben couldn't seem to make it up the bank. "What's the matter, you ninny? Girl!" They laughed as Ira and Roy both grabbed him under his arms and shouldered him up the incline. Now, standing here in the silence, memories cascaded like a meteor shower: Ben begging off tree house building, Ben sleeping during a rodeo—gol darn—and even turning down snipe hunting! Something had been real wrong and that was sure, but this? No, no, no!

Last Saturday night, after lights were put out for young boys needing their rest and while the grownups were all gathering at the Ward place for some card playing, the threesome had made plans to climb out of their bedroom windows and meet down by the pump for some night mischief. Ira could hear the group down in the kitchen laughing and jawing as he slipped noiselessly out the window and down the side of the house, landing in the soft earth below. He reached the pump to find Roy waiting, but time ticked by and Ben never showed up. So Ira and Roy took off through the glen to the O'Malley house to pick him up. At first they threw rocks at his bedroom window. When that didn't rouse him, Roy did his owl impersonation. Still Ben didn't come to the window, so they shinnied up the drainpipe to the roof above the shed next to the house and jumped the six

feet to the main roof. Gazing through the window, they saw him lying there in the moonlight with his eyes wide open but not a muscle moved or flinched—still, so still. Ira would never forget that look on Ben’s face—so pale in the moonlight, just staring with eyes that didn’t see. They pounded and pried on the glass window (the only one in the house) and tried to rouse him but he never moved. Finally his mom came out and shouted, “Hey, what’s going on in the name of Jesus?”

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*Gazing through the window, they saw him lying there in the moonlight with his eyes wide open — but not a muscle moved or flinched. Still. So still.*

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“He’s not movin’!” they yelled back, and that was the beginning of the nightmare. Try as they might, nobody could wake him up—nope, nobody—not even Doc Hess. He just lay there so still—he didn’t even fog a mirror, as Grandma Julie used to say.

Ben’s ma started hollering and soon everyone in the lane came running down to see what was causing the ruckus. They laid him out on the kitchen table while everybody cried and turned him this way and that, but there was not a single mark on his body—nary a one. Sheriff Henderson got down and looked us straight in the eye: “Alright boys—what do you know about this?” Roy started crying and spilled his guts on just about everything we had ever done.

Me, I said, “Nothin’—sir.”

Ben lay on that table from Saturday night until Wednesday noon. The strange thing was—he never got stiff and he never got real cold and he never stirred and he never breathed and...he never woke up. No heartbeat could be found. Finally the sheriff said that by law, a dead body had to be buried. Doc said we should wait because, as he put it, “This ain’t a stiff!” But by this time the whole town was divided and tempers were flaring, and in the end the sheriff ruled, so Ben’s dad and brother built him a casket. His mom dressed him in his Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, which were scratchy and tight, but they didn’t make him wear shoes. Roy and I had already made a pact to steal them if they did. The whole town turned out for the funeral—even school was let out. Roy and I hid until it was too late to wear our fancy duds and then ran in and sat by Mr. and Mrs. O’Malley, Ben’s folks. Preacher Chester just wouldn’t stop talking and there was sobbing and nose-blowing till all get out. Roy and I just wanted to grab Ben out of the box and take off down to Cow Creek. They buried him in the graveyard next to his grandpa and then everybody went down to the church where the ladies had laid out a spread.

It made me think—I decided that I was never going to die. Roy wasn’t either. They’d have to chase me down before I’d go into a box. Roy said the same. I couldn’t sleep that night just thinking about Ben—who could burp the Star Spangled Banner, among other great stuff—lying there in the darkness in a box with the lid nailed down, and I got goosebumps all over. Next day I took the day off from school and went behind the barn to have me a smoke when I heard some talking going on inside. Dad was talking to Uncle Earl and some other men. I couldn’t hear everything but a word floated by every once in a while. Something about being buried alive and Sheriff Henderson. I took off to tell Roy.



Strange goings on. Then that night, just as we were eating dinner, somebody knocked on the door and Dad excused himself and got up and left—and we were having meat and potatoes and corn on the cob out of the bin! I could hear voices outside. As soon as Mom turned to fuss with the baby, I ducked out and sneaked myself around the corner of the house in order to get a good earful. And that’s when I heard my Uncle Earl say: “You be the lookout, Clyde—better bring your gun, Jake. We’re going to need torches.”

“I got ’em!” A voice called out.

“We’ll meet in the graveyard at half past midnight when the moon is on its way down, and bring your shovels. This is just between us! No outsiders—ya hear?”

“Yes sir’s” were heard all around. Me—I took off through the woods for Roy’s. That’s when we decided to meet at the pump at midnight.

And now the moon was falling. Dad had left about a half hour ago and where in the bejesus was Roy? “Hey!” He slipped up behind me.

“Hey yourself,” I answered.

“Got some smokes?”

“Yup.”

“Save ’em.”



The graveyard was spooky and ground mist made the grass wet as we wound our way through the old stones that stuck out at different angles. At first I thought I had heard wrong because not a sound could be heard, but just as we got down in the ravine we saw a glow. There was Dad and Uncle Earl, the Doc, Mr. Hicks and his nephew Bub, Clem the blacksmith, old man Mose, and even the preacher! Some were holding torches which made a tight yellow glow over the cluster of men as they all watched with eyes down at the men in the middle shoveling. Grunts were heard as the earth was thrown over their backs, wet with sweat even in the cold still night. And finally Ben’s casket was pulled up and placed on the mound of earth.

“

*And there was Ben, all dressed in his scratchy suit.  
He just lay there with his eyes open, not saying a  
word — and then he blinked.*

I saw Dad take off his hat and wipe his brow with the back of his arm as he bent over the casket with a long metal rod. “Here we go,” someone announced as the lid was pried off. Roy and I had worked ourselves into the throng and wormed our way to the front. And there was Ben, all dressed in his scratchy suit. He just lay there with his eyes open, not saying a word, and then—he blinked! A gasp went up all around and then his papa grabbed him up: “My boy, my boy—Praise the Lord!” He was alive! Well, we got

shoved back in the commotion, which was just as well, or we would've gotten a tanning for being up after moonrise, not to mention being out after the moon had set. But we did have that smoke before we got home. We couldn't believe our eyes! Ben was back! He had been buried alive! What tales he would tell. We couldn't wait!

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FROM THE AUTHOR

*Happy Halloween*

*Love you*

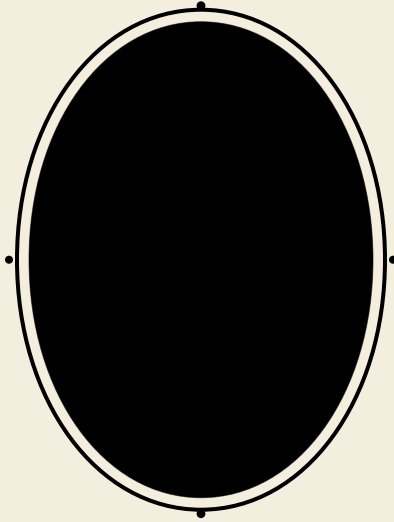
*Mom*

VISITATIONS & GHOSTS

# THE MOMENT

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, October 2005*



**T**he warm October day came sliding down. The grasses swayed with the rhythm of the congas. Blades of light sliced through the trees proclaiming the sun's last shout of the day and dusk settled in for a long evening. Wedding feast preparations were evident among the long white linen clad tables and hundreds of starry candles twinkled as the light faded. Voices could be heard as an indistinguishable chorus and the laughter rose and fell in the rippling shadows of the smooth lawn while music played and glasses tinkled. This was the eve of the day that had been planned since the tiny child was born. This was the celebration long dreamed of by the parents of

the dark eyed girl child as she took her first step, whispered her first sound, danced her first dance, smiled her first most engaging smile. She was the princess and her every breath was music to her parent's ears. Oh yes, there were other children that came later, all adored, all doted on, all recipients of the lavishness of the hacienda, all heirs of the manor – all loved. But this one shown above all others. God had given her shine and her voice was music to all who were privileged to hear it. Songs were written about her, suitors vied for even just a glance thrown in their direction, other maidens of the village both envied her and loved her. But she was promised to only one – Reuben. Reuben and Celia had known each other from infancy. Born within months of each other to women who were best friends, their lives had been laced together just like two vines around the same tree. It wasn't until the first fall harvest after grammar school that they began to look upon each other with a difference. Their parents had watched them, giving one another knowing glances as they envisioned the marriage of this golden pair. Both beautiful, both born into wealth and privilege, they were destined to carry on their family's blood lines. It was their responsibility, no, their moral duty.

The marriage contracts were drawn up by the patriarchs of the two families when the two youths, Celia and Reuben were but 12 years old. The union would join two dynasties. The father of the bride Armando Reyes, the wise and benevolent owner of the El Hacienda Esplendido, lorded over his lands as a father would lovingly covet and protect his family. The hacienda spread further than the eye could see. Grapes from its vines, grain from its pastures, cattle from its ranges were touched with loving care and the harvest each year was abundant, each year growing to be bigger than the last. It was the source of all commerce, all food and drink, all festivals, all harvests and employment – in short, all of life in the village and this had been ongoing for generation upon generation.

Bernardo Morales, the father of the groom was also a land owner but instead of wine and beef, his land produced oil. His was a newer family to the valley, only a century in this place rather than centuries like the Reyes. A doting father, a stern businessman, a hard worker who showed true grit and fairness to his workers, his word was like sterling silver. His honesty was well known in the valley. The joining of the two families made perfect sense in bankable assets but, more importantly, it was fundamentally based on the love of every person within this happy place.

But when did the moment come? When had she noticed? That the sweet kisses from Reuben were not enough? The moment came in the spring when Celia had run into the stable to fetch her beautiful white horse, Robusto. Rounding the stable's open doors, she literally ran into the new stable boy/man, Diablo Lopez. Darkly handsome, sturdy and slightly ruffled from the hard work of the horses, he was knocked slightly off balance. They both drew back in surprise. Then they laughed, brushed themselves off and turned away. That was the moment. After that, she always found something that necessitated a visit to the stable, even when her Robusto was out to pasture. When Diablo was gone from the stable usually somewhere with his companions, she could feel disappointment consume her. But when he was there, he would smile at her and blatantly look at her body as though quelling a thirst that only she could quench. One night she heard him from her window over the porch, singing along with the strumming of his guitar and she stole down in the darkness. His kisses were deep and strong and he smelled like a man who knew what he was about. She was overcome with guilt that first time and spent the next days in early morning mass.

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*That was the moment. After that, she always found something that necessitated a visit to the stable, even when her Robusto was out to pasture.*

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“Please Father, God, save me from this craving.” Yet it continued, stolen moments of passion, knowing glances and risks taken.

Once, while dressing for a bridal soiree, she ran crying into her mother’s room. “Mama, please, I must talk to you. I cannot marry Ruben, please, please...I’ve been.....” But her mother’s look was so hard and piercing that she was frozen.

“Stop! You will never say speak that way to me ever!” Then she softened.

“You are just nervous, my sweet daughter. There is nothing that you could ever do that couldn’t be forgiven by Reuben.”

“But mama, I will die if you make me. I do love him but not in a way that ..... No, no, please mama, please, I can’t do it!”

“Not another word!” Her mother’s words stung and then: “You can and you will!”

Spring flowed silently into summer. Celia’s color faded in the summer sun. Dark circles rimmed her pale eyes and sleep evaded her.

“It’s bridal nerves,” friends were heard saying. “She’s in love, lucky Reuben.”

Oft times, she found amidst a crowd and looking up, would realize that her mind was somewhere far away with Diablo. She took to riding in the late afternoon all alone, down the dirt road that rimmed the hill overlooking the sweep of the hacienda. She felt free then, the heavy weight of her broken heart lightened somehow. Urging the white horse faster and faster she relished the rushing feeling of flight. After each ride, she could breathe again, but the old feeling of heaviness always returned once she was back surrounded by family and friends. And so now, on her wedding eve, before the dinner, she pulled away from her final fitting, away from the clucking of the old ladies, away from the laughing of her girl friends, the smothering of her ladies maid and her dress maker. She slipped through the gathering shadows of late afternoon, past the tables and the heady smell of gardenias to the stable. To get out, she thought, to breathe before my heart explodes and I die from its breaking. Her girlish thoughts fantasized at the thought that the tragedy of the dying bride would bring to the event, to the hacienda, to the village. Out of the darkened corner of the stable, Diablo stepped. His look stopped time as he held out his hands. “Come to me.”

But she turned and willed herself to gather the reins of Robusto. As she swung herself up, she heard Diablo say, “I will die without you.” As she rode away, she knew what she must do.



Riding up through the woods to the road, she felt light hearted again. She would be free! The guests would dance on without her, she thought. Surely papa would forgive her, she was his golden one. But mama would be so disappointed, mad at first but once she knew Diablo, she would surely love him too. And Ruben, poor Ruben. But, surely he will understand, he loves me so. Coming out on the road, she flung her cape behind her and touched Robusto's flank lightly with the whip and raced away down the road, her heart pounding. Around the first curve they flew with a long stretch to go. Suddenly, out of the forest, a rider appeared. A woman with long wild black hair that flew in long matted clumps behind her bent over the reins of her massive black stallion.. Her face, dark and contorted, she rode her black stallion driving him forward with a vengeance. Her long black cape whipped behind her making her voice sound like a banshee's wail. "Stopppppp, stoppppp, Celiaaa before its too late. Come back! Stoppppp. Listen to meeee. Stop! Stop! Danger! Dangerrrrrrrrr!" The race was on with the black stallion gaining with every hoof beat. Celia's heart raced, her knuckles bit into the mane of her beloved horse whose heart beat hard also beneath the saddle. She could see over her shoulder, the foaming nose of the black stallion and the long, crooked grasping fingers of the rider. She could almost feel the woman's scratching nails grabbing at her cape. In terror, she jabbed hard into the side of the horse, "Go Robusto, go, hurry, hurry, help me, save me!" And then the bridge appeared. A sharp turn, holding on and twisting dangerously, the white horse and rider rushed across the wooden trestles and when she looked, the black stallion and the rider were gone.

*Suddenly, out of the forest, a rider appeared — a woman with long wild black hair that flew in long matted clumps behind her, bent over the reins of her massive black stallion.*

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Shaken, she threw herself off of her horse outside the stable and stumbled across the porch and into the great hall. “There was a demon, a witch, a murderous hag who wanted to hurt me! She tried to attack me....!” But no one was listening. The room blurred and spun, the music blended with glasses being clicked and voices hummed.

“There you are!” Her mother tightened her grip on her arm and spun her towards the dressing room. Celia watched herself from afar as she was dressed and fixed. Her hair was swept up with a jeweled comb, her nose powdered, her cheek bones rouged. Flowers were arranged like a crown upon her golden head and she was sent forth to be a bride at the groom’s dinner.

She felt the unreality of the evening as she seemed to float through it smiling her smile on the outside while praying for it to be over on the inside. Toasts were given all around amid the smell of roast beef and the sound of the music and then the crowd paused for “The Kiss.” Ruben planted his sweet boyish kiss on her cheek, missing her lips as she turned her head away to see Diablo watching from the porch. Reuben’s look was pained and surprised, but she didn’t notice. Her heart had already left. And then it was over. The hacienda was dark. Somewhere off in the distance, the laughter faded. The bag of her hastily gathered things was flung over the back of Robusto. The two lovers left in the moonlight. The night was cool and dark.



Twenty years passed by. Some would say time stood still, others would say it flew by like a whisper. The years were not kind to the land or the village. Stories about the scandal of the groom left at the alter faded. Armando Reyes, without concern for his own welfare, searched far and wide for his beautiful daughter. No word came and nothing could be done to comfort him. One dark night, while making his nightly rounds, evil befell him and he was found in the morning light with a knife in his heart. The crime was never solved but those in the village sadly shook their heads and agreed that his daughter had been the one to kill him long before the knifing. His wife followed him shortly thereafter in death, never knowing the fate of her beautiful Celia.

Reuben took over the role of his aging father as oil baron but he was not the businessman that Bernardo Morales had been and mismanagement and dry holes took their toll, not to mention the loneliness of the broken heart. And then one day, Celia and Diablo returned to the hacienda. At first, they were welcomed with thanksgiving but it soon became apparent that evil had entered the place. The once beautiful Celia had lost her shine, her eyes downcast, she hid her bruised face behind her faded shawl. Diablo and his compadres strutted and pranced through the hallways of the mansion, kicking over anything that got in their way. Wielding all manner of weapons and shouting crude insults, they bullied the family and the hacienda staff and eventually ran them off of their land. It was shocking, especially to this family who had never had need for weapons to defend themselves. Their lives had been peaceful and loving insured by their beloved Armando Reyes and his beautiful wife, Angelina. Celia, crying and

begging Diablo to stop, she was beaten and thrown in a shed out behind. She clawed herself free and again tried to catch up with her brothers and sisters but was discovered and after another beating, was locked in the room where her bridal gown still hung. Gathering in an inn in the village, the family and their staff and friends began to make plans to regain their home and to rescue Celia. Alas, the next morning, they were all found dead in their rooms, victims of a “mysterious disease.” The constable and his men were too small in number to go against the rebel gang. And so the days and years went by.

Without loving and careful care and hard work, the grapes withered and died, as did the crops and finally the cattle. The same is true of the heart. Celia’s fate was that of a prisoner in her own home. Her mother’s words came to her in dreams, dreams of lush lawns and brilliant days. Then the morning would come once more. Her husband’s unfaithfulness was all that saved her periodically from endless days of torture. She lived for one thing and one thing only.

On this warm October day, the wind whipped through the filthy house blowing up dust and splitting the once beautiful draperies into molding tatters. Pictures and finery had been sold or broken and the evil within the rooms permeated the air so that its acrid smell was toxic to breathe. The lord of the manor lay sprawled across the threadbare settee, whiskey bottle in hand, drool dripping off of his tangled beard. A bony dog crept silently around the house as the blowing sand hit full force. Somewhere, a door swung in the wind, chickens bobbed on the porch dodging the occasional bottle flung out of the broken door to land in a growing pile of glass on the once beautiful steps.

“Where do you think you’re going, wench?”

“Out.” Celia murmured as she threw her cape around her shoulders and hurried out, just missing being hit by a bottle and almost falling over the dog. “Don’t worry, she whispered to the cowering animal,” I’ll bring you something good to eat.”

The sneering high pitched laugh from within carried across the yard. “Oh, yeah? You don’t have anywhere to go – who would have you? You sow!”



Up the path, past the first rise, she cut back through the trees to throw anyone off the track who might follow her. She shivered under her cloak even on this day. Cold sunlight embraced her through the tall limbs and she could hear the leaves whispering their admonishments. But still she pushed further. How long had it been since she had eaten? She couldn’t remember and her boots felt loose on her feet – but no matter. And then, she rounded the crest of the hill. And there he was, her beautiful stallion, an animal that suddenly appeared one day from somewhere unknown, like a gift from God. She had hidden him here in the cave, stealing out to feed him with hay or oats that could be gathered from the overgrown fields. She loved to brush him, burying her face in his mane. And so now, the time had once again come. She would win this time, somehow, she must, she must. It was October once again and the sun was beginning its descent. Memories of long ago were clear in her mind’s eye. This is the day, she said to herself. Today.

*It was October once again and the sun was beginning its descent. Memories of long ago were clear in her mind's eye. This is the day, she said to herself. Today.*

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They waited, she and her beautiful black horse waited there in the trees as the wind blew the dust, and the sun willing gave up with a sigh as it cast long shadows in the glen. And then the moment arrived. The young bride all in white on her white horse galloped by and NOW! Shouting at first and then crying out, Celia called, “Stopppppp, stoppppp, Celiaaa before its too late. Come back! Stoppppp. Listen to meeee. Stop! Stop! Danger! Dangerrrrrrrrrr!” Closer and closer she closed the gap, reaching out to grasp the cloak of the young girl – almost, almost.....And then suddenly, the white horse and the young rider, with a spurt of power, moved out of range and over the bridge and they were gone. “No! She screamed, tearing her hair and digging her nails into her bony arms. “No, I will die.” Her wail pierced the air sending flocks of birds rising in hysteria from the trees. Her horse, tired and spent turned back carrying his rider sobbing, a heart broken. It only took a moment.

The moment, how clear it appears, yet elusively remains just out of reach - impossible to retrieve. That moment in time – that moment – if only we could touch it, we would change it somehow. But it only comes once and then forever repeats and replays in our dreams. So, take warning, your future may come back to haunt you. If you listen carefully, one cold, dark night, you may hear the wail of the banshee and the high pitched whinny of the black horse. If you do take heed, they may be coming for YOU.....heh, heh, heh.....

*pleasant dreams.*

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FROM THE AUTHOR

This story is my version of a Twilight Zone episode that I saw as a girl and then used it to scare you when you were kids just as it had scared me. Hope you like it.

*Happy Halloween*

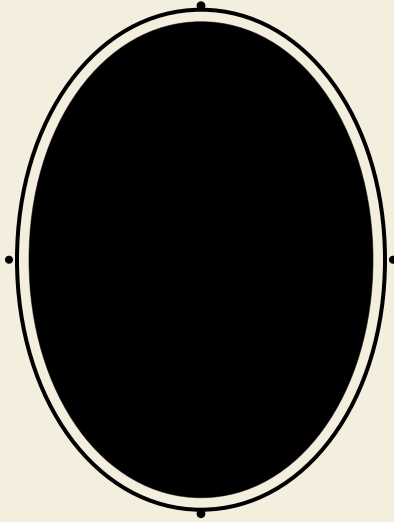
*Love you*

*Mom*

# THE GHOST

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, October 2007*



One warm day I found myself strolling along a narrow winding path over hills and dales ablaze with brilliant autumn foliage. I had longed for this journey for some time and I felt the exhilaration that just being here made me feel. My destination was the Beta Phi Gamma house and I had come a long way. Tonight was a special night - it was Founder's day and it always fell on homecoming week-end. So many times I had thought of this place and of those golden times when I was young and innocent and so sure of myself. Today, I thought back to those days in my sorority house and the girls, my "sisters" with their dewy faces and starry eyes when everything

seemed possible. I couldn't help but wonder if life turned out like they hoped. Where did their lives take them? What did they encounter on their journeys? But there they were, clustered in my mind's eye sharply focused like a snapshot in time, always the same in a place where time stands still.

Over time, my memories seemed to always come back to this spot on the earth. The sounds of high pitched laughter and girlish squealing came back as I recalled those wonderful crazy days. I had come to State U. from my home town, a small farming community in Alabama. We were a sturdy stock, my family and I. Men worked hard in the field, women worked hard in the home. The golden rule of our days was: Good things only come with sacrifice and hard work. I was in tune with this – it was the chorus to my beating heart. I have clung to this to propel me forward when I have really felt like sliding. Back then, out of all of my brothers and sisters, I was the one designated to go out into the world. It was not a hope or a request – it was expected – like a rule sent down from God. It was like the elders had convened to decide just what to do with Ann taking into account that I had always been bookish. I had loved the world of school so much that the teachers always had to shoo me home at the end of the day. I was awkward in the kitchen, at the quilt frame, and on the tractor. So my fate was decided. And oddly enough, for the first time in my life, I felt like maybe I was really valuable as a human being and for that my wishes were coming true. I was going to college! And I was going to be a teacher! It was truly a miracle.

My mom and dad proudly sent me to this small college town to take classes at the university. In my family, this was verging on the bizarre since we did not have much money and all the girls in my family usually married right out of high school to their high school sweetheart and had babies. The cycle of life repeated. And none of the girls from my town were ever sent to

college – only their brothers were. And they were contented with that. They all looked at me with puzzlement. Why on earth would I want to put off marriage for school? In my own mind, I knew why I had been given this chance. It was no secret that there were three big reasons why I was sent to college: First of all, if I couldn't do the work of the farm, then I had to find another way to pull my share. This could be accomplished in college by getting a degree or by marrying an educated man. I would then come back home and help support the family. Secondly, I couldn't do anything else well so no well-respected man would probably want me and thirdly, and the trump card: I would be taken away from Jack – my sweetheart and in their minds – not a well-respected man. To say that they didn't like him was putting it mildly. He was despised by my family. Always in trouble, he was daring and arrogant and I loved him. To them, he was too old, too wild, too lazy, and too poor. When he first started coming to call, I couldn't believe that he really liked me – he was handsome and I was plain. He was full of adventure and I was – well, bookish. He didn't seem to care that I couldn't bake an apple pie. He said back then, and I can still hear him in my head saying, "I like a strong woman!" Those words would come back to haunt me.

The big day arrived. My family and friends gathered at the station to give me a send off. Their faces stick in my memory so clearly. They were so hopeful - no – much more than that – expectant. Farming was hard and sometimes it barely brought in enough cash to cover. I was their hope. I suspected that I was not as good as they thought I was. It crossed my mind as they stood looking out of the train window that maybe I was a fraud and then just as quickly I made a promise - I would try to be that good – no I would BE that good! They were counting on me. Just the thought of this sent a shiver down my spine. I watched them slowly get smaller and smaller and then disappear from sight down the tracks. I was scared to death on

that day but deliriously happy. Here I was, I thought– on my own, leaving my town, my home and all of those things that were safe that I loved. I was going to a new place – should I be afraid? I was determined to make it up to them for this wonderful chance. Was I up to it? And then there was the Jack issue. Already I was ignoring that little voice in my head – the one that says, beware. Maybe ..... If he could just try a little harder, maybe.....?

University life was a perfect fit for me. I loved school – reading books, doing projects, living in the library as long as I wanted – nobody to tell me how unhealthy this was like they did at home – going to games, staying up late. It was like being released from a cocoon– oh happy days! School started with a crack that fall as though someone had shot off a gun. I joined the throngs of students pushing through the campus. It was never strolling like I’m doing now – it was actually pushing forward. We had things to find out – and we were in a hurry in those days.

This day I felt that old buzz stir within me again – the need to hurry, hurry – it was still there after all of these years. Other travelers on this path seemed heading in the same direction. I could hear bits and pieces of their conversations as they passed me. I was startled to hear their excited chatter about something that was about to happen. I followed close behind a couple of walkers, straining to hear their words because one word carried through the air from the passerbys to me. They were talking about a ghost. My ears perked up. Had I heard right? At first, I thought I had misunderstood. The couple ahead of me, oblivious to my eavesdropping, talked excitedly about the anniversary of the ghost who would appear at midnight – and shocking to me – the ghost was supposed to appear at my old sorority house - the Beta Phi Gamma house!! They spoke of a legend that this ghost appeared every 25 years and hoards of people always arrived on this anniversary to stand outside the front entrance and watch for the

apparition. The ghost had been appearing one of them said, for 100 years and in fact, tonight was the 100-year anniversary. They said they were expecting many people to arrive for the midnight appearance of this ghostly visitor. Hey, I mused to myself, I chose the “right” Founders day anniversary to make this journey. I tried to remember if we celebrated a ghost and I couldn’t remember anything like this happening in my time.

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*The ghost was supposed to appear at my old sorority house — the Beta Phi Gamma house. They spoke of a legend that this ghost appeared every 25 years.*

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Sorority rush came that first fall and I was in it as you might have already guessed! I don’t know why I signed up, it was so unlike me. And then, I was so surprised when they took me! But it was expensive. I got a job down at the jeweler’s shop on the square so that I could pay my sorority dues and to save up for my wedding to Jack. This was my secret for now. Working while going to school bothered my parents. They couldn’t understand why I needed more money than they sent.

“Ann,” they asked, “How are you going to do your homework and still work? How are you going to go out and meet people (meaning rich college men of course).” But honestly? If my mom had known that I had to work in order to be in the sorority, she would have first been shocked that her money wasn’t enough and then she would have encouraged me to do it. I know in her heart of hearts, she loved it – my being a “sorority girl” - absolutely loved it. I can just hear her now dropping the Beta Phi Gamma nugget at church socials and neighborhood get-togethers with a sideways glance to see how the other ladies were taking this giant leap that her

daughter had taken into society. And although my parents thought they were sending me a healthy allowance, it was still way below what other students got from home. I couldn't make it without working. It was hard to make them feel good about their money and still live the life that they believed they were adequately providing for. I was always stuck in the middle trying to make them happy and having the life that I loved. And I so wanted to make it. I wanted it all – be a teacher, be the savior for my family, be a sorority girl and live for once – and marry Jack.

The girls of Beta Phi folded me into all of the secret rituals of the house. Things were so different than I was used to. For example, we had to dress up and wear girdles to meetings. I was small and didn't need one but the proctor would stand at the gate to the meeting room and snap the girdles through the member's clothing. If nothing snapped, you were in trouble so I wore one although it always slid down. Then there was the ritual and oaths in which one and all we chanted the words. We were sisters. Forever. I was one of "them." One of the most important rituals was the one in which all of the sisters sat in a circle in the candlelight chanting softly. A single red rose was passed around the circle. One of the girls had a secret and when the rose came to her, she held it to her heart signifying that she was engaged. Instantly, all of the candles were blown out except the one held by the lucky girl. Then there were screeches and tears and everyone rejoiced, hugging her and placing her in the center of the circle. I remember lying under the eaves in my small room in the boarding house dreaming of the time when I could make that important announcement about me and Jack. I could see the good in him, why couldn't my mom and dad? I was stuck in the middle. But I had made my decision. I knew what fun was now. I was riding on a magic carpet. I could have it all.



Noises jerked me back to the present. The town seemed to inhale me and here I was back in Middleberg. I found myself walking down the narrow street where my boarding house still stood. It was one of those warm autumn days when the heat is neither stifling nor cold but rather hollow – you know - empty somehow. The sounds of the day drifted over me. The combinations of the sunshine, the changing colors of foliage and the feeling of the warm air at once lulled me into a pocket of endless moments where time stands still and at the same time sharpened my senses so that every sound became acute – the pecking of the wood pecker nearby, the sound of water sprinklers on the lawns across the winding street, the brush of the newspaper as it blew by me on the breeze.

The sight of my old neighborhood brought back memories of those days of dashing back to my apartment on my bicycle after class, climbing the old wooden stairs behind the house to my small room in the attic. There it was – my boarding house – it stood silently , mums in bloom, broken stairs on the porch waiting for the current occupants to slide across the lawn in the groove carved out in the lawn by the feet of those students. The groove was still there. Tiny details of the past flooded me and I was so happy to be here in this time, in this space. I had lived in the dorm which was really just a big old house during the first semester and then because of my parents dwindling finances, I had moved into this boarding house. But I didn't mind. My pay at the jewelry store kept the wolf away. I was proving that I could make it and have it all.

Leaving the cool canopy of trees on my street, I came into the town square and wandered into a small pub. The news stand on the corner heralded the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “ghost” and shop windows carried mannequins dressed up in ghostly garb with ghoulish souvenirs spread around. Outside the pub, the town was bright and busy but inside the pub, the smoky room was cool. I seated myself in a dark corner, squinting at the sunlight coming in the doorway up front. As I sat there in the corner, I listened to the customers in lively conversation talking about their own experiences or the experiences of others of seeing the ghost. The talk bounced around the room from table to table, from one to the other. At the stroke of midnight, they said, the ghost (this word was always said in a loud whisper) appeared at the Beta Phi Gamma house.

I pictured the house. There was the meeting room, the kitchen, the parlor, the conservatory, the house mother’s room – where did the ghost appear? Was this just a made-up story? And then it hit me with a jolt. I get it! This was just a sorority trick to raise money for all of their parties and socials. We Beta Phis and every other house on campus had been doing this since the first founder’s day, I would bet. There was no ghost – there never had been. I would have known about it. This is a stunt made up by a bunch of crazy girls. Well, good for them, I thought with a chuckle. Suddenly, I was excited again. I made up my mind: I would even get there early and help out, I hadn’t planned on staying after the Founder’s day dinner but I changed my mind. This time, I would stay late just to see how they pulled it off.

Mid afternoon arrived and the homecoming parade winded its way down Main street on its way to the football stadium. Game day was always exciting. At home as a child, my siblings and I usually had to work when our high school had a game, but once I had arrived here, things had been

different. Here, I was a part of something. I got to be one of the crowd instead of always being an observer. The band struck a chord and suddenly I was engulfed in the crowded bleachers watching the players on the green grass play out their game of football. I looked around me for someone I knew but nobody looked familiar. Today, I was again, just an observer. Homecoming had arrived here at State in this sleepy town nestled in the rolling hills of Alabama. I had come again after all of these years to soak up this world of my youth when everything was good and new. Oh, to go back there in time. But of course I can - on the wings of my mind!

I remember the time that Jack came to the game and we stole back to my room where the roar of the crowd was blocks away. He was warm and smelled slightly of sweat. I remember looking deep into his blue eyes and thinking that if I never breathed another breath, I would be happy for eternity.

Those were the best days of my life. I remember the night that I held the rose in the circle when all the candles went out except mine. My parents had finally given in when they saw that I was determined and had given us a wedding in the church. I used my money from my job at the jewelry store to buy my own ring. But I didn't care, Jack would make it up to me. The wedding was small but so perfect. My Beta Phi sisters were all there. They sang a chorus while Jack and I danced. I was in love and love was good....I thought. Jack and me - we went off to live our lives waving a hand at my worried parents. I tried not to feel guilty for my deception of using their money for my prized education but marrying the man that they hated anyway. It was time for me to stop being in the middle, I thought. They will see. I will pay them back and who knows? They may see how wonderful a man he really is.

*I remember the night I held the rose in the circle when all the candles went out except mine.*

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At first, I didn't mind working while he "looked" for a job. After all I was a college graduate and teaching school was a good living for a woman plus it was my dream come true. I even worked extra duty on the playground and in the lunch room to give us the life that we wanted to live. Sometimes Jack would get a job on the rails and I wouldn't see him for awhile. Babies came and diapers on the line. I had to give up my job, but only for awhile, I thought. I stayed home with the kids and took in ironing to make ends meet. There was nobody to watch the kids but me. And now I needed him to have a steady job – sometimes he did but most times – not. Jack never worried. He would take my face into his hands and tell me he loved me and then I knew by morning he would be gone and I would be left to try to survive. I longed to go home to mom but I knew what she would say and so I just kept quiet. And besides when he came home, life was good – sort of. The kids didn't care that we were poor, they loved him so. I loved him still, but.....this wasn't the life I had dreamed about. I sold my wedding ring to pay the rent. I was stuck in the middle.

I knew that I should have listened to my conscience instead of my heart. Someday, someday, I'm going back to the Beta Phi Gamma house and I'm going to tell my story to my little sisters, I would think as I sat on the porch rocking my babies and watching the train go by. The passengers waved out of their windows at us on their way somewhere. Love is funny, it can trick you, I would warn. Loving someone can be a hook. Beware! Love can be brutal. It can put you in the middle and you can't get out, I will tell them.



The game was over, State won, the queen was crowned and I threaded my way through the crowd to the Founder's Day Dinner at the Beta Phi Gamma house. Soon, I left the lights of the stadium behind. Everything looked different to me in the dark and after a few wrong turns, I found myself on Sorority Row. I was going back! I couldn't wait to go back to where I had belonged, where I was not been an observer but one of the group. They had accepted me exactly how I was. Those days in the house, with friends all around and the doors of the college opened to me was the beginning of me. I had a ticket to my future and all I had to do was follow the rules that I was born with: Good things only come with sacrifice and hard work. Sacrifice – that was the key. I had always thought that if I could only go back in time, I would heed those words. And I was on my way to that place this night. I was almost there. I was so happy, I thought I would burst.

But when I arrived, I was surprised to see that already the crowds were forming around the small white house waiting for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ghost. What had happened to the time? Hurry, hurry. I must get inside for the starting ritual of the Founder's Day dinner. I tried to push myself through to the front door but was turned away by a policeman who waved the crowd back. I dropped back through those who stood waiting and made my way silently around to the back of the house. The door stood ajar and the house was darkened. I slipped through the crack and into the kitchen and by the light of the moon shining through the windows I crept through the back hallway towards the front of the house.

Muffled laughter and whispering voices came from the meeting room. The opening ritual was just starting. Hurry, hurry. I knew that the girls were in the circle – I was just in time, I thought. I tried to find a robe to slip on over my coat so that I could enter the room, but in the dark, I could not see one as I dug through the robe closet in the foyer. I heard the campus clock begin to strike the hour. Just then, I heard the slightest intake of breath behind me and when I turned around, I looked straight into the eyes of the proctor as she held her candle up to her face. And then the scream started – first from deep in her throat – then from the room behind her, and as the front door blew open the screams came in waves from the crowd.

And then I knew. Once again, in my journey through the ages to that threshold of hope and promise, I had been blocked by the specter of time. One chance – that was all I would ever get. The moment of decision only comes once to a life. Beware to those souls who are not brave enough to stand up to the task. For now, in my horror, I know.....that.....

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*The moment of decision only comes once to a life.  
Beware to those souls who are not brave enough to  
stand up to the task.*

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*.....I am the ghost.*

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FROM THE AUTHOR

This is my own version of a classic.

*Happy Halloween*

*I love you*

*Mom*

# LADIES' NIGHT

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, October 2015*

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

*October 24, 2015*

*Hi Everybody –*

*Once again, I have written a Halloween story and I hope you like it. I would like to introduce you to Maggie O'Malley. I have been working with this character for a long time and so I am putting her out there so you can check her out and see what you think. To give you some background, she is a psychologist, family therapist, drug counselor who lives in a small Midwestern town, has 7 children, two sons-in-law and three daughters-in-law all of whom are experts in different fields and who help her solve crimes. –She is a professor at a small community college, and so is her man friend. She has another office for her practice and lives on a busy street in an old two-story house surrounded by big trees. Oh and she loves to cook, garden, quilt and she's crazy about her grandchildren. She has a couple of kooky friends and two Bichons. This idea just sort of came to me from out of the blue – don't ask me how – I'm just creative that way.*

*I am also introducing her family. If you happen to recognize someone like yourself and would like a different name – let me know. Alan chose his. If you don't want to be in my stories – not happening! It's a price to pay.*

*Okay – see what you think.*

*I love you*

*Mom*



Racing through the stormy night, I couldn't help but snip at myself for once again giving in. I'm such a sucker, I thought. I rounded the corner, splashed through the parking lot with my wind shield wipers swishing away on the highest mark, swerved into the only parking place in the middle of the lot and slammed on my brakes. Grabbing my brief case and umbrella, I made a mad dash for the building. Wilcox Hall was lit up – evening classes at Western Plains Community College were already in session and I was late, late, late – and I hate being late.

My name is Maggie O'Malley, PHD and I was on my way that night to step in for my old friend and colleague, Karen Higgins, in her Abnormal Psychology class. She had called about 30 minutes before and gasped out something that sounded like “Mag – Could you please take over my class tonight? I've come down with something – it just hit me like a load of coal and..... I heard the sound of the receiver hitting the floor and her footsteps running across her kitchen floor as she called out, “It's in the basement of Wilcox Hall,” and then the sound of retching.

Oh Dear! I was just settling down on my cozy pillow top bed to watch a Masterpiece Mystery. But okay, okay.... The clock on the top of the dresser read 6:50 – 10 minutes to get there. Yowza! I stepped back into my clothes from the day's work, checked myself out in the mirror – Oh good, I haven't washed off my make up yet, locked my two little Bichons in the kitchen with their pillow beds and dog munchies and sped the 18 blocks through the streets of Windy Hollow around the corner on two wheels to the college campus and well.....

Wilcox Hall is the oldest building on this campus dating back to the 1920's and it's pretty much in the middle of the small Kansas town that I live in. I have been a psychology instructor here for the past 20 years. I am also a therapist with a small private practice Psychological and Family Therapy Center. I keep telling myself that I'll stop when it's no longer satisfying and fun and I haven't hit that mark yet – after tonight I might reconsider. But, I don't teach at night anymore – that's out! Well, except when something like this happens.

The students were all sitting at long tables arranged in a horseshoe facing the door and all eyes looked me over with curious eyes as I came dashing through the door, shaking off the raindrops that had managed to get through my umbrella and soak me down. And the room was crowded – so many students – and so stuffy! “Well, well, well,” I said, “It looks like it is ‘Ladies’s night,’” I said. All women – the class was made up totally of females. Everyone laughed breaking the silent moment.

“Dr. Higgins has taken ill,” I explained, “ and I will be stepping in for her tonight. But I’m sure she will be back next week. I am Dr. O’Malley but my students call me Dr. O. “Why don’t you all tell me who you are everybody?,” I asked. The dam of silence was broken and everybody started talking at once.

“We’re twins – I’m Rosemary and she’s Sage,” Two willowy blond girls on the right with pink faces started the introductions. They took charge like the MC’s of a variety show pointing out all of the special information about the other students much to the enjoyment of all present except a small girl named Lacy who was slumped down under her hoody glaring out at the room.

“Okay - That’s Lyndsey,” and they nodded toward a large robust girl in the back.

“That’s me,” she said, in a low voice. “I’m pretty much what you see is what you get. I speak my mind and don’t put up with any shil.....oot.” Laughter around the room.

“I’m Lillian,” said a slim girl in a white shirt, black horn rimmed glasses with her brown straight hair pulled back in a slender pony tail. “I’m a business major and I’m just taking this class to finish my credits. I’m going to graduate this year and go to state.”

The class seemed to pause to soak that in and then off they went.

“I’m the grandmother of the group, said a cheerful voice in the back. A plump smiling lady with curly white hair held up her knitting needles covered in blue yarn. “If it bothers you, nodding to her knitting, “I won’t do it but I can’t promise what mood I’ll be in, she said with a twinkle. Laughter all around.

“Looks like good therapy, ” I said with a nod of approval.

“She has a day care and I’m thinking about taking my Robert over there. He’s a handful,” Masie added.

“Agnes appointed herself the class mother last week,” said one of the twins.

“That’s right. I’ll look over you. I’ll never let you down – that’s for sure.” She said settling back with her needles clicking.

“Somebody better,” the words came from a girl sprawled in her chair with a baseball cap perched backwards on her head. “My mom says I’m nuthin’ but trouble. Hi ya doc, I’m Tess and I play soccer and wrangle horses so don’t mind me if I have an ‘aroma’ if ya know what I mean.” And she swung her hat and around and tipped it at me.

It was an interesting bunch of gals. There was Annabelle with blond hair and big blue eyes. She spoke in a small squeaky little girl voice. Evelyn was a 40ish woman with a short light brown bob and everything on her was beige. She described herself as a boring Midwestern housewife. One girl hung back. She introduced herself as McKenzie and that was all she said. Her hair hung almost to her waist with beautiful blondish red curls. It was pulled back with a light rose colored ribbon.

“So what is this? I said. “Your 2nd or 3rd week?” Somebody said ‘3rd’ and after asking where they were in the book, I sat down at the bottom of the horseshoe and began. How many times have I taught this course – a zillion? At least. I know it like the back of my hand. But it’s the kind of course that changes each time according to the students in the class because they always bring their own stories with them. I looked around the table – most could be said to be early to mid-twenties with a sprinkling of 19 or 20 year olds and a couple of older women in the back. Evening classes are usually like this with working adults and retired people coming back to school for a change - mixing in with those younger students who couldn’t get a place in a daytime class.

The first hour sped by. Tonight’s topic from Karen’s lesson plans were on the topic of the psychological disciplines and career opportunities. It wasn’t the most exciting topic but these women seemed ready to discuss. This was going to be a good evening – I like it when there is a lot of class

interaction and boy was there ever tonight. The rain beat down on the basement windows and thunder rumbled overhead but the ladies in Ab Psych competed with each other to tell their stories and once in a while I got a word in edgewise. The subject veered off to the use of psychotropic meds and everybody got into the game - those who thought they were great and those who thought they were mind control.

“I couldn’t have made it without Prozac, McKenzie said in a soft voice.

“What do you think about testosterone injections? Does it change your personality? My husband is .....a beast!” Evelyn said.

“I say the more testosterone, the better,” spoke up Annabelle with a giggle.

“I say, we change the subject, shall we?” this coming from Lillian. “The world would be better off if we just had sperm banks!”

“Okay, let’s get back on topic,” I interrupted. “Testosterone is not a psycho trop.”

Agnes stepped up with a nod to me, “Natural medicine is the only way. I think they give you meds just to shut you up. I don’t trust them. I believe in the old home remedies that my grandma used,” Agnes added.

Wow! We had gotten way off of the subject of careers in psychology – always happens in Ab Psych. “Break Everybody!” I said as I pushed back my chair and stood up. Everybody filed out and clustered together out in the

hall. I could hear their voices chattering as I headed down to the restroom. Sitting there in the stall, I couldn't help but hear two voices standing on the other side of the door discussing me.

“So, what do you think about Dr. O?”

“I like her better than Dr. H – She actually practices abnormal psych. She's gotta know what she's doin.” Another voice replied.

“Do you think she will figure us out?”

“What, that you're crazy?” Loud laughter and before I could open the stall door, their voices were already down the hall. A masculine voice in the Ladies' Room?

Everybody filtered back into the classroom. I was going to listen for those voices that I heard in the restroom– not that it made any difference just curious – “figure us out?” Isn't that what she/he said?

BOOM! Lightning struck something close by and the lights went out – total darkness in this basement room. A moment of silence and then somebody screamed and there was yelling and more screaming and it got louder – now it was mixed with yelling. Just then the lights popped back on.

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*BOOM! Lightning struck something close by —  
and the lights went out. Total darkness in this  
rickety old building, and right in the middle was a  
snake somewhere.*

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“There’s a snake in here! I felt it! It’s HUGE!” More screaming and yelling and then all of us were standing on the tables. Tess looked over at me and said sheepishly,

“I don’t do snakes, I do horses.” Somebody yelled, “It’s over there!” And then all screaming stopped and everybody’s eyes turned to look. A small voice could be heard from under the table. First her huge round blue eyes and mop of white blond curls and then her Kupe doll heart shaped lips and then Annabel’s head popped up – and then her shoulders but wrapped around them was a huge snake. More screaming. I got a grip and stopped screaming long enough to shush everyone else down.

“Sorry about that,” she said in a quiet voice. “She got out of her bag.”

I wanted to say “DON’T EVER BRING AN ANIMAL BACK INTO THIS SCHOOL, EVER! DO YOU HEAR ME?” But nothing came out of my mouth. Annabelle and her snake hurried out. I got my voice back, got down off of the table and called security.

Like a fire cracker going off, everybody started talking at once – louder than usual. Nervous laughter as women took their seats and I could hear some of them leaving behind me as some hurried out of the door. Fear was electrical, voices were a decibel above normal and spindles of nervous laughter sparked around the tables. I could feel my heart calming down whether from fear or anger, I couldn’t tell – probably both. I suggested that we call the class for the evening but everybody had calmed down and taken their seats.

“I have a babysitter tonight, Peggy said, a young woman in the back, “and I can’t go home yet – it’s my night out!”.

“ She and her snake are gone – we might as well stay.” Ellen said in a calm level voice. Everybody nodded their heads in agreement.

The rain continued to beat on the windows and we soldiered on. The conversation turned to fears - primarily snakes and spiders, heights, and close spaces – and the chatter took off again - while the lights continued to blink off and on and the minutes ticked by. Not the topic, (sorry about that Karen) but very therapeutic for these students and myself too. Rosemary said that she was afraid of the dark and Sage gave a shiver. “Me too.” Lillian was afraid of failure, Lyndsey had a fear of clowns and so the last hour sped by.

Thunder rolled and then it was time to go and so I brought the class to an end. The women started to gather their things and filter out into the quiet hallway as I too got ready to go. As they left, some of them murmured that they hoped to see me again and also that they hoped Dr. Higgins would get well. Some of them mentioned again how exciting the snake incident was. (Too exciting, I thought to myself). Then they were gone out the door and down the hall. Gathering up my notes, I dialed security again and left a message this time on their voice mail before going out into the empty hallway and making my way up the stairs to the outside door. On second thought, I turned and went the short distance down the hallway to my school office to make sure everything was ready for class in the morning. Minutes later, I was out the door – with visions of Masterpiece Theatre waiting for me in my cozy bedroom under my quilt.



By the time I got out to the parking lot, it was almost empty. It was still pouring outside and my car was barely visible way out in the back of the lot. As I splashed my way out towards my car, I heard a voice calling my name from one of the remaining cars. The window was cracked and a face peered out at me getting wet. “Dr. O!” This time with more urgency.

I turned and looked back towards the sound. “It’s McKenzie from your class,” the voice said. “Can I speak to you for a minute?” Her eyes blinked in the rain.

Are you kidding me? No way! I thought. “What is it McKenzie?” I said trying not to sound annoyed.

“Get in the car please,” she said in a whisper.

I hesitated and then made a decision and walked around and slid into the passenger side and closed the door.

“I am afraid,” she whispered. “I got scared in the class and I’m sorry but I had to go. I couldn’t be there!” And she began sobbing.

“I don’t blame you..” I reached over and patted her hand.. “That snake was shocking.. It may take a while for you – for all of us .....,” I began.

“No! I mean I’m afraid of ... I think there’s someone evil in.....”

At that moment, someone knocked on her window and a voice interrupted “Everything alright? I saw your car and thought I’d better check. Do you need help” Agnes pressed her sweet face against the window.

I looked at McKenzie and added: “Do you need help?”

“No, no!” she said in a shrill voice. “Nothing’s wrong! You don’t believe me! I don’t need help from anybody!” And she closed the window abruptly on Agnes and turned to me. “Go Good bye Dr. O!” and pointed at the door.

I had barely stepped out of her car when she peeled away even before the door slammed shut. I could hear her tires as they squealed out of the parking lot. A chill went over me. What was she about to say? Clearly she was frightened but was it of the snake? I shivered from head to toe and hurried to my car, threw my bag in the back seat and jumped int. Home!! Yippy. I started my car. A pickup pulled out ahead of me – must be Agnes, I thought. Nice of her to come back and check. Another car pulled out right in front of me, a champagne colored sedan.

My house is on a busy street and sits back away from the curb with big trees in the front yard. I couldn’t wait to get home, take a hot bath and have a glass of wine and turn on.... As I got closer to me end of the block, I saw that cars were swerving around something in the street. There in front of my driveway was a little white pile of fur lying in the street with rain pounding on it it.. I slammed on the brakes and leaped out. Oh My God! Poppy was on her side on pavement - lying there so still. I squatted down and touched her and she turned her head and then collapsed back down. She wasn’t dead! But she was so bloody – she had been hit by a car! What’s she doing OUT HERE? My dogs are never outside. They have no idea about traffic. So how did this happen? I grabbed my raincoat and bundled her up in it and started hurrying tor the house bent over to protect her from the driving rain. But when I got to the back storm door - it was swinging in the wind and the door itself was wide open.. My mind went blank. I

couldn't seem to wrap my mind around it. .Who.....? How.....? I always lock up everything before leaving the house. I remembered locking my phone in the house that morning and then finding it in my purse – but the door was locked! I had to go back to the car and get my keys... I live alone – I even have timers on lamps all over the house upstairs and down so that it will be lit up when I get home at night. I put Poppy carefully down on her pillow and ran around the house – the gate was open and so was the kitchen door and now I started screaming for Sophie – nothing but the sound of the rain. Poppy turned her sad eyes towards me as I did a quick bone check. It didn't feel like anything was broken – but there was lots of blood. “How did you get out of the house, little one,” I whispered to her.

My car! It was still sitting out in the street! My mind was fried. I pulled it into the garage and called “Sophie! Sophie! Into the rain and wind before heading back into the back kitchen door – and that's when I heard yipping coming from the small closet on the basement stairway.. As soon as I opened the door Sophie came bouncing out. I started to look around. Pots of flowers were turned over on the wooden floor in my living room beside the French doors to the back yard and that door was standing open too. That made three doors and a gate were standing open – Like an idiot I began to look around at all of the obvious things - but nothing seemed to be missing. Not the laptop, not the flat screen TV's, not the money lying on the dining room table – nothing. And then I suddenly stopped in my tracks! What am I doing? Somebody's been here and what if they are still here? My brain caught up. I called 911 and waited for them on the back porch..

As I climbed into my bed later that night and turned off the light, all I could think of was that the young policeman, Officer Stanton, who came to my door to make a report seemed to think that it had been me rushing out

of the house, leaving the doors and gates open and just a case of me overlooking things. Really? Then doubt started creeping in. Would I do something like that and not even remember? I started to wonder. But what about Poppy getting out of the kitchen, the back door with the hook was open, and the gate on the dog patio with the latch that's hard to open was open and what about Sophie being locked in the broom closet? I turned the light back on. And then I fell asleep. Weird dreams taunted me all night – I kept hearing the ladies screaming and that huge snake and a siren going off then I then woke up and the phone was ringing off its hook.

Fumbling for the phone, I knocked over a few things before I finally got it to my ear. Janice Taylor, the Dean's secretary seemed to be screaming in my ear. "Did you hear me Maggie???" She sounded upset. "I said, Karen-was-POISONED and they don't know whether or not she's going to live!" I looked at the clock -6:00 am.

"How?" It seemed to be the only coherent thing I could push forth through the clouds that were just now parting out of my brain.

But Janice was galloping on. From what I could gather, emergency dispatch had received a call with nobody on the other end. They traced it to Karen's house and found her on the floor in her bathroom.

"Who?" Another one of my amazing contributions.

"Who – what?," Janice demanded.

"Who was the mystery caller?"

“They are checking now trying to find out. The police called me instead of the Dean since it was so late and since you are her best friend, I knew you would like to know.” Click. Silence. Then a loud blast from the phone again.

“Hello.”

“You better plan on teaching her Ab classes Maggie.” Click. I waited. Silence.

I dialed the hospital but they could not give out any information. I was too shook up to go back to sleep so I went down to the kitchen and checked on the fluff balls as Poppy and Sophie are lovingly called. – Poppy’s side was still seeping and she was lying on her side crying her dog cry very softly. The vet clinic opened at 8:00. I settled Sophie in the kitchen with her food and opened the door with pet door into the back yard, closed the door on the side of the garage and carried Poppy out to the car. Sophie was not used to be left alone without Poppy and she started crying the minute that I closed her in without her buddy. I could hear her yelping as I placed Poppy in the car and closed the door.

Maybe I DID leave the doors open accidentally. Maybe the door just closed on Sophie somehow in the broom closet. With these thoughts in my head, and a big mocha latte and Poppy on a pillow in the passenger seat, I made a flying dash the 20 miles to the vet in the town north of us, McCormick. The sun was shining out on this beautiful October day in Kansas. All thoughts of storms, and snakes, and intruders began to fade. I left her in the able hands of Dr. Bob Foster and his staff and took off for school and my first class.

At break, I called the hospital again to check on Karen. “Are you a relative dear?”

“No, I said, “but I am her best friend.”

“Just a moment and I will let you talk to her nurse.”

Karen wasn't doing so well. They were having trouble identifying the poison that was in her body. I assured them that she would never try to kill herself. For some reason they didn't question me on this point. I left my number so that they could keep me posted. They said they would. I checked with security about the snake but they didn't seem too concerned about it and had not received any complaints yet. Serious?

A call from the vet confirmed that Poppy had been hit by a car and also that she escaped without any broken bones. But she was very bruised and cut and also that she could go home. I had just enough time to drive the round trip to the vet and get back in time for my first client.

“Dr. Foster would like to talk to you Maggie,” Ginger looked up to greet me as I walked into the clinic. She had been there as long as I had been coming and always had a friendly face for everyone who came by. She showed me back to one of the clinic rooms and it wasn't long before Dr. Bob walked in carrying Poppy.

“She took a pretty good beating under the car that hit her and she's going to be pretty sore. But when we cleaned her cuts and scrapes we found something odd on her belly. It looks like a”.....pulling back the fur.....”she's either gotten bit by a spider or gotten scraped with something

pretty fierce – it’s already swelling up. Good thing it wasn’t a deep puncture or it could have been deadly.” There on her pink belly skin were three little holes.

As I was about to go, I said, “It’s not a snake bite, is it?” Then I told them about the student and her snake. Ginger and Dr. Bob stopped short. Four sets of eyes shot glances at each other. “What does she look like? Blond hair/blue eyes? Long black hair/brown eyes? Red braids/freckles?”

“Funny question guys. I said with a laugh. “This student is a blond with blue eyes,”

“Don’t be too sure of that, You may be looking at the ‘Snake Lady.’ She changes her look like a snake changes its skin. And she always drags that boa constrictor around everywhere she goes in a big carpet bag. Everybody is always on the lookout around here for her. Her dad pretty much owns the county or she would have been locked up years ago. A real whack job! I hope it’s not her. She’s trouble! Hey but the holes in Poppy’s belly are too small for a snake that big if that’s what’s worrying you. It looks like a brown recluse may have taken a small bit out of her.”



I was still thinking this over when I pulled into my driveway 20 minutes later. I carried Poppy and hurried in the back door. But I stopped short. Sophie was no longer in the kitchen where I had penned her up. She was waiting for me on the other side of the door –in the family room. And she was definitely penned up. The door was shut into the dining room. I

went back outside and walked slowly around the fence and sure enough - the back gate was open again. And another weird thing - The little TV in the kitchen was playing loudly and the water was running hard from the faucet in the sink. What was going on?? “Is this my fault too Mr. Cop?” I said under my breath. My cell phone started ringing.

“Dr. O’Malley?”

“Yes.”

“This is Norah Nelson calling. Teddy, our son has tried to hang himself and he won’t go to a hospital. We are on our way to your office. We should be there in the next 10 minutes.”

“Wait – please take him straight to the ER!” Too late. Click. I put the dogs back in the kitchen and turned off the TV and the faucet and then closed and locked the back door. I looked at the dogs and knew that I had to go and meet with this family. I would rush to the office to meet with this family and then, if I had a break this afternoon, I would think of what to do next. Visions of a waiting room full and a boy in crisis all waiting for me made my decision for me. I would work on this problem tonight when I got home. A million things were going through my mind that day as I hurried down Main Street the 20 blocks to the office. When I got there, the clients were waiting at the door. It was a full house. Teddy and his parents never came that afternoon which was good on many levels. I was certain that he needed to be hospitalized and get medical care and I already had a full load of clients to see and it would have put me behind. At one short break between clients, I had time to turn on my answering machine. A few requests for appointments went by and the last message was the voice of a small child. “Please please save me,” she cried. “I’m all alone and my

mommy and daddy are gone. It's dark in here. Help me! Help me! They are hurting me!" Then a horrifying scream. The phone went dead. I looked on the monitor: "Private caller." I tried to redial but "...this number has been disconnected or changed...." Was this a prank? I played it again. I stared at the phone. Clients were waiting.

As I was finishing my notes after my last appointment, I tried redialing the number from the call I had received from the Nelsons about their son Teddy. I didn't know them but wanted to check and make sure they had gotten to the hospital safely. A woman's voice answered the call and answered.

"Teddy what are you talking about? Nothing's wrong here," to my question. Then she said in a low tone of voice full of suspicion, "Who are you and why do you ask?"

"I am the therapist that you called this afternoon after your son attempted suicide and I was...."

"You've got us mixed up with somebody lady. Teddy has never ever done anything like that. We didn't call you this afternoon. Who do you think you are anyway? The nerve! And with that, she slammed down the receiver." I checked my phone. I had redialed the same number. Hmmm?? What was that about?

Whoever it was, they sure got my attention today at home in the kitchen when I took their call. And then I got a chill and a possibility hit me. Grabbing my gear, I ran out to the parking lot behind my office, threw my stuff into the back seat and pulled out down the alley toward Main Street. I drove home as steady and as fast as I could - staying just the speed

limit and the thought that went through my head over and over was: “Please, please, please be all right.” Why did I leave the dogs at home? Why did I leave the dogs at home? Why did I leave the dogs at home? But to my relief, there on the porch under the porch light sat two little white dogs waiting for me. Back door – open. Back gate – open with the chain on the ground. No matter. They were safe. They were here. I sat on the step between the two fluff balls and called the cops. Officer Stanton spoke gently to me as though I had lost my marbles. “So, Dr. O, nothing seems to be missing. No locks are broken. That lock over there, pointing to the padlock on the ground, “looks like it’s been unlocked. Sure you didn’t push it shut tight enough? Are you the only one who has a key?” I nodded. “I can’t find any evidence that anybody’s in there right now but I’ll make a report. That’s all I can do. Okay, are you going to be alright?” I mumbled yes but he wasn’t listening. He was already heading to his next call. I watched him pull out and thought, “Somebody is tormenting me. Should I tell my kids about this? About then, lights swung into the driveway as a champagne colored sedan pulled in and the window rolled down.

“Are you okay? I saw the police pull out and decided to come back.” It was Evelyn from the Abnormal Psych class.

“It’s been a very busy day,” I said.

“How about I go down to the coffee shop and bring something back and we’ll sit, drink coffee and chat. I mean it. I would love to do it.”

“Thanks! I said. That would be awesome. Make mine de-caf please.” I went into the house picking stuff up along the way to the dining room. It was a spur of the moment decision but this might be just what I needed. I had only just met her less than a week ago. I reached in the frig and pulled

out the small coffee cake that I had purchased a couple of days ago at the farmer's market thinking at the time that maybe one of my kids would stop by. Perfect. And here she came carrying two big coffees and leading the way for two more people who also were carrying coffees.

“Look who I bumped into - Lyndsey at the coffee shop and Agnes was out for a walk,” she said. “They wanted to come too. Hope you don't mind.” Lyndsey and Agnes brought up the rear. I lit a couple of candles and everybody joined in around the old oak table. I put cream, sugar and honey and small dishes for the cake on a tray with forks and spoons and everybody dug in and started a pot of coffee. Only one mishap occurred when Lyndsey's large body squeezed under the table and shook everything. Everybody grabbed their coffees – everybody but me that is. Mine spilled all over the table but no matter, I ran and got a towel and Evelyn started mopping up. Agnes started to scold her about spilling but stopped when she saw how okay I was with it. Spilling is no big deal around here.

“Hey, what were the cops doing here? I saw them too like she did – pointing to Evelyn, “but hey if I had known it was you Dr. O, I would have stopped. As it was, I was heading to get a video at the coffee shop so I just kept going. Lucky I ran into her. Lyndsey, in her young way, jumped right to the chase. “How long have you lived here? I think I know your daughter Nikki. This is sweet.” And she got up and wondered into the next room checking things out. For the next hour, we all sat chatting. Evelyn said that she was in an unhappy marriage and always drove around town until she thought her husband had passed out before she went home. She just happened by my house and saw the police car pull out. Agnes described the children that she took care of in her daycare. She knitted them hats and mittens and always had her knitting handy. Lyndsey was getting over a bad

break-up and was lonely. As for me, I only told them that the dogs got out and the sheriff just brought them home. A white lie but really, what else is there to tell that makes sense?

Agnes was the first one to leave – “It’s way past my bedtime!” she said with a smile.

“I’ve got a movie to watch!” And Lyndsey was out the door.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay and help clean up?” Evelyn offered but I turned her down with a wave. “No thanks – I’ve got this. And thanks a million for everything. It was awesome.” The dishes placed in the dishwasher, the doors were checked and I headed up the stairs. Sitting on my bed, I dialed the hospital to get an update on Karen. No change.

The next morning, the newspaper reported that a college instructor had been poisoned and police were considering that it may have been an attempted murder. Murder? I couldn’t believe it. Poison – who would have wanted to hurt somebody as nice and funny as Karen?

The next day, new locks were installed all over the house and new padlocks were put on the gates. Okay whoever you are – try to get in – I dare you!! I checked back midafternoon on my trip from my school office to my practice office. The locks were still locked and Poppy and Sophie were still in the kitchen. They could still go out of their pet doors and were enjoying the autumn sunshine and the shower of maple trees falling all around. I felt good that afternoon. Karen was finally awake and showing some improvement the report was just an hour ago. I was going to run over to the hospital when I closed the office tonight and see if they would let me visit her. I felt safe that afternoon, I remember and for the first time in a

week, I wasn't worried about going home. I opened my office door and saw the blinking light on my phone. I am a one-woman office making all of my own appointments. I have an accountant to take care of business, Jackie, who has an office a couple of blocks away but other than that – it's just me. I walked across the room and pressed the button on my desk phone. But my heart jumped a beat - there she was again - the little girl calling for help. Only this time she had terror in her voice. Her voice was shrill and choking on a sob, she pleaded:

“HELP ME! WHY won't you come, Dr. O? They are hurting me!” A blood curdling scream – almost too loud for a child's and then the phone went dead. PRIVATE CALLER showed on the display. She had called me by name...I called the police. Naturally it was Officer Stanton who showed up.

“Dr. O – you are having trouble at work too?” He rolled his eyes and chuckled. I tried not to sound angry and pushed the button on the machine and let him listen to the two calls. “Okay, I'll see what I can do. It sounds like a prank to me. You must have someone who has it in for you. Any ideas?”

I shook my head. “Can't think of anyone. But if this is NOT a prank, then I am very concerned for this child. Can't you trace this call? I don't want to take a chance.”

He assured me that he would let me know what he found out and then I heard the bell jangle on my front door. First client had arrived. And my afternoon and evening had begun. The time went by sitting in the lamplight in my cozy session room as troubled people came and went. My own worries always fade away while I work whether with my students all morning or

with my clients all afternoon and evening. I am one of those lucky people who get to do what I love to do and my career choices are perfect for an older woman – very unique circumstance to be sure!

A call to the hospital told me that Karen could not have visitors but they would tell her that I had called. They were hoping to move her out of intensive care tomorrow. My house looked secure as I drove into my gravel drive. The carriage lights on the garage always were a welcoming sight to see. The light on the porch came on as I stepped up the steps and walked across to the door. There was a package by the door that had brownies from Evelyn. Perfect! Then as I opened the storm door, a note fell out and fluttered down as I made jerky attempts to capture it.

It read: “I almost died thanks to you! You will be sorry. Teddy PS Thanks for the cider.”

“

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*I almost died thanks to you: You will be sorry. —  
Teddy. P.S. Thanks for the cider.*

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The door was locked - good! I ran around to the gate – still shut tight. So how...? Cider!! It hit me. The fridge In the garage! I ran back inside the garage and worked my way beside the car back to the old refrigerator. Inside the door sat an empty gallon of cider with a note that read, “I win. You lose.” The inside of the fridge was sticky with cider.

I could hear Officer Stanton tell me (in my head) – “This is Halloween season. It’s just a prank – kinda funny really.” I didn’t call. One dose a day of Officer Stanton was more than enough. Inside Poppy and Sophie danced

around my feet waiting for their treat. I patted their fuzzy heads. Poppy's little holes in her belly were scabbed over. Dr. Bob's office had called to say that it appeared that she had gotten a some kind of a bite, just like he thought- just enough to give her a big sore. "Keep it medicated and it should take about a week to heal. Notice if she becomes dehydrated. If so, bring her back in. Have a good day," Ginger's friendly voice on the answering machine. Okay, a call tomorrow to the exterminator. No spiders allowed - I have grandchildren!

Sitting on the stool, I took another look at the note. And by the way, who is Teddy? The only Teddy I could think of was the kid that was supposed to have tried to hang himself the other day. If this is a joke, it's not funny, I thought. I am being stalked and nobody seems to believe me. Guiltily I thought about the fact that I had not called my kids before this because I hate to worry them but maybe I will in the morning. Maybe.... Maybe not... The phone rang interrupting my thoughts. "Hello," I said warily looking at the clock - after 10:00. Just the sound of breathing on the line.

The next few days brought more messages from the little girl that were progressively less terrified but now she was angry - screaming accusations at me that I was ignoring her. Officer Stanton called to tell me that the calls appeared to be coming from stolen phones. And also that they were "working on it." The week-end came and brought with it the task of transporting my beautiful plants from back yard to greenhouse. Clark (Rogers) dropped by, my colleague from school, to help me with my promise of dinner and hot tub afterwards as always. He brought the wine. Sitting there in the hot tub under an October moon with Clark sipping wine while the leaves continued to fall made me forget for a moment the snake, Teddy, little scared girl, the intruder, and the cider. The next day, on

Sunday afternoon, I took a trip to the pumpkin patch with all of grandchildren. Yippee!!! Big and little munchkins running around the patch, their laughter squealing from behind giant pumpkins and from within the corn maze. Then hamburgers on the grill at Gaga's house (me). Heaven on earth for sure.

Sitting around the chimanea later watching the fire, I mentioned some of the stuff that was going on to my kids, trying to sound pretty casual. They all jumped on it. Here's a summary of what they said with me trying to get a word in edgewise while leaving a few pertinent details out. After all, I thought, maybe Office Stanton was right and I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. No sense worrying them too much. I was to regret this.

"Somebody is watching you. Somebody who has been in your house! Oh My God!" Nicole

"You DID change the locks didn't you like I told you to?" George

"She never changes the locks!! Remember? You have called the police, right? So what did they take? Have you checked your jewelry?" Katy

"I think it's somebody just messing with her. But that's not okay with me. If you find out who's doing this mom, I mean it...." Hunter

"You better let the police decide. This is serious." Mattie

"When are you going to break down and get a security system like Sullivan and I have been telling you for years now?" Michelle.

“Why don’t we just check the house before we go? Are you okay Ma?”  
Ward

“It’s probably nothing. I think the cop is right.” Paul

“Come on I am going to make sure that everything is locked now. Did you check after we got here?” Margo

“Are Poppy and Sophie okay now?” Vanessa

I knew this would happen – they looked doubtful even though I tried to assure them that I had it covered. They all gave each other knowing glances. And then the evening was over and everybody gathered their belongings, gave the house another look, gave me a hug, bundled up the kids and off they went with a “Call if something happens mom.” And then I started picking things up and getting ready for the week. I lined up my wardrobe for the coming week in the laundry room in the basement and pressed each piece before taking my shower. Then I lined them up in the order I would need them. I am too busy to not be organized. As I stepped out and dried myself, I could hear the phone ringing upstairs. “Somebody must have left something behind,” I thought.

I missed the call but listened to my message.

“Mag, I hope you are planning on teaching Karen’s class – probably for the semester, it doesn’t look like she will be able to come back. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” It was Janice’s voice on the machine. Then another call came in. Kind of late wasn’t it? I thought.

“So...find your cider?” A rough voice said with a sneer.

That voice! “Who is this and why are you doing this?” I was instantly enraged, my heart kicked up a notch and I could hear my voice boom into the receiver.

“Who do you think it is? Are you stupid? It’s me Teddy - your worst enemy. You and your and psycho –therapist friends are going to pay for all of the damage you’ve done to all the kids out there you’ve ruined. How many are you going to mess up before someone like me stops you?” He said with a sneer. I started to speak and found that I was shocked into silence.

“Didn’t think I knew did you? “ What was he talking about? “I know all about you, you know. I even know what you’re going to wear tomorrow – the green blouse – the one with the orange flowers, am I right?” His laughter was wicked – almost a screech. “Get ready you old hag.” More laughter.

Terror chilled me. The basement window. He could have watched me through the window when I was pressing my clothes for the week. But how did he get past all of the locks?

“So you’re wondering. How did I get in? Ha! Wouldn’t you like to know? Be careful when you hit the sheets tonight Dr. O.” I jumped off of the bed and ripped back the sheets. Nothing was there and I relaxed. Officer Stanton was right - now I knew – this guy, Teddy, or whatever his name was was just a prankster but how to get rid of him? But just to make sure, I dragged the bedding to the basement and put it in the machine on the hot cycle.



A new week was about to begin. Monday morning and I was off and running. Classes went well for a Monday – lots of enthusiasm. In between classes, I stopped in to check in with Janice in her office in Wilcox Hall. “I wish you would check around and see if anybody else would like to take this class on a permanent basis. I am already way over my limit,” hour-wise I said.

But she gave me her most surprised look and said, “Are you serious? Karen wants YOU to fill in for her – only you. Are you seriously going to let her down when she is barely out of the woods?”

“Hey, Dr. O.” A voice from the student worker in the next room spoke out. “Somebody came in last week and asked if you were going to continue with that class. They said they sure hoped you were.”

“Who was it? Can you remember?”

“No. I didn’t even look up from what I was doing.”

“Man or woman?”

“Couldn’t tell you. Think it was a woman.”

“That was nice. Thanks for telling me.” It always felt good to hear complements to keep you going but still...okay...maybe. No notes on the door at home that afternoon, when I got home to check the dogs. Thank God. Tuesday came. A week had gone by and it was Abnormal Psych class again. But first, Karen was seeing visitors and I and so I dropped in to see her with a sunflower bouquet. She gave me a weak smile and a weaker pat on my hand. “I was poisoned Maggie,” she said in a soft voice. “They found

some evidence in my house that proves it. But please don't say anything to anybody," and she beckoned me to lean closer. "The police aren't telling everything until they catch whoever did this to me. But I want to tell you – I know you won't say anything."

"Are you sure you should tell me then?" I asked.

"Maggie, I need to tell somebody and you are the closest friend I have in the world."

I patted her hand. "I'm here for you. Tell me – you know I won't say a word to anyone."

"Whoever did this to me was still in my house when I got home and must have been watching me." She trembled. "They saw me pass out and then they stabbed me in the back twice with something dipped in brown spider venom! How could somebody hate me that much Maggie? Tell me! I can't stand it!" Big sobs escaped from her throat. And she seemed to sink deeper into her pillows. I sat down in shock. This was more than I could ever have imaged. My heart was racing but I tried to be strong. But I was shaken as I left her room -shocked and terrified.

I felt a cold shiver travel up my spine as I made my way out of the hospital and to the classroom for the evening. The class prep took my mind off of Karen for a while and I was ready with my lecture and demonstrations when the students began coming in carrying all of their books. We all got settled in and I introduced the topic for this evening – mental illness. My lecture had begun when I heard the door behind me open and close and a beautiful Black girl came gliding into the room behind me.

“Hi”, she said in a southern drawl. “My name is Nelly. I’m new.” And she sauntered around the horseshoe looking for a seat. A bell went off in my head when I saw the bag slung over her shoulder.

“Nelly, before you sit down, would you mind telling me and the rest of the class, what you’ve got in your bag?”

“Huh,” startled her head jerked around and then everybody leaped out of the chairs.

“Oh it’s nothing to be scared of,” she said and a strong purring could be heard and a little fuzzy tiger head popped out. Everybody closed in around her wanting to know if they could pet it until I cleared my throat and asked “Nellie” to please meet me out in the hall with her....eh..tiger cub.

“Annabella, you are not welcome back to class or even on school property with a wild animal. I will call security now so do what you have to do. She turned and ran down the hall holding the bag close to her chest.

“I didn’t even recognize her” was the basic starting theme of the class. And “Is she a multiple personality?”

“No, Annabelle knows perfectly well that she is changing her appearance and does it on purpose. A Dissociative Identity Disorder core personality is not aware that they are changing personalities and therefore cannot “change” on purpose. However the other personalities usually are aware that they all exist outside the core personality and sometimes they are mean to the core personality. Annabelle does not fit this profile.

“Okay, I might as well admit it,” Lacy cut in with a laugh, “I’m not Lacy. I’m Lucy. We’re twins and sometimes we fill in for each other. But we are NOT different people” Another round of “you look exactly alike” and we finally got down to the topic for the class which appropriately enough was: mental illness. I noticed that McKenzie was not present this evening and Tess came in late – “soccer practice,” she said as an excuse.

Evelyn had turned in to the stereotypical older lady in the class that asks all of the questions. At break, I told her thanks for the brownies. I had put them in the freezer to keep for my grandchildren. “What brownies?” she asked. “Honestly you wouldn’t want to eat anything that I would bake – I’m terrible!” The brown wrapper had Evelyn written in blue ink, I thought to myself. Who left them if it wasn’t Evelyn, I wondered. It was a hot October night with a breeze and the students were clearly interested in the class. I had to admit that I really liked teaching it even with all of the craziness that had gone on, maybe I would stick.

After class, I stopped to check tomorrow’s class prep in my office for a few minutes before heading for home. Fifteen minutes later, I was out the door. A note was fluttering on my windshield read: “Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home, your house is on fire and your children are.....”

I frantically took out for home, my heart beating in my mouth. I juggled my cell phone in my right hand, dropping it on the floor and almost having a wreck. Pulling over, I got it in my hand and couldn’t seem to stop shaking long enough to punch in 911 and then it went dead. I screamed and pushed on the gas. I had to get there, get there, get there. Just before I got home, I got the phone plugged in but then I turned off the car keys in order to open the back door. All of this would soon play through my brain on a feedback loop. Unlocking the back door I started calling the dogs. There

was no smell of fire and I could hear them barking at their gate anxiously waiting for me. I slowed down. Just another prank, God I am so tired of this, I thought wearily as I pushed open their gate and slowly walked bent over petting them into my little kitchen.

“Well, hello Ladybug.”

Startled I jerked up to see Agnes leaning against my sink clicking her knitting needles. I screamed but too late. She grabbed my head and fought me trying to stick a piece of duct tape over my mouth.

“What took you so long?” she said but not in her voice – one that I recognized but....

“Agnes!” I said backing up and falling over the dogs,

“Please DON’T get us mixed up with that old bitty. Don’t EVER.” And then her head fell to her chest and when she looked up, she pinched up her face and out of her mouth came the voice of the scared little child.

“You wouldn’t save me! I hate you, I hate you!” Her head bobbed again and now it was Teddy coming at me and pinning me against the doorframe.

“Teddy?” I whispered.

“Like you didn’t know, you freakin shrink. You told everybody in class tonight all about me and you’re going to pay for it. You’re going to suffer just like all of the children you’ve hurt. Everybody thinks it was Nora but I know better. It was you!” (Nora?) Agnes’ hands held a small bottle. “Good

old Aggie, she's good for something old babe. Why she almost died once when she got bit by one of her 'babies' but we couldn't let that happen, now could we?" Teddy's voice. I twisted out of his grasp but he pushed me hard from the back and I fell over the dog gate. She/he was on me in a flash and she was heavy and strong. I fought hard but the air was crushed out of me and I could feel the darkness coming. Off in the distance I could hear Teddy's voice..."Tell Doc Higgins hello when you get to the gates of hell. Hey Doc – you listening to me? A hard slap across my face and he dipped the knitting needles into the bottle. Here's a little spider juice from the Spider Killer himself." He/her hands came back over her head and stopped short for just an instant when the crashing sound of the back door being kicked open and footsteps came running across the wooden floor, "Doctor O! Doc! It's me, Billie Stanton.

I rolled and kept rolling while she thrashed around the air with her needles flashing.



And then it was all over. Policemen filled my house. I sat on my stairway and cried and shook. Agnes, Teddy, child and whoever else was taken out in handcuffs and I could hear Agnes begging the police to stop hurting her. Officer Stanton squatted down in front of me offering me his hankie. "We found fingerprints in Dr. Higgins home and knew that we were looking for Teddy Thompson, the Spider Killer. What we didn't know and it seems that nobody else knew, was that he was connected to Agnes Williams – in fact he was one of her personalities. He is one of the most vicious killers in the US today. He has killed single women psychologists

from the East coast to here. He kills his victims with puncture wounds done with knitting needles that he dips in Brown Recluse venom. That is his signature. Her house is filled with boxes of spiders that she calls her children – right – Brown Recluse. We were finally able to trace the call that you got from the Nelsons (the people with the son Teddy?) an hour ago and it lead back to Agnes – well, they ARE Agnes. Thirty minutes ago, we got a search warrant and we found pictures of you all over the basement room in her house and here we are. You kept telling me that nothing was missing. So I thought it was just a student playing you. Why would anybody break into a house over and over and NOT take anything? Teddy wasn't stealing anything but he must have been planting cameras because there are pictures taken of you in almost every room in your house on that wall. (Later it turned out that he was right.). Agnes/Teddy must have copped your keys when she was having coffee with you that night. Yes, I was watching who was going in and out of your house” he said to my surprised look. She had them in her pocket just now. By the way, I checked on your outside doors a couple of times a day and once in the evening while you were at your office (he did?) and there was a package on your porch. (Eveyln's). Still have it?” I went in the kitchen and took it out of the freezer and handed it him. “Mind if I take it back to the lab?” I nodded. I seemed to have lost my voice.

“Are you okay?” Oh yes, I am way okay now, I thought. It better be – it's Halloween and its been the scariest night of my life!

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*Are you okay? — Oh yes, I am way okay now. It better be. It's Halloween, and it's been the scariest night of my life.*

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## Epilogue

Records tracing back to the 1950's in the Bridgewater Asylum in Bridgewater, Rhode Island, say that a small five-year old child named Agnes Stafford was admitted after being reported by her parents as being "odd" and unmanageable. She remained there in the asylum until her disappearance at age 16. Notes in her file described her as being a precocious "troublemaker" who caused trouble by acting out and being rude to the staff. "She calls them names, even attacking them and acts like she knows more than they do." In fact, Agnes was only 'odd' because she was a brilliant little girl born into a family of average or below IQ's. In her trial, her expert witness, Dr. Horace Stein testified that in his opinion, Agnes was tortured throughout her childhood, first by her parents, and later by staff in the asylum. At moments of absolute unbearable terror, her mind literally checked out and a new personality was frozen in time – a frightened little girl, an adolescent boy who called himself Teddy who liked spiders, and somewhere in early adulthood, Nora Nelson, the woman on the phone who called about her son Teddy who had attempted suicide. Agnes was unaware of her other personalities but had experienced lapses in memory sometimes lasting as long 2 – 3 years when she suddenly become aware that she was in a new place, was older and people were calling her by a different name. Once when this happened, she found herself in the 5th grade and she thought she was in the 1st grade. She struggled in her adult years, and the only record of her existence were jail records and hospital admittance when she was accused of bizarre behavior and of attacking those that she thought had provoked her. She loved children but was unable to keep a job because of her "erratic" behavior as she traveled back and forth within her multiple personalities. And somewhere within the recent years, Teddy and Nora took control. These two personalities sought revenge for all of the atrocities that had been used on them back in Bridgewater. Their targets were single

woman who lived alone and were in the field of psychology and mental health. Teddy became the Spider Killer and had left a trail of murder from Charlotte, North Carolina westward through Tennessee and Missouri until they reached what they must have thought was a good hiding place, here in Windy Hollow.

The Teddy personality would pick his victims out and then stalk them until he had them cornered much like a spider does its prey. He liked to torture them first before killing them by breaking into their residence and hurting their pets, leaving evidence that he had been there and placing cameras throughout in order to watch his victims without notice. Trunks of lost cell phones were recovered from the house where Agnes lived and these were apparently used to make anonymous calls as a method of terrorizing his victims but also to manipulate them out of their homes so that he could place his cameras and spiders inside. He always left behind his signature spider bite. The killing process usually began with a food product laced with a small to medium amount of brown recluse venom according to what stage of killing he was in and then finally, once the victim had passed out, he stabbed them with sharpened knitting needles that had been dipped in concentrated venom.

Lakeview Community College in Columbia, Missouri was the first time the killer had killed a college professor instead of a mental health worker. It was thought to be a mistake because the victim was a psychology teacher and did not work in the field. Karen was assaulted; it was reasoned, to bring me on since I was the only other teacher who taught this course. Agnes herself said that she took the course because she was unable to get an appointment with me because she did not have insurance and thought this would help herself. She admitted that she had been feeling that something was “not right.”

Agnes was committed to Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane after pleading not guilty by reason of insanity and winning her case. Karen and I both testified at the trial as did McKenzie Adair, the quiet little student in my Ab Psych class who was waiting for me in her car that night. She had recognized Agnes as the babysitter, Norah Nelson, her parents hired for her long ago once when she a child while they were out for the evening. The child overhead them to say before the sitter arrived, that if she 'worked out' she would be hired as their nanny. That evening Teddy took over the core personality and terrorized McKenzie throughout the night transitioning into Norah when her parents returned home. The child immediately began having night terrors and reverted back to bedwetting and speaking in baby talk and luckily was seen by a child psychologist at this point, who was able to coax the problem out in the open. When the authorities tried to find the sitter, she had vanished as Nora Nelson. McKenzie dropped out that semester but came back the spring semester and was in my abnormal class again.

The brownies were not from Evelyn but from Nora and yes, they were filled with venom. Remnants of poison-laced brownies were found in Karen's stool. She remembered finding the brownies on her porch in a brown-wrapper with MY NAME on them. The killer must have been hiding somewhere inside her house watching to make sure that she ate some and when she collapsed, stabbed her with the knitting needles. Lucky for Karen, she had her phone set to call 911 at the press of the star key and as she fell, it accidentally hit that button. Then 'Teddy' simply took the brownies and left her there. It's a good thing that I am always on a diet and decided to save them for later. Traces of poison were later found on my dining table from the coffee that was spilled.. One of Agnes' personalities must have poisoned my coffee either when they were coming in to the house or sometime while the rest of us were carrying the coffee cake to the table.

We will never know. She had been watching from out in my yard in the trees when she was seen in the headlights by Evelyn that evening when she returned with the coffee. All of the multiples recessed deep into Agnes sick brain and now only glimpses of them are seen by those who reside in the hospital. However, it has been said that late at night, a child's cry and voices can sometimes be heard in heated arguments from her cell. Agnes, Teddy, Nora, and baby Agnes will spend the rest of their live(s) residing back within the cold, hard, walls of the old state hospital where it all began - at Bridgewater. Let's hope they find some spiders.....heh heh.

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

Here are the true pieces of this story:

I did have an Abnormal Psychology night class one hot summer 17 or 18 years ago that was all women. And yes, we called it “Ladies’ Night.” It was almost like a meeting of women rather than a class – I still run into women today that I met in that class on the warm, humid summer evenings in the basement of Lockman Hall. One girl shocked the rest of the room when she yanked up her sleeves and showed off her cut marks. Sadly it’s not that uncommon in today’s classrooms. One woman was a shoplifter – we found that out after she was caught with some of our stuff in her backpack. There was that middle-aged woman who sat right up next to me on the right arm of the horseshoe and she always had something to say about everything. She always wore beige and her views were very conservative compared to the younger women. This was the Evelyn character in the story. It got so that everywhere I went – she just ‘happened’ to be there. Always over the top friendly. And she was always leaving me brownies. Then one day she showed up for an appointment at my office for a scheduled appointment but she used a different name and later I remembered that she didn’t act like she knew me. I told her that I couldn’t see her as a client because she was also my student and that would go against my code of ethics for Dual Relationship. I recommended that she reschedule for some time in the spring when the semester was over. She became agitated – almost belligerent – and told me that she wasn’t now nor

had she ever been my student. I told her that she was in my Ab Psych class that met every Tuesday evening and she paused and then covered this with the news that she had made the decision to drop out of the class. Plus, she said that she was moving out of town anyway. And so, I consented against my better judgement and she came in and took a seat. She became very calm and told me her story.

One morning after opening my little office in the Quest Center, I sat at my desk listening to my messages on my answering machine. The last one was startling – a child’s voice screamed out at me begging to be saved. The message went on for over a minute and then line went dead. These were the days when caller ID’s were brand new and I had not invested in one being that I was running my business on a shoestring. I tried the call-back protocol but it wouldn’t go through. At first, I thought it was a prank and then I was afraid that it might be real. It got so that I dreaded pressing the “Play” button every morning. And then, after several calls, I pulled cash out of my small petty cash fund and went to Wal- Mart and bought one. I hooked it up and couldn’t wait to get to the office the next morning to see if I had another message. Sure enough, the child had left a message and this time she was hateful and actually called me by name. I was shocked to find out that it was “Evelyn’s” number. I dialed it and when her husband answered, I asked him if there was a small child in his household who was using his phone. There was a silence at the other end of the line so I followed up with: “I thought maybe your daughter’s little

girl....” She had mentioned a daughter many times. He stopped me short. He did have a caller ID and he knew who I was.

“Mrs. Osterhout, we do NOT have a daughter nor has a small child been in this house, to my knowledge, since we moved into it. You have the wrong person.” Later, when she came in for her appointment, she was dressed in a poodle skirt and saddles with two pony tails with red ribbons and smeared bright red lipstick across her mouth and a painted on beauty mark on her lip. She said her mother sent her and she had had a hard time finding my office. And so began the very rocky ride of therapy with a Disassociate PD. In the story, I made Agnes the multiple because I thought it would be more surprising.

BTW, she never dropped the class and always came in her beige outfit with her beige hair in a capped hairdo with a barrette on the side and very beige makeup. And she was always her ‘normal’ self - the talking older woman who sits at the front of the class..... [I always think of this term because years ago when I started back to school and took classes at HCC, I remember Casey saying – “I hope you aren’t that older woman who sits at the front of the class and talks about EVERYTHING!” I realized then that she had described me to a T and dialed it down. Thanks Casey Lee.]

The end of this story is that one day during a canceled appointment, I ran home to bake some cookies and throw in a load of laundry. Two sheriff’s deputies were standing on my back porch. They asked me if I knew a person named

“Evelyn.” I told them that I was bound by confidentiality and..... That’s when they told me she had charged me and a woman psychiatrist from Newton with breaking into her house and tampering with her meds. AND that this wasn’t the first time that she had complained about us. She claimed that she had a picture of me climbing in her window but was never able to produce it. I was disappointed, that would have been great to know that I could actually pull that off. Just kidding. The charges were dropped of course but it taught me a lesson in dual relationships and I have never ever been coerced again to cross over that boundary. Eventually, she and her husband disappeared from Hutchinson and I have no idea what happened to them.

The snake lady existed back then and her background that was given in this story is true. It has been almost 20 years since I last saw her and have lost track of what happened to her. She was a master at changing her appearance and was always popping up at places where I would go. Once while standing in front of the video display at Hastings, the wall seemed to be opening up like a hidden panel and she stepped out with her carpet bag over her shoulder. It was a total surprise. She had long black hair to her waist, very dark skin and brown eyes that time. I got used to recognizing her. She collected exotic animals but had a reputation of never feeding them. They would escape from their pens and kill livestock in the area. It is my understanding that she was reported to SRS many times because her small children complained to their teachers that the snake would escape from its pen and since she had a reputation for not feeling her animals, it was

conceivable that something bad would happen to them. Schools and churches in the area were always on the lookout for the 'Snake Lady'.

And finally, in September, during the fair, something happened that still creeps me out. One windy sunny afternoon during the Fair, I made my daily stop at the house between school and office to check on the dogs, play the piano for 20 minutes and freshen up before starting my afternoon appointments. As I pulled up to the porch, I was totally taken aback to see the storm door flapping in the breeze and the back door standing wide open. I stepped out of the car and just stood there trying to soak in what I was seeing when around the corner of the porch to my right, slunk a dirty little white dog – Poppy was out! I looked and the dog gate was standing open. I started screaming for Sophie with no response at first. I went in the kitchen door to check things out (I can still hear my dad, the ex cop saying to me in a very stern voice: “Don’t EVER go into your house if you come home and the door is standing open.” Okay, I thought about that AFTER I went in. Sorry about that Daddy. As I turned to let Poppy in I noticed that she was hurt. Her back leg and belly were both bloody. Also some dishes in the sink seemed to have been thrown in a pile as though they had been swept off of the counter. In the living room, pots of house plants had been knocked askew as were all of the gates that we put up to keep the dogs out of the rest of the living room. “Somebody’s been here! I thought and so I stupidly starting LOOKING! It didn’t occur to me that I shouldn’t even be in the house until I was standing in the

sewing room. YOWZA –what if somebody’s in here?! I hurried back down the stairs and started to call Alan back at school and that’s when my phone rang and it was an emergency call from a woman whose son had tried to hang himself just like in the story only this one was a real woman with a real son. So – no question about it - I had to leave Poppy and rush off to take care of it. Alan came home and made sure that she was all right and looked around. He thought she was bearing weight on it so nothing was probably broken (it wasn’t) and he raced back to school to cover his class that had started without him. However, Poppy was in pain all night, so early next morning, Alan carried her out to the car and I ran up to McPherson to the vet with her. Alan penned Sophie up in the kitchen as always and made sure everything was locked up tight. I was beginning to doubt that anybody had been in our house – maybe WE are the ones who left – unlikely – but maybe....??? After class, I made another trip to McPherson and brought Poppy home with pain killers and antibiotics. No bones were broken but she was black and blue all over her body. She really was lucky that the car had not rolled over her little fuzzy body. But when I got home, Sophie was now penned up in the family room with the dining room door closed and again, things were moved around. I thought Alan must have put her in there even though it didn’t make any sense. I rushed off to school. When I asked him later about it, the look on his face told me the story. Well, he didn’t/wouldn’t EVER pen her up in the TV room, he said. He had made sure that she was securely penned up in the kitchen – locked the baby gates tightly, closed the tight latch on the fence and both of us

heard her crying clear out to the driveway that morning with Poppy. When I found her, she was actually closed up in the TV room with the door to the dining room closed tight. That night when I got home from work (Alan was still at school), both dogs were outside again sitting on the porch – back door wide open and the dog gate as well. We called in the report but we have never found anything missing then or now. Not the flat screen TV's, the Mac sitting on the big table in the dining room, money laying on the side table in the bedroom, no food was missing – no alcohol – NADA! The police took the report over the phone – nobody came out. The next morning all gates and doors were locked or chained up – Mr. M took care of that. It hasn't happened again.

All of the above is true. And oh by the way, the young officer of years ago who was involved with the Agnes/Evelyn character was Sheldon Stewart who was a young sheriff deputy at the time.

