

T H E
PLEASANTVILLE
E X P E R I E N C E



By Timothy S. Klugh

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Dedicated with all my heart and inspiration
to my wife, Delora and the wonderful people
of the fictional town of Pleasantville.

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THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE

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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.

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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

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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 stinky 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.”

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“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.

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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.

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“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.

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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.

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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.

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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.”

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“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.

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“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.

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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.

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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.

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“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?”

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“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.

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By Timothy S. Klugh

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?”

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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.

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“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.

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“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.”

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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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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.

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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.

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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 Remey, 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.”

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“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.

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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.”

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“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.

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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.

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“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.

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“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

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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.



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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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“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.

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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?"

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“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.

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“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.?”

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“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.”

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“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.

CHAPTER FIVE

“The Answer”



I ventured back into a memory so many years passed when I was eight years old. I was sitting with my mother and father on an over-stuffed red sofa looking out a bay window into a wooded area behind our house. My mother placed her arm around me and held me close to her. I felt so comfortable and safe next to her feeling the warmth of her body and the security of her love.

The image faded into blackness and all I could see was the outline of light around the edge of a door. I was sitting on the floor of a closet. It was a place I had been many times before.

He had come home drunk and decided to take out his rage on me again. I was not one of his own children so beating me would not make him feel guilty later. After he would finish the abuse, he would lock me in the closet until he was satisfied with my suffering. Sometimes, I would be inside all day.

I really did not mind it though. The solitude and darkness of the closet was much better than the abuse that came before. Besides, I could think about my mother and feel as if she was with me, although she could never come back for me.

I awoke and saw Doc Howard. I was lying on a cot and he was in a chair next to me treating the sores and bruises on my swollen chest and face.

We were in a small room that had two jail cells and a doorway leading into a hall. In the hall I could see shadows and hear a heated argument. The voices were all familiar. It was Sally, Stephen, Mr. Thompson, and the sheriff.

“Now, I knew that boy was going to be trouble,” I heard the sheriff say.

“What trouble?” I heard Sally question in astonishment. “He was beaten up and locked in an attic!”

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“All I know is someone locked me in my cellar, stole the money from my cash register, and that boy was the only one I saw in the parlor!” Mr. Thompson interjected.

I did not remember any money being stolen during the incident at all. I assumed Mike and Karl must have taken it after locking me upstairs thinking I would surely be accused of stealing it.

Doc Howard glanced at me with some concern. His expression indicated that he did not know what to make of me considering the argument we were hearing. He awkwardly smiled at me not knowing what to believe.

I remained quiet and distant. I was not going to talk to anyone at that moment. I had regressed completely to the way I was when I first entered town. I could not trust anyone.

“Did you find any cash on him?” Sally asked.

“No,” Mr. Thompson responded, “but he probably hid it or gave it to his friends.”

The voices stopped for a second, then I heard what sounded like a wrestling match. Sally forced Mr. Thompson into the room where Doc Howard and I were. Stephen and the sheriff came in behind them trying to control Sally.

“Then how did he get those bruises?!” Sally angrily questioned pointing at me without moving her eyes from Mr. Thompson.

Looking over at me, Mr. Thompson paused and replied, “His friends probably turned on him and ran off with the money.”

From out in the hall, I heard the voice of an elderly man yell, “Ya’ senile old fool! Ya’ don’t know whether you’ve been shot in the foot or kicked in the head!” The unfamiliar voice was richly deep and aged well with time.

Stepping through the doorway was Mr. Millington, the gentleman I saw sweeping the sidewalk across the street from the ice cream parlor. He glanced at me and to the sheriff.

“These two girls came over to my store,” he said gesturing to Olivia and Renee. “They told me the new kid was being charged with something he couldn’t have done. They were wondering if I saw what happened.”

Again, he looked at me. I was not sure what the old storeowner was going to say.

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He continued. “Ya’ know, I don’t know why this kid is still hanging around here when ya’ bone heads keep trying to throw him in jail.” His eyes returned to the sheriff. “The truth is Sheriff Frazey, if ya’ weren’t so busy trying to convict this kid, ya’d realize that your son and his contemptible friend Karl are the real culprits.”

Everyone’s stare was fixed solidly on Mr. Millington as he stopped talking briefly. The elderly gentleman then leaned against the wall and related the rest of his story.

“I was finishing up sweeping the outside walk of my store when I noticed Olivia and Renee leaving the new kid at the ice cream parlor. A moment later, Mike and Karl were snooping around outside. When these two hoodlums finally went inside the parlor, I decided to pay close attention to see what mischief they were getting into.

“They immediately began harassing the new kid and a fight started. Not seeing old Thompson around anywhere, I called Wilbur to tell ya’ your son was making a menace of himself again.

“Why Wilbur found it necessary to bring the cruiser around the corner, lights a’flashing and sirens a’wailing, I don’t understand. That sent Mike and Karl running out of the parlor and down the street out of town with a wad of cash clinched in their fists.”

The room became quiet as it was suddenly obvious how ridiculous and desperate Mr. Thompson’s accusations about me were. Olivia smiled confidently and stared at the sheriff.

Sally angrily broke the silence saying, “Sheriff, instead of making half-baked allegations about Timothy, why don’t you lay down the law on your own son who really needs it!”

Sheriff Frazey did not say a word back to Sally.

I was shocked myself. I could not think how the sheriff was supposed to be a pillar of law and order in the town when he could not even relieve the community from the burden of his trouble-making son.

Appearing defeated and somewhat ashamed, Sheriff Frazey turned to Stephen and said, “I’ll leave the boy in your hands.”

Stephen nodded in response.

The sheriff faced Mr. Thompson. “Come on Jake, we’ll get Wilbur and track down my son and Karl.”

As the two of them walked out of the room, the tension in the air dropped. Sally nestled herself into Stephen’s arms and he rocked her gently from side to side.

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She seemed to be able to stand up to anyone who came against her, but retreated to her husband when it was over.

“How’s he gonna’ be, Doc?” Stephen asked.

Doc Howard, who was just finishing, stood up and replied, “Well, he’s showing some improvement with his bronchitis. The bruises are gonna’ be there awhile, but nothing’s broken. He’s gonna’ be swollen and sore for a few weeks. I think the worst of it is over, though.”

“Should he rest in bed?” Sally asked the doctor remaining in Stephen’s arms.

“I’d say he should take it easy for most of the day. After that, let him do what he feels like doing,” the doctor responded picking up his leather medical bag.

Stephen thanked Doc Howard again as he walked out of the doorway.

Mr. Millington spoke up, “I guess I’ll get back to my store.”

“Thank you, Phillip,” Sally graciously said to Mr. Millington. “The sheriff was ready to throw him in jail until you came in.”

“That’s all right,” Mr. Millington replied. “I feel the kid deserves a fair shake in this town.”

Sally smiled warmly at this storeowner who had come to my rescue. “Why don’t you come over for dinner,” she suggested.

“Ah, there’s no need for going out of your way, Mrs. Seneca,” Mr. Millington responded. “I’m sure I could slap a little apple butter on a piece of bread when I get home.”

“After speaking up for this young man like you did, I insist that you allow us to show our gratitude and accept our invitation,” Sally demanded.

“Well, it would give me a chance to get better acquainted with the new kid,” Mr. Millington commented. “I guess I’ll take ya’ up on your offer. But, I’ll warn ya’ that if the food is good, I’ll eat a lot of it.”

“There’ll be plenty to go around,” Sally assured him.



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The entire day I spent lying in bed without saying a word or expressing an emotion, for I did not want to open up again. I felt as though I was hidden away deep inside myself, and the distance between me and the outside world made everything safe within.

Olivia came in and wanted to talk to me about the incident at the ice cream parlor, but I would not reply to her nor fix my eyes upon her. I remained still and silent while gazing out the window. Eventually Olivia gave up and left the room.

A short time later Sally opened the door.

“May I come in?” She asked.

I did not respond.

She stepped into the room and sat on the bed. “I’m sorry that you went through all that last night. This really is a very friendly town, with the exception of those two ruffians. Unfortunately, the sheriff has never been able to control his son Mike or his hooligan buddy Karl Boothe.

“I feel so uneasy when that boy Karl even looks at me, and I feel frightfully worried when he watches my daughter. There’s something cold in that boy’s eyes. He only poisons Mike Frazey all the more.

“I just wish Keith was still around. I wouldn’t have a single fear about Olivia if I knew her brother was there to protect her.”

An image of my mother passed through my mind, and I knew the security Sally was speaking of.

“He’d look after her. Those two cared about each other a lot. Now, I’m not saying Keith and Olivia got along all the time,” Sally said suddenly chuckling.

This surprised me. It was the first time someone laughed when they mentioned Keith.

“That son of mine would tease his sister incessantly,” Sally continued, “but I recall one time when Olivia decided to get her brother back.

“You see, my son was very fond of a young lady named Julie Macallin whose parents own the farm by the old McDowell Mill. Determined to win this girl’s affection, Keith decided to do something to impress her. Olivia suggested that she bake up a batch of chocolate chip cookies and have Keith tell the girl that he made them for her himself. My son liked the idea and gladly accepted Olivia’s offer.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE

By Timothy S. Klugh

“Now, my daughter had nothing but mischief on her mind because this was the opportunity she had been waiting for. Instead of using chocolate chips, Olivia put pebbles and dirt in the cookie dough. Keith, too anxious to deliver the goodies to his sweetheart, did not notice the strange lumps in the cookies and neither did his young lady friend because she actually ate one.”

Sally’s story had just reached a point that was too interesting to ignore. Intrigued, I turned to look at her.

“I have never eaten rocks before,” she went on, “but it must not have tasted very good. As my son told us, the girl threw the rest of the cookies at Keith and kicked him out of her house.”

Sally’s story forced a smile on my face. Her eyes caught that smile and she hugged me. She kept an arm around me and went on talking about endearing stories about her family many which included Keith.

I was not bothered by her closeness to me. In fact, I felt a strong desire to drop my guard and relax, but I would not. I did not pull away, but I talked very little to her. I mostly listened and enjoyed her stories while partly wishing those happy memories could have been mine.



After not eating all day, the aroma of supper cooking taunted me in my room. Although I did not want to go downstairs, I knew I would have to if I wanted to have dinner. Eventually my hunger won over my resistance and I ventured out of the bedroom.

Mr. Millington had already arrived and was sitting in the dining room with Stephen, and he was carrying on about a barbershop quartet that he was part of.

Not wanting to be around other people at least until I had to, I sat on the couch in the dark living room and stared out the window into the street.

A sporty blue pick-up truck drove up the road and parked across the street from the house. The truck door opened and a handsome young gentleman about my age stepped out of the cab. He was wearing a red flannel shirt neatly tucked into his jeans and a pair of snake skin cowboy boots. While walking toward the house, he adjusted a black cowboy hat on his head, then he began to whistle as he came up the walkway. Stepping on the front porch, his boots made loud thuds on the wooden floor, and I glanced into the dining room surprised that no one else had heard them.

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He came to the door and knocked in two repeated series of three taps. Olivia, in great excitement, shot down the stairs to answer the door.

The teenage male stepped into the room larger than life. He had a face capable of charming anyone and a grin that reflected his confidence in himself. He was tall, lean and muscular. These were all qualities that I seemed to lack. Draping down his shirt was a bolo tie with an ornament shaped like the state of Iowa that caught the light coming in from the dining room. As he moved around, the ornament shined like polished silver.

“You’re late,” Olivia playfully chastised him.

His grin broadened as he apologized. “My chores ran later than I expected,” he added. His voice had a thick country accent that was instantly familiar to me. This was indeed the voice I heard talking to Olivia outside the bedroom door on the first morning I was with the Senecas.

In a boisterous friendly voice he hollered, “Sally! Those fixin’s sure do smell delicious! I can’t wait to dig in!”

“It’ll be ready in a few minutes!” I heard Sally call from the kitchen.

“It’s about time you arrived!” Mr. Millington complained from the dining room table. “We’re about starved to death waiting for ya’.”

“You’ll be eating soon enough, old man,” the teenage male responded.

“They’ve been friends forever,” Olivia commented to me. “They’re not arguing. The two of them like to tease each other a lot.”

I nodded my head.

Noticing me sitting on the couch in the darkness, the young man stuck out his hand to shake mine and said, “My name’s Iowa J. Johnson...Iowa Jefferson Johnson.”

“Timothy Reye,” I replied quietly.

He saw my wounds from the fight and remarked, “I hope ya’ don’t hurt too badly.”

I shook my head and turned back to the window suddenly feeling embarrassed and frustrated. I could tell by the way she looked at him, Olivia was incredibly infatuated with this farm boy. I did not want to call anymore attention to my defeat by having him take sympathy on my bruised face and body.

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Fortunately, at that moment Sally called everyone to supper.



I was sitting in what had become my normal place at the table. Iowa was across the table next to Olivia and Mr. Millington sat next to me. Stephen said grace and everyone began filling their plates. Like Stephen did at the breakfast table, the gentlemen did not start to eat until both Sally and Olivia had.

After taking his first bite, Iowa exclaimed to Sally, “Mmmmmmm! I’d say this is the finest steak I’ve ever tasted.”

“Oh Iowa, you exaggerate too much,” Sally responded, “but please don’t stop.”

Iowa returned her his pleasing grin while digging a fork into his fried potatoes.

“So Iowa,” Stephen initiated a conversation, “Timothy here is really interested in farming. I thought ya’ might tell him what ya’ folks do out there on your farm.”

Iowa glancing at me, took a moment to chew and swallow the food in his mouth and said, “Well, my family owns the farm just south of town. We have two thousand or so acres where we grow corn, wheat, soybeans, alfalfa, clover and timothy.”

I stared at this young man confused that he mentioned my name and stopped abruptly.

“Yeah ya’ heard me right,” Iowa continued, “there’s a crop named timothy. We grow alfalfa, clover and timothy for making hay, but our major crops are corn and wheat...” He paused and proudly added, “field corn and soft red winter wheat, just like my ancestry in the glorious state of Iowa.”

“And oats?” Mr. Millington asked.

“What about it?” Iowa questioned back to him.

“Now, I thought oats were one of Iowa’s biggest crops?” Mr. Millington questioned.

“Well, if that ain’t the rock in my boot,” Iowa responded pausing to take a drink. “I start talking about my family’s great traditions, and of course you’ve got to throw in your two-cents worth. Let someone else grow the oats, y’old coot! The Johnson’s have enough to do already!”

Olivia chuckled at Iowa’s response as did Mr. Millington.

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“Now, calm down Iowa J.,” Olivia responded patting him on the shoulder.

“Where was I?” Iowa asked himself turning to me. “Oh yeah, we also have 12 Horses, 42 beef cattle, and 29 hogs.”

“Iowa J.’s a fine horse rider,” Olivia mentioned. “He’s already won three contest classes in the first county point show in June. If he gets first place in July’s show, he gets to compete at the State Fair--”

“Now, hold on just a minute,” Iowa interrupted. “Let’s not get carried away. I did get the fastest times in barrels, pole bending, and speed and control, but that’s a far cry from making first place in July’s point show--and that’s a farther cry away from the State Fair.”

“You’ll make it this year, Iowa J.,” Olivia encouraged him. “You’ve worked so hard for it.”

“This is my last chance,” Iowa responded returning his eyes to me. “I’ll be too old to qualify next year. It’s a dream, but I won’t get all worked up about it.”

“Ya’ better be there,” Mr. Millington spoke up. “I have money on ya’ with the fellas down at the barbershop.”

“Now, I don’t approve of that gambling talk in this house,” Sally chastised.

“Ah, it’s just a way of making things more fun,” Mr. Millington rebutted.
“I just don’t want that talked about here,” Sally stated.

An awkward quiet followed for a few seconds.

“I think everyone appreciates what you did for Timothy today, Mr. Millington,” Olivia said starting up a new conversation that was clearly intent on changing the subject.

“Yes, thanks again for speaking up for him,” Sally added obviously feeling a little guilty for scolding Mr. Millington after he was the hero of the day.

“Really, the kid deserves a fair chance,” Mr. Millington replied. “Except for this family, this town’s been pretty hard on him. It don’t make sense to me, especially for a town like this one.” He glanced at me and continued, “Kid, I’m gonna’ give ya’ that chance. How would ya’ like to work at my store?”

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The room became silent again. Apparently no one expected Mr. Millington to make such an offer. There were more than a few expressions of shock on the faces around the table, one of which was mine.

Mr. Millington looked over to Olivia's father. "I know what you're thinking, Stephen, and don't ya' worry about it. You can still have the kid in the mornings for farm chores, and he can work for me in the afternoons." The elderly storeowner turned back to me. "Kid, what do ya' think? I sure could use the help, and it would put a little money in your pocket."

I was not even certain if I wanted to stay anymore considering the incident the night before. I was definitely not in the mood to take on a job at the general store. But, I remembered the feeling I had while gazing at the pale light glowing from Mr. Millington's store windows, and I recalled watching Mr. Millington as he swept the walk in front of it. The image was so wonderfully peaceful to me.

The old man was surprisingly trusting and generous to me, which made me almost compelled to accept his offer. However, deep inside something was refusing to befriend anyone.

"I don't know," I finally uttered staring at my plate.

Mr. Millington took a moment before responding as if he was taken back by my answer. "Well kid, the offer is always open," he finally said.



Dinner was finished and all six of the Pleasantville folks were casually discussing many situations relating to the town. Since I was not familiar with most of the subjects and certainly not in the right frame of mind to talk anyway, I excused myself from the table and walked out on the porch. I sat on the swing and moved gently back and forth while I thought about what I was going to do from there.

After some time had passed, Iowa stepped out on the porch alone. While putting his hat on, he noticed me sitting on the swing. He leaned up against the house and gazed out at the street.

"Quiet tonight, ain't it?" He asked.

I did not reply. I stared at my bicycle thinking that I could just move on from that town and continue going nowhere, or I could stay and wait to see what fate would become of me.

"I get the feeling you're not too fond of me, and that's a real shame," he eventually spoke. "I'd like to think that I'm a pretty descent fella once folks get to know me. I'm certainly not your enemy--"

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“Everyone’s my enemy,” I quickly interrupted not removing my eyes from my bike. “Everyone’s my enemy until I know what they really are. Life has always been safer when I go about it that way.”

“What happens if ya’ get to liking someone and they accidentally hurt ya’?” Iowa inquired.

“If they get close to me and hurt me, they are my enemy again,” I answered. “I’ll never let them in again.”

“Really?” Iowa asked somewhat alarmed. “And, ya’ go through life that way? It’s a wonder ya’ have any friends at all.”

“You don’t know me,” I said glancing at him sharply.

“No I don’t,” he responded, “and I kind’a doubt anyone else knows ya’ with that type of attitude.”

“I doubt you’ve experienced very much in this small town. You couldn’t possibly relate to what I’ve been through even if you tried.”

“I could probably relate to ya’ better than ya’ think I can,” Iowa replied.

I turned and stared at the street wishing this bothersome country boy would go away.

“I recognize pain,” Iowa went on. “That’s what you’re filled with, ain’t it? I get the impression you’ve been through a lot of it, and I’m sure what Mike Frazey and Karl Boothe did to ya’ last night was only a drop in the bucket to what you’ve endured.”

“What do you care?!” I snapped at him.

“I care just like anyone else who could understand a bit of what’s going on inside ya’,” he answered walking over to the porch railing and sitting on it. “I’ve had a lot of it myself--”

“Spare me your stories,” I stated abruptly silencing him. “There isn’t enough room left in me for your problems. Unlike you, I don’t care.”

Iowa paused and stood up. “Alright then...Maybe you’re happier letting your sufferin’ eat ya’ up, but somehow I don’t believe that. Riding your bike all alone the way ya’ were and not letting anyone know of your past, it all makes me think that your trying to get away from your pain.

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“Let me tell ya’ something. The Senecas are a good family. The same can be said for Mr. Millington and me. And, sometimes Heavenly Father guides us to a place where we can live the life we always wanted to see. I never had to travel very far from home to find it, but perhaps your place is right here in Pleasantville...but ya’ have to open up before things change.”

I did not react nor did I indicate in any way that I was listening to his words. His talk of God meant very little to me. I had given up on God long ago, but I could not disagree with what he stated about the Seneca family. They treated me better than anyone had in years, and I realized that I would have been foolish to leave the Senecas at that time.

“You’ve got an opportunity to start a new life in a new town with a new you, if ya’ want it,” Iowa continued. “I don’t think too many people get that kind of a chance. I’d take that job at Millington’s if I were you. Don’t let two hoodlums like Mike and Karl scare ya’ off. Pleasantville means many things to the folks around here, and to you it could be an answer.”

With that, Iowa went down the porch steps and across the street to his truck. He turned around in the road and drove back into town.



For an hour or so, I stayed on the porch letting Iowa’s words echo in my head. He was right about my search for peace, and he made the town of Pleasantville seem like the place to search for it. As I grew tired and stood up to go to bed, I decided that I would give Pleasantville another try.

CHAPTER SIX

“The Dance”



The next morning I woke up late. I figured Stephen was aware that I had been out on the porch the night before thinking to myself. Maybe he overheard Iowa talking to me or he was letting me recover from the incident at the ice cream parlor. Whatever his reason, Stephen did not wake me early for farm chores.

My face was still very sore. Upon a personal examination in the bathroom mirror, I found that my face was looking better but remained swollen and discolored.

Breakfast was quiet. Sally asked if I felt better than yesterday. Everything was calm until I told them my decision.

“I think...I’m going to accept Mr. Millington’s offer,” I said and waited for a reaction.

“Are you sure you’re up to this?” Sally questioned me with much concern in her voice.

“I feel well enough,” I answered. “I intend to try things over again and this job seems a good place to start.”

They all seemed surprised to see that my confidence had returned. I was then certain none of them knew what Iowa had told me the evening before. Perhaps the change in me was kind of sudden to them, but I had had the entire night to think over my decision.

I turned to Stephen. “I’ll do my part here since you all are letting me stay awhile. I’ll only work for Mr. Millington if you can spare me in the afternoons.”

Stephen nodded his head and replied, “I don’t have any problems with it, and I appreciate you being considerate with me, son.”

Sounding worried, Sally asked, “Are you going to start working today?”

“Yeah,” I responded, “I think I will.”

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“Will ya’ need a ride over?” Stephen inquired.

“No thanks,” I replied, “I’ll just walk.”

“Well,” Sally responded hesitantly, “I heard Mr. Thompson dropped the charges because Mike and Karl gave back the money. Are you sure you’re going to be safe?”

“I don’t think I should hide here in the house, if that’s what you’re saying,” I calmly answered her. “I have to face it some time.”

The truth was that physical beatings were nothing new to me. Most likely, Iowa had no idea how correct he was when he mentioned that Mike and Karl were only drops in the bucket when compared to all the struggles I had been through.

“Well, you better wear something nice to work so you’ll be ready for the barn dance tonight,” Olivia jumped in.

“What barn dance?” I asked.

“The Friday night barn dance,” Olivia replied. “It’s a dance we have every week. The entire town goes to it. They have it at the old barn behind the court house.”

“I don’t know if I’ll make it,” I responded. “I’ll probably stay at the store till it closes.”

“Then you’ll be right on time,” Olivia countered. “Mr. Millington always closes the store shortly before the dance begins. You can come with him.”

“Olivia, I’ll be honest with you,” I told her in a serious tone. “I appreciate your offer and I’m sure this barn dance is a real big event in this town. But, I’m not too familiar with many people around here, and I don’t feel comfortable with my wounded and discolored appearance in public.”

“There isn’t any need to be concerned about not knowing anybody,” Olivia commented. “This is a small friendly community and you’ll blend in quickly. Don’t worry about your bruises because everyone in town already knows about them!”

“Great,” I answered sarcastically indicating happiness.

“I’m sure you’ll have fun there, dear,” Sally encouraged.

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“Aside from everything else, I’d like you to come. Won’t you please come for me?” Olivia pleaded.

Her green eyes stared straight into mine and I found it impossible to decline her. “O.k., I promise.”

“Then I guess we have some shopping to do before you go to Millington’s,” Sally commented.

“We do?” I inquired.

“Of course!” Sally answered. “If you’re going to be seen in a social setting in this town, you have to dress appropriately.”

“This is just a country dance, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes it is,” Olivia replied for her mother. “Now you’ve got to look like a country gent to go to it.”



Following breakfast, Sally and Olivia took me to Lenora’s clothing store to buy me the outfit that I would wear to the dance.

The two ladies debated over what clothing would best suit my appearance before they finally found one they could agree on. It consisted of a blue striped shirt, jeans, a leather belt and a pair of black boots. They also picked out a cowboy hat, but I insisted on wearing the John Deere cap Stephen had bought me instead. Neither Sally nor Olivia liked the way the cap went with the outfit, so they decided that no hat at all was the more fashionable decision.

After changing numerous times for the women, I was relieved to step out of the dressing room one last time with the preferred clothing on.

“That’s definitely the one for you,” Sally declared.

“Oh, you look so adorable!” Olivia remarked taking my old clothes from my hands.

“Does this mean we’re done?” I inquired in a tone that was indicating both tiredness and boredom.

“I believe so,” Sally replied.

“Fine,” I said. “Then I’ll just change back--”

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“No you won’t!” Olivia interjected wrapping her arms tightly around my old clothes. “I like the way you’re dressed now. Besides, you’ve got to break-in your new outfit.”

“What are you going to do with those clothes?” I questioned.

“Throw them away, most likely,” Olivia answered.

“I don’t think so,” I stated.

“My daughter is only teasing, Timothy,” Sally commented resting her hand on my shoulder, “but I do agree with her about your new outfit. You should wear it all day so that it’s worn in a bit by the time of the dance. I’ll take your old clothing home with me.”



I arrived at Mr. Millington’s store around noon. No one was in the front room when I walked in.

The room had a high ceiling with floral designs in it. Along the walls were large wooden shelves stocked with a variety of goods placed in no particular order. By the door was a counter with an old-fashioned cash register on it and several glass jars filled with horehound, peppermint sticks, licorice and penny candies. In the rear of the room stood three refrigerated cabinets that appeared to have been operating a long time. Against the back wall was a barrel with a checkerboard on top of it and two chairs to either side. Next to them in a corner was some fishing gear.

From what I had seen of the elderly storekeeper the day before, the interior of his store did seem very suitable for him.

Mr. Millington stepped out from the back room carrying a box of canned goods. He noticed me and asked, “Are ya’ lost, kid?”

“I heard you say last night that the offer was always open.”

“Are ya’ saying ya’ want the job?” He asked with some interest.

“Each afternoon when I’ve finished helping Stephen with farm chores,” I replied, “if you’re still offering.”

“Kid, you’re hired,” he announced placing his box on the floor. He stood up, stretched, and said, “By the way, do ya’ play checkers?”

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He motioned me over to his checkerboard and we played a few games. As we did, the old man told me what my duties would be in the store.

“You’ll be kind of a stocking boy...You’ll lift the heavier stuff and save me the trouble,” he explained. “Ya’ look strong enough to handle it. I ain’t expecting too much from ya’ am I?”

I smiled and shook my head.

Mr. Millington talked about the town and the people in it. He mentioned Iowa’s name and expressed his fondness for him in the stories he told me.

“I’ve known Iowa since the day he was brought into this world,” the storeowner carried on. “He’s a fine young man with an over-sized heart. You can take my word for it.”

“Sound’s like I could,” I responded moving a checker piece on the board. I was still deciding what I thought of Iowa J. Johnson, but I felt that the old man was entitled to his opinion.

Running out of things to say and finishing up the game we were playing, Mr. Millington went to the back room and returned with an apron for me.

“Now that we’re better acquainted, kid, why don’t ya’ go ahead and stock that shelf with those cans I brought out,” he said motioning to the box he sat on the floor earlier.

I could not help liking Mr. Millington. He appeared to be very honest and friendly. He also seemed intent on giving me a chance before deciding what he thought of me. I respected him for that, and I eagerly attended to my duties as a stocking boy.

The elderly storekeeper sure knew how to carry on conversations. He had that country gift for gab. He could talk over a variety of subjects from Mr. Farthing’s trout fishing to Mrs. Howell’s rheumatism. He knew a little something about each customer who came in and carried on with each one on a personal level.

Crouched down placing packages on a low shelf, I was amusing myself listening to Mr. Millington conversing with Mrs. Howell while pretending not to pay attention. I was startled by a sudden tap on my shoulder followed by a young woman’s familiar voice saying, “Excuse me, are you working or eavesdropping?”

I turned around to see Renee Howell, Olivia’s friend, leaning over my shoulder. She smelled very nice and I was surprised that I had not noticed it when I first saw her at the ice cream parlor.

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“Oh, hello again,” I said standing up. Her dark hair appeared as if it would be exceptionally soft to the touch, and her brown eyes seemed as if they stared right through me. She was a very beautiful girl.

“You’re working for Mr. Millington now,” she commented tugging on my apron.

“Yeah,” I replied casually, “I just started today.”

“So you’re gonna’ be here awhile then?”

Her expression did not make it clear how she intended that statement to come across, and I was not sure if she expected me to respond. So I answered, “I don’t know, yet.”

“I assume you’re coming to the dance tonight,” she mentioned with a half smile on her face.

“I guess I am. Olivia and her mother spent all morning shopping to buy me this country outfit to wear to it,” I replied gesturing to my clothing.

“I can see a little of it around your apron,” Renee said glancing at my sleeves and legs. “By the way, nice boots.”

“Thanks,” I responded.

“Well, my mom’s about to leave. I’d better join her and let you return to work.”

“Yeah, I better get to it,” I commented grabbing a few packages to put on the shelf.

“I figure I’ll see you tonight,” Renee mentioned turning to go to her mother.

“Most likely so,” I confirmed taking a last glance at her. “By the way, I hope everything’s going well since I saw you the other night. You seemed a little upset last I remember.”

“Don’t trouble yourself about that matter. There’s enough talk in this town as it is. No need concerning yourself with Olivia and my business.”

With that, Renee gave me an unemotional expression and then joined her mother walking out of the store.

I could not figure her last comment out either. She was hospitable sometimes and rude at others. This was truly a girl I felt most comfortable having distance from.

Mr. Millington looked over to me and said, “Pretty nice girl, ain’t she?”

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“If you say so,” I replied and returned to my work.



As afternoon progressed into evening, the customers became fewer. Mr. Millington and I cleaned up the shop and he talked me into playing one more game of checkers with him. In the middle of our game Iowa stepped through the door. He grabbed some licorice from the candy jars and walked over to us.

His attire was not too different in style from mine, except he was wearing his black cowboy hat along with it. The hat was the same one he wore when he came over for dinner the evening before.

“Don’t make him lose too badly,” Iowa said to me as I jumped one of Mr. Millington’s pieces.

Mr. Millington glanced toward Iowa and commented, “Ya’ know, I gave him that move.”

“Of course,” Iowa agreed in a tone of voice that indicated differently.

I returned my attention to the game. The long discussion Iowa and I had the night before made me feel a bit awkward in his company. He was very smart and perceptive, and I did not want to give anything else about me away.

“Did your mother make a peach cobbler for tonight?” Mr. Millington asked Iowa while leaning back in his chair and placing his hands on his stomach.

“Yes, she did, sir. She slaved all day on it. In fact, she even made two cobblers considering that at the last dance ya’ ate her cobbler in one bite,” Iowa responded as he pointing out a possible double-jump that I did not see.

“Let the kid play his own game!” Mr. Millington interjected. “Besides, you’re wrong. I ate it in three bites and I had a right, too. The cobbler was getting cold and I didn’t want it to go to waste!”

“Thank goodness the women of our town have you to finish off the leftovers,” Iowa said patting him on the shoulder.

Iowa suddenly noticed what I was wearing. A large grin came across his face as he remarked, “Well, Sally and Olivia have done themselves proud. Don’t you look like the country boy.”

I glanced up at him only for a second and said, “Had Olivia not refused to give me my old clothing back, I would not be in this get-up now.”

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“I think she did the best thing for ya’,” Iowa remarked. “You’re gonna’ have no problem fitting in tonight...” He paused abruptly as if he just found a flaw in my country attire.

“What are you staring at?” I inquired.

“Nope,” Iowa commented, “that hair of yours just ain’t gonna’ do it.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“I see what ya’ mean,” Mr. Millington spoke in. “Kid, when was the last time ya’ had a haircut?”

I stopped to think. “I got one in late spring, but I’m not sure about the exact date.”

“Well kid,” Mr. Millington said, “before ya’ go to the dance, we’re gonna’ have to take ya’ to Jesse’s for a decent cut.”

Not having any need to argue with them on the matter and being interested in losing the excess hair anyway, I agreed to go along with them.

Locking up his shop behind us, Mr. Millington and Iowa took me across the street to Jesse’s Barbershop.

As we stepped through the door, I heard a bell ring and I immediately noticed an old bubble gum machine standing by the entrance. The room was filled with the smell of after-shave. Three large barber chairs were situated down the length of the room with one large mirror behind them on the wall.

A middle-aged fellow with dark brown wavy hair was shaving a gentleman in the far chair. Another barber, also with dark hair, sat on the closest barber chair to me with a towel in his hands. A third barber, a chubby old gentleman with white hair (whom Mr. Millington referred to as Jesse), was sweeping the hair off the worn tile floor.

Wooden chairs stood against the opposite wall where two customers sat carrying on a conversation with Jesse and the seated barber. At the end of the room was a bulging potbelly stove and beyond it a door leading into a darkened back room.

“Would ye be needing a haircut, laddy?” The seated barber asked me in a distinct Irish accent.

His voice was strong and friendly and a little more boisterous than I expected. Somewhat startled, I nodded my head and accepted his offer.

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He stood up and brushed the hair off the chair with a towel. The barber than leaned against the counter and said, "Hop on up, lad. I won't bite."

I sat down on his chair and waited for him to start.

He looked over my hair. "I think a little off the top, short around the ears...would ye be wanting your sideburns off or on?"

"Off, I guess," I responded.

Mr. Millington sat on one of the wooden chairs and carried on with Jesse and the other men.

The men talked among themselves with such ease, they would flow from one subject to another effortlessly. Iowa stood by Mr. Millington's chair and carried on with them.

My barber did not carry on in the conversation. He went about his work without saying a word. This created an awkward silence between the two of us, but I did not speak at all thinking I was the only one who detected the abnormal quietness.

"Ye haven't a lot to say, do ye laddy?" My barber commented as he went on with his work.

With the silence broken, I had to answer. "I'm new in town."

"That I know already," he said. "What do ye think of our town?"

I did not feel like carrying on with the stranger. Surely any answer I would give would stimulate another response from him, so I felt compelled, nevertheless, to converse with him. I directed the attention to the barbershop fearing he might eventually turn the topic more about me.

"I like your barber pole," I remarked.

"How is that, laddy, when all barber poles look alike?" He returned.

"Yeah, but your barber pole is only red and white," I commented. "I've only seen red, white and blue ones before."

"Oh, I see," he replied. "Why that is a very old pole outside this shop. Do ye know why a barber pole is red and white?"

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Actually, I never wondered much of anything about barber poles, but it did give us something to talk about that would not direct his attention to me. I shook my head.

He continued, “Why hundreds and hundreds of years ago a barber was also the doctor and dentist, ye know. Why they even had their own guild.

“A barber would use a pole for his patients to grasp during surgery, while using a basin of leeches to consume the blood. When the barber finished, he would put the bloody bandages around the pole and place it outside his shop. It was a way he’d advertise his business.

“The wind would wrap the bandages around the pole. That is why barber poles are red and white. I think the blue is an American custom.”

“O.k.,” I responded feeling slightly sick to my stomach.

“Well its true, laddy. By the name of St. Julian, I swear it to ye,” he added.

“Michael, would ya’ stop it already with your blood-drenched story of the barber pole?!” Jesse jokingly complained, then glanced at me. “Don’t mind him, kid. We call Michael O’Brien the town encyclopedia because he knows a little something about everything.”

“And it all be true, too,” Michael insisted.

“Have ya’ gentlemen met the new kid?!” Mr. Millington asked aloud to everyone.

“Yessir, I cud tell by hiz face,” answered a hillbilly gentlemen sitting down with so thick an accent that I could hardly make out a word he was saying. He turned to me and said, “Yous the boy who got whupt by ‘em bulliez the othah nat.”

“What’s yer name, kid?” The barber with dark hair asked at the far end of the room.

“Timothy,” I responded feeling apprehensive that I had become the focus of everyone’s attention.

“Where ya’ from?” Another one of the customers inquired.

I was getting tired of the way the citizens of that small town were constantly questioning me. Still, rather than cause a scene I answered, “I’m from out-of-town.”

“We’ all know that already,” the customer responded, “Where are ya’ from in particular?”

There was a long pause as the men in the room awaited my reply.

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“I don’t see why I need to talk about it,” I stated discretely emphasizing the sharpness the message was intended to send.

“Well,” he remarked, “I don’t know if I can trust someone who won’t tell where he’s from.”

“Ah, leave the boy alone,” Jesse said in my defense turning to the customer. “No one knows where you lived before ya’ came to this town. Should we stop trusting you?”

“Heck, I wouldn’t trust ya’ with two bucks, Bill,” the barber at the end of the room added, “and I don’t care where you’re from.”

“Listen,” Mr. Millington spoke up irritated, “this kid has put up with quite enough of this town’s inquiries and judgments. He’s a good kid, and he works for me. So, I’ll have no more of ya’ fellas coming down on my new employee.”

Silence filled the room except for Bill who grumbled and opened a fishing magazine.

“Well, how about that barbershop quartet we’ve got going?” Jesse said moving on to a new conversation.

Smiles appeared across several faces. It was obvious that this quartet was something these gentlemen were very proud of.

“The four of ya’ are sounding better than ever,” Iowa commented. Looking over to me he explained that Mr. Millington, Mr. O’Brien, Jesse and Mr. Harris (the other barber) made up the quartet.

“And a fine quartet it be,” Michael remarked as he buzzed the hair around my ears which caused goose bumps to raise on my neck.

“Of course sometimes we are helped out by that pretty young lady,” Mr. Millington said continuing Iowa’s description of the group.

“Angelina McNeal,” Michael added.

Mr. Millington continued. “She works across the street at Lenora’s. Every now-and-then she comes over after work to sing with us.”

Stephen stepped in through the door as Mr. Millington finished speaking. Everyone in the room greeted him. Noticing me in the closest chair to the door, he asked, “How was your first day, son?”

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“I think I did alright,” I replied feeling surprisingly more at ease since he had arrived.

“The kid did O.k.,” Mr. Millington commented, “he didn’t get fired.”

Iowa chuckled under his breath.

“No, problems then?” Stephen calmly asked me.

“None today,” I responded.

I detected some concern in the way Stephen spoke to me just like I had with Sally. I had not had anyone care about me for quite awhile, and the feeling was somewhat refreshing to me.

Stephen nodded to me and turned toward Jesse. “Can ya’ squeeze me in a \$5.00 trim before the dance, Jess?”

“I think I can do that, sir,” Jesse replied. “Sit there in my chair and I’ll get to ya’ in a moment.”

“Alright,” Stephen said as he sat down in the center chair. He pointed to a used newspaper near Iowa. “Grab that for me, won’t ya’?”

Iowa picked up the paper and tossed it onto Stephen’s lap.

Opening the newspaper Stephen asked, “So Bill, did ya’ catch any bass while fishing with the fire chief the other day?”

“Fishing!?” The customer exclaimed who was formerly interrogating me. “Bob Farthing don’t fish. He just gets the boat out in the water and sleeps. Ain’t like it was fishing with Phil.”

“Bill, I’ve only been out of it for a week now!” Mr. Millington broke in. “Ya’ make it sound like we haven’t fished in a year!”

“Ain’t the same, though,” Bill retorted.

“Ya’ still fishing by the mill?” Jesse asked preparing for Stephen’s haircut.

“Yeah,” Bill responded, “but we ain’t gettin’ much fish there.”

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“Well, there’s your problem,” Mr. Millington spoke in. “I told ya’ to fish further up stream by the old Rheuben farm. There’s a lot of rocks there for the fish to hide from the current.”

“How’s the farming coming along, Stephen?” Jesse asked.

“I’m almost through combining the wheat, I’m gonna’ plant the soybeans in a few days,” Stephen replied.

The small town barbershop was beginning to take form to me. This was a place where the men could get together in a simple and relaxed environment and discuss things that mattered next to nothing in the world. This explained why the two customers sat in the waiting chairs but never got a haircut. They were there because the barbershop was also the men’s social club of the community.

My thoughts were broken by a sudden burst of wind as Michael O’Brien used a blow drier to get the loose hair off my shoulders. After finishing, he spun the chair around so that I could see myself in the mirror. My hair was very short, but it looked rather nice. As a matter of fact, even with the bruises on my face, I appeared pretty decent.

“What do ye think?” Michael asked.

“I like it.”



After Stephen finished, the four of us--Stephen, Mr. Millington, Iowa and I--walked to a large brown barn on Main Street where the dance was being held. The structure was situated behind the courthouse. There was a field just South of it, and beyond the field was a high school with a small stadium next to it.

Walking in the large doors facing the street, I saw the interior of the barn decorated with ribbons and strings of lights. Instead of chairs, straw bales lined the walls. A large table loaded with homemade pies, cakes, and other treats including a huge punch bowl stood inside the door. Mr. Millington’s attention was instantly directed to it.

“Peach cobbler,” Mr. Millington happily uttered admiring the table display.

The barn was crowded with people. Some were dancing to the music played by a small band at the other end of the room, and other people were gathered along the side of the dance floor.

“I’d better sample the fixin’s,” Mr. Millington said placing his hands on his stomach again.

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“Now, where’s my wife?” Stephen asked peering through the crowd.

I could not relax as the men around me did. The crowd was too large and the people were foreign to me. I reconsidered whether I really wanted to attend the dance. I took a few steps backward but Iowa grabbed my arm without even looking in my direction.

“Oh no ya’ don’t. You’re staying right here,” he said sternly.

“I don’t have to stay anywhere,” I smartly remarked. “I’ve changed my mind about the dance.”

Iowa turned to face me. “Now, how are ya’ gonna’ give Pleasantville a chance when ya’ don’t even want to get involved in what we do?”

“Maybe this isn’t the way I want to do it,” I replied.

“What did ya’ have in mind? Call them all on the phone?” Iowa inquired. “If ya’ want to fit in around here, ya’ have to do the things the folks around here do.”

“Sure, you can say that. You only live in this town.”

“Ya’ know a lot of people have come halfway for you since ya’ arrived a few days ago. Maybe it’s time ya’ come halfway too,” Iowa said pointing into the barn. “These people ain’t so bad, but not all of them are going to conform to you. I’m afraid you’re gonna’ have to give a little.”

I stared at him a few moments then glanced down at the country attire I was wearing. “Well, Sally and Olivia did spend their money on my outfit. I guess I shouldn’t let them down...Fine, I’ll give it a try.”

“Grand!” Iowa exclaimed. “Tonight ya’ meet these folks Pleasantville style.”

I allowed Iowa to lead me through the crowd. My mere presence in the room was attracting attention, and I could feel many eyes upon me as we walked along. As a result, I stared at the floor feeling very uneasy.

Eventually, Iowa stopped and said, “Folks, I’d like y’all to meet Timothy Reye!”

Lifting my head I saw Olivia, Renee, another young woman, and two guys.

“My name’s Jack DeChamp,” announced the taller muscular fellow with dishwater blonde hair and blue eyes.

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His chest, under a blue shirt, appeared as if it was made of iron. His arms were powerfully built and one circled around the waist of the other girl who had long wavy blonde hair and brown eyes.

This woman, who I assumed to be his girlfriend, had a perfect appearance. I could not see one blemish about her body or her attire. I figured that was why she was with someone as physically fit as Jack DeChamp. The two complemented each other so well.

This young woman gave me a flawless grin and told me, “Hi, my name is Barbara Susan.”

“And I’m Fraun Sodier,” the other guy interrupted with a foreign accent grasping my hand to shake it, “and you look like a man in pain.”

“What?” I asked. Then I realized he was referring to my bruises. “Oh, my face. It doesn’t hurt as bad as it looks.”

“Oh, you look fine,” Barbara assured me, “one can hardly tell.”

“What are you talking about?” Fraun jumped in. “His head looks like a blueberry.”

“Fraun, keep quiet!” Renee angrily warned him.

Fraun was a little shorter than the others in the group, but I was already seeing how his slightly annoying personality made him hard to ignore. He had brown hair that was longer than Jack’s and a body structure that suffered in comparison. All in all, he seemed somewhat of an odd fellow to me.

“Are you French?” I asked him.

“You’d think that wouldn’t you?” He replied as if I had made a common mistake about him. He gave me a large smile and replied, “Actually, you’re right. Up until my grandfather, my family lived in France. My grandfather came here with a job opportunity in the city, but when he made it out here, the job was gone. With things not going well for him in the old country, he decided to bring his family over here and live out what he thought was the American dream: to own a farm and two automobiles. We still live in his farm house west of town.”

“That’s interesting,” I responded trying to show some courteous interest in this stranger’s life story. “I just met an Irish barber earlier today.”

“Well, that is interesting isn’t it,” Fraun declared as I heard another song starting. “My, it’s so hard to find an Irish man who isn’t a barber anymore.”

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Olivia, getting tired of Fraun's obvious sarcasm, grabbed my hand and said, "Dance with me, Timothy."

I did not get a chance to respond as she dragged me out to the dance floor.

"I can't dance, Olivia," I uttered when we reached an open area of the floor.

"Nonsense," Olivia responded, "everyone can dance. It's just a matter of knowing what to do with your feet."

"That's my problem. I've never danced before."

"You've never danced before!?" She exclaimed in amazement. "How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen," I answered feeling like I was below her status.

"You're seventeen and you've never danced before?" She inquired.

"Olivia, my life didn't allow me the opportunity to dance," I replied.

She stopped and thought for a moment and a smile came across her face. "Well, your life is going to give you that opportunity now." Putting my hands into place she continued. "Let's try something simple. Place this hand in mine and the other around my waist."

As she placed my hand against her delicate frame, I became a bit nervous and my body froze up.

"Timothy, loosen up," she complained, "you're so stiff, it's like I'm dancing with a tree."

"I'm sorry," I responded trying to relax.

"Now, move your feet like mine," she directed pulling away from me enough so that I could see her legs.

I awkwardly tried to mimic her steps, and after a moment I started getting used to it.

"You'll have to hold me closer now," she told me, "or people will think you're afraid to touch me."

I moved in closer to her. I glanced at all the others dancing around us. Some would look at me occasionally with curiosity and some with suspicion in their stare.

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“Olivia, I really don’t feel right about this,” I quietly commented.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“I know what all these people are thinking. They’re wondering what to make out of me. They’re thinking I’m the wandering vagrant who caused the incident at the ice cream parlor. Maybe it’s too soon for me to be among these folks.”

“Then don’t be,” Olivia said. “Just close your eyes and pretend that there’s no one else in the room.”

She held me closer and I could feel her hair against my face and her perfume all around me. I closed my eyes and I thought only of her as her arm gently pressed against my back. Her body was warm and soft, and I felt her breathing. For that moment my past was far away from me and all that mattered was this lovely woman dancing next to me.

It was an incredible experience for me. Olivia was such an elegant young lady, and I had never had such an opportunity as to be near someone so charming as she. I was secure in her arms and that meant more to me than anything else at the time.

The song ended but I continued dancing with her. The noise of the crowd came to a silence.

“Uh, Timothy?” Olivia said tapping my back lightly.

I opened my eyes and saw everyone staring at us. Tension filled my body again.

“Uh...he was too busy keeping count,” Olivia desperately explained. She took my hand and led me off the dance floor into the crowd.

“My, that was quite a dance,” Renee commented to us.

“You two must have been dancing to a different song,” Barbara added.

“He was learning a new dance,” Olivia defended us. “We just were not through dancing yet.”

“Everyone else was,” Fraun remarked.

“Where’s Iowa and Jack?” Olivia asked glancing around.

“Iowa went to look at Jack’s truck,” Barbara responded. “It’s been overheating.”

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At that point Iowa and Jack came back to us.

“What’s wrong with it?” Barbara asked Jack.

“Iowa found it,” Jack replied. “The anti-freeze is leaking from a hose. Nothing difficult to fix.”

“That reminds me,” Iowa spoke pausing a second. “I’m here to dance.” He turned to Olivia and offered his hand. “My lady, may I have the pleasure?”

Olivia gave him her hand and replied, “You may.”

Jack and Barbara followed behind them.

Fraun turned to Renee. Renee glared at him in disgust. She finally said, “Come on, Fraun, but after this dance we’ll act like we don’t know each other.”

I sat on a straw bale alone during the song. I then sat alone through another song. I looked around at all the people in the barn. Although the town was indeed small, I was amazed at how many people were attending the dance.

Sally appeared out of the crowd coming toward me. “Where have you been hiding?”

I checked either side of me to see if I was camouflaged with the straw. “Right here,” I replied.

“I knew it,” she remarked, “you were afraid I would want to dance with you.”

I stood up. “May I dance with you, Mrs. Seneca?”

“I thought you would never ask,” she answered.

We stepped to the floor.

“I only know the dance Olivia showed me earlier tonight,” I admitted. I showed her the dance.

“Why her father taught her that dance, but I can improve it a bit.”

Sally showed me a few modifications that I caught onto easily.

Watching Sally’s caring eyes made me see how much I appreciated her. Everything she did for me she did not have to do. When I felt I had nothing left, suddenly Sally was there. It was almost as if I was meant to find her. For a brief moment, I thought I could tell her of my past.

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“Sally, I...”, I uttered starting to hesitate.

“What is it, dear?” She inquired stopping.

The fear came over me again as if I had just broken out of a spell. Telling her would probably ruin all that I had going for me, so I decided I could never tell her.

I tried to think up something else. “I...was wondering whether you had baked anything for the dance?”

“Why sure I did,” she replied. “I baked an apple pie. You’ll have to try it.”

She guided me over to the refreshment table and loaded a plate with a piece of her pie and some cookies that Olivia had baked for the dance. She recommended that I not eat the other women’s baked goods because they would not taste as good.

Mr. Millington and Stephen were also at the table carrying on a lively conversation.

“So there you are!” Sally exclaimed to Stephen.

Stephen, startled, turned to face her. “Oh, I’m sorry dear. Mr. Millington and I were just having some punch. Would ya’ like some?”

“No,” she replied, “but I would like you to put it down and dance with me.”

Stephen sat the punch down and turned to Mr. Millington. “I guess I’ll see ya’ later.”

I returned to the straw bale. Fraun was sitting close by eating what I guessed was Iowa’s mother’s peach cobbler.

I sat next to him. “Is everyone still dancing?”

“Yup,” he responded. With his accent, the word “yup” sounded very strange.

“Olivia with Iowa and Barbara with Jack?” I asked.

“Yup,” he responded again.

“Renee?” I asked.

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“Nope,” he responded. His one-word answers were becoming annoying. I was wondering where his sarcastic comments had gone.

“Where’s Renee?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

I stood up and walked toward the rear of the barn. There was a doorway leading outside. I went to return to Fraun, but I decided to get some fresh air instead. I had had my fill of Fraun Sodier for one night.

“Irritating little twerp,” I commented to myself as I stepped through the door.

Behind the barn was a parking lot filled with mostly pick-up trucks. On the other side of the parking lot was an old outhouse. Questioning if it was still usable, I went toward it.

As I walked I heard Renee. Her voice sounded distressed.

“No, I don’t want to,” I heard her say.

I followed her voice till I heard Karl’s also. I froze instantly.

“I’m getting tired of waiting for it,” Karl insisted.

“Karl, leave me alone,” Renee said in an upset and frightened tone.

I could not believe what I was hearing. I felt it could not be what it sounded like, and even if it was, I knew I could not win a fight against Mike and Karl.

“Karl, don’t!” She cried.

By this time I had reached the edge of the barn wall. I stepped around the corner of the barn to get closer. The other side of the barn was darker so I would not be seen. When I went around the corner, however, I found myself right next to them. My heart nearly stopped.

Karl had Renee pinned against the wall and his hands were upon her breast. Renee’s face was streaming with tears.

“Timothy, please help me,” she pleaded in a hopeless voice.

“Turn around and walk away,” Karl warned me with glaring eyes.

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My entire body trembled. I had never witnessed this in my life. Fear and confusion filled my mind and I could not say anything.

“Turn around and walk away,” Karl warned me again gritting his teeth together. “Ya’ ain’t too stupid to understand that are ya’, boy?”

I stepped back a pace and halted. I could not just leave Renee there. Something horrible was about to occur and I was the only one there to stop it.

“N-N-No, I won’t leave!” I replied through shaking lips.

“You’re just always getting yourself into trouble, ain’t ya’!?” He angrily remarked coming at me.

Renee was now free of his grip, but was apparently too terrified to move.

Karl swung at my head, and amazingly, I blocked it without thinking. I went to kick him between the legs as I had done before, but he caught my leg and twisted my ankle with his hands. I fell to the ground in great pain.

He went to jump on me, but I kicked my other leg up and the toe of my boot caught him in the stomach. He fell to the ground and rolled into the light shining on the gravel parking lot.

I heard Sheriff Frazey call him. Karl scrambled to his feet and ran toward the courthouse with the sheriff running after him.

I tried to stand up, but my right ankle, the one he wrenched, was in incredible pain. I collapsed again to the ground and dragged myself over to the barn.

Renee was still standing against the wall crying.

“Are you all right?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she replied in a tense sigh.

“I don’t think he’ll be coming back,” I told her.

“Not tonight anyway.”

I dragged myself closer to her.

“Please, don’t come any closer,” she said fearfully but still quietly.

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By Timothy S. Klugh

“I’m sorry,” I responded stopping and resting where I was. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know,” she replied, “I just don’t want anybody near me right now.”

A couple moments passed before I spoke again. “Has he bothered you before?”

She did not say anything.

“I think I’ll get you some help,” I finally told her trying to get up again. The pain in my ankle was unbearable, but I knew she needed someone she could trust.

“No, stop!” She hollered suddenly grabbing me.

It was not hard to obey her since I could not picture how I would be able to make it to the barn on my ankle. I sat back on the ground and she sat next to me.

“You can’t tell anybody,” she said emphatically.

“What do you mean? You need to tell somebody,” I responded.

“You’re not from around here and you don’t know how things are. They’ll think I’m a tramp.”

I looked at her in shock. “He was attacking you, Renee. No one will think you’re a tramp.”

“Not everyone, but some will.”

“Renee, I don’t understand.”

She paused burying her face in her hands. “Karl and I used to see each other a lot.”

I could not conceive the thought of that fragile beauty in the arms of someone as vile and sick as Karl obviously was. It was difficult to fathom why she would have ever had a relationship with him.

“I didn’t know what he was like, and I really didn’t care back then. I just wanted someone who I could talk to.”

“What about Olivia or your other friends?”

She glanced at me. “I didn’t have any of them at the time.”

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

“I’m sorry,” I responded, “please go on.”

She looked over toward the courthouse bending her legs close to her. “All I had was Karl to turn to. He pulled me away from everyone else till I only had him to depend on. That’s when he started pressuring me. He told me that he had done so much for me that I owed it to him. Eventually he started to get forceful. I thought about running to the police, but they’d think that it was as much my fault as his. Finally, I broke up with him.”

“Well, that’s good, Renee, but that’s no excuse for what he was doing to you.”

“He says I still owe him,” she said becoming more emotional. “He says he won’t leave me alone until I...” She broke off her words weeping.

I did not know what I could do for her other than get her some help. “Renee, I still don’t know why you won’t tell the police.”

“Because, they’ll think that the tramp is just getting what she deserves.” She wrapped her arms around her bent legs and started trembling. I could comprehend the torment she was going through, but I did not clearly understand why she felt she would be thought of so lowly.

“Promise me you won’t tell anyone,” she pleaded sobbing profusely.

She seemed unmovable about keeping her problem a secret, although I could not see an adequate justification for her doing so. However, it was her troubles to keep inside just like mine was for me.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I assured her.

She leaned against me until she could regain control of her emotions. I placed my arm around her and remained with her feeling my presence was some kind of comfort to her while also worried that Karl might return. When she was ready to leave, we went to join the others.

Olivia saw us as we came around the corner. Renee was helping me walk with my bad ankle.

“What’s wrong?” Olivia asked running over to us.

“Uh, I took a fall walking around the barn...and Renee stayed with me till I felt like moving,” I lied.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

Olivia saw that Renee had been crying. “Are you all right, Renee?” She questioned in concern. The expression on Olivia’s face made me wonder if she also knew about Renee’s troubles.

“I’m all right now,” Renee replied.

“I understand,” Olivia said.

“Where the heck were ya’ guys!?” Iowa exclaimed walking over to us. Noticing Renee’s tearstained face and me leaning against her, he asked, “What happened with you two?”

Olivia turned to Iowa. “Renee tripped Timothy by accident and he hurt his leg. Renee felt so bad that she cried about it.”

“Well that’s just dandy, Timothy Reye,” Iowa commented. “Ya’ can’t go two days without hurting yourself can ya’?”

Olivia and Renee artificially chuckled for Iowa as if they were trying to throw him off from what really happened. Olivia’s lie was worse than mine, but it worked. And that made me all the more curious about whether she knew about Renee or not.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The Pleasantville Gang”

Over the weekend a selected committee, under the direction of Mayor Ben Smythe, who had been out of town for two weeks, prepared Pleasantville for Independence Day. July Fourth would fall on Monday and every business in town would be closed.

When he heard about me, Mayor Smythe contacted Stephen, and the two of them along with Sally had a meeting about my situation. Since I was not telling about my past, I figured I might as well start to pack because there would probably be trouble for me.

What I did not know was that Stephen’s father and Mayor Smythe were high school chums, so that gave Stephen and Sally an advantage. Mayor Smythe finally decided to leave things the way they were as long as the Seneca’s took full responsibility for me.

The meeting with the Mayor seemed to have renewed Stephen’s concerns of the mystery that surrounded me, but keeping to his word, he said nothing to me. He had said earlier that I had two weeks to disclose my secret, and I knew the clock was running. Yet, I still had over a week left so I tried to block it from my mind. I would deal with that crisis when I had to.

That was not the only dilemma that I could not avoid. The episode the night before when I rescued Renee from Karl stayed with me constantly. I felt so much frustration because of the fact that it was only by chance that I happened outside the barn when I did, and even by a slighter chance that I overheard Karl and Renee at all. The thoughts tortured me of what might have happened if I had not gone to investigate.

The oath I made to Renee to keep silent made it difficult when conversing with Olivia the next day. I felt Olivia was aware of Renee’s problem, but I could not prove it. I would not utter a word to Olivia unless I had no doubt she knew.

Olivia seemed suspicious about me that day as well. I detected it in the way she watched me almost like she wanted to ask what actually happened the night before.



THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
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My ankle that Karl had twisted was in less pain by the end of the day and was no longer a hindrance to me. So, when Olivia asked if I would go out with her and her friends that evening, I had no reason to decline.

Olivia and I joined the others at the restaurant on the corner of Pleasantville and Main Streets. The place was called Jane's Kitchen.

The restaurant had wood paneled walls and green booths and tables. Some of the booths ran along a long curved window that faced the parking lot next to the road. One could clearly see the courthouse across the intersection from inside. By the cash register near the entrance was a jukebox flashing combinations of colors around its vicinity.

Iowa, Renee and Olivia's other friends were crowded around one of the booths by the window. Olivia and I walked over to them and found Jack and Iowa in the middle of an arm wrestling match. The group was cheering for their chosen hero.

"Must you two carry on like this?" Olivia inquired in a tone of disapproval.

In spite of Olivia's chastisement, the contest continued on with neither of the brutes answering back or budging their arms from center. Their muscles were bulging with veins showing, but they acted as if there was no struggle at all.

"How ya' feelin'?" Jack asked with confident eyes.

"I'm feeling like I could leave my arm up all night," Iowa answered with equal composure.

"So can I," Jack responded.

The pressure built even more. The gentlemen's faces started to turn to subtle shades of red with beads of sweat appearing on their foreheads.

"By the way," Iowa asked with his voice a little tense, "why did ya' ask?"

"Well," Jack said trying to sound relaxed, "I just wanted ya' to know there is no shame in losing."

Iowa looked down at the two tightly clinched hands and replied gritting his teeth, "Thanks for letting me know...but I also know that there ain't any shame in winning either."

"You know you two are probably going to burst a blood vessel doing this," Fraun warned them.

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By Timothy S. Klugh

“Yes,” Renee added, “you two should probably quit before someone gets hurt.”

“Let them go on!” I exclaimed in both excitement and intrigue over the country boy’s competition. Curiosity filled me as to which young man was the stronger.

As a result, Renee glared at me sternly, but Olivia patted me on the shoulder.

Jack and Iowa’s arms started to lean from one side to the other, and it became evident that the victor would soon be known. Each spectator drew closer to see what the outcome would be.

“Your food’s ready!” The waitress called out as she placed a tray of cheeseburgers and french fries on the table.

Iowa and Jack instantly released their grip and grabbed some food.

“You mean they’re not going to finish arm wrestling?” I asked Olivia.

“Apparently not today,” Olivia responded. “They’ve been arm wrestling on and off for a few years, but so far neither has won.”

“Why do they arm wrestle if no one wins?” I asked pulling up a couple chairs for Olivia and me.

“Oh, I can answer that,” Iowa jumped in. “Jack here’s an athlete. He’s a first string varsity football player.

“One time, when we were both freshman, he challenged me to an arm wrestling match. He thought that an all-star athlete like him could easily whip a guy like me, who just did farm chores and 4-H. I took him up on his challenge.

