

CHAPTER ONE

“The Arrival”



It seemed that I had been on my bicycle for days, leaving the city far behind me. Aimlessly wandering the countryside, I carried my only possessions in a backpack. In haste I grabbed clothing, a blanket, and some money deeming them necessary for my survival.

I did not think there was a need to keep track of the time that had gone by. One day blurred into the next with little consequence to my situation. Every night I would walk my bike into a field away from the road. Wrapping my blanket around me, I would fall asleep in a soft patch of grass. Every morning I would wake drenched with dew.

My throat had been aching for awhile and my chest was tight. Eventually I could not breathe deeply without coughing. I was certainly sick but not much could be done about it.

It was a hot summer. The afternoons were sweltering. I am not sure what the temperature was, but it felt like it was in the hundreds. My blanket had become tattered and was taking on a repulsive odor after the many evenings I lay in it. The odor most likely emanated from me as well. My money had also become low and I had only enough for a little more food.

I was a young man of only seventeen years, but I had been through a lifetime's worth of suffering. In my youth an accidental tragedy occurred that caused me to spend many years in misery. As time went on, life continued taking turns for the worse, and it grew apparent to me that I had to get away.

One night I got on my bike and took off. I rode throughout the night and for many days that followed. I had to clear a great distance in a short amount of time. It did not seem there was any other choice for me. I was scared, confused, and tired of what was happening to me, so I kept moving in search of some kind of peace.

The roads I had traveled were numerous. At each intersection, I would randomly decide which way to go next. I was not sure where I was or what direction I was headed. On my journey I had passed many farms and towns--some towns no larger than a gas station, store, church and a traffic light.

At night the roads were often too dark to make out what was ahead. Sometimes, they were a little frightening, especially when trees shadowed the roads making black tunnels to travel through. This made me gain a great appreciation for moonlight. I never realized just how bright it could be. Some nights it illuminated entire stretches of road in a silverish radiance.

As I gazed into the stars before falling asleep, I wondered what was going to become of me next. I was very ill and was showing no sign of improvement. Still, I had made a decision to go it alone, and as a result I had no one to turn to for relief. What I did not know then was that things were about to change for me.

One evening while coming up to a railroad crossing, I noticed to my right a cleared area of dirt in the shape of a large oval. There were small wooden bleachers set up around the parameter. The place looked like a simple arena used for sporting events.

I walked my bicycle off the road and into the oval. I noticed a lot of horseshoe prints stamped in the dirt and occasional excrements of dung in small clumps. The smell would have offended me, but for days I had the frequent opportunity of smelling manure in the air and had become quite used to it.

I sat on the bleachers, and in doing so heard a nostalgic creak in the wooden seat. I wondered how many people had sat in that exact spot watching horses running in the arena. I glanced around questioning to myself how long that place had been there. Obviously it was still in use, but the structures appeared very old.

Maybe, like a county fair, it was a traditional spot people from the area would congregate each summer to watch a few farm boys jump small obstacles with their horses. I could picture family after family sitting on the bleachers cheering for their favorite heroes as they would try to win the blue ribbon.

My imaginary scene filled me with comfort. What I would have given to grow up in such an atmosphere--to live a simpler and happier life.

From where I was sitting I could see a town across the tracks about a half-mile farther down the road. It was getting darker and I knew at some point I would have to pull off for the night. I wanted to cover a little more distance, perhaps just get passed the town and then pull off in a field somewhere. I walked my bike onto the road and started to ride. I went across the railroad tracks toward town.

Beyond the tracks was a sign announcing the name of the town, Pleasantville. By the name alone, the town seemed inviting. As I rode further in, I observed houses of brick, stone, and wood along either side of the road--all of them decorated in beautifully detailed architecture

including wrap-around porches, turrets, cupolas, and other designs. I always possessed a passion for old houses and places. It seemed I yearned to live in the past. Through the years I had read many books about it and lived vicariously through the eyes of the characters in each story. As I finished a book I would anxiously start another, so I could continue the fantasy that I was someone else in some other time and forget all about my miserable life.

The flashing lights of a police car pulling up beside me interrupted my thoughts. As I looked in the window, I could see the officer signaling me to stop. As I did, he pulled over to the side of the road and got out leaving the lights flashing.

As the officer walked over to me, I could see the word “Sheriff” displayed on his badge. He was large and stalkerly with thick brown eyebrows.

A sinking feeling stressed my stomach and I feared my travels had come to an end. I tried to look confident and act like a local native hoping that I would be able to talk myself out of trouble.

“It’s a bit late to be out on your bicycle, boy,” he said as he adjusted his belt and gazed up and down at the bike and me as if trying to figure out who I was.

“I’m sorry, sir. It is late for me to be out. I’ll be off the road shortly,” I responded as respectfully as I could. I wanted to say the right things so he would let me go on my way.

This was my first encounter with a small town police officer, but country wisdom had taught me that I would have to remain friendly and agreeable if I wanted to avoid problems.

“Where’re ya’ from, boy?” He asked glancing over my attire curiously. “I don’t recall ever seeing you around here.” He shifted himself from resting on one leg to the other.

“I’m from out-of-town and I’m just heading back to my parents’ farm,” I said feeling pretty confident with my story.

“Where’s your farm?” The sheriff questioned, stepping closer while sniffing the air. A repulsed expression crossed his face and he stared at me with disbelief.

“Oh-Oh-Oh, just on down the road a ways...not very far at all,” I stuttered. My body began trembling and sweat collected on my face. Things suddenly were not going as well as I had expected.

“Boy, I know everyone within ten miles of this town, and I ain’t ever seen ya’ before.”

“We j-j-just moved in, sir.” I desperately commented trying to salvage what I had left of a story.

“How long ago?” He asked putting a rather large hairy hand on my handle bar.

“A week ago, sir.” This time I gulped loudly.

The sheriff cocked his head as if he had just heard enough. “How’s come I don’t believe ya’ boy? I think it’s time you and I go down to the court house.”

I did not have much choice but to go with the sheriff. I nervously got off my bike and gave it to him. He placed me in his cruiser and put my bicycle in the trunk. We then drove further into town until we came to an intersection.

The town was still remarkably nostalgic even in the heart of it. At the main intersection were a restaurant, Farm and Feed, hardware store and a huge stone courthouse. I would normally find great interest in these buildings especially by their apparent old age, but I was frightened and preoccupied on what was ahead in the immediate future.

The sheriff parked the car outside the courthouse and escorted me into the building.

The ceiling was at least thirty feet high in the shape of an arch with lights hanging down the middle of the hall. The floor was hard wood and creaked a lot, which reminded me of the bleachers I had sat on earlier. The sounds of our steps echoed down the empty corridor making me more apprehensive with each passing click of the sheriff’s heels.

We stopped part way down the hall and went into the sheriff’s office. Another officer, with the word “Deputy” on his badge, was leaning back in a wooden chair with his feet resting on top of the desk. He was much younger than the sheriff, and appeared to be in his twenties. He was tall and thin with a long neck, small head, and short curly red hair that exposed his large ears.

The sheriff signaled me to sit in a chair then threw his keys to the deputy. “Go get this boy’s bicycle from the trunk of the cruiser,” he ordered.

After the deputy left the room, the sheriff sat down at the desk and looked through my backpack. Disgusted from the smell, he tossed my blanket on the floor away from him.

My eyes focused on a gun cabinet displaying several rifles and pistols. If I chose to run, I wondered if the sheriff and deputy would hunt me down. I had no intention of being shot, so I stayed where I was terrified of what would happen next.

I coughed to ease my aching throat and the sheriff sharply glanced at me. I questioned to myself what was going through his head as he continued examining my belongings.

After a couple of minutes, the deputy walked my bicycle into the room and rested it against a wall. He then slumped down into the seat next to me.

The deputy took a couple whiffs in my direction and exclaimed, "Some animal must have crawled in your shirt and died! Ya' stink!"

I gazed at him tensely. I was not sure how to react and wished I had never ridden into this town.

"Now boy," the Sheriff finally spoke looking at me over his desk, "I believe the contents of your bag throws out your farm story. Ya' want to tell me what is really going on?"

I decided that moment would be a good time to just keep quiet. I figured the more I was opening my mouth, the more trouble I was getting into. At least if I remained silent, he could not find out who I was or where I came from.

"Boy, did ya' hear me? I said do ya' want to tell me what is going on?" The Sheriff asked again.

I remained silent feeling more scared.

"Are ya' a mute?" The deputy inquired.

"No he ain't a mute, Wilbur," the sheriff responded glancing toward his deputy. "I was just talking to him down the street a few minutes ago."