*Have an Awesome Halloween and send me loads of pictures of  
it.*

*Here's the wish that you enjoy reading this years Halloween  
story:*

*Ladies' Night.*

*I love you!*

*Mom*

*Oxoxo*

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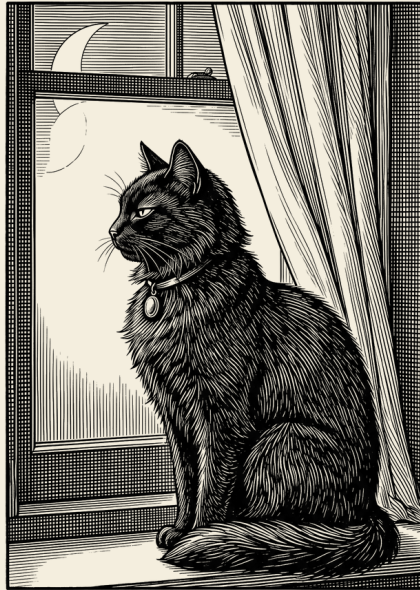
VISITATIONS & GHOSTS

# THE CAT

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Witchey Mama, October 2018*

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All was quiet on Willowtree Lane except for the distant sounds of the children on their way to school. Bicycles and summer toys littered the yards awaiting their return. The flowers along the sidewalk gardens were giving out their last hurrah. White fluffy clouds moved lazily across the clear blue sky over the chimneys of the big old houses along the lane with their lofty elms. Suddenly the blue door at #502 swung open with a bang and out the door, over the porch, across the yard Jacob Albert Miller III streaked. His cap stuck on his head sideways with red hair sticking out in all directions; his shirt, hastily put on, stuck both in and out of his jeans and what looked suspiciously like a sling shot hung out of his back pocket. He leaped over the brick wall with ease and was down the street in a flash. Then the dust settled again, the door slowly bumped against the door jam of his house, and once again, all was quiet on Willowtree Lane.

The day then proceeded to pass by much as all of the other days had passed since Sunnyside Elementary school started back in August. In the big house across the way, Mr. George Goldsmith called to his dog, and gave her his egg yolk that Mrs. Mildred Goldsmith had fixed him for breakfast. He was a proud veteran of the big war and although retired considered himself to be “fit as a fiddle.” He had been an Army Ranger, you see. Mrs. Wilson down the block could be seen over her fence filling her bird feeders and dead-heading her flowers for the beautiful and fragrant sachets that she made each year for Christmas presents. Miss Polly Pinkston could be seen down in the next street in her Postman cart coming to deliver letters in all of the mail slots. The Tyson’s dog Ralph was tipping over trashcans as usual, nosing out the leftovers. Most everyone else on the block had already gone to work. Oh, except for #502. The silence was broken by the sound of a baby’s cry coming from that address because a little one had been born to this family just nine days ago.

Inside #502, Marybeth Miller pushed a stray lock back off of her forehead, jiggled the crying baby girl on her shoulder, stepped over 5-year old Stella's doll castle, and shoved another load of clothes into the old washing machine. She heaved a sigh when it groaned to a start. Money was tight right now and a new washing machine just wasn't in the budget. "Okay," she thought wearily, "Now maybe for that cup of coffee." She poured herself a cup and looked down at the pink baby in her arms. Chloe Ann was a sweet, beautiful, healthy, baby with big brown eyes and curly wisps of hair. She was snuggly and precious. But ..... so far did not like to sleep at night. "Oh well, this only lasts for a short time," she told herself. Rondo, two years old and feeling it, on the other hand was wide awake and by the way, where was he....? CRASH! Oh, oh..... Let's leave this happy scene and check out that strange sound outside.

Things seemed to have changed since we last checked in: The sky looked yellow and somewhat dark – the clear blue sky was gone and with it the fluffy clouds. The air had cooled and had a funny feel about it. Summer had vanished in just a blink of an eye. Disappeared! The wicked autumn wind had arrived – right on schedule - as it always did in October. It had come barreling in, blowing the heads off of the flowers, rocking the bird houses, scooting the trash down the lane and hooking it around the lampposts and flapping the unhooked garden gates. Summer toys seemed to gather in their yards in defense. It had come - the end of October. It was serious autumn now. VERY serious!

In the midst of the wind storm, something peculiar seemed to be happening down at the end of the lane. For around the corner glided a large fluffy gray tabby cat, a newcomer to Willowlane. It paused briefly, and looked around the street as though searching for a destination, then finding it, chose one side of the lane and appeared to head in that direction. Ralph,

seeing a great opportunity, jumped up from his dog-nappy spot by the trash can and launched after his prey, tongue dangling, ears flapping, a gleeful look in his big dark eyes. Unconcerned, the big gray cat mildly turned her big yellow eyes on him just as he jumped towards her and with a lazy blink at her attacker, the big blond dog seemed to flip head over heels backwards, landing with a hard thump -- legs sprawled. Turning, the cat continued down Willowlane with her big fluffy, regal tail swishing behind. Ralph's tail on the other hand was jammed between his legs, and with a definite hurtful whine, he slunk off towards home. Dog and tail were later found cowering under the Tyson's porch and had to be coaxed out with a dog treat.

Inside #502 mom and babies snoozed their afternoon naps, not noticing the mail as it flew through the mail-drop in the blue door, landing on the floor and sliding under the couch on which they slept. A visitor with a fluffy tail and yellow eyes slipped silently through the slightly ajar, unlatched door and settled down on the white pillow in the blue checkered chair by the window to smooth her gray tabbiness. The school bell brought a change to the afternoon. It was 3:15 PM on the dot and soon the sound of children's voices could be heard outside in the lane growing louder and louder through the wail of the wind as the children came skipping and running happily home to Willowtree Lane. A moment later Jake and his five year old sister, Stella, bounded through the front door, their noise waking the sleepers on the couch. Throwing down their back packs, they raced each other to the refrigerator and both started their search for after-school snacks. The visitor jumped from the pillow and slipped behind the chair. Mary Beth had awakened from a lovely dream of flowers in her Gram's garden long ago -- and a song that she couldn't quite remember.

Life had changed since baby Chloe had been born, as it always does when someone new moves in. For one thing, there's never enough time to do everything that needs to be done. Schedules get mixed up, and ..... well, take a look. "MOM!! THERE'S NOTHING TO EAT!" It was no different in #502 Willowlane. Mr. Miller (Jacob Albert the II), the master of the house, (we'll just call him Albert or dad) worked in the city and was usually kept late by his boss, Mr. Wedel, which made Albert miss his train and thereby making his arrival at the family home after 6 o'clock – that is if the trains were running on schedule. That had not changed.

Mrs. Miller (Mary Beth) had hired Lilly, an old school friend to manage her shop, "The Lemon Drop, A magical market place of herbs, tinctures, and soaps." She was taking off a few weeks to baby her baby. Later she would take both little ones to the shop with her while she taught classes in tincture and soap-making. But for now.....well staying at home was turning out to be harder than she thought – what with two babies at home and two little school kids to manage. And without much sleep she was still falling behind. No snacks after school, for example, much to Jake and Stella's chagrin. The wash had stopped in the middle of a cycle for some unknown reason and her project of tincture and soap-making still sat in the breakfast room half-done and shoved to one side – even though Lilly called to say they were running out at the shop and desperately needed more. Mr. Miller called to say the trains were running late so "Go ahead and start dinner without me my love." (Dinner? Oh right!) AND that's when she noticed - the diaper box was empty!

"What about my ballet lessons?" screeched Stella, "I am going to be late....AGAIN!"

Mary Beth wanted to sit down and have herself a good cry. But just then the doorbell rang (Albert must have fixed it..hmmm? Seriously?). Jake and Stella wrestled each other to get the door open and when they did....there on the porch was an amazing sight. An imposing old lady in a straw hat stood there holding a big carpet bag and wearing a big toothy smile. There was a pause and then out of her mouth boomed, “Mary Beth I am SO happy to see you!” And without waiting for an invitation, she marched across the threshold. “Stella you take my hat and Jake take my bag up to my room – the one at the end of the hall will do.” The children stopped still in amazement. “Hop to it!” she boomed. And then with a start, both children did exactly as they were told. Amazing!

Mary Beth was stunned into silence. To her knowledge, she had never seen this woman in her entire life. She briefly thought of asking her if she was Mary Poppins but when she opened her mouth, all she could think to say was, “Who are you?”

“Oh my my, didn’t you get my letter? I’m your Aunt Marge – your grandmother on your father’s side’s cousin! You probably don’t remember me. Oh, but I remember you, you little darling!” And with that she swept Chloe, who suddenly stopped fussing, out of her mother’s arms. Turning to Rondo who was sticking a dog biscuit in his mouth, Aunt Marge pointed her crooked finger straight at him and boomed “No!” He dropped it. “Now, isn’t it time for ballet? Hmhhh? Better jump to it! I’ll start dinner.” And carrying the baby in the crook of one arm, off she went towards the kitchen.

Later that night, while lying in bed, Mary Beth tried to explain all of the odd happenings to Albert. He asked her to try to remember when she had known Aunt Marge but try as hard as she could, she absolutely could

not EVER remember her. She also couldn't think of a good reason WHY she would ever leave Jacob, Rondo, and Chloe in the care of a complete stranger in order to take Stella to ballet. But she had just up and handed over Chloe and grabbed Stella and her ballet shoes and they were out the door and across town before she realized what she had done. Leaving Stella at dance class, she rushed back across town, with thoughts of headlines reading "Small children killed by babysitter" or "Taken...."

Screeching to a stop, she leaped out of her car and ran into the living room, tripping over the rug and coming to an abrupt stop. For there she was -- Aunt Marge -- in the big rocking chair with a happy baby and the other two playing quietly on the floor; something delicious was cooking on the stove. She had sighed a sign of relief, blew out some air and relaxed and then -- she did it again! She left everyone at home again and hurried back out the door to arrive just in time to pick up Stella at the ballet studio. Then realizing her gaff again -- rushed back home!

Albert had arrived home that evening to a dining room where everyone was sitting around the table waiting for him. This was VERY unusual, since he was a little late. He had turned with surprise to meet Aunt Marge, who emerged from the kitchen carrying a big serving bowl filled with something that smelled delicious. He gave Mary Beth a puzzled look and then sat down to dinner -- just as Aunt Marge had told him to. But it was later, after that wonderful chicken and dumplings dinner that Aunt Marge had made, that they found the mail under the couch and when they did, they found the letter telling them of her impending arrival. So they relaxed and reasoned that maybe it wasn't that unusual and in fact, it had turned out okay -- in fact, better than okay. "But wait," Albert said as he

jerked back awake. “I am still not sure. Not sure. We don’t know her and you have no living relatives who could verify her existence. The letter was postmarked somewhere in Idaho.”

And that wasn’t all that was odd about that night. It was also after dinner that they first discovered the CAT! It was an animal that somehow had gotten inside their house when they weren’t looking and didn’t seem to want to leave. No matter how many times they put it out, it always seemed to find its way back in. Jake and Stella and Gordo were over the moon about it and begged to keep it.

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*It was also after dinner that they first discovered the CAT! It was an animal that somehow had gotten inside their house when they weren’t looking and didn’t seem to want to leave.*

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“Kids!,” Albert said. “This is somebody’s PET! We can’t keep it even if we wanted to! We’ll put it out on the steps and if it’s still here in the morning, we will try to find its owner.”

But just as he finished his speech, they all (cat included) took off up the stairs. “Oh no you don’t Miss Steria,” he said, thereby giving her the name that stuck. He swooped her up and sat her out on the porch, shooing her away. “Go back where you came from,” he said. But the cat just sat there staring at him with her big yellow eyes. “It was a pretty cat – that was true,” he thought to himself. “It was cold outside this evening – that was true. But all the same..... OUT!”



One person who definitely did not like the cat was Aunt Marge. She went into a sneezing fit every time it came near all evening. And it seemed to dislike her as well. And It seemed to get under her feet everywhere she went. “It has to go,” said Mary Beth, “There is no other way.” Just as she was about to drift off to sleep that night, Mary Beth thought of something else: “Another odd thing is: Just how did Aunt Marge know about our storage room at the end of the hall and how did she know the children’s names?”

But Albert had already started to snore. Snuggling Chloe Ann between them, she decided to sleep on it and worry about it in the morning. Mom and dad dropped into the deepest sleep that either of them had enjoyed in a long time. Baby also slept soundly, all night long.

The next morning they awoke to the smell of coffee, and there on the kitchen cabinet was everybody’s favorite breakfast – bacon and eggs, over-easy for mom, over-medium for dad and toast with marmalade and pancakes with blueberry syrup and fresh orange juice! Dad had time to eat and run for the train, Chloe Ann cooed in the bassinet, where she had miraculously been put while her parents slept. She was changed and dressed. Rondo sat in the high chair happily eating his oatmeal WITH raisins and Jake and Stella sat at their places at the table, all ready for school, eating their breakfasts WITHOUT fighting. “I can’t thank you enough....” began Mary Beth, but Aunt Marge shushed her.

“I am just glad that I got here when I did, you poor darling,” she said, raising her eyebrows meaningfully at Jake and Stella. But they didn’t notice because they were already out the door. But just before the door closed behind them, the big gray cat slipped silently back inside.

“Aunt Marge was amazing,” thought Mary Beth as she drank another cup of delicious coffee. When she had checked out the storage room earlier, she was surprised to see that it had already been changed into a cozy bedroom. Aunt Marge seemed to have a knack for putting everything right. She was always reaching into her big bag and bringing out just what she needed. “I don’t know why you came but I’m so glad you did,” Mary Beth told her.

As the days rolled by, Aunt Marge showered them with her cooking and baking. After-school snacks were always either cooling on the cookie rack or icing over in the refrigerator. The washing machine hummed away without a glitch for some odd reason. Mary Beth had finally given up on getting rid of Miss Steria, even though the cat certainly had it out for Aunt Marge. However, the old lady seemed able to fend for herself, she reasoned.

Mary Beth was sleeping like a rock these days, but then she began having the same dream night after night and it always was the same: She was in her grandmother’s garden and her grandmother seemed to be trying to tell her something. For some reason, it seemed she was thinking a lot about Gram. When she tried to explain it to Albert, he always told her it was good thing. “Things are going well. Just like when your Gram was alive. That’s got to be it. That and maybe Aunt Marge reminds you of her.” Then he would hurry off to catch the train. But there was something unsettling about it that she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

“Maybe tonight I’ll hear what she’s trying to tell me.” And then she leaped out of her soft bed, left arm wrapped around Chloe, and made a dash for the kitchen. These days she would come up short as everyone looked up from their breakfast or paper as if to say, “What.....? We went on without you,” (even though this wasn’t ever said out loud). Aunt Marge had everything covered.

“The red eyes! That’s what it is,” she thought later as she was driving home from the store. That dream – the one with Gram – always seems to end with two huge eyes – dark red and evil and they were staring right at her. But it would only last for a moment and then it was over but it left her eyes burning. She told Albert about it the next morning after having the dream again and his response was, “Everyone has weird dreams my love. Gotta go!” And then off he went to catch his train.

This night she slid down into sleep easily as she had been doing lately and found herself dreaming that she was sitting on the little bench under the huge tree-like trumpet vine with Gram. She could hear the voices of passersby calling out “Miss Susan Alice” (that was Gram), “May we pick some flowers?” It was a warm sunny day with a slight cool breeze just outside the kitchen door of Gram’s old house. There were usually kittens under her porch in the summer and when she was at Gram’s, they would sit on the bench watching the kittens while making trumpet vine dollies. A big pitcher of fresh lemonade with lemon slices would always sit on a small black wrought iron stand and they would drink their lemonade in beautiful glasses with red tulips painted on them. And behind the tree, the yard was always absolutely ablaze with flowers and butterflies. And Gram always let people pick a bouquet when they came by. It was heavenly.

Sometimes back then, she would fall asleep with her head on her Gram's lap and listen to the same song that she always sang to her, "but for alwaaaays." The dream began whooshing away. Her Gram's voice changed its tone from the singing voice to a straight forward stern one that came as a whispered " Mary Beth, baaack awaaaay" and then it faded away... Then there was a POP! The red eyes! They seemed inches away this time and their stare felt like red pokers piercing her eyes. The pain!

Then a soft buzzing in her ear, and she woke up to moonlight streaming through the window, icing the bed with stars. Jerking up off of the bed and turning to look back, she saw there on her pillow, right above the sleeping baby, Miss Steria -- and she was gazing straight at her with those big yellow eyes!

"Get out!" she screamed. Coming off of the bed and waking Chloe Ann and Albert, she took a swing at Miss Steria, missing the big cat, who dove off of the bed, streaked towards the door and disappeared into the hallway. Mary Beth was shaking with anger as she tried to untangle herself from the bed covers. She stopped short when she realized that somebody had been right outside their bedroom door and Miss Steria must have run into whoever it was as she escaped. There was a scream of pain and it sounded unfamiliar to Mary Beth. Then the walls began to shake as bodies were hurled against them. She could hear Miss Steria snarling at whoever it was, a cry, and then footsteps could be heard running down the hall. Mary Beth finally untangled herself and rushed into the hallway but .... nobody was there. It was empty! Not a noise could be heard. It was as if whoever it was had vanished into thin air. Albert was right behind her reaching for her. "Mary Beth, wake up! You're dreaming. Nobody is here. You are fine. Come back to bed."

“Didn’t you see the cat?” she blurted. “It was sitting almost on Chloe’s head!”

“No, of course not,” her husband said. “The cat wasn’t there. And look: Chloe, our sweet lamb has already gone back to sleep. Come on, let’s get some sleep.”

Mary Beth lay there, twisting and turning, her heartbeat finally started to slow down. And then as the moon went behind a cloud, she fell back into a deep slumber. But her dreams were troubling. She kept hearing bits of Gram’s song in the distance: “be loving youuuu,” and then seeing those terrifying red eyes. She felt weary when she pulled herself up to start the day.

Breakfast that morning was very quiet. She inspected the children, but nobody had scratches on them and they reported sleeping well. “Who was out in the hall last night after the lights were out?” she asked. “Anybody hear anything in the night?” Jake and Stella looked at each other and then each one got real busy eating their breakfast with their eyes down. Aunt Marge was busy at the stove flipping big fluffy pancakes and she seemed quiet as well. “How about you Aunt Marge, hear anything last night?”

Without turning around, she said, “Slept like a rock.” Albert gave her a meaningful look like “I told you so.” And then everyone was off and Mary Beth picked up a fussy Chloe and put Rondo’s shoe back on that was lying under the high chair and that’s when she came up with an idea. She brightened up. “This may turn into a wonderful day,” she thought, with a surge of renewed energy.

“Think I’ll take some product down to the shop, Aunt Marge.”

“Wonderful!” She responded with cheerfulness. “I’ll watch the kids; don’t you worry about a thing!”

Mary Beth took a nice hot shower and got ready to take a little couple of hours to herself. “Yay! I’ll stop by the Metropolitan Coffee Shop and have myself a caramel macchiato,” she said to herself. But just as she was about to leave, the toilet in the kitchen bathroom started making noise -- and all of a sudden the sewer backed up all over the bathroom and out into the kitchen. “OH NO!” The plumber didn’t get there until after lunch, and then it was time for the kids to come home from school. The day was gone. Mary Beth’s alone time had vanished.

“Looks like somebody flushed a shoe down,” reported the plumber, dangling a wet slipper by two fingers. It was one of Aunt Marge’s house slippers.

“That cat took it out of my room and did it ON PURPOSE!” cried Aunt Marge.

“Highly unlikely,” said Albert, later, under his breath to Mary Beth as they were heading up the stairs to bed. “It was more likely Rondo, but let’s keep that to ourselves, shall we? Wink.

That night in the hallway there WERE two little kids tiptoeing down the hall past their parent’s room to the stairs leading to the kitchen. It started when Jake tapped on the adjoining wall to Stella’s bedroom. But this night, he had had to sneak into her room and shake her hard to wake her. “Hey, wake up, stinky!” Stella sleepily slid down from her bed, wiping her eyes. “C’mon. Let’s go get cookies!” She brightened up. Her brother was good at coming up with nighttime adventures and she was always ready to

go wherever he picked – except outside. He was the only one who ever went outside at night by himself. “Okay he whispered, “KEEP QUIET! I don’t know who mom heard last night, remembering her asking them that morning, but if it wasn’t us, who WAS it? Now just follow me.”

As they got close to the kitchen, they began to hear voices. Someone seemed to be giving orders and the other one was begging. They peeked around the door and were met with a strange sight. Aunt Marge seemed to be talking to someone. Peeking further around the corner they saw her standing at the sink looking into her big bag that was sitting on the counter. The weird thing was that she looked like she was actually talking to something in her carpet bag!

“I want to see closer,” whispered Stella. And before he could stop her, she had dropped quietly to the kitchen floor and was crawling along the back of the island and when she reached the small table, she watched and waited until she thought she was safe, and slid underneath. There was nothing left to do but follow her. Jake was bigger and a couple of times, he thought the floor creaked and when it did, he would freeze. They wanted to see whatever was in that bag -- and there was someone in that bag -- because there was definitely a voice coming out that was speaking in angry tones. Aunt Marge was begging and promising to do whatever “it” wanted and to give her more time.

“You will snatch that baby, Evilia (Aunt Marge was Evilia?). I need to harvest a new soul! Time is running out!” It sounded like whoever was in the bag was telling Aunt Marge to snatch Chloe so he could take the infant’s soul! Jake tried to hear more of what they were saying. He slid under the table with Stella and leaned in.

“Wait until they eat these muffins and they will sleep forever! Chloe Ann will be yours!” Aunt Marge cackled like a witch! Was that actually her? He wondered. Then she turned and started mixing something in a big mixing bowl and sprinkling it with some white powder out of a long glass vial. With a wicked cackle she gave a shake and the powder poured out of the lip of the vial in a heavy stream into the batter. Suddenly, out of the pantry, Miss Steria leaped - first up on the island and then sailed over the table where Jake and Stella were hiding - clear over to Aunt Marge, knocking the vial out of her hand and shattering it into a million pieces, with the white powder scattering all over the kitchen floor. Then turning to the bag, Miss Steria gave it one of her yellow eye blinks and the bag seemed to fly up into the air. But before it started to fall down there was a snarling roar and a black figure rose out of it and when it did, a vile stench filled the air.

“Pee You!” whispered Stella, holding her nose.

Then the thing bent down towards Aunt Marge as she grabbed the bag -- and flames shot out of two big red eyes straight at her, scalding her face and singeing her hair. “Kill!!!” the monster commanded.

“Please Master.....” began Aunt Marge. But the stench had now descended to the floor and both children started choking. Stella rose up, bumping her head on the table, and then she did just what Jake was afraid she would do. She stood up from under the table. Aunt Marge jumped in surprise with a startled “Oh!”

And Stella, looking Aunt Marge straight in the eye said, with her hands on her hips, “You can’t have Chloe Ann! I’m telling mom!”

“This is not going to be good,” thought Jake from beneath the table.

“YOU!” roared Aunt Marge, and with that she yanked the little girl up off of the floor by the back of the head and lifted her up to eye level. “Going to tell Mom are you? We’ll fix that. We’ll fix that good!” With her free hand, the old woman pried open the child’s mouth and grabbed her tongue. Stella put up a good fight. She kicked and pounded at Aunt Marge. But the old woman was too strong. Squeezing her tongue, she glared at Stella, eye to eye, and whispered in a voice that seemed to come from the depths of a cave, “After I am through with you Stella dear -- you will never talk again! Little girls who make threats to the magnificent Evila are never heard or seen again!”

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*After I am through with you Stella dear — you will never talk again! Little girls who make threats to the magnificent Evila are never heard or seen again!*

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While all of this was going on, Jake had slid out from under the table and taking a heavy skillet off of the stove, brought it back over his head and rushed at Aunt Marge, but before he could bring it down, a furry animal streaked by and attacked the old woman on the side of her head. Jake fell back in surprise. Miss Steria dropped to the floor and clamped her fangs hard around Aunt Marge’s bony ankle, causing the old woman to yell out in pain. And when she did, she loosened her grip on Stella, who then crashed to the floor. Aunt Marge was enraged. Both arms began swinging at everything she could reach, breathing hard and uttering some kind of language under her breath.

The carpet bag landed on the floor and the monster sunk back into it while sending off a new stream of the stench. Jake and Stella tore out for the back stairway at the far end of the kitchen, knocking aside stools and baskets in their way. Taking the stairs two at a time, the children raced up the back stairs, but only got half way up when they were blocked by Aunt Marge, who somehow had managed to around through the livingroom and up the front stairway in a flash.

“Who is downstairs? What in the devil is going on? What’s all that racket?” Their dad’s voice sounded from his bedroom door. Then they heard him moving around trying to find his slippers.

Aunt Marge yanked their faces toward her by pinching each of their chins between her bony fingers -- and looking directly into their eyes, said in a dark and evil voice, “Stella you will NEVER talk again, but if you find another way of repeating what you saw this night, I will take your soul!” Looking at Jake, she uttered, “Mind what I have said, boy, or the same will happen to you!

Both children trembled and Stella began crying while Jake angrily tried to pull away from her iron-clad grasp. “Let go of me you old...I’ll....”

“AND mind my words my pretties OR I will put your mother and father in a dark and evil place FOREVER. Oh and I have delicious plans for Rondo!” Then she released their chins and disappeared into the darkness.



A voice boomed from the top of the stairs, “JAKE AND STELLA!” They jumped. ‘GET IN YOUR BEDS....NOW! What do you think you’re doing? It’s after midnight! You’ve got school in the morning!’

The kitchen was pretty quiet the next morning. Nobody spoke and the children picked at their oatmeal. Everyone seemed preoccupied with other things. Aunt Marge was wearing a bandana on her head and her face seemed to be glowing a bright red. “Oh, I’m just trying out some new face cream,” she said when asked about it. But she seemed off of her game this morning.

“Don’t worry about cleaning up Aunt Marge, I’ve got it this morning.” Mary Beth started clearing the table.

“Well then. Let me take the baby for you and we’ll have us a rock,” said Aunt Marge, reaching into her bag and bringing out a snow globe music box.

“Who has a snow globe at the ready?” chuckled Mary Beth to herself. Aunt Marge, with Chloe and Rondo toddling behind, headed for the living room and the big rocker. Gathering up the breakfast dishes and stacking them by the sink, Mary Beth thought about that night that she thought she saw Miss Steria on her pillow. She had been having one of those dreams right before that happened. “ I wish I could go back and hear what Gram wanted to tell me, “ she mused. And then, “It WAS that stupid cat who woke me up. I KNOW I saw her. I just know I did.”

Speaking of....she felt the cat rub against her leg and automatically bent over to give her a rub. That’s when she noticed some white stuff – like powder- on the floor, under the cabinet overhang. It was amazing how

quickly things could get out of place. Just since Aunt Marge started cooking – and that was only a week ago...or so – things were rearranged in her own kitchen.

She needed to start taking charge again. It wasn't fair to place so much responsibility onto Aunt Marge. No wonder there were spills here and there and that the dishes and glasses had been rearranged. She reached under to brush it and something sharp embedded itself in her fingers – glass! There were tiny pieces of glass under there too. But before she could do something about it, the front door opened and she could feel a draft around her ankles. Then the familiar voice of her best friend, Lois Tyson speaking to someone on the front porch.

“Wonderful,” she thought, and then “I wonder why she isn't at work and who is she talking to? Must be Aunt Marge.” Hurrying to the livingroom, she was surprised to see both women on the front porch. Aunt Marge was all bundled up with the carpet bag gripped in one hand and pushing the pram across the porch with the other. It looked like Lois had come up the porch steps and had stopped her. “No, no, please don't leave on my account,” she said to Aunt Marge. Then the visitor leaned into the pram. “Aww look at you Chloe Ann,” she cooed. You must be Aunt Marge. I can't wait to get to know you!”

Mary Beth stepped out into the cold air on the porch, “Lois, I am so glad you're here. How ARE you? Please come in and Aunt Marge, where do you think you're going? It's much too cold to take a walk. Come back in and meet Lois. Where's Rondo?” Was Aunt Marge going on a walk without the toddler? Where WAS Rondo? And then she saw him curled up with Miss Steria, sucking his thumb and staring blankly at the TV screen. She would have to mention this to Aunt Marge later after their visitor left.

Leaving Rondo without telling her – well leaving with Chloe and not telling her? What was that about? But of course, she asked herself, “Why wasn’t she, Mary Beth taking the children for walks? It was just that she was so tired all of the time....even with all of the sleep she had been getting. It was so annoying!

She was brought up with a start from her thoughts with by Lois shouting at Ralph, her friendly canine. Lois had brought Ralph! Oh dear! And he was being chased by Miss Steria around and around the room and through the kitchen, up the back stairway and down the front one again and again they raced.

Rondo was clapping his hands and squealing every time they ran by. Aunt Marge shoved Chloe in Mary Beth’s arms and fled up the stairs, carpet bag in hand, mumbling something about “out of control.” At last, it sounded like there was a scramble of the two animals and a yelp coming from the kitchen. There was a momentary silence. Miss Steria then pranced regally out of the kitchen with her big fluffy tail held high in the air and took her place on the white pillow on the blue and white checkered chair. Ralph could be heard by the thump of his tail under the stove in the kitchen. Mary Beth grabbed Miss Steria off of her throne and tossed her out on the front porch and shooed her away. And then turning to her guest, “So sorry....”

“I shouldn’t have brought....”

Both women started at once and then again and then...”Let’s have coffee!” from Mary Beth, and they both went in to the kitchen table and settled Chloe Ann in her basket. Rondo was placed in the high chair and cookies were passed out. (Thank heavens for Aunt Marge’s baking). Lois

passed on the cookies because she was not feeling well this morning. She had brought exciting news to tell her friend: She and Hubert were expecting a baby! Hugs and squeals from Mary Beth. Morning sickness was the reason that she was at home from work this morning, she told Mary Beth. But she couldn't wait to tell her so as soon as her stomach had settled down at home she had put on her jacket, grabbed Ralph and zipped over.

“By the way, do you have any of your fantastic tinctures that would work on this morning sickness? I'm telling you, it's the WORST!”

But before Mary Beth could answer, Aunt Marge appeared at the kitchen door and joined in on the excitement. “Oh, I just love babies,” she cooed. Her whole demeanor had changed. “Do tell me, WHEN is this precious lamb going to be born?” But before Lois could tell her, they were interrupted by the buzzing of Mary Beth's phone, notifying her that Sunnyside Elementary School was on the phone.

“That was Stella's Kindergarten teacher – something's wrong with her tongue and I need to go get her.”

Aunt Marge opened her mouth but Lois spoke first. “Oh I would love to watch Chloe Ann and Rondo while you're gone!” she exclaimed. “It will give me practice for when our baby comes. PLUS I can get to know Aunt Marge better, right?” Aunt Marge closed her mouth.

All the way over to Sunnyside School, Mary Beth's mind was racing. “What on earth could be wrong with her tongue?” Mary Beth's brain was on overdrive. “Could she have bitten it? Did they give her something too hot to drink?” Stella's teacher Miss Glenda was waiting with Stella by the door and holding her hand her out to the car and leaned in as she helped her

belt into her car seat. The teacher confirmed that something WAS wrong with Stella's tongue. In fact it was so swollen that Stella couldn't talk, so at first it was hard to realize that the little girl was trying to get her attention.

"The school nurse says it may be a virus – they are always going around. You know how it is", she said with an apologetic look on her face. "Now you get well soon Stella girl, you hear me?" Stella nodded slowly with tears sliding down her little pink cheeks as her teacher closed the door and waved at her through the window.

"Does it hurt Stellabella?" asked Mary Beth, as she pulled out of the school parking lot. "Oh right! You can't talk. Annnnd you can't spell yet, so right. This is going to be tricky. I will call Dr. Gomez as soon as we get home. You're going to be just fine (I hope)."

Lois was happily rocking Chloe Ann in the big chair in the living room and singing a lovely lullaby when they came in the room. Handing her over to her mom, she called Ralph, who reluctantly left his hiding place. "Come on, sport, we've got to leave so everybody can get back to normal." (Normal? What was that, wondered Mary Beth.) Later when she called the doctor, she found out that Dr. Gomez was out of the office and would be until the end of the week. The nurse told her to have Stella try to drink through a straw and as soon as she knew something, she would get back to her.

"I don't know but I'm sure it's alright," the nurse said, and hung up before Mary Beth could ask any questions.

Aunt Marge mixed up a concoction in the blender for Stella, who refused to drink it. And then they were all so drowsy after lunch. Mary Beth and the children cuddled up on her big, old bed and took a nap. The afternoon passed by under the roof at #502. Everyone was asleep, except for an old woman who was busy in her room and a yellow-eyed tabby who lay on her belly, peeking under the door watching her.

Jake ran in from school slamming the door. But instead of his usual race to the kitchen for snacks, he started looking for his sister. Once he found her, he tapped her on her shoulder to wake her up and said in a whisper “Stella, Stella.” And when she blinked open her eyes, he asked, “I heard at school that .....” but he couldn’t finish. Then all she could do was cry. Her tongue was too swollen to talk. “Oh, no! Mom, do something, he wailed!”

“I’ve never seen you so concerned for Stella before,” his mother said, while rubbing his back. But Jake was crying, too.

“I think she’s allergic to the cat. I’ve seen this before and I’m telling you THAT CAT needs to go!” Aunt Marge said, from the door, and she looked straight at Jake, who turned white, took in a breath, and started hic-coughing.

“Well, that sounds logical enough to me,” said Mary Beth. “I agree, the cat needs to go, but nobody has answered our flyers that we nailed up all over the neighborhood and I hate to just take it to the pound. You never know if they will find a family or not....”

“Oh stand up for yourself girl!” bellowed Aunt Marge, and then she dialed it back down to her sweet voice. “I think it would make a lovely pet for another family – maybe some older person who is lonely or...”

But no one was listening, dad was home! Early! Everybody rushed down to greet him. “How’s my little princess, he said, picking up Stella and holding her close. “Open up and let me see that tongue. Does it hurt?” She shook her head but then changed it to a yes nod. “MB she doesn’t feel hot – have you taken her temp? Hmm no temp, huh?”

Aunt Marge thinks she allergic to the cat,” said Mary Beth.

“Well we’ll just see what Dr. Gomez says, dad said, while holding Stella in his arms. “He always knows what’s wrong. When did you say he would be back?” That night’s dinner was a beef stew with thick brown gravy, but Jake said he didn’t feel like eating, which was very strange. “Does your tongue hurt, too?” said dad.

“NOOO!” shouted Jake and he ran from the table.

“What’s got into him?” Albert said to his wife.

“Stella’s tongue ailment has scared him for some reason. He’s probably afraid he will get it. And that was exactly what was on his 10-year old mind that night. He waited until he could hear his parents’ breathing after lights out and he crept into their room, dragging one of his blankets, and slept at the foot of their bed. Stella also wanted to sleep in their room and as soon as she drank her dinner through a straw at her dad’s insistence, and took her bath, she was put on a cot next to mom, in case she had trouble in the night.

Mary Beth, on the other hand, went to sleep peacefully with the sounds of her family's breathing in their sleep. But it didn't stay peaceful. For the dream came and this time she was again in her Gram's garden but this time her grandmother looked at her with alarm. She leaned closer and said words that sounded like "Verena.....back away....back away. She whispered it over and over again. Mary Beth strained to understand her and only caught pieces – "baack awaaay," and then the dream was gone and the red eyes were back. And this time they shot hot sparks into her eyes and she awoke in a cold sweat.

She picked her way across the room and out into the hall trying to shake off the after-effects of the dream. Down at the end of the hallway, she could see a light under Aunt Marge's door, and she thought she could hear her talking to someone, or maybe that was her radio. Someone laughed a high-pitched, gleeful cackle, and then as she walked near the room, the light went out and all was silent. Aunt Marge must be talking in her sleep, she thought, She is amazing -- moving in with people she doesn't know like us – even if we are relatives – and doing all of the work she does around here. Mary Beth felt better just knowing that she was being watched over by her aunt, and crawled back into her bed and went to sleep. And this time, she slept like a log.

Out in the hall the next morning as she started down to breakfast with the babies, she was surprised to hear Jake whispering to Stella. She followed the sound and found them in a little nook under the attic stairs. They jumped when they saw her. They were both bent over a scrap of tablet paper. "What are you guys doing in here?" she asked. They both held their fingers up to their noses to shush her but it was too late.

Aunt Marge looked over their mother's shoulder. "Breakfast! Get going Jake. Cat got your tongue, Stella?" she said with a little laugh and headed down the main staircase. Mary Beth and Stella watched her back and then looked at each other. Stella had turned white. Aunt Marge had a weird sense of humor for sure. She reached down for the note they had been writing and put the scrap of paper in her pocket to look at later.

Late in the morning, a call came in on Mary Beth's phone from Lois. It seemed that Ralph could not wake up after he got home from their house yesterday and they took him to the vet last night. It turned out that he had some kind of sleeping chemical in his system but it was so rare that they were having trouble isolating it. "He got it either in your house or mine OR in our yard yesterday we think. We scoured the yard this morning before we both left for work and couldn't find anything. Just thought I would tell you in case he got into something at your house. He was starting to get around when we left."

"He must have picked it up outside somewhere. We don't have sleeping draughts here in the house," Mary Beth told her. This morning was starting out good. The sun was shining outside, Rondo was playing merrily at her feet, Stella was sitting on a kitchen stool, drawing in her sketch book while trying to ice her tongue with cold water, and the washing machine that had miraculously started working last week was washing away. It wasn't until she heard Mrs. Pinkston put the mail through the mail slot that she remembered Chloe Ann upstairs in her crib. That baby had been sleeping for a while – a long while. She hurried upstairs to the nursery. As she walked down the hall, she could smell an odd odor. And it seemed to be coming from the nursery. As she entered the nursery she saw Aunt Marge with her back to her, leaning over the baby crib waving a sheaf of some kind of weed

and speaking in a soft sing-songy voice. The smell was intoxicating – pleasant but twangy and it was coming from the sheaf of leaves. “What are you doing?”

Startled, Aunt Marge whirled around -- and quickly holding the weeds behind her back, she said, “Why, I’m just singing a lullaby to.....” But she was stopped in mid-sentence as from under the baby blanket in the crib came the cat, who sprang at the old woman in attack mode, sinking her claws into her back and sending her falling forward into Mary Beth who, in turn, staggered back against the door jamb. It was so startling that it took a moment for Mary Beth to realize what was happening. Aunt Marge shook the cat off and, grabbing her, she threw Miss Steria against the crib with such amazing strength that the picture fell off of the wall. Through all of this, Chloe Ann didn’t make a sound, but just blinked her big eyes and smiled a sweet smile. Mary Beth rushed past the old woman and scooped up the baby. Miss Steria was not through with her attack, it seemed. With a yowl that was strangely familiar, thought Mary Beth later, the cat charged Aunt Marge again. This time the old lady took flight out of the bedroom door and down the hall. Her screams could be heard as she started down the front stairs and then there was a loud noise and sounds of her hitting the stairs as she fell and then....quiet.

With the baby in her arms, who seemed unusually dreamy, and running to the top of the stairs, what met her eyes was a terrifying sight. Aunt Marge was lying on the rug at the foot of the stairs and Miss Steria was on top of her, yowling. She raced down the stairs and knocked Miss Steria away from Aunt Marge.

“Marge!” she cried. “Are you all right?” Aunt Marge rolled over, sat up and grabbed her ankle and began screeching unintelligible sounds, clearly angry, glaring at at Miss Steria. Stella and Rondo sat scrunched together at the top of the stairs. The ambulance drivers had to fight Aunt Marge all of the way to the emergency vehicle. She didn’t think she needed to go ANYWHERE! And they finally bandaged her ankle and gave in and let her stay at home. Mary Beth searched for the cat. This time it very definitely had to go.

Aunt Marge insisted on fixing dinner even though Mary Beth begged her to sit down and take the load off of her ankle. But to no avail. The old woman limped straight to the kitchen and started cooking. And when Albert got home from work, he found them all sitting around the big table with a big lasagna in the middle of the table. Stella had what looked like a milk shake in front of her and as soon as he took off his coat and put down his briefcase and sat down at the head of the table, they all prepared to dig in.

Just then they heard the front door fly open with a crash, the candles on the table began to flicker, almost blowing out and to their utter amazement, Miss Steria raced into the dining room. She seemed to fly through the air, landing right into the middle of the lasagna! And that wasn’t all. She began digging in the pasta as though it was her litter box! Everyone started grabbing for her and shouting at her and in the turmoil everything on the table was knocked over. The cat squatted and everyone yelled. Jake yelled “Gross! I’m going to be sick!” Dad took a swing at Miss Steria again and the big gray cat jumped out of the pasta and leaped off of the table, knocking over Stella’s shake on her way, and sprinted out the door into the night and was gone.

“That does it! It’s going to be pizza night!” announced dad, and he started tapping the number into his phone.

“I make a lovely pizza. Cancel the order!” commanded Aunt Marge. Too late. The pizza was on its way. And dad took control, start to finish, of the pizza as it came in the door and until it was completely gone.

“Aunt Marge, this is your night off! For heaven’s sake, put your feet up, rest that ankle and have some pizza. It’s the least we can do,” he said. But she refused and hobbled up the stairs with a scowl plastered on her face. “That woman,” said Mary Beth through bites, “She just DOESN’T know when to stop. She’s amazing – AND with her ankle in a sling.”

That was the first night in a couple of weeks that Aunt Marge had not cooked. And although the food she made was delicious, still it was nice to be back to normal and just eat take-out -- and they all helped with the cleanup. Stella nodded her head when asked if she felt better and her tongue did look smaller.....didn’t it? They all cozied up on or around the big bed again. But everyone had trouble going to sleep this night – maybe it was the trauma of Aunt Marge falling down the stairs or the Miss Steria pooping in the lasagna incident that caused their anxiety. Who knew? Rondo wouldn’t stay in bed and kept getting into stuff and Chloe Ann was fussy – not dreamy any longer.

But Mary Beth had no trouble falling asleep. And instantly she found herself back in Gram’s garden. The dream seemed so much clearer than before. Back in the flowers, she could see her grandmother wearing a big straw hat, bending over her flowers. She could smell the sweet smell of roses and gardenias and feel the warmth of the sun on the back of her neck. She saw her Gram turn around as though in slow motion to face her. In one

hand, she held a basket full of purple flowers. Holding one out to Mary Beth, she spoke in that familiar voice that was music to her ears and her words seem to float out in slow motion, “verbeeeena.” A cloud of petals began to float toward her as the whole scene became a whirl wind.

“Stop! Come back Gram. I need you,” cried Mary Beth. But the dream was gone and in its place were the horrible red eyes -- and they darted out at her stabbing her and she woke up.

“Mom, wake up! There’s something we HAVE to TELL you!” they whispered. They were crouched down by Mary Beth’s side of the bed. Mary Beth looked at the clock. It was 2 a.m. “What is it? Stella, can you talk now?”

“Listen mom, please please listen. We have something to tell you.”

“Albert rolled over behind her raising his head above her shoulder. “Calm down Jake, we are listening.”

Big brother gave Stella a look and she took her finger and zipped up her lips. In the moonlight their little faces were white as snow and their eyes were as big as saucers. Jake told them the whole story about night in the kitchen and Aunt Marge and the monster in her bag. His words tumbled out in between sobs. “And they said that they were going to take Chloe’s SOUL.”

“What?” Both parents leaned in closer.

“Stella told her she was going to tell and Aunt Marge...” began Jake.

“And she hurt my tongue....” whispered Stella, with tears rolling down her cheeks.

When they were finished, both children collapsed into silent sobbing. Mary Beth could hardly breathe. “What have I done? How could I let a monster into my house with everyone I love inside? I believed her!” Then she put her arms around the sobbing children and, sobbing herself, hugged them to her. Dad enfolded the lot and they all remained there until Rondo broke the silence with a little baby grunt.



“You can’t tell ANYBODY mom – Promise, promise! Please mom and dad, please!”

“But why can Stella talk NOW?” asked mom and dad together.

“Stella can talk because we DIDN’T eat the food that Aunt Marge made last night because Miss Steria pooped in it,” said Jake. “Aunt Marge is POISONING us – we saw her putting white powder in the muffins before Miss Steria knocked it out of her hand. You’ve got to believe us! Miss Steria isn’t bad – she is trying to save us!”

“White powder under the cabinet.....hmmmm?? That must be why Ralph went to sleep and couldn’t wake up,” reasoned Mary Beth. “He got into it when he was in the kitchen. And I’ve been trying to get rid of that cat ever since she came into this house. What’s wrong with me? “

That's why I am so groggy in the morning," said Albert thinking of all the times he had dozed off unexpectedly on the train and in his office at work – not to mention the deep sleeping every night.

"That night that Miss Steria woke me up on my pillow – she was trying to tell me that someone – Aunt Marge – was outside in the hallway and I thought she was trying to hurt Chloe Ann and I threw her out! She was trying SAVE Chloe Ann."

"The night that you saw Aunt Marge talking to the monster in her carpet bag was the night that you, (looking at Jake and Stella) were making all that ruckus on the back stairway, right?!" Albert grabbed his forehead in disbelief. Both children soberly nodded. "I should have come down and checked out what was going on! What kind of a dad am I? I just went back to bed!"

"And Aunt Marge is always trying to get alone with Chloe Ann. She was waving mugwort over her cradle when Miss Steria attacked her. I couldn't place it at the time but now I remember that smell. Mugwort will settle you down and make you feel dreamy. She was going to slip my baby out without us knowing it by putting her to sleep! Oh when I get my hands on her....! Miss Steria was actually hiding in Chloe Ann's crib and attacked Aunt Marge. I thought the cat had gone mad but now....."

"But Mom Miss Steria was guarding us. She caused Aunt Marge to fall down the stairs – I know because I saw her trip her," added Stella.

“And she would have left with Chloe that day that Lois just happened to come over to visit. She was leaving with our baby! Oh dear! What would have happened if Lois had not come at just the right time?” cried Mary Beth.

“Boy, Miss Steria made sure that we didn’t eat that lasagna – there must have been some real potent stuff laced into that dish! And as I remember, she dumped over your shake, am I right?” he said, looking at Stella. Everyone laughed softly, thinking of that night that the cat pooped in the lasagna.

“Miss Steria WAS the one who dropped Aunt Marge’s slipper down the toilet that day,” added Mary Beth. “She did not want me to leave Chloe Ann with that witch! And I was feeling sorry for myself because I didn’t get a morning out. Oh my, my.....”

“Aunt Marge told Stella that she would never talk again....” began Jake.

“....and she hurt my tongue – BAD!,” sniffed Stella. Mary Beth pulled her close.

“It was pretty cagey of Aunt Marge – Stella doesn’t know how to read very many words – OR write them, so without her tongue – HOW was she going to tell us?”

“That what we were doing in the closet mom; we were going to draw a picture to try to tell you but Aunt Marge showed up behind you and we had to stop.”

“I still have it,” their mom said, “But all that was on it was a big bag with a face.....Oh, I get it! That was Aunt Marge’s carpet bag with that thing that’s inside.....”said Mary Beth, as her voice cracked.

They all sat there full of terror and shock. “Now see here, my love,” said Albert. “You had no way of knowing that Aunt Marge was evil. None of us did. She just showed up when you were recovering from birthing Chloe Ann and needed some help around here. If anybody’s at fault it’s me. I should have taken more of the chores over. I should have listened to you and believed you, my sweet wife -- I was just trying to do well at work and impress my boss and maybe get a raise because we are so stretched.....” And then he took a breath and looked at his family all sitting there watching him. “But hey! That’s all in the past. Look at us. We are all here. We are going to fight back, right gang?”

And all of their faces broke into relief. Putting his clenched fist in the middle of the circle, he looked each member of his family in their faces (except for Rondo and Chloe who were sleeping peacefully in their blankets), and with a voice full of determination, he said, “Come on, gang, this calls for action!” And in the next breath, “Let’s huddle.” They all piled their fists on top of each others. “Now, how are we going to get Aunt Marge and her carpet bag friend out of our house and keep Chloe Ann and everybody safe?” Everyone went to work, putting their heads together and trying come up with a way to get Aunt Marge and the demon out of the house without having her put some kind of evil spell on them.

That’s when Mary Beth remembered her last dream. Gram was sending flower petals to her over time and the look in her eyes had an urgency to them. What was the name of that flower? She couldn’t quite put her mind around it and then..... Suddenly Mary Beth put her hand over her

heart and her eyes filled with tears. “Oh Gram, you sweet thing. You told me that you would never leave me. And you didn’t! Guys - I think I’ve got it!” Dropping to the floor and crawling under her bed clear to the back, she pulled out a small floral box with a gold clasp with a lock. Then pulling up the gold chain with the locket and the key from around her neck, she opened the clasp. This is my very special box that Gram gave me when I was a little girl – at maybe age 4? I put all of my special things in it and kept it in my special drawer at Gram’s house. After she died, I opened that little drawer and it was still there.”

Opening the lid and pulling away lace handkerchiefs and sachets and an assortment of bracelets and rings, she retrieved a small bottle with a glass stopper. When she held it up to the moonlight the liquid within was a beautiful bluish purple.

“Okay, said Mary Beth, “this is what we are going to do.” With their heads together they huddled in a circle, each one coming up with a new idea until mom and daughter fell into an exhausted asleep. Dad and Jake, on the other hand, had a lot to do before the sun came up. Albert began writing notes on the backs of envelopes and scraps of paper that he found in his bedside table. Then he handed each note to his son and gave him specific instructions. “Alright, soldier, now scoot and don’t make a sound. Be back here and on your cot in 20 minutes. I know you can do it, because I know about your nightly outings.” Jake looked sheepish for a moment and then standing at attention, he said, “Hoo-rah, sir!”

Twelve and a half minutes later, Jake was snuggled down under his covers – he had followed his orders to the letter and fulfilled his nighttime duty. Now for some rest. Tomorrow was on the way.

“Okay, troops, are you ready?” whispered Albert under his breath. It was 5 a.m. – an hour before their usual get-up time. They all nodded yes and stood at attention inside the bedroom door. Trying not to awaken Aunt Marge, they quietly got dressed and assembled back in mom and dad’s bedroom. They stood in a line.

“Stella, remember - you will guard Rondo ALL DAY. Act like you still can’t talk. You know what to do with the toys, right? And stay close to mom. Jake, just to review, did you hand out those notes to our designated contacts?” A yes nod from Jake. “Wait for my signal and then meet at our rendezvous. Got it?” Another nod from Jake. “I will call the school and tell them you’re sick today. Now kids, I am telling a little white lie today because it’s an emergency. Never tell a lie EXCEPT in an emergency, got it?” Two nods.

“Okay, here we go. Remember DO NOT eat ANYTHING that Aunt Marge makes. Remember our plan and follow it! – This could mean Chloe’s life or death!” Everyone’s face told him that they knew the importance of what he was saying. “Now stand up so your mother can sprinkle you.” Mary Beth place a drop of the blue liquid out of the bottle onto each person’s head and then onto the palm of each hand.

“Rub it in,” she said. “That’s the way. I hope that lasts.”

“Okay troops, let’s do this!” This was going to be a big day. Stella, still mumbling as though her tongue was still swollen and she couldn’t talk, took Rondo by the hand and started down to breakfast. When they all got to the kitchen, Aunt Marge was already there, cooking up a storm, and she seemed to be in a foul mood. She turned with a glare at everyone – “It’s about time” she growled, even though they were slightly earlier than usual.

Then she softened up and, turning to Mary Beth, “We are out of eggs! Better get to the store this morning – I’ll take care of Chloe Ann and try to get some order around here!”

“You’re looking much better, Aunt Marge,” commented Albert, ignoring her tone. “And don’t worry about the eggs, dear heart (this to his wife), I will pick them up on the way home tonight.” Turning to Aunt Marge, “You don’t have to worry yourself about Chloe Ann.” Startled, Aunt Marge dropped her spatula and as she reached for it, she tripped over Miss Steria, catching her sleeve in the burner flame. Letting out a screech, she began racing around the kitchen waving her arm and screaming in pain. Everyone jumped up from the table but it was Albert who finally caught up with her and put out the fire. Taking her by the shoulders and guiding her into the small kitchen bathroom, he looked back at the crew, and said with a wink, “Okay, guys, finish your breakfast and get going! You have a busy day ahead of you,”

That’s when everything started happening. First the phone rang. It was Hubert Tyler, Lois’ husband. It seemed that Lois was having a terrible go of it this morning with severe morning sickness and desperately needed some of Mary Beth’s peppermint tincture to quiet the nausea – and could she have it immediately? “Come around to the back door, Hubert, and I’ll give it to you.”

Dad grabbed his briefcase that was somewhat puffed out and smelled suspiciously like eggs, oatmeal, and bacon and dashed out the front door. Jake took out for the front door, Rondo threw his oatmeal on the floor, Aunt Marge charged back into the room slipping on the oatmeal and grabbing the cabinet to keep from falling down, and Stella took Rondo down from his highchair and headed for the living room toy box.

That's when the back door bell rang. Aunt Marge made a grab at Chloe Ann but Mary Beth swept the baby out of her bassinet. "Relax, Aunt Marge, I've got this," she said, giving her a radiant smile. Hurrying out the kitchen door and through the breakfast nook, she scooped up her bottles of peppermint tinctures and then she slipped out through the passageway to the back door. From the kitchen she could be heard talking to Hubert Tyler with words of caring for his wife. "Here's the tincture. It worked wonders for me and I'm sure It will work for Lois. Tell her to call me if she has any questions."

While this was going on, in the kitchen, Aunt Marge was acting strangely. "I am warning you," came a snarling voice from the carpet bag. "If I don't have the babe by nightfall, you will be sent to the master."

"Please, please.....," groveled Aunt Marge.

"STOP SNIVELING AND DO IT!"

"Are you talking to someone?" asked Mary Beth as she returned to the kitchen, holding Chloe tight, and starting up the back stairway.

"No, of course not. Why don't you sit down and have a cup of my delicious coffee.....wait, where are you going?"

But mom and baby disappeared up the stairway, leaving Aunt Marge standing there holding the cup of coffee. This was very unusual. Mary Beth usually liked to sit and chat and drink her coffee – her coffee with Aunt Marge's "special" ingredient in it that is. It always calmed her down for the day (naturally heh, heh) and by the afternoon, after two cups of coffee and lunch, Mary Beth, Rondo, AND Chloe were out like lights.

This was the time that Aunt Marge and the master made preparations for setting up a horrible “accident” that would end in the whole house burning down with everyone – everyone that is, BUT herself, the Master, and the babe. Everyone else INCLUDING that cat would burn to a crisp. Just thinking about it brought an evil smile to Aunt Marge’s face. “Oh if they only knew,” she mused, “this is their last day on earth! Heh, heh” The Master shot stench out of the bag, which brought her back to the present. “Okay, Mary Beth,” she thought with great pleasure, “you will now find out who Aunt Marge REALLY is! Your dear old Gram chased me out of her gardens and banned me from earth in her time but that time is OVER and its payback time, Susan Alice!”

“What is keeping them?” the old hag thought. Mom and baby had stayed upstairs for a while – too long. Aunt Marge waited for them to come back down and finally decided to go up herself and see what was going on. Everyone was acting a little strange this morning, now that she thought about it. Surely those brats knew what was best for them and hadn’t told their parents about.... Then picking up the carpet bag, she started up the front stairway but was stopped by the bell -- the front doorbell that is. First there was a bell, than a knock and then the sound of Polly Pinkston’s voice, “Special Delivery for Mary Beth Miller.”

Irritated, Aunt Marge turned around and walked down the stairs. Sitting down her carpet bag and yanking the door open, Aunt Marge held out her hands for the package. “What are you doing here so early? Give it to me. I’ll take it to her,” she grumbled.

“I said Special Delivery to MARY BETH MILLER!” stated Miss Pinkston in a voice that very much sounded like an order – not like Miss Pinkston at all. “I am a U. S. Postal carrier and we have rules and regulations!”

“That’s okay, Polly, I’m here now,” said Mary Beth, as she reached around Aunt Marge, grabbed the box and turned and ran up the stairs. “I think I hear Chloe Ann,” she called over her shoulder. Her footsteps could be heard as she hurried along the upstairs hallway.

Aunt Marge whipped around to follow her, stepped on one of Rondo’s toys and skated across the floor on her way to doing the splits. “Clean this up NOW, Stella,” she growled under her breath as she pulled her legs together and, leaning on the rocker, pulled herself up to standing position. Rondo squealed with baby laughter and patted his little chubby hands together.

“Stella, bring Rondo upstairs and leave Aunt Marge alone for awhile, okay?” called their mother. The little girl took her brother’s hand and climbed the front stairs.

“Good riddance,” thought Aunt Marge. Just then, a crash was heard and the sound of a toy box being emptied on the back stairway reverberated until the last toy hit the bottom step. Aunt Marge put down the bag and hurried into the kitchen. Hmmm? That little deed had effectively blocked the stairway. “Is something going on here?” thought the old woman, with her first real sense of worry. Hurrying around to the front stairway, she was met by Miss Steria lounging on the stairway halfway up with her tail thumping the wood and her big yellow eyes staring straight into hers as if to say, “I dare you.” Aunt Marge and the Master reconvened in the kitchen.

Things were going on in the attic. Muffled voices and things were being moved around. But still Mary Beth hoped that blocking the stairway with toys and Miss Steria on the front stairs would keep the noise too far away to be heard. The old house had ten-foot ceilings, making the attic quite a distance from the ground floor and taking into effect that the walls were one foot thick, maybe Aunt Marge wouldn't be able to notice. Mary Beth locked the bathroom door with everyone inside and began filling the bath tub full of alcohol from her tincture stores. She then opened the box brought to her by Polly Pinkston. "Good going, Jake," she thought. Mrs. Wilson must have gotten the note that Albert wrote in the middle of the night and that Jake delivered. And it was full of exactly what she was hoping for. She mixed the crushed leaves and blossoms from Mrs. Wilson's garden with all of the alcohol that they had found in the house last night. She had plenty in her basement storage ready to use in her tincture-making business.

She then filled all of the bottles that they had collected the night before, opened the bathroom window and waiting outside of the little window hung a slender rope with a hook on the end. Carefully she hooked each bottle of tincture to the rope, jerked it and watched as it was pulled up to the attic. Mr. Goldsmith had installed the perfect pulley set-up, just like he had done in WW II during D-Day at Normandy, when the Army rangers scaled the cliffs and saved the world. Pulling up a few bottles of tincture was a piece of cake to him, she was sure. "Good job, George," she thought. Stella and Rondo were getting restless in the little bathroom. And true, the odor was getting pretty strong, she had to admit, even with the window open. It was then that she made a decision that she was later to regret. "Stella, run into the nursery and grab Rondo's blankey for me. Run fast!" She pushed her out into the hallway, counting on Miss Steria to keep Aunt Marge downstairs, and quietly pushed the door closed and latched it and waited.

Suddenly there was a knocking at the bathroom door and instead of Stella's voice, it was Aunt Marge's. "Mary Beth WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE and WHERE IS CHLOE ANN?"

"Don't worry, Aunt Marge, she's in here with me and we're just fine."

"I have Stella with me." She no longer sounded like Aunt Marge. "I think you had better come out."

"It's okay, Aunt Marge. I am just finishing my project, I will be right out. Just leave Stella right there and....."

"NO!" boomed the voice. "Come out now or YOU WILL NEVER SEE YOUR DAUGHTER AGAIN!!"

"Mommy, mommy, she's hurting me," cried Stella.

"Take your hands off of my Stella or I will....."

"Will what? You groveling little weakling, you couldn't even..." But suddenly Aunt Marge let out a cry of pain, and she dropped Stella who hit the floor with a thud. Mary Beth flung open the door and with Rondo under one arm and the baby carrier on her back, she stepped out into the corridor, just as Aunt Marge was being bombarded again and again with rocks fired from Jakes's secret weapon - his sling shot. He was stepping out from his bedroom door, taking aim and hitting his mark, then reaching back into his bucket of rocks, loading up again and firing. Miss Steria was amid the fray as well -- clawing the old lady in every bare spot she could find. Mary Beth, still with Rondo under one arm, the baby carrier hooked firmly on her back and Stella running in front, took off for the attic stairs. Up the

narrow stairs they went, into the darkness of the attic. It was only lit by a single light bulb hanging from a cord from the peak of the roof. Shadows danced around the room, but nobody could be seen. “Albert?” she whispered into the dark. No answer. She turned and waited, holding the frightened children close and trying hard not to be afraid. Waiting.....

The attic door squeaked opened below and angry footsteps stomped up the narrow attic stairs. A horrible stench preceded the appearance of Aunt Marge’s face that appeared first, followed by Jake’s face. His face didn’t look so good – in fact he was turning beet red. Aunt Marge had had a stranglehold on him and then.....something dark with those big red eyes came out of her bag. “Did you think a few pebbles would stop ME? OH NO! AND when the pebbles were gone, your boy here thought he could outrun me.....HA! And that stupid vile cat is GONE – you won’t see her again – she RAN FROM ME! When things got too tough – she left you like yesterday’s garbage! Oh by the way, she’s been around for a long, long time. Why she was born under your dear Gram’s porch, did you know that? Oh yes, don’t look so surprised, Miss Mary Beth. I know Susan Alice. Oh, I knew her well! She thought she had eliminated me, but here I am! She’s dead now, so I guess you will have to pay!

Mary Beth took a step towards Jake, whose face was fast turning purple. “Let him go please, I beg of you....” “

OH, NO YOU DON’T!” boomed the voice of the monster with a roar that shook the house and rattled the windows. “You will hand over the baby NOW or your boy will die a violent death,” and with that an evil laugh, “and you wouldn’t want us to do that, now would you?”

Her mind racing, Gram's words came back to her, "No matter what, Mary Beth, back away" and forced herself against her will to back away from Jake, her son. Keeping Stella and Rondo close against her body, she backed back into the deep attic, only stopping when she and the children were under the light, as they had planned. Scared for Jake, who was now lying limp on the floor at Aunt Marge's feet, she quickly unhooked the baby carrier, leaned down into the baby blankets and kissed the head of... Stella's doll! "Okay," she said in a loud angry voice, "Hand over my son first and then I'll give you Chloe Ann." And she extended her arms with the baby carrier with the rubber doll hidden inside, out in front of her.

"We must see the baby first," growled the monster. "Get over there, Evila! NOW!" Aunt Marge scuttled over to them dragging her foot. But folding the blankets back up, into her arms, Mary Beth took a short step back.

"NO" She commanded, "I will ONLY show my baby to the monster himself."

There was a huge bellow of flames that leaped out of the monster's mouth, with a stench that burned skin and eyes of everyone there. "GIVE ME THE BABE!" And suddenly the thing shot straight at Mary Beth and just as it reached her, an avalanche of vertaine tincture, full strength, cascaded down from the rafters like a waterfall, washing over the monster and Aunt Marge, covering them with liquid.

Steam hissed as the monster's flame was extinguished. The stench was instantly gone and replaced by the smell of verbenas. The monster howled an agonizing shriek that shook the house and rattled the window panes – and then all that was left of him was a burnt spot on the attic floor. This was

followed by a blood- curdling scream that pierced the air, and ....she vanished. In the stillness that followed, the sweet sound of a melody from long ago could be heard.

Albert and Mr. Goldsmith climbed down from the rafters. Mom and Dad rushed to the limp little boy on the attic floor and began working over him. There was a stunned stillness as everyone held their breath, fearing the worst. And then a gasp for breath and everyone cheered! Jake began to get the color back in his face after taking in a few big breaths and getting hugs and shakes and showered with kisses from his worried parents and everyone else. And then they all gathered downstairs in the living room with towels to mop off the tincture that had soaked their clothing. The signal went out when Albert rang the big brass bell on the front gate. And people began arriving at #502 even though it was quite late. Mrs. Wilson passed out hot cider and Polly Pinkson held out a tray of big ginger cookies to everyone at the door.

“Mom! Where is Chloe Ann?” wailed Jake and Stella at the same time.

“She stayed the day at the Tyler’s. Hubert picked her up this morning in a box that was supposed to be filled with peppermint tincture. And here she is now.” Hubert and Lois and Ralph came in the front door carrying a very fussy baby in their arms.

“And that fussing is music to our ears, said Albert, reaching for Chloe Ann.”

Albert had written short notes to his neighbors, telling them that his family was in danger and asking them for help. Jake was the messenger, delivering each note to their neighbors in the night. Then he brought his

weapon, as were his instructions, – the sling shot – and being the excellent shot that he was, his job was to hide and wait and divert Aunt Marge so that Mom and the kids could escape to the attic and then climb out his bedroom window and climb the ladder to the attic where dad and Mr. Goldsmith were hiding in waiting. This would give Mom and the kids time to get ready before Aunt Marge and her carpet bag followed her.

Mrs. Wilson grew amazing, prize-winning verbenas in her back yard and every year she collected their blossoms to make sachets. In her dream, Gram had tried to remind Mary Beth of the importance of verbaine – verbena - in getting rid of witches and vampires. Her grandmother had even given her a small bottle of verbaine tincture to use if ever she needed it when she was a girl. She had forgotten all about it until last night. She had put it on everybody as a defense. Mrs. Wilson as soon as she read the note this morning and had immediately called her friend, the mail carrier, Polly Pinkston and the two had put their heads together and had come up with a way to get that box of verbena seeds and pedals to Mary Beth.

“I almost thought we weren’t going to get it past her!” said Polly Pinkston. “But we did!” Everybody cheered.

Mr. Goldsmith’s instructions were based on his expertise in scaling cliffs back in WWII. He met Jake and they rendezvoused on the side of the house hidden by bushes and, together with Albert, had scaled their house to the attic window. Mrs. Goldsmith stood watch as the look-out. The two men had spent the day constructing the tubs used to contain the verbaine that Mary Beth made that day in her bath tub while Jake hid out in his bedroom, waiting for the chance to use his sling shot. The tubs were placed strategically on beams spanning the peak in the attic roof with a star marking the spot on the floor for Mary Beth to stand.

The plan was for Mary Beth to somehow entice Aunt Marge to the attic using the baby carrier with the fake baby and hopefully bring her bag with the monster inside. They had not counted on Stella being grabbed or for Jake to get stuck on his window sill, but somehow it had still worked out. Mary Beth was to stand on the small star on the floor in order for the tubs to be in exactly the right spot. Gram must have known what was going to happen with Jake and that his mom would have trouble leaving his side and backing away and so, in the dream, she kept trying to tell her “back away, back away, Mary Beth,” -- and now she knew why.

“It almost didn’t happen when I saw what they were doing to Jake. But I got a grip and backed up,” explained Mary Beth. “I just hurried as fast as I could.”

And the Tylers had taken Chloe away in a box that morning and had cared for her all day. There was one thing that Aunt Marge did that worked in their favor – Mary Beth had used a small amount of the mugwort that morning for settling down Chloe until she was safely away.

Everybody praised Jake for his courage and Stella for throwing the toys down the back stairs, PLUS standing up to Aunt Marge in the kitchen. “But the real heroine is – and pointing to the big gray cat on the white pillow on the blue and white checked chair – Miss Steria,” said dad, and they all cheered. Miss Steria simply soaked up the praise and primped her magnificent tail. And then they all sat around the fireplace, with its logs glowing, drinking cider, eating cookies and recounting the day’s activities, including tales of climbing the cliffs of Normandy, as told by George. Then everyone filtered out into the starry night and sleep descended on Willowtree Lane. The fragrance of verbena and a song from long ago lingered in #502. Sleep.



The next day Miss Steria went out for a stroll and didn't return. The whole family knocked on doors up and down Willowtree Lane but alas, she seemed to have vanished. With tears, the children went to bed in their own beds this night with the promise that they would get another kitten soon. And life went back to normal. Jake was usually late to school with his hat on sideways, the washing machine stopped washing again, Stella started talking.....and talking.....and....., Mr. Miller raced to work each day and raced home, Rondo tore things up in his little 2-year old way, Chloe Ann started waking up in the night again, and Ralph kept knocking over trash cans. Life was good.

And two blocks over, a sweet baby's cry could be heard through the lace curtains in another big old house. A familiar tail is seen disappearing through the front door that was, interestingly, left ajar. The laughter of a visiting grandmother is heard and a florist delivers a bouquet. Nice. Very nice. But wait. What is that in the attic window? Could it be? I think it is. The nasty glow of ....evil ...in the form of flaming Red Eyes staring out at us.....

“

*A familiar tail is seen disappearing through the front door that was, interestingly, left ajar. The laughter of a visiting grandmother is heard and a florist delivers a bouquet. Nice. Very nice. But wait. What is that in the attic window?*

Beware of old ladies carrying big bags....

Wait a minute! -

That could be ME!

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FINIS

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FROM THE AUTHOR

I know it's long but the story just rolled along and I finally just gave up and let it.

Hope you like it!

Here's the song that Mary Beth's gram sang to her.

Irving Berlin – Always Lyrics

*HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

*Love you*

*Witchy Mama*

*Xoxoxo*

VISITATIONS & GHOSTS

# SATAN'S WOODS

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, PhD, October 2023*



Once upon a time many years ago, a little boy walked into a woods with his little dog and they were never seen again. His parents became worried at first when he didn't return to their homestead by nightfall but then frantic

as they began pushing further through the fields through the tall grass and calling his name but there was only the sound of the wind. Neighbors heard them and their dogs barking and came to help. Within the next few days, neighbors in surrounding farms as well as villagers combed the area. Bordering their property on the east was a large, wooded area that surrounded the farms stretching for miles towards the mountains. It was called Satan's Woods by the locals because of stories that those who entered in the darkness of the trees would never return. On dark nights, it was known that a putrid smell would drift out from the woods and strange and piercing sounds could be heard as if something or someone was caught in a trap. On rare occasions, a green mist would rise above the trees in a giant cloud and then with a crackling sound it would seem to shatter into a million pieces in the air. About halfway through the forest and cutting it from north to south was an old, rutted road worn into the soil by carts pulled by oxen or mules. Some would drive their teams that way but whipped them hard so as to not tarry long. A man in times past was said to disappear in the middle of the curve in that road seemingly abandoned his cart in the middle with his oxen. After that and for days after, travelers along that route reported hearing a man's voice calling for help. But no trace of him was ever found. Others who found themselves wandering on Devil's Curve as it came to be known, reported hearing the sound of voices coming from deep within its darkness inside. The Satan's Woods had a rotten smell of dead animals, but the curves's odor was a stench that caused their eyes to burn and pain in the heads who took their time getting through. When the moon was full, the forest lay in silence not even for the sounds of owls or coyotes.

The search for Teddy continued on for a couple of days staying in the fields until finally someone said, "We need to go in the woods." A murmur went through the crowd and some refused outright. Fear grabbed the hearts

of even the toughest men who seemed to find excuses to get back to their homes. But about that time, three brave young men from out and around stepped up and volunteered to go into the forest. “We ain’t scered,” they boasted as they held up their lanterns. Two had shot guns and one, Zeb, the biggest and hardiest boy in the area bellowed: “We are coming in to get ya Teddy and turning to the crowd, he held up a large knife flashing its blade in the light of the sun, “We ain’t afraid of no ghost or monster!” But they should have been because.... only one of them came out.

The sun was at noon when the people gathered around waved good-by and off the young men tramped with arms draped over the other’s shoulders like warriors heading into battle. Their voices could be heard as they called to one another until finally they couldn’t be heard anymore. The forest seemed to have swallowed them up. Hours seemed to drag by and the afternoon stretched long. Evening was close when suddenly those who were waiting on the fringe said that they began to hear moaning noises as those some animal was in pain. Fearing that the boys were hurt, a few brave men grabbed their shotguns, headed into the trees, and tried to follow the boys path into the woods by following their footprints in the dampness. But darkness began falling and they said they “lost their bearing so they turned back.” Another hour and then a buzzing sound that that started out as a low murmur and began to get louder. “This is the sound on Devil’s Curve, one said but then some thought they it sounded like voices calling in a whisper while others thought it was the sound of the trees themselves.

And then, just when all hope for the boys was fading, the full moon rose over the trees, the sounds went silent and in that moment one of the boys came stumbling out through the trees. It was Zeb, but now, he was no longer the brave warrior. No not now. His clothes were ripped and torn from catching on branches and twigs and he was covered with scratches and

cuts. He burst out from between the branches. Terror was in his eyes and he gasped once and fell face down on the ground . The crowd pushed forward kneeling around him. His father pushed through the circle and threw himself over the boy, begging him to speak to him. Zeb slowly rolled over and tried to talk but his sobs shook him so hard that it took a while to speak. Everyone leaned in and strained to understand what he had to tell.

When he was brought into the light of the lanterns that had been lit, he began to tell his story. He described the three walking in a dense thicket of woods where the tall trees were so close together that it was hard for them to push through. “There weren’t nothin’ there except trees and bugs. Oh yeah, there was that buzzing sound.” One of the boys, Jarod wanted to turn back then but Zeb kind of gave short laugh then, and then caught himself and said low under his breath, “We called him a coward, Elias and I so he stuck it out.” “

“Where is he? Where’s my son?”

“Let him talk,” somebody said.

“ What about the buzzing?” came from the crowd, “Did you find out what it wuz?”

“Nope,” he said looking up into the crowd. “But boy did it get loud and stink!”

But we kept goin’. We kept on walkin’ durn near all ta afternoon. We looked everywhere for that kid Teddy and...we yelled our voice out. We thought he musta gone another way cuz he weren’t here. It was spooky in there – quiet – nuthin except us makin a noise.” But when the sun began to

set and the way was harder to see even with their lanterns, they came upon the Devil's Curve. I knew it cuz it was coming across our path coming out of forest down on the right and bending around and up to the left and it stunk like high heaven. We all just about puked and our eyes burned shut. "The buzzing sound was hurting their ears by that time, and it seems that they were feeling the pain of their boots rubbing their feet from tramping through the branch strewn rocky floor of the forest and so they decided to sit down on the boulders beside the path and have themselves a smoke. "We was just getting finished lightin' up when I thought I saw something hanging on a broken branch across the path. "Whatz that?" I says. I pointed it out and Jarod, he right away jumps up and starts running to it. I told him it might be somethin' bad but he says, "I ain't no coward, no sir and he runs over there and grabs it off the tree and yells "It a hat!" and then he says "Come on. This has gotta be the kid's hat. He's around here someplace and I'm goin' find em." and then he took off like something bit him and started running up to the curve. Elias started after him but I had to put my boots back on. I started runnin' but had to go back and get my knife.

Zeb stopped to sucked in a breath and looking up at his dad, he then started sobbing again. "I tried to stop em dad, I swear to God, I tried. But they kept on goin and they wouldn't listen." He continued going back and forth picking up pieces of the story and then trying to make the folks understand. Some were rocking on their feet in growing anxiety. "I was holding the big knife out front in my hand just in case, and boy did I run as fast as I could but I twisted my ankle," he pulled up the leg of his pants to reveal his leg black and blue and swollen over his boot top. I dropped it. My knife and I had to crawl in the mud to get her.



The story continues after a brief time to look at his ankle.

“What happened to my boy?” shouted Jarod’s dad.

“Well, he said, I could see them ahead and hear them yelling to each other when suddenly he heard a loud pop and when he looked ahead, he saw them in the last light for just a moment – not even a second and then.... they vanished....

“VANISHED?” the whole crowd gasped in unison. “What do you mean? VANISHED? WHERE ARE THEY?” They were getting agitated.

“I thought I was a seein’ things.” Zeb whispered. And then louder, “They wuz there and then...they weren’t.” He paused. “I walked right up to where they disappeared, but all that was there was that little brown hat layin’ right there on the ground. I yelled out their names begging them to come back but they wouldn’t answer me. And when I looked down at the mud for their footprints, they weren’t none. No siree they just stopped and “there was nothin’ there, I tell ya! It was like they never wuz there. Right there in the mud nothin’ no footprints, no nothin’.” He stopped. The crowd waited. He continued.

“

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*I thought I was a seein’ things. They wuz there and  
then...they weren’t.*

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“Then that buzzin’ noise hit my ears like a dad burn hyena – my eyes watered so much I couldn’t get my eyes open. It felt like something heavy was comin’ down on me squishing me. It was on top of me smotherin’ the wind right outta me. I was about ta puke. The whole place started changin’ colors and I could smell something strong and I thought I was going to fall down or pass out. It got green -like and I pointed my ole knife at the sun and flashed the light right back at the dark,” and he patted it as he spoke, “that’s when my head cleared up and I knew I hadda get outa there FAST. I tell you, I yelled for em agin but they had went or somthin had em. I got up and as fast as I could and started runnin for my life. I didn’t stop till I saw you all. The boy kept talking through his sobs. The crowd pushed close around him trying to make out what he was saying. His voice rose and fell with the sound of his sobbing. Then he fell quiet while his mother washed his face with her kerchief. He opened his mouth and seemed about to say something more, but his head lolled back and his eyes rolled white and Zeb fell back and fainted dead away. The hat was crushed in his fist and his big knife lay in the grass beside him.

The crowd began to spread out and go to their wagons. Zeb was led away but his voice carried through the night air as he sobbed, “I thought I could hear screamin” from somewhere back in the woods but it was too far away. I was sceered and couldn’t breathe. ” His voice trailed off as his family held him up on both sides and led him across the grass.

This tragedy was felt by everyone in those parts because it split everyone up.

The families of the young men who had not returned with Zeb huddled together crying and holding one another that first night. But by week’s end some had worked up a rage and gathered together those who

wanted to search the bend for the boys. They organized a group of other angry citizens planning to search the Devil's curve and the woods around them and if the boys weren't found, then they began to discuss secretly a plan to lynch Zeb accusing him of murdering their sons and lying about it. The energy of the group grew until one night with burning torches and hoods covering their faces, they drug the boy out of his house after beating his parents and tying them up. And then dragged him through the woods to the curve in the road to hang him. But that fell through when members of that mob also disappeared right before their eyes on that piece of the road and when they did, the rest of them dropped everything and all scattered leaving Zeb to make his way back home. He was never the same after that . And it wasn't long before, his family packed up their carts and took whatever they could and left leaving their place to stand empty until a bunch of hooded figures, one dark night, burned the place down. It was fear and rage that turned the community into a time when neighbors took sides against their neighbors, a fight that remained for the next 100 years. As for the young man Zeb, he moved far away with his family but he never outlived his feeling of shame. After all, he was the one who survived.

Teddy's parents, Elton and Molly Fleming, had disagreed with even looking in the woods, at first, because they firmly believed that their son would never go into that dark place. As small as he was, they reasoned, he wouldn't have been able to walk that far for it was about a quarter mile from their home to the edge of the woods. They may have been afraid as well because of the dark history of Satan's Woods. The recovery of Teddy's hat changed everything. When it was held up for them to see, Molly ran forward and snatched it out of the hand that held it and her scream echoed through the hollow and some even said they heard it from a mile away. She threw herself backward into her husband's arms and then getting a second wind, she pulled away from his arms and charged through the crowd and

began pounding Zeb about his head, “He’s out there in the dark. Go back and get him!!” She was pulled away, fighting until she finally collapsed. Oh no oh no oh no,” she sobbed as she was carried back home by those who gathered around both young grieving parents.

Elton and Molly Fleming stayed in their homestead, but without Teddy, their hearts were broken and the farm went to ruin while they waited for their darling little boy to come back. They never stopped believing that Teddy would come home. They say that Molly lost her mind and died young. His dog came back.

Years went by and life in the little village went on and the story of the boys vanishing in the forest and the little boy who never came home passed down from generation to generation. Kids and even some adults liked to sit out under the stars and listen to the sounds coming from the woods and watch for the green mist to rise in the trees as it did on a time when the moon was dark and new. One school girl doing a science project on the woods and after sitting on the edge of the curve in the road for one full month, found that the weird noises and the heavy air only happened when the sky was dark – never when the moon was full. At those times, the woods were silent – no strange sounds – no voices – no buzzing no mist rising. After that it was said that only witches danced under the moon on the edge of the road but still only the very brave. But even for most “non believers, none of them ever took a chance to venture inside the darkness moon or no moon.

Those in the small farms around the village knew the story and stayed away from that woods and the Devils’ Curve in the road if they could – they had seen the green glow and heard the buzzing and felt the heavy air at times. But there were those who ventured into the woods on other times

when the moon wasn't full either by accident or to prove their courage and some came out and some didn't. For those who didn't, there were sometimes search parties sent out to try and find them but reports from those who were actually in those search parties said that they didn't go in very far although they reported that they did.

The county took back the property and a small wooden sign went up on the side of the road next to the beginning of the curve that split off to the road leading up to the old Fleming place as it came to be called, and on it was painted in big black letters: For Sale. But those newcomers who inquired always backed off after hearing the stories although they wouldn't admit that that was the reason for their change of heart. The sign weathered over the years and the paint peeled off in places and cracks appeared across the front as it sank deeper in the earth.

One day, a man, by the name of Walter Higgins and his family from the coast back east rolled into the area with his family on a cart pulled by a couple of tired mules, took a wrong turn, bumped down the road bordering the woods and rolled past the sign. Then stopped and got down and took another look at the sign. So, Mr. Higgins, decided to camp there for a spell, looking things over what with the road full of ruts. He walked the road to the farm house and saw that the roof was caved in on one end of the house and almost completely gone on the barn. He walked closer and was surprised to see that the house was more of a large cottage with a big porch in front. He had to tromp his way through because the weeds and grasses were taller than the porch. He had left their old place on the inner banks when the storms had washed his place all away for the 3rd time and now he was searching for a little bit of land that was cheap. But as he eyed the rolling hills, he wondered if it was good for growin something other than grass. He brought the cart around and parked out from the house because

the kids said the place they were parked out by the fork in the road was making them sick. One morning he woke to the smell of grits frying inside the house. And when he it checked, he found his wife Emily standing in a kitchen swept clear of the clutter, standing in front of a wood stove with an iron skillet sizzling on top. She was singing her morning song for the first time since they left the coast. The windows were opened letting in the summer breeze and the morning sun was shining in bringing with it the sound of the birds. The children were gathered around an old wooden table waiting for breakfast. “Mornin’ dad!” They all sang out. “Mom says we’re home.” He looked at her and she smiled, that smile that always melted his heart– and well that settled it! Walter Higgins made it known that he was an interested buyer.

People all around the county were glad to see somebody take it because it was a haven for tramps and gypsies and other vermin, as they called them. Everyone agreed to keep the old stories of the past to themselves until the Higgins moved in and maybe not even then! But the registrar of deeds in the magistrate’s office asked him if he knew the story of the Satan’s Woods and when the answer was “nope” the official spilled the beans. But Walter Higgins or Walt as he preferred, was “no sissy” he said and he was not going to let a bunch of trees scare him. And that was that.

They got busy fixing it up and clearing the fields and all his neighbors jumped in to help – always bypassing the bend and the woods of course.

Over the years, he lost some livestock that seemed to disappear mysteriously, but he didn’t blame it on the road – at least not to others. “I am not a believer!” He said to everyone who brought it up. But in his heart of hearts, he knew that there was an odd sound that came out of those woods at times and the heaviness in the air caused a feeling behind a

person's eyes to the point that they felt like they were floating. Another thing was that the deeper you went inside the woods, the feeling of dizziness caused a person to be wobbly on their feet and it was likely that you would begin to lose your way. Also, colors changed almost like looking up from under water to a sunny day. Higgons was a smart man and stayed clear of Satan's Woods except on a full moon when he harvested the mushrooms and wild onions that grew near the edge.

One day a man in a Sunday suit came in a buggy to knock on the door of the cottage. He said he was from the highway commission and wanted to talk about getting permission to build a big road over the curve through the middle of the woods from an old path through the mountains. He showed him the plan, laying it out on the kitchen table. The plan was to make a curving road that branched off from the current road on the south around and back to the same road on the north. Walt Higgins sat there thinking to himself of the woods itself and the possibility that something dangerous might come of it. And then the man opened up his bag and pulled out a quill. A fair sum of money was offered, and as he looked around at all of the things that needed fixing and the dress that his wife wore that was her only one, Walter Higgins took the quill in his hands and signed the contract. Later, he made a trip to town took it personally to the bank to make sure the check was good. It was good! And soon the sound of workers with their horses and carts could be heard as they began to clear the woods for what would later be called "The Devil's Curve." It was supposed to end up a road with two lanes that actually had room for two carts to pass one another. It curved from the south side and came out two miles out the north end making a big curve.

Things started out in high gear but It soon became apparent that something was wrong. Workers began walking off the job and talk at the local taverns was that some had actually gone missing and there was much chatter among the townspeople. Other carpenters and workmen said there were strange beings visiting their campsites at night while others attributed that to the gallons of moonshine being passed around among them. Six months was the time allotted for the work at the beginning but because of the strange things that went on, workers began drifting away. One morning, out of 30 men on site, only 3 were left causing construction to be halted. It was begun again with prisoners from the local jail. But they didn't stay. Fall turned into winter and the wheel of time kept rolling. Work finally came to a stop for good. They all gave up and went back where they came from. The state sent a letter about the check they had paid in the beginning but when Walt responded with a hand- written letter that charged them with damages on his property, the letters stopped. The curve was cleared through the woods and so travelers still used it although it was rough. The road smoothed out a bit but was almost always muddy. So many accidents occurred, and the air was so putrid and heavy that that piece of road was referred to as Devil's Curve. It was years before the little stretch of road was finished and by that time several generations of Higgins had gone by. But from that time until present day, people driving the Devil's curve report feeling the heaviness of the air, smelling the stench that burns their eyes and nose, and hearing the buzzing in their ears that seems to abruptly stop the instant that they pull away and enter the straight road. For this reason, people have been known to speed around the curve, breaking the law and county records can verify that more wrecks occur on Devil's curve than is normal. But repairing it was always put on the bottom of the list. "Rural road?" They asked whenever it was mentioned, "Who goes there anyway?"

Generations of Higgins passed the farm down from one to another. The little house had grown over the years with rooms added and improvements made and it was a lively meeting place for friends to gather. A big green lawn bordered by flowers of every color and a white picket fence stretched out in front of the house where generations of Higgin's children had played. A fence was put up on the edge of the woods to keep the livestock contained it was said but everyone knew that it was to keep kids from walking through it to the Devil's curve because of all the woods, That's the place where the strange things always happened as though the workman of the past had put the curve right over a place of evil.

The legend of Teddy and the boys who were lost had been the theme of many campfires and the story was a good one to tell on Halloween. But interestingly, although some kids had secretly climbed the fence and ventured into the woods without telling their parents and some had actually gone as far as the Devil's, Curve, but nobody had ever actually stepped out on the curving road or at least if they did, they never told. However, they did tell about the haze that lingered made it hard to see and the strange behavior of the birds and bats as they would dive bomb passing travelers and even those walking on the road were bombed.

It was a beautiful fall day in Alexandria. The weather was balmy, and the leaves were beginning to change color. Traffic had slowed down mid-morning but in the small coffee shop on the square, it was coffee break time. Emi Lawrence sat sipping her cappuccino in the corner on her break while leafing through a small book entitled "The Haunted Highways of America" that someone had left behind on her table. One of the stories caught her eye: "Satan's Woods and the wicked Devil's Curve within. A ghostly road in Pennsylvania where people disappear and are never found."

There it was - her families' farm. Seriously? She thought. Was it her farm? She scanned the first page and to her delight - so it was. The article described reports from people in the area sharing their experiences of driving through The Devil's Curve, which was the curving road that sliced through the large, wooded area on their family's farm. The article had parts of interviews of the locals who reported hearing strange sounds from the woods that sometimes sounded like people from a distance and part about the investigations that had gone on of that area. But hey! She looked at her watch. She had a deadline to make for her column at the Tribune, Emi Lawrence's "Talk". She nodded at the cashier and held up the book and was given a nod, "Go ahead and take it. It doesn't belong to the shop" the cashier said. Emi slipped the book into her purse, grabbed her coffee and rushed back to the newsroom and was immediately gobbled up by the sounds and rush and energy of it.

It was later than usual when she hurried out of her building, but she felt invigorated after meeting her deadline – once again. "I'm so good," she laughed under her breath. Human interest – that's where she belonged at least for now while the kids are young. Who knew? She had won many awards for her provocative stories from war zones and mountain tops. It was funny, she had never wanted to be locked into a newsroom. She had started out doing war zone commentary as a junior member of the team and later moved into a correspondent position after she was called to fill in or a fallen journalist in Iraq. She became known for her willingness to take chances and would jump at the chance to go anywhere in the world on a moment's notice. "This is Emi Lawrence of CBS news reporting live from the middle of an active war zone in...." or "an earthquake in Chile." Her actual news reporting under pressure was considered by some to be bold and courageous. Little did she know that she would soon face a dangerous and terrifying situation – one that she wasn't prepared for.

She thought she had her future mapped out, traveling the world, meeting interesting people and then on a trip into the struggle in Israel, she met Phil. He was reporting from Tel-Aviv-Yafo and life took a turn. They seemed to cross paths all over Europe and the Middle East. When Phil was caught in enemy fire and injured, they married in the hospital. When the twins were born, they decided to go freelance and chose Alexandria, Virginia, close to the news hub, and settle in. Life was good in Alexandria, they got used to the life and along came Archie, a surprise bundle who was now an energetic, spunky 4-year-old. She laughed to herself at the thought of him and his shenanigans. Josh Eberly, an old colleague who was now the editor of the Alexandria Tribune gave her a call on the day that she had enrolled Archie in preschool, and made a deal she couldn't turn down, she took it. It all fit together – perfectly – especially since Phil was freelance. Now as she walked across the square to the parking garage, she brushed her hair out of her eyes and looking up, she was startled to see the waving of the branches of the red maples next to the sidewalk. A shower of fall leaves came fluttering down just then. The sky was yellow, and then she heard it – the whisper and she was hit with the absurdity that that old weird memory had come to her twice in one day when she so seldom even thought of it. For just this morning on while rushing back to the front porch from hurrying her kids out to the curb to get on the school bus, she had heard the trees blowing in a burst of wind and looking up had seen the big red maples swaying their branches in the breeze in the yard and again, the sky was a balmy yellow. A voice soft and faraway whispered ..... And there it was – that memory again. The memory was odd to her because it came to her only on balmy days like this and it didn't seem to have a purpose. She knew her grandparent's farm had something to do with it but again, she didn't know how it figured in, just that it seemed to. The thought came and it was gone. The one thing that always frustrated her about it was that she thought she could hear a voice but could never understand what it was saying. She

would think of it briefly and then not again until another balmy day with a yellowish sky and then – there it would be again. She always asked herself, “Is it the trees swaying like that that means something? The sky? The voice? But why? What am I supposed to remember? For a brief moment she always tried to understand what the voice was saying but then she would resume what she had been doing and not think of it again.... until next time.

She dug into her coat pocket for her car keys and felt the little book. She had not thought of it since she left the coffee shop. Nothing better, home, dinner, bedtime for kids, and a good book! Later after the kids were in all snuggled in their beds and the house was quiet, she sat there under the lamplight reading the short story about the Devil’s Curve. Their farm was mentioned a few times in the story and her grampa had even been quoted as saying that he believed that the woods really “needed to be studied for the weird abnormalities.” Emi jumped out of the chair and carried the book into the study. She spent the rest of the evening digging up everything she could find about that area, the town of Mountainview, and all of the reports that had been made clear back before the Civil War about that forest. This is only scratching the surface, she thought. There is something here. Thinking back as she climbed into bed beside a snoring Phil, all she could think of was that her childhood was normal. There were happy times spending summers and holidays at the farm. The only thing that stood out to her as she was falling asleep was that time when she got lost in the woods.

The next weekend, as Emi sat under a big hat on the bleachers with Phil and the girls watching Archie play his first game of soccer, she reached into her purse to grab her phone, once again she pulled out the little book. It fell open to the story and for a moment, her mind raced back to her families’ farm. She thought it was odd that she couldn’t remember them

talking about anything strange about the woods. But wait a minute, she remembered now looking into her grandma's eyes up closely and being told to "NEVER EVER go into that woods! Do you hear me Emi Louise."

The cheering of the crowd brought her back to the soccer game. Her mind switched to the sound of the crowd. When she looked out on the field, there was Archie running around the field carrying the soccer ball with a big happy smile on his face while the crowd roared with laughter. "Put it down! Put it down! "Phil and the girls shouted. "Mom! DO SOMETHING! He is embarrassing us!!!" The moms and dads who were doubling as coaches ran around trying to round all of the 4-year old soccer team and one of them finally chased Archie down and kneeling on one knee could be seen trying to explain the game of soccer. But now all of the kids on the field – both teams- got into running and kicking the ball or throwing it or just playing in the dirt. The teams fist bumped, it was over, and then ice cream! Such joy!

Later that night after the kids were in bed and Phil's snoring could be heard out in front of the television in the game room, she opened the lid on her lap top, took out the little book and started searching data again in her computer about the story to see if she could find anything else on the legendary story of Satan's Woods and Devil's Curve and the mysterious disappearances.

When Phil stuck his head in the door on his way to bed, she said "I'll come to bed in a bit. I think I need to write everything down that I can remember about the farm. There may be a story here."

"Don't stay too late," he said as he headed down the hallway.



As she sat there in the lamplight working, memories of her days when the family went to see her grandparents in Pennsylvania unfolded on the pages. It always started with a a long trip from their home in Springfield, Indiana to Mountainview, Pennsylvania. They had driven this route so many times that they knew it by heart. She and her siblings always knew they were getting close when they went through the small town of Mountainview and came to Freddie's Shopabit, a little shop on the corner of the turn to the road to grandma and grandad's. It opened with a screen door that had "Wonder Bread" printed on it. Her dad would pull into one of the 4 spots in front and they would all pile out. The shop was full of wonderful treats and stuff. There were bins of penny candy such as root beer barrels, Likemaid, bubble gum, Firecrackers, Licorice sticks; a red pop machine with glass bottles of root beer stood inside the door, and racks of pop guns, monkeys on a stick, and wooden gliders. It was a wonderful place. Mr. and Mrs. Duffy the shop owners always gave each of her siblings and herself a Black Cow – those big caramel suckers that would last the rest of the way. Dad would get his wallet out of his back pocket and pull out a couple of dollars to put on the counter. The old cash register would ring and they would pocket their candy and climb back in the car for the rest of the way. They all knew that it wouldn't be long now before they went around the curve, smelled that smell and then took the turn and down the bumpy road to grandma and grampa's house. Yay! She thought even now. She let her mind wander back in time.

She could see it now in her mind's eye, there she was pressing her nose against

the glass in the backseat window of the old Chevy and rocking to the side as dad swerved around the curve with mom telling him to slow down. She shivered as she thought of that smell – eeee that was terrible, she remembered – and wondered if they had ever found out where it came from. Surely, they had, she thought. After all, she would have been just 5 or 6 that year and that would be more than 30 years ago. Oh and that buzzing noise that Sonya, her big sister, said was a ghost about to get them. She laughed to herself thinking of Sonya now up in Montana with Ryan and the boys. I wonder if she still tells scary stories? She could feel traces of the excitement that she always felt as they bumped down the road and around the bend to her grandparents' farmhouse. Those were good times. She kept typing.