“We were hand-to-hand for thirty minutes when the lunch period ended leaving no winner. Ever since then, whenever one of us gets the inclination, we go back at it.”

“Yeah, and we’ll keep it up till I finally beat ya’,” Jack added with a large bite of cheeseburger crammed in his mouth.

Barbara covered it with her hand. “Jack, don’t talk while you’re eating! It’s not very attractive to look at!”

Swallowing his mouth-full, Jack turned to me and asked, “Sports man, are ya’, Tim?”

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“Timothy,” Olivia corrected.

Jack glanced to Olivia. “Whatever.”

“Not exactly,” I answered, “I was pretty much to myself most of the time.”

“What do you mean by ‘to yourself?’” Barbara inquired in a tone of voice that made her sound like a psychiatrist. She stared at me intently while nibbling on the end of a french fry.

“I mean I didn’t really get a chance to play with friends much,” I replied watching each of her tiny bites.

Noticing me observing her fry, she examined it carefully, then she asked me, “Do you want one?”

“No, no thank you,” I replied looking away.

“Then, what’s wrong?” She questioned examining the french fry again.

“Nothing, really. So, tell me more about yourself,” I responded changing the subject.

“There isn’t much for me to tell you,” Barbara replied, “I’ve lived across the street from Jack ever since I was a little girl. I’m a cheerleader. I don’t know what else to say.”

“You know, I think I’d like to be a professional singer some day. I want to have a voice like Angelina McNeal at Lenora’s,” Renee suddenly commented changing the subject completely. However, everyone joined right in.

“I think I’m gonna’ go to college and play football,” Jack added pretending his third cheeseburger was a football. “Someday I’m sure to make it to pro.”

“I’ll be your personal water-boy,” Fraun said to Jack. “No, better yet, I’ll be the team owner.”

“I’m going to change the world,” Barbara announced with her eyes staring into infinity. “I’m going to help the homeless by setting aside money, so I can give them some. It seems like no one else really cares.”

“That’s a great dream,” I commented feeling her enthusiasm might be showing sincerity.

Surprised at a response, Barbara’s eyes moved to me. “Thank you, Timothy Reye.”

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“You better stick to dreams you can achieve,” Fraun suggested to her, “like mine for example.”

“Change the world? I’m going to stay right here in Pleasantville. I’m going to be a housewife and bring up a wonderful family,” Olivia declared.

Although everyone else’s goals were astounding, I found Olivia’s comfortably inviting as I envisioned it in my head.

“Well, I’m gonna’ inherit the Johnson farm and continue our grand tradition of field corn and soft red winter wheat,” Iowa said crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair.

Olivia gazed at him and smiled. Apparently, and unfortunately for me, she must have felt his plans and hers were going to be together some day.

“What are you going to be?” Barbara asked me.

“I don’t know,” I responded, “I never gave my future much thought.” I glanced over at Olivia whose eyes were still focused on Iowa. “For the most part, whenever I think things are going to happen one way, they go the other. So, I really don’t rely much on what I hope will be,” I uttered despairingly.

“But, everyone has a dream,” Barbara countered. “What is your dream?”

“I’m not sure. I guess yours is pretty good,” I answered. “I never had much chance to think about my dreams.”

“You mean there isn’t a single goal or wish that you ever wanted?” Barbara persisted.

My only wish was to have my parents back. All my goals of childhood disappeared when I lost them. My only desire was to have the beautiful life that these people had, but I did not mention that to them.

“I guess I’d like to be an author some day. I used to like to write stories,” I finally spoke.

“What did you write about?” Barbara inquired intrigued by my response.

“Nothing much...stupid stuff I guess,” I replied. It had been so long since I had written a story that it did not matter anymore.

“I think that is so fascinating that you used to make up stories,” Barbara commented.

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“I don’t know,” I said humbly. “I always had a hard time finding good material.”

“Hey, maybe you can write about us,” Jack jumped in. “You’ll have an instant best-seller!”

“You should do something like that,” Barbara suggested. “If you write about real people, the story creates itself. There’s a lot to write about this town despite its size.”

“I don’t write stories anymore,” I uttered staring down at the table. “I don’t do much of anything anymore.”

As I glanced up, I saw Renee gazing at me. Her brown eyes showed no emotion except a slight bit of interest in my words. She seemed to be contemplating about me or about what I said. Before I could speak, she looked away.

Everyone at the table became silent as the conversation ran out.

“Well, we’ve about drained that subject for all it was worth,” Fraun remarked gazing out the window, “It’s getting dark. Let’s go play night tag.”

“Tag?” I questioned. “I thought tag was a kids’ game.”

“It was fun when you were a kid, wasn’t it?” Iowa inquired.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Ya’ sure don’t think you’re too old for fun, do ya’?” Iowa asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Then, if ya’ ain’t too old to have fun, ya’ ain’t too old to play tag,” Iowa said.

“You’re welcome to come with us if you want to,” Barbara added.

“Sure,” I responded deciding to give their activity a chance.

Iowa, Olivia, Renee and I crowded onto the bed of Jack’s pickup truck. Barbara and Fraun sat with Jack in the cab. We drove down Pleasantville Road passed Millington’s and out of town. The first road we came to was called Cemetery Road. We turned right and eventually ended up by an old church with a small graveyard next to it.

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Beyond the graveyard was a large open meadow with a few trees growing here and there. Surrounding the far side of the meadow were dark woods covering a large hill. I guessed we were on the other side of the hill that was behind the Seneca farm.

The truck pulled over in front of the church.

“We’re playing tag here?” I asked because the church was empty and dark and nothing else was around.

“Why not?” Olivia said hopping out of the truck.

“At a church?” I questioned standing up to get out.

“No, don’t be silly,” she replied almost laughing. She pointed toward the graveyard. “Over there.”

“In the graveyard?” I nervously uttered sitting back down.

She sighed while placing her hands on her hips and looked at me as if I was the village idiot.

“Beyond the graveyard in that large meadow,” Olivia explained.

“Oh,” I responded feeling better about the situation. “I was beginning to wonder about you folks.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please! I don’t know what kind of people you’re used to being with.”

“That’s the same thought that was crossing my mind,” I responded.

Walking with Olivia, I asked her why they went all the way out of town to play tag. She explained that Iowa, Barbara and herself used to play out in the meadow after church services when they were youngsters. They would play until their parents told them it was time to go home. Ever since then, the meadow had become a traditional place for their game. They decided to play at night because one could hide better in the dark.

The group gathered in the center of the clearing. The moon lit up the area so that nearly everything could be seen, however, there was a silver haze over the field, which would make someone hard to see at a distance.

I decided to make the initiative on my fate in the game and cried out, “Not IT!”

This took them all by surprise and they gazed at me oddly.

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“No, Tim,” Jack commented as if he was correcting my misdirected ways, “we don’t decide who is IT by crying ‘Not IT!’” He smiled like a parent softly reprimanding a child’s mistake. “We are a mature crowd.” He reached down and grabbed a handful of long thin weeds. “We decide who is IT by drawing straws. The shortest one has to hunt.”

Jack took his pocketknife and cut the weeds into different lengths. After wrapping his hand around them again, everyone took a turn at drawing a stem. When the stems were compared, Jack found that he was left with the shortest one. Suddenly, he abandoned his more mature method and cried out, “Not IT!” However, fair is fair and Jack had to hunt.

Jack closed his eyes and we all spread out across the meadow to hide. Iowa pulled me along with him informing me that he was generally the last one to be found.

This variation of tag was kind of mixed with hide-and-seek. Everyone would hide until the person who was IT found him or her. If the hunter failed to tag them, they could run and hide again somewhere else. There were no bases in this version of the game, so one was never in a safe spot. Once a person was tagged, they also became IT along with the tagger. They would go on tagging people until everyone was IT. The first one tagged would then be IT in the next game.

The weeds in the meadow were almost waist high, so one could duck down and be pretty much hidden. However, Iowa did not feel it was good enough.

“Jack and his pa hunt deer a lot,” Iowa commented to me. “We shouldn’t pick obvious places when he’s on the prowl.”

Iowa guided me to the edge of the clearing where the woods began.

“This is my favorite hiding place,” Iowa remarked pointing up a large tree with low limbs. “Not only are we gonna’ be hard to see in the shadows, but who’s gonna’ think of looking up in a tree?”

We climbed up the tree into the darkness of the upper boughs and gazed down upon the meadow.

Jack began walking around the field casually. He stopped for a moment then started creeping up on something like a cat about to pounce on its prey. He then leaped into the weeds. Fraun jumped up and ran off, and I assumed he had evaded being tagged.

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Jack stood up and ran after him. On the way he tripped and fell causing several heads to pop up in his vicinity like prairie dogs rising from their holes. Two sunk back down, but the other, Barbara, broke into a sprint. Jack, being an athlete, easily caught up and tagged her.

Barbara slapped Jack in playful frustration, then ran toward the spot where the two other heads were. Olivia and Renee took off running. Barbara, being closer to Renee went after her.

Fraun who was in Renee's path jumped up when Renee passed, but Renee shoved him backwards and Barbara tagged him. Jack caught Renee while Barbara went to search for Olivia.

I found the entire scene very amusing from my bird's eye position.

Fraun, now a hunter, wandered around near the woods walking the perimeter of the meadow. As he got near us, I shifted to get a better view of Fraun as he drew closer. The limb I was standing on suddenly snapped giving a little. Fortunately, it did not break off. Nonetheless, Fraun heard it and walked down below our tree.

"Sh!" Iowa whispered quietly but emphatically. "Don't worry. It's too dark up here for him to see us."

We heard a couple of clicks and a flashlight turned on in Fraun's hand. He pointed it up the tree exposing us completely.

"You're cheating!" Iowa called out.

"Whatever it takes to win," Fraun responded as he began to climb.

I went to ascend higher into the tree, but the branch gave away causing me to fall to the ground.

"Are ya' all right!?" Iowa hollered from the top of the tree.

"I'm fine," I said standing up and brushing myself off. "My back side took most of the blow."

I saw Renee running toward me. I fled in the opposite direction. I could only limp quickly because of my sore ankle, but I kept glancing behind and found that I was maintaining a good distance from her. Maybe she was being nice to me considering my injury, and perhaps not.

Suddenly, I ran into a brick wall. I fell again to the ground and looked up to see what I hit. To my surprise, it was not a wall at all. I merely ran into Jack.

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Jack grinned broadly and said, "You're IT!"

In the second game, Barbara was the first to be IT. Iowa, Jack and I ran into the woods to hide. We walked a short distance and ended up in another clearing a bit smaller than the meadow. Walking into the middle of the clearing, I discovered a rusty old pail.

Iowa looked down at the pail and said, "Well, it appears that someone's been snipe hunting."

"What's a snipe?" I inquired picturing a small rodent-like animal.

"Ya' never been snipe hunting before?" Jack asked in amazement.

"No, I haven't," I replied. "I've never hunted anything before."

"Ya' gotta try snipe hunting," Jack remarked.

"I don't think so," I responded. "I don't know how to hunt, and I don't like killing things anyway."

"No one said ya' have to kill the snipe," Iowa responded. "All ya' do is lay a trap for the little guy."

"How do you trap a snipe?" I asked curiously.

"With this pail," Jack said picking the one up from the ground. "Ya' crouch in the middle of the field and set the pail sideways on the ground, see. When the snipe sees the opening, it'll think the pail is its hole. It'll run right into it. Pull the pail upright and you've trapped yourself a snipe."

"Do they bite?" I cautiously questioned.

"No, their very timid creatures," Iowa said.

"I'll tell ya' what." Jack placed a hand on my shoulder and glanced into the woods toward the meadow. "It'll take the gang awhile to find us. Why don't we give ya' a chance to catch a snipe right now?"

"I don't know what a snipe looks like," I responded.

"You'll know it when ya' see it," Jack assured me. "It'll come straight for the pail." He handed it to me. "Iowa and I will go into the woods and scare one out for ya'."

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I was not happy with the thought of catching a wild animal in a pail, but the two seemed like they believed I could do it. Their confident smiles, almost on the verge of laughter, showed me that they felt I could do it.

“O.k.,” I finally told them, “I’ll try it.”

With reassuring nods, they both went back into the woods disappearing into the darkness. I knelt down with my pail and awaited anything that would come toward me.

I wondered if Olivia’s brother Keith ever hunted snipes. I pictured him, like I was, out in the middle of a clearing waiting for a snipe to run out of the woods into his pail. I amused myself at how impressed Olivia would be if I walked up to her and showed her the snipe I caught huddled down at the bottom of my pail. She would probably think differently of me knowing that I had hunted snipe.

I kept a keen eye on the woods realizing the snipe could bolt out from any direction. I was not going to be taken by surprise. I did not want to look like a fool waiting out in the middle of that field.

After being crouched down for a long duration, I began to question to myself what was keeping Jack and Iowa so long. I figured that snipes must be hard to find in the dark woods. As time went on, I started to feel quite alone and thought maybe something had happened to them.

Barbara and Renee emerged from the woods. They stopped and stared at me curiously.

“Are you all right, Timothy?” Barbara asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I responded still holding my pail steady against the ground. I entertained the thoughts of making my catch with them watching me.

“What are you doing?” Renee asked a little confused about why I was still huddled against the ground when they obviously saw me.

“I’m snipe hunting,” I announced proudly. “Jack and Iowa went into the woods to scare one out, and I’m going to catch it.” I held up the pail so they could see it.

Barbara sighed and put her hand to her forehead. Renee smiled but tried to hide it.

“What?” I asked starting to realize something was going on that I did not know about.

“I knew those two were up to something,” Renee commented to Barbara.

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Barbara looked over at me with a pitiful expression on her face. “Timothy, there won’t be any snipes coming out tonight.”

“There won’t?” I asked wondering how she was so sure.

“No, there won’t,” Barbara replied. “Come on with us.”

Jack and Iowa seemed so positive about being able to scare out a snipe for me. Perhaps, there had been too many people out in the clearing keeping the timid creatures from coming out. Feeling Barbara probably knew more about snipes than I did, I went with Renee and her back to the group, leaving the pail behind.

Coming out of the woods into the meadow, I saw the other four around Jack’s truck over by the church. As we got closer, Jack and Iowa noticed me coming and started to crack up laughing. Fraun laughed with them in a high shrill, and Olivia, apparently upset with them, repeatedly swatted their arms telling them how cruel they were for doing that to me. However, the guys seemed oblivious to her hits and chastisement.

I was at a loss myself. By the time I reached them, I felt like I had missed out on a very good joke.

“Those snipes don’t come out as often as one would think, do they?” I said assuming Jack and Iowa gave up searching for one.

My comment sent them into a hysterical laughing fit. Fraun, unable to keep his balance, fell to the ground rolling. Jack leaned over the side of the truck into the bed.

“It’s not funny,” Olivia remarked sharply. “That is such a stupid game.”

Iowa tried to stop by sealing his mouth shut, but he could not hold it in and burst out laughing again.

“What game?” I asked completely confused as to what was going on.

“Snipe hunting,” Olivia answered looking at me compassionately. “Timothy, they were not going to scare out a snipe. They were just going to leave you waiting in that field while they came here to join us.”

“You mean they weren’t going to scare out a snipe for me?” I asked suddenly feeling like the joke was on me.

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Olivia confirmed my suspicion by saying, “There are no snipes in those woods.”

“Oh,” I responded not knowing what else to say. I had never been the victim of a practical joke before and was not sure how to react to it. “Funny joke,” I eventually uttered.

“Glad ya’ could take it well,” Iowa said patting me on my shoulder. “You’re a good fella’, Timothy. I always knew it.”

“Welcome to the gang,” Jack said stepping around to let Barbara in the truck.

“I’m not riding in the cab with you after what you did,” Barbara snapped at Jack while walking over and standing next to me. “You were mean.”

“Ah! Ya’ ain’t mad ‘cause we initiated Tim are ya’?” Jack asked in a sweet innocent voice trying to win Barbara over.

“Yes, I am. I think you have a very poor choice of initiation,” Barbara replied completely unaffected by Jack’s charm.

“You three boy’s cram into the cab,” Olivia commanded in that unmovable Seneca tone. “We don’t want you in the truck bed with Timothy Reye and us.” She glanced at me putting a hand on my cheek. She then turned again to the guys and said, “And take notice that I said boys instead of men.”

Jack stood, open mouthed, still holding the truck door open for Barbara, and all three fellows were utterly speechless.

Iowa turned to the other guys and said, “Well, it was fun anyway.”

Jack’s eyes moved to Fraun. “I guess I’ll hold the door open for you then.”

“Why thank you, kind sir,” Fraun responded in a feminine voice stepping into the cab.

Iowa crowded in after him.

“They can be such children,” Renee remarked as the rest of us sat in the bed of the truck.

“Timothy, don’t take everything those boys do as an example of the rest of us,” Olivia informed me.

“It didn’t bother me,” I commented.

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“You’re very tolerant,” Barbara said smiling. “That might come in handy from time to time.”

“Like with Mike Frazey and Karl Boothe?” I asked.

Renee looked toward me. I got the impression that she did not want to hear me talk about the two hoodlums, so I did not say anything more.

We drove away from the church headed for town.

Along the way, the three young ladies gathered around me telling me how unfair it was for Jack and Iowa to leave me out there in the middle of that clearing alone. Barbara remarked on how brave and sportsmanlike I was to handle the situation the way I did.

I had never received so much attention from the opposite sex before, and it felt pretty good to be the center of their attention. I began to wish that the trip to town were a longer one.

Peering into the rear window of the cab I noticed that the guys had stopped laughing, for there is nothing as bad as the fury of a woman’s scorn. Perhaps after being chastised and abandoned by their lady friends, the guys did not feel like laughing it up anymore.

Fraun turned to face us once with a dismal expression on his face. I grinned widely. For, at that moment, it was clear that I had had the last laugh.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Independence Day”

I’ve never seen as patriotic a people as the folks of Pleasantville. The lampposts along the town’s two main streets were decorated with American flags. The town’s people referred to them as the Old Glories. It was a tradition that the town had followed since the early nineteen hundreds. I had overheard Mr. Millington saying that a few of the flags went back to the time of The Great War. When the streets were quiet, the air would be filled with the sound of the flags flapping in the breeze.

I could tell that the citizens of Pleasantville had a deep love for their country, and I was about to discover their considerable enthusiasm for celebrating that love.



The Fourth of July celebration was to be held in the large field between the dance barn and the high school and was supposed to last all day. The Seneca family wanted to be there when it began.

Everyone had to wake up that morning about the same time as Stephen usually got up so the women could be ready in time for the opening activities. Because this event was so important, the ladies had to spend a little more time primping.

I decided to wear the cowboy suit Sally and Olivia selected for me, and unlike the women, it took me the same amount of time as it always did to get ready.

Sally did not have to cook because there was going to be a town breakfast at the event. That was good news since it had been over an hour and neither Sally nor Olivia was ready.

I asked Stephen why it took women so long to prepare for the day, and he replied, “That is a mystery I still haven’t solved yet, but always remember that ya’ can’t rush a masterpiece.”

When Olivia was finally done, she was wearing a lovely summer dress and had a pair of jeans and a shirt bundled in her arms for any sports she would get involved in.

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We arrived at the celebration around six o'clock. Some gentlemen, including Mr. Thompson, the ice cream man, were manning the grills. Next to them was a tent with tables loaded with food and supplies.

Mr. Millington walked over to us with a cheerful expression on his face. "Well, the festivities can begin now," he said shaking Stephen's hand. "After all, it wouldn't be the same without the Senecas."

"It's perfect weather for the Fourth," Stephen remarked. "Breakfast ready yet?"

"On its way, but the Mayor's gonna' want to say a few words before we begin," Mr. Millington replied. "He's been gone a couple weeks, and he wants to make sure we haven't forgotten him."

"Well, I hope Ben makes his speech short. I'm so hungry, I can't think straight," Stephen responded.

I did not understand what Stephen meant by that, but I figured, if he could not think straight, he did not understand either.

We walked passed the tent to where several rows of chairs borrowed from the high school were set up facing a podium. Most of the folks were already seated and awaiting Mayor Smythe's address.

Mr. Millington, having no one to sit with, sat next to me placing an arm around my shoulder. On my other side was Olivia wearing her delicate summer dress. She had her hair braided and pulled over her shoulder, and appeared particularly elegant in the bright sunlight. My mind reflected on what Stephen said about not rushing masterpieces, and I observed that he knew exactly what he was talking about.

Sheriff Frazey and Wilbur sat up by the podium with the Mayor. Occasionally, the sheriff peered at his watch indicating how impatient he was for everyone to be seated. After a few minutes, the sheriff was satisfied that everyone was ready (or he was just tired of waiting), and he nudged Wilbur to begin.

Wilbur stepped up to the podium tucking the back of his shirt into his pants along the way. He tapped the microphone to make sure it was working and it let out a loud ring. He then pulled out a note card and began.

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“Welcome citizens of the Town of Pleasantville on this Monday, July the Fourth, nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, for the opening of this official celebration, and we will hear a few words from Mayor Benjamin Theodore Smythe.”

There was a small applause as Wilbur sat down and the Mayor came up to the podium.

“Where do ya’ think Wilbur got those big words from this time?” Mr. Millington asked Stephen.

“It sounds like he got ‘em from his high school diploma,” Stephen replied.

“Nineteen hundred and eighty-eight...” Mr. Millington repeated to himself laughing along with a few other people who overheard Stephen’s reply.

Mayor Smythe cleared his throat and said, “Thank ya’, Wilbur. That was very...er...wordy.”

The Mayor grabbed his lapel and began again. I figured, with Wilbur’s formal introduction, he would have some powerful words to say to us, but I was quickly corrected.

“Well, I sure am glad y’all could make it out here this mornin’ for the Independence Day Breakfast. My! We have a fine list of fun things to do today. We’re gonna’ get a softball game goin’, play some horseshoes, and I hear the barbershop boys have worked up some music for us. Then tonight around ten-thirty, we’re gonna’ have the finest display of fireworks this side of route 37. So, I hope y’all brought your appetites with ya’, and...uh...let’s eat!”

“Fine words!” Mr. Millington remarked standing up. “Especially the last two.”



The food was set up as a buffet, and I was in line behind Mr. Millington. Watching him serve his portions, I could not help but notice that he was placing twice as much food on his plate as the others were.

While he scooped up a small mountain of scrambled eggs, he turned to me and said, “I’m still growing.”

“Eating like that, there’s no doubt your growing,” commented Iowa who stepped up next to him. “The question is which way are ya’ growing?”

With that said, Mr. Millington took a sausage off his plate and defiantly popped it into his mouth. Picking up the rest of his meal, he stepped over to the next serving tray.

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Iowa turned to me and patted my shoulder. “Ya’ gonna’ play softball today?”

“Sure, but I’m not that good at it,” I replied.

“That’s enough of you putting yourself down,” Olivia ordered standing behind me in line. “Now move on up before Mr. Millington assumes he can have the rest of the food.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Iowa responded for me, and we both continued down the line.

“She can get rather feisty,” I commented to Iowa.

“Yeah,” Iowa said glancing back at her, “she can be a real vixen when she’s hungry.”

“So, how are things going with your horse competition?” I asked moving on to a new subject.

I did not choose this topic by accident. I remembered when my parents took me to the State Fair when I was very young. We would wander through all the buildings and exhibits. My particular favorites were the horse shows.

This was all a part of my passion for the country life. These folks in the town were living the fairy-tale life I had always dreamed of. It was no wonder why Iowa’s involvement in the horse contests caught my interest.

“Still practicing everyday, except holidays of course,” he responded.

“I did not say much about it at dinner the other night, but I used to love to watch the horse contests at the fair.”

“Really, county or state?” He asked intrigued.

“State fair,” I replied glad to see his response. “We used to watch one show after another.”

“We?” Iowa questioned. “Ya’ mean your family and you?”

Suddenly I realized I was speaking too freely. I stopped talking and moved to the next food tray in the buffet.

Iowa also stopped for a moment then joined me again and said, “Timothy, how would ya’ like to be my assistant for the horse contests?”

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“Assistant?!” I exclaimed in shock. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I don’t know the first thing about horse contests.”

“You’ve seen it before,” Iowa responded. “That’s experience ya’ know. Besides, there ain’t much to being an assistant trainer. I’ll guide ya’ along. Do ya’ want to do it?”

“It’s your horse contest, but I guess if you want me to I will,” I answered.

“Grand!” Iowa shouted and walked further along the line with me.

I knew that I would not be able to fulfill the responsibility that I just accepted. When the time Stephen gave me ran out, I would have to leave. All the same, I figured Iowa did not need to know anything about my situation. When I had to go, I would just disappear from town. The country bumpkin horse rider would simply have to find himself another assistant who knew how to be a real trainer.



After breakfast a couple of sporting games began. Somehow Iowa coaxed me into joining him in a couple rounds of horseshoes.

“This is as simple a game as they come,” Iowa explained picking up a couple of horseshoes from the grass. “It’s all a matter of hand and eye coordination. Ya’ want to get your horseshoe around the pole or at least be the closest one to it.”

At first, we played against Stephen and Mr. Millington and ended up losing. While Iowa was able to ring the pole with his horseshoe most every time, I was not even able to get mine far enough to be close.

Iowa felt that my throwing the horseshoes over-handed was cutting my distance short--not to mention making my throws somewhat dangerous too. Iowa and Mr. Millington would step far away from the playing area whenever I went to throw mine.

I tried Iowa’s under-handed toss in the next game when we played Jason Remey and Michael O’Brien from the barbershop. Again, we lost.

“Maybe horseshoes just ain’t your game,” Iowa said patting me on the back. “Let’s see what else is going on.”

We went over to attend an activity where a large group had gathered. We made our way through the crowd to see the event. It was a race--a very slow and cautious race. Each participant was crossing the field carrying an egg on a spoon that was sticking out of their

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mouths. Each racer was balancing their egg in the bowl of their spoon while being careful not to drop it. Some participants were not as successful, for they dropped their eggs onto the grass.

I spotted Jack DeChamp who was in the lead and Fraun--who had just lost his egg. Fraun tried to catch the egg before it hit the ground but it smashed in his hands.

Jack won the race and immediately began gloating and posing for the crowd.

Mayor Smythe gave ribbons to first, second and third places. The fourth one to cross the line received a dull green ribbon for honorable mention. He pinned a blue ribbon onto Jack's chest next to one that was already there. Barbara ran up and gave him a victory kiss.

"Looks pretty fun doesn't it?" Iowa asked as I was watching someone help Fraun clean the egg off his hands.

"A little messy though," I observed.

"Sometimes ya' got to get a little dirty to have fun. That's why folks love to play outdoors."

"If you say so," I responded.

"Why don't we give these games a try," Iowa suggested putting his arm around me like we were old chums.

With a casual laugh I declined the opportunity.

"FOLKS, THE NEXT EVENT WILL BE THE THREE-LEGGED RACE!" Mayor Smythe buzzed over a megaphone.

"That counts me out," I explained to Iowa. "I don't have three legs."

"You do now," Olivia spoke while seizing my arm and dragging me to the starting line.

Olivia had changed into her jeans and shirt for the event. I had no idea she was in ear-range of Iowa and me.

Just like at the dance, Olivia gave me no chance to refuse her. She simply grabbed me and pulled me where she wanted to go. I did not mind it though. If she wanted to spend time with me over Iowa, I was more than happy to oblige her.

She tied my left leg to her right and we stood up to prepare for the race.

“I don’t know how good at this I’m going to be,” I commented to her.

“Be a bit more confident will ya’,” Olivia snapped at me.

The flag dropped and we were on our way.

Because our legs were tied together I kept bumping my arm into her as we went along.

“Timothy, put your arm around me!” Olivia complained. “You’re bruising me!”

I put my arm around her having no hesitation with the feisty young lady’s commands. Being close to her did not bother me at all.

We began picking up speed but were held back again because we could not walk at the same pace. We clumsily hobbled along as other racers passed.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” she said urging me forward.

By the time we reached the end, most of the players had already crossed the finish line.

“NEXT EVENT, THE POTATO SACK RACES”

“Do you want to give it another try?” Olivia asked untying our legs.

“Are you kidding me?” I questioned in disbelief. “I am not a good athlete.”

“Nonsense!” Olivia interjected as she stood up. “Everyone has a sport, Timothy. You just have to find the one that best suits you.”

“I hardly think a potato sack race is going to suit me.”

“You never know,” Olivia commented. “A burlap sack might suit you very well.”

I chuckled half-heartedly and began to walk away.

“You’re not about to make me race alone are you?!” Olivia asked.

I turned around. “I’m sure there are other contestants.”

“You know what I mean.”

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I did not want to ruin Olivia's interest in me, but I also did not want to make a fool of myself in the event. However, I decided to give in to her anyway.

I sighed. "Fine, I'll give it a try."

At the starting line, potato sacks were placed in front of each contestant. Mine was large and itchy, but I was determined not to let it hinder my performance. Jack and Fraun also joined the race.

The flag dropped and we were on our way. Not more than ten feet from the starting line I took my first fall. I looked up to see Jack already in the lead. I got up and continued on. After a few hops I fell again. Fraun passed me as well as many of the others. By the time I fell a third time, I was ready to give up. Most of the people were already across the finish line and I was not even halfway.

"Get up, Timothy!" I heard Olivia yell from behind me.

I turned around and saw her standing over me.

"Don't you think I've made enough of an idiot of myself?!" I responded in frustration. "I'll just drop out here."

"No you won't! You are going to finish the race." Olivia argued unshaken by my anger. The young lady was indeed able to hold her ground well.

"Everyone, besides you and I, have already crossed the line," I stated glancing toward the finish line. "The race is over."

"The race isn't over until everyone crosses the finish line," Olivia said nudging my back with her knees.

"Olivia, I am not going on!"

"Alright, then I'm not going on either," she replied sitting down next to me.

Voices of confusion came from the people watching us as we sat there in the hot sunlight. Mayor Smythe talked with the appointed officials for the activities. He then grabbed his megaphone and called out, "YOU TWO GONNA' BE CROSSING THE FINISH LINE ANY TIME SOON?"

"Not until he gets up and moves!" Olivia called out.

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The embarrassment hit me at that moment as I realized all eyes were on us.

“Get up, Timothy!” I heard Sally exclaim.

“I think ya’ can still take ninth place, if ya’ get up now!” Iowa yelled.

“Hey, Kid!” Mr. Millington shouted. “You’re a representative of my store. Don’t make me look bad!”

Feeling ridiculous, I glanced at Olivia.

“Quitting is a bad habit, Timothy,” she remarked softly.

I reluctantly stood up and received a large applause from the crowd. I went on hopping and finished the race with Olivia right behind me. Reaching the finish line, I was greeted with pats on the shoulder. Mayor Smythe even mentioned Olivia and I when the ribbons were given out.

“You’ve renewed my confidence in ya’,” Iowa mentioned shaking my hand, “so why don’t the two of us join in the wheelbarrow races?”

“No more for me,” I declared. “I’ll just watch from the crowd.”

“You’re letting those small setbacks get ya’ down. Don’t let them ruin your fun.”

“Iowa, to sum it all up, I am not an athlete.”

“You can say that again,” Fraun bluntly remarked passing by us.

Iowa watched Fraun walk by then turned to face me. “Are ya’ gonna’ let him get away with that?”

“He’s right,” I replied.

“There’s your first mistake,” Iowa argued. “Fraun is never right about anything.”

“What’s my second mistake?” I inquired.

“That you listened to him, and you’re third is that you give up to easily,” Iowa replied. He paused and leaned closer to me. “Between the two of us, I think we can make Fraun eat his words.”

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“How do you mean?”

“Well, I’m already sure ya’ could beat Fraun at whatever ya’ choose, if you’re determined to do so. I also know that Fraun will be joining up with Jack in the wheelbarrow race. I’m sure I can do my part against Jack as long a you can handle Fraun.”

“So your saying both of us together can outdo both of them.”

“That’s right, and all ya’ have to worry about is Fraun.”

“When you limit my competition to just Fraun, any intimidation just kind of vanishes into the air,” I remarked liking Iowa’s plan.

“With you and me working together, the Mayor might as well hand us the blue ribbons now,” Iowa commented as we both went to sign up for the races.

For the first of two races, I played the wheelbarrow. At the starting line, Iowa lifted up my legs and tested me in forward and reverse. After completing his test he said, “Ya’ better limber up. Ya’ handle like my pa’s plow.”

“I’m feeling up to the challenge though,” I responded. “This wheelbarrowing stuff doesn’t seem too hard.”

“That’s the spirit!” Iowa exclaimed.

The race began and we bolted from the starting line. I never realized how awkward it would be for me. In all my life, I had never tried to run on my hands.

Jack rushed closely by using Fraun as his wheelbarrow. Fraun glanced over at me and laughed. He then grabbed some grass and threw it at me. I went to return the favor, but instead went face first to the ground.

“Ya’ all right?” Iowa asked as I got up.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I replied. “Fraun threw grass at me, so I grabbed some to throw back at him.”

“Better leave the grass throwing to the experts,” Iowa said preparing to press forward. “We have a race to win.”

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Iowa moved fast to catch up to the others. He went so quickly that I could not keep my arms going rapidly enough and I fell down again. He shoved me on a few feet before discovering my dilemma.

He stopped and said, “You’re gonna’ hurt your face, if ya’ keep doing that!”

At the end of the first race, Jack and Fraun relentlessly teased us for our attempt at beating them. This got Iowa steamed, so for the second race Iowa was alive with energy. He even volunteered to be the wheelbarrow.

The race began and Iowa and I shot out at an accelerated pace. He was angry and set upon winning. He was going so fast that it was all I could do to keep up with him. I was basically just holding his legs up as he pulled me along.

Again Jack and Fraun caught up with us. Fraun went to throw more grass at us but Iowa rammed into him knocking both Jack and Fraun over. Iowa then raced toward the finish line. By the time we got there Jack and Fraun were close behind us, but we won. Iowa smiled with great satisfaction.

It was the first and only blue ribbon I won that day.

As Mayor Smythe pinned on my ribbon, I noticed a young lady watching me. She had long blonde curly hair and blue eyes...deep blue like the ocean. They were so incredibly blue that they distracted my attention from everything else.

I concluded that she must not have been looking at me. I had bruises on my face which were still somewhat discolored making me a little less than attractive. I figured she must have been gazing at Iowa standing next to me or Jack who was on my other side receiving a second place ribbon.

Even if she was watching me, it was probably because of my bruises or because I was the stranger in town. I did not like being stared at in that way.

I had made some friends who were treating me with respect, and I did not need someone to look upon me with any less consideration. I began to feel very cold about those brilliant blue eyes and was glad when Mayor Smythe finished giving out the ribbons.



After the morning activities the women of the town prepared a large lunch. Iowa and I got in line early so we would not have to wait until Mr. Millington had picked over the food. Olivia ate with Renee a couple tables away from us.

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At this time Olivia had changed back into her summer dress.

Olivia was what any man would want from a lady, but she liked Iowa. What made it even worse was that Iowa did not seem to be responding to her. It was like he was preoccupied with other interests, and he had not realized how Olivia felt about him.

She glanced over at us with those radiant green eyes of hers, but for a moment I pictured them blue.

I suddenly recognized that I was thinking about the blue-eyed girl who watched me receive my ribbon--or seemed to be watching me. The whole predicament was becoming quite confusing. I thought I had chose to dislike the young lady, but I was also attracted to her. Perhaps I was attracted to too many people.

I had been receiving so much attention from folks who seemed to care about me, the Seneca's especially. Olivia Seneca had a genuine affection for me. It was indisputable. Surely there was something in her that I could win over.

My eyes turned to Iowa, my competitor for Olivia. Without trying at all, he had Olivia's heart in his hands. It would have been so easy to dislike him as a result, if he had not been such a good friend.

This made my emotions confused about him, and I wondered if Iowa knew about my feelings for Olivia. If he did not, our friendship was certainly doomed to destruction. If he did, he was being very arrogant about it. He was not intimidated in the least. Either way, he carried on with a pleasant disposition that did not appear to hide any ill will at all. In fact, he seemed rather anxious to make me a part of his life.

Jack passed our table wearing multiple blue ribbons he had won during the day and one red one for second place. Iowa pointed at the red ribbon and examined it.

"Hmmm, second place in the wheelbarrow competition," Iowa said before bursting out laughing.

Jack scowled at Iowa before ripping the second place ribbon from his shirt and throwing it away. He turned to us and said, "Blue's more my color." He then walked away.

"A little hard on him weren't you?" I expressed seeing how Jack took Iowa's comment.

"Nah, that's just the way we joke around," Iowa replied before biting into a chicken leg.

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“He seemed upset with you,” I commented observing Jack who was picking up a football a short distance away.

“Ah, he knows it’s just a joke. It breezes right passed him. It’s probably the furthest thing from his mind. Really, Timothy! Ya’ have to learn that around here folks know how to take a joke.” Iowa said reaching for his drink.

That was when a football landed on his plate splattering food all over us.

Iowa observed the disaster for a moment and the ball that caused it. He looked up at me and asked, “Did I ever tell ya’ Jack’s a pretty good football player?”



The softball game followed one hour after lunch. Iowa was intent on preparing me for the game, for he declared softball the friendly rendition of America’s favorite pastime.

“It’s a direct cousin of baseball, and I won’t let ya’ argue your way out of playing,” Iowa stated firmly. “If ya’ did, I’d question your patriotism.”

“I’ve never touched a softball in my life,” I admitted to him. “If I’m going to play, you better teach me the rules.”

Iowa worked with me as I practiced trying to make contact between the ball and my bat. Unlike the other games I joined in that day, softball took a lot more concentration. I felt the skills necessary to play the game decently would take a lot longer to acquire than the half-hour or so I had to train in. Nevertheless, Iowa was determined to brief me through all the basics.

We found that I was only good at hitting slow tosses, and, although I could throw, there was never an assurance that the ball would make it to Iowa’s glove. I either undershot or overshot the target.

“Looks all right!” Iowa commented after awhile.

I smirked at him knowing he was lying, but I stuck with it anyway.

Iowa showed me some of his tosses so that I could pick up some pointers from him. He demonstrated his curve ball, which was very impressive. He was so accurate, he could hit a water pump from halfway across the field.

He pointed to a considerably large white Victorian mansion that was more beautiful than any structure I had ever seen before. It was about a mile down the road beyond the high school,

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but it was magnificent even at that distance. Behind the mansion were two equally impressive white barns.

“See that house down yonder?” Iowa asked.

“You telling me you can hit that house with your softball?” I questioned with disbelief.

“Nah, I can’t throw a softball that far,” he answered. “That’s my family’s home.”

“That mansion is your house?” I asked in amazement. “Are you rich?”

“It all depends on who you’re comparing us to,” Iowa replied chuckling. “That place has been our home since my family first came to Ohio. My great great grandfather built it. It’s older than the town.”

“No wonder you already own your own truck. Your family must be swimming in cash!”

“Anyway, the reason I showed ya’ my house is because I want you to come over tomorrow,” Iowa went on, “so we can get ya’ involved in my preparations for the horse contest.” I paused. “You’re serious aren’t you?”

“No, I just like lying to ya’ on hot summer days!” Iowa sarcastically remarked. “Why do ya’ think I kept pressin’ ya’ about it this mornin’? I want ya’ to be my right hand in this.”

“It’s your funeral, Iowa,” I responded.

“So, ya’ still want to do it?” Iowa inquired.

“Sure,” I replied.



For the softball game, Stephen was chosen as the manager of our team. The football landing in Iowa’s food evened things up between Iowa and Jack, so they both joined Stephen’s team dragging me in along with Fraun and five other guys.

Mayor Smythe elected the high school physical education teacher, a man named Coach Dale, to manage the opposing team. Coach Dale saw Jack on our team and became somewhat irritated. After a few minutes, the coach had carefully selected players that he claimed would make a suitable rival team. Besides Jack, his team consisted of all the other great athletes of the community. I could not help but feel that the odds were in his favor.

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The game started and Stephen selected one our players to bat. He hit it immediately and made it to first base.

“Seems easy enough,” I thought to myself.

Another guy came up to bat. He successfully hit the ball leaving two on the bases.

Iowa was next. The country boy stepped up to the plate swinging two bats in his hands. Tossing one a short distance away, he placed the other bat between his legs as he reached down and grabbed some dirt from the ground. Rubbing his hands briskly, he assumed his position staring confidently at the pitcher.

With one good swing, Iowa walloped the ball sending it soaring passed the outfield. He circled the entire diamond and slid into home. Coach Dale removed his cap and scratched his head as he watched Iowa return to our bench.

“Iowa, when am I gonna’ get ya’ to play sports for Lincoln!?” He asked.

Iowa faced him with a large grin and said, “Like what ya’ saw, huh?! It’s a rare gift indeed, but I owe it all to farm chores!”

Stephen sent me in next.

“Stephen, I have never played softball before,” I warned him. “I only practiced for an hour before the game with Iowa, and quite frankly, I stink.”

Although I was serious, this got laughs from my fellow teammates.

Stephen rested an arm on me. “Just do your best, son. It’s only a game.”

“It’s never only a game!” Jack interrupted. “Don’t mislead him, Mr. Seneca! Sports are everything!”

“Give me what ya’ can,” Stephen went on ignoring Jack. “I’ll be happy with that.”

“Yeah, but how about the rest of the team?” I glumly asked as I picked up a bat and approached home plate.

The pitcher was large and muscular and appeared as if he could break me in two as easily as a toothpick. Thank goodness softball was not a contact sport.

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He threw the first pitch. It breezed by faster than I could start to swing. I had a feeling that I was not going to see Iowa's slow tosses in this game.

“STRRRRIIIIIKE!” The umpire shouted.

I looked back at the pitcher telling myself to concentrate. He smirked at me and threw again. This time I swung at it.

“STRRRRIIIIIKE TWO!”

“Ya' sure do swing like a baby,” the catcher commented. “Maybe ya' should be watchin' the game instead of playin' it.”

I glared at the catcher gripping my bat tightly. My eyes then returned to the pitcher who was preparing another pitch. He threw it. It made contact with my bat. I dropped the bat and ran for first base.

“FOUL BALL!”

I returned to home plate and lifted up my bat to swing again.

The umpire then yelled, “YOU'RE OUT!”

Puzzled, I turned toward the umpire. “I'm out on a foul?”

“In softball ya' are,” the umpire replied. “Now, move on. You'll get another chance later.”

I dropped the bat and walked to the bench.

“You'll get 'em next time,” Stephen said as I sat down.

Jack stepped up to the plate with a confident glint in his eye. On the first pitch he hit the ball with a resounding crack and ran a home run.

By the time the fifth inning rolled around, I was not making much progress. I could not even be a good catcher, and was receiving jeers from the opposing team. To make it worse, a good size swarm of people had gathered around us. Iowa pitched and Jack played right field, so their talent distracted people's attention away from my less developed skills.

Our team was up to bat.

“Watch me intimidate this fella',” Iowa said to me when it came his turn.

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Iowa was a real crowd-pleaser. At the plate he licked his finger and held it up to see which way the wind was blowing. He nodded his head and pointed in the direction the ball would travel after he would hit it. On the first pitch he lambasted the ball sending it flying over center field as he ran safely to second base.

My turn came to bat. I walked up to the plate prepared to do an awful job just like I had done every time before.

My eyes suddenly caught site of the young blonde-haired and blue-eyed girl I had seen earlier when I was being awarded. As before she was watching me. This time I was sure it was me she was observing. She sat next to an older girl with light brown hair. They had similar facial features as if they were sisters.

“Well, here comes the first out,” the catcher sarcastically uttered glancing up at me.

I lifted my bat and awaited the pitch.

I wanted to prove that catcher wrong. I wanted to hit a home run like Iowa or Jack and stroll around the field laughing at every player who ridiculed me. Unfortunately I felt the catcher was probably right and I would strike out.

This is not to say that I had not hit the ball successfully before. During the fourth inning I did my best performance. It almost made it all the way to the pitcher’s mound before landing and rolling on the ground. The first base man had the ball before I got there.

The pitcher threw the ball. I swung.

“STRRRRIIIKE!”

A smirk came across the pitcher's face again, and he walked up closer to me. He turned around and signaled all the other players of his team to come in closer.

“He’s still not swinging hard boys!” The pitcher shouted.

“What are ya’ doin’, Roy?” The umpire called out to the pitcher.

“It seems to me that this boy either strikes out or bunts the ball. I think it’s only fair that we make the game smaller for him,” the pitcher answered as his team came in tightly around the diamond.

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“Ya’ know, if this youngin’ hits the ball long ya’ ain’t gonna’ have any men out there to catch it,” the umpire advised.

“Ain’t no worry ‘bout that, ump’. This boy’ll never get it out that far. I’m willin’ to bet five bucks on it,” the pitcher replied dropping the softball into his glove.

“I’ll take that bet!” Iowa yelled. “It’s a sin to gamble, but I think I’ve got a sure win here.”

“O.k., suit yourself,” the umpire said getting back into position. “PLAY BALL!”

I looked at Iowa nervously as if I was asking, “Now why did you have to do that?” At this point I had a wager on my head. Iowa gambled foolishly and I was about to cost him five dollars.

The audience became silent as the pitcher assumed his position halfway between the pitcher’s mound and home plate.

I thought maybe I could do it. After all, I did get a blue ribbon in the wheelbarrow races. On the other hand, Iowa pulled me to the finish line as I simply ran along behind him.

The pitcher made the next throw, I swung the bat as hard as I could. It hit! The ball went way up into the air and landed behind the umpire.

“FOUL BALL!”

Although it was a foul, the force that it took to send the ball that high sent fear through the opposing team players. Some of them seemed to want to return to their regular positions, but they could not because of the bet made.

I was surprised myself at the strength of my swing. I felt slightly more confident about the situation as a result.

“Young man, that’s two strikes,” the umpire discretely warned me. “If you’re plannin’ on doin’ something, ya’ better make this one count.”

The pitcher hesitated a moment as the hush in the crowd persisted. Somewhere in the distance I heard a cow.

The pitch was made and it was as if everything was in slow motion. I could hear the ball coming, and I could feel the tension of every person looking on waiting to see what would happen. I closed my eyes and swung while rapidly whispering to myself, “Oh please, Oh please, Oh please, Oh please...”

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The bat struck the ball with a mighty blow. I opened my eyes to see it go deep into the outfield. I stood there in sheer astonishment.

“Move, boy!” The umpire shouted.

I bolted for first base. When I reached there the other team was just getting to the ball. I ran for second and third. The ball was being flung to the pitcher. I sprinted for home sliding in just as the catcher caught the ball.

“SAFE!” The umpire called out.

I stood up receiving the roar of the crowd. I peered out to see the blue-eyed girl smiling at me. I liked her smile. It thrilled me all over. I came to the bench receiving praise from my teammates.

Stephen came over to me and commented, “I knew ya’d do it, son.”

When the excitement calmed down, Iowa walked onto the diamond to collect his money.

It was during the last inning that the memorable play was made. It was the classic climax to a game. The other team had the bases loaded and their best hitter was up to bat.

It had been tight for the last two innings. All the other team needed was two more points to win, but they already had two outs.

The game had been tough on the players and we were all fatigued. On top of that, we could smell dinner coming from the tent.

Iowa made the first pitch. I caught it. Over the game, I had learned how to catch the ball well.

“STRRRRIIIIIKE!”

That was one. This guy had not received a single strike during the entire game, so this shocked us all.

Iowa stared the batter down. For the first time in the game Iowa threw a slow ball to him, and it worked. The batter expecting a fast ball swung too soon.

“STRRRRIIIIIKE TWO!”

I sighed deeply and wiped the sweat off my forehead. I threw the ball back.

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Iowa played the odds that the batter was expecting another slow ball and he threw it fast. The batter swung.

Having a healthy hit, he knocked a fly ball out into right field. He quickly took off for first base. Jack ran and dove for the ball. As an opposing player was heading for home plate, Jack caught the ball in the air.

“YOU’RE OUT!”

It was the highlight of the afternoon, our team celebrating and cheering like it was the most important victory of their lives. Some of the members of the other team were pretty good sports about losing with the exception of a few.

The pitcher walked up to me and shook my hand, which I did not expect.

“Ya’ know ya’ only won that game because ya’ had Jack,” he said bluntly.

“I agree, Roy,” I responded in a haughty tone, “but that’s not the only reason we won. I also have you to thank for stepping in too close when it came my time to bat.”

Obviously angered by my comment, he replied with his teeth tightly clinched, “Ya’ sure got a whole lot’ a pride for bein’ a wand’ring vagrant.”

His loose-lipped criticism blew right passed me. I smugly remarked, “You’re right, Roy. I do have a lot of pride for being a wondering vagrant, so you’d better get used to it.”

He went to hit me in the face but stopped. He smirked and said, “Ya’ ain’t nothin’ to be concerned about.” Jerking his body around he walked away.

If he had hit me, he surely would have broken my jaw. It was a relief that he did not, but I felt real confident in myself. I felt like the toughest thing since rocks were created.

The winning team was awarded several pies. One of them was an apple pie that Iowa’s mother made. Iowa and I sneaked away to a remote table and ate it for desert.



Following dinner, the tables were cleared from the tent and the chairs were lined up in rows. Once everyone was seated, Mayor Smythe stood in front and made an announcement.

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“Now folks, let’s show our appreciation for the good people on our committee who organized these fun activities we had today and the delicious fixin’s we had to eat.”

This was followed by an enthusiastic round of applause.

“A little later tonight, we’re gonna’ clear these chairs out of the tent and have ourselves a little square dancing before the fireworks begin. But in the meantime, while your stomachs are still full, we’re gonna’ hear the sweet strains of our own Pleasantville barbershop quartet with ol’ Millington and the boys from Jesse’s.”

Up front came Mr. Millington, Jesse, Mr. Harris and Michael O’Brien all dressed up in clean and pressed suits. They started to sing. I imagined they would sound coarse, unpolished or even comical, however I was mistaken. They sang beautifully. Their voices touched me deeply with warm harmonies filled with nostalgia. As they sang each chord I was taken back into my past.

I remembered my mother teaching me to play the piano. She chose the same music that her father had used to teach her. I also recalled a night when a thunderstorm was roaring outside. I was too scared to go to sleep, so my mother came in and sang softly to me. Finally, I remembered my mother was gone.

My mind returned to the present and my eyes were flooded with tears.

Iowa, who was sitting beside me, saw my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I responded quickly. “I have to go. I’ll be back in a moment.”

I got up and walked out of the tent. I wandered to the edge of the field and sat against the trunk of a tree.

The memories were too vivid and I had lost control. I wished I could just ignore those thoughts of the past, but my mind kept returning to them at the slightest familiar event.

Iowa appeared out of the darkness. “Millington don’t sing that bad does he?”

Even at this point Iowa’s humor amused me. I lightly chuckled. “No, but I’ll bet he’s thinking he does now that I left.”

“Maybe,” Iowa said pausing, “but I don’t think that’s why ya’ left.”

I did not respond. I tried to dry my moist face with my sleeve.

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“May I keep ya’ company?” He asked.

I hesitated a second then answered, “Yeah, sure.”

He sat down and stretched out his legs. “My, that was some softball game. I gotta be honest. I thought at the end we were sure to lose.”

“So did I,” I said observing my blue ribbon. “You know, after the game I thought the pitcher was going to take a slug at me.”

“Really?” Iowa laughed. “Roy’s hot tempered alright and he hates to lose. Coach Dale doesn’t like losing either. That’s why he stacked his team with the best players he could find, and we still won. That must’ve burned him pretty bad.”

I nodded my head and wiped away a tear that was escaping my eye.

Iowa stopped for a moment. “I bet it’s really hard keeping this problem of yours all to yourself,” he commented compassionately. “It must seem sometimes ya’ feel like you’re the only one who is sufferin’--like no one else could understand if they tried.”

“That is so true, Iowa,” I said exposing my frustration. “Sometimes I do feel like the only one who is suffering. Look at you, Iowa. You haven’t a problem in your life. Your world couldn’t be any prettier if someone painted it.

“There are painful memories that haunt me when I least expect them. There are pressures that are building up on me all the time. My world can break apart at any minute. You and this entire town probably never felt anything like that.”

He sat quietly and listened.

I went on. “Take Olivia for example. I could slave away a hundred years to please her, and she’d still be in love with you. You haven’t done a thing for her, but she worships the ground you walk on--”

“Now Timothy, that’s just not true,” Iowa interrupted in a calm but stern voice. “I do a lot of things for her, and I think a lot of her. We’ve been good friends for a long time but that’s not the point. Timothy, it’s up to her who she’s gonna’ take a fancy to.”

“See what I mean?” I argued back. “Look what you said, ‘take a fancy to.’ Why didn’t you just say ‘like’...’who she liked?’ I’ll tell you why. Because you’re a natural born--woman’s dream come true--gentleman. You can’t help it, it flows from you naturally!”

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“Is this really about Olivia and me, or is all this anger kindled about something else?” Iowa asked harshly but not outside the limits of his good temperament.

I suddenly stopped my bickering. Actually Olivia was not the real stress at all. It stemmed from the problem I could not tell anyone about.

Iowa immediately became less brusque seeing that I had stopped fighting. “It is the problem you’ve been hiding, ain’t it?”

I did not answer.

“Are ya’ gonna’ let this thing tear ya’ apart?” He placed a hand on my shoulder.

I remained quiet with my eyes watering over.

“Listen,” Iowa said in a comforting tone, “if winning Olivia means that much to ya’, I’ll leave her alone. Would that ease up things for ya’ a little?”

I glanced to the ground. I felt ridiculous for quarreling over who got Olivia. “No, you’re right. She’ll choose who she wants anyway. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Women are like that, ya’ know. Once they’ve made up their minds, there’s no changing them. Especially with Olivia because she can be so bull-headed. Sometimes I swear her folks came from Iowa. She sure does have that Iowa stubbornness,” he commented doing his best to cheer me up.

“Iowa, you’re so proud of your heritage. Why aren’t you stubborn?”

“I don’t know. I think it disappeared with my grandpa.” He glanced at the tent. “Looks like they’re getting ready for the dance. Maybe ya’ should dry your face off so we can get some kicks in.”

“I’d better wait here awhile,” I expressed considering how I must have appeared. “I’m sure my face still looks like I’ve been crying.”

“I’ll tell ya’ what. We’ll both sprint back to the tent together. That way our faces will both be sweaty, and people’ll think we’ve just been running.”

Pondering a moment, I decided to take Iowa’s suggestion and we raced to the tent.

By the time we got there the chairs had been moved to the edge of the tent leaving the floor clear. A band was setting up where Mr. Millington and the others had been singing.

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The square dance started. At first, I did not want to participate because I had never done it before, but Iowa encouraged me to join in saying I would pick it up pretty easily. I asked Renee if she would be my partner.

We were grouped into four couples forming a hollow square. Throughout the music an announcer would call out strange statements like “promenade” and “do-si-do”, and the people would react doing a different movement with each call he made. I eventually caught onto the movements, but I never did understand the words.

It was during a very energetic part of the dancing that I got lost from my group and ended up in another. We were weaving in between each other as we proceeded to the next person when the blue-eyed girl went by me.

“Hi,” she said in passing.

Before I could respond she was gone.

Renee located me and guided me back to my original group.

“I’m glad I found you,” she commented with a sigh of relief. “Wilbur tried to take your place as my partner.”

Olivia had been a controversy discussed between Iowa and me, so I kept a distance from her. Because of this Olivia felt the isolation and became inquisitive as to why. I recognized this when, at the end of a dance, she pulled me aside.

“Did I do something wrong?” She questioned.

“What makes you ask that?” I replied as naively as I could.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because you’ve asked Renee to be your partner twice and my mom a few times. You have not gotten closer than ten feet to me since the dance began.”

Olivia seemed a little irritated that I left her alone. Maybe she really liked me after all.

I continued to act ignorant of what she was talking about. “I’m sorry, I never realized you were feeling that way.”

“Don’t play innocent with me, Timothy,” she warned me. “What is going on? Why have you been avoiding me?”

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She was indeed concerned about this, so I decided, no matter how things were going to turn out, I did not want to hurt her feelings.

Even though she was annoyed with me, her eyes flashed the splendid green that melted me inside. I finally gave in. “The truth is Olivia, I...” I rethought my intentions. “The truth is I just wasn’t thinking. It would take an idiot not to notice a beautiful woman like you. Would you please dance with me?”

I was laying the complements on thick and was worried she would not believe me. She cocked her head and I knew I was right. She then smiled and accepted my offer. She must have felt that my attempts to win her over with flattery were good enough.



After the dance ended, Iowa and I separated for the evening. I joined Olivia and her family to watch the fireworks.

Just before the display began our view was directed toward the high school where a large flag was waving. We sang the National Anthem followed by several other patriotic songs.

The first of the fireworks rocketed up blasting into a massive dome of blue sparkles. Two smaller ones in red and white followed it.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this,” I commented as I watched the descending embers fizzle out.

“It hasn’t been that long,” Olivia replied. “They show fireworks every year.”

“I kind of missed out on it in the last few years,” I said without thinking of the curiosity Olivia would gain.

“Why haven’t you?” She asked.

Realizing what was going on, I made my answer short and boring. “I was just distracted.”

“You were distracted for a few years?”

She was really intent on pursuing the subject, which agitated me.

“Olivia,” I replied, “I guess I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Fine,” she responded slightly defensive, “you brought it up anyway.”

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Another firework blew up into a spectacular burst of red and green accompanied by several loud booms.

“It’s like they’re stars falling out of the sky,” Olivia observed lying down onto her back.

I glanced over toward her completely lost as to what she was talking about. Her eyes turned to me as she asked, “What do you see?”

“I see fiery balls and glowing particles dropping down,” I answered.

“That’s all you see?” She questioned in astonishment.

“What more is there?”

Olivia sighed despairingly. “Timothy, you’ve got to be more romantic about things like this.”

“I am romantic...” I stopped with some doubt. “...I think.”

She shook her head.

I rested back on the ground and spent the rest of the time trying to figure out what I saw in the colorful explosions above.

CHAPTER NINE

“The Johnson Farm”



Tuesday morning came and the town was back to work. Stephen woke me before dawn to get an aggressive start on the day. As soon as the sunshine came over the horizon the temperature raised to an uncomfortable level. At noon Sally prepared a cold lunch before I left for Millington's.

Arriving at the store I was tackled in the entrance by a large brown dog.

“Sandy! Get over here!” Mr. Millington ordered while standing at the cash register.

The dog bounced off me and ran over to him.

“That's one energetic dog,” I remarked standing back up.

“She's my girl,” Mr. Millington responded scratching the panting dog vigorously behind her ears. “Sometimes I bring her to work with me. I thought ya'd like to meet her.”

“What type of dog is she?” I asked walking over to them.

“She's a mutt. I think she's part Labrador and part something else. I found her hanging around outside my house about six years ago. She kept coming over so I took her for my own.”

I rubbed the dog on her back, which she enjoyed very much. “She's very friendly,” I commented.

“Yeah, mutts usually are,” Mr. Millington said wiping the sweat from his forehead. He gazed out the window at the sun-beaten street. “My! This heat just ain't gonna' break soon, is it? Tell ya' what ya' can do first, kid. Give Sandy some more water and get us some sodas from the fridge before we dehydrate.”

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As I walked away he remarked, “If it gets any hotter, I’m gonna’ send ya’ over to Thompson’s for some ice cream.”



Later that day, I was greeted with a surprise visit from Renee, who had dressed appropriately for the weather in a short but conservative outfit.

“How is the new guy doing today?” She asked having a bright glow about her.

“New guy...” I repeated reviewing the phrase for a second. “That sure sounds a lot better than ‘wandering vagrant.’”

“Well, how are you?” Renee persisted.

“Oh! I am doing fine. For me it’s just another day of keeping Mr. Millington in business.”

“Watch it kid!” Mr. Millington interjected.

It appeared as if Renee appreciated my humor, which made it easier for us to talk.

“Listen,” she said discretely, “I just wanted to thank you for treating me so nicely considering what happened at the dance.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied compassionately, “but I’d suspect anyone would have--”

“Timothy, please don’t go on about it,” she suddenly interrupted. The emotionless expression returned to her face. “I don’t want to go into it. I just wanted to thank you.”

“O.k. then,” I responded, “I’ll just leave it at ‘you’re welcome.’”

Renee smiled a little and said good-bye. As she walked away, I wondered how she could go on like normal considering what Karl was doing to her.



In the afternoon, Mr. Millington had to make a home delivery. I was left in charge of the store. Since there were no customers to attend to, I stocked some shelves.

I turned away from my work for a moment and saw Sandy with her head to the ground and her hind legs straight up. Her tail was wagging and her eyes had a deviant expression.

“No, Sandy!” I shouted firmly to stop her from any trouble she might have been considering.

She gave me a playful growl warning me of her intent. I turned to face her again.

“Don’t bother me. I’m trying to work.”

I questioned myself as to why I was trying to reason with a dog. Nevertheless, she growled again followed by a muffled bark. I ignored her and went on about my duties. It was not long before Sandy jumped on me knocking me to the floor. It was obvious she was going to have her playtime, or I would never be able to get my work done. Considering no one was in the store, I decided to give the dog a few minutes.

She was really good at wrestling and was surprisingly clever. She knew many tricks and evaded my attacks like an expert. Most of the time she would be able to squirm and twist enough to free herself. However, I ended up victorious. I caught her in a hold she could not get out of.

Olivia walked in the door and saw the dog and me intertwined on the floor.

