

Part One

A Remarkable Concurrence of Events

CC Woodberry

A Remarkable Concurrence of Events

A Novel by

CM Woodberry



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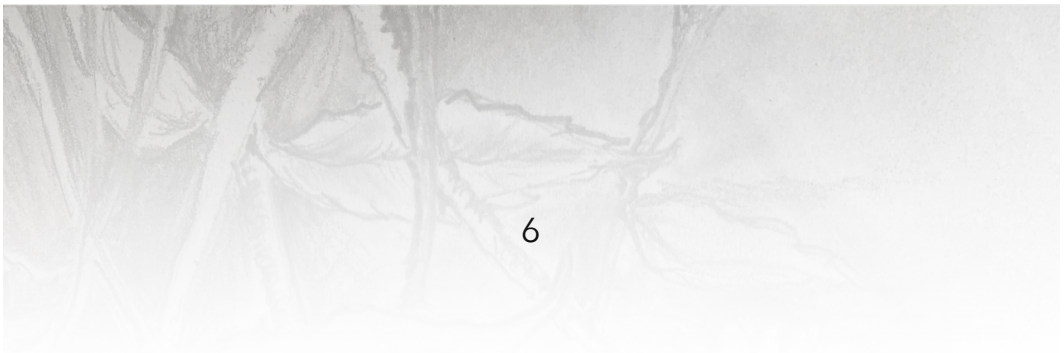
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For all the Hope and Viola Mae's in the world

Consider our strange sisterhood:
proof of the power of circumstance.
For when we came to the intersection,
we each thought the way was clear.
As it transpires, our collision inevitable.

CM Woodberry



A Remarkable Concurrence of Events

CM Woodberry
2023

Part 1

Coincidence

A remarkable concurrence of events.

Prologue

As I tell this story my much older self is both dismayed, and oddly proud, of the silly young woman hurtling herself towards her fate especially knowing, as I do now, just how significant the consequences of her naivety will be, and how patently unprepared she is for the events that will unfold and the sorrows that will follow.

I ache to reassure her that the collisions that result from these seemingly random events will be largely outside of her control and that fortunately, most of those encounters will deliver only a glancing blow, momentarily significant, and in the end little damage will be done.

But I want to warn her too that there will be collisions of such magnitude that the force of those impacts will be such that the trajectory of her life will be forever altered, for it seems the events were as remarkable as they were inevitable.

Chapter One

August 25, 1975

It was 8:00 am, late August 1975 and already so hot that the only benefit from the wind blowing through the rolled down windows of my old blue VW Beetle was my hair would be dry by the time I got to Hillsdale.

I was 19, nearly 20, and this was my first real break from home. The first time I would not have to explain what I was up to and who I was with, and the first time, for better or for worse, I would navigate life on my own.

I had no idea that I was about to encounter a chain of events that would alter my world and the world of so many others. Honestly though, I am not sure that had I known what was coming if I would have acted differently. Probably, maybe even certainly, the things that happened would have happened anyway, regardless of my involvement; then again, maybe not.

After two years of coasting I had just graduated from the local junior college in June, proved to be a mediocre waitress at a local diner during the summer, and was now on my way to the state college, just about two hours drive away. The small bag of clothes in the back seat all that I brought with me. I would be needed at home again on the weekend.

Home was the farm we had moved to a few years earlier. My father had inexplicably experienced a mid life crisis that saw us load our belongings on the back of a truck to move to the Midwest and a farm he had purchased, sight unseen from, and I am not lying here, old Mr. MacDonald.

I am pretty sure our neighbours in New Jersey breathed a sigh of relief as we backed out of the driveway. My father was a particularly opinionated man and not averse to sharing those opinions.

Once we arrived at the farm our total lack of farming experience meant we were so perfect an imitation of the Green Acres television series that I swear I could hear people humming the theme song when they saw us in the local farm store.

We were painfully aware of just how ridiculous we appeared, yet somehow after the first few months of ineptitude, we found our rhythm and the farm became home even if Murray County, located smack dab in the middle of the USA, never did.

I loved the mountains and forests where I grew up back east, felt uprooted and exposed in this great expanse of grass and sky, the sameness only broken by the occasional string of scraggly trees lining the creeks. I felt so sorry for those trees, for they were nothing like the majestic oaks and elms I had known, as if out there on the prairie they were so lonely they seemed to have forgotten how to grow.

The winters were grey and bleak, the cold so numbing it hurt to breathe. The summers, this summer in particular, was filled with day after day of blazing blue.

It was so hot that the afternoons could only be tolerated sitting in front of the fan, watching the static that passed for television, sweat stinging our eyes and rolling down our backs, the chores left for early evening when there was some respite.

I can't recall ever specifically wishing for summer to end, only of being very aware that thankfully September was almost here, heralded by the persimmon trees changing colour, the first to suggest the golden autumn and relief to come.

It seems almost laughable now that I was naïve enough to believe autumn would bring something more hopeful to my life, when the blue of the sky would become somehow friendlier, the air drier and cooler and, as long as the rains held off, a time when it was possible to be lured into believing there was beauty here after all.

Believing if only I could find some sort of life to replace the friends and forests I left behind back east, then just maybe I could bear the flatness and the ruler straight monotony of the sections of land that surrounded our farm.

Believing too that I would be able to make something of the new place I was driving towards on that August morning. A place where I would meet new people, possibly even start a real life. A place that I could finally feel a part of, rather than the stranger I knew I was.

Be careful what you wish for of course, for I would certainly have a new life, just not the one I imagined.

I intended to leave on Sunday night, but it was a particularly difficult weekend. Dad was pouring a concrete floor for the new grain silo and it hadn't gone well. The cement dust still caked my shoes and they kept slipping on the clutch as I changed gears.

I planned to take the highway from the farm to Hillsdale, the good sized town south where the college was located. But somehow, not paying attention, I got caught between a semi hauling cattle and a grain truck making its way to the silo.

I was late to getting my drivers license, fully 18, a good two years after the legal age in that part of the world. A year later I still felt a lingering shame that it had taken me so long to work up the courage.

I guess my reluctance to drive was mostly due to fear. Fear of hurting someone, going the wrong way, even of taking up space on the road, or perhaps just fear that I wouldn't be able to pass the test. But at least part of the reason was I enjoyed being a passenger and I knew that driving required concentration, a responsibility I didn't want.

I confess that getting my license didn't stop the day dreaming and on that particular day I was lost in another when I didn't notice the turn off in time that morning.

After the first wave of panic I managed to compose myself and concentrate on navigating the unfamiliar dirt

back road, thankfully relatively smooth from a recent road grader.

Driving as fast as I dared I barely registered the dry pastures and ripening corn fields as dust filled the car. I did stop once to get my bearings at an abandoned gas station in a forgotten town.

All that remained, in what must have been a busy main street at one time, were small dilapidated houses without windows or doors, a one room schoolhouse and a desecrated old timber church, the stained glass windows that must have cost the congregation plenty, now torn from the walls, leaving gaping holes.

It was a lonely place, a place not only forgotten but discarded. I didn't have any desire to linger and hurriedly spread the dog eared map on the hood of the VW eventually working out that if I kept going south east I should meet up with the highway and Hillsdale.

As I pulled back onto the road I berated myself once again that I should have left earlier, would likely be late for my first class. Becoming increasingly anxious I was driving too fast when the straight dirt road became a series of bends following the tree lined creek, slowing me down considerably, and just as well for without warning the road curved sharply left and I found myself at an old timber bridge. After the dry summer the creek underneath was just a trickle, nevertheless it still spooked me.

For reasons I have never fathomed I panic every time I have to cross a bridge, even if it is only on foot, but

especially when I am driving and especially driving across this kind of bridge: the sort with timber tracks that had to be followed else your car risked breaking through the rotten cross beams.

I was concentrating on lining up the VW when I saw the coyote. The light filtering through the cottonwoods had cast morning shadows across the bridge and made it difficult to make out what the coyote was doing. I stopped just short of the bridge entrance, and watched as it stared directly at me, the rabbit in its mouth still twitching.

Mesmerised by the coyote at first I didn't notice the old blue pick up at the other entrance to the bridge facing towards me. It had stopped as well and blocked the way. I couldn't see who was in the driver's seat, thought little of it, just momentarily annoyed that I would have to wait until both the coyote and the pick up got out of the way.

I must have made some sort of movement for the coyote shook itself then came towards me, at first menace in its eyes, then deliberation. I started to back up, awkwardly at first, trying to get off the road and make room for the coyote to escape while anxious not to slide down the bank into the creek.

The coyote with the rabbit stuck fast in his jaws, cantered towards me, hurrying to the gap I made for him.

Time standing still is such an over worked cliché, but I am not clever enough to find a more apt way to describe that moment, a moment that seemed to last forever until

it was abruptly broken for suddenly the pick up on the bridge roared forward catching and throwing the coyote.

The guttural scream of fear, pain and anger rings in my ears still.

The injured coyote thrashed about trying to stand up; its scream becoming a heart wrenching yelp when I heard another sickening thump and a final groan. The pick up had stopped just to the right of me, then backed up over the coyote again leaving it still, and thankfully silent.

I only caught a glimpse of the driver, although I am sure he looked directly at me, before he sped away skidding again as he came to a stop about fifty yards down the road, the dust nearly obscuring the truck.

I put my hand on the door and started to get out, not sure what I intended to do. Then perhaps good sense, more probably fear, took hold. I can't remember getting back into the car, at this point my memory, so clear about so many other points in time that morning, on this is quite hazy.

I do recall stalling the engine and desperately trying to restart the car. I scraped the bridge railing as I slid sideways on the timber tracks before I got under control and didn't look back as I sped away, my heart racing and my hands shaking for the rest of the journey. I know it is impossible but I swear I did not catch my breath until I saw the town water tank announcing the entrance to Hillsdale, the tank shiny against the heat washed sky.

I am ashamed to say that the horrific and the mundane were equally as impactful for me that day. The

violence of the incident on the bridge momentarily forgotten as I imagined the prospect of being embarrassed on my first day of classes and anxious about how I was going to explain the scrape running down the side of the car to my father.

Of course, I was spooked by the killing of the coyote, but also so self-absorbed that as I turned into the entrance to the college it was momentarily forgotten as I frantically tried to remember which building I was supposed to find as I drove down the narrow lanes bisecting the college campus.

By the time I arrived at my class I had calmed a bit and hurried to take a seat just as the lecturer entered the room.

That first night, I couldn't get comfortable on my friend's couch. The light from the street lamp shown through the curtains of the unfamiliar living room, the upholstery was slippery, the blanket itchy, and I was worried.

Worried about my classes, worried about finding some place to live, worried about getting a job. Berating myself that I hadn't dealt with these things earlier, problems I should have seen coming, but had failed to fully consider.

It was only later that I thought again about what had happened. The coyote fleetingly reappeared in and out of my dreams that night, but again was forgotten the next morning, as ghosts in dreams so often do.

I finally fell into a deep sleep sometime in the early hours and woke the next morning to the sound of

Monique fixing breakfast and her husband Rich, getting ready for class.

Still tired I excused myself and got dressed in the bathroom, skipping the shower, my first thoughts were not on the worries from the night before, but of the coyote on the bridge and of the guy in the pick up.

I shuddered as I thought, hell, who are these people who live around here? Who runs over a defenceless animal for no reason?

Monique called out to me, asking me what I wanted for breakfast, the coyote forgotten again.

Odd, but it is only now that it occurs to me how easy it was to dismiss that horror, how a plate of bacon and eggs and a gossip with a good friend can somehow make you so easily forget something as troubling as a needless act of cruelty.

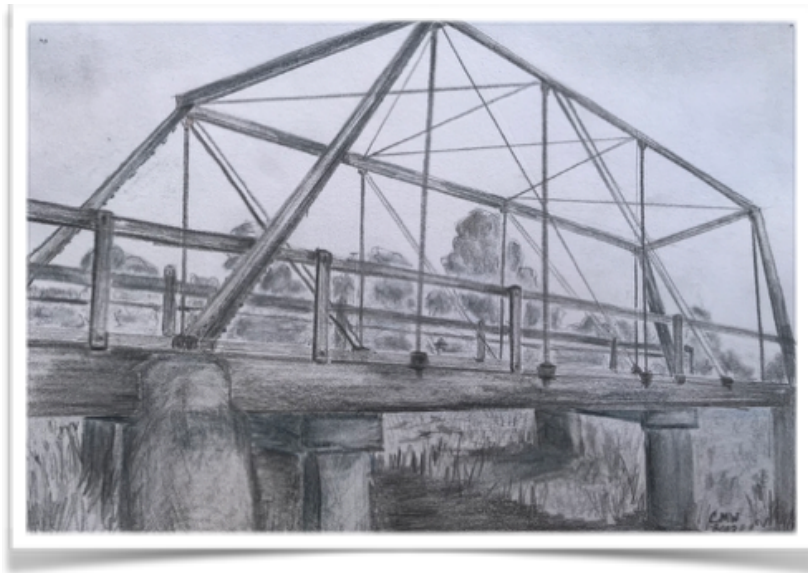
Of course I was still blissfully unaware of what was coming and even now it seems especially odd, fantastical really, that the man responsible for the cruelty on the bridge would become entwined in my life in ways I could have never imagined, can barely accept even now.

As I reflect on that day and what came after, I am reminded of a conversation with my father.

Decades after his time in the Korean War, he and I were discussing something unrelated when unexpectedly he told me about the time his jeep was blown up, killing his companions while he lay, in stillness but alive, in the cold Korean mud for a full two days before he was found.

Shocked, I asked him why he had never spoken of it before and he said simply, “Well, you know, it was like it happened to someone else so I let it be, it’s easier that way.”

That pretty much sums up my year in Hillsdale and even after chronicling this story, a story that intimately involved me in a myriad of ways, it does indeed seem like it happened to someone else - only I can’t seem to let it be.



Chapter Two

August 29, 1975

I had exactly \$25.00 left from the tips I earned at the cafe the summer before. \$25.00 to get me through until mid September. My parents were going to help me with the rent as soon as I found somewhere permanent to live, but I knew they didn't have much to spare and I wasn't going to ask them for anything more.

Whether I was ready or not I needed to get a job. As she so often did, Monique came to my rescue. When she and Rick had moved to Hillsdale a few months before, they'd settled into the married housing just east of the main college campus.

There's had been an unusually quick courtship: their first date in March that year, engaged in June and married in July, and as far as I know they are married still.

Monique's mother made her wedding dress, an off the shoulder white gown with sheer light blue floral overlay - it was beautiful.

It didn't take long for Monique to get a job working at a nursing home south of town. So like the little puppy I was, I followed her there, sweated through a job interview of sorts and was hired on the spot.

When I first pulled into the parking lot of the nursing home they were busy erecting a new sign near the front entrance to a new and very modern two winged one story building of yellow brick with plenty of large windows. A perfect spot to deposit, without too much guilt, the unwanted and infirm.

Clearly it was then, as it is now, hard to find anyone to work in a nursing home, especially for \$2.00 an hour, minimum wage back then. If there was ever a person unsuited to being a nurses aide it was me. I had so little life experience I had barely changed a baby's diaper, let alone dealt with an incontinent adult.

Yet there I was, on my first shift, my new white nurses pant suit still an unfamiliar fit, about ready to help a surprisingly small woman onto a cold metal bedpan.

Belinda, the LPN on duty, leaned over the left side of the bed and lifted the woman under her arms while I reluctantly, and awkwardly, leaned over the right, trying to imitate Belinda's confident stance.

As Belinda expertly slid the bed pan under the woman I tried to support the frail and nearly weightless old woman. She winced when her bottom touched the cold pan then smiled bravely, her face so close to mine I could feel her light breathing on my cheek and smell the acrid bitterness of her breath.

She was clearly embarrassed by her helplessness, which somehow made me feel ashamed too. I tried to hide my own mortification at the smell of her urine as all three of us waited until the sound hitting the metal pan

stopped. Belinda handed her the toilet paper, six sheets, carefully folded, and the woman wiped herself.

After removing the bedpan and settling the woman back onto the bed, Belinda handed me the pan and said, “Take this to the bathroom, flush it and rinse it.”

I gagged but did as I was told, not realising that a bit of pee would be the least offensive bodily fluid I would have to contend with over the coming months and after a perfunctory rinse I returned with the dripping bedpan.

Belinda glared at me with exasperation and distaste and said, “For heavens sake, dry it before you put it away.”

My first shift at Serenity Nursing Home had begun. I still wince when I think back to those weeks that followed, filled as they were with the ever present feeling that I had no idea what I was doing. A feeling that was echoed in the classes I was taking at the college.

Chapter Three

September 8, 1975

When I agreed to move in with Vicki I didn't know her well. We had only worked together at Serenity for a week and I had no part in choosing the house she had only recently rented.