And Granny would be waiting with her bright smile and laughing voice. The house would be bright with a fire in the fireplace and there would be the familiar aroma of cookies in the air. Sonya and Troy, her older siblings would be sleeping in the back as always back then and her mom and dad would be speaking in low tones so as not to awaken them. The nights were dark at the farm which made a spooky sight with the moon shining through the trees, their branches bare. Halloween would have been just around the corner because every year for as long as she could remember, she and her family – aunts, uncles, cousins – the whole bunch made that trip to her grandparent's house this time of year for the big Halloween Trick or Treat Festival, and it was always wonderful.

Emi stopped for a moment to sip her now cold tea. She looked at her screen – 1:30 AM and thought to herself, 30 more minutes.

Down the dirt road and then there it was. Lights shining bright in the dark night. The door would swing open and there would be all of her cousins and aunts and uncles and then a time of hugging and exclaiming how big all of the kids were and, she could picture it now. What a wonderful childhood I had, she smiled, and now we're all spread out. We need to get together! She could see all the uncles crowding out the door to help dad haul in the bags and get them settled. They would sit around the fireplace and drink cider and eat grandma's iced sugar cookies. Emi usually fell asleep and had to be carried up to the attic room and tucked into the big bed under the eaves, she remembered now. Always the next day, Emi wrote, after breakfast, she would go with grandma out under the willow, taking a blanket to sit on and a pitcher with pretend tea. They had a special game of fairies out there if the weather hadn't turned cold. She was the baby cousin of the family and was always left out of their big kid games. But no matter. Grandma always gave her special attention. She even had a special drawer in grandma's big dresser that always had lemon drops in a little crystal dish just for her, a beautiful feather from one of the birds that filled the trees outside, and last but not most importantly, was her small round silver mirror with the word "Love" engraved on the back that Grandma had given to her on her 5th birthday this past year. After Emi had blown out her candles, she opened the small box with the mirror inside and after touching the engraving, she passed it around for everyone to see at the big table. She now remembered that Aunt Bea spoke up and told her that she and all of Emi's aunts as well as her mother all been given one on their 5th birthday. "You are now a registered Higgins female" she said. And everyone clapped. She pulled it out of her pocket and took it out of its soft blue velvet pouch that day, she remembered as they sat under the tree. And Grandma's words came back and whispered in her ear to keep it close because she said it was full of magic and would protect her. "Keep it near for it is your talisman."

“What’s a talisman, grandma?” Emi remembered asking her as the sound of the buzzing floated in the air.

“Someday, you will find out, my darling,”

Also on that day, Emi could see the breeze rustling the willow branches as she reclined on her back listening to grandma singing her Irish tunes to “call the fairies out to play,” she always said. That tree was surround with large flat stones forming a circle and that day they had made daisy chains and sipped their pretend tea while the big kids ran and played in the yard. Emi could still hear her voice, thin and high pitched with a sweet trill. Sweet grandma and granddad, she thought, I miss them. If only I could talk to them and hear their voices. Emi wiped away the tears and stood up to stretch. This idea of writing it down was turning into a real stroll down memory lane. She vaguely remembered the words to the song that grandma always sang. Too – ra-loo-ra-loo-ra in her sweet voice.

She must have fallen asleep because now, she vividly remembered waking up that day and her grandma was gone. The big kids were laughing and yelling at one another and she could have tried to join them, she thought looking back, even though she could never catch up but on that day, she remembered, she didn’t want to chase after the big kids. She started wandering in her grandmother’s garden, chasing butterflies. The grass was high, there was the sound of birds. The grownups were all inside. She remembered climbing over the wooden picket fence because she still had the scar on her knee where she scratched it on a nail. That was one of the first times that she hadn’t cried like a baby, she remembered. She reached down under the table and absent mindedly rubbed her knee where the scar had been. Why did I go over the fence? she thought to herself and then she remembered that she was chasing a big blue butterfly.

She was not supposed to leave the yard, she knew, but she had that day partly, she thought now, just to show the big kids that she could. But she had gone too far and before she knew it, she was at the edge of the Satan's Woods. She remembered now that she looked around and she could barely see her grandparents' house. It was just a speck in the distance and her cousins were running in the yellowing grass playing tag. But she didn't care about them for some reason. The sound of the trees lured her further inside. The buzz, that smell.

Emi stopped typing. There was a gap. She couldn't remember what came next and then she vaguely remembered that she was inside of a swirl of bright colors and was being pulled through a tunnel. "I must have fallen asleep and was dreaming – that's all, she thought now and wondered why she hadn't thought of this before. And then somebody pointed a flashlight in her face and yelling "HERE SHE IS! SHE'S HERE! "The ground was wet and cool beneath her, she remembered, and it was so very dark. Her whole family seemed to be closing in on her. Her mother's face suddenly pushed down to look in her eyes and then grabbed her in a tight squeeze and sobbed as if her heart was breaking. She remembered that she couldn't breathe against the beating of her mother's heart. And then she could. Questions flew from every direction. "Why, why, why, did you go into Satan's Woods? How did you get to Devil's Curve? Emi Louise!!!!" Questions were coming from everyone. "What's this?" someone said. She was clutching her little mirror in one hand and it was covered in mud.

But she wasn't listening. There was a moment of memory of tree branches waving in the wind and a yellow sky and a strange voice that seemed to come from far away and now she could barely make out what it was saying: "Emiiiiii, Emiiiiii, Welcome Emi Louise welcome." And then a

loud popping sound from somewhere and then it was gone! She tried to capture it again, but it was gone. And now she found herself sitting at the kitchen table being examined for bites or cuts by everyone.

Emi stopped. She looked at the clock – 3:00 AM!!! What was she thinking?? It was late – I’ve got to stop, she thought. But something had happened in that woods and she was there, and it was starting to come back. Who was calling my name? she thought as she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning at breakfast, Phil watching the breaking news and gulping his coffee as usual said, “So, how did it go?” When she didn’t answer right away, he added, “You know your research into the Haunted Highway?”

“You mean Satan’s Woods and the Devil’s Curve? I am going back.”

“Wait, what? Going back where?”

“I have to Phil. Maybe it’s nothing but I want to know. I’m going to talk to Mr Eberly this morning and see if he will let me do a piece on it. You know, like returning to the scene or something like that? It would be fun to take a trip up there anyway PLUS she added, warding off his remarks, it will be right about Halloween. PERFECT! They have a great Halloween Festival in that town close by. The kids could miss a couple of days at school.”

“Hey, he said as he kissed her good-bye, I’m in, chickedee. Just tell me when to start packing.”

Emma was surprised. It didn't take as much convincing as she thought it would with her boss, Mr Eberly. He was eager to give her the reins on this one. She was working on some others but she could take her work with her and so, after loading their SUV and picking up the kids after school and preschool, here they were driving through the crisp fall air to the small town of Mountainview, Pennsylvania in the Poconos.

While Phil drove, she read through the notes she had taken after digging up old news stories about the area, the history and even the deed of the family farm. She was surprised to see that it was extensive. She could see that this may turn out to be a bigger story than she had thought it to be. Little did she know. People seeing a green mist and hearing sounds was pretty standard for haunting stories but there was actually over 90 people who had vanished after entering that area and 26 car accidents with fatalities on that road that were on the books - documented by the county not counting the non-fatal accidents that were reportedly caused by the sound, the smell, increased pressure in the air. There were pages of them.

This story could catch fire! She thought. The forest sounded spooky but that crooked road called Devil's Curve seemed to be where most of the strangest things happened.

The first Mr. Higgins, her great, great, great, grandfather, that owned the place had been the one to agree to let the county put that crooked road through the middle of his forest property. And then he had made a path from the edge of the woods back through the trees to the Devil's Curve as it was now called. And that was back around 1870, she thought.

She contacted everyone in her family who had grown up on the farm and heard some pretty interesting stories from them but the ones who could have provided her with the legends and old tales were her sweet grandparents who had were no longer there would have been the ones who knew about the woods and the curve. “Grandma would have been the one to ask,” she admonished herself. After all grandma was born and raised on that farm and had come back to live after she and grandpa were married. Maybe she wrote something down, she thought. I’ll look.

She called her mom while on the road and was given the hiding place where the house key was kept. Family members who lived nearby had been taking turns visiting the place to make sure everything was okay ever since grandma had died. The farmland was leased out to neighboring farmers, but the house was now sitting there empty. “And stay out of the woods,” her mom added. There’s nothing in there but ticks and snakes anyway. At least that’s what I’ve been told. Oh and, I guess you probably know this, but don’t linger on that Devil’s Curve very long. Just hurry on through if you have to go down there. Maybe someday they will fix whatever is making that buzzing sound that drives everyone crazy and the smell...whew! Pretty strong.” Said her mom.

“What can you tell me about the legend of Teddy?”

“All I know is that a little boy got lost and they never found him. He wasn’t the only one either.”

“Really?” She acted like she hadn’t spent hours reading up on all of this.

“Oh yeah,” her mom said. “A kid in my class in high school disappeared on prom night. Some idiot dared him to do down on the curve and lie in the middle of the road. And he did! Probably drunk. His name was Stuart. Nice kid. Quiet. Anyway, he disappeared, and they never found him. The other boys were arrested because, well, maybe they were with him, and they thought they had done something to him. But they couldn’t prove it. I don’t think they did anything to hurt him. Some of them were friends of mine. They were all pretty nice kids. But it was such a tragedy. Nobody knows what happened to him.” She said.

“That’s about all I know. I do know that me and Sarah and Jolene and Eric (her sisters and brother) would have been grounded for the rest of our lives if we ever thought about climbing that fence.”

“Fence?”

Her mom laughed. “Oh baby. Your grandad put up a big fence across the back of the field right in front of the trees with a big sign that said KEEP OUT! Don’t you remember it? Maybe it had fallen down by the time you kids came along. And we all knew not to get near that fence and to stay off that old road. Warn the kids to keep out of there. Darn I wish I could make it up there and see you while you’re there. I miss you.”

“Hey we’re coming into Mountainview now, I’ll let you go. I’ll keep you posted. I love you mom.” And she clicked off.

“Kids! We are almost there – this is Mountainview. Look the old Shopabit is still there. Pull over, we’ve got to stop.” They all climbed out of the SUV stretching and looking around. And then they all marched into the tiny store. To Emi, it was like walking back in time. Gumball machines

stood like soldiers inside the door, old, faded Coke posters lined the walls over the wooden shelves and bins of penny candy fronted the counter. Behind the counter stood a white-haired man with a handlebar mustache who greeted them with a cheery “Howdy folks, welcome to Shopabit! Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.” While the kids perused the candy bins, and Phil checked out the newspaper rack for today’s paper, Emi explained that she was coming back to visit her family’s farm that was just north of the town. “Oh, you must be one of those Higgin’s,” he said with a wink. “So I don’t need to tell you to be careful going around that curve. Been lots of accidents up there. By the way, we are sure missing your grandma – your grandpa too. They were the nicest folks – always had a smile and a good thing to say. Everybody in this town went to their funerals. I tell ya, they don’t make em like them anymore.”

Emi nodded her head in agreement. She wandered around the little store, making sure to pick out some of her favorite candies from the bin. Everybody put their purchases on the counter and Phil stepped up just like her dad had always done, and settled up at the cash register. Walking out into the sunshine, she breathed in the brisk fall mountain air and thought to herself, “Oh yeah, this was a great idea to come. And who knows there might even be a story!” This was interrupted by the sounds of a scuffle. Gayle, with a firm grip on Archie’s upper arm, and Hariette with the other arm were holding him tight and yelling, “Look mom. Look what he did!” Archie’s cheeks were puffed out with wads of Double Bubble gum that he had helped himself to from the bins. As he wailed, candy and gum came raining down from his mouth, his fists, and his pockets. “Oh Archie,” she looked at the girls, “Okay, let him go. I’ll take care of this. Kneeling down and wiping tears from his face, “Hey buddy, you can’t just help yourself to stuff. Now daddy has to pay for it.” Four-year-olds!

Heading out through the mountains and forests of trees turning red and gold, they hadn't gone too far when they got near the Devil's Curve. Emi, gave Phil "the look". Earlier they had agreed to keep the stories about the curve a secret to see if the kids could tell, by the smell, when they were there. But there was no doubt about it. It was immediate. "What IS that sickening smell?" Harriett was the first one.

"Ooooo Archie just puked on me!" Gayle was next.

Phil started to pull the SUV over to the side of the road but Emi stopped him, "No NO Keep going until we hit the road to the farm. Just then something hit the windshield with a crash.

Before they could determine what it was that hit the car, another shriek from the back. "He did it again!" This was accompanied by sounds of Archie retching in the back seat.

Phil was slowing down getting ready to turn. Holding one hand over an ear, Phil looked at Emi "What's that sound? Do you hear it? It's giving me a headache!!!" Archie was crying now.

"There it is" said Emi, raising her voice and pointing to the turn off to the farm. And within 50 feet, the air was lighter, and the buzzing grew fainter.

Everyone piled out of the car and cleanup began. The kids started stripping off

their clothes, the girls still screaming at Archie who had a green tint to his face now.

“Welcome to Higgins Farm!” Phil said with a grin, trying to make light of a messy situation. As the bags were being pulled out of the back of the SUV,

Emi found the key above the door just like her mom had instructed and had pushed it open. The first thing she saw was grandma’s old green jacket hanging on a hook to the left just like always. She couldn’t help but reach out and touch it. She flipped on the light switch and the big room lit up. There it was – the house just like always waiting for someone to come in. It was a comfy sight with its overstuffed chairs and knickknacks on the shelves.

“Ooo, the girls said in unison, “It smells good in here,” and dropping their bags on the floor, they started exploring followed by Archie who had recovered by now.

“Wait for me!” He wailed.

“You girls get the attic room,” Emi shouted as they all disappeared up the staircase. “Archie, you will stay down here so we can keep an eye on you.”

“Ahhhhhhhh,” I don’t wanta mommy” He moaned.

Everyone settled in and then gathered in the kitchen for lunch. Passing out sandwiches from the cooler, Emi took them all on a tour of the old place. There was the old barn with the ladder to the loft, the pond with mallards nesting, the croquet corner that still had wickets stuck in the ground (Grandad was the champ- always), the training circle where the horses had been, the empty chicken coop – (no sounds of clucking now),

the fairy circle with the stones laid out around the big old willow tree and last of all, she took them inside to show them her little drawer in grandma's dresser. The children all oohed and awed when she told them about the lemon drops, the feather, and her little magic mirror. The little draw slid open and there in the little crystal dish were old lemon drops and a blue jay's feather, but her magic mirror was not there in the little blue velvet sleeve. And then she remembered losing it in the fairy circle that day after she got lost while playing fairies in the fairy circle. She remembers how hard she cried when she couldn't find it and how everyone helped look for it in the grass. But they had to stop looking when her dad honked the horn. "Come on," mom yelled. "It's time to go."

They all cried "Let's go look for it!" And down the stairs they ran, out into the fairy circle to spend the afternoon.

Emi took the blanket out and spread it out under the tree for them just like grandma always did. Phil came with a tray of fruit drink boxes and that's when they were told stories about The Devil's Curve and why they should not go there plus that it was the reason they all got sick. Emi leaned forward and said in a stern voice (much like her own mom's back then), "Listen to me! Stay away from that fence out there by the forest! Look at me!" They all looked into her eyes. "DO NOT, FOR ANY REASON, GO INTO SATAN'S WOODS – It's called that for a reason. AND STAY AWAY FROM THAT CURVE! Then she lowered a voice and said, "I don't believe in ghosts but whatever is in that woods around the curve in the road is what we are doing here.

They all looked at her with a questioning look. "Because" she said, "I'm going to find out! And write about it."

“Don’t worry mom, one of the girls said, and they both chorused “We don’t want to get sick!” Looking at each other they chattered “That smell was too sweet,”

“That sound – like a buzz,”

“What got me was.....”

Emi went back into the kitchen table and opened her laptop.

But first, she turned to Phil and pointing out the window towards the direction of the curve, “Wow!” Emi shook her head. That was much worse than I remember it. It’s probably because we’re not used to it.

“I’ll bet money that it is some electrical generator somewhere that’s sending out waves of energy,” Phil said.

But Emi pointed to her briefcase and countered, “This is one of the areas that has been tested for that and just about everything else according to the research I found. Actually, they did find something like you’re talking about, but they can’t seem to find where it’s coming from. I’m beginning to believe that something is actually going on and I wouldn’t be surprised if the government knew all about it. I am going to find out!

“Thata girl,” cheered Phil. “You go for it! Watch out whoever you are. Emi Lawrence is coming!” he said to the air.

The afternoon sped by and the only thing of note that happened was that Archie got stuck up in a tree and they had to get a ladder to get him down. And then when the girls weren't watching, he tried to catch a frog and fell into the pond, and he also got stung by a bee.

Dad fixed his standard steaks on the grill using the old grill beside the house and everyone was asleep by 10:00. Everyone except Emi who sat up late at the kitchen table, organizing her notes and setting her schedule for the next day – interviews, newspaper archives, area property tax rolls. But first on her list was taking pictures of the area and she was going to start with The Devil's Curve early in the morning as the sun was rising and before traffic gets busy, she thought to herself. She knew that Phil wanted her to wait until he could go with her but, she thought, we'll see if he's awake and ready to go at 5AM.

Morning came in the blink of an eye. Emi's watch twitched on her arm and she was instantly wide awake. Slipping out of bed, her feet touching the coolness of the hardwood floors, she pulled on her jeans, wiggled into a tee shirt and leaving him sleeping, carefully went down the stairs so as not to awaken the rest and out the front door grabbing grandma's jacket as she went. It was cold out there! The sun was barely shooting streaks into the early morning darkness as she pulled out of the driveway and headed slowly down the rutted drive towards the turnoff to the main road and the curve. Phil would be annoyed, she knew, but this was her thing, after all and if there was any danger, well she was just protecting him from it, right? she reasoned.

The farm road was rutted, and the car bounced around as she navigated past the edge of the woods, through the trees and hit the curve. The sun was peeking over the horizon as she found a level spot and parked

on the side of the road. She turned off the engine, leaned over to grab her camera and that's when she heard him giggle. "ARCHIE!" she shouted at the top of her lungs Twisting around to see him sitting in the backseat. WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THE BACK OF MY CAR?!

"Hi mommy," he whispered." He sat there in his Spider man jammies smiling back at her, but now with a worried look starting to creep across his little face.

"I'm coming with you, I'm Spidy Man." he said.

NO YOU'RE NOT! YOU ARE A NAUGHTY BOY!!" The light, she was going to lose the light she wanted for the pictures, she thought. He started to cry, and she calmed down a bit and jumped out of the car into the cold air, threw on the jacket and opened the back door. Leaning into the car, and folding him into her arms, she said, "Archie, you are going to sit right here and wait for mommy. Do not move. Don't get out of the car and I will be right back. Okay?" He nodded with a single tear dripping off his chin.

She closed the door and hurried up the slight slope in the road." "Perfect," she thought as she clicked off some shots. Then she started hearing the buzz and feeling the heaviness and knew she had better hurry back. And then out of the silence, she heard her car door open and a split second later, Artie brushed her leg as he ran past her shouting, "I run fast mommy!"

Emi screamed for him to stop and then tore off after him as now he was a small figure ahead. As she crested the hill, she was blinded by the morning sun as it came over the horizon between the trees. “STOP STOP ARCHIE STOP!!!” She could see his little form running at top speed and then.... he vanished into thin air. It was like he ran into a hole.

“ARCHIEEEEEEEEE! Her equipment landed in the ditch as she dug her toes in racing ahead, her heart beating hard in her chest, her legs aching and then a blast of icy air hit her full force in her face and chest and she felt herself being sucked upwards off the ground. She could feel the air pressure rise. She was in total darkness and pressure. “Mommmy” she could hear Archie’s voice as it sounded as if was coming from the bottom of a well. As she struggled to breathe, a swirl of brilliant lights of all colors came curling out of the darkness and swirled around her, lifting her high in the air and suddenly she felt herself traveling through a vortex of color speeding faster and faster through time and space. She tried to call out for Archie but her words would not come- just the buzzing sound of the vortex. At times she had the feeling that she was under water. She felt her ears pop and then she was set down gently on soft grass. The light uncurled around her and left her standing on a grassy hill overlooking a valley surrounded by high snow-covered peaks. The hill was dotted with red maples swaying in the breeze and the sky was a yellowish. The buzzing sound became voices as people began cresting the hill. She ran towards them and called out “My son! Have you seen a little boy?”

“We saw him, but they took him away.”

“WHO TOOK HIM?”

The crowd started talking all at once. Some tried to calm her down. And finally, an older woman, in overalls patted her and offered a small cup of liquid. “They already took him away, my dear. But don’t worry. You will see him again.”

But she couldn’t stop. Emi could hear herself screaming as if from a distance and finally she collapsed on the ground.” Where are we?”

A young woman in a bonnet stepped up and said in a voice that seemed to reverberate in the mountain air, “We don’t know where we are but some think this must be heaven.”

“NO,” shouted a man in a leather hide, “THIS IS HELL!”

The murmur of the crowd grew, and someone shouted, “I think we’ve been kidnapped!” Emi searched for the man who spoke first, “You said you saw my little boy?” They all nodded. “Who took him? Where is he?”

“They took him back to their laboratory and they are probing him like they do everyone who ends up here. They did it to all of us.” And there was yelling from the crowd.

“It hurts!” Someone shouted.

“We are treated like animals!” another yelled.

“That’s where we got these,” said the first man and pulled up his shirt and showed the tiny scars on his side.”

“Don’t listen to them, it didn’t hurt that much. I’m Elias, by the way,” and a young man with longish hair thrusting out his hand to her.

“I’m Emi.” She told the others. “How do we get out of here? Where’s the lab?”

The crowd went silent, the air seemed to close down and a voice behind her said,

“Hello Emi Louise. Welcome back.”

“

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*Hello Emi Louise. Welcome back.*

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That voice! It was the one that came to her in that memory. Emi whirled around and was face to face with a creature in a gray hood that seemed to be speaking from inside a hologram. A woman’s wrinkled face smiled out at her from the hood . “Come with me and we will find your boy. Archie, is it?” Enraged Emi charged the hologram, swinging her fists but was knocked back by an invisible shield. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY SON!!!!” Her cries filled the air and brought the sound of the crowd to a peak.



Darkness. She awoke on a cold smooth white floor in a cold white cell fronted by bars and blinking lights. Another person was there, she realized when she heard the voice. “Don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you.” And sitting on a white pallet was a small woman dressed in a long cotton dress with a white apron and a white lace cap and black lace up shoes.

Emi’s first thought was Am I on the set of a movie! Then, “Who are you?”

“Lucy O’Malley,” she whispered in a voice with an accent.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

“These are my clothes ma’m.” And then she added. “There aren’t many of us in here.”

“I saw a lot of people out on the hill. It looks like a lot.”

“Girls. Not very many girls, I mean.”

“Oh.” And then, “How did you get here?”

“I don’t know. Me and Tad wus runnin’ away from Mr. Morgan’s men. I think I’m in jail so they must have caught me. I don’t know where I am.” And she dissolved into tears.

“Who is Mr. Morgan and Tad and?” What were you running away from?”

“I was Miss Morgan’s maid, ma’am back in Jersey Town and Mr. Morgan were hurtin’ me real bad. Tad, too, so we runned away. But now.....and she pulled up her apron to cover her face, “some ghosts got me. “ More sobs. I reckon I deserve it.”

Noise in the corridor behind her and Emi turned toward the bars. Tall thin white creatures with long noodle shaped arms glided back and forth pushing gurneys that floated in the air. She watched in horror as they hurried by loaded with unconscious humans and animals lying on them. As she stood there in shock, one of the creatures stopped in front of her and pointed down to a gurney it was pushing. With one of 3 long pointed fingers, the creature pulled back the sheet to show Archie lying still as though he were unconscious or.... She gasped for air and tried to reach through the bars when one of his eyes seemed to flutter open to a slit and his lips moved just barely, “mommy.”

A burst of yellow light shot out of one of the creature’s “fingers” hitting Archie in the forehead and he went still. Emi was wild inside her cage, pounding and screaming until she felt the sting on her side and then darkness.

Back on Devil’s Curve, Phil had found their car sitting beside the road with the back door open. Archie’s dragon that he carried everywhere was in the back seat, so he guessed what had happened. Further on down the road, was the camera equipment and Emi’s phone. “Darn it Emi! Why won’t you list to me!” he muttered while pulling out his phone and calling 911. Law enforcement and emergency vehicles from all over the area came in droves. When it was found out that Emi Lawrence, renowned reporter for the national news was the person who was missing as was her 4-year-old son, the news broke all over the U.S. and by evening it went worldwide. Giant news

trucks from every network rolled into the little town with reporters and technicians bringing with them of every kind along with their equipment. Now helicopters buzzed the air like flies. News reporters stood just out of distance of the Curve, and lights from newscasters broadcasting to audiences all over the area could be heard up and down the road that was blocked on the end of the curve.

“Acclaimed journalist Emi Lawrence awarded for her courage in the war in Iraq and as you many remember was awarded the Bayeux Award given to war correspondents covering conflicts for her stories from Afghanistan and Iraq was the person has gone missing along with her 4-year-old son Archie on a strip of road in Pennsylvania known for other mysterious cases of missing persons.....”

“Search parties from the U.S Marine Corps Reserve out of Allentown, Pennsylvania are now being dispersed along Satan’s Woods and Devil’s Curve outside of Mountainview, Pennsylvania looking for Emi Lawrence, the missing news reporter and her son that we have been following for the past 12 hours.....”

Emi’s family rushed to the farmhouse from coast to coast to join Phil and the girls and to fend off the news media. They all gathered together around the television not wanting to miss a single report and hoping and praying for Emi and Archie to come home safe.

Emi found that she now had those needle marks on her side as well. She could tell that they worked as sensors for white lights that burned when a person tried to get out of their cage or moved in areas that were guarded. Now, she found herself out in an enormous space of glass-like flooring under a massive glass dome milling about with the people that she had met

on the hillside. She recognized the few who had spoken to her. One of the women, lightly touched her arm. And when she turned, she saw the face of a woman of about 30ish wearing clothes that reminded her of the mom on Leave it to Beaver.

“This place is where they put us for a short time. It is the only time that we can be with the others.”

“How did you get here – first?” Emi asked.

“We had a flat tire out on a highway. And while Ed was changing the tire, I got out of the car – he told me not to but I did anyway” with a sob. She continued, “And I remember that I started walking - I just looked around and I don’t know what happened. It was like I was being shot out of a cannon and I landed on a hill – like you did. Everything lands there. I don’t know why. Be careful, those “things” indicating the creatures, have something that shoots out of their fingers. They are monsters! I’ve had it happen to me and it causes you to faint. I keep thinking someone will come and rescue us but so far..... I should never have got out of that car.” And she held out her arms in a sense of hopelessness.

“We’ve all been shot at some time or other,” speaking of the finger zappers, a young man in high boots and a straw hat had joined them. “Be careful. Don’t go close to the far end. There are wild animals and such behind the glass – and they’ll try to attack you.” He looked around at the gathering group of people, “You know, like they did Jarod.” They all nodded.

“Does anyone know if there are children here?” She asked to the gathering.

“I think they keep them in a different place,” one man said and other’s spoke up to agree.

One young woman nudged her as they were about to be transferred back into their cells, “I thought I saw Annabell, my little sister, once over there behind a fence. A couple are in cages.” and she pointed back over her shoulder. “She waved at me,” she said with a sob . “She only 3 years old.” Emi rushed to the fence and there he was huddled down against the wall. She opened her mouth to call to him but nothing came out. Sound was being blocked.

Time seemed to go on and on without end. During those times, when the humans were transported to the place under the dome, Emi spent her time getting to know everyone and her questions always centered around the same questions:

What had happened to them?

Where were they now.

And how did they get here?

One of the questions she asked was what was the year that they had come through the tunnel was interesting. The dates of their entry were varied, and some had to guess but the clothing that they wore as well as their memory of what was happening at the time put some of them back in the days before the Civil War and some even earlier. This apparently had been happening for at least 200 years – maybe even longer. But the portal that she had started thinking of it as – the place where they remembered being when they were “taken” was always the same. They all remembered being

on the same spot which was either on the road or in the woods - probably before the road was put in. And another similarity was that they all felt the light of many colors carrying them through a vortex. They all smelled a heady fragrance, felt the air pressure increase and heard a buzzing sound AND they all landed at the same place: the hill overlooking a valley surrounded by mountains.

Emi was careful not to take on the appearance of leadership knowing the stories of others who had tried to form groups to overtake the creatures and had disappeared for good. The creatures had the advantage of those zappers. Emi thought she heard Archie's voice once in the middle of the night and she started pounding on the walls and shouting his name. Her roommate cowered under her covers in terror. The old woman in hologram appeared in the cell said in a soft voice. "Emi Louise, stop causing a commotion or they will use Archie for fuel. The image vanished and she left behind a strong smell of lilacs in her wake. Emi stopped yelling. That woman was warning her. Who was she?

Sleep was hard to come by. She had kept Grandma's jacket on ever since she had left the farmhouse that morning that she left the house. But now, as she tried to roll over on the pallet, something hard in the coat was causing discomfort. She had felt it before and had actually looked through the pockets but could never find whatever it was. But now, as she searched for them again, her fingers found a hole in the bottom of one of the pockets and when reached her hand inside, she pulled out her little round magic mirror! It had fallen through the hole into the lining! Grandma must have found it and put it in her jacket pocket after we left that day. She turned it over now and saw how worn out and broken she looked. "I'm not going to last," she said to herself. And then grandma's voice, as clear as if she were standing in the cell, "No matter what comes your way. Never ever give up.

Someone will always be there to help you. The reflection of you in this little mirror will show the way and who you are and who you will become. Keep it close, you never know what ideas may spring out of it. “She flipped it over in the palm of her hand and there in an engraving so faded that it could barely be seen, was the word, Courage where the engraving of Love had been. Brushing away the tears from her face, she thought, “No, No, No! I WILL get out everyone out of here!” Another glance into the mirror and her reflection had changed to reveal the Emi who had set out to conquer the world - strong and brave as in the days when she was in the war zone in Iraq in the middle of an enemy attack. She wasn’t afraid then and she wouldn’t be now. She feel a warmth spread over her from her toes to the top of her head. She felt invigorated. “Bring it you white slimy creatures, I am ready – Oh yeah!” she said under her breath. She thrust the little mirror into the pocket that didn’t have a hole in it, gave it pat and started the wheels turning in her mind.

The other humans had developed a code to alert one another of messages of importance before she had arrived. Basically, it consisted of body movements and touch, and she used the network to tap into it and send her message as soon as she was transported with the others back into the white space under the massive dome. Gauging time was developed by keeping track of flexible cycles of behaviors observed of the white beings. By their determination, the time was coming when they would all be put on the hillside again. This was only done when there was an arrival through the portal out of the vortex – usually an animal but in rare occasions, an actual human. She sent a message through the network of encouragement. And then she received a message back that sent a chill down her back. It was an eyebrow lift the signal that before long, she was going to be killed. One of the humans had overheard the woman in the hologram whisper, “Emi is in danger of elimination. Tell her. ”

Emi and Lucy whispered in their cell and created a signal to one another if they became aware of danger. They both tried to stay awake to stand guard when darkness came, and the lights went out. But Lucy's gentle breathing could be heard coming from her pallet and Emi knew that she had fallen asleep. Emi had just dozed when she startled awake to a sound of movement somewhere nearby. And there in the cell beside her was the shape of a white creature as it drifted toward her. Emi jumped from the pallet, and she did, she bumped into the pallet where Lucy had been sleeping. The girl watched from her perch in terror. Suddenly the figure sprang forward, its long thin finger extended ready to strike but Emi darted to the side and moved around behind it. And for a moment, she was able to stay out of the line of fire, but she could see that she was no match for the creature. In her maneuverings, her coat swung around her shoulders and when it did, it brushed against her leg and when it did, she could feel the little mirror inside. She reached inside and grabbed it thinking that she could hit the creature with it but the creature was too quick and was already closing in close and the finger was almost there. Instinctively Emi stuck her hand holding the mirror in front of her face to ward off the blow. The zap meant for Emi hit the mirror and bounced back shooting directly hitting the creature who was thrown backwards and it began to disintegrate into pieces. They all fell down into a pile on the floor that began to sizzle for a moment. And then formed a whisp of white smoke that floated up in the air and disappeared.

Emi looked at Lucy who was staring in disbelief at the spot where the creature disappeared. "What just happened," she whispered. And she turned the mirror around and looked into it. Her face looked back at her and for a moment she thought it nodded. There were a million questions on her mind and she and Lucy spent time in the dark beside their pallet trying to plan what to do next until the lights came back on. When she had

received this on her 5th birthday from her grandma, the whole family had clapped around the dinner table, and everyone had called it her “magic mirror.” It seemed that everyone was given one on their 5th birthday. It was round and held in a silver case with fluting around the edges. But so, what? She thought now. They didn’t mean it was actually magic. Grandma made that up, right? The whole order of events from her coat swinging just as the creature pointed its finger at her. Her arm went up as if automatically and she pointed her mirror at the creatures “face.” Why did I hold it up in front of my face? I literally zapped that thing...with my mirror! Was it grandma or the woman in the hologram or.....? She switched. It seems that something that can reflect light is lethal to these creatures if you know how to use it. “So maybe anything that can reflect works??? Or...? Was that it? She remembered the big hunting knife that was in a story about 3 boys who went to the Curve looking for another little boy. The boy said he held up his knife and was able to escape when his friends disappeared. He said he held up his knife not that he cut anything. That was in the old police report that she had found. He said that he flashed it and felt released from whatever was holding him. That’s got to be it. She had been mumbling under her breath.

“What does it matter, if it works Emi?” asked Lucy, breaking through her thoughts. (She had stopped calling her ma’m). Okay if that is our way out, how do I save all those people with one little mirror? There are so many creatures. “What are you going to do Emi?” whispered Lucy. “Do you think they will come looking for – and she pointed to the place on the floor.

“Let me think about it.”

Back at the farm, sitting around the kitchen table in grandma's kitchen, the family held out hope that someone would find the pair and bring them home safe. "You tell us that mom was doing research on that old curve in the road that has so many creepy stories about it, but seriously what if those stories are true?" asked Harriot.

"Actually," their dad said, "that is basically what she was trying to find out."

"Hush, somebody will find them. I just know it." Aunt Mirna responded. "I've never believed any of that old hogwash. Have you Annie?" And she looked at her sister who was sitting at the end of the table.

"Yes, I have believed it and I still do! There are too many things that have happened out there and of somebody knows what, they better speak up," she said hotly.

"Like whom? Speak up, I mean." This from Harriot.

"I think she thinks it's some kind of conspiracy," said Gayle under her breath.

But, of course, everyone at the table heard her. They all gave each other a look but nobody said a word for the rest of the supper. Just as well, thought Phil. We are all torn up about this. And he helped clear the dishes and put on his jacket and headed for the door.

"Wait up dad," called Gayle, "I'm going with you."

And the whole gang followed him out to the SUV. The woods and road were lit up with news trucks and emergency vehicles. The military convoy had arrived early in the day and now a soldier stood at the barrier to the area. Phil approached him explaining that they were all family and he let them pass through. The road was cleared except for a few who were setting up cameras and adjusting the sound. But the rest of the area including the woods were filled with lights and technicians and now military personnel. News trucks and reporters were positioned in every available space while the sound of helicopters flew above.

“I can’t tell the buzzing of the road from the buzzing of those choppers,” complained one television anchor but the smell is pretty heavy and so is the air!”

Government officials herded the family into vans for more questioning.

And under the dome, word was spreading around the exercise room under the dome as the humans became aware of the incident in Emi and Lucy’s cell the night before. A scuffle broke out as some decided to take the mirror into their own hands. There was pushing and shoving while others tried to bring calm before the creatures would notice and come and zap them. And then it happened. Someone came up behind Emi and yanked at her coat and she stumbled forward and fell face down on the white shiny floor. The little mirror flew out of her pocket and shattered into a million pieces. Emi reached in front and grabbed the mirror frame but most of the mirror itself was spread across the floor. Everyone stood stock still and then Emi whispered “Everyone, grab a piece and hide it.” And that is exactly what they did. Even if it was powdered glass, it was saved somehow if only stuck to the skin on someone’s chest out of sight.

The floor was spotless when they were sent back into their cells by the creatures – no signs of broken glass could be seen. Emi confided to Lucy that she didn't know whether the mirror shards would even work. Her little round mirror frame only had a small piece stuck in the frame but still. If only.

The next day, the creatures took them out of their cells, the children's cages were loaded, and the animals were unhooked from their chains. Everything was flown in a sleek, silver air train to the sky above the top of the hill. They landed in the soft grass. The red oaks were waving their branches against a yellow sky once again and a low buzz filled the air. "I've been here before. Now I know where that memory comes from. But now she was on a mission – to find Archie, somehow break him out of his cage and then find that portal and get back into it. And now the others kicked through the grass and drifted around trying to look unconcerned even though everyone of them was waiting for her signal. And they all knew what they needed to do when she sent it out. She made her way over to where the child cages sat. There were only four of them. She was still formulating a plan when she heard his voice calling "Mommy!" And as she got close to the cages, their doors all popped open. "How did... she started. But Archie held up his bubble gum and so did the others. "The nice lady in the picture said she was our protector. She told us to put it over the big lights and we did!" They had blocked the light that held them inside with Double Bubble! She grabbed Archie who was holding onto the hand of another little boy with their mouths filled with candy. "This is my friend, Teddy," he said and then hugged her around her legs. "I got more if you want some," and he reached into his pocket.

“Oh my God!” In spite of herself, without thinking, she had raised her voice. And then she felt it - Zap! A yellow flash hit the tree beside Archie’s head and Emi pulled him down on the ground next to her. She reached into her pocket to grab the mirror and suddenly from a large cigar-shaped object in the yellow sky, the air was filled with white creatures floating down and as they did, yellow flames shot from their fingers into the crowd. Shouts and screams were sounded.

“NOW,” she yelled, and a cheer went up as all of the humans pointed their shards of glass into the falling creatures. Silver flashing blades of light shot back at the creatures from all of the glass shards and the white creatures began to fall in heaps in the grass as they were hit and immediately after, they began to disintegrate. And as they kept coming, someone shouted above the crowd, EVERYBODY! THE PORTAL! IT IS HERE!” A column of swirling color was moving like a tornado across the grass. Just then a man with a television camera came shooting out of the vortex from the group back at the curve, with a surprised look on his face. He was pushed back inside of it and then everyone poured into the spot that seemed to suck them in including animals and birds as well.

The craft above darted off across the yellow sky and the only thing left on the ground were puffs of smoke and then they, too, were gone.

Emi and Archie and his new friend joined the rest and within a matter of seconds were sucked back into the vortex. The swirl of colors surrounded all of them and they traveled the vortex through time and space just as they had before but now they were returning back to the third dimension and they arrived back on the road, amid popping sounds that could be heard. They were set down onto the road. Some started running forward and

some, more hesitantly ,walked slowly towards the light. They were silent as they came forward down the road through a green mist towards the cameras and lights.

Unbelievable” was heard as people and cattle and dogs and coyotes as well as forest animals large and small – even bears- came into view. The crews on the ground rushed forward but slowed down when they saw the terror on the faces of the Arrivers.

“There they are!,” shouted Phil as Emi and Archie with his new friend, Teddy came through the dust that was being kicked up into the news cameras. The cameras closed in close but the family pushed their way through forming a circle around them – laughing, crying, hugging. This didn’t stop the news media as they all went wild sticking microphones into the circle yelling their questions.

And then an earth-shattering sonic boom shook everything, knocking down trailers, felling trees, popping tires, hurting ear drums and all were stunned into silence as a massive round disc the size of a fifty football fields slowly rose up through a green mist and as the mist cleared, it could be seen hovering above them. Then the buzz began, growing louder while the disc still hovered above with lights blinking around its edges.

Those who were there later reported that they saw thin white faces in the windows on the craft looking down. Lights flashed and cameras rolled. And as the buzz became ear-splitting, it suddenly shot up until it looked like one of the stars among the others sparkling in the night sky.

One newscaster was heard with these remarks that were copied and repeated all over the world, “Wonder what they will say about that weather balloon?” And then he winked at the camera among laughter in the background. Then chaos erupted on the ground and throughout the world reined.

“

*Wonder what they will say about that weather balloon?*

Emi, Archie, and Teddy were immediately moved into emergency trailers to be checked and rechecked. Guards were present, guns at the ready. Calls were put out on the media for medical personnel and first responders to help. The arrivals were guided into hospital vans. Some of the people were terrified of the world that they had returned to and tried to get away while others were stunned and shocked and moved in slow motion like zombies.

It was not clear what to do with all of the animals and one camera man was attacked by a wolf. And then some of the farmers in the area along with veterinarians from neighboring towns started arriving and taking charge.

“Where did you get this candy?” Archie was asked as he and Teddy spit out their bubble gum.

He looked up at mother. “In your pocket, right?” she asked. “From the Shopabit?” He nodded.

The whole family was finally allowed to come into the trailer while mom and son were getting checked. “This is Teddy,” she said to the family. “I think he got lost over a century ago.”

The little boy looked up with wide eyes, “Where’s mama?” he said. A social worker bent down and took his hand, “Come with me,” she said and led him through the curtains.

“Good idea. Let’s go home to Grandma’s house. I’ll tell you all about it. My briefing is in the morning. By the way, how long were we gone?”

“48 hours too long,” answered Phil wearily.

“It seemed like years to me.” She said and meant it.

Later, she slid the mirror out of her pocket, as she was winding up a brief version of what had happened to her, and to her surprise, the little mirror was not broken. “This was shattered.”

“Well somewhere in the future, it will be, but we’re not there yet,” replied Phil. And the others nodded. The word Love was engraved on the little mirror again.

“I need to talk to you all about this mirror?” She said to her aunts. Is there something you haven’t told me?”

Emi picked her phone up off of the charger where it had been placed and saw that it had been blown out by her editor. She wanted to tuck everyone in bed and have some wine before she called him back but she knew that time was of the essence in the news world.

Archie was tucked into his bed and handed his dragon with everyone gathered around his bed. He looked up at them with a worried face and looked like he was about to cry. “What’s the matter buddy,” everyone said in unison.

“Is it too late to go trick or treating?”



A military escort followed them back to the farmhouse that night and kept it surrounded for days following the arrivals.

Scientists from all over the world converged on the farm, the forest, and the road, blocking it off. The Higgins Farm is still owned by the Higgins family although it is now a place of research. And by the way, since that night of return, there has not been a single case of disappearance, the heaviness in the air, the fragrance and the buzzing sounds no longer exist. It will be studied for years to come.

Emi became a part of a task force that worked with all of those who returned through the portal. Archie and Teddy were best friends and still are. Her book, “The Future from someone who has been there” broke all records on the national best seller list. It was followed by “Survivors of a Journey Through a Portal Tell Their Stories.” She was a popular guest on news shows and continued to write and her career as a journalist continued.

Out of this incident came methods of detecting portals and that work continues.

There was no evidence that anything had been inserted into any of their bodies and many other abductees have been reported. Recently knots were discovered in the double helixes of the DNA in all of the “Arrivers”, human and animal. And all were identical from their location on the same alleles and in the same position and had the identical shape. Something appeared to have been changed inside of the brains who had traveled the vortex. Research from this could essentially be said to have traveled back from the future through the data within these knots and have been found to be extremely instrumental on many levels in research studies across the board including the elimination of disease, environmental purification and more.

Emi as well as the rest were regressed hypnotically. It was found that she was the only human who had indeed been sucked into the vortex as a child but had been returned when she had pulled out her mirror. The woman in the hologram who appeared to the power who put her back into the portal and sent her back to her own time that night when she was 5 years old. Hence the answer to the purpose of the elusive memory. The old woman remains a mystery.

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

Andi asked me once where I get my ideas for stories. Usually, I try to come up with something all year long but it usually comes to me in the middle of August and then I start building something around the idea. I don't know why this happens but it would be nice if it would come earlier in the year and give me a little more time. I'm just saying.

The idea for the curve came from a woman who mentioned once that she came from a small town in the south and she had recently gone back for a visit. She said there was a legend about a piece of road that gave people earaches and that it still did. That's all she said about it and when I asked, she said, "That's about it".

Later, I thought, Okay, I've never written anything about a road. And that's where this story idea began like most of the others I've written – just a mention of something by someone or something that interests me. For example, I also knew that it would be interesting to write about a portal or vortex but couldn't decide whether to make it about time travel, a parallel universe, alien planets, and even at one time thought about it being a portal to a Hansel and Gretel type fairy tale. I got stuck on the idea about making it about the bend in the road that the lady was telling me about but couldn't decide how to wind it around a road story. The recurring memory is one that I have had since I was a young woman pulling my kids in a wagon on a balmy day. I couldn't figure out why in moments of extreme stress, that

memory would always come up in my head. My stress is usually on the moderate side but there are times when it goes up on the scale. On one of those times, it showed up and I decided to write it down and see if that helped find the answer. I don't know why, but once I did, I came up with what may be the reason I have it. That's not in this story. I'll save it for later. The only part of my recurring memory that I used in this story is the description of the trees (mine are poplars) and the balmy yellow sky. It seemed like a way to move things in the story.

I have taken this story apart a million times and put it back together. I will probably keep thinking of ways to make it better long after I have sent it to you. But, oh well. Onward! Other story ideas will show up next August (hopefully sooner) and I will be jumping on them. So much fun.

I liked writing it. I Hope you like reading it.

VISITATIONS & GHOSTS

# THE WINDOW

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterbout*



I stood there in the middle of my back yard that day, in the sunlight, looking at the amazing blaze of flowers. They had taken over, sprouting up in every niche, draped over tree limbs and climbing fences and trellises – so

many it was hard to drink in. I had to smile as I reached up to touch my locket – the one Gram gave me on my 16th birthday. Her backyard had looked just like this one. Her house was badly in need of paint – it had turned a rust color over the years – and the back porch was a little saggy but nobody ever noticed it because the yard was absolutely splendid with color. She lived on a corner and people literally slowed down and pulled over to gaze at the beautiful sight of her garden. Sometimes they would ask her for a bouquet and she would clip, clip, clip them an armload. The other flowers in her garden then seemed to fill in the gap. Annuals such as petunias and marigolds sprung up every year without planting in the rich black earth. And much to my surprise and pleasure, years went by and I became a wife and mother to children – 7 to be exact- and one day we drove up to this house with its multitude of stairways and a big park butted up to our back yard – and there it was – Gram’s garden in my own backyard. I had tried for years in other places to grow some of these same flowers and here they were all the time – growing themselves in this back yard. Lucky me.

This house was built at the turn of the century and it was amazing. There were cubby holes and secret places behind cabinets and under stairways. Gram had been gone for awhile but I could still feel her warm touch as I went about my huge but cozy home. I had her locket with the tiny scratch on the back around my neck. I had worn it since that day that she had given it to me and I was sure that I would never take it off. Gram was born in 1876, the centennial year, and had ridden in a wagon all of the way from South Carolina to Kansas with her ma and pa and siblings. As her mother lay dying, she took her locket off and gave it to 12 year old Gram, and told her to keep it always to remember how much her mother loved her. Gram knew the story of the locket; it had come from some ancestor back in the old country and passed down from generation to generation. It was my

most precious possession – even more than my birthstone ring – and I could feel it against my skin as I soaked in the sunlight and flowers in my garden that day. Gram, you would love my garden, I thought.



“Sarah Ann!” I was jolted out of this nice place in my mind by Arty, my friend from church who was standing at my backdoor waving.

“Geez, I thought you were in a trance!” I couldn’t believe she was inside my house and then I remembered that Kent, my husband was home for a couple of days vacation leave. Not that Arty wasn’t welcome anytime to be inside of my house – I preferred people just walking in – otherwise I had to run down one of the stairways and try to get to the right door. But Arty usually only came over for a Sunday School party. I was glad to see her.

“Let’s sit down in the breakfast room and have a glass of iced tea,” I said as I guided her into the kitchen.

“So, what’s up?” I asked.

Taking the tall glass and settling in, she said, “Oh, nothing really. I went to play tennis and my partner didn’t show so I was driving home and just thought I ‘d drop in.” Arty was good at everything – tennis, bridge, you name it and she had two little blond daughters that never seemed to get dirty.

“So where’s Max?”

Max was our 3 year old, the youngest of our children and the mascot and yes, he did get dirty. Everyone knew Max because all of the kids took him with them everywhere. Our conversation was into its second glass of tea when Arty commented on the fact that she had seen Kent carrying wood through the kitchen and down the narrow stairs to the old basement numerous times since we had sat down.

“What’s Kent doing in the basement?”

“Ohmygod – haven’t you ever been to our basement? You won’t believe it, come on, let me show you but just for a minute, I want to be sure that I can hear Max.”

I led her down the old stairway, telling her the story as I went. Here’s the background: We had purchased this house from an estate. It had been standing empty for several years and so we got a very good price on it. After we took ownership, we realized what a huge job we had undertaken: ceilings were down, doors hung on their hinges, electric lights hung from cords in all of the rooms upstairs. Taking down some old metal cabinets in the kitchen, for example, we uncovered a door that led up a back stairway that had been hidden for years. Once we had cleaned out the main part of the house and we were able to move in, we tackled the basement. It had been an apartment complete with a small kitchen. We also found an old door that led into a coal room that we turned into storage. We painted the basement apartment and fixed it up as a bedroom with pink and green flowers and ruffled curtains. Two of our daughters moved right in.

The day that Arty came over, we had lived in our home for about 4 years. It was still a work in progress, but it was shaping up and we loved it. We had gotten involved in the community and were fortunate to live in a

neighborhood teaming with kids – all about the same age as ours. The year before in the summer, the children were all out in the park playing softball when a storm came up. They brought everyone in the house and began playing like the basement was a ship and running around the various rooms squealing and laughing. Well, the sun finally came out and all of the kids filtered out through the various doors into the park and left their “ship” abandoned. While, checking out the “damage,” I noticed that a piece of the old wall board in the girl’s room was pulled away from the stud that held it. At first, Kent thought he would just nail it back to the stud, but when he felt a steady airflow, he pulled it back further and to our amazement, we discovered that the wall was merely a partition in a very large room.

That was the beginning of an amazing discovery. The room itself, after removing the “wall” was large but that wasn’t the end of it. Fallen bricks at the other side of the room, in line with the basement steps, proved to be an old doorway leading into yet another large room. It was an odd-shaped room with a slope at one side that went down at an angle for about 20 or 30 feet and stopped against a stone wall. We all just stood there – we couldn’t believe it. Talking about it in bed later that night, Kent wondered if this had been some kind of tunnel – we were in Kansas – surely this wasn’t the Underground Railroad? That was only the beginning. All of the kids were so excited that they brought their friends in to check it out. Everyone had a theory. But Kent had a vision of a woodworking room all of his own and so the first big room was finished first. First there was white vinyl flooring, overhead lights and outlets. The little kitchenette was made into a tool supply room and he spent literally week-end after week-end dismantling his wood lathe and saws, carrying them down the narrow steps and putting them all back together again. Then with everything in place, he began on the second room, building shelves against every wall for toys and storage. This room was definitely kid-friendly with colorful tiles and rugs and bean

bag chairs. The slope was covered in slick material and the kids slid down it in their sleeping bags, or rolled down it on skates when they thought we weren't watching. We were the kid party house supreme!

This basement had been the talk of the neighborhood and so I was surprised that our fame had not reached Arty. It was always fun to take people down there because it was so funny to see the look on their faces which was usually always one of shocking amazement. Kent was down there immersed in his project, listening to his small radio and whistling, I remember. Arty and I were laughing and she was suggesting that on Halloween we should have the next Sunday school party down here. The slope always was a puzzle to most – what on earth was it exactly, they would ponder. Arty slid down the slope, but somehow went off to the side and stuck her heel through the grout on the stone wall. We screamed with laughter – there she was with one foot stuck in the wall. Kent was called to help us unhook her shoe. He did but it brought a wall of gray stones crashing down and there in the corner was another door. Looking through the opening, one could see that we were staring down a tunnel. Down at the other end of the tunnel, just barely visible was a wooden staircase with just a faint glow of light from above. We ran down the tunnel gasping for breath and up the stairs. Up and up we climbed until we came out way up high into an attic that was so full of dust, that it was hard to identify the objects that lay strewn about. We ducked as we picked our way across the boards and under the rafters, kicking up the dust and making our way to a window that accommodated the shape of the roof by having a half-circle shape. It looked as if the paper or cardboard covering it had been jabbed by something from the outside so that it -the covering - was broken in the middle.

*Kent wondered if it hau veen some kind of tunnel.  
But we were in Kansas — surely this wasn't the  
Underground Railroad.*

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For some reason, I don't know why, I was the first to reach the window. I yanked on the paper and there I was on the window sill looking out into a cobblestone courtyard that was surrounded by very tall, wooden buildings of at least 4 or 5 stories. It was just after a rain and the sun was coming out making rain drops glisten on the wet wooden planks of the siding covering them. The air was dewy fresh from the rain. It was breathtaking. Across the big court yard there was an alley going straight out to a street beyond. A woman was sweeping the rain from a door in the alley while another one shook a rug from a wooden stoup behind the building on my right. Through the alleyway, you could see horse drawn carriages passing by in the street in what appeared to be a bustling city street. Something moved – and out of the corner of my eye, I caught the sight of a small child wearing a soiled brown hat with a broken brim that was pulled down over her long scraggily hair – so tiny, scampering just out of sight.

My mind seemed backed up as I tried to take it all in – the fantastic sight, the air, the smells of salty air and boiled sausage, the sounds of people and commerce. Where were we? A moment passed. I tried to think, - if I were up in some attic in my home, where was my neighborhood in relationship to this scene? Where was the front of my house? Again – where were we? I was stunned into a sort of slow motion but not Arty. She threw her leg over the sill and much to my horror, pushed herself onto a brick step that was almost invisible. It was the top step of a stairway that had been created from bricks by some carpenter as a latticework from the window to

the ground and it was cleverly placed hugging the side of the wooden structure so that its purpose, although visible from our angle, would only appear as brick décor from below. Arty had shockingly (to my mind) actually gone into that scene like stepping through a mirror.

“Look, a stairway!” she called over her shoulder as she jumped down to the payment from the last step and started across the cobblestone courtyard toward the alley. Kent and I were frozen as we watched her. Just then the woman with the rug threw it aside and started striding purposefully across the cobblestones towards Arty. She was dressed in a long soiled skirt with a sort of muslin blouse rolled up at the sleeves over her skinny arms. The clothing was nondescript in color as it swung around her bony frame. The woman’s brown boots were scuffed at the toe and worn and old with yellowish wool socks bunched around their tops. On her head, she had a ruffled hat pulled down over her ears with stringy pieces of dark brown hair sticking out from all sides.

“Hey, Hey ya! Huh I’m talking ta – ya!” As she neared Arty, it was plain to see that – and quite shocking -she was a clone of Arty but coming from some other time, some other place. I mean, she looked exactly like Arty!

Arty saw the same thing that we saw because, she came to a stop and turned to look at Kent and I up in the window sill and mouthed the words while pointing at her own chest – “Do you see it? She’s ME.” Then all of sudden, it was as though Arty realized her folly and turning around, she fled back up the brick stairway. Panting and red in the face (the window looked out over at least the same distance as the other buildings – probably 3 stories at least – probably more, she shoved me aside and dove right through the

window. Kicking up clouds of dust, she stumbled across the room and threw herself down the long wooden staircase - I could hear her steps pounding through the tunnel.

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*She came to a stop and turned to us in the window.  
Pointing at her own chest, she mouthed the words  
across the cobblestones — Do you see it? She's ME.*

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I had fallen backwards into the dust when she had come through the window but as I pulled myself back up by my fingertips on the sill, I looked out once more. The woman was marching angrily back to her stoop. As she pounded across, she swung her mop at the small waif sending her scuttling like a mouse into the shadows. Suddenly, Kent's strong hands jerked me back and half dragged me across the attic room and I felt myself pulled down the stairs while my feet tried to catch up with my body. "Get out of here!" Shouted Kent. "Run!"

I ran down the tunnel and back into the light of our basement, but my mind was still racing. I wanted so badly to take another look, I remember. Wow! What was that? I reached the kitchen with Kent behind me just in time to hear the front door slam shut as Arty hurried out to her car and peeled away. I turned to Kent who was ashen in color. "Talk to me," I said. "What did we just see?" Kent said that if he didn't know better, he would think that we had just seen London, a couple of hundred years ago because of the clothing and language and the carriages but that couldn't be possible. Then we stopped. Both of us got the same idea at the same time and we raced up to check on Max. He was wrapped around his monkey with a smile on his little lips. Life was normal and nobody knew but us.

“We should tell someone,” I said.

“No, No! Don’t tell ANYBODY about this! I’m telling you – nobody will ever believe us – it will ruin us. I mean it Sarah Ann – NOBODY – not your mother – NOBODY. You hear me?”



He scared me – mild, funny, loving Kent. Something had happened, that was for sure, but what? That night I lay in my bed with a million thoughts racing through my mind. The moonlight came through my window. I listened to the breathing of my husband. “Are you awake?”

“yes.”

Earlier that evening, while going about my normal tasks - fixing dinner, or sitting at the table, or packing the kids off to bed, I would remember that amazing scene from that window. But when I would look up, Kent would always be there to give me a look and I would lower my eyes and try to file it away for later. He had blocked up the hole to the tunnel with the fallen rocks, I later found out when I went back down. We talked into the night about the courtyard and the tunnel and the woman who looked like Arty. He was just as curious about it as I was that night. I called Arty the next day and the day after but she didn’t ever return my calls. Once, at church, she stared right through me and didn’t respond when I spoke to her. Kent grew more distant and it seemed he did not want to talk about it anymore.



One afternoon, in the autumn when all of the kids were at school and once again Max was napping, and Kent was at work, I stole back down the tunnel, up the stairs and looked again out of the window. It was still there only now, it too was autumn with the leaves drifting down to scatter in the wind over the cobblestones. A cat sat in the window across the way sleeping in the sunlight. Suddenly my eye picked up movement. There was that small child again scuttling around the corner, picking up scraps from the garbage can on the stoop across the way. The door banged open and out came the woman with her mop swinging it with force and catching the child across the shoulders as she flung her off of the stoop and onto the cobblestones. "Feed your belly on somebody else's garbage! Get out and don't come back till you pa comes home if he ever does!" Her cackle was deep in her throat and so hard that she had to come up for air before she started it up again. The child lay still on the cobblestones. A stray dog nosed his way around her, pushing at her shabby coat. The door slammed shut.

Without hardly a thought, - down I climbed from my perch on the sill and I raced across the stones to the child who was so still. Now I could see that she had vomited and she was now laying face down in it. I turned her over and wiped off her face with my sleeve. She opened her eyes and stared at me. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Abigail," she whispered.

"Who is that woman?" I ventured.

“Me ma,” she answered. “She’s naw ri,” she pointed to her head. “Please, if she sees ya, she will kill me she will.”

I reached into my pocket and handed her a half-eaten roll of lifesavers. “Candy,” I explained.

From then on, I visited that place at every chance, always stacking up the rocks at the tunnel entrance whenever I returned. I heard that Arty had gone to visit her mother in Cleveland but it was rumored that she had had a nervous breakdown. Kent had grown more silent with every passing day and sometimes he seemed to be miles away. He didn’t whistle anymore and the lathe stood gathering dust in his special room. The children also noticed it. And still I visited the little girl, taking her small treats, careful not to give her something that would bring her trouble.

Then came that fateful day when I stayed too long. Max woke up from his nap and wondered out on Adams, the busy street close by. Somebody called Kent and when I came back through the door to the tunnel all hell broke loose. He screamed at me all night. I felt so terrible. My Max! What if something had happened to him – I was sick with guilt and I made a promise that I would never ever do it again. I tried to talk to Kent about Abigail but he would have none of it. The memory of that day seemed to have faded from his memory. He kept saying “Forget about it Sarah Ann –it never happened!” Sadly, I couldn’t. I was good most of the time and then I would spend days in my room in the dark, crying and my mom would have to come and take care of the kids. They would creep into my room at last and I would push myself out of it and swear to “get a grip!”

Snow was on the ground – it was a gray shivering cold godawful day. I went through the house, cold and lonely - Max was now in preschool. And I did it again. I went down that tunnel and looked out of the window. After adjusting my eyes to the dimness through the swirling snow in the courtyard, I spied her huddled next to the grate, her bare knees sticking out from under her skirts like sticks. As soon as I bent down to her, I knew she was starving to death and I handed her a dinner roll and some jelly beans. Suddenly there were footsteps behind me. Kent was running across the slick cobblestones toward me with fury on his face. I unclasped my beloved locket and placed it around her neck. “Keep this and remember how much I love you,” I said as he put the handkerchief over my nose.



Spring came. I sat in my chair in the game room with the other patients and watched as the birds began to sing. I had been declared “mentally unstable” and given rounds of drugs and lots of therapy by well-meaning nurses talking baby-talk to me. I gave up on my story because nobody believed me and even my husband denied that it had ever happened. Maybe it didn’t..... Maybe I was crazy.....

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*I gave up on my story because nobody believed me  
— and even my husband denied it had ever  
happened. Maybe it didn’t. Maybe I was crazy.*

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I got to go home on Mother's Day. As we drove up, the children were all lined up on our brick wall out in front with bouquets of flowers from our garden. A large banner hung from the posts on the porch which read "Welcome Home Mom!" with x's and o's. I was so so happy to see them I could die. Thank you God thank you God thank you God!!!!

Life started fresh. The basement wall had been cemented closed. One day, while cleaning a cupboard, I came across a box that was still left unpacked and to my pleasure, found my Gram's Bible, worn and faded with her smell about it. I fixed myself a glass of tea and sat by the window leafing through it. I had been through it a couple of times when a thin yellowed envelope fell out from between two pages. It was addressed to Beatrice Ricketts, my great great grandmother. I pulled the letter out gently because it was so thin, almost transparent. It read: My darling niece Beatrice, I am so in hopes that your journey was a pleasant one across the wide expanse of the great ocean. My days are long without you but I find happiness as always in your happiness. I feel it is time to tell you a story that I have kept hidden in my heart for a lifetime as my destination on this earth is drawing near. Beatrice, you are like a daughter to me and it has been a lifetime of happiness for me to have you grow up in this house.

The letter went on. 'I was the child of a ship oarsman and his young wife, a girl from the countryside. They married quite young and were very happy, I am told. But he was a man of the sea and he could always hear it calling to him and so he moved his young wife into a place far from her home, in the poor and gritty side of London near the docks. There he left her all alone to answer the call of the sea. My mother gave birth to me in the darkest of rooms in a place that even now I cannot think of without sickness overtaking me. By the time my father returned, she was quite mad. In her madness, she thought of me as vermin and tried many times to kill

me. My father tried to care for us but in the end, he returned to the sea and was lost. I grew from a tiny child by learning to eat what the other animals ate and tried to dodge her wrath as best as I could. Sometimes I was beaten so badly, ( Beatrice, it pains me to tell you this but I am telling you this my darling so that you will know)that I was want to die. On such a day as I lay praying for an angel to take me up in the heavens, a kind and gentle woman looked down into my face and did one of the most wonderful things that had ever happened to me – she wiped my brow and asked my name. My darling daughter, I truly believe that she indeed save me from giving in to death that day. She spoke in a strange tongue albeit a sort of the King’s English and dressed in a manner that was quite odd. My life has been strengthened, I am of the belief, by the vision of her kind and gentle face that I still see in my dreams and hear the soft sound of her voice. On that last day she did something for which I will never forget. I have kept the memory of it close to my heart and it has been my strength. Within a fortnight of that moment, I was found by the Women’s Social League and placed in an orphanage. I was there but for a short time which to me seemed much like heaven with its pallets to sleep on and warm food. Two years passed. I was but 7 years of age. A man and his wife, a handsome and benevolent couple of privilege, picked me out of the line of other homeless children and took me with them to their large and loving home. There I was raised as their own daughter in the drawing rooms of the gentry and was married after my presentation at court to a kind and wonderful man, your loving uncle, the brother of your poor father (God rest his soul). My fate was changed; I am quite sure, my darling Beatrice, by the sweet kindness of that unusual woman, an angel from heaven to be sure. I am sending you this talisman that she gave to me that last day that I ever saw her face. It has been my strength and salvation. Keep it and know that how much I love you. Your loving and devoted aunt, Abigail

Out of the envelope and into my hand fell the gold locket with the tiny scratch on the back.

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FROM THE AUTHOR

*Happy Halloween*

*Love you,*

*Mom*

PART TWO · THE HALLOWEEN  
ANNUAL

# DREAM STORIES



*Tales the sleeper brought back — the threshold of  
waking and what slipped across it.*

# THE DREAM

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Mom, October 2008*



I can't remember when I first started having the dreams. I think it was when I was a child of about 5 or 6. I was the only child of doting parents which can be a lonely existence really. The job of the only child is to keep

their parents happy and be the child that they want them to be. This can be daunting especially since all of their attention is on you alone! Not that I could have been naughty or even wanted to be – just, well, there’s no room for mediocrity – I guess that’s really the way to put it. I was the princess. My mother would spend hours arranging curls on the top of my head as I sat on a stool facing a big dressing mirror. I was blond with green eyes – she was dark –black hair and brown eyes. She came from a family who all looked alike – and I was different. Because of my coloring – I looked like my dad’s side – it was like I had arrived from some mysterious place to her. Her hair was thick and beautiful. Mine was fine and floaty. It was so light that it floated in the air around my head – so annoying. But it was fascinating to her and I was glad.

As much as I adored my parents – who were in a perpetual love affair – the guilt of being a fraud (I wasn’t as good as they thought I was) was my terrible secret. What if they found out? And so I escaped into a wonderful world of my own. Lying on my bed during my afternoon nap, I would imagine fairies dancing in the breeze as it wafted through my window ruffling the curtains. And then there was John and Johnny. But wait, there’s more. I remember the hot, heavy, summer sun beating down on our big back yard with the buzzing sound of bees and waves of butterflies over the flower beds. Two – no three things were wonderful about that place – Josie, my curly black cocker spaniel, the massive weeping willow in the corner of the yard and my little wooden playhouse. Josie was unconditional love all wrapped up in a long pink tongue and a waggly tail. And best of all – she had a litter of little black curly adorable puppies! The willow was my one major achievement because I could climb it without fear (I was very timid). I could climb it better than the little girl across the street who would stand at the bottom and cry because I wouldn’t come down and she couldn’t come up. I was queen of the willow and when the tree was cut down in spite

of begging my dad to save it, I didn't go back out into the backyard ever again. The little white frame play house was just one small room with two windows and a door. This little house was so big deal – my dad was a builder – and he had made it especially for me. And yet, it was another one of those burdens – what on earth do you do with a small house with a table, chairs, cabinets and doll bed when it is buzzing with bees and so terribly hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter? Wonderful things in an impossible place. For me, I solved the dilemma by playing with my dolls in my doll house so as not to hurt daddy's feelings, sang my songs and then when the bees and the heat became too much.....I sat in the doorway and wished a friend would come my way. Josie lolled under the willow as afternoons wore on keeping one eye on me and one on her puppies. That is when my two imaginary friends, John and Johnny came on the scene. I can see them now – John – the mean one and Johnny – the nice one. We spent long days together for almost a year and then one day they were gone. My parents were amused at my endless chatter at the dinner table regaling them (or so I thought) about our adventures. John and Johnny went everywhere with me and even my afternoon naps. That was the ultimate in true friendship. Oh yes, my imagination was keen.

They, the dreams, always started in the same way. They would begin each night just as I laid my head upon my pillow and started to fall asleep. I was the storyteller of the dreams, the manager, the creator – I started the story where it had left off the night before and then I fell asleep and the story continued on as a dream. The next night I would start the next chapter and the story would take flight again. And so on it went on through the years – each night I lived another life while I stood watching in shadows.

But sometimes I, myself was in the dream – not just an observer. Sometimes when I was in a dream I was unaware that I was dreaming. It really seemed real. Once, while in a dream, I found myself as an adult sitting in an old school room on a child-sized chair. A friendly woman whose voice I could almost remember sat with me chatting. It was as though we were revisiting our school during summer break. We sat alone in an empty room. She turned to me and looking into my eyes, she asked me what had happened to all of my horses. Horses? (Remember, I didn't know I was dreaming). And then I recalled the long forgotten dream stories of my youth and the ones about horses. In my real life I had always wanted a horse – not just any horse – a palomino like my cowboy hero. I knew nothing about horses and living in the city, there had never been a chance of this happening. At first I was startled by her question and then memories flooded in on me of long forgotten days on my dream horses, of the feel of the wind, and the joy of riding up the winding path to my home on a hillside amidst a waving field of sunflowers. My dream brothers and sisters hung off of the porch waving and calling to me.



*Sometimes when I was in a dream I was unaware  
that I was dreaming. It really seemed real.*

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Certainly I was aware of the fact that I had dream stories but I guess I hadn't thought of them as a whole life of dream stories. The stories that I now recalled were pleasant to remember again like revisiting a familiar place where I rode horses and had brothers and sisters to play with. Her question ignited these wonderful memories of them all over again. Upon waking, I tried to recapture the face and voice of the woman who had spoken to me but it was gone. Still the dream lingered with me and it comes to me even

now. I was surprised that I had forgotten the stories themselves – the early ones like the story of my dream life and still odder that I was actually reminded of them in a dream.

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*I hadn't thought of them as a whole life of dream stories.*

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When I was 7, I got a little sister and she became the center of my life. John and Johnny faded back to where they came from. My dream stories abruptly stopped for awhile. Later, but not much, they returned. I was glad to start them again as I loved them as they put me to sleep each night. It was as though I planted the seeds of the story at bedtime and during the night, they sprouted. I found that I could have both – my real life with my parents, my little sister, friends, and school and on the other side – I could live in this world of dreams.



Well I grew up. I went to college. I got married. I had children of my own. It was a happy life. The dreams entwined my journey. They were actually ahead of me in time – I guess they always were. They seemed to be stories of what might happen on down the road or so I guessed. But that never was the case. For when I actually reached the age foretold by my dreams, my actual life was quite a bit different from my dream life. In my dreams, things stayed pretty much the same – I grew older, got married, had children – ordinary things and nice - but easier. Well, for example: My real

life was more like climbing over a mountain of large boulders – exhilarating at times, but then a bad foothold and there it was – pain and starting all over again. Frustrating and awesome and sometimes horrifying but for some reason, the need to climb the mountain trumped everything else – that was my real life. It was a constant journey of lessons. My dream life on the other hand, moved along on a smoother journey with twists and turns but usually ending the segment on a wonderful note as if to smooth things out a bit – not exciting at all but pleasant none the less. If the dream story took a turn not to my liking, I would simply change it the next night and put it back on course. And then of course, as I grew older, my dream self grew older too.

My life finally reached a place where I had conquered the rocky mountain so to speak. Life was good – no, life was fabulous! Finally, things began to fit in such a way that those financial decisions of the past brought gold. My bank account grew. My career took flight. My books were published. My success became noticed by others to the point that my “expert” opinion was not only sought out but actually quoted in publications. A new love with a brilliant, handsome, and successful man engulfed me. My children proudly honored me. I reveled in the spotlight with only the slightest concern (was this another incidence of fraud on my part ? Was I really this good?) No matter. I had worked hard for this. I had sacrificed my life, past loves, my children’s companionship for this. I deserved it!

Oddly. I had forgotten to dream. But really, I reasoned, my life was so good that I really didn’t need the dream to smooth things out. I actually liked it this way. True, I felt guilty about it. There was the feeling that I was somehow neglecting my dream life and all of the people in it by this shutting them out. Sometimes, annoyingly I felt it calling to me like a whining dog but still I kept putting it off. My thoughts as I lay back on my

soft pillow were all about my wonderful life bypassing any attention to the waiting dream. But came that night when sleeplessness kept me pacing the floor. Trying to read, the words of the book I was reading floated off of the page. Sinking into my soft bed and closing my eyes, my dream opened up. It seemed to start without me this time as though it was tired of waiting and had taken on a life of its own.



I found myself walking down a street in a broken down and trashy neighborhood. Windows in homes and buildings were boarded up with thin broken boards. Black soot clung to everything, camouflaging what looked to have been a thriving city street. The air hung heavy as though it had sucked the life out of all the inhabitants therein and was silently waiting for the next person to deflate. Down the street rolled a rowdy gang of kids, jeering and yelling at those they met. An old house sat back from the street wedged between two large buildings. Something about it struck me – and I stopped, turned back and stared hard. I recognized this place. This couldn't be...but it was... my childhood home. The city must have grown out to our hill on the prairie and devoured it because here it stood, yellow paint peeling under layers of soot. Back then, It had been such a happy place , with neighbors sitting on the porch in the evening drinking lemonade and playing croquet in the yard, talking all about their day and us kids playing in the grass in the twilight. I could still hear their voices calling out in the dark, “Ally ally outs in freeee!” My dad had built this home with his own hands start to finish with great pride. And there it was standing with a tiny square of concrete in front – no roses now, no laughter, and no wind. All gone. I

remembered as a little girl gazing at the ceiling from my big soft bed, wondering about the big wide world out there beyond my room and dreaming.

An old mail box on a leaning wooden pole stood out in front at the end of the walk by the curb. Instinctively, I reached my hand inside and pulled out a wad of mail. Looking down at the mail, I saw to my shock, that it was all addressed to me. It must have been accumulating in my absence because it was almost too large a pile to hold. The first letter that I opened was news from my son. He was in Europe and sorry to say, he wouldn't be sending me anymore money. It caught me up. Jeff didn't tell me he was leaving. Money? It had always been me sending him money. Something was very wrong here. Where had the dream gone in my absence? I opened a birthday card from my granddaughter (when was my birthday?) with a message that she had missed me at the cemetery on memorial day but that she had placed flowers on her mother's grave – my mind whirled – who?... her mother? - my daughter? Couldn't be - no! The eviction notice lay on the bottom of the pile dated weeks ago. The dream had taken the wrong path! It seemed to have gone on without me. I had not been there to change its course. But I was here now – not to worry. I would fix it!!!

And then I heard the creaking of a door on rusty hinges. Looking up, I saw an old woman, stooped and trembling emerging from inside the house. She paused, looked back over this house with its boarded windows and peeling paint and laid her hand upon the door frame as if saying good-by. I watched as she turned to face the street. Something about her was familiar. Her knarled fingers clutched a bag filled to the brim with stuff – probably her only possessions, I thought. She wiped her eyes with her coat sleeve as she stumbled down the broken steps. I thought I heard a low sob. What was it about her, I wondered? And then her hair caught my eye - thin and grey –

floating in the air. As she neared me, I wondered if she could see me. Hoping not, I stood invisibly as always watching her slowly, slowly come. But when she got near, she looked me straight in the eye and said, “You finally came back, didn’t you?” Then it hit me. I felt sickness spread over me. I thought I would collapse. She put out her thin hand and steadied me. In terror, I realized that I was looking into my own eyes. They were pale green cloudy eyes that searched me out through sallow grey skin and an odor of age.

“ I am so sorry, “ I cried out. “I am going to wake up and change this dream. I promise! After all I am the one who created it and I will go back to the beginning,” my mind raced.....” I will go back to my real life and .....

“But don’t you see?” She whispered. “That was the dream. We are still here.” Time swirled around me like a wind storm filled with illusions of summer days, curtains fluttering in the breeze, the sounds of laughter, new babies, goals to reach, and applause. The swirling air engulfed me and building up to a roar, there was a final pop and the whirling mass seemed to shatter into the air and was gone.

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*“But don’t you see?” She whispered. “That was the dream. We are still here.”*

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Silence. The cold air sliced through my thin coat. With a choke, a single tear coursed its way down my cheek.

Ah, dreams. Without them life is an empty shell. But... which ones are real? And which ones are.....not?

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FROM THE AUTHOR

*Happy Halloween*

*Love you*

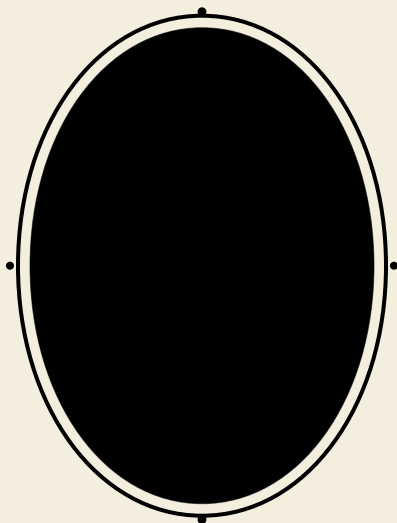
*Mom*

DREAM STORIES

# THE WOLF

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, October 2006*



**P**op! She was awakened from that lovely dream into the icy coldness of terror. She held her breath, her heart pounding, her nose stinging with the familiar feeling of danger as she felt more than heard the heavy animal as he slowly crossed over the roof of the dugout above her head. King's low growl came from somewhere in the small room of the dugout. Her body began to tremble. We are the prey, trapped out here just waiting to be slaughtered, a voice whispered in her mind. No! Stop! She told the voice. She heard the beast sniffing around the roof, pawing at the dirt foundation. Rolling off of the pallet so as not to awaken Kathareen, sweet baby, she reached for the

gun. Come on, she thought to the monster outside, come, come on in, I'll kill you. I'm ready. Waiting until dawn, in the dark, finally she felt the wolf slowly move away and when the morning sun was new, he was gone.



It was late summer on the Kansas Prairie somewhere out west of Hutchinson in the big sky country. Hot, oh how hot, killer hot and windy – hard harsh wind that stung your face and beat the life out of everything – the grass, the creatures of the prairie, the people. Alice was used to hot Kansas summers, that wasn't really the problem. But the loneliness – well that was a different story. This place was the substance of her life – a dugout with dirt floors, swept to a high polish, but dirt all the same. Her husband Carl Edward was a wealthy man – from one of the wealthiest landowners in this state – he was a good businessman but not much interested in a home. He left for long periods of time on business leaving her here alone with the baby, the dog, the new baby within her and the wind.

“

*We are the prey, trapped out here just waiting to be  
slaughtered — a voice whispered in her mind.*

She tied her 3-year old on her back and seeing that King was asleep on his side in the corner – the clue that danger was gone, climbed the ladder with great difficulty what with the pregnant body of hers and opened the lid. Dust hit her in the face, coating her tongue and stinging her eyes. It was morning – better get moving – there was much to do before sunset – and

hauled all three of them up on the hard ground. No tracks – no wolf tracks – the ground was as hard as stone – but she knew. She knew. Carl hadn't listened to her when she told him of her fears.

“Old honey bun, wolves travel in packs – not just one – a pack. You can smell em in the air, you can hear em howlin' at the moon. And it's not wolf season even if they were to come this far out.”

He had scoffed at her when she had begged him to stay this time, at least until the baby was born. But his men came by one evening with word of some trouble on the land in the next county over and with barely a nod, he was gone. And she and Kathareen were left. Oh and King, the old black dog, he remained. When Carl was gone, King was allowed in the house, especially now that they had become prey. Carl would not allow it so she was careful to keep the dog out when she thought her husband would return home. Carl was a good husband in the sense that he provided for them, but well, he had his moments. She brushed the thoughts away. It wasn't worth thinking about.

As a girl, she had lived on a farm near Pretty Prairie, a town in the southern part of Kansas. She was the oldest girl. She had an older brother, but “oldest girl” always meant Mother Number 2 – and Alice had lived up to that name. She could sew a dress by the time she was 7 years old, cook a good meal at 8, grow a garden, care for babies. She learned to care for the sick even when she was sick herself when she was just a wee girl. Alice was strong and smart. She helped her mother with the five youngest children and together they worked from early morning to night. Her father was a nice man but not too ambitious and if the truth were known, somewhat lazy. So mother and children did the work – plowed the fields, dug the wells, and tended to things while pa chewed the fat with the old boys down on the

porch. One cold winter, they ran out of spuds and pa got a chill and couldn't hunt, so Alice, a girl of 10 took the gun and with her brothers learned how to shoot to kill. And she was a crack shot. She practiced for hours as the winter wore on and she brought back the creatures that they ate all winter. She could handle the gun. And they didn't starve that winter. Oh no, she would never let that happen.

Today, she had to lay in provisions in case the baby came in the night. She carried the bucket out back to the pump and started by pushing down the heavy handle, pumping as much water as she could. It started out cold and clear, went to a muddy stream, and then dripped to a stop. She would pump more after it rested – the pump that is. Not her, she wouldn't rest until night. There was work to be done, livestock to check, a garden to tend, and diapers to wash. With her child on her back, she walked way down the narrow dirt path to the gate. From here she could see the tiny speck of her neighbor's house. She pulled down the branch that was leaning against the gate to make sure that the white cloth was still tied hard to the end and then she pulled it up and latched it to the gate. White flag – a signal that there was no baby yet. Margaret would be keeping watch from her window across the way. If the flag was down, Margaret would come. Alice had the berthing board ready. Walking back up the rutted path, her loneliness disappeared in the sunlight. Another soul was only ½ hour away.

Alice placed Kathareen on a soft cotton blanket in the shade of the lone tree and they ate their morning meal listening to the chatter of the birds. Afterwards she boiled the water over an open fire in the pit, saving some out for their dinner of beans and hard bread and a little bit of jerky. Carl had brought a pound of sugar home the last time and she kept it stored tightly in a jar for special occasions. She had chickens and goats. Maybe she would make an egg pudding for dinner, she thought. Maybe not. She was

losing her appetite, which was a sign that her time was close. She worked the cotton gauze against the washboard in the soapy water for her baby. Then she shook the water hard off of the diapers and hung them on the swaying clothes line. They flapped in the wind making a rhythmic sound that mingled with the sound of the black birds high above and the child's voice talking to her dolly in her favorite space beside the single tree out from the house. She could keep Kathareen in sight from every place in the yard. Her morning chores were positioned so that she could see the little girl from every angle.

Kathareen was a beautiful little girl, with raven colored curls and big brown eyes. She was a gift from God for Alice. Nothing mattered – not wind– not storms – not loneliness – not even dugouts for homes because she had been given this precious child for her very own. At 3 years old, Kathareen would gather field flowers, weave them into garlands with her tiny fingers and bring them to her mother's skirts where she would be lifted high in the air and swung about, both of them laughing. She loved to sing and dance and the wind seemed to carry her baby songs around and around sweetening the air and filling the vastness of the sky. Birds gathered at her feet and butterflies landed softly on her beautiful head. The terror of the night shattered into the brilliant sunlight as Alice gazed from under the flapping clothes on the line to her beautiful baby singing softly in her play. Oh mama, she thought, how I wish you were here. And for a fleeting moment, she remembered her dream of last night. Oh to revisit it again.

The day droned by and the night fell. The water sat in pails inside the little home, just in case the baby came tonight. King was brought in, and Kathareen fell asleep in her arms, a sweet smile on her tiny baby lips. Alice blew out the lamp and tried to get comfortable on the pallet. She wasn't afraid of being attacked in her sleep. If danger came, she would know it.



As a small girl, she could see things that others could not. She had second sight. Her grandmother had had it too. Neighbors came to ask her questions when she was only a small child of 5. It puzzled her that others were blind to images that were so clear to her. Her mother called it a “gift.” It worked well when her sister had almost drowned in a well, or that winter when she knew where to hunt for rabbits, or that fateful night when the wolf came.

On her childhood farm, they raised crops, cows, pigs, and chickens. The favorite animal though was a beautiful mare named Daisy who pulled the plow and the wagon. Daisy loved the children who rode her bareback and fed her apples. That summer, prairie wolves had filtered down from out west. A lone wolf had howled to the moon, a mournful sound that carried over the prairie and into the windows of their farmhouse.

“Aw, wolves are scereed of folks,” Pa had said at the supper table. “No need to go lookin’ for trouble.” Her mother wasn’t so sure, with her eyes darting from father to Walter, Alice’s big brother.

“It wouldn’t hurt to keep the gun ready, dear,” she said.

“Un,” he uttered through his teeth – “no need to go to all that trouble.”

After dinner, while the dishes were washed up, Alice saw Walter quietly take down the gun and the bag of shells and slip out the back door. Later, before bed, she found the big black gun leaning in the corner of the

porch. Danger, when it came to Alice, in her sleep, felt like an unbearable pain that sliced through her chest and had a smell that was indescribably foul. The pain sliced through her in the darkest part of the night. She awakened with a start, doubling over. She could smell the wolves. Quickly, she crept through the darkness and found her big brother, Walter. He sat straight up in his bed, immediately awake. But when he didn't hear anything, he patted her on her shoulder and rolled over. He was only 12 years old. She sat by the window for the rest of the night rocking herself back and forth. Death was all around, she knew – she could smell it. The next morning, two cows were dead with their bones picked almost clean.

“This must be a pack of big prairie wolves,” their neighbor said over morning coffee in their kitchen. “We all best be on the lookout.”

Alice shot Walter a look but he lowered his eyes. Yes, Alice knew these things, no question...and her brother knew that she knew. Neighbors sighted the wolves and shots rang out sometimes during the night once in a while during the next few weeks. Then, after a few kills, the wolves seemed to be gone from the area. Snow fell and winter set in. As hot as Kansas can be in the summer, it can be just as cold in the deep winter. And it was a killer winter. The pain shot through Alice again one freezing night as she lay snuggled in the big feather bed with all of her little sisters. The smell of danger burned the inside of her nostrils and she was instantly wide awake. Carefully she slid out of the top of the covers into the frigid air, her breath blowing smoke. She picked her way across the room to her brother's bed.

“Walter,” she whispered as she poked him. “Walter, the wolf is here – in the barn! Walter – Wake up!” Walter gave her a shove that knocked her off of her feet.

“You’re dreaming! For cryin’ in a bucket Alice, leave me be!”

The smell got stronger, her eyes watered and her heart skipped a beat. The gun! She flew down the stairs and out the door onto the frosty porch. It was gone! Quick, in the closet! And there it was, the old double barreled breach loading shotgun, right there against the coats. She grabbed the bag with the 12 gauge shotgun shells loaded with buckshot – the big heavy stuff – no matter! She could hear Daisy out in the barn, screaming her horse scream for help as she raced across the yard towards the barn. Alice was only 10 years old but she knew what she knew. “Hang on Daisy”, she cried in her heart. She could hear the beast snarling and the horse screaming but she was fearless as she flung open the doors of the old barn. And in the moonlight, a giant of a dark beast glared straight at her over the ravaged body of her beloved horse. Daisy was still alive, but wanting to die as she lay bleeding on the straw, the flesh torn from her side and legs. For a moment, Alice was stunned, and then the wolf moved slightly. Filled with rage, Alice yanked on the hammers but they held tight. She pulled harder and then again. The wolf sensing her vulnerability, straightened up as if to spring. Just then, the gun was yanked out of her hands, the shooter aimed straight at the wolf and fired. A howl filled the night air as the wolf vanished out of the back of the barn. Then Walter took aim and shot Daisy. Lanterns were lit in the house as the whole family rushed out into the icy night. Alice had to be torn away from Daisy and covered in blood, she was taken back into the house, sobbing and fighting to get free. She was wrapped in her mother’s quilts by the stove as the men set about digging a grave in that hard cold ground that night. The next morning, a trail of blood was found in the snow but the wolf was gone.

She had not been believed as a girl when she felt the danger that had killed the cows and Daisy and she wasn't being believed now. But she knew what she knew and she knew what the danger felt like. And she knew that she was being stalked by a wolf.

That night, she had the dream again. She was once again, a girl of twelve, holding her dying mother in her arms. She had been caring for her ever since her mother had taken ill 6 weeks before. Her mother's breath was crackling in her chest and her head was hot with fever. Please God, please God, she had prayed all day and all night. The babies were crying and the children were hungry but her mama was dying and she wouldn't leave her. Mama had not spoken a word all day. Suddenly, she opened her eyes wide, "Alice, I know what heaven looks like. It's right here in this room."

"What's it like mama?"

"Look, my darling, the room is filled with babies and roses." And the heady smell of roses filled the tiny room. Alice could smell it. The room was suddenly cool and still.

"Mama, mama, I can smell the roses. But, don't go mama. Please don't go. Don't leave me mama. I am afraid. Please, please mama."

"Alice, look, they're here to take me." Out the sashed window, Alice gazed in disbelief at a sight she would never ever forget. A beautiful white carriage was waiting on the lawn. It was drawn by two magnificent beautiful white horses. The driver, a small man was dressed in a white top hat with a white waist coat and knee pants. He gazed at her with his crystal blue eyes and rosy smile. Her mother's dead sisters sat smiling in the plush white cushions. They glowed with a golden sparkle. Before she could stop her, her

mother flew like a summer breeze out to the waiting carriage. Then they all turned to smile at her as her mother waved. “Goodbye, my darling Alice.” The moment was gone. Her mother went limp in her arms, her smile fixed on her pretty face.

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*Out the sashed window, Alice gazed in disbelief at a sight she would never ever forget — a beautiful white carriage waiting on the lawn, drawn by two magnificent white horses.*

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“Come back mama! Mama, come back!” Alice sobbed into her mother’s chest.

They buried her sweet mother under a big tree. And then Alice and her brothers and sisters set to work. They worked as hard as they could. They were all young children. For two years, Alice and two of her brothers planted, plowed, and harvested the crops. Then they hauled the wheat, corn and straw to the mill, in a wooden cart drawn by one old horse. But it just wasn’t enough. Her sisters watched the babies while she and her brothers toiled, but her sisters were just babies themselves. One day, the school teacher came out to the farm. Alice fixed her a glass of tea and they sat themselves out on the porch. It was hot and the flies were bad. Alice held Rachel, the baby on her lap, as she rocked.



“Alice,” began Miss Sarah, “You are working yourself to death. I’ve got an opportunity that I think you should take.”

“I can’t stop working, Miss Sarah, we would starve.”

“I know, I know. I’m not suggesting that you stop workin’ chile. I’m just suggestin’ that maybe you should consider something else. Now before you protest, let me finish. They’re needin’ a school teacher up in Reno County. You were my smartest student, Alice. They would pay you and you could live with the Schmidt’s, so you could send your money home.”

“But who would take care of the kids?”

“You let me take care of that.” And she did. Within two weeks, Alice was packed up and carted off to be the school marm in a one-room school house 20 miles away. And the kids were checked on by the good women of that settlement, who took the smallest ones into their own homes until they were old enough to help out back home on the farm. Alice was only 14 years old and that first winter, she cried herself to sleep every night in her bed under the stairs.

“Oh mama, oh mama, I need you so bad, my heart hurts. Why did you leave me?” Alice was young but she was smart. She loved her students and they loved her back. She walked the few miles to the school house every morning before the sun was up and back home to the Schmidt’s in late afternoon. Every cent she made was sent back home and it was her hard work that kept her brothers and sisters fed and clothed.

Years went by and Alice kept teaching school. But she also did sewing and piecework for a few extra nickels a week. She was sought after for the beautiful handwork that she produced but especially for her hats. When she reached the age of 18, she was expected to move on to her own place and so she moved into Hutchinson, a dusty town, filled with salt miners. It was the gateway to Western Kansas and cattle was the currency – that and land – and salt. It was booming when Alice procured a small room with a store front. There she displayed her hats in front and slept on a small bed in the back. Her reputation spread throughout the area. Women came from as far away as Newton and Salina for the beautiful feathered and laced hats that were made by her hands.

And the years went by. She did not expect to marry. She knew her job and that was to support her brothers and sisters until they married. She was far too old anyway – girls who waited past 17 were old maids. Nobody wanted them then. And she was way older than that. Besides, she was safe in her little shop in the middle of town – safe from animal wolves if not from human ones.

One day, a dashing man tipped his hat to her as she tripped by him on the wooden walkway. Her heart skipped a beat and then she admonished herself for being so silly. After all she was 25 years old! Much too old to act so girlish! But later, while she was fitting a hat on one of her ladies, she heard about Carl Rittenoure, a wealthy landowner, who had opened an office on Main and was said to be single. Could it be him? she wondered. “No, surely not.”

Carl Rittenoure came from a family of wealth and he had an eye for Alice. One year later, they were married in a church wedding surrounded by family and friends. Afterward, they left for their home out here on the prairie. Alice was so in love with Carl, she would have gone anywhere with him. He called her, his “old honey bunch.”

That was 4 years ago, she thought, as she stood at the clothes line. It seems so long ago. In the darkness, memories of her mother wafted through her head. Her face, when it came to her, always seemed so sweet, her eyes questioning. What did the dream mean? That night, there were no wolf steps on the roof of the dugout, no pain of danger awakened Alice and, the trio – she, Kathareen and King slept peacefully in the dugout under the moon. The smell of autumn was in the air.



Morning came and Alice was awakened with a start. Gazing up, she looked into the face of her darling daughter.

“Mama, wake up. Did the baby come yet?”

“No, my sweet, but soon.”

The day started out so still. The air seemed to hang heavy, and the birds seemed distant somehow. Alice carrying her child on her back and her child in her belly, felt the sweat trickle down her back as she made her way out to the gate.

Where was King? Odd. He usually followed her wherever she went. At night, she couldn't even change her position in bed without him opening one eye to check her. Back at the house, she saw the big old black dog sitting near the tree, watching out the back, cocking his head and twitching his ears as he sniffed the air.

“Better get the gun, just in case,” she thought. She climbed back down into the house on the ladder, and pulled the gun back up with her. She loaded it and kept it close. The morning wore on, the birds were singing and King lay on his side waving his tale to keep the flies off of his back.