“Timothy!” She cried out alarmed.

Embarrassed, I scrambled to my feet. “It was the dog’s fault.”

“What are people going to say about you now?” She harassed me.

I went over to the counter. “What can I do for you, Olivia?”

“Mom received a call from Mrs. Johnson. She says she’s going to have you over for dinner tonight. I just stopped by to let you know you’re to go straight over to Iowa’s after work.”

“That’s easy enough,” I responded, “he showed me his house yesterday.”



I was already dressed to help Iowa, so going straight to his house after work was no trouble at all. As a matter of fact, I was excited about the whole thing. His house was so large from far away, I could hardly wait to see how it appeared up close.

Walking the long distance from Millington’s store to the Johnson farm was no small task. It took me more than half an hour to get there. I decided next time I would ride my bike.

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Iowa's home was more enormous than I had imagined. It was two-and-a-half stories high. The top floor was only visible through windows in immense gables projecting from the roof. In the northeast corner of the house was a turret rising majestically the full height of the structure. The porch stretched across the front and wrapped around both sides of the house. It was a spectacular building that complemented the prominent historic family that lived within.

I stepped onto the porch noticing a swing and other types of outdoor furniture. I also saw extensive patches of roses growing through several elegant trellises connected to the porch. The front double-doors were wooden with a glossy finish garnishing two large panes of beveled glass. The letter 'J' was etched fancily in the glass of each door. I rang the doorbell while peering inside.

The interior room appeared dim. It was illuminated only by the sunlight coming through the windows and doorways. The size of the room seemed as if it would engulf the entire main level of Olivia's house.

Across the wooden floor on the other side of the room were a stately fireplace and various pieces of antique furniture placed in decorative locations.

A lady walked into the room from one of the doorways wiping her hands with a cloth. She wore a floral dress with a white apron over it. Her hair was deep brown and was pulled into a bun. I figured she must have been Iowa's mother.

Opening the door, she said, "Well, you're the young man the whole town is talking about."

"I guess that would be me," I responded borrowing Iowa's confident grin.

"Sorry we've missed each other. I must say you sure don't look like a vagrant to me. It appears to me that Sally's really taken good care of you," she commented observing me carefully.

"Thanks," I cordially replied. "I guess Sally has."

"She's a real sweetheart," the lady added. She took in a sudden breath. "Oh, what kind of a hostess am I, leaving you out in this heat? Come on in and let me get you something cold to drink."

I stepped inside and sat down in the most convenient seat. The lady walked out of the room to get me a beverage.

Above the fireplace was a portrait of an aging gentleman posed proudly next to what I figured to be his wife. Other pictures were placed around the room, but none seemed as significant as

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the first one I saw. Turning the other direction, I saw a cast iron spiral staircase climbing the interior of the turret.

I stood up and drew closer to the first portrait. I soon noticed a name plate at the bottom, "Adicas and Elizabeth Johnson"--the legendary couple who founded Pleasantville.

"So, you're the ones," I said softly staring into their distinguished faces.

The lady came back into the room carrying two tall glasses of ginger ale with ice.

"Here you are," she said handing me one. "Oh, where is my head? I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Iowa's mother, Rebecca."

"I'm Timothy Reye," I responded.

"Iowa will be here in a moment. Why don't we have a seat and chat a bit before he comes in?" She suggested motioning to a nearby sofa.

We sat down and I took a sip of the ginger ale. The fizzing cold liquid lubricated my dry throat.

"How are you liking our town?" Rebecca asked enthusiastically as if she had been greatly looking forward to having a conversation with me.

"It's a very friendly place." I thought about what I had just said. Surely she knew I had problems with the town in the beginning. "Well, at least it is now," I added. I figured she must have known that Sally and her family took care of me almost as soon as I came to town. "Well, except for the Seneca family. They were really nice to me from the start." Then I realized I had forgotten to mention Iowa. He surely helped warm things up for me. Not mentioning him to his own mother must have seemed pretty rude. "Oh, and there was Iowa too. He's been pretty good to me as well." At that point I had forgotten to mention Mr. Millington who helped me out at the courthouse and Jack, Barbara, Renee, Fraun and so many others.

I did not realize how long the proper response would have to be, and I was sure Rebecca Johnson was not interested in hearing it. So, I decided to change the subject completely. "So, Iowa rides in the county horse contests?"

"Yes he does," she answered, "and he's very good with his horse, Wheat Bread. He practices as much as he can after doing his farm chores, and every evening he comes in with a large appetite."

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The term “appetite” reminded me of the dance that past Friday. “Speaking of food, Mr. Millington loves the peach cobblers you make. He’s your biggest fan.”

“Mr. Millington, dear, is a fan of anyone who cooks,” she remarked placing a hand on my knee.

Iowa came into the room with his clothes dirty and his hair wet with perspiration.

“Ya’ ready to begin?” He asked somewhat out of breath.

“Iowa J., you get something to drink before you go back outside. You look exhausted and overheated,” his mother ordered.

“I’ll have a glass of water,” he answered.

I followed Iowa to the back door of the house.

On the way, we walked through a brightly sunlit room with a black grand piano in the middle of the floor. Several pictures stood on top of it. The one that caught my attention was that of an elegant young woman with soft dark hair and hazel eyes. She wore a playful expression on her face. She appeared frolicsome like her life was filled with joy.

“Ya’ play the piano?” Iowa asked noticing my distraction.

“A little,” I answered fascinated by the picture. “Who is this girl?”

“That’s my sister, Jacquelyn,” he responded placing his hand gently around the frame.

“This town is just filled with attractive young women,” I observed. “Is she here?”

“No Timothy, she’s not here,” Iowa responded in a voice laced with melancholy. “This photograph was taken a long time ago.”

“How old is she now?” I questioned further.

“She’s passed on, Timothy,” Iowa responded firmly.

His words reacted like a vacuum in my mind and stomach. Suddenly all the thoughts of this woman’s beauty was sucked out of my body into an emptiness of the shadow that remained in that photographic image. She was dead, and that changed the curiosity I had into a sad loss of someone I saw but would never know.

“How did she die?” I asked without considering how inappropriate the question might be.

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Rather than being offended, Iowa sighed turning to me and said, "I guess I'll start with saying it wasn't her time to go. It's something nobody likes to talk about, but I'll tell ya' the story."

Curious, I waited for him to continue.

"My sister was raped and murdered, Timothy,...and they found her body down in the cellar of the McDowell Mill. I was only ten years old at the time."

I felt an awkward silence follow. It seemed terrible for me to be calling his attention to such memories.

"I...I'm very sorry, Iowa," I said sympathetically. "Really I am. I apologize for bringing her up."

"It happened seven years ago, Timothy," he replied. "It's still difficult to discuss, but I told ya' for a good reason."

"What reason is that?" I inquired completely unaware of what he meant.

"It's to let ya' know that you're not the only one with dark memories in his past," he replied releasing the picture from his grasp. "Olivia and I have a similar disaster in our lives that bonds us together like no other friends I know. She lost Keith and I lost my sister. You're not the only one sufferin'."

His words struck me severely leaving me feeling the strain of the secrets I was keeping. He added nothing more to what he said, though. He continued instead about his sister.

"They accused McDowell, the Mill owner, of the crime," Iowa went on. "He was convicted and sent to prison." He paused briefly. "But, I don't think anyone was quite certain he did it. McDowell lived his life like a hermit. This made him the main suspect, but he really had no motive for it. They closed the mill and no one has used it since."

I listened intently to everything he related about the incident. Maybe these were things he never got to talk to anyone about.

Iowa glanced up at me with a dismal expression. Placing a hand on my shoulder, he sighed and grinned.

"Sorry. I didn't ask ya' over here to bring ya' down. Let's get to training," Iowa said trying to cheer me up. Perhaps he was also trying to distract himself from his memories.

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We stepped outside through the back door onto the porch. Apparently the porch encircled the entire house. Here, as in front, was a swing and several other pieces of furniture.

The two giant white barns dwarfed the stable and shacks that were around them. We walked through one of the barns that was filled with livestock. The stalls were crowded with some cattle and hogs. There were also a handful of geese roaming freely about.

“This is great!” I exclaimed. “I love farm animals!”

“That ain’t all of them,” Iowa responded pleased with my excitement. “A lot of them are out in the pasture. Ya’ might stand clear of those geese though. They can get awfully ornery.”

Going out the other side of the barn we went into a corral. There I saw several horses in very healthy condition with limber muscular legs and sleek coats.

Iowa walked over to a saddled, chestnut brown one that had a streak of white running down her face.

“This is my girl,” Iowa commented patting the horse’s shoulder. “Her name’s Wheat Bread.”

In a dirt covered area near the barns were three obstacle courses where Iowa trained. We would eventually practice at each one before the evening ended.

The first course he called the “Barrel Class”. Three barrels were placed a distance apart from each other forming a triangle. He gave me a stopwatch and told me to tell him how long it took him to complete the course. I reset the stopwatch and yelled “GO!”

He circled around the barrel to my left then crossed over and circled the one on my right. After which he rode to the far barrel and circled it as well. He raced back to me between the left and right barrels to his starting position.

I stopped the watch. “Nineteen seconds,” I said impressed with his time.

“Oh, that ain’t gonna’ do it,” Iowa responded disheartened. “I’m gonna’ have to do better than that.”

He went through the course again this time taking eighteen seconds.

“Let me see that,” he ordered taking the watch from me. He examined it for a moment than whacked the back of it with his hand. He then returned it to me. “There, let’s see if it works any better now.”

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Again he attempted the course.

“Eighteen seconds again.” I knew he would not be happy with his time.

“Well, I guess it ain’t the watch,” he commented. He looked up into the sky. “Must be the weather.”

After finishing up the Barrel Class, we moved onto the next obstacle course. The course consisted of six poles spaced apart in a row. He referred to it as “Pole Bending”.

Iowa started off by riding his horse to the far end of the row. At that point he began weaving around each pole coming toward me. Once at the closest pole, he circled it and wove back around the poles going the other way. At the far end again, he came toward me down the other side of the row.

“Twenty-five seconds,” I said cheerfully.

“Oh my, this is a bad evening!” Iowa remarked a little aggravated with his performance.

“Do you just need to have the fastest time?” I asked.

“That’s almost all there is to it,” Iowa replied. “Ya’ also can’t knock anything over because that adds time, and ya’ can’t break the riding pattern because that’ll disqualify ya’.”

“So, how’s the best way to do it?” I inquired.

“Using the correct lead and knowing your horse well,” Iowa responded. “Let’s try it again.”

He went through the course several times. He did as well as twenty-three seconds but did not get any better.

The last obstacle course he referred to as “Speed and Control”. A fenced in area in the shape of a small square box was the beginning of this course. The fenced box had an opening in one of its sides, and branching from this side perpendicularly was a row of three pylons.

Before I could start timing Iowa, he had to ride his horse into the fenced box and turn her around. He would have to stay there until he could get Wheat Bread settled. When ready, he would break from the box and I’d start the watch. He would begin weaving between the pylons like in the “Pole Bending Class” circling the last pylon and weaving back the other direction. After that he would reenter into the box and turn the horse around again. Once the horse was completely settled, I would stop the watch.

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He averaged about twenty-four seconds for that course.

“This is intolerable!” Iowa exclaimed after the eighth time running it. He paused and glanced to me. “I’m hungry. How about you?”

“Whatever you say, Iowa,” I responded.

“Good, we’ll concentrate more on this training tomorrow,” he said getting off his horse. “It must be getting close to supper.”

It was not long after that, I heard the loud blare of clanging metal.

“That’s Ma calling us to dinner,” Iowa told me as we were walking through the barn toward the house.

Iowa and I washed up and went into the dining room, which was equally as large and splendid as the rest of the house.

“This place is magnificent, Iowa,” I remarked in awe.

“Well, thank my great great grandfather Adicas for the main structure. Each generation after added something to this farm, though,” Iowa responded gladly sharing his family’s history.

We both sat down.

“Let me tell ya’ about the horse contest this month,” Iowa said. He began to explain in some detail how the contest worked.

In the July point show, the participants would collect points by competing against each other in the three classes they had chosen. First place in a class would receive the most points followed by second place and so on. These points would be added to the points they earned in the June show. The five participants with the most points in their classes at the end of the contest would be selected to go to the State Fair.

“That is my goal,” Iowa commented with humility. “I may be a good farmer, Timothy, but I have yet to make it to the State Fair. This is my last year, and I’d really like to qualify.”

His performance that day had not left him very confident in himself. I had no idea what I could say that would make him feel any better until suddenly an idea came to me.

“You’ll make it this year, Iowa J.,” I remarked mimicking Olivia’s voice, “you’ve worked so hard at it.”

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A grin ran across Iowa's face. "That's actually pretty good."

"You better make it," I did my best impersonation of Mr. Millington, "I got a bet on ya' with the fellas at the barbershop."

"Now, I don't approve of that gambling talk in this house," Iowa attempted to imitate Sally scorning.

Iowa's father walked into the room. He was about the same age and stature as Stephen. He came over and shook my hand.

"You're the new fella' in town. I'm Alexander R. Johnson...Alexander Roosevelt Johnson," he announced just as confidently as the time Iowa told me his name. I could not help but recognize the similarity in the way the two of them introduced themselves.

"I'm Timothy Reye," I responded.

"Ya' use 'Timothy' instead of 'Tim'. I like that," he commented sitting down at the head of the table.

I repeated his father's full name in my head followed by Iowa's. "Do all the Johnson men have a middle name titled after a president?"

"No, Adicas F. Johnson started that tradition with his son Benjamin W. Johnson," Alexander replied.

"The 'W' stands for 'Washington'?" I inquired.

"That would be correct, sir...Benjamin Washington Johnson," he answered.

Rebecca came into the room carrying dinner. Everyone's attention was immediately turned to the roast which had been cooked to fork tenderness.

"If that ain't the most delicious thing I've ever seen," Alexander stated licking his chops.

"Ma, ya've outdone yourself," Iowa remarked.

I felt like I had to say something too. "Mrs. Johnson, you've brought beef to a new level."

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Rebecca accepted the complements with the greatest of appreciation. “Oh my,” she responded overwhelmed with gratitude, “that was so sweet of you all. I know three gentlemen who are going to get an extra special dessert tonight.”



After dinner, as Iowa drove me back to the house, we discussed more about the horse contest. We figured that I should meet him after work each day until the actual point show that Friday.

“Friday?!” I cried.

“Yup, July 8th,” Iowa replied quite calmly...seemingly oblivious to my hysteria.

“How am I supposed to help you in any sort of training before Friday?!” I frantically questioned.

“I realize there ain’t much time left,” Iowa responded still as easygoing as before, “but I’m not the one who set the date. Ya’ can blame the point show committee for that.”

“Iowa, what can I do for you with only two days of practice left?!”

“Ya’ can be there for me!” Iowa responded emphatically. “I want all my friends to be there, and I especially want you to be there as well.”

“Friday,” I muttered quietly.

It was at that point I figured out what Iowa was talking about. He was not saying he wanted his trainer with him. After all, what could I truly teach him about horse contests? He said he wanted all his friends there and me as well...especially me.

I was his friend. In less than a week, I became Iowa’s friend. Why he was so quick to befriend me, I was not certain. But if that was all he was asking for, I did not mind either.

“Fine,” I uttered.

“Glad to hear it!” Iowa responded.

Once back at the Seneca’s house, I decided to take a bath and go to bed. Passing Olivia’s door, I noticed it half open. Olivia was inside at her vanity combing her long luxuriant hair. I remained standing silently in her doorway admiring how beautiful she was.

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Her eyes caught sight of me in the mirror. Without turning to face me she stated, "If you're not comfortable standing there gazing at me, I could get you a pillow so you can sit down."

"No-no," I replied coming out of my trance, "that won't be necessary. I just wanted to say goodnight."

"Goodnight, Timothy. I'll see you in the morning," she responded returning to her combing.

CHAPTER TEN

“Renee’s Problem”



On Thursday evening I was walking my bicycle out of Millington’s store to ride over to Iowa’s house when I saw Karl Boothe sitting on the green bench in front of Jesse’s barbershop. His stare was cold and full of anger. He did not say anything nor did he move from his spot.

Expecting trouble, I got on my bike and rode down the street cautiously waiting for him to come after me or for Mike Frazey to jump out in front of me. Nevertheless, nothing happened.

The only possible explanation I could think of was that Karl was afraid I would tell someone what I saw the night of the dance. If he left me alone, he probably thought that I would keep my mouth shut.

Continuing my trip to Iowa’s house I passed by the dance barn and was greeted with a disturbing scene. Renee was huddled in the shadows against the side of the barn. I got off my bike and ran over to her. She was sobbing heavily and shaking all over.

“Are you all right, Renee?” I asked kneeling down beside her very concerned.

She looked up at me with her face filled with anxiety and horror. Without a word she sprung up and embraced me. Her grip was so tight that it hurt me, but I did not try to loosen her grasp. I waited a moment while holding her gently before trying to talk to her again.

“What happened?” I inquired breaking the long silence.

She did not respond but held strong to me.

“O.k.,” I spoke again, “I’ll stay here with you as long as you want.”

Time went on. I guessed an hour had passed before I felt her body calm down.

“Thanks for staying with me,” she finally uttered.

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“Anytime,” I replied releasing my arms from her.

“No, don’t let go of me!” She suddenly implored as if terrified of being away from me.

“That’s all right with me,” I responded placing my arms back around her.

I felt the softness of her hair against my arm. She was so wonderfully attractive and delicate, and I thought to myself why would anyone want to hurt her?

She became quiet again for a long period of time, and I did not push her to do anymore than that. Eventually, she became comfortable enough that she was able to release me.

As she sat up on her own, I saw that her blouse had been ripped and was exposing her shoulder. There upon her splendid milky white skin was the blemish of a large bruise. When she saw it was exposed, she quickly pulled her blouse over it.

I was embarrassed for looking at it, but I was more concerned about how she got it. With that in mind, I did not hesitate to confront her. “Did Karl do that?”

Not surprisingly, she refused to answer.

“Does Olivia know about this?” I asked desperately attempting to get Renee to talk.

More time passed and I just about gave up on getting anything out of her. This frustrated me because I wanted to help.

“She doesn’t know about him hitting me,” Renee finally replied almost without a voice.

“Why do you allow him to abuse you?” I questioned her.

It was hard enough to believe she never tried to report Karl to the police. It was even more difficult to understand why she would not even confide in her best friend.

“Because it would be worse than it is now,” she responded.

“How can it be any worse than it is now?”

“I guess you’re not familiar with small town life. If I told anyone, the whole town would know about me and gossip would spread. I’d never be able to go out in public without folks saying wretched comments about me under their breath. Life would never be the same for me

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again.” She paused briefly. “It’s better to keep things as they are. At least this way there is only one person making my life horrible.”

“But, on top of the harassment, he’s beating you, and you are so humiliated by it you won’t even tell Olivia,” I debated.

“So what if he hits me!” Renee spoke sharply. “It isn’t like that’s anything new to me. My father used to beat me all the time until he died. When Karl came into my life he started hitting me too. It doesn’t mean anything to me anymore.”

“Oh, Renee,” I commented sincerely brokenhearted for the girl, “you can’t let this go on.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it!” She exclaimed as tears flooded her eyes. “You don’t know what it’s like! You’ll never understand what I’m going through!”

I sat quietly for a short while watching her huddle up again and cry feeling no one in the world could relate to her pain.

I calmly said, “Renee, I do understand...because...I’ve been there myself.”

Her anger and sadness were not unfamiliar to me, and I realized it would ease her stress if she knew she was not alone. It took all the courage I had to disclose my dark secret, but it was the only thing I could think of to help her.

She needed to know that someone understood what she felt, and that seemed more important than my reason for keeping my past concealed.

Renee looked up at me in bewilderment.

“If I tell you, it has to be our secret. You can’t tell anybody,” I warned her.

She did not respond but maintained her stare.

“My parents died when I was nine years old. I was at home with a baby-sitter when they were killed in a car accident. Not having anyone to take care of me, I was sent to a foster home.”

“Did you have any brothers or sisters? Didn’t your Grandparents or relatives take you in?” She inquired.

“I didn’t have anyone,” I replied, “or rather I didn’t have my family. At one moment I was with my Mom and Dad, and the next I was flung into other people’s homes who did not understand or give any concern about me. Most of the time I felt the people only took me in

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for the money they received for having me. I didn't want to be with them because they weren't my parents...nor could they ever be."

I stopped. Renee had come out of her huddle while sitting listening to me. Her expression indicated both interest and sympathy to what I was saying.

"Renee," I spoke very seriously, "what I'm telling you about, you can't tell anyone else."

She paused. "O.k."

I continued. "My depression lingered on for several years. For the last couple of them, I had been living in a roach infested excuse for a house in the inner city with the Gerris family. During that time, I got the opportunity to see my foster guardian, Eric, develop a drinking problem.

"He would get angry with me when he was drunk. At first it was only criticizing and threatening me. I was his victim since I was the outsider. This went on for almost a year.

"The one thing they had that I enjoyed were some worn out books that were stored away in boxes in their basement. They were my escape from the misery. I read stories about the olden days. I love those times and the way people lived their lives and treated each other...

"The rest of it happened so suddenly. I had this idea to use a wire clothes hanger to connect a few scraps of wood and make bookends out of them. When Eric came home drunk again, he caught me using his pliers to bend the hanger. He walked over and grabbed the pliers from my hand. He gave me a cold glare and then, without being provoked, punched me in the chest so hard it knocked me off my chair.

"On the floor he kicked me in my side yelling at me to get in the closet. He locked me inside in the darkness and left me there until he was satisfied."

"Did you tell anyone?" Renee asked.

"No, I didn't. I didn't know what to do. He said he would be worse on me if I ever told anybody, especially my caseworker.

"I thought it had ended that night, but a few nights later he did it again. A couple nights after that he did it again.

"The only one I could reach to was my mother. When I was locked in the closet I would imagine her and my home. I just wanted to be home with my mother. I would pretend she was with me holding me closely--keeping me safe from any danger."

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I had become overwhelmed by my emotions from my past, and I covered my face with my hands trying to hide the tears until I could stop them. I thought I had to appear stronger for Renee's sake.

Tenderly, I felt Renee's arms go around me and her head rest on my shoulder. She held me tightly and I marveled at the amount of affection and friendship I had received in this town. It was everything that I had longed for since my parents died.

"Renee," I asked as delicately as I could, "did Karl have his way with you tonight?"

Renee became still and I waited for her response.

"He hasn't yet," she answered. "He just hit me and ripped my blouse."

"If you want, I'll walk you home. It's getting dark," I suggested glancing up at the dim sky.

Renee loosened her grasp but kept her arms around me. "Timothy, tell me one more thing. How did you get to Pleasantville?"

"So, there ya' are!" I heard Jack yell.

Startled, Renee and I released each other as Jack, Barbara and Fraun walked toward us.

"You didn't make it to Iowa's house and folks are looking for you now," Fraun commented a little distracted by Renee's torn blouse.

Soon they all saw the bruise on her shoulder.

"What in the world's going on here?" Jack questioned in an angered voice.

I saw the expression on their faces, and I had a hunch what was going through their minds. The look in Renee's eyes told me she knew it as well. I was sure they assumed I had done it.

Renee stood up and closed the rip. She took a deep breath and said, "It wasn't Timothy,...it was Karl."

Shocked and open-mouthed, they stared at her.

"What did he do to you?" Barbara inquired.

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Iowa's truck stopped on the road with Olivia and him inside. Apparently they had found us too. By the time they came to us, Renee prepared herself to tell everything that had occurred between Karl and her. She also told them that I was only helping her. Renee kept her promise to me and mentioned nothing of what I had told her about myself.

Immediately after finishing her story, Jack, who became inflamed by her words, turned his cap around backward on his head and cried, "I'm gonna' get that guy! Come on boys, let's go find him!"

"No! That's exactly what I don't want!" Renee shouted.

Jack, Iowa and Fraun all stared at her dumbfounded.

"Renee, don't ya' want us to beat the fella to a pulp?" Iowa asked totally confused.

"No, I don't," she emphatically replied. "I don't want you boys to do anything. You all don't need to get yourselves hurt, and Iowa's has his point show tomorrow."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about us getting hurt," Jack commented. "Karl's the one to worry about."

"Don't be so arrogant, Jack!" Renee yelled. "Don't you realize you aren't doing me any favor by going after him!? All you'll do is bring people's attention to this, and that's the last thing I want! You all must promise to keep this a secret among us."

"But, what can we do to help ya', Renee?" Iowa asked.

"Just keep things quiet," Renee replied with glassy eyes, "and don't leave me alone anymore."

Olivia went over and hugged Renee. Hesitantly, everyone promised not to tell and this appeared to relieve Renee a little.

With the crisis over for the night, Iowa decided he had better get some sleep for the horse contest the next day. Before retiring though, he drove Olivia, Renee and me to the Seneca house.

After spending some time consoling Renee, Olivia and I walked her home which was located across the street closer into town. It was an elaborate brick home with a slate roof and bay windows on the first and second floor situated near the front door.

On the walk back Olivia and I did not say much. The event of the evening had emotionally exhausted both of us.

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I took a lengthy bath before going to bed. In the soothing warm water I closed my eyes and rested trying to free my mind from the stress.

Aside from the problems, I decided that most of the people of the town were not that bad. My parents would have certainly liked them as well. Olivia and Iowa had befriended me instantly, and I felt I had just found a friend in Renee. It was all kind of unbelievable to me, although it was real.

Still, the peacefulness was only temporary. Like Renee, my problems could only worsen especially if others discovered them. I would rather run away again than go back.

Unfortunately, leaving Pleasantville would not be easy for me. I had not felt as happy or as safe since I lost my parents.

It almost seemed as if my parents had guided me to the Senecas, but there was no way I could stay with them. I would have to tell Stephen or leave.

When I finished my bath, I put on a robe and walked toward the bedroom.

I heard Olivia loudly whisper, "Timothy, come here!"

I glanced down the hall and saw Olivia standing in the doorway of the last room on the right. It was a room I had never been in before.

I went toward her and quietly questioned, "Why are we whispering?"

"Because mother and father are asleep in the next room over," she answered. "Now, come in here."

The room was a study. Lining the walls were shelves filled with aged books. An old desk sat in the middle of the floor with a couple of pictures resting on top.

"Why did you call me in here?" I inquired while admiring the large collection of literature around me.

"Because you're not allowed in my room," she replied shutting the door.

I ran my hands along the binders of the books. I entertained the thought that I could spend the remainder of my life reading all of them.

"Timothy, I just wanted to let you know that..."

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Olivia apparently had something to say, but she did not know how to say it. This was a problem I had seen once before. Since it was a complaint last time I prepared myself to be chastised.

“Timothy, I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

I was puzzled. “I don’t want to get hurt again either, but isn’t Renee the one we should be worrying about.”

“I know that but Karl doesn’t like you any better. I just want to be sure you’re safe,” she responded like an over-protective parent.

“Olivia, I’ll be as safe as I can. Why are you so distressed about me?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you too--” She paused instantly and the room became deafeningly silent.

“Lose me too?” I finally spoke. “You mean like your brother?”

She did not want to answer, but eventually she nodded her head. A tear fell down her cheek, and she sat on the desk.

I was not sure how to respond to her. Keith’s death had been devastating for her, and now she seemed just as concerned about me. I realized that Karl’s aggression toward Renee had probably put a lot of strain on Olivia, so she was surely overreacting about me. All the same, she needed for her pain to be pacified.

“I’m sorry, Olivia,” I uttered with some guilt in my voice for not reacting to her more appropriately.

“Timothy,” she said softly, “you’re wonderful. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She called me ‘wonderful’. With that I melted inside. She did not mean anything more than friendship, and I knew that by her tone of voice. Still, her compassion for me meant much more than a mere acquaintance. What she brought across to me was a lot more significant than that.

I guess that made it all the harder to tell her the reality of our situation.

“I’m only going to be here till Tuesday,” I said.

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“What?” She asked sounding shocked.

“Your father says if I don’t tell him my secret, I have to leave. He gave me a couple of weeks. Those weeks end this coming Tuesday,” I explained.

She paused for a second. “Why won’t you just tell us what happened so you can stay with us?”

“You don’t know how much I want to stay here. If I tell or if I don’t, I still have to leave,” I answered feeling aggravated with my predicament.

“What do you mean?”

“If I tell everyone, what I’ve left behind will come after me. I’ll be taken away. If I don’t tell, I’ll be kicked out of your house.” I leaned against the desk. “I guess my best choice is to not tell anyone and just leave. At least they still can’t find me that way.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Olivia asked getting tired of my vague descriptions.

“They are the reason my life is ruined,” I replied angrily. “I mean, if my parents were alive, I wouldn’t even have to deal with this.”

I stopped. I had told her too much!

Olivia’s eyes widened. She reached out for me, but I pulled away.

“Listen,” I aggressively stated, “I can’t tell you anything more. I shouldn’t have said what I did already. Just do me a favor and keep it to yourself.”

Before she could respond I left the room and went to bed.

Both Renee and Olivia knew enough to cause problems. I did not even want to consider what would occur if either one spoke a word of it to someone else. I figured no matter what, there was nothing I could do about it that night. So, I closed my eyes and tried to get some sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“The Point Show”

Mr. Millington gave me the day off on Friday to go help Iowa prepare for the point show. The contest that Iowa would be in would not take place until that afternoon, so I had time to help Stephen with farm chores.

I arrived at the Johnson farm around eleven o'clock. I found Olivia, Renee and Iowa in one of the barns. A large blanket was spread out on the floor with three plates of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and coleslaw on them. Olivia was taking soda bottles out of a large basket.

“A picnic!” I declared awkwardly thinking I was not expected for their early lunch. “I’ll just go over to the other barn and visit the pigs. I’ll be back in awhile.”

“Calm down, Timothy,” Renee said opening a second basket beside her. “We knew you were coming. Your food is in here.”

“Oh,” I responded relieved, “in that case, I’ll stick around.”

Iowa could not remain seated and kept getting up and pacing the floor. Although, Iowa tried to convince us he was fine, the way his hands shook when he finally took a bite of chicken lead us to believe differently.

“Alright, I’m nervous,” he finally admitted, “but it ain’t surprising being that everything is riding on my performance today.”

“You’ll do fine, Iowa J.,” Olivia assured him as she assumed a more elegant approach to eating her chicken.

“Yeah,” I added, “you’ll be the best contest rider there. You’ll easily qualify for the State Fair.”

“Are ya’ kiddin’ me?” Iowa responded. “Have ya’ seen these riders before? They’re really good!”

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“Relax, Iowa J.,” Olivia spoke up. “You’ve practiced very hard and you’re going to do well.”

“You’re involved in three classes.” Renee joined in. “All you have to do is qualify in two of them. That’s the most you can do for the State Fair, right?”

“That’s right, but I’m not doing so well in timing,” Iowa said staring into his mashed potatoes.

“Are you doing really bad?” I asked.

“No, I’m doing about average,” he replied standing his fork freely upright in his potatoes.

“I’ll bet all the contestants are saying the same thing you are right now. You’re probably not alone,” I commented taking a swig of soda.

“They probably are,” Iowa responded picking up the portion of mashed potatoes stuck to his fork, “but this is my last show.”

“No more of this pessimism, Iowa J.!” Olivia ordered. “You are a great rider, no one in this town will dispute that. You’re going to go to the point show and qualify for the State Fair! Your friends will be there to cheer you on. For Pete’s sake, you’re going to do fine today!”

“Yes ma’am,” Iowa said suddenly grinning. “Well, if I’m doing this for Pete’s sake, I had better make it to the State Fair.”

“That’s the spirit!” I shouted. “By the way, who’s Pete?”



After lunch, I loaded Iowa’s truck while he prepared Wheatbread. The rest of the gang had arrived also but I did not know this yet.

I was rushing my work in excited anticipation of the show I would be seeing later on. It was while hurrying out of the barn that I bumped into Barbara Susan and knocked her down. Dazed by the blow, she sat on the ground caressing her nose which had taken the worst hit.

“Sorry,” I said reaching out my arm to pull her up.

“You hurt my nose.” Her tone was still sweet though almost pitiful, but she definitely was not angry with me.

“Thank goodness it’s still on your face,” I responded cheerfully.

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“Am I bleeding?”

“No, you look terrific,” I assured her.

I walked Barbara to an old chair standing just inside the barn and told her to stay there until she was fully composed again. I went to the house and asked Rebecca for some ice.



Just before leaving, Stephen, Sally and Mr. Millington, who were also going with us, met at the house. A few other people stopped by to wish us luck including Jason Remy. He gave Iowa some money to go out and celebrate a victory dinner after qualifying for the State Fair. Iowa assured Jason that if he made it he would spend that money.

Not long afterward, we left on the trip with Iowa’s parents following behind. Iowa insisted that I ride along with him in his truck. He told me that I would be in charge of Wheatbread whenever he could not be with her.

Iowa was not enjoying the music on the radio and kept fidgeting with the dial. I thought the music sounded fine and he was just nervous, but I did not say anything to him. Finally, Iowa found an upbeat tune and started singing to it.

“Gosh, I like your life, Iowa,” I said spontaneously in the middle of his crooning.

He abruptly stopped. “Thanks, I like your life too.”

“Why?” I asked doubtful anyone could like my existence.

“You’re a good fella. I’ve been aware of it many times,” he replied. His anxiety had vanished as if he had dedicated all of his concentration toward me.

“Yeah, but it’s nothing like yours. You’re incredible and everybody knows it. They respect you. People can’t get through a day without mentioning your name.”

“Now, don’t ya’ think you’re exaggerating a little?” Iowa questioned with disbelief.

“I don’t have any proof but I wouldn’t doubt it,” I replied. “It’s like there’s nothing you can’t do. You’re charming, witty, intelligent, and you’ve got a rich heritage...and you’ve got a fantastic future.”

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“Don’t go putting me on a pedestal. You are every bit as great a man as I am. Our Heavenly Father loves us all the same way,” Iowa assured me.

“I don’t feel that way,” I commented. “Sometimes I feel God forgot me.”

Iowa gave me a puzzled glance.

“I’m serious,” I continued. “I often feel He doesn’t care about me.”

“Doesn’t care!?” Iowa responded astonished by my words. “Why would ya’ ever think that?” “Because my life has been awful. God never helped me.”

Iowa’s next remark was somewhat sarcastic showing me his feelings were hurt. “Well thanks, buddy! Ya’ sure have made me feel awful. As a matter of fact, ya’ just made everyone in town who’s been there for ya’ feel terrible.”

“No, I wasn’t referring to Pleasantville. You folks are beyond belief. The whole town’s like something I’ve always dreamed of.”

“And ya’ can’t see how Heavenly Father has helped ya’? Your answer is Pleasantville. He never forgot ya’, Timothy. He loved ya’ enough that he guided you to our town,” Iowa explained, “and we’re glad you’re here.”

Iowa made perfect sense, and I suddenly had no doubt that my parents were with God watching me.

“Heavenly Father loves ya’, Timothy,” Iowa went on. “He loves ya’ more than you’ll ever know. He loves ya’ more than you’ll ever love Him.”

It felt good to know that somebody had been looking after me all that time. I was also glad Iowa was able to make it clear to me. “You know Iowa, you’ll make an excellent preacher one of these days.”

“No not me,” Iowa responded. “I’m gonna’ proudly carry on the great Johnson family farm tradition. I’m gonna’ get married, have some children, and live happily ever after.”

“That sounds good enough for me,” I commented imagining the scene he described.



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There were many events that happened that afternoon and not all of them were speed contests. Some riders were simply judged by style and appearance. Still, the thrill of racing against the clock caught my attention better than the other class events I saw.

Iowa met with one of the judges at his stall. The judge asked him several questions pertaining to his 4-H project level. He was in the advanced level for training and keeping the horse. After finishing the interview the judge gave him a grade and moved on.

“Gee Iowa, there sure is a lot to know about horses,” I commented amazed by his responses during the interrogation.

“That’s nothing,” Iowa responded, “I’ve been taking care of horses and other livestock all my life. It’s the contest that I’m worried about.”

I helped Iowa saddle up Wheatbread then he relieved me of my assistance and told me to inform the others that he would be doing the barrels soon. Olivia and Renee found me on my way to the bleachers.

“How’s Iowa?” Olivia asked enthusiastically.

“He did well in his interview with the judge,” I replied. “He says he’ll be doing the barrels soon.”

“Good,” Olivia responded with a sigh of relief. “I’ve got my fingers crossed for him. He has to make it this year!”

“I have never seen Iowa as nervous as he was this morning,” Renee commented.

“Well, if he makes it to the State Fair, he’s probably gonna’ be a lot worse than he is now,” I said taking a brief glance at the class event that was currently taking place.

“‘If’? Did you say ‘if’, Timothy?” Olivia hysterically questioned me. “Don’t bring doubt into this situation. That’s the last thing Iowa needs. From now on say ‘when’ instead of ‘if’.”

Considering she had her fingers crossed and Renee was discussing Iowa’s nervousness, I felt my conditional reference to him would not cause controversy. Nevertheless, I did not debate it with Olivia figuring that she would still come up with some reason why she was right and I was wrong.

Perhaps Olivia felt so uncertain that she did not need another person to be unsure also. So she demanded all the support she could get.

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“Is there anyone else from Pleasantville also competing today?” I asked with my eyes returning to the events.

“A few,” Renee replied, “but the only other one I know is Adrina Bernadine, but she would have been out here earlier today.”

Olivia cringed.

“Is she a friend of yours?” I inquired to both of them.

“No, I don’t really know her that well,” Renee answered. “She’s an acquaintance of Iowa’s, but he keeps all his friends informed of what everyone else is up to.”

“I think Iowa has too many lady friends,” Olivia remarked slightly piqued.

I thought I detected jealousy in her words, which assured me all the more that I would never be able to win Olivia’s affection.

Olivia quickly abandoned her insecurity like a vague meaningless emotion that she was foreign to. Her mind moved onto other matters as she said to me, “We’re going to get some candy apples. Do you want one?”

“Yes I do,” I replied thinking how refreshing an apple would be in the heat of the day. Because Mr. Millington had paid me on Thursday, I would be able to buy one with my own money. This way the vendor would not frown for having the ladies pay for me as Mr. Thompson did at the ice cream parlor.

I walked with them rather confidently. Even though there were many other people around us, most of the men noticed Olivia and Renee. I do not think it was because the two young women were dressed well or they were beautiful to look at. They radiated something that the other people lacked. Their entire appearance was that of old-fashion quality and ladylike charm.

Maybe the other men could not describe what attracted them to Olivia and Renee, but they certainly recognized that something different lingered about the two of them. I was pleased that I was the one they were with.

I had never tried red candy apples before, but I had eaten caramel ones. When it came our turn at the refreshment stand, Olivia and Renee encouraged me to buy a red candy apple. I decided I wanted to go with a caramel.

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“The candy coating will probably yank my teeth out,” I argued. “I’m going to buy something I’m familiar with.”

“But Timothy, you’d like red candy apples a lot more,” Olivia attempted to convince me.

“You’re going to wish you’d bought one,” Renee added.

“Listen!” I assertively stated holding my ground. “I have always chosen caramel apples, so why should I change tradition?! Besides, it’s my money and it’s going to be my choice! So, I say I want caramel!”

“Great! Now hurry up and buy one!” I heard someone yell from the back of the line.

I put my money on the counter and boldly ordered a caramel apple with nuts sprinkled on it.

On our way back to the bleachers, Olivia offered me a bite of her apple for a bite of mine. I decided one try would not hurt so I took a bite.

The red candy apple had a rich, sweet cinnamon taste that was delightful on the tongue. Suddenly, my caramel apple became bland and almost flavorless in comparison. The red candy apple was clearly better. I mentioned nothing about my discovery to them but their satisfied smiles indicated they already knew.

We joined the others. My reserved seat was between Olivia and Sally.

“How’s Iowa doing?” Sally asked just as concerned as Olivia was.

“He’s trying to keep calm,” I responded. I chose not to directly say he was nervous for her daughter’s sake. “He’s doing the barrels soon.”

“In a few minutes actually,” Stephen spoke in.

“I want him to make it,” Sally commented. “This is very important to him.”

“I want to see him do well too,” I added before taking another bite of my caramel apple.

Stephen noticed this. “Son, ya’ bought a caramel apple? Why didn’t ya’ get a red one? There a lot better.”

I put my hand to my head. I had heard about enough of everyone’s preference for red candy apples. What did it really matter what type of sugary sweetened apples one chose anyway? You gain weight from either all the same.

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I grinned and replied, “I guess I just like to torture myself. That’s all.”



The Barrel Class started. Eventually it became Iowa’s turn. He bolted around the first barrel. Wheatbread and he worked perfectly together changing leads smoothly and tightly as they circled each barrel. It went by so fast there was hardly time to worry whether he was going to do well or not. His timing was sixteen seconds.

“That’s a good average,” Mr. Millington remarked.

“You’re telling me,” Alexander added.

And it was. Iowa came in first place, and I heard several sighs of relief on either side of me.

The Pole Bending Class was not as easy for Iowa to handle. The rider before him was excellent at switching leads and finished with a time of twenty seconds.

Iowa came out with Wheatbread in a full sprint at the far end of the poles. Weaving around the poles I noticed that Iowa was not able to switch leads as effectively as the former rider. The poles required successive changes in direction, and Iowa was having a lot of difficulty with it.

He ended the course in twenty-one seconds, a time better than I expected. Fortunately, no other contestant was able to perform as well and Iowa came in second place.

“Iowa is still doing better than he’s ever done before,” Olivia said. “No thanks to you jinxing him, Timothy.”

“Sorry,” I responded.

Some time passed before the Speed and Control Class, and we all waited tensely for it to occur. When it did happen, it became clear to us that this was to be Iowa’s largest challenge of the events.

Unlike Iowa’s fenced in square box at his farm, the point show’s box was lined with sheets of wood lacking the opening’s that Iowa’s fenced version provided. Wheatbread seemed uneasy and confused making it hard for Iowa to get her turned around and settled to the judges’ satisfaction.

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Once he had successfully calmed Wheatbread, Iowa burst from the box and circled the three obstacles. As with the poles, Iowa was not able to switch leads smoothly which cost him valuable time.

His misfortunes did not end there. Upon returning to the box, he found he could not get Wheatbread to settle comfortably in the box again. He finished in twenty-five seconds, which put him in fourth place.

“Oh my gosh! That’s terrible,” I uttered under my breath. I knew Olivia did not want to hear me say that but all of us had a sinking feeling inside.



We all met Iowa at his stall ready to say anything that would comfort him. He was silently packing his gear when we got there.

“How are you feeling?” Olivia asked as compassionately as she could.

“Well, considering everything that has happened,” Iowa replied quietly trying to hold off his emotions, “I’m feeling pretty good.”

“You’ve worked so hard,” Rebecca said embracing her son.

“I know Ma, but I gave it my best. I can certainly be proud of that,” he commented tilting his hat up on his head.

Everyone understood how awful Iowa must have felt. This was his last chance and he had dedicated so much of his efforts into it.

“Ya’ know, there was one good thing that occurred today,” Iowa remarked smiling the best he could.

“Yeah, you did a fine job in the barrels,” I commented cheerfully.

“Well, that was part of it,” Iowa responded pulling out a white T-shirt with the words “1988 State Fair Representative” on the front. His smile broadened as he gleamed with joy.

“You mean you qualified for the State Fair?” Olivia asked.

“In the barrels and poles I did,” Iowa replied almost laughing.

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Olivia threw her arms around him and everyone gathered close congratulating him with hugs and pats on the back.

“I was waiting for the Speed and Control here at the stall,” Iowa explained. “The Show Committee Manager, Julie Galingier, came up to me and said I qualified for the Ohio State Fair and I got this shirt to prove it.”

“Iowa, I knew ya’ had it in ya’,” Mr. Millington stated shaking his hand. “Finally, there’s a good reason to know ya’.”



On the return trip to Pleasantville, Iowa occasionally carried on about the events he was in. He also continuously retold me how he found out he was going to the State Fair. It got so I was able to tell his stories just as well as he did!

We stopped along the way to have dinner. At the restaurant, several tables were pulled together so it would seat all of us.

Iowa took out the money Jason Remy gave him for his celebration. “Well deserved reward,” Iowa remarked choosing the most expensive meal on the menu.

“Ya’ did a good job. Now ya’ have an excuse for spending all of Jason’s money,” Mr. Millington said reclining back and putting his hands on his stomach. “It didn’t surprise me though,” he continued. “I knew someday ya’d make it and today ya’ proved me right.”

“That’s really something that ya’ always knew, huh?” Iowa responded. “Now, let’s hope I win at the State Fair. Ya’ don’t happen to know that too, do ya’?”

“If you try just as hard as you did at the point show, you may very well win the fair contest too,” Rebecca assured him.

“Win or lose, what’s it matter?” Stephen jumped in. “Ya’ made it to the State Fair. No matter what occurs there you’ve accomplished your goal.”

“I guess you’re right,” Iowa said. “Still, it would be nice to win.” He turned to me. “You’re gonna’ continue to help me train aren’t ya’, Timothy?”

“I’ll be there if I can,” I replied with some hesitation in my voice. I knew my time was almost up but most everyone else at the table had no idea why I replied that way.

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Olivia, who was sitting next to me, put her hand on mine. “He’ll be there for you, Iowa, even if I have to chain him to me.”



When we arrived in town, Olivia, her parents, and I went to the house to prepare for the Friday barn dance that night. Sally had bought me a couple new shirts and pants during the week, so I would have something nice to wear.

An hour passed before we were ready to leave. Sally baked a couple of pies earlier and was preparing them to go.

Olivia made a batch of peanut butter cookies. She let me try one before she finished wrapping them in foil. They were scrumptious. I was fascinated by the mesh pattern of lines she had put on top of each cookie. I inquired as to how she accomplished it.

“With a fork,” she answered glancing at me as if I was an idiot. “I stamped a fork on it in a crisscross pattern. How hard do you think that would be?”



I entered the barn dance following Sally while carrying one of her pies. She cleared a spot on the table and put the pies down. Olivia came up behind her and sat her cookies next to them.

“Ah, time for dessert,” Mr. Millington remarked stepping to the table of goodies.

A song started and Olivia insisted that I dance with her. We walked out to an open area on the floor. I put my arms in place around her and began to dance the way she had taught me with Sally’s modifications.

“Well, you are much better than you were last week,” Olivia commented impressed.

“I guess you can tell I’m a little more confident than I was then,” I responded.

“This week went better for you than the first week.”

“Yeah, it did, and I’m amazed how quickly the people accepted me. I would have assumed in a small town like this it would have taken longer,” I said while discretely checking my feet to see if they were in sync with the music.

“Iowa really likes you,” she remarked. “He’s taken you under his wing.”

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“Does he see a farmer in me or something?” I asked in jest.

“I don’t know what it is,” she answered, “but, come to think of it, I think we’ve all seen something special in you.”

“Who do you mean by ‘we’?”

“Oh, Iowa, my parents, Mr. Millington, myself...even Renee. Renee has talked to me about you, and she doesn’t normally go out of her way to talk about anyone.”

This made me slightly apprehensive. I was worried that Renee had failed to keep our secret.

“What did Renee say?” I questioned.

“She told me that, although she hasn’t known you very long, she appreciates your friendship a lot.”

“Is that all she said?”

Olivia’s eyes flashed and a smirk came across her face. “Yes, that’s all she said about you. Do you think she should have said more, you conceited thing?”

“No, I was only curious,” I replied relieved.

We danced awhile without talking. Eventually, Olivia started up a conversation again.

“Timothy, can I ask you something personal?”

“That depends on how personal your question is,” I answered.

“You mentioned last night that your parents died--”

“That’s too personal,” I interrupted.

“Why don’t you want to talk about it?”

“Olivia, let’s just leave the whole subject alone,” I responded experiencing the pressure that keeping my secret was creating. “I told you I can’t tell you anything. Why can’t we just talk about simple stuff like the candy apples or the point show?”

“Because I want to know more about you,” she replied.

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“Please let me keep it to myself. Understand that it’s not you. I can’t tell anyone. Why can’t we leave it that way?”

“I care about you and I don’t think you realize that. I want to help you. My parents want to help you, too. You have to tell us so we can.”

It was like she was trapping me in a corner. I tried to be as composed as I could on the outside, but my inner emotions were shattered with my past and my uncertain future.

A single tear escaped my eye as I tried to maintain control. When Olivia saw this her expression softened and she pulled me closer to her. I closed my eyes and rested my head against hers.

The smell of her perfume and the warmth of her body allowed me to collect myself. Olivia lightly rubbed her hand up and down my back, which gave me a reassured sense of security.

When the song ended, she took me to the refreshment table and filled up a plate of treats for me. Giving me the plate she whispered an apology for being so persistent.

Renee called Olivia away and I was left alone with a loaded plate of baked goods in my hand. I took a bite of one of Olivia’s peanut butter cookies and glanced out over the crowd.

I was suddenly distracted by wondrous blue eyes returning my stare. They were the same blue eyes I had seen at the Independence Day Celebration. I recognized the young lady. She was the one who watched me win my blue ribbon, observed me at the softball game, and briefly said “hi” to me as she wove passed me at the square dance. It was she because I could not mistake her stunning eyes for anyone else.

She was wearing a floral pleated skirt and a white lacy blouse with lovely curls hanging over her shoulders. In her arms was a denim jacket. I questioned why she would have brought one with her considering the summer heat wave.

It was as if I was in a trance as I gazed at her in awe. She smiled at me and I thought my heart stopped. Something in our stare made me desire and fear her at the same time.

I admired her elegant high cheekbones and the other delicate features of her face.

I wanted to walk over to her but I seemed to be frozen in place. If I was not so over taken with infatuation, I might have realized how silly I appeared standing there staring at her with a plate full of desserts in my hand.

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“Timothy, are ya’ O.k.?” Iowa inquired walking over to me.

This broke the spell I was in.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I replied somewhat embarrassed. “I’m just having a little snack.”

“Yeah, I’d say ya’ are,” he responded glancing down at my plate. “Cake, pie, cookies and brownies...you’re just loaded with samples aren’t ya’?...Hey wait, my mother made another peach cobbler for tonight, and ya’ don’t have any on your plate. Now what’s the problem, young man?”

“Who’s that girl over there?” I asked somewhat oblivious to what Iowa just said.

“Who? Do you mean the one that you’ve been gawking at for the longest time?”

“Yeah, her.”

“Ya’ know, I don’t really know her too well, but I know her older sister, Therese Wesleyan. Why do ya’ ask? Have ya’ taken a fancy to her?”

“Have you ever noticed her marvelous eyes?” I inquired finding that I was almost falling into my trance again.

He stood quiet for a second and studied her. “Hmmm, they’re blue as the sky on a lazy summer afternoon...but no, I can’t say I’ve ever noticed them before.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Iowa. How could someone not notice her eyes?” I astonishingly questioned him. “They are the most illustrious eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“I don’t know. I think green’s more my color,” he responded putting a piece of his mother’s peach cobbler on my plate. “So, what are ya’ gonna’ do about it?”

“Do about what?” I replied looking down at the giant piece of peach cobbler on my plate. He could not have been seriously expecting me to eat all of it.

“Are ya’ gonna’ go over there and introduce yourself, or are ya’ just gonna’ appreciate her from a distance?”

“I think I’ll stick with the distance thing for now,” I replied.

“That’s real good, Timothy,” Iowa remarked sarcastically while placing a hand on my shoulder. “You are so courageous, it’s intimidating to me. What great and noble forefathers

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of ours accomplished such spectacular achievements in history by doing the opposite of what you're doing. I weep for your ancestry.”

“You're not going to eat all of that are you?” Renee asked walking over to me.

“No, I'm not,” I responded glancing around the room for Mr. Millington. Once I spotted him, I said, “I'm making it for him. Hey, Mr. Millington! I got your plate ready!”

Mr. Millington lifted up a plate already in his hands. “No thanks! I've already got one!”

“Oh!” I replied. “Well, never mind then!”

I shoved out a space on the table and sat the food down. I glanced back at Renee and shrugged my shoulders.

“Aren't you going to ask me to dance?” Renee inquired.

“No, he's got someone else on his mind,” Iowa spoke in.

I looked over to where the young lady was, but she was not there anymore. Apparently, someone had already asked her to dance.

I turned to Iowa. “What are you talking about? I was just about to approach Renee for a dance.”

I took her hand and we went out onto the floor.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“The Confrontation”



It was early Tuesday evening and I had found the time to read the ending of STATE FAIR. The book had become ever more interesting to me since Iowa's qualification at the point show.

I had tried to keep busy over the weekend so I would not have to think about the inescapable event that was to occur that night. I was hoping that Stephen had forgotten too, but during the past two mornings he kept giving me an expectant expression as if he thought I would voluntarily tell him what I had been hiding for so long. I could not tell him and I hoped he would not confront me with it.

The Senecas treated me like I was part of their family. I enjoyed being Stephen's helping hand with farm work. It made me feel confident every time he inspected a job I did and said, "That's pretty good, son." I liked the way Sally looked after me, worried about me, and showed me a tenderness I thought did not exist.

On the whole, I was beginning to believe again in people and my future had hope, but that hope was contingent on what would happen that night. I did not want to leave the Senecas, but that would have been my only choice if Stephen demanded to know my secret.

I read the last pages of the book and closed the cover. The house was quiet. I gazed out the window into the evening sky. It was just beginning to dim but would not be dark for a few hours.

"God," I uttered humbly as my lips began to quiver, "if you can hear me, please help me. Iowa told me that you love me very much. If that is true, I ask that you help me to stay in this town.

"The people here treat me so well, and I don't want to leave. Please, help me."

My voice turned to a whisper and I held my hands to my face.

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I heard Stephen call me downstairs.

Knowing the worst was about to happen, I grabbed my blanket and clothing and stuffed them into my backpack along with what money I had left.

I walked into the hall closing the bedroom door slowly behind me. Passing Olivia's room I noticed the hurricane lamp softly illuminating the interior, but Olivia was not there. I was thankful she was not home to see this. As I descended the staircase I dreaded each step I took; when I reached the bottom, I found Stephen, Sally and Olivia sitting in the living room waiting for me.

"Come sit next to me, dear," Sally said offering me an empty cushion on the couch.

"No thanks, I'll stand," I responded trying to be strong and emotionless holding the backpack in my hand. I knew I would fall apart if her arms were around me.

Stephen appeared as uncomfortable as I was and he cleared his throat.

"We really have taken a liking to ya'. You've really been an ideal guest, and I don't think anyone here wants to see ya' go."

I should have been saying or doing something at that time. He stopped briefly as if he was waiting for me to do so, but I was too scared to do anything more than stand silently.

Stephen continued. "Ya' remember I told ya' I'd give ya' a couple weeks to think things through before ya' told your story. Well, that time is up now." He paused again. "Son, we all want to help ya' the best we can, but you're gonna' have to tell us where you're from and what happened to bring ya' here."

My entire body was shaking. "I-I-I can't tell you."

"Son, that wasn't a request," he replied as carefully as he could. "Now, if it's too sensitive to tell in front of Olivia, we'll send her out of the room. If ya' just need to talk about it with another man, you and I can talk alone in the barn. We can't have ya' stay in this house any longer if you're not gonna' tell us."

"I can't! I really can't!" I shouted completely losing control. "If I tell you, I'll have to go back. I won't go back! I will never go back!"

Unavoidable tears began to fill my eyes as did Sally's as well.

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“I want to be here with all of you,” I went on. “I want it more than anything. But, no matter if I tell you or not I’ll have to leave, so I might as well go.”

I opened the front door while putting my backpack on my arm.

“Isn’t there any other way we can handle this!?” Sally desperately asked Stephen.

“I truly wish there was,” Stephen answered, “but we can’t continue like this. We know he’s a fine boy, but that ain’t enough. If he can’t level with us, there is no way we can let him go on living in this house.”

I walked out the door.

“Timothy!” I heard Olivia cry. Her voice cut into me deeply.

“Olivia, let’s not make this any harder than it already is,” I heard Stephen respond.

I shut the door.

Going over to my bicycle, I had the emptiest feeling in my chest. I wanted to do something to fix everything, but there was nothing I could do. That frustrated me even more. I walked the bicycle to the street and began to continue the journey I had abruptly ended a few weeks before.

Reaching the traffic light in the center of town, I glanced across the street at the courthouse and replayed the first night I arrived in Pleasantville. Sally rescued me that evening from Sheriff Frazey and Wilbur. I only wished that I had someone to save me from the situation I was in.

Everything that I had been through since my parents died did not matter anymore. I came to Pleasantville and stayed a couple of weeks and I knew I would miss it forever.

I rode to the front of Millington’s store that was closed for the day. Staring in the window, I saw the checkerboard on the barrel where Mr. Millington and I indulged a few minutes of entertainment while shooting the breeze about any subject worth talking about. My eyes moved to the floor where his dog Sandy and I wrestled and were caught by Olivia. I saw the fishing gear and remembered a conversation Mr. Millington had at the barbershop. I thought that I would have liked to go fishing with him once.

I went across the street to Jesse’s barbershop. The inside was dark except for a light coming from the back room. I could see Mr. Millington, Michael O’Brien and the other barbers crooning away old melodies in their quartet rehearsal back there. The chairs, counters and other items in the front room seemed to effortlessly enhance the gentlemen’s nostalgic tunes.

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It filled me with longing to be in there with them. I almost knocked on the window to get their attention, but after thinking about it, I decided not to.

I got on my bike and returned to the traffic light. My next destination was unknown and unimportant to me, so I randomly chose east and started on my way.

I rode by a few buildings on the south side of the road: the Farm and Feed, Pleasantville Bank and the Grange Hall. Beyond the buildings was a large farm with vast fields of cattle.

The other side of the road was a different scene. After going by Jane's Kitchen Restaurant, I passed three streets going North lined with houses enveloped by a multitude of trees. As I rode further, the streets with houses ended and only woods remained.

Much farther out beyond the farm and the woods I could see a creek. I guessed that it was the fishing area for the men who were discussing this leisure activity at the barbershop. By the creek on the south side of the road was the abandoned McDowell Mill that Iowa had told me about.

I was surprised when I saw two people walk out of it. They were too far away for me to be able to tell who they were, but as I got closer, I recognized them as Mike and Karl. I considered turning around until I saw a dilapidated dirt road headed northeast into the woods. Avoiding trouble, I turned onto it and peddled as fast as I could over the sinks and bumps in the road. The road stretched forward about a hundred feet before disappearing into the overgrowth, and I realized I was trapped. The only thing I could do was go through the woods, so I got off my bike and went running with it.

Having no idea how well Mike and Karl knew those woods, I did not waste any time. I plowed through the dense growths of thickets, small trees and other difficulties that came along my path. Eventually I saw a clearing ahead, and I slowed down until I was sure all was safe. As my body perspired I felt the sting of sweat seeping into the scratches and welts I had accumulated racing through the underbrush.

Stepping out of the woods, I beheld a sight that was hauntingly magnificent. In the clearing was an old deserted amusement park. It was breathtaking to see and I stood in awe for the longest time admiring it. The first feature that caught my eye was a rusted Ferris wheel that was the tallest construction in the park reaching as high as the trees. Amazingly it had kept its structural integrity despite the obvious years of neglect. The high grass, weeds, and vines climbing the ruins indicated to me that this park had been abandoned for many years.

As I walked into the park, I noticed the end of the dirt road coming out of the woods. I figured that the last time the road was used was the final day the park was in operation. I started to

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explore around the remnants taking my own personal tour of this historic heirloom of Pleasantville.

The park was not overly large. At most it was ten acres in size. Along with the Ferris wheel, I came across a concession building, a couple of shelter houses, stables, a pony ride and a carousel all equally deteriorated. In my mind I could picture each structure in their days of usefulness attended by crowds of people strolling by and enjoying the entertainment and festivities of a pleasant sunny day. I could imagine the music in the air, the lights, noises, clowns and kids with candy and balloons tightly clutched in their hands. I was certain many joyous occasions had taken place in that park, but now all was quiet and forgotten.

I wandered around awhile before remembering I was still running away from Mike and Karl. The two of them never emerged into the clearing, so I figured they did not recognize me or they gave up their search.

I saw a footpath leading into the woods to the west. As I approached it I saw a wrought iron gate at the beginning of the path. An arch was constructed over the gate with the word "FAIR" spelled out in the iron. I turned back toward the park realizing I was looking at the Pleasantville Fairgrounds. I wondered, if this was their fair, why was it not used anymore?

I turned toward the path again and walked on. A few old lampposts stood along the way as I went down the path. All of them were as equally decayed as the structures in the fairgrounds. I heard water ahead like the trickling of a stream. As I got closer to it, I saw a small wooden footbridge.

To my surprise, standing on it was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed young lady that I watched at the dance. She wore a white blouse and blue jeans with her denim jacket draped over the railing. She was writing something in a notebook and I saw her adjust a delicate pair of wire-framed reading glasses that were slipping off her nose.

I carefully laid my bicycle on the ground and I crouched behind a bush so that she would not see me. She seemed so engrossed in what she was doing and only stopped briefly once or twice to glance into the woods before returning to her writing.

I felt something crawling on my arm and looked to examine it. Creeping toward my elbow was a large tick. I can tolerate most insects but not ticks! During my bike trip I had had to deal several times with them. At gas stations I bought matches to burn them off. This was an old remedy I had heard of. Since I had no matches at the time, I instantly swatted it off my arm.

This startled the young lady.

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“Who’s there!?” She called out.