Although she was a clever girl she had opted out of going to college, instead choosing a more immediate path to a dead end job, unlike so many of us in college at the time who took the more costly indirect route to the same sort of jobs.

The positives in her choice were immediate and substantial, no assignments or exams to worry about and a better and newer car. Our house was one of the many built on this particular street by the mining company that for previous generations defined the town.

When it was originally built it was, if not particularly fancy, at least a reasonable home for the miners. They, like the coal, were long gone. But the coal dust did remain, it was an ever present enemy that still coated the paint on the window sills and could be clearly seen in various cracks and crevices of the house, impossible to remove no matter how much I tried.

I write as if I knew about the history of Hillsdale when I first arrived. In fact, I knew nothing and have to admit I

wasn't even interested until some of the residents at the nursing home filled in the gaps.

Many of the residents at Serenity had quite extensive galleries of photographs on their bedside tables. Except for their clothing and medication, the photos were the only personal items allowed and the only real link left to their lives before their move to the nursing home.

During my rounds I would often pause to hold the heavy framed photos in my hand and admire the young and frightened looking bride and groom, my compliments delighting the residents, their smiles so often tempered by the heart breaking sadness in their eyes, loss just below the surface.

Sometimes there would be a very old photo, taken towards the end of the 1800s. These were photos of the mothers of the residents, staring straight into the camera, grim and resigned, clad in formal somber dresses, arms as strong as a man's.

These photos, and the rigid poses from the last days of the old west, gave the impression of curiously one dimensional women who must have been so much more than just carers for their homes and children, but I guess for the most part we will never know their secret dreams and desires. Their children were now old men and women, confined to a bed, sometimes in the night crying out for their own mothers still.

The photographs of the fathers, were oddly different, and often curiously less formal. The men appeared to have been caught unawares holding the hand of a young

boy, a grandchild I guess, the man clearly uncomfortable with the unfamiliar intimacy, pretending an affection that my recollections of my own great grandparents taught me was unlikely. Perhaps it was a pose after all, the men wanting to show the camera that, if only briefly, how much they really cared.

By the time I lived on Elm Street the houses, mine and most of the others, had long ago been sold to the more well to do locals. They kept them just this side of liveable, while a steady stream of students like myself travelled through them, helpfully paying off their mortgages.

I tell you all of this about myself and my first days in Hillsdale because I am unsure how to begin the real story. A story in which I played many unintended and unwilling roles that, at least in the beginning, had little to do with me - until they did.

One thing for sure, living on Elm Street made it immediately clear that I was no longer living in the pleasant middle class suburbia as I had back east, or in the welcome isolation of the farm, neighbours far enough away to barely earn the title. No, here on Elm Street another life entirely revealed itself.

On one side of us, a group home had recently been set up, the first in the area. Young people, all in their 20s like me, all with some sort of intellectual disability, lived there with guardians. They were chatty and friendly, only occasionally causing a commotion, and things always settled down pretty quickly. They were no bother, in fact

good fun to get to know as we talked about nothing much over the dividing fence.

On the other side, the corner house, it was a different matter. We rarely saw the old man who lived there. When he did emerge he skulked furtively from his front door to his old Oldsmobile, vintage somewhere in the 50s .

The car never started first thing and he would crank it and curse. Finally a foul brown smoke would belch from the exhaust as he reeved the engine and lurched backward down the drive.

He was never gone for very long. Getting groceries and booze I suppose. If Vicki or I happened to be outside while he was going somewhere he would leer at us, an ugly smirk on his face, showing his rotten teeth. So much like a troll that *Rumpelstiltskin* became our rather cruel nickname for him.

My bedroom was on his side of our house. The walls were cheaply made of course, with little, if any, insulation and the windows barely able to be fully closed, so it was impossible to ignore his rantings.

The old man had a short wave radio and spent his nights, sometimes all night, listening in, and often swearing at something that was said by someone, somewhere in the world, his angry and ugly opinions declared at the top of his lungs in the crudest language I had ever heard.

Across the street was a house even more dilapidated than the rest, the corner posts on the front porch threatening to collapse at any time. There seemed to be

an endless stream of children who ran in and out of the front screen door, slamming it as they went. Every now and then there was a shout from inside the house berating them, but the slamming continued.

As I have said I don't overestimate my importance in all that played out that year and the subsequent events that followed and, admittedly I was just one part of a bigger story, but one thing I did learn was that each part of the story was important, a link in the chain of events, perhaps inevitable, for each coincidence led to a collision which in turn led to a series of unimaginable consequences.

Remove some of the links and perhaps things would have been different. As it was though, the coincidences kept mounting up. My decision to move in with Vicki on Elm Street, just one of them.



Chapter Four

September 12, 1975

“Sue Ellen, come here right this minute!” The demand came from the doorway of the house across the street. It was a young woman’s voice. A voice that carried the faintly southern accent that seemed to percolate through the this part of the midwest.

I watched as the little girl stopped in the middle of the street. She glanced over her shoulder at the still closed front screen door, hesitated only for a moment then hurried across to where my two cats waited for her on the path to my own front door.

The little girl had been a frequent visitor to my front yard since I moved in the week before. I had watched Sue Ellen surreptitiously from behind the curtains and knew she belonged to the people in the house opposite but this was the first time I would hear her name.

She seemed to be the oldest of the children and the bravest. My two cats were friendly and compliant and the tidbits of food the little girl brought them, as she gingerly ran across the road each time she saw them, meant she was a welcome visitor.

“Hello,” I smiled. “seems your mother wants you home.”

The little girl stood frozen, the frightened look in her eyes made me feel guilty, as if I was spying on her.

“Don’t worry darling, it’s okay to pat them.” I reassured her.

Without a word she held out a treat for the cats and picked up Smokey, and stroked her, carefully but firmly, lest she squirm free.

I had been hesitant to get too friendly. Although I knew my own rented house was no palace, and that I had no call to be up myself, I admit I looked down on my neighbours, knowing the house I lived in would at least look better in comparison.

Although it leaned towards being a dump it had been recently painted and modernised, at least as much as modernisation could happen in Hillsdale in 1975, all burnt orange counter tops and olive green painted trim.

I had been in enough houses like the women’s across the street to know that inside it would probably smell of urine and dirt, poor people’s food and wood rot. Maybe even the faintly metallic smell of long dried blood, like the kitchen of one of my childhood friends, where it was considered more convenient to kill the chickens in the kitchen than in the wood shed that was crammed with inevitably so much junk that you couldn’t swing a cat much less a chicken.

Even now I can see Sue Ellen look back at her mother standing in the doorway across the road, a pretty, thin, small blonde woman not much older than I was.

Sue Ellen wistfully put the cat down on my front porch step and hurried across the road. I winced as I heard the slap on Sue Ellen's bottom as she went through the front door.

Once I learnt her name I found myself finding excuses to watch the house across the street. Looking out my front window, always hidden by the curtains, I would smile as Sue Ellen would sneak across the road into my front yard, sometimes curling up behind the wisteria bush with one of the cats held captive as she stroked and crooned it until it settled and purred back.

Other times when she felt it was too risky to incur her mother's wrath I guess, she would stand on her side of the street and call the cats to her. Occasionally they would reluctantly come to the edge of our yard, and then deciding it was worth it, cross the street in that way that cats do. Seems animals know when they are needed and those cats were particularly kind.

Sometimes Sue Ellen's little brothers and sisters would sit on their front porch, their mother seemingly temporarily absent and watch as Sue Ellen made her way over. Too shy or frightened to make the trek themselves, yet somehow delighting in their sisters adventure. I toyed with the idea of asking the mother if I could give Sue Ellen a kitten, Smoky was clearly pregnant and it

wouldn't be long before there would be more than enough kittens to go around.

Chapter Five

September 14, 1975

Chris was pulling into the Serenity parking lot that morning just as I got out of my car. We waved to each other and I waited while he found a parking spot around the side of the building. He was grinning his cheeky grin as he walked towards my badly parked clapped out old beetle.

“How is it possible that thing is still going? He teased. “And I see the parking lessons didn’t improve your aim much.” Not waiting for an answer he gave me a hug.

“Hush you.” I answered with a smile, enjoying his teasing and the warmth of his affection.

It was funny how we both ended up working at Serenity. We had known each other at junior college in the neighbouring county, me, a hippy looking art student and he, a track and field jock.

One afternoon I was frustrated with my attempt at a painting of the old derelict barn next to the college campus and noticed him throwing the javelin at the track nearby.

I was mesmerised by the grace of the javelin as it flew through the air and then pierced the ground and couldn’t get the image out of my head for the rest of the day.

The next day I waited outside the locker rooms for him, at first I didn't dare speak when he came out of the double doors, but just as he was about to walk past me he abruptly stopped and looked at me quizzically. Mustering up my courage I blurted out a bit too loudly,

“Chris, isn't it? I made this for you.”

I thrust a bit of paper into his hand then stepped back, eyes down. It was a drawing of him holding his javelin.

“I thought you looked a lot like a Greek athlete yesterday at the meet and that maybe you might like something to remember the day.” I stammered.

I scuttled away only daring to look back at him as I got to the top of the stairs.

“Wait a minute, uh thanks, that's really good.” Looking hard at me, a look I never did adequately interpret, he asked, “What's your name again?”

“Olive, Olive Cash.”

“Well Olive Cash, thanks again. See you around?”

“Sure,” I giggled, “see you around.”

We started having lunch together, not dates, just choosing to sit together if we happened to be in the cafeteria at the same time, and although he later told me that he initially half expected it might lead to a bit of something, it became clear that he and I were friends, someone to talk to and even confide in.

Some of his friends kidded him for hanging round a kookie girl like me but he didn't mind, even defended me to them, and for a time we became quite close.

Things changed once we graduated from the community college and went home to our respective farms and we only spoke once on the phone the whole summer.

He was as surprised as I was when we both turned up at Serenity on what turned out to be the first day of work for both of us and laughingly greeted each other across the training room.

We resumed our friendship, although the intimacy was gone. I think we were both relieved to not have to worry about that level of intensity and I kept my distance knowing Sally, his old girlfriend, was again on the scene.

Besides we were so busy at work and classes that there was only time for light banter, and only once in a while, a real conversation in the brief moments late in the evening when things quietened down a bit.

I knew he kept an eye out for me and was especially worried when I agreed to move in with Vicki. He had gone to school with Vicki and told me she had quite a reputation, a warning I heard and then discarded.

Chris was studying Criminal Justice. He thought he might be a probation or parole officer; or maybe even go into law and become a public defender.

His job at Serenity had started out with nursing duties like the rest of the us aides, but increasingly he had taken on the role of security of a sort and less to his liking, in charge of the laundry.

During our first few weeks at Serenity things were pretty quiet, the residents just old people who

occasionally wandered away. It was only when the new arrivals from Graystakes started trickling in that things got interesting.

Chapter Six

September 17, 1975

Those first few weeks of working at Serenity overshadowed my studies at the college. The classes were relatively uninspiring, certainly not interesting, but at first I seemed to be coasting along okay.

It would be a few months before I would seriously start worrying about failing. So in those first days of autumn, in that fateful year it was not my classes, but the responsibilities of the nursing home that kept me awake at night.

When I first started out many of the rooms were vacant, anticipating the newcomers. Fortunately there was still time to get to know some of the old regulars who were still lucid enough to have a conversation with.

Of course this was all before the Graystakes folk arrived, and with them the documentary making, but that story will have to wait to be told.

Although the complications were coming in the beginning working at the nursing home was pretty straight forward, if often beyond my ability or experience.

Having said this I must not have been that concerned about my inexperience as I often found myself finding time to visit with the residents.

Ruby was one of my favourites. It was clear from the photos on her bedside table that Ruby Moss had been a lovely woman.

I often imagined her when she was young, the kind of girl who yearned for a certain kind of fairy tale life and who had, for a time, believed it was possible.

Ruby had an air about her, her hair soft and white, her eyes twinkling, and one night, when not much was happening, I sat with her as she told me about her youth.

As she spoke her voice was full of yearning for a young man who was meant to be her prince. A young man who had gone off to France in 1917 and never came back.

Ruby's last stroke had left her voice weaker, but still surprisingly clear. I wonder now, for the thousandth time, what was it that drew me to her?

On the night she shared her life with me I made sure I left the door to her room open just in case I was needed. Over the years I have often wondered if things would have been different if Mr. Wilhelm across the hall had needed to have his bed linen changed, or if Sister Curtis had had one of her spells and needed my attention. If they had I am pretty sure I would never have come to know Ruby so intimately.

I have come to understand that we seldom share our stories, seldom reveal ourselves and that there is no doubt that this night, of all possible nights, was the time Ruby wanted to talk about her life and looking back I can see that it was inevitable that it would be me who would be there to listen.

She spoke that night in dribs and drabs, was often difficult to follow, but as I remember it now, I think I have included everything of importance.

She began simply, “I was born in 1893. I like to say I have lived in two centuries, makes me feel important. I can still remember when I saw my first automobile. I hid behind my mother’s dress, the ugly smoking thing making such a racket I put my fingers in my ears.”

“We were just your typical farmers, some good years, some bad, but we all went to school regular and I thought for a while I might be a teacher, but there was no money for all that, so I helped out at the farm until I was well past what was considered marrying age back then.”

“One day we had a visitor, our neighbour’s nephew Bill, and we fell in love the first day we met.”

“For some reason, I’ll never understand why for I knew he loved me, he felt the need to go off to war. Believed those stupid posters I guess, thought it would be a great adventure. His uncle gave me the bad news on my 26th birthday.”

“At first I waited, hoping he would return to me, believing there had been a terrible mistake, that he was still alive somewhere but just couldn’t get home. Of course he never did come back, they left the dead where they died in that war.”

At this stage Ruby started fidgeting, clearly uncomfortable, so I rearranged the pillows underneath her head and gave her a sip of water. She smiled her thanks and continued.

“I was just one of a lot of girls my age, the men we should have married, gone. But you know, turns out I was lucky after all because one day my John came calling. He said he had seen me riding my horse through the pastures near home.”

“I had long brown hair back then and he used to say that it was like a horses mane, caught in the wind. I was embarrassed by his attentions at first but he kept coming back and after a time I stopped sending him away.”

“Later, once John and I got to know each other, he told me about that day he first saw me. He said he was doing a friend a favour, just like John always helping others, throwing his hand in to get the hay in before it rained.”

“He watched me for a good while before he said to his friend, I’m going to marry that girl, just you wait and see.”

“John was a miner, not a farmer like most of the other men I knew, and a bit older than me. Like I said I was shy of him at first, but he was a determined man and he came around every Saturday afternoon for weeks until I said yes.”

Ruby paused here, not sure how much she wanted to say. Her jaw determined as she continued.

“Seems like this might be the only chance I will have to tell my story to someone I don’t have to worry bout their feelings first. So I might as well tell you like it was.”

“John’s steadiness was like a balm to me, but I didn’t feel the thrill of love for him, not like with my first young

man. But John was a good man, someone I could count on, someone to put food on the table and I loved him in my way.”

“We got married in the little church at Mildred, our wedding day photo is faded now. I keep it next to my bed, say good night to him every night. My he was tall and always smiling. I was, small even then and a lot smaller now. I came up to just below his shoulder.”

“Funny, I look at that wedding picture everyday and I am still a bit put out that the dress looks too big for me. Your wedding dress is supposed to be the best dress you ever have, but we were saving up and even though John wanted me to have something new, I was stubborn and said my sister’s dress will do.”

“But she wouldn’t let me alter it, even though she was a lot stouter than me and by the time we finished arguing about it the wedding was upon us. Never did quite forgive her for that you know.”

“I got nothing much left now, course there’s the house but I don’t spect I will be going home any time soon. So all I’ve got is that photo and the fancy brush John gave me years ago. and the family of course”

Ruby paused again wiping her eyes with a tissue and asking for another drink of water. I poured the water for her and she sipped slowly, clearly deliberating about how much more she wanted to tell. She was determined in seems and she sat up a bit straighter , the half smile gone, mouth set and a bitterness in her voice.

“Our first years together were real good. There was money enough so we could buy that small house in town, bought it from the company, and although she never appreciated it, there was enough to make sure our daughter, Lorraine had as much as we could give her.”

At this point her voice became so quiet I could barely hear her.

“John died too young. It took a week before they found his body in the rubble of the mine shaft where he had been working and another two years before I finally got a payout. It used to eat away at me, still does I guess, just not so much now.”

“It isn’t Christian of me but I hate that company and those company men with all my soul. I never did meet them in person, but they made sure the lawyers whittled away at me until I gave in.

“You know John worked for them all those years, filthy work it was and so hard on a body he could barely move some nights. But he went down the shafts every day, never a complaint. When he died it was like he was nobody, just a problem they wanted to go away.”

She paused again, clearly unsure if she wanted to tell me more.