“I was worried about nothing,” she thought to herself. She put the water onto boil and then lifting the bucket off of the fire, she washed up the linens. Kathareen sang to her dolly and the sound of bees droned under the sound of the wind. As she stood at the clothes line, hanging up the sheets, Alice's mind was back on the hat shop, the bathtub she had purchased years before and her friends laughing over tea as they all sat around the small table in the sewing room of her shop. She was brought back by the baby moving within her.

Suddenly she realized the silence. No birds were singing, the wind was still, the sheets hung limply on the line. “Mama, mama, come mama. MAMA!” The pain of danger almost doubled Alice over. Her nose burned, breath caught in her throat and her heart seemed to stop beating in her chest. Over the top of the clothes line, she gazed straight across the yard and into the yellow eyes of the beast. The wolf had crept silently into her life. There he was – crouching not 15 feet from Kathareen who angrily was being guarded by King. The position of the wolf put him at a point of a triangle with Alice and the child at the other two points. Kathareen began to cry out for her mama, angry with her dog that then backed into her

knocking her into the dust. Her eyes searched for Alice and her crying stopped at the sight of her mother's terrified face. King stood guard with snarling lips pulled back barring sharp white teeth. His body stood rigid, tail erect, fur standing straight up on his back. Alice knew that, King would fight to the end, but he would be no match for the beast.

The gun! She slowly bent down to retrieve it but just as she did, with horror she saw the gun leaning against the stump 20 feet away where she had carelessly let it fall. The wolf paused to run his tongue over his teeth and then started to turn towards the child. NO! Get the gun! She told herself. But if she did, she would have to turn her face away from her baby and run further away from Kathareen in order to grab it. Maybe the wolf would then come after her, but with his giant legs, he could reach her in a single bound and then if the Wolf killed her first, then....the thought stopped..... she couldn't think further. Time stopped. Suddenly the wolf turned back toward Alice, he seemed to rise up into the air, his hot breath seemed to shoot from his throat, and he sprung towards Alice. The next thing that happened lived forever within Alice's memory – so real that she never could quite tell the whole story without crying. But it was a mystery. And those who tried to untangle the mystery told the tale for years to come.

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*And drifting back from the carriage, she heard the sound of her mother's voice, ever so faintly — I am with you, my darling Alice, for ever and ever.*

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Suddenly, as the wolf rose into the air, wide drooling mouth pulled tight over large snarling fangs, head bent down, his yellow eyes gleaming for the kill, a sound rose up from the ground. The rumble of horses filled the

air followed by a sound so wonderful that it was not of the earth. It began as a feeling and then grew into loudness. The moment seemed to stretch out as time stood still. Alice couldn't take her eyes off of those of her attacker. It was though she was paralyzed in place. She and the wolf were locked in a time and space that was not in sync with the growing sound. Passing by her left with a whoosh, galloped two giant white horses pulling a beautiful and massive white carriage. As they passed, the air turned cool and sweet. Alice watched in amazement as the driver raised his white gloved hand and with a snap of his wrist cracked his whip. The wolf fell in slow motion, slowly, slowly into the dust, dying as he fell. The life left the body of the wolf like a flapping of crow's wings and then the wolf was still. The white dust, the sound of strings, but strongest of all – the heady smell of roses settled down over them as the carriage disappeared through the mist. And drifting back from the carriage, she heard the sound of her mother's voice, ever so faintly, "I am with you my darling Alllllllllliiiiiceeee for ever and everrrrrrrr." Collapsed in a mound on the ground over a wriggling 3-yr old and an old black dog, her heart was filled with the essence of her mother, the sound of heavenly babies, and the heady smell of roses. And she knew.

The next morning, Carl Rittenoure returned home to find the body of what was thought to be the largest wolf ever seen in Kansas lying dead in his yard. The animal's neck had been snapped by a single whip lash although no whip was ever found nor any carriage man skilled enough to do it. Inside the little dugout, a baby gurgled her first cries. They named her Marjorie. She was a beautiful baby girl – a baby who was born with a birthmark on her side – in the shape of a wolf.

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FROM THE AUTHOR

PS – Alice was my darling grandma, Susan Alice Ricketts Rittenoure. I was named after her and have the same initials. She was so wonderful. She was the strongest woman, I will ever know. She makes me look like a weakling. The new baby born that morning was my aunt, Marjorie. She was born with a birthmark in the shape of a wolf after “that incident with the wolf.” Kathareen, of course was my Aunt Kappy, an artist from the start. Gram told me this story one afternoon on her big soft bed. She told me that she could never reveal it to the others.

“But what did you tell your husband, Gram?” I asked.

“I simply said that a man in a carriage came by and saved me.”

But what skilled person could possible kill a wolf with a single crack of a whip? That was forever more a mystery. Gram knew, though and she kept it locked in her heart. She knew what she knew. And now you do too. Hope you like it.

*Happy Halloween*

*Love*

*Mom*

DREAM STORIES

# LOST IN THE DARK

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, October 2016*



**I**t is that time again and I was heading out to the pumpkin patch to enjoy the fresh air with my grandchildren with the corn mazes, hay rack rides and pick up a few pumpkins for my front porch. The directions texted to me by my son went something like “drive north out of town until you see the blacktop on the east side of Seneca. From there go west 2 miles.....”

Thank heavens for my GPS. Instructions given in directions such as north and south have little meaning to me. I can read a map – I just can’t look around me and somehow recognize my surroundings as being on the map that I’m reading. I have better luck with objects – “Go to the corner of 4th and Main and turn left.” In other words I have dominant object memory opposed to dominant spatial memory. That’s right there is actually a reason for all of this. My mother had it too. It was comforting to find all of this out years ago as a student in a doctoral program studying brain anatomy. Some things are well, just the way they are. My name is Maggie O’Malley and I live in a moderately small town in Kansas in a big old house with my two little fluffy Bichons, a big flower garden, tons of books, and a room just for quilting and writing stories and whatever else I come up with. My seven children are all grown and I have 10 grandchildren that I adore. Oh yes, I am an academic psychologist, a family therapist, and drug counselor with a cozy office down the street and have been a college professor in the local community college for 20 years as well. Life is good.

But sometimes in the middle of the night, I still startle awake with the end of a terrifying dream shattering into the darkness, the dream of a memory of a night when was scared out of my wits. At those times, I snuggle down deep in the soft down coverlet and lie still until my heart stops racing and I can slowly drift back to sleep.



It was the time of year when everything was mellow. It was autumn in Kansas and I was on the road selling cell phones. It was 1991. It had been a rough year. I had learned a lot over the past year. For one thing, I found out that I could actually do stuff that I didn't think I could do – such as drive around the countryside by myself to unfamiliar places which was tough since, as I mentioned before, I have no sense of direction. Also, I knew nothing about life in the country and it was apparent as I went to farms trying to sell them a cell phone. I said a lot of stupid things such as calling steer – a cow and getting sick to vomiting by a pig barn but the nice people put up with me and taught me the ropes. Cell service had only been licensed in the rural area in the past year - since 1990 and we had very little cell service back then – two towers in our area and service was only great when you were within 15 miles of a tower. So much of the time I was on my own without contact. People born since then cannot even conceptualize this. I had gotten the job out of sheer desperation. I was newly divorced and trying to rely on a job at a dress shop wasn't cutting it. One day after watching another sales person grab my suit sale I called an old friend and asked him for a job in his advertising agency. My friend looked at me sadly and shaking his head, told me that there was no money in advertising anymore. And then he stopped and snapped his fingers. “Hey, an outfit out of Tulsa contacted me last week. They are bringing Cell Uno into Windy Hollow and desperately need a salesperson. And you would be perfect!”

How's that? I wondered. I had never ever done anything like this. I had only worked with women – jewelry sales as a young college student, the dress shop, and five years of teaching quilting to the local women. Back then

only men were into electronics – it was a man’s product. I knew nothing about electronics. He didn’t say anything about driving around the countryside – that would come later.

“Well you know rich people and you’re broke!” He said this with such enthusiasm that I remember laughing out loud and then..... crying. So much for gallows humor. I applied. They offered me a base salary that was decent plus commission and benefits. I took it. And then they immediately sent me to billing school, cell school, and tower school in Texas and Florida. I came home hit the road running. He was right – I was broke. Every morning racing across Kansas covering about 200 miles in my little car, then racing home to fix dinner for my two sons who were still at home, throw our laundry in the machine and then off to the mall to sell clothes and then home to study – Oh yes, I was going to back to school. I was a single mom with 7 of the most wonderful children and I was not going to let them down. I was determined that I was never going to be in this situation again – ever!

During that first year, I walked into a lot of situations that I didn’t know were dangerous simply because I didn’t know any better. I had been a stay-at-home mom for all of my adult life and didn’t yet know that here is a lot of bad people out there in the world. But that was almost 30 years ago. I have learned a lot since then.

Back then there were only 4 of us running Cell Uno – the manager, a very nice man from Kentucky, another woman, Laura, who was the office manager, and Steve and I, the sales team. Steve and I were paid \$250.00 for every phone that we sold. I was in debt, living in a rental with two sons at home and 5 children in college or grown and we needed every single penny I could get my hands on. Since there were only two women in the state selling

cell phones at the time – Steve came on later - I was making pretty decent money. But it still just barely covered and on those occasions when it didn't, I had to borrow from my dad. And so, whenever the call came in from a customer wanting to buy a phone, I agreed to go. The only thing was that this time, the customer gave an address that was way out in the country southwest of town in an area that I was unfamiliar with and it was for 9:00 at night. It would be pitch dark by the time that I got there. There was not such a thing as GPS back then and my cell phone that was installed in my car probably wouldn't have service.....but \$250 was calling my name. First, I had to find someone to work my shift at the mall but if I could sell a phone, that would trump the \$4.50 an hour that I would make at the dress shop. Deal! I traded shifts, ran home and put dinner on the table, told the boys I was going to make a sale and then I should be home soon after and here I was heading south on a country road with a scribbled set of directions on a piece of paper. Please, please, please I said over and over to myself. Make this month the one that I don't have to call Daddy.'

Right off the bat, I was lost. I circled and circled – I kept passing the same farm houses as the sun sunk down past the trees and then..POP! it was gone and darkness descended. I had lost sight of the cars on the highway 45 minutes ago. I couldn't turn back because I had no idea where "back" was. And so I just kept driving - bumping along on rutted roads and slowing down for every mailbox. My cell was as dead as a doornail –not the battery – no service. And it was dark dark dark! Now what? And then I saw the mailbox lying in the weeds up ahead on the left. I got out of the car and bent down over the weeds. The little eyes shining out of the weeds at me did not even faze me by this time after over an hour of watching little creatures scurry across the road in front of me. Yep – the name on the mailbox read "Harold Goodfather." I turned left and went down a deeply rutted road, past a grove of scrubby trees, through a rusty chain link gate and there in

front of me was a small ranch style house with its light on. Later I wondered why I didn't turn around right then – my desperate need for money trumped my gut feeling – and I had one for sure.

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*My cell was as dead as a doornail — not the battery, no service. And it was dark, dark, dark!*

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Several big mangy dogs came rushing at me barking and growling. The front door remained closed. I looked around my car for something to offer them. Aha! A half-eaten moon pie! I thought to myself “They better by darn buy a cell phone – no! Two cell phones. Oh well, here goes. I grabbed a half-eaten Moon Pie out of the box on the seat next to me, broke it into pieces and tossed it in their direction. They stopped barking and began gabbing for the treat. As I bent down to speak to them, I realized from the pool of light on the dirt that the front door had quietly opened and when I looked up, I saw standing there in the light a very tall, very thin man and peeking around his elbow was a small frail looking woman. He said nothing to me or his dogs – just stood there in silence watching. I looked up and broke the silence by telling him who I was and why I had come and then I asked if he was Harold Goodfather. Then his voice boomed out in a friendly voice, “Yes, I am the Good Father! And his whole demeanor changed as he held the door open for me and reached down and with one of his big hands, grabbed up all of the bag phones that I was struggling to carry. And I was swept into their living room. I can see it now. It was lit solely by white candles except for a kerosene lantern that swung from the rafters. It had a musty but pungent smell that some farm houses have, I noticed. Harold turned to this wife and said, “Lurleen why don't you go get this fine lady a little cup of juice, why don't cha? She scurried away like a little mouse back

into the shadows as he ushered me into a room to the right. It was long and narrow with picnic tables lined up down the middle - end to end. And the left back wall was covered with bookshelves that actually looked a lot like mine at home. I recognized this from the layout I had noticed from outside to be a breezeway between the house and the garage that seemed to have been enclosed into this long, narrow room. It, too, was lit by candles and there was a lamp hanging from the rafters just like the one in the first room. So far it seemed that there were no actual ceilings – just rafters - it was like a cabin. My book shelves at home were literally crammed with books. This one, as I was to find out, was filled with bottles and jugs all filled with a liquid and other stuff. Harold put all of my bags and equipment on the middle picnic table just as Lurleen appeared with the cup of juice. “Go ahead and sit yourself down and get comfortable and we’ll be back in a jiff.” And they disappeared through the door that we had just come through.



The “juice” smelled like spiced hot cider and yet had a bitter after taste. After a couple of sips, I put my cup on the table and then I just sat there. Minutes ticked by. So quiet. I couldn’t even hear anybody moving around in the house. After over 30 minutes, I decided to wait 5 more minutes and then go looking for them. In the meantime, I untangled myself from the picnic table and started browsing the bookshelves. I walked up and down the room looking at all of the jars - each had something floating in the murky liquid. Just when I had had enough and stepped back to my seat to pick up my stuff, I turned to glance at the shelf to my right and was instantly startled to see floating in a large jar, a little being with two little eyes staring back at me. I jumped back and when I did, I ran right into

Harold and Lurleen who had somehow mysteriously appeared from somewhere and were now standing very close behind me. They both stared at me with sober eyes that contrasted with the small slight curve of their lips.

“Oh!” I startled and then catching myself began to ask where they had been but Harold spoke over me,

“You haven’t drunk your juice!. Come on now Miss Lady, it’s Lurleen’s specialty – you wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings now would you?”

But I wasn’t playing this game any longer. “What’s in this jar?”

“Which one?” He said buying time.

I reached up and tapped the glass with my right hand. “This looks like a fetus.”

Lurleen immediately spoke in her whiny voice, louder this time, “Oh it’s not what yer thinkin’. This is a little soul what didn’t make it to heaven.”

“Like a miscarriage?” I knew I needed to get the \_\_\_ out of there.

“Go ahead and tell her Harold.” Now it seemed that Lurleen was in charge.

“Have a seat,” he told me. I took hold of the handles on my gear – I was still standing - but he covered my hands with his big rough ones and said in a gentle voice. “Just relax, we’re goin’ to buy yer phone but here’s the deal.” Lurleen pushed me gently from behind and I was suddenly back on the bench of the picnic table.

“Ya see”, Harold began, we believe in the life everlasting.”

“Oh go ahead Harold, Lurleen cut in, “We are witches, Maggy.” I had gone from Miss Lady to Maggy in the last hour.

“Really? How interesting.” Now I was trying to buy time. “So do you mean Wikens?”

“Oh heavens no! Besides they aren’t even witches....not REAL witches, right Harold?”

“No they aren’t real ones. Just so you know Maggy, we made this appointment tonight just so you could be our Special Guest. We saw you at the Fair selling phones and we just knew you would fit right in.” He said this like he was presenting me with a gold medal.

“You saw me?” I was getting a sick feeling.

“This is the night of the changing of the harvest moon – a special day on the earth and covens all over the earth join together in worship.”

*This is the night of the hanging of the harvest moon — a special day on the earth, and covers all over the earth join together in worship.*

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I felt a cold chill go up my back. “No thanks but I have kids at home and I need to get back – they will be looking for me. And besides I’m a Methodist.” I started pushing away but as I tried to stand up, the room and the candles and the strange smell all seemed to swirl around me and I had trouble keeping my balance. I felt like I was drunk – “what was in that “juice?” I tried to get a hold of myself and suddenly we were outside in the crisp air and I was beginning to feel kind sick again. Lurleen and Harold were on either side grasping me by the arm pits. I was suddenly away of others passing us as we headed up a lane.

“Okay STOP! I am NOT going any farther. Do you hear me? I tried to yank my arms away and I remember dragging my self back but I was held tight.”

“Hey, calm down – we’re almost there, you are going to love it Maggy, trust me, it is wonderful.” Lurleen seemed to whisper in my ear. I was being shoved along in 3” heels over a dirt and gravel path. I kept stumbling and turning my ankles. On top of everything else, I still had my purse over one arm and a bag phone over the other. It seemed like we just kept going and going. My head was clearing a bit. It had to be either the candles or the juice.

“Tell me again, where are we going.”

“Harold already told you, it’s the Harvest Moon celebration – the equinox! You HAVE heard of it haven’t you? It’s a BIG deal around here.” Maggy acted like I was a toddler and she had to speak to me in words of two syllables. “We have a gynomous (I’ve always hated that word if it is one) bonfire. There will be dancing and cider and the kids get into it.” And then “And you will be one of our special guests this year!” She said this as though I was suddenly chosen Homecoming queen. Wait did she say that I was “one” of the special guests? All I could think about was that movie about the children of the corn and whatever I knew I was getting out of this somehow. Nobody was cutting out my tongue! Okay, I DON’T WANT to be your guest! If you don’t let me go now, I am going to scream!”

Harold bent down and said with a chuckle, “Who do you think will hear you Maggy? It’s just us.”

I remember thinking that that sealed it – I was in trouble. Before this, I think I was hoping that this was all a joke that I was tangled up in. My mind was racing. The boys had no idea where I had gone – I hadn’t told anybody. I thought that if I could run back on the path, I would reach the house but if I had to run in the forest, I would have no idea which direction to go. But first, I had to get loose.

We were cutting through a heavily wooded area and the sounds of the cicadas were all around. Honestly, for some reason, that sound kept me centered. The only other sound I could hear was the thumping of my heart and even in the night air, I felt slightly damp from sweat. The moon was hidden in a cloudy sky. It was pitch black – not even a star. And then suddenly, the wind either shifted or the path turned into the breeze and I could smell the wood smoke and see the flames from 100 yards away up above the trees could hear voices chanting to the beat of a drum and once in

a while some kind of music like from a flute or whistle. Someone called to Lurleen and suddenly she let go of my arm and ran forward. I was surprised to realize that Harold must have departed from us a ways back and I was thinking too hard to notice. I was unattached! I hesitated but only for a moment and then I darted left into the trees and ran as hard as I could deeper into the forest with branches tearing at my hair and scratching my face. I couldn't believe it. I fell down several times over fallen trees and low places. I think it was then that I lost the bag phone. I was wildly trying to get away but I somehow I kept running into something and or falling into ditches. It was like running in water, I couldn't seem to make progress and all of the time, my mind was racing trying to find some clue to tell me that I was actually going the right direction. I heard Lurleen call out my name and she sounded close by and then many voices calling to me and I tried to hurry faster. But which way to go? I tried to see the smoke and then run away from it hoping that it would take me towards the house – but which way was it? And then I ran smack into a tree in the black night and something hard and pointed gouged me right beside my left eye barely missing it. It came up so suddenly, I fell into darkness and stars.



“Look what you went and done to yourself Maggy!” Faces were looking down at me. I tried to look over the cloth that was covering my face on the left side. “Now come on, we are about to begin and we don't want to start without you. You just got lost – I shouldn't have left you.” Right.

They helped me to my feet and pulled me through the opening into the clearing with them. Throbbing pain that's all I could think about. There was blood all over the cloth. Then I remembered getting stabbed with that stick or branch right before.... The bonfire was everything that Lurleen had said – “ginormous.” I looked around at all of the people standing around that huge bonfire – a huge crowd. They were all wearing robes or garments that looked like sheets with holes in the middle and were standing around the fire swaying in time to the music and shouting something. There was a small group of musicians playing to the side and everyone seemed like they were having the best time ever. Several women held my arms and put something over my head.

“Now there you are Maggy, just stand here with the other guests and don't go and get yourself lost again. You don't want to miss all the fun, right?”

“Hey somebody, get her a crown.” Shouted one of the other “special guests” and I had a wreath pushed down on the top of my head. There were 3 or 4 of us and we stood together behind a braided rope. The rest of the “guests” looked happy to be there and everybody was passing around a big metal bucket or can of something that smelled just like the juice I had already tasted. I tried to act like I was taking a drink and then I passed it to the next guest. The dancing around the bonfire got faster and faster and now people were swirling, their white garments rippling out as they swirled. Some whirled so much that they fell to the ground as though they were in a stupor. I tried to tell myself that these people were just fine – they were just having good fun and it was me who was such a nerd that I couldn't just let go and.....but I told them that I didn't want to be here.....they said that they saw me at the fair and picked me out.....and then I remembered those eyes in the jar. I turned and looked - My fellow special guests were now

embracing each other. I was at the front of the group next to the rope so I was in plain sight – a bad position to be in if you are trying to disappear. I tried to come up with a plan. I knew that I needed to somehow disengage from the bonfire but then what? Where was my car? Where was the house? Where was the path? Just then somebody pulled me away from the group and swung me around the fire. One of my shoes fell off and I felt dizzy again. I buried my face in the man's chest trying to get away from the smell of smoke and then I just dangled there like a rag doll. Sure enough he got tired of my dead weight and dropped me. I fell hard on the dirt and my bloody eye towel came off. My yellow suit was brown now with dirt and blood spatters. I remember the eyes of those clapping and chanting – they sparkled and their faces glowed. It felt like I was in slow motion as I crawled out and grabbed the heel of my shoe and then I crawled backwards into the tangle of bodies. I kept crawling back under the swaying people who were becoming more and more active, trying to dodge the legs stomping and swaying. And then I was out in the dark. I got to my feet and tried to see something in the darkness. This time I was not going to get caught!

The voices seemed to be singing now instead of chanting and I hurried through the trees stepping carefully with my arms stretched out in front of me. I felt like I was going in circles and knew that sooner or later they would discover me missing. I was having trouble seeing out of my left eye that was swollen almost shut and I had no sense of where I needed to go – okay I was lost. I leaned back against the trunk of a tree to catch my breath and a warm tongue licked me on my right hand. I almost jumped out of my skin. It was those dogs from the house. Here they were happily looking for some more moon pie! They jumped around me yipping and brushing against my legs and I remember grabbing one about the head squeezing his ears. “You beautiful old dog. Now go home,” I commanded. “Come on, let's go home!” They took off to the right and when I lost them, they turned and

came back for me. I remember thinking as they took off... I can't believe they are going right – I would never have gone that away. I grabbed a collar on one of the dogs and let him pull me along between trees and around stumps and brambles. I stumbled half running and after a period of time when I thought my back would break in two, suddenly we were back on the path and I could let go. The dogs jumped around yipping as though this was great fun. "Please please be quiet." I tried to shush them. Once I thought I heard some shouting and I picked up steam and started running faster. The 3 inch heels were long gone. I could see the back of the house with the tall pole light in front of it but it seemed miles away. I took off the shoes and kept one as a weapon. We kept running and they were way ahead of me when the moon came out from behind the clouds and I could see way off in the distance the little house in the moonlight.

And then suddenly we were there. I ran to the corner of the house while the dogs were making a racket in the dirt clearing in front of the house. I tried to stay in the shadows as I ran around the house and across the front to my car. Suddenly a man ran out of the darkness from the left but I was already in my car pressing down on the gas when he started pounding on the hood. I threw the box of moon pies out of my window for the dogs, backed up and headed for the gate. Whoever was running after me kept yelling for me to stop but I just kept going popping the gate open on the right as I hit the long rutted driveway. Once on the road I turned and started driving. And driving. And driving. Up one dirt road and down another. I even drove by the road to the house again - maybe twice. If only I had a sense about which way to go! At one point, I hit a dead end and had to back up and turn around. An old truck was all at once following close behind me with people inside banging their hands on the sides of it and yelling. But I kept going and then there in the darkness a way up ahead I saw cars going down the highway – a point of reference! With this truck behind me, one

thing that I was afraid of, I remember, was that I would hit another dead end and I would be blocked in. I turned toward the highway on every road that came up and finally, I was staring ahead at Highway 90 heading straight home to Windy Hollow. I was determined to run the stop sign if the truck got too close but it seemed to give up and dropped back a ways and I zipped left and floored it until I had passed the next town and I could see the glow of the lights of Windy Hollow in the sky. And then I started crying and kept this up until I pulled up into my driveway. My 14 year old son was in the livingroom watching television and I tried to slip up the stairs before he saw me.

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*The moon came out from behind the clouds — and  
I could see, way off in the distance, the little house in  
the moonlight.*

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“Hey Ma! Where ya been? Hey Tom’s here.”

“I’ll be right back down,” I called as I went up the stairs. My eye was swollen almost shut, I still had straw from the “crown” stuck all over my hair and I was a mess. I called my friend Rita and tried to tell her what happened I was too tired to say anything plus every time I opened my mouth, I started crying.

I had a black eye the next day plus lots of scrapes bruises on my arms and legs but big purple ones in my arm pits and around the tops of my arms where they had held me tight as we were going down that dark path. I did have stitches in my face but it still left a scar anyway. I made up some kind of

a story to everyone else but to my boss, I told the truth. He reported this to the police and to the corporate offices but nothing ever came of it that I know of.

Steve went back out there the next day and found the house after getting lost himself a few times and knocked on their door to pick up my equipment. Mr and Mrs. Goodfather asked him inside and offered him some juice which he turned down (ha!). They acted surprised that I had left all of my equipment and seemed puzzled at my departure but said that they thought I had gotten sick and hoped I got better. As for the bonfire, they said that yes there had been a small bonfire in their backyard with a few friends. (Right!) And get this: Steve then sold them two phones! And we split the commission.

Sometimes I wonder if all of that really happened. And then I notice that tiny scar at the corner of my left eye and those nights when I dream of an infant floating in a jar.....and I am lost in the dark.

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

Note: As strange as it may seem, almost this entire story is true. I have had students who came to me for counseling when I was a school counselor at HCC who proclaimed to be witches and belonging to covens in that area but none of them said that they had ever heard of saving unborn fetuses in a jar. Most of them talked about their interest in the earth and the sky and everything natural. They told of ceremonies to celebrate the changing of the seasons and the changing of the moon phases which sounds like a lovely thing to do. However, some did mention that there were “strange” things that “went on that you wouldn’t want to be a part of”. When I think about it, I wonder what happened to the other “special guests” and why it was so important to them that I be one of them. It seemed scary that they chose me for the bonfire after seeing me at the Cell Uno booth at the fair. I will never know. I’m good with that!

One funny note: My dad and I spent great times all of my life debating everything under the moon from world peace to Christians in the arena with the lions. Towards the end of his life, he had Parkinson’s Disease and I could tell when he was bored and was really needing a good argument because he would bring up either working mothers and the damage they did to their kids or women’s rights. The very next day after this happened, my boss told me to stay home and rest and I was standing in the diningroom (I can still see it to this day) and daddy came in the back door. He came into the dining room, said hello and right away he brought

up still another one of those old saws: Taking religion out of schools which to him was horrible. I asked him if he meant every religion should be in schools since wasn't it true that freedom of religion meant you could choose any religion that you wanted to? He reluctantly agreed (I know he really didn't.) Then I said,

“How about witchcraft? I met some people last night who say that their religion is registered as a legitimate one and they are full on witches and they even have babies in bottles!”

He took a breath. He couldn't seem to find anything to say.

I jumped in with, “So one week, our schools worship as Protestants, then one week Jewish, then one week Catholic, then one week WITCHCRAFT, then one week.....?”

“Got any coffee in this place?” It was a win by default.  
Boom!

*HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

DREAM STORIES

# TWINS

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed —, October 2019*



“**N**ot again!” Here I am once again stuck out in the rain and I can’t find my car. She moved it again, I thought as I hurried back under the porch of the Community Center.

I glanced down to take a look at my phone, trying hard to shelter it from the downpour. “4 o’clock?” Where on earth did the time go? It seemed like only an hour ago it had been noon.” The afternoon had been a whirl of activity at the annual Book, Music, and Art fair. Our booth Cozy Corner Books had been busy but seriously! Four hours had whizzed by! Maybe Rebecca had really needed it. I scoured the parking lot through the pouring rain. It was hopeless. The car wasn’t in the place that I left it so I knew she had to have taken it. But I was totally exhausted and so ready to get home and jump into a hot shower. “PLEASE don’t make me do this AGAIN!”

I could feel that familiar sinking feeling. One of Rebecca’s usual tricks was to leave the car somewhere where I would have to search for it and then hang back, laughing about it. I know because she always tells me about it in one of her tirades, always giving herself away in those notes that she leaves all over the apartment. I am just not in the mood for it today, I thought wearily. I am so over Rebecca! Then I caught myself. Come on Rachel, that little familiar voice in my head said, after all she IS your twin sister. Okay, stop whining and start walking. Hey wait, the thought popped into my head, Maybe Allison is still inside and she could take me home. That’s it! After all, Allison HAD offered to take me home while we were closing the shop a while ago, when we were pushing the trolley out to her van. Sweet Allison, she’s always there for me. Maybe she wasn’t gone yet.....

I thought back to that first time we met on the first day of school in Miss Wheeler’s room in the Kindergarten class. I was so shy back then and always afraid to speak. “Hi. I am Allison. What’s your name?” She had dark wavy hair that hung down her back that she swung back and forth while she

talked. When she got excited she would bob her head with happiness. I remember that she had on a light blue check dress with puffy sleeves and a sash tied in back in a bow that day. She was so pretty....and she still was.

“Rachel,” I whispered back. She reached out and took my hand and we skipped down the hall and out into the sunlight for recess. The thunder brought me back and suddenly I was back in the present and so far – I had no way to get home. I turned and pushed open the glass door to the big hall, shook the rain drops off, and hurried inside. The fair was almost torn down. I could see that people were gathering their cargo and scurrying to get it out to their vehicles. The maintenance crew was sweeping the leftovers into piles with their long-handled brooms.

I hurried across the floor to our booth space but everything was gone and nobody was there. “Have you seen Allison?” I asked Emily, hopefully. She was the woman who had had the jewelry booth next to ours.

“Where the devil have you been?” Emily looked at me with disgust.

“I just went outside to get into my car and it looks like my sister took it.”

“Well she was here all afternoon causing trouble and making messes as usual. Allison could have done with your help, so....where WERE you?” Brushing a stray lock of hair off of her forehead, she gave Rachel a glare.

“What do you mean? I was right here,” I stamped my foot with irritation and pointed to the floor.

“Sure you were. Well no, I don’t know where she is now and I don’t want to know. When are you going to take control of that sister of yours?”

I couldn’t even describe her but I do know this: We are so different! I guess you could call us mirror twins, I thought. I didn’t even know that I had a twin until I was 7 and she seemed to just show up one day out of nowhere. “Hi! I’m Rebecca!” I heard her say. That was it.

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*We are so different! I guess you could call us mirror twins, I thought. I didn’t even know that I had a twin until that day.*

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“Hey! Are you looking for me?” And there was Allison. “I saw the Mazda out on 10th street and I knew what had happened. Come on, I’ll give you a ride.” We looped our arms together just like always and rushed out into the rain. She was right. As we rounded the corner, there sat the old brown Mazda sitting next to a fireplug on 10th street with a yellow ticket stuck under the windshield wiper. “Thanks Rebecca,” I thought. “That’s going to cost.” But the good news was that the keys were still in the ignition. Allison was off to meet Rod, her boyfriend and I started the engine, with the familiar backfire, and pulled out into traffic.

The next thing I knew I was standing under the warm shower feeling safe and sound in my cozy little apartment. It was moments like this when I could relax and just soak in the peace and quiet. I grew up here in Rockwood. I was an only child for the first part of my life, went to school at Roosevelt public school until I went to middle school at Morgan and graduated from Rockwood H.S. and State U all here in town. I had been

here all of my life, in other words. I had a great life with two parents who loved each other and the three of us seemed like the perfect family -- until something happened that changed everything.



There was an accident and I remember it as though it were yesterday. I was 5 years old. Mom woke me up very early just as the sun was making pink and purple swirls in the sky. The window was up letting the cool breeze in before the hot day began. “Rachel, she whispered, “Can you hear that?” I listened and way off in the distance I could hear the sound of sirens. “Those are the emergency ambulances on their way to pick up daddy.” That’s when I sat up and was wide awake. Across the park by our house was a busy street and I could hear the sounds of sirens. “He has been in an accident. Maxine is here to take care of you sweet pea.” She kissed me lightly on the forehead. And I sunk back into my pillow and drifted back to sleep. Later, as I was waking up, I remembered mom’s voice and wondered if I had been dreaming. I could hear noises in the kitchen and I jumped up out of my soft bed and hurried in to tell her about my dream. But it wasn’t mom who was making all of the racket. It was Maxine, our next door neighbor who was fixing breakfast. She looked sideways at me from the sink.

“Good morning Rachel.” And she came towards me and held out her arms and folded me into a hug. I knew something was very wrong.

“Where’s mom? Where’s daddy?” I could hear my voice shaking. Then I started crying and I couldn’t seem to stop but when I finally did, Maxine said that he was still alive and we would just have to wait. And the rest of the

day is a blur. I just remember that lots of people were coming and going through our house and talking in whispers while we waited for word from the hospital.

It turns out that daddy was on his way to work that morning on his regular route. The blacktop road went south outside of town and there was a railroad track that cut across it. That crossing was not marked at all and many people had been hit by the train over the years. Early that morning there had been a light shower that was just letting up as he listened to the radio and smoked his Lucky Strike. And before he knew it, he was sliding into a train that he hadn't seen. He slammed on his brakes but it was too late and he slid right into the side of that big engine that was rushing down the tracks at top speed. The force of it knocked him down into the seat and crushed the truck cab around him and that probably saved his life. Daddy lived and after months in the hospital of rehabilitation, he finally got to come home.

I'll never forget that day. The sun was shining and all of the neighbors were out in the yard with balloons and big signs welcoming him home. A cheer went up when my mom drove our Oldsmobile up to the curb. I was so happy I thought I would burst. I had made his favorite lemonade – just like he taught me how – and it was in his favorite big glass by his chair. I drew a picture and put it on top. But daddy was not the same as he had been before the accident and he never would be. He had a puzzled look in his eyes most of the time whenever I caught him looking at me but he only mumbled. I walked by his wheel chair and touched his hand. Mom wheeled him inside and turned to tell everyone thanks. Maxine took me by the hand and pulled me towards her house. But I tried to get loose. I didn't want to leave him. "Let your daddy rest, sweetie," she said. Later I got to go home

but he was asleep in their room and the door was closed. Late that night I slipped back down to the kitchen and there was the lemonade standing untouched by the sink.

It seems like mom didn't have time for me anymore. She spent all of her time looking through the paper trying to find a job. And one day, she left me alone to take care of daddy. She bent down as she buttoned her coat and looked me square in the eyes and told me what to do. She had a list written in big black letters. And then she said, "You can go get Maxine if something happens. I will be gone all day. I'm going to pick up my cousin at the farm." I remember wondering what she meant by "if something happens..." It scared me. I was 7 years old and I had never been left alone by myself before and now I was supposed to take care of daddy. I didn't think I could take care of daddy. I tried to stop her but she was out the door and pulling out of the driveway.

There was nothing to do but go back into the house and try my best. I wondered what she meant by "the farm." I had never ever heard my parents speak of "the farm." What farm? What cousin? That day was the longest day of my life. Maxine dropped by a few times and we tried to feed daddy. She helped him to the bathroom once which was a disaster. I tried not to cry in front of him. The house was so quiet. Deathly quiet.

Finally mom came home bringing "the cousin, Evelyn." And everything changed and nothing was ever the same again. I look back on that time as the turning point in my life. A bad turning point. The cousin was a tall scrawny woman with buck teeth and dark stringy hair and bad breath. Her arms seemed way too long for her long stretched out body. She had big feet and big muddy shoes. Mom made her take off her shoes and leave them by the door, I remember. I don't know what happened to those

boots but sometime later I noticed that she had tennis shoes on which made a squeak when she walked on our wood floors. She had a foul odor about her and you could always tell when she was close by. Mom had pushed all of daddy's stuff to one side in the extra room and that became Evelyn's room. I never ever think about Evelyn without getting sick. Evelyn became the boss of me while mama was at work. The next morning when I went down to breakfast, I was startled to see that it wasn't mom standing at the stove singing the little song that she always sang "Good morning to you, good morning to you, we're all in our places with sunshiny faces for this is the wayyyyyy to start a new day! Your poached egg is ready! Better hurry." I rounded the corner expecting to see her cheery face.

But oh no no - it was Evelyn who was standing there. And nobody was singing. In fact, I don't think I ever heard that song again. "Your mama has gone to work. Here's your lunch. Now take it and get out of here or you'll be late."

"Mom usually takes me to school," I said.

"Well you're walkin to school from here on out. I ain't got a car and even if I did, I don't know how to drive. Now git!" I ran all the way to school that day I remember. Allison was already gone from the corner. When I opened my lunch box, there was mound of something that I later learned was grits and soggy bread.

It turned out that Mom had found work as a bookkeeper in a mortgage company. She had to open the office before 7 AM and most nights she was kept late. The dark days had begun. She was always tired and dragging her feet when she came home.

I remember hugging her hard and planting my face in her lap that first evening when she finally came home. “Things are different now Rachel and you’re going to have to get used it,” she said. “We are so lucky that Cousin Evelyn has come to us help out. I don’t know whatever we would do without her.” I wasn’t sure about that. But we were to find out. Evelyn had no intention of “helping out.” She was lazy and dirty. Plus she was a horrible cook. All she knew how to do was fry Spam and boil cabbage – mostly boil cabbage. She hated our dog, Chief, who growled at her whenever she came near to him and one day she told me that he just ran away. I looked all over for him up and down streets and even knocked on doors but he never came home.

Evelyn acted all nice when mom was home, bowing and scraping, “Yes ma’am, no ma’am,” all smiles and kind of awkward. But boy when mom was not there Evelyn was mean – even cruel both to daddy and me. She acted like the queen – even prancing around in mom’s clothes and posing in front of the mirror. If she had only known what was coming.

Every afternoon I walked home from school with Allison which was the best time of the day. Then I would turn at my corner and drag myself down the block to my house. Evelyn would be polishing her nails or trying on mama’s clothes and daddy’s lunch would still be sitting on the table. His mouth would be crusty and dry but she wouldn’t get him a drink. And I would run and get him some. He always had tears in his eyes. I got so mad and yelled at her once and she locked me in the closet in the dark. I was so scared that I wet my pants. Mama spanked me when she got home and when I tried to tell her what Evelyn had done; she slapped me across the face. Later she came into my room and bent down and kissed me in my bed. I acted like I was asleep but I could feel her tears on my cheek. I knew she felt bad about it.

Allison said that I should just take care of daddy and try to get along. It was hard. Time went by and if things hadn't changed enough already, one day there was Rebecca. That seemed good to me at first. It came awhile after dad's accident. It started out that she wasn't always there but only now and then. Mom had little time for me what with her new job and also having a someone to share my life seemed fine with me. I tried to talk to mom and dad about it but ever since the accident, they seemed to shut me out. So I decided to get busy and make Rebecca at home. I came up with a plan to how we could share all of my toys and clothes since she had arrived without anything. Or at least, I couldn't find any new things of hers or even a box or a suitcase that could have belonged to her. And that's when things started to turn bad.

Rebecca wasn't into sharing, I found out. Plus she didn't know how to take care of things or even how to put things away. I remember the first time I walked into my/our room after going to Allison's 8th birthday party and it was all torn up. Rebecca had not been invited. She was sitting on top of the dresser laughing like a maniac. Mom came busting into the room and yanked her off of the dresser and gave her one of her beatings with a belt that had been happening lately. I could hear Rebecca screaming but there was nothing that I could do. It was like I was watching the whole thing happening. Like I was invisible. Mom had not been herself since the accident. Of course I was the one who had to clean the whole mess up and both of us went to bed without dinner that night. Rebecca was always getting me in trouble and even if she was the one who committed the crime, I was the one who took the blame.

I thought my life had changed all it could change when daddy got hurt. But there were some pretty horrible things to come. For one thing, all of my Storybook dolls that I always kept dressed up and carefully placed on

the shelves were destroyed. Their hair was pulled out, their faces marked up with markers, and their clothes torn and ripped apart. My collection of horses was also broken up into pieces. Rebecca just laughed that evil laugh every time I cried about it. Once I stayed in bed all day crying after I got punished for it, but she just sat on the dresser and made fun of me. Mom would never take my side against her. She always said, "Stop lying, Rachel! I hate it when you lie!" Dad just sat in the corner of the living room humming like he always did now-a- days and didn't say a word.

Every morning I got ready for school in a hurry and ran out of the house, letting the screen door slam trying to escape from Rebecca and skipping those horrible lunches that Evelyn fixed. Allison and I would meet at the corner and walk the 3 blocks to school. Her mother always made her a lunch in a little lunch box and put in extra for her to share with me. I loved Allison and her mother and her father – well the whole family. They were always smiling. It made me warm inside just thinking about them. Once in a while I was allowed to walk home with Allison and play after school and on those days I walked on clouds all day long just counting the minutes until the school bell rang and we could run down the sidewalk to her house. Everything smelled like baking bread or geraniums. Then came the day when Rebecca showed up at her house and started screaming and throwing a fit. Mom came and got us and it was a long time before I got to go back to Allison's house to play.

Sometimes Rebecca acted normal. Honestly, she could actually be good sometimes. The time in the 6th grade when Mrs. Trousdale, our 6th grade teacher, accused me of stealing candy out of her drawer - which I hadn't done - Rebecca spoke up and boldly told her that I would never steal anything and then accused her – the teacher - of eating it herself. I couldn't believe it. Rebecca had to stay after school but she winked at me as she was

taken out of the room. Later that night at home after we were alone in our room, she pulled the candy out of my pocket where she had hidden it and started laughing as she chewed it. “Go ahead and eat it you sissy face. What, are you scared the spiders are going get cha?” But I didn’t take it.

One thing that was always a wedge between us was Rebecca’s hatred of Allison. Allison and I shared everything with each other and I had told her what went on in my house and of all of the mean things that Rebecca had done to hurt me. Allison was so kind and forgiving. She always told me to keep being the good twin. And then we would keep our little secrets as a pact between us. We were best friends and still were. Rebecca hated her and often did things behind my back to scare Allison away but she always knew the difference between me and Rebecca and would call her out which only made Rebecca’s hatred grow.

Allison and I went clear through high school together and then we split up and went to different colleges. But she got homesick and came back home to go to State. I was so happy to see her. Now we could get back to normal. And that just grew into our little shop. We opened our own little bookshop on Clover Street in downtown Rockwood three months after we both graduated from State -- me with a degree in Education, as an English teacher, and Allison with a degree in Business. Her mom and dad loaned us the money for our deposit on the little shop, and we started out with a small collection of books and magazines. Both of us had “real” jobs while we struggled that first year. She did the books for other small businesses in that district and I substitute taught in the public schools. And so far we are making it happen. The shop is filled with greenery in the little corner that we named “the nook” and we have a big fluffy calico cat named Winston.

We love our little shop and the business has grown so that both of us have cut down our side jobs a bit and spend a lot of time in the shop and running our booth at fairs in the area. And the crazy thing is that Rebecca has not given us much trouble. I wonder why she showed up today? She does that. She literally disappears, kind of, for weeks – sometimes even months -- and she doesn't seem to be interested in me and then boom! There she is again. I know she's been about because I will come home and all of the furniture is moved to a different place, the refrigerator will be empty and all of the dirty dishes will be strewn around. I'll go places for the first time and people will think I'm Rebecca. That's the problem with being twins. Her clothes will be thrown in my closet – in a wad. And believe me they are not clothes that I would ever wear – oh no! Gaudy colors, low cut tops and short short skirts are her style – not mine! I can't tell you how many times I have had the locks changed but she always finds a way to get in.



Today I just knew that she would do something – I don't know why – I just had a hunch. Now maybe she will leave me alone for awhile, I thought as I toweled off with my big fluffy towel – a luxury item that I treated myself with when I moved into my little studio apartment. All through college at State, I lived at home so that I could help with dad and I worked in a little flower shop near the school. I helped mom with the bills but I saved money with each paycheck so that someday I could do just this – live in my very own place. Dad died when I was in my senior year and mom moved to Winfield near her brothers and sisters. I stayed in the house until it sold and by that time, I was ready to graduate. This little place just popped up and I

grabbed it. Of course Rebecca showed up now and then and hid stuff and told everyone around that she was me. But no matter. All of a sudden, like magic after I signed the lease, I was moved in, settled and there were dishes in the cabinet. My neighbors called me Rebecca so I knew that she had been there, which explained a lot.

Now as I stepped out of the bathroom into the rest of the apartment, I was shocked into reality. Chairs were tipped over, the water was running in the sink, books were knocked off of the bookshelf, clothes were thrown in piles as though they had been yanked off of their hangers, and the door to the hallway was standing open. Several neighbors were standing there looking in. “Everything alright in here?” someone said. “We heard a big commotion and wondered if you were okay. We almost called the police.”

“I’m fine. It was my sister Rebecca, I’m sure.” I sat down on the upturned couch and put my face into a pillow and felt hot tears sting my eyes.

“Here, let us help you put things right.” They all started picking things up and Mrs. Turner from down the hall sat down beside me and put her arm around my shoulder and she didn’t say a word. I was glad. I was so tired of trying to explain everything to people. They always looked at me as though I was making it all up. I wish!

My things were picked up and set to rights. Everything that was broken was swept up and thrown away. The neighbors drifted away and I fixed myself a cup of cocoa. “Why don’t you leave me alone? What do you want?” I heard myself whisper to the empty room. I thought I heard her evil laugh but it was just my mind playing tricks. I sunk down into my soft bed and drifted off to sleep.

The phone was ringing somewhere in the distance. I jerked awake. The clock read 3:12 PM. Allison's voice on the phone, "Rachel, have you been calling me?"

It took me a minute. "No. I'm sleeping. What's going on?"

"I knew it wasn't you, she said. Her voice was trembling. "She sounds just like you. Rebecca has been blowing out our phones. She says she's going to hurt me if I don't leave you alone. She says horrible things about you. It's scary, Rachel. I am afraid for both of us. I'm turning it off. Go back to sleep. I'll see you at work in the morning." Click.

I could tell she was scared. I couldn't sleep. All I could think of was that time in high school when the snake from the science room had gone missing and was found in the floor of Allison's car. Thankfully she heard it rattle as she was driving home and was able to get out of the car even though she almost wrecked her car trying to pull over. Another time she almost drowned because someone held her leg down under the water during swim practice. But she kicked her way out of the hold. There had been so many times when Allison had either narrowly missed being hurt or actually had been hurt by something freaky happening that was creepy. We couldn't prove anything ever but lying there, I just knew what I think I had always known, and that was that it had had something to do with Rebecca. It made me sick thinking about it. No matter whatever happened in my life, I had made it through it because I knew that Allison would stand up for me. What was I going to do about this? What now? I had tried to tell Allison so many times that we shouldn't be friends but she always said that she didn't really believe that it was Rebecca doing it. She was just "accident prone."

Plus we couldn't let her ruin our lives. I knew then that I had to tell somebody. I would call the police tomorrow. I was ashamed that I had never done it before.

I finally just got up and got dressed and went down to the shop. I couldn't sleep anyway and I didn't feel safe in my little apartment right now. I needed to think this out. How was I going to explain this to the police? It took me back to that night -- the night of the incident.



The months after Evelyn came to live with us got worse. She had begun coming into my room at night doing things to me, like holding my arms down and tickling me so hard that I couldn't breathe. I would try to roll away from her but she would jerk me back. Once she got so angry that she held my pillow over my face until I passed out. If mom ever checked out what was going on, Evelyn in her phony sweet voice would say, "We are just having fun. Aren't we Rachey?" And then as soon as the door would close, she would pinch me real hard and whisper, "Don't even think you can say anything about this. I mean it! I'll hurt your daddy, now won't I just?" I tried to tell mom but she always said that Evelyn was just trying to be my friend and that I needed to stop being a brat about it.

Then Evelyn started burning me on the back with a lighted cigarette. She would push my face down into the pillow so nobody could hear me and push the cigarette onto my skin. I was afraid to tell anyone because I knew they wouldn't believe me. I must have gotten toughened up or something because it got so that I didn't even feel it so much. But more and more sores

appeared on my back. Now I know that I could have shown somebody – even my teacher - my back but back then I was just a little 7 year old girl who was scared out of her wits and I didn't know how to escape. It was right about then that Rebecca came to live with us. I remember thinking that with two of us in the room, Evelyn wouldn't be able to hurt me anymore. But it didn't matter. And it got worse. My back hurt all of the time. And then came the night when I must have fallen asleep early. I always try to stay awake until I could hear Evelyn's bedroom door close. But this night it seems that I wasn't able to stay awake. According to what I've been told, she must have come into our room in the middle of the night with her cigarette burning and got tangled up in my jump rope and crashed to the floor hitting her head on the corner of the dresser on the way down. That seemed to have caused the music box to topple down and hit her in the middle of her forehead. In the process she appeared to have burned herself up and down her arms. When the police came to take her body away, they sat me on the edge of the bed and questioned me for hours. But I had had no memory of it at all. And I never have. All I know is that Rebecca said stuff to me like, "Who do you think takes care of you now? Huh?" I was afraid to think about it.

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*She would push my face down into the pillow so nobody could hear me and push the cigarette onto my skin.*

There were a lot of strange things about it. I've thought about it over the years as I got older. According to the police report that I found in the bottom of mom's drawer when we were moving there was a lot of information that I had always wondered about. For example, the rope was somehow

said to be wrapped around her legs. I couldn't even remember ever bringing my jump rope into the house. But it seemed that it was in my room and it had gotten wrapped around her legs somehow and that's what tripped her. It was later determined to be some kind of a freaky accident. The report stated that she must have stepped into a loop of the jump rope with one foot while holding the rest of the rope down with the other foot. Otherwise how could she have tripped? I wondered. The cigarette had burned a place on the wooden floor. I know that because it left a big brown mark on my wooden floor that we could never get up. So mom put a rug over it eventually but it was still there – oh yes, it was still there. I knew it. But what about the burns that were up and down her arms?" That had always been a mystery to me. Maybe she rolled back and forth on the cigarette in pain after she conked her head on the dresser. That's all I can think that happened. I remember that I heard the cops talking to each other there in my room that night. I heard them say, "She's too small to have pushed her." And, "What was that woman doing in her room with a cigarette in the middle of the night anyway? No good, I bet," one of them said. If they only knew. I thought about it later after it was all over – years later. And I wondered then why I hadn't shown them where my back was covered in open sores. They would have known for sure how mean she was. But I know the answer to that – I was too scared to tell them about my burns. Even after I found out that she had died my lips were sealed. Only me and Allison knew. Rebecca had only been around for a short time and she never mentioned it either. Another weird thing was the issue with my music box. It was said to be what killed her. According to the report it stated that Evelyn must have jarred the dresser so hard when she fell that it caused the music box to have fallen off of the shelves above the dresser in order for it to have hit her hard enough to have caused such a deep bash on her head. But I know for a fact (in fact I can still picture it) that that music box was ALWAYS sitting on TOP of the dresser and hooked to the mirror. It

couldn't have come loose and fallen. And even if it could have, it would only have fallen a short distance – not enough to put a gash in her head. I couldn't figure it out and I still can't. I remember the policemen looking me straight in the eyes - me in my little pink nightgown shaking like a leaf and him - a great big man in a uniform with big black eyebrows and brown eyes asking me pointed questions that I couldn't answer. His eyes seems to drill holes in my head. And he just kept on asking question that I couldn't answer for a very long time. I remember weeping and calling to my mother to come to me. I can still see her standing behind the big cop. She looked at me with a strange look and wiped the tears off of her face but they wouldn't let her come to me. Later, I was questioned again by another man at the police station and still later my mom had to take me to a big hospital and I had to be questioned by a kind lady who spoke to me in a soft voice. I remember that she told me that she was going to put me into a trance which I remember felt good – almost like taking a nap. As I we sat in her big office, I heard her tell mom, “Your daughter has no memory of that night but she seems terrified of someone named Evelyn.” I looked at mom but she wouldn't look at me. The lady went on with her soft voice, “Children of this age suffer from nightmares. She's been through a lot. Take her home. She will be all right. She is a normal 7 year old child.” So mom and I came home and that was the end of it for them. But for me, Evelyn still haunts me now and then and when she does I can't sleep and feel sick all over again. I remember thinking all of the way home that day, Evelyn's dead. Evelyn's dead. I'm safe. I'm safe.

I never felt sorry that she was gone and I still have the scars on my back to this day. I just know that telling the police about Rebecca right now might turn into something difficult to describe. On the other hand, I can't let anything happen to Allison. I was riddled with anxiety all day.

The sun came up and Allison came in late. We started to talk about the night before and then customers started coming into the shop and we had to put it off. After all, she had been up most of the night answering the phone and she was tired. She and I worked all day long and the subject of the night before kept being put off until we would have time to talk. Right before closing time, a big order was delivered by truck and put in the back room. Both of us were beat. "It's my turn," I said. "I'll stay."

"Okay, she said as she grabbed her coat and headed for the back door. "Meet me at Carl's at 9:00 for a beer. After all it IS Halloween." Then she added, "Rachel, I am getting worried that Rebecca is getting ready to go off of the rails. Seriously!!" And then she was off. I looked around at the mountains of boxes and started unpacking books. Time flew by and once,, when I glanced at the windows high up next to the ceiling, it was already dark. I could hear my stomach growling and I felt weary. I remembered how early I had gotten up this morning. No wonder, I thought. So I called it a day. That's when I noticed that my phone had been turned off. How did that happen, I thought. As I put on my coat, I heard the text message buzz. When I looked, I saw that there was a string of them – all from Allison. Hours before, she had texted, "My car was full of rats when I started to get in behind the shop. I pounded on the back door but I couldn't get you to come to the door." The next one "I called the police. They said they broke down the front door but you weren't there. Your car was gone. Where are you?" Shocked, I burst through the door separating the storage room from the front of the shop. I was astonished to see that indeed, the front door HAD been broken into and now it was blocked off with boards and tape. Furthermore, to my shock, there was a message written on it with red paint that read, "She dies!" The door had literally been broken from the outside sometime between the time that I started unpacking boxes. When did this happen? Why didn't I hear it? A cold chill ran up and down my spine. I was

terrified. I looked around to make sure that I was alone and then grabbed my bag and pushed through the storage room bumping into boxes and shelving in my haste to get out of the alley door. It took me a moment to realize that my car was not there! It was pitch dark and my clock face read 8:30. I started running, afraid that whoever had done this was going to come after me. The streets were empty and the store fronts were darkened. But I kept running. I couldn't decide which way to run – towards the police station? Towards home? I stopped under a street light to catch my breath and noticed another text that read, “Rachel somebody in your car tried to run me down. I'm at Carl's. Get here as soon as you can.”

But no. I couldn't seem to think straight. I have to get home first and change my clothes, I thought. My thoughts were jumping around and coming out in a crazy jumble. Maybe, I reasoned, my car is at home – I have to find it first. Crazy thoughts kept changing my mind and my course. Head bent down I charged ahead fighting through my thoughts. As I turned the corner, I ran straight into some barriers that were all around MY CAR! I was stunned and for a moment, I couldn't move. All I could think of was that I wasn't going to be driving it anytime soon. It was smashed right into a telephone pole on 3rd and Monroe. Police yellow ribbons were already staked out all around it. The hood was crumpled. And then I saw the words that had been scribbled on the driver's door. They were written in the same red paint as the door at the store and read, “You can't save her now R.”

That's when it finally sunk in. Rebecca is going to hurt Allison or worse!! I couldn't bring myself to think those thoughts. “YES I am going to save her Rebecca,” I screamed into the empty street and I turned and ran as hard as I've ever run towards Main street and Carl's Bar. My coat was flapping in the cold breeze and my skin was frozen. I had trouble breathing the cold frigid air but I would not stop. No, she was not going to take this

away from me – not this – not ever!” I ran across streets stopping cars who honked and screeched to a stop to avoid hitting me. I slammed into a person on the sidewalk knocked them down but I just kept on going. I heard them yell, “Hey! Come back here ....” But the words were lost in the wind as I strained to run faster.

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*YES I am going to save her Rebecca! — I screamed  
into the empty street.*

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Please, please, please, I could hear the words in my head. And then I saw the lighted sign of Carl’s Bar in the distance and I seemed to gain power as I ran even harder. The blast of warm air and loud boisterous voices hit me as I pushed through the heavy door and into the crowd. Skeletons and ghouls dangled from the ceiling in celebration of the holiday. Jack o’ lanterns glowed from every niche. I stretched to see over the crowd and I saw her dark head bobbing in the back and heard her familiar laughter. “I made it! I’m here” I shouted, unheard in the din. I started pushing. I shoved my way through the crowd. I was almost there. I was almost there. I was there! Allison turned to me and smiled, just for a second. Suddenly there was a blood curdling shriek and the crowd seemed to rustle around me and that’s when I felt something brush against my thigh. I looked down. It was my hand. My hand! It was holding a knife and .....it was covered in blood.

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

Multiples – what a complicated and amazing condition to the rest of us. But to those who suffer with it, it can be hell on earth. In the 25 years that I have been practicing, so much has been discovered about the reality of this disorder. It used to be considered a common practice to try and separate the personalities with “reported” success. This has always been questionable.

Personalities split off generally when a small child is placed in an inescapable and terrifying position and experiences unbearable pain. At that moment, they suffer a black out and their personality splits out. As one man who is a split told me, “I have taken every beating for him and now he wants to get rid of me?” The idea of a guardian angel may be more than an idea. But try and convince those who just “want to get this guy out of my head!” One of the worst if not the most annoying thing is the missing time piece. One client complained about missing days at a time and it scared him so much that he placed cameras all over his house in order to see what he was doing while “blacked out.” That was before he was diagnosed. And in fact, his description of this was the major factor into my investigation into his therapy. Incidentally, he was surprised to watch himself although he noticed that in the video he seemed to try to stay out of the picture as though he knew he was being watched. (Of course the personality on camera DID know).

The twins is a story that is based on bits and pieces of cases that I have treated over the years. As you know I am bound by state law to maintain confidentiality and I take that very seriously. For that reason, all of the names and actual details have been changed. The jest of this story is taken from a case that involved a client who, as a 4 or 5 year old child was involved in a questionable “accidental” death that occurred in her bedroom while she was sleeping. She had no memory of the actual event but was questioned by the police extensively as she recalls as well as by others – possibly by social workers or therapists (as near as we could find out) and she remembers that she was administered something that was called “truth serum” and she thinks she was hypnotized. The death was later determined to be accidental and was dropped and there are no records of it that she has ever been able to find except the notification of the death and the police notes found in her mother’s desk. Take into account that 50 years have passed since this happened.

She didn’t come to therapy for anything associated with this but for help in areas of life management according to what she told me upon presentation at the first session. She told me that she was a twin she thought but that “it was complicated.” Later she mentioned that something “weird” had happened to her when she was a girl. This seemed to me to be an afterthought at the time that she mentioned it. Later in another session when another personality presented to me and gave me actual details of that event and other information, the work began and is still ongoing.

Let me be clear, this is always a hard diagnosis to make. And it takes a lot of work and time. In my mind, I know, I am always hoping that we hit a dead end and that everything they are telling me can be accounted for in an ordinary way. Nobody comes to therapy thinking that they have a multiple. Many think that somebody is running around town or at their workplace who “just happens to look just like them”. People will tell them that they acted strangely at work. Or it may come up that they have stretches of time that they can’t account for or their furniture gets moved around just like in the story. And there are so many other problems that they have that they are afraid to tell anyone because they know it will sound weird to others. It takes awhile before I have any idea that these things are happening because it takes a while for clients to feel safe enough to tell me.

One thing of interest (one?) is that we know now that at the moment of separation, the brain begins forming a whole new system of memory that is separate from the original one (somewhat like plasticity if you are brain student). If you are interested, I have loads of books that I refer to whenever I have a dissociation case. But my go-to one is:

One side note: When I was dating Alan, a person who knew me through the court system because I have been an expert witness in court cases that were serious or unusual so many times (as well as fairly normal ones too) a lot over the years, asked me: “Does Alan know what you do for a living?”

She said it as though he would run if he knew the truth about me. Ha! How would I ever be able to explain it? Hmmm? Maybe by writing Halloween stories? Heh-Heh

Side bar: There are a couple of parts of the story that I took out of my own life. Daddy was in a train wreck just like I described and he took a long while to recover but he did. Yay! Mom did wake me up to hear the sirens on the morning but it was because my granddad had been in a head-on crash in his pickup with a dump truck. It was barreling down Hydraulic from Hayesville on the other side of a two-lane highway and the wind hit the hood on the truck and it flew up blinding the driver. It crossed the road and crashed into him, throwing him out of the truck and literally crushing him. He almost died many times and was in the hospital for months. But he lived into his nineties and was as sharp as a tac as some of you will recall. You can't get good men down with a bad wreck! (Right Peter James?).

*HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

*Sweet dreams,*

*Witchy Mama*

DREAM STORIES

# NIGHT SHIFT

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed —, October 2020*



**N**ight shift! Staring up at the tower, gleaming in the sun's setting rays brought back waves of her childhood memories of falling asleep watching the lights of the tower in the distance from her bedroom window. It seemed

like magic back then when as a small child, Jae's wish was that someday she would get to go up in the tower and get to see the sky from under the Crystal dome. She always felt the same tingle – even tonight. And now here she was - a commander in that very tower. It had been a long hard climb up through the ranks over the years from the first day she had entered the academy. Many times she had almost given up with thoughts to pack up and go back home but just the sight of the tower would change her mind. Every time she failed, she bounced back more determined than ever. Tonight would be the ultimate test of all of that training. She would know if it had all been worth the struggle and if she had what it took. As she fixed her eyes into the entry lens, the passageway expanded and she was drawn inside the rotunda of the magnificent structure. The air inside was cool - almost cold and the beam of light from somewhere up above pulled her onto the circular gliding stairway and she felt herself start her ascent. As she allowed the moving stairway to take her to the top, she surveyed the mighty tower from the inside. Glancing down over the railing and surveying the rotunda down below, she could see the first group of Day shifters pouring out of the exit tube. Their work was over for today and their reports were waiting above under the dome. Her anticipation grew as she neared the top. Up, up, up and then boom she was under the dome. Members of her crew were already preparing for their shift - some in groups, some getting a cup of coffee, some were already at their stations.

The dome itself was a spectacular gigantic crystal glass enclosure spanning the whole night sky for those beneath to behold. Tonight the suns were down and the stars were beginning to sparkle in the shimmering galaxy. Already her crew of Time Traffic Control Specialists was revved up – a feeling of excitement was building to a crescendo. There was a flurry of activity as the members of the crew moved about the floor scanning their screens and adjusting their ear sensors. She wasn't late. They were just early.

The space in continuous rotation was filled with thousands of sensors keeping watch over the starry sky and delivering the info to the receptors in the tower. Each Time Specialist was assigned to a station that itself slowly circles around the focal point of the space under the dome. In the center and above the stations, a golden globe turned on an unseen axis. When lighted, it became a transparent look-out with a panoramic view of the circular room. Within the globe could be seen a cluster of sensors, constantly changing monitors, lights, and various notification noises. Now as the time for the start of operation neared, the globe began to glow and Commander Jay could be seen. Inside the globe, C Jae, as she was called by her crew, began synchronizing her monitor, checking the instruments, and looking over the day shift notes as they scrolled down the visual. When she was satisfied with the status, she then took notice of her crew members who were settling in and in some cases, hurrying to their stations. It was almost time.

“Okay, let’s go! Who’s landing? Who’s taking off?” Laughter all around. And then the chime sounded as the Day shift’s reports opened onto their monitors. There was a click as the outside doors slid closed and locked signaling that from now until morning, everything was tight. There was the possibility of course, that the portal might be needed. She frowned at the thought. Entering or exiting the dome through the portal was used only in extreme emergencies.

Across time and space at 30th Street Station outside of Philadelphia, a train was just seconds away from pulling out. It jerked slightly and then rocked forward. The conductor tipped his hat to no one on the dark empty landing as he always did out of habit and then stepped back into the train. Suddenly out of the night two men leaped inside the small landing nearly being caught in the door as it slammed shut knocking the conductor back

against the back of the passageway. The train then jerked ahead throwing all three against the door to the cabin on the right. The Senator from Vermont, Todd O'Malley righted himself and then to the conductor. "Sorry sir." Turning to his assistant, a slightly disheveled man in his late 20's, "I told you not to worry man, I KNEW we were going to make it!" Grumblings could be heard as all three men started down the aisle, two with backpacks over their suits and ties and one shaking his head and mumbling something under his breath.

In a tiny office (the workers there called them "cubbies") in the town of Walhalla, New York, a young woman sat staring at her computer monitor with a tired and rather grim look on her face. Her hair kept falling over her eyes no matter how hard she tried to control it. Her makeup had long since faded, and a single tear slid down her tired, forlorn face. She brushed it away with the back of her hand. The overhead lights were all out in the big room holding all of these cubbies in shadowed darkness- all except for hers, as all other workers in the publishing firm had gone home hours ago and the lights had automatically shut down.

Way in the back of the large darkened room, her small cubby could be seen lit by what looked like an ancient desk lamp reflected in the tall glass windows in the old building. On closer observation, the young woman appeared to be sitting at a large, rather weathered old wooden desk that had seen better days. She was bent over a laptop. "This place was left over from the flood" she mused glancing out of the bare windows at a big gold Halloween moon against the dark night. Shadows closed in around her as the clock ticked 10 pm. "Summa Cum Laude from Brown and what have I sunk to?" Looking around, and answering her own question: "A hole in the wall, crummy, office working pretty much as a gofer for a stupid publishing company! That's right folks, I am bottom rung all the way around." All of

her friends, okay take that back – MOST of her friends, she thought, were soaring with the Eagles – big jobs – big lives – big money... “And here I am working late once again doing Jeremy’s job because “he has gone somewhere important.” she mumbled. “Not to mention I am missing the party.....”

Jeremy – she could picture him now, how he leaned into her office doorway, just as he was closing the door to his cubby next to hers, and pounding himself on the chest as he said, “Cover the bases for me babe – Jeremy has places to go – BIG PLACES!. Hope your subscription to the Post is up to date so you can see this face (making a frame with his fingers) on the front page! Oh yeah!”

Brother! She couldn’t believe it when her boss actually used the same words as Jeremy (without the “babe.) “Hey Gab – looks like you’ll be covering the bases for Jeremy this afternoon – he’s got that piece to write before deadline in the morning don’t forget.

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*Hey Gab — looks like you u ve covering the bases for  
Jeremy this afternoon.*

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“Where’s he going?” she asked..

Brushing her question aside, he said, “Take it from me he’s got an ace assignment. That guy? He’s going places! Better get it done tonight. Don’t stay too late. I would stay but Mona’s got a thing we have to go to. Hey you’ll be alright – you’re a tough INDEPENDENT WOMAN, right?”

Laughing at his own lame joke, he started out and then turned back, “This old building is pretty safe but hey it IS Halloween and they say It IS haunted – woo woo!”

I hate you, she thought.

“Oh brother!” Looking around the deserted room of cubbies, she doubted that it was all that safe. After all it must have been built more than 100 years ago and it just took birds on the wires outside to turn off the electricity! Not only that - the elevator groaned, the windows rattled, and the plumbing was constantly backing up. I’ll finish up and get out here, she thought Just then, something popped up on her computer screen She looked down and read the message. This one looked like a threat. Repulsive email messages had been coming as pop ups for months. The techs would wipe them and they would be gone for awhile and then they would come back and they seemed to always be from the same person. They had to be,” she thought. All of them were the same - bad spelling, bad grammar, and pretty stupid all around. But in the past few weeks, the messages that got through seemed more threatening than perversions. Every time one popped up, she reported it to the internet techs immediately.

“This guy isn’t as stupid as you think,” Trisha from IT told her the last time. We might even have to close down the system if the boss will let us. (Unlikely). Tonight’s message was creepier than usual, it read, “Pain. Is that what you want? You got it!” Many times she had wondered if she should call the police but each time, she talked herself out of it – “This guy was just getting off on scaring her – he probably doesn’t have the nerve to do anything in person, right?” She thought to herself even as a shiver coursed down her spine. Anyway she was able to delete this one. There! Switching

her attention back to her desktop and stacking her notes, she glanced briefly at her in-basket over-flowing, scolding herself once again for not opening her mail. Then brushing the thought away, she went back to work.

“We are at zero minus 40.” Spec Mac checked the coordinates. “The margin is closing.”

“On it,” coming from Handler Spec Val . The energy under the dome was beginning to ramp up slightly.



Her neck hurt, her mind was wandering. “One more cup of coffee,” Gabby Huston decided. This was taking a lot longer than she thought it would. She had actually been invited to a Halloween party tonight but once again – here she was. “Better get this finished. I’m getting groggy.” She put her cup of stale coffee in the microwave at the coffee bar and then remembered that it was out of order. But to her surprise, the light came on and it started heating. “It’s fixed! Yay!”

Spec Val: Broken Micro connected. Caffeine enhanced. Subject conscious awareness increased by +2.89 in 4..

Spec Mac: “16 minutes and counting – 37 tops.”

“This is CRAZEE GOOD!” A large man – mid 20’s with longish greasy light-colored hair, thick glasses, red unshaven face and beady rat-like eyes , bounced up and down on a rickety chair in a dark room. The space was filled with an unbearable stench and stacked with trash and the smell of

rot. His white belly lapped out of his trousers and down over the old chair that seemed to hang together by sheer luck. He pounded his chest with a grubby hand while swiping his nose with the other. Throwing his head back and gasping for breath, he bellowed a terrifying sound that echoed around the room rattling the glass in the old windows and moving the ropes of dust that hung from the ceiling. It was a roar of insanity echoing on as it seemed to bounce and then fade. Looking around the room, you could say it was maybe average in size but it was hard to tell because of the darkness and because it was stacked or rather piled almost to the ceiling with indistinguishable items that were covered in a thick layer of dust. The floor was rough with dried food and grime. Light was provided by a few small lamps that were also hanging in dust ropes.

Only one wall was free from clutter. It appeared to be papered with photographs black and white and some that were actually in color. They had been there for years, gathering spiders, yellowing and curling at the edges. Some of them were hanging by a single nail. Still others were faded to a blurry shadow. At first glance, they appeared to be of young women of all ages all of whom had thick curly reddish orange hair. But at a closer look, it soon becomes apparent they are all pictures of the same person. A young girl who must have been about 14 when this collection started was snapped at a distance as well as close range without her being aware that she was being photographed. And in the latest one she looked to be in her mid to late 20's.

As though speaking to the computer screen, he growled "Miss-to-good-for-me get ready to move into your new digs. Hey, old Lar's goin' to do you a little favor sweet cakes.. Go ahead; ignore me – it doesn't matter anymore. Oh no! Tonight. You are belongin to ole Lar! You and me!

Checking himself out, pushing his greasy hair back through blackened fingers, “I am a GENIUS! Sending that text to Jeremy about volunteering with Senator whatshisname. Like leading a chicken to slaughter! Oh yeah!”

Slapping his belly and wiping the spittle off of his mouth with the back of his hand, he slammed down the lid to his laptop and stepped around the stand. Throwing his food trash on the floor and kicking it under the stand, he pushed aside stacks of garbage and long discarded items as he made his way across the room. Coming to a halt beside an old bookcase, he pulled a length of chain out of his pocket and picked through a bunch of keys until he found what he was looking for. And then with a half scream, half yell he shoved the bookcase so hard that it almost fell over, leaned over and pushed the key in the lock and opened the small door hidden back there.

Back under the dome C Jae checked her monitors once again. “Spec Mac, coordinates out – time engineer reports trouble.”

Spec Mac to Spec El: Incoming mark is coming too fast. Slow it down by 11.23 NOW.”

Spec El: “Got it under control. Deer on the track.”

Gabby sat her coffee down onto the desk calendar and with a heavy sigh, read through her writing once again. Making a few changes, one more quick scan and then she pressed send. “That’s it! I am going to the party folks,” she said to the empty cavern and then just as she was putting on her jacket, she remembered something. Something she had heard Jeremy say that had been hanging there in her mind. What was it? She started to button her coat. She started and then stopped short. Something caught her

attention... The wall! The wall separating Jeremy's cubby from hers. Now she remembered! Snapping her fingers she recalled hearing Jeremy talking on his phone to someone through the walls of the cubby. And then she heard that name! Jeremy was saying something about that Senator O'Malley from Vermont, the one fighting for human rights and the environment among them healthcare. She remembered that her ears had perked up at the mention of the Senator name because she had followed his political climb from the very beginning when she was in high school and respected his ideas on just about everything. She was an enormous fan. She chuckled remembering that she tried to hear through his door but he lowered his voice so she went into her cubby and put her ear against the wall. She must have looked like a weirdo! She chuckled. But what she heard was amazing. She would have checked into it then if she hadn't been called into the IT office about those emails. Now it all came back – Jeremy was talking about Senator O'Malley's interview on Face the Nation (she had missed it) and it seemed that he had actually mentioned a writer on our staff who had published a .. what did he call it? "Superb piece on water conservation." He wanted to talk to them and Jeremy was pretty sure that it was someone right here in our office! Right! There! Now it all come together – Yes! That's it! What if he was talking about MY article. Maybe...just maybe....probably not but...It couldn't be my article.....or.....could it?" Tossing her coat on the chair in her cubby, she dug through her mail and yes! There it was, a letter addressed to her from Senator O'Malley's office! Jeremy always delivered the office mail and he must have seen it. She berated herself for being so lost in herself that she didn't even read her mail! Ripping it open carefully so as not to rip through the Letterhead, she read:

The Honorable Senator Todd O'Malley

United State Senate

154 Russell Senate Office Building

Washington DC 20510

Dear Miss Huston

I read your piece in the Business Today and Tomorrow Journal concerning global climate change and its affect on the growing season, weather patterns, ocean temperature increase and specifically as it adapts to declining water supplies and health. I would like to speak to you in person to have a conversation about your vision on this subject. I commend you for speaking up and I must say, I was quite impressed with the depth of the research evident in your stated perspectives. My office will be contacting you to set up a possible meeting.

“Oh my God! ARE YOU SERIOUS!,” she shouted to the air as she pressed the letter to her chest and began jumping up and down around her office squealing. This lasted until she dumped over the last dregs in her coffee cup.

Pushing back the red hair off of her forehead, she opened her computer and started writing . “I have to write this before I forget.” All thoughts of leaving put aside.

Alarms began going off inside the dome. C Jae: “Spec Lee, your T frame is jeopardized.”

Spec Mac “Commander, The subject was diverted by a brain memory which changes the time frame. Spec Val has asked for assistance from Spec Lee in charge of obstacle Larry and he has accessed the portal, do you want contact?”

C Jae “No, we’ll wait for his return. Spec Mac, I want confirmation when resolution is in. Specialist Val, switch coordinates.

Val: On it.

C Jae: stared down at the monitor while glancing at the timer. Tracking on.

The train had slowed briefly and now was picking up speed and they were on their way again. “So tell me, Jeremy, have you worked on any political campaigns or environmental committees? In other words, since we will be working together in the next weeks, preparing for my testimony at the committee, I would be interesting in knowing what your fundamental opinions are.” No answer. Senator O[’Malley cleared his throat.

“Ah well, yes I worked some back in college passing out posters and such.” Jeremy’s mind was a blank. “Hey, he wanted to say, “I’m just along for the ride. I don’t give ...” But Senator O’Malley was speaking again.



“I see....I would like you to go over this brief before morning – you don’t have to read the whole thing (whole thing? You are fricking kidding me!) Tomorrow should be a short meeting since it is the opening of the session.” Jeremy took the folder and tried to look serious as he opened the cover.

Back in the filth of the room, the smell of dead rot drifted out of the little hole of a room under the attic hidden behind the bookcase. High pitched giggling was heard above the sounds of the floor boards creaking as the heavy man rocked back and forth on his heels. Larry could just envision the shock on her face when she saw who was the boss and she..couldn’t...do ....anything...about it! His fantasy was cutoff when suddenly there was a pounding on the door to the hallway. A voice came blasting through the door. “Hey What’s going on in there? We can’t sleep with all of that yelling. Cut it out! I mean it! I’m calling the police! I tell ya.”

For such a large man, it was amazing how fast he could move. He burst out of the hidden room head down and charged the door like a raging bull, roaring across to the door throwing it open wide and grabbing the man by the neck.

“Time glitch, “ the Speck Mac offered.

C Jae: “No, we are going to see what Spec Lee has in mind.”

The monitors under the dorm were blinking and beeping as the crew buckled down for the encounter.

“You seriously want to make me? Do you know what happened to the other morons who crossed me?” In a rage, he shook the smaller man hard, dropping him with a thud on the hard hallway floor, then delivering a hard kick to the man’s ribs, he brought his leg back for another kick. The man on the floor jumped up and though badly injured, still pushing close to the large man, he opened his mouth to say something. Instantly, he was shoved backwards with force across the narrow hallway -so hard that it put a dent in the plaster. Shaking his fist in the man’s face, Larry saw his watch out of the corner of his eye and stopped - fist raised. He quickly stepped back inside the room and slammed the door. Then thinking, he hesitated. “Police. Did he say police?” He yanked open the door again with raised fist and took a step out into the hallway but the man had disappeared.

“Portal has been closed.”

Spec Lee: C Jae, this is S Lee reporting. Obstacle slowed 6.09.

C Jae: S Val – Urgent - Move Subject Gabby out of the station!

S Val: Condenser on clock building sending volts to Morton building compressor by passing circuits from main coil - to turn all lights off.

Gabby glanced at the clock. It was not midnight for 20 more minutes. She had gone through her research for the Journal article and tweaked it. She would just do a couple more things, she told herself and make a copy and then she promised herself she would go, taking it home with her of course, so she could read it again. She would be ready if she EVER got that meeting!!! The party was drifting out of her thoughts.

Within the night train were people journeying from one city to another some with purpose, others with end of the day blank stares and among them the young Senator from Vermont. He looked tired. His tie was now off and stuffed in his jacket pocket. His hair was rumpled – as usual. Worry lines creased his forehead as he sat with his briefcase on his lap holding a stack of papers and a notebook. On top of all this, he was stuck with this young guy next to him as a helper. At the last minute, Jeremy had answered a request for an assistant to aid him as he faced the Environmental and Public work committee to prepare for our testimony in the Senate Hearings?. Looking up from his paper, he nudged Jeremy next to him to see what he thought about the brief so far. “Did you see....” But the assistant was asleep and slightly snoring - the brief hanging off his knees. And then, Senator O’Malley turned back to his reading, remembering how many months he had worked on this project and how hard it was to be called before the Senate.

Traffic ControllerEl: Agent P Give me an update on DO.I

Spect Pz: On schedule.

The room under the attic was equipped with a cot on the floor, heavy chains hanging from the ceiling connected to hooks, blood stains spattered on the slanted roof and an odor of rotting. No windows in this space and no head room. It was large enough for one human stooping down and from the looks of it, had housed humans before this night.

The large man, Larry, appeared to prance around his room, stopping in front of a broken mirror hanging from a nail to admire himself. “I have worked hard – mighty hard for this since when? Eighteen years – that’s when,” answering himself. “Oh yeah. Many have sacrificed so that I would

get it right,” glancing at the hole into the attic. And now,” he stopped to look out through the broken blinds of his window down the empty downtown street at one window still lit in a building on in the Morton building. “You know what?, “ he asked himself. “The last I looked, she was still there so Huston, It’s a LIFTOFF!”

Spec Mac to Spec El: Incoming mark is coming too fast. Slow it down by 221.23 NOW.”

Spec El: “Got it under control. Moving fog air.”

Jeremy roused himself on the train trying not to let the Senator know that he was awake. He had gotten himself in a mess and he knew it. What did he know about pollution? Or anything else? Plus did he actually care about any of this? No! he just wanted his face in the paper – that’s all. Is that too much to ask? He faked it on the intake and flirted with Lindsey, the Senator’s secretary – always worked with those plain ones. He had tried to remove the Senator’s letter from Gabby’s desk but that girl NEVER LEFT HER OFFICE! Yowza! Not his type, for sure! But might check the Senator’s secretary out later, he mused. He had brought his briefcase in order to look cool but there were only comic books and some Milk Duds and not much else inside.

“So Jeremy, tell me this.” The Senator was talking to him again! Just then the train began to slow down and looking outside, all he could see was thick fog.

“Will this ever be over?,” Jeremy thought.

C Jae: Traffic control Dan – Why the circling? The runway is clear... We need to get the subject out of the building before the obstacle leaves HIS building.

C – Landing was delayed due to a problem with subject Gabby’s recall – they call it a memory. We are working on it. Stopped moving out.

Val: Volts current is ready..

C Jae: Spec Le– Brief on the breach.

Spec Mac: Special forces Le breached the dome and confronted the obstacle Larry. Slowed him down by 2.14 but was bypassed door slam.

C Jae: too fast – slow down the train carrier -.et97

Spec El. We are transporting 6 miles of fog to the west to east the speed problem. We will get back to you.

C. Jay: No stopping.

Agent G: No just slowdown.

The door to the dark apartment stood ajar in the dingy hallway. Larry had his arms full of “battle equipment” as he headed down the stairs to the alley behind the building. It took two trips to carry all of the gear down to the old van from the 4th floor apartment. For a man of his size, Larry was out of breath but otherwise quick on his feet. He had planned this for a long time – years actually and had practiced on others. He thought to himself, “ I could do this in my sleep. “ He climbed into the old van and it

started on the first try – that was a good sign, he thought as he put it in gear. He pulled out of the alley and headed down to the Morton Building, home of Morton Publishing Company. So close so close so close went over and over in his head as he picked up speed. He was so excited that he almost went by the parking garage but swerved into the Parking entrance at the last minute bending the mirror on the side of the vehicle. No matter. He pulled up to the monitor and used the number that he had found after he tunneled into their system and opened the gate. “Easy peasy,” he whispered. His heart was beating hard – he was pumped.

Larry Trank was actually a pretty smart guy when it came to getting into other peoples computers. He was good like that. Not like his old man, the clock maker! That’s right, his dad spent his whole life fixing clocks in an old jewelry store in downtown Walhalla. Larry was the youngest of 4 kids – the others were all girls. They tormented him his whole life and treated him like scum. He hated them!

He had noticed Gabby right off. She lived down the block on the corner in a house her dad built (his company built all of the houses in the neighborhood). She even had a swimming pool in the back yard. He tried to talk to her but he knew she thought he was dirt. He could tell. Then one morning he was coming home from a night at this buddies and he caught the paperboys peeping in windows on their route. Hey, why not? From that time on, he thought of her as belonging to him. He watched her through her window and shot photos of her when she was sleeping at night, he followed her at school and started leaving notes on her old car. And she never ever knew it was him.

In high school, it got easier. Every Friday night, her mom and dad went out and took her sister with them, leaving Gabby alone to get ready for a date. It was all he needed. Gabby always sat under her hairdryer in the dining room and she usually just had on a robe. He made more photos. Every Friday night, she had a date or went out with friends. He watched her through the window – at the bottom under the shades. Sometimes, he could even see her getting ready in her bedroom if he was lucky. It was the best time of his life to him – so great that he began to call just to hear her voice and when she answered, he would just hang up. He got a phone in his room when he was 16 which made it even better. Then he got braver and sometimes he even whispered stuff to her like what she had on that day and who she had talked to, where she parked her car, what she had for lunch and stuff. It freaked her out which was so great that he would lie in bed at night and think about it, giggling to himself until his dad would shout at him to cut it out. Once Gabby’s dad answered the phone and said some mean things to him so he started calling at different times all night just to make him mad. Larry thought it was funny.

For Gabby, it was a nightmare that just wouldn’t stop for herself and her whole family. They couldn’t take the phone off of the hook because her grandma was old and might need them in the night and the only way to stop the ringing was to answer the phone. Sometimes it went on all night. And then during her freshman year at City College, it stopped. That’s right – stopped. She was so happy that she told everyone at school and also at the jewelry store that she worked downtown all about it.

One day when Larry got home from his job where he delivered pizza, the garage door was open – it was never used and was filled with junk but now it was open. “Uh oh, they found it,” was his first thought. And sure

enough, his dad met him at the door and started pushing him around. All of his pictures of Gabby had been torn down and his dad started burning them, yelling at him that he was a pervert and couldn't live there anymore.

“Well dad, I win. You lose,” he told himself out loud as he pulled through the gate and parked a few stalls down from the only other car in parking garage – hers.

Warning buzzer in the dome. Zero minus 25 and counting.

The train was rumbling along now at normal speed and was closing in on Walhalla station for a brief stop before heading on its way to Union Station in the Capital. “Looks like we might make it in time to get a little sleep before the meeting starts tomorrow. I'm counting on you Jeremy. It was fortunate that you have a knowledge of the terrain we will be covering.”

“What terrain?” Jeremy wanted to scream. “I am feeling a bad case of asthma coming on or the flu or something serious – I ain't gonna make it big fellow.” But he kept all of this to himself. “I'll spring it on him in the morning,” he decided. Or maybe I'll just leave after he goes to his room.

J: This is too close. Hang on – we are zeroing in on launch. Murmurs and rustling under the dome.

Spec Ut: “Door noise set on and off. Aisle blocked.”

Val: Volt bypassing street on NE now.

Larry climbed the emergency stairs and pushed on the door to 8th Floor. It creaked louder than he thought it would. Gabby, sitting at her cubby, jerked her head in his direction but didn't to see him out in the dark hallway through the window. He paused, then crept down the hall to wait outside the office's main door.

“What was that noise?” she thought and suddenly felt a shiver. “I need to get out of here and go home.” Suddenly all lights and computer screens went black. “What?”

“The electricity again! Bad timing!” ,she said to herself. The old building had had trouble before with birds on the wire – but this was almost midnight – no birds would even be out!. Grabbing her coat and her briefcase, she ran down the corridor between cubbies towards the front doors to the offices. But she ran into something blocking the aisle in the dark and almost tripped. She gave it a shove and tried to push past it but there was more behind it! “That’s funny...when did this aisle get blocked...? Oh well, I’ll take the freight door,” she thought and turned and felt her way down the aisle to the other side of the room. Finding the door, she pushed hard and it swung open. She groped out the door and found the door to the stairway. It opened silently.

Larry realized his blunder when he heard her footsteps down at the other end of the hall heading for the stairs. He swirled around, swinging his gear, and throwing him off balance. Stumbling, he threw himself in that direction.

Gabby was slowly making her way down the stairs when she heard the door above creak loudly. “Somebody’s up there,” she thought. She started jumping two steps at a time to the bottom, remembering where she parked

her car, she hurried towards it in the darkened garage. The door from the stairwell opened with a crack and now footsteps could be heard run/walking towards her. “Who’s there,” she called out but all she could hear were heavy footsteps and hard breathing. No voice answered. But the footsteps seemed to turn towards her voice and now they were getting closer.

In the darkened parking garage, panic set in and she began digging through her big messy bag. “Please, please.” Whoever it was was panting now and was getting closer.”

“Ground support, block!” roared the commander

“Found them!” She slid into her car, slammed the door, put the car in reverse and screeched back barely brushing something with her fender. Straightening up and not looking back, the car squealed out of the garage barely missing the gate as it started to raise. But what’s this? Another vehicle crashed through the parking gate and was now behind her closing the gap. Just then a taxi shot out from nowhere. The other car was blocked. Her mind raced – where should I go? But the other car passed the taxi and now was almost beside her on the left. In terror now, she wrenched the steering wheel to the right and rounded the corner on two wheels and found herself heading down the side street lined with apartment buildings.. Straight ahead of her and down at the end of the block, she could see the railroad crossing lights come on. That car was right behind her. And now it bumped the back of her car. Looking ahead at the approaching train, “Oh no, I have to make it before the arms come down.” But they were already starting down. She wasn’t going to make it! She had to stop – no! She pushed hard on the brake but instead of slowing down, her car seemed to jump forward. It seemed to be driving itself. Inside Gabby could see that she was going to

reach the tracks too late to make it across and she was hurtling toward the coming train full speed. Just before the train came into side view, her car seemed to leap across the tracks barely escaping it, crashing through the barriers, sliding across the slick embankment after a 180 turn and slamming into a street sign, smashing it to the ground.. Stopped. She could see that the train was still moving. Time stood still.

The sound was one she would never forget – first there were the sounds of metal hitting metal, as something being crushed by the engine, then the screech of the horrible sound of the train braking that seemed to go on for an eternity. There was a silence inside her car and then people in costumes surged out into the streets from the clubs. It was Halloween! All of the bars in town were open celebrating Halloween and this was the antique district with streets of clubs and stores. Everyone seemed to come out into the street to see the commotion. A person knocked on her window and helped her out of her car and she sat down on the curb and started crying. “My car. It just wouldn’t stop,” she kept saying over and over to no one in particular.

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*The sound was one she would never forget — first there were the sounds of metal hitting metal, as something being crushed by the engine, then the screech of the brakes.*

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It seemed like just a moment but it must have been longer before then the sounds of sirens filled the air. Lots and lots of sirens. People in the street went by milling about. And suddenly there was a medic bending over her checking to make sure she was alright. “What happened to the car behind me? She asked.

“It didn’t make it. The guy who was driving was taken to the ER – no reports yet but I would be surprised if he makes it. It’s a mess out there. They are taking all of the passengers off of the train and blocking off the streets. There are some injuries but not bad....except for the poor dude who hit the train.

It was a howling mess inside the train with luggage and people’s belongings scattered everywhere. “Let’s get out of here...go”, pointing at the end of the car where they had entered just a short time before, the senator pulled Jeremy out into the aisle and gave him a push. Stumbling forward clutching his briefcase, Jeremy, bewildered, \_

Out into the night, people were pouring from the train into the street. It was the bar district in Walhalla, Pennsylvania, an area of small shops and restaurants. The night was cool and the brick street was lighted by the cities old street lamps. Jeremy, who had been staggering out of the train suddenly seemed to come alive and began leading the senator through the crowd. “Hey hey – I know this place. This is great” as he weaved his way through the crowd.

Transfer office Teddy: “Heading to the landing.” The crew inside the dome, let out a brief sign of relief – more like a moan.

Gabby felt the heavy bandage on her forehead. It was amazing how she felt ...actually, to her amazement,okay. The medic had suggested that she go to the hospital but as soon as she heard him say that, she felt overcome with wellness – weird! Her car had been loaded on a trailer already and the tow truck’s back lights disappeared through the crowd. Groups of people filled the street and sidewalks around her and she heard someone in the throng say that it was time to go back in and have a beer until everything cleared out. She seemed to be taken up by the wave of people and felt herself moving with the crowd almost automatically. “Might as well,” she whispered to nobody in particular. She let herself go with the flow, down the narrow sidewalk passing the open doors along the way jammed with costumed patrons. “We just had a train wreck, she wanted to say but didn’t. “Does anyone remember?”

The crowd poured into a small bar with a brightly lit neon sign over the door that read, The Serendipity Lounge.” Stepping inside, she stood looking for a place to sit while watching waitresses dressed like witches and cats balancing large trays of slopping beers from table to table. Suddenly she heard a familiar voice, “Gabby, Gabby over here!” Working her way towards the sound of the voice, she saw Jeremy wave at her and pointing to a bar stool. “Hey! What are you doing here?” he said. Before she could say answer, he took off on the train wreck story. The man beside him turned just then and Jeremy stopped midsentence and seemed to remember who he was with.

“Gabby, I want you to meet Senator O’Malley,” he said. Then turning to him, he said, “This is Gab...Gabrielle Huston. We work in the same office. “

The Senator turned to face her, repeating her name, “Gabrielle Huston, how do I know that name?” Then looking straight at her. “Have we met?”

She opened her mouth to speak but Jeremy jumped in, “She wrote an article about that was published recently in the Business Today and Tomorrow Journal.

Snapping his finger, Senator O’Malley, turned to her, “Yes, Yes! I know exactly who you are! What a coincidence that we should meet right now. I am actually testifying in the Senate committee on Environment and Public Works in DC and our opening meeting is in the morning! This couldn’t have come at a better time! He stopped for a moment and “Barkeep!” Then turning back to her, “Can I buy you a beer? And then, “What happened to your head?”

“Yeah – what happened?” Jeremy suddenly noticed the big white bandage on her head.

Her words seemed stuck in her throat. And then, “Yes, I would love a beer and this, pointing to her forehead, is a long story. Do you mind if we talk about it later? I would love to talk to you about your waterway pollution bill that’s going through Congress right now .”

“Would you mind if I picked your brain?” Both spoke at once. “A beer for sure! But I can’t believe this! You are just the person I would like to talk to. “Oh,” as an after-thought,” and it’s nice to meet you Gabby. He beckoned to the over-whelmed bartender who motioned that he would get to him – in a bit.

Gabby felt her mind leave the hurricane of thoughts and boom! She was there – in that room – with the Senator – and ideas began to circulate and she could hear her voice. The room noise faded into the background and she heard herself say clearly, “Senator, I would like to hear your opinions as well. And it’s a pleasure to meet you.” And they took off on a verbal journey as though they were colleagues continuing a previously unfinished conversation..

Sometime later, she heard Jeremy’s voice, “Hey Senator, hey...I just got a call, pointing at his phone, and I have something I have to do – it’s family, and I don’t think, I mean I know I can’t go with you tomorrow...I have to get home....that was my mom...”

Without a blink, the senator looked directly into Gabby’s eyes, “What do you think Gabby? Would you be able to accompany me in the Senate hearings tomorrow? You would be a big help, that is, if you can get away. We would have to get you checked but...”

“Yes!” She heard herself cut him off with a direct hit. Her little cubby in the publishing firm seemed to drift off into space somewhere. She was floating in a bubble in time and she could feel the excitement building within her. It was almost 1 am and the bar was closing and they were still talking when a policeman tapped her on the shoulder.