I remained as quiet as possible thinking she would figure it was just an animal. Her eyes stayed fixed on my position, but I was sure she could not see me. She reached her hand down near her purse. At this point, I thought I had frightened her, and she had decided to leave. However, instead of grasping her purse, she grabbed a rock. Before I could react, she flung the rock toward me and hit me with it.

Suddenly realizing that this girl was dangerous, I picked up my bike and sprinted toward the fairgrounds.

“Wait a minute!” I heard her yell.

I turned around expecting to evade another stone, but she was not holding any. Her expression indicated that she recognized me.

“You’re not going to hurl another rock at me are you!?” I questioned wondering whether I should continue running.

“Why were you hiding there!?” She demanded.

“Because I thought I was alone!” I responded. “I did not want anyone to know I was here!”

“You’re the new guy aren’t you!? I saw you at the dance Friday!” She shouted in a more pleasant tone.

“You were also at the softball game!” I hollered back.

“Yes I was! You did very well that day!” She cried out.

“Thanks!” I called back. “I amazed myself that day! The way you threw that rock, you should play softball too!”

“Are you hurt!?”

“I’m fine except for a knot on my head!”

She put her hand to her mouth and I assumed she was clearing her throat. She then looked back at me and yelled, “Can you come closer!? I think I’m losing my voice!”

Our somewhat hostile shouting match had turned into a boisterous casual conversation, and since there was no more need for the distance I walked over to her.

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I saw that she was much prettier up close than the splendid face I had always seen from afar. Her eyes were enchanting, and I had to turn away a few times to keep from staring into them.

I rested the bicycle against the railing of the footbridge. "I saw you writing," I commented. "This is a beautiful place to do that."

"I know," she agreed. "I come to this bridge a lot."

"Yeah, it's nice and quiet."

She tilted her head to the side. This was an interesting gesture I had never seen before. Her eyes glistened reflecting what was left of the sunlight as her face took on a new appearance.

"Actually, it isn't," she responded.

"Isn't what?" I asked losing track of what we were talking about.

"It isn't quiet at all," she restated. "Listen." She gazed into the woods. "You can hear the creek, the birds and the breeze passing through the trees."

I paused. "You're right...but besides that, it's pretty quiet."

"I enjoy small stuff like that. Sometimes we go so fast in life that we miss out on those types of things."

"So that's why you come out here?" I inquired.

"That's one reason," she replied. "It also gives me inspiration to write my journal entry. I like to keep a record of my thoughts."

"I've never kept a journal before," I commented glancing around to take in every detail of the surroundings she mentioned, "but, if I did, I certainly would write about this place and all of this town."

I stopped when I remembered that I was leaving Pleasantville. This tore at my heart all the more as I thought about it.

"My name is Mary Jane Wesleyan," she announced shaking my hand. "My dad owns the hardware store in town."

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“I’m Timothy Reye,” I responded enjoying the opportunity of holding her hand, “I’m the wandering vagrant.”

A grin drew across her face. “You’ve got a sense of humor.”

“Not a very good one, I’m afraid,” I responded feeling more at ease. “I keep working on it though.”

“I think you’re doing pretty good right now,” she assured me. She looked up the path where I came from, “I take it you’ve seen the old fairgrounds.”

“Yeah, I kind of ran into it today. It is extraordinary. How long has it been closed?”

“They stopped running that fair long before I was born,” she replied. “I’m not sure when it was.”

“I think it’s fascinating that the rides and buildings are still standing.”

“I’m happy you like it,” she remarked cheerfully, “I love that place. I go there a lot and imagine what it must have been like back when they still ran it.”

“Would you like to show me around the fair?” I inquired.

Immediately I felt awkward for asking her. She stared at me a moment. Apparently, she suddenly felt awkward as well. She grinned again and said, “Sure, why not?”

We went to the entrance of the fair. The evening was dimming so the grounds and the structures were taking on the images of vague black shapes against the woods.

“Isn’t it incredible?” She asked. “They just quietly stand there like an antiquated reminder of some wonderful time long ago.”

She astounded me with her words. She felt the same way I did about that place.

“Can’t you just picture how it would have appeared at this time of night when it was open?” She inquired helping me to create the scene in my mind. “The rides and the buildings would be filled with lights. The carousel would be playing music--”

“The midway would be crowded with people hurrying to get a ride on the Ferris wheel, farmers showing their prize livestock, and kids begging for goodies from their parents,” I jumped in adding more to the image.

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“Exactly,” she said looking at me excitedly. “I can imagine a dance going on at that shelter house.” She pointed to the shelter closest to the concession building.

“Yeah, with women in lacy country dresses and men wearing their Sunday suits twirling around the dance floor.”

“That’s right!” She nodded. “I thought I was the only one who cared to imagine such things.”

“I have a deep affection for country life and the past,” I responded gazing into her marvelous eyes now darkened with the evening. I suddenly wanted to take her hand and stroll around the fairground ruins like a young couple enjoying an evening at the park.

She put her jacket on and said, “Maybe I should be getting home.”

I had felt infatuation before but never this strongly. I could not understand why either. I had just met this young lady a short while before, and suddenly I did not want to be away from her. I had to find an excuse to be with her longer.

“M-M-May I walk you home?” I asked stuttering nervously.

She paused a second tilting her head again. “Sure.”

I grabbed my bicycle and the two of us left. We returned to the bridge and continued following the path until it ended at one of the roads, lined with houses, I had seen earlier. This particular road had houses only on one side while the side that the path came out on was simply wooded.

Our conversation never ended the entire way. We talked about her family. Her older sister, Therese, who Iowa had mentioned at the dance, was her only sibling. She mentioned that Therese was attracted to eccentric and whimsical items and her father had a habit of being gullible.

“He’s always getting taken in by anything he thinks is a good deal,” she said. “My mom is much better at business than dad is and she’s the reason his store has been able to stay open.”

“I’d assume she’d have to be if he’s real bad at making a good purchase,” I commented.

“He’s a good man though, everybody likes him. Oh, let me tell you about his last blunder,” she went on chuckling. “Some store--I can’t remember the name--went out of business in Cincinnati. My dad knew someone who was able to get him an opportunity to buy a bunch of flashlights from this store at a great bargain. What my dad didn’t find out ‘til later was that

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this store was a toy store. Before he knew it, daddy ended up stuck with six hundred ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlights.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” I uttered.

“Nor had anyone else in this town, but it’s something we won’t forget,” she continued. “These flashlights were little hot pink thingies with the face of a clown on the side that would illuminate when the light was turned on.”

“You mean the clown face was the light?” I asked getting involved in her story.

“No, it was a regular flashlight. The face was on the handle,” she replied. “Anyway, since my dad ran a hardware store, these hot pink clown lights didn’t go over well in sales. In fact, they didn’t go over at all. Daddy couldn’t sell a single one no matter how low he made the price. People would much rather purchase a more expensive respectable flashlight than one with Glowie’s face on the side. Even my Uncle Remey, who owns the Farm and Feed store, couldn’t sell any when my daddy asked him to help.”

“I feel so sorry for the guy,” I commented entertained by her father’s dilemma.

“Well, my dad finally decided to get rid of them but he didn’t know how. Along came my sister, Therese, who took an interest in them. So she asked if he would give them to her for her birthday.”

“She wanted six hundred toy flashlights for her birthday?” I questioned in shock.

“She was in love with them! She gets so fascinated with the oddest stuff, but fortunately her interest in them doesn’t last long. Anyway, after begging him for the flashlights for a week and a half, daddy gave them all to her.”

“So, now your sister has six hundred ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlights.”

“Yes, with batteries included,” she confirmed, “but now that her interest has moved on, those clown lights just sit in three large boxes in our shack at home.”

We came to a picket fence that ran along the front yard of her home and stopped at the gate. She lived in a charming but modest white house that was two stories high.

On the front porch I could see a swing like the Seneca’s and several flowerpots of healthy blossoms on the stairs. A small footpath extended from the gate to the porch that was bordered by other varieties of flowers.

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“Who’s your gardener?” I asked.

“My mom is,” she answered. “She’s really into it. You should see this house during the daytime.”

The porch light turned on and a middle-aged gentleman walked out of the front door onto the porch.

“It’s getting late Mary Jane,” he said looking at the two of us.

“That’s my dad,” she said opening the gate.

“I guess I better be going,” I commented getting on my bike.

I wanted to ask for her telephone number or when I could see her again but I did not. This would be the only time I would have a chance to talk with her because I was leaving town.

Mary Jane walked onto the porch and waved good-bye. I tried to take with me a mental picture of her so that I could reflect on it when I reminisced about Pleasantville in the future. Her father walked inside behind her shutting the door and turning out the light. I sighed deeply and began to ride away.

I knew how to get back to Pleasantville Road so I could leave, but I could not bring myself to go there. My feelings for the town were intense and I was not ready to depart from it yet.

The road Mary Jane lived on, which I discovered was called Willow Tree, ran parallel to Pleasantville Road. It was on the other end of the roads lined with houses I passed earlier.

I stayed on her road and followed it east. I eventually came to an intersection with a road called Maple that headed north. Willow Tree went on eastward disappearing into the dark woods. Not liking what was ahead, I turned north.

There were other houses along this road as well. Some still had their lights on. I fantasized what was happening in those warmly lit windows as I passed by. I amused myself imagining families sitting around their living rooms spending time together before retiring for the night. I could picture a mother bringing in desert to a grateful husband and children. I gazed into the illuminated upstairs windows and entertained the image of a child’s bedroom with a little girl nestled tightly around her father’s arm as he read a book to her.

My yearnings to have had these experiences in my life were some of my greatest desires and dreams. In this town I had been accepted by a good family and was away from my agony until my past destroyed it all.

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The road ended at a crossing road called Culmination. Glancing down the road to the west, I saw an old one-floor building standing next to the railroad tracks. It was the only building on this short road. Both ends of the road ended not very far in either direction making the road roughly a hundred yards in length. After passing the building, the railroad tracks curved deep into a field across the road and faded into the distance.

I rode over to the building. A paint-chipped sign indicated it was formerly the Pleasantville Railroad Station. The windows were dingy and only allowed me to see the room inside blackened with the night. The place appeared as deteriorated and abandoned as the fairgrounds had.

Both places, the fairground and the railroad station, were hidden away from the main streets of town. I figured that at one time there were less houses and roads in the area so these two historic landmarks did not appear so secluded.

The weeds in the cracking road lead me to believe that Culmination was a lane nearly forgotten. After all, why would anyone have a need to come to this remote stretch of road anyway? Its sole purpose, the railroad station, had been closed for a very long time. As the ends of the road faded into the weeds and grass so had its usefulness faded with the years gone by.

I figured I could surely pull off nearby to sleep without disturbing anybody, but I did not stay at the station. Instead, I went out into the field to a large solitary tree a short distance from the road. Once I arrived, I opened my bag and took out my blanket, which no longer had its odor. Lying down against the trunk of the tree, I immediately felt the familiar discomfort that I had become accustomed to before arriving in town. It was not a welcome sensation at all. I much preferred the bed at the Seneca house.

As a matter of fact, I liked the Senecas more than I realized I did. I also liked Iowa, Mr. Millington, Renee, and I was really getting to like Mary Jane Wesleyan. I questioned whether I would ever have these marvelous encounters in another town, or was the Pleasantville experience unique and once in a lifetime?

I started to reconsider keeping my secret, however the fear and confusion of it all kept me from doing anything more than resting under that tree.

Tilting my head back I gazed into the greatly numerous and brilliant starry sky. This was a sight that I saw many times on my bicycle trip. Its beauty and peacefulness used to be enough to relax me, but that night it agitated me more.

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“Iowa told me you loved me, God,” I said pausing afterward. “If you do, why didn’t you keep this from happening? Why didn’t you help me stay?”

I was suddenly distracted by the headlights of a vehicle coming toward town on Main Street, which was far across the field from me. I was above town where there were no obstacles to block my view. Another vehicle came out of town. Both vehicles stopped beside each other. After a few minutes they both went into town. I briefly wondered if it had anything to do with me. Could it have been someone searching?

Mike Frazey might have told his father that he saw me. Maybe the sheriff and Wilbur were looking for me, but the police station only had one cruiser. Whoever it was, I was happy I was safely tucked away back in the field.

“I had just started to believe you were really watching over me,” I uttered continuing my conversation with God. “I guess that’s what I get for trusting.”

I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep. Tomorrow I would be travelling again and needed my rest.



My dozing was interrupted when headlights shined on me. I turned to see a pickup truck on Culmination that had partially pulled into the field. I immediately thought to hide but realized that my bicycle leaning against the tree had already given me away.

“Timothy! Is that you?!” I heard Iowa yell.

I was relieved that it was not the sheriff and Wilbur, but it did seem silly that Iowa would ask if it was me. I mean how many people could have been in Pleasantville that night camping outside beside their bicycles?

“Who do you think it would be!?” I called back.

Iowa came up to me followed by Stephen, which surprised me. What did Stephen want from me at that point?

“We have been looking all over for ya’ the entire evening,” Iowa commented.

“Well, here I am,” I replied with a hint of callousness. “Where would you expect me to be, in a hotel?!”

“Now I understand your anger, son,” Stephen said gently.

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“Do you?!” I responded. “My whole life is falling apart because of something I can’t get away from. I was with you and your family and was O.k. again. For the first time since my parents died, I felt wanted and appreciated. Tonight comes and I have to leave it all and continue running. I’m glad you can understand my anger!”

“Your parents died?” Iowa asked sitting down beside me.

“Son,” Stephen spoke, “I want ya’ to know that no sooner had ya’ left that my family and I talked about your predicament. Olivia has already told us about your parents dying. My wife then insisted that I go out and find ya’.”

“What about you? How did you feel about it?” I questioned him.

“I formed the posse to look for ya’! Do ya’ know who is out there searching for ya’ right now?”

“We have five cars going through town and all around the surrounding area. There’s Jack and Fraun, Phillip Millington, Alexander Johnson, Jason Remy, and Iowa and I all out trying to find ya’.”

“Why did you go to all that trouble when you just threw me out of your house?” I asked.

“No son, ya’ made the decision yourself to leave. I agreed with ya’. If ya’ couldn’t tell us, there would be no choice,” Stephen replied.

“Why do I have to tell you anything now? I’m not in your house anymore.” My emotions were very confused. I did not want to act so cold to Stephen, but I felt rejected by him. I was also filled with fear because I had no idea where I was going to go or what would become of me.

“That’s true,” Stephen remarked, “and I still want to know your story before I take ya’ home. I want ya’ to know that we sincerely want to help ya’. You’re a fine young man, and we all have noticed it. Over these last two weeks I’ve seen a timid, distrusting boy turn into a friendly, hard-working, respectable young man. Our entire family likes you quite a bit. Otherwise, we would not have gone to all this trouble to bring ya’ back.”

“The Seneca’s ain’t the only ones who want ya’ to stick around,” Iowa added. “The whole gang adores ya’...Renee, Jack, Barbara, and Fraun...My parents like ya’...Oh, and Mr. Millington--he really thinks you’re something.”

My mind remained focused on Stephen. “So why was it so easy for you to let me go?”

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“That’s just it, son,” Stephen answered. “It wasn’t easy to let ya’ go and that’s why I’m out here with ya’ now. I just want to tell ya’ that ya’ don’t have to be alone with this problem. We will be there for ya’.”

“There’s nothing you can do. I’ll have to go back if I tell you. If you really want to help me, you’d let me stay with you without explaining anything. Just let my secret remain buried,” I said knowing Stephen would never agree to these conditions.

“I can’t let ya’ do that,” Stephen responded removing any doubt. “Ya’ can’t hide from your problems. Otherwise, they’ll never die and you’ll never be at ease.”

“Just leave me alone.” I pulled my blanket up to my neck.

Stephen glanced over to Iowa. “I’ve done all I can. He just doesn’t want to trust anyone.”

They both started to leave. After taking a few steps, Stephen stopped and turned around. He took his wallet from his pocket and pulled out some money. He then came over and set it on the ground beside me.

“Son, that’s fifty dollars,” he said. “That’s all I have on me. That should last ya’ awhile.” He paused. Even in the dark I could see his expression was full of sadness and pity for me. “I want ya’ to realize that life will not get any easier for ya’ as long as ya’ keep running away. We are all here for ya’ now. Ya’ probably won’t find that again on your journey.”

I did not say anything.

He drew in a long slow breath. “Good luck, son...Take care of yourself.”

He turned toward Iowa, and they walked away.

In my mind, I repeated his words in my head, and I felt Stephen might be right. Still, there was nothing that I could do. If I told him, and he could not do anything for me, he would immediately call Children’s Services and I would end up where I was.

What if I did not say anything and kept running? Most likely I would never find another place like Pleasantville, and I would continue running alone without anything to comfort me. What would I do with myself when I turned eighteen and would still be a nomad? Life would be intolerably horrible with no sign of hope.

My future was dreary and discouraging no matter what path I took, but, at least with the Seneca family, I had a chance.

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“STEPHEN! IOWA!” I yelled as loud as I could. Almost to the truck, they halted and turned around.

“I have something to tell you!” I called out.

They returned to the tree, and I handed Stephen his money.

For the next hour or so, I told them my life story about the foster homes and Eric Gerris. I explained the night that Eric came home drunk and beat me before putting me in a closet. I went on to tell them the other painful events about how Eric continued to abuse me afterward. It did not matter whether he was drunk or sober because eventually he would still hurt me.

I told Stephen and Iowa how much I loved my real parents and how cheated my life had been since they died. I explained that my memories of them were the only things that gave me strength to get through those terrible experiences.

By this point my emotions had fallen apart as I disclosed my tale to the two of them.

“And that’s why ya’ came here?” Stephen asked.

“Well,” I went on, “I had no idea where I was going to go. One night I just got tired of being hit around. I became fed up with wondering each day whether he’d get drunk, whether he’d beat me up again, or whether things would ever change for me.

“I woke up one night and decided I had to leave. No matter what would happen to me, I had to get away from there. I grabbed my backpack and stuffed in a blanket and some clothing. I stole some money from a pair of dirty jeans Eric left on the living room floor. I knew he would only spend it on more liquor, and that I could use it.

“I didn’t want to wait anymore for things to improve, I was going to make something happen. I got on my bike in the middle of the night and left.”

Stephen nodded as if he clearly understood how I felt.

I went on. “I knew they’d come looking for me--I mean Children’s Services. I didn’t want to be sent back to the Gerris family or anywhere else. Even if I were placed in some other home, how would I know if my next foster family would treat me well? Besides that, what type of future did I have ahead of me?

“So, I rode my bike out of town and kept on going. I figured the best thing I could do was get out of the city assuming the greater the distance the less chance they’d have of finding me.”

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“Ya’ stole the money to survive on?” Stephen inquired.

“Yeah. I knew that I would need to buy food and necessities,” I replied. “I limited myself to one meal a day, and I purchased food that wouldn’t cost much. I’d buy gas station hotdogs, potato chips and soda most of the time. This worked out well for awhile, but the farther I went into the country, the less I ran into places to get food. So, I’d buy extra when I got the chance.”

“Where’d ya’ sleep at night?” Iowa asked.

“Much the same way I am tonight,” I answered, “and I’d been doing it for a number of days in this scorching heat. I did it until Sheriff Frazey caught me. I was just passing through before I stopped to sleep again. Pleasantville didn’t seem any different than any of the other towns.” I paused briefly. “I had no idea that it would end up meaning so much to me.”

A moment passed and none of us spoke a word.

I was trying to guess what was going to happen next and I questioned myself whether they were thinking the same. Perhaps Stephen was reconsidering if he really wanted to help me.

“I am a runaway, Stephen,” I broke the silence. “I really appreciate all you’ve done for me, and I understand if you don’t want to implicate yourself any further.”

After thinking about it a little more, Stephen stretched his back and glanced at his wristwatch. His eyes then turned to me again. He reached out his hand and said, “It’s getting late. There’s chores to be done tomorrow. Let’s go home, son.”

I could not be sure whether he meant for me to stay with him and his family for the night or longer. I also did not know what Stephen was intending to do with me considering my situation but, since I had no other good options, I went with him.

At the house I was greeted with embraces from two very worried ladies who were genuinely concerned about me. I was then treated to milk and cookies. Sally and Olivia sat across the table staring at me compassionately as if they were nourishing me to health.

“I’m all right,” I finally uttered. “I’ve only been gone a few hours.”

“We’re so glad you’re home,” Sally responded.

Olivia nodded in agreement and the staring persisted.

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I could not take it anymore. “Is there a large grotesque boil or pimple on my face that I’m not aware of? I mean has something bizarre happened to me that’s caused you two to take great interest in looking at me?”

“I’m sorry, dear,” Sally replied recognizing my slight discomfort. “We’ll let you eat in peace.”

Olivia walked out of the room. Sally did the same but not until after giving me another hug.

As Sally left I uttered, “Thank you for caring so much.”

“It’s no bother, dear,” she replied.



I had a hard time getting to sleep. Although I was safely in bed at the Seneca home, I had no idea how long I would be able to stay. I was also concerned with how Stephen and Sally would handle my dilemma now that they knew everything.

Would they report me to Children’s Services? I would never accept returning there and I had made that clear.

Would they really try to help me? If they did, would they be able to do anything that could make a difference?

My rest was also being distracted by a conversation going on across the hall in the sewing room. The muffled voices were disturbing. I knew the subject was obviously about me. Thinking that listening in would inform me of the Senecas’ intentions, I cracked the door open so I could understand what they were saying.

“We can’t let him go back to a foster home after what he’s been through. Bless his little heart!” Sally exclaimed emotionally.

“I don’t want to see him go back into that lifestyle either,” Stephen responded much more calmly. “I just said that we have to measure the facts so that we can discuss the options available to us. I promised him we’d help and that’s what we’ll do.”

“I won’t let him go back!” Sally stated firmly.

“I agree with ya’, Sally, but I don’t know what the law will say about us harboring a runaway,” Stephen said maintaining his gentle tone of voice.

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“Well, I won’t tell anyone,” Sally commented. “Why do we have to tell anybody about this? We’ll just keep quiet.”

“And how long will that last?” Stephen questioned. “Will we keep him out of school? Will we keep him out of the public eye? Someone’s gonna’ find out about him some time and he’ll be sent back to foster care.”

“We’ll adopt him!” Sally cried.

“Now wait a minute!” Stephen interjected. “Let’s not get out of control here. We don’t even know for sure if he’s telling the truth about all of this yet.”

“He is, Daddy,” I heard Olivia speak.

“I thought ya’ were asleep, young lady,” Stephen said.

“I was ‘til you guys woke me up,” Olivia snapped. “I think Timothy is telling the truth. He accidentally mentioned his parents dying the other night. Why would he be hiding that unless there was some truth to it?”

“I believe him,” Sally spoke in. “Why don’t you, Stephen?”

There was a brief pause.

“The fact is I believe him, too,” Stephen admitted. “He’s a pretty respectable young man, and I really have no reason to doubt him.”

There was a longer silence following this.

“What are we going to do, Daddy?” Olivia asked.

“I don’t know,” Stephen replied somewhat frustrated. “There are so many other matters to attend to right now. This draught ain’t letting up and I’ve got the crops to worry about. I guess we’ll let Timothy stay until we can figure out some sort of solution. But, his story goes no further than this house. I don’t want a single word of it said to anyone, or we may have no choice but to give him up.”

“Thank you, Stephen,” Sally responded relieved.

“I love you, Daddy,” Olivia remarked.

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I myself was a bit comforted. Any problems I would have to deal with would not be for awhile.

I closed the door and went to bed.

A few minutes passed and Sally walked into the room. So she would not think I was listening in on their family meeting, I pretended to be asleep. She sat down next to me on the bed and ran her hand through my hair. I then felt her kiss my cheek. It brought to mind memories of my mother and how much she loved me.

Sally left the room and I tried to get some rest.



I opened my eyes to discover that I had been asleep a few hours. The room was still and I could tell it was the middle of the night. That was when I saw her. My mother was standing on the other side of the room. I was bewildered at her appearance and for a moment I said nothing.

Her manifestation was just as I had always remembered her. She seemed unchanged by the years that had passed. She was young, beautiful and glowed like an angel.

“Mom, is that you?” I asked.

She walked over to the foot of my bed.

“You’re here in Pleasantville?” I questioned.

Mother smiled at me with a facial expression that I remembered from years gone by. I had not seen such a smile in years. I felt very warm and loved by it.

“Mom, where have you been? They took me away to a foster home. I’ve missed you so much.” I began to cry.

The smile never left her face and she stood perfectly still gazing at me.

“I love you, Mommy,” I went on. “Please, don’t ever go away again.”

As I finished my words she began to fade into the darkness. The scene filled me with terror and despair.

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“Mom! Mom!” I shouted as loud as I could. Again, I was being abandoned like I was before when I was put in foster care. “I don’t want to lose you again!”

I awoke realizing it was a dream but the ghostly apparition of her remained in my head. “Mom, please don’t leave me,” I begged with my eyes shedding the same tears I had shed at the Gerris home.

Sally rushed into the room wearing a quilted robe. Finding me safe and sound, she relaxed.

“What’s wrong, dear?” She softly asked.

There was nothing I could say. I was embarrassed that Sally heard me. Still, the overwhelming emotions remained.

“I-I-I saw my mother,” I eventually replied. “She was standing at the foot of the bed.”

I assumed Sally would think I was crazy when I told her but her eyes expressed compassion. She sat down on the bedside and put her hand to my cheek.

“She disappeared,” I continued.

Sally wrapped her arms around me and pulled me to her.

“I know it was a dream,” I said. “I really miss her.”

“Everything’s all right now, dear,” Sally soothed.

I breathed out a long sigh.

“I guess I’m being pretty silly, huh?” I asked.

“No dear,” she responded gently, “I understand. I’ve been there before myself.”

I was relieved that she could empathize with my grief.

“I’ve told you about my son, haven’t I?” She inquired keeping me close to her. “There are still many nights I dream of him coming home...telling me that there was some mistake and he was here to stay. I have cried many nights thinking about him. Sometimes I’d even go out back to see if he was coming across the field and sometimes I would just come in here.”

A few minutes passed before either of us spoke again.

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“Iowa told me that God loves me and looks after me,” I commented.

“I believe that as well,” Sally confirmed.

“If He is looking after me, why didn’t He protect my parents?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” she answered. “Sometimes Heavenly Father does things for reasons that we don’t understand.”

“But, I needed them. Why was it necessary for me to be beaten by Eric Gerris? Why was it necessary for my life to be in such a mess?”

She paused for a second. “My world fell to pieces when my son died. It seemed without him, I could not be complete anymore. I lost a part of myself when I lost him. It looks like you and I both needed something in our lives to ease the pain.”

I think it was at that moment that I recognized the full extent of the wholeness I had with Sally and her family. It was a prayer answered, just like Iowa had mentioned.

“I’ve often thought that my parents were watching me from Heaven,” I said. “I wonder if my parents guided me here. Maybe they lead me to this town because they knew you would find me.” I stopped. I did not want to imply anything or impose upon her. “I don’t know. I guess I just needed something to believe in.”

Sally took in a breath and pulled me closer to her.

“I think I could believe your parents were guiding you,” she responded. “It certainly seems comfortable to think that way...and I feel privileged that your parents sent you to our family.”

Her words were more than enough to put my heart at ease. She had done so much for me and never demanded anything from me. I could not ask for better than what the Senecas had given me.

“I guess I’m holding you up from getting a proper night’s rest,” I commented.

“I don’t mind,” she replied cheerfully.

“Sally, thank you for taking me home from the police station. Thank you for being there for me.”

“You’re more than entitled to it,” she responded.

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I closed my eyes and fell asleep in her embrace.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Fishing and Philosophy”



“Alright, just put that hook right through that worm,” Mr. Millington said after tying the hook to my fishing line.

It was the four of us together, I with the fishermen: Bill, Bob Farthing, and Mr. Millington. Bill was the gentleman who interrogated me at the barbershop the evening I went to my first barn dance. Apparently, he had come to accept me.

It was a brilliant sunny afternoon, so Mr. Millington closed the store early to take me along with his buddies for a fishing excursion. Here I was with the town experts of the sport in Bob’s boat anchored in the middle of a wide area of the creek.

I held the defenseless creature between my fingers. It was ugly, slimy and kept trying to escape my grasp, but I felt this was no reason to puncture it with a hook.

“But, it’s still alive,” I protested. “I can’t harpoon it with a hook.”

“Well I’ll be! We got ourselves here one of those humanitarian types,” remarked Bill.

“Kid, ya’ could just try fishing without a worm, but I doubt you’ll catch many fish,” Mr. Millington responded.

“Can’t I use artificial bait?” I asked.

“Artificial bait?!” Mr. Millington exclaimed. “Why would ya’ want to use a rubber worm when ya’ got the real thing in your hand? Ya’ wanna’ catch a real fish don’t ya’? Don’t cheat it out of its last meal.”

The other two laughed at his statement.

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I slowly stabbed the hook into the worm. At first it would not go through. The worm kept stretching over it. Finally the hook sank into it and out the other side. To my astonishment, the worm was still moving around dangling from the hook.

“I guess I’m ready,” I declared holding up the tortured creature.

“No Kid,” Mr. Millington said. “If ya’ throw it in like that, the fish’ll clean that worm right off your hook without getting caught on it.”

“Them fish are awfully smart,” Bob added. “They’re pretty used to fishermen.”

“You’re gonna’ have to run the hook through the worm in several places,” Mr. Millington continued. “That way a fish is sure to get snagged on it.”

I hesitated a second, then bent the worm around stabbing it through in a few locations until very little of the worm was free of the hook.

“What do you do when its insides start coming out?” I inquired examining the mutilated creature.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that,” Mr. Millington replied. “The fish’ll take care of it.”

We cast our lines into the water. I delayed a minute or two before talking again.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“We wait,” Mr. Millington responded.

I could not help but realize that we did all that work just to end up throwing it into the creek and sit around doing nothing.

“Pretty exciting,” I remarked sarcastically.

“It will be when your line starts tugging around,” Mr. Millington assured me.

“That’s why I like fly fishing,” Bill commented. “There’s a lot more action to it when you’re whipping your rod about.”

“There’s too much activity in the world already,” Mr. Millington remarked. “There’s no need to take the relaxation out of fishing.”

“I agree,” Bob spoke. “It’s the only thing that can calm down an energetic man like me.”

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The sun felt hot upon my body and I worried about burning. Bob, Bill and Mr. Millington did not seem to mind it as much--in fact, before long Bob fell asleep.

“Well, there he goes,” Mr. Millington commented. “Kid, if his line tugs reel it in for him. Energetic indeed!”

“Sure thing,” I replied.

I remained quiet awhile in order to soak in the atmosphere. I paid attention to every detail like the sound of the rippling water hitting against the boat, a distant hawk circling in the sky, and the roar of Bob Farthing’s snore.

“He’s gonna’ scare the fish away just like always,” Bill complained.

Actually, it was Bob who caught most of my attention, which did not seem surprising. One could not ignore his snorting grunts. His napping in his boat had become a tradition to the town. Everyone seemed to know he did it. Even Sally mentioned it the night she found me at the courthouse. How many towns could boast they knew their fire chief so well?

Bob appeared very content resting there taking on the image of an over-stuffed sack of flour. It seemed as if his existence could not be any more complacent. My mind then took an entire new look at society. Everybody made themselves so busy in the world trying to become more successful, and this man found happiness simply by sleeping in his boat. Surely, there was more to this picture than met the eye.

“Here, have a chocolate bar,” Mr. Millington said passing me one of my favorites.

“Thanks,” I replied accepting it enthusiastically.

“Thought ya’ might want something to snack on,” Mr. Millington added.

“Well, that’s just terrific, Mr. Generous,” Bill commented with a note of banter. “Now where’s my candy bar?”

“Back at the store,” Mr. Millington responded. “Ya’ can buy it from me later.”

Bill grumbled a bit then pulled out a magazine from his tackle box.

“I wonder what the rest of the world is doing right now.” I thought out loud.

“Hopelessly wearing themselves out,” Mr. Millington commented stretching.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

“You mean working too hard?” I asked.

“No, there’s nothing bad about hard work,” Mr. Millington replied. “It’s just that they are all putting in too much time at the wrong things. Kid, I’ll let ya’ in on a little secret. Life really ain’t that difficult to figure out.” He took out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his face.

“What do you mean?” I inquired.

“It’s their priorities that they’ve got so mixed up,” Mr. Millington explained. “Today everything’s in a big rush and most folks are caught up in it. Newer and better--more and more money--people are losing sight of what’s really important.”

“It’s a cryin’ shame,” Bill responded taking a second from his reading to put in his two cents worth.

“What is really important?” I inquired.

Mr. Millington contemplated a moment. “I’d say one of the most important things they’re neglecting now-a-days is family. Why, family is what life’s all about!” He paused to organize his thoughts. “I married Margerie in ‘46. I had just gotten back to the states after The War. We got married as soon as we could. I took over my father’s store and we settled down in a small house six miles west of town.”

“Now there was a beautiful woman,” Bill commented.

Mr. Millington continued. “Well, Margerie was never able to have any children and she always regretted that, God bless her...but we didn’t let that hinder us. We did our best for our family with just the two of us. I’d never let my livelihood come before her. She was the most important thing in my life.”

“Sounds like it,” I commented.

“We used to take a lot of walks,” he carried on. “Sometimes we’d just sit on the porch and watch the sun go down. We always had something to talk about.

“She loved working in her vegetable garden. She’d always give me fresh cucumbers and carrots to have with my lunch, and I sold her tomatoes right there at the store. She was quite a woman, and I’m thankful for every moment I had with her on this earth.”

“She made a terrific tuna casserole, too,” Bill remarked.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

We sat in silence. I watched a dragonfly buzz around over the water pausing at times in its irregular flight pattern to hover over one spot as if it was observing us.

“These are crazy times we’re living in, kid,” Mr. Millington said wiping his face again. “All those people working so hard to find peace in their lives and we find it going fishing.”

My line tugged.

“I think I got one,” I announced excitedly.

The line tugged a few times more and I was certain I had hooked a fish.

“Reel it in!” Mr. Millington commanded.

I reeled in the line and a good-sized catfish came out of the water.

“Mmmm, someone’s gonna’ be eating well tonight,” Bill remarked.

“I’m really surprised at this,” I said holding up my catch. “I thought one of you guys were sure to hook the first one.”

“Kid, all the fish see are the worms not the fishermen,” Mr. Millington responded.

I examined the fish feeling very impressed with my achievement.

“I can’t believe I caught one this big!” I shouted. “Does anyone have a camera?”

“Feeling pretty decent about yourself, aren’t ya’?” Mr. Millington inquired happily.

“Yes I do,” I replied sounding awfully proud.

“You’re gonna’ want to be careful taking out that hook,” Bill warned me. “If ya’ don’t hold a catfish just right, you’ll get stung. Its got a big spur in its top fin.”

“Just show me how to do it and I can handle it,” I assured him. “The only thing I hated was the disgusting stuff earlier like putting that worm on my hook.”

“Oh, the disgusting stuff ain’t over yet,” Bill said. “Ya’ gotta clean that fish before ya’ eat it, ya’ know.”

“Clean it?!” I exclaimed. “What’s so gross about cleaning a fish? Pass me the soap!”

Bill laughed a little at my lack of knowledge. Mr. Millington just smiled.

“No, Kid,” Mr. Millington answered. “Ya’ take a knife and split it down its belly and take out its innards. After that ya’ take hot water and scald the skin off of it.”

I looked at the fish again repulsively as a sick sensation built up in my stomach. Then I promptly cut the line and threw it in the water.



In the evening, I went to help Iowa with his practicing for the State Fair competition, during which I informed him about the large catfish I had caught. When he asked me if he could see it later, I told him that I threw it back for the sake of humanity.

After eating supper with his family, Iowa and I retired to the front porch. He groaned as he sat down showing me how fatigued he was.

“Are you really that tired?” I asked.

“It has been a long hard day,” he replied stretching his legs out. “It feels real good to finally sit back and relax.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “I’ve been sitting in a boat all afternoon.”

“So, you’re a real fisherman now, aren’t ya’?”

“I can hold my own,” I responded confidently. “Speaking of fishing, I want to talk to her again.”

“Oh no! Here we go again with what you’re gonna’ do about Mary Jane Wesleyan. You’ve been telling me about her for several days now and ya’ haven’t even tried to talk to her since the night ya’ met her on the footbridge.”

Iowa had a valid reason to complain. I had not seen Mary Jane since that night and I had not had an excuse to return to her house.

In the meantime, I had been talking Iowa’s ears off about the matter. He had given me a couple suggestions that were very considerable. One was to simply go to the footbridge, and the other was to be daring enough to go to her house just to visit her.

“She prob’ly thinks ya’ don’t like her,” Iowa carried on, “or, even worse, she’s forgotten all about ya’.”

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

“Don’t say that!” I exclaimed in mild terror. “I can’t get her off my mind. I would hate to think she’s forgotten about me.”

“She will if ya’ keep being as timid as a rabbit,” he responded. “The way ya’ publicly gawked at her at that dance, one would think ya’ were capable of anything.”

“But she hasn’t even tried to get in touch with me,” I argued.

“I’m glad. ‘Tells me she’s a lady,” Iowa commented.

“But how do I know if she likes me?”

“Ya’ don’t...Pretty thrilling, ain’t it?”

“A little too thrilling if you ask me,” I remarked tensely.

Iowa thought for a second and said, “Ya’ know, there’s a lot of ways to get a lady’s attention. Ya’ can give her flowers, write her poetry, serenade her--”

“I think I can do the flower thing,” I interrupted accepting his safest suggestion.

“Well, that’s dandy!” Iowa responded smiling. “It’s about time ya’ got courageous. What are ya’ gonna’ do--pick her some wild flowers from the field?”

“No,” I answered, “I was thinking of a red rose.”

“I don’t think ya’ can find rose bushes growing wild around here.”

“I know that,” I said to him pausing briefly afterward, “but your mother grows them.”

He grinned glancing over at the trellises. “Have ya’ any idea how precious those are to my ma? You’ll never get a single blossom off that bush if she has it her way.”

“You think so, huh?” I questioned.

He crossed his arms confidently. “Timothy, that much ya’ can count on.”



“I think that’s a wonderful idea. I’ll go cut you off one right now,” Rebecca said in response to my request.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE

By Timothy S. Klugh

Iowa and I were now in the kitchen where Rebecca was organizing her spice rack.

“Iowa told me you wouldn’t let me have a rose just so I can give it to a girl,” I commented looking over at Iowa.

“That’s because Iowa has never asked me for one,” she responded. “I’m afraid dating is unfortunately the last thing on my son’s mind.” Rebecca stopped talking and stared at her son pitifully.

“What?” Iowa inquired apparently unaware that Rebecca had implied anything.

His mother sighed and shook her head in despair.

“Ah, c’mon Ma,” Iowa complained, “I can’t date right now. I got the State Fair to prepare for.”

“I know a pretty little blonde-haired girl who thinks the world of you, but if you don’t act soon you may lose her,” Rebecca warned him. “She won’t wait around forever, you know.”

“Well, if I don’t get her then it wasn’t meant to be,” Iowa firmly stated showing the unmovable stubbornness that his ancestry was noted for.

“Even things that are meant to be may not happen...especially if you’re as quick as molasses in January to do something about it,” Rebecca commented opening up a cookie jar before taking a couple plates out of the cupboard. “I’m just glad she’s so patient with you, the poor dear. If it were anyone else, you would have lost her by now.”

Iowa did not respond to this. His mother then pulled out a bottle of milk from the refrigerator, during which Iowa gave me a “well, here she goes again” expression on his fatigued face.

After placing the cookies on the plates and pouring two glasses of milk, Rebecca sat them on the table in front of us. “You boys eat while I go and choose a rose.” She then hurried out of the room on her errand.

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate receiving a flower tonight,” Iowa spoke.

“Maybe not tonight,” I responded suddenly feeling a bit apprehensive about the urgency of making the delivery. “I think I’ll give it to her in a day or two. The rose should keep if I put it in water, right?”

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE

By Timothy S. Klugh

“Now, you’re off on the wrong foot once more,” Iowa complained dunking a cookie into his milk. “Ya’ might as well give up now. I’m sure she’s about to give up on you.”

“Hey, I’m not the only one avoiding a relationship, you know,” I stated defensively.

“That’s true,” Iowa responded, “but at least Olivia and I are good friends. Ya’ haven’t even talked to this girl since ya’ walked her home the other night.”

“You’ve got a point,” I commented facing the reality of the situation. “You’ll have to give me a ride though. It would be too late if I went by bike at this hour.”

“I’ll give ya’ a ride. Besides, I don’t want to miss this.”

“That’s fine with me. I won’t have to be alone.”

I decided to eat a few cookies myself. They tasted all right but did not come near to the delicious batches Olivia made.

“You are unbelievable, Iowa,” I commented.

“How’s that?” He asked biting into a milk-drenched cookie.

“One of the most beautiful women that I’ve ever seen is in love with you, and you take it for granted.”

“I’m not taking it for granted,” he replied firmly. “I’m just not in a big rush. Life will unfold in it’s own sweet time, and I’ll just wait and see what happens. If it feels right, I’ll do something about it all. If it doesn’t then there’s no damage done.”

“I just hope time doesn’t run out on you,” I said before drinking my milk.

“It won’t,” Iowa assured me. “If it’s meant to be, time won’t run out. I believe that deeply.”



It did not take long for Iowa to drive the distance from his farm to the front of Mary Jane’s house, but I grew more timid along the way. By the time we stopped in front of the gate, I felt it would take all my effort to gain enough bravery to go through with it.

The front room of her house was lit with a soft yellowish glow as was an upstairs window.

“Well, here we are,” Iowa stated after a moment of noticing I was not doing anything.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

“I’m aware of that,” I said staring at the rose delicately grasped in my trembling fingers.

“Oh,” he responded, “I thought you were waiting for me to let ya’ out.”

“No...I just never did this before,” I admitted. “I’ve never pursued a girl.”

“I swear there ain’t anything to it,” he assured me. “She’ll probably be as excited to receive the flower as you are to give it to her. She’ll be flattered you were thinking about her.”

“I don’t know. This suddenly doesn’t seem like all that great of an idea.”

Iowa paused to contemplate.

“Think about the alternative,” he finally stated. “If ya’ don’t go through with it, you’ll go home tonight wondering what could of happened if ya’ did. Also, you’ll stress over the fact that ya’ went one more day without talking to her. You’ll be more of an anxious mess than ya’ are now.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I replied wiping away the perspiration that was collecting on my forehead.

“Sure I am,” Iowa confirmed. “Now go on up there and give her the flower. Tell her that ya’ really enjoyed the time you two spent together and that ya’ just couldn’t get her off your mind.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” I told him.

“Dandy!” Iowa responded with slight laughter. “Then ya’ won’t be lying about it. Now go do it and make this a lovely evening for the both of ya’.”

Probably the most difficult part was preparing to knock on the door. Going through the front gate was an emotional struggle, but raising my hand to knock on that door was definitely the worst.

I had been shy and quiet most of my life. I had never even tried this type of interaction with a girl before, but I knew Iowa was right. Still, what would she say after the flower was given? Would she smile and ask me in or would she promptly inform me that she was not interested? Would she drop me just like that standing alone on her porch with Iowa there to see the whole humiliating incident? It was all too much to think about but I decided to go through with it anyway.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

I knocked. In the still of the evening, with only the crickets chirping in the distance, my thuds on that wooden door seemed to echo into the street.

Time passed and no one answered the door. I questioned whether I should walk away.

Perhaps there was no one home, or, if there was, maybe they did not want to be disturbed. I turned around to walk off the porch.

“Knock again!” I heard Iowa insist in a breathy yell.

I faced the door again. Slowly I lifted my arm and knocked. At this point, I figured if someone was home, I was certainly annoying them.

The porch light turned on and I heard the lock unlatch. The door opened and through the screen I saw Mary Jane’s father dressed in only work pants and a sleeveless T-shirt. He appeared rather tired and irritated.

“Yeah?” The man said in a deep and stern voice.

I immediately gulped feeling very intimidated. “Um, I-I-Is M-M-Mary Jane home?”

“No,” he replied sharply glancing down at my rose. “She’s out taking a walk.”

“D-D-Do you know when she’ll be home?” I asked as my stomach began churning.

“No,” he responded in a way that made me feel like I was using up his valuable time.

“Well, thank you anyway,” I said ending the conversation.

He closed the front door and turned out the porch light.

Emotionally drained from the whole experience, I stepped off the porch and walked to the truck.

“This was a terrible idea, Iowa,” I uttered.

“Why? What happened?” Iowa asked.

“What?! Were you asleep or something?! Didn’t you see the way her father reacted to me? I wish Mary Jane had answered the door. I don’t think her father likes me at all.”

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE

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“Ya’ gotta get in good with her family,” Iowa commented, “otherwise you’re always gonna’ have problems. Besides, a father is supposed to give ya’ a hard time when you’re trying to win his daughter’s affection.”

“Why’s that?” I inquired.

“Well, ya’ gotta see it from his eyes. He had to put up with her all those years until other guys started liking her. He’s bound to get angry when someone like you tries to take her away for free.”

“What are ya’ saying? I have to buy her from him?”

“No, you’re not getting the point. If ya’ want to win the girl, ya’ gotta win her father over too.”

“How do I do that?”

“Believe me, you’ll win him over faster than you’ll win Mary Jane,” Iowa answered confidently as if he knew all the tricks of courtship. “Stop by his shop and help him unload stock from his truck sometime. Talk with him about hardware--”

“All I know is that he sold ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlights.”

Iowa burst out laughing. “I remember those things. I wouldn’t have bought one if the sun burned out. No, I wouldn’t discuss those flashlights. It’s likely you’ll make a life-long enemy out of him.”

“I’d rather help him around his house. That way I’ll be there when Mary Jane is.”

“Now ya’ got the spirit of it,” Iowa commented patting my shoulder. “That’s how ya’ play the game.”

Our conversation was suddenly interrupted by a feminine voice that rang similar to Mary Jane’s.

“Hey down there!” It called.

Turning around, I saw a young woman looking out of the upstairs window.

“Therese!” Iowa called back. “How ya’ doing?!”

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“I’m taking care of myself just fine!” She replied. “If you want to find M.J., she should be coming back from the fairgrounds.”

“We’ll give her a ride home! Thanks!” Iowa shouted.

Therese closed the window.

“I guess this evening ain’t over yet,” Iowa remarked as I hopped in the truck.

We drove toward the path to the fairgrounds and found Mary Jane walking home. She was carrying a flashlight illuminating the road in front of her. We pulled up beside her and Iowa introduced himself.

“I know who you are, Iowa,” she replied chuckling. “This town isn’t that big.”

“Well, do ya’ know this fella’?” Iowa asked pointing at me.

Mary Jane came up to Iowa’s window to get a better look at me. “Yeah, I know you, Timothy. How could I forget the guy I threw a rock at?”

Iowa gave me a curious expression. “So, that’s how ya’ got that knot, Timothy. I guess that throws out your story about big foot throwing rocks at ya’.”

I shrank into my seat.

Apparently, Mary Jane did not pay much attention to Iowa’s remark. She went on saying, “That’s why I’m so late coming home. I was thinking about you this evening. I had such a nice time when you and I went to the old fairgrounds the other night that I stayed out late tonight just to see nightfall there again.”

“That’s real remarkable,” Iowa commented. “It just so happens Timothy here has been thinking about you too...quite a bit. He’s been carrying on and on about ya’ for the last few days.”

I slugged Iowa in the shoulder.

Mary Jane tilted her head.

Iowa turned to me and said, “Well? Am I supposed to do all the talking here, young man? Ya’ still speak English, don’t ya’? Why don’t ya’ talk to the pretty lady?”

“H-H-How are you?” I finally uttered desperately trying to come up with something.

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She stepped back and examined herself. "I believe I'm doing all right."

I was so nervous, but I tried to speak confidently. "That's terrific! You're doing all right too-- I mean I believe I'm doing--I mean...I'm O.k." Confidence was no friend of mine that evening.

Iowa glanced at both of us. "I'll tell ya' what. The two of ya' sit in the bed of the truck and I'll drive ya' both home."

Mary Jane accepted the offer, so I stepped out of the cab and went to give her a hand getting in the bed of the pickup. To my amazement, she gracefully leaped into the bed without my assistance. I was not so elegant though. With a lot of effort and some help from Mary Jane, I managed to climb into the bed myself almost crushing the flower in my hand.

Once I was settled I offered it to her. "I..." I cleared my throat. "I'd like you to have this."

"Oh, it's beautiful," she remarked gently taking the blossom into her hands. "I don't see many roses. Mom doesn't grow any herself. Where did you find it?"

"I didn't. Mrs. Johnson gave me one from her rose bushes."

"The Johnson's have a lovely farm," she commented. "I'm sure there are a lot of pretty things out there."

I saw the pink flashlight with a clown face on it in her hands. I knew what it was instantly.

"Hey! Glowie the Clown!" I exclaimed. "I hear they're real hot items in the market right now."

A smile drew across her face. "Oh yeah!" Mary Jane replied in a tone both excited and sarcastic. "I think everyone's going to have one or more of these thingies. We have six hundred ourselves."

Her humor was delightful and refreshing. She knew exactly when to come in and what to say. She was both adorable and incredible.

"I enjoyed that evening we spent together, too," I spoke again. "I never knew anyone else enjoyed old stuff like that."

"I always have," she responded. "I am fascinated by old places. It was great to find another person who shared that appreciation." She stopped for a second.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
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This gave me a chance to notice that Iowa was not driving us directly home. To give us more time, he decided to take a more scenic route.

“If people could go back in time,” Mary Jane went on, “when would you like to go back to?”

“You mean if I could fit in with whatever time frame I wanted to?” I inquired.

“Sure. If you could go back to whatever time that you wanted and live exactly how they did, where would you go?”

“It wouldn’t be too far back,” I commented. “Knights and stuff like that are pretty interesting, but I wouldn’t want to live then. Actually, I wouldn’t want to go that far back at all. I think I’d like to go back around the late eighteen hundreds and be a farmer...or if I couldn’t be a farmer, I’d like to be a traveler and ride trains across the nation. That way I could see everything the way it was. I’ve always liked trains. What about you?”

“I think I’d like to go back and live with my great grandparents. They owned a farm in Kansas. Things were so much simpler then. My great grandmother had fourteen children. There was never a time when their house wasn’t full according to my grandma. The farm is still in the family, but not our family. One of the other children took it over. I think he’s my Great Uncle Jake or something like that.”

“I’ve never been to Kansas.”

“The last time I was out there was four years ago when I was twelve,” she said sniffing the rose.

“Oh, you’re sixteen years old.”

“Hey, you can count! You just keep impressing me,” she remarked playfully.

We reached her house and the truck came to a stop.

It was a feeling I had not experienced much of--me being with her--but I understood it. Our time together was about to end for the night and there was a sweet melancholy to it all. I knew that something exceptional was inside Mary Jane. It was not necessarily in the words she said. It might have been in her illustrious eyes or in her uplifting personality--I was not sure. All I knew was there was a sensation I got by being near her that was quite new to me and I wanted to feel more of it. It was distinct, real, and only apparent when I was with her. It intrigued me.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
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I walked her from the truck to her front door.

“It’s a good thing I ran into you that night at the footbridge,” I told her.

“When I threw that rock at you I had no idea that I would end up finding a friend I could easily talk to on any old subject,” she responded.

“Yeah, I guess it was a good idea for you to have thrown that rock.”

The porch light came on and I knew her father had flipped the switch. This was probably his way of telling us our chatting was over for the night.

Mary Jane smiled and said, “That’s my daddy.”

“I know,” I responded. “Well, it’s getting late anyway. I have chores to do in the morning.”

She opened the door and stepped inside. She then turned to face me through the screen door.

“I want to thank you for the rose,” she commented. “It was a nice gesture.”

“You’re certainly welcome,” I responded.

“I must say, you made a good decision the other night.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m happy you decided to stay here in Pleasantville.”

“How did you know about that?” I inquired in shock.

“My Uncle Remy was one of the men who were looking for you that night. Anyway, as I was saying, I’m happy you stayed. Before meeting you this town sure was dull.”

Those were very endearing words that came from her lovely mouth, and I wondered if those words meant I stood a chance with her.

“Goodnight,” she said as she closed the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“The Big Storm”



I was at the store stocking shelves in the late afternoon. It was getting as dark as night outside, and the temperature was dropping. It was cool for the first time that summer. The wind was strong and kept blowing into the store entrance knocking over the cardboard displays Mr. Millington had arranged on the counter.

“That’s going to be some storm,” I commented walking over to the counter to pick up the fallen ads.

Although Mr. Millington would never admit to it, I think on occasion he had problems with his back. Stubbornly, he would often still carry boxes and bend over a lot whether he was suffering or not. I would voluntarily take over these manual tasks whenever he appeared to be in pain. I would just make it look like it was more convenient for me to perform the task. I would never let on that I knew he was having any trouble. I mention this because at the time, he appeared to be having problems.

Mr. Millington peered out the window putting his hands to his waist. “Them clouds are sure looking pretty vicious. The breeze feels good though. It beats that heat-wave we’ve been having.”

Thunder crackled in the distance.

“The farmers can use the rain, too,” he carried on.

The telephone rang and Mr. Millington stepped over to the counter to answer it. I went to the door to observe the brewing storm. After a moment Mr. Millington hung up the phone and grabbed some baking soda from the shelf.

“John Edder’s boy has frequent bouts of gastritis so I’m gonna’ have to run this baking soda out to them. They live a good distance away, so you’re gonna’ have to close up shop for me.”

“You got it,” I responded.

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Mr. Millington grabbed his umbrella and went out the rear door.

I finished stocking the shelves and went up to the counter.

The street was abandoned. It started to rain, and after a short time it began to pour down hard.

Figuring I would not have any customers for awhile, I decided to call Mary Jane. Now, I was indeed still timid about the whole situation, but I assumed if she could accept a rose from me, Mary Jane would surely be expecting me to call. Because it was thundering and raining so much outside, I knew she would be home.

The town telephone directory was very small, and since there was only one entry in the book with the name Wesleyan, I felt certain it was hers. I dialed the phone. After a moment someone picked up.

“Hello,” I heard a young woman’s voice answer.

With Mary Jane and her sister Therese having similar voices, I decided to ask for Mary Jane directly.

“This is Mary Jane,” she replied, “and you’re Timothy.”

Her tone, which was already sounding quite nice, seemed to brighten up more. That made me feel even better about making the telephone call.

“How about this weather?” I asked watching the lightening illuminate the darkened street.

“How about it? I didn’t even get to take my evening walk,” she humorously complained. “Did you get to the Seneca’s from work without getting wet?”

“No, I’m still at the store,” I answered. “I’m closing shop tonight, but I usually don’t go directly to the Seneca’s anyway. Most of the time I go to Iowa’s house to help him practice for his horse contest at the State Fair...although I don’t think he’ll be practicing much tonight.”

“I’ve heard about Iowa’s coming competition at the State Fair. He’s been waiting for that a long time.

“I love going to the State Fair to see the animals, the rides... especially at night. The lights are so pretty. When I was eight years old, my parents walked with me the entire length of the midway. I thought so much of the lights and music that my family had to walk the midway twice before I was satisfied.”

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“I’ll bet your legs were tired,” I said just as thunder clapped loudly outside. “Whew, that was a close one!”

“You know, my birthday’s is a little over a week away. If you’d like to, you can come over for dinner,” Mary Jane said with casual enthusiasm as if it was very natural to invite me.

As a matter of fact, all of our conversations went well. It seemed once we got started, we were like old friends and I was very comfortable with her. So accepting her invitation came easily.

“I can do that,” I replied. “Maybe afterwards we can walk around the old Pleasantville Fairgrounds again.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to the State Fair on my birthday,” she commented. “That would be a great way to spend it.”

“Why don’t you go then?” I asked.

“Because my birthday is in July and the State Fair runs in August.”

“Oh,” I responded. “Hey, maybe if they knew how much you’d like to spend your birthday there, they’d open it up early just for you!”

“Sure Timothy,” Mary Jane said sarcastically, “I bet they would.”

That was when a young lady with dark hair came running into the store drenched with rain. Twisting the water out her hair she looked toward me and to my surprise it was Renee.

“I guess I have a customer,” I said to Mary Jane. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah, you better do something,” she ordered. “You’re still on the clock you know.”

I laughed lightly saying good-bye and hung up.

Shocked to see anyone out in the storm I asked, “What was so important that you had to come out in this downpour?”

She paused giving me an annoyed expression as if the rain had already given her enough problems. “My mother sent me to pick up bread, milk and flour.”

“O.k.,” I replied. “Well, you dry off and I’ll go get those items for you.” I walked to the refrigerator case then turned around toward her. “Do you want whole milk?”

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

“Yes!” She snapped while trying to squeeze the water out of her blouse.

“Hold on a moment,” I said. I went into the rest room and grabbed a couple of towels. Walking into the main room I gave them to her. “This will work better.”

“Thank you,” Renee uttered calmly.

I finished bagging her order and rang it up on the cash register.

“Five dollars and thirty seven cents,” I said.

She opened her purse and gave me the money. “Ya’ better ad a newspaper to that price.”

“A newspaper?”

“So I can keep dry going home,” she answered.

I glanced out the windows toward the unceasing rain. “Listen, why don’t you stay here until the storm ends. You won’t get any wetter than you already are and I could sure use the company.”

She thought a few seconds and then accepted my offer.

“That’s great! Are you any good at checkers?”

“Not really,” she responded, “I haven’t played it much.”

“Even better! Let’s play!”

To my amazement Renee picked up on the strategies of checkers very quickly. By our fifth game she beat me.

“I don’t want to overwhelm you with checkers,” I commented. “Maybe we can take a break.”

“No!” She responded excitedly. “I’m starting to like this game.”

We set up the board again and started another round.

“I’ve seen the old fairgrounds on the east side of town,” I stated hoping to begin a conversation. I figured it would distract her concentration on the game.

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“I know the town fairgrounds,” Renee said. “I used to go there when I wanted to be alone.”

“Yeah, it’s really quiet there.” I made a move. “Do you know anything about it?”

“I know my mother remembers when it closed. She said it ran its last season when she was four years old. The train station closed years before and that was how a lot of out-of-town people would get to the fair. There was also the county fair and the State Fair, which were a lot bigger. Everyone didn’t mind traveling anymore, so they closed the town fairgrounds.”

“I wish they hadn’t,” I commented with a hint of melancholy. “I really like that place. I feel something almost magical from it.”

“It is interesting isn’t it,” Renee uttered looking through me as if she were seeing something at a far distance. “Sometimes it seems we belong not somewhere else, but some when else in time.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I responded. “That’s really funny that you bring that up. I was just talking over that very subject with--”

“At least if I was born in some other time,” she interrupted oblivious to what I was saying, “I wouldn’t have to live in the same time as my father and Karl. That way they would have never been part of my life.”

“Oh,” I said awkwardly not knowing how to react. “I was thinking about a different concept all together.”

She put her hand over her eyes for a moment and then glanced at me. “I’m sorry.” Her eyes returned to the checkerboard. “Whose move was it?”

The thunder crashed with such force that it sounded like a bomb exploding, and the entire room went black.

“I don’t think it matters anymore,” I replied staring at her darkened face. “Well, as soon as the rain ends, I’m just going to lock up and go home.”

“I’ll wait with you,” Renee told me, “but not back here. It’s too dim. I can hardly see you. Let’s move closer to the windows.”

It almost sounded like she did not trust me, but still she was willing to stay with me till I locked up. I figured she just felt uncomfortable in the dark. We sat on the floor near the front door and leaned our backs against the side of the counter.

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Renee's hair had begun to dry having just a slight bit of dampness about it. It did not retain the perfect form it normally had, but it remained quite beautiful to look at.

"You are really pretty considering you've been in a downpour," I remarked relating my observation.

"The room must still be too dark," she responded. "If you could see me better you wouldn't be saying that."

"I doubt it," I said winking at her--a trait I picked up from Stephen.

This surprised Renee. "Timothy, are you flirting with me?"

"No!...I mean I'm not meaning to," I replied nervously. "It's something Stephen Seneca does every so often. Sorry."

"That's fine." She put her hand on my shoulder. "I just wanted to know what your intentions were."

"Totally respectable, I assure you."

"I can trust you," she responded. "Besides, it's good that you're opening up. I think I like the person I see."

I stood up and bought us some licorice. "Actually, I haven't felt comfortable enough to wink in years. This town is just bringing out the best in me."

I sat down next to her again and gave her some of the candy.

"Timothy, I want you to know that I do trust you," she said

"I'm pleased to hear that."

"Karl scares me a lot. I often feel like he's going to really hurt me."

"He already has," I responded.

"He says that I owe him all the time." She tilted her head to the floor. "He's told me some day he'll take me to a place where I'll have no choice but to give him what he wants."

I glanced over to her very concerned. "Are you serious? What is he talking about? What place is this?"

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
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“Timothy, I don’t know. He just said it’s the place where it happened before,” Renee replied resting her head against the counter.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“He has said it so many times, I think he’s just trying to scare me...and it works whenever I think about it. But, maybe that’s all it is.”

“Renee, I promise I’ll never let anything happen to you,” I told her. “I may get beat to a pulp trying to protect you, but I’ll do whatever I can.”

In the distance I heard a siren. As it got louder, Renee and I stood up and went to the door. A fire engine passed going on down the street headed east. It went through the intersection and continued on Pleasantville Road. A car came racing from where the fire engine came. It suddenly halted so quickly in front of the store that it almost spun on the wet pavement. Bob Farthing was at the driver’s window wearing his uniform.