“Like I said I gave in at the end and the payout wasn’t much, but it kept me and Lorraine with a roof over our heads. She was still a teenager when she ran off with that salesman in the early 50s. Of course I worried about her but what can you do?”

“I didn’t hear from her until about a year later when she came to the door one night and handed me a little girl, hadn’t even properly named her, so I called her my little Hope. She had just started to walk.”

“Lorraine left the next day again, different salesman this time. I wasn’t old yet, but it was still hard at first taking care of a young un but after a time me and Hope made a family and we were happy enough, living a peaceful life, except for the times Lorraine was in town.”

“Then Hope had her own young’uns, but that’s her story to tell. Course she likes her nights out, but at least she didn’t run off like Lorraine, and she has been a loving granddaughter to me, I can’t complain.”

“I took a turn awhile back now and she took right smart care of me until I started feeling poorly this summer. You know how it is, you try to pretend you’re all right but things got real bad one night. My little great grandchild, she’s a smart one, called for the ambulance and I haven’t been home since.”

As she finished Ruby slapped her hands on the counterpane, then reached out and squeezed my hand before rolling over onto her side, hiding her face as her shoulders shook from her sobbing.

I touched her gently on her back and left. The rest of that night was a blur of call bells and bathroom visits.

It startles me now that while Ruby shared her life with me that evening that I was still completely unaware that the little girl across the street was Sue Ellen, her great grand daughter, her granddaughter Sue Ellen’s mother

and that within the next few weeks our lives would be intrinsically linked with the chain unbroken still.

I suppose it is time to let them have a say.

Chapter Seven

September 9, 1975

“I am tired of hearing about those damn cats Sue Ellen now go and see too little Sam. He needs changing.”

“Yes’m, right away.” Sue Ellen replied, keeping her voice as low as possible, but still loud enough to be heard, just like her mother expected.

She hurried down the hallway to the back bedroom and found the baby crying in his crib, flipped him expertly on his back and removed his diaper, wiped his bottom with toilet paper, pinned on a clean diaper and took the soiled one to the toilet, dipping it up and down until most of the mess was in the water.

Trying not to let the now soaked diaper drip too much water on the floor she gingerly carried it to the over full diaper pail.

Appreciating for the fifth time that day that some nice person in town had donated a years worth of diaper service to the family when Sam was born. At least she didn’t have to wash them too.

Hope, Sue Ellen’s mother, had been annoyed at first. “I would rather just the money,” she complained. But Grandma had insisted that the diaper service was needed more.

Hope more often than not forgot to put the pail of dirty diapers out for the delivery man, but at least he always left a fresh stack of clean ones for the baby and that made less work for Sue Ellen, even if the back porch smelled bad most of the time.

Sue Ellen started school when she turned 6, the legal requirement, but it was an unusual week to see her in class for more than four days in a row, usually less and even this early in September it had already become normal for her to only show up occasionally.

There were few expectations for someone like Sue Ellen. “Just look at the family she comes from?” The teachers would say and that was enough for them to leave things be.

Every now and then Sue Ellen’s dad, Sammy would show up at the house on Elm Street, usually with his mother, a stern middle aged woman. She would bring ordinary necessities for the family, but Sammy always had a bag of snacks for the kids. Admittedly they were out of date and he had taken from the bin in the back of the grocery store where he worked but still something special.

He was a stranger to the younger children, but Sue Ellen knew him as the father who used to swing her around until she giggled so hard she would wee herself a little and tell him to stop.

That was before the other kids came and he found the role of father too overwhelming. He often apologised to Sue Ellen as he hugged her before leaving.

“I’m sorry Sue Ellen, but there are just too many of you now. I need to stay with my Mom and Dad.”

Sue Ellen seemed to accept his limitations and always welcomed him when he came to the door with his mother.

He was careful to try not to show up when Hope’s car was in the drive and so it was rare to see all of them at home at once.

Up until she went to the home Sue Ellen’s Great Grandma Ruby stayed quiet when Sammy and his mother showed up. She accepted the gifts from Old Lady Werner, as Ruby called her (a woman half Ruby’s own age) with a soft thank you as she would silently put them away in the cupboard. With Sammy she was more animated, giving him a hug even though his mother clearly didn’t approve.

Although Sue Ellen had no expectations, of her father, or anyone else for that matter, she did look forward to the treats, always careful to hide some in the corner of the high cupboard, something to bribe the young ones with when they were particularly naughty, and some she kept for herself too, the occasional secret pleasure, worth the guilt.

Sometimes during the night, when Hope was still out and everyone else asleep, Sue Ellen would take a handful of candies and sit on the broken back porch swing wrapping an old croqueted throw around her shoulders, she would listen to the sounds of the night, slowly rocking back and forth as she pretended to be a princess on a throne or a little girl who had once been a fairy.

It was there, one night in late August, that the grey striped cat first came around the corner of the house, Sue Ellen couldn't see it, just sensed the movement when the cat jumped into her lap.

Startled for a moment, then profoundly happy, she gently stroked the soft grey fur until she could feel its deep purr rumble against her stomach. She fell asleep, dreaming lovely dreams of soft kittens and fields of flowers until woken by a car door slamming and her mother's footsteps on the front porch.

Chapter Eight

April 14, 1951

Hope's Grandma Ruby always told her she had named her Hope so that each time anyone said her name she would be reminded to be hopeful, to look forward, not backward.

Grandma had raised her. Everyone knew that Hope's mother was 'not the sort to settle,' as Grandma put it and so Hope had grown up in the old house on Elm Street, her mother, an irregular visitor whose arrival brought a mixture of excitement and anxiety.

On those occasions during Hope's childhood when her mother would burst through the front door, as bright as sunshine, Hope, hearing her mother's throaty voice would run through the house calling, "Mama, Mama" throwing herself at her mother's legs, hugging them as if she would never let them go.

Her mother, would giggle nervously as she disentangled herself from Hope's embrace while awkwardly patting Hope on the top of her head, all the while reminding her, "It's Lorraine, dear, not Mama."

At first Hope's mother would spend a little time with her, would even occasionally let Hope sit on her lap, trying at least to show some affection, more often than not unsuccessfully hiding her impatience.

Inevitably Lorraine would start to go out most evenings and not return until dawn. And always, within a few days the fights would start, Grandma's gentle voice hardening as each day and night passed until Hope would hear a certain slam of the front door and the roar of a car as the latest man drove away with her mother.

Hope was seventeen when Grandma had her first stroke. It wasn't too bad, some mild speech loss and a weakened left arm, enough though so that Grandma had to quit her job at the diner.

So Hope left school and went to work at the local grocery store, working a split shift so she could get home and check on her grandmother while she recovered.

Quiet, but well liked, she stacked shelves and eventually worked her way up to cashier. She never missed an item as she rang up the groceries and by the end of the first month she was proud that she knew most of the prices by heart.

Hope's life changed when Sammy came to work. Sammy was a simple boy, only a few years older than Hope was, but seemed younger.

He was a bit slow, had a look about him that advertised that slowness and at 19 was grateful to have escaped high school and the years of bullying.

They struck up a friendship, Hope insisting with a derisive snort that they weren't dating.

"Why Grandma, you must have rocks in your head to think I would fancy Sammy, like that."

But Ruby was watchful, especially when Sammy starting spending so much time at the house. She had known Sammy's mother for years, but she also knew that no matter how sweet and backward Sammy was, he was still a man and she warned Hope to take care.

Hope laughed, "Sammy is harmless, more of a child really, but he's okay company." One night Hope, keenly aware of her own secret longings welcomed Sammy into her bed. For Hope the experience was empty, as if she wasn't there at all, but Sammy felt he had discovered something magical and so, Hope not really knowing why, except that she appreciated Sammy's enthusiasm, allowed him to move into the house and her room, much to his own parents consternation, and to the delight of his brothers.

For a while there was a sense of them all being something, even a family of sorts. Hope, Sammy and Grandma managed pretty well, the extra income helping out with the bills and such, until within a few months it became clear that something had changed.

Hope felt tired and sick to her stomach, her periods had stopped. She was afraid to go to Doc Ritter, her Grandma's doctor for 40 years, but knew she had to talk to someone.

Finally she worked up the courage to go to the local clinic. When she got the news she went home to tell her Grandmother. She could hear her Grandmother crying as she left the room, Hope's own reaction was one of stunned shock.

That night she walked all the way to the river, wondered at one point if she should keep walking, but she didn't know where she might go, this town all she knew.

“Why, she thought bitterly, “I’ve never gone any further than Maitland.”

She and Sammy got married at the Courthouse, her mother even showed up and brought Hope a new dress, a bit revealing Grandma had said, but Hope thought it was beautiful.

Sammy wore his father's suit jacket, too big for him, but still something special for the occasion. Grandma Ruby had managed to climb the steep courthouse steps without too much trouble and Sammy's older brother was the other witness.

Hope being Hope hadn't bothered to put in a name change and when little Sue Ellen came four months later she would take her mother's last name, Sue Ellen Moss.

Hope, only vaguely aware of what was in store for her during labour, had a rough delivery and was more relieved than elated when the pain finally stopped. She barely responded to Sue Ellen as the nurse laid the little infant in her arms, just stared at her and wondered, *“What do I do now.”*

Chapter Nine

November 27, 1971

There are people in the local Baptist church who claim angels are sent to earth to care for those children who have no one else to look after them. A cruel fairytale, but in this case there must have been some element of truth to it for Sue Ellen thrived despite her mother's lackluster parenting and Sammy's constant state of panic.

Years went by and more babies came and they too survived thanks to the angels who were watching over the house on Elm Street. Soon however the ladies of the church eventually stopped speaking of the heavenly variety and agreed it would seem the angelic duties had been passed onto that first little child.

At four, Sue Ellen could pull a chair over to the stove and make eggs and toast, by six she had mastered spaghetti as well as hot dogs and beans, and by eight she was running the house.

Hope wasn't entirely negligent, she saw to it that Grandma took her pills and went to the doctor, and for the first years at least, cared for the little ones, did the washing and shopping, but even she admitted, little else.

Hope had quit her job at the grocery store when she started to show with Sue Ellen, but Sammy stayed on, becoming an essential part of the place, stacking shelves,

carrying groceries to cars and collecting the shopping carts.

It was not long after little Sam arrived that it became clear that Sammy could not cope having found the children confusing and difficult to manage. More and more often he stayed at his parent's place only showing up to see his family when his mother could come with him.

Social Services had discovered the family soon after Sam was born and Hope in turn discovered welfare. It wasn't much, but enough, and the compulsory trips to the welfare office turned out to be an opportunity to make friends with some of the other mothers.

Soon Hope was introduced to a whole new world and soon was regularly invited to join her new friends at The Jack and Jill Lounge, a dive in the industrial district, next to the old train depot.

In the early days Hope felt a twinge of guilt leaving the children but Grandma had improved of late and was able to mind them for a few hours at least. Hope was keenly aware that her youth was slipping away. Not that she had many dreams to begin with, but life with a passel of screaming kids and an old woman, as much as she loved her, couldn't be all there was.

After her first few tentative times sipping rum and Coke, and learning to smoke Virginia Slim cigarettes like a movie star, she would sit in a booth with her new companions and revel in this place that had begun to feel like home.

For it was only when she was at The Lounge, as the regulars liked to call it, that she felt like she was living something called life.

The children were sometimes completely forgotten as she sat snuggled up against whatever man that evening was willing to order her drinks and a meal, his hand sliding up her thigh, promising even more.

It didn't take long though for the evenings at the Lounge to become commonplace, not exactly boring, just familiar. Lately Hope had felt that maybe now was the time to finally break free, of what she wasn't certain.

Sammy had gotten a second job on his days off, mowing lawns and doing repairs for some of the old ladies in town and gave her the extra money.

Although he got real mad when he found out she would sometimes give it to the girl down the street to babysit the kids when she went out of an evening, he kept giving it to her anyway.

She considered going back to work, but the idea lost its appeal when she weighed up the prospect of returning to the grocery store and the monotony of the checkout register.

Plus, even though welfare was always sticking their noses into her business, at least she got the check and it was steady. Besides it was enough to be a mother wasn't it? Though deep down she was not completely convinced.

Hope thought of herself as a pretty good mother, didn't she send Sue Ellen to Headstart when she was four? Sue Ellen had loved it, brought home the things she

made and talked non stop about the teachers, the other children and even Cookie, the favourite who let Sue Ellen help in the kitchen when Hope was late picking her up.

Hope felt her hackles rise at the memory of the head teacher, arms crossed across her chest glaring at Hope that last time she came to pick up Sue Ellen.

“This is the fifth time you have been late this month Mrs. Moss she said. “I am afraid we will need to have you come in next week and have a talk with us about picking up Sue Ellen on time. It really does distress her.”

Hope spat back, “More like you want to git going home you mean.” The teacher, silent and tightlipped, watched as Hope grabbed Sue Ellen’s arm and pulled her down the wide passageway through the double doors of the old school building.

Sue Ellen looked back at her teacher with such a heartbreaking expression on her little face that the woman almost cried out to her.

It was the last time Sue Ellen, or any of the other children, would be allowed to go to anything resembling something extra and it would be another year and a half before Sue Ellen would start school properly.

Those first days of school she was shy and very aware that the other kids seemed to know what was expected of them, whereas it was all a mystery to her, so much so that she would sit silently in her seat, her feet just barely touching the ground and try to avoid the attention of the teacher, a harsh, round woman with a clipped voice. The

teacher was of the old school, the children just another group of minds to be moulded, but not particularly liked.

She smelled of moth balls and lavender in her too tight dresses that made her look as if she was made up of a series of rolls, stacked one on top of each other. Her dresses, though all different, seemed to always be some version of the colour that wasn't quite purple and wasn't quite red.

Chapter Ten

September 15, 1975

The bathroom in our share house was not renovated with the rest of the place. The floor tiles were cracked and the drips of hardened navy blue paint the painter had carelessly splattered in the bathtub made it look like it had a rare disease.

The mirror over the sink was silver and cloudy with age, not nearly big enough to capture all of me at once so I couldn't tell if I looked at all presentable in my slightly damp nurses uniform.

I could only afford one uniform and could usually get by with wearing it two days in a row before throwing it into the old washing machine on the back porch. Barely cleaner when it emerged, but smelling better.

This time there had been no time for the washing machine and I had no choice but to wash it in the sink the night before, hoping to at least rinse out get the contents of the urinal bottle I spilt on myself at work.

I wrung it out as dry as I could before hanging it over a chair in front of the radiator hoping, in vain as it would turn out, that it would dry enough before my next shift.

The cold air hit the damp fabric as I rushed to work - walking today in the unusually chilly autumn afternoon. My car was in the shop and the walk took me a good half

hour longer than usual. The uniform was not much drier by the time I arrived for the staff meeting.

I took a seat at the back, the vinyl on the folding chairs cold through the thin fabric. Jean gave me a look as I came in.

Jean, the head nurse and part owner of Serenity was a solid woman. Without her uniform she looked like every other customer in the local grocery store check out line, a midwestern matron of an indeterminate age, vaguely familiar.

But here in her domain at Serenity it was another story. She carried herself with the confidence of ownership and control. As I recall her now the words that spring to mind are formidable and menacing, although I would have never dared use those words to describe her back then.

“As you know we recently added a new wing and I know there have been rumours so I thought we had better set things straight.” Jean paused and looked us over, silently accusing all of us of being guilty of spreading the rumours, which indeed turned out to be true.

“It is correct that in two weeks the first group of residents from Graystakes will be arriving.”

We all shifted uncomfortably in our seats, furtively glancing at each other. But Jean was having none of that and again she paused then held her hand up to quell any questions from us.

“Before you ask, no they are not violent. All of our new residents are quiet, and of course safe.” She declared emphatically.

“The fact is they require ongoing medical care and are over 50, hence that is why they will be coming here.”

She looked at each of us as she scanned the room, daring any of us to comment.

“The first and largest group will arrive next week and the next group a week later. We expect Serenity will be 90% full by the end of winter and all of you are expected to be as well organised as possible by then.”

“Meds and meals will need to be finished within a specific time frame and resident bathing will take place every two days rather than each morning, unless of course it is otherwise necessary.”

“Evening shifts are expected to do the laundry, night shift deliver it to the rooms and day shift to make sure every resident is up and ready for breakfast by 8:00.

Breakfast is from 8:00 to 8:30, lunch 12:00 to 12:30 and dinner 5:00 to 5:30 - no excuses. All residents to be in bed by 8:00 pm - no exceptions. Any questions?” Of course there were none, no one, not even the LPNs, wanted to extend the meeting any longer than necessary.

Chapter Eleven

September 22, 1975

The closure of Graystakes, the state mental institution, had sent shock waves through this corner of the state, especially the local community of Hillsdale.

The idea of the inmates from the local mental asylum being dumped in their town triggered community meetings and letters to the editor of the local paper. The Graystakes residents were not interviewed for their views on the matter.