“Miss, are you the woman who just missed getting hit by a train?”

“Yes I am.” Oh no, I am going to get arrested right here in front of the Senator, she thought, remembering the barrier. She felt the blood drain out of her face.

“Did you know the guy who was chasing you? (Yes, he WAS chasing me – I’m glad you know this.) There are some unusual items in the back of his van. Was he planning on hurting you, do you know?”



## EPILOGUE;

In the tower, under the dome, a cheer went up as the crew all stood up from their stations and started high fives all around! It was finally brought to a halt when Commander Jae’s voice was heard over the din.

“Alright everyone! Gather around.”

“Mission accomplished!” More cheering.

“Stand by for shift review,” she commanded, while scrolling through the notes on the optical:

“Crew to start, the original message requesting an assistant for the senator was sent to Jeremy instead of the subject, Gabby Huston.

The second item: Unfortunately for us Jeremy accepted the assignment unexpectedly leaving Gabby in the building alone. The log book on potential settings for this event is heavy and began a millennia ago. We had to set up the construct for the potential elimination of the obstacle but it put our subject in peril as you know. The problem was compounded by many factors starting with:

“Number 3: The senator and Jeremy almost missed their train!  
“Landing signal officer Boyd, report please.”

LSO Boyd: “Their taxi got stuck in traffic. We had to change the timing on the lights and divert emergency vehicles. And increase air/wind velocity to lift them into the train (“Don’t you mean throw them into...” Said a voice from the crew followed by laughter.).

C Jae: Number 4: “Train speed. Air Traffic Officer El -The deer – real?”

ATO El: “Hologram – worked though, right? Slowed it down by 13.0071.”

C Jae: “Excellent – back to old tricks!”

C Jae, Also Number 4: “According to the intercom El, the train speed was a problem even after the deer – and still we almost got there too soon. Please report.”

ATO El: “OMG it took a fleet to move that fog 6 miles! And we almost missed.”

C Jae: “BUT You didn’t – all that matters. Good job.”

Turning, Number 5: “Thanks for taking one for the team Officer Min. Breaching the portal was last ditch – this time it was messy.”

Ground Support Officer Min: “Thanks Commander, my neck will never be the same not to mention my ribs! That guy was an animal!”

SGO X: “Commander, We missed the memory transport but gotta ask: Where did that memory come from in her head and why at that moment?– You know the one about hearing Jeremy through the wall talking about Senator O’Malley noticing her piece in the Journal?”

C Jae: “Human minds are THEIR biggest advantage and their minds are OUR biggest challenges to put it mildly. This species moves through time lead by their memories of the past and this memory just surfaced in her hippocampus at a dangerous moment. And from there, all of her logic just went down the path and she reasoned that she needed to put things down on her computer right then. She was unaware that a killer was coming and he was close to ending her life. Check your manual under Damage Control.

C Jae: Number 6: Speaking of – Val – the caffeine boost helped her conscious awareness but on the down side, she stayed in the office too long.

Val: The microwave was easy but transferring the volt by bypassing the lines across space to get her out of the building was tricky but we shut down the light – again slowed both the subject and the obstacle. Door noise saved the project in the Morton building –literally.

No it was a team effort.

C Jae: Number 7:“That was a great move with blocking the aisle VC. Otherwise she would have run right into him.”

HHVC: “Right! We had to turn her. She was heading right towards him. The light was good for it.”

C Jae: Number 8: “Blocking that 2nd door sound was a good try VC. Actually working sound on the door latch was stellar.”

VC: “Yeah but it didn’t work. Had to enhance the 3rd one or she would never had heard him. He would have caught her in.03.

C Jae: Number 9: “DO block occurred 9 before landing. Report.”

DO: “Gabby, excuse me the subject, brushed him with her car in the garage – he was slightly off target. He was not knocked down by her car, and was able to get up – get to his vehicle and start that vehicle on the first try (we missed that one both times) and therefore get out of the parking garage. The taxi was inserted to block the van and force a right turn. The van passed to her left and she turned right.”

C Jae: Number 10: “Drive Officer HT You controlled the speed of the vehicle, right?”

DO HT “I had to; she was a millisecond late. She would have been smashed”.

ATO El: “Hey, nothing I could do about it. Our time was set at that point. The train was ahead in time frame.”

C Jae: “Number 11: Ground support, PZ – “Injury to subject, report.”

PZ: “Limited to head wound. Air body cloak in place, Commander.”

C Jae: “Number 12: “Using the crowd to propel her to the...what was the name...oh right, the Serendipity Lounge was good until she got inside the door. Her hesitation threw the timing off by .0001. AR what happened?”

Spec AR: “Jeremy saw her come in but he wasn’t going to call out and then something “odd” happened: He opened his mouth and words came out!” Laughter rocked the room.

“Alright now I want to talk to all of you seriously. As you know, this team was put together because we don’t fail.” Silence fell under the dome. She continued: “ Gabby Huston is a case that must be met with courage and clear-headedness. This case has been discussed and engineered since the beginning of time. We were chosen as the special team to see that she made this connection and I am proud to say that we accomplished our mission.” Clapping. “But we are not finished.”

“This human will save the planet Earth from destroying itself. She will lead her species into time by diverting their course and therefore their outcomes. It is up to us to see that she gets there. We have a big task in front of us and we cannot fail. . The life of planet Earth is over if we fail. This human will cross our axis in time intersections many times and from what I saw tonight, I know that we will be ready. Excellent work team! Praise from the Galaxy are coming in and we will remember this night in time to come as the night we started the course to change Planet Earth and therefore the living universe and that includes us.”

“

*This human will save the planet Earth from  
destroying itself. She will lead her species into time  
by diverting their course and therefore their out-  
comes.*

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Looking around her crew under the dome, Commander Jae looked out over the faces turned up at her and felt once again that sense of pride and accomplishment – a feeling that not be duplicated. “Finish your reports, pass them through to the day shift and we’re out of here!”

The suns were peeking over the edge of their horizon as one by one the agents left the pods of the magnificent tower. The glow stood out against their sky as they each walked towards their portals and went home to their own bases. It was the end of the day for the night shift.

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

Versions of this story have floated through my mind for years but it always got too complicated or too long or something would make me put it away. I finally was hit with this idea one afternoon. Hope you like it.

Here were my choices for titles:

The Tower

The Coincidence

The Train

The Nightshift

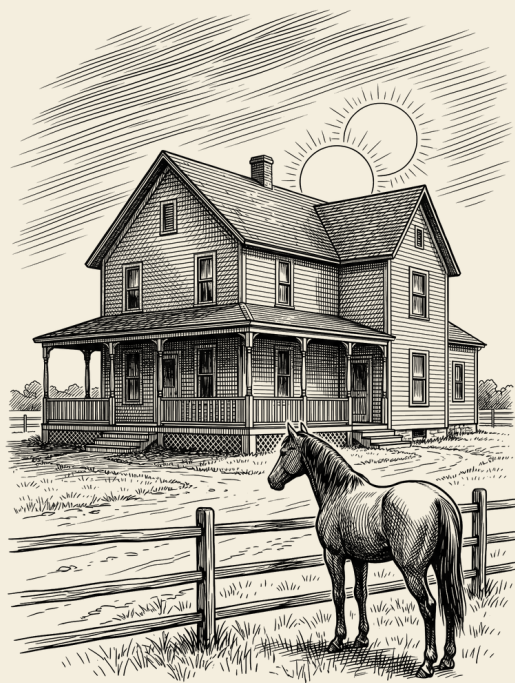
I realize that using the name Serendipity Lounge is giving my point away somewhat. So, I am asking you - what do you think? Is there such a thing as a “coincidence?”

DREAM STORIES

# THE HOUSE ON GOOD MORNING LANE

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed —, October 2021*



**P**rologue

Through the dark stormy night the train rushed along the tracks, winding its way through forests of the Green Mountains. No moon that night, only darkness. A young woman huddled in her seat in the back of the train car holding her bag to her chest and watching out the window. A sob could be heard at times from back there and a pile of tissues were crumpled on the floor between the seats. A few other passengers were scattered throughout the car taking the midnight express but most of them were sleeping. The storm raged outside rocking the train at times as it wound its way through the Green Mountains carrying the girl back to her home in the Cove and what awaited her there..

“

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*Through the dark stormy night the train rushed along the tracks, winding its way through forests of the Green Mountains. No moon that night, only darkness.*

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The cove was located back in the forests close to the town of Middleton, Vermont. Those in the surrounding area were very familiar with the cove but to outsiders it could be hard to find without a map. Those who entered came through a small opening in the trees on the highway onto a narrow road leading back through a covered tree tunnel and coming out into a spectacular clearing with a beautiful pond surrounded by white cottages and lawns spreading out with grasses and flowers in abundance. The cottages, each one with its own identity and all white with thatched roofs and colorful shutters sat back a ways from the pond at different angles with white garden paths from their door leading down to the pebble path that wound itself around the pond.

The cottages were all inhabited by the Anderson Women, their husbands, and their families flower beds ablaze with color, song birds, swarms of butterflies, not to mention turtles sunning themselves on rocks and ducks and swans gliding across the pond gave it an unreal look. The large cottage on the left was the home of Katharine Anderson Cook, “Aunt Cappy” to her nieces and nephew. A glass dome room that covered one side of the cottage was entered through a vine covered archway with a sign that dangled from the entry that read, “Katharine’s Studio.”

The next cottage at distance from the first but also back a ways from the pond although facing it, was surrounded on one side by patios on various levels and had the look of an outside café with tables with gingham cloths and chairs. A wing of the cottage on the right had chimneys from ovens and stoves within the kitchen inside. Wonderful smells of fresh baked breads and pies as well as delicious dishes drifted constantly out of the kitchen door and down the path. Some said they could even smell it in town on days whether windy or still. This was the cottage of Aunt Maggie and Uncle Ralph and the two oldest cousins Marcella and Jerome. The small sign at the gate reads Divinely Delicious.

Around the end of the pond and across from Maggie’s cottage on the right sits the cottage of the matriarch, Alice La Plume Anderson. Her cottage is the largest one of them all and very distinct from the others in many ways but primarily because it had been built with a tall stone bell tower where a white and silver bell rings for various reasons, one that can be heard very clearly with its commanding gong. Alice has lived here all of her life, in fact she was born there as was her family before her, except for a short time when she was married to Andrew Anderson and their three daughters were born. But then he went off to war and was killed in battle. And so, at her mother’s urging, she and her daughters had moved back to the Cove

where she opened her hat shop. This cove had been in the La Plume family for several hundred years. Like all the other cottages, this cottage also had a shop as a part of it. And this one was a hat shop. A cobblestone walk led up from the path, circled a fountain and continued onto a long porch. French doors led into the house and another one on the right at the end of the porch led into the hat shop, a wonderful place filled with Grandma's hats.

The last cottage was the one where Josie, and her mother and father lived. This one was white with lime green shutters and looked basically like the others except for the massive gardens that covered the whole acreage surrounding it. A glass greenhouse of a great size sits on the side slightly to the right with a shop on the front and a sign that read "Becca's Blossoms." Josie Anderson Cornel and her husband Walter and daughter Josie Cornel, that you've already met live within.

And this is where the story begins....



I felt a blast of cold air as I felt the train pull to a stop, the doors opened letting the cold air in and the one lone passenger off at their stop. I had dozed off with my head crooked against the window ledge. And then I remembered and my mind began once again to race. Over and over in my mind, the words, "Gramma please wait for me. PLEASE," repeated and repeated. Tears rolled down over my face over dried ones. The clacking of the train kept time with my heart beat. Rain beat against the window. It would be a long ride tonight. A few passengers were scattered throughout the car and I could see that most of them were sleeping. I stood to stretch

and then my legs seem to give out and I crumpled back into the seat. I was drifting for a moment. I could hear the sound of a song somewhere in my memory and then it felt as though I was being shot back on a sailing ship of time through oceans of stars back, back, back. The morning sunlight through the gingham curtains splashed across my face causing me to blink. I rubbed my eyes. I was back in my girlhood bedroom in our cottage in the cove. “Good Morning to you, Good Morning to you, we’re all in our places with sunshiny faces, for this is the way, we start a new day,” my mom was singing as she fixed breakfast and I could smell bacon frying. I peeled back my quilt, swung my legs over the side and hit the floor running. I couldn’t be late to Maple Elementary because this was the day that Miss Wheeler announced the winner of the city wide art contest and I thought my picture of exploring a pyramid might have a chance. Buttoning my back buttons as far as I could reach and letting my sash dangle as I hurried into the kitchen. And there as always sat a small blue plate with a poached egg in the middle that mom fixed every morning for my breakfast with crumbled bread crumbs. Her mom was nicknamed Becca but her name was Rebecca, a slender dark haired woman who was 3rd in a family of sisters that were known all around as the “Anderson Women.” She always sang her morning song. In fact her voice could be heard off and on all day throughout the cove being carried by the breezes that swept across the pond. It was a morning song that she had learned from her own mother, it always seemed to start the day “on the right foot” as Grandma Alice, always said. .

Dad had already left for work. He left before sunrise to run his business, Walter Cornel’s Construction. Dad could fix anything. He kept the Cove running. He also liked to sing but his was in the evening with his guitar. Mom sang in the morning and then all day long while working in her flower beds. You could hear her voice floating in the breeze across the pond and sometimes I thought I heard it when I wasn’t even there. I gathered my

things, kissed mom and then out the front door through the garden, around the pond, pausing to throw my bread crumbs out to the mallards before they flew away southbound in a few days, down the lane through the trees lined with forest flowers and the sound of birds only to pop out around the bend to hook up with Mazey, my best pal. I was jolted awake.

I sat bolt upright. The clattering of the train on its rails seemed louder than before and the heavy rain seemed to be beating harder on the roof. I was sick at heart and afraid of what I might find when I reached my destination. Hurry Hurry Hurry.

And then I was back in time once again chasing butterflies in my Aunt Cappy's back yard while the sound of sewing machines drifted out of the open windows of her studio. I had dreams back then of someday having my own studio just like hers with tall mirrors and high windows with hexagonal platforms for ladies to stand on and twist and turn to admire themselves in Aunt Cappy's beautiful latest creations. She was magic to me -Aunt Cappy. Somewhere in the recesses I could barely hear her voice calling to me. "Josie Josie, where are you my darling girl," My memory went back to visions oft in her wonderful studio. I can see her now in my mind's eye inspecting rolls of fabrics on the racks, pinching a tuck in a skirt as she passed it by and standing back with her one finger on her lips and one eyebrow raised to take look like she always did.

She was the oldest of the Anderson sisters. Her husband that I had never known, Uncle Steve, had been lost at sea years before I was born. And like Grandma Alice, she had come home to the cove. Aunt Cappy was thin like all of the Anderson women almost birdlike.. She had dark raven colored hair and twinkly eyes. She was an artist and musician and everything she touched was better for it. She can just give you a glance and then walk over

and tweak something – your hair, your collar, your bedroom lamp – and a soft sound of mandolins can be heard somewhere like fairy music and then tiny sparkling stars will fill the air for just an instant – and then everything will be put to rights in a splendid way. People say that she has magic in her fingers. Her studio is a part of her cottage with high vaulted glass ceilings. You can see the sky from inside Down below on the walls hung colored spools of threads and sitting on every sewing machine were cushions of pins and needles. I could see the hooks along the wall where the sharpest silver scissors hung in their sheaths on silver hooks.

Once while making a muumuu for an Hawaiian dance at school, the needle on my machine broke. Mom was gone and couldn't help me and I was almost out of time before my date arrive. I grabbed it off of the machine and dashed around the pound through our gardens and the tall grass to the studio. I had designed a muumuu that I believed to be quite different from the normal shapeless, sleeveless ones with big palm trees on the. Oh no, mine would be different. It was a bright golden yellow, straight and short above the knees with large elephant ear sleeves and a big white pocket on the front with a handle sewed there to make the pocket resemble a basket. Cappy was alone that Saturday. She looked up from her machine, I can still see her – head bent over her work, light filtering down on her – a moment in time. She looked up and a smile broke out on her face when she saw me. In a rushed voice, I told her my dilemma. She stood back and then pointed out a machine that I could use. I took the seam ripper from its hook and started working each stitch when she leaned over me and pointed to a loose thread on the other side of the seam. “Always pull the bottom string Josie when you want to open a seam. With the slightest pull, the seam came apart. I placed my faric back under the pressure foot and stitched it up. I was excited to look at it but was slightly disappointed when I held it up and looked it over. It lacked something. Aunt Cappy looked at my face and then

at the muumuu and held out her hand. I handed it over. She sat down at her machine and in a matter of minutes she had taken scraps of colorful fabrics out of her scrap basket and machine-appliquéd a huge bouquet of tropical flowers dripping out of my muumuu basket pocket and they were cascading down the front to drip a few petals off of the hem. Magic! Minutes! That's all it took her. "Here you go! Now run or you will never make it!" And run I did – just in time! And off to the dance. My muumuu was a big hit and some even asked me if I would make one of them. Looking back now, I know that that day with the muumuu in Aunt Cappy's studio changed my whole perspective in design and from then on my ideas soared. I began to try out ideas that included retro and bohemian – even eclectic and experiential. In other words a little quirky – or even a lot quirky and she was my biggest fan cheering me on. Sometimes she even used one of my ideas and the best part was that when she did, she always included my name under her label. So different that what was to come.

I roused as the train stopped to let a lone passenger off at a stop. I sat back in my seat thinking of my dream remembering cars circling our pond, stopping at our cottages.

People come from towns around to Aunt Cappys studio, Katharine's. But that isn't the only reason that people come to the cove. My other aunt - Aunt Maggie is a genius in the kitchen absolutely amazing. She is known everywhere for her delicious pies and cookies and pastries and everything she makes. Her pie shop, Divinely Delicious, was built as a part of her cottage like every cottage in the cove. And starting with early morning breakfast, people began arriving at the crack of dawn and it is filled with people until dusk. One of her special skills is that she can make a feast out of random food items AND on the spur of the moment as well. From early morning until late afternoon, delicious aromas wafts out of her pie shop

and drifted magically down the lane seemingly to capture the desires of motorists on the road as well as riding the winds or breezes into town through the vents into homes and businesses captivating all who are privileged to breathe in these wonderful smells. Aunt Maggie can bake a single piece of pie for you if you are having a bad day and she always seems to know what you are hungry for. One special memory was the time when I was small and I had my tonsils out. Afterwards, crying in pain in my bed unable to swallow, and then suddenly I heard the sounds of the mandolin strings and knew that something was coming. The rich buttery smell of the pie was next to make an appearance in the air followed by the sound of her footsteps tip tapping on the stairs. Around the corner came Aunt Maggie with a cloud of tiny stars swirling over her head. In her hands, she carried a piece of lemon meringue pie on a white plate with a silver fork and she held it out to me with that sweet smile on her face. I took one bite and felt the lemon pudding slide down my throat over my tonsillectomy and Wa La - the pain was gone! I gobbled down the divinely delicious lemony pie and slid off to dreamland.

And there is my mother, the youngest of the sisters. She can grow anything! Flowers fill the cove around all of our cottages, the pond, the paths, the road AND in her immense gardens and greenhouse. She is a gardener with a gift for growing. Everything she touches flourishes in abundance. In the summer, fall, winter, and spring something is in bloom in my mother, Becca's, gardens both inside our cottage, in our luscious greenhouse or blanketed all around our house and spilling out into the pond and down the lane. Mom is the proprietor of Beccas Blossoms, the flower shop that is a part of our greenhouse where as fast as flowers are sold, more will bloom – like magic.

Even flowers that normally die in the fall and have to be replanted in the spring will magically spring up every spring as though they had been snug in their beds sleeping deep beneath the snows of winter only to wake up every spring. Her flower shop, Beccas Blossoms, is situated in the front of the long and tall glass greenhouse and is always bursting with plants and blossom – well - growing. Many townspeople come to Becca’s Blossum greenhouse just to inhale the wonder of it rather than to buy anything. But mom will never allow it. She always sends them away holding a blossom and wearing a look of happiness. I can feel the hot tears. “I am so sorry,” I whispered.

Marcella and Jerome were the oldest cousins and I was the “little cousin” guided into ornery deeds by my cousins and taught all kinds of things.. They were my heroes. I tried to do everything that they did. We ran around all day long back then as a group – always with bare feet. To wear shoes meant that you were a sissy which was the worst thing anyone could be according to Marcella. To cry when mentholate was put on a cut – same thing. There were rules.

And then there was Tommy Benton, our friend from outside the cove whose mom was and still is one of the seamstresses in Aunt Cappy’s studio. He hung out with us when school was out sometimes – funny – red-headed and unpredictable. Marcella and Jerome didn’t pull any of their tricks when he was around – always following the rules as though he may report their shenanigans if he knew. But most of the time Tommy was just one of us. Those were happy summer days in the cove. And then the memory of leaving it and the faces of all of them waving good bye.

On days that it was just us, we made secret pacts in the woods under rocks and in caves. We climbed our special trees with Marcella and Jerome going way high in the branches and me whining down below until they both called me a sissy and I grabbed the lowest branch, stuck my foot in the notch and pulled myself up. (I smiled at the thought of it). Jumping into the cloudy water of the pond in spite of our parents rule to “stay away from the deep in,” holding our breath until we felt like bursting – summer days in the cove. Marcella could do this the best actually she could do everything the best even though Jerome was the oldest.

As I sat in the loneliness of the train that night I thought back to the cove. The days of green worm burials, riding a lawn chair tied by a rope and swung around by Jerome, secrets told with a mark on your hand and best of all swimming in the pond. We loved to swim in the pond. Both Marcella and Jerome were experts at holding their breath for long periods of time and swimming under water. I tried and tried but I always had to give in and pop up to grab a big drink of air. One afternoon they talked me into trying again. Both of them counted seconds as I sat in the bottom of the pond and tried my hardest to hold my breath. Once when I almost made the count, they pulled me into the woods under the wishing stone in the fairy circle and whispered, “Josie, when you hold your breath, close your eyes tight, count to 3 and then open them wide until you see the sunbeam and then you can stay down forever!” It took several tries before I could talk myself into opening my eyes – sure I saw the sunbeam but..... And it worked! I spent the rest of the afternoon staying under water until I heard my mom call “Supper is ready.”

That night after dinner, my mother came into my bedroom and sitting on my bed, I remembered her solemn look as she said in a very stern voice, “Josie, I happened to look out of my kitchen window this afternoon and I

watched you kids in the pond. Marcella and Jerome were sitting on the bank and I saw you go beneath the surface. You stayed under too long, my little love.”

“But mom! There’s a trick. Mar.”

She put her fingers on my lips and shushed me, “I know I know. But let me be very clear Josie Ann and she leaned forward almost to nose-touching and directed her gaze directly into my eyes until it stung, “You must never use that “trick” recklessly EVER! Do you hear me? I will block you forever from the pond – do you want that?” I wasn’t sure which way to nod so I squeaked out, “I won’t.”

Mom replied, “Do you promise me Josie?”

I whispered so that the words came out like a shadow, “I promise.”

To be blocked from the pond would be the worst punishment on earth. I could hear Marcella and Jerome calling me a sissy and making me kiss a bug or something before I could join them. I had never been spoken to like that from mom and in fact, I had never heard talk in that tone of voice before from anyone. I must have done something very wrong, I thought. But I couldn’t think what would be wrong with holding my breath.

The next day I sat at the end of the old wharf watching my cousins and Tommy frolic in the water feeling sorry for myself. They called to me but they could tell that they better not pester me. That was the day that Jerome got caught under the wharf and almost drowned. It seems the trick has a time limit and once he got stuck, and Marcella realized it, it was almost too

late. Her screams could be heard around the cove and all of the aunts, my mom, and everyone in their shops and studios raced to the wharf. I ran as fast as I could through the high grass and got there just as my mom dove under the water. Agonizing minutes dragged by as we waited. Aunt Cappy stood waist deep in the water holding mom down as she blew water into Jerome's mouth and was finally able to break him loose. His lifeless body was carried out of the pond and placed in the grass while emergency workers worked over him. When he finally gasped a breath, we all did. They took him away and it was a few days before he came home. We gathered around his bed while he tried to make jokes about it. I remember hearing Gramma's voice out in the garden the night that it happened. They stood surrounded among the fireflies that night talking about the possibility of a "breech". Somehow I knew she was talking about Jerome and his accident but what did she mean? My mom never said anything to me but her words rang in my head "You must never use that "trick" recklessly EVER!. The pond was still with only the ducks and birds and the waving grasses and lilies for days as if they knew what had almost happened.

And then everything seemed to fall into place and life went on in the cove. People lined up outside Aunt Maggie's cottage every day for her delicious pies, cookies, and cakes; the sound of sewing machines hummed from Aunt Cappy's and a steady stream of women with big shiny packages tied up with satin ribbons carrying their beautiful garments happily pranced out her door with their bounty, flowers still bloomed and people still came, Grammas Alices hats still were seen on those leaving the cove, but something was different somehow.

As I sat huddled there in the train, I was faced with the fact that I had been traveling in memories of my childhood in the cove with my aunts and my mom. But the one person that I was afraid to think about now was my

Grandmother Alice. Gramma was the queen of us all. In her younger days, she was the proprietor of a spectacular hat shop. Ladies from far and wide – cities and towns and farms came to twist and turn before her mirror with her wonderful hats on top of their heads. She designed and created these amazing hats and to this day the Anderson women as we are known, can always be seen wearing beautiful and even audacious hats of all sizes and colors. Gramma Alice still makes hats but only special orders. Naturally all of us have closets of hats – beautiful, clever, sporty, and just about everything you can imagine. Some people have the power of knowing, my grandmother says, and seriously I believe she is right especially when I am wearing one of her hats! Once you place one on your head wonderful things happen. If you are scared before you put it on, now you are brave for example, if sad or blue; now you are happy and the sun seems to shine.

As a child it all just seemed normal – nothing special. Magic didn't seem like such a big thing – Grandmother could tell Aunt Maggie when her pie was at risk for burning, or Aunt Cappy when she had left a pin in a garment or alert mom that a bug was about to eat up all of the nasturtiums – and all of this without being there. She knew when you were going to arrive at her cottage and would be waiting with your favorite tea. She could answer your questions before you asked them and was very wise. We all counted on her almost like a guardian angel. We didn't think of it as magic-just that it was well ...Grandma Alice. One night when I was about 8 or 9 I was awakened by voices in the garden. I crept out in my bare feet and peeked through the lilacs and saw my all of them gathered in a circle under the moonlight. Suddenly they stopped, got quiet and shushed each other while looking around over their shoulders. My grandma Alice turned abruptly and sent a look directly into my eyes across the yard, through the lilacs where I was hiding. I could hear the distant sound of mandolins and see the tiny sparkling stars and then it was morning with sunlight coming through

my windows and the sound of my mother singing Good Morning to you in the kitchen. “It must have only been a dream,” I thought to myself and when I told Grandma Alice, she agreed.

“

*Magic didn't seem like such a big thing — Grandmother could tell Aunt Maggie when her pie was at risk for burning, or Aunt Cappy when she had left a pin in a garment.*

I was 13 years old and things were changing as I became a teen. One of them was that I began to realize when something was about to happen – little things like knowing that a pop quiz was coming before it happened or that Marcella and Jerome were not only cooking something up but I began to know what it was before they did it. It became hard to surprise me. One afternoon while sitting with Grandma on her swing under the wisteria she startled me when she said, “Josie be careful what you say to people. They will not understand. You have a gift like the rest of us. Use it with care and only for good. Be careful of all that comes to you.” Looking into her eyes I knew exactly what she was talking about (except maybe “all that comes in). I had crossed a threshold it seemed, into a place that I didn't know existed before that. I was growing up. Weird. I should have listened.



When I was in junior high, a new family, the Holt's, moved into town. Mr. Holt went to work in Uncle Ralph's Grocery and Mrs. Holt joined the garden club. Our town is always happy to have new families move in and everybody gathered around taking turns having them over for dinner. Randy, their 16 year old son, was in high school but Donna, their daughter, was Masey's and my age and so was in our classes which was great. So we jumped right in and invited her to walk with us after school since she lived in the same area of town. We also invited her to our homes for after school fun as well. She was loads of fun and at first, we were all friends. Her family began joining in the town's activities and everything was going well. Halloween was coming and that year, there was going to be a big Spook Walk and Haunted house in the town square. We collaborated on our costumes and signed up for shifts in the Spook House now that we were "older." Then right before the big night, she stopped sitting with us at lunch and didn't show up after school to walk with us even though we waited and waited for her. Halloween came and went and we began seeing her hanging around with a whole different bunch – the "wild" kids. Mazie said she was through trying to make friends with her because she was starting to be rude and even insulting. I kept trying for awhile and then I too realized that I was probably pushing in where I wasn't wanted and so I stopped too.

Then horrible things began to happen. The tires on our bikes were sliced as they sat in the bike stands behind the school building; the waterline to mom's greenhouse was cut; mean notes were left on our lockers, and taunts were thrown at us in the hallways. And then around homecoming, someone caught Donna and her pals under the bleachers painting mean messages about Mazie and I and my family and they were all expelled from school. But it didn't stop from there. It seemed to make it worse. As time went on some of the kids from her group started calling our phone at home

and yelling hate messages. Taking the phone off of the hook only caused it to buzz loudly so suddenly the phone seemed to jump on the table but the ring couldn't be heard. Grandma to the rescue! After a while, it stopped.

In the spring I was awarded the Fashion Show Manager in the Homemaking Division at school. This was an award that I had been aiming at and was only given to 9th graders. It essentially was a big deal in my school and right away Donna and her group filed complaints saying that I should be disqualified because Cappy was my aunt and she was probably doing my work for me. Which was not true of course because for one thing, we would never do that but also because it was easy to tell Cappy's from mine I wanted to bow out but the teacher insisted that I remain as the manager. My dad said, "Don't let them scare you away Josie. Put on your hat." That did it! I wasn't going to back down. Donna and her friends were denied their request and their complaint was dropped. I forged on even though the whole thing backfired. Retaliation occurred. And it got worse – for me, for Mazie, and my family. Greenhouse windows were broken with snow on the ground, and the freezing temperatures would have killed our plants except for grandma Alice's prediction and the help from all of us in the cove to show up and stop it before all of the glass was broken. Aunt Maggie's pies that were sold out of her and Uncle Ralph's grocery store in town caused food poisoning to all those who bought them that day but when examined by the police, it was clear that the coverings had been cut so it was obvious that someone had come into the store and had clearly damaged them. Grandma told everyone with dogs in the cove to keep them in one day. But one of ours got out, became ill and it was discovered that he had been poisoned. He survived but this was getting serious. We were under siege. Some of my friends began to back off because of fear that they would get the same treatment. Mazey and Tommy were my only friends that stuck it out but then again, Tommy seemed to straddle the fence at times.

When I was old enough to drive, I was given an old coup that I named “Baby” and after Marcella went off to culinary school, I was given her special job by Aunt Cappy. Here’s how it worked. During the fall, winter, spring and summer, the new fashions would “come out” all over the world and would be visible in our town, first in the upscale dress shop windows in our town that sifted down from the big city nearby. Aunt Cappy must have known already what was coming out even though back then we didn’t have televisions yet or computers and fashion magazines came in the middle of the month. But she was like all of the rest of the Anderson women so when I think about it now, I realize that she probably already knew. But back then it was pretty cool to get to drive but super cool to be given this job plus to us, it was exciting to get an early peek at the colors of the season, the hem length, and the overall presentation of the clothing that would be displayed in these elegant store windows. First I would get a note at school from Aunt Cappy that said “Wool Brothers is in,” and that would be my clue that after school I was supposed to drive downtown in Baby and draw the new season fashion arrivals in the two upscale dress shops on my drawing pad. Then I would get in Baby and take the drawings out to the Cove specifically to the Studio and put them on Aunt Cappy’s drawing board. Everyone would gather around and discuss what they saw and what they thought about it and much more. A few days later amazing designs would spring out of her drawing board almost like a cannon being shot. Hers were nothing like those in the windows and that was her point. She didn’t use the designs rather she created designs that challenged them – went against them so to speak. Women all over the country – that’s right, not just in our area – but everywhere would clamber to see what was coming from the studio of Katharine - Cappy’s Studio. Sometimes they would even be featured in catalogues. The fall season was coming. School had started and for fashion,

it was that time of year. Late summer/early fall and soon the fashions would come to town. That's when something happened that I will never forget and after that, nothing was the same.

That brings us to the Wool Brothers incident as we called it. I was sitting in my Social Studies Class doodling on my notepad and trying to stay focused on the teacher's voice. The windows were up to let in the warm breeze. I glanced down at my notepad and at first, I didn't know what I was looking at and then it came into focus and there before me was Wool's window with the new arrivals. I had drawn them and I hadn't even SEEN them yet! What was I thinking? Just then the door to the classroom opened and the school secretary came through the door with a smile on her face, holding a note and looking straight at me. Cappy's note! Everyone looked my way because everyone knew about this and I admit I had played it up. My friends shot me a glance. And then like the crack of a gun, Donna jumped out of her seat beside me and grabbed my notepad. She held it up and shouted: "She's a fraud! She already has either seen the windows OR she's a WITCH!" There was a gasp as I sat there stunned. Miss Packard the secretary came over to Donna, held out her hand, and took the notepad. Then she looked down at me.

"I was going to let you out early so that you could do what your aunt wants you to do but now I guess there's no need. Looks like you already know although how you did it, I don't know. I think it's time Miss Cornel that we talk to Miss Lemon(the principal)." I could hear the tittering in the classroom as I meekly followed Miss Packard out.

"Josie, what's this about? Can you explain this to me?" Miss Lemon seemed puzzled. I shook my head and then I thought I should have lied and said that I had already seen them but I am glad that I didn't because 1. I am

a terrible liar and 2. It was proven that I had not left school since the time that Wool Brothers had opened their curtains that afternoon. I had not done anything wrong exactly but my parents were called in. The main problem was that my drawings exactly matched Wool Brothers window. To everyone investigating this, there was no evidence of wrong-doing really because I hadn't cut school even though kids started looking at me weird.

It was a blow to me that my mind seemed to take in information such as Wool's window could come to me uninvited – so was I in control of my thoughts or not?. I felt like I WAS a fraud. It made my Manager Award seem underserved. Sure I had been sewing and drawing all of my life unlike most of the other girls who were beginners. So I had an advantage over them. When I told Grandma about my shame, she said, “Josie, Miss Wells,(my teacher) knew what she was doing when she chose you to lead the other girls. This was not unknown to everyone – you know that we are known for our work, right? This was not a competition for the best seamstress, this was about leadership. Don't let anyone take that from you. But t is time that you learn to watch what ideas come into your mind. You are growing up.” There it was again.

The harassment didn't stop. In fact, the taunting and bullying kept on. Donna and her gang set out to prove that we were all evil witches. They tried to prove that Aunt Margie put drugs in her baked goods – otherwise, why did you feel so good after eating them? Of course that wasn't true and could never be proven. I think actually some were upset that it wasn't. This whole investigation didn't seem to hurt business. Mom's herb gardens were destroyed while they tried to prove that she was growing illegal herbs. It ruined her gardens but just like all of the plants in her garden, they grew right back.

Aunt Cappy's habit of looking at other people's designs was publicized all over but when her designs were finally published next to the ones in Wool's windows and all of the ones for years before, it was obvious that their charges were "balderdash," as Grandma angrily cried. And speaking of Grandma, interesting point – nobody – absolutely NOBODY messed with Grandma. Make that what you will. But my family was put through a very dark time and had to prove that the charges were unfounded took a lot of time and it was a while before things started to re-balance but it didn't stop the Anderson women. They marched on.

My family cleared their name but why did they even have to? Answer: Because of me. Okay so what about me? What are we? Are we witches? What are we? Nobody would straight out answer me but a moonlight meeting was called under the full moon. Marcella had even come home from college for it and all of the Anderson women in white robes danced in a fairy circle. It was April but the air was filled with butterflies, sparkling stars, and mandolin music and moonlight. I had come of age. It was lovely and wonderful. Grandma led the meeting. "We gather together as women of the earth. We have been given our skills as a gift to spread and to give back to the earth. This remains a secret that we must guard so evil does invade our space and seek to hurt us.

We are sisters of the knowing. Josie we welcome you into our circle."

"Me? Know my own knowing? So I am weird and what they are saying about me is true? Well, I am turning it down! I don't want to be like you," I shouted into the night air. Stillness. The fireflies went out one by one. The fire died down and there was a dark silence except for the sounds of my sobbing and my footsteps as I ran through the grass.

And then the spell was broken for me. I heard them calling for me in the wind as the moon went behind a cloud. I jumped in Baby and raced out of the cove, around the pond on two wheels. I reached the highway and stepped on the gas, tears filling my eyes. Everything raced through my mind, the mandolin music and sparking stars – the crazy things that Marcella, Jerome, and I used to do. How many times had I heard the word “magical.” And look what it has done to me and my family. Baby was weaving all over the road as I tried to wipe the tears out of my eyes and hang onto the steering wheel.

BOOM! Suddenly a bolt of lightning struck the highway right in front of me on the road and then rain came down in torrents. I couldn’t see out of my windshield. More lightening. The wind came up rocking Baby. I slid across the centerline on the wet blacktop and found myself heading down a country road into a woods. Baby seemed to sink. And I was stuck in the middle of nowhere and the gas gage said “Empty.” There were no lights in the town. The rain pounded on the roof. Darkness was heavy around me. All thoughts of moonlight and gifts vanished as my mind raced trying to think of what to do next. And then a few minutes later – I saw a small light shining through the trees. It seemed to be in the attic of an old house way back from the road. I could barely see it. My heart sang. I found my hat in the back seat and wrapping my flimsy white “moon” robe around me and holding my hat on top of my head, I opened the door of the car and stepped out into the mud. I could hear the sound of a bell ringing in the wind and I started slogging through the mud in that direction. The house was further away than I thought it was and by the time I reached the porch I was covered in mud and soaked to the skin. A shiny brass bell showed the darkness. Dark – very dark and for a moment I thought I had been mistaken about anyone being up but then I saw a candle glowing from within the big double doors and a sweet face peering out behind it.

“Oh my dear, step inside. I’ve been worried.” It was warm inside the massive room with a fire cackling in hearth. “Forgive me dear, but our lights are out,” she whispered. “Please sit by the fire and have a cup of tea. It will warm you.” Her face was hidden in the shadows and her knarled fingers were ice cold to the touch. The sweet hot tea warmed me as it slid down my throat but as I looked up once again into her eyes I began to feel myself falling backward into a swirling mist and then everything went black.

The next morning I awoke in the front seat of Baby and we were on the shoulder of the highway. Someone was knocking on my window. I sat up and rolled it down blinking in the morning sun. “Are you alright? We saw the car and decided to make sure nobody was inside. But here you are.”

“Thank you,” I rubbed my eyes trying to wake up. “I slid off the road in the storm and must have fallen asleep.”

“I am glad you’re okay,” she said but as she walked away towards her car, I heard her say to the man with her, “Storm? Was there a storm?”

I slowly drove up and down the highway scanning the trees looking for an opening but couldn’t find one. So I headed back home.

“So....?” Mom looked up from her tulip bed as I walked past on the path.

“Sorry,” was all I could say. Where had I been and who was that woman? I felt certain that I had sloshed through the mud in a driving rain and up the steps to a large porch filled with potted plants and a wooden swing swinging in the wind at the far left as it curved around the side. The porch framed a large house – the one that I had seen through the trees every

time lightening lit up the sky. I could still hear the bell in my head at times and see it swinging on the hook beside the massive front door casting a gleam as it swung showing off roses engraved on the surface gleaming in the moments when lightening lighted the sky. On the day that I returned home, these thoughts ran like a broken record through my head as I worked in the gardens with mom avoiding her eyes whenever possible. I wanted to tell her and then again, I wondered, did she already know? Also questions such as how did I get back in Baby? Who was this woman and what did she mean when she said, "I've been worried?" Worried about what? Who? Baby was clean all over – no mud. I also showed no sign of being drenched in a storm and no part of my legs or feet were muddy. My hat was dry and still sitting in the back seat. And just when I thought that I was losing my mind, I saw it. A thin thread of mud laced one small pleat on the hem of my robe. Yes! I folded it mud and all and put it in a box that I slid under my bed. The memory of the woman's blue eyes and the fire behind her came to me in dreams for a while and then faded away. But the thought stayed with me and although I never went up that highway that I didn't find myself scanning the trees on the left for the road through the trees I could never find one.

I was learning that thoughts came into my mind's eye without being called. After the "Wool Brothers incident" and the uproar it caused I made up my mind that if I would get control of it and put it stop to it. Having a "knowing" as Grandma Alice called it hadn't been good for me .I decided that the only way to squash it would be to leave the cove and get as far away as I could. So I began making my plans. First of all, I stopped entering competitions at school for fear of being accused of being a witch. I tried to stay in the background at school and against my family's wishes I quit the debate team, choir, student council, leaders club, and volleyball. I still participated in school but if something came up such as picking new school

colors or something, I submitted anonymously. I did not want to cause any more trouble. It was a lonely time for me but it worked to some extent in that I no longer got egged, the telephone harassment only happened after school parties that of course, I wasn't invited and to my knowledge the town talk about witchcraft connected to the Anderson women died down.

I turned my attention to college even though it was still two years away and began sending applications in to all of the state colleges that had design schools and building my portfolio with Aunt Cappy's help. And one day in my senior year, "The Letter" came in the mail box down the lane from our cottage. In it was a letter congratulating me on being awarded the Paul Martin Design Scholarship to the Vermont University, the most prestigious school in the state school in Fiber Arts and Fashion Design. I was elated. Jerome had been awarded a design scholarship to the Vermont School of Art and Design and Marcella was awarded a scholarship to the School of Culinary Arts in Burlington. It was my turn. My letter was passed around from cottage to cottage and everyone cheered. I was excited but a little bit nervous because I had never been that far away from home for long periods

My whole family and I knew that they thought that I would be coming home someday and be one of the "Anderson ladies of the cove". And truth be told, I wanted to, I really really wanted to, but I knew that I couldn't. I had already caused too many horrible things to happen to all of them. It was hard to explain and they wouldn't listen when I tried.

After the announcement in the local news of all of the scholarship recipients, the name-calling started again with accusations that we had put a spell on the VU and began a campaign to send a letter to the school telling them. I tried to ignore Donna and her minions even though they went back to calling me a witch and egging Baby as we drove by. They even rubbed

eggs in my hair when they caught me alone and other disgusting things. I decided to stay home from the senior prom even though I had designed a dress that I loved but after the attacks I thought that none of my pals would feel safe going with me even though they all denied especially Mazie and I didn't want to be there by myself. Tommy said I could go with him but I didn't want him to have bad things happen to him so I turned him down. But I was coerced into going to graduation by everyone in my family. Jerome and Marcella were the ones who finally threatened to tie me up and dump me on the stage if I didn't go. "Stop thinking only of your self Jo Jo. This isn't about YOU! Give all of us the benefit of watching you get that trophy!" Okay okay. They were talking about the scholarship I thought but actually somehow they knew that I WAS getting a trophy: I was awarded the Student of the Year for designing a new school logo and creating and producing a school banner. I was stunned as the class and all of the audience stood and gave me a standing ovation –even the Holt family. It pulled at my heartstrings but still I was afraid of what might happen next as retaliation.

After graduation, my family held a big graduation party for me and I was surprised that a lot of people actually came even a lot of my school friends. It turned into a wonderful afternoon and for a moment, I wondered if I began having second thoughts. I heard people asking my grandma Alice if I was going to join Cappy someday but I didn't hear her reply. Then two women made a comment about feeling better after eating from Aunt Maggie's party buffet and then winking at each other and all thoughts of staying vanished. Early the next morning I packed up and headed out of the cove. My family waved their good byes and blew kisses. I waved to them out of the window of my green sedan, my graduation gift. I was leaving everything behind – even Baby. There was a huge lump in my

throat because I knew that I would never return to this wonderful place to stay. I could see the butterflies swirling in the air and all of the spring flowers waving in the breeze in my rear vision mirror as if they were saying farewell.

The University of Vermont was 4 hours away and the road leading up that way was the same one that I was on that night in the storm. I glanced at the tree line for a ways as I drove up the highway. It was woods all around and maybe that road had gotten overgrown, I thought. No matter, I will find it someday, I promised myself. I thought of the box under my bed at home. I knew what I knew.

College was not that difficult to navigate but still it was so different from what I was used to. For one thing, I had to do everything for myself much to my dismay I found I wasn't that good at it. But I had made the decision to come here so I needed to get a grip. I put on my hat. The upside was that where I was known as the "girl who can sew funky clothes," not to mention "the girl who is a witch" in high school, I was pretty much invisible here in collage. And I loved it. All of the other students in my classes were talented in all kinds of designs. I wasn't special – just one of the class. The downside was that guilt plagued me and I knew there was no way I could call my family for help when I needed them or just wanted to talk after what I had done to them in exposing them and their magic. But that's not to say that I didn't like college. My scholarship was big enough to cover all of my needs including art supplies plus a little left over for my apartment. I talked my mom and dad into letting me get one rather stays in a dorm and I found a small nook of an apartment in the attic of an old house. I made friends with the occupants. At times, I was lonely and called home! I was determined to prove that I could make it on my own to both them and to myself!

Life went on. I spent most of my time in the studio on campus. It was wonderful! I could spend hours at the drawing board with my earphones on. I had trained myself back in high school to stay in the background and I found it difficult to join in with the other design students. And ideas literally floated off my drawing paper. My quirky ideas could get quirkier here – there was freedom in expression (actually the motto over our design studio door.) And the campus was beautiful, hilly and covered in trees that changed into brilliant colors as the leaves began to fall. The beauty of the campus gave me zillions of ideas and sometimes I felt like I couldn't keep up with my own mind. At the end of the first semester, I was called into the office of the Department Chair and my professor and was told by then that as unique and creative as my designs were; I needed to be reminded that I needed to take academics more seriously if I wanted to stay in school. I doubled up on my classes because try as I might I just couldn't let go of my art and design classes to make room for my academics so I just took both.

One day in the cold of the winter, someone pulled out my earphones and said, “Hey is there anyone in there?” I jumped. Smiling down at me was the tall guy with the mustache in my class. Dusty was holding out his hand to me beckoning me to join him and several others. “We're all going to Bernie's. Take a break woman. “

I started to protest but everyone started chanting, “Josie, Josie, Josie!” So I gave up, grabbed my parka, and off we went to the campus hangout. We laughed and complained about professors. It was a good time.

Vicky, the girl with the purple hair, leaned forward and said, “We have all been wanting to ask you Josie. Where do you get all of those amazing hats?” Everyone chimed in as I told them that my grandma Alice was a hat maker. Wishful sighs and swoons as

Penny, another student, voiced what everyone else was probably thinking, “Oh to have a grandmother who makes hats!” and After that, I was a part of the group – an awesome group. You could always tell the artist on campus because of their weird hair, paint brushes behind their ears, and paint splattered lab coats. We stood out and liked it that way. One day our favorite teachers called us all Rookies and that became our name as in a text” “Rookies meet on the common – 8!” Something else began to occur.

Dusty began staying late and walking me back to my apartment and we became an “item.” Life was good. I began calling home once a week.

It was in my junior year that odd things began to happen. There had been some things that may be construed to be weird before such as Grandma calling me to tell me not to drive my car and when I had it checked, the brakes had been tampered with and then the tires were slashed after that but of course I knew it before I drove it because Grandma told me. I began blurting out things without thinking such as “did your sister have her baby yet?” She didn’t even know that her sister was pregnant. And similar things like, “How do you like your new truck?” It was sitting in their parking spot as a birthday gift and they didn’t know about it yet. And others. I had done stuff like this all of my life I realized now but it seemed more apparent to others. Of course I came up with excuses and we all laughed at the “coincidence.” I was going to have to try harder. This was a part of me that wouldn’t do me any good if others knew about the truth of it. Dusty met me after class and asked me to have a sandwich with him which was weird because both of us were always broke and basically lived on PBJ’s.

He steered me into a small coffee shop and we made our way to the back booth. That's where he told me that he had been getting anonymous phone calls for awhile and so had all of the other Rookies. Someone was saying the same old things from high school – that I was a witch and so was my family and that we had done bad things to others with our magic blah blah blah. He said, "Crazy, right? I didn't tell you because it was so insane and I didn't want to scare you." Tears were now flowing down my face and dripping off of my chin. I couldn't think of anything to say. I started to slide out of the booth but he blocked me. "Do you know what this is about?"

I sat there sobbing and he held my hand. I finally told him that my family were all artisans (we had talent and skill) in some way and had done business in the town for decades – maybe even longer. I told him about Donna and her family who had, for some reason, seemingly resented us and that we were never able to understand.

"So they bullied you? Worse?" He asked.

All I could do was nod. Words would not come out of my mouth. He looked at me with such understanding in his eyes."Okay this has gone far enough. We need to tell the others and I will see if there's anything we can do about the phone calls." (There wasn't.) He gave me a hug. "Don't worry Josie." (If he only knew). One thing about that day in the coffee shop that was the icing on the cake: He never asked me if it were true. I'm not sure what I would have said.

Members of my family would come to campus at times and load me up with goodies and I would go home on holidays and a few times in the summer although I knew they could use my help, I didn't stay long. Of course, I always left with a box of pies, a new hat, bouquets of flowers, and

some wonderful new fabric and sometimes a new thimble or tape measure or pin cushion. My friends, the Rookies were always happy when I came back especially with the pies.

The voice messages slowly stopped with Dusty and the rest of the Rookies. But I began getting notes stuck on my apartment door that read, "I know who you are and I know what you do. Not long now." They would always find me, kept going through my head. And then again I countered, a written note might hurt but that was about it so I wadded them up and threw them away. A mistake. Other things happened such as I kept thinking I saw Marcella in a crowd or across a crowded street. Once I even was sure I saw Jerome riding up in the glass elevator in our building. I jumped in the next one but he wasn't at the top. I was losing my mind. Sometimes I would smell one of Aunt Maggy's pies and rush home, take it out of my freezer and share it with Dusty as our whole supper. I always felt better after that.

Things got worse. My teacher received a message that someone was waiting for me in the school commons and I needed to go as soon as possible. I rushed to get my coat and sitting on top of it was my latest hat from grandma Alice, a dark navy blue baker boy with white and grey feathers on the side. Seriously I knew then that either I had totally lost it because I knew for sure that I didn't bring it that day OR Grandma Alice was trying to tell me something. "Okay," I thought, "Grandma Alice I'll play your game," As I neared the Commons, I had a horrible feeling that something was very wrong and I began shouting "Get off the walk, get off the walk!" Everyone turned to look at me. Nothing. And then crashing over the curb and veering through the Commons straight at us came a delivery truck with the driver passed out on the steering wheel. It crossed the path right where I had been walking and crashed into a brick wall. For a moment everyone screamed and scattered and then turned and ran back to pull the

driver out of the truck. It burst into flames. Fire trucks and police car sirens came howling around the corners and soon everyone was huddled in groups talking to them and pointing at me. Oh boy. They took me inside a police car and ask me a slew of questions such as, “So how did you know the truck was coming? When did you know it was going to hit you? Did you know the driver?”

And something told me to simply say, “I don’t know.” And they finally stopped their questioning and let me go home. It was past 6:00 pm, a stiff coldness covered the sidewalks. I had chosen to walk that morning and now I was sorry that I did. “Hey.” And there was Dusty. “Hey I heard something happened in the Commons. Do you know anything about it?” I was tempted to give him the “I don’t know,” but I didn’t. We talked and walked across campus to my little attic apartment and all I could think of was that I was positive that Grandma Alice and her magical hat had saved my life.

I emailed Jerome and asked him if he been on campus. “Are you crazy? I am up to my knickers in deadlines!” Jerome was working for a coat designer and making a name for himself in the metro and seriously I wanted to say yes (about being crazy) but I didn’t. Why start something? Marcella was in culinary school and getting ready to graduate and start her apprenticeship to be a chef so I was sure she wasn’t coming to campus and neither one would come without telling me. I was being silly. Still, they had tricked me before. One thing that could have ruined my college degree and that was that I had missed a deadline because I never got the memo because it had been removed from the board outside our classroom. Someone was sabotaging me! My friends began to check with me to make sure I knew

what was coming up and at first it was surprising how many I had missed in the past and didn't even know it. And then one morning I heard something outside my door, and when I opened it nobody was there.

On my way down the stairs, my neighbor, a piano teacher on the 2nd floor, opened her door just as I was going past and stopped me.”Josie, wait a minute. There was a young man in a hoodie outside your door when I came in about midnight and he was still there this morning when I picked up my mail. I think I just saw him running down the stairs. I couldn't see his face. But he dropped this and I'm sorry but I read it. I think you should see it. “Die Witch!” was written in bold letters.

I froze.

“Do you think you should call the police?”

“I don't think it would do any good Polly, but thanks!”

“Let me know if there is anything at all I can do.”

And then as I headed up the stairs, she spoke again, “Oh he dropped this too, “ and she handed me a door key. Dusty's door key. What? I was crushed. I ran into my apartment, threw myself across my bed and had a meltdown. And when I came up for breath, there was a distinct pounding on my door.

It was Dusty.

“Hey I came by last night late after I left the lab and there was a note on your door. It was threatening. I knocked but you didn’t answer so I decided to wait outside your door in case the guy who left the note came back. I ended up just sleeping all night out here in the hall. By the way, where were you? I was worried.”

“I didn’t hear you,” I mumbled. “ I had on my earphones – so sorry!”

“I don’t have the note - I must have dropped it when I ran to class this morning. I thought it might be here. Did you see it? Say have you seen my key? I’m missing it too.”

I was working at my drafting table with my headphones on until the wee hours. So while he was protecting me out in the hallway on the hard cold floor, I was in my cozy apartment unaware that he was there and all because somebody who hated me for whatever reason, had left me a threatening note.

In 3rd year my department began to submit my drawings along with others in my class to big design houses and by the end of the year, replies were coming back – some good and some “sorry your work does not fit our mission.” By the beginning of 4th year, big design studios began to call. Every time one of the Rookies got a bid from a studio, we all met at Bernie’s to celebrate. The wheel turned and another autumn and then Halloween came and went and another. We all dressed up in wild and crazy costumes and danced in the Commons, designated “Spook Hollar” for the occasion, to music by the Blues Boys, a popular campus group, knowing that this was our last Halloween. Dusty and I made a pact that wherever the other one

went and no matter how far apart we were, we would always be together and someday, who knew? It was unsaid. I couldn't think about it. I loved him.

College came to an end. All of the Rookies excelled and got jobs or apprenticeship offers and each time we all celebrated at Bernie's Dusty was the king of the group with his offer to a fashion house in Paris. A dream job. I accepted an offer of a job/apprenticeship with Eclectic Spice Chic in Chicago and all of the others were heading to new places and new lives. We were scattering and there was some sadness and excitement at our graduation. My family came early and showered me with love and presents and gifts of money. I was going to need it. I could see their smiling faces and I knew that they wanted me to come back to the cove which at times, I longed to do. And then I heard my name as I was called to the stage with my friends so that we could all be honored for the offers we had received from major fashion houses. I looked out into the audience and for a moment I could see tiny sparkling stars and butterflies and hear mandolins as the cove seemed to fade. This was my chance. The big design studios in the city are calling and I have to go. Surely they will understand. Right?

New York and all of its sounds and smells with people rushing in all directions and more cars than I had ever seen grabbed me up and spit me out in the garment district on the sidewalk outside of one of the tallest buildings I had ever seen. As I rode the elevator up to the 45th floor, my heart was in my throat. I had forgotten my hat that day so I put a strong look on my face (I hoped). I was riding the glory train. No matter that I was the lowest paid junior graphic designer (not a full fledged designer yet) and shared a small cubbyhole of an office on another floor than the design studio. I felt like I was on top of the world – sort of! Letters went back forth from me and Dusty. He was also on the bottom level of his design house

but he seemed to be struggling. Then a dress that I submitted for approval was picked up by the head designer and suddenly I am off to the races! My first design was featured in a small article in Fashion Room Magazine but I was shocked to see that my boss' name was signed on it. Hale the department assistant to the head designer and I had met on the elevator one day and became friends at the water fountain. He saw me looking at the board and leaned over and whispered, "They always take credit for the work of the juniors. Not fair but..." and looking over his shoulder with a grimace, went on his way. I pinned the article to my wall. I kept working late hours and spending my lunch hours walking the streets of the Garment District checking out windows for a peek into the big world of fashion. It always inspired me and I would go back to work invigorated. My designs were being picked more and more as time went by and as before, my boss always took credit for them. I tried not to let it bother me but I will admit holding back on some that I wasn't ready to share.

As for Dusty, his early struggle in his design house was over apparently. His letters were more sporadic and when they came, they were written as if in a hurry with a promise to write longer ones next time. He also always apologized for sending fewer letters but explained that he was very busy. He said he would see me at Christmas. During the first year apart, we had written to each other every week but now weeks may go by without one. One evening after work, Hale met me at Harrigan's, a deli close by to celebrate the end of the week. We liked to commiserate the fact that neither one of us had home cooked meals or even a cat to be waiting for us in our small apartments. Hale was from Wisconsin and had a girlfriend back home so we had things other than work to talk about. That night, I told him about Dusty and about the letters coming later and later and he reminded me that in this business we really need to expect that relationships don't always last. And then he went on to talk about other things but I really

wasn't listening. He thought he was being helpful but I remember crying myself to sleep that night. I almost called Dusty in Paris in the middle of the night but I stopped right before dialing. Come on Josie, I said to myself. I am broke! Long distance calls are expensive! Give the guy a break. He said he is busy and he is! I was glad later that I didn't.

A couple of days later, I received my Alum Newsletter in my mail box. There on the front page above the fold was Dusty, a big smile across his face, walking the red carpet in a show during Fashion Week in Paris with a beautiful dark headed slender girl (obviously a model) clinging to his arm and gazing adoringly up at him. And it was then that I stopped answering his mail. He even called on the phone but when the operator asked me if I would accept the call, I said, "No, tell the caller I don't talk to married men," and hung up. He might not be married but it looked like he was heading that way!

I was angry and not just about being jilted. Things got worse. When my boss told me that someone was waiting to see me in the small bird sanctuary across the street, I thought, "oh boy here we go again, Donna and her pals are going to send another truck to run over me. No thanks!" But I did look out my office window. There was a lone person standing by a tree so maybe not a truck this time, I thought, maybe just a mugger! I wouldn't give them the satisfaction! Then I saw a notice on the board about another award that Sheila had been awarded for one of my designs and I abruptly turned and marched right into her office. She looked up at me with a mix of annoyance and surprise. "What is it Jolene, hmmm?"

My name is JOSIE, I heard myself say. I heard a voice in my mind, say “caution Josie,” so I softened my voice a tiny bit, cleared my throat and started over. “I feel that after 2 years, I deserve recognition not to mention payment for my work.” (I didn’t plan to say anything about money).

“YOUR work? She chuckled. “My dear YOU work for ME and EVERYTHING you do belongs to this firm. Go back and read the contract that you signed if you don’t believe me. Now get out of my office and go back to your work bench wherever it is and GET BACK TO WORK!” I hesitated. “NOW!” She screamed. I felt like a mouse scuttling back to my little hole. Everyone in the room had gotten quiet and all were looking down at their drawing boards as though they hadn’t heard. But news spreads fast.

I went down the stairs and into my little office holding back tears.

“Go ahead Josie,” one of my officemates said to me under her breath. I looked at her in question.

“Go ahead, cry.”

And I did. I sat there as the evening fell outside my window and I could hear all of the elevators going down as people scattered for home. I have always comforted myself with dreams of opening my own shop just like Aunt Cappy’s back in the cove with the sound of bees in the grass and the buzz of sewing machines inside. I pulled on my coat and taking the stairs opened the side door to the alley and walked through the streets to my apartment. Visions of the cover – the cottages, the pond, and then the faces of Marcella and Jerome. They bent down towards me and I heard a voice, “Josie, don’t be a sissy! Stop crying! You can do this!” I sat up in bed, swung

my feet over the side and walking across the cold wooden floor of the attic room, sat down at my little work table and turned on the light. I made a plan and the next day I put it into action. I started my new idea designs at home on my time and while at work I still worked but only submitted the ones that I didn't want. I had lost my zing for Eclectic Spice Chic or ESC.

It was if the light had gone off in my head. Now the street sounds were too loud, the odors from food vendors were too strong, and furthermore, Dusty could go fly a kite!

Hale tapped on my door after lunch the next day and without being asked stepped into our little mouse hole (as I was calling my office now). "Guess what?" Then without waiting for me to answer, "You have been chosen to be on the design team for the Eclectic Extravaganza! You Josie! YOU!" Everyone jumped up from their boards and in that tiny room, we hugged each other and danced, happiness filled the air.

Two days later, movers came in and moved my pallet, my board and lamps and all of my supplies to the Design Studio and put them on a proper table with my name on a gold plaque on the back of a stool. I didn't think of the cove except in passing from then on. Like Dusty, I was too busy. The only thing on my mind was the show, the deadlines and collaborating with "real" designers – people who actually knew what they were doing. (Aunt Cappy crowded into my thoughts at time but I closed her out.) My mind took flight. Visions of spectacular garments in bright and contrasting even clashing colors bombarded me and flowed right out of my pens. I allowed myself to be buried in the process and sometimes didn't go back to my little apartment for several days. But when I did, there would always be sour milk in the refrigerator, dried up plants in my pots, messages blinking on the answering machine (this was my one extravagance) but I would ignore them

and fall into bed with my coat on. The next morning I would jump out of bed, telling myself that I would take care of everything soon. Phone calls began to arrive at work from home and notes would pile up on my drawing board but although I cared, I was too busy. I would get to them later, I told Hale when he questioned me about them. The show is two days away. And then it was one day away. And then the show burst on the scene and I will never forget it, I thought. And all of us in the studio stayed late excitedly waiting for the reports coming back – each one of us hoping that our designs were chosen to be shown on the main runways or even noticed. Hale showed me pictures of my designs mixed in with the top designs from other design houses and they were spotlighted front and center. I was on top of the world. Then the final night of the Fashion Week and all of us designers were allowed into the show. We stood in the back watching as the last models walked the runway. My design closed the show with its chartreuse and hot pink ruffles over a split skirt and a backless bodice. People stood and clapped and my peers hugged me. Then reporters buzzed around the fashion world icons including Sheila. As she stepped to the microphone, she beckoned to Hale whispering in his ear and then to my amazement, he turned and looked straight at me and motioned me to join them on dais. My head swelled with pride, I could feel my heart beating out of my chest as cameras flashed. “Look at me now!” I said to myself. Hale took my hand and helped me up on the platform and Sheila draped her arm across my shoulders. Cameras flashed and questions were thrown at them. Sheila leaned close and whispered in my ear, “don’t say a word dear. I will take care of this.” And as I stood there, she began to speak. And then what came out of her mouth stabbed me like an arrow. She described how honored she was for their recognition and said that all of her work was inspired by years of work in the field and her insight that she was born with. She then proceeded to take all of the credit for my work and calling them a result of her (Sheila’s calling) as amazing and brilliant and then turning to

me and in a patronizing voice said, “Please take a bow Josie. After all you did help me. Please give her a hand,” There was a small patter of hands then before the applause ended, “Now run along. I am sure you want to do whatever young people do” and I was dismissed like an errant child. As I left the room I could hear her describing how she gets her insight from “the heavens.”

“All of my work! Everything that I’ve given up just to have everything stolen from me. I realized now that she didn’t hire me to “help me grow into my own” as she show glowingly said as she welcomed me into her firm. I believed her and all she wanted from me was what I could produce and then she cast me aside” Now run along.” I could hear Hale calling out to me but I just kept running. I grabbed my jacket and satchel from under my chair, yanked all of my drawings of the boards and whatever else I could see and stuffed it all in.

“Stop Josie, Think this through. Don’t go.” Hales voice followed me down the back stairs to the street.

“I have to. Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow but right now I’ve got to get out of here,” I choked through sobs.

Bars and restaurants up and down the street were lit up and overflowing with the sounds of laughter of those celebrating Fashion Week. I could see our crew through the window of Clancy’s, our hangout as I hurried by. Many had left earlier in the day to skip the show and had started partying hours ago. They sat clinking their glasses in victory toasting each other around the big table in the window. “Join us,” they mouthed but ignored them. This was a big night for ESC. It was the fashion house toast of the town. And me? I was only a tiny light that blinked and then went

out. It was a low point that night. I felt stupid for believing that I could ever be a designer. I realized the hard work that it had taken Aunt Cappy to achieve her status in the world of fashion. I hadn't even talked to her about anything for months. I saw the blinking light on my answering machine but I was too exhausted to deal with it now. I heard myself say "Where is everybody when I need them" knowing that I was actually the one who left them not the other way around. I fell across my bed and then darkness.

I was dreaming that someone was trying to wake me and when was able to rouse someone was pounding on my door. Hale's voice was shouting "Josie, Josie, OPEN THE DOOR!" I opened the door a crack but he pushed it open and thrusts the morning news in my face. A picture of herself and Sheila on the platform last night filled the front page with the caption SOMETHING FISHY in FASHION! The article started out with the question, "Is ESC REALLY EPIC? It seems that some of its runaway sensations look suspiciously like designs from another designer that were actually being held back for spring. Questions are being thrown around in the industry today asking "who is to blame and also who stole from who – adding " if they ARE actually copies." After all they are not EXACTLY the same but very close, quoted from an insider. Scandle in the fashion world with the spotlight on ESC."

"Sheila is in a rage and screaming. She wants you to explain. She's saying that you betrayed her and ESC and she is accusing you of trying to ruin her. I stood there in shock. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "DON'T JUST STAND THERE!", her commanded, "WE'VE GOT TO GO!" I tried to think. Hale was racing around my little apartment grabbing my satchel, my coat and I grabbed the black beret on its hook by the door.

I tried to get my thoughts together. They couldn't be talking about MY designs. I would never copy from anybody. Hale opened the door and we rushed down to the curb to hail a cab. For the past months I had spent all of my time in the studio – never going out for lunch with my coworkers – never even calling home – never even looking in a mirror. I was so determined to put my ideas into cloth and show Sheila that I worth her notice. There's been a mistake. Once she sees my drawings, I reasoned, surely she will see from her drawings that these designs are definitely NOT COPIES. I settled down a bit.

But as I entered the big design studio, I could see that gathered around my work table were all of the head designers of the firm and in front and center was Sheila red-faced and glaring sand a couple of men with briefcases that she had never met. They had all of her work spread out before her. A short man with a mustache and horned rimmed glasses stood by Sheila patting her arm as if to calm her. On the table in front of him lay the specs they were comparing with mine. I adjusted my beret and stepped closer so that I could see them myself. The designs were not exactly the same but similar even to the button placement and the dips in the hems on one dress. “Did someone copy some of the details from ME? But I couldn't think of a time that anyone could have seen them outside of my case. It was always locked beside my table. Or...” Her mind was swirling as she remembered the day that the idea for this piece had come to her. She and Hale had been invited to lunch by Sheila to meet “their competitor Iris Hoffman from Alive Incorporated.” They hadn't even talked about fashion or design that day. Only small talk around the lunch table. Had she picked up something from that designer that day?”

“Don't take off your coat! You won't be staying long,” commanded Sheila.

“Do you mind if I ask,” I heard myself speak up, “the name of the designer that you think I copied from?”

“Iris Hoffman!” boomed Sheila before the little man with the glasses could stop her.

“That’s not true. I have never even seen her work. And everyone knows that many styles are similar to others – but they are NOT copies!” I blurted out but I could feel hot tears start to fall. In this industry designs were many times, similar. But deep down I already guessed that it could be possible that I had picked up Iris’s thoughts that day without knowing it. I began to babble out the differences in the items but I could see that they were not listening.

Plus I was pretty sure it was true. This was just like the Wool Brothers incident. I HAD copied but without my knowledge. How could this happen again? But I already knew the answer. I am who I am. I have to stop running from that fact. I stood there speechless as everyone seemed to wait, as I watched my dream of stardom in the big city fade. I was numb and then I heard a small voice in my head ask, “Stardom in the big city? Josie was that really your dream?”

I was shown out of the room. I headed down to my mouse hole office. They were already boxing up my belongings and Mr. Attorney handed me his card with the words, “We will be contacting you.” I bundled up my mail. And then they ushered me out to the street. It was raining hard. Some of my friends were already down on the street and all telling me to get an attorney and saying that they would all vouch for me because of course I was innocent. Innocent? Hale took the handle of my pull cart and splashed along trying to keep up. I hurried along In a daze, almost getting hit by a

car, walking into newsstand and I heard someone calling her, “Hey you dropped something,” through the sound of her brain Hale’s voice was loud and clear. “HEY!”

He handed her a rain-soaked letter with her mother’s handwriting on the front. This was the letter that she had stuffed in her purse several days ago. She didn’t want to open it but he stood looking down at her with a look. It said

Dear Josie

Granma is dying. Please come home. Please hurry.

It won’t be long.

Love

~Mom

“Miss, Miss, Miss!

Suddenly I was jolted awake by someone shaking me and shouting, “Miss, miss! You are going to miss your stop!” I had been in the deepest of sleep dreaming Technicolor dreams. But now in a split second the dream faded away and reality came crashing down and I was back on the train trying to wake up. I tottered to my feet, grabbing my bag as I stumbled down the aisle and was whooshed out onto the platform as the door slammed behind me and with a whistle, the train chugged out of the station. I looked around at the empty platform and realized that nobody knew that I was coming so how was I going to get home? It was dripping

wet and cold. One solitary light hung from an ancient light pole. I thought I could hear my name whispered and then a gust of warm wind, and around the corner on two wheels, a yellow taxi pulled up beside me. The short cabby jumped out, grabbed my bag and the next thing I knew I was whizzing through Middleton towards the Cove and Grandma Alice. “Please be there Grandma....”.

The taxi sped down the highway and turned into the path leading to the cove. I could see the garden lights leading up to the doors of the cottages. A light rain fell.

I’m home, I thought. The taxi had arrived at Grammas cottage. I glanced at my watch. It was after 4:00 am but there were a few lights on inside the house.

Back to real time. Out of the taxi window, I could see the small walkway lights leading up to her door.



The cabbie swung opened the door and offered me his hand. I jumped out of the cab and ran stumbling over the cobblestone walk. When I reached the big doors, I pushed my way inside. The room was empty, although cozy with the door to the hat shop on the left closed tight. Where was everyone? The fire was crackling, in the fireplace and the air felt close and slightly too warm. I hurried down the hallway thinking a jumble of “Am I too late, are you still here? Please don’t leave, my darling grandma, I’m sorry, so so sorry.” Light shown under the bedroom door and I opened

it to reveal my family gathered around her in her beautiful room with the roses on the wallpaper, a fluffy pink and baby blue quilt on her large soft bed. Faces swung to take me in. They looked flushed in the candlelight and their eyes were spilling over with tears. Sadness was heavy. Mom sat by Grandma Alice's pillow, holding her hand in the dim light.. My mother looked at me as though she knew I was coming and turned and leaned in to Grandma," Mom, she's here." Grandmas eyes sprung open to look directly at me. Mom beckoned me to come closer and I leaned over the bed and began kissing her soft cheeks and rosebud lips. Tears washed down over my face like a waterfall falling onto hers. She put her hand on my head and softly patted me.

"Grandma, please don't go," I started, but she stopped me.

"Josie, my darling girl, look at me now," She commanded. I stopped and gasped at the sound of her soft voice, "Your gift is within your heart. "

"It is a part of me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Forever." Her voice was so soft that I could barely hear her. "You will see a beam, flutter hard. Hard! And FOLLOW wherever it goes. Beware. Evil is close at hand. I will be with you in the morning lane and always. Listen and you will hear my voice, Josieeee."

And then with a whiff of roses, tiny stars filled the room causing the air to shimmer. The soft sound of mandolins, and she was gone. The room was still for

a moment and then everyone spoke in a whisper, “Good bye good bye.” And then sobs. Darkness prevailed in the hearts of those in the cottage as the morning sun began to light the sky in pinks and blues and golds and purples. Days went slowly by.

Funeral arrangements were made. I helped but somehow felt like an outsider who had returned after a long journey. The hat shop’s windows were shuttered for now. All of us Andersons chose one of her hats to wear to the funeral. Mine was a dark wine-colored wide-brimmed fedora with a dark rose velvet band carrying velvet pink roses (Grandma’s favorite). Marcella’s hat was a cinnamon colored gaucho xander that dipped on one side to show off her fiery red hair. My mom and my aunts wore a variety. Aunt Maggie wore a pleated and veiled newsboy hat-caps. Mom wore a grey panama covered in white lilies, and Aunt Cappy wore a big-brim floppy hat with a veil in black with blood colored roses. Grandma Alice had essentially dressed us all for her funeral. I found that after the funeral, I literally lived with that hat. I slept with it. If it was not wearing it was near me. I wore it whenever I ventured it. It hid me under its wide brim but most of all; it covered me with the feel and fragrance of her.

Folks from miles around began showing their respect and love for Grandma by bringing flowers. One autumn day on the day of her funeral people arrived in cars, on bikes, on foot to move slowly into the cove to gather in the woods at the far side of the pond to give her a final farewell at her funeral. She was buried back in the trees on a knoll by a brook that fed off of the pond into the woods. White flowers sprang up around her grave the next day. Sadness prevailed. I saw Donna and her family at the funeral and was infuriated that they would show their faces. Marcella and Jerome

closed in around me and whispered, “Peace Josie, let it go.” Later as people were leaving, I saw her coming towards me as if to speak but I turned and escaped into the woods until I thought she was gone.

Soon slowly slowly life began to turn and our cove was again filled with groups of people shopping for flowers or pies or dresses. The sound of laughter could be heard again with the sound of geese heading south for the winter.

One morning, my mom called me to the table where she had fixed me a poached egg with cubes of bread just like I liked. I knew what was coming. Dad was at work so it was just mom and I. She reached across the table and covered my hand with hers, “What happened Josie? Why aren’t you going back to New York?” And so I told her my whole story even though I was sure that she already knew most of it. Plus she would fill in the gaps when I missed something, giving herself away. As we talked my aunts began to arrive one by one.

When I came to a stop, it was already time for lunch. Aunt Maggie opened her basket and served bowls of hot cheese and vegetable soup and cucumber and sprout sandwiches with her homemade corn wafers and guacamole. Aunt Cappy was the first to talk. “Okay girls, lets go to New York! We’ve got work to do! Mom chimed in with, “I vote that we take my flower delivery truck and Aunt Maggy added “I will bring lunch! Everyone starting helping out by having my apartment in New York subleased. We made a trip one weekend in mom’s van and we packed up my stuff. The fall fashions were all over the stores. I recognized a few of mine in the windows and could feel myself tense up. “Give them to them my love,” my mom whispered. Give them away (referring to my designs).

“You have more where those came from and 10 times – no 100 times better,” added Aunt Cappy. I was back. I was a part of the cove as one of the Anderson ladies. It felt good.

It was a happy trip and we all sang in the van on the way home. I thought I would be sad leaving New York but it was more like wistful. I wondered what was going on at Epic and how my friends, especially Hale were doing. He had called several times and now I needed to call him back.

Grandma had left us all with a sizeable lump of money which I wasn't expecting. Immediately, I took my check and headed into town and straight to the bank to arrange for a deposit. I had not walked down Main street for awhile and I could see some changes had been made. One of them was a new coffee shop and I made a decision to stop there on my way home. As I entered the bank, I saw that there were several new faces at the bank including Mazie's who was now an assistant manager. She came hurrying towards me and gave me a hug. We chatted briefly making plans to get together soon. As I finished my business and started to walk out the door, she caught up with me and said, “Say, I have something to tell you about Donna but I'll tell you when we get together,” she squeezed my hand and I stepped out onto the street.

“Hey Josie!” Looking up I saw Tommy hurrying towards me. “Come on, let me buy you a coffee.” It was so good to see him. He had been at Grandma Alice's funeral with his mom, Florence I had shied away from everyone that day, not wanting to talk to anyone. We chatted over our coffees. He had changed from a boy to a man and he seemed different somehow. He still had a boyish look but his hair had changed from red to auburn and all of his freckles seemed to have faded. He asked me what I was going to do now. It seems he knew about my firing in New York. And I

heard myself say that I may join Cappy in her studio. And I wondered why I had said that. I hadn't really thought about it. And before I could process what I had just said, Tommy said, "What happened to your plans to open your own studio?"

It turned out that Tommy was a realtor now and he turned the conversation to the possibility of starting a business and renting an office big enough. I sat and listened as he described the ins and outs of being in business for yourself. He then began asking me questions about what kind of place would I need – how big, and what price I could afford. By the time we finished, my head was swirling and I was beginning to think it might even be possible. After all, I had just inherited some money. We promised to get together again and then as I was walking away, I turned and called out, "Tommy! Wait up." For some reason I told him about my experience on that night of the storm way back when I was in high school and run away from the fairy circle although I didn't tell him that part. "I wonder if that lady would be ready to sell her house. She seemed quite old and that's been years ago. She may have already moved away. Do you know of any property that sounds like this?" I asked.

"No, but I will do some digging and get back to you," He said. I could see why he was in sales. He was good at it. I thought about it all the way back to the cove. My mind was on fire and ideas were darting through my head. I couldn't wait to open some of my boxes and dig out my story board so that I could start a new one.

It was a couple of weeks before I heard from him again. "Hey Jojo, I think I have found the house you were talking about but seriously it is in bad shape. It's not something that I even want to show you."

“You are wrong! Yes I DO want to see it. Where is it? Tell me where it is and I will go see it myself!”

His voice took on a tone and stated flatly. “NO! I wouldn’t think of it. I shouldn’t have even told you about it.....it might be dangerous to go out there. People have seen things and..he started but I cut him off.

“Okay, then I will find it myself! But thanks Tommy for doing the legwork. At least I know it might exist. See you.” And hung up. The phone immediately rang again..

“Okay okay. I’ll come by and pick you up....after lunch” and he hung up. I was ready, standing down the lane in front of the flower shop entrance with my jacket and camera. I was excited to talk to that sweet lady who lived there and find out what had happened that night.

It turned out that I had always been looking for it further away than it was. The road that it was on was only minutes up the road. The road itself was actually a narrow lane that was almost totally overgrown with brush and trees. It couldn’t be seen from the road but Tommy had found it earlier and he turned his car into the narrow lane. I rolled my window down so that I could see it better and I heard the ringing of that bell on the porch. But the house was set way back from the road around a curve. It looked like it had been standing there empty for years and was in terrible disrepair.

“No, this can’t be it,” I turned to Tommy. “The house I was in was in perfect condition – a woman lived there! This isn’t it.”

“Good, he said, “Then we can go.” And he started to back up. “Seriously this is the only one that is anywhere close to where you say it is – I’ve looked!”

“Okay wait,” I said. “I DO want to look at it. After all, we’re already here.” I could tell he wasn’t happy about it but he pulled over and we got out.

As we made our way through the patches of weeds and dirt to the porch, the bell hidden under the fallen porch roof rang and we both jumped. It was the same bell with the engraving on it except it looked like it had gone back in time. The porch swing lay on its side next to broken flower pots. The windows were broken out and the old double door hung on its hinges. A black cat jumped up on the porch rail and licking her paw, gave out a loud meow.

“What happened to the lady who lived here?”

“I know that you said that you talked to a woman, but city records show that the last occupant died over 100 years ago and nobody has lived here since.”

“No, that’s not right. I did see her. She had a sweet face and the house was cozy and nice and.....”

“Okay okay, but as you can see. She’s not here now. Let’s take a look around. By the way did you tell your mom where you were going? It might take a while.”

“We’re good,” I said. But no, I was a big girl now and wasn’t used to telling anyone where I was going but he didn’t need to know about it.

We walked through the house. It had been beautiful with its oak flooring and leaded glass windows although most of them were cracked or broken clear out. There were many rooms and hallways. We counted 7 stairways both front and back – even two leading to the cellar. At times we got separated and had to knock on walls to find each other. On one side was a large room that looked like it had once been an arboretum. Some of the glass sections were still intact. A few ceilings were down and all of the light switches had buttons and in some rooms light bulbs hung down on wires.

It was beginning to get late and shadows were falling as we made our way out into the back. “This property goes all the way back to the edge of the woods and get this: It actually has a pond or a stream but it is overgrown and full of broken limbs. This is a ruin Josey, don’t you think? It’s probably haunted.” And then he gave me a sideways glance and immediately apologized which made it even worse. Another jab at me and my family made as a joke. Lame. Maybe I needed to get over it, I thought.

But I was in love already with this old place. I could see it all fixed up and it would make a wonderful studio. That big arboretum filled with sewing machines and platforms and mirrors and design boards – I could see them already.

“How much?”

“What?” He jerked towards me and repeated. “What did you say?”

“How much?” I repeated my question.

He stammered out “You can’t be serious. This is a wreck. I don’t even know if it CAN be fixed.”

“I do. Want it. Find out how much they want and all of the details.”

We rode home in silence. I could see his mind racing as he drove. I thanked him for the whole day and we parted ways. He didn’t answer and drove off.

I began dreaming about that house. In my dream I was back on that velvet couch before the fire looking into the eyes of that sweet old lady. There was something she was trying to tell me in my dream but I couldn’t hear her. And then she was gone in a mist and poof I could hear my mother singing in the kitchen and I was back in the real world. I even drove by the house down the lane and pattered around it by myself. Grape vines were tangled around some of the big trees in big knarles. I kept walking around the yards, not venturing inside alone and one day as I ventured down to the edge of the pond at the back of the property behind the house, I saw a statue of a fairy peeking out through the dead wild roses that covered the large stone that seemed to bridge the brook that came out on the other side. I decided to take a look. I took off my shoes and rolled up my jeans and started to wade out to get a better look. Immediately just as my feet entered the icy water I began sliding down a steep muddy slope and in desperation, I dug my heels into the mud and tried to walk backwards up the slope before I went any deeper. I made a little headway and then my feet slipped again. I could feel myself losing my balance and began to wave my arms wildly as I tried to get a foothold. Suddenly out of what had been a still day out of nowhere, a strong gust of wind hit me full blast in the face and chest and I was thrown backwards onto the bank. In shock, I pulled myself up to a sitting position and sat there for a long moment while I tried to get my

bearings and then I heard someone calling my name or was that only the sound of the wind? I jerked around hoping that someone was there. The yard leading up to the house was barren. No one was there. Broken garden tools, an old swing hung on one chain and the only thing moving were the leaves falling in a shower from all of the big old trees. Then I felt eyes on me from somewhere and out from under the porch came the little black cat. I heaved a sigh of relief as I held out my hand to it. Just as it came near enough to touch, it suddenly turned and seemed to look up. And when I followed her gaze up towards the attic window, I saw her staring down at me. It looked like a woman but then maybe I was imagining it. The cat darted up the slope and disappeared under the steps. Someone was in my house (did I say “my house?”) I walked through the tall weeds around the broken wheel barrow and scattered debris and carefully stepped onto the broken wooden steps. I knocked once and then again. Somehow I knew no one would come. “No,” I said to myself, I am going to find out.” And with a deep breath and a strong sense of resolve, I pushed my way into the back door, through an old porch filled with broken wicker furniture scattered everywhere – chairs tipped and flower pots holding dead sticks that once were flowers among a rocking horse and a rag doll sprawled over a broken lamp. One table stood in the corner with chairs as if waiting for some long ago party to begin. I wanted to look further but the eerie stillness seemed to draw me further inside. I cautiously stepped through the Dutch doors leading into a long room with coat hooks lining the walls and shelves dripping in cobwebs. Peering into the door on the left down the narrow hallway, I looked into what been a very large kitchen. Late afternoon light streamed through the high windows showing off dust clouds in the air and spotlighting the china cabinet on the opposite wall. I started to step into the room but then a large black spider dropped down almost touching my face and I jumped back. I turned and could see the front door at the end of this hallway and I headed that way, dodging books from a fallen bookcase along

the way. As I grasped the brass door knob, I remembered what I had started out to do and stopped and turning towards the curved stairway, I called up the front hall, "Is anyone there?" And then again only louder. Silence. Nothing could be heard except the wind through the broken windows. As I turned to go, a strong smell of lilies and a draft of warm air brushed around me then it too was gone.

The wind had come up as I walked towards my car and whipped my hat off my head and carried it down the road. I took off running trying to catch it and finally it hooked on an old bent street sign. I grabbed it and hurried back to jump in my car and pull away from the house.

I thought a lot about it on my way back to the cove and then decided it was all in my imagination and let it go.

"When are you going to show us the house? My mother finally asked me as we were sitting down to dinner that night. I had not told anyone! But of course she would know about it! There was no way to keep secrets from her or anyone else in my family. And so I finally told my mom about it and my aunts the next day and all said in unison, "It's about time! And we all grabbed our jackets and jumped in Maggie's big delivery truck and off we went. I thought they would try to talk me out of it once they saw what condition it was in but instead they all loved it. Everyone talked at once. They all had a million ideas for this whole place. After hearing my ideas, they all agreed that it would make a perfect studio – if it worked out – the sale that is. Later my dad joined us and being a builder and from a family of builder, was skeptical but after inspecting it top to bottom, and consulting with Uncle Eddie who was a electrical engineer, he announced that it had "good bones." The little black cat wound her way around us all afternoon and Aunt Maggie named her Cleo. She was wary at first but soon was

rubbing against our legs and purring. Everyone was on board and I knew before Tommy called that it was going to work out. When he did call, he tried again to talk me out of buying the house but I was adamant about it and in the end he reluctantly agreed to offer me the deal on the house. I was beginning to think that he was only worried about me and I tried to be more agreeable on other things. I had asked him about the history of the place and he was able to find out that it had been built over 175 years ago by a man who was interested in cultivating the lush chestnut trees that filled the forests. The last person to live in the house was his granddaughter, a woman named Lily (the smell of lilies at times, I thought) who died almost 70 years ago and had no living heirs. She was known in the area for her music and art. She played the mandolin and she was a fiber artist. After she died, there were rumors that she haunted the house. On Halloween night strange anomalies were said to be seen on the grounds and candlelight flickered in rooms on the upper floors throwing shadows of dancers on the window shades. Strains of music floated down the lane as though from a string quartet. Years went by and people forgot about the house although it was on a Halloween Haunted House Register. But occasionally there were visitors on moonlit night to try and see the ghosts – mostly teenagers.

Before signing the contract, we did a walk through and he pointed out his reasons for not wanting me to sign the deal. I listened patiently and I even described my experience on the day that I almost slid into the pond. “It’s deeper than it looks,” I told him.

“And full of trash I bet,” he said with disgust. The wind was picking up and he seemed to suddenly be in a hurry. We took a quick look in the downstairs rooms and headed up the beautiful circular stairway to the second floor. As we turned the corner around the stairway, the black cat darted between my legs and I fell forward on the oak floor hitting my head

on the corner of his briefcase. I felt the rattle of something above the large crystal chandelier crashed from the open steeple above. The cat uttered a loud meow and I realized that if she hadn't tripped me It could have been my death blow. It barely missed me. Shaken I sat down on the top step and looked up. It looked like the chain holding it had snapped. "Now are you sure that you still want to do this?" Tommy asked belligerently?

"No use, he's never going to like it." I got up and turned to him. "Do we need to go to your office to sign it?" I asked.

"Nope, I've got it right here." I signed it right there on the top step, handed over the money and the work began! We started by clearing out stuff that couldn't be repaired or salvaged, taking many trips to the dump. Then cleaning and making lists. And then bad things began happening. First a candle in an upstairs bedroom fell over catching the wallpaper on fire. Aunt Cappy smelled it one afternoon when she was In the house measuring windows for curtains. She ran up the stairs to the 2nd floor and followed the smoke. And there in one of the bedrooms, she saw flames curling up the old lace curtains hanging from the front window. She screamed for help and dashed down the hall and grabbed a bucket full of drain water to thrown on it. She rushed frantically towards the fire but as she rushed into the room, the bedroom door slammed shut behind her. She turned to see the lock on the bedroom door turning as if on its own. She was trapped! She could hear footsteps coming on the stairs but before whoever was out there was able to get into the room, the ceiling fell in an avalanche of water washing down the walls and dousing the flames. Later we discovered that a rusty water pipe had broken in the room above filling the ceiling full of water and dropping down into in to the room. The fire was put out. Aunt Cappy was certain

that the door had locked by itself which was mysterious – maybe - but the big mystery was the candle. Nobody could remember putting put a candle in that room – a lighted candle at that

Dad and members of the construction crew often donated their time sometimes when they weren't busy to come and the heavy stuff, tearing out walls and replacing windows. After the fire, they concentrated on the plumbing that seemed to go on forever. Tommy, in spite of his obvious disgust, showed up occasionally as well to pound a nail or paint a wall. I told him how much I appreciated it. And then one afternoon just as we were getting started, Marcella came home for a visit and I took her on a tour. We searched the attic and found many treasures including a butter churn that I immediately gave to her being a chef apprentice and all. She found a sliding panel in the circular landing at the top of the stairs and that was a part of one of the turrets. We laughed as we went down the narrow steps inside the turret around and around, pausing at times to look at the narrow windows. We explored the pond and found a narrow outlet on the other side of the huge stone bridge. I had cleared away the vines to reveal the fairy sitting on top. It was a lovely afternoon as we started to explore the stream on the other side of the bridge but it disappeared under years of overgrowth and fallen trees and we saved that for another day.

I spent most of my time working in my house. Sometimes I was alone with my thoughts and sometimes, members of my family stopped by to help. It was beginning to take shape.

As for the ghost, I felt from the moment I entered the front door that someone was watching me. At times I thought it was Cleo the cat. But other times I wondered if it was the ghost of Lilly, the woman that I remembered from the stormy night. As time went by and September turned

into October, I sometimes was startled by the sound of a footstep or soft breathing and when I would turn to look, no one was there. I felt the presence of her and thought she was still here in her house. Although I wanted to live in the house, there were times when I felt that she wanted me to leave. One example was the day when I slid down the banks of the pond, the chandelier that barely missed me, my Aunt Cappy saved by a broken water pipe. But there was more. There was an entryway into the front through double doors that led into a large wide living room. A stone and brick fireplace greeted those who entered. Above it hung a large oval mirror in a gilded frame. When the ceilings were repaired and the old worn carpets and velvet curtains were removed, the room sprang to life. The day that I decided to work there, I carried my tools into the center of the room. Some of the old furniture was scattered still around. I could hear others throughout the house working and chatting. Tommy had stopped by and had gone to the kitchen to check on something. I was feeling safe and happy as I unloaded my basket. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cleo jump up on the back of a chair causing it to wobble. In an instant, the tall brass Victorian lamp began to fall. I stepped away to catch the lamp and the big ornate mirror over the fireplace crashed to the floor barely brushing my shoulder. It sent me crashing to the floor scattering shards of glass all over the polished floor. Tommy ran in from the kitchen followed by all of the workers within earshot.

“You could have been killed,” He said and then came over like he was going to hug me. I wasn’t sure I wanted him to but I let him. After all he was a good friend but lately he had been acting more like a boyfriend. I didn’t feel the same about him.

Later my dad was on a ladder inspecting the wall behind the mirror. “Something’s not right, he said. “This bolt is strong. The wire looks like it has been cut or maybe it broke for some reason but it isn’t worn. First the chandelier and now this – somebody’s got something out for you,” and he wasn’t smiling. I was pretty sure that I had seen the woman in the house who I now called “Lilly.” I had never told anyone about her. I couldn’t decide whether I thought she was a good ghost or a bad one. I started out thinking she was good because if she were the ghost of the lady I saw that night of the storm, I had always remembered her as sweet and kind. But now that I thought about it, I drank her tea and passed out so was she trying to poison me? And if she was, how did I get back in my car? I didn’t feel frightened yet. So I was sticking to good witch.

Mom began bringing baskets of flower bulbs over and we began making beds of tulips of different colors, yellow and white daffodils, a variety of Iris some in a multitude of colors and some the standard purple. Rows of alliums in all colors lined the large garden in front and tiger lilies on the side of the house by the porch. Spring was going to be splendid! I was up in a room in one of the turrets and I heard a weak cry from the back yard. Looking down, my mother seemed to be wrestling a rope around her neck and then I saw that it wasn’t a rope. A snake!

I flew down the stairs screaming in hopes that someone else was in the house. I grabbed a long knife off of the kitchen counter and raced to where my mom was now lying on her back with her eyes glazing over. Rage engulfed me as I began slicing at the snake with everything I had. And with one random whack, beheaded it just as it was about to spring. Its head flew as a huge white owl dove down, and grabbed it in its beak and flew off.

I lifted my mom off the ground with strength I didn't know I had and ran/walked around the side of the house just as Uncle Eddie arrived. Seeing me he jumped out of his truck and ran up, grabbed mom, laid her back on the ground and cut an X on her neck and began sucking out the venom. Then he carried her to his truck and we raced to the hospital in town. The medical team worked over her as everyone gathered in the waiting room. And finally, the doctor announced that she was going to be fine and we all took a breath. As we grouped together around her bed as she slept, there were questions. 1. How did a rattlesnake get into my yard? They are very rare in this state. 2. Are there more of them? 3. Was this random or was it on purpose? My question was how did Uncle Eddie know what to do and know where she had been bitten? I don't remember telling that because I didn't even know where she had been bitten. Also what about the bird? Where did it come from? Everyone seemed to start drifting out of the room and make plans for taking turns staying with mom. It seemed I had a lot to learn.