“Run for some help, Farmer Susan’s barn is on fire!” Bob yelled to us before speeding on down the road.

Now, it seemed strange for Bob Farthing, the fire chief, to be having us run for help when the fire engine was already on its way, but by the time we banged on some doors and finally got to the Susan farm, we saw why. The entire barn was engulfed in flames and due to its closeness to some trees, it was threatening to set them on fire. To make it worse the trees came up close to the house.

The volunteer firemen did all they could to contain the fire, but that was not enough. The people of the town were helping by hauling water in pails and barrels from the creek nearby. Someone had already called for assistance from another fire department located some miles away.

Farmer Susan was Barbara’s father. Her family lived in a brick house just beyond the creek outside of town. Her boyfriend Jack’s house was located just across the street in another brick home which appeared a little older than Barbara’s. Jack’s house was right across the creek from the old McDowell Mill.

Sally, Rebecca, and a few other ladies of the town were on the porch of Jack’s house comforting Barbara and who I guessed was her mother. Renee joined the women.

“Tim, can I get your help!” I heard Jack shout.

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I ran to him. He and some others were moving a woodpile and other objects safely away from the barn clearing the area for the firemen to get better access.

“Are the animals all right?!” I asked carrying away an armful of logs.

“No, a couple of cows are still inside!” Jack replied. “We must get these obstacles out of the way quickly! The firemen will take care of the animals!” He then ran ahead and dumped the items in a pile a good distance away from the chaos.

There was obviously no time to ask questions. I ran to the pile and dumped my armful. After that, I continued running around the area removing obstructions from the field until there were no more left.

As I was returning from dropping my last load onto the pile, I saw the last cow being lead out of the barn. Not long after that, I heard a terrible creaking of wood and saw the roof of the barn collapse.

“Was there anyone still inside?!” I yelled running toward a line of men passing buckets of water from the creek.

On the way I was intercepted by Mr. Thompson who put me to work bringing the cows across the street to Jack’s family’s barn. That was also when the other fire department arrived.

“What caused the fire?” I inquired of a guy who was helping me lead the cows.

“Lightning!” He called back.

“Lightning?” I asked glancing at the inferno in shock. “I thought the lightning rods would protect the barn.”

“Who told you that?” He questioned.

I could not tell whether he was being serious or sarcastic, so I just shrugged my shoulders and moved on.

The fire truly seemed unquenchable even with both fire departments and the town working to put it out. The entire structure was collapsing and the flames were getting closer to the trees. It appeared as if everyone was putting forth all their effort just to keep the fire from spreading anywhere else. Thank goodness it was still raining. I was drenched from being out in it, so I knew the fire could have been much worse had it been drier.

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The activities continued into the night. I assisted until there was nothing more that the town's folk could do.

The firemen were successful in keeping the blaze from spreading, but they could not stop the fire from burning Farmer Susan's barn to the ground. After the flames were extinguished, Farmer Susan stood alone observing the smoldering disaster. Mr. Millington, Sheriff Frazey and I were not too far away.

Farmer Susan took off his hat and held it in his hands. He sighed and then took in a breath as if he was going to say something, but instead he kept silent. After a moment, he put his hat on and turned to us. He paused and said, "Thanks boys."

I heard a crack in his voice as if he was in deep despair inside, however on the outside he remained emotionless. He said nothing more and walked over to his wife and daughter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Under the Stars”

I was relieved to discover that no one was seriously hurt during the fire. A few firemen suffered minor burns that kept Doc Howard busy for a few days.

In the meantime, I directed my concentration on finding a way to get in good with Mary Jane’s father while getting to visit Mary Jane at the same time. This desire of mine was further inspired by a surprise that arrived one morning while I came in from chores for breakfast.

Olivia stood in the dining room doorway holding several daisies in her hand. She said curtly, “Mary Jane Wesleyan brought this to the door for you.”

“No kidding,” I said taking the flowers into my hands.

“What’s going on between you two?” Olivia asked.

“Nothing, Olivia,” I replied. “We’ve simply become good friends.”

Actually I knew I felt a lot more than friendship, but I was not ready to make this news public.

“I’m sure you are,” she commented taking a seat at the table. “Good friends give flowers all the time.”

“Olivia, I need some advice,” I said sitting down across from her. “Mary Jane’s father seems to be a difficult person. He’s been pretty cold toward me when I’ve seen him. I’d like to warm up to him so that I can see more of Mary Jane.”

“So, you do like her!”

“I think that is obvious. I guess with these daisies, I can rest assured that she likes me as well. Now, how do I become chums with her father and see Mary Jane at the same time?”

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By Timothy S. Klugh

“I’m not sure,” Olivia answered. “Well, they don’t have a farm to help out on. Let me think...”

“Why don’t you do some yard work for him!” Sally shouted from the kitchen. I had no idea she was listening in. “That way you have a reason for being there,” she continued, “and you’re sure to see Mary Jane Wesleyan!”

Olivia nodded in agreement.

“It’s worth a try,” I responded. “I’ll borrow the mower after I get off work and do their lawn tonight.”



With all the anticipation I was feeling, I ate breakfast faster than normal. Stephen was still far from being finished eating, so I excused myself and went out to the porch to rest awhile. There was a good breeze that was taking away the heat of the day.

I heard the cry of a cat. After several mournful wails, I decided to seek out the poor creature. On a low limb of a tree was a small black kitten who appeared to have found its way up the tree but was at a loss as to how to get down.

“Do all you kittens do this?” I asked.

It looked at me and meowed again.

I shook my head. “I’ll save you this time but somehow I’m sure I’ll find you trapped up another tree some other day.”

The limb was easy to reach, but when I went to grab the kitten, it scampered up the tree to a higher limb.

“Now what did you do that for?” I asked as it stared down at me. “Just a second and I’ll go get a ladder.”

I walked around to the barn and got the stepladder. Once I dragged it around to the front of the house, I stood it under the tree and climbed up to retrieve the cat.

Upon reaching for it, it scaled higher into the tree beyond my grasp.

“This isn’t funny, cat!” I angrily muttered.

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By Timothy S. Klugh

I grabbed a limb and ascended from the ladder into the tree. As I moved closer to the kitten, it kept scrambling for higher branches, but I continued my pursuit. Eventually it would have no place else to go.

When the limbs became smaller I had my chance to grab it.

“Gotcha!” I exclaimed pulling it toward me.

“Timothy! What are you doing?!” I heard Olivia yell.

I glanced down to see her standing about thirty feet below.

“This kitten was stuck in the tree!” I called back. “I had to rescue it!”

“You caught Snowball!” She shouted. “She hates being saved from trees!”

“You’re name is Snowball?” I asked the kitten whose coat was an ebony puff of fur.

I carried the cat between my chest and hand as I used my other free hand to descend the tree. My new feline friend decided to thank me by squirming and digging its claws into my skin. Before reaching the bottom of the tree, the kitten broke free of my grasp and scratched up my arm while escaping to a branch beyond my reach.

“Fine, you little ungrateful fur ball!” I hollered. “Stay up there! I hope you get stranded for life!”

Reaching the ground I continued my complaints to Olivia. “I chased that thing all the way up the tree and this is the thanks I get!” I showed her the scratches the kitten had given me.

“Snowball doesn’t like to be helped,” Olivia responded.

“That cat stood on the bottom limb and whined over and over for me to get it down and then it takes off into the tree. She knew what she was doing!” I grumbled staring at the kitten who was observing me from a high limb. “It had the whole thing planned out.”

“Oh, I’m sure Snowball did,” Olivia replied chuckling.

“What type of name is Snowball for a black cat anyway?” I inquired still upset about the whole episode.

“It’s Bonnie’s cat. She’s the elderly lady who lives next door. She’s mostly blind and...well, it’s a long story.”

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“Go on. I want to hear this.”

“Well, Bonnie lives alone. She was getting very lonely. She told mother and me about a white kitten she used to have when she was a young girl. A couple months ago mother and I found that black kitten hanging around our barn. No one came looking for it, so we figured it was a stray.

We gave it to Bonnie. We told her it wasn't white but Bonnie didn't care. She said she'd name it Snowball after her cat and think about her old white cat whenever she held it. So, that's why she's named Snowball.”

“You should have named it inconsiderate-little-beast-who-makes-people-chase-it-up-trees-just-to-end-up-clawing-them- to-pieces,” I complained.

“No Timothy, that name is much too long,” Olivia responded chuckling again.

“Are ya' ready to get to work?” Stephen hollered standing at the front door.

“Gladly,” I replied.



After leaving Mr. Millington's, I rode home as quickly as I could. Stephen had given me permission that morning to use his lawn mower to cut Mr. Wesleyan's grass. Because the lawn mower did not move very fast, I asked Sally if she knew of any short cuts that would get me to Mary Jane's house faster. Sally told me that there was a dirt path that ran along the railroad tracks from Main Street to the old train station, and that that route would save me a lot of distance.

I gave her route a try and eventually made it to Culmination Road. From there I followed the streets until I reached Mary Jane's house.

Arriving at her house riding my lawn mower came as quite a shock to Mary Jane's mother who did not know me and was not expecting company from strangers straddling grass-cutting vehicles. She was working her garden along the fence when I pulled up to the gate and turned off the ignition.

“I've come to trim your grass,” I announced.

“You've come to what?” She asked confused about my offer.

“I want to mow your lawn, Mrs. Wesleyan,” I restated.

“You have me at a loss, child,” she responded. “What is your name?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Timothy Reye,” I answered.

“You’re the stranger,” Mrs. Wesleyan commented recognizing my name.

“I figured your husband must be tired working those hard hours at his store, so I thought I’d cut his grass for him.”

“Is there a reason for your generosity?” She inquired standing up straight.

“Just out of the goodness of my heart, Ma’am,” I replied.

“Well, alright. If you really want to do it.”

Mrs. Wesleyan opened the gate for me. I put the lawn mower in neutral and pushed it into her yard.

“By the way, is Mary Jane home?” I inquired.

“Oh, so you do have an ulterior motive for offering your labor,” she commented shutting the gate.

“Well, I have to be honest, Ma’am. That is the reason I came, but I’m going to do the work I said I would.”

“Neither of my two daughters are home right now. It’s just me, but they’ll be along a little later. You’re welcome to wait for them.”

“I’ll wait if necessary, Ma’am, but right now I have work to do.”

Mrs. Wesleyan shook her head as she stooped down to continue working her garden.

I turned on the lawn mower and started my task.

The yard was not that large of an area to mow. I began to wonder what I would do if I finished before Mary Jane arrived. Mrs. Wesleyan told me I could wait, but that would have been very awkward. The way she kept glancing over toward me, as if she was trying to figure out if I still had all my marbles, lead me to believe she was already feeling uncomfortable with the situation. Still, I gave my best grin and continued cutting the grass.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

In order to use up more time I occasionally went over a spot several times if I missed a blade or two of grass. During this time I ran out of gasoline and had to borrow some from her.

By the time Mary Jane and her sister came home, I had covered the entire yard twice. I could tell they had been shopping at Lenora's because of the bags stuffed with clothing in their arms.

I shut off the lawn mower. "Well, that should about do it."

"Good!" Mrs. Wesleyan remarked. "I thought our lawn would be bald by the time you'd be done."

Mary Jane ran over to me. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just doing some yard work for your dad," I replied. "He must get very tired after a long day at his store. I felt I could help him out a bit."

"That was very sweet of you," she commented.

"That's just me. I'm sweet all over."

"Can you stay for supper?"

Could I stay for supper? That was what I had gone over for. I guess Mary Jane had no idea that my intention was to be able to spend the evening with her. Still, I had to make it look like it was not.

"Oh, I don't know," I responded. "I don't want to impose or anything."

"You certainly wouldn't be," she stated tugging me off the lawn mower. "It's a great way to repay you for your kindness."

"O.k., if you insist," I said going along with her.

We went into her house followed by her mother who breezed past us in quite a hurry toward the kitchen.

"Oh my lands!" Her mother exclaimed. "Your fathers going to be home any minute!"

"What's wrong with her?" I asked Mary Jane.

"I think she forgot to get supper started," Mary Jane replied.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

Their living room was filled with cozy furniture that looked nice but was not as charming as the Seneca's. Still, it had a simple beauty to it. Across the room from us was an aged upright piano. It filled my mind with memories of my parent's piano that was similar to it.

"I'll be right back," Mary Jane said leaving my side and running up the stairs.

No one else was in the room. I sat down on the sofa and observed the family pictures on the walls. My eyes then returned to the piano.

Before I lost my parents I used to love to play the piano with my mother or by myself. Taking songs I was taught and adding my own spice to them was a joy of mine as well as making up my own works. It was all part of a grand dream for a boy. I thought that I would one day be much more than I was.

My recollections of the days with my mother and father had once more revived my longings for the old days and before I completely returned to the present, I walked over and sat down at the piano with the same excitement I once had so many years past.

I pressed a key softly and listened to the sustaining note. The tone brought to mind many memories. A song entered my head. It was one of my favorites. The combinations of notes in the piece were warm and reminiscent and the words were delightful. I began to play the song.

The music was rough sounding at first, but like an old friend, it all came back to me. It was not long before my thoughts drifted while my fingers pressed out the pattern of the charming tune. I did not sing a word, but rather enjoyed my mother's voice as she sang in my memories.

I finished the musical piece and listened to the fading sound of the last keys pressed. I was then startled by Mary Jane's voice behind me.

"That was probably the loveliest thing I've ever heard," she remarked in a sincere voice.

Instantly embarrassed, I closed the cover over the keys.

"No!" She exclaimed running over to me and lifting the cover up. "You've got to play some more."

"I haven't played the piano in years," I commented. "I'm not that good at it."

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“For being not so good at it, I certainly thought it was pretty,” she responded sitting down on the bench next to me. “Play another song for me.”

“I don’t want to give your family a headache. I better stop now.”

“Are you kidding? We have a piano so people can play it. If we didn’t like it, we wouldn’t have a piano.”

I considered her words.

She grabbed my hands and sat them on the keys. “Now, take your long nimble fingers and play me a song.”

“Well, maybe I do know another one,” I pressed the opening chord to the song.

“Great!” She cheered clapping her hands together.

I continued. Mary Jane listened to me while rocking to and fro to the melody. Suddenly her face lit up.

“Hey! I know that song!” She roared. “Dad used to sing it when he shaved in the morning.”

She began to sing along with the music. I soon heard a second voice crooning away. The strains were coming from Mary Jane’s sister Therese who came over and leaned against the piano. Feeling the enthusiasm of the two young ladies, I was inspired to add in my vocal chords. It was astounding to comfortably sing again.

As we were going through the last chorus, I heard the screen door shut.

Mary Jane turned around and yelled, “Hi Daddy!”

Therese faced the door and issued the same greeting.

I abruptly stopped the music.

From in the kitchen, we could hear Mrs. Wesleyan still singing the song, but after a few seconds she became quiet.

“Dinner ready?” Mr. Wesleyan asked in a fatigued voice.



THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

At the dinner table everyone ate quietly. It did not appear as if anyone wanted to talk about the day's events. I could see why Mary Jane was so used to being by herself. With her family lacking interaction, life must have been easier for her to just be alone.

She glanced up at me and smiled occasionally which I enjoyed every time. I thought about starting up a conversation with her but I figured it would disrupt the family's norm of silence at the table. Eventually, Mary Jane spoke up on her own.

"Daddy, did you notice your lawn was cut this evening?" Mary Jane inquired.

"Hmmm?!" Her father grunted stuffing a fork full of food in his mouth.

"Did you see that your grass was shorter?" Mary Jane rephrased the question.

"I noticed that was not my mower out front," Mr. Wesleyan replied.

"No," Mary Jane went on. "Timothy came over and mowed the lawn for you."

He grunted again while chewing and looked up at me. "He did, did he?"

Her father took a drink then cut off a bite size portion of his meat. If he were being appreciative at all, I would not have recognized it.

"You're a very good piano player," Therese commented to me.

"Thank you," I replied humbly.

"Playing a piano doesn't make money," Mr. Wesleyan remarked.

There was pause before anyone spoke again.

"Timothy works part-time at Millington's General Store," Mary Jane said pleasantly but in my defense.

Mr. Wesleyan grunted.

That became annoying to me. I did something that he disapproved of and he put it down. I did something that he would approve of and he just grunted. He was obviously not a person who could raise one's self-confidence. How was I to get her father to like me if there was no way to please him?

I questioned myself as to whether Iowa would be able to handle this situation.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

I tried an opening that would spark up an intense conversation with the fellows at Jesse's barbershop. "So, you do any fishing, Mr. Wesleyan?"

"No!" He replied sharply. "I work too many hours than to spend my time on frivolous activities."

His words were surely in reference to my part-time work and piano playing. I figured that I would never be able to win this guy over.

I glanced over at his wife who was sitting submissively at the other side of the table eating. After mentally debating it for a moment, I figured she would be much easier to get along with than Mr. Wesleyan.

I thought of what Iowa would say. In a boisterous voice I exclaimed, "Mmmmmmm! This is one of the best meals I've ever eaten, Mrs. Wesleyan!"

Mrs. Wesleyan gave me that same peculiar expression she did earlier when I arrived at the house on my lawn mower. As a matter of fact, the entire family was taken by surprise by my outburst.

I cleared my throat and stared straight at my food. It was my intention not to look away from it until I was finished eating. I decided I had said quite enough for my first dinner with the Wesleyan family.



With the unfortunate supper experience over, Mary Jane invited me to join her for an evening stroll through her neighborhood. We ended up going on the path that led to the old fairgrounds.

"This is beginning to become our special place," Mary Jane mentioned as we entered the woods.

"I can't think of a more beautiful location to call our own," I responded.

We kept going down the path until we came to the footbridge. Mary Jane stopped and leaned over the railing.

"The first time I was at this spot was the night I met you," I commented feeling completely at ease just being alone with her. "It was the best day I'd had in a long time."

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By Timothy S. Klugh

She smiled gazing at the creek then she glanced toward me. “Well, if a better day than that one ever comes along don’t tell me about it.”

“That day will certainly be hard to beat,” I responded, “but I already know of a potential one.”

She tilted her head to the side.

“It would be the day I win your father over,” I continued. “What does it take to get that guy to like me?!”

She rested her hand on my shoulder. “I thought cutting his grass was a great try.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t good enough. He sure didn’t think much of it.”

“Maybe you should try helping him at his store,” she suggested.

“That idea has been introduced to me before,” I responded. “Maybe some evening Mr. Millington will let me off early.”

“Wait!” She cried springing up on the railing as if she had just discovered the secrets of the universe. “This Saturday is the barn raising at the Susan farm. Everyone in town is going to be there. Why don’t you hang around my dad awhile that day? Maybe if he sees how friendly and hardworking you are, he’ll start liking you.”

I gave it some thought for a moment or so. “Alright, I’ll give it a try.”

The conversation lightened from there. We both watched the creek as it rippled by us and listened to the sounds in the woods.

I liked the way she noticed all the details of her surroundings, the way she handled life, and the way I felt when I was around her. It was like I commented before...when we were together, it was like old friends reuniting...old close friends.

“How would you like to do something really strange?” She suddenly inquired.

“Strange?” I questioned wondering what she meant and what put her in the mood for bizarre ideas.

“Well, if it makes you feel more at ease, let me rephrase that and say peculiar.”

“It depends on what it is.”

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

“Come on,” she said, “I’ll show you.”

She grabbed my hand and we walked on down the path toward the old fairgrounds.

“Here we are,” I remarked looking around the deserted park upon entering. “The most barren place in Pleasantville. Funny how we always end up here.”

“I like it here,” she responded, “and it doesn’t have to be barren. Not if you’ve got a creative mind.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Remember that night we took this old place and painted an active and joyful scene here just with our descriptions?”

“Yeah,” I replied, “the night we first came here.”

“Well, if you want to, we can use our imaginations and bring this old fair to life for just the two of us tonight.”

“How? I’m sure these rides can’t be turned on anymore.” I had not the slightest clue what she was getting at.

She put her hands on her waist in frustration. “Timothy, I know you’re a deeper thinker than that! Pretend with me that this fair is running and for us it will be. Get it?”

“I get it but I don’t think I know how to do it,” I responded.

“It’s not that hard,” she said taking my hand again. “I’ll give you an example.”

She guided me into a shelter house. “O.k., this is where we’ll start for tonight.”

“If you say so,” I remarked staring at the aged rafters filled with rusty bolts and cobwebs.

“We are no longer standing in an old abandoned shelter house. This evening a dance is taking place here,” she explained walking alone over to one of the outer supports. She turned to face me leaning against it and continued. “I am a shy young lady who hasn’t been asked for a dance yet.”

“Am I able to see you from where I’m standing?” I questioned raising my head over invisible spectral dancers.

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“Well, it is very crowded, but yeah, you do catch a glimpse of me from time to time,” she answered.

“Is this girl beautiful?” I inquired with half a smile.

“Absolutely!” She replied brushing her hair back. “In fact she’s quite stunning. No sense in throwing out all reality here.”

I laughed at her remark.

She went on. “Considering this, you better quickly ask her for a dance before someone else does.”

“Oh my!” I cried rushing over to her. “Lovely evening, Madame.”

“Madame?!” She interjected. “I am not a married woman!”

“Fine,” I responded. “Lovely evening,...er...maiden?”

She tilted her head to the side.

“Lovely evening isn’t it?” I inquired.

“Yes, it is,” she replied contented with my new approach.

I pointed my finger to where I was formerly standing. “I was just over there watching you, and I asked myself why a ravishing lady like yourself would be without a dance partner for this splendid music.”

“I just wandered over here,” she responded playing her role.

“You mean you’re alone here tonight?” I questioned in shock. “That certainly seems inconceivable that someone so remarkably attractive would have to spend one moment alone.”

“Well, I do have a boyfriend who’s incredibly handsome. He’s six foot-five and a body builder, and golly, is he the jealous type. If he knew I was talking to another gentleman he would break him into pieces like peanut brittle.”

“Wow!” I nervously commented gulping. “Sounds like a real tough guy.”

“Oh, no need to worry about him,” she remarked comforting me. “He’s not here tonight. He spends a couple nights a week wrestling bears. This is one of those nights.”

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“Great!” I replied. “Then I guess he’ll never have to know that I’m about to ask you to dance with me.”

“You are?” She inquired.

“My dear, it would be impossible for me to leave without asking once. Will you dance with me?”

“Sure,” she answered holding out her hand.

I lead her to the middle of the floor. There I began to dance with her the way Olivia and Sally taught me how.

“How am I doing so far?” I inquired.

“You’re really a good dancer,” she replied.

“No, I mean am I playing my part well?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “You’re doing just fine.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so, my lady,” I remarked returning to my character role.

“O.k., maybe there is one thing wrong,” she commented. “Don’t sound so medieval.”

“Fine,” I responded while humorously acting disheartened.

It was hard to know when we were to stop dancing because there really was not any music playing. However, Mary Jane was more than happy to guide me along whenever I was getting lost.

From the dance we moved on to the pony ride followed by visiting the stables. I bought her some cotton candy and won her a stuffed animal in a carnival game. It was odd for a short while acting like I was someone else, but soon I realized that it was just as easy as when I pretended I was a character in the books I read. It was all the same except I was really living the fantasy and I had this lovely young lady along with me. For awhile, I even forgot any worries I had in the real world. However, our game did not last forever and we came back to reality.

Eventually we retired to the carousel and sat down to gaze at the starry night sky.

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“See that long band of tiny stars going across the sky?” Mary Jane rhetorically asked pointing upward. “That’s the milky-way.”

“When I was a kid I used to think that the sky was a large dome above us,” I commented. “At night I thought someone turned out the light inside and you could see the outside light through the cloth. I guess if I had seen that band of stars from where I lived, I would have probably thought it was a seam in the cloth.”

The air was getting cooler and she put on her jacket. “When I was in kindergarten I used to think that the Lord was putting the world to bed. He would turn out the sun and leave on the moon as a night light.”

“How did you account for the stars?” I asked.

“I never applied that to my theory when I was five years old,” she replied. “What would you expect from a girl that young?”

“What does it look like to you now?”

“Endless lights going on for eternity.”

“But that’s what they are.”

“I know that’s what they are,” she responded, “but that is what I see. Looking at the night sky is like observing our destiny. Each one of the points of light are like someone’s dream.”

“And the moon?” I inquired.

“The moon is like the light that attracts everyone who doesn’t dream that deeply. It is right there where anyone can get to it. It requires no work at all. So everyone sees its light. The brighter stars are larger dreams that many people are striving for. The dimmer lights are those deeper and greater dreams that take so much work to reach. There are other stars beyond that we can’t see--dreams much more magnificent than we will ever understand. That’s why we can’t see them.”

“You sure do have a philosophical way of interpreting stars,” I commented.

“See those stars that look like they’re outlining a ladle?” Mary Jane carried on pointing her finger out at the sky again.

“Those?” I questioned following her finger.

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“That’s the Big Dipper. Those two end stars on the bowl points to the North Star.”

A ball of light raced across the sky and disappeared as quickly as it came.

“What was that? A meteor?” I asked with some excitement.

“It’s a shooting star,” she replied. “You can make wishes on them.”

“I can?”

“Only while you see them,” she answered.

“Gee! You gotta’ be pretty quick to think of something when those things pass,” I remarked.

She chuckled and leaned closer to me.

I glanced over at Mary Jane as she continued to make her astronomical commentary and I knew what my wish would have been.


There I was under the stars with a lady who made everything present itself much more extraordinarily than anyone else would see it. I enjoyed seeing the world through her eyes, and I enjoyed her even more because of it.

My wish was that I could have known her all my life. I questioned to myself what my life would have been like if I had her in it all along.

That is when I saw a star that had seemed dimmer before. I was probably mistaken, but it did not matter. Its symbolization was what caught my interest. If Mary Jane was a dream--if my life was changing for the better--I had just moved a step closer to it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Barn Raising”



The heat was just as bad if not worse by Saturday, the day of Farmer Susan’s Barn Raising. The whole town was to work in a joint effort to build a barn in one day. I was new to the whole concept, but I would end up finding a unity among these people that one would never find in the city.

All of Pleasantville knew about Farmer Susan’s dilemma since the night his barn burned to the ground. With money being as tight as it was, there was no way he could replace the structure himself.

Times were tough for everyone else as well, but people still pitched in where they could. After all the town’s folk and local farmers chipped in some money and a sizable donation made by Alexander Johnson, there was enough cash to afford the raw materials needed. Tools and other supplies were provided by everyone who came to help which, as I said, was virtually the entire town.

Now the barn raising was not just a working endeavor. On the contrary, the whole affair was treated as a massive social event. People were just as anxious to be there as the time of The Independence Day Celebration, and like the Fourth of July, there were activities scheduled for everyone.

The barn would require as much time as we could give it in order to be finished by the end of the day, so everyone arrived very early that morning to begin. However, I had my doubts that such a task could be accomplished in a single day.

“Well, are ya’ ready to get your hands dirty?” Iowa asked resting his arm on my shoulder.

“This place is more crowded than the Friday night barn dances,” I commented.

Olivia stared at Iowa waiting for him to notice her. Unfortunately, our mutual country friend was not paying attention.

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“The whole town is here along with a lot of folks from around the area,” Iowa responded.

“You mean everyone dedicated their day to helping construct Farmer Susan’s barn?” I questioned in sheer amazement.

“That’s the way folks are in the country,” Iowa replied. “We are always ready to help a neighbor in need.”

“Yeah,” I added, “but the whole town?”

“I see ya’ still have a lot to learn about country generosity,” Iowa remarked.

Olivia stomped her foot to get our attention. “I have been standing here for some time and you haven’t even greeted me, Iowa J.!”

“Oh!” Iowa responded shocked with himself. He stepped over to Olivia. “Well, I am sorry ma’am. Good morning to ya’, Olivia!”

“That’s better,” Olivia stated happily.

“There is no way anyone can build a barn in one day,” I stated.

“Oh, I see you’re new to this type of thing,” Iowa said. “These kinds of things have been done for generations. You can ask anyone here. I don’t think there’s a person who will be able to recall a time a barn didn’t get raised in one day.”

“No one can do that,” I persisted.

“No one can’t, but everyone can,” Iowa responded. “Timothy, you just do your part along with everyone else and you’ll be surprised what we are all capable of.”

“That ain’t nothing! I could probably build it all myself in a day-and-a-half!” Jack exclaimed overhearing us.

Jack, Barbara, and Renee walked over to us with Fraun not far behind.

“Sure you could, Jack,” Barbara cynically remarked.

Barbara’s comment bounced right off Jack.

“Ya’ think you’re ready for this?” Jack asked me.

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“We’ll see,” I replied.

“That’s not good enough,” Jack said. “Ya’ gotta’ be sure about yourself. This can be dangerous work ya’ know.”

“Don’t worry yourselves any further, the French man is here!” Fraun announced finally joining us.

“That’s just great!” I replied trying to match Fraun’s odd sense of humor (if it was humor at all.)

“How are you, Timothy?” Renee asked me with a very warm smile. “With all the excitement since the night of the fire, I forgot to tell you something. I left my groceries at the store the other night.”

“Oh, so you did!” I responded. “Mr. Millington didn’t mention anything about it to me. He must have thought he’d forgotten to deliver it to someone.”

“You owe me some milk and flour,” Renee teased.

“And bread, too,” I added.

“What is he picking up your groceries for?” Jack inquired of Renee. He looked at me. “Well, if ya’ can do that for Renee, ya’ can certainly deliver all of our groceries.”

“No, you don’t understand,” I said trying to clear things up.

“Oh, do you mean that this service is only for the ladies?” Fraun asked. “Well! What a double standard! I’m going to sue Millington’s!”

“Really? Are you delivering groceries now?” Barbara asked. “Can you deliver to my house?”

“No! Wait! That’s not it at all!” I interjected.

“You never deliver to our house!” Olivia complained.

“Why does only Renee get all the special treatment!?” Jack shouted.

“You’ve got it all wrong! Ask Renee! She’ll tell you!” I called out into the horde of complaints and inquiries.

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Renee stood silently watching me with a large grin. She was apparently enjoying my frustration.

“Hi!” Mary Jane called out locking her arm around mine.

Everyone instantly stopped talking and looked at the two of us. Their faces indicated a lot of confusion except for Iowa and Olivia who were both quite aware of the situation.

“Um...folks, I’d like you all to meet Mary Jane Wesleyan,” I announced. “Mary Jane, I’d like you to meet...uh...the gang.”

There was an awkward pause as everyone decided what to say. It was not that they were shocked to see Mary Jane, it was that they were shocked to see her on my arm. Even during that brief time Mary Jane maintained her large smile.

“Well shoot! I know M.J.,” Jack remarked reaching out his hand to shake hers. “How ya’ doing little girl?”

“I’m fine, Jack. How are you?” Mary Jane replied.

“Perfect as usual,” Jack answered arrogantly.

“Hello, M.J.,” Barbara said cordially.

“Hi, Barbara,” Mary Jane responded.

“Well, it seems like you all know each other already,” I commented. “I should have known. You all live in the same town.”

“That’s not the point here, Timothy,” Fraun spoke in. “We could not help but notice that this woman is on your arm. I don’t know why the others aren’t speaking up, but I’ve got to ask. Is there something going on between you two?”

“Leave them alone,” Olivia ordered. “If they wanted you to know something, they would have told you.”

“Olivia’s right,” Barbara commented turning to Fraun. “Mind your own business, Fraun!”

“Excuse me!” Fraun responded.

“Let’s get to work!” Stephen yelled to us from a distance away.

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“Yeah, we better get started,” Iowa agreed. “Come on men, let’s do what we came here for.”

The other guys departed from the group.

As I left I noticed that Renee’s pleasant grin had vanished leaving only her usual emotionless expression. I began to wonder what had happened to her during those few moments, but I did not have time to ask her.

Iowa put his arm over my shoulder again and the four of us went to join the other men at the site where a barn would be standing later.



Most of the wood was already shaped and ready for assembling. Very little cutting had to be done, although some adjustments were undoubtedly going to be needed along the way. The pieces would end up serving as rafters, posts, beams and so on.

The task most of the men were assigned to was constructing the bents which were assembled flat on the ground. These were the frames that would end up supporting the structure.

I was not very good with woodworking, so I had to ask for help more than once. Iowa and Jack were willing to assist but Fraun had nothing but scornful remarks every time I had a question. For example, when I was first beginning to understand what a bent was for, Fraun just could not believe his ears.

“Have you ever built anything in your life?” He asked in astonishment to my lack of knowledge.

“Well, I tried to make book ends once,” I answered.

“That’s a great way to comprehend this,” Iowa jumped in trying to clear up my confusion. “Bents are a lot like book ends except, book ends hold up a few books, bents hold up a whole barn.”

“Oh, so bents can hold up giant books,” I commented.

Fraun put his hand to his head.

Iowa paused for a second. “Er...yeah. Don’t think so hard on it. You’ll understand the whole thing by the end of the day.”

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When the bents were ready, we prepared to raise them up to their standing positions. Each bent would be raised one after the other.

The sun was like an oven and our bodies were glistening with sweat. I took off my John Deere cap to wipe the perspiration off my face with it. I knew the next task was going to be tough.

Three teams were formed to hoist the bents into place. Some of the fellows, including Iowa and me, were placed on the second team. Long poles were given to our team and the third team. Our team had poles that were eight feet in length and the third team's were twenty-foot poles.

Team one lifted the bent from the ground and over their heads as high as they could reach. Our team took over by placing our poles against the bent and shoving it up higher. At this point a couple of guys grabbed hold of the bent and raised up into the air with it. The third team then placed their longer poles on the bent and lifted it the rest of the way. The bent was held into standing position by ropes that were tied to the top. The men who had ascended up with it to about thirty feet above the ground made necessary adjustments.

Girds and knee-braces were used to connect the bents together, each piece being assembled using wooden pegs pounded into pre-drilled holes.

I was determined to work along side and fit in. In order not to be a burden, I followed every direction as best I could. I had many questions and I directed them to people who would not mind answering them. Soon enough it almost became second nature to me and I felt I knew enough to build my own barn someday.

Summer beams and floor joists were constructed about fifteen feet above the foundation to provide support for the loft. It formed a sort of crisscross pattern of timber suspended in the air that we could walk on. This gave us better access for installing the purlins to the rafters for the roof.

I was one of the people who had the privilege of helping with the purlins. There were large gaps between the joists (where one could fall right through to the floor), so I had to be very careful. Since I had a fear of heights, it made the experience somewhat thrilling for me.

A section of ridgepole, the highest horizontal beam, was the last support to be connected to the structure. A pine branch was nailed onto it before we installed it. I asked Mr. Millington, who was near me, why the pine branch was necessary. He told me it was a tradition with building wooden structures for giving thanks for the timber that was used.

There was much applause when the final ridge beam was put into place.

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It was not long before lunch was ready and the entire skeletal frame of the barn was completed. Everyone was content things were going as planned. As for myself, I was astounded at the work we had already done. I observed it from a distance in complete awe not realizing that Stephen was watching me.

“What do ya’ think, son?” Stephen asked walking over to me.

“That’s just incredible,” I replied. “I would have never guessed that you guys could put together a whole barn in a single day.”

“Well, it ain’t a whole barn yet,” Stephen replied removing his cap and wiping his face off with it, “but the day ain’t over yet either. And, let’s not forget you had a part in it too.”

“That’s another thing,” I said still staring at the future barn as if it were a priceless masterpiece. “I’ve never done anything like this--nothing this big. I mean, this barn is going to be here for a long time. When I’m dead this barn will be still standing. Part of me will always be here. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying, but let’s not go rushing your funeral. That’s the thing with constructing a barn. They’re built to last for years. I’ve seen barns standing that are far over a century old. They’re very important buildings!”

“You think this one will last that long?” I asked.

“That’s oak timber up there,” Stephen replied. “We certainly built it sound enough. I’d say its gonna’ be there awhile.”

“You mean something I took part in is going to be around a century?”

“That’s right but you’ve done a lot more significant things than that since you came to this town. You’ve become a trusted general store attendant, a fine farm hand, and the first horse contest trainer who had never been to a horse contest before.”

“I guess I’m doing O.k.” I commented still marveling over our morning’s achievement.

“You’re doing better than that,” Stephen remarked resting his hand on me. “Now let’s go get something to eat.”

As we were working on the barn, the women had prepared a hearty lunch for us. I found Iowa with a plate full of food sitting in the shade under a large tree. I obtained some lunch for myself and went to sit next to him. I had just sat down when the rest of the gang joined us.

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No one was saying anything about it, but I knew they were still very curious about Mary Jane and my surprise earlier that morning. It was settled that they would not pursue it, but I wondered when the issue would come back up.

“So...how did you meet Mary Jane?” Fraun asked as naively as he could.

“Fraun! Drop it!” Olivia ordered.

“Here’s the way I see it,” Fraun said. “We are all friends here, I trust that hasn’t changed...and with so much love between us, well, I just certainly don’t see any need to darken things with secrets.”

“Fraun, just stop it, alright?” Barbara pleaded.

“No!” Fraun responded. “Hey, I’d tell you guys about my girlfriend, if I had a girlfriend to tell about.”

“He’s right,” Jack added. “It’s no secret that Barbara and I are going steady. Why should there be a secret about Timothy and M.J.?”

“Fine folks, I’ll tell you about Mary Jane Wesleyan and me,” I said ending their bickering. “We met the night that I thought I was leaving town. Mike and Karl were walking down Pleasantville Road, and in order to avoid a possible fight, I took off into the woods across the creek from here. I ended up at the old fairgrounds. When I was walking the pathway out of the park, I saw her at the footbridge--”

“And ever since then they’ve been hanging around each other so much you’d think they were Siamese twins,” Therese Wesleyan commented coming toward us. “All except for now since she has to help our mother at the moment.”

“Therese!” Iowa exclaimed. “Well, sit down young lady and rest your feet awhile.”

Therese joined us and took a bite of her food. “Did you know that Timothy plays the piano? He’s a regular Beethoven.”

Iowa looked at me and smiled. “Oh, so ya’ were holding out on me when I ask if ya’ could play the piano.”

Olivia crossed her arms with a hurt expression on her face. “Timothy, you haven’t shared that talent with me.”

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“Well, Olivia you don’t have a piano,” I tried to explain.

“Iowa does!” Olivia responded sharply.

“What’s so great about playing a piano? All you’re doing is hitting a few keys every now and then,” Jack commented exposing the fact that he knew very little about being a musician.

“I’d bet we could have Timothy give us a concert some evening. We could even use all those flashlights Therese has for lighting,” Iowa said giving her a wink.

“Oh, take them!” Therese exclaimed. “I’m so tired of those ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlights. I thought they were cute once, but now they aren’t anything but a nuisance. They take up too much room. I hate them...”

As Therese carried on complaining about the six hundred flashlights that she wanted to get rid of, I figured her whimsical fancy for odd stuff had moved on from those ridiculous lights to something else.

I contemplated about Iowa’s suggestion to use those flashlights for a concert and entertained the idea that it could work.

My mind drifted away from that topic onto thoughts of Mary Jane. Her birthday was coming, and she had mentioned how she always wanted to go to the State Fair on that day. Unfortunately, the fair would not be running yet. I tried to think of a way I could make her wish come true, but how could I give her the fair before it opened? All of a sudden the solution hit me!

I had lost track of the current subject everyone was talking about.

“...The ground was so swampy that he had to abandon his tractor right there,” Iowa told the group obviously deep into his story. “When he came back the next day, the entire tractor had sunk into the muck. There wasn’t anything left of it--”

“Therese, were you serious about getting rid of those flashlights?” I interrupted.

Therese was confused for a second and then replied, “Yeah...Why? Do you want them?”

“Yes, I do...all six hundred of them,” I answered.

Fraun glanced at me with a strange expression. “What for?”

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I leaned back. “I have a great idea for Mary Jane’s birthday present, but I haven’t figured it all out yet. All I know is that I’ll need all of your help and I need those flashlights too.”

Therese also had a peculiar look on her face, “Well, they’re yours if you want them.”

Everyone was quietly watching me as if they were trying to figure out why I burst into the conversation begging Therese for six hundred flashlights no one else wanted.

I didn’t let it phase me though. I just smiled at them and said, “You all will know soon enough.”



After eating, the men ambitiously returned to work on the barn. I was put on a team that was installing the inner wall that we would eventually apply the siding to. This task took a lot of time, and with the fatigue I already felt from building the frame, I was sure the difficulty of this current work was magnified.

The afternoon sun was scorching us, which was no big change to the regular weather pattern. I was happy I did not have to stand out there in the heat all the time like the suffering corn stalks.

It was common knowledge about the drought taking place. The dwarfed corn crop was what I knew most about. The storm that hit and caused Farmer Susan’s dilemma did not do much for the crops either. There had not been enough rain, and the farmers had been getting concerned.

Stephen tried to keep his worries away from Olivia and me, but I heard him discuss it with Sally a lot. Also being his farm hand, I was exposed to the problem everyday.

My own troubles were not so involved in the struggling crops but had lingered in a terrible past and an insecure future. I decided that I would not deal with the drought issue.

Besides, Iowa’s father said that it was not the first drought the Pleasantville farmers ever saw. The town and local farmers had always pulled together and made it through in the past. Surely they would make it again.

By the time we began to put up the siding, it was getting late in the day. Iowa and I worked together for awhile until he got called away.

To my surprise, as early evening approached, the temperature did not seem to be getting any cooler. Thank goodness Mary Jane came over and gave me a glass of lemonade. I drank

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down the glass with the thirst of one who had just walked across a desert. The cold liquid was a refreshing and welcome sensation to my body.

“That did it!” I said passing the empty glass to her. “I’m really glad you happened by with that.”

“Goodness! I didn’t think you would drink it so fast,” she exclaimed observing the glass.

“It’s sweltering out here,” I responded. “I feel like I’m going to sizzle.”

“Well, before you do, you might want to help my father out some. Remember what we were talking about yesterday?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I replied wiping the sweat off my face. “I guess I’ll go face it now.”

“Just be kind and helpful,” she commented as I walked away.

Mr. Wesleyan was busy at the time nailing siding into place. I determined that the best way to assist was to simply stand next to him and work.

He glanced toward me for a moment. He appeared slightly irritated by my presence but spoke nothing. After awhile I realized that he was willing to let the whole episode pass without speaking to me at all. Knowing that this would do nothing to increase better relations between us, I decided to take the initiative.

“Sure is hard work, ain’t it?” I asked.

He did not reply but acted as if he did not hear a word.

I decided to try again. “Whew! I don’t think it can get any hotter than it is.”

He paused and shook his head then resumed his task.

I was pleased to see a response of some kind. I continued. “I think out of everyone here in this town, you being the hardware man, you would probably know most about what’s going on.” I felt maybe an inquiry about hardware would spark his interest. “So, are these the best nails for putting up this siding?”

“Ya’ just don’t get it do ya’, boy?” He finally said sounding rather angry with me. “Why are ya’ bothering me and my family?!”

His hostility took me by surprise but I wanted to win his respect.

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“Just trying to be friendly, sir,” I replied.

“Friendly?!” He questioned.

“I just thought I’d like to get to know you.”

“Why in the world do ya’ want to get to know me?! I don’t know a thing about you, boy!”

“Oh,” I replied feeling the reasons for his apprehension was simple to fix. “I thought we discussed it all at dinner. I’m Timothy Reye and I’m staying at the Seneca’s.”

“No, I mean before that...before ya’ came to this town,” he went on. “All I know is you’re a wand’ring vagrant who happened into this town and has not told anyone anything about where you’re from...or why you’re here. For all I know the law might be after ya’ and you’re hiding out! I don’t know a thing about you, and suddenly I find ya’ chasing my daughter around and intruding into my home! To tell ya’ the truth, I don’t like it at all!”

There was not much I could say to that. I saw his point clearly, but I could not tell him what he needed to know. If I spoke a word of my past to him, how could I be sure that he would keep it a secret? He obviously had no great compassion for me, so what was his incentive on keeping my story to himself?

He continued. “I think considering the circumstances, it’s a good thing we got to talk. Now I can tell ya’ what I really think about the whole mess. I just don’t feel that it’s a good idea for you to be chasing after my daughter. I would like ya’ to leave her alone.”

“But your daughter and I like being around each other,” I responded.

“Mary Jane’s a little naive. All the same, I suggest ya’ go along with what I’m telling you,” he stated quite seriously.

This was much different than what I expected. The entire situation left me in shock and completely speechless. I would have been much happier if I had never come to talk to him at all, and now that he banished me from seeing Mary Jane, I had done more destruction than if I had not.

I did not know what to do, so I just walked away. The forceful impact had really shaken me up to the point of confusion. Had this all been building up in him, and I just did not see it coming? His quick anger was like that of Eric Gerris, which sent fear through me. Was a potentially dangerous stranger all he saw when he looked at me?

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I found myself walking by the back of Barbara's house where I was greeted by a black-haired lady who had just stepped out the backdoor.

"Hello, Timothy!" She cried. "My daughter Barbara has told me a lot about you. I'm Emily Susan."

"Hi, I'm the wandering vagrant," I replied glumly.

She chuckled as if I was merely joking.

"Do you know where Sally Seneca is?" I inquired not knowing precisely why I asked. I just suddenly felt that I needed to be with her.

"Last I saw she was working on a quilt with the women on the porch."

"Thanks," I responded.

I went to the front of the house and found Sally, Rebecca, and some other ladies all taking part in sewing a checkered quilt while conversing enthusiastically. They were so cheerful in their eager verbal interaction that I hoped my depressed frame of mind would not bring them down.

I stepped onto the porch and sat on the handrail next to Sally.

"Is the barn all finished?" Rebecca asked.

"No, not yet," I replied.

"Oh, you're just on break," Rebecca went on.

"Well," I paused, "I certainly could use one."

Rebecca and the other women did not pick up the hidden meaning in my remark, but Sally detected that something was wrong. She glanced at me with a concerned expression. I had the urge to wrap my arms around Sally just to have her embrace me, but I felt awkward about trying to do it-- especially with all the other women present. I figured I would probably be better off being to myself.

"I guess I'll leave you ladies to your quilt," I said standing up.

"Don't work too hard out there," one of the other women commented.

THE PLEASANTVILLE EXPERIENCE
By Timothy S. Klugh

I ventured over to the creek. There were some stones by the road. I grabbed a handful of them and returned to the creek's edge. I began tossing the stones one by one into the water.

"What's the matter, dear?" Sally inquired stepping up beside me.

"Just tired..." I replied flinging another rock into the water, "...tired of all the hassles."

"I can imagine," she commented. "Raising a barn can be a real tough experience."

I stopped for a second. "I wasn't referring to building the barn."

"I figured that out already, dear," Sally responded. "I just did not want to push your problem out of you."

"Sally," I spoke, "how come people react so differently to the same situation?"

"Well, there's a lot of diversity in this world. People think and react differently to things. Did something happen today?"

I thought about keeping the details of the dilemma to myself, but Sally and I had shared a close emotional bond between us the night I woke up with my mother's apparition haunting my mind. I knew it would be safe to tell her.

"Mr. Wesleyan doesn't want me to see Mary Jane anymore," I uttered throwing another stone. "He doesn't trust me and he doesn't want me hanging around his daughter."

Sally paused to contemplate. "A lot of people are always going to be hesitant about you because they don't know who you are or where you came from."

"You didn't hesitate the night you found me at Sheriff Frazey's office."

"No," she responded. "I saw something very special in you the minute I first saw you."

"Why did you feel something and someone like Mr. Wesleyan doesn't?"

"Not everyone can feel those things, Timothy."

"Mr. Millington did...Iowa did."

She held my hand. "Some people are willing to open up their hearts to others even if they don't know much about them. Some people don't know how. It doesn't mean they're bad or anything, they just don't understand those kinds of feelings."

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“But if Mary Jane can open up her heart to me, why can’t her father?”

“I’m sure there’s a lot more feelings in her heart for you than just that, Timothy. It’s really easy to trust someone when you like them a lot.”

“I like her a lot too, Sally.”

“I know,” Sally said, “I’ve known it since the day you watched her for the longest time at that barn dance on the day of Iowa’s point show.”

My eyes widened. “How did you know about that?”

“Never underestimate a woman,” Sally replied.

“Timothy! Did ya’ get lost?!” Stephen yelled from several yards away.

“Why yes I did, sir!” I replied throwing my handful of stones into the creek.

“He wanted to talk for a moment,” Sally said as Stephen came over to us.

“We’re about to wrap things up on the barn,” Stephen commented to me. “I thought you might like to be there when we did it.”

“Yeah, I’ll go back with you,” I responded.

“You gentlemen take good care of him,” Sally said hugging me.

“We won’t do anything that’ll permanently hurt the boy,” Stephen teased.

Stephen and I went to the barn which was all completed except for one nail on the outside wall that had only been partially driven in. All the gentlemen had gathered in a half-circle around the area of the nail, leaving room for Mayor Smythe who was standing by it with a hammer resting in his hands.

“Now quiet down! Quiet down! I have a few words to say before this last nail gets driven!” Mayor Smythe called out.

The chatter faded eventually until everyone was silently observing.

Mayor Smythe cleared his throat before continuing. “Today we kept an old tradition that our town and other towns like her are very proud to have.

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“Farmer Susan lost his barn in the big storm we had. This whole town gathered together to help save his farm from certain danger...and not only did we do that, but we came back to help him replace the structure he lost that evening.

“The people of this good town have shown again and again over the years that they will work together and support anyone in need. We saw it twenty-seven years ago when several farmers east of town lost their homes in a tornado. The entire town brought food and supplies and helped them rebuild. Over and over again, I’ve seen people like Alexander Johnson and other folks, who are a little better off than most of us, help those out who are in financial need. There has never been a problem that we couldn’t solve be it crops, homes, or money.

“That type of caring and support are dying out in this day and age,...but I’m proud to say that it ain’t dying out here in Pleasantville.”

This got a roar of cheers from the men.

Mayor Smythe waited for them to quiet down before going on with his speech.

“And, let me just say that I’m honored to be Mayor of this here town!”

More cheers followed.

Mayor Smythe waved his hands to silence the crowd. “Now, it is a custom in Pleasantville to let the owner of the barn drive in the last nail, and today that privilege goes to George P. Susan.”

As Farmer Susan walked over the men applauded for him. Mayor Smythe shook his hand and passed him the hammer before stepping into the crowd.

Farmer Susan paused while examining the hammer until the clapping stopped.

He was obviously a humble man. I could tell this by the way he only looked up at us a few times.

“Um...I want to thank y’all for helping me to raise this barn up,” he spoke fidgeting with the hammer. “I want y’all to know...” His voice began to crack a little. “...I want y’all to know that had this happened to any of y’all, I’d be there for y’all the same.” He stopped. “Thanks again.”

With that he turned around and, with three hits, drove the nail into the wall.

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I was extremely tired when I got home and was the first to retire. My bed was very soft and was just what I needed after the long hard experience. It was amazing that we had built an entire barn. I would have never believed it if I was not there myself to see it. I rested my head on the pillow and that was all I could remember before falling asleep.



Olivia woke me up. The room was dark, so I knew that I had been sleeping awhile.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Someone was throwing pebbles against my bedroom window,” she replied. “I opened the window and saw Mary Jane Wesleyan in the yard. I told her to go around back if she wanted to talk to you. So go to your window.”

I looked over at the window just as a pebble came up to it. Since the window was already open, the pebble came inside and landed on the floor.

“Now she’s your problem. Goodnight,” Olivia said as she left the room.

I got out of bed and went to the window.

“What time is it?” I inquired.

“It was eleven o’clock when I left my house,” Mary Jane answered.

“Does your parents know you’re here?”

“I don’t think so. They went to bed around nine and I sneaked out my bedroom window.”

“You are so eccentric,” I commented. “I think that’s why I like being around you so much. I just never know what to expect.”

“Can you come down and talk?”

“Sure, I’ll meet you at the front door.”

I put on a robe and went downstairs. I unlatched the front door as quietly as I could and walked out onto the porch. Mary Jane was sitting on the swing. I sat down next to her.

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“Tim, I heard what happened to you,” Mary Jane said. “It’s no wonder my dad wouldn’t talk to me about how things went between you two. I’m so sorry.”

“I have to admit that I didn’t see it coming at all. I knew he was a little hesitant, but I never thought I bothered him that much.”

“It shocked me when I heard it too.” She placed her hand on my arm. “You have to believe me when I tell you I had no idea he was going to burst out at you.”

“Oh, I believe you all right,” I responded. “I don’t think either of us saw that one coming. But, now I can’t even see you anymore...I’ve really liked the time we’ve spent together. I didn’t want to see it come to an end.”

She shifted herself until she was able to lean her head against me. I glanced over and noticed how beautiful her hair appeared in the moonlight.

“We don’t have to stay away from each other, you know,” Mary Jane said.

“But your father told me to stay away from you.”

“Tim, I don’t want you to stay away from me,” Mary Jane spoke somewhat angrily lifting herself up. “Don’t I get any say in what I do with my life?”

“Yeah, I guess you do,” I replied

“I enjoy being with you. If my father doesn’t like being around you then maybe he should stay away from you. I want to be with you. What about my birthday coming up? I want to spend time with you on my birthday.”

She sank back down next to me. We sat quietly a couple of minutes.

“Well,” I finally uttered. “If you are determined to be with me...and I’m not saying I’m forcing you...I would like to meet with you some time in the evening after you’ve had your birthday with your family. I have a surprise in mind.”

“A surprise?” She asked rising up and staring at me in anticipation.

“Yeah, it’s a surprise, so I’m not going to tell you what it is. Lets just say that I think you’re going to really like it. So, you still want to see me that night even if your father doesn’t want you to?”

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She thought it over then nodded her head.

I sighed in relief. “Great. I was hoping I’d be able to do this for you.”

The moonlight did not just make her hair appear splendid but it illuminated her face so elegantly that it took my breath away. Not only that, I was so spellbound by the image that I could not think of anything to say just to keep the conversation going.


“I’d better be going home,” she finally stated. “I want to still see you, Tim...and I’m looking forward to my birthday surprise.”

We said goodnight to each other and she stepped off the porch and disappeared into the darkness. I waited awhile just watching the area where last I saw her before she faded into the night.

I wondered what the Seneca’s would think about Mary Jane and me seeing each other behind her father’s back. Not being able to think of any good conclusions, I dropped the thought for the night and went to bed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“The Surprise”



Olivia could not stop inquiring of me to reveal the secret surprise for Mary Jane’s birthday. Most of the gang was equally as curious especially because of the strange requests I had made when the idea hit me. Nevertheless, I planned to keep it a secret until the right time on Mary Jane’s birthday.

Mary Jane was worth all the effort. She opened doors in me that nobody else could. Through her eyes, we saw things that only she and I could truly appreciate. Therefore, the surprise I had planned for her was truly a deserving one.



By the morning of Mary Jane’s birthday, I guess Olivia could not take the suspense anymore. She came out into the field to have me unveil the big secret to her.

“Now what is this big surprise you’ve been planning for today?” She asked.

“Olivia Kristeen Seneca, you’ll have to wait until this afternoon just like I told all of you guys last night,” I replied.

“You are really being ridiculous about this whole issue. What’s the difference whether you tell me now or this afternoon?”

“There’s a lot to it so I only want to tell everyone once. When we get together here at twelve-thirty you’ll know the entire plan.”

“Timothy, you’re really going overboard with this cloak-and-dagger business,” she complained.

“Olivia, you are simply not getting this information from me until then,” I responded. “Now I’ve got work to do. We’ll just have to talk about the surprise later.”

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“Fine, you can have it your way,” Olivia remarked strolling away, “but don’t be alarmed if one day I have my own surprise and you find a secret ingredient in the cookies I bake you.”

“I can deal with that,” I said, “just make sure they aren’t rocks.”

She instantly stopped and turned around. “How did you know about that?”

“I’m a very smart young man,” I replied. “You see, I can read people real well.”

She put her hand to her chin and contemplated. “My mother told you didn’t she? What else did she say about me?”

“You’re life story...and a bit more.”

She came back over to me. “Well Timothy, I trust you have the good sense to know what to tell others and what to keep under your hat.”

“Olivia, your rock cookie secret is safe with me.”

With that said, she smiled and left for the house.

That is when I went on. “Providing, of course, I don’t find any foreign substances in my baked goods.”



Renee was the first to show up at twelve-fifteen. I greeted her at the door and humorously complained that I had stated, “twelve-thirty”!

“Has anyone else arrived yet?” Renee asked.

“Yeah, Olivia and me. We’ve been here quite awhile,” I responded. “Sally and Stephen are also here.”

“You know what I mean,” she said stepping into the house.

“Olivia is upstairs if you want to see her.”

“No,” Renee responded, “I’ll wait down here.”

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She sat on the couch. So that she would not be waiting by herself, I sat down next to her. It was the first time we had been alone together since the barn raising.

“I hope I didn’t offend you the other morning,” I commented.

“What morning?” Renee inquired.

“The morning the gang realized Mary Jane and I were friends--before the barn raising.”

“Oh,” she said pausing a second. “No, I wasn’t offended.”

“Then why did you get so quiet? You seemed so happy then you just sealed up.”

“I’m sorry,” she responded, “I guess I really didn’t notice.”

Her change in mood that morning was quite obvious. I had a hard time believing she had not noticed. Olivia came down the stairs and that was where the topic ended.

It was not long before everyone had arrived all anxious to hear what my big surprise was. I waited until everyone was seated before I told them my grand plan.

“We are going to have a fair!” I announced totally delighted by the very thought of it.

“A what?” Fraun asked. “Are you kidding me? You mean like a state fair? How are we going to do that?”

“Hold on a minute,” Jack said to Fraun. “Tim is not from around these parts. Maybe what he calls a fair ain’t what we call a fair.”

“Jack, I speak English just like you,” I commented, “and I mean exactly what you’re all thinking. We are going to have a fair.”

“How are we supposed to go about having this fair?” Barbara inquired.

“That’s the beauty of it,” I replied. “We already have everything we need. All you have to do is follow my agenda and you’ll see exactly what I have in mind.”

“And, what exactly is that?” Fraun questioned.

“A fair!” I exclaimed. “How’s your hearing, Fraun?”

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“That’s all right, Timothy,” Iowa said, “but are ya’ sure ya’ know what you’re doing? I mean to say, how are ya’ gonna’ get the rides, the candy, the people and so on?”

“The rides I’ve got,” I responded, “the candy we’ll get and the people are right in this room.”



The plan was ingenious, if I do say so myself, and I knew every step it would take to accomplish my endeavor. Once the gang believed I was seriously able to do it (and that I was not losing my mental stability,) they agreed to help me out.

The first step was retrieving the six hundred flashlights from Therese. Mr. Wesleyan did not want me to hang around his family anymore so I sent Iowa to pick them up.

When Iowa came back, Therese was in the cab with him. He told me that she would not give him the flashlights until she knew what I was going to do with them. When Iowa told her he had no idea, Therese insisted that she go with him to find out.

Therese already knew that they had something to do with Mary Jane’s birthday. She promised that if I let her get involved, she would not tell her family a word of it. With that in mind and Iowa’s assurance, I decided to trust her and welcomed her into the project.

The only item I did not know how to obtain for my surprise was a battery operated radio. However, I relied on the assumption that someone in the gang would own one. My guess was not only correct but was better than I expected. Jack had more than just a radio for me to use, he had a rather impressive portable stereo with a large collection of music to boot.

Therese left us early to rejoin her family for Mary Jane’s birthday. This way her parents would not be aware that anything was going on. Before she left, Therese assured me that she would not let on that she knew anything about Mary Jane’s surprise--not even to Mary Jane. Hoping she was being honest with me, I went on with my plans.

Since I had not had much to spend my money on, I still had most of the wages I had received from Mr. Millington. This gave me some cash to spend on needs for the fair.

I separated the gang into two groups. The first one would collect ladders and tools from everyone’s house. The other group would go along with me to purchase the other supplies. The first stop we had to make was at Wesleyan’s Hardware Store.

“I thought Mary Jane’s father did not like you,” Olivia said as we stood a short distance down the road from the store. “Do you really think David Wesleyan is going to help you set up a surprise for his daughter?”

“Who says I’m going to tell him what the stuff is for?” I asked.

“I agree with Olivia,” Iowa joined in. “I think ya’d be better off going out of town to another hardware store than trying to get service there.”

“Are you suggesting that just because he doesn’t like me I won’t be treated like a respectable customer?” I questioned.

Iowa thought for a moment. “Probably not, Timothy. He doesn’t like ya’, and he’ll most likely be suspicious about anything ya’ buy in the store.”

“What am I supposed to do?,” I inquired. I glanced at Renee. “What do you think?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

I looked across the street at the Farm and Feed. “I’d try to buy the stuff over there, but I don’t know if he’ll have what I’m searching for.”

“That’s not the greatest idea either,” Iowa responded. “Jack Remy is related to the Wesleyans. Wind of this is bound to get back to David Wesleyan.”

“Oh, that’s just great!” I remarked in frustration. “I’ve got to get some batteries for Jack’s stereo and I also need some duct tape.”

“Duct tape?” Olivia asked. “What in the world do you need that for?”

“You’ll see later,” I replied, “I also need to get some things from Millington’s.”

“Timothy,” Renee finally spoke up rather sharply, “why don’t you just let Iowa and me go get your batteries and duct tape while Olivia and you go get your stuff from Millington’s?”

“Hey, now there’s a solution,” I replied with satisfaction.