By the time the majority of Graystake residents had left the haunted stone halls of that cruel institution, those remaining had two things in common: they could be relatively easily confined to a room without supervision; and they required essential medical care.

Not long after they arrived at Serenity Chris and I discovered their case files, carelessly left in a box in the storeroom, just another example of the shameful treatment of people with disabilities, mental illness or just plain people who had no where to go and no one to look after them.

The files contained their lives, and indeed their very identity, summed up in just a few words on yellowing legal paper.

There was Vince of course, his chronic alcoholism with suspected dementia not called PTSD back then.

Pearl, who would become another favourite of mine, was a lovely wise woman blinded by her husband's gift of syphilis. Her husband had shot through during the height of the Depression, yet somehow Pearl managed to raise her 5 children on her servants wages until the ravages of the disease took hold.

Perhaps the most tragic story was the file on the lives of twins, Dean and Ted, born with both physical and intellectual disabilities so severe that their doctors had told their parents that the twin's lives would undoubtedly be short and limited and therefore they should be sent to an institution and forgotten - a welcome verdict which their parents embraced.

Somehow the brothers had survived the explosion of their genetic time bomb and were middle aged when I first met them, together in the womb, together still I suspect, in the cemetery on the hill outside of town.

As for Turk, well he certainly gave us all a run for our money. As quick as a fox he was a great escape artist, something I guess proved useful when he was a soldier in World War 1. He left his mind, and indeed his identity for we never knew his real name, somewhere on a battle field in France.

Joining Turk as his roommate, and sometimes fellow escapee, was a man who so closely resembled a cartoon character it was difficult to see him as a real life person. He had been incarcerated for life for child abuse. Soon

after he had arrived at Graystakes, when he was just 24 years old, he was castrated without fanfare.

As for Vince, who would have guessed that his arrival at Graystakes was integral to everything that happened next and that he, more than all the others would become part of my life?

Tolstoy once said that there are two kinds of stories: someone goes on a journey and a stranger came to town.

Vince and I were the strangers who came to town, but we were also about to embark on the most extraordinary series of journeys even though we were innocent bystanders to so much that occurred.

You could say that if he and I had not come to Hillsdale, had not both ended up at Serenity then many of the awful things that happened that particular autumn may not have happened at all.

Chapter Twelve

September 23, 1975

“God damn those kids!” Hope exclaimed through gritted teeth, as she surveyed the chaos of the kitchen, even surprising herself that she said the words out loud and with such force.

She was glad Grandma Ruby was not there to hear her, glad too that her grandmother didn’t know about many of the other things Hope had been up to lately.

Momentarily chastened she grabbed the broom that was leaning on the kitchen wall just behind the door. It was worn to a frazzle and not much use but she brandished it like a weapon and started to sweep up the cereal that was scattered across the floor.

“Sue Ellen!” She called, trying not to sound so mean this time. No reply.

“Sue Ellen!” still no reply.

“Sue Ellen come here right this minute!” Not caring how she sounded now, or who heard, she strode across the faded linoleum floor to the front door.

She could see Sue Ellen across the street again, messing with those cats, talking to the girl who lived there.

Hope knew she was a good looking woman, was used to the stares and flirting she would get most everywhere

especially at The Lounge, surely prettier than that girl across the street, but watching her talking to Sue Ellen she felt a deep stab of envy.

The girl hadn't been living there long, just another college student like all the other ones who came and went every year. She had moved in with that chubby girl with the hot car, a dark blue Dodge Dart. Blue Fire, that was the colour.

Hope had memorised all the details of that particular model at the car dealership just on the edge of town. She liked to walk around the car lot on a Sunday morning when most other people were in church, even brought the kids along as a kind of special thing.

There were no pesky car salesmen giving her the look and in the quiet of a Sunday morning she could dream that one day she would drive out of that lot in her own brand new car.

By Monday she knew better. Her clapped out old Chevy, needing new tires, and brakes and smelling of diapers and trash, would have to do.

It seemed that these days Hope could barely look at her neighbour without feeling the rage of resentment. "How come the chubby one has a car like that?" What does she do to be able to afford it anyway?"

"And look at that house, I hear they painted the whole inside and even put in a new stove and fridge."

But she had a special hatred for the tall, skinny girl who seemed, if she thought about it, a lot like Sue Ellen,

kind of dreamy and blowy, like a fairy or something, no sense at all.

Her car was one of them Bugs, a foreign thing that you could hear coming hours before it got there. Since she arrived she seemed to always be swanning around in her bell bottom pants and tiny tee shirts, looking like someone out of the movies, talking to Sue Ellen like she was special, looking down on Hope's house, judging her no doubt.

“The stupid bitch is the lucky one, she'll get some kind of degree from the college and leave this shit hole.”

Hope, furious with frustration slammed the door shut and knew she would live in this dump until the day she died.

Chapter Thirteen

September 28, 1975

Temporarily convenient relationships forged in our youth are often mislabeled as friendships, and so it was with my relationship with Vicki.

We only had one thing in common, we both worked at a nursing home that provided such woefully low wages that I considered a dinner of a can of beef stew a luxury.

Paying rent on a place of our own was unimaginable for both of us. When she asked me to share a house with her I jumped at the chance, gave no thought to whether we would be compatible or not, and as with so many other things in my life at the time, not thinking things through and suffering the consequences.

I should have wondered why a girl who lived in Hillsdale all her life didn't have friends she could move in with and of course she should have wondered why I too, was not at all that choosy either.

But we didn't consider those things and so we found ourselves living together there on Elm Street, rarely meeting, never doing friend type things, always careful around each other and, as for me, always checking the calendar by the back door, counting down the months until the tenancy was over, not realising that we would be bound together long after the lease expired.

Vicki hadn't been to the house for a few days, I didn't think much of it at first, she often didn't come home, and unless I saw her at shift handover, we rarely were in the same room. It suited me, I mostly had the place to myself and there were times when I was pretty glad that she didn't come home unexpectedly very often.

This particular day I didn't go to classes, my period pains were enough of an excuse (and a relief) to stay home, clutching a hot water bottle and reading.

By the afternoon I felt better and started a cleaning blitz. That's when I found the empty pill containers carelessly shoved down the sofa cushions.

Clearly she had taken them from work. I was not sure why, she hated downers, never smoked pot and hardly drank.

I had never gone in her room before, was nervous this time, but after glancing out the front window to make sure her car wasn't there, I opened the door and went in. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but certainly afraid of what I might find.

I realised that I hadn't taken too much notice when she started losing weight. Had even complimented her on her new figure a few times.

Careful not to move anything I walked around her mess; clothes thrown everywhere, empty coffee cups, green scum on the top, were lined up next to her mattress on the floor.

A long box, secured with a metal clasp was tucked into the gap between her bed and the bedside table. I

hesitated briefly then lifted it up for a closer look and when I opened it the smell of speed and disinfectant filled my nose.

I was shocked to see a full injecting kit. She'd clearly graduated from taking an occasional white to full on hitting up. I snapped the box shut, tried to put it back exactly as I found it and closed the door behind me.

"Wow, what do I do now?" I thought in a panic. I knew that if she was ever busted I might be implicated in her mess as well.

It could mean getting thrown out of my course, losing my job, maybe even go to jail. Cleaning forgotten, I put on my coat and got in my car, and spent the rest of the afternoon just driving around wondering what to do.

It started to snow and I knew my tires were not so great. By the time I turned back up our street I had decided what to do - nothing. Nothing at all, everything, I assured myself, will turn out all right.

Chapter Fourteen

September 30, 1975

Sue Ellen's mother certainly had a lot of visitors I mused. I wasn't sure, but the man I believed to be Sue Ellen's father, came over fairly often, usually with a woman I presumed to be his mother, a large woman in an old style house dress, heavy swollen legs walking stiffly up the walkway to the porch, awkwardly carrying bags of food in their brown grocery bags, the young man usually carrying nothing much except for a small bag of something, walking behind the woman almost as though he was a child himself.

Occasionally I would hear shouting, the voices indistinct, the cause of the argument lost as their voices crashed over each other. Soon after, the mother and son would leave, letting the screen door slam as they hurried to their car. Sue Ellen's mother on the other side of the screen continuing the argument.

Other times Sue Ellen's mother would leave the house just as I got home at 8:30 at night, in different cars or pick up trucks with unseen men who would stop briefly as the mother would disappear into the night.

I don't know why, but I never questioned who was watching the children, assuming that a grandmother perhaps was there, not realising that it should have been

lovely Ruby, the same Ruby that I had helped to the bathroom that very evening.

Another opportunity missed, another chance to keep the things that were about to happen at bay. But I didn't know and so it seems that all the while, as I looked over at their house, the children were often in there alone, left to their own devices as their great grandmother was sleeping soundly in the room across the hall from Vince and Fred MacDonald, unaware of the events on Elm Street and what was coming.

Chapter Fifteen

October 4, 1975

One early evening, on a rare day off, I sat on my couch and watched the first of the autumn leaves drifting quietly in the warm Indian summer breeze, the light holding on just that bit longer than usual.

I could see Sue Ellen playing quietly with the cats through my open front door. She didn't notice me but every now and then she turned her head towards her house to see if she was being missed, gauging just how long she could stay before the shadows of evening called her home.

Just as I was about to get up to suggest Sue Ellen go I saw a man pull up in front of her house in a red pick up. Both Sue Ellen and I watched as he stomped up her front porch steps. He banged on the door and began shouting into the house.

The usual noisy arguments between Sue Ellen's mother and father had been fairly benign, the irritated and annoyed banter between families, but this time there was menace in this man's voice.

Alarmed I watched a nervous Sue Ellen skittle off my porch and make a beeline around the back of her house.

I couldn't hear what was being said, but I did see the man as he left, revving his truck before storming off,

anger in the screech of tires the menace followed him down the street. I shuddered and quickly closed the door as a nagging worry for the little girl settled over me.

I don't know if this particular fellow ever came back. Of course, I would have paid more attention had I known I would be called upon to recount the goings on across the street but how was I to know? And anyway I had troubles of my own to worry about, not the least of which were Vicki and her new boyfriend, Mick.

Chapter Sixteen

October 7, 1975

Mick carefully pulled the curtains across the front window. He liked having the place to himself, especially after the stupid roommate had a day off school and had cleaned the place up. It must have taken her most of the day he thought idly, still gazing out the now shiny clear window.

Vicki hadn't washed the dishes in a week and the McDonald's trash from Sunday was still next to the couch when he left on Monday afternoon.

Vicki was a slob, he fumed, as he glanced through the open door of her bedroom, but as it turned out, a very useful slob. And although her house wasn't much, it was better than the shit hole he was staying at on the other side of town.

Olive, the girl who shared the house with Vicki was hardly there and he usually managed to avoid her. Not that he minded having a perv when she was around, but he got an uneasy feeling when she looked at him, like she thought he was something dead on the side of the road.

Those looks pissed him off but he kept his irritation to himself. If he was honest, she made him feel dirty.

"Now that's a looker!" He said to himself as he grinned and pulled the curtain over just a bit more. The woman

across the street, was washing her car, despite the early autumn chill in the mornings, the afternoons were still warm and it looked to Mick as if she had decided that it was a perfect day to try and get that last bit of tan and he was certainly glad of it.

Dressed only in her bikini top and cutoffs she pulled her Chevy into the driveway and unfurled the hose. Although the sunshine was warm the breeze was chilly and she quickly regretted the skimpy clothes as the cold water splashed over her.

Hope knew she often let things go, the house and the car getting filthy before she took any action, but when she did decide to clean she did it with a vengeance and now thoroughly chilled, she hurried through her usually meticulous regime of vacuum, wash, then polish.

Preoccupied, it was some time before she noticed the 'boyfriend's' car across the road and as she looked up at the house she saw the front curtains flicker.

Slowing now, she provocatively swirled the suds over the hood of the car, her breasts matching the rhythm of her hands. She thrust her ass in the air, the shorts cutting into her as she swayed, fully aware of the effect it would be having on the man at the window. She had seen this on a movie just that afternoon, the one with Paul Newman, her favourite actor at the moment.

Mick stood absolutely still as he watched the woman across the road, keenly aware that she knew he was watching.

Now with no thought of the cold Hope continued her slow suggestive dance as she slowly caressed the car, stopping once to drip soap suds down her neck and across her cleavage.

Hope heard the front door across the street open and the man take a step onto the porch. Her eyes flashing, she smiled, anticipating what was coming when a car honked its horn behind her. Startled she turned and frowned as Sammy pulled up.

He parked the car and he and his mother shuffled out. She glanced across the road, the front porch across the way now empty. She turned on Sammy and shoved him as they went into the house.

Mick was annoyed too. What an opportunity lost he mused and then remembered he was due to make a pick up at three and would be late if he didn't hurry.

As he walked through the kitchen he saw the Walmart bag on the top of washing machine by the back door.

Vicki had bought him another present. Only briefly reading the sappy note she had left, he grabbed the bag and registered that it was a shoe box. He tossed it on the back seat of his car as he got in, glancing briefly across the street and saw that the woman had returned to her car.

He backed slowly out of the driveway and into the road just that bit further than necessary so that he was abreast the woman and the car.

Without looking directly at each other he nodded and she gave him a little girl wave. Mick accelerated in a

flourish as he speed off down the street just as Hope turned to her husband and mother in law who had followed her outside. It wouldn't be long before their shouts could be heard up and down the street.

Chapter Seventeen

October 7, 1975

Chris dropped Sally off at the steak house precisely at 4:00 as usual.

Sally worked at the nicest restaurant in town, really the only nice restaurant. It was frequented by local doctors, lawyers and car dealership owners who liked their surf and turf and fancy cocktails, but most of all liked that their patients, clients and customers generally couldn't afford to spend an evening in the dimly lit timber decor that passed for luxury in this part of the state.

These select clientele were generally well behaved, their passes at Sally more discrete than at the Holiday Inn and she made good tips. In fact, she made twice as much as Chris, a disparity that secretly irked them both.

She was always on him about coming to work there too but Chris refused to consider it.

"They're looking for a chef's assistant again," Sally told him, as she stared at Chris with that intense look that unnerved him every time.

"Phil walked out last night - of course Cheryl can be a real pain. But hey, you have always gotten along with her and the pay is a lot more than at that stupid nursing home, plus a share of the tips."

“I like it at Serenity - most of the time. At least the oldies are generally nicer than your stuck up customers,” he told her, “and besides, it’s not a good idea for us to work together. I’ve seen that first hand.”

When Chris was younger his parents had a business back in the late sixties selling the first microwave ovens in their corner of the Midwest.

It took five years of money worries and constant bickering before they called it quits on the business and the marriage and Chris’s mom left to find herself like so many other women in those first heady days of the Women’s Liberation movement.

Although she sent Chris letters and presents for Christmas and his birthday she effectively disappeared from his life leaving him and his father to fend for themselves.

Some late nights, when Chris’s father would have too many drinks with his friends at the VFW Hall, he would slouch down on the couch next to Chris, throw his arm around him his shoulders and declare, “Never work with your missus,” he said, “ruins a marriage you know.”

And Chris had taken heed.

“You always have an answer for everything, don’t you” Sally retorted as she angrily slammed the car door. “Go ahead stay in that crappy job, just quit bitching to me about it when you get home!”

As Chris sat in the car and watched Sally storm towards the kitchen entrance door, she paused and adjust

ed her shoulders and smile before she went through the door.

He marvelled, as he often did, on how easily she could go from pissed off to perky, that unless you knew her like he did you would never think she was capable of the kind of fury he saw all too often lately - the fury almost always directed at him.

He had been toying with the idea of asking Sally to marry him - they were both 21, old enough and once he finished his course he was confident he would get a good job and she could go back to school full time to finish her psychology degree.

As it was they shared the house with his Dad. Fortunately he was away with work a lot and it was mostly just the two of them. As much as a part of Chris wanted to somehow secure their relationship he was sensitive enough to realise that he was anything but sure about her answer if he did propose.

Chapter Eighteen

October 8, 1975

“Olive, would you care to join us?” I opened my eyes and instantly felt myself blush crimson with embarrassment, caught sleeping again in the geography lecture.

Wednesdays were always hard, my shift ended at 11:00 Tuesday night and it took a couple of hours for me to fall asleep, especially when Vicki had people over on her nights off like last night.

The too warm classroom and dry drone of the instructors voice were stupefying and inevitably sent me off to sleep every time I actually made it to class.

I tried sitting at the back of the room thinking I would be less conspicuous if I dosed off, knowing full well that some time in the next hour my head would drop and I would fall asleep, head cupped in my hands, elbows locked on the desk top in front of me.

But it was clear, despite my precautions, that I was the object of attention and almost certainly ridicule, attention that I not only didn't want, but that I knew would now keep me from wanting to attend this class at all.