The stress was making my throat throb in pain, and I started coughing uncontrollably.

A lady walked in. She was middle-aged with blonde hair and was wearing a full length ivory white dress with lace around the shoulders and neck.

"Sheriff, my husband's been trying since church let out to get Snowball out of the tree, and she just won't come down!" The lady stated stepping over to the desk.

Hearing my coughing, she turned around and walked over to me. "Oh, you poor thing! Looks like you've caught quite a chill." Crouching down in front of me, she placed the back of her hand on my forehead.

“Sally, we’re trying to hold official police business here,” the sheriff complained distracted by the lady’s intrusion.

“How do you feel, son? I think you have a fever,” she said gazing straight into my eyes.

For some reason her concerned expression comforted me. She reminded me of someone I knew long before but who was lost to me now.

“My throat hurts and my chest is tight,” I replied.

“Why didn’t ya’ get Bob Farthing? He’s the fire chief,” the sheriff suggested reclining back in his chair.

“We tried,” she replied still focused on me. “He’s been out fishing all day and hasn’t come back yet. He’s probably asleep in his boat again.”

“Oh, for the love of all that’s holy!” The sheriff complained again sitting up in his seat. He glanced over at the deputy who was staring at him and said, “Wilbur, drive Sally home and get that cat down.”

Moving her hand to my cheek, the woman stopped and did not speak. For a few seconds it was like she was gazing right through me. She stood up and took my hand. “I’m taking this boy home with me, Sheriff.”

“What?! Now Sally, ya’ can’t do that,” the sheriff griped. “This boy’s a wand’ring vagrant, and I’ve got to hold him here overnight.”

“What this boy needs is a hot bath and a good night’s sleep, not some holding cell,” she replied in an unmovable tone.

It amazed me how compassionately the lady was treating me even though she did not know me, but I was not about to inquire why. If she was willing to rescue me from this interrogation, I was willing to go with her. I stood up beside her.

“Sally, ya’ have a daughter, aren’t ya’ worried?” The sheriff hastily added trying to get the lady to change her mind.

“My daughter is fully capable of protecting herself,” the lady responded as she and I walked to the doorway. Standing quietly, she waited for the deputy.

The deputy glanced at the two of us then over to the sheriff. The sheriff opened his mouth but realized he hadn't an argument left. Giving up, he looked at the deputy and said, "Well Wilbur, drive Sally and the boy home!"

We were driven back in the police cruiser to the lady's house, which was located up the same road I entered town on, a road simply called Main Street.

Her house was a yellow wood-sided structure with a front porch stretching the full length of it containing a wooden swing.

When we got out of the car, the lady sent the deputy to the back of the house to help her husband. She then took me inside.

Walking through the door, we entered the living room. It was as if I was gazing into an old tintype. The furniture and the pictures on the walls were just like what one would see in old photographs.

This lady had obviously spent a lot of time preserving these antiques, which made me more curious about her. I looked at her and she smiled warmly back at me.

"There's no need to be frightened, Sweetheart," the lady said, "but we better clean you up a bit."

She led me up the stairs and down a long hall to a bathroom.

"I think you'll probably enjoy a hot bath," she commented turning on the faucet in her tub.

"Thank you," I mumbled softly still trying to figure out why she was being so nice to me.

She filled the tub with water and handed me a towel and wash cloth.

"When you're done, I'll show you where you can sleep tonight," she said and stepped out of the room gently shutting the door behind her.

I finished undressing and got into the tub. The water was hotter than I expected, but it felt wonderful. I lathered up until I was covered with foam and washed myself thoroughly.

I must have been in the tub for a long time because the lady knocked on the door and asked if I was all right. I got out, dried off, and stepped into the hall with the towel wrapped around my waist.

The lady took me to another door in the hall. Inside was a boy's bedroom, which was exceptionally clean. Simple furniture was placed around the room: a bed, a couple dressers and a small bookshelf below a window filled with old literature.

"It was my son's room," she uttered reverently and paused. She did not speak but stared into the room in silence. Her expression seemed distant. "It hasn't been used for awhile," she finally added.

Glancing at me she pointed to pajamas that were on a dresser. "You can change into these. Keith was a little bigger than you, but I'm sure they'll fit.

"My name is Sally Seneca. If you need anything, just let me know."

"Thank you again," I responded before giving in to another cough.

She sighed. "I'm going to have Doc Howard take a look at you tomorrow. He'll know what to do about that cough. I'll also have my daughter pick up some cough syrup as soon as Phillip Millington opens his store tomorrow."

I glanced at the bed not knowing how to reply to her generosity. I was not used to such compassion.

The bed appeared soft and inviting. I knew it would be a welcome relief from all those nights I slept in farm fields at the side of the road.

"Oh, you must be very tired," she commented. "I'd better let you get some sleep."

I nodded my head turning my eyes to the floor.

"You sure don't talk much," she remarked. "Maybe tomorrow after a hearty breakfast you'll feel more like conversing. Good night."

She walked out of the room closing the door behind her.

I opened my backpack and went through the few belongings I had left. I still had enough money to continue running, but my bike was left with the sheriff. It was certain I was better off staying in a house for the night.

Surprisingly, the strange new surroundings did not make me as nervous as the courthouse did. I felt as though I could try to relax for the night in the serenity of that country home.

**THE CREATIONS OF
TIMOTHY S. KLUGH™**
Sample Chapters from Novel

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh
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I turned out the light and got into bed. I watched as my sight adjusted to the darkness that gradually gave way to the silverish moonlight coming into the room.

I had come a great distance on my journey and I was concerned as to what would happen next. Eventually, my body surrendered to the fatigue and I fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Seneca Family”

I awoke to the enticing aroma of breakfast cooking. Opening my eyes I saw the room was brightly lit from the daylight illuminating through the open window. From outside I could hear farm machinery close by, but the sound did not cover my stomach’s angry growling. I had not eaten a decent meal in days and the delicious smell of food was torture to my starving body.

I heard voices outside the door. I knew the conversation was about me as several references were made about the “wandering vagrant.” This was the term the sheriff called me the night before.

One voice was that of a woman. It did not sound like the lady named Sally Seneca who took me in, but it was similar to hers. I assumed it was her daughter. The other voice was that of a young man. I listened intently to what was being said.

“Mother brought him home last night,” the daughter spoke, “we don’t know anything about him.”

“How did ya’ find him?” The young man asked.

“Sheriff Frazey had taken him to the court house. Mother insisted he come here.”

“Your mother’s got quite a heart to take in a stranger.”

“Your mother would have done the same.”

“That’s probably right,” the male voice admitted. “I just hope this wandering vagrant doesn’t make trouble for your family. Heaven knows you’ve been through enough in the last few years.”

“Everyone’s had troubles,” the female voice retorted. “Still, my father brought up the same concerns, but my mother told us the boy was alone and sick when she found him. She said she felt prompted to bring him home.”

“Why did the sheriff have him anyway?”

“Sheriff Frazey caught him riding through town on his bicycle,” the girl replied. “He thought the wanderer might cause problems. Now we have him. Wilbur brought over his bike this morning.”

“How long is he gonna’ be with you folks?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, I have to wake him and give him this cough syrup. I’ll come over tonight and tell you what he’s like.”

“Alright then. Take care of yourself. I’ll see ya’ later.”

The door unlatched and an attractive blonde-haired girl stepped into the room who seemed to be about my age. Her hair was exceptionally long flowing all the way down to her waist.

“Good morning,” she said looking at me.

“Hi,” I uttered quietly while clearing my throat.

“Mother wants you to take this medicine.”

I nodded my head as she placed it on the dresser.

“It’ll make you feel better,” she commented. “What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?” I questioned forcing away her inquiry.

She gasped a little holding her hand to her chest. “There’s no need to get defensive,” she stated, “but to answer your question my name is Olivia Seneca. Would you like to answer my question now?”

“What’s it matter? You don’t know me,” I replied.

“Fine, remain a mystery,” she said turning to leave the room, “I was only trying to be friendly.”

“Wait a minute,” I responded reaching my hand to stop her.

“You changed your mind?” She inquired sarcastically.

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “I at least owe you guys some courtesy for letting me sleep in your house last night.”

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Timothy Reye,” I answered. “I’m not from around here.”

“I already know that. Are you in some sort of trouble?” She pursued further.

“Not really,” I answered, “I just don’t want what I left behind to come find me.”

“What happened?” She enthusiastically questioned gaining interest as if I was leaving a trail of breadcrumbs.

“Listen, I really would rather not talk about it,” I replied.

She looked at me without talking for a moment. “Is it something serious?”