I gave them most of my money and told them to buy as much duct tape as they could as well as the batteries for Jack. Olivia and I then began to go down the sidewalk toward Millington’s.

“You know, I’m really beginning to worry about you,” Olivia commented. “You’ve been acting so strangely...all that interest you’ve been having in a fair and duct tape and flashlights and other queer items. I mean has this heat been getting to you? Are you getting too much sun?”

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“Olivia, believe me, you are going to understand this whole thing very shortly,” I assured her.

“I really hope so,” she responded.

Mr. Millington was glad to see me but a bit surprised that I was coming in on a Saturday.

“Just can’t keep away, can ya’, kid?” He said placing both hands on the counter. “I thought I told ya’ no overtime...that is unless you’ve come to play checkers.”

“No, I’m not here for a game,” I responded. “I’m just doing some shopping.”

“Ya’ go right ahead. Ya’ know where everything is. At least, I hope ya’ know where everything is,” Mr. Millington responded.

I laughed and began shopping.

“So how’s your folks doing?” Mr. Millington asked Olivia.

“Oh, they’re doing well,” Olivia replied. “Dad’s still worrying about the heat and the crops though.”

“Well, there’s a lot to worry about out there,” Mr. Millington commented. “We’ve got to see some more rain pretty soon or a lot of farmers are gonna’ be fussin’ over the weather.”

“How’s Timothy fitting in?” Olivia inquired. “Has he started giving you any problems?”

“Has he started giving me any problems?!” Mr. Millington exclaimed in jest. “When hasn’t he given me any problems?”

“Hey! I’m doing a pretty good job!” I called out defending myself.

“Actually, it was a pretty wise decision to hire him. This way I don’t have to do the hard work anymore,” Mr. Millington said.

As they talked I gathered the snacks for the event. I brought candles, pies, popcorn, peanuts and cookies up to the counter.

“Now, let’s have a gander at the candies,” I commented looking in the jars on the counter.

Olivia picked up the popcorn. “Are we going to pop this corn ahead of time or are you planning on just crunching the kernels?”

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“We’re going to pop it there,” I replied. “We’ll bring a pan from your house and pop it over a fire--which reminds me. I need some matches.”

I walked away to get a book of matches.

“What are ya’ doing with all this?” Mr. Millington inquired. “Are ya’ having a sweets fest?”

“No,” Olivia responded. “He’s got a crush on some pretty little young lady and he’s going all out to impress her.”

“I don’t think you’re doing this the right way,” Mr. Millington commented. “Ya’ give her all these sweets and she’s likely not to be little much longer.”

“This is for more than just her,” I said returning to the counter. “This is for everyone.” I began to sort out some candies.

“How many young ladies are ya’ courting right now?” Mr. Millington asked.

“All of our friends are going to be with him and his girl tonight,” Olivia responded.

“Everyone’s gonna’ go courting with ya’,” Mr. Millington said putting the story together as he saw it. “We didn’t court like that in my day. Ya’ can’t steal a kiss with too many people around.”

“Mr. Millington!” Olivia shouted astonished.

“She’s a very special girl,” I remarked pulling out my money.

After Mr. Millington rang up the order it turned out I did not have enough money to pay for it all.

“It seems I’m a bit short,” I uttered with a hint of despair. “I guess I’ll put the popcorn back. It would have been a big hassle anyway.”

“Now hold on,” Mr. Millington said grabbing the popcorn. “If you’re gonna’ do this right for the young lady, you’re gonna’ need everything it takes to make it perfect.”

“But I can’t afford it,” I responded.

“If she’s really that special to ya’, I’ll make an investment in your relationship,” he commented as he began to bag the goodies. “This one’s on me.”



The gang met again at the Senecas. From there we drove to the old fairgrounds pathway.

“I’ve got it!” Fraun announced getting out of Jack’s truck. “You are planning on holding your fair at the old Pleasantville Fairgrounds.”

“My, but you’re sharp!” Olivia commented to Fraun as I opened the door for Renee and her. “Anybody could have figured that out.”

“How did you know?” I asked Olivia.

“When you said earlier that you had the rides already,” Olivia replied.

“You mean you’re planning on using those pieces of junk! They’ll fall to pieces if you touch them!” Fraun complained.

“I know we can’t use the rides,” I responded. “What we’re going to do is make the rides appear like they can be used.”

“You mean fix them up?” Jack asked.

“No.” I replied. “I’ll tell ya’ what. It’s too difficult to explain everything I have in mind. Just help me set up and you’ll see what I’ve got planned.”

Everyone grabbed something and we walked on the path toward the fairgrounds. With a couple trips back to the truck, we had everything we needed on the grounds.

The gang stood at the entrance observing the old structures. I was certain that they instantly knew my plan and felt the same excitement that I did.

“This place should be torn down. What an eyesore!” Fraun exclaimed.

“Fraun, you poor narrow-minded fellow,” I said. “Mary Jane brought this fairground to life one evening for me. She can imagine and describe a perfect picture of this fair long ago when it was open. Tonight I want her to actually see what it might have looked like.”

“What exactly are we gonna do?” Iowa inquired.

“Hold on a few seconds,” I replied gazing over the whole area. “I want to picture it first.”

They waited as I studied the grounds.

“Well, when you’re finished I’ll be over at Jane’s Kitchen eating a few dozen cheeseburgers,” Jack commented.

“I’m with you,” Fraun added.

“Stop it!” Barbara snapped. “I’m interested in this.”

“In what? He’s just staring at this old rusty mess!” Fraun responded.

“Will the two of you keep quiet?!” Olivia chastised.

Silence followed but shortly Fraun started up again. “I wanna go home.”

“O.k.! I know what needs to be done,” I finally said rubbing my hands together. “I’m going to divide us up into two groups--you three ladies and us four guys. The ladies will be in charge of opening up every one of the ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlight packages and putting the batteries in them. As for the guys, grab a ladder and a roll of duct tape and follow me.”

We went out into the middle of the fairgrounds carrying our supplies.

I put my equipment on the ground and turned to face them. “Alright. I want you guys to take a look at each building and amusement ride in this park. What we’re going to do is install the flashlights to each structure. I want it to appear like a carnival--”

“Or a fair,” Fraun interrupted.

“Or a fair,” I said. “Thanks for your input, Fraun. What I want is for everything to be lit up.”

“So, we tape the flashlights to these structures, and turn them on,” Iowa commented.

“No, don’t turn the flashlights on right now. The batteries will be dead before tonight,” I responded. “Wait until it gets dark. We’ll turn the flashlights on when there’s just enough light to see. I’ll go get Mary Jane and by the time we come back, the Pleasantville Fairgrounds will be open and ready for business.”

“Then what will we do?” Fraun questioned. “All stand around and admire them?”

“Fraun, there’s a lot more to come,” I answered. “You’ll know it all by tonight.”



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It went better than I expected. With the ladies assembling the flashlights and the guys taping them to the structures, things moved faster than I had thought it would.

Of course there were some problems. Because of the rust on the rides the duct tape did not always hold the first time. We brought the tools out and used steel wool to clear the surfaces for the tape to adhere better.

Another problem was the hot day. It was unbearable working in the heat without refreshments. That is when I also remembered that in my haste to get snacks, I had completely forgotten about drinks! Not only did we need drinks in the sweltering afternoon, but I also needed drinks for that night. To make the problem worse, I recalled that I had not a dime left and somehow that reminded me that I needed to borrow a lantern as well.

Humbly I came before my friends and told them of my dilemma.

“Ya’ forgot drinks?!” Jack exclaimed. “I couldn’t be more dehydrated if I was a cracker on hot asphalt!”

“I thought I had gotten everything,” I responded. “Drinks just weren’t on my mind earlier.”

“My house isn’t far from here,” Barbara said. “I’ll go whip up some punch.”

“Can you make enough for all of us tonight too?” I gently asked.

Barbara sighed. “Yes, I’ll make some for tonight as well.”

“Great,” I responded rubbing my eyes and glancing at all of them. “You guys are the bestest buddies anyone could hope for.”

Several smiles appeared on their faces.

I then inquired, “Could I also get a lantern?”



Once the flashlights were in place, it took a few more hours to get the rest of the surprise put together. By the time evening came the finishing touches were being made. At that point everyone left to ready themselves for the event to follow.

Since I was already prepared, I stayed behind and browsed around the grounds while amusing myself of how things might turn out that night.

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I eventually strolled over to the pony ride and leaned against the aged guardrail encircling it. The ride certainly must have had many days of use. I was sure that children had been greatly entertained on it long ago.

The fairgrounds made me miss old days that I was never a part of but wished I had. If there were a means to travel back to spend a day, I would have been the first one to go. I questioned why those days ever disappeared.

Olivia, Renee and Iowa were the first to arrive. It was getting dusky out. Iowa and I began to turn on the flashlights. Barbara, Jack and Fraun came not very long afterwards. Barbara had fixed two large serving bowls of punch and let Jack and Fraun carry them. After putting down their punch bowls, Jack and Fraun began to help Iowa and me. When everything was just about ready I left for Mary Jane's house.

As I went along the path toward the footbridge, I gathered a selection of wild flowers that I could see along the route. When I reached the bridge, I arranged the flowers into a crude bouquet and sat them down. Since the woods were so dark, I could not tell whether the floral arrangement was attractive.

Coming near to her house I saw Mary Jane sitting on her porch steps. The screen door was open and the lights were on inside. I walked close enough for her to see me then I retreated a distance. She stood up and stepped over to the screen door.

"I'm going for a walk! I'll be back later!" I heard her call through the door. She stepped off the porch, out her front gate, and down the road toward me. Even her silhouette in the darkness was elegant to me. It was as if the finest artists in the world had sculptured her delicate frame.

"So, where's my present?" Mary Jane asked enthusiastically.

"Just a moment," I answered. "First, let's take an evening stroll. At the end I'll show you the surprise."

"I've been anticipating this forever," she said. "Are you telling me I have to wait even longer?"

"I'm afraid so," I told her placing her arm around mine, "but it won't be that much longer."

She grinned and rested her head on my shoulder. We began to walk.

"How was your birthday party?" I inquired.

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“It went well,” she replied, “but I didn’t get my wish. I even blew out all the candles.”

“I’m sorry. What was your wish?”

“I wished my dad would have said he changed his mind about you and that he wanted you come to my party. It really would have been a lot more fun with you there.”

“It would have been great to be with you and celebrate,” I commented. “That is something I really wanted to attend.”

“Did you know we’re the same age now?” Mary Jane rhetorically inquired. “If we were both a year older, it wouldn’t matter if my dad approved or not.”

“Hey, don’t worry so much about it. We’re together now aren’t we?”

“Yes we are,” she responded. “This was the part of my birthday I had been looking forward to all day.”

We reached the path to the fairgrounds. It was completely black in the woods, so black that I began to wonder if I had only dreamed about fixing up the fairgrounds that day.

“We’re going in there?” Mary Jane asked a bit frightened. “It’s kind of late to go in there right now, don’t you think?”

“That is where your surprise is,” I told her. “I think the woods make a great hiding place for it.”

“Tim, I’m not going to be able to see a thing in there. I never go in the woods at night without a flashlight or something.”

“Mary Jane,” I said softly, “I really didn’t take into account just how dark those woods were going to be but I have a magnificent surprise waiting for you in there. But you have to trust me. If you’re too terrified, I can take you home but, unfortunately, you’d never get to see your present.”

“I trust you,” she responded, “but that’s not the point. The woods can be very scary at night.”

“I’ll protect you from anything,” I assured her. “I promise.”

“Well...” She seemed to be thinking it over. “If you’re with me, I guess I’ll be fine.”

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“That’s the spirit!” I quietly exclaimed and we ventured onto the path.

She held tightly to me so strong that I thought my arm might lose circulation, but I patted her hand and continued along the path.

We arrived at the footbridge and I began to bend down to grab for the bouquet I had sat there earlier.

“Are you O.k.?” Mary Jane asked worriedly.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I replied. “I’m just trying to find something I left here.”

I fumbled through the blackness waving my hand about until I found the bouquet. I raised up again and gave it to her.

“What is this?” She asked. “Is it a plant?”

“It’s some flowers I picked for you,” I answered.

“Oh! I’m sure they’d be very pretty if I could see them.”

“I apologize,” I uttered.

“Is this my present?”

“No, that still lies ahead.”

We went on down the path until we saw the lights piercing through the trees in the darkness. Mary Jane halted in her tracks.

“What’s...” She began to talk but suddenly stopped. “What’s going on?”

“Your surprise,” I replied.

Again she was silent.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“What did you do, Timothy?”

“Something you always wanted to see,” I answered. “Come on, it gets better.”

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I nudged forward and Mary Jane began to walk along with me. As the layer of woods became sparse between the park and us she started to see the details. It took my breath away as well.

“Oh my gosh,” she whispered in complete awe.

We stepped out of the woods into the clearing. There before us was the Ferris wheel, the carousel, and all the other buildings glowing with lights. It was hard to believe we were seeing only ruins, each structure seemed as if it were open and ready for use.

Mary Jane just stood there not saying a word. The only sounds were those of the crickets, frogs and other creatures in the woods around us.

“Welcome to the Pleasantville Fair,” I softly announced.

“Tim...Tim...its the most incredible...its the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” she commented sounding like she was crying.

I turned to her. “I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings or anything.”

“No, you didn’t,” Mary Jane replied. “This is perfect. This is so perfect. Thank you.”

She wrapped her arms around me and held me for the longest time. I placed my arms tightly around her and returned the favor.

It was a grand sensation I had in me. I did something so marvelous that Mary Jane was nearly speechless. I had no idea that I was capable of doing something like that for someone else.

“HURRY! HURRY! RING A PYLON, GET A PRIZE!” We heard Iowa shout in a carnystyle voice. We both were startled instantly even though I knew it was coming.

At the closest shelter house Iowa was standing shaking a stick he was using as a cane in one hand and holding wooden hoops in the other.

“Is that Iowa?” Mary Jane asked.

“I’ll give that a try!” I said taking Mary Jane over to Iowa.

“Glad we have a brave lad in the crowd tonight!” Iowa exclaimed as we approached.

Inside the shelter he had set up three pylons he normally used for his horse show training. He had them arranged as a triangle and placed a board a short distance away.

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“Step no closer than the board, my good man,” Iowa instructed, “Ring a pylon--That’s right! Ring only one pylon and ya’ walk away with a prize.”

“How much will this cost me?” I questioned.

“I usually charge a dime a game but since it is the young lady’s birthday, and ya’ don’t have a dime to your name anyway, there’s no charge,” Iowa replied.

“Hey! I like that price,” I commented which got Mary Jane chuckling. “Give me the rings.”

Iowa handed me the three wooden hoops.

I studied the pylons carefully then I threw the first hoop, which hit off the top of one of them and fell to the side.

“Ya’ missed, sonny, but ya’ made a good effort,” Iowa remarked still sounding like a carny.

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you?” I asked him.

“Just part of the game, fella,” he replied. “Try again.”

I tossed the second hoop and rung a pylon.

“There ya’ go! We have a winner!” Iowa announced. “Choose your prize.”

He held up both hands. In one he held a bag of candy while in the other he held nothing.

“Wow!” I sarcastically remarked. “Where’s my choice?”

“That’s all the choice ya’ get when you’re playin’ on the house,” he responded.

“Gee, I guess I’ll take the candy,” I said snatching the bag.

“Come on over here, boy!” Jack yelled from not too far away. “I have better games and a larger variety of prizes!”

Mary Jane and I went over to his game that he had made out of some boards and crates. On the top he had what appeared to be a miniature bowling lane in which he used old cans as pins and a worn out softball.

“Get a spare ya’ get your choice of prizes, get a strike ya’ get the grand prize,” Jack said offering me the ball.

“Alright, I’ll play your game,” I said reaching for it.

He pulled it away. “Sorry, but this game ain’t free like the last guy’s. It’ll cost ya’.”

“But I don’t have any money,” I responded.

“I do!” Fraun said coming over. “What’s the price of this game?”

“Twenty-five cents a roll,” Jack answered.

“Wait a minute!” I interjected. “Iowa’s game was only ten cents a toss?!”

“Prices have raised since then,” Jack replied, “and besides, my game has something his fell short of.”

“What’s that?” Fraun inquired giving Jack his quarter.

“Mine’s actually fun,” Jack answered.

Fraun took the softball and rolled it down the miniature lane. It hit several cans.

“This game’s easy!” Fraun exclaimed. “Next time put some more thought into it, Jack. Carnival games are supposed to have some catch that makes them nearly impossible to win.”

Jack gave Fraun the softball again. Fraun rolled it a second time and missed the standing cans altogether.

Jack grinned. “Why should I make this game any more difficult? For you it’s hard enough.”

Iowa came over. “Let me try this game. I’ll determine if this game is difficult or not.”

On Iowa’s first bowl he knocked over most of the cans. On his second he got the spare.

“Ain’t anything to it,” Iowa remarked. “What’s my prize?”

Jack picked up a roll of duct tape.

“I thought ya’ had a lot of prizes,” Iowa complained.

Jack paused. He then reached up and ripped a flashlight down. “Now ya’ have a choice.”

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Iowa smirked grabbing the duct tape. "At least this is useful. I certainly don't want a clown light."

"How about if I give you some candy instead of a quarter?" I asked Jack.

"Fine," Jack answered snatching the bag.

"I guess that's fair enough," I said as Jack gave me the softball.

I rolled the ball and was fortunate enough to knock over a few cans. Jack returned it to me.

"I sure hope I can knock over the rest," I said preparing to roll the softball.

"May I try?" Mary Jane asked. "I think I can do it."

"Sure," I replied giving her the ball.

"Hold my flowers," she said handing the bouquet to me.

"Now, M.J., ya' gotta give the ball some effort or it won't make it all the way down the lane," Jack explained to her as if she was a small child.

Mary Jane tilted her head to the side. Her face indicated that she was a bit insulted by Jack's words. She flung the ball down the lane. It smashed into the cans knocking them all over the place but Mary Jane got her spare.

"Oh, I hope I used enough effort," she saucily remarked to Jack.

"Yeah... That was pretty good," Jack commented glancing around at the scattered cans.

"I'll take the 'Glowie the Clown' flashlight," I said, "unless you want to give me my candy back."

"What do you take me for?" Jack inquired handing me the flashlight.

I gave the light to Mary Jane.

"Well that just about cleans me out," Jack uttered.

"Wait, what about the grand prize?" I questioned.

"Oh, there wasn't any grand prize," Jack responded. "That was just for attracting customers."

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“Hey, I’m here!” Therese announced running over to us from the entrance.

Mary Jane turned around in horror. “Therese! What are you doing here?!”

“Don’t worry about it, M.J.! Dad and Mom don’t know anything about this,” Therese responded.

“How did you find out about it?” Mary Jane asked.

“Because someone had to get the flashlights from me,” Therese replied. “M.J., I’ve known about your surprise since Timothy told us about it at George Susan’s barn raising. You have nothing to worry about. I just wanted to be here with you.”

“Well,” Iowa said, “now that everyone’s here, we have something waiting for Mary Jane at that shelter house.”

He pointed toward the shelter where Mary Jane and I had our pretend dance. I picked the place specifically.

We all went over to it where Olivia, Renee and Barbara had lit up seventeen candles and put them on one of the pies.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” The three of them cheered as we approached. This was followed by an energetic round of us singing “Happy Birthday to M.J.”. Mary Jane, who appeared to be not used to so much attention, tilted her head down and stayed close to me. After the song was over she was too timid to say anything.

Iowa spoke up. “Well, you’re gonna’ have to make a wish soon, young lady, or we’re gonna’ have wax all over that pie.”

I nudged Mary Jane to move toward the pie. She stepped over to it and paused for a moment. She smiled and blew out all the candles. This of course received applause, during which Fraun began yelling “SPEECH! SPEECH!”

Mary Jane shook her head moving toward me.

“Come on, give us a speech!” Jack exclaimed.

I reached out my hands to stop her. “You have to say a few words first.”

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“Fine,” she said smiling almost giggling. “If you want to embarrass me, I’ll let you. You all deserve that much after going to all this trouble for me.”

She picked the pie up from Olivia’s hands.

“There’s one thing I want to know. How did you guys pull this thing off?” Mary Jane asked.

“It is pretty incredible, isn’t it?” Fraun commented.

“Timothy had the whole shebang planned out when we met him this morning,” Iowa responded to her.

“We thought he had gone crazy but it did turn out very well,” Barbara added.

Mary Jane turned toward me. “How did you ever think of all this?”

“Well,” I responded, “you said you wanted to go to the fair on your birthday. I could not get you the State Fair, but I knew where I could find abandoned fairgrounds and six hundred ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlights.”

“That’s what we forgot!” Olivia spoke. “We should have had a clown.”

“Now that would have been a great idea,” Fraun responded. “I wish I had thought of it. I bet I could have been a great clown.”

“Fraun, you already are a great clown,” Iowa commented.

“Shall we start this dance?” Barbara inquired.

Mary Jane came over to me. “A dance?”

“Yes, a dance,” I replied. “A dance right in the shelter house where we had one previously. Remember?”

“Of course I remember,” she replied.

Jack started up the first song...a slow one.

“May I?” I inquired holding out my arm.

“Yes, dear sir,” she responded.

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We began to dance. It was a warm and comfortable experience for me.

Her eyes and her smile were things I remembered most that night. If I could have frozen time for eternity, there was where I would have liked it to stop. It was like a dream spinning around with her under the lights of the Pleasantville Fairgrounds. I was happier (that I could recall) than I had ever been in my life.

“This is a dream come true for me,” Mary Jane commented. “Why did you do this for me?”

“Because it was your birthday,” I responded, “and I knew how to give you the present that you always wanted.”

“This is it and I love it,” she said. “It makes me all the more excited to see a real fair again. I haven’t been to one in a few years.”

“I’ll be going with Iowa for his horse contest. We’ve been training very hard for it. I think it’ll be Iowa’s biggest moment.”

“It would be nice if his moment was a happy one.”

“I think so to,” I responded.

For a moment we did not say a word. Instead she leaned her head against my shoulder and swayed back and forth with me to the music.

“I was thinking about asking you to dance the other evening at the Friday night barn dance,” I told her. “That’s why I stared at you so long.”

“I remember that night,” Mary Jane said. “You were as still as a statue holding that plate stuffed with pies and cookies. I was hoping you’d come over.”

“I wanted to. I really did. I just didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t know that you wanted me to come over.”

“I held out as much as I could that night. I thought you were really handsome and so shy. I considered asking you myself, but I knew it wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Handsome?” I questioned in amazement. “You think I’m handsome? Maybe you should have your vision checked again. I think in reality, you mean I’m tolerable to see. You can look at me without getting sick.”

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She glanced up at me. “No, I mean you’re handsome. In case you never noticed, I was always staring at you as well.”

“I’m really handsome?”

“Yes, you are really handsome.”

I stopped briefly. “How handsome am I?”

She glanced up again and tilted her head.

“I mean you are stunning,” I continued. “Am I good looking enough to be with you?”

“What type of question is that?” Mary Jane inquired. “Of course you are,...but it wouldn’t matter if you were the most awful looking person on this planet. I think you are handsome but I am more attracted to what’s inside you. That’s the part of you I want to know more about.”

“I like the way you see things,” I remarked.

We danced more.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” I said. “How about you coming with us to the State Fair? You’ll get to see Iowa’s horse contest and we’ll get to spend the remainder of the day going around the fair.”

“Oh, I would love to go with you,” she responded. “Boy! That is a tall order though. That’ll be some story I’ll have to tell my father so I can go with you.”

“That certainly would be!” Her father remarked angrily.

Shocked, we instantly looked to see both her parents standing just outside the shelter house. It felt like all the blood drained from my body. We both just stood there terrified.

“What’s going on here?!” Mr. Wesleyan demanded.

Someone turned the music off.

“A birthday surprise,” I replied.

Mrs. Wesleyan was gazing at all the lights we had put up. “How did you guys do this?”

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“We did it with duct tape and those ‘Glowie the Clown’ flashlights your husband couldn’t sell,” Fraun answered.

I continued to face Mary Jane’s father. “I did it because it was your daughter’s birthday and this is what she always wanted. This is her favorite place.”

“I’m aware of that,” Mr. Wesleyan replied. “That’s why I knew where to find her. We were worried about her but that’s beside the point. I thought I told ya’ to stay away from my daughter!”

“Daddy, I don’t want to stay away from him,” Mary Jane spoke in.

“You’re not seeing the entire picture here, Mary Jane,” her father responded. “Ya’ don’t know anything about this boy. He could be dangerous.”

“Timothy? Dangerous?” Jack questioned. “Are ya’ kidding me? He’s a cream puff.”

“What you think doesn’t matter a heck of a lot to me,” Mr. Wesleyan remarked.

“Are all these lights those toy flashlights my husband bought?” Mrs. Wesleyan inquired oblivious to the situation. “Finally those things went to good use.”

Renee walked over to Mary Jane’s father. “Timothy is not dangerous and you shouldn’t be so prejudice.”

“That’s about enough out of you,” Mr. Wesleyan responded to her. “You kids are being brought down by this stranger. I won’t have my daughter doing the same.”

“I won’t hurt your daughter,” I firmly stated.

“How do you expect me to believe that?” Mr. Wesleyan questioned. “How am I supposed to believe anything ya’ say when ya’ don’t say a word about your past? No one in their right mind would trust ya’.”

“With all due respect, my past is my problem not yours,” I replied.

Mr. Wesleyan paused a few seconds. I thought that maybe he was reconsidering.

“Well, she’s my daughter,” he finally spoke, “and your problem doesn’t have to be ours.”

“Why don’t you ease up a little?” Mrs. Wesleyan asked.

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“What?!” Mr. Wesleyan responded turning around to face her.

“I said, why don’t you ease up?” Mary Jane’s mother replied firmly. “You think he’s trouble just because you don’t know a thing about him. You know more about him than you think. Look at the friends he’s made here in this town.” She pointed at the gang. “See? We have Iowa Johnson, Olivia Seneca, and Barbara Susan...These are well-respected children in this town. Are you going to question their judgement of character?”

“They’re just kids!” Mr. Wesleyan declared.

“And what about these fairgrounds? Have you stopped to take a glance at this? This ‘wandering vagrant’ did all this for your daughter’s birthday! I mean this really took a lot of work. And look at all the people he invited. Do you think he would call all this attention to himself if he was a criminal--if he was meaning to hurt M.J.?”

Mr. Wesleyan continued his argument. “This has nothing to do with--”

“And what about your daughter?” Mrs. Wesleyan interrupted.

“Go get ‘em, Mrs. Wesleyan!” Fraun exclaimed.

“How valuable is your daughter’s opinion to you?” Mrs. Wesleyan continued. “Doesn’t what she thinks matter to you? From what I’ve seen, I think this young man deserves a chance. I think this ‘wandering vagrant’ issue has been going on long enough. So what if he doesn’t want to share his past with us. It’s none of our business anyway! And besides, with the hard headed people we have in this town, I don’t blame him for keeping his life a secret.”

“Are ya’ through?” Mr. Wesleyan inquired.

“Not quite!” She replied. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with him. I say, let Mary Jane see him if she wants to. Let her go to the State Fair. We’ll judge him for ourselves.”

Mr. Wesleyan turned to face us again and for awhile he stood quietly.

“Please, Daddy,” Mary Jane pleaded.

Her father’s eyes and mine never left contact with each other. I was not going to back down. I kept the same stone face that I had when Roy, the pitcher, went to swing at me at the Independence Day Celebration.

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“Alright,” Mr. Wesleyan finally spoke, “you may see my daughter,...but I’ll be watching ya’ very closely. Don’t even try anything, or I’ll be on ya’ quicker than ya’ know it.” He stepped back and glanced around at the lights. “It’s getting late, Ma. Let’s go home.”

As they walked away Mary Jane wrapped her arms around me.

Jack slapped me on the back. “You were mighty brave.”

After letting go of me, Mary Jane and her sister hugged while almost crying.

Renee was standing by one of the posts. I went over to her.

“That was pretty rough,” I commented.


“Yes, it was,” Renee replied observing the Wesleyan girls.

“I want to thank you for sticking up for me,” I said. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Well, think nothing of it,” Renee responded abruptly and walked away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“The Day Before”



Tomorrow was going to be Iowa's finest moment. I found that I was almost as anxious as he was. I had been working with him since the July Point Show in preparation for tomorrow's event and it was about to happen. We were going to the State Fair.

We were planning to leave that afternoon for the fair after I got off work. Iowa would be getting things prepared in the meantime so that when I got to his house, we could take off shortly after. His parents would be traveling behind us bringing their house trailer for sleeping quarters the couple of nights we would be at the fair. The Senecas would be coming out the next day bringing Mary Jane along with them. Mr. Millington and the gang were coming then as well.

Renee had been distancing herself from me ever since the evening of Mary Jane's surprise. I knew it was directed toward me because she maintained her friendship with Olivia and Iowa the same as usual. I was not sure why but I had been determined to find out. Unfortunately, whenever I would talk to her about it, she denied the entire thing. Still, I could not help but feel the coldness.

This was emphasized further by her not showing up at the store anymore. Mr. Millington would run her groceries to the house.

The reason I mention this matter was because that day Mr. Millington was going to deliver their groceries. I was ecstatic about tomorrow's big event but not as excited as I thought I could have been. The bitterness Renee was showing me through her silence was putting a deterrent on my thrill.

It has always been that way for me. I find I cannot enjoy the full flavor of a good happening in my life if another part of it is in distress. Nevertheless, I felt I had been suffering long enough.

I volunteered rather insistently to deliver the groceries myself.

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Mr. Millington glanced at me puzzled then said, “Sure, if it means that much to you.”

When the time came to make the delivery, I stuffed two bags of groceries to fill their order. I got on my bicycle and carefully placed the bags so they would not hinder my riding much. This required me to ride with one hand while wrapping my other arm around the bags. I slowly peddled the bike to the Howell’s house trying my best to keep steady.

When I arrived there, I got off my bicycle and rested it against the house. I balanced the weight of the groceries onto both arms and stepped up to the front door. I rang the doorbell. There was a white curtain in the door window preventing me from seeing inside. Eventually the curtain moved and Mrs. Howell peered at me through the window.

Mrs. Howell was an elderly looking lady. I always marveled how a lady of that seemingly advanced age could have a daughter as young as Renee who was my age.

Mrs. Howell stared at me for the longest time and I started to feel uneasy. I figured maybe she had forgotten who I was, or she was wondering what I was doing there.

“Groceries!” I called out.

The curtain was moved back into place and I could no longer see her. I heard the lock unlatch and the door slowly opened but only enough for Mrs. Howell to see me.

“Phillip Millington delivers my groceries,” she said.

“Well, today I’m doing it for him,” I responded.

“Does he know you’re here?” She questioned.

“Of course, ma’am,” I replied.

“Why didn’t he come himself like he usually does?” Mrs. Howell inquired.

“Who is that, mother?” I heard Renee ask.

“It’s that wandering vagrant,” her mother replied.

I had heard the term “wandering vagrant” so many times that the belittling it was meant to inflict did not phase me anymore. However, it did seem to bother Renee.

“Mother,” she said somewhat sternly, “his name is Timothy Reye.”

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“You deal with him,” her mother responded stepping away from the door. “I’m not going to talk to a hoodlum.”

Renee came over in her place.

“A hoodlum?” I questioned.

“My mother is one of the people in this town placing you on the same level as Mike Frazey and Karl Boothe,” Renee answered.

“Well, I came to deliver your groceries,” I commented.

“Thank you,” she responded reaching for the bags.

“Oh! These are very heavy bags,” I remarked pulling the bags from her grasp. “I would not have you hurting your back. Maybe I should just carry them inside for you.”

A slight smirk appeared on her face as if she knew I was up to something.

“Sure,” she said opening the door wide enough for me to walk through, “come on in.”

I went inside.

The house was crowded and nearly cluttered with worn antique furniture covered with knickknacks. There was a thick smell of spices in the air. It seemed an appropriate environment for her mother but definitely out of place for Renee.

The front room was drenched in sunlight coming through the bay window. Across the room from it was a large opening leading to a dimly lit dining room. A massive dark wood table was clearly visible along with a wooden shelf of dishes behind it.

“Just put them in there,” she said motioning toward the dining room.

I followed her orders and put the bags on the table. I saw a small kitchen through another doorway.

“Got something cooking in there?” I asked trying to place where the spicy odor was coming from.

“No,” Renee replied. “Why do you ask?”

I figured she was not aware of the odor I was detecting.

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“No reason in particular,” I answered. “So, where did your mother go?”

“She went upstairs,” Renee responded. “She’s quite prone to having her opinions known verbally and nonverbally.”

“She sounds real sweet,” I remarked sarcastically.

Renee came over to me and took the milk out of one of the bags.

“Well, she is my mother,” Renee stated sounding annoyed with me.

She went into the kitchen.

“Thanks for bringing the groceries!” She called out as if expecting me to leave.

I had not yet fulfilled what I had gone there for, so I searched my mind for an excuse to hang around.

“My! It sure is hot out there,” I commented staring out the window across the room. “It sure can get a guy thirsty riding out in it. Would it be too much out of your way if I asked for something to drink?”

Renee appeared at the kitchen doorway. “Would you like a glass of ice water?”

“Do you have any lemonade?” I inquired.

“No, but we do have prune juice,” she replied.

I shuttered. “I’ll have water.”

“I thought so,” she said and disappeared again.

I glanced around the room. “This is really an interesting layout you two have here. It’s all kind of old-fashioned-like.”

Renee came out of the kitchen and handed me the water.

“Well, this is my home,” she commented curtly.

I took a sip from the glass.

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“You can sit down if you want to,” she stated.

“I guess I could stay a few moments.”

“I know that’s what you wanted to do,” Renee said. “After all if you were really thirsty, you would not have simply taken a sip of that water.”

“Yeah...You’re right.”

We walked over and sat on the couch, which was in front of the bay window. With the sun beaming into the room, it made this the hottest spot there. However, I sat down without a complaint. Renee sat down next to me.

“What is it?” Renee questioned staring at me.

“Umm...” I took another drink. “This...This is really tasty water.” I held the glass up to the sunlight. “And, it’s really clear too.”

“Timothy,” she said taking the glass from my hand and setting it on the coffee table, “what is it?”

“I...I...” I sighed. “I want to know what I did to get you angry with me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do,” I responded with irritation in my voice.

She sat quiet with her emotionless expression.

“Renee, I really value our friendship.” I paused. “I don’t want to lose it. So whatever I’m doing wrong, please let me know.”

“You’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Then why are you being so distant from me? It’s like before we became friends now.”

Renee turned her head toward the window and remained silent.

“Timothy,” she eventually spoke somewhat sadly. “I’m dealing with some problems right now. It’s just that I thought something good was finally coming into my life when it really wasn’t what I thought at all.”

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“What’s wrong?” I inquired.

“I wish I could tell you,” she uttered almost in a whisper, “but it wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“So what!” I responded. “Life has never been fair to me.”

“No,” she stated. “I can’t tell you. I’m just going to see where my life takes me from here.”

“Renee, we’ve shared with each other some of our darkest secrets. Surely, you can tell me this one.”

“No, I won’t tell you this one. So let’s not talk about it any further.”

“O.k.,” I said dropping the subject. Renee seemed so distressed and I wanted to help, but I respected her wishes and mentioned nothing more of it. “Are you coming to the State Fair with us tomorrow?”

She gazed at me without speaking. Her face and hair appeared so soft in the sunlight. Her eyes seemed as if they were seeing something miles away although they were only directed on me.

“What did you say?” She asked.

“I said are you going to the fair?” I replied.

“Yes, I’m coming with you. Well, I’m coming with the gang tomorrow,” Renee answered.

“Great,” I responded. “That’ll probably cheer you up some.”

“Maybe.”

I drank the rest of the water and stood up. “Well, I’d better be going. Mr. Millington is probably wondering what’s taking me so long.”

Renee smiled.

I walked over and opened the front door. “I guess I’ll see you later. It’s going to be a big day tomorrow.”

I started out the door.

“Timothy!” Renee called out.

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“Yeah?” I said looking back at her.

Renee seemed as if she was about to say something but then she stopped. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you later!” I responded and shut the door.



According to the instructions Iowa was sent concerning the State Fair Youth Horse Show, the arrival time at the fairgrounds was at six o’clock that night. Mr. Millington let me off early (at four o’clock) because he knew Iowa wanted to get there as soon as he could.

I rode my bicycle over to the Johnson farm and around back to find Iowa and his father very busy getting things prepared. I joined right in.

I was as ecstatic as I thought was possible for me--so eager to get on the road and see the fair! It was almost as if I was in Iowa’s shoes because I had been working with him for weeks. I was so energized as I helped them! I felt that if I did not comment to someone about it, I would burst.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been as excited as this,” I remarked to Alexander Johnson as we gathered straw for bedding in one of the barns.

“I feel the same way,” he responded, “and it’s not just about the State Fair either. It’s been quite awhile since I saw the big city.”

“The big city?” I asked.

“Yeah, the big city,” he replied. “That’s where the State Fair is...in grand ol’ Columbus.”

“Columbus?!” I exclaimed in shock.

“Yeah,” he said, “Columbus, Ohio.”

Alexander took his load and left.

A sinking sensation built in my stomach. Columbus was the last place on earth I wanted to go. My parents had taken me to the State Fair when I was a child and that was years ago. I never realized it was in the same city I had just run away from.

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I was frozen with terror at the thought of going back there. I suddenly felt trapped knowing I had told Iowa I would be there for him. I realized that they had no idea that I came from Columbus. But what could I do?

I thought about getting on my bicycle and riding out of town as fast as I could, but I figured that decision was too drastic. I considered pretending that I was sick, but Iowa was really counting on me. The stress was so strong that I began to shake.

I heard Alexander coming toward the barn. "What's keepin' ya', Timothy Reye?!"

The fear and confusion was making it impossible for me to think clearly or act normally. I ran to the other side of the barn and out into the pasture.

When I had gone out a good distance I turned around to see if they had seen me and unfortunately they had. They were both standing just outside the barn staring at me.

"Something scare ya'?" Alexander Johnson called out.

I did not reply.

Iowa and his father talked a moment then Alexander returned to the barn. Iowa ran out to me. For some reason I did not go any farther. I guess it was because, since Iowa was there the night I told Stephen Seneca that I was a runaway, there was no need for me to fear what he would do. After all, Iowa was the closest friend I ever had.

"What's wrong with ya'?" Iowa asked when he got to me.

"Iowa, I can't go with you," I responded.

"What do ya' mean ya' can't go with me? Tomorrow's the day we've been training for."

"I had no idea where the State Fair was. I can't go back there."

"That's the place ain't it? That's the place ya' ran away from."

"Iowa, if you tell anyone a word of it, I'll leave this town tonight," I warned him.

"Don't worry about me," Iowa said reassuring me. "It'll be our secret. I wouldn't want to see ya' back where ya' came from anyway."

"I can't go to the State Fair with you."

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“Can’t go to the State Fair?!” He exclaimed. “What makes ya’ think that?”

“Someone will recognize me there.”

“Someone will recognize ya’? Were you really that popular that a whole city would know who ya’ are?”

“No,” I replied. “Of course everyone wouldn’t recognize me. But what about Children’s Services? What about the police? Eric Gerris? My caseworker?--”

“Hold on a minute,” Iowa interrupted. “Let’s take care of one thing at a time. I really doubt that Children’s Services are gonna’ be combing the fairgrounds searching for ya’--especially at the livestock complex...unless ya’ always hung around the place before.”

“I haven’t been to the fair since my parents were alive,” I stated. “That was a long time ago.”

“O.k., I guess there’d be no reason for Children’s Services or your caseworker to look for ya’ there. As far as the big city police go, I’m sure they’re much more concerned about the crimes going on then one runaway that apparently disappeared.”

“What about Eric Gerris and his family?” I inquired.

“A guy like Eric Gerris does not sound like a horse show fan,” Iowa answered. “Timothy, I’ll be honest with ya’. I’m really saying all this just to get ya’ to go with me. I’ve been really looking forward to having ya’ there.”

“But--”

“Hold on!” Iowa interrupted. “I’m not through speaking yet.” He paused again to collect his thoughts. “Like I said before, maybe I’m just convincing ya’ for my own sake. Even if I wasn’t, I really doubt that anyone would recognize ya’ the way ya’ are now.”

I glanced down at myself. The cowboy boots, the worn out jeans, and the flannel shirt definitely did not look like me when I first arrived at Pleasantville.

“You’ve changed since ya’ came to this town, and I don’t just mean your clothes. You’re a lot more muscular. You’re a different young man with a different way of thinking.”

“Iowa, I want to go with you,...but what if they recognize me?” I asked nervously.

“It’s all up to you,” he replied, “but I don’t think you’re seeing things as others will.”

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“What do you mean?”

“Well, first of all the Timothy Reye who came to this town never was a country boy. You are. The Timothy Reye who came to this town was a loner. Your gonna’ be traipsing around the fair with a group of good friends and a pretty little sweetheart on your arm. Say your caseworker sees ya’ out of the hundreds of folks walking up and down the midway. Your caseworker wouldn’t even take a second glance, because ya’ definitely wouldn’t be the troublesome boy who ran away from his foster home.”

“If only I could be sure,” I commented.

“Ya’ can be,” he responded. “Have a little faith. Heavenly Father won’t let ya’ down.”

I sighed. “I wish I had as much faith as you do, Iowa.”

“Like I said before,” Iowa restated, “it’s up to you.”

“Let me give it some thought,” I told him as I gazed at their farm. “Maybe I’ll have my answer by the time your ready to leave.”

I came back with Iowa to the barn and continued to help his father and him prepare.

I thought about what Iowa said and some of it did make sense. It was very possible that I would not be recognized at all. I was not dressed like a runaway and I would appear like I belonged somewhere. I enjoyed thinking that last part...that I belonged somewhere. Many people in Pleasantville were treating me as if I was a part of their family. It was a great feeling.

As time drew closer to leave, Iowa brought his outfit for the next day to the truck. When I came over to see it, he placed a black cowboy hat on my head.

“Now you’re totally disguised,” he said. “With that hat covering the top of your head, that flannel shirt, and those boots, no one is gonna’ know who ya’ are.”

“Alright, Iowa,” I responded. “I’ll go with you.”

“Grand!” he shouted patting me on the back.

“What’s grand?” Mary Jane asked approaching us.

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

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“Nice hat!” She exclaimed.

“Well,” Iowa said nudging me in the side with his elbow, “I guess I better leave the two of ya’ alone awhile.”

He walked away whistling.

“I’m so glad you came,” I commented to Mary Jane.

“Did you really think I would let you go without saying good- bye?” She inquired.

“I never thought about it now that you mention it.”

“Just like a man,” she remarked. “If only you had a bit more of a woman’s tenderness, you men might be emotionally tolerable to deal with.”

“Hey! I like to consider myself a very sensitive type of guy,” I rebutted.

“Yeah, I can see that,” she commented cynically. “You’re just dripping with sensitivity.”

“What do you think of my hat?” I asked running my fingers along the brim of it.

“Quite stylish,” she replied. “I like you looking more like a cowboy.”

“You’ll have to stick by me tomorrow. I’ll be helping Iowa all the way up to show time.”

“I’ll be there,” Mary Jane responded.

“That’s about enough talk for ya’ both,” Iowa said making sure the horse trailer was firmly hitched to the back of his truck. “We gotta be taking off. You two will have plenty of time to talk tomorrow.”

“I guess I’d better get in the truck,” I told Mary Jane as I opened the door.

“Just one more thing before you go, Timothy Reye!” She demanded sounding a little angry.

“What?” I inquired turning toward her.

She wrapped her arms around me and held me tightly.

“Golly!” Rebecca remarked passing us. “You’d think you two would never see each other again the way you’re carrying on.”

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“You’re telling me,” Iowa added already sitting in the truck. “Come on!” He tapped the horn a couple of times.

“Here’s some chicken sandwiches you boys can eat along the way,” Rebecca informed Iowa. “Your father says if you’re having any trouble just wave your arm out the window. We’ll be right behind you.”

Mary Jane finally let go. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You certainly will!” Iowa exclaimed. “Now come on! Let’s go!”

I got in the truck and we began to go down the driveway with Iowa’s parents following in their truck behind us. Mary Jane and I waved at each other until I could not see her anymore.

“Pleeeeezzzz!” Iowa groaned. “Ya’ sure haven’t left that girl much doubt that you’re hers.”

“I’m not hers,” I responded. “We’re just friends.”

Iowa gave me a look of disbelief.

“Really,” I added.

“Fine, you’re just friends,” Iowa stated, “but ya’ wouldn’t mind it if it was more.”

I thought for a moment. “No,” I finally spoke. “So, what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Iowa said, “but ya’ might play a little hard-to-get, ya’ know.”

“Why?”

“Just to make sure she keeps her interest in ya’.”

“She is interested in me,” I argued.

“She’s interested now, but what about down the road when this stuff has all become an old habit. All I’m saying is don’t let it get old too quick. Take your time. Go slowly or you two will burn out before ya’ know it.”

“Things are working out rather quickly. It’s very easy this way.”

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He stretched his arms. “Just remember that nothing good that lasts come quickly nor easily. If ya’ rush a good thing, your certain to ruin it. If ya’ take the time to build it soundly, you’ll have something worth holding onto.”

“But I like her,” I commented.

“She likes ya’ too,” Iowa responded. “At least it appears that way. That’s all the more reason to take things slowly. If ya’ two really like each other, than you’ll like each other all the more after spending time making a strong friendship as well as a strong relationship.”

“O.k.,” I said. “You’ve been right before. What should I do?”

“Well, I’m not overly experienced in relationships, but I can tell ya’ a few things I can see will help. First, keep things the way they are now. She’ll feel you’re pulling away from her if ya’ hold back anything you’ve already shared with her. I’d spend more time just doing things together, talking, and learning more about each other. If things are meant to be between the two of ya’, it’ll wait till ya’ both have become closer friends.”

“What about kissing?” I asked. “Not that I’ve kissed her or expecting to anytime soon. I’m not really comfortable with the thought of it right now.”

“Oh,” he said pausing briefly. “Ya’ see, kissing sends out a large signal. Ya’ gotta make sure ya’ feel the emotions that go along with it before ya’ actually do it.”

“I’d have to be in love before I’d kiss a girl. I like hugging though.”

“Yeah, hugging’s fine. Everybody likes to hug. I agree with ya’ about kissing. That’s about how I feel about it. I want to wait until I’m sure she’s the one.”

“Who? Olivia?”

“No one in general,” Iowa replied. “I just mean when the girl comes along who’s right for me.”

“Yeah,” I responded. “Olivia.”



Needless to say, seeing the Columbus skyline as it began to appear from the freeway was a terrifying feeling. Several times I told Iowa that I might be changing my mind about wanting to go. He continued to assure me the chances were slim that someone who knew me would

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see me at all. This was when he was between times telling me how nervous he was about the horse show the next day.

There was no mistaking the fairgrounds when I saw it. I could see a beautiful Ferris wheel, other amusement rides, and buildings. What I most recognized was the large old wooden grandstand with the words "OHIO STATE FAIR" in red letters on top.

"I remember that!" I exclaimed in excitement. "I remember seeing that grandstand when my parents took me to the fair."

"Yeah, the old white wooden grandstand," Iowa added. "That's the icon of the fairgrounds that everyone remembers first."

"It's simple, but magnificent," I commented.

"It's traditional," Iowa remarked.

"Being as old as that grandstand probably is, I sure hope nothing happens to it," I said.

"No need to worry about that," Iowa responded. "The grandstand is always gonna' be there. It'll be a dark day when folks decide to get rid of something as timeless as that."



When we arrived at the fair, Iowa had to check-in, register, and unload. His parents took the house trailer to a reserved area just north of the fairgrounds. At the livestock complex, I went with Iowa as he guided his horse to his designated stall.

The stalls and aisles were numerous. I remembered walking around in the complex years ago, but I never recalled it being so large. The stalls around us were also in use by other youth horse show contestants.

The pressure of competition was thick in the air. I wondered, as I glanced at the others, just how good the other riders would perform the next day. It was difficult to imagine that all the riders had practiced as diligently as Iowa and I had.

Iowa brought his own grain, hay, straw and other supplies. He did not want to have to purchase any since his family had ample provisions at the farm. We put out some straw for bedding in the stall so that his horse would not have to put up with a hard floor. We also gave Wheatbread a thorough cleaning so that she would look her best for the next day.

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Iowa took his horse to the make-up arena, a large rectangular area of soft dirt with an equally large roof suspended over top. There he worked his horse awhile. I watched him from the fence. After some time he dismounted and walked over to me.

“Looking real good, Iowa,” I commented.

Iowa just stared out into the arena without saying a word. I pressed my hat down on my head and looked around to make sure no one was watching me.

“Here’s where I’ll be before the show tomorrow,” Iowa said without taking his eyes off the arena.

“Excited are you?” I inquired.

“Worried,” he answered.

“Worried? Why are you worried? Tomorrow is going to be the day you’ve been wishing for. That certainly isn’t anything to be worried about.”

“Ain’t it?” Iowa responded. “All my life I wanted to make it to the State Fair. Finally, I did it my last year. I just wonder how I’ll compare against the other riders tomorrow.”

“You sure have practiced a lot,” I commented trying to comfort him.

“But have I practiced enough? Am I gonna’ go home a winner, or am I gonna’ go home knowing I got my chance and I didn’t make it.”

“Iowa, you are going to go home a guy who pursued his dream to the end. That’s a lot more than most people have done. And besides that, you are here at the State Fair. Tomorrow who knows what’s going to happen, and it doesn’t really matter right now. You’ve practiced quite a bit. I should know. I’ve been there with you. I’ve been as excited to see you compete as you’ve been to come here!”

Iowa remained quiet then he turned his head toward a large brick building near us.

“That’s the coliseum,” he said.

“Can we go see it?” I inquired.

“Yeah, what the heck.”

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We took Wheatbread to her stall then we walked to the coliseum. After going inside, we climbed a flight of stairs leading into the actual arena. It was an incredibly large circular room with many rows of seats going up the walls like a stadium.

“My parents used to bring me here to watch the shows,” I mentioned glancing around the room. “I liked horse shows a lot.”

“Well, tomorrow’s show is gonna’ be quite a dandy,” Iowa responded.

“Can we go to the top row?”

“If it’s important to ya’.”

We climbed the stairs near an aisle all the way to the top. It was a fantastic view.

“This is great!” I exclaimed. “How high are we?”

“Pretty far up,” Iowa replied. “I’ll be in that arena tomorrow.”

“And you’ll do fine,” I assured him.

“I hope so,” he uttered. “There’s gonna’ be a bunch of contestants tomorrow. They’re very good too.”

“So are you, Iowa!” I interjected suddenly annoyed with him. “I can’t believe you!”

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked somewhat taken back.

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you, Iowa? I’m having a hard time believing you’re the guy who has made a great impact on my life. Without your friendship, I don’t know where’d I’d be. Where is that strength I’ve seen in you so many times--that same strength that I’m trying to get myself?”

“I did all that for you?” Iowa asked.

“You certainly did,” I answered. “Don’t let me down now.”

“Well, that’s a whole other topic, Timothy. This here’s concerning my dream.”

“Your dream is now!” I exclaimed. “You made it! Here you are! This is what you’ve been dreaming about! You go out there tomorrow feeling you can’t do it, and you won’t. But you

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go out there with that strength I'm talking about, and you'll ride better than I've ever seen you before. You'll do it because it's your dream and because of who you are."

"And who am I?" Iowa inquired.

"Why, you're Iowa J. Johnson...Iowa Jefferson Johnson."

Iowa clamped his lips tightly together and nodded in agreement. "Ya' talk encouragingly anymore. I see I taught ya' well."

"Fine," I responded. "I'm happy that's settled. Now, let's go get a soda. I've talked so much my throats dry."

After stopping by a pop machine, we went to the livestock complex and returned to Wheatbread's stall. It had already gotten dark outside. We knew the big event was not that far away!

We sat on the bales of straw Iowa had brought and talked for some time about things. Our conversation got deep and we talked about his life, my life, the future, and Heavenly Father. We carried on till we were both too tired to continue.

Since Iowa was not about to leave Wheatbread for the night, we lay down on the straw bales in the aisle. To keep myself from being discovered, I covered up with a thin sheet and rested my hat over my eyes. One would think I would have had a difficult time falling asleep, but I was out like a light before I knew it.



I woke up just once that night. Iowa was asleep on his straw bale. I was startled and in a cold sweat.

I had dreamed that I was watching Iowa riding in the coliseum and I was crunching on a red candy apple. Suddenly I spotted my parents down a few rows in front of me. In haste I called out to them as I stood up. A hand grabbed my shoulder and turned me around. It was a couple of police officers. I looked for Sally and Stephen but they were not there, and to my horror Eric Gerris was standing next to me. That is when I awoke.

I rested my head against the stable until I felt Wheatbread try to nibble on my hair. I pulled my head away and brushed my hand against her.

"Go to sleep," I whispered. "You two have a big day tomorrow."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“The Big Event”



“Are ya’ gonna’ sleep away the whole morning?!” I heard Iowa exclaim. It woke me right out of a sound sleep. I was still tired and I knew it was early.

“What do you want?” I asked with my voice cracking and my eyes still closed.

“I’ve got a horse show later. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. What did you wake me up so early for?” I inquired refusing to raise my eyelids. “There isn’t any farm work to be done. Leave me alone.”

“Ya’ got company,” Iowa responded.

This was a good enough reason to open up. As my eyes came into focus I saw Mary Jane looking down at me as she sat beside me on another straw bale.

She looked so fresh and wonderful. This was impressive being that I knew the Senecas and her must have left Pleasantville very early to arrive at the fair at that hour.

I cleared my throat. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, bright eyes,” she replied. “You’re so adorable when you sleep.”

“More like a drooling crusty mess, you mean,” I commented.

“No, that isn’t what I said at all,” Mary Jane stated.

I rose up off the straw bale and yawned. “What time is it?”

“It’s six-thirty,” Iowa answered. “The barrel class starts at eleven o’clock.”

“At eleven?” I questioned. “What on earth did we have to wake up so early for?”

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“Well, you didn’t,” Iowa voiced. “I have a lot of things to do and there’s no way I could relax enough to sleep in this morning.”

“You’re much more interesting to me when you’re awake anyway,” Mary Jane remarked. “Isn’t that all the reason you need for waking up early?”

“Fine,” I responded, “but let me help you out, Iowa. I don’t want to use up all this time doing nothing.”

Iowa smiled. “Ya’ helping me out is what I had in mind.”



Mary Jane and I assisted Iowa as he continued to prepare for the competition. Around eight o’clock we went to his parents house trailer where Olivia, Sally, and Rebecca had made breakfast. Once the food was served at a table outside the trailer, we all sat down to eat.

“I imagine you’re feeling mighty thrilled about the horse show,” Alexander commented taking a bite.

“More like trembling in fear,” Iowa replied fidgeting with his silverware in his fried potatoes.

“Is something wrong, dear?” Sally asked him.

“No, nothing’s wrong, mother,” Olivia answered. “Iowa’s developed a habit of playing with utensils in his potatoes before a horse competition.”

“Oh,” Sally said a little lost. “Well, if that’s what he enjoys.”

“Kind of a traditional superstition ya’ developed there,” Alexander commented. “Does it bring ya’ luck?”

“Nah,” Iowa replied. “It just makes me more nervous so far.”

“Then why don’t you eat?” Rebecca inquired.

“I’d like to, Ma,” Iowa answered, “but I ain’t feelin’ hungry this mornin’.”

“Iowa J., don’t be so nervous!” Olivia scorned. “All you have to do is perform your best today. You’ll do fine.”

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“Come on, Iowa,” I spoke nudging him with my elbow. “Remember what we talked about last night?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Iowa responded. “O.k., I’ll try to eat something.” He took a bite of his bacon.

Mary Jane applauded.

“Well, I’m full,” Iowa announced.

“Iowa J., if you don’t eat more than that, I’m going to take it as a personal insult to my cooking,” Olivia warned him.

Iowa’s eyes grew wide. “Whatta ya’ know? I just got my appetite back.” He took a heartier bite of his eggs.

“Good,” Olivia responded satisfied.

“When’s the gang arriving?” I inquired of Olivia.

“They all agreed that they would leave early enough to be here by ten,” she replied.

“Is that breakfast I smell?” Mr. Millington asked coming toward us.

“Oh,” Olivia continued, “and we gave Mr. Millington directions so he could show up whenever he wanted.”

“Lot’s to go around,” Rebecca responded to Mr. Millington.

“That’s just fine,” Mr. Millington remarked pulling up a chair. “All I got was a couple slices of toast before I left this morning. I was starving to death. I thought I was gonna’ faint in my truck.”

“Well, we certainly don’t want you blacking out on us,” Sally commented filling up a plate for him. “You just eat all you want.”

“I sure do appreciate your offer,” Mr. Millington said. “I think I will.”

“I’m glad to see ya’ could finally show up,” Iowa complained to Mr. Millington. “What? Were ya’ on holiday today?”

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“You just mind your P’s and Q’s,” Mr. Millington replied. “It’s good enough I closed the store all day so I could see your contest.”

Mary Jane leaned against me and yawned.

“I’m sorry you had to get up so early,” I said to her sympathetically.

“What do you mean get up so early? I was too excited to go to sleep,” Mary Jane replied.

“So this is the little girl you’ve been courting, eh kid?” Mr. Millington mentioned noticing us together.

“Yeah, this is the one,” I answered.

Mr. Millington leaned in his chair and put his hands on his stomach. “Mary Jane Wesleyan... Well kid, ya’ sure did get yourself a pretty one. Ya’ got the luck of the draw.”

“Is that so?” Olivia spoke up somewhat annoyed.

“I mean to say, one of several lucky draws in Pleasantville,” Mr. Millington rephrased.

“I hate to breakup the party, but Timothy and I have work to do,” Iowa stated standing up.

Mary Jane and I stood with him.

“So, if y’all will excuse us,” Iowa went on, “we’d better get going.”

“We’ll be leaving for the coliseum shortly to find some good seats,” Rebecca said.

“Grand,” Iowa responded. “Wish me luck!”

“Good luck!” Several of them shouted, as we left for the livestock complex.



Just as we finished up and Iowa was taking Wheatbread to the make-up arena, the gang stopped by to give Iowa some last minute encouragement. On the outside, Iowa had apparently lost his nervousness and appeared as a confident contestant. The gang was impressed that he could be so cool and calm considering the stress of the coming event. Iowa simply tilted his hat and smiled in response. Satisfied that Iowa was going to perform better than ever, the gang went into the coliseum to join the Senecas, Mr. Millington, and Iowa’s parents.

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As Iowa worked his horse in the make-up arena, Mary Jane and I watched him from the surrounding fence. He was dressed in appropriate attire. He was wearing blue jeans, boots, a white shirt, leather vest, cowboy hat, and his State of Iowa bolo tie. He definitely looked his part.

There was a crowd moving to and fro from a large commercial building connected to the arena. They seemed oblivious for the most part to the riders in the arena, but I did not get the impression that a lot of them would be the type to like horse shows. The fair had many other exhibits to attract people's attention.

Much more of a concern to me was that somebody passing might recognize me. I kept my hat on tight and held onto Mary Jane who, by the way, did not seem to mind.

"Why is Iowa numbered 254?" Mary Jane asked.

"He's not, Wheatbread is 254," I answered.

"Why did they assign her 254?" She inquired further.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. They just assigned her a number."

"You're really helpful," she commented saucily.

There were aromas coming from the midway that was a short distance away. Mary Jane recognized one of them as she started sniffing the air.

"Mmmmm," she said in very hungry ecstasy. "I smell elephant ears!"

"Gross!" I replied. "I don't smell anything that would make me think of an elephant's ear."

She squinted her face at me and made the strangest noise. It would be hard to describe in words other than someone exhaling a large sigh while also growling. I figured she did it because of my remark.

"They're just called elephant ears," Mary Jane stated. "They're like a sweet fried pastry with cinnamon on top."

"Why do they call them elephant ears then?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered mimicking me from a response I gave a moment before. "They just call them that."

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I crossed my arms. “Fine.”

We heard Wheatbread’s number being called over the loud speaker.

“NUMBER 246 NOW WORKING...NUMBER 250 ON DECK...NUMBER 254 IN THE HOLE!”

Iowa rode over to take his position in line. The number called that was working was the one actually competing next. The number called “on deck” was the rider to follow, and the one “in the hole” was to come after that.

We went to the fence across from where Iowa was waiting.

“How do you feel?” Mary Jane asked him.

He turned to us and replied, “I’m doing all right. I feel better than I thought I would.”

“I know you are going to do your best,” I told him trying to be reassuring.

“I’m certainly gonna’ try,” Iowa commented. “You two better get inside if you’re gonna’ see me ride.”

“Good luck!” Mary Jane called out.

“You don’t need luck!” I yelled to Iowa. “You’ve practiced hard enough. You’re going to do great because you’ve worked for it.”

Mary Jane and I started to leave but Iowa called me back.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Timothy, I just want to say...” He stopped. “Well, I just wanted to tell ya’ thanks for helping me get here. I want ya’ to know that it’s the truth when I tell ya’ that I’ve appreciated everything you’ve done. I couldn’t have done it all without ya’.”

It was kind of awkward to accept a compliment in the company of many bystanders, but Iowa was a great friend who had taught me a lot and was a good example of the way people should treat each other. So I had to reply the best I could to my close friend regardless of the strangers present.

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“I couldn’t help it Iowa,” I said. “I owed you for showing me the answer I was looking for all these years.”