This was my second time taking the class. I had gotten a D in it at the community college and I couldn't take it again. Somehow it hadn't occurred to me until this

autumn that failing something as fundamental as geography would not bode well for an education major, no matter how I might be doing in my other classes.

I feigned an interest in the rest of the lecture and as usual running late I hurried from the lecture hall into another chilly day - way too cold for October.

The afternoon was particularly bleak, drizzly with gusty winds and once again the car was in the shop and the walk to work was miserable.

By the time I arrived my hair and shoes were soaked. Thinking as I changed into my uniform and shoved my damp clothes into my bag that surely the winter wasn't coming already.

I tied my hair back with a clip and clocked in just in time for the shift change. At handover I half listened to who had done what during the day, was reminded to make sure the laundry was done. Jean was especially shitty that the day shift had run out of clean sheets again this morning.

I absently waved to Raylene as she hurried down the hall on her way home as I answered the bell from Fred's room. Since early September Fred and Vince had shared this double room at the end of the West Wing.

Vince spent most of his day in the tv room, so I knew it would most likely be Fred who needed some assistance.

"Well, good afternoon to you Mr. McDonald," I said smiling as I entered the room. I was happy to see Fred, despite his pain, he was always pleasant, always grateful.

Although his cancer was beyond treatment somehow he managed to stay in good spirits.

“What took you so long? He says he’s feeling poorly,” a voice said from behind the door.

Startled, I turned to see Fred’s wife glaring at me, holding a tiny dachshund, sitting up alert and angry, in her ample lap.

I nodded at her but didn’t respond and instead walked to Fred’s side, turned off the call light and held his hand. “Not such a good day then Fred?” I asked.

“No, no I’m okay,” Fred replied. His half smile masking his pain.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him, “I’ll get Belinda to get something for you and be right back.”

“Bout time bitch,” I heard Fred’s wife say under her breath as I hurried to the nurses station only to find a note that Belinda had gone home, one of her kids was sick.

“Finish filling the medication cups and call me ONLY if there is an emergency. The narcotics key is in the drawer.”

I hesitated before I went into the meds room. It felt like I was sneaking into someone’s house. I knew that I wasn’t authorised to give narcotics, but I also knew that Fred might not get his regular pain relief later either with Vicki on the night shift.

Lately, as my suspicions about Vicki grew, I had begun to suspect that it was not just the speed that she was interested in. Although I was pretty sure that she wasn’t

using the pain killers and downers herself, I knew, given the opportunity that she could be tempted to steal them from the residents and trade them for the speed she was increasingly using with Mick.

Deciding I couldn't risk Fred suffering all night I made the decision. My hand shook as I opened the narcotics safe and nervously considered how I would explain giving Fred a controlled medication.

I knew the doctor had given blanket permission for some patients to get them as needed, Fred was one of them. I justified my actions by convincing myself that Belinda would have readily agreed to give him this extra dose.

We all knew Fred was dying, the signs were there. When discussing him, the nurses would shake their heads agreeing it won't be long now. I was both uncertain if I was doing the right thing and alarmed that if I didn't Fred would be in horrible pain until the morning.

As I got his other medications ready I tried to come up with a good reason for what I knew would be the discrepancy in the narcotics tally the next morning.

Maybe if I told them I accidentally dropped it down the sink, or that maybe one of the other patients had spat out their tablet and I couldn't salvage it.

Screw it, I'll just have to tell the truth, resigned to whatever might happen. I finished counting out the rest of Fred's medications and checked the cart to make sure everyone else's night doses were ready, no need as it

transpired because of course Belinda, efficient as usual, had readied everything before she left.

To cover myself I wrote a note on the medication sheet, vaguely describing the compelling need and detailing the time, hoping the repercussions wouldn't be too bad.

"Here you go Fred" I said as I gently lifted his shoulders to help him swallow.

"Thank you honey," Fred said quietly, his voice hoarse and breathing shallow as he lay back on the pillows, a weak smile on his face as he tried to hide the grimace of pain.

"You should feel better soon," I said as I patted his hand then smoothed his bedding. I almost got to the door.

"Where's that good lookin' young man who sleeps over there?" Fred's wife abruptly asked. I had momentarily forgotten she was there and the look on her face unsettled me.

"In the TV room I guess," I stammered, as I walked briskly to the door.

"Wait there you." Fred's wife said. "He's a dying ain't he?" I looked towards Fred who had already started to lightly snore.

"You'll have to talk to Belinda or your doctor. I really only work part time so I don't get told much."

"Hmff, I reckon he's a dying and it can't be quick enough. I am sick of having to come over here, got things to do and can't get em done till this one is gone."

She gestured towards Fred, her hand brushing the dachshund's nose, waking it up as he sensed her agitation.

“What's that you just gave him?” She asked.

I felt a bit of panic,

“Just something to help him sleep and his regular tablets”.

“Hmff,” she replied again. “I suspect I best be going.”

“Hold him will ya?” She said as she handed the dog to me while she put on her coat.

I reluctantly gripped the squirming dog a little too hard and only just managed to avoid his nip as he squirmed and twisted, clearly unhappy to be held by a stranger.

Head lowered I followed Fred's wife up the corridor and slipped behind the safety of the nurses desk. Fred's wife stopped and turned back to face me,

“Had to put my last dog down. That vet doctor just stuck a needle in her and off she went.”

I stood silent not knowing what to say, she shrugged and waddled awkwardly down the passage, the dog continuing to squirm until she smacked it on the head.

I had checked on Fred twice before Vince shuffled past the nurses station and went to his room closing the door behind him.

Gauging by the smell of him someone had snuck in another bottle of whiskey. Oh well, I shrugged - at least he won't bother Fred and hopefully he won't soil his sheets until after I go home.

Fred McDonald had been admitted to Serenity the spring before I arrived. Raylene told me his daughter, Viola Mae, brought him in when he was admitted, fussed over him and made sure the staff knew what sort of food he liked and the station he listened to on the radio.

Those first weeks he had the room to himself and for a while he only needed help showering and getting dressed. But by the time I started work his health had very quickly deteriorated and instead of his daughter sitting in the chair next to his bed, his wife was there with the disagreeable dog.

I don't think I saw Viola Mae, his daughter more than a few times and the last time was only briefly. She was walking quickly down the corridor and didn't notice me as we both tried to come through the entrance doors. Her face was flushed and her anger apparent as she and I had a brief tug of war over the door.

"Sorry about that," I said as we finally managed to step past each other, but she ignored me. Raylene was still on evenings with me then.

"What's with her?" I asked as I signed in at the nurses desk.

"Her mother is threatening to take over Fred's affairs. Seems the old lady might just do it too." Raylene was thoughtful for a moment, deciding whether to say anything more.

"I know a bit about Fred's wife, let's just say she hasn't been the best mother, or wife either, and the mother and daughter don't get along."

“But we can’t interfere,” she shot me a warning look before she continued, “I know how you like Fred...”

“Sure, I’ll stay out of it.” I said, interrupting her, then through gritted teeth I added, “and I can see what she means about her mother, I don’t like that woman at all, there’s something about her that gives me the creeps.”

Chapter Nineteen

October 9, 1975

Thank god I can sleep late, I thought as I ignored the sunlight streaming in the curtain-less window and checked my cheap plastic watch.

I hadn't been able to afford an alarm clock, or a watch either, but Mick had given Vicki two and in an uncharacteristic act of generosity she gave one to me. ("At least you'll know not to come back to the house until I tell you its time!" Vicki had told me.)

However, when I recalled my actions of the night before any pleasure of a sleep in was soon lost in worry. My anxiety rose over the day of forgettable classes, punctuated by gnawing hunger.

I had run out of money a few days before and relied on a quick meal at work for my one meal. Today though it was just as well I hadn't eaten for my stomach was in knots worrying about what might happen when it was discovered that I had made my own decision about the medication for Fred.

There was a police car in the Serenity parking lot and an unusual amount of activity at the front office when I arrived. My heart was in my throat as I hastily pulled into a spot at the edge of the paved area, my VW just fitting.

In a panic I walked quickly through the big double entry doors, expecting to be met by Jean, wondering what would happen and how I would make it through the month if I was fired.

But there was no stern faced Jean waiting. It seemed that Turk, one of the new residents, had escaped and somehow made his way to the local Denny's where he proceeded to grab food off of the plates of the other diners.

The Denny's waitresses couldn't catch him and it took two policemen and a couple of short order cooks to finally pin him down, but not until he had thrown plates full of food at his captors and managed to trash the dining room in the process, cackling in his high pitched, yet somehow endearing maniacal way, throughout the whole affair. (This was all relayed to me later by a clearly highly amused Chris while we did the laundry together during a quiet spell.)

Raylene and Belinda were in Jean's office when I arrived and even through the closed door I could hear Jay shouting. I hurried past to answer the call bells that were binging at the nurses station.

Belinda looked directly at me as she strode hurriedly up the corridor, her face was white and her mouth tense.

"You," Belinda, tersely growled, gesturing me to follow her into the medication room.

"Don't you ever do that again," Belinda said as she pointed to the day sheet.

“Because of you I have to fill out a narcotics incident report and deal with that crap too!”

Looking over her shoulder at Jean and Jay huddled in an animated conversation further down the corridor.

“Next time DO NOT change medications for Fred or anyone! It’s not your place and its against the law! Just remember they’ll probably live until morning”. Got it?

“Sure Belinda, I’m really sorry but I thought ...” I mumbled nervously only to be cut off by Belinda.

“Don’t think, you’re not paid to think, you’re paid to do as you are told and only as you are told. Got it?”

“Sure, okay, it will never happen again.”

I was relieved that the repercussions hadn’t been worse and for the first time acutely aware that, although the aides were expected to do a lot of things, it was a mistake to think I knew what I was doing, far from it.

Forget the doctors, the LPN’s were the bosses and stepping over that line I could get in big trouble, really big trouble.

Chapter Twenty

October 10, 1975

It was a slow evening and I knew I should have been in the laundry, or perhaps checking to see if all the dishes from dinner had been collected, but I was intrigued, and as everyone else seemed to be on a smoke break out the back, I snuck back into the storeroom and pulled out the Graystakes files again, keeping an eye on the corridor while I read.

Vince's file was on the top, and after another look to see that I was alone, I opened it. The information on Vince was surprisingly detailed. By the time I read through the notes I felt as if I knew more about Vince than I knew about people I had known all my life.

The notes began with an overview. Vince was still a youngish man when he was temporarily committed to Graystakes by his brothers. A disturbing alcoholic binge resulting in the DTs frightened his parents and prompted them to call his brothers back home.

"It was for his own protection." They had said and much easier to make the decision when they all agreed.

Vince attempted suicide his first night at Graystakes by breaking into the infirmary and drinking straight rubbing alcohol. If his body had been battered by his

drinking before that was nothing to what that clear liquid did to his internal organs.

As a result he required, not only refuge from the world, but round the clock nursing care for some time and then, when he was finally well enough to go home, he found he was unable to stay away from the bottle and cope with the nightmares at the same time.

In the end he committed himself for treatment. When I first met him he was in his fifties, it makes me smile to recall how old he seemed to me then, a full decade younger than I am now.

Even then the decades of institutionalism had erased much of his vibrancy, but thankfully not his intellect, or his determination.

Most days he sat in his chair and read book after book. Or, when the sitting left him too stiff, he paced the corridors, his bow legged gait identifying him as he made his way down the hallway.

There were some days though when he sat silently looking out of the day room window, only making a fuss when one of the staff tried to get him to join in the activities.

As I skimmed over the final notes, notes clearly transcribed by a sympathetic staff member at Graystakes, I realised they were a verbatim account from Vince's own words, this was verified by Vince when he and I discussed my invasion of his privacy many years later.

"I was 18 when I signed up for the Army. My older brothers had already gone off to boot camp, based in

Texas somewhere, preparing to go to Europe, their letters home talking about their boredom. No one would have ever accused them of being writers, but somehow they seemed to tell a pretty good story as they wrote home in the night time quiet of the barracks.

They told me about the endless drilling, the senseless sweeping and cleaning of already clean parade grounds and the sleepless nights, being kept awake by the sounds of too many bodies in one room.

They joked about the good natured complaints and ribbing they got about the letter writing and hinted at the fear that was growing as their day to ship out got closer.

I would read their letters and yearned, despite my brothers warnings, for a soldiers life. Looking back I wonder how many of those snoring boys didn't come back, would be blown to bits, or maybe so badly wounded they wish they'd died with their comrades on the battle field. Of course some of us came back with all our limbs attached, just as damaged, full of invisible wounds and cracks.

Stupid me! I didn't have to join up but I wanted it bad, had to have the adventure, didn't want to miss out and as soon as I turned 18 I signed up and was on the bus to Fort Smith, Arkansas.

By the time I finished boot camp the war in Europe was winding down. Soon the allies would be in Germany, the Russians were already moving through Poland. So instead of a trip to Europe, me and the rest of

the 77th Infantry Division found ourselves on ships headed for the East China Sea and Okinawa.

We would be some of the first ashore, and within a few days three of my best friends were dead. So dead I couldn't even be sure it was them when I took their dog tags from around their necks. Always trying not to look at their faces, blown to bits.

I sent the tags to their families when I could find them after the war. I don't like to talk about my last memory of the war, but I guess I will anyway because god knows it should be told if just to let people know how crap it all was.

I was crawling over an embankment, pushing through brush and splintered branches that cut my hands up something awful. I saw a bunker up head and after shooting into it for what seemed an hour, but was in truth only seconds, I tossed my hand grenade at it hoping I had finished them off."

I nearly stopped reading here for I knew that what was coming was awful, could not be unknown once known.

"When I got to the bunker it was filled with dead and dying children, dressed up in Japanese uniforms. I found out later they were Okinawan kids who had been kidnapped and forced to fight for the Japanese. I could see that one kid had a badly wounded arm and I went over to help him, stepping over the other bodies. Before I got to him a kamikaze plane burst on the ground in front of us and the blast sent us flying. The kid landed near me, only his little body was in two pieces. That's the last

thing I remember until I woke up on a hospital ship. Even now thirty years on my ears begin ringing for no particular reason.”

I was shocked at the image, ignored a call bell, my lips pressed hard together as I continued reading.

“For months I was shifted from ship to ship then to a base at Midway, until eventually I found himself standing on the road in front of my parent’s place. I remember the washing on the line out the back blowing in the wind just as it had the day I left. I can remember feeling a kind of despair for it was as if none of that hell had ever happened. By the time I got back my brothers had moved on, only coming home for short visits, leaving within a few days, really only coming back to show off their latest kid or to brag about their new cars and their big houses in California. I tried to make plans too, thought I might open up a gas station somewhere near where my brothers lived. But my father was getting older and my mother had just had a baby, god knows how, and had her hands full. I have to admit it made me sick that she had a child at her age, but she was my mother and I felt sorry for her so I stayed on and helped out the farm. I say helped out but truth is I ran the place. Seems like the more I did the lazier the old man got and pretty soon it was just me doing all the work. The four of us bumped along for a while like this, just managing. I tried to kill the boredom by fixing up neighbours pickups and tractors, anything with a motor, for extra cash. One night one of the neighbours

came by, he owed me a bit of money for a job I'd done on his old Dodge. He never seemed to be able to come up with the cash and eventually he offered to pay me in some of his sweet moonshine from last years corn. I stayed up all night drinking with him and didn't stop until I woke up because someone was screaming, it took me a minute before I realised it was me."

"Olive, get that bell." Belinda called out to me from the Day room. I had mistakenly thought she had gone out with the others and hurriedly tidied Vince's file and slipped it into the box.

"Just getting some sheets," I stammered.

"*That was close.*" I thought as I walked quickly down the corridor, embarrassed to see that it was Fred and Vince's room that had rung, and it seemed for a moment I had been caught snooping.

As I went into the room I could see that Fred was asleep. Vince looked up at me as I came over to his side of the room, his reading light illuminating his craggly face.

"Yes Vince?"

"Uh, sorry to bother you but would you mind getting me another book?" He apologised. "Belinda told me not to wander around at night and it's just that I find it hard to go to sleep. I've finished this one."

I looked at the book lying next to him on the bed, a dog eared western of some description.

"Sure Vince, I've got a few minutes." I nodded as I looked into his eyes, the notes in his file still so vivid in my mind.

“Something like that one?” I asked?

“Maybe something with a bit more ... depth?”

“Hmm,” I replied as I pictured the book titles on the Day room bookshelves.

“Jeez, they are mostly Mills and Boon types and westerns like that one.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “I have a Kurt Vonnegut book I just finished. He’s not for everyone, but he was in the war too and maybe you’ll get something out of it.”

Vince looked at me curiously, “How did you know I was in the war?”

Embarrassed I blushed bright red and stammered, “Uh, I guess someone must have mentioned it.”