Things went pretty smoothly for awhile – no snakes were found, nothing fell off of the wall or the ceiling, no fires. At moments while painting a wall or putting shelf paper in kitchen cabinets, I would feel the presence of someone and turning I may see a shadow of the lady that I began to call by name, Lily, disappear around the corner or down the hall. I knew who it was, I was sure it was the woman that I had met that stormy night right here in this house but now she was beginning to scare me. I had been wrong so many times about people that I began to think that she didn't want me in her house. I started jumping at small things such as the creak of a door or the wind rattling a window. Whenever someone came to help, I would breathe a sigh of relief that I would not be alone in the house that day. As days went by and Halloween approached, I began to relax. And soon, I was fine being alone after all I chuckled to myself, I didn't want to

be a “Sissy.” I put off telling anyone about this because I knew that if I told mom about Lily and that I was becoming frightened of her, that she would worry about me or do something to enrage Lily or worse, try to get me to stay away from this house. And in spite of everything, I loved this place. It was coming alive again with everyone’s help. It wasn’t finished but the main living areas that I had chosen were turning into cozy rooms with polished oak floors, soft painted walls and bright and quirky ones in others. Dangling electrical cords were gone, replaced by fluted milk glass domes in my bedroom to an old fashioned paddle light in the kitchen to fit the age of the house. The mirror had been replaced and re hung over the massive fireplace and the furniture had been returned to its original splendor with stain and polish as well as my aunts skill with fabric and upholstery. I could hear the chatter of all of them working together in the arboretum and the click of needles and scissors as they turned cushions and love seats of long ago into works of art.

The arboretum had been restored and my mother had hung ferns and blooming flowers throughout from rusty hooks. But like most of the house, it was not quite finished but it was becoming livable. No matter, I had other things to worry about.

For one, I needed to get ready for Halloween. The cove would be ablaze with pumpkins and jack o’lanterns, witches and scarecrows at every bend in the road around the pond. The cottages each had their own décor and treats were handed out all evening to children with apple bobbing, pumpkin carving, and apple cider for all who ventured in. Of course all of us always were in costume and sounds of hoot owls and haunted houses could be heard throughout. It was celebrated with gusto. Grandma Alice

would not be standing outside her gate this year in her splendid pointed hat and flowing robes but her cottage had been reopened and owls always flocked to her rooftop each year on Halloween.

But this year, I had my own house to decorate and for weeks I had hauled loads of pumpkins, gourds, and hay bales home to arrange by the porch. A goblin sat on the swing and cobwebs hung from the ceiling. I was working on my costume in the kitchen one evening as the sun set. I had stayed after everyone went home for the night and was sitting on a high stool by the counter. I could see the moon rise over the woods as I listened to the radio, and put the last feathers on my black silk Cape. Cleo had been sleeping on the window sill but now she was nipping at my ankles and then she started yowling. “What is wrong with you?” I said as I swatted at her. But she wouldn’t stop. She jumped on the counter and humped her back and tried to claw at the window where when I looked through the glass a hooded figure stood outside with red eyes looking straight at me. Someone was on my back porch! Everyone locked up when they left, and then I saw the knife. It was being tapped on the window. I jumped back, throwing myself at the Dutch Door and threw the big lock that my dad had insisted on installing. “Thank you dad.” I grabbed my scissors as I rushed down the narrow hallway as I heard the glass shattering behind me. I pulled at the front door but it wouldn’t open. Desperately I turned, bounded up the circle stairway heading up towards the second floor as all of the lights in the house went out and I was in total darkness. Instead of continuing up the winding stairway, I stepped into the back stairway and crouched back into the corner as hard as I could. Something moved behind me and I fell through a narrow slit in the wall and found myself on a platform. I quickly slid the panel closed and tried not to breathe as I heard footsteps rush by on the other side. “Maybe that was Tommy coming to save me,” I thought because he had left a message that he was going to stop by tonight. But what

if it wasn't? I thought. I stayed quiet. He said he had something to show me. My heart was beating out of my chest as I thought Tommy please hurry, please hurry!." The smell of lilies warm presence was here with me, I wanted to cry. All I could think of was that I hadn't told anyone about Lily and now they would never find me. My heart sank. Dumb! Why? Why am I so stupid? And then I heard Marcella when she looked down at me from the tree, "Josie don't be a sissy! You can do this. Just put your foot on the crook in the tree and pull yourself up!"

The platform began to ascend and I realized that I was on a dumb waiter. Who or what would be waiting for me when I got to the top? As I neared the 3rd floor, I pushed hard at what I hoped was an opening and then pushed myself through it when it cracked open. I heard the waiter continue its climb to the attic without its passenger. And I edged my way around the walls with the help of the moonlight and was thankful that Aunt Cappy had not hung the curtains in this room yet.

I slipped through the door into the hallway just as I heard the click of the lock in the door behind me. Grasping the railing of the circular stairway to brace myself I tried to steady myself. Something or someone was trying to lock me in just like it did to Aunt Cappy on the day of the fire. So far I was staying head but I had a feeling or was it a "knowing?" I was locked in the house with something that wanted to hurt me. I paused and took a breath and then I saw it. In the dim light I could barely see a dark figure down below. Trapped! I couldn't get back into the room and now I had to find a way down. And then I remembered when Marcella found the sliding panel up here on the landing. It was actually a part of one of the turrets that I saw that night in the storm. I felt my way around the paneling trying to guess where the door to the hidden stairway would be and bingo! I felt the old brass hinge and slid the panel open and stepped through the narrow gap

and began to climb down, trying not to make a sound. Where was Tommy? But then I saw his car parked on the side through one of the small windows on the stairway. He was here! And then I felt panic. What if he HAD been here but something awful had happened to him? I was panicked. I picked up my pace and hurried around and around the turret steps to the bottom. I kept thinking that even if I couldn't find him, I could escape out of the Dutch Doors in the kitchen. I reached the bottom and started pushing on the door. And then it was yanked open from the other side and standing in front of me was the hooded figure. His knife was gleaming in the moonlight.

I leaped out of the stairwell but he grabbed my arm and jerked me back with such force that I hit my head on the edge of the door. It stunned me momentarily and then I started screaming "Tommy! Tommy!" But I was held by strong hands that felt like they were going to crack my bones.

A booming laugh and I felt evil all around me. "You can stop calling for Tommy because he's already here!" And he yanked off his hood and standing showered by moonlight with his auburn hair standing on end ....was Tommy.

I was startled and then I was angry, "What are you doing? This is NOT FUNNY!"

"You are so RIGHT little girl! There is nothing funny about this. In fact, I would kill you right here but I don't want to mess up the kitchen!"

"Tommy this is crazy, wha." But I didn't get the words out before he slapped me across the face so hard that I passed out. When I woke up he was dragging me across the kitchen floor. My arms were tied behind my back.

The lights were on now. He propped me against the cabinet. The whole time that this was going on, I almost felt like an observer of an unreal scene. Here was my childhood friend saying that he wanted to kill me. But why? I heard myself asking him that question.

“Why? Why? Well let me tell you!” He leaned down so that he was close to my face, his breath burned my eyes, as sweat rolled down his face. Hatred distorted his face and his word spewed out like acid. “You have treated me like an animal ALL OF MY LIFE!”

When I tried to speak, he raised his hand as if he was going to hit me again. I closed my mouth. “Your aunt treated my mom like a slave making her work her self to death in the hotsy totsy STUDIO all day and all night.” I remembered Cappy and Florence laughing together over sketches, drinking lemonade on the porch in the evening after work. Sure they worked hard but I always thought that she loved her work as much as Aunt Cappy. He was ranting on. ME? Oh right I was the poor relations. You and those evil cousins of yours wouldn’t even let me into your “inner circle.” Oh no! I only got to be a part of your “little group” when YOU ALL decided.” Marcella and Jerome could be hard to understand at times. I even got shut out at times. But Tommy didn’t always want to play with us, I remembered. Sometime he came to work with his mom and liked to play alone. He even brought his erector set that he didn’t let anyone touch.

I caught up with what he was saying. “I knew you were all weird when I heard your grandma talking about the “fair circle and the moon.” I read about it during library day when I was 12 years old. And do you know what? When the moon is waning, it is possible to block thoughts. You didn’t think I was smart?” (I did think he was smart – smart enough, like all of us). So I waited and when it was just right, I rode my bike in the middle

of the night to the pond and moved a trap under the wharf. It was amazing!" I felt sick at what may be coming. "Two days later, Jerome, got stuck!" His face lit up and he threw back his head and laughed an dreadful laugh. "He almost DIED!" Another evil laugh. "I wanted Marcella but Jerome would do." They couldn't figure out how this happened, I heard them – you witch women! It was ME – little 'stupid not-good-enough ME." I felt sick.

"No you don't" he snarled. "No don't you look away from me," and he jerked my chin around. "Oh, JoJo, there is more and YOU ARE GOING TO LISTEN TO ME FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YOUR LIFE! He went on.

"The Holts come to town. Did you know the Mr. Holt stole money from his work? That's right. So it was easy to get sweet little Donna to do whatever I wanted her to." He looked at me. "She had to! Or I would have told your uncle about her dad and he would have lost his job! And they would have RUINED! That's right. They were broke when they came to Middleton! I know because I saw them at the food bank getting food." He spoke as if being broke was a sin. Tommy and his mom lived in a small apartment. He wasn't wealthy.

He kept rambling. He boasted with pride, " I was the captain of all of them – That's right. Me - the Captain,"he repeated. " Everyone has a family secret and I am a genius at finding them out! Still am." He winked at me. My fingers were pulling at the chords that bound my hands but I kept my eyes straight ahead.

“I was the one who cut your mom’s hose,” he bragged. “Donna wouldn’t do it so I made her paint those words under the bleachers and she got caught! That stopped that. The next time I told her to do something, she did it.” And he clapped his hands together. “But when you turned me down for the prom even after you had made your dress, I decided that you would pay no matter how long it took you were going to pay.” And then he began describing the evil that he took credit with – the lost memos on the board outside my classroom that almost ruined my grades, the slashed tires, the note on my door, while I was at VU checking them off on his fingers. He grunted in disgust, “That crazy guy who got sloshed before the truck deal and I paid him a bundle and he couldn’t even hit you!” that he paid off the driver who lost control and hit a tree, the note on my door and on and on. My back was killing me as I tried to get loose but his voice kept droning on and on.

I realized he had stopped and was staring at me. “Please let me say something,” I pleaded.

“Let YOU say something when you have never ever been nice to me EVER? Even now when I try to touch you , you act like I’m dirty or something.” I must have looked surprised. “How do you think that fire started, Huh? Who do you think lit that candle? How about the mirror? I almost got you then. The snake was perfect! Poor poor Becca – sweet Becca,” he whined and wiped away fake tears. I could feel the gall boiling up in my throat. “I took it out of the nature center. I poisoned the water jug but that stupid cat tipped it over before anyone could drink it.”

“What have you done with her,” I suddenly realized that I hadn’t seen her for awhile.

“Oh she’s going to the same place that you are if I can catch her!” And he reached up on the counter and pulled down a burlap sack. “You’re going to be as snug as a bug in a rug and they will NEVER EVER find you. And by the way, thanks for leaving me your house in your will.”

Will, what will? What was he talking about?

“I am a wizard when it comes to signatures. Ask the county clerk. Oh that’s right, you will be gone! Too bad!” He pulled the bag over my face and down my body and tied it around my ankles so tight that I held back a scream. He yanked me down the steps bumping my head with each step and across the yard and I began to understand where we were going. Suddenly there was a flapping of wings and the sound of birds and he began shout at them as he stumbled across the yard. I could tell he was trying to fight them off. Then a loud meow and I knew Cleo was on the attack as well. Tommy fell forward and began to roll down the slope but stopped himself and pulling himself to a standing position, he jerked the bag with me in it the rest of the way down the hill kicked me into the cold icy water of the pond.

I took a deep breath and I heard him call just before I hit the water, “Good byeeeeee Josie! Pleasant dreams.” I was sinking fast in the freezing cold muddy water of the pond until finally I hit the bottom. I could see the faces of my mother and dad, Grandma Alice, Dusty, and everyone I loved flying by in my mind. And suddenly I heard Marcella ,” JOSIE OPEN YOUR EYES and I remembered what she and Jerome had taught me years ago as we played in the pond and I forced my eyes open so that I could hold my breath longer. I blinked and tried to see through the burlap bag. And there it was - the beam! I had to get out of this bag. But the more I struggled the more I was getting tired. And then I remembered the scissors I had grabbed as I ran out of the kitchen. I grabbed my pants and pulled my long

pocket around to the side so I could reach it. My hands were tied but my fingers finally got a hold of the scissor handle and I kept pulling until it was free. Minutes ticked by and I knew there was a time limit and I could feel myself running out of air. I stabbed at the burlap until I made a hole, stuck my finger through it and tried to pull it apart. I started to feel my strength ebbing and in my small space I heard Aunt Cappy's voice telling me to pull the string on the bottom just like she taught me years ago. I fumbled in the water as my fingers began to go numb and when I thought I had it, I pulled and the side of the burlap sack fell apart and I kicked out of it. The scissors started to slip out of my numbing hand but I hooked the handle with my thumb as it fell. With several attempts the chords came loose around my hands and feet and I felt myself rising to the top where I was sure that Tommy was waiting to kill me if I came to the surface. I could see the beam more clearly now but oddly it seemed to be moving deeper and further away. I was running out of air, I didn't think I had enough to go deeper. Just as I was about to kick to the surface, I heard Grandma Alice as she lay dying say "Follow the beam and flutter as hard as you can." I didn't know what she meant that night but now I knew. Flutter kick!!! And kick I did as hard as I could as I pointed my hands forward. I was moving through the water towards the beam. I followed it through a tunnel under the stone bridge and at times I had to squeeze through a passage that was almost too tight. But the beam was straight ahead and I couldn't turn back so I pushed and clawed my way through the slit. My air was getting thinner and I was losing power in my legs when I saw the large docking rings next to the bank. I grabbed the top step and strained to pull myself up out of the water. My lungs sucked in the icy night air and I hugged myself hard and tried to catch my breath. I was still paralyzed with fear that somewhere out in the dark, Tommy was still looking for me. Then I heard voices back on the yard

behind the house, shouting and saw a shadow of two men run across the yard in the moonlight and grab Tommy. A fight ensued as others came around the house. I recognized mom and dad and my aunts and uncles.

A voice shouted above the others “What have you done with her? Tell me or I’ll.....” Then I heard my dad calling my name. Another voice, vaguely familiar seemed to be begging Tommy to tell them what happened and I could hear him say that he hadn’t seen me. I couldn’t seem to say anything, I was paralyzed and then I started croaking and then softly at first “I’m here, “ I am over here,” and waving my arms. My voice gathered strength as I called out.

“Wait I heard I heard something,” I heard someone say and everyone stopped shouting and listened. I slogged around the banks of the pond. “I’m here!” As I climbed the slope towards the house, I was grabbed and hugged by everyone in the yard that night. Sirens could be heard in the distance and the sheriff and his deputies arrived. The man who was holding Tommy on the ground stood and released him into custody and he was led away. Everyone talked at once and I tried to tell them what had happened when someone pushed through the crowd and to my utter amazement, it was Dusty and behind him were Hale and Donna! It was a long night answering questions from the sheriff first and then when he decided I had had enough for the night, and turned to go, I looked at Dusty and both of us said at once: “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Sitting on the floor of the kitchen that night listening to Tommy, for a moment I felt an intense sense of guilt when I thought how he had always felt left out but that quickly turned to horror and then rage when I realized that he had tried to kill members of my family starting back when he tried to drown Jerome. He had gotten past my Grandma Alice’s “knowing” by a

fluke of nature. True it was the waning moon phase that sometimes allowed that to happen according to my family, but they didn't think that that was be enough. We may never know. But the moon was waxing the night he tried to kill me and for whatever reason, his evil alerted everyone on the cove and all were on their way to save me. That also seems to have alerted the owls who attacked him as he was dragging me to the pond. Lucky for me, I learned the trick that Marcella and Jerome taught me that day long ago how to hold my breath or I wouldn't have been able to live through that horrible night.

As for Lily, my mother and my aunts held a candlelight walk through every room and stairway and then we all met in the kitchen with cups of cocoa and Aunt Margy's warm and wonderful cinnamon rolls. All of them began to speak of a lovely lady and they described her as a lovely ghost who they called "Granny" such as in "Granny's garden" and Granny's bell" that incidentally seemed to ring with different chimes according to the day or mood. On Halloween, for example, it was a deep gong sound but on summer afternoons, it was a lovely chime. It seems that cats have a connection with ghosts and Cleo (short for Cleopatra) is no exception. As I sat there in the kitchen that day, I listened in awe while they spoke of the wind that she had sent that day to blow me back on the grass when I was slipping down the muddy bank of the pond. The breaking of the water pipe in the room above the fire that put it out and saved Aunt Cappy – that was Lily; the day that Cleo pushed the lamp and I stepped to catch it just as the mirror fell behind me; the poisoned water jug that Cleo pushed over in the backyard before anyone could drink from it. The lock that seemed to work on its own but was actually Lilly locking Tommy out instead of locking us in. I had worked against her that night when I thought I was escaping that room. And of course, that rainy night when I ran away from the fairy circle and into a mysterious storm that didn't happen. I was caught and saved

from hurting myself in my erratic driving down that road that night and taken in by a lady with a big heart who said “I have been worried,” one night in a beautiful house on “Morning Lane.” As I sat there, sipping my cocoa listening to their voices, with Cleo chiming in with a meow, I knew then that they had known all along and had counted on Lily to watch over me. And I knew then, having a ghost in your house can be good especially on Halloween. On Halloween, mandolin music can be heard upstairs along with the sound of dancers. You can see their shadows moving across the window blinds outside to the sound of the music. Whenever I feel a warm gust of air and smell lilies, I know I am safe.

The house it turned out had been a part of my great great great grandfather Albus Anderson’s estate and had been gifted to his sister Mona to live in until her line no longer existed and then it was to be returned to the estate. That meant that it basically was a part of the cove and the pond outlet under the stone bridge where the fairy still sits feeds into a brook that winds through the forest and comes out right by Grandma Alice’s grave where it flows into our big pond. We are connected. Tommy found this out when he was digging for information for me and he and the city clerk hatched a plan to keep this information from me for several reasons:

He tried to talk me out of buying it because he wanted it. But when that didn’t work:

He sold me a house that essentially I already owned and kept the money.

He forged my name on a will that he had written giving him the property at my death.

He planned to kill me, take possession of the house, and be a part of the Cove. And to that end, he acted like my friend as he had always done. I could see now why Marcella and Jerome didn't invite him to play with us at times. Even as children, they seemed to have "the knowing."

He was charged and convicted of attempted murder. The city clerk was fired and faced charges associated with forgery and fraud. They are serving their terms.

Tommy had bragged to me that night while I sat tied up in the kitchen all about his power over Donna and the others. It turns out that she had seen me talking to him on the street when I was headed to the bank with my inheritance and became worried that he was up to his old tricks. She followed him one night when she saw him loading a ladder in the back of a truck and followed him out to the old house. He entered the house with a flashlight and she knew he was cooking up something. That could have been the night that he rigged up the chandelier. After that she tried to contact me and when that didn't work, she tried to keep track of his comings and goings. She was the woman in the backyard that I saw that night trying to convince him to tell everyone where I was. Tommy had harassed her family and those of the kids that I called "the gang" all of these years. Donna had finally broken free when she had evidence that he had paid someone to drive across the Commons at VU and run me down. The blackmailer was blackmailed. She said that she had tried to warn me many times about him but I would never let her get close enough. True. Mazie met me for coffee one morning and told me the same story. Grandma's words came to mind, "Evil is near. Nothing is what it seems." We became friends again.

It turns out that my aunt Maggie and Uncle Ralph knew all about the trouble that Donnas' dad had been in before moving to Middleton but they believed him to be a good man, who had made a terrible mistake in trying to save his family from being evicted rather than a criminal. He had told Uncle Ralph the truth about himself when he came into the grocery store to apply for the job. They both knew he was telling the truth as they listened. Aunt Maggie had the knowing as you recall. They helped him pay back the money he had taken even though it took several years. He later became the store manager and a member of the city council. Donna, as a girl, didn't know that the family secret was not a secret to Uncle Ralph and Aunt Maggy. So when they were threatened by Tommy, she stepped up to protect her family when all of this time, it was unnecessary.

Remember the street sign that my hat got hooked on when I first was looking at the place and I had to run after it? Well when the pole was straightened back up and cleaned off, it read, "Morning Lane." I know Grandma Alice is with me because on her death bed, she said I will be with you always on Morning Lane. At the time, I didn't know what she meant.

All of those years that I tried to find my way by getting as far away from the cove as I could starting with the stormy night and ending on the day I was fired in New York, I guess I was only growing and learning. True I made good friends and learned how the fashion design world works and both are basic to my life today. I also learned that shutting people out of my life doesn't work and can even be dangerous. And just when I thought I had lost everything, I was wrong. My family, my roots, and the house on Morning Lane were all waiting for me to come home. And by the way, Marcella and Jerome WERE watching over me when I was in college by taking turns coming to VU and watching over me. Grandma Alice had sent

them. Jerome said that when he saw Dusty sleeping in the hallway outside my attic apartment, he knew then that they could stop coming to VU because he would keep me safe.

As for Dusty, yes he had been walking down the red carpet with a gorgeous brunette model but he said that he had never dated her and besides he had someone else (me) and so did she. But just as I treated Donna when she tried to tell me about Tommy, I wouldn't let her for fear she was going to hurt me with her words, I would never talk to him either. I even returned all of his letters unopened and threw away any article about him that showed up in a magazine or newspaper.

I gave up on him but it seems that he didn't give up on me. He quit his job in Paris and took one in New York in order to try and talk me into giving him another chance. He was the man waiting for me in the bird sanctuary that I saw out my ESC window but didn't meet because I thought he was a mugger put there by Donna. After the blow up and my ousting from ESC, my friend Hale remembered our conversations in that little coffee shop where I had told him about Dusty. After I returned to Middleton, he ran into him at an opening. Hale was worried because I hadn't answered his letters (for once this may have worked in my favor) and that's how their plan to come to the cove started out. Okay, so was THAT a coincidence? They made plans to visit me around Halloween since they both knew how much I liked it but when they got to town, they couldn't figure out how to find the cove. They got to Middleton later than they planned having never before driven through mountains at night. And then saw lights in the window of the City News office. The woman at the desk was.....Donna! She was just leaving but when they asked her how to find the cove and that they were looking for me, she explained that it might be hard to find it and it would be easier just to lead them there rather than try

to explain. And so they reached the Cove just as everyone was rushing out to their cars to come and save me. My dad, when hearing that they were looking for me, shouted out of his car window “Follow us!” And that’s how they all arrived almost at the same time. (It would have been nice if they had all gotten there a little earlier, I thought, but of course I didn’t say that

Hale eventually changed jobs and is no longer in the fashion industry. Sheila was fired from ESC and banned from the industry. And since she had taken credit for all of my designs she was unable to switch the blame to me and in the end, she wasn’t charged with anything because the designs had not been copy written. But her status in the industry was damaged and she has yet to get it back.



Epilogue:

5 years later

The beautiful white house with the wraparound porch and two turrets surrounded by flower gardens sits back in the woods somewhere in Vermont. There is a rose covered archway out by the highway that can be seen if you are looking for it with a sign that reads, Welcome to Enchanted Designs by J and D. And if you enter through the archway, you will find yourself on Morning Lane, a narrow path that winds down through a wooded lane lined with flowers of every color. Listen and you will hear the sound of the ringing of a bell and the chirping of songbirds. The opening is ahead through the tunnel of trees and spills out the other end into a large

clearing. On one side sits a boat dock by a brook where boat rides are available between Morning Lane and The Cove on certain holidays. Beyond lies a pond with water lilies floating among stones where turtles sun themselves and ducks and geese play.

In the center is a round flower garden surrounding a large statue of a hat. If you look at it closely, you will see a woman's face peeking out from under its brim with a small smile on her heart-shaped lips. Song birds fly over ahead and land on the brim to sing their morning songs and flowers magically bloom there all year long.

But the beautiful white house with the wraparound porch and the two turrets sits in its glory around a bend in the middle of a lush green lawn. It sits surrounded gardens. At times, people can be seen carrying large packages tied up with satin ribbons out of the glass studio on the side.

On this day, a black cat sits on the porch licking its paws in the afternoon sun. If you look closer, you may just see a shadow of a woman's smiling face looking down from the attic window. Toys are strewn around the porch and from within the house, a baby's cry can be heard and the sound of a mother's voice singing,

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*If you look closer, you may just see a shadow of a woman's smiling face looking down from the attic window.*

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Good morning to you

Good morning to you

We're all in our places

With sunshiny faces

For this is the way

To start a new day.

Composer unknown

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## FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a story of the pain of being born with something you didn't ask for, whatever it may be, and the struggle to turn it into something good.

The Cove is all a figment of my imagination but this story is a pretty good description of my grandma Alice Rittenoure, my mother, Barbara Jane Rittenoure Ward, my Aunts Katharine Rittenoure Bernhardt, and Marjorie Ritenoure Gaston and my cousins, Marjane Kay Gaston Cooper and Jerry Lee Gaston. I added the magic.

My grandmother had a hat shop in Hutchinson at the turn of the century filled with her own designs. She lived in the back of the shop on Main street and I am told and had a bath tub which was a big deal to her. She was skilled in all kinds of needlework, had flowers growing in abundance at all times of year, and had a cat and a canary named Sweet who sang sweet songs from the cage in her kitchen. I think of that every morning when our parakeets, Sweetie and Sugar began to sing their sweet songs. She was amazing and I can say, without question, Grandma had “the knowing” and could “know” the things I credited her with in this story. Since I was a girl, this fact was our family secret but now as an old lady, myself, I can write these words without compunction.

Katharine, Aunt Kappy as we called her, was never able to have children because she had had cancer but she was a wonderful aunt and looked just like I described her. As a girl of 14, her father was taken to live out his life in a hospital and

was never able to return. So it fell to the three older children to help. Katharine, being the oldest had to help support the family. She was only 14. She rode the bus to downtown Wichita, Kansas to work for Lewins Dress Shop by lying about her age. She started out as a seamstress but soon was designing clothing. Back then, upscale dress shops had their own designers. By the time she was 30 years old, she had her own studio and with her own label Katharine's in downtown Wichita. The ceilings were high with light pouring in through the top of tall windows. Women turned on the hexagonal stands to gaze at the clothing in tall mirrors. "Katharine's" was a magical place as I described in this story. I would tell my mom that a dress was coming and she would tell me to draw it on blackboard in our family room and next would come fittings and hems and then Wa La. I remember that Aunt Kappy wore a dress to a family dinner once and it was "ready-made." My mom and Aunt Marjorie pestered her all day to tell where she bought it and they all ended up on the couch screaming with laughter and she finally told them, "J.C Pen Yays" JC Penneys of course. They looked it over good and agreed that although it was "ready made, it wasn't that bad." None of us kids wanted to sew when we grew up as we were called on sometime to put in hems. But we all did. Jerry worked for a coat designer. He was the most talented of the cousins. A pastel picture that he drew when he was 8 hangs in our dining room now. For a time, he accompanied Andy Williams in Las Vegas. He could do everything like Aunt Kappy. Jerry was gay and back then it was discriminated against even worse, I think, than now. One note: Jerry was friends with some of the musicians on

Lawrence Welk who also were gay. Whenever they came to town for a performance, he would bring them over to visit. Good times.

Marjane worked for an Italian designer in Florida and Jill her daughter even modeled for Eileen Ford. Me? I like sewing just about everything but I love making quilts! But I don't have to tell you.

Aunt Marjorie was just like I described her. Everything she baked or cooked was absolutely delicious! And she could make it in any quantity that you may want it – ½ of pie or for a banquet for 50. Yes everyone who ate her cooking felt better. I added the magic.

Mom was the athlete of the bunch and the youngest. She had taught swimming in high school and we all taught it up into our late 20's. She was also on a traveling baseball team. She was a catcher when she was in high school. As you remember, she loved to play golf, bowl, tennis, and was pretty good at all of them. She was already to play with her grandchildren whenever she got a chance. She loved board games and cards and was a fierce competitor at croquet out in our front yard. But she also was a good cook, could sew wonderful things from a picture and she and everyone else lived in homes with flowers everywhere.

The story about Baby, my car, and that I got to go downtown to sketch the fashions in the windows was true. That was a big deal to me. The two stores were Lewins and Woolf Brothers. But I didn't know what was there before I got there – pure fiction! The muumuu story was also true.

Marjane and Jerry (Marcella and Jerome) were exactly like I described them plus everything we did was true EXCEPT the holding your breath part.

My dad and my Uncle Lawrence descriptions are right on.

BTW I won the city contest with my picture of me exploring a pyramid. The question asked was “What would you like to do if you could do anything?”

2nd place went to a boy who wanted to ride the roller coaster at Joyland.

3rd place went to a girl who wanted to watch television.

My mother's singing was true. And the song, Good Morning to you,

was true. I still sing it but now I sing it to my parakeets every morning or to my grandchildren when they are near. Alexa sings another version of it as well. And daddy singing with his guitar has been in several of my stories. Sometimes I ask myself, “Who tells their life history in Halloween stories?” We all know the answer to that.

So how do people know things before they happen, do you think? This has fascinated me my whole life long. Meyers-Briggs the personality Index calls it Intuition. Some have it and others don't. In my classes I always tested my students to find out. But I only tested them on the intuition part of that inventory. It is information that is useful to know about your students (or anyone you hang out with). Only approximately 5 out of 30 would test high on intuition. My testing usually resulted in 17% intuitive. Those who are intuitive can be trusted to have pretty good hunches. So if you have an I in your Meyers Briggs results, know that you have something special and it can be measured. My grandmother's abilities were so special that I have researched it since I was a girl looking for the biological reason for it. I even took brain anatomy at the U. of Indiana with the basic reason of trying to find the answer. At that time, incidentally Indiana University had the 9th largest research library in the world. It was awesome and research was rich in the brain anatomy category for intuition. One example that I like, is not about intuition exactly but more about the ability of the brain to know something before our conscious awareness. Take for example that when you touch a hot surface, you will automatically yank your hand back and THEN you will feel the pain. So why did you yank your hand back first? Because your brain knew it before your conscious awareness did. Is that precognition or the brain at work?

One story that I cling to and if I could locate it in my files, I would share the research with you. It is the story of a man who listens to the radio without it being turned on.

Why? Because he picks up frequencies. Ahhh once again. Everything is not as it seems So good. I always announced at the beginning of every semester during the 25 years I taught at HCC that my students had to open up and believe that everything is possible for the semester – they couldn't question the presence of UFO's or ghosts or fortune tellers or psychics for 4 whole months. They just had to go with it and after that they could go back to their old stuck in a rut mentality. And for the most part, they did just that.

It was awesome. As I have always said, those who have those abilities do not have a choice of whether to believe or not, they know what they know. Those who don't believe can assume that they know. Very provocative!

I had fun writing this story and I hope you have fun reading it. I apologize for the length. I'll try to go shorter next time.

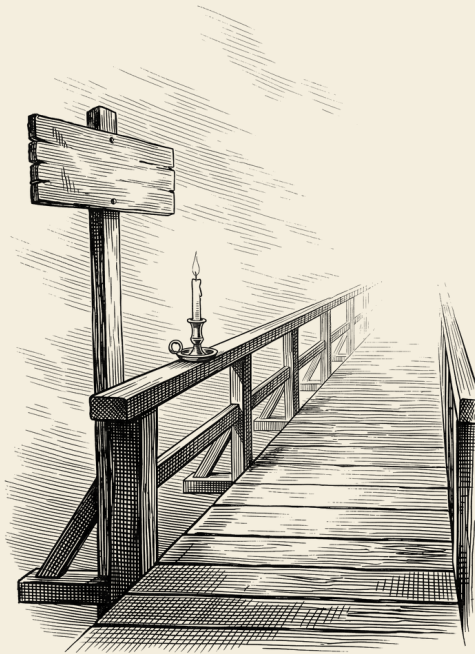
Oh and by the way, I made up the moon information about waning and waxing Have a wonderful Halloween and always remember...

DREAM STORIES

# THE MESSAGE

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed —, October 2025*



She hurried down the street through the neighborhood where she grew up with purpose. It had been awhile and it was further away than she remembered it being. It was his birthday and she couldn't be late. It was

strange, she thought, I've got that same old feeling I used to get whenever I was worried about something. Racing heartbeat, sweat dripping down my back. God almighty, I haven't felt this way for a long time. AND time is closing in and I am not ever late and now...? I can't be late. I've been late before but this is the day I've been waiting for and I won't be late. The heat steamed off of the cement and the street seemed to go on forever. This was the same sidewalk that she and her cousins had walked back and forth to school every morning but the way seemed further now. Her cousin Alyssa was giving a Halloween birthday party for her and Ron's 5 year old son, Teddy. She couldn't wait to see his big brown eyes and hair. He had been a baby when last she had seen him. She felt happy all over just thinking about who and what she was about to see. Some of her lifelong friends from school days would be there too. They had always been a team. She could see them waiting for her and she picked up her gait. Hurry hurry.

Crowding her thoughts were all the times she had spent with her cousins and best friends, sisters Alyssa and Molly. Members of their families – grand parents, aunts and uncles and cousins had all lived on the same block – or at least most of them. Alyssa and Ron had actually moved into Grandma's house after she and grandad had passed and that was where she was heading now. Memories of happy days of her childhood. She could remember Grandma's big yellow two-story house - It was the biggest house on the block – the yard filled with flowers blooming everywhere on a summer day – every passerby stopped to gaze at them and best of all a giant maple tree out on the side of the big corner lot filled with song birds in the summer and a wide wooden swing dangling from its branches. Grandad, sweet grandad made it for the hoogie boogs – his name for the us grandkids. I could hear the sound of our voices and the creaking of the swing as it swung back and forth under those leafy branches. And what was that song that we always sang – what was it? Oh right, John Jacob Jingle Heimer

Smith. His name is my name too. Whenever we go out the people always shout. HEY! John Jacob Jingle Heimer Smith! Tra la la la la la and then again. The creaking of the swing, the cool breeze blowing my blond hair. Gram coming out the front door with glasses of fresh squeezed lemonade – a little sour. One of us would run to hold the door and then we kids would all sit there on the porch swing sipping the lemonade out of jelly glasses and swinging with our dirty barefoot feet sticking out in front of us. Aww but now time was flying by, and she knew she still had a ways to go.

Miles away from the woman rushing towards Teddy’s Halloween birthday party, in a ditch beside an old blacktop two-lane highway, a bus is nose down with clouds of heavy black smoke pouring out from under its hood. And right about now the passengers are getting some bad news. “Sorry folks but it don’t look good. We’ll just have to wait and see if somebody goes by that can hep us.” The bus driver closed his eyes and shook his head. “Never agin,” he says to himself under his breath. Just then a belch of smoke and oil explodes spattering oil, grease, and dead bugs all over the windshield. Cries go up as the passengers show their anger and distress.

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*Miles away from the woman rushing towards  
Teddy’s Halloween birthday party, in a ditch  
beside an old blacktop two-lane highway, a bus is  
nose down with clouds of heavy black smoke.*

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But one passenger has already figured it out way back when the first belch sounded from under the old bus and it headed for the ditch. He had jumped up from his seat, reached up, grabbed his duffel bag from the

overhead, pushed open the side doors of the bus and is already heading down the road. He hears the explosion and knows he should go back and help but he can't – not today. Oh no, As he turns around towards the oncoming traffic, he throws out his arm, thumbs out and keeps moving backwards. He's a man with a mission. No matter that he has one bum leg and walks with a crutch. No matter that his bag is heavy. No matter that the heat is unusual for this late in the season. I can and I will, those words repeat in his head with every step. The bus in the ditch grows smaller behind him as cars begin to whiz by without stopping but he keeps going. Nothing's going to stop him now. A broken down vehicle is no big thing to a private 1st class fresh from Viet Nam after two years of fighting in a jungle, he thinks. And no way am I going to miss surprising Alyssa and Teddy on this day – It's his 5th birthday!! No Way!

Just then, down the hot and dusty highway, an old truck comes rattling along blowing smoke out of the exhaust. Long ago red paint shows in spots where it hasn't rusted off and the front bumper seems to be hanging on by some miracle. It rushes by spewing dirt from the blacktop and then it screeches to a stop fish tailing the back end. The soldier on the side of the road turns and with a glimmer of hope starts pushing towards the truck that has started backing towards him. A gravelly voice yells out through the open windows, "Hey there soldier! Where ya headin?"

"Evermore Sir!" The hitchhiker hobbles up to the truck and grabs the window to hold himself up.

"Well climb in soldier. I'm heading that way." With that, the old man cranks open his door and heads around the truck, grabbing the bag from the young man and then with a hard grunt heaves it up into the truck bed. This is followed by a hacking cough that bends him over for a spell. Pulling

back up and wiping his mouth with his sleeve, the old man throws out a knarled hand with a big toothless grin. I'm Edgar Wilson – glad to make your acquaintance my man.”

“I'm Ron Hadley, Sir. I'm glad to meet you too. And I'm trying to get home in time for my son's birthday Sir.”

“Just Edgar son. Not sir.” And he wheezed again and mopped his wrinkled brow this time with a dirty handkerchief. “Climb aboard!” After they are all settled in the torn leather seats of the old truck, Edgar grabs the wheel and turning to his passenger says with a wink, “Hang on! This ole truck has seen a million miles and she'll get you there in plenty of time, I gar on tee ya! Pushing down on the gas with his old brown boot, and giving an order as if to a horse “Let's hit it Clara!” The truck lurched forward, groaning as if in pain and they were off – truck, driver, and soldier, the last hanging on tight with both fists with a grin on his face down the dusty highway wind blowing dust and heat rising from the blacktop ahead.

While back on that street, the traveler can just now see the big yellow house on the corner with the giant tree showing over its red roof as it comes into sight. Life is going on and the energy can be felt as party guests are arriving. Children and their parents are scattered on the porch, in the and in the grass along the side of the yard as guests go in and out of the house. Voices and laughter and the screen door as it bangs shut, fill the air. Laura feels joy and absolute love bursting within her and as she draws nearer she can see and feel it – just like she remembers it. But the house has changed - its now yellow with green shutters -not white, a brass plate now hangs from a hook with the number 2247 swinging out from a fancy black rod ironed hook and the front door seems larger. And then she sees the potted mother-in-law plant sitting next to the door in the big blue pot as always. Yes, I'm

here, she thinks and she is stepping through the door into the cozy living room. Laughter is so bright and loud that it fills the space and stops her for a moment. She feels herself being swept into the celebration. Parents and children are making noise. She can hear their laughter and excitement with an occasional whoop of one of the party goers. Small children everywhere. Time! Hurry! A lur of faces. Am I too late? She sweeps the rooms looking for them in building panic. Where is he? Where's Teddy? Where's Alyssa? Moving through the throng of party goers, she suddenly hears it - the musical sound of a familiar laugh. Norman Davies! She sees him, her old friend from high school is here! And there he is in a circle of guests out in the corner of the family room. He looks up straight into her eyes and waves with that great smile and nods his head towards the back door. Following his nod she sees her - Molly - sweet Molly with her red hair floating in the air by the side door. She is glowing in the afternoon sun. The noise and children's laughter fade into the background. Beckoning to her, Molly turns her head and nods out into the yard towards the tree. Laura can feel time beginning to be picking up speed. It is almost time and she is here but where's Alyssa? Out in the yard, the party is in full swing. A group of small squealing energetic children are gathered around the old giant maple tree taking turns on the swing. Squeals of laughter spike the air. Molly has moved out and is waiting just on the step by the back door. Autumn leaves shower down in the afternoon sun. "He's there," Molly whispers sweeping her arm and pointing at a small boy who is chasing a black and white puppy across the yard through the piles of leaves. Teddy has left the shelter of the big maple and the other children on the swing and is now skipping happily after a puppy in the direction of the far corner of the yard towards the mailbox on the curb. Laura can hear his soft voice carry over the breeze, "Raffy! Raffy come back."

Suddenly – a loud voice from the doorway, “Where’s Teddy?” And there’s Alyssa shouting to nobody in particular and everybody in general who are out in the yard. Cupping her hand over her eyes she calls again. And then spying him on his way to the curb, she begins calling louder, “Teddy? Teddy, come now. It’s time! Time for cake!” But he doesn’t seem to hear her calling. Laura looks towards the children under the big maple tree, as she stops and looking towards the voice in the breeze, they pause in their play and gather around somebody she knows well. Laura can see Julia, her roommate from State college and Ron’s little sister. She is gathering the children together with her arms spread like wings around them. Soft and musical, her voice carries over the breeze, “Children go now. First one to the cake gets a PRIZE!” With cheery voices, the children start all running for the door with rambunctious delight.

And a block away, the old truck careens off the [ LOST PASSAGE ] Bridge on the edge of the town of Evermore, rattles down the street and swerves around the corner on two tires onto Henderson street. Inside the truck, Ron who is just finishing giving Edgar the directions to his house, cuts to “Hey old man! What the hell?”

But Edgar is no longer conscious. He has coughed one final cough and has fallen forward cracking his forehead on the steering wheel and in the doing, has pushed down hard on the gas with his boot sending the old truck rocketing down Henderson Street. To his horror, Ron can see his house down the street full of people and there’s Teddy happily skipping towards the mailbox on the curb right in line with this truck that is now heading at top speed right in line with the boy, the mailbox and a puppy. And then a clear commanding voice from inside the truck brings Ron to atten-

tion, “Soldier Grab the wheel, turn it hard to the right. NOW! STEP ON IT!” The voice of Sgt. Norman Davies his squad leader – a voice he will never forget is speaking to him now.



From the yard with the party in full swing, Alyssa’s attention to Teddy chasing the puppy is suddenly switched to the children who had been playing under the tree who are now suddenly racing towards her at the door.

Laura feels the earthly mantle that has protected her in her journey to earth begin to fall away as she leans into Alyssa and speaks in a soft but firm voice, RUN to the MAILBOX ALLYSA! NOW! RUN!”

Alyssa hears the voice followed then by the sound of a backfire coming from down the street. Jerking her head towards the sound she becomes instantly aware of the the tragedy that is just about to happen. The old truck is rocking from side to side at full speed towards the mailbox now and Teddy and the pup!.

The time has come. And then everything happens at once.

Pushing himself over Edgar in the front seat of the truck, Henry grabs the wheel jerking it to the right hard throwing the truck off balance. It jerks to the right and begins to fall over to the left side throwing Ron out the drivers door as it swings open. And just as it seems to teeter before falling, the old truck rights itself and at full speed races down the street angling straight towards the curb, the mailbox, the dog, and Teddy. Ron scraped

and bruised jumps up just in time to see his little boy chasing a pup who suddenly stops and as if in slow motion changes direction and ducks behind the mailbox causing Teddy to turn and run after the dog, a split second before the truck jumps the curb hits the mailbox barely missing the child before it races full boar across the yard and crashes with a mighty crack right into the old maple tree. There's a moment when the giant tree moves slowly before beginning its fall at first as in slow motion and then gathering speed, comes crashing down above Alyssa who is now running under it towards Teddy. In that split second before the tree crashes to the ground, her hands reach out to her little son, swooping him up in her arms before falling face down in the grass inches out of reach of the fallen tree.

That was the moment when time stood still. The air, filled with the sound of the sounds of the universe - strings and the glow of sparkling stars for just that moment in time. From above a man could be seen crawling towards a woman who is cradling a small boy with a little dog next to a broken mailbox; a massive tree with a split trunk vibrating from a fall on the yard sending up energy into the air. The truck high-centered on the trunk of the twisted tree still with its wheels spinning. There is silence. All sound is frozen.

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*That was the moment when time stood still. The air, filled with the sound of the sounds of the universe — strings and the glow of sparkling stars for just that moment in time.*

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And then the moment passes.

Time starts up again with a blast and noise and screams break the air.

The sound of a mother's voice "Oh my god, Alyssa sobs as she squeezes Teddy to her breast while both rolled in the leaves.

"Mommy don't squeeze me so hard," he wailed.

"Why oh why did you go out in the street? You know better!" Sobs mixed with hysteria.

"The lady told me to."

"What lady?"

"His tiny voice "Mommy I saw her - a golden lady. She said her name was Molly. She called to us - me and Raffy."



And there it was.

Voices. There was the voice of a woman sending the children inside to the cake. But was not thought of again.

A man struggled up from the yard. He had been thrown from the truck. He kneeled down and wrapped his arms around them. They were inches away from the massive trunk of the fallen maple.



Some were heard to say that day that they thought they saw a glow like the air was full of stars right before the truck hit the tree. Others said that they heard the sound of music like musical strings buzzing in their ears and then was gone. “Shock can do that to you,” one of the guests was heard to say.

Laura was still above as time was spinning like gold. The group in the yard, the sounds of voices and sirens and dogs barking was sharp at first and then fading. Memories of long ago being pulled out from under a dock when Mollie and she were on a camping trip with their families by a 12 year old Alyssa, whose bright blue eyes staring into hers, her thoughts cascading. She could remember gasping for breath as Molly’s hand slipped from her grasp into the still waters under the dock. They were 10 years old. She could remember family faces coming in and out of her focus and a shrill voice from her Aunt Carol, their mother, “ALYSSA WHERE’S MOLLY?” And Alyssa, sobbing “I can’t find her mom!” Over and over the sounds of sadness. Molly, funny Molly with her red hair and funny laugh had drowned that day. Laura knew that she would have drowned too except for Alyssa who saved her by pulling her out from under that dock. Memories swept by her in a flood. The ticking of time, she could see Norman dancing at the Friday night Hop in the 8th grade with those gangly legs going every which way to the strains of Be Bop a Lula, She’s my baby, snacks on the sideboard provided by their smiling moms and dads. Then time speeds on. Graduation and college. All of us home from college waving goodby to Norman at the station all decked out in his Army uniform, full of anticipation. Big tall Norman left college to fight for his country only to

return in a box two years later. He was a hero who saved his squadron out there in the unrelenting torture of the Viet Nam jungle. He was fatally injured that day despite the efforts of his 2nd in command, Corporal Ron Hadley who carried him on his back miles in the killing heat trying to save his life. But to no avail. Time was now spinning faster, faces, weddings, babies, Julie, Ron's sister, dies from cancer, asking her brother Ron on her death bed to help her husband Jim to raise their two daughters. The two men trying to braid the girls hair for school without Julie and breaking down. Sadness.

The clear and vibrant sounds of our individual tones began to weave together into a deep and ethereal frequency of sound as myself and each of my teammates start to ascend. And our time is up for now. We are the soulkeepers on the golden thread as the scene below begins to disappear below. The four of us were sent here on a mission. I realize now that time is an eternal loop and our threads will circle around in time in other combinations, other moments. The other three have gone on missions before but this was my first time and I got lost at first in earth, sun, and air. I began to remember what it was like to be human again. Two Earth years have passed since Jeff, my husband and I and our three kids huddled that night in the basement of our home as the storm raged above. The air around us became heavy and filled with a sort of glow. It was as if we were waiting for something terrible to happen. And then the shrieking banshee of the wind exploded our world and we were blown into nothingness. I sailed away gripping my baby Tim's little hand in the ragged air and then everything became silent. I can remember I was wondering there with Tim and then I heard it - the harmonious sound, a blend of tones from the universe. We were lost somewhere in a white nothing. I held tight to his tiny hand in mine. A soft voice, vaguely familiar, spoke to me in a gentle voice. "Let go Laura. You will see him again a promise. You will always be near

him through eternity. Someone you love is waiting on earth for a new baby to arrive. His soul has a life but you must stay behind.” Tim, my baby, held tight to me with his chubby little hand and then I let him go. “Mommy, don’t leave me.” “Good by my darling baby. I love youuuuuu.”

A circle of time in the universe. Alyssa saved me that moment under the dock so that I could guide her to save Teddy from the tree. Molly, her sister saved Tim/Teddy from the truck. Norman saved Ron so that he too could save Teddy. Julia, Ron’s little sister saved the children under the tree from the truck that was about to hit them. We are the Soul Keepers and now we are ascending on the golden frequencies – our individual notes blending in harmony. The earth is now a tiny blue marble in space. Those moments when pieces of the universe sparkle the place, time slows down so that our tones can separate and we can be heard. But we will return, in other times, in other places, in other situations with one another and separately.

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*A circle of time in the universe. Alyssa saved me that moment under the dock so that I could guide her to save Teddy from the tree.*

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Back on earth, crowds gather around the big yellow house on the corner as emergency vehicles blink their lights carrying Edgar to the hospital clinging to life. Halloween night descends on the place. Those who were there would recall a sound and then the boom of the tree as it crashed to the ground shaking the windows and knocking over dishes and lamps inside. Those on the outside of the house would remember for a while being stampeded by the children who seemingly all at once forced their way back into the house pushing and shoving towards the cake therefore escaping the

truck and the tree. Ron sat and watched with his arms around Alyssa and Timouthy now Teddy with thoughts of that voice of his Sergeant inside that truck that saved Teddy. Alyssa heard that voice and ran almost like a voice from the past that saved her life and Teddys. But she knew why Teddy, heading towards the mailbox on the curb stepped to the right towards the “golden lady who said her name was Molly.”

As the guests began to scatter away from the yellow house and the big maple tree in the yard that was now roped off, the fireman pulled their big trucks back onto the street, the moon rose big and yellow high above, jack o lanterns began to shine up and down the street and goblins and monsters came out to trick or treat, and life and time went onward. Those who had heard the interwoven sound of strings and saw twinkles in the air as the moment arrived would most likely discount it as just a reaction to the shocking event themselves – or a hunch that their mind was giving them a message and maybe never ever think of it again. But those who heard the voices have an idea that death had been calling for them and someone spoke to them and saved a life. They would go about their lives with new purpose now for they all knew that they had been given a rare opportunity and with it came a responsibility to the people of the earth. Some of them would share their experience with others and some would keep it to themselves but all of them carried it with them for the rest of their lives and will always remember the sound of that voice they and they alone heard that day.

Teddy will grow up on that corner with his brothers and sisters and parents with love and care. They will plant a new tree to replace the old maple and fix the swing that their great grandad made. When it is time, he will go off to college and graduate with honors and then again and again many times. A brilliant scientist, he will be smart and creative and innovative and talented and he will be up for the job that he was handed in

the life he is living. He had been chosen to find the cure that would save humankind and the planet. But he will be a hard one for the soulkeepers to guide – trying new adventures and escaping many pitfalls. It will take teamwork from his soul keepers to keep him safe. But that's for another story.

Miracles occur to us or are they miracles or are they part of the grand plan? Hmmmm? But whatever, I say Don't be afraid of voices in the night. Happy Halloween!

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PART THREE · THE HALLOWEEN  
ANNUAL

# THE PIDDLINGTON TALES



*Dispatches from a small Midwestern town that thinks  
itself ordinary but isn't.*

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THE PIDDLINGTON TALES

# THE WITCH

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, October 2012*

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I so remember that balmy day in late summer when I first met Essie. She came walking down my street under the lush overhang of the tree tunnel as I always thought of my street, carrying a book. She had an abundance of the blackest hair I had ever seen all tied up with a purple ribbon. Although she was still almost a block away, her voice seemed to float through the air, “Hi! My name is Essie.”

I was taken with her. That simple. I not only liked her immediately – I wanted to be just like her.

“Would you be my friend?” She said. I nodded. “Then, here, sign my friend book.” Somehow, in a moment, she was standing right before me. And she handed over a huge black book with a leather cover hard with age and with thin crackly pages. A quill pen attached to the binding by a velvet ribbon was wedged on a page in the middle of the book. I quickly took it and signed my name.

By the way, reader, my name is Susannah. I was going through a hard summer back then. Something had happened in the spring when I was chosen to be the manager of our school’s fashion show. A girl who showed the best workmanship and design in her 9th grade sewing project was always chosen. It was easy for me because, you see, I had grown up in a family of seamstresses and had been designing and sewing since I was 7 years old. My aunt Katy was a fashion designer and her label was sought after – even in fashion magazines. She had, as my mother and others often described, as “the touch.” Everything she touched turned to absolute perfection. She could walk into a room and move an object and all of a sudden the room seemed complete – calibrated almost – perfectly in place. But her sewing was absolutely amazing. I would put my drawing of the

dress I wanted to wear to the dance on her drawing board in her beautiful studio on Monday and it would be hanging there waiting for me on Friday and it would fit perfectly and be the absolute color that I had chosen in my head.

So, back to the fashion show ordeal. You can see that I was going to win that year over anyone who had just learned how to sew. Maybe it could be thought to be unfair in a way but the point is: I had already been named the top student in academics and had gone to the state competition in piano. These awards sound like I'm bragging but really they were not ones that the "in" crowd ever competed for. The popular girls headed by a girl named Dortha were cheerleaders, prom queens, or .... Fashion show Manager. That's right, I had stepped over the boundaries into their realm and they were enraged. From then on, I was not invited to any end-of-year parties or picnics that they held and they were the only ones who did. They even formed a "Susannah hater's club" and wrote insults all over my locker at school. One of my best friends, Kay, even refused to walk with me to school at first for fear of being jeered out by these popular girls and their friends. I cried all of the time. My mother tried to console me by telling me that they would get over it. Maybe so, but I didn't think that I would.

All of my family went out of their way to make me feel better. My other aunt – Maggie – was known all over town as the best cook. She could whip up the absolute most delicious dish in the blink of an eye – AND in ANY quantity. It was uncanny! Serious! Once when I was a little girl, me and my cousins were playing tea party when Aunt Maggie came into the kitchen and baked 3 small pies instantly. I remember because mine was lemon meringue – my favorite. They were tiny pies with tiny meringues – perfect. Another time much later, she stopped by just as my mom's best friend, June, from high school arrived with her family unexpectedly. Aunt

Maggie simply went into the kitchen and within a short time, laid the table with plates and silver, and served the most delicious meal in all of the right proportions and it was to die for. She even remembered to make June's portion without the ingredient that she was allergic to. We hadn't even seen June for 5 years! Aunt Maggie was like that. She just knew. Whereas Aunt Katy had "the touch" for design and sewing – Aunt Maggie had "the touch" for cooking. During that summer, Aunt Maggie made me all kinds of treats and whether I was at her house with my cousins or at church or hanging out at home, Aunt Maggie always had a glass of nectar all iced up with sliced oranges for me. We all called her special iced tea, nectar, because, as my dad used to say: "It is the drink of the Gods!"

All three sisters could cook and sew like artists but each had their own specialty. Of the three sisters, my mom had been the tom boy in the family. She could play almost any game with vigor and skill and she was very hard to beat. My friends loved her and were always challenging her to a new game.

As a girl, she had been on a traveling girls' softball team as a pitcher. Stories go that she had a mean arm and once it was reported in the paper that balls left her hand like "white lightning." My uncle always teased her and called her white lightning. But she was good at most sports. She and my dad loved to go to the park early morning just before the sun was up in the summer and play tennis before he went to his filling station to work the rest of the day. They slammed the ball back and forth and daddy really had to work to get the best of her. She also loved to play golf, bowl, and well.....almost everything that was competitive. In just regular life, she was very quiet – almost shy and a very good wife and mother. Me? As I said before, I could sew and design well for my age. Later, I learned how to cook. But my special gift, if you want to call it that, was that I could play the

piano. I loved it and I spent hours playing it. In fact, my parents loved to hear me play so much that I could get out of all chores, including drying the dishes, by just sitting down and playing the piano for them. My dad would push back the recliner, close his eyes and hum along. “Pure enchantment,” he would murmur. “Pure enchantment.” Music rolled off my fingers effortlessly, but there was one piece that was all mine. I had sat down one afternoon and it just almost played itself. That was the one that daddy called Enchantment. I always wanted to please my mother by being good at softball but every time I got up to bat, my teammates would groan. Later, my sister came along and she was good so it all worked out. We all seemed to have our own thing.

Well, all that summer, I was taunted relentlessly by Dorthea and her gang. They toilet papered my yard, called me on the phone singing some stupid song, and wrote stuff on my sidewalk. I had quit crying except once in a while. The thing was, I have friends – very good ones who stuck by me, but both of them were either gone or busy. Sandy, a short curly-headed prankster type was gone to her grandparent’s farm for the summer, Judy had to babysit her brother’s baby and Kay, whom, I had relegated to spot 27 on my friend list, vacillated between me and Dorthea and her gang and once in a while would “do me a favor” and call me up. So the summer seemed to stretch forever. I was and still am a people-person and living without friends made the days very lonely for me. Just when I thought I would pop my cork, Essie came into my life. The sun came out. Birds starting singing. A rainbow.....well not really, but you get what I mean.



Essie and I became very best friends immediately. She and her mom, Loreena, had moved into Miss Clara's house down on the corner after she died in the spring. Miss Clara had been a kind little lady who had never married and had retired years before as a kindergarten teacher. It was so wonderful to visit her because her home was filled with knickknacks and overstuffed chairs. Her checkered curtains were always pulled back to let the sun in and her canary whistled the most cheerful tune all day long. Miss Clara would let me play her beautiful old grand piano whenever I visited. Sometimes she would ask me to play my special piece, Enchantment and of course I would. Then we would sit on her settee and eat soft and delicious sugar cookies and drink iced tea in the summer and hot tea with lemon in the winter. Her yard was filled with flowers of all species and swarming with butterflies. In the spring, about the time I was chosen manager of the fashion show, Miss Clara suddenly died. I heard the neighbor who found her say to another neighbor, "If you asked me, she died of fright – you should have seen her – eyes bugged out and her hair, well that was the weirdest part – it was standing on end.

In the paper, it just said that she died of "natural causes". After all, Miss Clara was 82 years old. Her one sister came and sold her house leaving all of her things inside. Yeah, that summer was not just a little bad....it was really, really bad. But now, Miss Clara's house was filled up again and so was my life.

It wasn't long before Essie invited me over to meet her mother. It was the same house but so different. For one thing, all of the flowers were gone and replaced with rocks and there were no butterflies anywhere. Inside, it was amazing. The doors were hanging with crystal beads that made a tinkling sound almost like distant voices. Bamboo shades covered the windows giving the rooms a dusky look. Huge ferns and ceiling fans seemed

to whisper. A large green parrot sat on a perch where the canary used to hang in his cage and would squawk “Get out” whenever I walked up. The carpets had been pulled up and stacked outside leaving the wooden floors to creak when you walked across it. Even with these small sounds, the place seemed very quiet.

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*The doors were hanging with crystal beads that made a tinkling sound — almost like distant voices.*

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I remember the first time I ever saw Loreena. She came whishing through the beaded curtains from somewhere in the back of the house. Her long red hair was thick and unruly and bound up with cords. A long gauzy skirt swirled about her ankles topped by a billowing blouse and about a million beaded chains. Long feathered earrings dangled from her pierced ears and her face – WOW. It is hard to describe. Her eyes appeared to be yellow – serious! She had cat eyes with heavy made up eyes and cheeks. Gold and jeweled rings filled every finger and she danced around the room with a long taper lighting zillions of candles. Her voice was breathy and sweet and her teeth were the only white objects in the room. She seemed overjoyed to meet me and took my hands in hers and drew me over to the table. “Let me get a good look at you my sweet,” she said.

She looked me over top to bottom even turning me about. “Aw Essie....she is absolutely perfect!”

“Perfect for what,” I asked her.

“Perfect for Essie,” she replied.

“Come, come Helia, you must meet Susannah.” And in walked a huge gray cat who made circles around me before stopping and staring up at me. Her eyes were brilliant green.

“Ohhh, she likes you too!”

“Sit here by me, my sweet and have some tea, won’t you?” Sitting there in the darkened room surrounded by the sounds and watching the flicker of the candle on the table was terrifying and it was wonderful. I sipped the pungent tea – bitter – but somehow good – and knew at once that mom would disapprove of the whole setup. For one thing, only trashy girls had pierced ears according to her! As the afternoon wore on, it was like being in a dream – everything seemed so unreal. I was startled out of my reverie when out of the cosmos came my mother’s voice calling me to dinner. One rule at our house: Don’t be late for dinner.

Later, my mom questioned me about Essie’s family and I told her all about it..... with some deviations from the truth of course. I knew if she knew the whole story, there was a chance – a good one - that she would block me from going back. It was hard to do because I am a lousy liar and especially to my mom. I felt so badly about it that I couldn’t sleep. But finally it came to me right before my alarm rang, that what I needed was something that was just mine – after all, I was starting high school in a few weeks. And feeling good about that, I jumped out of bed and got ready for school. That, I guess, was my first step towards what was to come.

Although, I invited Essie to my house a lot, very soon, it just seemed like we were spending more time at hers. One afternoon, Loreena showed me her beautiful Tarot cards. She let me shuffle them and feel them in my hands and then she laid them out on the table and just from “reading what the cards were telling her, she began to tell me things about myself stretching clear back to the day I was born. I was absolutely shocked by the whole thing. I whispered to Essie, “Is your mom a witch?”

“Oh, yes,” she whispered back. It was our little joke.



Summer skidded to a stop and it was time to go back to school. Sandy and Judy were back and I couldn't wait to introduce them to Essie and her mom. “But I thought there were four of you”, her mother said when I presented my friends to her.

“Oh, you must mean Kay,” I said. She's been gone for a while, I lied. How did she know about Kay, I wondered. I probably mentioned her sometime, I guessed.

“Oh well, no matter, come, have some tea my sweets.” And with that we all sipped the bitter tea and talked the afternoon away. Occasionally the parrot would squawk, “Get out!” And we would squeal with laughter and keep on with our little tea party.

Kay eventually caved in and with much apology, joined us and we were all a happy group again. But not for long. One night I was awakened by the blast of sirens. Mom and Dad and I and the baby stood in our pajamas on

our front porch watching the flames reaching clear to the clouds downtown beyond our neighborhood. The frantic efforts of the firemen weren't enough and Kay's father's little hardware store burned clear to the ground. After that, Kay's mom had to go back to work so Kay had to stay home and babysit after school. It was very sad plus now Kay couldn't join us.

But we all walked to school on the first day with our arms looped through the others. All of us except Essie because she was home-schooled. But we all rushed straight to her house when school let out to bring her up on all the latest gossip. The biggest news was about Dorthea and her two little toadies. On the first day of school, as I walked into English class, I heard Dorthea say, Well, isn't this just great – Miss Wormy (short for bookworm) is in here with us!" I dropped my eyes like I always did.

Just then from the back of the room, a boy jeered, "Look who's talkin – Miss Zit Face herself!" I raised my head and looked to see who he was talking about. Dorthea and her gang were absolutely covered with sores of all shapes and colors all over their faces. Dorthea flung herself sobbing out of the room. Her two friends would have done the same but Miss Thomas gave them the stare and they sat back down. All day people were laughing about this but I couldn't help but feel a little bit sorry. After school when I told the story to everyone around Loreena's table while we were sipping our tea, she let out the loudest cackle – it got us all to laughing. "It serves them right!" she said. And suddenly I felt the same way.

School and our routine of running over to Essies seemed to go about the same everyday. Sandy was chosen to be on the cheer squad so she had to go to practice and Judy's mom started making her do her homework first so they both only came once in a while. As for me, I was having trouble keeping my mind on my school work and my parents were not happy when

they found out a parent-teacher conference that my grades had dropped off horribly. “What is the matter with you?” My mother demanded, on the walk home. “Have you lost your marbles? You have always been a straight A student. And what about Kayettes? You couldn’t wait to be a part of that. Your dad and I spent a lot of the money for that uniform?” Kayettes was a special group of girls who cheered with the cheerleaders and got to go to all of the out of town games on the bus. “What about it? I thought. It’s stupid.

“No more socializing after school young lady” My father said. “Oh, and by the way, your piano recital is coming up and I haven’t heard you play in weeks. What has happened to you?”

To tell the truth, I couldn’t tell you. I just felt different about things. The piano had always been the love of my life. One day while at Essie’s, I noticed that Miss Clara’s piano had been shoved in the little sitting room through some double doors and covered with a blanket. This little room had always been a special treat to visit when Miss Clara lived here because it was filled with music boxes and crystal sun catchers. The rainbow colors were always ablaze in there – magical. But now, the shades were drawn, the sun catchers were piled in the corner and who knows where the music boxes were stored? I crept into the room when Essie and her mom were in the back of the house doing something and carefully pulled back the cover on the old Steinway and touched the beautiful mahogany surface. “STOP THAT, STOP THAT NOW!!!!” Loreena screeched so shrilly that I felt as if I had been stabbed with a dagger.

“Whaaaaa???” I stammered in total fright.

“GET AWAY FROM THAT FILTHY THING NOW!” I backed away and when I bumped into the wall, I started and scuttled back into the front room. With that she flung herself around causing the rustling of her skirts to extinguish all of the candles and then disappeared through the tinkling beaded curtains. It almost seemed as if the beads crashing together were screaming. The parrot squawked, “GET OUT, GET OUT!”

Essie took my arm and steered me toward the porch whispering softly in my ear, “Mom hates music so badly that she tried to burn that piano when we first moved in, but for some reason, it just won’t burn. You better go now. See you tomorrow.” I was shaken pretty badly and after that, I tried to do everything like Essie so that I would still belong. I also didn’t much want to touch my piano and it wasn’t long before I was taken off of the accompanist list at school.

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*Mom hates music so badly that she tried to burn that piano when we first moved in — but for some reason, it just won’t burn.*

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Things were going badly at home. My parents hardly spoke to me at the dinner table – even my dog Mattie shied away from me with her tail between her legs. Once I even heard her whine and saw her shake from under a chair as if I would ever hurt her!! I knew it was all my fault, but I couldn’t seem to make it right. Once I awoke from a bad dream and thought I heard Essie’s voice begging me to come over. But, I just laid there staring at the ceiling. The next morning, I woke up late and rushed in to science class right before the bell. Mr. Stone was passing out the exam – egad! I had forgotten all about it. I hated science right then and I hated Mr.

Stone. He was downright mean to me and I had complained loud and clear to Loreena and Essie. At the end of the week, Mr. Stone asked me to stay after class. He beckoned me to come up to his desk and in a stern voice said, “Susannah, you are failing this class. You have not handed in your assignments, you have not completed your lab book, and now you have failed the exam. I am sure your parents are going to be so ashamed of you!” And with that he stuck my text in the file cabinet beside his desk and slammed the door with a bang. “Now, get out – I can’t stand the sight of you right now!”

All of the way home, I tried to think of how to explain my failure to my parents. I brought it up when I stopped by Essies. Loreena was outraged, “What do you mean – your failure? This is all Mr. Stone’s fault – he should have been better at teaching it!!!” She’s right, I thought. He is a terrible teacher! And with that I had another cup of tea. My parents did not agree with me however. My mom went right to the phone and dialed the school. But she got a busy signal. There had been an explosion in the science lab. Mr. Stone had been seriously injured and the whole room was gutted. The odd thing was – nothing else in the building was hurt. My dreams that night were soon nightmares. In my dreams, Miss Clara kept trying to tell me something but I couldn’t hear her over a whirl of beaded curtains.

On Monday, we had a substitute science teacher, Miss Omen. She was short and plump with a little bow mouth. “Good morning students, she said. “I am sorry to report that your teacher will not be back this semester if ever and also that all of your papers as well as the grade book have been destroyed. So, we will have to start over from scratch!” As horrible as it was about Mr. Stone, I couldn’t help but be happy about starting over.

Halloween was coming. Our whole neighborhood was covered in jack o'lanterns.

Essie announced that she was having a Halloween party and that all of us were invited to come. Judy and Sandy and I were too old to go trick or treating but we planned to walk around with our little brothers and sisters and mooch some treats along the way just the same. We had not seen much of each other all semester which was very odd. I kind of wondered if they had heard about my grades. All of the parents on the block got into the holiday spirit wearing costumes and getting together. It was so much fun! Essie and Loreena kept me guessing about all of the secret and scary things that they were planning. There was now a big black pot in the middle of the living room. It sat on a pedestal over a burner like a cauldron. Everything was draped in black and even the candles were black. "Stop in early and get a preview," Essie said with a wink. So I did.

Something was different about the house, I remember thinking back. When I walked up to the door to ring the bell, I was whooshed into the room. I mean it, that's what it felt like. And dark – the room was pitch dark. All of the candles lit at once and the fire under the pot snorted into flame. And suddenly, there they were. Their faces seemed to float on air but I could soon see their silk clothing when my eyes became adjusted to the dark. Their voices seemed to come from miles away. "Susssssannnnnnnahhhhh-hh, welcome to our coven, my sweeeet.

We have been waiting just for you. Here, take my hand and touch the crystal ball." Mesmerized, I put my hand in hers and saw that she was guiding it towards one of Miss Clara's large crystals that was sitting on the

table. Just as my hand fingers brushed the glass, the front door slammed open and a powerful force knocked Loreena backwards and bent the flames of the candles over.



“GET AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!” Mom? Was that my mom? She sort of sounded like mom and she sort of looked like mom. She stood at the door, her hair standing straight out from her head, the gown that she had on blew back as though from a strong powerful wind. Her eyes were enflamed – they almost darted out of her head like darts. Behind her stood two other beings.....my aunts!!!

While I was trying to get my thoughts to make sense, a voice that sounded like it was miles behind me screeched, “OH NO BERTIE. SHE BELONGS TO ME NOW.” And with that a cold silver light was cast straight at my mother.

“Stop! I shouted, but my voice was lost in the din. What followed was something I will never forget for out of my mother’s hand shot a ball of ice blue fire just like white lightening. It struck Loreena in the neck throwing her back hard against the wall.

“You call yourself a witch?” my mom said with a sarcasm that cut to the bone. “You make real witches ashamed that you were ever born!” Loreena tried to hide behind Essie but to my amazement, Essie was no longer Essie. She was an old hag with green skin and a black pointed hat. Mom shouted, “Get out of my way Esmeralda! Your little creepy toad is not

worth saving. She reached her arm back and threw another firebolt straight at Essie but Essie batted it away and in one blink of an eye, she grabbed me by my hair and thrust my face toward the cauldron full of boiling tea.

“Leave us Bertie or your little girlie will be a worted toad forever and ever.”

“Magpie – now!” My mother spoke over her shoulder and Aunt Maggie was suddenly in front of the cauldron, a tinkle of bells, and the tea turned to nectar.

“Go ahead Esmeralda – have a taste, or are you afraid,” smiled Aunt Maggie.

A rustle of skirts and Loreena ran for the beaded curtain.

Again, my mother spoke with authority. “Katydid, Now!” And my aunt Katy pointed her needle finger and the beaded curtain wrapped themselves around Loreena – around and around, tighter and tighter until the beads popped off and only the strings bound her tight. “What have we here and what do I hear? Asked Aunt Katy and she pointed her needle finger again and a blue light drifted over and around all of the beaded curtains and people began to emerge from out of the light.

I was so amazed at what had happened that I had not been watching Esmeralda. I turned to find my mother contorted over a blade of light coming from Essy’s hand. An evil laugh filled the room, a stench followed that stuck in my throat and burned my eyes. My mother was trying to tell me something. I was frozen – please, please..... And then I heard her in my mind, and I raced into the little room, threw back the blanket and started

playing. Enchantment! The music soared around the room. Essie and Loreena were hardened into stones. The bamboo curtains zipped up and the evening light came in the windows. The parrot turned into Miss Clara who turned to me and said in her sweet little voice, “I told you to get out but you just wouldn’t.” The cat, Helia, turned into the canary. My mother swept the room with her lightening and all of the people began to cheer. Aunt Maggie turned to the crowd and pointed to Esmeralda and Loreena. “I really hate to spoil a good nector, but.....here goes.” The crowd dropped them into the pot and the liquid was poured down the drain. Their screams echoed through the pipes and then all was silent.

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*I raced into the little room, threw back the blanket, and started playing. Enchantment! The music soared around the room — and Essie and Loreena were hardened into stones.*

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“Don’t worry about them Bertie, I will take care of everything. And Susannah, come and play my piano anytime you wish.”

I looked at my mom and my aunts and we walked out of the door. By the time we reached the sidewalk, they were back to normal and I was beginning to wonder if I had actually seen what I thought I did. Now, I wondered about all of the times that my mom always seemed to show up at the right time. What about the time when the dog was chasing me and stopped snarling and started whining. What about....

“Hey, we better step on it – we don’t want to be late for dinner!” And my mother put her arm around my shoulder and we hurried home. After all, it was Halloween- the scariest night of the year!

Remember my sweets, everything isn’t what it seems.....evil exists so beware. Heh Heh! Indeed it does.....but Good Magic is always close by.

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FINIS

FROM THE AUTHOR

*Happy Halloween!*

*I love you*

*Mom*

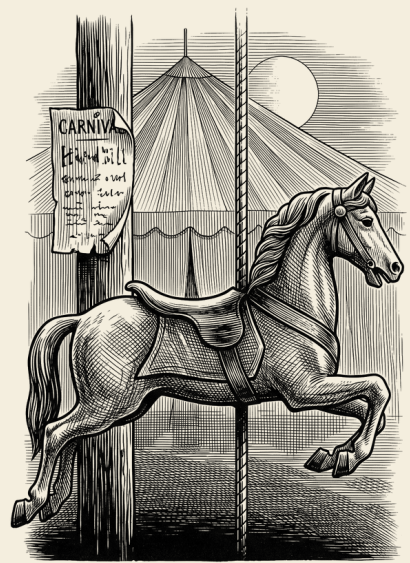


THE PIDDLETON TALES

# THE CARNIVAL

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, October 2014*



Here they come!!! Yay!!! Down the street marched the Jester band and right in the middle of the marching genies came the big brass gong being carried by two giants in flowing black robes with shining gold trims and beads. And the Master of the band, wielding the large mallet was “The Striker” in his flowing purple, red, and gold robes and turban and burgundy slippers swinging along with that familiar stride. His long gray beard flowing out behind him in the breeze, he brought back his large muscled arm and with a mighty swing, he struck the big gong and out of the brass gong came a deep and resonating BOOM that traveled in waves through the air hitting the ear drums of everyone in the crowd before the sound moved out into space. Loud cheers from the crowd always roared as an aftershock. Chills ran up my spine as I watch the band advance. They always did.

Okay reader, you heard me say ‘familiar’ right? Get this: “The Striker” is MY DAD!!! Yep, that’s right. My family has been members of The Secret Society of Guardians for centuries. True, it may be a secret society but literally everybody in my town belongs to it. The rule book says that you have to be related to somebody who is a member in order to belong and to wear the sacred adornments and in Piddleton, you usually are – even if it was your 3rd cousin twice removed who was the son of the 2nd wife of..... well you get it. My grandfather Albert who is daddy’s dad, is the Honorable Grand Wizard of the whole Secret Society and my grandmother Gracie (this one doesn’t let us grandkids call her “grandMa”) is the Grand Matron of the Eastern Women of Mysteries. The girl’s branch is called the Morningstar Girls so naturally all of my girl cousins and I belong. You might say that our family is royalty in a sense. Our moms have loads of stories about their days in the Morningstar’s. The boys belong to The Order of the Knights. To make it more confusing to you the reader, the Jester Band – the one that was fast coming towards us right that minute, is a part of the division of the

Guards (short for Temple guards) that is called the Jesters. This division is famous worldwide for the charitable work that they do – especially for children. They are also responsible for providing the light heartedness to the world – hence the name: Jesters. There is a sacred code that we all strive to live by. It is to try to have:

1. Courage
2. Wisdom
3. Compassion
4. Discipline and intelligence in all things.
5. Sacrifice

The Jesters were now upon us and with a wink aimed directly at me, the Striker gave a nod and BOOM, the gong sounded deep and full!!! A moment and then the cheer!

They are always the main attraction in every parade wherever they may be.

Molly, Judy, and Sandy, my best friends and I were miles ahead of them earlier that day on our high school jazz band float. We are all members. We had jumped off when our float reached the end of the parade and dashed back up Main Street to squeeze into the front of the crowd standing by the curb to watch the Arabian band come down the street in all of its glory. After it passed us by and the gong had sounded its boom, we pushed back through the throng and raced down to the spot beside Dottie's Drugstore

where daddy's old blue Chevy pickup was parked. I jumped behind the wheel and gunned the motor; everyone piled into the back and off we went to bring up the rear with all of the others in their pickups. We had spent all morning decorating it and now with a load of friends hanging out of the windows and crowded into the back, and paper streamers and balloons blowing wildly in the wind, we headed up Main Street waving our flags and ringing our bells but most of all shouting to the crowd and throwing candy to the kids. This marked the beginning of the end of summer each year followed by the opening day of the carnival that had come to town in the middle of the night. School was closed that Friday to start the week of the carnival and excitement filled the air. The whole town had been getting ready for weeks. It was here and we were so ready.

The Benny and Bozo Carnival Circus Extravaganza came every year and stayed a whole week. It was dirty, it was cheap, and gaudy and we loved it! It had pulled into town last night and we passed it by on our way back to my house. "Look, cried someone in the truck bed, "there's the first food trailer loaded with greasy stuff. Yay!!!And the main tent is set up!" A fall breeze had come up and it was starting to feel more cold than cool and smell like fall as we pulled into my driveway. Mom was waiting by the door. She stepped outside, held the door open, and beckoned everyone inside.

Everyone jumped out of the truck and filed into the open door and to our surprise, the familyroom was filled with tables covered in red checked table cloths, and bowls of crackers and pickles. Colored balloons floated and confetti was scattered throughout the room as the aroma of chili and hot apple cidar wafted through the air. A fire was burning in the fireplace and the logs were crackling.

My mom greeted everyone with, “Hey everybody! Find a chair and let’s eat!” There was a rustle of chairs being pulled out and the buzzing of happy voices as everyone found a place to sit at one of the tables. Aunt Katy came out with pitchers of nectar, a fruity drink created by my grandmother with her secret recipe. Aunt Maggie, known to be one of the best cooks in the county, followed with steaming bowls of her famous chili. My mom, dad and two aunts buzzed around the room refilling bowls and cups until we were all so full we were about to pop.

It was then that one of the girls stood up and announced, “We’ve got to get going if we are going to be ready for the Morningstar Girl’s Fall dance!” Yowza!

Mom called out, “Don’t worry about the dishes girls, we will take care of it – now off you go!” Tonight was one of the three Morningstar Girl’s dances of the year. They were the only times that girls could actually ASK THE BOYS!! That’s right, I am not kidding! We could even CALL THEM ON THE PHONE if we had to. Serious!! Yikes! I had asked a couple of boys but they already had dates so I finally settled on Richard, this boy I’ve known forever. He’s a lousy dancer and kind of nerdy, but he is kind of funny PLUS he said yes.

Mom and my aunts had made my dress. I would put my drawing of the dress I wanted to wear to the dance on my Aunt Katy’s drawing board in her beautiful studio on Monday and it would be hanging there waiting for me on Friday and it would fit perfectly and be the absolute color that I had chosen in my head.

Honest!! Nobody can believe it but it's true. We are a family of seamstresses or like me and Janie, my little sis, seamstresses in the making – so much fun – but they are the best there is – my mom and aunts but especially Aunt Katy. “ She has magic in her fingers.” That's what I heard one of her customers say to another lady once. If they only knew.....ha! I'll fill you in on this later.

I jumped in the shower and rolled my hair on big fat rollers. Then I sat under my big hairdryer and painted my nails. Ooolala! I was going to pick my date up in Baby, my awesome coupe. I got her over the summer from my parents and daddy painted her bright blue. Well, Richard had this thing about a girl picking him up so he walked over to my house. I have to say Richard looked cool – better than I thought he would. And so did I. Mom took our pictures and then we all piled in my folk's car and we were off!! Right, I would have been allowed to pick Richard up in Baby, but going to the dance? We still had to have parents take us. It was a great dance. All of the moms and dads were there at the treat table – you never wanted to look at them or they would smile real big or grimace and shake their heads – something embarrassing. Anyway, everybody was there and the band was really hitting all the good notes and playing some rock and roll that was to the moon. We danced to Bubba and his Blue Notes. Of course, we took off our shoes to dance towards the end – those pointed toes were killers! And throughout the evening, we all gathered in the little girl's room to dish the dirt. Sandy, one of my best friends, actually was hoping to get kissed by Ernie, tonight. Ernie wasn't actually a student at our school or even lived in our town. Sandy had met him the night before just hanging around at Dottie's Drug Store and had asked him to the dance and he said yes. It was exciting that his parents were carneys so we all wanted to meet him of course. Anyway, we didn't get to because he seemed to disappear from the hall just after the music began.

Judy was having an overnight after the dance. Her family had a house with a basement and they had made the coolest room out of it. They were calling it a “rec room” short for recreation room, get it? They had an old couch and some chairs down there, just like a regular room and we were all getting to sleep on our bedrolls there overnight. It was going to be a blast! We all rushed home to change and then our parents dropped us off in front of Judy’s place. Holy Cow! There were tons of girls going in the side door and down the stairs. I couldn’t wait to get inside so I could save my space. Judy’s parents got us settled and then they left and went down the street to play cards with some of their neighbors. It had turned off cold by the time we got there – already 10:30 pm if you can believe it – and it was a little drafty in the basement.

Something happened that night in the basement that changed things for me. I keep going back in my mind trying to understand it but it is always the same. We were all huddled in our blankets telling ghost stories and eating popcorn and getting plenty scared when there was a knock at the side door at the top of the stairs. Everyone let out a squeal. When we calmed down, I suddenly knew exactly who it was. In my mind’s eye, there was a guy in a squashed hat that said Pizzeria and he was holding a stack of pizzas that were so tall, they almost covered his eyes. AND, it was slightly raining. I remember it as clear as day. Everybody squealed and somebody, I think it was Judy, crept over to the stairway to look up and then I realized that everyone else actually did not know who it was. So I spoke up and from then on, I was in trouble. This is what I said: “Hey, that’s just the pizzeria guy trying to deliver some pizzas.” Everything suddenly went still and everybody turned and stared in horror at me. “What? I’m not kidding,” I said. “Go up and see for yourselves.” What’s the big deal, I thought to

myself. Judy pushed by everybody and crept up the stairs and opened the door. Sure enough! Just like I said – there stood this little twerpy pizzeria guy getting wet standing in the rain. Turns out, he had the wrong address.

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*Something happenea wai night in the basement  
that changed things for me. I keep thinking back on  
it.*

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Judy came back down and whispered to me, “Come in the furnace room with me.” Okay, sure. What’s the matter? I wondered. “How did you know it was the pizzeria guy?” She asked.

And I said (and I am so so sorry that I did), “I saw him.”

“How? You were sitting right in front of me!” She sounded like she didn’t believe me...and a little touchy too.

“He was right here (touching my forehead with the back of my hand). You know, in my mind’s eye.” Geeze, how else are you supposed to describe it? “What’s the big deal Judy?

“I’m calling my mother!”

“Why?”

“This is weird! You’re lying!” That was like socking me in the face. Nobody had ever said that to me.

She turned around before I could even think of something to say and stalked back into the rec room. Everybody suddenly got quiet and sort of moved away from me like I had cooties or something. Some of them started whispering and glancing at me. Then Sandy and Mollie both came over and took my arm. “What’s the matter with everyone,” I asked them.

“They can’t figure out how you knew who it was.”

“It was just the PIZZARIA MAN!” I shouted. Now I was mad.

“Okay, okay, calm down,” Both of them patted my arms.

Well, it wasn’t very long before Mrs. Barkman, Judy’s mom, came home and called me upstairs. I heard everyone smirking behind me as I walked up the stairs. I looked down at them but Sandy had her finger on her lips to shush me as she shook her head. “Come and sit down Susannah and tell me what happened,” Mrs. Barkman said in a phony nice voice. I did. It didn’t help anything.

“Susannah, I can’t believe you would do such a thing. It is so out of character. What got into you? Why did you order the pizzas?” Now she was angry and her voice was shrill.

“What? Pizzas? Do you think that I ordered pizzas? Why would I do that? How could I?” I was dumbfounded. “I never left the basement. I don’t even know where your phone is.” It was then that I started to cry – which made me angry at myself.

Mr. Barkman stuck his head around the corner, “Hey Joyce, ease up. Pizzeria says that their man took a wrong turn and went to our house by mistake. Susannah did not order any pizzas.”

“That still doesn’t explain how she knew he was here. Something’s fishy about this. Okay, I need to put my feet up.” And she went into the other room rubbing her forehead, leaving me sitting there. Misty, their cocker spaniel came up and licked me on the cheek.

I got up and headed for the stairs. That’s when I noticed that the side door where the pizzeria guy had been standing was ajar. I started to close it and then for some reason, I decided to open it further and look outside. I stuck my head out and suddenly I felt a push from behind and I was out on the stoop. The door slammed behind me. I looked back through the window in the door. Somebody’s shadow passed over the window and vanished. Who would do this to me? The wind came up and the rain came down harder as I stood there in my pj’s and I was freezing wet. I knocked on the window over and over but nobody came. I ran around to the front door and rang the bell but it must have been broken because I couldn’t hear it ring inside. Nobody came to the door. By this time I was getting scared. Shivering, I crouched down by a basement window and pounded on the glass. I could see the girls laughing together in the basement but nobody seemed to hear me tapping. My hands and bare feet were numb. The wind or something slammed me hard against the house and knocked the wind out of me. “Help! Somebody help me!!!” What was I going to do? Judy’s house was the only one on a busy street filled with shops. All of their windows were dark – it was after midnight. I looked around at the empty streets – no place to run. I ran around the house again, on my numb, wet feet. This time I pushed on the side door as hard as I could. But it was closed tight. And then suddenly it popped open. But there was no body there

except Misty, the dog. No way she could open the door. I am losing it. I stumbled through the door and went down the stairs. One small light was still on next to the floor and most of the girls were already asleep on their bedrolls. Judy looked up at me. Before I could say anything, she said “I know. Mom told me. You didn’t order the pizza. I’m sorry I got so mad Susannah, but still. It’s pretty weird – you know - like about knowing who it was and all and then not telling us.”

“Judy, I’ve been locked outside pounding on the door. Why didn’t you let me in?” My face and hands and feet were numb and I couldn’t stop shaking.

“Really? I thought you were over there in your bed roll.” And she snuggled down in hers and pulled the covers over her face. Sandy and Molly were already sleeping. And I then made the next mistake – or maybe not, now that I think about it. I went into the bathroom and ran scalding hot water on my hands trying to get the feeling back. It didn’t work. Feeling miserable and wanting to cry real badly, I stumbled back into the darkened room of sleeping girls and crawled into my bedroll. I stared at the ceiling trying to remember exactly everything that had just happened. Why was everybody mad at me? There was something that I was missing but I just couldn’t catch it. And then I drifted off dreaming of someone calling my name. His eyes looked familiar.

A cold gray morning and I woke up hurting all over – especially my hands that were covered in large blisters from the scalding water of last night (that was the bad mistake). Everyone was gathered around the dining room table eating doughnuts and drinking hot chocolate but I couldn’t wait for mom to pick me up. Nothing sounded good. I was sick in more ways than one.

Mom was quiet on the way home in the Spitfire (that's my dad's name for our 57 Dodge). But I didn't mind. I was trying to think how to tell her about last night but right now, I just wanted to go to bed. As soon as we walked in the back door, she helped me with my stuff and told me to go straight to bed and she would wake me up for lunch. Gladly! My dreams were all weird. In one of them my cat Prissy kept trying to tell me something but I couldn't quite hear her. In another one, I was falling into a pit and when I woke up, I was covered with sweat. Off in the distance, I heard my mom say to my dad, "Will, I think her fever has broken." And then I fell back to sleep. It was late afternoon when I finally got up and felt rested. In fact, I felt good as I showered and dressed.

"Well look at sleepy head," my mom called out as I walked into the kitchen.

"What's cooking? I asked.

"Vegetable soup and corn bread," she said. "Here have a brownie to tide you over."

"Mom, a strange thing happened last night at Judy's and...."

"I know," Mrs. Brantley called already. Oh, oh.

"I don't know why they didn't believe me," I said. "Mrs. Brantley even said that she thought that I had ordered the pizza! And then I got locked out in the rain and almost froze to death but..."

"Susannah, tell me what the pizzeria man looked like."

“Mom! Don’t you believe me? Look at my hands – I got locked out and nobody would let me in!” That’s the good part of the mistake – my blistered hands proved I was telling the truth. Right? My dad put his hands around my shoulders and gave me a hug.

“There’s no question that we believe you Susannah. We just thought you might want to talk about it. Tell you what, why don’t you take some brownies down to Miss Clara and you will just have time before dinner to sit down and have a nice chat. She’s been missing you. We will talk more about it when you get home.”

Miss Clara is a sweet and wise 80 plus year old lady that lives in a little cottage down on the corner with her cat Miss Pixie and her parrot Happy AND best of all, her grand piano. I love to play on those wonderful ivory keys. Music always sounds better – almost like it’s enchanted there in her little parlor. Her house is so cozy with the sweetest fragrance that seems to float in the air. Miss Clara used to be a teacher and she has a way about her that brings out the best in everybody. I thought about how I would bring up the subject of last night as I kicked through the leaves on my way down the street under the falling leaves of the tree tunnel. Miss Clara has taught me so much more than how to play the piano even though, that is my very favorite thing to do. She was captured by witches a couple of years ago and that’s how I learned that there was more to things than I thought. She was almost killed by them and still the very next day after, she acted as though it had never even happened. Last year when our town experienced a strange occurrence with a fiddler, Miss Clara tried to warn me in advance, I can see that now, by telling me the legend of the fiddler and loaning me a mysterious little tattered book. I didn’t get it until later. She would be the one to ask for advice about what happened last night at Judy’s overnight, I thought, I won’t have to worry about bringing it up. The sun was hovering

above the horizon as I walked up onto her porch and, just as always, the moment I reached out to push her bell, but before I did, the door swung open and there she was and all at once, I knew that everything was going to be all right.

“You’re just in time for a cup of tea with lemon,” she said as she steered me toward the soft flowered chintz sofa. I could hear her canary, Sweetie, singing a lovely melody on his golden perch by the window. I handed her my plate of brownies and she looked so pleased as she took it into her bright little kitchen and placed them in the cupboard by the sink.

“Okay, now sugar lump,” she always calls me that - “tell me all about the Pizzeria man.” I told her all about it- the whole story- and before I knew it, big fat hot tears were rolling down my cheeks and dripping off my chin. It seemed like I couldn’t stop the sobs boiling up from my chest and then they finally calmed down to hiccups. And then out of the blue, she asked “Do you remember Lizaba’s grandmother?”

“Lizaba’s grandma?” What was this about? “Why, what made you think of her?”

“Well, you see, my sweet, I want you to think back in time for a moment. But first, know this: Lizaba’s grandmother died when Dorothy was 10 years old.” Lizaba was my friend who used to live across the street when we were little. Dorothy was her mom. They had moved away but we still got to see each when they came back to Piddleton for a visit.

I could remember meeting her on the day that I went over to see Lizaba but my friend wasn’t home that day. So I stayed and followed Dorothy, her mom, around the back yard while she hung the clothes on the

line. Mom and Daddy and I had been to the movies the night before and so, for some reason, I felt like telling her the whole story of that movie. When she was out of clothes in her basket, Dorothy had gone back in the house that day. I could just see her in my mind's eye going down the stairs to the basement to finish the laundry and I remembered that I had followed her down, chatting away at my story. An old lady with a shawl around her shoulders sat rocking in a wooden rocking chair down there by the stairs. I thought she was Lizaba's grandmother. She had the sweetest smile on her face. But I do remember that I thought it was kind of strange that she was sitting down there in the dark cellar with the laundry tubs. Dorothy didn't even speak to her, I remember. The lady seemed to be trying to tell me something and so I leaned close. But just then, Dorothy said, "Susannah, that was your mother on the phone. She wants you to come on home. But thanks for telling me about the movie," she said with that sweet twinkly laugh of hers. I loved Dorothy. I told her good-bye and I waved goodbye to Lizaba's grandma and scampered up the stairs and home.

That night at the dinner table, I remembered, my mom and daddy had that look on their faces that they thought I had done something cute or funny. I remember mom saying something about me 'talking Dorothy's ears off' telling her about the movie until she had to call mom and ask her to call me home. I told her about following Dorothy around under the hanging clothes in the sunlight but I thought that she liked hearing about the movie. Hmmm?? Oh and then I told them how I had gone downstairs and talked to Lizaba's grandmother. And then they both got very still and white which was odd. Had I done something wrong?

"She was so nice – she liked talking to me," I explained to them, thinking maybe they thought I had been bothering her. But I hadn't. I knew I hadn't. She had smiled at me with such a kind look as she gently

rocked. She looked very happy to see me. My dad started asking me about her and my mom just listened with that same look on her face. There wasn't much to tell – she was just rocking there, making hardly any noise and she was trying to tell me something but I could barely hear her whisper. I had leaned in twice; I remember now, but could only feel her breath on my cheek and the slightest sound from her lips. Well, I don't remember ever talking about that again. So why was Miss Clara bringing that up now?

I looked up into Miss Clara's face. "So, she died?"

"Yes," she said gently.

"When Lizaba was 10?"

"No, when Dorothy, Lizaba's mom was 10."

"Okay – no! I saw her in the basement and Dorothy was grown up – way older than 10! Maybe it wasn't her," I reasoned.

"Susannah, you saw her, I'm sure. There in the basement. But if you saw Flo, she was a ghost." Miss Clara smiled her sweet smile and waited.

"Oh." My mind was whirling.

"Susannah, when you see something with your mind, it is better that you don't tell anybody about it – NO MATTER WHAT – do you understand?"

"So, was that what was happening with the pizza man, last night? He was dead?"

“No, he was there alright. But seeing him in your mind’s eye is just what I am talking about. You may know things before others – just like knowing who was at the door - but if you tell anyone, first of all, they won’t believe you.” Right, I found that out – “and then they will think that you are strange.” Right again! Always think very hard before you say anything out loud. This is very important. Do you think that you can keep it a secret just between you and me? You and me and your family?”

“Okay, how does this work exactly? I see dead people, serious? Creepy!”

“Susannah? I’m waiting for your answer.”

“NO. I mean YES. NO, I won’t tell and yes, I can keep a secret. Believe me I will never say anything ever again.”