“It’s something personal,” I replied, “but please don’t let it hurt your feelings. I can’t tell anyone.”

“O.k.,” she said, “I won’t pry into your private business. It’s good to meet you, Timothy Reye.”

“It’s good to meet you.”

She walked over to look out the window. “Have you seen the view from here? It’s really something. You can see all the way to the hill.”

I nodded trying to show some interest on my face, but my mind was on other things...troubles that refused to leave my thoughts.

“My family has a beautiful farm. Consider yourself lucky. My friend Renee has told me more than once this house reminds her of a bed and breakfast. You got to stay for free.”

Olivia was a very beautiful girl. I loved the way her name sounded when she said it. She seemed so delicate standing at the window.

Perhaps her friend Renee was right. I never expected I would be in the bedroom of a country home talking to such a lovely young lady. It was all too good to imagine...too good for something that would happen to me.

“Dad’s coming in from the field,” she commented turning to me. “Breakfast must be ready. We’d better go down and set the table.”

“We?” I inquired.

“Yes we,” she replied with a smile crossing her face. “You surely didn’t think your free stay was going to last any longer did you?”

“I guess not,” I agreed looking over my attire, “but I’m in pajamas. I’ll have to get dressed.”

She opened the top drawer of the tall dresser. “Here’s a robe you can wear instead. Mother is going to wash your clothes today. Come downstairs as soon as you can.”

“Fine,” I replied observing the robe. This family had taken my clothes from me leaving me stranded with only night garments to wear.

Just what type of people were the Senecas? Although, I did not like the way they took my belongings, I did appreciate what they were doing for me.

Stopping as she opened the door, Olivia glanced over at me. “You know, people in this town are going to be very curious about you. They won’t be like me and stop asking questions when you say it’s personal.”

“I know,” I answered. I knew she was right.

She walked out of the room. I figured that I would see if the medicine calmed my cough and then eat a hearty breakfast. Later, when my clothes were clean and ready, I would leave again. I put on my robe and went downstairs.

Walking through the living room, I found my way to the dining room. Being much smaller than the front room, the dining area was mostly taken up by a large wooden table and a china cabinet. Olivia was setting the dishes on the table as I came in. Another doorway to the left entered into the kitchen. Sally Seneca passed through it and noticed me standing there.

“Good morning, dear!” She announced. “I hope you’re pretty hungry.”

I hesitantly nodded and leaned against the wall.

Olivia handed me a stack of saucers. “The wall doesn’t need held up, you know, but the table does need set.”

I silently marveled over this girl’s persistent invitation to have me help her with her chores. This made me more curious as to why these people were treating me as if I was the boy next door. Regardless, I stepped over to the table and began placing the saucers next to the plates.

I heard a screen door shut followed by a man’s voice talking to Olivia’s mother. Curious, I asked Olivia who he was. She replied that it was her father. After a few minutes, the man walked into the dining room.

He was tall and muscular with rough worn skin. He wore a blue cotton shirt rolled up at the sleeves and grease stained pants. The man lifted his hand glancing to me and tugged at an old cap on his head.

“So, you’re the one Wilbur was fussing about,” he commented to me.

I continued setting out the dishes. “I guess so,” I uttered in reply.

He looked me over and said, “You’re definitely not a farm boy.”

“I’ve never been on a farm before,” I responded avoiding eye contact with the large fellow.

“The sheriff told me you’re a vagrant. He says ya’ rode into town last night on your bicycle with only a backpack filled with dirty clothes and a blanket.”

I remained quiet and continued working. Only a cough escaped my mouth.

“Daddy, he doesn’t want to talk about it,” Olivia commented softly to her father.

Nevertheless, her father pressed further. “Are ya’ in some sort of trouble, son?”

Tension built in me as the man continued pressuring me. I glanced into the living room at the front door and considered leaving immediately in order to avoid confrontation. My eyes cut short to the robe I was wearing, and I realized I would have to wait at least until my clothes were washed and dried before making my escape.

Olivia’s mother stepped into the room carrying two serving platters covered with eggs, bacon, hashbrowns and toast. I could not help the sudden smile that crept across my face as I anticipated the wonderful meal I was about to eat.

“Stephen, would you stop harassing the poor child,” she playfully chastised her husband.

“I’ll get the orange juice and butter,” Olivia volunteered going into the kitchen.

The lady sat the trays on the table and looked into my grateful expression. “Now, don’t be afraid to eat all you want. I assumed you’d have a good appetite.”

Olivia came back in the room and we all sat down at the table. Her mother said a blessing for the meal and then the food was passed around the table.

I served myself a modest portion and stabbed my fork in to take the first bite. I stopped when I noticed that Stephen Seneca had not started eating. Puzzled, I put my fork down. Once both women began eating, he took a bite of his breakfast. I glanced at Olivia and shrugged my shoulders.

“It’s a tradition, Timothy,” Olivia explained. “We’re very big on traditional values in this town.”

“But why wait for the women to eat first?” I asked. “Aren’t you just letting your eggs get cold?”

“The symbolism of it is what’s important, son,” Stephen replied after swallowing. “It means that I will always let my wife and daughter eat before me, even if there isn’t enough food for the three of us.”

“Speaking of food getting cold, why don’t you try my cooking,” Olivia’s mother commented pointing to my plate.

I took a bite of bacon followed by a mouthful of hashbrowns. It was delightful to my taste buds that were more acquainted with convenient store potato chips and heat lamp hotdogs.

“This is delicious, Mrs. Seneca,” I remarked reaching for my orange juice.

“Oh, my dear,” the lady responded, “please call me Sally.”

“So, your name’s Timothy,” Stephen said buttering a piece of toast.

I turned to him, “Yeah, my name’s Timothy Reye.”

“Reye...I don’t know anyone with the last name Reye,” Stephen responded.

“Stephen!” Sally warned. She smiled resting her hand on my arm. “How are you feeling this morning, Timothy?”

“I’m feeling better,” I answered.

“I’ll call Doc Howard this morning and ask if he has time to see you today,” Sally said appearing genuinely concerned about my well being.

“The sleep I got last night did a lot for me,” I told her clearing my aching throat. “I don’t think a doctor will be necessary.”

“Nonsense! Of course a doctor is necessary,” Sally insisted. “If you’re sick, you need a doctor to look at you.”

The lady seemed unmovable on this matter, so I nodded my head and gave in to her.



After breakfast, Stephen went back outside to work and Sally went into the kitchen to wash dishes. Olivia had me help her clear the table. As we finished, my chest began to feel tight and I started coughing again. Sally thought that I should relax in the bedroom until the doctor came.

Walking into the room, I lay back on the bed. Facing the window, I gazed out at the brilliant blue sky while enjoying the warm breeze that occasionally blew in.

What was going on around me was nothing different than something I might have read in one of those old novels I cherished, but it was all part of a normal day for the people in this town. Unfortunately, it was not a normal day for me. My days had not been normal for many years, at least not the peaceful lifestyle these small town people were accustomed to.

I focused on the robe I was wearing. It probably belonged to Sally’s son who I could only assume had died by the way Sally mentioned him the night before. Glancing around the room, I wondered why this family kept his clothes and furniture. Was it that they thought he might return someday, or was it that getting rid of his things would be like throwing away their memories of him?

The pain the Seneca’s felt for the loss of their son was something I could relate too, but it was all a long time ago.

Releasing my mind from the past, I got out of bed and went to the window. About fifty yards from the house was a large wooden barn with green and yellow farm equipment inside. The doors to the barn were open and I could see Olivia’s father working within.

Behind the barn was a large cornfield and further back in the distance was a hill completely covered with trees. It was a similar scene to what I saw everyday of my journey.

As I had gone by the many farms, I often pictured in my mind what life would be for me if I was a part of the families that lived in them. Sally Seneca brought those images to life in the way she treated me. I could not deny the charity she showed me. However, I knew it could not last. It never had before, so I vowed to remain distant from this family.

I returned to bed and tried again to fall asleep.



I was awakened by the sound of Sally and Doc Howard entering the room. The doctor was a tall thin elderly man with white hair where he was not balding on his head. He carried in his hand an old black leather bag. He put it down on the side of the bed and pulled a stethoscope out of it.

Putting on a pair of wire framed spectacles, he looked at me and said, “Well, let’s see what we have here.”

Sally leaned against the small dresser and observed the examination. Without a word, she waited there the entire time.

First the doctor checked my heart, then my pulse, and so on. Following that, he started looking at my nose, eyes, and throat.

“How’s your throat feel?” He asked shining a light into my mouth.

“It hurts a lot,” I responded as best I could with my mouth wide open.