Vince stared at me for a full minute then said, “I’ve heard this Vonnegut fellow really sticks it to the officers. Yeah, sure that sounds like something I’d like.”

“Okay Vince,” was all I thought to say as I hesitated then, prompted by the sound of the call bell again hastily told him, “I’ll bring you the book in a minute.

He was in the bathroom when I came back. I left *Slaughterhouse Five* on his night stand.

Chapter Twenty-one

September 25, 1975

Vince was finding it harder than he thought. The medication he was on was supposed to stop the craving but instead made his nightmares much worse.

He stopped sleeping at night and took to walking up and down the dimly lit corridors until the nurses shushed him back to bed.

Most days he read or dozed in the recliner in the Day room, ash tray next to him overflowing. Sometimes, especially lately when they were doing the filming for the documentary, he would lie on his bed, side curtain drawn.

It was worse after the night Fred's wife smuggled in whiskey. He spent most of that night vomiting from the booze and the chlordiazepoxide and hadn't been able to get the taste of garlic out of his mouth, even after gargling with salt water, he wasn't allowed mouth wash.

After a few bad days things settled down and he managed to get on top of things again. It set him back though and there were times when he felt he would never get out of here at this rate, depressed that even if he did he had no where to go.

When his parents retired and his brothers had him officially sectioned they were forced to sell the farm to the neighbour to pay off the taxes.

When they had learned they would be released to the outside world some of the residents of Graystakes were very distressed at the prospect of Graystakes being closed down. As bad as it was, it was the only home most of them could remember.

But Vince found himself counting down the days. He woke up each morning in the lead up to their departure feeling something he thought he had lost long ago - hope.

Amazed at himself that he had allowed the possibility of a future to creep into his thoughts. A possibility away from the walls and despondency of the cell like rooms, a possibility that grew into vivid daydreams of a small apartment with a couple of plants and a job working in a mechanics shop, all the boys getting on and joking during coffee breaks, the boss telling him he was doing an ace job.

Heck, he had even conjured up what he would wear for a night on the town, the imaginary mirror agreeing he looked sharp in his leather jacket, crisp denim jeans and polished boots.

The daydream always stopped there, the night on the town too dangerous to imagine. For now at least that daydream had been put to rest and he wasn't sure if he could take any more hope.

It transpired that it had been a needless worry for that hope had faded the moment he had walked through the heavy double glass, and now after all those years in that hell hole Graystakes, he had ended up in another kind of

prison with no prospect of a future, a somewhat young man in an old folks home.

This particular afternoon was like every other Vince sat by himself in the small TV room just off the now quiet and dimly lit Day room. As usual he had the place largely to himself, Frank and Jim, the only other men on this ward who could manage to stay up past dinner, had hobbled off to bed after the news.

Despite his despondency Vince was begrudgingly grateful for Serenity and for Fred, his roommate. Fred was quiet company and he valued that quiet for the cacophony of Graystakes at night was something he had never gotten used to.

He especially looked forward to Fred's daughter, Viola Mae, visiting. She had the look of the girls he remembered from his younger days, before the drinking got bad and before his stint in Graystakes.

She certainly wasn't young anymore either, but she was kind of sparkly and they even flirted a bit, Vince marvelling at himself that he still knew how. She didn't stay long, always seemed to be in a hurry to go somewhere, he couldn't even imagine where.

Vince managed to stay off the booze since the last time old Fred's slimy wife had slipped him the Wild Turkey and although he still craved it he could feel himself improving.

Maybe I can get out of here after all, he told himself as he lay in bed at night. Any day now - maybe.

Raylene, didn't know who was more shocked, her or Vince when the phone call came for him. He didn't have the money to have his own phone in his room so he took the call at the nurses' station.

Raylene standing far enough away to give him some privacy, but still alert to the open medicine room door. Vince was clearly upset when he got off the phone.

"You okay Vince?" Raylene asked.

"Sure, just my brother, wanting money, as if I have any."

"So you have a brother here in Hillsdale?" Raylene asked politely.

"Yeah, My older brothers live out west. Don't hear from them much. Haven't seen em since the farm was repossessed. The youngest has always been a bit different, hardly know him really and never see him 'cept when he wants something."

Raylene, was slightly shocked, this was more words than Vince had spoken to her since he arrived.

Vince was unaware of her surprise as he continued, staring out the big window opposite the nurses station.

"Not sure what he wants that en, best to take a message next time he calls, would ya? I'll call him back if I feel like it."

"Sure, Vince whatever you say. I'll make a note for the other nurses."

"Thanks." Still preoccupied he returned to the TV room.

Chapter Twenty-two

October 1, 1975

The only time Merrill got anything done was when he felt slighted, then nothing could stop him. As his father used to say, “Got to make him mad before you can git a lick of work out of him.”

Merrill had phoned Vince three times, wasted a dime three times and got told three times that Vince would get his message and no doubt get back to him.

A week went by and still nothing from Vince.

Merrill hated places like Serenity, hadn't even visited his parents while they were dying in the Pearson's old nursing home, the one that burned down. The smells were bad enough, but it was the confinement he couldn't bear, like being in a prison without bars.

But he was mad now, Vince could have at least called him back, his neighbour had let him use their phone number. They were getting tired of Merrill asking them if there were any messages for him so he decided to do something about it, no matter how much he hated old folks homes.

He parked his old blue pick up right in front of the front doors, challenging the Ambulance and Doctors Only sign.

“Screw them,” he said out loud, “I can park where I damn well please.”

He hitched up his pants, seems he never could get jeans to fit, not with his narrow hips, and these new ones only barely stayed up with the aid of a belt, hips like a girl his brothers had taunted him.

He noticed the blonde storm out of the office as he went through the double door entrance. She bumped into him knocking him a bit but didn't even reply when he spoke to her, just continued through to her car.

He watched her briefly, mumbled to himself, then turned to go towards the nurses station.

“Looking for Vince Pike,” he declared loudly to the first woman he came upon in a nurses uniform. The nurse was startled and looked him over before gesturing down the hall.

“He's watching television I think, on the left, mid way. But please keep it down, visitors hours are over and some people are getting ready for bed.”

He didn't like her tone one bit and started to tell her so but she was gone, Merrill already forgotten as she went about her duties.

Vince had his back to him, intent on an old western rerun, when Merrill peered into the room the aide had indicated. The colour TV was a surprise to Merrill, this place must charge a pretty penny he thought.

For a moment he was mesmerised by the vivid green scenery of the Ponderosa, something he had only ever seen on a black and white TV before.

“Hey, Vince.” Merrill said, his face beamed with satisfaction as he saw the startled look of fear, then resignation, on Vince’s own face when he turned around.

“We need to talk brother. Someplace quiet we can go?”

Vince led Merrill down the corridor, Merrill strutting, and winking at the nurses as he passed the station,

Vince hurrying them back to his room, clearly embarrassed by his brother’s arrival.

Chapter Twenty-three

October 1, 1975

Usually Viola Mae would drive past the nursing home before turning in, making sure her mother's green Ford wasn't in the parking lot.

Viola Mae managed to avoid her for weeks but knew it was inevitable that one of these days they would come head to head.

Today, thankfully the Ford wasn't there, for she wanted to see the owners of Serenity, Jean and Jay Prescott, alone and knew they would be hard to pin down during the day.

Viola Mae had overheard Jay tell one of the nurses that on the first Wednesday of the month he and his mother were forced to work late, the government forms and invoices had to go out the next day so Viola Mae knew she would find them in their office.

She knocked lightly on the office door, suddenly quite nervous about the confrontation she had planned. There was no response.

A louder knock was answered by an annoyed, "Yes, who's there?"

"It's Viola Mae MacDonald, and I would like to speak to you about my father."

“We are quite busy you know.” Jay said, his voice revealing his irritation as his head emerged from behind the half opened door.

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow, during office hours?”

“No it can’t. I work during the day and I have tried to make an appointment with you for ages, but as you know you keep giving me the brush off.”

Viola Mae was firm now, resolve replacing nerves.

“I suppose if you insist, come in.” Jay’s voice changed back to his overly polite default mode but his face gave him away as annoyed as well as anxious.

Jean looked up from her desk, carefully placed a blank piece of paper over the pile of forms she was working on and folded her arms, resting them protectively on top of the papers in front of her.

“What can we do for you?” Jean asked making it clear she was being generous and Viola Mae the intruder.

Viola Mae took a seat, pulled out a list from her handbag.

“I’ll get straight into it - firstly may I remind y’all that I am the executor and conservator for my father. He and my mother have been separated for a number of years and I am the only person you should be talking to about his care, not her.”

She looked from Jean to Jay, and with emphasis said,

“After all I am the one who makes sure your bill gets paid every month.”

Jean remained impassive, but Viola Mae was pleased to see that Jay was becoming nervous.

“I looked over the latest pharmacist bill yesterday and I believe that my father is being overcharged for medication, and for a lot of medicine he doesn’t seem to be getting. Seems strange doesn’t it?”

She glared at both of them, daring them to interrupt, but they stayed silent as she continued.

“Another thing - he is losing weight and the last time I was here the nurses just left his meal tray on his table and didn’t bother to even help him with those juice containers nobody can open. If I hadn’t come along he wouldn’t have had any dinner at all.”

“Finally - and this really gets up my goat, you allow my mother to bring that filthy dog into his room. Surely that is against the regulations, maybe even the law.”

There was a long pause, Jean took a breath, indicated to Jay to keep quiet and replied in the condescending tone should used with the residents.

“We’ll take these one at a time shall we?”

“Number one, we realise your parents are separated, but they are not divorced and we are not in the position to tell your mother not to visit. I admit we do let her know how he is doing from time to time, but I am sure you don’t begrudge her expressing her concern for your father now do you?”

“As for your father’s account, as you can appreciate we do expect prompt payment, something you might have been neglectful about on occasion.”

Viola Mae was annoyed and showed it, she had been late once with a payment, had quickly paid and thought

nothing of it until now. She could see the confrontation was not going as planned.

“Number three - your father’s physician has changed his dosage and changed the times he is taking certain medications, I can assure you we are providing all his medication as per the doctors orders.”

Viola Mae started to say something in argument but Jean cut her off.

“Number four - I will speak to the nurses but I am sure on that one occasion they intended to come back and assist your father with his meal, but seeing you with him they assumed you would prefer to help him yourself. I will speak to them though and see that his weight is checked.”

“And finally - as for your mother’s little dog. Your father has expressed how happy the little one makes him so we have turned a blind eye to his visits. Of course, since you have raised the matter it will be forbidden from coming again. Although perhaps your father won’t be so thankful for your objection.”

Viola Mae was deflated, rather than the relief she thought she would get from telling Jean and Jay off instead she felt as if she had been called to the principal’s office and reprimanded.

Not knowing what to say next she stood, then abruptly left the room.

On the way out of the double doors to the parking lot in her haste she bumped into a man, younger than her, coming in.

“Excuse me,” he said sarcastically.

She didn’t answer but rushed past. He glared, started to say something else but noticed her tidy figure and the nice car she got into and shrugged.

“Wouldn’t mind a bit of that.” He said under his breath as he pushed the entrance doors open again and made his way into the foyer. It would be years before he would run into her again. Neither of them remembering that first encounter.

Chapter Twenty-four

October 7, 1975

Working the evening shift I saw a side to the residents of Serenity that the day shift never saw.

They were quieter, those who were still social at all were all chatted out by early evening, and everyone else just tired.

But day shift was different. I hadn't known how different until one day over lunch Monique had me laughing about the how often the raucous bingo regulars were caught cheating.

Sometimes it was a deliberate lie, sometimes dementia, but resentments were deep and the bogus bingo winner was whispered about on the way back to the rooms.

Technically bingo was gambling back then and the state legislature had sent ominous warnings about the gambling dens of inequity that were springing up all over the state in Catholic Church Halls, Elk's Lodges and even Nursing Homes.

But no one ever showed up to shut down the illicit activity at Serenity so the game went on.

When I mentioned the threatened crackdown to Ruby she told me straight faced and serious, "We don't care what they say, after all what are they going to do to us,

send us to prison when we are already there? Anyway, it's kind of thrilling breaking the law at our age, maybe we could branch out and rob a few banks, but maybe not, we might not be so good at the getaway."

As usual I laughed too loud and got a shush from Jean as she walked past, somehow always there, often even when we thought she had gone home.

Monique said days were especially fun when every now and then one of the volunteers would come in and play the old upright piano for a singalong.

Some of the men had surprisingly lovely baritones, but on a whole the women's shrill voices were so out of tune that Monique struggled not to laugh.

"Luckily they are all pretty deaf," she told me grinning, "or they would surely be too embarrassed to sing don't you think?"

"I don't know, there are some real egos among the ladies, I wouldn't want to be the one to tell them that their singing stinks."

Despite Monique's assertions, I admit I found it hard to imagine the somber, life worn people I saw from 3:00 to 11:00 finding it in themselves to sing at all, much less laugh.

Certainly by the time I came on shift it was too late for fun, instead those sometimes interminable hours were filled with the mundane. It was all meals, medications and preparing people for bed, the corridors cloaked in shadows, voices lowered unless the sound of the call bell punctuated the quiet like a sharp prod in the ribs.

Daytime was the time for visitors too.

Visitors, who came in two categories according to Monique, either hoverers or buzzards. The former would come in the morning, stay for hours, and fuss over their mother, father or auntie until everyone was agitated and overwrought, staff included.

The latter usually arrived after lunch, clearly impatient from the get go, they would incessantly check their watches to make sure they didn't stay a moment longer than the allocated half hour, the maximum amount of time they were willing to invest in their mother or father, just enough for a hedge against any threat to the anticipated inheritance.

Because visitors were so rare in the evenings I was startled to find Fred's wife sitting in Fred's chair again a few nights after I had broken the rules and given him the extra medication.

"It's you again Dolly," came the voice in the shadows.

"Heard you got yourself in trouble the other night." Startled I turned to address Fred's wife (what was her name again?).

"Uh not too much," I stammered.

"But please just make sure you let them know when Fred is in pain earlier - before the regular nurses go home."

"I guess you ain't no real nurse then heh?" She smirked not expecting a response.

I breathed deeply and paused before I said, “No I guess I’m not. But please it is best to tell them earlier if Fred is going to need extra medications.”

“Humpf,” Fred’s wife said as she opened a greasy bag of french fries and began to eat them in between bites of a large hamburger.

She talked as she ate, bits of food flying out of her mouth. “Mmm this is good Fred - too bad that’s all you git.” she said as she nodded at the sandwich, soup and carton of milk on the putty coloured serving tray on his bed table.

Trying to avoid looking at Fred’ wife, the half chewed food in her gaping mouth making me slightly nauseous, I turned to speak to Fred. There was not much room between his bed and his wife’s knees and she did not move. I went to the other side pushing Vince’s chair out of the way figuring Vince would be having his meal in front of the television in the dining room as usual.

I helped Fred unwrap his sandwich and open the milk carton cursing once again to myself - *for God sakes why do they keep giving out these cartons* - no one, not even the nurses could open them and certainly the older residents found it impossible.

Using the handle of a spoon, I managed to tear open the carton and only spilled some of it as I poured it into a glass. Fred slowly chewed his sandwich, choking slightly when the cheese stuck in his throat. As gently as I could I held his head forward as I helped him drink the milk, his hands shaking with the Parkinson’s tremors.

After whispering “I’ll be back soon,” to Fred, I turned to speak to his wife as I took the tray to the cart in the hallway.

“I’ll be in to help Fred in a bit when its time to turn out the lights.”

Fred wife looked up but said nothing just wadded the food wrappings in a ball and dropped them on the floor.

It was then Vince came in, his limp more pronounced than usual, hurrying to the bathroom, acknowledging me with a nod. I nodded back as I bent down to retrieve the trash on the floor.

As I rose, red from both embarrassment and humiliation, I saw the undisguised lust on Fred’ wife face as she licked her lips and stared at the not quite shut bathroom door. Shocked I left, not sure if I should say something to Vince, knowing I wouldn’t.

When I finished turning down the beds and had settled everyone on my side of the corridor I returned to Fred and Vince’s room.

Vince took care of his own evening preparations and it meant I could have a minute to make sure Fred was comfortable and not be rushed to go to the next room. Fred’s wife had never stayed this late before that I knew of and I felt sure she would be gone.

“Lights out fellas.” I called out only to be startled yet again as Fred’s wife entered the room behind me.

“That un went out, “spect he’s got things to do.” She smirked.

“What do you mean out?” I said alarmed. “He’s not meant to leave...”

“Yeah well he’s up and gone like hasn’t he?”

I checked the corridor, unsure what to do. Had he left Serenity or was he just in one of the common rooms somewhere? Before I could leave to go look for him Fred’s wife grabbed my arm.

“Fred here is I poorly I think.” As she pulled me over to his bedside. I turned my attention to Fred.