“No. That’s going too far. Just remember, some things are best left unsaid. And this goes for everyone – not just you. Some things are dangerous for others to know. You MUST let nature work it’s course. Now let’s have some tea, shall we? The potatoes are finished boiling and your dinner is almost ready back at home.” I looked around the room. Everything looked the same and different all at the same time. The candles were glowing in the soft lamp light, the sun had set through the curtains and Happy was sleeping with her bill under her wing. But Miss Pixie who was curled up by the hearth seemingly dozing, blinked open her yellow eyes and looking directly into mine, winked and then went back to dozing. I looked into Miss Clara’s soft blue eyes and saw my mom with her masher vigorously making those delicious mashed potatoes – I could smell their wonderful aroma.

“What about my friends? I don’t think they knew about the pizza man. Judy acted really weird about it.”

“Your friends do not have the gift so this is one of reasons that you need to be extra careful. You will want to tell them but, it would certainly scare them and wouldn’t help them. Don’t share this with them for their sake. And, can you remember what the pizza man looked like?”

What’s with the pizza man? Mom asked the same question. “No, all I saw was this guy holding a stack of pizza boxes with his hat pulled down.”

“You better hurry before your dinner gets cold,” she said with her sweet smile.

So many questions bounced around in my head as I hurried through the dusk that night towards home: How will I know if something is real or not? What will happen if I make a mistake? How did I get this way? Who else is like this? Am I a witch like my mom and aunts? No, no. Surely not. Am I? So I can see dead people AND other stuff? No way! I made up my mind right then to not believe it.

My family were all sitting at the table waiting for me when I rushed into the dining room. Mom and dad gave each other a look and I knew they probably had seen Miss Clara and I sitting in her parlor as clearly as we had seen them here in the kitchen. And they probably sent me down there on purpose. So are we different? Who knew? For myself, I’ve always been pretty much normal – at least I thought I was. I put it out of my mind.

The next day was bright and sunny and promised to be a hot one. The rain and wind had vanished. Yippee!! Yesterday had been the day for judging quilts and goats and cakes and what not but today was the actual first day of the Benny and Bozo's Carnival Circus Extravaganza. The ribbon was cut by the mayor as the sun was breaking over the hills and we all went rushing in. What a glorious day! Yesterday's stuff faded away. Benny and Bozo are the two owners of the carnival circus. We always just say "carnival." Benny always wears a ringmaster's uniform and carries a long shiny black stick and Bozo is a clown with a white face and a big red frown painted on it. Nobody has ever seen him without his mask – not even when he's not at the fairgrounds. Benny and Bozo usually walked around the carnival grounds all day greeting the entire crowd except when they were performing with the circus. This year, however, Benny had taken ill and was resting in his trailer. So, until he got well, Bozo was covering the whole carnival and it seemed like everywhere you looked – there he was.

The carnival is arranged with a midway surrounded by a large area filled with all kinds of rides such as the Whiz bang, the Hammer, the Carousel, the Whirly Gig and the miniature train and tons more. There are vendors selling all kinds of delicious food like corn dogs and root beer and cotton candy. Carney's hawk games of chance and people line up to try their hand. Every year a lady carves a cow out of butter and a man swallows fire and divers dive from a tall ladder into a small tank of water. And that's not all: at the edge of the carnival grounds is where the giant circus tent is. This is the place where amazing circus acts take place every afternoon and evening. There are trapeze acts where ladies in beautiful costumes swing from the tent tops and leap to the catcher while everyone holds their breath; monkeys and poodles dance and spin while elephants lumber around the rings with glamorous riders on their backs; horses prance, clowns make everyone laugh and the man on the high wire walks close to death without a

net. Lions and tigers' pace in their cages until it is their turn to be turned loose into the big enclosed cage with their lion trainer. This is usually reserved for Friday night because we can sleep in on Saturday morning. And our families all go together. We all sit in the dusty tent and then spend hours talking about it with my friends, the Gaggles – that's what we call ourselves. On the other nights of the circus, we always sit out on Sandy's front porch on the way home each evening because she lives by the carnival grounds and it's on our way to our homes and also by the end of the day, we are all pretty worn out and need a break. Plus, her mom always has root beer and cookies ready for us to eat as we relive every single minute of the day until our curfew is up. And then we all leave and walk to our homes and into bed. After all, school starts at 8:00 each morning carnival or not and we can't be late. But it lets out at noon all week which is cool! The whole town goes wild all week. And most of the shops are closed by midafternoon. It seems like it is late summer when the carnival comes to town and it has turned into full blown fall by the time the carnival leaves town – all in the space of one week.

We ran all over the carnival on the first day, sticking together which was a rule that was pounded into our heads by our parents each and every day. We got to go without them but only if we stuck together. I remember that day of riding a new ride that spun us around until we stuck to the wall, of gorging ourselves on caramel apples and candy corn, and of watching the little lambs bounce around their moms in their pens and loads more. That evening we all lined up to see Merlyn the Mentalist and we made the cut by the guy at the door who was counting heads and got to go in. And then surprise! We were all chosen to go up on the stage and get hypnotized which was scary and wonderful. Merlyn hypnotized us and made us dance and fall asleep and basically act silly. He went around eyeing all of us on stage and then picked us Gaggles out of the group on stage and put us all into a deep

trance. Later, we all talked about it and we all had had the same “dream.” It felt like we were on a magic elevator going down through beautiful levels of rooms of different colors of blue, green, purple and finally white. Then we slid down a magic slide and out into the stars. It was amazing. Then POP! We all woke up. On the way out of the arena, I heard a noise and thought I saw Bozo crouching under the stands. What was he doing? Spying on someone? It creeped me out and when I told the gang, they felt the same. But our thoughts soon turned to the wonderful ride that we had all taken on the magic elevator and we talked about it all of the way home. It was such a wonderful feeling, warm and safe and completely rested. I even dreamt about it that night and so did everyone else. Same dream. Sorta weird.

Carnival week was the best time of the year. Every morning kids gathered in groups in the hallways to talk about what amazing things they had done the day before at the carnival. Lots of bragging about how many times you rode the roller coaster could be heard, or how sick you got on the Whirly Gig. Somebody always got kissed on the Boat House Ride or was chosen to go into the clown act during the circus. And then the bell would ring and everyone would scatter to their classrooms but the feeling in the air throughout the morning was electric and no work got done. Then the noon whistle was blown and for that week only, school was out for the day! Yay! Me and the rest of the Gaggles all had to go home and check in before we could go to the grounds and of course, we broke speed records as we raced home in our saddle oxfords and pleated skirts flapping in the breeze. Then we all gathered at Sandy’s house to make a plan for the day. Then we hurried off towards the carnival grounds. You could hear the lively sound of the circus calliope with the little puppet in his top hat and tux dancing his heart out. Two years ago, after my friend Kay’s dad’s hardware store burned down, this antique puppet was found in an old safe that had been buried in

the basement. The Carnival Circus' puppeteer, Alphonzo had purchased him and now here he was dancing for everyone to enjoy every day and night that the circus was in town. Sometimes we split up in order to wait in line at different rides and then the one who got to the front first would give a yell and we would all rush over and jump on the ride. Everybody did it so it wasn't as bad as you are thinking it was. And it was sort of breaking the 'split up' rule but not really because we could still see each other.

This day, I remember, Sandy was determined that we should all go to the Fortune Teller, Madame Mimi to find out when she was going to get kissed. Brother! Outside of Madame Mimi's little tent sat a black crow on a perch. He squawked at every passerby until they threw him a treat. Inside was the heady fragrance of incense, and candles. Soft pillows lined the walls and in the center was a tiny table covered with a thick shawl. Madame Mimi was dressed all in dazzling white robes covered in crystals that sparkled like diamonds. "Come girls and let Madame Mimi look into your eyes and tell you what wonderful things are about to happen in your lives." We were mesmerized. The candles sparked the crystals and in the thickness of the air, we all relaxed on the pillows. Madame Mimi pulled a golden rope and a beautiful crystal came down from the ceiling. It flashed and sparkled as though it was on fire. It was hard to look at but then it was hard to take your eyes off of it. It's hard to explain. It looked exactly like the one on Miss Clara's little round table. I couldn't wait to tell her about it. One by one, we took the chair across the table from her and offered her our palm. She told us a lot of other things about our lives that were very surprising and she told us some scary stuff too.

Judy was first and she was trembling as she sat down. Madame Mimi had many wonderful things to tell her. She was getting an A on her theme, she would be chosen to be the lead in the dance recital, she would soon

receive an award. And then she said, “Judy, my crystal tells me that you have recently hurt one of your best friends.” Judy nodded and glanced at me. “Aww but, I now see that she has forgiven you.” (Oh. Really?). “Your future is hazy. Oh, Judy, it looks like a time will come when you will break a very important rule.” Judy trembled. “And when you do, your fate will rely on two very important things. And they are: The first one is to look for the button with the star. The second one is that you must press the star 3 times with you finger and when you do, the ring will open the doors for you. Now, your session is over, lead the others to the purple and wait. You may go.” Judy stumbled back to the cushions.

“Sandy, please come forward,” she whispered and Sandy bounced up and plopped down on the cushion. “So Sandy! “WHAT EVER YOU DO,” Madame Mimi’s voice boomed out. We all jumped. “Do NOT ON ANY circumstance, kiss the boy that you want to kiss!” Sandy’s hands clinched the sides of her seat under the table and I could see that she was angry. “Do you hear me, my sweet?” Her voice took on a softer tone. “Do not look into his eyes or touch his lips or you will be enslaved by him forevrrrrr.” Madame Mimi told Sandy that she was going to try harder to listen to Miss Gabby in English, that a boy with blue eyes was smitten with her...., but I was not listening. Wow, she had really started out on Sandy pretty hard. I knew this was only a trick because how did she know about Ernie? But still, it was pretty close. “And last of all, my sweet,” she was holding Sandy’s hand, “when you are the most frightened that you will ever be, remember to grab the gold ring and pull it down hard. You will not want to do it, but it is the only way you will escape. You may go.” Man, that last was too much. Sandy rolled her eyes as she sunk down on her cushion.

I looked up as Mollie walked up and sat down. She was pretty laid back and seemed to be enjoying the whole things. Her fortune was told – Madame Mimi even knew the name of her cat, Hortense – and then as she was about to get up, Madame Mimi held her palm firm and said, “Mollie, in the next few days, you will be faced with a decision that could change your life and your family’s lives. Listen carefully, my dear, stay close to your friends, do not be tempted by pleasure, to break the ring of friendship by going your own way and whatever you do....Don’t go near the water! You may go.” What water? The pools were closed for the season. Mollie looked serious as she came back to the cushions.

When it was my turn, Madame Mimi, took my hand and looked deep into my eyes and taking her time, she finally spoke in a very quiet voice, “Ohhhh Susannah...your future is wrought with danger....and you must be verrrrry careful, my sweet. Evil awaits you in the realm of amusement. (Ok must be here at the carnival). Deep in the sanctuary of goodness will you find redemption.” (Sounds serious.) But”, and she shook a slender crooked finger with a long nail in my face very slowly, “you will only reach it by loyalty, cleverness and sacrifice. You have the power to bring happiness to others but only if you remember to do these things. Remember to rely on the keys that will have been given to you by luck. Ward off evil with the place you put rings but ONLY with your right hand. That is all. You may go.” Okay. I don’t have a ring on my right finger. Why? Because I would lose it! I lose everything. Also, what did the deal about the key mean? I have one key and it opens the front door.

Madame Mimi seemed stuck on rings. Judy had to push a button to get hers. Sandy had to pull on one, Mollie wasn’t supposed to break one, and I supposedly used the one I already had. None of us could guess what any of this meant. But we were about to find out.

We left Madame Mimi's and wandered down the strip, watching people throw darts at balloons and balls at ducks and so forth. One of the carnies with the bill of his hat pulled down covering his eyes called out to us in his sing-songee voice: "Step up ladies and win a prize that you will cherish. Come inside the "Tent of Spells" and give the Wheel of Fortune a spin." His voice was smooth and lovely to listen to plus it sounded like lots more fun than Madame Mimi's.

"Let's do it!" we all said at once. But just as we started to turn towards the open flap of the tent, Bozo stepped out into our path and greeted us all with a big howdy do. (Oh no!). He handed us all stems of cotton candy (we were so over cotton candy) and said, the Carousel awaits!"

"No thanks, we're not interested," we all said at once. We are not babies! Please! Bozo was getting on our nerves and besides the carousel was way on the other side of the Carnival grounds. Just then, Misty, Judy's dog, ran out of the crowd and bit Bozo on the leg! We couldn't believe it. How did Misty get out? It wasn't funny, I know, but we couldn't stop laughing. Bozo let out a screech and took a swing at Misty who took off through the crowd with all of us chasing after her.

"Catch her before she gets hurt!" Judy shouted and we chased her down through the tents and vendor wagons and then she suddenly seemed to disappear. We saw her run around the corner of a building at the edge of the carnival ground but when we got there, the only living creature to be seen was a lady with a scarf tied under her chin. She shook her head when I asked if she had seen a little black cocker spaniel and said in a whisper, "Beware."

"Who are you talking to?" my friends asked.

“That lady with the...” I could see that look on their faces and when I looked back, the lady was nowhere to be seen. She had vanished.

Miss Clara’s words ran through my head then: “Don’t tell anybody what you see...NO MATTER WHAT.” Oh well, it was time to head for home anyway.

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*Miss Clara’s words ran through my head then —  
Don’t tell anybody what you see. Not ever.*

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All week long, all of our friends had been talking about The Amazing Alphonzo The Magic Puppeteer and his Magic dancing puppets. There was even a full page article on Page One of the Piddleton Gazette. And of course, we were dying to go. There was always a line but everybody said that it was worth the wait. We had put it off for a day or two because it was kind of expensive. But then Judy suddenly found a \$10 bill stuck on the bottom of her shoe and it was just enough for all of us to go. The light inside the little tent made everything look dusty and gold. The curtains on the puppet stage suddenly swung open and beautiful puppets came dancing in. They were so real that it was shocking. You could see their little mechanical eyes and lips open and shut and the wires pulling them but otherwise it would have been hard to believe that they were only puppets because they flipped, tapped, clapped, danced, and sung just as though they were real. We never wanted it to end. After the curtains came down the puppeteer pulled the

curtains up and took a bow. We clapped and clapped until the puppets danced an encore. As we left the tent, something kept pulling at my brain....something about the eyes of the puppeteer....where had I seen them before? Then I forgot it and we all walked to Sandy's house before going home. Her mom had glasses of homemade root beer all iced up and ginger snaps hot from the oven. This night, as I was walking home from Sandy's, I thought I saw Bobo sitting on a park bench that sits by the bus stop. But when I got up close, he was not there. It made me wonder why he was waiting for the bus. Someone should have told him that buses don't run that late. It was already 9:00.

We had waited all week to go to the circus and tonight was the night. Our parents, with all of us walked down the midway towards the big tent. Dad had helped out all week at the Carnival long after he got off work at the filling station so it was just mom with the other parents. I took Jane, my little sister, by the hand and my friends took their little brothers and sisters and we strolled along that night with the music down below and the starry night twinkling above. The parade began in the big top and everybody scrambled for their place up on the wooden bleachers. Bozo boomed "Welcome to the Bennie and Bozo Carnival Circus, The Greeeatist Show on Earth!" My heart leaped with the joy as the elephants started around the 3 circus rings with the beautiful trapeze ladies riding on top. Next came the clowns, then the horses prancing with plumes on their heads and their trainer, a beautiful woman in a tuxedo keeping them in line with a long black whip. All of the wonderful stars of the show pranced and twirled. The monkeys danced and romped about keeping everyone in stitches. They pulled a golden cage with a baboon inside who peered out through the bars as if he were in jail. Once in a while, one of the monkeys would pull on the ring on the top of his cage and he would screech out in anger and then the crowd would clap for more. One thing that happened that stopped the

parade for a while was when all of the dancing dogs got out of formation and ran all over the floor barking and growling while their trainer ran screaming after them, her feather headdress askew on her head. One of the dogs bounded up the stairs by us and cowered behind mom until she handed it back to the circus worker. "I hope they are treating her right," she said with a worried look on her face. Last came the big cages with the lions and tigers pacing back and forth inside their cages, growling and sticking their paws out between the bars when anybody walked by. Two men in sparkling costumes carried a banner that announced: Hercules, The Mighty. He was the largest lion and was known for being ferocious and dangerous. His roar could be heard throughout the parade.

Then Bozo raised his baton and the circus band struck up with a blast of the horns and the circus began.

Popcorn, peanuts, and cotton candy vendors walking the crowds shouting out their wares, balloons getting loose and sticking to the top of the tent, the shrieking of the crowd, the noise at high level and it was all totally.... wonderful. Intermission and we all raced to the Girl's room. As I pushed through the crowd pulling Janie behind me, ahead I saw an old woman wearing a shawl enter the restroom ahead of us. Something about her was familiar and then I remembered that she was the woman I talked to when we were chasing Judy's dog. And now I'm seeing her again, I thought, but I won't mention it because nobody else could see her, I remembered. Once inside, Janie and I waited in line with everyone else. I turned to find Mollie and her sister and when I turned back, Janie was gone. Someone said that they thought that she had squeezed in ahead and was already in the stall. I waited a minute and then pushed through and looked under the doors to see if I could see her legs. She was not there and then I felt a panic that made me want to throw up. I started yelling her name and then

everybody started panicking. Out in the corridor, people were crowding together and it was hard to see through them and then I heard her voice somewhere near. And there she was and somebody had her by the hand and they were going out through a slit in the tent wall on the side. “Janie!” I yelled as though my lungs would collapse. She turned and saw me and started pulling on the hand and whimpering. I threw myself in that direction and reached her just as Bozo’s face came into view.

“Here you go little girl, better stick with your sissy,” he said. And then he was gone.

“Janie! Why did you go with him?”

“I didn’t, honest.” Honest was a big word in our family. You could be kidding and say ‘really’ but ‘honest’ had to be the truth.

“You mean, he made you go with him?” She shook her head.

“No!” No matter, we just had enough time to use the bathroom before the second half began. .

The second half of the show was spectacular. There were a couple of times when I had to hide my eyes such as when the man on the wire almost fell off without a net and the lion actually tried to attack the lion tamer when he made him sit up on his stool. But we all went home and it wasn’t until I was falling to sleep that I remembered about Janie and Bozo. Something about Bozo’s voice....?

The last day was here. So much to do. It was a whole day and we were ready. We rode the rides over and over and ate all kinds of greasy junk until we were about to pop. I tried my luck at the ring toss and won a little pink miniature piano that actually worked. I put it in my back pack and we headed toward the Boat House ride. So far, we had not had time for it like usual. Mollie and Judy had gone ahead to wait in line while Sandy and I were ring tossing. I was hurrying along lost in thought and suddenly realized that Sandy wasn't with me. There she was with some guy standing by the Bible ladies pie shop booth. "Sandy, come on, they are waiting for us!" I yelled at her but she was looking dreamy eyed at the boy who had his hands gripping her arm.

"Susannah! Come and meet Ernie." He turned and looked at me with such evil that, for a second, I was frozen solid. Those eyes! Where...? Oh no...he was the Pizzaria man – no – he was The Amazing Alphonzo! Whoever he was, I had to get Sandy away from him. I started to speak but I stopped myself. She would never believe me. He turned and leaned toward her. He was going to kiss her! Madame Mimi had warned her - Before I could even think what I was doing, grabbed a banana cream pie off of the counter and slammed it in his face. I turned to the shocked expressions on the Bible ladies faces and said, "My mom will be by and pay for it." The pizzeria man or whoever he was disappeared through the crowd and I grabbed Sandy's hand and drug her wailing down the midway towards the Boat house Ride.

But when we got there, Mollie and Judy were nowhere in sight. They weren't in the line, or waiting by the ticket taker. "Are you looking for Mollie and Judy?" somebody in the crowd said and when we said 'yes,' they said that they had seen them get in a boat with Dorthea and Sharon already. I guess they got tired of waiting for us and went ahead.

“I hope Dorteia doesn’t push them in,” we laughed. We’ve always had kind of a competition with her and her friends in the past. We got in line but 20 minutes later and still Mollie and Judy had not come out of the ride so we decided to look for them and come back later. An hour later we were still looking. Sandy had calmed down a little from the Ernie episode but she still thought that I had lost it totally. That’s when she thought she saw him going into the Puppet tent and she insisted that we go in for another show. I reluctantly went with her because by now I was getting worried. The curtains flew open and the show began. Dancing puppets dazzled us. One of them in particular seemed to be looking at me. She looked just like Mollie. “Sandy, look at that puppet in the purple tutu. Who does she look like?”

“It looks like a puppet, goof ball.” She didn’t see it, but I couldn’t get it out of my mind. And then it struck me. The puppeteer is Ernie or the pizzaria man!

Outside, it was growing dark as dusk descended on the carnival grounds. We started back to the Boat House Ride to look for the girls. Mollie’s dad hurried up with a worried look on his face, “Thank heavens, I’ve found you. Where’s Mollie?” When we told him that we couldn’t find her, he became very alarmed. Okay, was this when I tell him that I think Mollie is a puppet? Probably not. But where was she? And Judy? I kept thinking that if I could only see her face, I could get the puppet out of my mind.

“Susannah what came over you to push a pie in Ernie’s face?” Sandy’s voice came through the fog swirling around in my head.

“Remember, Madame Mimi told you not to kiss the first person who wanted to kiss you?” And then I began to remember the rest of her words....Mollie was not to go near the water – The Boat House Ride! Judy was supposed to grab the gold ring. Gold? The ring toss rings were all white plastic. Where have I seen a GOLD ring??? The Master of the Ring - the lion!!

Grab the gold ring. Right.

I took off for the Boat House once again but the line was huge and I knew it would take an hour to get up to the ride. Desperately, I went around in back. There was a door but it was locked and then I saw Bozo slipping down the side of the building in the shadows. I looked around the corner but nobody was there. That’s when I heard the noise inside. There were the squeals of the boat riders, and the shrieks of the manikins who spring out to scare you but this was something different. It was more like a litter of hungry kittens. I felt the wall until my fingers slid into a crack and when I pushed, a small door swung open. I was inside somewhere in the dark background of the Boat House Ride. I could still hear the muffled cries that I had heard before but now they were a little louder.

“Mollie,” I whispered. “Are you here. It’s me Susannah.” And then, I couldn’t breathe as somebody grabbed me from behind. I fought with all of my might, biting and kicking, but the arms that encircled me were too strong.

“Thanks for coming little lady. You saved us the trouble of coming after you.” And standing before me was Alphonzo and with him. A fierce looking man in a dark cape, “Let me introduce myself, I am Hector, a friend

of Essie. I saw your name in her friend book, so I know we are going to be great buds.” Essie was a witch I knew once and made the mistake of signing her book, but that’s a whole different story.

“Where’s Mollie?” I screeched. And that’s when they put the tape on my mouth. I needed to think about this better.

“Well, do you want to see her? Alrighty then.” And they pushed my head down and shoved me in a tiny closet with a lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Dozens of fancy puppets hung by their wires from the ceiling and there she was. Mollie hung from a wire with tears rolling down her puppet face.

“We have a new one – just now joining us.” The door opened and a puppet with curly hair was placed on a hook. Sandy hung there with a blank look. The door slammed.

“Where’s Judy?” But, although their mouths could open and close, no sound could come out. Think. Think. I have to think. The door opened and the evil-looking man in black yanked me back out into a small dirty room.

“Okay, Susannah. Tell us the secrets that you hide?” Secrets? “You’re family is the royal family and you are the witch in waiting. We know all about you.”

“You’ve got me mixed up with someone. We are not royalty. Seriously, you think I would be wearing....” A hard slap across my face. “Well, there’s not much to tell. I play the piano in the Piddleton Jazz Band....I..” and then I saw stars and felt my face burn.

“Bring her out,” The Great Alphonzo ordered and the door to a chamber swung open and there was Judy. “Come on out, my sweet, the King is hungry.” She seemed to be in a trance as he steered her towards something in the corner and when he yanked off the cover, there was the lion cage and the beast of a lion also known as the King of the circus.

“Stay away from cats. Grab the gold ring.” Those were Madame Mimi’s words. It seemed like ages ago. Then I noticed several smaller cages in this place – the baboon was in one of them and began shrieking and rattling his cage. The gold ring on the lion’s cage began to swing as he became restless and started pacing, turning his head to look at Judy and baring his huge teeth.

“Judy! Grab the ring!” I screamed at the top of my lungs but she didn’t seem to hear me.

“Talk witch!!” Hector glared at me. I glared back. Then he dangled Judy closer to the lion cage

“Please PLEASE DON’T HURT HER.”

“Talk!” Alphonzo stepped closer to me and now he held a dagger. Judy screamed as her face was slammed into the bars. It was like a bolt of lightning struck me and ignited something. I bolted out of the chair and pushing Alphonzo to one side, yanked Judy and her wires away from Hector who fell back in surprise, I lunged at the cage and punched the lion in the nose and grabbed the ring. The lion roared and started back at us. Nothing happened. Oh right, She’s supposed to grab the ring. I snatched her hand and closed it around the ring and everything began to happen. For one, Judy woke up. I was grabbed by my hair from behind. Okay, now

what? Keys, keys....where's the key? And then I understood. Alphonzo was upon us but I punched him in the stomach, ran around him and unzipping my back pack, I grabbed the little pink piano and began playing Enchantment, my favorite tune on the piano keys. That's right. THOSE keys. The next shocking thing was that the baboon turned into a strange looking ringmaster and the lion turned into cowboy with a gun. The puppets now sounded like girls and they were pounding on their door and begging to be let out. I backed toward the door and opened it but when I turned around, we were cornered by the cowboy who seemed to be yelling something at us while waving his gun in the air. Everyone got very quiet. I heard Judy say, "go towards the elevator" and the girls behind me began edging against the wall towards Judy. Alphonzo seemed to have run off but Hector knocked the cowboy down (okay maybe the cowboy was ON our side?) with his stick and charged me . I tried to push myself into the elevator but it was packed clear to the ceiling with people and the doors were barely able to close. They pulled me in but then the doors would not shut and Hector had begun whacking at us with his stick shouting what seemed like evil spells. I stepped back out with such a sick dread within me, I could hardly breathe. The doors shut and the elevator descended. I swung at Hector and caught him with my ring finger which then hurt like crazy but he began to disappear into thin air. His last blow pushed me backwards into the elevator shaft. As I fell, I could hear Madame Mimi's words "the finger that holds rings....."



Down, down I fell into the blackness. I must have lost consciousness because when I opened my eyes, I was lying on a soft cushion and the first thing I saw was the top of a golden dome. The murmur of chanting filled the golden air. When I sat up and looked around, I could see that I was on a cushion on a raised platform in the center of a circle of people. I'm dreaming, I thought or I'm dead and this is heaven. They were all dressed in white robes with golden sashes swaying in unison. Across the room was another pedestal and on it was sitting my grandparents and my mom. What is this? Where am I? I must be dreaming, I thought. I blinked my eyes to clear them and what I saw astounded me for in the center of the circle under the dome was a tall man about to strike a large brass gong with a large mallet. And as the sound of it reverberated back and forth through the air, I realized that he was looking straight at me. Yes, my dad was here. The sound of the gong faded out into space and then all was quiet. I sat up and looked around. I turned when I heard my grandfather's kind voice. He looked

down at me with that twinkle in his eye and his voice, although quiet, was music to my ears.

"Susannah, welcome to the Cavern of Mystery. You are here with us and you are safe."

"What's happening? Where are we?" Words began tumbling out of me as the chanters began to move around us.

"Look around you my dear, these are your family, your friends, your neighbors. This is our Temple of the Guardians."

"Under the Carnival Boat Ride?"

He chuckled. Our temple has existed here for hundreds of year. The boat ride was built over it to keep it hidden. Have you ever wondered why it is the only ride that remains here all year long and doesn't leave with the Carnival?"

"Oh, right." Hmm, why didn't I think of this?

We almost revealed our secret when Hector saw all of you entered the magic elevator. Luckily you touched Hester's arm with your ring finger when you tried to defend yourself."

My ring finger? That was a lucky swing, I thought. But...my ring finger? Seriously?

Grandfather seemed to be reading my thoughts as he waited. "Yes, Madame Mimi Is Miss Clara. You recognized the chrystal ball in Madame Mimi's tent as being one like Miss Clara's. When it was actually....."

"hers," I finished.

"Yes. And when she took your hands in hers, she installed a spell into your ring finger on your right hand as a precautionary measure in case you needed it."

I knew it. I knew it...I think. Ideas began to spring up in my mind.

"Yes, Susannah, you suspect things and now it is time to reveal the secrets that we hold. And we have a lot to tell you. Do you think you are ready to hear it?"

I squeaked out, “yes.”

Just then, Mom and dad, Aunt Katy and Maggie, Grandmother, Miss Clara and literally the whole group gathered around me to offer encouragement. Some hugged me. One of them covered me with a warm blue knitted shawl. Another helped me into a large soft over-stuffed chair. Someone brought me an ice cold glass of nectar. Candles began to light up around the temple.

The gong was struck by my dad and the voice of the grand master (grandfather) was heard.

“The time is nigh. We will begin.”

My grandmother stepped up and sat next to me. ““Susannah, as your grandmother and the Grand Matron of the Guardians, I am here to tell you the history of your beginnings. I will begin the story. Members of your family and those who know you well will continue when I am finished.”

“You and Janie are the children of two factions, “began Grandmother. When your daddy married your mother, they combined the two: The Secret Society of Guardians, your dad’s family and The Royal Order of Witches, your mother’s family. It was the wedding of the century and all Guardians and good witches around the world celebrated for weeks with happiness because we all knew it would bring special beings into the world – how they would be special was yet to be known. And so we waited with anticipation to see what their baby would bring. In order to keep you safe, a spell was cast around you to block all potential incoming and outgoing signals and yet allow you to live a normal life. All of us in the family watched you grow,

guiding you when needed, and allowing you to learn on your own when we thought it was better. We expected your innate talents develop and we were aware of our tight bond.

But we were shocked out of complacency when you came home that day and told your parents that you actually saw Flo with your own eyes. We were not expecting you to have that ability until much much later – maybe 12 or 13 but you were only 4 years old! And so we were unprepared for it, at first. Flo, you see, is a guardian spirit who watches over children. She was not Elizaba’s grandma as you thought. And she can only be seen by those with that talent – usually well- developed witches. Also, we became worried that If she could pick up your energy, than who else out there could? Our block spell had been broken.

“And so, we knew that you could be in danger, not just by others who may want to hurt you or hurt your family but by yourself. Not knowing that you could see what others could not, you might innocently tell them something that would be questionable to others.,” added Aunt Katie as she passed around a plate of her cookies.

That’s for sure, I thought.

“Over the years, we have done a pretty good job of keeping you safe. Many have come to help you when we thought you were in peril,” said mom.

“Like John and Donny?” She nodded. “And Clara?” Another nod.

My dad then stepped into the circle and sat down next to me. He was a great story teller and I got settled. He cleared his throat and in his warm and smooth voice, he began.

“Over 100 hundred years ago, a battle was raging between the bad and the good witches and wizards. Hector, a very powerful dark wizard, had made life miserable for centuries for common ordinary decent people with his evil spells and his glee in creating pain and havoc. When the Guardians created our Carnival-circus, it was for the purpose of bringing happiness and joy to all of the towns and cities where the Carnival visits and then to use the money that was made to fund children’s hospitals all over the country. Hospitals flourished and children were treated for free and the money also funded new research. It was a miracle for many. The Grand Master of the Guardians at the time, was the one who always appointed the Manager of the carnival who was also the Ring Master of the circus. Back then it was called the Circus of Goodness. And it was a source of excitement and abundant cheer as it traveled around the country. Good witches in every town volunteered on the carnival week and also in the children’s hospitals as well.

During the time of the war of the witches, the Carnival-circus just happened to be in full swing. Everything was going great when things began to go wrong. Elephants got loose and stampeded down the Midway; one of the trapeses broke and dropped the trapeze artist into the tiger cage who was injured but escaped; one of the tents collapsed during a show, and the popcorn stand caught on fire and the list goes on. Benny, a friendly and kind man and a very good carnival manager lead the fair with such success that it was eventually named after him. He took the bull by the horns and set out to find out who was doing these evil deeds and why and this led him in extreme danger. A local coven of good witches approached him and

offered him their services in casting spells explaining that they were in the middle of a battle with evil wizards and they had information that the carnival was being attacked by Hector, one of them who wanted to take over the carnival in order to strike at the witches. But although Benny respected the women, secretly he really didn't believe in witches and so turned them down saying that although he appreciated their offer, he thought he could take care of it himself. Big mistake. One night as he was locking up the gates of the carnival after putting out another fire, he was captured by Hector and his evil forces and turned into a puppet. Not being a witch, Benny had no way to defend himself.

The little puppet was put in a wooden box lined in [ LOST PASSAGE ] and passed around during the many battles between the witches and wizards. One of them finally left it in a toymaker's shop with dire warnings to keep the puppet hidden. But as time went by, the puppet was forgotten, and eventually the toymaker died. His children, not knowing what was in the box, buried it deep out on the prairie and that's where it remained for a number of years.

And then a [ LOST PASSAGE ] named Alphonzo, a fairly young wizard remembered a story about a Ring Master who was turned into a puppet and began a search. He was joined by the evil Hector who heard of his search and remembered the carnival and decided once again to take it away from the Guardians and the good witches.

“Benny had been hidden in his box. The little puppet was sending out beams of energy. Time went by and a town was built over this spot and later, a hardware store was put over the spot where the trunk lay. The Guardians as well as the good witches were relentless and never stopped searching but although Benny's calls were heard sometimes in the wind,

they were growing weaker and weaker. But they weren't the only ones searching. Alphonso and Hector and their gang were searching as well. And as their numbers increased, they increased their search as well."

"A family of witches moved into town, as you know, Susannah because they had also heard the calls. And they knew that the puppet was hidden close by and began their search. They had spells of their own put on them by Hector and the only way to release them was to find the puppet. And so Esmerelda, the evil witch, caused Mr. Anderson's hardware store to burn down to the ground and there in the ashes was the safe and inside was the puppet. Within an hour, Alphonso appeared and offered this devastated family enough money to rebuild their store, and without realizing their mistake, they sold the puppet without question to him. Esmerelda was too late!

Alphonso, in his desire to bring down the Guardians and become the Grand Master, put a spell on the puppet that compelled him to dance without stopping as long as the calliope played. Next, he was determined to capture the child who was to become the leader of the Guardian/Order of the Witches alliance and hold her for ransom. And that, my darling daughter, would be you, Susannah." (Me? Leader?.) "He crippled the Carnival years ago and was doing it again - not only by turning Benny into a puppet, but also the Sheriff on the case into a lion. All of those who got in their way - participants of the carnival and circus who brought happiness through their work were changed into dancing dogs and monkeys. And then Alphonso and his gang perfected their skills as they went from town to town turning young girls and boys into puppets until the day that they arrived here in Piddleton. And we were waiting. We had a plan." My dad sat back. "And here it gets dark."

Everything went well, until you (Me?) were able to actually See Alphonson as the Pizzaria man at the back door of Judy's house that night of the overnight. That would have been okay with our plan but you then TOLD everyone, well because you didn't know any better. That worked perfectly into their plan. We all sprang into action from that point.

As you know, two years ago, Mr. Anderson's hardware store burned down for reasons that we will not go into right now and there in the basement was the safe. Mr. Anderson did not recognize it as an important artifact and had it opened and when he did, out came Hector, still in his puppet form. All of us kept watch to see who would show up for him. It was Alphonzo. He was now in possession of one of the most powerful evil sorcerers that there ever was.

When we heard that he had joined Benny and Bozo's Carnival Circus, we were especially watchful. This circus has long been a prize of The Guardians. Benny is a Grand Master and Bozo is played by a resident in every town they go to.

"You mean, there is a different Bozo in every town?"

"Right," Grandad said with a nod. "And who do you think was Bozo this year in Piddleton?"

"Who?"

"Your looking at him."

"Daddy!"

“That’s right. His job was to keep everyone safe from Hector and Alphonzo.” He WAS sitting on the bench at the bus stop.

“We had made a decision before the carnival came to Piddleton, that this was the perfect platform for us to give you your first test BUT with caution because we couldn’t afford for anything to go wrong,” explained Grandmother.

“Test?”

“When a young person with your lineage reaches an age, it is our duty to test you and train you for the next step.

It seems that everywhere the carnival has gone, young kids have disappeared, never to be found. The pizzeria man, as Ernie, had already been to Dottie’s Drugstore, the dance, and he knew exactly where everybody was that night at Judy’s. I made the mistake of telling everyone what I knew which threw everything off. It turns out that Misty, Judy’s dog, is a bad witch and it was she who pushed me out on the porch and then blocked all sound coming into the house so that nobody could hear me ringing the bell and knocking. She was hoping to keep me outside long enough for Alphonzo to come back and grab me. Flo was the one who popped open the back door for me and all I saw was a shadow passing by the window. I actually wondered if Misty had opened it, I remembered. And then thought how stupid that was – a dog opening a door?

“We had a very concise and detailed plan and we followed it to the letter – with some missteps,” said Aunt Maggie. “Some girls broke the rule of sticking together and decided to split up,” and she gave me such a look! I scooched down in my cushion.

“Merlyn, the hypnotist, planted the magic elevator into your minds as an enchantment to show up as a dream in case something went wrong and you needed it. We didn’t think it would but it turns out, we did. It worked well with the girls and they will never remember their stint as a puppet or anything else.” Whew, I was glad about that.

“We did try to give you some clues,” said Miss Clara, with a wink. And right away, I knew she was Madame Mimi and Sweetie was the crow.

“Daddy kept a pretty good eye on you all but once you split up; things began to get out of hand.” Yowza!

“So dad, you saved Janie from the woman instead of trying to steal her at the circus?” I looked at dad and he looked back and nodded. I could read his mind and I knew he was thinking that I shouldn’t have let go of her hand in the restroom.

One thing that had worked out great for the Guardians was when Hector and Alphonzo set up their evil deeds inside of the Boat House Ride which was right above the Mystery Cavern. Even though they thought they could keep a good eye on them there, still things began to change when the Gaggles split up.

“Susannah, The Guardians are very proud of you. We expected you to achieve one small step but you have gone further than that and have shown skill and bravery on each of the five golden rules.”

“1. You showed courage when you faced down the lion, Ernie with the cream pie, (there was a chuckle throughout the group), Hector, the sheriff (even though he was trying to help you), and Alphonzo when you rescued the puppets and saved Judy from the lion. You showed courage when you stood up to Bozo when you thought he was kidnapping Jane.

2. You showed wisdom when you did not reveal your knowledge to your friends.

3. You showed cleverness and intelligence when you solved the puzzles of the predictions and rings that Madame Mimi gave you and your friends and also when you listened to your hunches and recognized the puppets, the identity of Ernie.

4. You showed compassion when you saved the animals who were actually people being held captive.

5. You showed sacrifice when you saved your friends by making sure they were safe in the elevator instead of yourself.

“Because of you, Benny can now be free. He is no longer made to dance to the calliope. AND he now knows that witches are real. All of the puppets have been changed back into kids. The monkeys and dogs are people again. The lion is a cowboy sheriff.”

I looked around the circle. There was my family and they were all smiling at me. And then Granddad gravely said with authority, “As the Grand Master of The Guardians, it gives me great pleasure to announce, that you, Susannah, are ready to enter our portals as a novice. Think hard about your decision because it carries with it a great responsibility to yourself and

others that will bring you many challenges. Your journey will be one of service and enlightenment. It will take you on many adventures – some exhilarating and some full of disappointment but all will fill your life with amazement. Are you prepared to take that step?”

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*As the Grand Master of the Guardians, I welcome  
our beautiful new member to the Guardian  
Council of Witches.*

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But that’s another story.

Later that night, I asked my dad, “How did you keep the identity of Bozo a secret from Alphonzo?”

“I’m good, he said with a wink, “I’m super dad.”

As I was falling to sleep that night dreaming of the magic elevator, a cold chill ran up my spine and I shivered suddenly in my bed thinking of all of the close calls we had had that week. But my friends would never know it – I wouldn’t tell them. I promised – honest!

Beware. Somebody once said ”something wicked this way comes.” And they knew what they were talking about.

Ray Bradbury, 1962

FINIS

FROM THE AUTHOR

Epilogue

Monday morning back to school. Memories of the  
carnival would linger for a while with some and then fade  
but they would last a lifetime for me.

*HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

*Love you*

*Mom*

THE PIDDLETON TALES

# THE POPSICLE MAN

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, October 2017*



**S**ummertime in our neighborhood meant waking up with the sun, pulling on your favorite shorts and tee shirt, gulping down your oatmeal and racing out the front door for a day of roller skating on the rough new

pavement, bike-riding, pogo jumping across boards, up stairs and down, jumping off of porches and not falling fall, stilt races, tree-climbing, baseball games in the street or in the front yard, hopscotch on newly paved driveways and then everyone scattered for lunch and naps. You could always find me curled up with a book – sometimes hiding in my closet with a flashlight trying to miss out on chores - or out on the swing reading another Nancy Drew mystery – oh it was pure joy! Sometimes our moms would load us up to spend an afternoon at the swimming pool at Riverside Park way across town and then we would all come home sunburned and very very content.

But there was a time after naps in the very hottest part of the afternoon when a familiar sound could be heard by all of us waiting on the curb up and down Cottonwood Street – first just barely and then a loud blaring as it came around the corner. It was the POPSICLE MAN!!! Yay!!!! First you would hear the music playing a lively tune getting louder and louder and we knew they were on the way. That’s when we would dash into our houses and beg our moms for a nickel. Then out to the curb to sit in a row and wait. And then around the corner would come a beast of a green station wagon with the front left fender almost touching the ground because of the heavy weight inside, blasting black smoke out the back. A worn hand-painted sign on the side of this vehicle read “Tank’s Tootle Pops” and hanging out of the windows were loads of red-headed ragamuffins waving and yelling while they tumbled and tussled inside making the “tank” rock back and forth on its axis. Tank himself always leaned out of the driver’s window with his big beefy arm grabbing the side of the car as if to keep it all together. His blue work shirt sleeve was always rolled up to show off a big tattoo on his arm that looked like an anchor with a snake wrapped around it and a stub of a cigar was clenched between his brown teeth. He always had a big gruff grin on his face and as we would

crowd around he would growl “to the stern my mates” and we would all race around to the back of the wagon where the window would roll down and a red headed boy and girl with dirt on their faces and big gap-toothed grins would hand out the popsicles with their grubby hands. MamaTank, herself a large and jolly woman with a sweet face and a knot of fly- away hair on top of her head would take our nickels and call out the flavors to the bunch inside: “Strawberry, O-range, lime, gerrape, bananaaaa or Ice cream bar, fudge cycle and be quick about it!” During this time there would be indistinguishable grunts and orders yelled out from Tank and then the window would come sliding down and the old station wagon would roll on down the street with a jolly tune blasting out from somewhere inside. It was great. We would all sit on the curb or roll around on the grass eating our treats while the afternoon wore on.

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*The very hottest part of the afternoon when a familiar sound could be heard by all of us waiting on the curb up and down Cottonwood Street.*

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Early evening, around 5:00 or 6:00 our dads would all come home from wherever they worked and pull their Chevys or Fords into their drives and walk into their homes ready for supper. We were the kids of the veterans of the Great War and there were a million of us in my neighborhood – later to be labeled baby boomers. My dad and his family were builders then and they had built hundreds of 3-bedroom frame houses – each painted a different color but pretty much all alike. Our house was right in the middle and was yellow. Whenever something went wrong with their new houses, they always came to get Daddy to fix it and off he would go to take care of it. Later in the evening after dinner and the dishes were done and put away,

we would all slip out in the falling darkness to play kick, the can, tag, do summersaults and handstands, and you could hear the sound of our voices shouting and squealing and the low murmur of parents on their porches talking with their neighbors over lemonade and guitar music played by my dad.

Soon the moon would rise and everyone would go into their houses one by one and the lights would go out on my street and all over Piddleton. Night would cover the town with a snug blanket of stars.



And then one afternoon something astounding happened. After Tank's Tootle Pops were long gone, another sound occurred. It was more of a jangle of bells and horns – almost a tinkling sound. And a big white truck with a cab in front and a square back and very black tires came around the corner. It stopped in front of my house with a halt and out of the driver's seat jumped a tall, skinny, dark-haired man dressed in a white uniform with a white flat hat that had a shiny black bill. He had black shiny shoes with silver bells on the toes and they tapped as he twirled and danced. And then with a flourish and a bow, he sang out in a high-pitched voice: "How do you do, little ladies and gentle lads? I am the Melody Man!"

We were all so shocked that nobody said a word.

“Let me show you what I have in my truck Especiallyly for Youu.” And with that he began: I have popsicles - icy treats of every flavor such as strawberry shortcake, swipop cherry limeade, grape soda, apple cidar, root beer float and .....(here’s where I began to get interested}.....black licorice!!!

“Oh there is everything you could ever want – let me give you a taste....for FREE!!” And he did one final tap with his shoe and jingle of the bells and opened the back of his truck. We were enchanted.

By this time, our moms were hurrying down to the curb to see what was going on. I remember mom wouldn’t let us have a taste because “It would ruin our dinner.” But later after he had passed out the treats to the others, closed down his truck and danced back in and had driven off, I could hear the moms all talking about how much cleaner this popsicle man was than Tank and his family were and how nice it would be to try out these new interesting treats.

And so we did. His popsicles were more expensive than Tanks – 10 cents rather than 5 so I would save up my nickels when I could and treat myself to a black licorice popsicle which was absolutely the best. I can still taste it. Tank’s Tootle Pops came earlier than the Melody Man’s truck so that you would have to wait, which wasn’t easy. The kids became divided between Tank and the Melody Man. I kind of wavered back and forth partly because of the reasons that I have already told you and partly out of loyalty. My mom finally decided that we had to only buy from the Melody man because he was cleaner and so I would just hang out in my bedroom until Tank’s old wagon passed by. My baby sister would sit on the porch and cry and say “I LIKE the dirty popsicle man” which is what we had taken to calling him.

One evening while playing in the yards, I overheard a conversation going on between the parents who were gathered on our front porch. The words ‘the children’s black plague’ were spoken in almost a whisper. I quietly slipped around and sat down at the end of the porch to listen in. My mother was doing a lot of the talking and I heard her say that the children’s black plague had been spreading in other areas of the United States and only recently a child had come down with it not far away in a neighboring town.

“

*The words ‘the children’s black plague’ drifted into my play and I stopped to listen.*

I heard the others gasp and one cried out “Oh No!” and someone said, “That close?” Mom said that children were coming down with it and it almost always resulted in paralysis and hundreds were even dying from it. And then their voices became too low for me to hear.

The next morning all of us kids gathered in the Petty’s backyard and almost everyone said that they had heard something similar at their house. Someone heard that the first signs of it were a stiff neck so of course we all suddenly had stiff necks which we forgot about later and then pretty much forgot about the whole thing. Life went on pretty much the same...for a while. Life on our street went on - bicycles, roller skates, stilts, and pogo sticks, backyard baseball, running in the sprinklers, and hopscotch, and of course...popsicles!

But very soon after this, small things began to change. For example, nobody spoke in whispers anymore about the children’s black plague. It was seen and heard on TV news every morning, noon, and night. The headlines

in the morning and evening newspapers told of the thousands of children who were polio victims and had to live in big oxygen tanks called “iron lungs” so that they could breathe. And those who could not be helped would die. The country seemed to be blanketed with a creeping giant of death that was only looking for children. There was a big sign on the swimming pool gate that said “Closed.” When we went to church, all of us wore face masks to keep us safe from infection. But where was it coming from? Was it blowing in the air? Was it in our water? My mom heard a report that the plague was in bananas – so no more bananas were allowed at our house. Soon it seemed that fewer and fewer children were seen playing outside on the sunny days on my street. Fear was on every parent’s face. The only time that there were a bunch of us kids together outside was when the Melody Man came down our street because by now, Tank’s Tootle Pops were ignored and although it still went by, it rarely stopped. Our parents said they were too dirty. The red-headed kids pressed their noses against the glass and stuck their tongues out as they passed by.



And then one night, the Crabapples across the street were seen leaving their house carrying one of their children wrapped in blankets and the next morning we heard that Davey Crabapple had the plague. It was here. The Black Death was right here on Cottonwood Street and now our street and every street in town was empty of people and looked pretty much like a ghost town. I heard my dad say to my mom, “Evil DOES exist and we can’t deny it.” Vera Jean Petty down the street was next and then Herbie Folk over on Rule Street and then Jackie Lou Sowders next door and Larry Mueller across the street – they all were taken away to hospitals. Our

mothers kept us inside with the blinds down while they talked across clotheslines up and down the blocks. Their voices were grim and some were hysterical. People broke down in tears just by looking at the houses of the victims.

One night while my parents talked to the other neighbors on the porch, I suddenly felt sick to my stomach and had to run inside quick. I remember feeling very tired and dizzy and then – nothing. When my parents came in, they found me lying on the floor in the bathroom with a raging fever. I don't remember that at all but what I do remember is waking up in the night and how dry my mouth was and how much I wanted – no I desperately NEEDED – a popsicle – ANY flavor would do. And just when I thought I couldn't take it a second longer, I remember hearing the sound of the Melody Man!! I slipped out of my bed in the pitch dark and slipping out the front door so as not to be heard, I stepped out on the porch. I could feel the cool cement on the bottoms of my feet. And there he was in the moonlight, his white truck shining like a star, as though waiting just for me. And in his hand was a popsicle – licorice – my favorite! Oh how much I needed that now. My burning mouth was on fire. He nodded at me with a huge smile and held out the frozen treat. I started off of the porch towards him when suddenly out of the darkness another figure emerged from the dark on my left – a huge dark hulk who shoved me down so hard, I lost my breath and the stars seemed to swirl about my head. I could hear a fight going on. There were grunts and growls and then an evil voice that snarled so low I could just barely hear it, “You will die just like the rest of them!” Suddenly there was a crack and a huge crash and the most horrible shrill evil scream that I had ever heard before, and then utter silence. I strained to see what was happening in the stillness and when the hulking figure stepped aside, I thought I saw a white sparkling whirling mass that streaked up and up and then disappeared into the moonlight.

I must have blacked out but when I came to, I was being picked up gently in huge hands and when I opened my eyes again, I looked right into the face of – TANK! I started to scream but he spoke to me in very low reassuring voice. “Don’t worry little one. You are safe now,” he said as he put me down softly on my bed. And the next thing I knew the sun was pouring into my room through the gingham curtains and my parents worried faces were leaning over me.

“

*I looked right into the face of — TANK!*

“I think she’s opening her eyes,” my mother said to my dad.

“Good morning,” I remembered whispering.

“Her fever has broken, thank the Lord.” And then I noticed the tears on their faces. “You were so sick Susannah, my baby, my baby. You were talking crazy talk about Tank and the Melody Man.”

“There there,” comforted my dad.



And then I remembered the night before and the moonlight. “Where’s Tank? Get Tank,” I cried.

“Oh dear, she’s doing it again.” And then to me “You are safe in your bed. We will get you a popsicle when the popsicle man comes by this afternoon.” But I had to tell her. “No, no – don’t tell me now. Go back to sleep.” Later that morning it came over the news that a man in some big laboratory in New York City had discovered a cure for the plague. But I knew who REALLY cured it but nobody would ever believe me when I tried to tell them.

I got better and soon I was back outside playing with my sister and my friends. The Melody Man was never heard of again. I knew what happened to him but. All of the parents scratched their heads and then forgot all about him. My dad fixed up Tank’s Tootle Pop truck so it didn’t spit out black smoke and ride low and he even gave it a fresh coat of green paint. Larry Muller’s mom had a beauty shop in her home and she volunteered to cut all of Tank’s kid’s hair and we all went back to buying popsicles from Tank’s Tootle Pops – Tank wasn’t the dirty popsicle man anymore. Davey, he got to come home but he was in an iron lung for the rest of his life. We all hung out at his bedroom window and talked to him back then. The other children in my neighborhood and at school who had been victims of the plague were left crippled in some way and some were paralyzed.

I finally gave up trying to convince anybody of what had happened to me that night. I looked at Tank way different than I had before – he was hero truly – not just in the Great War but in facing down evil right here on Cottonwood Street. Whenever I would catch his eye, he always gave me a look. We both knew the secret of the evil that lurked right here on Cottonwood street. As summer came to an end, my mom who was sorting our summer clothes one day in the laundry day to take to charity, gave a little “oh!” She called me into the laundry room to see what she had found.

When I went in to find out, she held up a little bell. “Look what was in your pajama pocket,” she said. There it was. A bell off of the black shiny shoes of the Melody Man. I keep it in my special place to remind me that.....

“Someone wicket this way comes.”

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FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a pretty accurate description of the neighborhood where I grew up in the 50's. The names are all correct. Of course, the 'plague' was polio. Some of my friends whose names I have included had polio but thousands of children died and many were paralyzed. You know one of them. Mary Ann had polio has a child and had had to suffer from it all of her life. Of course I didn't get to know her until she was grown and in college. Hers reoccurred in her late 30's – post polio syndrome – an evil trick. Fear was everywhere back then. Parks and pools were empty. It was like there was a giant monster creeping silently into a place and then lying in wait to hurt or kill a child. It was a very dark time. And then Jonas Salk invented the polio vaccine and he was considered a savior and so he was.

Also we did have the “dirty popsicle man” and the “Melody Man” and they pretty much looked just like I described them (without the tap shoes) but of course, they didn't have anything at all to do with the plague.....or did they?....heh heh,....okay no but it makes a good story, don't you think?

In honor of

Jonas Salk

*HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

*I love you,*

*Mom*





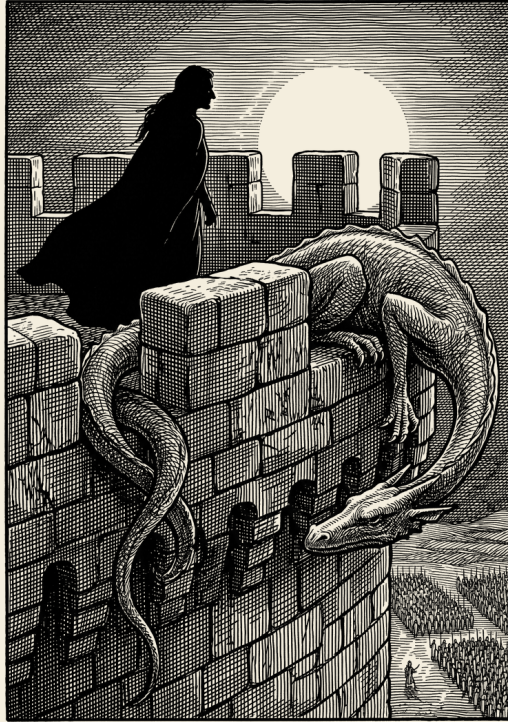
THE PIDDLETON TALES

# THE WITCH AND THE DRAGON

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Mom, October 2024*





**L**ong ago in the small village of Brooksong nestled high up in the snow-covered Enchantment mountains there lived the gentle King Wilmer, his Queen Barbara and Prince Hans and Princess Fleur. The town was known for the beautiful fountain in the town square that was fed by a singing brook that serenaded all as it rippled down from the top of the mountain through the forests and meadows into the town square. And that was not all. The water was also known around the region for its sweet flavor and drew folks from all over this side of the mountain to carry home their weekly supply.

Each morning the town's folks and those up in the farms surrounding it were awakened by the deep ringing of the big brass bell up in the belfry on top of the tall tower high above the town on the ridge. And as night fell and the first stars appeared in the sky, the sound of the brass bell's chime brought an end to the day. For the past 100 years ever since the town was rescued from the evil that had enslaved them, the people of the Brooksong had gone about their daily lives happily chatting with their friends and neighbors and dancing and singing in the town square. Rich smells of pies and breads sitting in windows to cool wafted out through the air. The town of Brooksong had a long history of conquering heroes and heroines, of brilliant scholars and talented craftsmen and musicians and poets that went clear back over 100 years ago. Indeed, it was a happy place – a joyful place. People left their doors unlocked and even welcomed strangers into their homes without fear. Neighbors took care of neighbors and families all stayed close. But it was not always that way. Legends passed down over the years told of a vile, foul, wicked witch, who, a century ago, arrived one horrible day on the back of a ferocious beast of a dragon and slaughtered their king right in front of them and then enslaved the town folks. Smelting furnaces were built where active farms once grew fields with abundant grains and corn – enough to feed the people on this side of the mountain. Their goats and cows that once produced the sweetest cream and the eggs their chickens laid were large and rich in flavor were slaughter. The witch and her dragon, terrorized the once vibrant community, killing those who fought back and enslaving the rest who were put to work in the giant brick structures where the iron smelting furnaces burned night and day. Soon the grimy smoke pouring out of the furnace chimneys polluted the air killing most living things. Years went by and hope died with it. And then one day on the holiday of Halloween, a young man with his band of mountaineers came up from the Green valley below and slayed the monster dragon and the evil witch vanished over the mountain and was never heard of since. The

conquering hero was Heath of the Green Valley who had come to free his beloved, Molly Ann who had been enslaved. After he felled the dragon and rid the kingdom of the witch and her minions, he became the Hero as the furnaces were torn down, the sky's were blue again, and peace returned, Heath of the Green Valley was crowned by the grateful villagers as King Heath, a brave and just man. The royal wedding of Heath and Molly Ann went down in history as the beginning of justice, fairness and freedom. King Heath and Queen Molly Ann were said to rule with compassion, fairness, intelligence, strength, and courage, with firm but gentle hands for many prosperous years setting standards that were still in place 100 years later. With their passing, then Princess Grace became a much-loved queen of the realm following in their footsteps. As the years passed, the crown was passed down from royal to royal, each one a version of King Heath of Green Valley to the present day and the gentle King Wilmer and his adored Queen Barbara. They too ruled their kingdom with grace and fairness along with their beautiful daughter, Princess Fleur and their handsome son, Prince Hans, King Wilmer was a responsible ruler who watched over his kingdom with peace and justice.

In the middle of the town's square, right next to the fountain of the singing brook, after which the village was named, stood a tall statute of King Heath and Queen Molly Ann. The legend of King Heath had been documented in a large leather-bound journal written by Heath himself and was kept safely in the tower. The tower was pure white and stood tall up on the ridge overlooking the town and was surrounded by a beautiful moat filled pink water lilies, tall grasses that waved in the breezes and black and white swans who glided with ease through the crystal blue waters and were fed by folks throwing them corn from the banks. A stone wall enclosed the Tower grounds bordered by a ring of beautiful trees that were filled with songbirds each summer. A narrow path leading from the bridge over the

moat down through the woods and out onto the sloping path to the town was always open to all and was bordered by gardens of brilliant flowers. The miracle of the amazing defeat of the evil witch and her vicious dragon by Heath and his band of men was that this farm boy who had never been in a battle or even a fight before challenging the fiercest of dragons and most wicked of witches and had the courage to face annihilation to save his love, Molly Ann. But that's not all. He also had the genius to strategize the clever and amazing plan of battle, the leadership and trustworthiness to draw a band of country men and women of all ages who themselves were also not warriors, had never even been off of their farms or villages, to join the cause. AND here's the AMAZING thing about it: They accomplished the victory WITHOUT WEAPONS of war. After all, Heath of the Green Valley was just a young man of 19 when he made that decision to fight the Witch and dragon in order to save his beloved and ultimately all of the folks in the town and on this side of the mountain. He and his band were from simple stock who did not have guns of war but hunted with traps. And they took down a giant beast who had terrorized the people of the mountain and had been doing it for decades! And on that day - the day he brought them down, legend tells that the Enchanted Mountain seemed to come alive as the doors of the furnaces swung open freeing the people inside. The singing brook was released and the water rippling over the rocks sang its song once again as it cascaded down through the mountain villages. Yes, indeed, King Heath was a national hero. His tools of battle were not guns or swords, or bows and arrows for of those he had none to bear. He used what he had and they were the parts and pieces (later renamed "tools") of simple games that folks from childhood to old age, played in local tournaments and on barn floors, and school yards and in homes after dinner before a fire. That's right, not a shot was fired. The battles were won solely with guile and courage and physical strength and game tools.

After the coronation of Heath as king and the lovely Molly became his wife and queen, a festival in his honor was created to celebrate the day and it was named The Heath Olympic Games. The games that the champion had used to crush the evil witch and dragon and all of her minions were changed to sporting events and become the sources of competition by athletes in villages all over the mountain for years to come. The festival was held once a year beginning on the 21st of October and running until the final day which landed every year on Halloween to honor the day when Freedom won over Evil. On that first day and for 10 days afterwards the sounds of music and dancing and much merriment filled the air. Sporting events were held all over the town and countryside with medal award ceremonies in the town square in front of the statue of Heath and Molly and the Fountain of the Singing Brook. Participants from the whole mountain region attended and some came who just wanted to take part in the merriment and eat the meat pies and drink the sweet ale made from the fountain's sweet water. Each year, local brewers tapped their barrels of Brooksong's Audacious Ale made especially for that event to fill the bellies of those who crowded the town and surrounding mountainside.

As for the sporting events, young and old with their special talents competed in the sporting events of Hopscotch, Jacks, Marbles, Tag, Hide and Seek, Marco Polo, Dancing Kite flying, Capture the Flag and Badminton. First place winners were awarded gold medals, second place, silver, and third place winners were given bronze medallions. On the final day of the game, a banquet was always served on large tables loaded down with scrumptious food brought from far and near, from the kitchens of all those who lived on or near Enchanted Mountain. As the food was being cleared from the tables, everyone filled their mugs and settled back in their seats and got ready for the entertainment to begin. And as the audience quieted down, the curtain went up on a theatrical presentation presented

with plain folk from the region playing the parts of Heath and Molly, his band of Warriors and the wicked witch with several playing the part of the dragon. Audiences always stood up and gave a rousing cheer as Heath and his band of men slayed the dragon with the big black shooter marbles, captured the witch and her cast of evil including minions, bats, and the dragon using jump ropes and jacks before walking them off stage to the “dungeons” to spend the rest of their lives as they pleaded for their lives. The curtain came down on a cacophony of loud cheers from the audience and a wonderful bedlam ensued with kegs of Audacious Sweet Ale and trays of cheese pies. The games ended with good cheer and farewells to meet again next year. The champions were paraded around Brooksong and in the neighboring towns all over the mountain for weeks and on every holiday until the next year rolled around and the Heath Olympic Games began once again.

And so it was that time again on Enchanted Mountain in the town of Brooksong. This would be the 100th year for the games and folks of the village had been getting ready for it all year long. They were all ready with flags and flowers and banners of past heroes waving in the October sun. Folks from all over the mountain had been arriving for days with their carts loaded down with wares and most of all their enthusiasm. Vendors lined the cobble stone streets with tasty tidbits and flowers. Musicians played their music on every corner and many kegs of the town’s Audacious Ale were again being tapped. Old friends happily hugged one another as they came back from villages all over the mountains to celebrate after a year apart. Friends and families gathered in the square sitting on the fountain or standing in groups chatting as children played tag games and stray dogs and cats – and even piglets dashed about. All week, small campfires burned on the hillsides surrounding the town on camp sites with the sounds of chatter and laughter and singing under the moonlight.

As the morning sun shone its first light over the mountain and its golden rays of sun burst forth filling the sky with streaks of light and the sounds of birds chirping in flight, the deep ring of the brass bell signaled the opening of the year's Heath Olympic Games. As its last ring faded over the mountain, King Wilmer, from the Tower belfry, proclaimed "Let the Games Begin!"

And so they did at the start of that beautiful day with excitement for the day ahead. The competition began with the sport of the Jacks event with teams from far and near in their colorful uniforms gathering to warm up with their coaches before their turn to compete came around. Spectators were held back with ropes and banners while some leaned out of open windows or perched high above on the roofs - all leaning in to see the action. If only they had known then .....

The morning went by with athletes vying for first place and crowds cheering for their choices. The sun shown down from a blue sky just as the noon bell called the crowd to the long tables of food as the games paused for lunch. Boasting and banter amid the sound of the singing brook in the center made for a lively and filling respite before the games started for the afternoon. Some took shelter under trees or in the shade of shops and fences to grab quick naps.

But it was not long before they were shocked awake by the rapid ringing of warning from the brass bell on the tower. Instantly a shadow crossed the square and the sound of a shrill murderous was heard. Up and down the narrow, cobbled streets townspeople ran frantically to take cover as darkness fell like a blanket blocking out the sun. Sounds of horses whinnying in panic and the screeching of the black ravens as they dive bombed the innocent victims were heard as pots fell from their holders to

roll down the way spilling their contents and making it slick for the runners. And then came the beast, - a massive dragon with large green eyes and slick shiny black scales on a tail that whipped and sliced the air like a knife killing and destroying any and everything in its path. An acrid stench blew like a harsh wind burning the air through the winding streets and pathways, knocking over everything in its way and setting fire to many thatched roofs and clothes hanging on lines. Those on the ground grabbed their eyes as they were scorched from the heat and began to bump into one another. Those who had found refuge reached out and pulled their fellows inside trying hard to hide. No one made a sound not even the scraping of a foot as they tried to stay still as those of the town feared that their hiding places would be found if they even whispered.

A blood curdling scream sliced through the silence and the crowd looked as a woman pointed at the sky. “THE DRAGON’S GOT EM! And when they looked, they saw the king, queen, prince, and princesses dangling from the massive claws of the giant beast. Their golden crowns came crashing to the ground dripping in blood as the beast flapped its mighty wings and sailed overhead higher and higher getting smaller and smaller with the witch leaning forward, head down riding on his back until they disappeared over the rim of the mountain dangling the limp bodies of its victims from the sharp pointed claws of the dragon. A cloud of black ravens followed behind. Their high-pitched squeals could be heard for miles as they disappeared into the distance.

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For a moment the crowd stood paralyzed with shock until the voice of a child said in a small voice, “The king is gone!” The crowd gasped and then pandemonium broke loose. A roar went up in the square as the crowd began to scream and cry. A dragon had not been seen or even heard of on these mountains nor a witch for over a century and actually some people began to believe that the story of Heath of the Green Valley as he had come to be called was just a legend and may not even be true. Some had actually gone so far as to joke about the stories of Heath’s journal and the strategies that were the sports competed in at the Heath Olympic Games was said to be only fiction told by old people. The tales of the methods created by the champion and his band of men that were used to beat that monster had become games used in rivalries across the mountain hamlets and villages – not weapons used in battle as legends told. One old man at the edge of the square, banged his stick on the stone statue of the hero until the crowd quieted. It was Isaac Herndon, a man in his 80’s who was known for speaking out with his forceful opinions and for playing lively fiddle music, his love for cherry muffins, and his cat, Silvia.

“I warned you that this would happen,” he said in a loud rough voice tinged with rage as he waved his crooked finger at the crowd.



“ A dragon has not been seen for over a century, we thought they no longer existed.” someone countered.

Another, “We thought those creatures were dead.”

“Or never existed,” grumbled a woman under her breath.

“Who was that creature with the black cape and pointed hat riding on the back of the beast? A boy yelled out.

“That my friends,” croaked the old man, “that was a WITCH, one of the vilest creatures of all. SHE WILL BE BACK I TELL YA, MARK MY WORD! We are sittin ducks for monsters like them what with your trust in everyone that shows up at your doors. Your homes left open at night with nary a lock. Oh no, you say, nobody’s gonna try and hurt us. What about your farms and animals just waiting to be taken. We got no weapons! What we gonna fight em with? And you who derides the history of our past as though it were a bunch of bunk – ya know who ya are. You all best be getting ready because theys a comin back and if yer not ready.....well who knows how bad its gonna git. He turned on his crooked stick, jabbing a fist at the crowd. And then as an after-thought, he yelled over his shoulder, “ya better get ready and keep yer loved ones safe. LOCK YOUR DOORS for cryin in a bucket! Do you believe me NOW?”

Voices from the crowds, “WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? And “Where did they take the King?” Cries and shouts and then the sounds of the ravens in the distance could be heard coming back. And the crowd began to grab their young ones and run. That’s when they saw the fires. They had fires to put out. Panic ensued. People and animals ran amuck through the cobblestone streets, up and down, knocking down everything in their way. Neighbors formed bucket lines to douse their fires as the shrieks of the ravens seemed to be getting louder. And then weirdly, the sound of the ravens suddenly stopped. Then silence except for the crackle of

fires. The flames were reduced to cinders at last and the sound of voices died down. Night fell and the moon was covered by clouds. “The bell! What happened to the bell?” Voices murmured. It was silent.

The town went quiet, and lights went out all over the side of the mountain. But down in the empty square, a youth sat up, rubbing the knot on his head. He had not been fast enough to get out of the way of the mob that ran over him on their way up the streets. Now he tried to stand but his head was whirling, and he fell back against the stone wall that surrounded the square. There was an acrid stench in the air and as his head cleared, he remembered the green eyes of that dragon and the shrill and high-pitched cackle of the creepy rider. What happened to everyone? Was it a dream? He thought. But reality struck him like lightning as he looked around at the equipment from the games that were strewn about on the cobblestones. This had been the day of the Games – THE OLYMPIC GAMES! The statue of Heath stood proudly there in the moonlight. The young man, Eric thought back to the stories that his father had told to him at night while tucking him into bed. They were great stories taken from tales of long ago – each one more exciting than the next. Each night, he begged for more stories of Heath of the Green Valley and his dad’s voice would tell of a young man who came out of the forest with his band of men and conquered the dragon, the witch and all of the evil minions who had held the mountain hostage for centuries making all who lived there, prisoners and slaves. The mountain was called Black Mountain back then because of the toxic smoke filled with oily grime that saturated the air. He had come to save a maiden without weapons but killed the dragon and imprisoned the rest with only a bag of game pieces and a quick mind and abundant courage. Is it happening again? Eric, shouldered his knapsack, wiped the blood off of his forehead with his sleeve and started up the cobblestones towards home. In the darkness, he stumbled over the Olympic flag that was burned from the

dragon's breath and was crumpled on the ground. He stooped to pick it up and saw that it was still smoldering and as he shook it, it started him thinking. How are we going to survive? He asked himself. And right then, the clouds uncovered the moon that cast the shadow of Heath himself across Eric's path. He stepped back in surprise, tripped and sat down with a thump right on the fountain's edge. A voice in his head whispered, "It worked before, it will work again."

"...but how?" he asked. And then he knew. In the darkness, he began to search for and gather up the sporting equipment that was scattered about the square - some broken, some torn, all blown far and wide. There were balls, cans, marbles, kites, stones, whistles, hurdles, flags and nets. And as he worked, out of the shadow his friends started silently inching back into the square under the moonlight. And one by one, they started gathering up the game tools until one of them asked, "What are we doing BB?" (His friends had called him Brain Boy since they were children).

"We're going to save the town and everyone in it AND every single person on this mountain. I don't know how. I just know that we need these tools. I don't know why. I'm thinking on it." And so they all started searching out the sporting tools. When they couldn't find another tool, they packed them in their bags, threw the bags over their shoulders and tiredly headed for home. Eric joined the pack home. Just then, Gladys, his friend since childhood sidled up to him and whispered, "You're going to use Heaths attack plans, right BB?"

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Eric, “Maybe. I don’t know.” (How did she guess? he thought).

Gladys, “If so, you’re going to need his journal, right?”

Eric. “Oh RIGHT! I forgot about it.

Gladys, “it’s got his plans in it.

Eric, “But where is it? How do we get it? Where is it? In the tower, right?”

Gladys. “Let’s go!”

Eric, “Now?” They turned and looked at each other. “Right we better get there before the Witch does.”

Making a sharp turn, Eric whispered to the rest, “We’re going up to the Tower and see if we can find Heath’s journal with all his battle plans in it.” He gave Gladys a look since she was the one who thought about it and now, he was taking credit for it. She gave him a raised eyebrow. The whole group raised arms in a salute – some chest beating. And off they went towards the Tower. It was a short distance out of town, through a narrow woods and up a steep trail to the ridge. But all things seemed possible in that moment with the clouds passing over the moon giving off its magical light,

the gang of friends ready to rebel and the idea of fighting back seemed a possibility. But as they drew near to the bridge over the moat, they began to hear the swans screeching out in distress and then the stench that began to fill the air and a sobbing sound from the top of the Tower and they all pushed back into the night and huddled in fear. They knew then that they were too late. The tower had already been overtaken by the witch! Somewhere near would be the monster dragon and all thoughts were to run. And so, they did. Through the woods, down the slope and into town and each to their own homes they ran with the reality of their fate setting in.

Morning brought the dismal sight of wreckage and the rancid smell of something else – was it death? People began to creep out of their homes and gather in their yards and streets to talk about what to do. Bands of villagers formed to save the king and queen but this was soon crushed when they heard that the witch and the dragon and their evil minions had already returned and had taken over the tower. In years past, in order to guarantee safety for all, all weapons, were kept inside the tower after an accidental shooting took place, with the ruling that they could be checked out at any time when needed. Those were the times of trust in humanity and community and neighbors helping neighbors. Keeping your guns, swords, and knives locked up where they were easily accessed in the tower that was open for all was reasonable. But life, as they knew it, was about to change and not for the good.

The happy town of Brooksong was no longer happy. There was no singing in the square or delicious smells of pies baking in the ovens. The canarys that could always be heard singing their sweet morning songs as they swung from golden cages in the open windows of the cottages were shut tight within. The fountain went dry, and the bell fell silent.

It wasn't long before the Witch brought starvation by ordering the minions to build giant smelting furnaces. Darkness fell over the land from the toxic smoke from their chimneys. Old man Herndon eerie prediction was coming true. It was a repeat of a century past. The water of the singing brook' was, once again dammed up and diverted to be used to cool the smelters. And without it, the musical sound it had always made as it rippled down the mountain and into the town for the past century was now silent. Without water the gardens died, the ponds dried up killing the fish and wildlife, and the small trickle of water that they were able to collect was rationed out in small tin cups brought from home. Out in the fields the grapes died on their vines, and without sunlight, the meadows and pastures followed, starving the cattle, sheep, goats and horses and every living thing. The smelting furnaces with their constant ear-piercing whine that spat out blackened grime into the sky poisoned all living things all for the sake of greed. Folks who tried to escape by every means possible, were caught and fed to the alligators that now lived in the once beautiful moat where swans had swum before. Worst of all, hope began to die on the day that the last light of the sun was eventually blocked out by the blackened air. Outsiders from other mountains were kept out by a ditch around the mountain base and barriers appeared on all roads and pathways leading up with signs that read, "No Outsiders Allowed on Our Mountain". Those in the valleys beyond read the signs and stayed back with fear. But they knew in their hearts that if Enchanted Mountain could be destroyed then inch by inch the evil would creep closer and closer to them. Proof of this was the smoke-darkened horizon over the mountain that seemed to be getting nearer. Evil had returned and it was coming their way.

But hope was still strong for a studious young man trying to figure out how Heath had used game parts to fight a monster as big as the dragon - Eric, the boy with the idea had not given up hope. Oh no. Each day, he,

along with his family and everyone else in the valley took their meager lunches of boiled turnups or soaked oats and trudged out to the brick silos with their smelting furnaces and worked all day on their feet carrying heavy loads of coal and rock. They were often beaten if they even stopped for a moment in pain and beaten if they fell back and beaten if they complained. They learned not to cry out because that brought unspeakable torture. At the setting of the sun each night, the gates were raised at the edge of the brick silos, and the workers were released to struggle down the mountain paths to their homes - some in town, while others on their farms. Winter, spring, and summer and in all kinds of weather with bone crushing pain throughout their bodies and blistered hands and feet, they would eat the small potato or boiled meat or whatever food they could find only to fall into bed to have nightmares of dragons and monsters. But Eric, with his mind busy trying out ideas before casting them aside, had trouble sleeping. Finally, he would drop off right before morning. It was the same every night. He would lie awake in his bed with his mind tunneling into ways to come up with a plan for redemption. And the only answer that returned night after night after other ideas bloomed and then faded, was finding the Journal of Heath of the Green Valley. How did he get past the snake pits hidden in the woods? How did he use marbles to slay a dragon? How did he get close to the dragon without being slaughtered? And on and on.

Sometimes during the day in the furnace room, he would catch a glimpse of one of his old pals from the past and occasionally, he would even catch their eye and give a nod. Many times, they didn't nod back, and he knew why. They were afraid and it came that finally Eric stopped raising his eyes as well after one hard beating. That night as his mother rubbed a tincture of rosemary on his wounds, she took his face into her hands, and

said, “My son, be smart and do not make a nuisance of yourself or you will come to ill. Do ya hear me?” And then she bent down closer and whispered softly in his ear, “But, my darling son, never ever give up.”

“Aggie!” A gruff voice from the other room from his dad. “He’s gonna get killed listening to that!” His dad was starting to give up, Eric thought. Dad hardly spoke at all but only stared blankly each night as they ate their scraps of food, not like he used to. His dad had always been his hero. He had taught him how to fix the roof and anything else that needed fixing. He took him everywhere with him, spent hours teaching him the game of marbles and telling him stories about Heath of the Green Valley every night when he tucked his son in bed. But now, he hardly ever met his eye or spoke to him at all.

Afterall, Ralph had always been a hard-working and decent man who had taken pride in his family, his work, his neighbors, and his town. He was a leader in his community, one where he had grown up and knew everybody. And he took that responsibility seriously. He had never ever thought that all of that could be destroyed by one evil witch or a dragon. She had surrounded herself with minions and a mighty dragon by fear, he was sure or the dragon had surrounded himself..... It didn’t matter, neither one cared about them except for what they could do for them to fulfill their greed and obsessive need for power. Thoughts filled his head of times gone by when life was good and cares were few. Now as he sat there looking out of the window of his home, a home that he had built with his own hands with the help of friends and neighbors, he felt defeated. No grass grew anymore, the fence had fallen down, and no flowers grew or birds sang. He thought to himself, “All of that work to build a life and raise a family and it only took one moment in time for evil to block the sun destroy this land

and crush our fair and just leader, King Wilmer and Queen Barbara and their children, the prince and princess to change the world we live in. And now what am I, he thought, but a broken soul who couldn't save anything?

That night Eric kept thinking about what his mother had said to him as well as the picture of his father sitting with his shoulders slumped as he sat in his chair staring out of the window at nothingness. He knew, he would do whatever it took to take back their village and their freedom no matter what.

Eric's wounds healed but the memory of the beating did not. They only increased his determination. One day, a woman with a dirt-crusting grimy rag covering part of her face, bumped him catching him off balance. And when she did, she pressed a wad of coal sludge into his hand. She looked up and right into his eyes with a quick knowing glance and dashed off down the tunnel. He started to look down and realized that it must be a message and rolled it tight and put it down his shirt. All day he had trouble keeping his mind on his work wondering if the wad he could feel next to his chest was actually anything important or not. But he knew he had to wait until he could not be caught before checking it out. Hurrying across the fields towards home despite his painful body, he finally reached the door to home and dashed inside to the privacy of his small room. Only then did he pull the wad apart and find the note inside.

It read:

BB, "danger" And the rest of words were rubbed out by the coal dust.

The next day Eric scanned the workers searching for the woman in the scarf who had passed him the note but the day went by without a sign. And the next. And the next. Then one day a scuffle in the tunnel brought pushing and shoving and Eric took a punch that sent him sprawling. Stars swam before his eyes and then a familiar voice in a low whisper in his ear, “do you? Have a plan?” It was Gladys who was hardly recognizable with her face covered with coal dust.

He was just barely able to answer back “We gotta get the journal,” he answered before everyone scattered and the minions and their bats came pounding through the dark.

The village paid dearly for this as once again, the shrieks of the ravens filled the air. The sun that barely shown through the coal dust went even blacker with the shadow of the green-eyed dragon who, once again, attacked the village in retaliation. Out in the countryside people and chickens and one goat were snatched by the dragon and carried off to the tower. One of the victims was Abe, one of the pals who was in the group that night they all went to the tower to find the journal only to discover that it was too late. And it so happened that while the dragon whipped and turned as he circled to land inside the gate, carrying his victims in his claws, that Abe was able to pull himself out of its grasp and fell hard onto a bed of corn cobs. He was a nimble gymnast and a fast runner who had come in second in the Tag races in the last Olympic games. In a split second he leaped up and dashed around the tower and courtyard searching for an escape when he was able to find an opening in the stone wall and started down a winding stone stairway into the bowels of the tower. He stealthily stepped down each stone step, listening for any sound forward and around each curve in the stairway. And then he stopped as he heard the sound of heavy grunting and voices. Grasping a hold on a bolt that happened to be sticking out of the stone, he

slid to an abrupt stop just as he made eye contact with a giant MINION! He stumbled back against the steps, got his bearings, turned and raced back up the winding stairway passing the outside doorway where groups of minions out in the courtyard appeared to be searching – probably for him – and then continued up towards the top. As he leaped from one stone step to the next, a loud roar blasted at the foot of the stairs rocked all the torches that lit the walls, and the fiery breath of the dragon blew up the corridor like a hurricane. He felt the fire burn his shirt that now hung loose and felt his back get scorched. He reeled in pain, but as he grabbed at the wall to steady himself and to his amazement, he fell through a narrow slit in the wall and landed on a stone floor into a small room. He laid there on the cool stone floor for a second gasping for air. But hearing voices out on the stairway, he scrambled onto his feet into the darkness. And as he did, he bumped into objects knocking them to the floor. One of the objects was a brass name plate that he slipped on, and he stooped and picked it up. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and his vision cleared, he saw that it was a name plate that read: The Journal of King Heath of the Valley had fallen out of a glass cabinet that he bumped in the dark. He felt around in the darkness until he touched a glass door standing ajar from a trophy cabinet and when he felt around inside, nothing was on that shelf but a pile of velvet where the journal had been. A stream of light from an opening high above in the ceiling shown down and as his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he could see that it was a trophy cabinet and there were some shelves that reached to the ceiling all filled with awards given at the Heath Olympic Games. His attention was instantly turned to the sound of pounding of outside the room that was getting louder as the minions got closer and closer the stairway on their quest to find him. He froze as the minions kept storming by on their way to the top. And he began searching for a way to escape. He couldn't go back out on the stairway because there were certainly more of the minions in the courtyard. And then he heard the sound of

boots pounding as the minions were coming back down the stairway chanting something. The closer they came, the clearer it was, “KILL HIM KILL HIM KILL HIM” Frantically, he darted about searching for a hiding place – the only thing in the room was the trophy case. TROPHY CASE! He was an athlete, a medalist every year in the Olympics ever since he was a small boy! He grabbed the highest shelf he could reach, pulled himself up, stood on the shelf, grabbed the next shelf, pulled himself up and on until he reached the opening in the top of the pointed ceiling. He swung his legs up through the hole using his strong muscular legs that had won him many medals and found himself on the roof of the tower right over the belfry. But upon scanning the tower roof, he could see that there was no stairway. The tower was too tall for him to jump – it went through the clouds at times. There was no way down. He looked down at the courtyard and the gate where the gateman stood who was now looking up at the tower. He was trapped. When the minions came back up the stairway he would be caught and tortured or fed to the alligators and he knew it. And then he heard the roar of the dragon and the stomping steps of the minions and he knew his life was over.....unless... And then he saw it, a rope was hanging out of one of the open louvers of the belfry and it seemed to be tied to an iron hook. Why hadn't he seen it before? He thought, I gotta get down to that rope. Could he swing himself down to the same corn stalk heap where he had landed in the first place? His thoughts raced. They were getting closer and closer. He yanked off his clothes and began tearing them in strips which wasn't hard as ragged as they were. First, he tore his trousers into strips and tied the pieces together and then his shirt and lastly, the rope he used for a belt. Quickly he tied them together, hung one end on a chimney bolt and ignoring the warning in his head, he dropped over the side down to the ledge, stood for a split second with his feet on the bell ledge just as the pant rope tore and broke and he reached down and grabbed the rope. He started to fall over the side but steadied himself and put his arm through the medal

ring in the rope and pushed off of the wall and started to swing. He tried to look down and find the pile of corn stalks in the dark but all he could see was the moonlight on the cobblestone courtyard, the gate, and the wall surrounding the moat. The minions were now in the belfry grunting and they had found him. As they started pulling the rope up, he gave one push from the wall, swung out away from the wall and dropped to the ground. He landed with a hard thump on something soft but before he could get to his feet, strong hands yanked him up by his arm and he found himself looking into the mask of the gatekeeper. He froze, his heart beating out of chest, his breath coming hard, he started to black out. Stories had been told that those who tried to enter the tower through the gate were thrown by the Gatekeeper into the moat to be eaten by the alligators. The gatekeeper shook him hard and his mind cleared up enough to try to pull away. But the tight grasp of the man was too strong, and he couldn't get away. He was grabbed by his arm and dragged behind the gatekeeper, his legs and torso feeling the sharp rocks tearing at his skin. At the hidden iron door leading to the banks of the moat, he was yanked through the moat gate and towards the edge of the stone edge. He could hear the water and the rancid smell of animal dung. Just as his boots touched the water, the gatekeeper shoved him to the right under the bridge where the water of the moat seemed to narrow. And as he looked, he could see that flat stones could be seen sticking of the water.

“RUN!” was all he heard, and he was off. He could already hear the water churning as the alligators came sliding towards him, their golden eyes gleeful as he ran and leaped from stone to stone until he got to the other side all the while feeling the presence of the open jaws of the alligators. He vaulted onto the slippery bank and clawed his way up and over the stone wall, hit the ground running and ran as though his life depended on it (which it did), down the path through the woods and out in the clearing

down the mountain slope and into the streets of Brooksong and home. He was greeted with words of shock and joy as his family hugged him covering him with kisses. Their son had literally returned from the dead because the last time they had seen him he had been dangling from the claws of the vicious dragon. He tried to answer all of their questions through tears and hugs and then more tears and hugs.

As he fell asleep that night in his bed in the corner of his home, a memory floated by of the last thing he had heard as he darted through the shadows was the Gate Keeper's deep voice saying to the squealy voice of the witch, "No. It was a rat." That voice lingered in his brain.

On his morning hike across the pastures towards the smelting furnace, shortly after the last dragon attack, Eric was handed a small ball of bread by a thin girl in a ragged coat that hung to the ground. "Thanks," he said with meaning. Nobody gave away food these days as they were all starving. But when he bit into it, he realized that this wasn't ordinary bread. Tucked inside was a tiny slip of paper. It read simply, "Z." That was the name they all called an old broken-down chicken coop that the gang had used as their "club house" since way back in childhood. It was originally named Zander's Den after one of the crew's grandfather, Lloyd Zander, who owned the land it sat on. But as time went by, the name became just Z. The pals had all started meeting there when they were youngsters in school and had continued as they grew up together. Even now, as young people, the pebble passed from one of them to another with a Z scratched in it always meant to meet at the shed on that night. He slipped out of the house through his bedroom window and crept silently as a ghost through the shadows at the edge of town into the fields and pathways until he arrived as the moon rose

over the mountain to shine through the smokey haze. The small shack, Z's Den could barely be seen through the smoky air except for a thin stream of smoke curling out of the chimney on the slanted roof.

Eric's heart began thumping in anticipation the closer he got to the place. And he felt it leap almost out of his chest as he embraced them - his lifelong friends, Gladys, Abe, Grendal, Rosealee, Avery, Jane, Burt, and Will. Hand slaps and shoulder hugs all around as they pulled him in close in the small space to huddle around a small stove with a few thin branches burning. Then everyone spoke at once telling their stories of loved ones who had been kidnapped by the dragon and horror stories of famine and loss since they had last seen one another. Tears were spilled both in happiness as they told their stories with friends and despair as they recounted their efforts for survival. The chatter came to a peak and then stopped short and everyone looked at Eric as if to say. "Do something. We're going to die if you don't."

And what could he tell them? he thought. That he had a plan but he didn't know how to make it happen?" He started to say something but stumbled over his words.

And then Gladys stepped in and said, "BB, Abe's got something to tell."

"Tell him Abe" the others urged.

"I will I will, just give me a chance!" And they all sat back with every eye focused on Abe.

He got to the point. "Listen BB, the journal isn't in the tower."

Eric: “WHAT? WHERE IS IT?” Then, “What makes you think that? Who told you?”

And then Abe told of his adventure in the tower, seeing the cabinet where it had been kept, his gymnastics to escape from the minion, the rope with the ring that seemed to magically appear, and the weirdness of the gatekeeper shoving him towards the stones in the water and telling him to run. They all clapped. The story got better with the telling.



Eric: “ That journal is everything! WHO STOLE THE JOURNAL?” We have weapons but how do we use them! We are dying – starving! This can’t go on. We gotta get that journal! “I don’t know what we’re goin to do without it.”

“I do kind of remember a story that it was stolen or something.” Gladys added.

Eric: “Who has it? Without it, we are lost.” He slumped into his jacket.

Gladys: “WAIT! The old man will know. You know....Isacc? Isaac Herndon. He was the man who said that nobody listened to him about keeping safe that day. Remember?” Everyone looked at her with doubt. “ At least, he might know where to start looking?”

And then everyone started talking at once. Some wanted to gather a crowd and attack the tower but Grendle reminded them that some of their own members of their families had already tried and were fed to the

alligators. Eric reminded them that they had the tools but didn't know how to use them as weapons. Abe added, "And believe me, THEY HAVE a dragon and there's an army of them what with minions and bats and ravens and that witch who kills everything with her screech AND only 10 of us. We don't stand a chance right now."

It was getting late when they all agreed that Gladys' plan to find the old man and see if he could help them was the best for now. All of them were wearing out plus they were filled with fear – both for being caught out at night and for banking on finding an old man who didn't seem to like anybody. And just then the fire in the grate went out.

"How shall we know when to get together to plan?" Jane asked.

"Yeah, how?" they all chimed in.

Eric, "I think the bread idea was too risky and looked what happened."

Gladys, "Let's do this. When Eric and I want to call a meeting we will pass a rock to....someone we each see more than others just like we've always done. I'll pass mine to Grendle."

Eric, "Abe, I see you on the mountain sometimes in the morning. I'll pass it to you." Abe nodded and the rest of the gang made plans with one another about passing the rock.

"Whenever you get one, you know we are meeting that night in Z." Everyone nodded in agreement and shuffled out of the door towards home.

Eric whispered to Gladys, “We gotta start now before something else happens.”

“Or we starve,” someone whispered who heard him. And so they all started back into town taking their own routes for safety. Gladys and Eric volunteered to try and find Isaac Herndon. Bidding everyone farewell, they wound their way around the darkened town among the broken pots and fallen limbs until they found their way on a rutted path with a broken sign that read Herndons. They crept along the path until they rounded a curve and there back amid an overgrowth of trees and bushes sat a small cottage with broken windows and peeling paint. “This must be it.” Eric whispered. They both crept up to the window making as little sound as they could on the dried branches and rocky earth as it was late and the moon was on its way down, long past bedtime. But through the smoke covered window by the door, they could just see the flicker of a small fire burning in a stove with the figure of a person sitting before it hunched over. And so they tapped on the door.

They could hear the shuffling of feet and an old man cracked open the door and a voice croaked out a whisper, “Who’s there?”

And Eric whispered. I am Eric Sharp and this is Gladys Wren. We’ve come to ask you a question.

“Who did you say you were?”

“I’m Ginny and Ralph Sharp’s son, Eric. And this here is Gl...”

“You say you are the Sharp’s boy? Ya gotta question?” he asked.

“About the journal – Heath’s journal.” Both Eric and Gladys spoke at the same time a little louder this time.

“Ohhhh the journal.....I see.....step closer and let me take a look at you. You say you want to know about Heath’s journal young man? Who sent you here?” And he looked Eric up and down. “What makes you think that I know about it? “Why do ya want it?” The old man looked at them warily with eyes squinted and eyebrows pushed together.

“Can we come inside?” Both stood shivering in the frigid mountain air in their thin, ragged jackets.

The door cracked open just wide enough for them to slip inside.

It was roasting hot in the small dark room and dark shadows danced around the edges lingering in the corners.

“We just wanta see if it can tell us how to save the town from the dragon, Mr.Herndon, you know, like HE did. We thought you might know where it is.” This was from Eric as he tried to make the old man understand.

“We heard....you....that day the dragon took..... We’re sorry we bothered you. We’ll go.” Gladys spit out her words as she started backing up towards the door. “Thanks anyway,” as she stumbled backwards over a chair nearly falling.

“Sit down and let me hear what you have to say,” said the old man in a louder voice while lighting his pipe.”

Both spoke at once, sometimes over each other unraveling their story starting with the day the Witch and his dragon attacked their town and how they had a gang of friends and all of them wanted to try and kill the dragon or, at least, get rid of him...and the witch, just as Heath of the Green Valley had done in the stories they heard. The two took turns telling the story in their way - thinking that if they could read Heath's journal, they could do what he did - "you know, use the game tools and...."

The old man nodded his head. "I see," he said, while studying both of them with smoke slowly curling out of his pipe. "And so, now you want to get your hands on his journal,.....hmmm?"

Eric cut in and told him that one of their group, Abe, had been inside the tower after the dragon dropped him there. "But he got away and found a room with a case, you know a shelf, that had a sign that said "journal" but it was GONE!"

"Someone must have taken it," Gladys chimed in sadly. "Some guys in my line at the smelter were missing last week and one bloke said that they had all tried to storm the tower through the woods but there are snake pits and the others fell into them and couldn't get out." There was screaming that night - everybody heard it. We did. I mean, my family did."

The old man looked from Eric to Gladys and back again. And then he said in his crackling voice, "So you want to come up with a plan to crush the witch, the dragon and all of the evil minions the same way that Heath did but ....looking from one to the other, "you need the journal to tell ya how to do it." More of a statement than a question. Both nodded. "And you think the two of you can do it on your own?" But before they could tell him about the others, he raised his voice above a whisper and barked in a throaty

grunt, “Come back in one week when the moon is dark. Make sure you aren’t followed. Ya hear me? No sooner than just about an hour or so after the closing bell and if it suits me, I will tell you a story. Now GO!” And he jabbed his finger towards the door of the cottage.