The loud speaker blared out, “NUMBER 250 NOW WORKING...NUMBER 254 ON DECK...NUMBER 262 IN THE HOLE!”

Iowa was only minutes away from going on.

“We gotta go!” I exclaimed taking Mary Jane by the arm.

We rushed into the coliseum. We met Jack and Barbara who had just bought refreshments. We went with them to join the others.

There were quite a lot of people seated in the coliseum, but not nearly enough to fill it to capacity.

“Where is everybody?” I inquired. “I thought this place would be loaded?”

“I’m afraid most folks from the city are more interested in the amusement rides than livestock events,” Mr. Millington commented.

“Really?” I responded. “I always liked the animals here.”

“Ya’ from Columbus?” Mr. Millington asked.

I was slipping out too much information again. “Umm, Iowa is about to come out.”

“Grand,” Mr. Millington responded looking down at the arena.

Mary Jane placed her hand on mine and smiled warmly at me.

“Do me a favor and don’t let go until we’re out of the coliseum,” I said to her.

She tilted her head to the side. “Why?”

“Because I want to make sure you don’t disappear.”

This made her all the more puzzled. “Sure.”

What she did not know was that my nightmare was still bothering me regardless of whether it all made sense or not.

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Number 254 was called. Immediately everyone's attention was focused on the arena.

Iowa rode out in good form on the barrels course. This relieved me of some worry. I feared he might be so nervous that he would break pattern, which would disqualify him from the contest, or that he would knock down a barrel and have penalty seconds added to his time.

He circled each obstacle better than I had ever seen him ride before. His turns were very close to the barrels. He was doing terrific up until the point he went to finish. Something happened, either he thought he could relax or he was overwhelmed by stress, but he came so close to the finish marker that he almost hit it. Fortunately for him he did not. He ended with an astounding fourteen seconds.

"That was one nerve-wracking experience," I commented with a breath of relief.

"Well," Alexander said, "you'll be happy to know my son has the fastest time yet."

"Fantastic!" I responded.

I watched carefully as each rider ran the barrels--each time feeling my body tense up as they went through the course. Iowa's timing was impressive but I feared some other rider might beat it.

Then one rider came that gave me a cold feeling in my chest. I just knew he was going to be a tough competitor, and my suspicions were confirmed when he bolted out for the barrels. This contestant showed excellent skill as he swerved around each barrel. His moves were confident and he went quicker than Iowa had.

As he circled the last barrel, he failed to clear a proper distance and knocked the barrel over. This added penalty time to his score and saved Iowa in the process.

At the end Iowa came in first place. He was awarded a blue rosette, a belt buckle, and a silver bowl. As Iowa was recognized we all gave him a standing ovation. I must admit I never saw Iowa appear so proud.



Afterward we all went to congratulate him. He showed us his awards. Iowa gave the silver bowl to his mother.

"And that ain't for serving food in," Iowa remarked.

His mother sighed. "Oh, Iowa J.! I wasn't about to think that."

“It’s too bad they didn’t give ya’ a new bolo tie instead of that there belt buckle,” Mr. Millington commented.

“Why’s that?” Iowa inquired.

“Because I’m getting sick to death of seeing that same old State of Iowa,” Mr. Millington replied.

“It’s true,” Jack added, “ya’ could be a little more modest about yourself.”

“I hope not,” Iowa responded glancing at his tie. “Someone here’s gotta honor his heritage. It might as well be me.”

“I think it’s fine, Iowa J.,” Olivia remarked.

“Pretty good riding out there!” Mary Jane called out.

“Ya’ thought so,” Iowa said with false humility.

“Ah, you knew you were doing well,” I said seeing through him.

“I’ll tell y’all the truth,” Iowa went on. “I’ve never ridden so well in all my life. Maybe I had a little celestial help out there.”

“Maybe so,” Alexander commented.

“If I ride like that in the poles next, I’ll do better than I ever dreamed I would. I’ll be going home feeling I’ve accomplished my greatest challenge in life.”

“There’ll be more where that came from,” Stephen stated.



By the time Pole Bending came around, Mary Jane had talked me into splitting an elephant ear with her. With such a name, I had no idea what to expect when I saw it. The flat round pastry took up the whole paper plate it was served on. The smell was rich and sweet. She wanted me to try it so I ripped off a piece and stuck it in my mouth.

“Oh, that’s hot!” I exclaimed trying to blow the heat out of my mouth.

“Maybe you should have let it cool some before eating that huge piece,” she said chuckling.

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“It’s delicious though,” I commented. “It’s like a cinnamon roll. Is this what an elephant’s ear really tastes like?”

“I don’t think so,” Mary Jane replied, “but I haven’t nibbled the ears of any elephant’s lately.”

When we brought the snack back to our seats in the coliseum, and the smell hit everyone, some of the others decided to get elephant ears as well.

The Pole Bending course went well for Iowa. He changed his leads with the horse very well. He seemed to handle the course as if he knew he would be victorious. At the end he finished in twenty-two seconds, which was a good average!

Smiles shone from our faces as we were all pleased with Iowa’s performance. In celebration, I ripped off another piece of the elephant ear and instantly devoured it.

The rider that followed Iowa came out on the course quickly. This contestant wove between the poles in both directions in a particularly smooth pattern then raced for the finish marker. The rider’s time was twenty seconds. Two seconds faster than Iowa’s.

My jaw dropped open! For some reason I figured Iowa would be unchallenged but that was not to be. I began to watch more intensely as did the others as if in some way our concentration would help Iowa.

Other contestants came and went, and before it was over another rider came through topping everyone else with an incredible nineteen seconds time! I felt weak inside as if I had lost all hope for Iowa.

When the awards were given Iowa came in third place for the class. It surely could have been a lot worse but we all wanted much better for him.

We met Iowa at his designated stall filled with sympathy for him. This was a similar situation when we had met him after the July point show. Of course that all ended well because Iowa still got the chance to go to the State Fair. I could not think of any surprises he could show us this time that would make his disappointment suddenly triumphant.

“Well, at least I got something,” Iowa said holding up his yellow third place ribbon.

His mother gave him a hug and so did Olivia.

“Ya’ did all right out there,” Mr. Millington commented to Iowa. “I sure couldn’t have ridden as well as you did in that arena.”

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“Are you going to be O.k.?” Rebecca asked not leaving her son’s side.

“I think I will, Ma,” Iowa answered.

This was not a satisfying ending for Iowa especially since he had practiced so hard. It seemed all his effort was still not enough. I felt bad for trying to encourage him the night before. It probably made the defeat all the worse on him.

Iowa picked up his blue rosette and stared at it, then he looked again at the third place ribbon.

“I guess I wasn’t as skilled at the poles as I had thought,” Iowa uttered.

Olivia gave him another hug.

“I was impressed with your riding,” Jack commented.

The comforting was useless. It was sad that Iowa had worked so diligently for the State Fair only to have this let down happen to him.

Iowa paused a moment then spoke. “Ya’ know, while I was receiving my third place ribbon a thought crossed my mind. No matter what position I came in, I had already achieved my goal. I guess that’s what really counted.”

“That’s a nice way of seeing it,” Barbara commented.

“Yeah, but you still only made third place,” Fraun stated bluntly.

Everyone stared at Fraun. I wondered if he had meant that to be consoling. Probably for Fraun it was.

“Third place, first place...what does it matter anyway,” Jack remarked which took me by surprise because he was so competitive.

“That’s how I see it,” Iowa went on. “There is no use in feeling bad over the things I didn’t get. It’s better to celebrate the things I have.”

“I’m proud of ya’, son,” Alexander said patting Iowa on the back.

“Mighty powerful words, Iowa,” Mr. Millington added. “I don’t care what everyone else says, I think you’re all right.”

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Iowa continued. "I have an empty display case in my bedroom that I made a few years ago. It was to hold the blue ribbon I would someday win at The Ohio State Fair. That dream finally came true today. Does it matter that I didn't get two blue ribbons? Nah, this yellow ribbon here is just extra. Besides, two blue ones would have crowded my display case anyway."

It amazed me how he could see the goodness in life's downfalls. I admired him for that. I thought to myself that I could apply his philosophy to my own life and be a lot more confident as a result.

"Can we go play now?" Mary Jane asked.

"That's a dandy idea," Iowa replied. "Let's go out and enjoy the rest of the day."

"I hope they have that clown ya' can dunk in the water," Jack commented. "I sure got the inclination to drown that painted face with orange hair this year."

"Are you guys coming too," I asked Sally and Stephen.

"I'm not sure that we have the same energy ya' youngin's do," Stephen replied.

"Yeah," Alexander added. "I say we split off. You kids go out there and burn your energy scramblin' up and down the midway. Us older folks will take a more conservative stroll."

"I'm in for that," Mr. Millington commented. "My feet are already killing me just standing here."

"Alright then," Olivia said to the adults. "Suit yourselves."

"Yeah, I'm sure it won't be any fun without y'all," Jack remarked sarcastically.

With that we left the more settled-back generation behind.



We arrived at the midway, which was very crowded. I placed myself in the middle of the gang to decrease my chances of being noticed.

"What are we going to do first?" Barbara asked.

"I say we hit the rides before the crowds get here," Jack suggested.

"The crowds are here," Iowa replied.

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“No,” Mary Jane said, “the rides are prettier at night. Let’s go then.”

“We can do it both times,” Jack responded.

“Yeah, and that’s all we’ll see of the fair if you have your way,” Olivia complained.

“I just want something to eat,” Fraun uttered.

“Now, hold on,” Iowa spoke up. “Let’s let Renee decide. She’s been awfully quiet all day.”

Renee had been very silent. Things had not changed much since our conversation the day before. I began to worry all the more about her.

“I don’t care,” Renee said softly.

I decided to say something myself. “Why don’t you decide, Iowa? It’s your big day.”

“Go ahead, Iowa J.” Olivia joined in.

“Well,” Iowa replied, “since the rides will be much prettier tonight, and we can get food about anywhere we go, I say let’s start at the sheep barn and work our way through the grounds.”

We all walked to the edge of the fairgrounds where there was a large open structure filled with stalls of sheep of all varieties.

As I strolled through the aisles, I began to wish that the stalls were somewhat smaller. This was because the sheep were so timid that, when I came up to their stall, most of them would go to the other side out of my reach.

“This is no fun at all,” I complained.

“Don’t worry, Timothy,” Olivia responded walking past me, “there are a few of them that will allow you to pet them.”

She was right. Olivia went a few stalls ahead and found one that did not mind being touched. I rushed over to get a chance to pet it.

“Slow down,” she said to me as calmly as she could, but it was too late. My quick movement frightened the poor sheep and it moved to the back of the stall. Eventually I did get the hang of it and managed to pet a few.

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The bleating of sheep is pretty easy to imitate. I could tell this by the way Jack carried on crying out sheep sounds. He sounded just like the sheep and very much enjoyed doing it.

It was my personal observation that even the actual bleats coming from the sheep sounded as if they were human imitations, but no one else really agreed with me on this point or why I even thought it up. I mention this latter part because of Fraun's comment that followed.

"How come you're always thinking up the weirdest things?" Fraun asked.

"I was just saying they sound like a human faking a sheep call," I replied.

"Well, they can't," he argued. "Sheep can't imitate sheep."

"Leave him alone, Fraun!" Renee snapped at him as she passed by.

Fraun went on down to another stall.

"I think they sound a little human too," Mary Jane remarked.

"Thank you," I responded to her. "It's nice to know that someone besides myself can contemplate strange thoughts without being discomforted by it."

"Everyone sees the world in a different way," she said rubbing my shoulder. "I just happen to see it close to the way you see it."

"I'm grateful for that blessing," I commented.



Since we had already dealt with horses for most of the day, we skimmed through the horse exhibit and went to see the cows in a connecting building.

Jack again found it necessary to imitate the sounds of the animals, only this time he was coming right up to the cows' faces. Barbara stood next to him a few minutes until the embarrassment was too much for her. She left him alone to continue his conversation with the cattle.

Iowa wandered over to Jack. "Ya' finally found something you can talk to on your own level, huh?"

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Jack turned his head to face Iowa, and gave him an offended glance as if Iowa had just interrupted him. He then turned back to the frightened cow and cried out, “MOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

We had gone up and down a few aisles when we came to one cow that apparently had a cold or something. This cow took me by surprise as I went to walk behind it. The cow sneezed and manure flew out of it and rocketed across the aisle splattering against the far wall.

Iowa grabbed my shoulder and stopped me.

“Let that be a lesson to ya’,” Iowa stated. “A sick cow is pretty unpredictable.”

“You can trust Iowa on that,” Barbara added.

“I can see the reason to trust him,” I said pointing at the thick brown mess on the wall. “You saved my life, Iowa! I’ll never forget it!”



My favorite part was the room where they showed the cows being milked. I stood fascinated with my face against the window observing the operation.

“You’re interested in this?” Mary Jane questioned.

“I really love farm life,” I answered, “everything about it.”

“I tell ya’, this exhibit is making me thirsty,” Iowa remarked. “Let’s go get a milkshake.”

“I’m in for that,” I said turning around. The day, like most of the others, was very hot.

“Where can we get one?” Mary Jane asked.

“We can get them right over there,” Iowa replied pointing toward another structure close by.

Unlike the other buildings we had been in, this one was very cool inside. Everything in the building had something to do with dairy products. Some items that caught my attention were statues of a farmer and a cow made completely of butter.

We gathered at a crowded counter and ordered shakes for everyone when an attendant could get to us. They had one flavor of milkshake...chocolate. It was a good thing chocolate was a favorable flavor for all of us.

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Sucking down the smooth thick shake, I wandered around with the rest of the gang never taking my lips from the straw. We came across a large scale. Immediately, Jack and Fraun began weighing themselves.

“Hop on the scale, Olivia, let’s see how much ya’ weigh!” Jack called out.

“I certainly will not!” Olivia stated firmly.

“Why not?” Jack asked. “All its gonna’ do is tell us your weight.”

She continued to hold her ground. “How much I weigh is none of your business.”

“Come on Olivia,” Fraun said trying to talk her into it, “let’s see how heavy you really are.”

Instantly, Olivia came up to Fraun with her eyes aflame. “If you ever use the word ‘heavy’ and my name in the same sentence again, I’ll slap you so hard you’ll be receiving retirement before the sting goes away.”

“Alright, no need getting your feathers ruffled,” Jack said. “Any of ya’ other girls want to get on the scale?”

Not surprisingly, every lady declined the opportunity. Perhaps they were all sensitive about their weight but I could not figure out for the life of me why. However, this was not the case with us guys. We each took our turn weighing ourselves on the scale while the other guys grunted like pigs. After that, all four of us guys got on the scale to see how far we could tip it.

“Speaking of hogs, let’s go see the swine barn,” Iowa said.



After going through the various animal barns, we decided to go through the commercial buildings. It was like a giant market place where one could buy a wide range of items from cowboy hats to hot tubs and oriental hand-carved furniture.

“This is really something,” Barbara said taking notice of all the details in the intricate work of a hand-carved table for sale.

“I could do that,” Jack commented looking down at the delicate designs. “All I’d need is a chisel and a mallet.”

“Yeah, you really look like the artistic type,” I remarked.

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“How much does this table cost?” Barbara asked the sales attendant.

“Three thousand four hundred and ninety-nine dollars,” he replied.

Barbara stepped away from the table. “Wow! That’s a lot to pay for a table.”

Iowa took off his hat and scratched his head. “That’s quite a lot of money,” he commented to the sales attendant. “Do ya’ really expect someone to be strolling through the fair with that much cash in his pocket?”

“You can charge it on any major credit card,” the sales attendant assured us, “and we also offer financing.”

“I bet ya’ do,” Iowa responded starting to laugh. “And what if there’s a problem after the fair? What if I decide I don’t want this table anymore and I want to return it.”

“All sales are final,” the sales attendant stated.

“Let me ask ya’ a question,” Iowa went on. “Why would someone come to the fair to buy a three thousand five hundred dollar table when he can buy a table for much less anytime some place else?”

“Because it’s hand-carved,” the sales attendant answered, “and, besides, it’s an incredibly low price for such an exquisite piece of furniture. You’ll find nothing like it anywhere else.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Iowa said turning around. “People come to the fair for cotton candy, Belgian waffles, and carnival rides--not for over-priced furniture.”

“Let’s take a look at the encyclopedias!” Fraun suggested.

Iowa rubbed his face in frustration then replaced his hat on his head.



About the only place I could afford anything was at a dealer who had her shop set up in the center of the building. Her counters were stuffed with all sorts of miscellaneous items placed in no particular order. Most of them were toys and pictures of Indians. I found an item I liked, a back-scratcher.

“Now, I could use this,” I commented to Mary Jane as I gave the scratcher a test on my own back.

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“What about this flute?” Mary Jane asked handing me a wooden tube-like instrument with finger holes in it.

I blew threw it and moved my fingers up and down on the various holes, but I could not get any sort of stable tune out of it.

“No thanks,” I said handing it to her.

“Sure! Get your slobber all in it and then put it down,” she responded.

I bought the back-scratcher and we went to join the others. The gang had made their way toward a candy counter. There were large strings of licorice, roasted nuts and slabs of various kinds of fudge.

“Are there free samples?” Jack asked the clerk. “I’d like to try one of each.”

The clerk, a young lady, chuckled. “No, you have to pay for them.”

“Well, what if I’m not sure I like it?” Jack inquired.

“Oh, I suppose I can give you a small sample of one but only for you,” the clerk replied with a smile.

Barbara did not like that smile at all, so she put her arm around Jack’s. The clerk’s charming expression disappeared and she went over to Iowa and Olivia who were about to make their decision on what candy they wanted.

“Which fudge do you like?” Mary Jane asked. “They have peanut butter, chocolate, black walnut, vanilla, maple--”

“To be honest, I have no idea,” I interrupted. “With that in mind, I think I’ll stick with the licorice strings.”

“You have to try the fudge first,” she responded. “Just pick the one that looks most appealing to you. I’ll treat.”

“That’s not necessary,” I said pulling out some money. “I can afford fudge.”

The clerk came over to us and I asked for some of the peanut butter fudge.

“That’s very good!” I declared with my mouth full. “It’s a little rich but still very delicious.”

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“We’ll have some more of that fudge,” Mary Jane said to the clerk laying her money on the counter.

“I can pay for it!” I declared trying to finish the fudge already in my mouth.

“I’m sorry but I can’t make out what you’re trying to say,” Mary Jane commented jokingly.

By the time I managed to swallow the last bit of peanut butter fudge in my mouth Mary Jane’s purchase was over.



As we were walking down the last aisle, we found recliner chairs with rollers going up and down in them. They would massage the body when sat on. This experience all of us had to try. Not that any of us were thinking of buying one, but rather we just wanted to relax a moment.

Near the end of the aisle a salesman’s voice attracted our attention. He had a small group of people around him and he was carrying on about a revolutionary new cleaning device.

“WITH THE CLEAN-UP X-40 DELUXE MOP WITH OPTIONAL X-40 CLEANING KIT YOU CAN WASH OUT ANY MESS--I REPEAT--ANY MESS THAT YOU FIND ON YOUR LINOLEUM FLOOR! OUR COMPANY EXPRESSES A THIRTY-DAY WARRANTY, BUT I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE THIS PRODUCT WILL LAST THE REST OF YOUR LIVES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! IT IS A SUPER-DUPER WONDER, AND YOU CAN TAKE IT HOME TODAY AT THE UNBELIEVABLY LOW PRICE OF JUST THIRTY-NINE NINETY-FIVE! THAT’S RIGHT, I SAID ONLY THIRTY-NINE NINETY- FIVE!”

“I’ve got to see this,” Iowa said getting up from his chair. Olivia, Mary Jane and I went with him.

“HERE IT IS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” the salesman announced holding up an ordinary looking sponge mop with an electric blue handle. “MIND YOU IT’S NOT JUST THE MOP ITSELF BUT THE SPACE AGE FORMULA X-40 LIQUID SOAP THAT WE GIVE YOU ALONG WITH THE MOP AND OPTIONAL X-40 CLEANING KIT AT NO EXTRA CHARGE! THIS INCREDIBLE X-40 LIQUID SOAP WE SENT TO NASA FOR CONSIDERATION FOR CLEANING THE ROCKET SHIPS ON THEIR LONG DUSTY MISSIONS THROUGH SPACE! YES, THIS VERY SOAP HAS BEEN CONSIDERED FOR CLEANING THE DUST OFF THE SPACE SHUTTLE ITSELF, AND YOU CAN HAVE THIS POWERFUL SOAP CLEANING YOUR LINOLEUM FLOORS AT HOME AND IT SOFTENS YOUR HANDS WHILE YOU USE IT.”

“Space dust?” Mary Jane quietly asked me.

“Maybe it’s dusty out there,” I said shrugging my shoulders. “I thought there was more than one space shuttle anyway.”

“WATCH CLOSELY LADIES AND GENTLEMEN AS I SPILL CORN SYRUP ALL OVER THIS LINOLEUM FLOOR,” he said stepping back to show us a demonstration. He poured out a puddle of clear syrup onto a small mobile display floor he had behind him. “NOW, WHAT I DO IS TAKE THE EASY-FILL BUCKET THAT COMES WITH THE X-40 CLEANING KIT AND SIMPLY POUR A LITTLE X-40 LIQUID SOAP INTO IT ALONG WITH A MIXTURE OF WATER, AMMONIA, VINEGAR, AND BAKING SODA.”

The crowd backed away from the bubbling concoction the salesman had put in the bucket, for the fumes were very strong.

“There’s a smell that’ll rip your sinuses out,” Olivia remarked.

“With all that stuff in the water why do ya’ need the soap?” I asked.

“DON’T WORRY ABOUT THE AROMA, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. IT’S THE FRAGRANCE OF POWER!” He grabbed the mop. “ONCE YOU SEE HOW THIS HANDY-DANDY LITTLE NUMBER WORKS, YOU’LL PREFER THE SMELL OF THIS CLEANING SOLUTION TO A ROSE GARDEN.”

“That’s hard to believe!” Someone shouted from the gathered crowd.

Barbara, Renee, Jack and Fraun came over at this time. I guess they had to get a closer look.

The salesman dipped the mop into the cleaning mixture. I was surprised to see the mop sponge actually come back out without being eaten away by the solution.

“THIS MESS WILL BE CLEANED UP IN NO TIME AT ALL,” the salesman went on scrubbing the mop over the mess. “JUST THREE GOOD STROKES...WELL, FOUR GOOD STROKES THEN...FIVE...THERE WE GO! FOUR OR FIVE GOOD STROKES OF THE X-40 MOP AND THAT CORN SYRUP IS A THING OF THE PAST. LOOK AT THAT SPARKLING FLOOR! YOU CAN’T SEE A BIT OF THAT SYRUP LEFT.”

“I couldn’t see the corn syrup to begin with,” another onlooker remarked. “That syrup was as clear as water. You sure it’s all cleaned up?”

“Why don’t you try something like maple syrup or molasses?” Someone else suggested.

“I WOULD SIR--I CERTAINLY WOULD. BUT UNFORTUNATELY I DON’T HAVE EITHER OF THOSE TWO ITEMS ON HAND, BUT I TELL YOU WHAT I’M GONNA’ DO. I’M GONNA’ STAND HERE AND PERSONALLY PROMISE YOU FRIENDS THAT THIS WILL CLEAN ANYTHING YOU PUT ON YOUR LINOLEUM FLOOR. JUST NAME YOUR MESS!”

“What about cherry punch?” A lady asked.

“CLEANS THAT UP IN A JIFFY,” the salesman replied.

“What about paint?” Another asked.

“DOES A BETTER JOB THAN TURPENTINE,” the salesman answered confidently.

“Does it work on tar?” Someone asked from the rear.

“I’VE HEARD THE X-40 HAS AN ORGANIC SOLUTION DESIGNED ESPECIALLY FOR THAT PROBLEM,” the salesman responded.

“What about nuclear waste?!” Fraun called out.

Everyone’s attention was suddenly drawn to Fraun.

“ARE YOU TELLING ME YOU HAVE NUCLEAR WASTE ON YOUR LINOLEUM FLOOR?” The salesman inquired in shock.

“I’m asking does it work on nuclear waste?” Fraun responded appearing very sincere. “If it works on space dust, surely it could handle nuclear waste.”

“WELL SON, IF YOU’RE HAVING PROBLEMS WITH NUCLEAR WASTE ON YOUR FLOOR, I’D MOVE IF I WERE YOU MUCH LESS TRY TO MOP IT UP.”

“Well, maybe it ain’t nuclear waste then,” Fraun said reaching into his front pocket while walking toward the salesman. “I put some of it here in my pocket. It sure does glow a lot.”

The salesman, obviously thinking Fraun had something strange in his pocket, began to back away as did the rest of the crowd.

“I’M NOT INTERESTED IN THAT,” the salesman remarked somewhat fearfully.

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“Oh, you big sissy,” Fraun replied. “Don’t be afraid of a little toxic waste.”

The salesman then moved away even quicker. In his haste he ended up tripping over his “easy-fill” bucket and landed bottom-first on the mobile linoleum floor.

“I was just kidding,” Fraun said pulling his hand out of his pocket and reaching out to the salesman. “My pocket’s empty. Let me help you up.”

As the salesman got up the small linoleum floor came up with him. It had stuck to the seat of his pants causing the crowd to laugh.

“Well, I guess that answers the corn syrup question,” Iowa remarked.

“I can’t believe Fraun did that,” Olivia commented astonished at Fraun’s behavior.

“Ah, it’s a riot!” Jack remarked chuckling.

“No, that was just plain mean,” Olivia responded.

Fraun helped the salesman remove the floor from his pants leaving several long stands of syrup between the display floor and his clothes.

Jack burst out laughing all the more. “Look at them!”

It took a few minutes before the crowd calmed down. Considering the syrup left on the mobile floor, no one was convinced enough to buy the X-40 mop or optional cleaning kit. However, to make up for the accident, Fraun bought the “easy-fill” bucket for five dollars.



After tiring of all the commercial and livestock buildings, we all decided to walk the midway. On the way, Jack and Barbara bought bratwursts and the rest of us got pizza.

I was really enjoying the festive atmosphere but I remained hesitant to get close to the other people walking by us.

Iowa had been correct so far. Not one person stopped or stared at me. Columbus was a large city and most of the people would not know who I was or if I even existed for that matter. They just went on by in their own small groups talking amongst themselves. It was a much different environment than Pleasantville where people interacted with each other like one big family. I noticed that more and more as I compared what I saw around me to what I experienced at the Pleasantville Independence Day Celebration.

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There was a distinct separation between big city and small town life. People think small towns are missing the important things that big cities have, but I tended to figure it was actually the other way around.

As we came into the amusement area of the fairgrounds, we passed a lot of carnival games. People were throwing Ping-Pong balls in goldfish bowls, trying to loop canes and other prizes, throwing darts at balloons and narrow stars, and other seemingly easy tasks that were actually a lot more difficult than they appeared.

One of the carnival games I saw was a classic. All one had to do to win was throw a ball and knock over three milk bottles stacked in a pyramid. It was the carny for this game that got Jack's attention.

"You look like the sporting type!" The carny called out. "Try your luck at this game! Knock over the bottles and win the girl on your arm a prize!"

"How many balls do I get for my buck?" Jack asked.

"Two balls a game," the carny replied. "Knock all three bottles down and win a prize."

"Heck, I can knock a few bottles down," Jack said pulling out his money.

Jack gave the carny a dollar and picked up one of the two softballs on the counter.

He threw the ball and knocked over two bottles.

Jack picked up the second ball and glanced at Barbara. "Just pick your prize out now, darlin'. This last bottle's as good as gone."

He threw the second ball. It hit the bottle but failed to knock it over.

The carny gave Jack back the two balls. "Here, try it again."

"I don't mind if I do," Jack said taking the balls.

Jack pitched the softballs the same as before. He was successful at knocking the same two bottles over as before but failed again to knock over the last bottle. At that point, everyone knew there was something fishy about the last standing bottle. This was especially noticeable since we all knew Jack was the all-star athlete at Lincoln High.

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Any other intelligent guy would have tossed in the towel and quit...but not Jack. He was too competitive than to just realize the game was rigged.

"I'll bet you'll do it this time," the carny encouraged handing Jack the balls once more.

"I sure will!" Jack replied somewhat angrily.

He tossed the first ball, and like before knocked over the same two bottles. Jack then threw his hardest pitch toward the last bottle and directly hit it. Amazingly, the bottle did not move. Instead, the ball ricocheted off the bottle and flew back out onto the pavement. It dawned on Jack at that moment the game could not be won.

"I ain't gonna' play this!" Jack stated. "It's no wonder you're still loaded with all those huge stuffed animals! No one can win the game!"

Jack turned to leave.

"Sir, you still owe me two bucks!" The carny called out.

"For what?!" Jack yelled.

"For the last two games you played," the carny replied.

"You gave me the balls!" Jack stated coming toward him.

"I never said those games were free!" The carny responded.

Jack pulled two dollars and slammed them on the counter. "There ya' go, ya' crook!"

We all began to walk away.

"What a rip off!" Jack complained. "There's gotta be laws against that! That's the last time I play a carnival game!"

"Let's hope that's the last time ya' get taken in general," Iowa remarked.

"I ain't playing no more games today!" Jack declared.

"What about that clown you wanted to dunk in the water?" Barbara asked.

"Well, I'll dunk the clown," Jack answered, "but that's all!"

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The next amusement that caught our interest was the giant slide. This was a ride that I had remembered from when I was a child. Therefore I had to suggest that we give it a try.

All of us chipped in some money to buy tickets except for Renee who said that she really did not feel like going on the rides. After collecting the money together, Jack and Fraun bolted for the nearest ticket vendor. Since Jack was so competitive, he made the excursion into a race. Although Fraun tried as much as he could, Jack won the race up and back. Poor Fraun was gasping for air when he returned.

“What’s wrong, Fraun?” Iowa asked. “Are your tiny French legs not fast enough to keep up with Jack?”

“No,” Fraun replied struggling to catch his breath. “My brain is somewhat larger than Jack’s,...so I have a heavier load to carry.”

We gave the slide attendant our tickets while Renee went to lean against a lamppost. The attendant supplied us with burlap mats to slide on. We then began to climb the long narrow stairway to the top.

“I remember my last experience on this slide. I fell off the mat and chafed my leg,” Mary Jane mentioned.

“Didn’t ya’ put your feet in the pocket at the bottom of the mat?” Iowa inquired.

“What pocket?” Mary Jane questioned.

“A-ha!” Iowa replied. “That’s why ya’ lost your mat. That won’t happen to me. I always follow the rules. That’s why I never lose my mat.”

“I’ll show you where the feet pocket is so you won’t fall off this time,” Barbara said to Mary Jane.

I inconspicuously located the pocket in my mat. I did not know until then that there was one.

At the top of the slide, while we were waiting for other people to go down, Jack suggested that we all slide together and see who could make it first.

“What is this thing about racing?” Olivia asked Jack. “Everything you do has to be a competition doesn’t it? Isn’t there anything else you think about?”

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Jack paused. “Nope. There ain’t nothing else worth thinking about.”

Barbara rolled her eyes.

That was the women’s point-of-view. On the other hand, the guys were willing to go along with Jack’s suggestion. Iowa admitted it would put more spice into the thrill. Still, the ladies would have no part in it and decided to go down after we had made idiots of ourselves.

We waited patiently until all of us guys could go together. When the time came, like experienced giant slide sportsmen, we placed our mats skillfully down on the slide, put our feet in the pocket, and assumed a strategic starting position.

“Who’s going to say ‘GO!’?” I asked

“I will.” Jack volunteered.

“I don’t think so,” Iowa responded. “We ain’t gonna’ let ya’ get a head-start on us by calling ‘GO’ after ya’ shove-off.”

“I’ll call it,” Barbara said tiring of us. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get you boys moving.”

With that decided, we all froze into our starting positions. We appeared something like a pack of wild animals about to pounce on their prey. The tension in the air was thick but apparently not where the girls were standing.

“Go!” Barbara called out sounding more-or-less bored with our sport. Nevertheless, the race was on.

Down we went and I instantly found myself in last place. I guess my sliding skills were not as polished as my fellow competitors but that did not bother me. Watching the other racers was far more entertaining.

Jack and Iowa were neck-and-neck for the lead, while Fraun was trailing behind them paddling his arms against the slide to pick up speed. I was not sure, but I believe Jack was not traveling as fast as Iowa. I assumed this because of the way Jack was stretching out his arm against Iowa’s chest to keep him from advancing further. This did not last long. Iowa suddenly got clever and laid flat causing him to slide under Jack’s arm. Thinking quickly, Jack yanked on Iowa’s mat knocking Iowa off. Unfortunately, as Iowa wiped out, his body hit Jack knocking him from his mat as well.

In the end, the two empty mats won the race, and Jack and Iowa were heavily chastised by the ride attendant for horsing around and breaking the rules.

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The entire incident only took seconds to happen, but it was one of the funniest things I had ever seen.



As evening approached and the sky began to darken, Mary Jane became increasingly more excited by the colorful lights on the amusement rides. She seemed so enchanted as she admired them in awe. I enjoyed the lights just as much as she did but that was not all we had in common.

We liked going on the same amusements. This made it very easy for us to spend all of our tickets before the rest of the gang did. We were especially fond of the fun house and the house of mirrors. I'll admit that the house of mirrors was only fun because Mary Jane and I had a tag game in it. Fortunately, we had enough money left to buy a few more tickets and another snack if we wanted one.

Iowa, Jack, Fraun and Barbara found great delight in the bumper cars. I guess they were pleased by getting hit in all directions and whipping their necks around. Olivia did not feel like straining her neck so she watched from the fence with Renee. Because Mary Jane and I were conserving our tickets for the Ferris wheel and sky ride, we watched with the onlookers as well.

After they had beaten themselves up in the bumper cars, we all headed in the direction of the Ferris wheel. Along the way, Jack found the clown in the dunking booth.

There was really not much to the clown game. All one had to do was throw a ball at one of two targets on either side of the booth. If the ball hit the target, the clown would fall into the water.

The clown in the booth was exceptionally rude. He taunted the pitchers by insulting and mocking them. The idea was to irritate the pitcher so much that he would pay whatever it took to dunk the clown in the water. Jack with his massive ego was certainly a perfect candidate to be taken in by such a scheme.

Jack must have made quite an impression on the clown the year before because the clown recognized him as soon as he stepped up to pitch. Iowa informed me that Jack had had a real problem with this clown. When Jack hit the target the year before, the clown did not fall into the water. The clown told Jack the seat had broken. Jack had a tantrum and threatened to return the next year to dunk him.

“Oh, it’s the old hot head hick again,” the clown jeered in a raspy voice.

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“That’s right,” Jack retorted, “and I’m gonna’ dunk ya’ this year.”

“Maybe the contraption’s broken again,” the clown said.

“Not this year, it ain’t,” Jack replied. “I saw ya’ get dunked a moment ago, you baboon.”

The clown laughed. “You mean buffoon, you stupid hillbilly.”

“Ya’ just keep talkin’, Orange Head,” Jack called out. “This year you’re getting all wet.”

“My! You’re just full of spit and vinegar just like last year, aren’t ya’ hot head?” The clown responded.

“You’re goin’ down this year!” Jack declared picking up his first ball.

“Come on, you mama’s boy!” The clown shouted. “Take your best shot!”

Jack aggressively threw the ball toward the target but missed it.

“Just like last year,” the clown remarked. “You still can’t hit the broad side of a barn can you, country boy?”

“It ain’t over till I’m through paying,” Jack replied.

“You just keep those dollar bills coming, Farmer Brown,” the clown stated. “I’ll take everything you have.”

Although Jack was a very good athlete, he just could not manage to hit the target. This confused me but Iowa explained the reason why.

“When Jack lets his anger and frustration get in the way,” Iowa said to me quietly, “his expert abilities fall by the wayside. It’s because his emotions mess up his concentration. That’s why he’s always getting taken in by these carnival games.”

“Oh, so you’re saying that Jack’s arrogance ruins an otherwise incredible athlete,” I commented.

“Ya’ got it,” Iowa responded. “Jack’s large ego is his downfall every time.”

Iowa’s words were proven right over and over as Jack kept paying his money and missing the target, but his determination did eventually bring about what he wanted. He finally hit the

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target. The bell rang but the orange-haired clown did not fall into the water. Jack stood frozen in place staring at the safe and dry clown seated in the booth.

“The contraption must be broken again,” the clown said. “What are you going to do now? Tell your mama?”

“I doubt that seat’s broken,” Jack replied. “I don’t think you were planning on falling in that water whether I hit the target or not.”

“The way I see it, the seat is malfunctioning,” the clown stated.

“How would the police see it?” Jack asked.

“How would the police see it?” The clown responded in surprise and fear. “Look kid, if you’re going to run to the authorities ‘cause you didn’t get your lollipop--”

“I don’t want any lollipops!” Jack interrupted. “I hit the target! You should be in the water!”

“Don’t you think Jack’s being a bit rough?” I asked Iowa.

“Well, it’s better than him stomping off I guess,” Iowa replied.

“Look, I’ll fall in the water if it’ll keep you from crying to the cops,” the clown said. The clown released the seat and fell.

Jack observed the clown until the splash died down then he started laughing. “I guess the contraption wasn’t broken after all! I wasn’t going to run to the police. I was just gonna’ give ya’ a hard time, orange head, and now you’re all wet!”

With that, Jack rubbed the dust off his boots and walked away smiling victoriously.



The Ferris wheel was a lot prettier than the one I lit up with “Glowie the Clown” flashlights at the Pleasantville fairgrounds, and it was somewhat taller. Mary Jane and I had enough money for a couple of rides. Iowa and Olivia were also wanting to ride.

We gave our tickets and waited as each person was seated on the rotating wheel. Eventually, it came Mary Jane and my turn. After a few minutes, the Ferris wheel started to spin. Mary Jane moved close beside me and leaned her head on my shoulder.

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It was a simple ride without much thrill to it. One would wonder why people still rode the Ferris wheel when other more exhilarating amusements were not far away. However, I did not figure that people were overly interested in the thrill of the rolling wheel. I thought it was more the romance and agelessness of it all.

The Ferris wheel was a connection to bygone eras and ways of life. To ride around the wheel one could capture nostalgic feelings that no other ride but the carousel could match, and that to me was surely the reason people still flocked to them.

Unfortunately, the ride did not last as long as I wanted it to. Before I knew it, Mary Jane and I were stepping from our seats and exiting the ride.

“That was really fun,” I commented to Mary Jane. “It’s great I got to ride it with you.”

She smiled and embraced me.

“We have a couple extra tickets,” I went on. “Do you want to ride again?”

“No,” she replied. “That was terrific enough. I don’t want to ruin the experience by getting too much of it.” She gave me her extra ticket. “You use it.”

“What am I going to do with this extra ticket?” I asked.

“Timothy, come here!” Olivia called to me.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” I told Mary Jane.

“That’s O.k.,” Mary Jane responded. “I’m going to the little girl’s room anyway.”

I walked over to Olivia. “What is it?”

“Ask Renee to go on the Ferris wheel with you,” she said quietly.

“Why?” I asked. “She doesn’t want to go on any rides.”

“She said she doesn’t want to go on any rides but that has nothing to do with what’s really wrong with her,” Olivia replied.

“What do you mean?” I inquired. “She told us earlier that she didn’t want to go on any rides.”

“Timothy, are you really that dense?” Olivia questioned.

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At this point I was baffled. “Now, what did you say that for?”

“Because you can’t see the whole picture,” she answered.

“What whole picture?” I inquired.

“Stop asking so many questions!” Olivia snapped. “Renee’s problem has nothing to do with the rides. I just want you to take her on the Ferris wheel. That’s all I’m going to say about it.”

“Will that solve her problem?” I asked.

“It will ease it up for the moment,” Olivia answered.

“Fine,” I said.

“Now, she might say no,” Olivia commented.

I sighed. “Then why am I going to ask her?”

“You have to be persistent about this,” Olivia stated.

“And get her upset with me? No thank you.”

“She’ll only get upset for a few seconds if any at all,” Olivia responded. “Now, don’t waste anymore time.”

“Alright,” I commented, “but if she yells at me, it’s your fault.”

Olivia nudged me toward Renee’s direction. “Renee doesn’t yell. Now go!”

Renee did not hear a word of our conversation as she was standing a distance off staring at the Ferris wheel lights. She appeared to be lost in her own world.

I went over to her. “How’s it going?”

Renee did not say anything immediately, but eventually she uttered the words, “In circles.”

“What?” I asked.

“The Ferris wheel,” she replied.

“Would you like to ride it with me?” I inquired.

“No,” she responded.

I glanced over to Olivia who looked away from me. I turned back to Renee.

“We haven’t talked to each other much today, and I really would like to have a few minutes with you. Go on the Ferris wheel with me,” I said.

“I don’t have any tickets,” she responded.

“I have a couple extras right here,” I stated showing them to her.

Renee’s eyes moved to the ground and she smiled. “I’ll go on with you.”

When the Ferris wheel reloaded again, Renee and I were able to get on. She did not say much to me as the ride finished loading nor did she attempt a conversation as the ride began. I decided to try.

“This is one of my favorite amusement rides,” I commented.

She remained silent.

“It’s been quite a day hasn’t it?” I remarked trying again to start up a chat. “This day has been so full that I bet I couldn’t recall it all if I wrote it down.”

Her face maintained its emotionless expression and not one word escaped her lips.

“O.k.,” I uttered getting serious. “I know you said yesterday that I wasn’t doing anything wrong to you, but this silent treatment is making me feel differently. So, I want you to know that I apologize for whatever it is I’ve done wrong. I’m really sorry.”

I put my arm over her shoulder. I knew it was a risky move but she seemed so much in need of comforting. She tensed up at first but gradually relaxed.

“There,” I commented. “Now we’re like one of those old-fashioned couples.” I slapped my hand on my leg closest to her. “It’s just like in the olden days.”

The slap was a bit harder than I expected and it stung my leg, so I kept my hand in place somehow hoping the warmth would ease the pain.

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Renee continued to stay silent, so I decided to just enjoy the view. The fair was so much more beautiful from the top of the wheel. It made me look forward to the sky ride that we would be going on next.

That is when it happened. It was strange at the beginning--the sensation of Renee's delicate fingers resting on my hand, but it was also very soft and calming. I did not dare to glance at my hand nor Renee for fear she would take her hand away. Still, I did not know what to do either. I just maintained my glance outward from our seat wondering why she did it and what I should do.

After a long while, I knew that my evading the situation was becoming obvious. I questioned to myself what I would do if the ride stopped and she continued to hold my hand? And, what would happen if everyone saw us? It was nerve-wracking to think about. Besides, I wanted to know what her reason was for doing it. I decided to slowly turn around and face her. As I did, I saw tears streaming from her eyes.

"Renee, are you O.k.?" I asked.

She quickly removed her hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Is there something wrong?"

"No Timothy," Renee replied. "If there's anyone doing something wrong here, it's me."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

"I don't want to never mind," I responded. "Why did you put your hand on mine? Why are you crying?"

"Just forget it ever happened," she stated putting her hands to her eyes.

I checked in my pocket for a handkerchief but unfortunately I did not have any on me. I made a mental promise to always keep a handkerchief on me in the future just incase such situations arise again.

"This is very confusing," I commented shaking my head. "I don't understand anything that's going on right now."

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I sat silently a few seconds while Renee continued to weep. I kept my arm around her hoping it would console her enough to bring her out of her sadness. After a brief time she did stop and regained control of herself.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she said drying her eyes. “I’ve always wanted to be a lady like Olivia, but I keep defeating myself. I apologize.”

“For what?”

“I was just tired of having everything good beyond my reach,” she replied. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You didn’t do anything bad,” I commented. “Hey, if it means that much to you, apology accepted.”

Her eyes stared at the ground as she softly said, “I give up.”

When we got off the ride, Mary Jane rushed over to me and announced that she wanted to get a funnel cake after we rode the sky ride.

“I’m hungry now,” Mary Jane remarked, “but the sky ride might give me motion sickness.”

Renee walked away from me and Olivia quickly joined her. I was very stressful and did not know what to do.

“Are you all right?” Mary Jane inquired.

“I don’t know,” I said turning to her. “I think so.”



It was quite a stroll going to the sky ride, but Mary Jane kept the conversation fresh by talking about anything she could think of. This relieved some of the tension but I could not enjoy her chatter as I normally did. My mind was distracted by the episode Renee and I had had on the Ferris wheel. I was at such a loss for what caused it to happen and why it ended the way it did.

Olivia and Renee kept a distance from everyone as they privately talked to each other. Renee appeared to be not doing much better than she had on the ride. The guys, who were not aware of the situation at all, were walking together joking and carrying on about the day’s events.

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Mary Jane and I sat together on the sky ride with Jack and Barbara in the car ahead of us and Olivia and Renee in the seat behind. Iowa and Fraun were the last of the gang to get in a car. The view was just as high as the Ferris wheel but was even better. The seat suspended from a cable coasted slowly and silently along the midway far above the ground. Because of this, we got a bird's eye view of the entire midway from one side of the fair to the other.

"I really had fun today," Mary Jane commented as we traveled along.

"So did I," I responded. "I had no idea I'd be so busy today. All I was really thinking about yesterday was Iowa's horse show and being with you. I would never have guessed all the things we'd be doing today."

"I'm sure happy I got to go with you," Mary Jane said wrapping her arm around mine.

"It was great being with you too, but I'm also thrilled that I got to spend this day with the whole gang. Today was certainly worth the memories made."

"And your back-scratcher too," Mary Jane added.

"And your funnel cake. Oh, but that's yet to come," I added. "By the way, I hope your legs didn't get tired with all the walking."

"Please!" She responded. "I'm a natural at this. Remember the other night I told you I used to drag my parents up and down the midway."

"Yeah, you told me that the night of the big storm. It seems like so much has happened since that night."

"I agree," she said. "Sometimes it seems hard to keep track of it all."

"I remember once when Barbara asked me what my dream was. I told her I'd like to be a writer someday. This summer has been the best summer I've ever had. If I would write something it would be about this summer."

"When did Barbara and you talk about that?" Mary Jane asked.

"Let me think," I replied trying to recall the situation. "It was in the evening and all the gang was there. That seems so long ago, as well."

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“The way you play the piano I would assume music would be what you’d want to do,” Mary Jane stated.

“I don’t know,” I commented chuckling. “I’ll leave piano playing to Mozart and Beethoven.”

“Tim, they’re not around anymore,” Mary Jane remarked. “That means we need new piano players. I know I do. I’m going to have to get you to play more often.”

“It wouldn’t be hard to find a piano to play. You’ve have one, Iowa has one, Renee has...” My mind faded from the conversation and I glanced at Olivia and Renee behind us. I replayed the Ferris wheel scene in my head wondering why Renee broke down like she did and what she meant by saying she gave up?

“Tim, what was that about Renee?” Mary Jane inquired.

I turned to Mary Jane again. “Oh, nothing. What were we talking about?”

“We were talking about pianos.”

I paused. “Let’s not talk about me anymore. I’m pretty boring. Let’s just take in the view before we leave the fair.”


She tilted her head. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I think I am,” I replied. “I must be getting tired.”

Mary Jane smiled and nestled in tight beside me. She then said, “Just make sure we don’t forget my funnel cake before we leave.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Sports and Music”



Glorious times fade slowly in Pleasantville. Even two weeks after Iowa’s incredible performance at the State Fair, it was still Mr. Millington’s favorite subject to talk about to the customers. As much as Mr. Millington teased Iowa, it had become common knowledge to me that Iowa was one of his best-liked kids. Of course, knowing Mr. Millington, he probably liked every kid who put forth a little effort in any endeavor.

Unfortunately, I had not been up to my best since the fair, mostly because of Renee. I was not the only one either. Olivia had deep concerns about her close friend. Renee had refused to come out with the gang at all since the day at the fair. She was isolating herself and neither I nor anyone else could get her out of it. This was not the worse news about her though.

Renee had admitted to Olivia that she had been talking to Karl Boothe again. This sent chills through my spine when I heard it. Olivia and I were both worried that she was falling into dangerous hands.

Renee’s problem had made it hard for me to concentrate at work. Mr. Millington was wondering if I had become ill because my mind drifted a lot. Checkers was no competition for him because I could not keep my thoughts on the game. Even after two weeks, I was not able to get into the swing of things again.

“I’m gonna’ send ya’ home early,” Mr. Millington said as I was stocking a shelf.

“There’s no need to,” I responded. “I’m fine.”

“I’ve seen you fine before,” Mr. Millington commented, “and this ain’t it.”

“I’ll be O.k.” I assured him.

“You’ve repeated that response for a couple weeks now. I think ya’ need a break.” He picked up a grocery bag he had just filled. “Go deliver this bag to the Susan family and then take the rest of the day off. Go out on a bike trip or something. Get some fresh air.”

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“I’m sorry I’m not being myself,” I said walking over to retrieve the bag. “There’s a lot on my mind. I’ll try harder tomorrow.”

“I know ya’ will,” Mr. Millington replied. “Maybe this break will give ya’ a chance to think out your problems.”

“Probably,” I agreed grabbing the bag. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”



I traveled out Pleasantville Road toward the Susan farm. Just as I had crossed the creek I saw Barbara riding her horse along side of it. She was about thirty yards off on the edge of her family’s field heading toward the road.

I stopped my bike and yelled to her, “If you were so interested in taking a ride, you could have came into town and picked up your groceries yourself!”

She looked at me. “What?!”

“I said, if you were...ah, never mind!” I walked my bicycle toward her. “I’ve got your groceries!”

“Well, thank you, but what good is it going to do me up here?” Barbara questioned gazing down from the horse.

“Oh yeah. I’ll just take them over to the house,” I said turning to go.

“I’ll go with you but let’s stop by the barn first. I think I’m through riding anyway,” Barbara replied.

I strolled next to her as she went toward the barn on her horse.

“Folks are getting worried about you,” Barbara commented. “They think maybe it’s something from your past bothering you.”

“Well, it’s certainly not that. Although my past does bother me, my concerns are mostly focused on Renee right now.”

“Yeah, I figured that out for myself. What exactly happened between you two?” Barbara asked.

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“I really wish I could tell you, but to be honest, I’m not sure myself.”

“Renee seems to have distanced herself from everyone,” she remarked.

“I know. Have you tried to talk with her recently?” I inquired.

“No,” Barbara answered. “She wouldn’t talk to me about anything she wouldn’t talk to Olivia or you about first. She’s closer to you two.”

“It just gets so frustrating,” I said. “I think Olivia knows more about Renee’s problem than I do but she won’t tell me anything about it.”

“That could be because they’re best friends, Timothy,” Barbara responded as we stepped into the barn. “Most likely Olivia knows her better than you.”

After guiding her horse into its stall, we went to the house and onto her front porch. Barbara opened the front door. “You want something cold to drink before you go?”

“Alright,” I replied.

Her house was like an antique store. There were crafts and collectibles neatly ornamenting the front room which itself appeared like the inside of a log cabin if such words are an appropriate description for it. The walls were covered with natural unfinished strips of wood that appeared as if someone cut logs in half and placed them on top of each other. Another beautiful attribute in the room was a stone fireplace that had an opening to another room on the other side.

“Was this house once a log cabin?” I asked.

“The front room was,” Barbara answered.

“What about the rest of the house?” I inquired.

She took the grocery bags from me. “There was no rest of the house when the log cabin was built. They expanded the house and bricked it over later. You want to come into the kitchen?”

I went in behind her. In the kitchen I found the other opening to the fireplace.

“Ingenious!” I remarked peering into it.

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The rest of the room shared the same decorum as the front room except for the lack of wooden walls. Barbara's mother, Emily, was busying herself in the kitchen tenderizing and seasoning a piece of meat on an island counter. On her stove was a pot of chopped potatoes and vegetables.

"Someone's going to be eating well today," I commented breathing in the delicious aroma in the air.

"Well, hello Timothy Reye!" Emily called out. "I haven't seen you since the barn raising. You really ought to come over more often."

"I'm afraid Barbara's boyfriend might get jealous if I started doing that," I responded.

"Oh, Jack? He's a pussycat," Emily said flipping the meat on her counter.

"Yeah, but he's a big pussycat," I remarked.

"I was just getting Timothy a cold drink," Barbara commented going toward the refrigerator.

"That's fine dear," Emily replied. "Give him some of that punch we whipped up for dinner tonight. Do you like punch, Timothy?"

"I've had little reason not to," I answered.

"Good," Emily commented. "Now pull up a stool and tell me all about yourself."

"To be truthful there isn't much to tell. Besides, I don't know how long Barbara was expecting me to hang around," I stated.

Barbara glanced over the refrigerator door and gave me a puzzled expression. "Since when have I not wanted you to hang around me?"

"I apologize," I said grabbing a stool. "I'll stick around then."

Barbara brought over the glass of punch.

"So, what do you think of our fine community?" Emily inquired.

"It's...uh...It's better than any community I've been in before," I replied.

"How long have you been here now?" Emily asked.

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“Uh,...I think since a week before Independence Day,” I answered.

“Mmmhmm,” Emily hummed turning her meat over again. “I heard you’ve been working at Millington’s for quite some time now. Are you enjoying it at the store?”

Barbara’s mother sure liked to ask questions, and I feared she might possibly start heading down mysterious avenues that I did not want to disclose. Her inquisitiveness reminded me of her daughter’s nature to pry deep into sensitive topics, which I had experienced from her before. Foreseeing the coming awkward moments, I redirected questions toward Emily.

“So, Barbara tells me a part of this house used to be a log cabin. How long ago was that?”

“Oh dear,” Emily responded glancing up to the ceiling. Her eyes returned to me after a few seconds. “I don’t remember at the moment, but this is a very old house. I’m sure my husband would know if you’d like to ask him.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” I said taking a sip from my punch. “I’m curious but not overly so.”

“Barbara tells me that you want to be an author some day,” Barbara’s mother carried on. “I’ve also heard around town that you play the piano a bit. You must be quite gifted.”

“I wouldn’t consider that to be true,” I commented. “I think people are just saying that to be kind.”

Barbara shook her head. “Not in this town. If you didn’t play well, people wouldn’t be saying nice things about it. They wouldn’t want to put their name on the line for someone who can’t play well.”

“Then I guess people haven’t heard good piano lately if they like my playing,” I remarked.

“I’m sure you play fine,” Emily assured me. “If we had a piano here, I’d invite you to come over and play for us.”

I had just about heard enough flattery on my piano expertise, so I changed the subject. “O.k., I’ll bet Barbara’s got a lot of talent.”

“No,” Barbara responded, “just a lot of inspiration. I can’t play piano or anything like that, but I do have my dreams.”

“My daughter’s going to save the world,” Emily drew out slowly.

“You’re going to save the world?” I inquired glancing at her daughter.

“I’m going to help the world,” Barbara stated. “Well, if I can’t help the world, I’ll help some of it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“My daughter has it all planned out,” Emily answered for her.

“No I...” Barbara paused. “I just know that I want to do something to help the less fortunate.”

“Aren’t there plenty of charities that do that already?” I inquired.

“Yes, there are a lot of charities,” Barbara replied, “but if there were enough of them, would there still be the homeless and other poor people?”

“Oh,” I said shaking my head. “I guess not.”

“Besides that,” Barbara went on, “a lot of people simply ignore the less fortunate and write it all off thinking somebody else will handle them. I think that every person is responsible for helping other people in crisis. Since I can only set an example for others, I am going to do my part.”

“That’s good,” I responded, “I like your dream and I hope you do well.”

Barbara smiled. “Thank you.”

“We’re very proud of our daughter,” Emily remarked.

“I imagine Jack is very excited about your ambitions,” I commented.

“No,” Barbara replied despairingly. “Jack isn’t all that interested in it, so I don’t discuss it with him.”

“I don’t see why he’s not interested,” I said. “I’d like to see you do it.”

“Well, there’s a voice of encouragement,” Emily commented.

“I’m glad you like it. You’re actually the first friend of mine to sit down and listen to my whole idea,” Barbara stated.

“Can you stay for dinner, Timothy?” Emily asked. “We’ll be having it in a little while.”

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“No, I’m sorry but I can’t,” I answered. “I’m having supper later at the Johnson’s. Besides, Mr. Millington suggested I get some fresh air, so I think I’ll just go on a bike ride.”

“O.k.,” Emily responded, “but if you ever want to come over for dinner, we always have an extra chair available.”

“I appreciate that,” I said before drinking down the rest of my glass of punch.

Barbara accompanied me to the front door. I went onto the porch and retrieved my bike.

Across the street Jack and Fraun emerged from Jack’s house. They raced into the large yard in front of Jack’s house and began passing a football back and forth. As I rode down Barbara’s drive Jack called me over.

“You’re not seeing my girl behind my back are ya’?” Jack inquired teasingly.

“Nope, just delivering groceries,” I replied. “Mr. Millington gave me the rest of the day off, so I thought I might go for a ride.”

Jack held up the football in his hand. “Well, Fraun and I were going to play a little game of one-on-one. I could make it two-on-one if ya’d like to join us. It certainly would make things fair for Fraun if you were on his team.”

“I can take you on myself!” Fraun remarked. “You’re big but you aren’t that big.”

“No, I don’t know how to play football,” I responded to Jack.

“That doesn’t matter,” Jack said. “Ain’t nothing more than running with the ball across the yard.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. Mr. Millington told me to get some fresh air.”

“Well, what better way is there to get fresh air than when you’re gasping for it playing sports?” Jack asked.

“Biking is a sport,” I commented.

“Shoot! It ain’t no real man sport,” Jack replied.

“I don’t feel like being tackled and having my face smashed into the ground,” I said trying as best I could to decline their persistent offer.

“Come on! Be a tough guy!” Fraun called out.

“Nothing to worry about,” Jack responded. “No one said anything about tackling anyway. It’s just a simple game of touch. Surely you can handle that...or is it still too tough for ya’?”

That line was rather intimidating and I certainly did not want to appear as a coward. So, I put down my bike and accepted their offer. After all, how tough could touch football be anyway?

“How’s it done specifically?” I inquired as we gathered in the middle of the yard. “I haven’t memorized any plays.”

“Tim, this ain’t the Super Bowl,” Jack stated. “All we’re playing is a little game of touch. And, since a football team has eleven players on the field, how many plays do you think were made for one or two?”

“Fine,” I retorted.

“Here, take this.” Jack handed me the ball. “Now Fraun will call out a color, a number, and a few huts.”

“Huts?” I asked.

“It’s part of the call, Tim,” Jack replied. “Now, he’ll tell ya’ ahead of time what call to go into action on. Ya’ don’t move ‘til he gets to that call.”

“And what will you be doing during that time?” I questioned.

“I’ll be the defense,” Jack answered. “I can’t do anything to ya’ until the two of ya’ spring into action.”

“So you can’t attack me if I’m not moving?” I inquired.

“That’s right,” Jack answered. “You’re catching on! Why don’t we give it a try?.” Jack glanced behind him. “If ya’ run past that far tree, ya’ make a touch down. Got it?”

Fraun and I agreed with Jack’s terms and Fraun took me into a huddle. He then began specifying the first play. “O.k. I’ll give you the ball on three--”

“What do you mean on three?” I interrupted.

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“I’ll call some color and a number and then I’ll say ‘hut’ three times. On the third hut you give me the ball,” Fraun explained.

“What does the color mean? Does the color pertain to the number? Does the amount of huts correspond with it?”

“No!” Fraun responded rubbing his hand over his face in frustration. “That’s it! I quit!” He walked away.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked.

“He’s reading too much into it and giving me a headache!” Fraun complained. He turned to me. “Can’t you just see the simplicity in it? There isn’t much to it?”

I scratched my head. “So, I take it the color and numbers are just random and the huts have nothing to do with it?”

“Yes!” Fraun cried out. “That’s all there is to it! Now, can we just play the game or are you going to scrutinize every instruction I give you?”

“Uh, Fraun,” Jack said, “actually those colors and numbers do mean something.”

“The coach never told me that,” Fraun responded to him.

“That’s ‘cause Coach Dale thinks ya’ can’t handle it,” Jack explained. “He thinks it’s too complex for ya’.”

“Oh! That’s just great!” Fraun angrily exclaimed throwing his arms up in the air. “So Coach Dale thinks I’m stupid!”

“I didn’t want to start this up, Fraun,” Jack remarked. “Maybe since you’re a senior this year he’ll see to it that you understand what the colors and numbers mean.”

“He better!” Fraun shouted and turned to me. “Well, in this game those colors and numbers don’t mean anything!”

“Fine!” I replied not understanding why he was so upset with me. “I was just making sure there wasn’t something you were overlooking.”

“I wasn’t overlooking anything!” Fraun stated loudly. He took a second to calm down. “Listen, if I don’t say it, then there’s nothing else to it. Can you live with that?”

“Alright!” I responded somewhat haughtily.

Fraun came back into the huddle.

“On three, you got it?” Fraun asked.

“Yes, I have it this time,” I answered.

I crouched down and Fraun stood behind me. Jack crouched in front of me facing me like an angry bull about to charge.

I remembered the tag game when I ran into Jack. I found it similar to running into a brick wall. In a second I was going to experience another encounter. It was like the brick wall was going to run into me this time. I knew it was going to be a pain I would not long forget.

Fraun began the call. “BLUE! 42! HUT! HUT! HUT!”