His breathing was so shallow I could barely detect the rise and fall of his chest. Ringing the call bell and getting no response I went into the corridor and called out for Belinda.

I must have sounded panicky because she came rushing down the hall, the stethoscope and blood pressure cuff flailing about as she ran. Checking his signs she shook her head at me, “ I need to call the doctor, stay with him”

Awkwardly I stood on one side of Fred, his wife on the other, a half eaten Hostess Twinkie in her hand. I tried not to cringe as she continued eating the cake, the golden crumbs falling on Fred’s sheets. It felt like an eternity before Belinda returned.

“The doctor and the ambulance are on their way,” she said tersely.

It was a tactic agreement to try to make sure the residents died either on their way to hospital, or once they got there. Much less paperwork and fewer questions

raised, especially at night when rigour-mortis, and the neglect it suggested, could not be explained away.

We heard the phone at the nurses station ring and Belinda hurried out of the room pausing momentarily to ask - "Where's Vince?"

"I don't know - Maybe still in the TV room?" I don't know why I covered for him, but Vince was soon forgotten as Fred took a huge breath, exhaled and then nothing.

I ignored the call bell and ran into the hallway. "Belinda, Belinda, come quick." Returning to Fred's side I gingerly took his wrist to check his pulse and found that he was already growing cold, his wrist heavy in my hand.

"I'm sorry, I think he's gone." I said gently as I turned to Fred's wife, her jaw slack, the half eaten food clearly visible in her mouth.

"You sure?" she replied.

"Uh , pretty sure... Belinda..." - Belinda rushed into the room.

"Damn, damn, damn."

"Olive go back to the desk, I think Venus' light is on and see if you can find Vince."

I glanced back at Fred, the ordinariness of his still body striking me, the first person I had seen die, the first I had touched. I was surprised by how oddly calm I felt.

Fred's wife, rifled through her bag before pulling out another package of Twinkies. She opened it with her teeth and began to eat. I hurried out of the room and was sick in the staff toilet.

Belinda let me go home early, I left before the morticians arrived.

Chapter Twenty-five

October 8, 1975

Fred's side of the room was empty when I came in the next afternoon. Clean sheets tightly drawn, the hospital corners sharp as folded paper. Belinda's work I figured. I must have stood there for more than a few minutes just staring at the bed when my thoughts were interrupted by Vince coming out of the bathroom.

He looked at me, a curious gaze, sizing me up, expecting me to reprimand him I suppose. It didn't occur to me to interrogate him, I didn't care where he was last night, in fact had forgotten that he had disappeared at all.

His voice was scratchy and low as he said, "I guess I got the place to myself for a while. Too bad though, I'll miss him, he wasn't a bad roommate. Hope the next one is okay. That wife of his though - whew she gave me the creeps."

Vince's hands shook as he took his neatly folded pajamas from the drawer in the grey metal bedside table.

"Would you mind getting me a cup of coffee?" Vince asked shakily, his eyes seeking mine again, looking for understanding.

"I'll see what I can do." I replied hesitating, knowing coffee was usually not allowed in the evening. The staff hated the work involved in extra trips to the toilet. But I

was also aware that given his tremors, and the tell tale smell alcoholics have after a binge, meant he needed it.

My grandfather had that particular smell, and some fifty years after he died I can still recall the sour earthiness. Now I recognise it as the smell of alcoholism and a body deteriorating under the weight of it - he died just two years older than I am now.

“Maybe there is some left in the coffee machine for the nurses”. I answered. “ I think Chris made a fresh pot batch in the kitchen when he came on shift.”

Vince just nodded as he nervously tapped the side of his chair. I didn’t drink coffee so rarely went into the kitchen at night and although I was willing to do Vince a favour I was also slightly annoyed about the full ten minutes it would take me to make the round trip from Vince’s room to the staff break room and back.

There was nearly a full pot already brewed and I filled a mug a little too full.

“For Vince,” I explained as I carefully made my way down the corridor past Chris and Dorothy at the East Wing station.

“Sure I’m not surprised,” Chris replied. “ They found him still passed out in the Day room this morning. Whoever smuggled in the booze didn’t hold back, there was an empty fifth of whiskey on the floor next to him.”

As I hurried away. Chris called after me, “ Try to get everyone to bed early, I need to talk to you and I don’t want to be overheard. Meet you in the laundry.”

“Thanks, you’re a life saver.” Vince said as his shaking hands took the cup and brought it to his lips, drinking so quickly the hot liquid burned his mouth.

“Wait Vince that’s much too hot!” I said, wincing as Vince sputtered hot coffee over reddened lips.

“No, no I’m just fine,” Vince said, eyes watering. “Just like I like it.”

When he finished he handed me the empty cup and casually asked, “Heard you were here when the old guy died?”

“Something fishy is going on with that wife of his.” He told me, careful to avoid my eyes.

“Guess I should have guessed something was up because she wanted me out of the way last night. That’s for sure!”

“What do you mean?” I asked puzzled.

“Nothing. Nothing just saying. Hey, I need to get ready for bed - do you mind?” He said abruptly.

I left the room aware of something unsettled between us.

“Wait, sorry I was rude,” Vince called out, “I’m just tired - you know.”

“Sure, not a problem, I replied.

“We all miss Fred.” As I spoke these words I knew they sounded as shallow as they were. I was half way up the corridor when I heard Vince yell, “Hey, come back Olive, I just remembered, he left you something. Asked me to give it to you in case - you know.”

I turned and went to Vince’s doorway.

“Sorry, something for me? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I don’t think it’s much of anything just a little token,” he said, not diamonds or anything, but nice enough.”

Vince handed me a small box. Not sure if I should open it or not I hesitated but Vince said,

“Go ahead, see what it is.” The box held a string of perfectly matched cultured pearls, the old fashioned clasp suggested it was made in the twenties. The pearls were still beautiful and strung in a graduation of tiniest on the edges to largest in the middle.

“I don’t know what to say.” I told Vince, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. “I ... I don’t know If I can keep these.”

“Sure you can”, old Fred insisted. “Said if I didn’t give them to you he’d come back and kick my ass. I guess he would too.” Vince chuckled.

I slipped the box into my pocket, left the room and swiftly walked down the corridor to answer the call light, Mr. Brown needed help with the urinal again.

“What’s up? I asked Chris later as I dumped the soiled sheets in the laundry hopper, the large washing machines all fully occupied and noisily whirling. The laundry, like the toileting was endless on evening shift.

“It’s about Fred.” You didn’t give him any extra medication again did you?” Chris’ asked, more than a hint of accusation in his voice.

“Of course not.” I replied, offended by his tone, “Of course not! “Why?”

“Looks like someone did. I heard the hospital thinks he was over medicated - by a lot.”

“I didn’t prepare the meds, Chris, and Belinda gave them out last night . The log will show that.” I was about to ask him more when I heard Belinda call my name and I hurried back to the wing.

It was only at home later that night, as I pulled the covers over my cold arms that I opened the box again. I carefully ran my fingers over the pearls, looking at the necklace and cried. I don’t fully understand why, but it was hours before I finally fell asleep and mid morning before I woke up - too late to attend class that day.

Instead I stayed in bed and read, getting lost in a silly romance novel I found lying around at work. The afternoon sun was warm when I got up. I heated a can of soup, dissolved a handful of crushed crackers in it, and sat on the stoop of the front porch, my coat over my shoulders.

Gazing idly across the road, I wondered what the kids across the road were up to. The soup was cold before I finally ate it.

Chapter Twenty-six

October 14, 1975

It was a week after Fred's death, Vince still had the room to himself and so there was no real need to check on him as frequently as I had when Fred was still alive. The whispers about Fred's death were still doing the rounds, but my name was no longer mentioned.

I saw Fred's daughter in Jean's office a few days after Fred died. The door was shut but you could hear the raised voices, could see the anger in the daughter's face as she stormed out.

We were all busy that evening so there was no time to find Chris and talk. As we juggled the meals one of the new ladies wouldn't stop screaming for help. She'd fall quiet for a moment after we went in to see her, then she would talk with us, as lucid as anyone discussing the weather and her stories, the soap operas of afternoon television.

As soon as we left her, the plaintive cries for help would start with a fury, getting louder and louder until we came to her side again, patting her arm and gently reassuring her, trying to keep our growing impatience from showing.

"No one is going to get any sleep tonight unless we do something," Nancy, the new LPN, said matter of factly.

That something was to ask me to stay overnight until Jean could authorise sleeping tablets. I was promised a bonus, and despite my misgivings, and knowing full well I would miss my morning classes, I agreed.

The poor lady was finally sleeping when I settled into one of the recliner chairs, a clean blanket from the laundry pulled over my shoulder, but she woke in an hour and it would take another hour of stroking her soft hand before she would fall asleep again.

At some point when she was finally sleeping I must have dozed for I was startled when Vicki prodded my shoulder.

“Shh.” she said, putting her fingers to her lips and gesturing towards our sleeping lady. The woman stirred, was quiet again, then began to gently snore.

I followed Vicki out of the room and whispered, “What’s wrong?”

Vicki was clearly upset, shaking she said. “I just did the medication inventory for the month, we are missing quite a lot of the pills, Fred’s pills.”

I started to ask, “Did you take ...” “No, and I know what you are going to say,” she said defensively. “It wasn’t me, I don’t even like them and besides there is no market for them at the moment.”

“Maybe it was someone giving him a bit too much extra” she snarled, glaring at me and I immediately became defensive.

“Don’t look at me, I know I gave him an extra dose that one time, at least I was honest about it and it wasn’t for my boyfriend!”

I thought she was going to slap me, perhaps she was but just as she started to reply the little lady started to wail again and called out, “Help Me, Help Me.”

I went back into the room, settled her but she continued to stir, not falling into a deep sleep until just before the morning shift came in with towels for her shower.

I gratefully left them to get on with it, dragged myself to my car, saw Vicki talking with Mick, both briefly looked over at me and then continued their conversation.

I fell asleep as soon as I got home, for the first time making sure I locked my bedroom door, and missed another geography class. The upshot for my trouble getting called into the dean, and as expected, was not paid for the night. Unauthorised overtime, was all it said on my time sheet.

Chapter Twenty-seven

October 12, 1975

Hope woke up with the familiar next day headache. “Sue Ellen, make me some coffee!”

“Yes, ma’am,” came the reply. Sue Ellen was relieved even though her mother was in a foul mood. She had been worried when she didn’t hear her mother come home and had waited up for her.

It was very late when Sue Ellen eventually fell asleep on the couch in the living room. She woke up just as the sun was coming up and hurried to the doorway of her mother’s room to check that she was there and saw her mother lying naked on the top of the covers, face down on the bed lightly snoring. Sue Ellen sighed with relief, grateful that she was alive.

By the time Sue Ellen had made the coffee and carefully carried it to her mother Hope was sitting up, sheets pulled up around her neck as she squinted at the harsh morning light coming through the window.

“Close them curtains!” she ordered. Sue Ellen sat the coffee on the spindly table next to the bed and pulled the curtains closed then waited, looking intently at her mother.

“Well, what do you want?” Hope demanded.

“You said you would take us to see Granny Ruby today.” Sue Ellen said quietly.

“Oh for God sakes! You can be a real pain when want to be.” Hope complained. “Maybe tomorrow. Okay?”

Sue Ellen didn’t move, just silently waited, watching her mother.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, just give me a minute will ya?” Hope said, exasperated. “Go and see to the other kids and I’ll get up. Go on, git.”

Sue Ellen carefully shut her mother’s door and went to attend to the other children, soon having them looking respectable, grimy faces cleaned with a wash cloth, the baby freshly diapered, the other children looking as presentable as Sue Ellen could make them in the clothes the church ladies left on the front porch every now and then.

Hope for her part walked sullenly to the bathroom, let the tap run until it was steaming hot and stepped into the bathtub. Fifteen minutes later she was ready, hair still damp and brushed back into a ponytail. The children were waiting on the front porch by the time their mother appeared.

Sue Ellen threatening them with a slap if they dared to make a move if they even thought about stepping off the porch into the muddy front yard. Once her mother was securely in the drivers seat Sue Ellen loaded the children into the back and solemnly took her place next to Hope in the front.

They made the short journey to Serenity in silence, the kids not fighting as usual. Granny Ruby had been ill again and they sensed this wasn't the time for foolery. Even the baby sat quietly in his car seat, another donation from a neighbour.

Ruby's room was directly across from Fred and Vince's. It was hard for Ruby in the first weeks after she was admitted to Serenity, but she perked up when she found out Fred was her neighbour, and she especially liked his daughter, Viola Mae.

Viola Mae always brought something nice for Fred, and, after discovering her father's affection for Ruby would bring something for her as well. She even brought Vince the tobacco he liked to chew after he arrived and had become a part of the small group of friends.

For some reason Ruby had taken a shine to Vince, he reminded her of so many of the young men of her youth. It surprised even her when she told people he was a nice enough fellow, even if he was a bit odd, and she had warmed to him even more after Fred had vouched for him.

She, Fred and Vince had a pleasant little corner, spending an hour or so every day reminiscing about something that happened way back when. That is, until the afternoon Fred's wife showed up with that snappy dog.

Ruby knew the rumours about Fred's wife, that she'd left him high and dry, Viola Mae had still been a little girl. They never did get a divorce but they might as well have.

Yet, here she was again, hovering over Fred like a crow waiting for a rabbit.

She nodded to Ruby when she first showed up until one day, out of the blue, marched over to Ruby's room and shouted through the door. "Hey you - Ruby Moss!" "You'd better be keeping your distance!" "Don't come fishin for catfish over here."

Ruby confused and embarrassed avoided going in to visit Fred from then on, even sometimes ignored Fred when he called out to her as she walked past. Something she regretted now.

Over the weeks Ruby listened as Fred's daughter and wife argued and soon the daughter came less and less until the last time she came it was to say goodbye to Vince and to have it out with Jean and Jay in the front office, or so Ruby had been told by the other women in the day room.

The last time Ruby saw her was at Fred's funeral. Hope had picked up Ruby and they had gone into the funeral home together. They sat at the back, feeling awkward and embarrassed, not sure of what was expected of them.

They watched Viola Mae and old Mrs MacDonald as they took their seats on opposite sides of the front pews.

Vince was there too, coming in a taxi. Ruby felt bad that she hadn't asked Hope to offer him a ride, knew that the taxi would have cost him a pretty penny.

He didn't seem to mind though and came over to talk to them after the service. As always he was kind to Ruby and polite to Hope, treating her as if it was an honour to speak with her. From then on whenever Hope came to see Ruby she would stick her head in to Vince's room to say hello, one afternoon there was someone else in with him.

Chapter Twenty-eight

October 12, 1975

“Afternoon Vince.” Hope said as she whirled past his room with the children in tow.

“Afternoon Hope,” Vince replied absently. Hope stopped, noticed a younger man in the room with Vince, sitting in the chair old Mrs. MacDonald used to sit in.

“Uh this is my brother Merrill, Merrill - Hope ... Hope - Merrill.”

“Please to meet ya,” she said giving the rather presentable young man the once over before being tugged down the corridor by Sue Ellen, anxious that her mothers distraction wouldn’t delay their visit to Ruby.

The kids tried to barge through the doorway all at once then clamoured over their Granny Ruby before looking for her candy jar. She always hid it in a new place, teasing them that they had to work hard for their rewards.

Hope kissed her hello. “How they treat’n you Grandma?” Hope always asking the same question each visit.

“Fair to piddlin.” Ruby would answer, the double meaning of piddling their private joke causing them both to giggle.

Sue Ellen always liked these moments, watching the easy love between her great grandmother and her

mother. It was the only time Sue Ellen felt she could see her real mother, the sweet one who liked to laugh, and not the angry person who was always annoyed with her.

Sue Ellen managed to get the children down from Ruby's bed. They had found the candy jar and they larked about as their sticky fingers picked up the lint of the blankets. They pretended to stick the fuzz on each other and Sue Ellen until Sue Ellen reprimanded them.

Ruby delighting in their antics, momentarily turned her attention away from Hope. "Now Sue Ellen, let them play my angel."

Meanwhile Hope had wandered across the corridor to Vince's room. She quietly lingered in the doorway, watching Vince and his brother talk.

Vince seemed annoyed and Merrill was pacing. Vince angrily turned his back to his brother, looking out the window, clearly finished with the conversation. Merrill shrugged and got up to leave, saw Hope and walked over to her. Hope smiled at him as he approached.

"Looks like this is my lucky day. Got to spend time with my brother and I got to meet the prettiest thing I've seen in ages."

Vince remained with his back to them. Merrill glanced over at him.

"Not that my brother is so happy to see me." He laughed, "But heh none of us gets everything we want, or do we?" he teased suggestively.

They were interrupted by the sound of a crash and glass shattering. The cut glass candy dish was now in pieces on the floor.