Startled, they both jumped at the bark and then fell over each other trying to reach the door, all the way nodding and squeaking out, “ Yeah yeah we will we will.”

“And BRING VITTELS or the door will stay locked, ya hear?” he called out in a loud whisper.

They scrambled over the rocky path as they dodged through trees limbs and large rocks and by the time they came out where the path started, they were both out of breath.

“Story? He’s going to tell us a story?” Eric grumped.

“He KNOWS something BrainBoy!”

“Oh.”

And they parted ways and hurried through the roads on the edge of Brooksong to the safety of their homes. Eric had more trouble sleeping that night.

In the next week, time crept by. More stories came down of others who had tried to escape and failed, of the gate keeper and the alligators but now screams and sobbing could be heard at times coming from the tower. The sound was terrifying.



And then came the night a week later when they were told to come back and the two met at the crossroads and headed for the cottage. They both were full of curiosity as they walked in silence hoping that their food offerings would meet his demands and wondering what they were going to find out on that night if anything. The door cracked open at their approach and Mr. Herndon's eyes could be seen peering at them from the darkness. He snatched the food out of their hands and once again, ushered them into his small cottage where a fire was burning in the stove.

As he settled back in his chair, puffing on his pipe with smoke curling around his head, he began his story.

“Back in the days about a hundred years ago, the Enchanted Mountain was pretty much like it used to be here except for there was a witch who brought bad spells once in a while to villages and towns up and down. Those stories are all true. The spells didn't always work and the villagers took to laughing at her especially when they'd had a long night if ya knows what I mean.” And he gave his listeners a look. “Nobody thought nothin bout it until one day here she came riding a giant purple dragon over the ridge and it swooped down and took a villager and his donkey and they were never seen again. From that day on, the story goes that the witch brought her dragon to feast on the town folks and the farmers with their livestock. Yup. They got ate. And it weren't long the village of Brooksong back then was turned into a death camp, I tell ya, with minions marching on the ground and bats and ravens patrolling the sky. It got purty bad. My grandpappy heard it from his grandpappy and he heard if from his. So he

tole my dad and he tole to me. Those folks – all of em were all captured and made to work like slaves in iron smelters that sprang up in the hills. Ya can still the places in the earth where they were. Nothing grows there. And those who tried to escape were thrown in the dungeons or fed to the alligators just like now. I’m tellin ya, that witch and her dragon must be some relation of the other one. The skies were dark – it was always dark as pitch just like the middle of the night. No sun. Sound familiar?” Both youths nodded. “This went on for years – maybe 50, may a hundred, I don’t know.” He paused and wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. Reaching behind him, he pulled out a large leather book and opened the cover.

“What? Is that the the....”

“Cover?” Gladys finished Eric’s question.

“Hold on and ya’ll learn. One day, a young guy from way down in Green Valley at the base of this mountain who was leaving home to find a new life, lost his way and took the wrong fork in the road by mistake, yes he did. And instead of going to the big town, he headed up to our mountain and got lost. That night he slept in the woods on a bed of pine needles to get some rest and get his bearings. It seems that as the morning sun crossed his face, he heard the faint crowing of a rooster. He was thinking that some friendly farm wife might give him breakfast, so grabbed his gear and headed that way. The sky was lookin dark in the distance as though a storm was coming when he came to a small rundown shack with a single cow rummaging for a blade of grass and a few chickens by the broke down door. Looking around, he saw that things weren’t good there. It looked like they were starvin to death at that farm. That’s right. That’s when he saw for the first time since he had took that wrong fork in the road last evening, that

what he thought was a storm a comin was not a storm at all but smoke in the sky.” And here ole Isaac stopped and ate the last of his meat pie that Erik’s mom had sent. “You see, dontcha,” he said, “he was walkin right into danger and it changed his life forever!”

“Keep going!” they both urged. “Don’t stop!”

So he settled back into his blankets, tapped the ashes out of his pipe and reloaded it with his thumb and continued. “He asked the farmer for something to eat and said he would help him that day for food. Well and as it turned out, for several days thereafter because as the story goes, the farmer had a beautiful daughter Molly Ann, you see, and the young man was smitten. As a fact, he stayed all that winter helping out at the small farm and they got to talkin’ bout what was goin on and that’s when he heard the stories of the monster dragon and the witch who the ones who were causing the skys to darken and the trees and grass to turn brown and die. That was the talk around the fire at night after they et that that boy, who were Heath of the Green Valley, just sos you know, found out all about it. That shack had barely missed being run over cause the borders of the kingdom wuz just a few miles up the mountain. That hadn’t stopped the poison from the smoke – no! And no water or sunshine, no corn! That farmer had lost just about everything but he was too scared to leave and so they just kept trying to scratch out a livin. But starvation was poundin at the door just like it is here right now – we are all goin starve if somthin don’t come about. That spring when the seeds that were planted in the fall didn’t come up, Heath says he knew what he had to do and he better do it quick. He thought he could go back down to Green Valley and get some vittels from the folks there and bring them back up to hold em over until he could talk the farmer to leave his place. But he was young. He didn’t know. He did go back down

the road he came up on headin to his home in the valley. The family probably didn't think he would return – all except Molly Ann. Maybe she did,” he added.

It was getting late but Eric and Gladys begged him to go on with the tale. “Well he traveled back down the road to his valley home to see if he could find a way to help them and of course, his people were happy to see their long lost son had returned but it didn't take long for them to rally around collecting food for him to take back. They had all heard the stories about Black Mountain (that's what it was called back then) – oh they knew all about it. They knowed they were outta their boundaries, but they could see it getting closer towards their village.

They loaded him down with goods, and he went back up the mountain again to the farmer's place. As he came over that hill where that old farm had been sitting, well sir nuthin, I mean nuthin, not a goldurn thing was there but ashes and oh and he did find a small piece of Molly Ann's apron. That boy, Heath just sat down on the dirt and scratched his head and that's when he heard the sound em. Yes the farmer and his family were still alive and hidin in the woods in a cave. He started lookin and he saw them down in that cave. Some of them was hurt real bad but they made it - Oh but Molly Ann she wus gone. Heath he was purty tore up about it. They told him that after he left to go back down to the valley that the witch ridin that nasty dragon had flew down and started a grabbin the little ones as they all ran towards the woods. They said that Molly Ann began grabbing them and throwing them to the ground as she herself was swinging from one of those claws – just like the dragon now. She was able to git loose and she dropped nearly 20 feet to the ground. That girl, she pulled up her skirts and ran after them tryin to get to the woods but she was not fast enough. That made that dragon so mad that he blew fire and roared so loud that it

knocked down trees burned down the shack, killed the cow, the rooster and all of the chickens and then it chased her down and the last they saw of her was her legs kicking as she fought for her life as they disappeared through the smoke. Nothing was left. She was pretty brave for a girl, I'm sayin," He blew out some smoke.

"Hrumph" from Gladys. "She saved her brothers and sisters from a certain death and gave her life for them!"

"Keep talking," Eric said to Isaac while trying to change the subject.

"Well, he took them down to Green Valley where they was tended to. He got all of the towns folks together to get their stories about the witch that they had heard and that's how it all started.

"Is it real?" from Eric.

"Can we see it" from Gladys.

Well....., said the old man as he relit his pipe and took a bite out of his meat pie complements of Eric's grandmother.

"Oh it's real all right. He wrote it hisself with an eagle quill. He took and hid it in case he was kilt in battle. It was lost for many years because the house where he wrote it had blown away in a storm taking it with it. But after generations had gone by it was found by a hunter lodged in a cave and he had a idee that it was something special so he brought back and kept it in a safe place and passed down through the generations."

And that's where the old man stopped speaking and looked up. Eric and Gladys had both become mesmerized by the gravely voice of the old man and lost in the story of Heath of the Valley. They started at the moment and then Gladys asked, "How do you know this story so well?"

The old man eyes sparkled in the firelight, "You asked me what happened to The Heath Journal?"

They both nodded.

"Well you see, the people who found the journal and locked it in the tower to keep it safe were the Herndons."

Eric shook his head thinking and then "So they were..."

"YOUR PEOPLE!" shouted Gladys.

"That's right. My people found the journal and locked it in the tower for safekeeping. And I am the one who took it out....for safe keeping." And a slow smile covered his face.

"But how did you do it?"

"Oh I got it right after that witch and her dragon flew off with King Wilmer and the rest. I knowed it was comin cuz I heard rumors that that dragon had been seen circlin round on the other side of the mountain. Nobody would listen to me but I wusn't taking no chances. I got this feeling and he tapped his old head and I had been planning on takin it back.

I barely made it....and I almost got caught but ya gotta be quick if yer gonna catch ole Isaac!” And with that he leaned back against his chair, folded his gnarled hands over his bony chest, and threw back his head in a cackle.

“May we look at it?”

“Tell ya what youngins, bring back some of that meat pie and we’ll look at it together. BUT ya can’t tell NOBODY, understand? NOBODY!”

“NO NO,” Gladys pushed back. “Right BB?”

“I swear...not a word,” he said as he pushed his finger across his lips as if to zip them shut.

And so the plans to save the people of the village and for that matter, the whole mountain began to seem real that night. The next week, Eric and Gladys sat in wonder as Isaac, tenderly opened the pages of the large, leather journal, and carefully turned the yellowed pages with Heath’s handwriting in black ink on each page.

The spirit of Heath, the long ago warrior could be felt that night as they marveled at the cleverness of using game pieces to fight a battle. They peered at the pages written in script on yellowed parchment. They could see diagrams of the forests and cliffs and pathways surrounding the kingdom as well as maps of the kingdom itself were right there, artfully drawn on the pages.

After watching the two young people reading with amazement, their faces aglow in the firelight, asking pertinent questions and becoming more and more eager to get started, ole Isaac knew that they had the grit, the

smarts, and the courage to fight the good fight. Night after night, Eric and Gladys spent inside that little place reading and planning by firelight and finally when they had turned to the last page, they saw Heath's message to his beloved, Molly Ann who had been captured by the monster dragon and imprisoned in a dungeon.

It read: My beloved Molly Ann I leave this day to battle the beast that took you from me. I will always carry you always in my heart, my love until the end of time. Heath

The two sat there in silence but just for a moment when it was broken by Isaac holding a small wooden box with a brass nail and leather strap. "And now my friends, I have saved the best for last – specially for you, my boy. He released the leather strap from the nail and carefully opened the box. Inside were two large black marbles resting on a pillow of goose down. They shimmered in the firelight and as the box was tilted, they clicked as the large orbs rolled against each other. Eric could not believe his eyes. The game of marbles was his sport and right here before him were the famous black shooters of legend that had slayed the dragon 100 years ago.

Eric was the first to reach out to touch them but the old man pulled the box out of reach. "Hold on son," he said. But before he could speak, Gladys jumped in, "Those are the shooters! They are the ones that Heath used to bring down the dragon! It says so in the journal!" There they were in all of their glory shining in the firelight like a spark as if waiting to be used in battle once again.

Eric could see now that the plans that Heath had made had taken months to plan and if they were going to have a chance of following in his footsteps it would take more than just reading the journal but preparing

physically and mentally all the while in secret. Once or twice a week, after the long hard days at the furnace, Eric would strike out for home, ideas swimming in his head. There, he would peel off his grimy clothes and leave them to soak all night in the bucket until they were put on again. Next, he would rub himself down with a rag, put on one of his worn shirts and trousers and head to Isaac's small cottage. The two of them would pour over the ledger one page at a time, line by line writing and talking them through. The old man would explain the ideas on the page as they were written over a century ago and the language was sometimes hard for Eric to understand. Isaac had been reading this journal over and over again since he took it from the tower and he almost knew it by heart. Before dawn Eric would take his notes and head back to his small room at home and slide them in the crack in the wall above the window. On days that he did not go to Isacs, he would study his scribblings all night by candlelight formulating his plan over and over and writing notes in his own ledger. Gladys joined the two men at times to add her ideas to the plan that was taking shape. All winter they worked but that was not all. Both Eric and Gladys did strenuous workouts building their strength and agility. Eric worked and re-worked his strategies until at last his plan was ready but he would need a band of able and skilled warriors atheletes.

At the first breath of spring, once again Eric and Gladys called a secret meeting in the Z for all their friends. As all of the members of the group gathered around in the little shed waiting for Eric and Gladys to begin, Abe spoke up and said, "We need a name." That's when they became known as the BB's Army. Each one had arrived with their bag of game tools instructed that they had first gathered that night in the square. They dumped them out onto the floor of the shed and spread them out across the dirt for everyone to see. There were: Marbles including shooters, boulders, bonkers, mashers, poppers, smashers, dobbers and bumboozers and small flat stones,

burnt stick markers for Hopscotch, six-pronged sharpened iron jacks and small balls for the game of Jacks, and sheets of thin cloth, long sticks and bolts of twine to make their dancing kites and to weave the netting from the game of badminton. This was followed by rolls of wool or cotton and thick sticks to make the flags for the sport of Capture the Flag. And names were listed of the fastest runners and strongest jumpers in the area who were medal winners at the last Heath Olympics in the sport of tag/kick the can and Hopscotch. These made up their weapons of war.

During that first meeting there in the Z shed, Eric and Gladys took turns explaining their plans for them to take back with them to their homes so they would be ready to fight for freedom from the witch, the dragon, ravens, bats, and minions. They used Heath of the Green Valley's own words in warning of the dangers and explained their plans to follow Heath's journal basic structure. When they were finished, time was spent answering all of their group's questions and there were many. And then they all swore their allegiance to the team and took an oath of secrecy.

The Warrior Athletes right then began divide into teams into their own sports according to their own expertise. A leadership council was formed with Eric and Gladys as co-leaders and the rest of the group were designated team leaders. Abe, because of his athleticism as a medalist in both long jump and hurdles, was made the leader of Hopscotch.

Jane, a gold medalist in the Game of Jacks, was made the leader because of her excellent ability to concentrate, her good timing and excellent coordination as well as dexterity and as rapid response.

Grendle because of his height and upper body strength was made the Leader of Bad Minton, a game that required a good grip, powerful fore and backhands, quick and accurate footwork, as well the ability to strategize and most of all the ability to be patient.

Will, became the Leader of the Dancing Kites, a sport that he earned a bronze medal in due to his running speed and endurance as well as the ability to gauge the wind and maneuver the proper angles for the kite to fly whether in strong gales or in light breezes.

Burt became the leader of the paint crew. As an artist, he had always worked on the Olympics banners and award design but also was an artist skilled in drawing animals which would prove to be pivotal in the coming battle. Rosealee, a seamstress, headed up the Team Uniform Gladys the project manager over all teams and lastly, Eric the Leader.

Although Eric was the one they had all counted on throughout their lives not only as a friend but because of his genius at almost everything – thus the name Brain Boy, he also had amazing athletic ability. Isaac had recognized from the games. He was the undefeated 3-time champion in the 3rd level in the Heath Olympic Games in the game of MARBLES! He could knock a mib out of the ring of any size up to 10 feet in diameter with his high powered and accurate aim of his shooter, a white marble that his parents had given him on his 5th birthday. He became adept at target practice, knocking bottles off stumps as a mere boy. He went on to win championships all over the village always carrying them in his pocket for practice. At 10 years old, he became the youngest competitor in The Heath Olympics, and he had reached Level 3 before his 15th birthday. But his lifelong dream was to reach the ultimate Level 5 and take the medal for shooting over 20 feet to hit marble target out of the ring, a feat that, so far,

had not been accomplished though many had tried. Eric was their hope of bringing down the monster just like Heath had done so long ago in his battle with the dragon. And he had been practicing hard day and night since the day the Witch and the Dragon had attacked their village.

Gladys called order to the team, and all gathered around that night to hear the plan. She told them of the journal and how the ole man Herndon had agreed to be their consultant. He was, she said, the keeper of the journal and all attack strategies would be done in his cottage. She described how the three of them, Isaac Herndon, Eric, and herself had worked all winter studying each line of Heath's writing in order to get a clear idea of the attack strategies and she described them as verrrrry complicated but extremely detailed. BUT, she added, "they are Extremely dangerous. She paused and looked out at her friends as they sat the in the darkness. "Think hard about whether or not you want to risk your lives in this battle because it won't be easy and some of us might not make it. Make your decision of whether you want to do this or not by the next meeting."

Eric stepped up then and in his precise way, laid out their first, second, and third steps: "1. We have to get stronger. You cannot be a weakling. 2. Pass the word to those you trust. We need everybody to make this work whether in battle or behind the lines. 3. Bring those who want to join us one week from today in the gully. And he raised a 3-fingered salute with his thumb extended. "WE BEGIN OUR FIGHT FOR FREEDOM NOW!" A murmur of voices cheering throughout the team as they all punched their hands in the air.

All week throughout the village and spread out to the folks on the farms, the word was spread and on the night of the new moon large crowds of folks gathered in the deep gully under the branches by Z. The darkness provided by the smoke-filled air was a cover for those made their way in silence towards the meeting.

Although some who were there thought they knew what it was about, still they were taken aback when Eric appeared at the front and a small bonfire was lit. No longer was he the boy that they had all known. Not at all. Under his baggy clothing, he had become a well-muscled warrior who was out for revenge and he spoke in the voice of a man who knew what he was about and what he expected of those who joined his band. Brain boy had become Brain Man. It was not a mission for those who would back down, he told them as he stood before the fire, flames reflecting in his face, his dark brown eyes glowing with the fierceness of someone who was angry and determined. Some of them began to drift back to their homes as they realized that they would not be brave enough to be of help. But the ones who stayed, did so because they were not only mesmerized by his words of reason pointing out that the evil that had taken over Brooksong. It was getting even stronger and spreading now, not just in the hills but it soon would be crushing their town and along with it their homes as new smelting furnaces were built where the village had been. He warned them that this may be their last chance of fighting back. Gladys joined him in describing the work that had already been done in making plans from Heath's journal. This included taking a secret stance, using clever ideas, quietly and stealthily conquering the enemy with guile and strength. Others in the team spoke up urging the newcomers to find others in their town and those surrounding ones to fight for freedom. Emboldened by the confidence of the gang, the villagers and country folk who were there began to open up with their own stories.

One man told of traps in the woods that surrounded the tower that were made of deep pits full of snakes. Some had lost loved ones who had fallen in them and were killed by the snakes. The once white tower was now blackened by soot and where once the big brass bell woke the villagers each morning and chimed at twilight was replaced by screams and sobs of those who were held captive. People had tried throughout the year to breakdown the massive wooden doors, but it was guarded by the gatekeeper who warned all that if they entered the tower courtyard, they would be fed to the alligators. There were rumors that villagers who complained would be used as alligator food. All those who spoke, spoke in whispers as though they could be heard by the Witch.

The leaders all began to pick their team members, and each group immediately rounded up to get organized and make plans. After that night, secret meetings took place all over the mountain as the volunteers who soon became known as Brain Boys Band (BBB) worked out their plans and trained to build up their strength. And all summer more and more people joining the team of BB's Armys reduced to just "BB." And as Halloween drew nearer, games were played in their most difficult form, tests of coordination and balance and quick thinking were given and that Eric had created originally for himself during the dark winter night. After one of these trainings under the cover of darkness, the crowd dispersed, Eric heard his name and turned and was surprised to see his dad standing in the circle.

His voice carried across the space between them with the sound of confidence and resolve for the first time in a long time, "I am proud of you my son. You are going to be a great leader. I want to join your team!" And from that day on, things were different between them.

And so, the final preparations began. Villagers met in groups to build large badminton nets that were strong and yet light-weight and made to roll up around tree branches that were cut to fit. The creation of battle attire was the work being done in the cellars of the homes of members of the members of the Team Uniform. Garments made from old and tattered clothing or other coverings that had been or were now being coated with coaldust brought home in their pant cuffs or shoes along with bits of coal from the smelting furnaces. All who joined the regiments of the attack team would be camouflaged with this attire as they moved in for the surprise attack. Rosealee, the Team Uniform Leader, aware of the fact that lives of the troops depended on their ability to remain unseen by the superpower of the eyes of the dragon. She was, not only very particular about the workmanship of her team but demanded that the garments were made to fit each warrior athlete. Burt and his team of artists painted their kites with pictures of the animals that were the favorite foods of dragons and stacked them in sheds throughout the hills and dales, in coal callers and barn lofts to be retrieved on the eve of Halloween. Team Jacks' athletes brought duffle bags filled with super balls, skin wax and the special large metal jacks with them and practiced on every type of surface, to be ready to place them just right when their time came. Target shooting, reload speed rebound was the work of the Team Marble athletes who could be heard practicing tirelessly. Distance shooters would shoot from the tower. Sharpshooters who were skilled shooting from shortrange would hold their positions on the ground. Fast runners and expert climbers from all the teams were needed in every category. Their strength and agility were key. At night in clearings and in homes and even caves, energy was at a peak and groups worked in a flurry of activity while during the day it was as though nothing was afoot as all went about their work in sober silence as before.

During these months, meetings were held on nights of the new moon when the sky was at its darkest in old man Isaac's cottage. Strategies were unveiled, ideas as well as problems were presented. And every member of the team studied the maps in Heath's Journal showing details that included

the lay of the land including the location of the snake pits in the woods, the narrowed places in the water of the moat, the door hidden in the wall that surround the moat – the one that the gatekeeper had drug Abe through and Yes, Heath had studied all of these by himself alone and the notes in the journal told of passing through the woods and falling into a snake pit that he was barely able to escape and scaling walls to entering the tower court to observing the daily lives of those inside while staying unseen and coming close to being caught on several occasion. And his description of his preparations was all there in detail in his own handwriting.

Abe also had drawn a map. His was of the layout of the tower with its hidden room and shelf to the top and the tower stairways. dungeons and secret passageways. Since he had firsthand knowledge of those things and also of the moat, its depth, and the rock pathway under the bridge with its stepping stones across the water. After studying the journal and maps, some of the volunteers took their place in the front lines with confidence. Others stepped back to take their places in the 2nd or 3rd lines to serve as reinforcement troops.

The beatings at the smelt furnace silos continued and as the days went by became more intense with villagers being carried off to the tower by the dragon almost daily. Their screams from the tower could be heard into the night and the troops became more frightened and some pushed Eric to attack sooner but he held fast, always saying, "We aren't ready." And so they worked even harder.. No longer did they miss a meeting or a workout or

even a test, because the darkness in the air felt more and more like death. Breathing became harder and eyesight dimmer. But Eric ramped up his coaching in pushing all the teams to do better and be stronger with Gladys as the offensive coordinator. Team leaders zeroed in closer to their athlete's skills, correcting mistakes and cheering their successes to keep up their morale. And every athlete, despite their difficulties drove harder towards excellence in competition with their mates. As the time grew nearer to the day of Halloween, each team began to pick the best of their best. Those who would become leaders in battle on the team Jacks had to prove their cognitive and motor skills by determining the angle of the throw to give themselves enough time to collect the correct and place the jacks. Those who were members of the Team Hopscotch competed in coordination, hopping and jumping for distance and balance with the ability to control and direct their body movements while navigating the obstacles. Team Kites athletes showed their expertise in positioning their kite by controlling the bar according to the wind direction, thrust, lift, and drag specifically. Team Bad Minton athletes competed for gauging power in controlling their serves and returns. For the battle, the warriors with the most strength would control the nets. The ability to escape capture by dodging, side-stepping, pivoting, gauging distance, and noticing slight movements were the skills of the Team Tag athletes. And Team Capture the Flag required adaptability to every circumstance, physical prowess in speed and agility and teamwork.

The teams of Art and Uniforms were in their own category and members worked independently in their homes as fast and as accurately as they could as the day of attack was coming.

Each team was finally ready with their strategies in place directly from Heath's Ledger through Eric, Gladys, and Isacc to their team leaders and they were faunching at the bit to put everything into action. Why? Because

the village was now being systematically crushed by the minions. In the past few days, the minions in their leather uniforms had begun tramping down the narrow path that ran through the woods each morning right after daybreak. They barked “Kill, Kill, Kill” as they marched from the tower to the town in squadrons while the Witch screeched her orders in that high pitched, shrill screech from her position on the back of the dragon. The burly minions with their chains dangling from their leather armor crushed everything that got in their way with their heavy spiked clubs. With each building that fell they shouted their victory call. Villagers ran screaming from their homes at the sounds of the killers on the rampage. The air was filled with ash from the scorching breath of the dragon as sections of the town burned. And overhead the cackle of the evil Witch as she screeched in pleasure at their pain and terror brought and even strong resolution in the hearts of all of BB’s Armies to fight back and win.

It was here! Halloween Eve had arrived. Throngs of warriors and warrior athletes from up and down the mountain began arriving during that night just as Heath and his band had done a century ago. The night had turned frosty and each man and woman in camouflage were carrying their bags of game weapons, found their appointed places around the edge of the woods and huddled together for warmth. More and more silently arrived to join the rest through the dark and spooky night. And the night wore on. By dawn legions of them were there waiting for the signal. It was eerily silent – not a sound could be heard not even a snap of a twig. The woods, devoid of all creatures stood like dead sentries. Nothing stirred and nothing could be seen. With their coal dusted cloaks and coverings, carefully sewn by candlelight in farmhouses and villages for months now had become invisible. And the Team Uniform had done their work well. For all that huddled that night by the forest had become invisible from above. Not a single breath of air from those many warrior athletes could be heard as

Halloween morning began in a haze with the rising of the sun as it peaked over the mountain and shone through the smoky air. And then, just as the first spark of light appeared, the sound of the minions coming through the woods on the path shook the earth with their every step and still the legions of BB's armies were silent. Waiting. Waiting.



As the dragon flew overhead carrying the Witch on his neck, the troops prepared to advance waiting for their leader to give the signal that they had been waiting for. But still they waited. The screeching of the witch grew more and more faint as she got further away towards Brooksong. The two leaders with Isaac had worked out this plan all through the spring, summer, and fall building and rebuilding the timing for the attack. When the minions began their destruction of the town of Brooksong, the timing of their attack jumped to a new level of possibility. With the evil forces out of the way, their warriors would be more able to advance through the woods and enter the tower gates to set up their battle plans before the witch and her dragon became aware that the towns folks had secretly vacated and the town was now empty. The sound of the minions shouting their first victory of annihilation in Brooksong faintly carried through the morning air and Eric stepped in front of his throng and in a voice of redemption, shouted “Freedom” to those near and in the next second, the signal was passed down the line and around the circle of warriors like lightning and the first line of Team Hopscotch was mobilized. Charging through the forest, hopping over barriers, dodging trees and stumps, they had no trouble. Their pathways had already been put into place by the athletic runners of Team Tag who had been entering the forest for months using the detailed maps

made by Heath's to find and verify where all the snake pits were although they couldn't tag them for fear of being found out, they were able to hide long branches among the fallen trees and leaves. Now Team Hopscotch quickly covered the ground through the forest to each snake pit to create barriers. They were followed closely by nimble and strong flag carriers of Team Capture the Flag. The strongest jumpers of Team Hopscotch would hop over the large pits planting the flags on all sides so that the following teams would not fall into the pits. Team Capture the Flags athletes passed them the flags and then stood guard until all was covered and then one athlete from each squad remained by the pits waiting for the next signal while the rest advanced. When all the pits were marked by these two teams, the athletes ran around them to the tower side of the woods took their places around the outside wall of the tower. Behind them came Team Tag minutes later, the largest team of all infiltrating the woods tagging one another with long strands of ropes made up of various materials by Team Badminton who were expert in making netting as well. The ropes were made as navigation elements as they were placed from all of the ports of entry around the edge of the woods through the trees and around the snake pits and out the other side by the moat. The following teams used the ropes to get straight through the woods in record time without falling into the pits by advancing hand over hand along each rope. All the warriors dropped bits of coal that they had secretly brought home for the smelting furnaces all of those many months. The path through the woods that had once been open to everyone and bounded by gardens of beautiful flower beds was now blocked and heavily guarded by minions and bats overhead with their vampire teeth dive bombed those who stepped foot that day. The minions and bats, busy destroying the town had left unguarded. Team Jacks moved in a flash filling the woods bordering the path to toss their sharpened metals jacks into the grooves in the dirt made by the minion's leather boots. They waited for their enemies to return hunkering down in the ditches.

Meanwhile Team Kites with their loads on their backs followed by Team Badminton carrying long nets and rackets sprinted through the woods along the ropes, missing the pits, and positioning themselves out of sight behind the others outside the wall.

And last came the sharp shooters and ammunition soldiers of Team Marbles. The massive crowds of warrior athletes moved aside and made room as the sharpshooter went to the front of the lines. The sun was up and the troops waited again for the signal. “Freedom!” The word rang out from Eric and just like before the word shot around the waiting troops like lightning. Instantly, the most skilled hopscotchers leaped over the moat followed by others using the long poles to vault. The fastest runners lead by Abe went over the wall and ran down the slope to the narrow place under the bridges in the moat. One by one they dodged the hungry alligators as they jumped from rock to rock to the other side and up the high banks. Without Abe’s maps, they would have been caught and devoured by the alligators, but Abe knew right where to go and he held the door open as they all poured through and out into the courtyard. The gate keeper had fled at the onrush and the crowds of athletes then stormed the gate shoving it wide open allowing the multitude of enraged warrior athletes to enter and take up positions at the ready. As the Team Marble and their sharpshooters spread out, Team Kite split off into teams covering both inside the tower walls while others were positioned around the far side of the moat behind the wall out of sight. The runners aiding those who needed help while the Team Hopscotchers remained by the moat to rescue anyone who might be thrown into the water during battle. At the sound of “Marco Polo” the long poles were instantly jabbed into the churning water while the Hopscotchers leaped to rescue them as needed. The Shooters quickly took their places inside the tower windows and those on the ground, found niches and piles of hay and corn to take aim out of sight and began loading their shooters

between their strong shooter fingers. Lastly, while everyone stood in place, the ground crew of Team Marbles emptied their bags. The clicking sound of thousands of marbles being tossed across the walkways throughout the courtyard could be heard as all took the warriors took their places and waited. It had only taken minutes for those maneuvers to be accomplished even seconds by all those who had suffered torture and heartbreak at the violence if the vile and evil Witch and her dragon, minions, bats, and ravens. But it had taken months and months of planning of preparation to get to this moment and they were ready to fight for their freedom.

A bone chilling screech echoed from over the town of Brooksong and they all knew what was coming. The Witch had seen that the town was empty of inhabitants and now she saw what was happening at the tower and she was violently enraged and ready to kill. The mighty roar of the giant dragon shook the ground and blew the branches off the trees as he circled high in the air, twisted and turned and then shot back towards the tower with murder glowing out of his fierce yellow eyes. Over the din of the dragon came the sounds of the screeching of the witch and the pounding feet of the minions.

The long-awaited battle was about to begin. And on they came – the minions storming up the slopes toward the path where the warriors of Team Jacks awaited. The witch frantically clinging to his neck as the dragon blasted his fire down on the backs of the minions as the witch screeched “FASTER FASTER FASTER YOU MORONS!” They burst out onto the path and as they began to fall on top of the jacks, the next squad ran over the first and the next and howls of pain filled the air. The large, sharpened metal jacks placed by Team Jacks had impaled their feet through their leather boots and their bodies as they fell to the ground. The bats began to dive bomb the warriors who were out through the trees. But

members of Team Jacks knocked them out of the air with their super balls, that they then caught in the air and fired at them again and again. Bats began crashing into other bats as well as the minions on the ground. Havoc and confusion ensued as they all came under attack. The squadrons of minions who were following them and could see what was happening to their comrades before them began running into the woods to escape. As they scattered through the woods, the Team Capture the Flag shouted “Freedom” and all of those guarding the snake pits lit their torches and dropped them into the pits that were now lined, not only with snakes but with the coal from the furnaces. Suddenly the woods became a ring of fire. With a thundering scream and a might roar the dragon flew straight up into the sky high above.

Back on the tower court, the minions who were left behind to guard the tower begin to rush out from their covers onto the courtyard only to find themselves slipping on marbles and crashing to the cobblestones. As they tried to right themselves, they found themselves being bombarded by hard marbles of all sizes being shot from all angles by the sharpshooters. They threw their clubs down and covered their faces while the warrior athletes snatched their clubs, disarming them as they kept trying to get up and continued to fall. With the woods on fire and the tower filled with troops of warrior athletes, the cheers of FREEDOM filled the air. But the battle had not been won yet and the worst was yet to come. From on high the dragon came back fire blasting out between his fangs and with his claws stretched out for the capture. A high-pitched evil cackle from the Witch and the dragon flew through the air above circling and peering down as if to pick his prey. And then suddenly he dove straight down close enough for the strike and to his shock, he was suddenly bombarded with marbles shot with force and accuracy by the shooters both from those on the ground and from those in the tower. As he tried to dodge the incoming forces, he

whipped his tail and the witch was nearly whipped off of his neck. The brass bell began ringing from the top of the tower with hearty rings as Gladys swung the rope. The dragon with his evil green eyes whipped around slicing through the air with his massive wings and shot straight up landing on the top of the tower eyeing BB's armies below with rage as he roared shooting flames. Twisting his large face down over the side, he eyed Gladys and Eric as they stood within the belfry. As he opened his jaws wide and flared his long nose to blow fire into the belfry, Eric leaned out, took aim and shot the beast first in one nostril and then in the other in rapid succession with the large black shooter marbles left by Heath. Instantly the airways of the dragon were blocked. He tried to blow fire but Instead of the fire blowing out of the dragon's mouth, it was sucked in as the monster tried to breathe. The dragon was fast losing air as he was being scorched by his own flames. The giant beast gave out a bellow and violently twisted and turned in the air. The witch was almost knocked off of his neck once again and she dangled with one hand gripping his scales and clung to her broom with the other. In this jerking of the dragon, one of the black marbles dropped out of his nose and as he breathed in the air, the dragon started to right himself somewhat. Gladys rang the bell again and Eric in a strong voice shouted "FREEDOM!" And that's when all of the many members of Team Kite released their dancing kites. The large brightly colored kites filled the air flying and dancing high overhead around the moat and throughout the inside of the tower wall. On their brightly colored surfaces were pictures of sheep, pigs, goats, squirrels, rabbits, foxes, cows, and horses dancing in the wind. The dragon, in his panic, shot straight towards the kites that he saw as juicy morsels. He twisted and turned trying to catch them, as the wind and the athletes below caused them to dance and dodge out of range entangling the fighting beast in the kite strings. As he began to falter, the cheers went up on the far side of the moat on the wall that surrounded the tower. "Freedom, Freedom, Freedom...." At the sound of their voices, the

dragon tore away from the air above the courtyard and dove straight across the courtyard towards the larger kites, dragging the kite strings behind him. The witch, who by this time, was pleading in a softer voice, “NO NO.” But the dragon was no longer listening to her as he dive-bombed straight towards the kites on the far side of the moat. And as he flew over the wall, Team Badminton raised their long and sturdy nets high overhead in front of the kites. He slowed down for the kill and flew right into the netting. Then Team Badminton with all of their mighty fore and back hands, pulled the nets tight and when they did, the dragon became trapped. The booming roar that came from his throat, rocked the towns and villages up and down the hills and dales breaking out windows and knocking over windmills all over the mountain as he twisted and struggled. And then there was a moment when the ferocious beast with his evil green eyes seemed to pause in the air and glare at all those warriors below before he plummeted down down down into the murky water of the moat. Just before he hit the water and into the hungry mouths of the vicious alligators, he gave one final blast of fire that ignited the witch’s broom as she tried to make her escape flying up and away towards the hills. And then she was gone. The last that they saw of the witch was a trail of smoke as she disappeared on her broom into the distance. She was never to be seen again.

As all stopped in their places waiting for the word with sweat rolling down their bodies in the autumn air and fatigue beginning to set in, came the loud sound of the metal can being kicked and the voice of Abe as he shouted, “Olli Olli outs in FREE!”

The flag carriers by the water, began to cheer WE WON WE WON!  
THE WICKET WITCH AND HER DRAGON ARE DEAD!

The brass bell began to ring as cheers went up all over the tower and courtyard and then the countryside and then the giant doors of the big black brick buildings with their smelting furnaces were flung open and workers ran out into the air waving their hands and the people on the whole mountain cried out “Freedom” and everyone shouted with joy and hug everyone around them.

As the cheers began to fade, someone shouted, “Get the gatekeeper!!” And when they turned, the gatekeeper began limping toward the crowd from where he had been hiding.

“Careful, he’s got a weapon,” someone yelled. The Gatekeeper threw down his club and reached up to remove his helmet with its face guard. The face on the man inside was not what they expected. Instead of fierce rage, it was one of JOY – and they all stood in shock.

A voice spoke out in the silence. “It is the KING! Older and withered but still the same bright eyes that now twinkled with tears. He put his hand out to stop the crowd as they advanced on him, some in anger but all in shock.

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*It is the KING! Older and withered but still the same bright eyes that now twinkled with tears.*

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And then he spoke, and they knew that it was truly him, King Wilmer.

“It is me my friends, your king.” The metal armor was fit for a giant, but the man inside had shrunk to merely skin and bones. In a soft voice, he explained, “I have been kept prisoner inside this heavy armor all of these long years and warned if I tried to escape, my queen and the prince and princess would be fed to the alligators. Each night, I have to swear my allegiance to the Witch or the gates to the moat will be opened in their cell and they will be food for the alligators. PLEASE, I beg of you, they are, right this minute being held in that dungeon below the tower and the minions will raise the gate at the setting of the sun. RUN! RUN! PLEASE!”

They all stopped and turned. Abe stepped up and shouted, “I know where it is. FOLLOW ME!” Their game tool weapons were dropped to the ground as they raced after him around the tower, hopping over marbles, and down the steep steps. The king tried to follow but he was too weak to carry the heavy armor that he still wore. Grendle and Rosealee ran to him just as the sun sunk below the mountain. A boom was heard from down below as the gate was being raised in the dungeon immediately after, sobbing was heard. All those waiting up above turned to one another in question:

“ Did they get there too late to save them?”

The king sunk to the ground holding his face in his hands And then around the tower they came bearing three weak and scrawny people all in rags – a woman who in spite of her boniness, held herself erect with grace. The prince and princess in tatters as thin as skeletons were being held up by the villagers. Tears streamed down the faces of everyone in the fortress. There were cries, but not of sorrow but indeed, cries of happiness. For the king and queen, princess and prince were saved.

The minions that had been found hiding in the stairways leading to the dungeon were caught trying to escape and led back to the dungeons in the cells that they had once guarded, to wait for justice. They would be dealt with later and although they had brought their murderous terror to destroy all life on the mountain, justice for them would be done in a fair and humane way. But that's another story. Folks came in to help as the moon shone through the smoky fog as it had done for the past years. The crowd rejoiced. Hugs and back slapping all around. Cheers went up as Eric and Gladys leaned out of the belfry where they had been ringing the brass bell once again after years of silence. Some nursed their wounds, some tended to the King and Queen and when, at last, all began to leave, they walked over the bridge once again and down the path with freedom to start their work to begin to rebuild what had been destroyed by evil and greed to be replaced by love and goodwill.

The days and weeks that followed were ones of recovery and renewal. The dam that had been made to divert the water of the Singing Brook to the furnace silos was brought down allowing the water to once again flow downstream. It's melodic sound was the sound of happiness as the empty fields and orchards that had stood barren were nourished once again. Life in the fields would start anew. Once the furnaces with their black smoke were torn down the sky became blue again and the songbirds slowly returned and the ponds became filled with ducks and geese.

A belated Halloween dinner as it had always been on the last day of the Heath Olympics was held in the grand ballroom in the tower. Tables were loaded down with food and ale brought in from the folks on other mountains. When Eric and Gladys and their warrior athletes brought down

evil and saved the village of Brooksong and the folks on their mountain, they were saving all people on all mountains. Evil was conquered for now but it would return someday and when it did, they would be ready.

At the dinner, King Wilmer and his family, told of their imprisonment inside the tower. It seemed that after they were captured by the witch and her dragon on that fateful first day of the Heath Olympic Games, taken to a cave far away in Drizzlewood. They were told that the town of Brooksong would be burned to the ground if the king didn't tell the witch where the their gold was hidden. Although they tried to convince the witch that the priceless "gold" of their kingdom was not a metal but that of freedom and human rights which included caring for their neighbors and living with trust and justice. But the Witch laughed her evil cackle later that very night they brought them back to the tower and the dungeons under the tower. King Wilmer described how he was able to negotiate the lives of his family by agreeing to stand guard at the gate and to kill all who tried to enter. "I made a false promise because, in all time, I never killed a soul," he said. "I only bragged about killing those who had entered the gates to save them and my family from getting fed to the alligators. On the times that he was away from the gate and imprisoned in the dungeons, those who tried to enter the gates were fed to the alligators." A gasp went through the crowd. Queen Barbara was next to speak, and she told of the day that the prince figured out how to pick the lock on their dungeon door. She begged him not to leave the dungeon for she thought he would be killed, But the prince, fearing that they would be starved, learned the timing of the guards and despite his mother's warnings slipped out at night to steal food. As time went by, the princess got brave enough to join him on his nightly missions and on one of those night they had climbed out to search for food and they were there in the tower belfry on the night that Abe escaped. They barely escaped the minions. "It was Princess Fleur who put the rope outside the

opening by the belfry for you to swing on, added Hans. I notified dad with our signal - an owl call \_ and he waited at the bottom for you. We wanted to come with you but we were afraid to leave mom and dad behind.”

“And besides,” Princes said, “You broke the rope!” The crowd laughed. It seemed funny now.

All of the Team Leaders were called to the front to be honored for their bravery and success in their battle. They were all given medals that looked suspiciously like the Heath Olympic game silver and bronze medals. Silver medals were awarded to the group leaders and bronze medals to everyone else as they were actually all conquering heroes and heroines for keeping their silence, painting and sewing and carrying home coal and the list goes on. The coveted Gold Medals were awarded to Eric, the one who had the idea and the brains to figure out the plan, the courage to put it into action, the leadership to take a bunch of regular folks and encourage them to risk their live for the cause of freedom AND for shooting the dragon right square in the snout from 20 feet away causing it to falter and eventually come down! The crowd began chanting “BB BB BB BB!” To Gladys for her suggestion of finding the journal (yes, she finally got credit), the courage to stay the course in spite of the danger, her skills as one who could inspire hope and determination in others, and her courage in re-starting their effort after they were scared off that first night at the tower as well as for organizing all of the secret meetings. “And for putting up with them,” she said, pointing to Eric and Isaac.” All laughed. All stood to give them a standing ovation that lasted until they were asked to stop. But the Award of Excellence was award to Isaac Herndon for his courage in standing up to his friends and neighbors when they wouldn’t listen to him, for providing his sage advice that kept them on track, the use of his home, in spite of the danger of being caught and tortured. But most of all for bravely

risking his life to enter the tower that night and steal back the journal. All stood and cheered. He stood there in front with his hands clasped in front and his head bowed. A single tear slipped down his face.

HALLOWEEN, a holiday to be remembered forever in the little town of Brooksong and all across the Enchanted Mountain, as the day that two courageous heroes, a century apart, would challenge a monstrous witch and dragon and legions of evil and win with only regular folks, their passion for freedom and the games played by people everywhere.

*“Fairy tales are*

*more than true:*

*not because they*

*tell us that*

*dragons exist,*

*but because they*

*tell us that*

*dragons can be*

*beaten.”*

*Neil Gaiman*

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FINIS

## FROM THE AUTHOR

I know. I know. You might think that this is the craziest story that I have ever written and believe me I don't ever know how these ideas come into my head. This one started out when Alan and I waited to get into the theatre in Kingston, New York to see Ruby, Hazel, and Sam in *The Nutcracker Suite* last December 2023. It was raining and cool as we stood under the overhang with the other theatre goers waiting for the man to unlock the door. I asked him if he was the gatekeeper and he said, "yes." Later, I thought about the word gatekeeper and decided to see if I could make up a story about it.

All spring I tried out new ideas and had loads of notes on my computer every time a thought entered my mind. By midsummer, the story was stalled. And then for some reason, I was thinking about the games that I played as a child and sitting here at my computer one day, I started listing them which led to googling them and then.....who knows how the mind works? I couldn't sleep one night and thoughts of combining them with the gatekeeper idea sparked an idea.

One afternoon, I went shopping at the local bookstore and when I got home, a bookmark fell out of the sack that the books came in. It had the poem on it that I used above because I just could not stop thinking about it. From then on, my story **HAD TO HAVE A DRAGON IN IT!**" Well, the gatekeeper stepped down from his position as the protagonist in this story but he's still a part of it.

And, to my delight, the story started rolling along and here we are. I have never heard of game pieces being used as weapons but that became my challenge - to try and prove to myself I that I could do it. Did I? Well, you will have to be the judge of that. I had fun writing it. I hope you have fun reading it.

*HAPPY HALLOWEEN!*

*Mom*

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THE PIDDLETON TALES

# FIDDLER'S CAVE

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Montgomery, PhD, October 2013*

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**F**aster, faster, faster!!! I couldn't wait to tell her the news. Over the steps, across the porch – “Mom, MOM!” I was totally out of breath. I had to lean over, hands on my hips and pant. It was hard to believe – I could hardly believe it now. John and Donnie were here – right here in Piddleton and they were going to MY school. I looked up and there they were! But hold on. Back up. Let's start from the beginning.

I was an only child until my sister came along when I was 7. My best friend then, was Lizaba who lived across the street. She also was an only. Her mom worked so she spent most of the summer with her grandma so I spent many long afternoons playing by myself in the backyard. I remember lying on my back looking up at the blue sky and watching the clouds floating by. The sounds of bees buzzing in the garden and an occasional car passing by out in front were all that could be heard. It sounds wonderful, I know, and it was, don't get me wrong. But sometimes it was, well, just plain boring. It was on one of those days when lying there on my back gazing up at the clouds, I drifted off to sleep. The sound of someone else's breathing must have awakened me because, looking up, I saw a curious sight – an upside down face – no two upside down faces grinning down at me. That was the day that John and Donny came into my life. They were hilarious. I wasn't used to playing with boys and they taught me so many things that summer like how to climb trees and how to make a slingshot plus all of the good hiding places. John was the good one and Donny was the bad one. Every night at the supper table, I would tell mother and daddy about our adventures in the back yard. They would ask me questions and we would laugh so hard. Once I fell off the chair while eating dinner it was so hilarious. Mom suggested that I invite them inside to play but they never wanted to do it. I liked John the best, of course. Donny could be mean sometimes. He liked to trick me such as showing me a “secret” place behind

the willow tree but didn't tell me that it was loaded with bees. I got stung and mom had to take the stinger out of my finger. I didn't like him very much after that. But I adored John. He was nice and funny and very gentle. He and Donny were identical twins but you could tell which was which just by looking into their eyes.

One day at the end of the summer they just didn't show up and that was pretty much the last time that I saw them until today! Once I woke up during the night and I thought I heard them but mom came in and told me I was dreaming.

Maybe I should tell you about myself – such as my name is Susannah and I live in

Piddleton which is right in the middle of rolling hill country with my mom, dad, little sister Janie, and our cat Miss Prissy and our dog, Mattie. I am a sophomore at Piddleton high. I have three best friends and we have been besties since our first day in Love bug preschool. We always walk to school together, eat our lunch together and then hang out after school - usually at Dottie's Drug store where we always get vanilla cokes and cherry mashes. Sandy is the funny one – she says anything and everything to everybody! Judy is the one who always knows the rules and then there's Molly. She is the quiet one but always comes up with the best ideas. We call ourselves the “Gaggles.” You know – after a “gaggle of geese?” There is also a mean girl named Dorthea in our school who has her own set of friends. Even though they are thought of as the “mean girls” still they are also thought of as the “pretty” and “popular” girls too. We all pretty much stay in our own little groups and then nothing happens but then sometimes, like today, for instance, something DOES happen. At least, it looked like it happened.

School started out this fall with a bang. Things were going so good that I guess it was preparing us for what was to come later. The first thing good that happened was that we got a new band teacher, Mr. Finch. He is so young looking that at first, we thought he was the new student in school. He has a pony tail! All of the other teachers roll their eyes when they think he isn't looking. He also wears jeans and sneakers and has an earring! Egad! But boy can he play the trumpet, sax, clarinet – well you get the idea. He started an actual jazz band – something this school has never had before. We all auditioned – me on the piano, Sandy on the clarinet, Judy on the drums, and Molly as one of the singers. Mr. Finch made it easy to try out. We all just sat by ourselves around the room and played our favorite piece and he would drop by and listen in. Finally, he said, “Time!” And we all picked up our music and walked out the door. The very next day the list of the ones who made the band were on a list put up in the hallway for all to see. Sandy pushed to the front and then squealed “We all made it!” We freaked out and started jumping up and down and hugging each other.

The second awesome thing that happened was the new boy. We Gaggles talked about him on the way to school, at lunch, after school – well you get the idea. We weren't the only ones. Every girl in school is in love with him. His name is Cliff. He's tall, has the greenest eyes, whitest teeth, has a brilliant smile....okay, okay – so I checked him out. So what? Dad teases us by calling him Mr. Dreamboat. Oh, I almost forgot – Cliff is in the jazz band too. He plays the guitar and makes up his own songs even and they are good! He's a senior so the gaggles are way out of his league. Oh, I forgot to mention, Vicky and her two best friends, Frick and Frack – okay, okay, Janice and Sharon, also made the band. And of course, Vicky latched onto Cliff like glue, batting her eyes and squirming around which is gaggy.



That night at dinner, I announced the good news about the band selection and immediately my mom and dad looked at each other and almost in unison said, “Are you sure you aren’t overloading your schedule?”

My dad said, “Don’t you have to tutor one of those nights? When will you have time to get your homework done? I don’t want you to repeat your first semester from last year.”

First off, I was selected to be a tutor this semester which has its good points as well as its bad. And second, last year was a whole different thing. Last year, I made friends with a girl who turned out to be a witch. Literally! The good news about tutoring is that I get credits towards graduation and the bad new is ---RICHARD! I have two students who I meet with to tutor in music and math. Stella, my math student, is easy. She comes on time and really is eager to learn. Richard is another thing. For one thing, I have known him since kindergarten and he is brilliant in just about everything and is only taking piano so I have to tutor him. He is a pest and a tagalong and if I had known he was going to be my tutee, I would have gotten out of it. He likes to play jokes that aren’t funny like hiding my music book so that by the time I find it, his time is up or showing up at the most embarrassing times and just listening in on private conversations as though he was invited. He also has a humongous crush on me and makes goo goo eyes at me while I try to tutor him in music. He stops by my house all of the time and if mom isn’t home, we hide until he gets tired of knocking and goes away.

Otherwise, I have to be polite to him and at least talk to him. I am annoyed with him most of the time and then I feel guilty for feeling that way because he can't help it if he so pathetic.

Mr. Finch played at our community arts fair right after he moved here and before school started and everybody came unglued, he was so good. He was immediately asked to play at all kinds of civic events. So when our first meeting was actually at his house, all of our moms let us go. We were shocked. He gave us his address and said we were all going to “chill.” Twice a week, we meet after school and “jam.” – a new word used by Mr. Finch. We all want to be like him so now some of the boys are growing out their hair (until their dads make them cut it). And we have all started using words like, groovy, and dig it like Mr. Finch. He books the PJB (Piddleton Jazz Band) for a lot of community events. It's almost like we are celebrities. People crowd around and clap so hard and of course, we all really ham it up. Finchie (our name for him) just gives a little cool sort of smile and walks around while we just play – not like a regular band director but much neater. Then, of course, he plays at the end of our program and the crowd goes wild and keeps clapping until we play another piece. Once, he pointed at Cliff to play instead – same thing – wild applause. Cliff was like the star – he always had solos and the girl singers always wanted to be the one he chose to sing his newest song. Sometimes he would have all of the girls sing and the rest of us played along. It was very groovy.

But the most exciting thing that happened was a startling discovery on Piddleton Mountain at about the end of August. It all started when Judy's brother, Will, was hiking up the mountain when the squeaky sound of the Fiddler came over the treetops. There is a legend around here about a mysterious fiddler who came into town a hundred or so years ago and disappeared in a mysterious cave on the mountain that nobody has ever

found. Sometimes you can hear a strange squeaky noise and sometimes it sounds like a tune, coming over the mountain – especially on nights of the full moon. People just pass it off as the sound of the Fiddler. But back to last February. When the sound came over the mountain that afternoon, Will’s dog, King let out a yelp and bounded into the brush and was gone. Will just thought he would come back or at least bark and let him know where he was. But the evening got late, and King didn’t come back. Will kept searching without finding him until almost dark when he heard a small yelping sound and knew that it had to be King and it sounded like he was in trouble. It was getting dark and so Will hiked back to his bike and hurried home to get help.

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*The most exciting thing that happened was a startling discovery on Piddleton Mountain at about the end of August.*

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Later that night a group of men and boys returned to the place that Will had marked and spread out searching and listening. And finally, someone heard the faint whine. “It’s coming from up yonder ,” someone shouted and they all started climbing up the steep mountain side through the pines and soft mud as fast as they could, carrying their flashlights and gear. It was hard going because it had started to thunder and the wind was coming up. They couldn’t hear the sound anymore and lightening was getting bad when Will’s dad made the decision to stop the search and go home. He leaned back against the rock to catch his breath and....disappeared! Literally – he was there one moment and was gone the next. After the guys got over their shock, everyone got quiet and that’s when they heard him from somewhere deep in the mountain calling, “Hey boys, you’ll never

guess what I found.” Yes, he had found King but that wasn’t all. They threw him a rope and pulled him and King up and boy what a story he had to tell. He had accidentally fallen into the legendary, mysterious, Fiddler’s Cave!

And that’s how it all began – the project of Fiddler’s cave. All of my life, I have heard the squeaky sounds coming from the mountain, especially in the summer evenings when all else has died down and the cicadas have gone to sleep. People call it the Fiddler’s song but I guess I never knew exactly what that meant. One day, while visiting Clara in her little parlor with her canary, Happy, tweeting happily on her golden perch, she brought me an ice cold frosted glass of peach tea with lemon and a plate of her delicious sugar cookies with sprinkles. “Would you like to hear the tale of the fiddler?” She asked.

“Oh, yes,” I answered eagerly. She reached up on the top shelf of her bookshelf and pulled down a slender volume. It had a cracked spine and the picture on the cover was faded. When she opened the yellowed pages, a dusting of powder floated up in the sunlight and for a moment, I thought I heard the soft, sweet sound of a violin. She settled herself next to me on the cushiony couch and told me the wonderful story of a young man who appeared one morning in the glen. He had curly blond hair that stuck out from his old brown faded cap. On his back was a fiddle in a bag. The old lady Carson said that she was coming into town and had stopped to rest her feet when she saw him. She called out to him in greeting and when he raised his head he looked straight into her eyes with eyes so green that it took her breath away. He smiled a big smile and then reached into his bag and took out his fiddle. He put it on his shoulder and began to play a tune so lively that she forgot all about her sore feet and began to follow him into town. He made quite a splash, he did. People gathered around to hear his beautiful music and it wasn’t long before he was making the rounds of meal tables far

and near, playing for his supper. At night, he left the town and went high in the forest on Piddleton Mountain. Nobody knew where he went but they could hear him playing his fiddle sometimes in the still of the night. At the tables of those who invited him to dinner, he told stories of a beautiful cave in the mountain where precious stones twinkled from rocks high above and crystals dripped from the ceiling and grew up from the floors. He had stories of mysterious passageways and tunnels – some that led to more riches and some that led so far into the center of the mountain that nobody could ever find their way back once they started down their dark passageways. Mealtimes were stretched out longer than usual in order to listen to his stories and hear his beautiful music.

His music had an effect on everyone who heard it – almost an enchantment – it seemed to cast a spell. Men forgot to plow and women burned their pies whenever his music floated around their heads. But that wasn't all. Young maids became besotted with him. That was the word used in the old book. They dropped their mending and tending to the chickens and followed him about unaware of their own folly. One morning, it was discovered that all of the beautiful maids of the town were missing and the last thing anyone could remember was the sight of them dancing behind the fiddler on his way down the lane and out of Piddleton. A few days later, a man arriving home after a night of drinking with his fellows, saw a strange sight. Out in the meadow in the moonlight, the fiddler was playing his beautiful music of enchantment while a circle of maidens danced around him. Their voices of happiness could be heard, he said across the space, and it sounded like the tinkling of tiny bells.

The townspeople were up in arms upon hearing the tale the next morning from the man's wife, they gathered a posse to search him out and teach him a lesson. There was no trace of him or the maids in the meadow

except for the flowers strewn in the grass. But they were never to be seen again. And that's when the eerie sounds of the mountain began to be heard, especially on moonlit nights. Sometimes, there are those who say they can hear the laughter of young women as well. I was entranced by the story and I could almost see them dancing in the moonlight. I was shaken out of this vision by Miss Clara. "Here, my dear. You may keep my book for me," she said with her sweet blue eyes looking into mine. "I know you will keep it safe." And with that, she thrust the little book into my hands. It was in a silk bag tied at the top with a lacy rose-colored ribbon.

"But, Miss Clara, what ever happened to the maids?" I asked.

"That, my dear, is the lesson of the tale. Be careful whose words you listen to. Do not get lost in the magic of the moment." I carried the book home with me and spent many happy hours turning the old yellow pages of the little book with the lovely faded pictures.

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*Be careful whose words you listen to. Do not get lost  
in the magic of the moment.*

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At school, things were busy. But so much fun. The meetings at Finchy's house were very unusual. For one thing, he always had incense burning plus lots of candles dripping their wax over glass bottles. There was food like hummus and carrot juice and pizza with no hamburger – and you

won't believe this but it was good – honestly! We would sit around on the floor and play our instruments and he would teach us new music and somehow, it always turned out good. He would end by having us hold hands in a circle and sway to the music that one of us played and then – time to go! But of course, sometimes I had to miss a performance because of my tutoring job. Stella soon did not need tutoring so now I only had Richard. Mr. Frick suggested that I used the big room where we practiced to teach music to Richard which made a big difference.

Well, soon the people of Piddleton began excavating the beautiful cave. True, it was a fairyland of sparkling rocks of all colors and crystal stalagmites and stalactites, they said. The public wasn't allowed in so we just waited for information to sift down through the ranks. Classes were directed to use the cave as a learning tool and theme for the semester. Many of the tunnels were said to be unsafe but some led to further large rooms and openings. The wind coming through the tunnels and escaping out the holes in the rocks made the eerie sounds, it was determined. To the city council, it was a dream coming true because now, Piddleton was on the map for something other than the county fair. They could almost hear the money rolling in from future tourists. Construction began on the cave in order to make it safe for tours and concessions. Plans were made to host a town celebration at the end of October.

Mr. Frick scheduled more and more performances and Cliff began meeting with different members of the band to practice together on the side. The gaggles all discussed this around the lunch table every day with our heads together whispering and giggling. It was creepy in an exciting sort of way. Once, while we were bent over the table, someone cleared their throat to get our attention. And there stood Cliff with a big smile on his face. “May I talk with you Susannah?”

I jumped up and spilled my milk right down the front of my blouse. “Me? Oh, I mean sure!” I gulped.

He looked at me with those beautiful green eyes and said, “Would you meet me after school? I think we need to practice together and I was wondering if you would come over for a while.”

“You mean to your house?” I asked.

“Yes, he said with a smile, “My car’s in the lot.”

“In the lot?” Mom would never let me ride in his car, I was thinking but I heard myself say, “Sure. Should I meet you in the lot?”

“Yes, I’ll be by the East door. Thanks. This helps me a lot. See you..” And he turned and walked out of the cafeteria.

I stood there for a moment and then Sandy tugged on my jeans, “Sit down!”

We all looked at each other and then we all said together: “Your dead!” My mom will kill me! But wait. Richard had canceled for tonight and my mom will just think I’m tutoring.

“YOUR MOM?” They were right, my mom could see right through that. Oh, I forgot to mention, I’m from a family of witches and to tell you the truth, I still don’t know how that works. But.....

“Okay! I’ll call and ask, “I said. And I tried but finally left a message on the answering machine that went something like: “Hi Mom, this is Susannah. I have to be someplace after school so I’ll be a little late – but not much – so don’t worry.” I know this is lame. I just won’t stay long and the good thing is – she really likes Cliff so maybe.....????

I ran to the girl’s room and tried to get to the mirror but it was too crowded – the bell rang and I dashed to my History class. All afternoon, I fidgeted, and I couldn’t keep my mind on anything. We were studying local history and for the past week it had been on The Fiddler’s Cave. We had all been given small booklets filled with amazing facts about the cave and blank pages for our own notes and comments. Today, I brought Miss Clara’s little book for the class to see. It was a good thing that we never got to the legend because I was having trouble keeping my mind on the cave. By the time the final bell rung, I was a total mess. I went to my locker to get my stuff and there was Richard waiting for me.

“Hey,” he said. “I got out of going to work and now I can come to tutoring.”

“But you canceled Richard and now I have other plans. I’m practicing with Cliff. Sorry.” I expected him to give me the “poor me” look but instead, he got mad and stamped his foot

“You’ve got to be kidding!,” he said. “You’re going to be one of Cliff’s girls? Oh Boy! You’ll be sorry!”

I was shocked. Little pathetic Richard maybe wasn’t so helpless and fragile after all. Oh well, I can’t worry about it now, I thought, and I took off at top speed down the hall towards the stairway and didn’t see Miss

Hysteria come barreling out of her classroom pushing a cart piled high with books and video equipment. I skidded to a stop but it didn't matter. I felt a hand shove me in the back right into the teacher. I was thrown over her and she was thrown over the cart and we skidded like that for a few feet and then the cart slipped out from under us and we crashed to the floor – me on top of Miss Hysteria and everything else on top of me. She screeched and I sunk into the floor never to be seen again. Okay – that didn't happen. But I wanted it to. I turned my head to the side and tried to see behind me but all I could see was Dorthea with a smirk on her face and behind her, a bunch of kids scattering everywhere. And that's when I felt that warm comforting feeling of someone's strong hand helping me up. I turned and there he was!!! John!!

“Hi Susannah, remember me?” He had those sparkling blue eyes and sandy hair with a look on his face that everything was going to be alright – no, super-duper!!

He helped me to my feet and turned to Miss Hysteria. “Here, let me help you, he said but she was already on her feet and with a harumt! She rudely stomped away leaving us and anyone else who would help us to clean up the mess. When everything was picked up, I picked up my books and backpack. But my little Miller's Cave book was gone – it had vanished. John, took my elbow and said, “Don't worry, Susannah, it will show up. How's your ankle?”

“Where's Donny?” I asked feeling the sharp pain in my ankle.

“Oh, he's around here somewhere,” he said.

“When did you get here? Are you going to Piddleton High now? Where have you been?” My words were stumbling over themselves, I was so happy!

He smiled that wonderful smile of his and said, “We just got here. I’ll tell you all about it later. But, I have someplace to be now. See you!” He turned and walked down the hall and he was gone.

My ankle throbbled as I hobbled towards the stairs. That’s where Sandy, Judy, and Molly caught me as I was making my way down. “What happened to you?” They all chorused. “We just saw Cliff pull out of the parking lot with Dorthea.”

But I didn’t care. It had worked out fine. All the way home I told them about John and Donny and how happy I was that they were coming to our school. “You will love them – well John anyway. He is so nice and kind.”

“But who pushed you? Do you think it was Dorthea? Really?”

Well, maybe, but the hand that pushed me seemed larger than hers would be.

I left them at the corner and now, here I was dying to tell my mom all about it.

“Oh dear, what happened to you?” My mom helped me into the kitchen and

started running hot water in the dishpan.

“You are not going to believe this, Mom. John and Donny are going to Piddleton!”

“Here, put your foot in here”, she said. “Okay, now – you mean the two boys that

you used to play with in the back yard?” And that started a whole conversation

all through dinner and right up until bedtime. I didn’t think I would ever go to

sleep and then all of a sudden, I was awakened by someone calling my name. It

was from a distance. Something was scratching on my window, but when I

looked out, it was only a branch. But eyes were looking back at me from inside

the branches – my cat, Prissy!!! Who let her out, how did she.....” I grabbed my

robe and ran down the stairs and out the back door. And then I heard it again,

only this time, there was the sound of beautiful music being played on a mandolin

and with it the calling “susannahhhhhhhh. Susannahhhhhh  
.....we’reeee waitttttt

for youuuuuuuu.” Out in the meadow beyond our picket fence, in the moonlight,

was the most magical sight I have ever seen. Someone was playing a mandolin and a bunch of beings in hoodies were dancing around and around the musician. Their voices could be heard wavering through the air. Before I could think, I was running towards the gate, “I’m cominnng,” I called. My bare feet were barely touching the paving stones.

I was brought up short by a yelp behind me. Prissy! But turning all I could see

what John and Donny who had just jumped down from our big oak tree by the fence.

“Hi Susannah!” they said.

“I thought you were my cat!”

“Nope, it was just Donny playing a trick on you. Sorry. Come on Donny, we’ve

got to go home. Susannah, you should go back to bed.”

“I’m going to the meadow, I whispered. But when I looked, the musician and the

hooded dancers were no longer there.

“It was just a dream,” whispered John in my ear.



I was in a whirlwind of voices, and music, and branches blowing in the wind and....my mother’s voice:

“SUSANNAH!!! GET UP! The Gaggles are here!”

The sun was up. I looked at the clock – 10 til 8!!! I’m late! I leaped out of bed and

yanked open my dresser drawer to grab my underwear and froze. Leaning

against the mirror was Miss Clara’s book! A chill went up my spine.

“SUS....”

“I’M COMING MOTHER!” I threw on something, ran a brush through my hair,

rubbed toothpaste on my front teeth, grabbed my backpack and ran out the door.

Then I ran back and grabbed the book, sliding it into my pack as I jumped down the

stairs.

“Mom, did someone come by and leave my.....”

“Not now, Susannah – Go, GO!” And she pushed me out the front door.

My friends were waiting but standing there too were John and Donny. They all seemed to have already met but none of them were saying anything. “I over slept!” I said as I joined them on the sidewalk.

“Don’t worry,” they said, “We did too!” And we all started running toward the

schoolground. The bell rings at 8:10.

“I...I..had..a..dream.” gasped Sandy. Everyone stopped in their tracks and stared at her.

And then everybody said at once, “I did too!!”

“Mine was a beautiful dream. We were all out in a meadow and everyone was

there. Someone was playing some beautiful music and we were all singing and

dancing.”

“That’s exactly like my dream,” said Molly.

“Mine too.” Judy and I chimed in.

By this time, we had slowed down but were still walking fast. “We were  
all

waiting for you Susannah.”

“Right, we were calling out to you, “ said Molly. I must have been  
sleep-walking

because this morning my feet and ankles were covered with wet grass.”

Everyone nodded except me. I hadn’t checked my feet yet this morning  
– but

now I was afraid to look.

We all were late and got detentions. John and Donny had split off at  
some point

and gone their separate ways and as far as I know had gotten out of  
detentions –

that was so like them! As I sat in my first hour class, I couldn’t stop  
thinking

about everyone having the same dream – weird. AND I just now  
remembered, I

forgot to tell them about the book.

Mr. Bernstein, announced in History that he had been give permission to take our class to tour parts of Fiddler Cave on Friday, a week before the big grand opening. Then in band, Mr. Finch announced in band that we would be playing at the Halloween party at Fiddler's Cave so there would be extra practices

almost every night until the big night. Things were really getting exciting. I met Richard for tutoring after detention in the band room and he seemed to be over his anger. He actually had worked on his piano lesson and I have to admit, he sounded pretty good. When he got up to go, he reached into his backpack and pulled out a hooded sweatshirt and pulling it on, took his music and said, "See ya." I had goosebumps. I walked home in the gathering darkness through the falling leaves. Pumpkins and scarecrows decorated porches and lawns. Porch lights were coming on as I walked down my street. What a day, I thought. I must have been dreaming but who brought back Miss Clara's book? I forgot everything in my mom's warm kitchen. "How's the foot?" she asked. I had forgotten all about it.

Friday came and Mr. Bernstein's history class met in the parking lot waiting for the van to take us to Fiddler's Cave. Everyone was excited and it met our expectations and more. The first opening in the cave was enormous. Lights were pointed at the walls and ceiling. The sparkling gemstones and crystals glittered like twinkling stars. It was breathtaking. Ropes had been strung around the room to guide you through safely. There were a jillion tunnels and cliffs. Some had big red signs and some had green.

"Nobody is allowed to go into the tunnels with the red lights. Some have been explored and found to be dangerous but most of the red tunnels have not been explored yet so for safety's sake , DO NOT GO THERE!" Miss Peabody, the town chairlady had been chosen to head up the

Halloween Festival committee and she took her job seriously. We toured many of the green tunnels and other amazing openings in the cave. One of the biggest caverns was named “The Fiddler’s Room” so named because of its size but also because it has an echo. A stage had been set up and the Community Theatre was presenting a play entitled “The Legend of the Fiddler.” It was going to be great fun.

We were all given hot cider, put in our vans, taken back to school, and the field trip came to an end. Judy is in my class and was on the trip so we went back up to our lockers together. On our lockers was a note. “Meeting tonight at Mr. Finch’s.” Yippee.



The big night was here. All of us were given a hooded sweatshirt with PJB in big blue letters on the back to wear for our performance. They gave us a team look and they would be needed as we had discovered on our field trip. The cave had air currents that flowed throughout and so it kept a chill in the air despite heaters that had been placed everywhere. We were ready for our performance. The whole school was buzzing with excitement and very few were actually able to get anything done. When the final buzzer sounded, everyone dashed out of the building and hurried home through the fall splendor to get ready. Now jack o’lanterns glowed and eerie noises came out of doorways. Halloween was here!

The PJB members were all in their places early, tuning their instruments and watching the cave come alive with the hustle and bustle of food trays and pumpkin lanterns being lit. Decorations had been put in

place earlier in the day and activities were being checked and re-checked. Everyone was in a costume and recorded cackles and shrieks were heard up and down some of the tunnels.

People began to arrive and Mr.Finch gave us our nod and down came his baton. The band burst into an opening sound and we were off and running, playing our hearts out. Cliff stepped up to the mike and the singers surrounded him to the tune of Rock Around the Clock. The crowds cheered and clapped and suddenly it was already time for a break. I thought I saw John standing near the popcorn stand and stepped down into the crowd. People patted me on the back and said “Good job,” or “we love your music,” or something as I pushed my way through the happy throng. But when I got to the spot I thought I saw him, he was gone. I helped myself to some popcorn and headed back to the stage. Everyone was gone – taking their break – and I sat down on the edge of the stage swinging my legs. A scrap of paper seemed to be stuck to the piano bench leg as though it has fallen off of the piano. Leaning over, I retrieved it and opened it to find a message. It read: “PJB’s are meeting in the Fiddler’s side room at break for refreshments and awards.” Wow, was I glad that I accidentally found this. No wonder, everyone is gone. I jumped up and headed for the tunnel marked Fiddler’s Room. Making my way down the tunnel, I looked again at the note. It read “side room.” Hmm, must be somewhere close to the big room – makes sense. I slowed down as I came near to the opening to the Fiedler’s room and saw a slender opening in the tunnel and a sign had been taped by it that read “Side Room.” As soon as I started down this narrow passageway, I could hear the music. This is it! I got so excited that I started running and the closer I got, the louder the music got. I ran around a corner in the tunnel and was hit by the bright glare. I was blinded at first. I could hear the murmur of the voices and when I could finally see, there in the center of the room was Mr.Finch. He was dressed in a shiny coat and all of

my friends were standing in a circle around him swaying left and then right almost like in a trance. “Come on in Sweet Susannah, the band teacher sang out, “We’ve been waiting for you to arrive. What’s taken you so long?” I cried out to my friends, “Sandy, Judy, Molly – let’s go!” Because suddenly, I began to see the scene begin to look like the story of the Fiddler and could hear Miss Caroline’s words, “Be careful whose words you listen to. Do not get lost in the magic of the moment.” I ran to the nearest one and grabbed her by the arm. But she looked at me with a blank stare and said in a whisper, “Susannah, come join us.” There in the circle were all of my friends, all of the girls in my class, Dortha, Judy, and Sharon, and standing in the center with Mr. Finch was Cliff but he had the same sickening smile on his face as the girls did. I felt myself being drawn into the circle like a magnet. I strained to get free and just when I thought I couldn’t pull away, there was a pop. Swinging through the air on a vine was Donny. As he flew past Mr. Finch, he knocked his hat off. The band teacher became enraged and took a swing at him but missed. The second pass and Donny had his mandolin. The pull got weaker and I yanked on Sandy’s arm so hard that it seemed to break the connection and she looked at me in shock. “Susannah? Where am I?”

“Hang on!, I shouted, and I started running towards the entrance dragging the string of kids behind me. But now there were many entrances and all of their lights were out. Which one? I heard a scream, “Run!” It sounded like Donny. So I picked a tunnel and started running down it while holding the hand of Sandy who was holding onto Molly’s and the circle had become a chain. I ran in the dark feeling my way. I could hear the shriek of Mr. Finch and the screams of those in the back of the line. The tunnel seemed to be getting smaller and smaller but I was desperate now and I kept going. First we had to bend down and then hands and knees and then we were crawling. I could just barely see the light and the people at the festival

through the small opening in the end, if I could just make it. But, no. I felt the walls close around me and suddenly I was stuck. Sandy grasped my foot. I tried to back out but no use. Stuck. In the dark. The tunnel was filling with water and I took a big gulp of air and tried to hold it before .....and there was that hand. Nice and warm and comforting. I'm dreaming. The walls sprung wider and someone pulled us out the end and into the light. I opened my eyes and there was John smiling back at me. "Hi Susannah", he said. I looked back at all of the girls and Cliff at the end. Aunt Katy was sprinkling them with something glittery. I could hear her say, "Girls, have a little starlight. You're going to be just fine."

"Where is Mr. Finch?" I asked.

"Don't worry about him, John said, "Donny has that taken care of."

"He's the fiddler, isn't he?"

“

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*He's the juuuer, isn't he?*

---

"We'll talk about it later," he said and suddenly I was standing there alone in the tunnel. I walked toward the bandstand and Molly rushed out towards me.

"Hurry up Susannah, we're about to start. Nobody can find Finchie. Somebody said they thought he went home sick. So Cliff's going to lead us."

I looked her in the eye and thought, “Don’t you even know what just happened? But then I knew – Aunt Katy’s starlight in their eyes and now they’ll never know what almost happened.

I played the second set but I was thinking how John and Donny “just happened to show up” every time I was heading the wrong direction. Hmmmm And why wasn’t my mom more surprised to see them? And could my friends even see them? And was Donny really the bad twin? After we were finished playing, all of my friends scattered throughout the cave, bobbing for apples, eating sweets and dancing to the DJ. Cliff tapped me on the shoulder and asked in his sweet, smooth voice, “Dance?”

I shook my head. He was nice and he could play beautiful music, but I’ve decided stardom isn’t my thing. By the way, anybody see Richard?

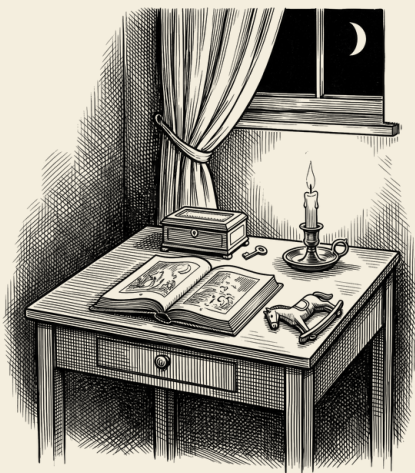
— — — — —  
FINIS

FROM THE AUTHOR

*Be careful. You could get stuck in something evil. Happy  
Halloween!  
Witchy*

PART FOUR · THE HALLOWEEN  
ANNUAL

# FOR THE GRANDCHILDREN



*Bedtime stories with one foot still in the dark.*



FOR THE GRANDCHILDREN

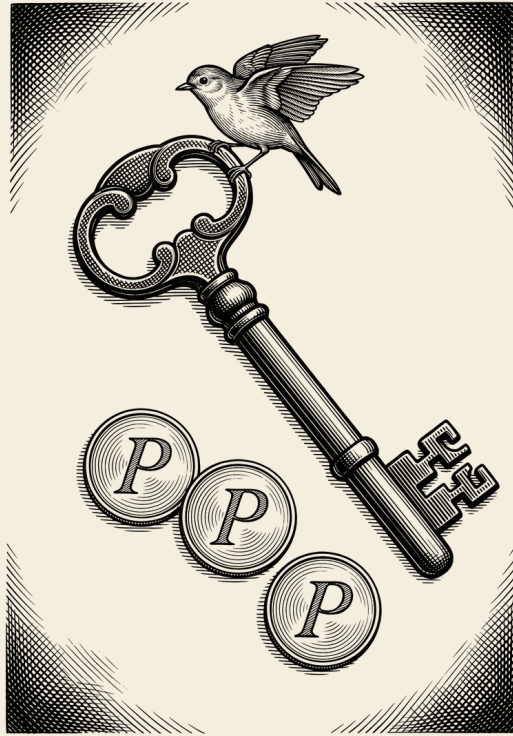
# THE GOLDEN BOY

*For Hank, on his third birthday*

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Sue Ann Ward Osterhout, December 2007*





So there was this boy – a golden boy – who played his sweet music throughout the valley. He strummed the strings of his wonderful bass up and down the dale and through the winding woods. Those who listened to his music were enchanted by it and followed him wherever he went just to hear his lively tunes.

One day, he came upon a high high mountain. It was surrounded by jagged boulders and dangerous passes. A waterfall cascaded down its face from an opening high above the clouds. Behind the water was a giant boulder. To reach the mountain, one would have to climb the stones which

were too slippery for a foot to hold. The road going back the way he had come was blocked by the river “Time Gone By.” There was nothing left for him to do but to find a way over the mountain or else spend his days locked in the woods playing the same tune over and over. As he stood there pondering this problem that seemed insurmountable, his lyrical music stopped and silence fell over the crowd. Just then a songbird sang a haunting song and from behind the waterfall there came a wizardess.

“I am looking for the golden boy,” she said. “I hold the secret to the key to the mystical tunnel that is laden with gold and silver, which is behind this heavy stone and which will lead those who enter it through the mountain. Who are you?”

“

---

*I hold the secret to the key to the mystical tunnel  
that is laden with gold and silver, which is behind  
this heavy stone and which will lead those who enter  
it through the mountain.*

---

“I am Snaggle Tooth,” he said because he was caught off guard.

“Then find the golden boy and send him to me,” she said and disappeared behind the waterfall.

Just then, the boy bent to drink from the water in the pool and saw his reflection. The sunlight slicing through the forest glen glanced off of his hair filling it with golden sparkles. “Wizardess!” he called, “I am the golden boy.”

Once again, she appeared and taking his chin in her hands, gazed into his eyes. “Oooo,” she said. “Golden boy, the key to the tunnel is knowledge.” And once again, she disappeared behind the falling waters.

“Wizardess come back!” he pleaded. “Tell me where to find it!”

Just then, her voice floated over the waters, “If you wish to find the key and enter the mystical cave, you must prove that you have courage and that you understand the meaning of the life journey. For this you must answer three questions. But if you fail, you will remain here until the end of time. Tell me. Do you think that you are ready for the challenge?”

“I am ready,” he insisted because he wanted to go beyond the mountain to a world that he had yet to know.

This time the wizardess appeared before him with a golden cup from which she drew out three slips of paper. She looked deep into his eyes and when she spoke, her words were firm. “The essence of life is love. Question number one: There is a black dog with a big heart waiting for you from your childhood. He is love. What is his name?”

“King!” the boy shouted gleefully.

“You are correct,” said the wizardess.

“The journey of life exists in time. Question number two: There is a place that is ancient, yet constant. It is a time constancy. What is the name of the 5<sup>th</sup> planet from the sun?”

“Jupiter!” He replied.

“Correct again. Now for the hardest one but the most important one for it comes from the one who holds the spirit of determination and fair play in his hands for you. Life is driven solely by spirit. Question number 3: What is the full name of the man who went by the name “Sweet Old Bill?”

“That is easy,” the boy shouted. “The man was Wilmer Vaun Ward, my beloved grandfather!”

“Now that you have found the key (and she handed him the golden key of knowledge) and you have answered the three life questions of love, time, and spirit, you have earned the privilege of being the keeper of the three secrets that I hold in my hand. Carry them with you always and use them whenever you are faced with hard decisions. She placed three small golden coins in his palm. Upon each of them was engraved a P.

“These three coins are talismans to remind you to always have Perseverance, Pride in good works, and Patience with all whom you meet and all tasks that are set before you. Without them, you will lose the path along your journey. Carry them with reverence and keep them safe within you. Beware, for there are people and things that will attempt to take them from you.



*These three coins are talismans to remind you to always have Perseverance, Pride in good works, and Patience with all whom you meet.*

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Just then, the waterfall stopped its cascade. The giant stone suddenly swung open to reveal a chamber within the mountain. The light coming from within burst out with such brilliance that the boy was blinded at first. Gold and silver and precious stones produced a rainbow in the forest. Suddenly the air was filled with songbirds with their enchanting music. Grasping the key tightly in his fist and placing the coins in their pouch next to his heart, the boy turned to bid the wizardess farewell. But she had vanished. In her place was a small boat with an oarsman who beckoned to him to climb aboard.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dazzling sight, he saw that he was being transported into a place of endless opportunities and vastness. He felt the gentle rock of the waves as the oarsman skillfully guided the craft into the mystical cave. He then gently placed the boy on the shore and giving him a gentle but loving shove whispered in his ear, “Go my son, live the best life. Don’t tarry, but hurry to grab the challenge for time is fleeing. Never fear for you have within you all that you need for the journey.” And as the boy turned to look, the oarsman and his craft vanished into the still air. As the vision shattered, the boy thought he heard a familiar chuckle. And then silence.

He looked about him. The mystical cave had always existed but he thought, “Why have I never known about it?” And then he remembered the words of the wizardess: “Only those that have courage and that understand the meaning of the life journey will ever find it.” The mystical cave expanded even as he watched as new knowledge grew like stalagmites from old and hardened into dazzling jewels of opportunities and treasures. He knew that even if he spent his lifetime searching, he would still never have time to explore each cavern, each gulley, and each mystery that filled this

place. Without a pause, he struck out to explore the wonders before him in the cave and through the tunnel under the mountain and beyond. After all he had the key and the three talismans. He was good.

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*April 20, 2009*

Dear Hank – Happy 3rd Birthday! A couple of years ago, I called you on the phone and told you that I was the Wizardess and that I was looking for the Golden Boy and then I asked you who you were. When you said that you were Snaggle Tooth, I told you to find the Golden Boy and bring him to me. Then I hung up.

Moments later, you called me back and we were off on the quest for the golden key that unlocks the mystery to the life journey.

I didn't realize it then but later I saw that I had spun this tale around the number 3 (questions - talismans) and the amazing cave of wonders that only opens up to those with knowledge. The journey that you have taken during the past three years has been fraught with boulders and road blocks but you never gave up and here you on the top of the 3rd mountain! Please take these three gold coins – you have earned them. They represent “Perseverance, Pride in good works, and Patience with all whom you meet and all tasks that are set before you.” Just as the wizardess told you, “Carry them with you always and use them whenever you are faced with hard decisions.” They will be your talismans as you begin your journey to the top of Mountain Four. “After all, you have the key and the three talismans. You're good!”

“

*Just as the wizardess told you, “Carry them with you always and use them whenever you are faced with hard decisions.”*

---

You are truly an amazing man. I can almost hear the sound of all of the Irishmen who have gone before you cheering you on with gusto – a couple of them are cheering the loudest!

I love you and I want to celebrate with you this your Happy 3rd Birthday!!

— — — — —  
FINIS

FROM THE AUTHOR

*Mom*



FOR THE GRANDCHILDREN

# THE MUSIC BOX

*Title by Uma · Story by Grammasue*

*By Sue Ann Montgomery*

*Originally signed Grammasue, January 2026*





Once upon a time in a far off land lived a little girl, her mother and her old old granny. The little girl's name was Katrina Annabelle but they called her Katie Ann, her mother's name was Alice and her granny was called, well granny. They lived in a small quiet village that had a town square, a church with a steeple that rang its bell for every celebration and in the springtime, the mountains around their village were alive with beautiful flowers of every color. Katrina's papa had left for the war and had never returned even though they always kept a candle in the window for him in case he lost his way home.

Katie Ann was a beautiful little girl with long raven black hair that curled in long curls at the ends. Her mother would comb her hair and sing a beautiful song while she twisted it into braids or left it swinging with colored ribbons to hold it back. Granny busied herself baking delicious pies and making colorful quilts that all of the villagers praised her for. She was loved by everyone far and wide and was well-known for her kindness. The three women worked keeping their little cottage clean and tidy and always welcomed in everyone who came to their door.

Granny had a wonderful music box that she kept on a special shelf high above the china cabinet in the corner. She would take it down sometimes in the evening with the time seemed to stretch on endlessly and place it on a special white cloth on their little dining room table. On top of the music box was a beautiful ballerina. When the music box was wound with its little key, the ballerina would twirl and dance on the top of the box while the music played the Blue Danube Waltz. It was absolutely Katie Ann's favorite thing in the whole wide world.

“

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*When the music box was wound with its little key,  
the ballerina would twirl and dance on the top of  
the box while the music played the Blue Danube  
Waltz.*

---

One day, a stranger came to the door with a big ugly trunk which was thrown over his shoulder. His hair was matted and dirty and he smelled like the swamp. The three women opened their door to him just as they did for every body who knocked and invited him inside even though he was so dirty. He was hungry so they busily fixed him a plate of their dinner even

though they all had to share. He wolfed down the food, cleaning his plate by licking out each crumb. Granny then cut her fresh apple pie in half, giving him the largest piece which left the three women to share what was left. He ate it down and gulped down his mug of hot tea. With that he bowed his head to show his gratitude, never uttering a single word and spreading his filthy coat on the floor in the corner, he laid himself down and began to snore.

The women cleaned up the table and seeing that the evening had turned cold, they stoked up the fire in the fireplace and covered the man with a beautiful quilt that was bright with color and puffy and warm. In the morning when the sun peeked over the mountain, much to their surprise, the man was gone but his old trunk remained sitting in the corner.

“Oh dear,” cried Alice, “he has forgotten his trunk!”

“We will keep it safe for him,” said Granny. “For he has carried it a long way so it must mean a lot to him. When he sees that it is missing, he will surely come back for it.”

Katie Ann eyed the trunk with disgust. It was dirty and the leather that covered it was old and cracked. It may have been beautiful long ago, but it was ugly and worn now. That night as the women and girl ate their meager supper they wondered about the man who had come into their home the night before.

“Who was he? Wondered Katie Ann. “He had never said a single word.”

“Just a lonesome stranger wondering through the countryside,” mused her mother.

“Everyone is always welcome into our home.” Said Granny. “Never forget that your work in life is always to look after others no matter what.” “Let’s listen to our lovely music box and watch the beautiful ballerina dance.”

And so they spent the evening watching the dancer spinning and twirling to the wonderful music of the music box. The music filled the room beyond the candle light and warmed their hearts as the stars twinkled over their little cottage.



The trunk stood in the corner for months and winter turned to spring, and spring to summer and summer to fall and still the stranger did not come back to retrieve his trunk and still it stood silently in the corner. It was Katie Ann’s job to keep it dusted and she wrinkled up her nose every time she got near it.

And then one horrible night in late autumn just when the leaves were falling and one that Katie Ann would never forget a troop of mean and vile soldiers came riding into town on their horses and set fire to the town square, the stores and all of the little cottages. The church burned to the ground as the bell in its steeple rang its last ring. Katie Ann was jerked awake by her mother. “Get up, get up my darling daughter.” Our house is burning down!”

Katie Ann ran to the living room and climbed up on the china cabinet and snatched the little music box. Granny screamed from the porch – we must save the trunk!” Then she collapsed. Alice dashed back into the burning house and with all of her might she dragged the trunk out just as Granny had wished. Their beautiful little cottage was engulfed in flames as they carried Granny to the edge of the forest. They bathed her face with clear water from the mountain spring. When she opened her eyes, she asked, “Where is the trunk?”

“Mother, mother cried Alice, we were not able to pull it this far.”

“Go back at once. You must save that man’s trunk. Now do as I say!”

Alice and Katie Ann found an old sled that had not been burned and placing the trunk upon it, dragged it, resting and then dragging it again until they were able to get hidden in the forest. Granny remembered playing in an old cave when she was a girl and slowly but surely they made their way deep into the forest, safe from the savage soldiers who were unaware that they had survived the fire, to the small dark cave and it was there that they hid. Each day they would venture out of the cave and pick berries to eat but soon the first snow fell and it became harder and harder to find food. To keep up their spirits, they played the little music box in the evening while they huddled together to keep warm. But one evening, the music box would not play and the ballerina would not dance.

Granny watched the small campfire die in the silence left by the silent music box. “Katie Ann,” she said, “you must never ever give up in your life. Always have courage and stand up for what you believe. Even when you the most frightened, if you will have courage, you will feel yourself get stronger

and you will be filled with enough strength to survive.” Granny could see the hopelessness in the eyes of Alice her daughter and Katie Ann, her granddaughter.

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*You must never ever give up in your life. Always have courage and stand up for what you believe.*

---



For three days, the music box would not play and the women ran out of food as the cold winds blew and the winter came on in full force. “Someone must venture out for food or we will surely die!” Katie Ann thought. “But Granny is too old and sick and mother has to take care of Granny. What will happen to us!” Big tears slid down her cheeks and her tummy rumbled with hunger.

That night as she slept, she had a strange dream. In it the ballerina came to life and danced joyfully around the cave spreading sparkling light and warmth. When she came near Katie Ann, she bent down and whispered in her ear, “Katie Ann, you can and you will!” And then the dream faded and Katie Ann awoke to the coldness of the cave. The fire had gone out. Suddenly she remembered the dream and the words of the ballerina and repeated those words to herself. “I can and I will.” She wrapped her jacket around her head and shoulders and crept out into the snowy forest. She

trudged through the snow further and further and finally came to a road where carts were stopped. As she approached them, a young man came out and called to her. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“

*Katie Ann, you can and you will!*

“I am but a little girl who is trying to find shelter and food for my aging granny and my loving mother.” With that, the people in the carts welcomed her inside their small circle and gave her a few crumbs of bread and a few drops of tea. It tasted wonderful to this hungry girl.

“We will share what we have with you so that you can take some back to your family. We are on our way to the port where a ship is waiting for all who have enough money to go aboard. It will take us to America where we will be free to have a good life! We do not have any money but we are going to go just the same. If we stay here we will all freeze or starve to death. Here’s a small bag of food.”

Katie Ann thanked them for their kindness and wished them good luck and started back through the snow. She walked for miles as her feet lost their feeling. Many times she got lost and yet she remembered the words of the ballerina – I can and I will! And each time she said those words she was filled with courage and strength. At last after hours she reached the cave to find her mother and granny desperate with fear that something bad had happened to her. When she gave them the small bag of food, they bowed their heads thanking the Lord for their small miracle. Then all hugged one another. The music box began to play without even being wound! The ballerina twirled and danced and the women in their moment of happiness

grabbed each other and shouted out with delight. When they did, Katie Ann accidentally knocked over the music box which fell with a clang on the cold cave floor. “Oh no!” she cried as she stooped to pick it up. It was lying on its side but a curious thing had happened. A little hidden compartment in the base of the music box flew open and out fell an old iron key. “What is this?” exclaimed Alice. “Let me have a closer look at it,” said Granny. She turned it over and over in the moonlight that shone in from the mouth of the cave. And then she sat down on the trunk. Just then the music box began to play again and the lock on the trunk seemed to rattle. All three of the women looked at each other in wonder. Could it be? Hurriedly, Alice tried the old key in the lock of the old trunk. The lid flew open and light burst from within. It was filled with gold! A note was placed on the top of the gold coins as they glistened and shone. It read: “My darling mother, wife and daughter. I am wounded and am afraid I am going to die. I was awarded this gold by the king for bravery when I saved the lives of 100 men on the battlefield. I am entrusting this trunk to my dearest friend to bring it to you. Before I left home to go to war I hid the key to this trunk in the music box for safekeeping. I will place the gold in this trunk and hope that it reaches you in safety. Always remember how much I love you! Your devoted son and husband and father.

The three women were struck with sadness and hope all at the same time. Quickly they placed the trunk on the sled and wrapped themselves in every covering that they could find. At day break they began their long journey through the forest to the road and then down the road toward the sea in hopes of getting there in time to get aboard the ship to America. They caught up with others along the way and traveled with them from town to town using some of their gold to buy food for themselves and the others.

At last, after many weeks, they arrived at the dock. Just as they made their way up to the ticket window, a blinded soldier stuck out his hand and asked for help in finding his way. When they took a closer look they saw that he was their beloved son, husband and father. He had survived even though he was injured and could not see. They embraced him with tears of happiness flowing down their cheeks. They bought tickets for everyone and as they boarded the ship, the music box burst into music and once again the little ballerina began to dance. We are off to America where we will be safe and free and where they will make your eyes to see!

— FINIS —

## FROM THE AUTHOR

Uma and I began writing stories together over the phone when she was 4 ½. We both loved Harry Potter stories and I made the comment once while we were critiquing the last HP book that we should write a story together and she immediately jumped into it.

“We’ll be rich! They’ll pay us \$100 and we’ll go to the Mall and buy everything there!” She launched into a story complete with title and chapters. The first one was “The Spider’s Lair” She spoke and I typed on my computer. What fun we have when we are writing the next installment. One afternoon she asked me to write a story and so I spent the next hour creating the following story. She told me that she would grade it 1, 2 or 3. I then called her and after reading it to her, I asked her, “What do you think?” “Good” was her reply. I told her that I couldn’t think of a title and she immediately replied “The Music Box.”

So here it is to add to our series of books as she calls it. She always tells me to be sure and tell them Uma and Grammasue are the authors in case “they” want to make a movie from our stories. Somehow Grammasue must know “them.”