“Uh-huh, ya’ having any problems breathing? Any headaches?”

“I can’t breathe deeply without coughing.”

After completing the examination Doc Howard began placing his equipment into his bag.

“Well, your throat is raw and you’re carrying a fever. It looks like ya’ may have acute bronchitis,” he explained. “I suggest ya’ take it easy for a few days. You’ll be coughing a lot, but that’s natural. Drink plenty of cold water, get some rest, and you’ll be better before ya’ know it. Think ya’ can do that?”

Taking a few days to recover was not part of my plans at all. “I don’t think that’s possible,” I replied.

“If ya’ don’t take it easy awhile, your illness is likely to become very serious,” the doctor warned me. “I suggest ya’ take my advice.”

Not knowing how long I could stay, I glanced over at Sally.

“I’ll make sure he gets his rest, Doc Howard,” Sally assured him while facing me with a warm expression.

“Well,” Doc Howard commented closing his bag, “I’ll see ya’ in a few days, young man.”

“Thank you, Doc Howard,” Sally said as the two of them walked out of the room shutting the door behind them.

“A few days...” I muttered to myself in frustration.



The afternoon dragged by slowly. Giving up on trying to take another nap, I decided to explore the bookshelf for something to relieve my boredom. I found a book that was particularly old and worn at the corners. It appeared as if it had been read a lot. Figuring that it would make the time go by faster, I went back to the bed and began reading.

Olivia walked in a short time later. She had a large plate of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies. The delicious smell was overwhelming and I anxiously gazed at the treats.

“I thought you might be hungry,” she said catching my stare.

I sat up in the bed as Olivia showed me the amount of cookies she had made.

“That smells great,” I remarked.

She smiled as if it were a triumph for her then walked over and sat on the bedside.

The cookies were hot just out of the oven. She offered me one and I graciously placed it in my mouth. With the first bite, the soft cookie fell apart letting the chocolate ooze out. I tilted my head back against the headboard in ecstasy.

“So, you like it?” Olivia asked fully confident of my response.

“Like it?” I responded. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted better.” Believe me, I was not exaggerating. Those cookies were the greatest things I had ever eaten.

“It’s kind of a hobby of mine,” she said looking down at the plate, “I like making cookies. I do it all the time. Sugar cookies, peanut-butter cookies, gingerbread...it’s something I enjoy.”

“You certainly know what you’re doing,” I replied reaching for another cookie.

“Take all you want,” she said handing me one. “I would have brought you a glass of milk, but I didn’t think it would help your bronchitis.”

“It doesn’t matter”, I responded to her, “these cookies are doing fine all by themselves.”

Olivia looked over at the book I was reading. “STATE FAIR...that was my brother’s favorite book.”

I glanced down at the book suddenly thinking the literature on the shelf was not meant to be touched. “I’m sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have it.”

“No,” she responded, “it’s just that no one has had that book out for a long time.”

“I couldn’t think of anything else to do, so I tried reading,” I commented watching her reactions carefully. It was obvious there were other thoughts on her mind besides the book. I wondered if me having the book off the shelf was disturbing her.

She sighed after a long pause. “You know, it’s good to see someone enjoying something my brother did.”

“What was your brother’s name?” I inquired delicately.

“His name was Keith. He was the greatest athlete at Lincoln High,” she answered.

“Was he?” I responded.

“There wasn’t anything he couldn’t do,” Olivia went on. “He played football, basketball and track. He could have gone anywhere he wanted to. He was our town’s hero.

“The whole town would go on road trips to see him play. At the market, you could always hear someone talking about the latest record Keith had broken...”

She stopped somewhat abruptly. I sat down the cookie I was reaching for and glanced at her. Her eyes were glassy and distant as she stared at the book I was holding.

“Keith must have been quite a guy,” I commented.

“Yes, he was,” she responded.

We were both silent for a moment as I waited for her to recover. Her expression was similar to what I saw in Sally’s face when she mentioned her son the night before.

Olivia’s mood eventually changed and she picked up the cookie I had reached for. “But, that was Keith. I’ll tell you more about him later. In the meantime, I want you to finish these cookies before they get cold,” she said shoving it into my mouth.



Later in the evening, as I was reading, I heard someone yelling outside. I went to the window and saw Stephen next to his tractor kicking the back tire and hollering all sorts of frustration at it. He then walked toward his pick-up truck and drove it over to the back of the tractor. As tired as Stephen looked, I could tell he needed help. I continued to observe knowing that I would not be of much use to him, but the urge to assist kept coming back to me. I finally concluded that if he was hospitable enough to let me stay in his house, I should be courteous enough to lend him a hand.

I put on the robe and went downstairs. Sally was in the kitchen talking on the telephone, so I decided to go outside through the front door and circle around the house. That way, I would not attract much attention to myself.

Stephen looked up and saw me coming. He was tying a tire to the front bumper of the truck with a rope. When I asked him why, he said that it would prevent the tractor from damaging his truck when he went to push it.

“Do ya’ know anything about tractors?” He asked hastily taking off his work gloves and wiping the sweat off his face.

“Actually, no,” I answered.

He shook his head in aggravation. “Can ya’ steer?”

“Yeah, I can steer,” I replied.

“Well, thank goodness for that,” he commented. “Ya’ get on the tractor and steer it into the barn while I push it with the truck.”

I was confident that I could do that much, and I hopped onto the tractor.

He shifted the tractor into neutral. “Don’t touch the gear shift. In fact, don’t touch anything. Just steer the tractor into the barn.”

He did not need to tell me that, I had no idea what anything was for anyway.

He went back to his truck and got inside. The truck slowly crept up on the tractor from behind and with a firm nudge, it started moving. I guided the tractor carefully through the barn doors and we came to a stop.

“What’s wrong with the tractor?” I asked as he got out of the truck.

“Water got into the fuel. It hit the fuel pump and snapped the drive shaft,” he responded.

With the light inside the barn I could see just how sweaty he was. His shirt was completely damp down the sides. From his appearance, it was clear he had just about had his fill for the day.

“Is it hard to fix?” I asked. I really had no idea what it was he said was broken.

“Is it hard to fix?” He repeated looking at me with a you-don’t-know-nothing-do-you expression. “Son, this is a ‘47 John Deere B Model--Everything’s hard to fix on this darn thing. This is the third time I’ve had this problem.”

“Oh,” I said glancing at the tractor. “Maybe I can help you fix it.”

Again, he gave me that look.

“All right, maybe I’d just be in the way,” I said returning his gaze. “I’ll just go inside and get out of your hair.”

As I walked out of the barn I heard him say, “We’ll need to pull the fuel pump off and rebuild it. We can start on it tomorrow.”

I turned around and glanced at him. He took off his hat again and wiped the perspiration off his neck.

“Sounds good,” I responded and walked back into the house.

Finding other pajamas in the dresser, I decided to take a bath and switch into the clean outfit. Afterward, I returned to my room and got into bed.

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Sample Chapters from Novel

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I read a little more of STATE FAIR before turning off the light. I liked the book because it was about a farm family. It was a similar setting to what I was in now. I could see how Keith must have really related to the story.

After a short while of reading I found myself too drowsy to continue, so I turned out the light and dozed off.

CHAPTER THREE

“Changes”

Like the morning before, I awoke to the smell of Olivia’s mom fixing breakfast. This time it was the rich aroma of sausage, biscuits and gravy. Coughing due to my scratchy throat, I reached for the cough syrup. Although my throat was still sore, I could tell it was improving.

Folded neatly next to the bottle was the clothing I wore when I came into town. They were clean, pressed and placed together with particular neatness. Again, I marveled over the care this family put into their home. I switched into my clothes and put the pajamas down on the dresser. Not wanting to offend Sally’s atmosphere of tidiness, I folded my pajamas as I lay them down.

I stepped out of the room and walked into the hall. The far-left door down the hall was open. Curious as to what was inside, I ventured over to it.

I was sure that the room was Olivia’s because, as I stepped inside, I instantly detected the scent of her perfume.

The sunlight illuminated the entire room with a soft yellow radiance. Near the left wall was a large, elegantly laced, canopy bed covered by a plush white quilt with three large pillows at the head. By the side of the bed was a dainty nightstand with a brass alarm clock, diary, and scriptures resting on top.

The windows in the room were decorated with lacy white curtains similar to the lace on the bed. Below the window across the room was a small dresser with a hurricane lamp setting on it reflecting the sunlight entering in.

To my right was a white vanity stand with a chair in front of it. A large mirror was fixed above the center of it and beauty supplies cluttered the counter.