Sue Ellen berated the guilty party and the sound of the crash, followed by Sue Ellen's raised voice, brought Raylene.

Assessing the scene she spoke to Hope. "Looks like a good time to call it a day, time for Ruby's medication."

Sue Ellen gathered up the baby and snapped at the others as they kissed Ruby good bye. She pushed them out of the door, clearly disappointed they couldn't stay longer, taking her annoyance out on the wiggling children.

Raylene looked quizzically at Merrill who was now standing next to Hope in the corridor, her eye brows raised questioningly.

Hope offered, "Oh this is Vince's brother, umm..."

"Merrill, names Merrill." Merrill replied.

Hope smiled sheepishly, embarrassed she hadn't remembered his name. Raylene glanced at Vince, Vince continued to stare out the window his back impassive.

"Okay, anyway the party is over."

Raylene ushered Hope and the kids down the hall, Hope looking over her shoulder to see if Merrill was following, he a few paces behind.

He caught up with her outside, leaning on her car door they talked for half an hour until the kids fighting became so raucous that even Hope noticed.

Merrill nervously licked his lips as she drove away.

Chapter Twenty-nine

October 13, 1975

“What do you mean they suspect you’ve been taking the meds? You didn’t say anything about me did you?”

Vicki was crying, and Mick could barely understand her. It didn’t help that it was raining and the racket on the roof of the phone booth in front of the shopping center down the road from Serenity meant Mick could only make out every other word.

Vicki took a deep breath. “It looks like someone stole a whole order of narcotics just before Fred McDonald died, you know the old guy Olive goes on about all the time?”

Mick only vaguely knew what she was talking about and was getting madder by the minute. “Shut up for a minute bitch,” he yelled into the phone, “shut up and get yourself under control.”

Vicki, hurt by Mick’s tone, spat back, “You shut up and listen for once.”

“I am telling you that Jean accused me of taking the drugs that someone overdosed Fred on. But... I wasn’t on duty that night or during the day when they were dropped off.”

“Once the bitch knew she couldn’t pin this on me, Jean started listing all the drugs that they suspected have gone missing since I started working nights.”

“I had to stand there and take it, what could I say?”

“I’ll say it again, Did you say anything about me?”

“Oh for fuck sake, what do you take me for? Of course not.” Vicki whined.

“I just said she didn’t have any proof or she would have fired me already. That stopped her.”

“But they know, they know for sure. What are we going to do?” Vicki was crying again her anger at Mick momentarily forgotten.

“Nothing, not a thing, we’ll just need to get someone else to take them every now and then, when you’re not at work. Hey, what about Olive?”

Vicki was alarmed and jealous. She had seen the way Mick leered at Olive when he thought she wasn’t looking.

“No way, she’s too much of a goody two shoes and besides she already got in trouble once for handing out meds without permission.”

Mick was quiet, trying to work out a plan.

“Yeah, right now we do nothing. You, You make sure you stay squeaky clean, then we’ll see. I’ll need to talk to someone though, they like having a steady supply.”

Vicki was silent and took so long to speak that Mick thought for a minute she had hung up.

“Look, I’ve got to go. I still have to work tonight, but they are making Belinda count out the meds before she goes home and the other aide has to be with me when I give them out. It’s bullshit!” Angry and aggrieved Vicki abruptly hung up.

“Talk to you later the ...” Mick held the receiver for a moment while he thought about the news. He didn’t like the way things were shifting. He had been onto a good thing, a steady supply of downers and pain killers and regular sex. Now he wasn’t so sure.

Vicki went home to change into her uniform, leaving her day clothes on the bedroom floor. She had just enough time to score a hit, careful to put one of the little round bandaids over the hole. She didn’t want any blood on the sleeve of her uniform.

Chapter Thirty

June 18, 1974

There was a house, not far from our farm, with a weed filled front yard, a large hole in the roof and broken windows. I came across the place on one of my solitary walks in the first weeks of loneliness on the farm.

I walked past it a number of times, not paying much attention as I did, lost in my thoughts. But soon, gradually, so gradually I hardly noticed, the house seemed to draw me to it.

Although in disrepair and neglect it had a certain charm. The yard was bordered by trees, the fresh grass just greening up, the dew as wet as rain. After many visits I started imagining living there, fixing it up first of course, mending the fences, mowing the lawn and putting a row of petunias along the front of the porch.

I'd haul away the old cars and tractor, only half hidden by the tall grass, and take them to the eroded gully near the train tracks then dump it all there with the rest of the miscellaneous debris from multiple farmyards in the area.

As I made the place over in my mind I could see it, trim and tidy with a vegetable garden and a few cats and chickens. It was some weeks later on a particularly warm afternoon that I finally worked up the courage to explore

it more closely. I remember the day so clearly because of the grasshopper plague. A quivering mass of them covered the road so thickly it was impossible to avoid them and they crunched as I walked in the ruts of the dirt road.

I gave up trying to avoid the hoppers and callously squished hundreds of them all the way up to the back door window. Despite the filthy cracked glass I could clearly see that something odd had happened here.

I was committed by then and finding the door stuck I boldly used my shoulder to push it open. As I stood there in the stale air that stank of mouse droppings and dust it seemed to me that the family must have gotten up from the table in the middle of a meal and just walked out the door.

Pans were still on the stove, petrified food on the plates. The raccoons and possums had made their own mess, but it was clearly not just their antics that had wrought havoc here. The illusions of my day dreams shattered, replaced by a morbid curiosity.

Maybe the family sitting at the table were eating dinner when there was a bang at the door, it was the bailiffs repossessing the farm, or could it have been the landlord, angry at back rent evicting the family on the spot, two big ole farm boys flanking him as he ordered them out.

Or could it have been someone they knew, the sound of a familiar car pulling up to the house their only warning, causing so much alarm that the family fled and

ran towards the trees lining the creek and then across the fields to a neighbour's place for refuge?

Later on I did try to find out what had happened here but when I questioned the neighbours I was either given the run around or bluntly told to mind my own business.

It was clear to me that there were secrets in the district, secrets and a protective wall around those secrets that could not be easily penetrated.

I did find out that some of the more well off farmers were tight lipped for good reason. For they were known to plant a crop on the acreage behind abandoned houses, letting people believe they were leasing the land, but in truth they never even bothered to hunt down the owners, the crop a welcome addition to their bottom line.

There was another reason people were reluctant to tell me anything. More than a few of them were known to have furnished their own houses with the furniture and other things left in similar abandoned places, sometimes even when they weren't abandoned.

Our own farmhouse was broken into when my parents were away for a few weeks. The nearly new kitchen, ripped out of the walls and hauled away.

I never visited the old place after I started classes in Hillsdale, and except for an occasional glance at it as I drove past my imaginings about the family who lived there were forgotten.

It was only later when I found out whose house it had been that I thought about it again. It seems impossible

still that it would be this particular place that I was drawn too and only a stones throw from our own farm.

Impossible that the lives of the boys who had grown up there would become entangled in mine.

Chapter Thirty-one

October 10, 1975

The night was pitch black as Merrill pulled up in front of the house. He left the pickup running, noticed the engine was missing a bit, "*Better see to that tomorrow.*" He thought and just as quickly forgot.

As dark as it was he could still see that the fields were recently plowed right up to the edge of the yard. The trees remained the only border between the house and the endless fields beyond.

Once so familiar the house now seemed somehow wrong, as if it had been dropped by a giant crane into some random place, the roof, porch, walls all slightly eschew from the impact. The trees the only other silhouette against the night sky.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark he could just make out that most of the upstairs windows were broken, scraps of old lace curtains reaching through the broken panes, waving in the wind.

Old man Cox had bought the place off of the county years before. Cox was a good farmer, Merrill heard he was doing just fine, something not many could claim around here, certainly better than Merrill's family ever had.

It had been years since he had climbed the elm tree that somehow still survived and just as many years since

he learned to drive in the fields that now held a late crop of soybeans, the fuzzy bean pods dangling from the stocks, looking faintly pornographic.

Merrill's father got sick the last winter before they lost the place, towards the end he spent his days in the old wicker wheelchair with a moth eaten crocheted rug over his knees, drooling as he slept, head tilted as if his neck had no bones in it at all.

Merrill's mother's anger kept her going, he could still see her sweeping around his father and hear the thwack of the broom as it hit the wheels of the chair.

Vince was well gone by then and Merrill could remember lying in bed at night trying to picture Vince's face, only barely able to remember what he looked like.

Once Vince left them there was no one to do the thousands of things that needed to be done around the farm and they plain didn't get done at all. By the time that last day came and went the farm house was just another clapped out property.

Merrill figured there might as well have been a sign out the front that said redneck hillbillies live here. He rarely brought friends back, even when he was a kid, ashamed of the state of the place and of his ageing parents.

Merrill finished high school without any real plan, wondering if he should join up like his brothers did, and if his case, go to Vietnam, glad now he didn't.

Too many of his old friends either didn't come back at all, or if they did, they were strung out and useless. But

his older brothers ended up doing real fine in California. Their war had done its damage but they had been spared the indignity of vets who had come back from the next two non wars in Korea and Vietnam.

Merrill had thought about moving out there to try things out but they never suggested he join them, hell he never really knew them, and something pride, resentment, fear they would say no, kept him from asking.

Not that he ever admitted any of this to himself, let alone anyone else. His high school graduation ceremony was a short one with only 23 graduates, maybe half of them would be going off to college somewhere.

Those fortunate few would use their last summer of childhood to have fun. The other half were like Merrill, heading to the Ozarks camping for a few weeks in June then going home and getting straight into haying.

Even though Merrill hated the sweat, the scratchy hay and the way his face and arms got covered in grass seeds and dust, he was a competent hayer and was well thought of by the other men for his ability to swing the bales four high and in his own estimation he figured he was the best stacker around.

Merrill Pikes loads were never lost, even when a driver took a corner too quickly. Merrill did have an Achilles heal, the snakes that got caught up in the hay bales.

The unfortunate snakes, their bodies cut in half, severed by the hay mower, would still be hissing when you grabbed the taut hay twine as you tossed the bales

onto the wagon. The first time a snake went for him his screams caused such a ruckus amongst the older guys working with him that they were doubled over in laughter and laughed even harder as he was sick over the side of the hay wagon.

Ego bruised, he soon learned not to call out when he found the snakes, although the terror in the pit of his stomach remained. By July he was as blasé as the rest and managed to barely register the snakes or the mutilated rabbits. If they were still moving he would kill them in one blow with the side of the hay hook.

The haying continued into fall and when it petered out he helped with the harvesting, alternating between driving the trucks collecting the grain from the combine harvesters and working at the grain elevator on the highway.

That had been ten years ago and although a lot had happened since then, much of it Merrill chose to forget, or rather had chosen to misplace, like something he temporarily lost, but couldn't be bothered to look for.

It was late November in 1969 the last time he had slept in the old house and he remembered there was sleet on the house steps when he got home from work.

The kitchen was hot and the smell of burnt pork chops and old bacon grease made the room seem too small for the three of them. He saw the big envelope on the side table when he came in.

Envelopes that size always meant something was up, sometimes they brought good news, like his diploma or

Vince's discharge papers, but usually it was bad, the bigger the envelope, the worst the news.

None of them said much, they were not a family who wasted words except to instruct or berate and so Merrill took little notice of the tension. The bang on the front door startled him, neighbours didn't come calling this time of night unless there was bad news and even then they rarely knocked, just simply called out, "Anyone home?"

If Merrill was surprised, it was clear his parents were not. They just exchanged silent looks with each other, their nods indicating that these visitors were expected. There was a scuffle as the sheriff ushered the three of them out the front door into a waiting police sedan.

Merrill's father needed to be supported on either side by Merrill and his mother. "You can come back and get a few of your personal things another day but right now the warrant says you've got to get out and leave everything behind."

"Wait a minute you bastards, what about my pick up, I paid for that myself." Merrill argued, his anger raising. "Sorry son, but it says here it's registered in your parent's name so that stays too."

The sheriff was apologetic but resigned, people should pay their bills. If they did he'd be spared all this commotion.

"Seems like there are considerable back taxes the county is wanting pretty bad."

The sheriff dropped Merrill and his parents at Uncle Vic's place in Clarksville. He didn't sleep that night, just laid on the lumpy couch his anger turning to fury then into helpless resignation by day break. By the time they drove back to the house the next afternoon, their cars and tractors that would still start were already gone, Merrill's pick up with them.

The sheriff pulled up between them and the house as they stood in front of the car borrowed from Vic. There was no room between the vehicles, the road too narrow for the two cars as well as people, and so they stood so close to the police car they could smell the sheriff's cigarette breath when he rolled down his window.

"You folks had better not have any thoughts about taking anything but what's on this list. Everything else belongs to the county now. If you want any of it back you'll have to bid on it like everybody else."

"I'll wait here for 10 minutes, so go get your things then you best you be on your way."

The sheriff waited, his glare on the back of their heads making them flush with shame and anger. Without thinking they stuffed the items listed into a couple of old duffle bags Vince had left behind and left as quickly as possible.

For once Merrill's mother did not take charge and had to be reminded by his father to get what she could. They drove silently back to Vic's house, stayed a week until another official looking car showed up, this time taking his parents to the old folks home, the one that burned

down later in Hillsdale, his parents died within a few weeks of each other a month after the fire.

Merrill ended up staying in old Man Cox's barn next door until he put together enough money to buy another clapped out pick up truck. He moved into a boarding house that the college students used to stay in until it became too rundown even for them.

Fortunately for Merrill the father of an old school friend needed a mechanic and took Merrill on as an apprentice, it turned out he was good at fixing things and soon found he had enough money for a reasonable room and a few nights out at The Lounge in town.

Chapter Thirty-two

October 10, 1975

I was unaware that my neighbour on Elm Street had even noticed me and I am not sure what I would have done about it if I had known the depth of her resentment.

School and work, school and work, that was all I thought about, or even registered, as I went through the days trying to manage paying the rent and doing the assignments.

Things were changing at work, the new residents had arrived and we just found out someone from the college was making a documentary about them. Although there was some sense of comradeship at the nursing home, the college social life was a mystery to me. If it wasn't for Monique and Chris, I wouldn't have known anyone.

The state of my invisibility struck me one night on my way back to the farm. The dash lights of the VW suddenly went out and I had to guess how fast I was or wasn't going when a whole family of raccoons, in single file, marched across the road in front of me.

I don't know how many I killed, there were trucks behind me and I couldn't pull over, let alone stop until further down the road.

When I doubled back I couldn't find the spot where it happened and after a fruitless and cold search made a U

turn and headed back toward the farm. On my way, still trying to work out my speed, the what ifs settled in.

What if it had been a real accident, or if I struck a child or even what if the car had broken down? What would I have done? Who would find me, or miss me, even mourn me?

It could take weeks to track down my parents, they were working temporarily somewhere out west. No one would think to call Monique or Chris, and my brothers were unreliable lately touring the surrounding states most weekends for suitable places for them to go to college when the time came. The neighbour and I managed to take care of the animals in turn.

I could go off the road into the deep ditch that ran parallel to the highway and no one would know. By the time I turned onto the dirt road that led to the farm I was convinced that except for my immediate family, there were very few people who would even notice my absence.

In my preoccupation I didn't see the pick up that pulled off onto the road not far behind me. I could tell it was a pick up because the lights were higher than mine and were shining straight into my rear view mirror, making it hard for me to concentrate on the road.

It came up quite close, too close and I was starting to get nervous when it sped up and went around me, nearly pushing me into the ditch. It raised so much dust as it drove off that I couldn't see and had to stop, hoping no one else was behind me.

By the time I got to our driveway and pulled in front of the farm house, rather than a refuge, it seemed menacing, even haunted.

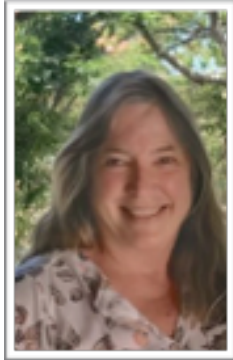
I panicked as my footsteps echoed through the silent, sleeping house and hurried around all of the downstairs rooms turning on lights. I checked each room and closet, even the kitchen cupboards, then checked again that I had locked the back door.

I ended up barricading the front door with some chairs because the damn lock still hadn't been fixed. Finally I made my way up the stairs, locking the stairwell door behind me. I stopped at each step and held my breath, listening.

My room, half finished from my parents endless remodelling of the old place, had no doors or closets and I was glad of that for once for I could lie in bed and still see the stair landing. I eventually went to sleep and woke just before dawn broke when the roosters crowed reminding me of the chores that needed to be done in everyone's absence.

I was glad that no one was home when I saw the barricades I had made. They would find a million ways to tease me and anyway how could I begin to explain the foreboding I was feeling. The feeling, an unsettling mixture of guilt from having hit the raccoons and the utter despair and loneliness that had embraced me last night, the morning bringing no reprieve.

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