I walked around the room making personal notice of each item. It was as if taking in these images were as important to me as breathing. The room seemed to be that of a princess’ chamber and I was only a peasant who had wandered in.

I was suddenly startled by Olivia's alarmed voice yelling, "What are you doing in here!?"

I quickly turned around and saw her wrapped in only a towel.

"I'm sorry," I answered in a shaky voice, "I was just looking around."

"This is my room! A gentleman should never come into a lady's bedroom!" Olivia stated sharply with more anger than I would have expected.

I apologized and silently left the room.

I entered my bedroom and immediately began to stuff my belongings into my backpack. Olivia's fury brought back memories of things I was trying to get away from. I was not about to take it again from someone else.

Zippering the backpack closed, I left the room and went downstairs. Olivia had shut herself into her bedroom and no one else was in sight. I could leave without anyone finding out.

I stepped on the porch and squinted as my eyes adjusted to the brightness of the morning sky. The air was filled with the sweet fragrances coming from the trees and flowers growing in the yard. A peaceful calm instantly came over me as I gazed at the quiet street. It beckoned me to stop my hasty departure. Giving into it, I sat on the swing and stared at my bicycle leaning against the house on the other side of the porch.

Olivia's anger stirred up emotions in me that I had left behind. I did not want to deal with animosity again, for I had lived with it for a long time. The pain and fear from where I came from was still in me and the need to run was strong.

How much more time would I have with the Senecas if I stayed? Their generosity would certainly have a limit. I had just witnessed Olivia's come and go. It probably would not take much longer for Olivia and her father to tire of having me around. I thought it best that I simply leave before the trouble came.

I stood up and went over to my bike. Lifting it from its resting position, I walked it to the top of the porch steps.

Inside the house I heard Sally call everyone to breakfast. Her gentle voice reminded me of the kindness she showed me at the sheriff's office. She really did seem to care about me, and I could not deny that. If I left, it was very possible that I would never again find the compassion she gave me. Considering that alone, I decided to stay a while longer. I leaned my bicycle back against the house and went inside.

Breakfast was not as eventful as the day before, mostly because no one was asking questions about me or where I came from. Olivia ate across from me. She gazed at me occasionally but remained in a typical silence that usually follows an argument. After a moment, Sally asked me how I was feeling, and I told her I felt a lot better. The conversation dropped again and for a time everyone just ate his or her meal.

“So,” Stephen asked, “ya’ gonna’ help me with that tractor today?”

Sally, shocked by his suggestion, interjected, “Stephen, Doc Howard said he’s supposed to be resting!”

“The boy feels fine,” Stephen replied, “he said so himself.”

“Now, I’m just getting him healthy and you’re going to take him outside and give him pneumonia! He’s not ready to help you with farm chores!” Sally exclaimed.

“The boy says he’s fine,” Stephen tried to convince her.

“I think I can do it,” I commented glancing from one parent to the other.

Sally looked at me with concerned eyes placing her hand on mine lightly squeezing it. She then glanced back to Stephen and said “Alright, he can help you...but, if he starts feeling sick, you better send him inside.”



It was not hard to get the parts for Stephen’s ‘47 John Deere B Model tractor. Jason Remy, the owner of the farm equipment and feed store, kept the parts in stock since Stephen kept snapping his drive shaft.

The day was a scorcher and the barn was like an oven, but we managed to work most of the day. At first Stephen seemed awkward with me and sometimes got aggravated with my lack of knowledge on farm equipment. Nevertheless, I persistently followed every direction he gave me carefully so that I would get it right the first time.

Gradually, Stephen became more relaxed with me, and by mid-afternoon he was beginning to joke around with me. I smiled at times, but I could not loosen up like he did. Things in my life were not permitting me to be that comfortable.

“I guess there is a little bit of country in ya’ after all,” Stephen commented. “Tomorrow we’ll try ya’ out in the field.”

“Sure,” I responded. I did not know why he offered to let me help him some more, but I preferred doing farm work rather than sitting in the bedroom being bored.

By late afternoon we finished fixing the tractor. Since we were so hot and exhausted, we both collapsed on nearby straw bales and rested.

“Well, at least that’s done,” Stephen said using his cap as a sponge to wipe the sweat off his face.

“Yeah, I’ve never worked so hard,” I added.

He looked at me and then toward the tractor and commented, “Ya’ seem to be an awfully decent fella for being a wandering vagrant.”

I smiled a little but did not respond. I did not want to get on that subject again, however he was not finished yet.

“Ya’ know Tim,” he observed, “I just can’t figure why someone like you would be out on his own roaming around on his bike going nowhere.”

Again, I said nothing.

Stephen sat up. “I can tell you’re a good person and it’s nice to have a farm hand to help out. I know ya’ have your reasons for keeping all this a secret--and I respect that--but I have a responsibility for this farm and to this family. I can’t go on letting some stranger sleep under my roof, or at least someone that I don’t know anything about. Do ya’ understand what I’m getting at?”

I knew my time with this family was almost over. Unless I told him, my thoughts earlier about leaving were going to come true. Still, I could not tell him anything because I did not want to go back where I came from.

I drew in a long breath. “Can I think about it?” I asked stalling for time.

He thought for a moment and answered, “Well son, I’ll be fair to ya’. I’ll give ya’ a couple of weeks to think it over, then I want to know your story.”

I felt tension all through my body. I wished that they would just leave my past alone. I stared at the wall on the other side of the barn as my mind wrestled with my stress.

“I really think highly of ya’, son. I want ya’ to know that,” Stephen commented as he stood up. He patted me on the shoulder and walked out of the barn.

I sat there alone so caught up in my thoughts that I was no longer concerned with the uncomfortable heat of the day. As the pressure of not being able to escape my problems increased, my eyes began to water.

“I thought you boys could use a cold drink,” Sally announced as she walked into the barn with a couple of glasses and a pitcher of lemonade.

I tried to hide my tears, but Sally saw them instantly. She put down the lemonade and sat next to me. Placing her arms around me, she asked what was wrong. I did not know what to say or what to do. After a moment I replied, “Nothing... nothing I can’t handle.”

She embraced me and gently rocked me. A part of me wanted to find comfort in her touch, but the rest of me remained stone cold refusing to accept her concerns.



About six o’clock in the evening, I was in the bedroom reading STATE FAIR. I figured reading would help me to relax. After spending that time in the barn with Sally consoling me, I was not suffering the anguish of those earlier incidents.

There was a knock at the door. It cracked open and I could see Olivia’s face.

“May I come in?” She asked.

“Yeah,” I said placing a bookmark I had made from toilet tissue into the book and closed it on my lap.

She walked in a few steps and shut the door. Glancing back at me, she noticed the book. “You’re still reading STATE FAIR?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied resting my hand on the cover. “It really is a good story.”

I could not figure what she was trying to get at, for her expression indicated that she was attempting to find a way to tell me something. After a second of silence, she gestured toward the bedside and asked, “May I sit down?”

“Go ahead,” I responded making room for her.

She sat beside me and brushed her long hair behind her shoulder. She paused again then said, “I’m sorry about being so harsh with you this morning.”

“I’m sorry for coming into your room,” I returned. It eased me to know that she would make the effort to apologize to me. “I thought that you wouldn’t mind it. You’ve been in here with me a few times,” I continued to talk.

“But, I’m a lady,” she countered in a soft but assertive tone. “A lady has more personal items and needs more privacy than a gentleman. One just doesn’t go into a lady’s bedroom.”

I did not know how to reply. I finally uttered, “I understand.” Actually, I still did not comprehend her point at all. It did not make sense that she could come into my bedroom, but I could not go into hers. I decided to simply let it drop.

“Your room is beautiful,” I said.

“Thank you,” she responded carefully but pleased. Her face lit up with a radiant smile that made her appear all the more attractive to me.

I liked her response and enjoyed gazing at her elegant features, and I carried on without thinking. “I’ve never seen a woman--I mean a room--so beautiful.” The Freudian slip took me by complete surprise.

She stared at me for the longest time with a puzzled expression.

“Thank you again,” she replied.

Considering the awkward situation, she looked down at the book and said, “I better let you get back to your reading.”

“Yeah,” I responded nervously, “that’s a good idea.”

As she walked out of the room, I asked, “Perhaps if your bedroom door is open and you’re inside, can I say ‘hello’ from the hallway?”

“Yes, you can do that,” she answered and left the room.

Still feeling embarrassed, I picked up the book and hit it against my head. Olivia was certainly a charming girl, but I had no idea I would accidentally tell her about it.



By the time I had completed reading for the day, darkness had set in. I decided to take a bath.

After finishing my bath I put on my robe and went toward my bedroom. As I did so, I noticed the door across from mine was open and a light was on inside. I walked over to it and peaked in.

Inside was a sewing room. All the items there appeared to be very old. Across the room was an antique tabletop sewing machine with a large spinning wheel next to it. Sally was in a corner working a loom. Fascinated by her skillful hands, I sat down in an empty chair next to her to watch.

“It looks difficult,” I observed.

“It’s not as difficult as it appears, dear,” she responded. “This is a tradition handed down through four generations of my family. I spin yarn and thread on my spinning wheel, make a fabric from it on my loom, and sew it into clothing on my sewing machine.”

“That’s quite an operation,” I admiringly commented.

“The loom and spinning wheel has been in the family since my Great Grandmother Everly started the tradition, and the sewing machine came from Grandmother.”

“Do you make all of your clothing yourself?” I asked intrigued.

“No, dear,” she said amused, “I don’t have much need to make my own clothes. This is only a way of relaxing for me.”

“Is Olivia carrying on this tradition?”

“She works in here some times,” Sally replied, “but I think she likes baking a lot more. She is always in the kitchen baking cookies, and I am sure that is what she prefers.”

“Did you ever make your children’s clothing.”

“When they were younger I did. The only large task coming up is Olivia’s dress for her Senior Prom.” She paused a moment looking at me as if in her mind she was at a different place and time. “You know, when my son Keith was your age, he used to always rip clothing. I must have sewn a hundred patches on his trousers.” She paused again and went on. “He was always rough housing with his father or his sister if he wasn’t chasing animals through the woods hunting.”

By everyone’s expression when they discussed Keith, I knew he must have died. Perhaps, I was about to go too far with my next question, but I was curious to know the mystery about her son.

“Sally, what happened to Keith?” I asked as gently as I could not knowing what type of reaction she would have.

Sally bent her head down and placed her hands on her lap. “Oh, I guess you would be curious about now, wouldn’t you?” Sally asked rhetorically. “All of us talking about him so. It’s just that the past few years have not been easy on any of us.

“Well, when Keith was about eighteen years old, he used to go hunting down by Harlow’s Hill which is across the field behind the house and to the North. He’d always take his rifle out there and hunt deer.” She paused for a moment to pull out a handkerchief and wipe under her nose. “One night he did not make it home on time. You see, Keith was always home by supper, but not that night. Stephen and I waited in the living room for him to come home. We were worried but we thought maybe he had just lost track of time.

“Finally, Stephen went out at ten o’clock to find him. I waited on the back steps until they returned. The moonlit field made it easy for me to see them when they did. A couple hours later, Stephen came out onto the field carrying Keith. At first I thought Keith had hurt himself...”

She stopped talking and glanced up and I saw her eyes holding back tears. She wiped at them with the handkerchief and continued.

“But, when they came closer, I saw Stephen was crying. Oh, the pain in his eyes. He didn’t have to tell me a word. I knew my son was dead.”

I had tension in the pit of my stomach as I felt the terrible feeling of loss for what it must have been like for Stephen and Sally to see their own son dead. I could imagine the emotions of despair, anger, and fear that they must have been gone through.

She went on. “Stephen found Keith entangled in a barbwire fence. He accidentally shot himself trying to climb through it. He bled to death with no one there to help him.”

Sally stared out the window obviously trying to fight off the tragic memory. In her grievous eyes, I could see that she was not over the loss of her son yet, but then I wondered if anyone could ever get over such a loss.

In my mind I could picture the scene she described and felt the agony that Sally and her husband went through. For I had been through the pain myself, but I did not bring it up.

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Sally eventually calmed down and dried her moistened eyes. She hugged me and said goodnight. I smiled at her and returned to my room experiencing some amount of guilt for having Sally recall such a terrible episode in her life.

So much had happened during that day. I did not know what to make out of everything. The Senecas seemed like decent people, but some of them were too anxious to pry into my past. I was not sure what was going to happen the next day, but I decided I would stay and enjoy the sanctuary of that home while it lasted.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Ice Cream Parlor”

Stephen who was dressed in his work clothes awakened me early in the morning. The room was still dark with the exception of the hall light beaming through the doorway.

“What is it?” I asked in as strong a voice as I could muster up.

“Were ya’ still gonna’ help me with the farm chores?” He asked quietly so as not to wake the women.

Although I could hardly think straight, I did recall him talking to me about helping him that day. I thought he had forgotten it considering the discussion we had afterward about my personal business concerning my past.

“What time is it?” I asked struggling to regain full consciousness.

“It’s four-thirty. I get up with the dairy farmers,” Stephen replied. “Ya’ still up to it?”

I plunged my head back to the pillow. However, my better judgement figured that it was best to stay on Stephen’s good side, so I had to get up and help him.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“Fine. Get dressed and meet me at the barn,” he said leaving the room.

I crawled out of bed and found some comfortable clothing to wear in the hot weather that would inevitably occur that day.

After this I went downstairs and outside to the barn. The air was already very humid, and I knew the day was not going to get any better.

Inside the barn was a truck full of grain and a large tractor-like machine with big reels on the front that Stephen was working on.

“What are you doing?” I asked curiously while walking toward him.

“Fueling and greasing the combine--getting it prepared for the day,” Stephen responded still working. “It’s late June and the wheat needs harvested.”

“I thought harvesting was done in the fall,” I stated.

“Some harvesting,” Stephen replied. “The wheat can be harvested in late June or early July. If I can harvest the wheat now, I can plant soybeans in the same field and harvest them about September or October. That’s called double-cropping, son.”

“What do you do with the corn this time of year?” I asked gazing through the dusty window at the vast cornfield.

“Not much at this time of the year,” he answered wiping the sweat off his face with his cap. “I just keep my eyes on it mostly. They say ‘knee-high by the fourth of July’, but I try for waist-high.

“The tenth of May is the last frost date in this state. If I plant my corn and a frost hits, it’ll kill the corn sprouts and I’ll have to start all over. So I try to plant right after the tenth of May so that my corn has a better chance of being waist-high by the fourth of July.”

“But there hasn’t been much rain this summer,” I said as I sat down next to him.

“Rain stress is good for corn in June,” he responded going back to work. “That gives a farmer a better chance of pulling in a bumper crop.

“This weather shows drought-like conditions, so I gotta watch over the corn carefully. If the leaves start to curl, the corn is drying out and will eventually turn yellow and die.”

“I guess you wouldn’t want that,” I commented.

“I’ve seen worse though. In some droughts the corn only gets a foot or two high by the fourth of July and by that time it’s too late.”

“What’s the best weather for corn?” I inquired.

“Corn loves hot-damp nights,” Stephen said as he got up. He stepped away from the combine and stretched his back. “Well son, let’s get started.”

We spent the first part of the morning driving the grain truck out of town to a granary. The granary terminal was a giant structure of adjacent silos where grain was purchased from

farmers, stored, and shipped. Stephen explained to me that when a farmer goes to sell his grain, it is checked for moisture and impurities that will bring down the value of it.

Often farmers store their grain in their own bins when the price is down, and they will keep it there until it can be sold at a higher price.

We talked the entire way up and back. That morning he changed my entire concept of agriculture. Long busy days of planting and harvesting were just a part of the big business of farming, and from what I saw, Farmer Seneca knew the ropes.

Stephen seemed elated with my interest in farming, so he went out of his way to explain everything he did to give me a better understanding. I enjoyed our conversation. Stephen and I found common ground...his knowledge of agriculture and my fascination in the country way of life. We talked so well together that I almost forgot about what had happened between us the day before.

On the way to town Stephen had me try driving his truck. It was monstrous to handle, so I had a hard time staying in my lane. I almost ran off the road into the ditch several times trying to avoid cars coming the other way. Stephen remained calm and patient with me and continued to let me drive. He assured me that I would get the hang of it.

Once we returned to Pleasantville, Stephen had me pull up in front of the farm equipment and feed store and told me to wait there while he ran in to purchase a necessity. He came out a few minutes later with Jason Remy, the storeowner, and walked over to my window. With a large grin across his face, he placed a John Deere cap on my head and said, “Now, you’re a real country boy.”

“Looks mighty good on ya’,” added Jason.

By the time we returned to the house, breakfast was ready. I came through the backdoor into the kitchen where I was greeted with the smell of pancakes and sausage. Sally said, “Hello” and hugged me. She took me by surprise but I found I did not mind it at all.

Stepping into the dining room, I saw Olivia setting the dishes on the table. She glanced at me and noticed my new cap.

She stood up and remarked, “John Deere, quality and reliable service since 1837. I’ve heard nothing runs like it.”

“Like what?” I asked.



From late morning to afternoon, Stephen and I combined the rest of the wheat field and baled the straw left in a field he had been drying.

Bringing the equipment into the barn, I felt very fatigued, and I was happy the day's chores were finished.

"How do you manage to do this everyday?" I inquired plopping down on a straw bale.

"Who else is gonna' do it?" Stephen retorted.

"I guess nobody," I answered, "but it seems like quite a lot for one person. Don't you have anyone who helps you out at all?"

"No, not since..." He stopped abruptly and looked toward the ground.

I could have finished his sentence for him.

He took off his cap and wiped his face again. "No, I've been doing it myself for awhile now." Stephen became silent as he placed the cap back on his head. "Well, there's that friend of Olivia's who helps me out from time to time."

It seemed that the emotional memories of Keith's death were as strong as if his apparition walked the house each night. This family could hardly get through a day without thinking about him.

The silence was broken by Doc Howard stepping into the barn.

"Your wife told me I'd find ya' here," the doctor said to Stephen. "Thought I'd just drop by to see how the young man is coming along."

"He's been helping me all day without a complaint," Stephen responded sitting down on a nearby straw bale.

"How ya' been feeling?" Doc Howard asked me as he walked over to us.

"My throat is a little itchy and sore but the coughing doesn't come as much as it did," I replied. "It doesn't bother me as much when I keep busy."

"Well, good," Doc Howard commented. "Mind if I look ya' over for myself?"

"No, I don't mind," I answered.

We went into the house for my follow-up examination. When the exam was over, Doc Howard suggested that I continue to take the cough syrup, and as long as I felt well enough to help Stephen out, he did not see anything wrong with it.

Doc Howard started to leave, but Sally insisted he stay for supper. Since she was making fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans, he did not seem to mind.

During supper Stephen and Doc Howard talked about the weather and how Stephen's crops were coming along. Hesitantly I would join in a word or two when Stephen encouraged me to add a comment about something I learned from him.

After saying a few things to the men about the crops, I turned away and caught sight of Olivia sitting across the table gazing at me with wide-eyes.

"What?" I quietly inquired of her.

"How do you know all that?" She questioned back.

I shrugged my shoulders and answered, "I guess farming comes pretty easy to me."

"I'd say so," Olivia spoke with a certain amount of respect in her voice.

I slightly smiled then excused myself from the table.

I retrieved the book I was reading and went out on the porch. I sat on the swing and picked up where I had left off. A short time later Olivia came out and sat beside me. Although I gave her no indication of it, I was happy that she joined me.

"You read awfully slow," she remarked looking at how far I had progressed in the book. "I can't believe you haven't finished yet."

"I enjoy stories. I like to savor them," I responded with my eyes fixed on the pages. "Was your brother a fast reader?"

"Faster than you at least," Olivia replied, "but I can understand why you like to take your time."

I did not look up again and nothing more was said. After a few seconds I became uncertain of her quietness. I glanced up and saw that she was staring directly at me.

The daylight reflecting in her eyes gave them a brilliant green radiance. I found myself caught by her gaze and I could not turn away. She was so beautiful that the sight filled me with an intense attraction for her.

“You look like you could use some ice cream,” she suddenly broke the silence.

“I don’t have much money left,” I returned.

“Don’t worry. My treat.”

We walked into town toward the courthouse, which made me feel uneasy. This was my first time in town without being with Sally or Stephen, and I was concerned how the sheriff would react if he saw me.

When I went to the farm equipment and feed store I was not so apprehensive because Stephen was with me. Now, I was only with Olivia.

The sheriff might have spotted me and assumed the “wandering vagrant” was on the loose again. Then I remembered the way Sally took over the situation at the courthouse leaving the sheriff speechless. Sally did not hesitate to assert her opinions on those local officials, and Olivia did not seem to be much different from her mother. If Sally was able to intimidate the sheriff, Olivia could doubtlessly do it as well.

Turning the corner and walking along Pleasantville Road, I glanced at the storefronts as we passed them. The first was a hardware store called Wesleyan’s and the second a clothing shop called Lenora’s. Both of them were closed for the evening.

Olivia and I crossed the street to a small brick building sitting next to the courthouse. On a large white wooden sign above the door were the words “Thompson’s Ice Cream Parlor” painted in black. The establishment had a simple name reflecting the general personality I was beginning to notice in this town. This shop, like those on the other side of the road, was part of a long row of connecting buildings stretching down Pleasantville Road.

Next to the ice cream parlor was Jesse’s Barbershop. A worn barber pole spun an illuminated red and white by the door. The white on the pole was so weathered that it was actually yellowish.

Just outside the barbershop window were two rough-looking teenage males sitting on a green bench. Both were thin in stature. One had blonde tousled hair and the other greasy brown. I could tell by their tattered clothing that they were not taking much initiative to impress the passers by.

They watched us as we came closer. Olivia seemed oblivious to them as she walked into the ice cream parlor. Either she did not know them or she did not care to fraternize with the riffraff. No matter what her reason, it did not bother me. I was not interested in meeting them myself.

The inside of Thompson's Ice Cream Parlor was outlined in a splendor of green and white trim. To my left were several small tables and chairs and to the right was a soda fountain. Mr. Thompson, a plump elderly individual, stood behind the counter wiping a glass clean. Behind him was a large mirror with sundae glasses, soda mugs and other ice cream dishes on a shelf in front of it.

Wilbur, the Deputy, had just purchased a milkshake. He noticed the two of us as we walked in.

"Oh my gosh," Olivia commented quietly to me, "the creature is here."

Apparently she had no great attraction for Wilbur who had just acquired a large silly grin across his face. Wilbur's expression seemed that of a man short on options in the area of relationships.

He was definitely much older than Olivia, but I got the feeling he was not the kind of guy who would let such a little thing as age get in the way. Perhaps there were not many females in town of his maturity, so he was desperately seeking any available girl who might take him.

"Well, howdy Olivia!" Wilbur exclaimed picking up his milkshake and walking toward us.

"Hello, Wilbur," Olivia groaned stepping back a pace.

"Just out on my rounds--keeping the town safe," he carried-on trying to impress her. "Just stopped in here to get a shake to beat the heat."

"Yeah, well you better get right out there and keep up the good work," Olivia commented as she maneuvered around him gesturing him toward the door.

Wilbur glanced over at me. "You still in town, boy?"

"Bye, Wilbur!" Olivia stated in an annoyed tone.

Wilbur turned back to Olivia. "What is this? I'm gonna' lose ya' to him?"

"Bye, Wilbur!" She exclaimed again.

"Well I'll see ya' at the dance on Friday," Wilbur said to Olivia while he stood at the door.

“Bye, Wilbur!”

Wilbur took a sip of his milkshake and stepped out.

“Lose you to him?” I asked Olivia repeating what Wilbur had told her.

“He’s never had me to begin with,” she responded, “but he thinks all the girls in town are in love with him. That’s what happens when a guy turns his age and hasn’t married.”

“If you say so,” I responded.

Olivia and I sat on the stools at the counter.

“What would you like?” Olivia asked.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. I faced Mr. Thompson. “What type of flavors do you have?”

Without looking at a list or stopping to contemplate, Mr. Thompson replied, “We have black cherry, black raspberry, butter pecan, chocolate, coffee, maple walnut, pistachio, pralines and cream, rocky road, strawberry, and vanilla.”

“I see,” I responded amazed at the amount of flavors available. I turned to Olivia and said, “I haven’t a clue what I’d like.”

“Why don’t you just have a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of vanilla on a sugar cone,” Olivia suggested. “Anyone would like that.”

“Sounds good to me,” I replied to Olivia as I glanced to Mr. Thompson.

“Scoop of chocolate--scoop of vanilla on a sugar cone,” Mr. Thompson confirmed, “and what will you have Olivia?”

“I’ll have a strawberry phosphate,” Olivia answered immediately as if it was the only thing she ever ordered.

“Scoop of chocolate--scoop of vanilla and a strawberry phosphate coming up,” Mr. Thompson stated as he grabbed a glass from the shelf.

I looked out the window toward the street and noticed that it was getting dark outside.

Just beyond Lenora's clothing store, heading away from Main Street, was a place called Millington's General Store. In front of the store was an elderly gentleman sweeping the dirt on the sidewalk from his door. The man appeared as if he would be very friendly, like the type of old fellow who would sit down with you and relate stories about his life for hours.

The lights from the inside of his store glowed a pale yellow through his windows. I was not sure why, but it seemed like a place I had an allurements for.

"What do you see out there?" Olivia asked.

"That store across the street where that man is sweeping the sidewalk," I replied.

"That's Mr. Millington," Olivia said. "He owns that store."

"Looks like a nice guy."

"He is."

Still gazing out the window I asked, "Olivia, which way is north?"

Olivia pointed across the street and answered, "That way. Main Street runs north and south, and Pleasantville Road runs east and west."

Mr. Thompson came over with my ice cream and Olivia's phosphate.

"There ya' go," he said handing the treats to us. He held out his hand to me. "That'll be one dollar and twenty-five cents."

"I got it," Olivia spoke handing her cash to Mr. Thompson.

Mr. Thompson took the money while giving me a soured expression of disapproval and went back to cleaning dishes. I glanced at Olivia and she gave me a reassuring smile.

"Your dad tells me a friend of yours helps him out with his farm chores from time to time," I commented starting up a new conversation.

"Yes, my friend Iowa," Olivia responded taking a sip of her phosphate. "His family owns a large beautiful farm on the south side of town. They actually have two full size barns!"

"Iowa?" I inquired in confusion. "Isn't that the name of a state?"

“Yes, and he’s very proud of his name...Iowa J. Johnson,” she answered emphatically. “His roots go back to that state where his ancestors were a prominent corn and wheat farming family. You’ve never heard of the Johnsons of Iowa?”

“Not until now,” I responded.

“I’m surprised,” she remarked and continued. “Adicas Johnson, Iowa’s great great grandfather, discovered rich soil in Ohio when he was on a trip to New York. He moved here and built a farm. Other people started moving in around him and soon this area became a town, Pleasantville.”

“So, why is it called Pleasantville?” I asked.

Olivia really knew a lot about this guy and strangely I found that it bothered me.

“Adicas Johnson’s wife, Elizabeth, named it that because of the serenity of the area and the charming spirit of the people,” Olivia replied with the highest admiration for what she was talking about.

“So, does the Johnson family own this town?” I sarcastically questioned in a tone exposing my irritation.

“No,” she hesitantly answered trying to figure me out, “they have just played a large role in its history.” Olivia stopped and looked at me oddly. “Are you upset about something?”

“No!” I replied suddenly grinning cheerfully. “Did I seem upset? No, I-I-I just got an ice cream rush headache. That’s all.”

“Good,” she said relieved, “because he’s coming over for dinner tomorrow night. You’ll get to meet him.”

“Great,” I responded as happily as I could sound at the moment, “I guess this is his big chance to meet the ‘Wandering Vagrant’.”

“Don’t be so down on yourself,” she playfully chastised me. “Besides, he already knows you.”

“He does? Have I met him?” I thought of everyone I had met in this town but no one named Iowa came to mind.

“Iowa hasn’t seen you in person yet. He was so curious about you, he almost went into your bedroom to see you Monday morning--the first morning you were with us,” Olivia responded.

“I guess you were asleep at the time. We were talking right outside your door. I thought for sure we woke you up.”

“Oh,” I uttered not having much more to say.

Apparently this Iowa already had his claws deep into Olivia, and that left me feeling defeated. Olivia was quite a wondrous young lady to behold. Perhaps I was being naive to not even consider that she would be spoken for.

With all the attention Olivia had been giving me, I was starting to feel that maybe she was attracted to me. Suddenly, she began talking about this Iowa J. Johnson, and I found that my entire concept of our growing friendship was totally misunderstood. I nursed my ice cream while pondering the fact that my closer relationship with Olivia was fading as fast as my ice cream was melting in the heat.

Another young lady about the same age as Olivia came in through the door. She had dark brown hair that feathered back slightly to each side and hung down to her shoulders. She was wearing a white blouse with a black paisley vest and a bolo tie. Along with this, she had on dark leggings tucked into black leather cowboy boots that had chains around them.

Although the bolo tie and cowboy boots did give her away as a country girl, in a town where flannel shirts and blue jeans appeared to be the preferred fashion, the rest of her outfit seemed out of place.

She appeared sad and upset. Walking toward us, I saw she had been crying. She came toward Olivia, but stopped to notice me first.

The new girl obviously had other concerns than meeting people, so she acknowledged my presence but did not say anything to me. Her brown eyes and face had no emotion on them, almost like she was hiding something inside.

She asked Olivia in a quiet voice, “Can I talk to you?”

A look of worry appeared on Olivia’s face. “Sure, I’ll be out in a second.”

With that, the girl stepped outside and waited at the door.

“What’s wrong with her?” I inquired.

“That’s my friend Renee Howell,” Olivia replied. “I’m going to have to go talk to her. I’ll take a short walk and be back soon. O.k.?”

“Sure,” I responded. At least she was not taking this small stroll with her friend Iowa.

“I appreciate it. I won’t be long.”

She rested her hand on mine then went outside to Renee. They walked out of view from the window heading toward Main Street.

I was the only customer in the parlor and Mr. Thompson was watching me curiously. He must have known that I was the stranger that the sheriff had caught.

“I have to get some supplies from the cellar,” Mr. Thompson finally spoke. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

He kept his eye on me until he disappeared through a doorway in the rear of the room.

I waited staring at Olivia’s unfinished strawberry phosphate wondering how much longer she would be. I heard the door open and I glanced to see who was coming in. Unfortunately, it was not Olivia. Instead, it was the two rough looking males that were sitting in front of the barbershop.

Immediately, I felt apprehensive, but I turned away pretending to take no further notice of them. I did not want to attract trouble, but I feared I already had.

The two of them sat on the stools on either side of me.

“Ya’ must be that wand’ring vagrant,” the tousled blonde-haired one commented.

“Yes, I am,” I replied civilly, “and who are you?”

“I’m Mike,” he replied, “and this here is Karl Boothe.”

I turned to his friend whose greasy brown hair matched his large brown eyes on his flat round face. He smiled exposing his yellow teeth that were not at all pleasing to see.

I nodded my head.

Karl suddenly burst out laughing directly into my face blowing into the air the aroma of whatever was making his teeth yellow. I casually turned back to Mike.

“I don’t think you boys came here for ice cream,” I remarked.

“No,” Mike replied sarcastically, “I come here for the cherry cokes.”

“Cherry cokes,” Karl repeated in the same manner as Mike.

I could feel my ice cream melting down the cone onto my hand, but I ignored it and kept my eye on Mike.

Mike glanced at the unfinished strawberry phosphate. “Is this yours?”

“No, it’s my friend’s. She stepped out for a moment,” I answered.

Mike picked up the strawberry phosphate and chugged it down his throat. He put the empty glass on the counter. “Tell your friend I said thanks.”

“Oh, your welcome,” I responded. “I’m sure she wouldn’t want it anymore.”

Mike’s friend Karl tapped my shoulder. “Since you and your friend are so generous, ya’ prob’ly won’t mind me having a lick of your ice cream cone.”

I spun around to Karl. “Sorry, but I’m not as generous as my friend.”

Karl stood up and put his hand against my chest placing his face right in front of mine. “Now, I don’t think that’s very neighborly, especially from some wandering vagrant. I suggest ya’ show a little country hospitality.”

I knew I was going to have problems no matter what I did, so I decided I would start the trouble before either of them got the chance. I half-heartedly smiled at Karl and said, “You know, I just could not see myself eating this ice cream after your yellow teeth has been all over it. You can have it all!” I shoved the ice cream into his face shattering the cone.

Mike instantly grabbed me around the neck from behind. Karl stepped up to punch me, but I kicked him between his legs causing him to collapse onto a chair. Mike, choking me, dragged me backward across the floor. Karl got up and started beating me in the face and stomach.

They dragged me to the doors in the rear of the parlor. Karl slammed the cellar door shut and locked it. I could hear Mr. Thompson yelling and running up the steps.

Mike with his hands still tight around my neck pulled me through a door across from the cellar and up a staircase. Karl continued whaling on me all the way up. I was dragged through another door at the top. At that point I was almost losing consciousness. They let go and I dropped to the floor.

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Karl glared down at me. “That’ll teach ya’ for getting friendly with the ladies of our town! Don’t even think about them, or we’ll mess you up real good next time, boy!”

Giving me one last swift kick in the side, Karl and Mike went out the door and locked it.

The room was very dark and quiet with a musty smell in the air. There were two windows on the other side of the room but I was in too much pain to move to them. From what I could see the room was completely empty.

My head and chest were throbbing and I could taste blood in my mouth. I coughed as I tried to breathe. Lying there on the floor, I waited for the pain to calm down but it didn’t.

The room became blurry. I heard a siren outside and saw blue and red lights through the windows, but then everything faded to black.

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CHAPTER FIVE

“The Answer”



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