As fast as I could, I gave Fraun the ball under my legs before the “freight train” hit me. All of a sudden, I was flat on my back admiring the beautiful summer sky and the strange appearance of stars in it. Fraun and Jack were long gone. I wondered if I could still move or was every bone in my body broken and I was now paralyzed? I marveled at how painful this game of touch was! It was relieving to know that, considering my recent state, it was not tackle football.

“I’m sure this is what Mr. Millington meant by getting some fresh air,” I lowly commented to myself.

I forced myself up into a seated position and saw that Fraun never made it to our declared end zone. Sadly, he was also a victim of Jack’s touch. However, we did gain some yardage.

“I don’t want to play a lineman anymore,” I said to Fraun as we huddled again. “Jack knocked me senseless the last time.”

“You’re not suggesting putting my athletic talents as a quarterback at risk by getting the full power of Jack’s charge do you?” Fraun asked.

“I’m certainly not taking that force head on again,” I declared.

Fraun looked at the ground for a second then he grabbed a stick and started drawing out a play in the dirt.

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“Alright, you be quarterback this time if you’re going to argue about it,” Fraun stated. “I’ll hold off Jack and you run with the ball.”

“Easy enough,” I responded.

“We’ll do it on two,” Fraun said.

“No!” I stated. “I’m the quarterback! I’ll call it! We’ll do it on one.”

We got into position.

I yelled the call. “SILVER! 84! --”

“Silver?” Jack questioned rising up. “What the heck does silver stand for?”

“I thought that the colors don’t mean anything in this game,” I replied. “I like the color silver.”

“Well, at least use something common like blue and red,” Jack commented. “I can’t listen to anything weird like silver.”

“Fine,” I said getting back into position. “RED! 16! HUT!”

Fraun sprang up and held off Jack better than I could. I went running with the ball as quickly as I could, but soon I found Jack was catching up with me. I knew I was about to feel the intense discomfort of Jack’s touch again as he approached, but suddenly I thought of a possible way to avoid the coming doom.

I remembered Jack mentioning a rule about not being able to tag me if I was not moving. It worked on the line when waiting for the call and I wondered if it also applied if I stopped sprinting for a touchdown and just stood like a statue. So, I froze in place.



I tried to explain to them why I stopped and let Jack trample me, but all they could do was laugh hysterically. Apparently, once the ball was in play Jack could get me whether I was running or standing in place. He knocked the wind out of me and for a brief while I thought I was going to die. They carried me onto Jack’s porch and continued their game as I recovered.

When the game was over, the two of them came up on the porch talking about their greatest moments during the event. I was just finishing counting the bruises and scratches I had acquired in my short involvement in the sport. Fortunately, no bones were broken so I thought

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I could still leave Jack's house a healthy young man. Since evening was setting in, I told the two of them I had to get on my way to Iowa's house for dinner. I got my bike and headed for town.

When I stopped at the traffic light in town and was about to turn left, I spotted Karl Boothe in the opposite direction. He was walking up Main Street on the same side of the road that Renee lived on, and I had a hunch that her house was where he was headed. The very thought of it sickened me.

I decided to delay my arrival at Iowa's house so that I could find out what was going on between the two of them. In order not to be seen by Renee or Karl, I rode around the rear of Jane's Kitchen and sneaked through the backyards of the Main Street houses until I was behind Renee's. I put my bicycle on the ground and crept around to the side of her house until I could hide by a bush near the front door. I did this quietly enough so that neither Renee nor Karl noticed my presence. They continued their conversation without hesitation.

"What do ya' mean ya' want me to go?" Karl asked in an angry tone of voice.

"Karl, I don't want to make this mistake with you again," Renee replied.

"What mistake?!" Karl questioned. "Are ya' calling me a mistake?!"

"No, you're not a mistake but we are," Renee responded. "My world is really messed up right now and I don't want to stray down the wrong path any further. I want to do something right for a change. I want to improve my life. And I'm sorry Karl, but that change doesn't include you."

"Ya' start taking my calls and begin to warm up to me. Suddenly, ya' change your mind, insult me, and expect me to walk away happy?!" Karl questioned. "Ya' little witch! I ought to belt ya' right now!..."

I prepared to spring out of the bushes and jump on him at any second.

"But I won't," Karl continued.

"Karl," Renee spoke fearfully, "I didn't mean to insult you--"

"Shut your mouth!" Karl yelled interrupting her. "I'm through being nice to you. I'm done leaving you and the vagrant alone. I've been nice long enough."

"He saw ya', Karl," Renee said. "That's why you've left both of us alone. You're afraid he'll talk."

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“Well, I’m not afraid anymore,” Karl responded. “No, I’ve had it with both of ya’!”

“What are you going to do, Karl?” Renee nervously inquired. “Don’t hurt him.”

“I knew ya’ had feelings for him. I could get him at any moment and that scares ya’, don’t it?” Karl said. “Well, ya’ leave me and latch onto the first bum that rides into town. You’re not improving your life, ‘cause ya’ can’t. Ya’ don’t know how.”

“Karl, leave!” Renee demanded.

“You ain’t ever going to be anything, Renee,” Karl went on, “because ya’ can’t make good decisions.”

“I know a good decision, Karl,” Renee stated and she slammed the door.

Karl growled and pounded his fist hard against the door. He then walked away. He was so filled with rage that I thought, if he saw me, he would kill me. With that in mind, I stayed hidden until he was long out of sight. Things were worse for me now but Renee was safe and apparently thinking straight.



By the time I reached the Johnson farm dinner was being served. Olivia and Mary Jane, who were also invited, had already arrived and were annoyed that I was running late. I figured it was wiser to blame my tardiness on my football injuries rather than mentioning I had been spying on Renee.

For dinner Rebecca had cooked roast beef, Olivia whipped up the potatoes, and Mary Jane sliced some fresh vegetables. It all smelled so terrific and I had worked up quite an appetite. When the blessing was said, I dug into my plate without conversing with anyone. I soon discovered that this met with some people’s disapproval.

“I can’t believe this! You get here late and now you won’t do anything but stuff yourself,” Olivia complained.

“I’m hungry!” I responded with my cheeks loaded with a bounteous amount of roast beef.

“You’re quite an aggressive eater tonight,” Iowa remarked.

I ignored him and continued my intake but Mary Jane pulled my plate away.

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“Timothy, stop to breath now and then,” Mary Jane commented. “I don’t want you to suffocate.”

“O.k., I’ll talk,” I said washing down my current bite with a glass of ice water.

Mary Jane smiled and gave my plate back.

“Well, Timothy,” Rebecca spoke up, “considering your appetite you must have had a very adventurous day. What did you do?”

“The regular things,” I replied. “This morning I worked around the farm then put in some time at the store. Mr. Millington let me off early to go bike riding. Jack and Fraun changed my plans though and had me play football with them. A lot happened today and it has made me very tired.”

“That’s dandy!” Iowa remarked wiping his face with a napkin. “I work all day and he plays sports. Now he has the nerve to say he’s tired? He doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”

“If I can’t say I’m tired, I can certainly say I’m famished and I want to eat,” I stated heaping a giant portion of potatoes into my mouth.

Mary Jane grabbed the plate again. “Remember not to get too involved in your food, Tim.”

“I’ll be good,” I responded taking the plate back.

“You better,” Olivia threatened, “or I’ll take your dinner away for the rest of the evening.”

“That’s a little strong don’t you think?” I asked Olivia. “You don’t mean that do you?”

“Try me,” Olivia replied.

I did not try her and I talked whenever I was spoken to for the rest of dinner. As a result I managed to take in enough food to sustain me through the night.

After desert, the four of us youngsters decided to retire to the main room. On the way, we passed through the room that had the grand piano in it. Olivia grabbed my shirt and stopped me.

“I have a better idea,” she stated. “Play the piano for us, Timothy. I’ve been wanting to hear you play.”

“No, I don’t want to,” I responded. “I’m not that good at it.”

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“Yes you are,” Mary Jane declared. “I like your playing. I want to hear it too.”

“That vote makes three with me,” Iowa added. “Tickle these ivories. Let’s share that musical gift of yours.”

I shook my head. “You guys are going to regret you asked me to play as soon as you hear how good I really am.”

I sat down at the piano. Mary Jane applauded for me.

“Does anyone have a particular favorite?” I inquired.

“Something sweet and old like what you played at my house,” Mary Jane replied.

“It doesn’t matter to me what ya’ play,” Iowa stated.

“Just play!” Olivia demanded.

I leaned back and thought a moment about a musical piece I would still remember. I glanced at the photograph of Iowa’s sister and thought of my mother. In my head I heard many melodies that my mother had taught me, and my mind caught hold of a particular beauty.

“Alright,” I said. “I haven’t played this in awhile. I may be a bit rusty.”

“I’m sure we won’t notice,” Iowa responded.

“I hope I recognize the song,” Mary Jane commented.

“As bad as I play, I’m surprised you’ll recognize anything I try,” I remarked.

Softly pressing the keys, I played the introduction to the song.

“I know it!” Mary Jane exclaimed. “Yes! I can sing it with you!”

I removed my hands from the keys. “You want me to sing it too?”

“Sure we do,” Iowa answered. “I want the whole show.”

“Oh, I don’t want to sing,” I whined.

“Please Tim,” Mary Jane pleaded. “Please, do it for me.”

I turned to the keys and played the introduction again.

“I can’t do it!” I declared.

“Timothy,” Olivia spoke sharply “can you sing at all?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Do you sound pretty good?” Olivia inquired further.

“If I try,” I answered.

“Then try,” Olivia responded.

I started the introduction again.

“Skip the intro and start playing where the words begin,” Olivia ordered.

I bypassed the introduction and nervously began to sing. Mary Jane sang along with me. Iowa and Olivia were also familiar with the tune but only knew enough to hum. By the time I reached the end of the song, I was quite confident my audience was enjoying my performance.

“Play another!” Iowa called out.

“Well, I know one song that’s slightly faster than the last. I’ll give it a try,” I said.

My mother must have taught me some of the most popular songs, for my three dear friends got right into the next song with me. Iowa was quite fond of the rhythm of the second piece and began tapping out drum patterns on a nearby chair.

Renee walked into the room with her head lowered toward the floor. I stopped my playing.

“Hi guys,” Renee uttered sadly. “I heard that everyone was over here. I called Wilbur and asked him to drive me over.” She started crying all of a sudden. “I’m sorry for pulling away from you all.”

Olivia immediately wrapped her arms around her. Renee was so emotionally shaken that I thought, if she had one more pressure in her life, she would fall to pieces--if she had not already. Everyone came over to comfort her.

“It’s going to be alright, Renee,” Olivia assured her. “No one here is upset with you.”

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“Nah,” Iowa said rubbing Renee’s shoulder with his hand. “We’re just happy you’re with us again.”

Although comfortable with the warmth of her friends, Renee was still acting awkward with me. This was probably because she could not get past our episode on the Ferris wheel. I really did not understand it all when it happened, so considering the situation, I was more than willing to put it all behind us.

Renee seemed to be satisfied with simply distancing herself from me. This made me sad because I really cared about her, but she being with us again was the important thing. I could learn to live with the fact she did not want to be as close to me as she was before.

“Timothy was just playing us some tunes on the piano,” Iowa commented to Renee. “Do ya’ have any old favorites ya’d like to hear? He seems to be stuck on nostalgic ditties.”

“Hey, it’s been years since I played!” I exclaimed.

“No,” Renee replied to Iowa, “just anything he wants to play.”

“Why don’t you continue with the music you were playing,” Mary Jane said sitting down on the bench next to me. “I like that song.”

I cracked my knuckles and continued playing the music right where I ended it previously.

“Didn’t think I’d remember where I left off, did you all?” I rhetorically asked.

“Just play,” Olivia stated. “Don’t go getting arrogant on us.”



At the end of our evening together, Iowa drove everyone home. Once there, I went to the kitchen to get a couple of prime selections from Olivia’s cookies and a glass of milk.

I went up to the bedroom. As I was closing the door I heard Olivia in the bathroom going through part of her nightly ritual for bed. This time she was humming one of the songs I had played earlier on the piano. Her voice was so sweet to listen to that I left the door open to hear her. Instead of going to bed, I stood by the window eating the cookies and gazing out over the moonlit field.

“This is so picturesque like a postcard of a perfect country landscape,” I commented faintly to myself. “Too bad there aren’t any photographers here tonight. This incredible view is hard to

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beat.” I stared up into the starry sky. “I never knew there were so many stars out there until the night I ran away.

“Mother and Father, if you’re watching me, from which star are you watching from? I hope it’s close because I want to make sure you see my life clearly so you can help me out.”

I took a gulp of milk before continuing my one sided conversation with the heavens.

“God, I know you have to care about me because you love me. I don’t know if I always see your caring at work.

“I mean look at Renee. Her life is really messed up right now. She wants so much to be an elegant lady but her father and Karl Boothe abused her. Why did you let that happen to her?...I know her father can’t hurt her anymore but what about Karl? Who’s going to save her from Karl? It’s like Eric Gerris. I don’t know why I had to go through that, but I see now how you saved me from it.

“I like this town and I like...well...I like most of the people in it. I like Iowa, Renee, Mr. Millington, and I really like Mary Jane Wesleyan. Most of all, I like the Senecas. I feel wanted and cherished by them. I don’t know if I’m seeing things for the way they really are. If I’m wrong, I like the illusion anyway. I just wonder how long I’ll be allowed to stay here.”

“As long as you want to,” Olivia replied compassionately.

Startled, I turned around and saw her standing in her nightgown at the doorway.

“How long have you been there?” I questioned.

“Here?” She questioned back. “Timothy, I’ve lived at this house since I was born.”

“You know what I mean,” I responded. “How much did you hear?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied. “The only thing that does matter is that I heard enough to answer your question. You can stay here as long as you want.”

“What makes you so sure?” I inquired. “Your parents can’t change the law. Once children’s services finds out where I am, they’ll take me away.”

Olivia walked over to me. “This is a very difficult problem to deal with, but I don’t see my parents in a big rush to let you go. My father thinks you’re the best live-in farmhand a guy could ever have, and you mean the world to my mother. I’m sure they’re trying to do all they can to help you.”

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“That’s a comforting thought,” I commented leaning against the wall, “but your parents can’t make miracles happen.”

Olivia embraced me. “We can try, Timothy.”

I sighed deeply and wrapped my arms around her. She squeezed me then released her arms. Stepping away Olivia smiled and said, “There’s no need to worry about any of this tonight. Tomorrow will come and you’ll still be here. No one can tell the future but you can be thankful for what you have now.”

“I know,” I responded.

“Well,” she spoke stepping to the door, “finish your snack and go to bed. There’s a lot of chores to be done tomorrow.”

“Good night,” I told her and glanced back out the window.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“The Old Mill”



I had just gotten back from Mr. Millington’s when Olivia rushed me into the kitchen. Sally and she were baking a variety of things and Olivia wanted me to appreciate their efforts firsthand. Renee was coming over to help them and was due at any minute.

“Do you want to help bake?” Sally inquired rinsing her hands at the sink.

“No, I’m a better taster than a baker,” I replied.

I saw some baking chocolate on the counter and I sneaked a bite. It was terrible.

“That’s all right,” Olivia said patting flour on my face. “We wanted the food to turn out good anyway. We’ll just wait for Renee.”

“What makes you think Renee can do any better than I?” I asked searching for something tolerable to sample. “Sally, is there something I can taste that won’t offend my tongue?”

“Here, you can lick the cake batter off this spoon,” Sally answered handing it to me.

“Why are you girls doing all this?” I inquired. “Are you having a baking marathon?”

“A few ladies won’t be able to fix their share of refreshments for the barn dance tomorrow night, so we’re filling in for them,” Sally replied.

I tried the batter and it was indeed delicious. “I guess that’s why you need an extra hand tonight, huh?”

“You’re very perceptive, Timothy,” Olivia remarked.

I rolled my eyes. “So where is Renee anyway? Isn’t she supposed to be here by now?”

“Quite awhile ago actually,” Sally answered. “She must be running late.”

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“Well, she only lives a few houses down the street,” I commented. “What can keep her so long? Geez! Are you ladies late for everything?”

“I’d better call and see what’s keeping her,” Olivia said stepping over to the telephone.

While Olivia called Renee’s house, Sally put me to work flattening dough with a rolling pin and occasionally sprinkling flour on it.

“What’s the flour for?” I asked Sally.

“It’s to keep the dough from sticking to the rolling pin,” Sally answered.

“But it still sticks,” I commented.

“Only a little,” Sally responded. “Just don’t roll it so fast and you’ll do fine...and don’t press down so hard.”

Sally had to show me the proper speed and force a few times before I got the hang of it. I never knew how complex the entire food preparation activity could be. I always thought whipping something up in the kitchen was an easy thing to do, but it can be a difficult experience when someone does not know what he or she is doing.

“I hope Stephen doesn’t catch me baking,” I remarked to Sally. “He’ll want me to prepare meals as well as help with farm chores.”

Olivia hung up the telephone and appeared as if she had seen a ghost.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Mrs. Howell said that Renee went for a short walk about two hours ago. She told her mother she’d be here by four o’clock,” Olivia answered.

It was five-twenty on the kitchen clock.

“Two hours ago?” I questioned.

“Something’s happened,” Olivia said in a shaky voice.

“Are you sure?” Sally asked.

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“Mother, she told us to never leave her alone again,” Olivia explained to Sally. “Karl Boothe has been harassing her. I know something has happened!”

“Alright,” Sally replied reaching for the telephone. “I’ll call Sheriff Frazey and you go get your father from the barn.”

Olivia ran out the back door.

With the name Frazey mentioned, I knew who to go to. I bolted out of the house and rode my bike down the street to the Frazey’s home.

Dropping the bike in the front yard and running onto the porch, I slammed on the door. I continued banging my fist against it until Mike Frazey opened up.

“Where did Karl take her, Mike?!” I interrogated him barging my way into the house.

“Where did Karl take who?!” Mike questioned.

“Where is Karl and Renee, Mike?! You’re the only one who would sink low enough to be his friend, so you’re the only scum on the earth who knows where he is!” I stated walking toward him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Mike replied standing unmoving in one spot.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I declared drawing back my fist, “and I will hurt you if you don’t start talking. What have I got to lose? I’m the wandering vagrant.”

Mike began to show a little fear on his face. “Man, I really don’t know. Karl told me to leave ya’ alone so you’d keep quiet. I don’t know what he was talking about.”

“You just followed what he said without questioning why?” I asked. “Karl has been harassing Renee for a long time and has threatened to rape her. You must be the biggest moron I’ve ever seen if you didn’t know all that!”

“I’m telling ya’ the truth! The only thing we’ve been doing is messing around at the old McDowell Mill. That’s all! That’s the truth!”

“The McDowell Mill,” I said and froze where I stood. I remembered Iowa’s story about his sister being raped and murdered at the old mill. I recalled the night of the big storm. Renee and I sat against the counter in Mr. Millington’s store when she revealed to me Karl’s threat. He told her that one day he would take her some place where she would have no choice but to

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give in to him. Karl was very angry when Renee changed her mind about seeing him. My blood ran chill at the thought that he had her there.

I immediately went for the door.

“It ain’t like Renee wouldn’t deserve it!” Mike slurred. “Everyone knows she’s a tramp!”

My anger built up faster than I could control. I swung my fist as I turned around and hit Mike in the jaw. He fell to the floor.

“If you ever talk that way about her again,” I warned him, “I’ll come back and finish this!”

I sprinted out of the house and got on my bike. Mike, mistaking my rush for being cowardly, came out on his porch yelling threats and insults. He was like an old dog barking from a distance because it’s too afraid to attack. I ignored him and rode as quickly as I could to the McDowell Mill.

When I got there the mill appeared deserted. I could not hear a sound other than the rippling of the creek. I walked inside, slowly.

The interior was very dark. I could not see but I felt the room was empty. I say this because it was too quiet for someone else to be in there--especially considering the situation I was expecting to find.

On a wall I discovered a ladder leading up to the loft. I stepped over to it and started to climb. As I did I heard a muffled cry. The voice was not coming from above me and did not seem to be coming from the room I was in.

I went further into the room feeling my way around the walls. Again I heard the voice. It was Renee’s and she was in distress. This frustrated me terribly because I could not locate where her voice was coming from. I searched harder and faster and eventually came upon a door. I carefully opened it and found a stairway leading down into a cellar. There was a dim light at the bottom and I could hear the voices clearly.

“Shut up!” I heard Karl angrily shout. “Don’t fight me or I’ll cut you! I swear I will!”

A sinking feeling of terror and anger magnified in my stomach. It was a sensation that had been growing since I left the Seneca’s house. Still, I could not rush down the stairs to save Renee. Karl obviously had a knife or some other sharp object and could end up hurting Renee or me. Instead, I crept along cautiously while looking for something to use as a weapon. All the way I was tormented by their conversation.

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“Karl please stop!” Renee pleaded. “Please, don’t hurt me.”

“Don’t hurt you?” Karl questioned. “After ya’ toy with my feelings and insult me? You deserve everything you’re getting.”

I heard material rip and Renee’s trembling voice yelp in intense horror.

“I could cut your throat right now,” I heard Karl warn her. “You let out one more sound and I’ll slice it...just like this.”

Another rip and I assumed it was Renee’s clothing. Her sobs were breaking me in pieces because I could not even see her or Karl yet. I would have to reach the bottom of the stairs before I could see where the light was coming from. Along the way, I found a sturdy piece of wood.

Once clear of the wall, I saw them. Renee was pinned by Karl on the dirt floor. Her face, neck, and shoulders were covered with marks and most of her clothing was shredded and torn open. Karl was waving a knife at her and severing her clothes with it. Tears were streaming from her face and Karl appeared amused by it.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Renee asked closing her eyes.

“Because ya’ owe me,” Karl answered sticking both the knife and his face next to hers, “and it’s even better because this is were Jacquelyn Johnson got it before. Don’t you remember what happened to Iowa’s sister all those years ago?”

Renee’s eyes opened wide. “Are--are you going to kill me, Karl?”

“Well, I can’t just let ya’ go free afterwards can I?” Karl responded. “McDowell wouldn’t let Jacquelyn live. I guess you can’t either.”

Renee’s voice shook in a hopeless whisper. “Someone please help me.”

“No one’s here to hear ya’, Renee,” Karl stated tearing his knife into Renee’s skirt.

In a great rage I stepped up behind Karl with the piece of wood over my head ready to swing it upon him. As I appeared out of the darkness Renee looked at me. Karl turned around to see me just as I swung the wood and it hit him in the face. He collapsed to the ground unconscious. I kicked his knife away from his motionless body and into the light where Renee and I were.

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Renee huddled into the corner covering her face with her hands, trembling all over. I went to sit next to her but she appeared to be in too much emotional strain for anyone to be near her.

Renee's blouse was torn in shreds. I started to take off my shirt to place it over what was left of hers. As I did, Renee glanced up at me with hysteria in her eyes.

"Don't worry," I said to her in as comforting a tone as I could. "I'm not going to hurt you."

I finished removing my shirt and placed it over her shoulders. Renee grabbed the shirt and wrapped it around her tightly.

Figuring she would prefer it, I sat on the ground a distance away. I kept an eye on her and the knife, which was at that time resting close to her. I sighed and wiped the sweat from my face for I knew she was safe.

Renee then completely took me by surprise. She picked up the knife and pressed it against her chest. I leaped toward her. There was a struggle but I managed to force the knife out of her grasp.

"Don't stop me!" Renee shouted grabbing for it.

I threw the knife away from us. "Renee, I'm not going to let you kill yourself!"

"Why not?!" Renee questioned in heavy sobs. "I'm nothing! I'm not worth anything!"

"Renee, yes you are! You are worth a lot!" I desperately tried to convince her.

"Then why did my father hurt me? Why did he hurt me?" She asked staring at Karl's body. "I don't want to live! I don't want to be hurt anymore!"

"You can't solve your problems by killing yourself! You'll be hurting the one's who do care about you."

"There's no one who cares about me," Renee responded curling her legs up close to her.

"Renee, that's not true. Your mother cares about you, Olivia cares about you, Iowa does...just about anyone who lives in this town cares about you."

"What about you?" Renee inquired raising her head and looking at me. "Do you care about me?"

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“Do I care about you?” I retorted. “Renee, why do you think I’m here? I care about you! I care about a lot of people here, but especially you. You’re one of the reasons I’m still in this town.”

“Timothy, take me away with you,” Renee said. “I want to run away with you. I’ll go wherever you want to. Just take me far from all this pain.”

Actually the thought of running away with Renee was very pleasant. She was so beautiful and I would cherish her as a companion. However, I knew it was not the right decision.

“Renee, running away will not take away the agony,” I responded. “It will always be torturing you no matter how many miles you put between you and Pleasantville. That is because your troubles aren’t in this town, they’re in your heart. You must deal with them.”

“But you got away,” she snapped giving me a hard stare. “You ditched your problems. That’s why you’re here.”

“Renee, my problems aren’t gone. Although I stay in this town, I’m still running. My world is always in turmoil. Remember when we went to the State Fair? I had to watch over my shoulders constantly to make sure that no one recognized me. You did not have to worry about that nor do you have to worry about being found. That fear stays with me all the time.

“What if I never get caught? What then? I have no certain future ahead of me? I have no one to turn to if this whole thing blows up in my face. Renee, running away doesn’t solve anything. It just prolongs the suffering.”

“Timothy, I’m so scared,” she said burying her face in her arms.

“I know, but I’m here for you. I’ll always be here for you.”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders as she sat quietly for a few moments.

“Timothy, do you understand what happened that night on the Ferris wheel?” Renee inquired.

I had to take a second to focus my thoughts on what she was referring to. “No, not exactly.”

“I’m so sorry for treating you coldly,” she mentioned still refusing to make eye contact with me. “Timothy, I have cared for you ever since the night you told me your secret. You were the first person to understand the fear I felt. I knew I could trust you from then on. I really wanted to get closer to you but before I could, Mary Jane came into your life.”

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“You liked me? Someone as incredible as you liked me, the vagrant?” I questioned in astonishment.

“I guess you couldn’t see how much I felt for you,” Renee answered.

The sobs returned to her voice as she continued. “Every time I saw the two of you together, I knew my chances to have you were growing more and more slim. I wanted to tell you but I knew it would not be fair to you or Mary Jane.”

“So, does that explain what happened on the Ferris wheel?” I asked.

“I couldn’t help it that night. I felt so hopeless but, when you asked me to ride with you, something inside of me thought I still had a chance. I knew I wanted to have you for my own but I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. While we were on the ride, my world consisted of just you and me. For a few moments I had you. I held your hand without thinking of the consequences. I wanted to know what it would be like to be the girl on your arm, if only briefly.”

“Renee, why didn’t you ever tell me this before?” I inquired.

“In the beginning, I always thought I’d get around to it, but before I had the chance--”

I screamed out as I felt an intense pain in my side.

“Good bye, you meddling fool!” Karl exclaimed pulling his knife out of my side.

I glanced down to see blood gushing from my body. Karl proceeded to raise the knife up to thrust it in me again.

“RUN, RENEE!!! GET OUT OF HERE!!!” I shouted at her while clinching my wound.

Startled, Renee jumped up and ran for the steps. Karl chased after her and threw her against the wall. He placed his knife against her neck.

“If you move,” he said to me, “I’ll slash her throat right now.”

I hesitated. I did not want to lose, Renee.

“Alright,” I responded. “I won’t move.”

He pressed the blade harder on her neck and Renee drew in a sudden breath.

“Karl! I told you I won’t move!” I yelled.

“I just want you to know that I wouldn’t give a second thought to killing this witch!” Karl called out.

I noticed my blood-drenched hand. “Let her go, Karl.”

“Shut up!” Karl shouted. “One more word and she’s dead!”

Karl took the knife to the shirt I put on Renee and ripped it open.

“Now, where were we?” He inquired. “Oh yeah, I remember.”

With the blade he tore Renee’s skirt all the way to the bottom. Renee closed her eyes and clawed her fingers into the dirt wall.

“Yeah,” Karl went on, “I was just about to have my way with you.”

He began to touch Renee’s legs and her weeping became louder. I got up but winced in pain.

“Do you like this?” Karl asked her.

I looked at the toe of my cowboy boot and recalled what I did to Karl the evening Mike and he fought me at the ice cream parlor.

Suddenly, Renee’s anguish stirred up the courageous rage that allowed me to defend her before.

I charged toward Karl. He turned around with his knife ready to stab me with it, but I kicked him as hard as I could between his legs with the pointed toe of my boot. He could do nothing more than bend over in extreme misery.

I forced his arms against the wall and continued to ram my knee against his groin thinking he would release the knife, but amazingly he would not. As I stared into his angry eyes, I was abruptly distracted by Renee who was trapped behind him. She wrapped her hands around his neck and began to squeeze.

“Let go of the knife, Karl!” I exclaimed. “Let go of it now!”

Karl continued to struggle but eventually loosened his grasp on the knife. I immediately seized it from him.

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“This is going to end here,” I said placing the knife against him. “I’m taking you to the police.”

I then saw that Renee was not releasing her grip around his throat. Karl, gasping for air, fell to his knees. Renee continued to hold tight to his neck.

“Are you going to choke him to death?” I asked Renee.

“No more pain,” she said looking at him. “I won’t be hurt anymore. Not by my father and not by you, Karl. I’ll kill you before I’ll let you hurt me again.”

I became dazed as I bled profusely from my wound. The blood made a puddle on the floor where Karl was kneeling. I showed Renee the blood.

“Renee, I feel the same way,” I spoke to her, “but you can’t kill him. We can’t sink to his level. Release him, Renee...please. I promise you won’t be hurt anymore.”

Renee bowed her head and took her hands off his neck. Karl went to the floor catching his breath. I pointed the knife at him.

“It’s over for you, Karl,” I stated. “I’m taking you to the sheriff. We spared your worthless life but if you try anything more, I will stab you.”

Karl slowly stood up and I motioned him to the stairs. We followed him up as I left a trail of blood behind me. I began to get dizzy going up the stairs so I gave the knife to Renee. She was not as gentle with Karl and forcefully placed the knife against his back.

We walked outside the old mill just as the police and most of the town were arriving. Apparently, they had succeeded in pulling the story out of Mike Frazey. The sheriff had Renee drop the knife, and Wilbur and he took Karl away.

Doc Howard, Sally, and Olivia rushed toward me as soon as they saw my wound, but I fainted before they got to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“The Recovery”



“...He never thought I’d be capable of something like that, but I showed him,” I heard Sally’s voice in the blackness. The voices had been vague but were starting to become meaningful as the darkness turned to light. As everything was starting to become clear I detected a discomfoting sensation in my side.

“I guess that’ll teach mechanics not to try to take advantage of a woman,” Sally continued. “I am certainly happy I was already aware that a jug of windshield wiper fluid did not run eighteen dollars.”

“I can’t believe how naive some men think we are,” I heard Mary Jane reply.

I opened my eyes into the brightness. As the images came into focus, I saw Sally, Mary Jane and Olivia sitting by my bedside. However, the bed was not familiar to me. I was in a hospital.

Sally looked over at me. “Oh, he’s waking up.”

Mary Jane sprang up and embraced me. I could smell the sweet scent of her perfume under her soft blonde hair.

“Careful not to rip out his stitches,” Olivia warned.

“Where am I?” I asked after Mary Jane released me.

“Don’t worry, dear,” Sally replied. “You’re at the hospital. You lost a lot of blood. Doc Howard fixed you up as best he could and had us rush you to the city.”

“Have I been asleep long?” I inquired.

“Just over night,” Sally answered.

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“Mayor Smythe is going to award you for bravery when you get back to Pleasantville,” Mary Jane announced. “Your name is even in the paper. What a hero!”

“Thanks for the news,” I responded with my voice fading out.

“We’ll see what those people, who didn’t like you in Pleasantville, think of you now,” Mary Jane commented.

“Now, now,” Sally spoke up. “Timothy is liked by most everyone in town.”

“Is Renee all right?” I inquired.

“She’s recovering,” Olivia replied. “Renee’s been under a lot of emotional stress but she’ll be all right. You’ll see her soon.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Renee went with Stephen and Iowa to get something to eat,” Sally answered.

“Mr. Millington’s here to,” Olivia added. “He went down to the gift shop a little earlier to get you a present. I don’t know what’s keeping him so long though.”

I rested my head on the pillow. “I’m glad she’s O.k.”

“Renee’s going to take some counseling to help her get through this,” Olivia remarked. “She’s very grateful for everything you’ve done for her.”

“That’s true,” Sally added. “Sheriff Frazey had her for awhile as they arrested Karl Boothe. Iowa drove her out here as soon as she could leave so she could see how you are. She’s been here since last night.”

“I’m happy,” I said placing my hands on my chest. “Everything is going to turn out well.”

The door across the room opened. Stephen, Iowa and Renee walked in carrying vendor machine snacks and soda.

“Well, he’s awake,” Iowa said stepping over to me. “I guess you’re back with us.”

Renee sat down her load and came over to me. “How are you?”

“Except for a tight sore feeling in my side, I can’t complain,” I replied.

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She leaned over and hugged me. “Thank you, Timothy,” she whispered before standing back up.

“So, it looks like you’ll be ready to return to your farm chores soon,” Stephen commented.

“No he won’t be, Stephen Seneca!” Sally argued. “He is going to rest until Doc Howard says he’s up to it.”

“Ah, the boy looks just fine to me,” Stephen said. “How ya’ feeling, son?”

“Whenever you need my help, I’ll be there for you,” I answered him.

“My order still stands,” Sally stated. “Doc Howard will decide when you can work again.”

A lady walked into the room. She was wearing a gray skirt and blazer over a white blouse. She had a dark complexion and short black curly hair. I recognized her instantly and fear filled my body.

“I don’t mean to be interrupting anything,” the lady announced stepping into our little group, “but I’ve been searching for this young man for quite some time.”

“Who are you?” Stephen asked.

“My name is Stephanie Owens,” the woman replied. “I’m with Children’s Services. I’m this young man’s case worker.”

“Oh dear!” Sally remarked with concern in her voice. “I knew this was coming.”

“With that said, I can assume you all are already aware of the boy’s situation,” Stephanie Owens stated opening a folder in her hands.

“Ma’am,” Stephen spoke up, “what’s gonna’ happen from here?”

“At this point, Timothy will be put into the custody of the county,” the lady answered.

“You can’t just come in here and take him away from us!” Olivia exclaimed.

“Calm down, dear,” Sally said placing her hand on her daughter’s. “Ms. Owens, I don’t think we want to let Timothy go.”

“Madame, harboring a runaway is against the law,” Stephanie responded sharply. “I would not recommend making things worse on yourselves by fighting to keep him.”

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“But, we’re willing to do whatever it takes legally to keep him with us. We’ll be his foster parents. Please, leave him with us,” Sally pleaded.

“There is nothing immediate that can be done to keep him with you,” the lady stated with little compassion. “You may go through the normal process for becoming a foster family, and Children’s Services will determine whether you are eligible to become one. Until then, Timothy will stay at a teen resident facility.”

“What’s going on here?” Mr. Millington questioned walking in during the discussion. He had a large stuffed bear under his arm.

“This woman is trying to take Tim away,” Mary Jane replied with tears streaming from her eyes.

“Why?” Mr. Millington inquired.

“Because I’m a runaway,” I answered.

“Golly! Anyone could have figured that out by now,” Mr. Millington commented, “but Timothy’s as harmless as they come. Why would she want to take him away?”

“Timothy Reye also has theft charges against him from his former foster family,” Stephanie remarked.

“Theft charges!” Mr. Millington exclaimed astonished. “He never stole anything from me.”

“Did his former foster family also mention that they used to physically abuse Timothy?!” Sally questioned becoming very upset.

“The county will look into that matter,” Ms. Owens responded.

“Do you have in your records that his foster father used to get drunk? Does your records say anything about that!?” Sally asked fuming. “How could Children’s Services fail to see a young man in their responsibility being abused?”

“Madame, if it will make you feel any easier, I can promise you that Timothy will not be placed into his former foster home,” Stephanie replied mildly tense. “I sympathize with your concerns and I strongly suggest you look into foster care if you are interested in Timothy. Nevertheless, as of right now, Timothy Reye is under the custody of the county.”

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This was earth shaking for everyone, including me. Here I had finally established a life with a family who cared deeply for me, and suddenly the floor fell through. However, this time I had people who were willing to fight for me.

A few days later when the time came for me to leave, the Senecas told me I was part of their family and I would be with them again soon. They would get through the red tape as fast as they could. Renee and Iowa assured me they would help the Senecas in any way they could. Mr. Millington promised me my job was always open and waiting for me.

Mary Jane had a difficult time letting go of me as she hugged me good-bye. Through her delicate voice breaking apart under the emotional pressure, she softly whispered, "Till we meet again."



Her words repeated over and over in my head. They echoed as I walked into the teen resident facility.

There were other youths there my age--people who could have probably become friends with me, but I already had friends I cherished and a place where I belonged. I completely withdrew from my current surroundings because I was there in body only. My mind was miles away in a small town with a name no one in the entire facility would know but to me it was home.

The first night I was there, I prayed a very special prayer to God. I was alone and fearful that I would never see my dear friends again. I needed desperately to be comforted, so I called God by a name I had learned that made me feel closer to him.

"Heavenly Father," I said quietly kneeling at the side of my assigned bed in a room shared with two other people, "thank you for bringing the Senecas into my life. Ever since my parents died, I have never been able to feel inner peace. For the longest time, I've been a shell with a soul tucked deep inside never surfacing for anyone. The Seneca's have filled my life once more with warmth and care that I have not had since my own parents.

"I'm also thankful for Iowa, my closest and best friend. I've never had a real friend before I met him. I'm truly grateful that he opened his world to me and allowed me to play a part in it. I also appreciate my other friends: Barbara, Jack,...and yes, I'm even thankful for Fraun.

"Renee is especially important to me, Heavenly Father. I had no idea that when I asked you who was going to save her from Karl, you had me in mind. I'm relieved I rescued her before he could harm her. Please, take care of her. She really needs a break from all the hardships. Let her know that I can care for her without being her boyfriend. Although I do like her a lot,

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you have brought someone else into my life that has aroused spirits in me that I thought were gone.

“Mary Jane has been so refreshing to me. She makes me feel important and excited. I like the way she smiles. I like the way she sees everything. I like the way I feel when I’m with her. I want to be with her again so much.

“Of course, I can’t forget Mr. Millington, Doc Howard, Michael O’Brien, Bob Farthing, and the rest of that small town. I don’t know where I would be without them.

“Oh, Heavenly Father, please help me get back to them. If there were any great miracle I could have, that would be it. I found my answer there. I found the life I always wanted to see just like Iowa talked about that night on the porch when I was so confused I did not know what to do. Please, Heavenly Father, help me return to them.”

I ended my prayer and got into bed. It was not nearly as soft and inviting as the bed at the Senecas. Of course, that was probably due to the fact I was feeling lost at the time. My prayer and my memories had given me some feeling of ease, though. The pillow was also not as nice as I was used to. I aggressively fluffed it and lay down.

“Does it work?” I heard a voice ask in the room.

I sat up and glanced around. There was a young man laying on his side across the room staring at me in the dark.

“No,” I answered despairingly examining my pillow.

“Then why do you do it?” He inquired.

“So, I can sleep better,” I replied. “I’m sure this sounds silly, but I have this habit of fluffing my pillow before going to bed. However, this one may need a beating before it’ll reach a satisfactory comfort.”

“I wasn’t talking about your pillow,” he commented. “I was talking about you praying. Does it work?”

“Oh,...yeah,” I replied thinking the question over. “Yeah, it does.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he responded turning his face toward the ceiling. “I gave up praying a long time ago. God ain’t ever answered my prayers.”

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“I used to think that myself,” I said lying back in bed. “I’d likely feel the same way now if this summer never happened.”

“What happened?” He asked curiously.

“I found a place I could call home,” I replied. “It’s a small town far from this city. I discovered it running away on my bike. A good country family took me into their home and invited me to stay. I got a job at a general store and I gained friends unlike any others...close friends.”

The voice did not respond but I knew he was listening.

“I don’t know how to describe it all,” I went on. “It’s like I went back in time when I entered that town. People were a lot kinder there and not so concerned with the modern world.”

“Sounds more like a cornball TV show,” a harsher voice in the room remarked. “Man, don’t listen to him. He’s lying to you. That’s nothing but a dream.”

“It would be easier to accept all this if it were,” I commented to him. “That way it would simply be like I woke up from it all, but it isn’t. That town is real and those folks are out there. I want so much to be with them again.”

“Ah! Man, shut up!” The harsh voice yelled. “I’m trying to sleep!”

Silence followed for a few minutes.

“What’s your name?” The first voice asked.

“Timothy Reye,” I replied.

“My name’s Peter Richards,” the guy said, “but most people call me Pete.”

“Most folks call me ‘the wandering vagrant’,” I responded.

“Wandering vagrant?” Pete questioned. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a nickname I received the first evening I showed up in that town. I wouldn’t tell the sheriff my name so he called me that in place of it.”

“You got arrested by a cop?” He inquired.

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“Well,” I answered chuckling, “if one could call Sheriff Frazey a cop. I think of Sheriff Frazey and his deputy Wilbur as a sort of slapstick comedy team. But, in Pleasantville there really isn’t much need for police...except recently.”

“What do you mean?”

“Recently one of my closest friends was almost raped and killed by some crazy ex-boyfriend. If I wasn’t there to save her, that lunatic would have gotten away with it.”

“You saved her?”

“Yeah, I knew it was coming--well, I knew it would be coming. It wasn’t the first time I’d saved her from him.”

“Let me get this straight,” the harsh voice joined in. “You runaway and go to a town where some wonderful family takes you in and you get a job. You outdo the local police by being a hero and saving a girl from being raped and murdered. Am I getting the story right?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Man! If all that happened to you, why in the world are you here now?!” The harsh voice questioned.

“Because I got stabbed while saving her,” I answered. “My case worker tracked me down at the hospital, and now here I am.”

“But where are those beautiful people for your now?!” The harsh voice pursued further.

“Trying to find a way to get me out,...I hope,” I said staring into the darkness.

“I’ve heard enough!” The harsh voice declared. “Man! I’ll tell you why you’re here now. Either there ain’t any people in the first place, or those people found out you’re too much of a hassle to get back.

“No one cares about people like us. We’re just cockroaches to them. They want us out of their sight or stamped out. You better stop dreaming and get used to this place, ‘cause until you’re eighteen, this is your home!”

Nothing more was spoken after those remarks. I pulled my cover up to my head and turned toward the wall. Closing my eyes, I silently hoped Heavenly Father would do something soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Dreams”



The next day I met with my caseworker concerning my claim of child abuse. She informed me that since so much time had passed it would be very difficult to prove the abuse. It would probably end up the foster family’s word against mine. I disclosed the entire miserable story of how the trouble started and the reason I ended up leaving.

“Why didn’t you ever bring this information to me when the abuse began?” Stephanie asked. “We met regularly.”

“Eric Gerris threatened me that if I told anyone, he would be worse on me--especially if I told you,” I replied.

“They became worse anyway, didn’t they Timothy?” She said leaning toward me. “I’m here to help you. I’ve always been here to help you. That’s part of my job. If you had told me about the alcohol and the abuse back when it was happening, we would have had a greater chance of proving it. We could have removed the Gerrises’ license and placed you in a better foster home.”

“But I did find a better place,” I responded.

“Yes, I’m aware of your residency with Mr. and Mrs. Seneca,” Stephanie commented shifting some papers on her desk. “They seem very fond of you.”

“Listen, Ms. Owens,” I spoke with conviction. “I have found the family I want to be with and they want me as well. I’ve got a job in Pleasantville and I can give the Gerris family back their lousy money. Let’s just get through all this stuff as quickly as we can so I can go home.”

“You’re pretty sure about all this, aren’t you?” Stephanie inquired somewhat surprised at my assertiveness.

“I’m absolutely sure about all this,” I confirmed.

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She reclined in her chair. “You referred to the Seneca’s house as home. Why do you like it there?”

“What’s not to like? Stephen and Sally treat me like I’m a member of their own family. I help Stephen work his farm. I like it so much, I may try my hand at farming someday. Their daughter, Olivia, acts like a sister to me. Oh, she can get snappy with me at times, but I know she cares. I know for sure that the whole family cares about me, but it’s not just the Senecas.

“Mr. Millington gave me a job at his store, and he trusts me enough to let me run it alone on occasion. And often, when business is slow, he and I will sit in the rear of the store and shoot-the-breeze over a bottle of cola and a game of checkers. If things are really stagnant, he’ll get a couple of his buddies and we’ll all go fishing together. I’m not that good of a fisherman, but I did catch a catfish that was this big,” I said spreading my arms out slightly longer than the fish actually was.

“It sounds like you had quite an experience with them,” Stephanie remarked.

“I’m just getting started,” I continued. “I met a guy my age named Iowa J. Johnson. His heritage goes all the way back to the Johnsons of the state of Iowa.”

“So his name would suggest,” Stephanie commented.

“That’s right,” I went on. “He took me under his wing and let me help him train for his 4-H horse competitions. I’m not too modest to admit that it was most likely due to my assistance that Iowa made it all the way to the Ohio State Fair. He won a blue ribbon.”

Stephanie smiled.

“But there’s more to him than that,” I said shifting in my seat. “He brought me out of my shell. I could actually be my old self again. I began doing things I never did before. I danced with a girl for the first time in my life. I liked it so much that I continued dancing with other girls and I don’t think I’m ready to stop yet.

“Speaking of girls, I met one named Mary Jane Wesleyan. I really fell hard for her and I’m still not over it. She watched me hit a home run at the softball game I played on the Fourth of July. After that it was just a matter of finding a chance to get to know each other, and once we did, I couldn’t get my mind off of her.

“But she isn’t the only friend I have. One of my dearest friends is Renee, but there are others: Jack, Barbara, Fraun,...well, too many to name!

“There were so many things I got to do. I helped to raise a barn, learned about crops, put out a fire, played football,...I learned how to roll dough without it sticking to the rolling pin,...and I learned about having faith in Heavenly Father.

“The point is, I actually lived the life I always wanted this summer in a town most people would not even know existed, but I like that town and it’s important to me. Ms. Owens, if you want to give me a good home, send me to the Seneca family. You couldn’t put me in a better place.”

Stephanie was quite taken by my words and remained silent a few moments. “Timothy,” she finally spoke. “I believe what you’ve said, and I promise you I will look into it.”



As the days went by, I continued to meet with Stephanie Owens.

During visiting hours at the facility, I would frequently find Iowa, Olivia, Mary Jane, or someone else from Pleasantville waiting to see me. Renee was currently dealing with the Karl issues at home. She would visit whenever she could. In her visits Renee never said a word of our conversation we had at the old McDowell Mill.

Stephen and Sally were going through problems of their own as they tried to work with the county on getting custody of me.

“You won’t believe what they are up against,” Olivia commented to me during a visit.

“What do you mean?” I inquired.

“Well, to say the least, they are trying to get through a brick wall with the Children’s Services Board. The board is discouraging their effort because our family didn’t think to report you to the police as soon as we found out you ran away from a foster home. They said our chances are slim of gaining custody.”

“No!” I protested in frustration. “I want to be with you guys.”

“Don’t worry. My parents haven’t given up on you. They’ve been talking with your caseworker. Ms. Owens is very interested in what happened to you this summer. She told my parents you have improved greatly since the last time she saw you, and you haven’t been as happy and confident for as long as she could remember. The fact you rescued Renee is also helping out. An official letter came to your case worker from Mayor Smythe commending you for your selfless and courageous act.”

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“So, what does this do for me?” I asked.

“Well,” Olivia replied, “what your case worker recommends will have a strong influence on the board and on the judge--”

“The judge!” I exclaimed.

“Yes. My parents will have to take your case to Juvenile Court in order to get custody of you. We are all pretty nervous about that but we’re going to do whatever it takes.”



Pete and I were becoming pretty good friends. Each night he would have me tell him about Pleasantville. Because I enjoyed reminiscing over the memories myself, I had no quarrel about sharing my adventures with him.

The harsh-voiced young man, whom I learned was named Paul Lyndell, did not care to hear my tales and would occasionally interject a grunt or complaint as I spoke. Still, I went on with my story regardless of his distractions.

“No really,” I remarked to Pete’s amazed expression. “Roy, the pitcher, called everyone in close around the diamond. He was so sure that I wouldn’t be able to hit the ball far that he was willing to put his whole team at a disadvantage.”

“So, there weren’t any players in the outfield?” Pete questioned engrossed in the event I was speaking of.

“No one at all,” I replied. “Roy was so cocky about the whole matter that he even bet five dollars I couldn’t do it. My friend Iowa immediately took him up on the offer. What nobody knew was that I had Roy right where I wanted him. At that moment my plan went into action. I even went far enough to take another strike before pulling off my revenge.”

“What happened?” Pete inquired hanging on my every word.

“Well, as I was saying, one more strike and it would have been over for me,” I continued, “but I didn’t show the slightest bit of fear. I just stared Roy down...intimidating him...letting him know that that would be the last time he’d ever see that softball again. The catcher, knowing he wouldn’t be needed any further while I was at bat, took off his glove and used it as a seat.

My story was straying from the truth and was taking on a life of its own...but I didn’t care. There wasn’t anyone from Pleasantville there to call me out.

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I went on. “Finally, Roy pitched the ball. It was the fastest throw he had done all day. I yawned as the ball raced toward me and casually lifted my bat. With one hand still courteously covering my mouth, I swung the bat with my free hand and sent the ball flying into the distance until no one could see it.

“Now, I don’t know just how far that ball went, but I know later, Farmer Davis, who lived a few miles away, complained that he heard a single softball size hail stone hit the roof of his house that afternoon.”

“Ba-lo-ney!” Paul shouted emphasizing each syllable.

“Alright,” I admitted. “I did exaggerate the story, but I did hit a home run that day. That’s the truth. Iowa did win the bet and the team did come in close around the diamond, and we won the game!”

“Man, shut up!” Paul declared. “I am so sick to death of your stories about that small town where everything’s wonderful.”

“I can’t help it if they’re wonderful,” I responded. “It isn’t their fault they know how to do things right.”

“Yeah, right!” Paul cynically remarked. “Tell me, did anything sad happen in this ‘hic-ville’ you call home.”

“Yes,” I answered. “Of course sad things happened. I could go on and on about them--”

“Lay one on me,” Paul interrupted.

“Fine!” I stated and thought for a second. The first thing that came to my mind was Renee’s unfortunate incident, but I did not want to discuss that story any further than I had. “Alright! There’s something that happened to the family I was staying with before I arrived. They lost their son and had a horrible time getting over it.”

“Then you came and made it all better, right?” Paul questioned.

“No! There’s no way anyone could make that type of tragedy better. I was just someone to talk to,” I said.

“O.k., did anything bad happen to you?” Paul inquired.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “I got in a fight at an ice cream parlor.”

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“An ice cream parlor?!” Paul asked in puzzlement. “What’d the guy do? Give you the wrong flavor?”

“No,” I spoke trying to piece the entire memory together in my head. “My friend Olivia had just left the place with Renee. Two guys came in and sat on either side of me. One was Mike Frazey and the other was Karl Boothe. Mike drank down the rest of Olivia’s strawberry phosphate, and Karl insisted on having a lick of my ice cream. Instead of just giving him a lick, I shoved the entire cone into his face. That’s when the fight began.”

“And, I assume you won,” Paul remarked.

“No!” I retorted. “There was two-on-one. I got beat up and locked in the upstairs of the parlor. I went unconscious as I recall.”

“Let’s say that you won’t be able to return to that town,” Pete broke in.

“Let’s not say that,” I responded.

“No-no, just for argument’s sake,” Pete went on. “If you could never go back to that town and see those people again, is there anything you would regret not having done?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Let me think about that. No wait! I regret...I regret not being so open with my feelings to Mary Jane Wesleyan.”

“Your girlfriend,” Pete commented.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s just it. Maybe my feelings for her were stronger than I let on. I regret not letting her know that. Well, I did do a lot of things for her and we spent a great deal of time together. I just wish we had more time together.

“I wish I would have gotten a chance to hold her a few more times. I liked the way she felt when we hugged each other. She fit so perfectly into my arms. I enjoyed her hair brushing against my face, hearing her breathe, and knowing that she thought as much of me as I thought of her. The way it felt to have her that close to me...I guess it just felt like I was holding the most magnificent person ever brought into existence.”

“Sounds like it,” Pete remarked.

“I also liked the way she smiled when she saw me, or the way she was always excited to see me when we’d get together,” I continued. “I was fond of the way she used to stare at me before we actually met. It was as if I had known her a long time ago. I didn’t really understand it much at the time.

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“Oh, and I liked the way she always carried around a denim jacket regardless of the weather. I think it was a security blanket to her, but I don’t think she needed it for security. Maybe she kept it with her just in case.”

“I don’t want to listen to anymore of this,” Paul stated walking toward the door. “By the time I return from the restroom, I want this conversation over!”

“Didn’t mean to upset you,” I said as Paul slammed the door. I turned to Pete. “You know, he’s very short on patience. He reminds me a lot of Fraun Sodier.”

“Don’t worry about him,” Pete commented. “I don’t think he understands or cares to.”

“Cares to?” I inquired.

“I don’t think Paul wants to dream anymore. I think he’s tired of being let down. You get let down enough and I guess those dreams ain’t worth wishing for anymore. That’s probably why he’s tired of you talking about that town.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It bothers him in either way he takes it. If he thinks you’re lying, he’d probably like you to shut up about all the fantasy stories. If you’re telling the truth, you’re most-likely irritating him talking about a chance you got that never came to him.”

“Oh,” I uttered, “I guess I never took into consideration how he would handle it. I better apologize to him when he comes back.”

“No, I don’t think he wants to hear that either,” Pete mentioned. “I don’t think he wants any pity.”

“I suppose it would be best if I didn’t talk about the town at all,” I commented kneeling down by my bedside for prayer. “Of course, I won’t be talking as much anymore since Pleasantville is the only thing on my mind.”

I did not speak my prayer aloud because I did not want to offend. In my prayer I mentioned my gratitude for the change in myself that Heavenly Father had helped me to bring about that summer. I also told Him how much I appreciated my friends in Pleasantville and my desires to be with them again. I included a request that Stephanie Owens would continue to soften up about my situation so she would encourage my being placed with the Senecas. With that, I ended my prayer and got into bed.

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Paul had not yet returned.

“Timothy?” I heard Pete say.

“Yeah?”

“I wasn’t speaking for myself, you know,” he commented. “I really like hearing your stories about that town. They don’t bother me at all.”

“I’m glad you like them,” I responded.

“And, if it’s all the same with you, could you go on saying your prayers out loud so I can listen to them? I ain’t got much to be thankful for, so I like what you say. I kind of wish I had those same things to thank God for.”

“Sure,” I replied.

The room became quiet. I closed my eyes and began to let my mind drift far away from the facility, but it was called back by Pete’s voice.

“Do you think there’s a place for me in that town?” He inquired.

I paused. “How old are you, Pete?”

“Sixteen,” he answered.

“Well, I wouldn’t recommend going to Pleasantville the way I did. You could very easily find yourself returned here like me--worried that you might never see those folks again. When you turn eighteen, and no one else can keep you from it, I’d suggest you going out there. It’ll probably be the best move you ever made.”

There was another moment of silence before Pete spoke. “Goodnight, Tim.”

“Timothy,” I responded.

“Whatever.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Believing and Guidance”



“...So, when I returned to the truck, Jack and Iowa were already there. Fraun was with them and all three were laughing as if they had just heard the funniest joke ever told,” I said to Stephanie Owens. “Olivia was with them but she was not amused in the least. She was slapping all of the guys rather angrily but it didn’t appear to phase them. It wasn’t until a few minutes later that I discovered I was the victim of a snipe hunt.”

Stephanie lightly chuckled.

The two of us were meeting together yet again so she could talk more about how I was and what went on during my stay in Pleasantville. She seemed a lot more encouraging concerning me possibly being placed with the Senecas. However, there were still some matters that needed resolved.

“Very humorous, Timothy,” Stephanie commented. “It certainly sounds like you found some good friends. As a matter of fact, I’ve been receiving a number of calls and letters from that town on your behalf. Those people really like you.”

“I hoped you’d be seeing that by now,” I remarked.

“This letter particularly caught my interest,” she mentioned unfolding a sheet of blue stationary. “The beginning read the same as the others did. It went on about how everyone adores you and thinks your rightful place is in Pleasantville. I could open any letter and see that, but this one was different. This young lady went on to talk about how you inspired her life, and for the first time she could reveal her deepest secrets to someone and feel secure. She said that ‘being friends with Timothy has helped me out in ways that even he doesn’t realize. Truly, Ms. Owens, I wouldn’t be alive today if it were not for him.’”

“Oh,” I uttered not knowing how to respond. The words left me speechless.

“Do you know who wrote this?” Stephanie asked.

“I could guess.”

“Her name is Renee Lynn Howell,” she answered for me. “This is the young woman you saved from being raped and murdered. I must say that I am very interested in you and her story. Do you want to share it with me?”

“I don’t know if I should,” I replied.

“Why not?” Stephanie inquired.

“Well, when she and I told each other our inner secrets, it was supposed to be confidential,” I explained. “I mean just because her secret unfortunately came out in the open is no reason for me to assume I can talk to everyone about it.”

“You’re obviously a true friend to her,” Stephanie commented. “I’m sure she’s grateful to have someone like you to trust in.”

“I’m pleased you agree,” I responded.

“I think your heroic effort to save Renee Howell will help to influence the judge a little,” Stephanie said sitting back in her chair. “It certainly won’t assure a decision in your favor, but it along with the other items of good rapport in the town, not to mention the Senecas themselves, may be enough to move things in the way you’d like to see them go.”

“Is there a down side to this plan?”

“I’m sorry to say the answer to that is yes. You see, you ran away from your foster home and the Senecas broke the law by never turning you in. Also, there’s the Gerris family.

“However, there’s better news concerning that matter. It seems your allegations of child abuse have caused that family to withdraw their attack. They won’t admit to anything, but they are willing to drop the charges against you.”

“But, Eric did abuse me.”

“I realize your concerns, and the county will continue to look into it. As for you, the Gerris family is out of your life forever,” Stephanie said smiling at me.

She paused and thought for a moment. “Your friend Renee Howell has caused me to become even more impressed with you. You were a sad and shy boy who was distant from everyone. I was very much worried over what might happen to you when you became an adult. When you stole the money and ran away, I figured all was lost for you. I never suspected that when I

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saw you again, you would be a respectable young man with an unrestrained, positive character leaving an outstanding impression on the people you were with.”

“Ms. Owens, when my parents died there was nothing else worth while to me,” I responded with a serious tone. “When I ran away, I felt it was the right thing to do considering my circumstances. I fell into the hands of folks that were willing to take me in and care for me even when they knew nothing about me. I discovered compassion in that small town that I believe has all but disappeared in these modern stressful times. That’s really sad because the kindness I found is so easily given.

“Let me tell you how I feel. If that’s the way the rest of the world wants to be, then let them go on losing the true values of life. I came across a town that still had what I wanted. Even if I have to stay here until I turn eighteen, I will return to Pleasantville. That is where I want to be.”

“So, you found your happiness there,” Stephanie commented.

“I don’t think happiness is a strong enough word to describe my feelings for that town,” I said. “It’s like I told you before. For me, it’s home.”



With all the conversation about Pleasantville, I was becoming much more lonely and homesick. However, this was not to last long. A few days later I got a visit from Iowa, Olivia and Mary Jane. When I saw them a grin came across my face that I could not hide even if I wanted to, and I greeted them very excitedly, especially Mary Jane. I wrapped my arms around her and enjoyed the comfort of having her close to me.

“How are things going?” Iowa asked as we all sat down.

“Just terrible,” I replied, “but improving.”

“I’ll say it is,” Olivia remarked. “Your case worker and my parents have been talking quite a bit. It seems she’s very interested in placing you back with us.”

“I know,” I said. “Stephanie and I have discussed you guys so many times, I’m losing count. I certainly hope she can do it.”

“I hope so too,” Mary Jane spoke up. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“Saying I’m missing you guys would not be half of what I feel,” I responded.

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“Well, what if I told you you may have less of a reason to be sad?” Olivia inquired.

“What are you saying?” I questioned with some interest.

“As I said, your case worker and my parents have been talking a lot,” Olivia began to explain. “Ms. Owens has made some visits to our house. It’s part of what she calls a home study to check out the atmosphere and lifestyle that we portray.”

“And what did she think of it?” I asked trying to keep her going.

Olivia gladly proceeded. “She didn’t just like the home, she liked the whole town. She mentioned that even she might move out there someday.

“Ms. Owens stayed with us for dinner the last time she came over. Mother also invited over some people who would be able to say some favorable words about you. She chose Mr. Millington, Iowa’s parents, and the mayor--”

“The mayor!?” I exclaimed.

“Timothy, it’s only Ben Smythe,” Olivia retorted. “It wasn’t as if she invited the President of the United States.”

“Yeah, but still...the mayor never came to dinner whenever I was there,” I commented.

“That wasn’t all, though,” Olivia stated. “After dinner all of us sat on the front porch and chatted. Ms. Owens didn’t leave until ten-thirty that night. I think she accepts our family.”

“I’d say so,” I remarked.

“Well, it’s still a day before you face the judge, and I can’t get a wink of sleep over it,” Iowa commented. “My pa says it’s starting to show in my chores.”

“Believe me, I don’t think anyone has been as worried as I’ve been about this,” I commented clasping my hand tightly in Mary Jane’s, “but what Olivia’s told me has made the stress ease up greatly.”

“Timothy, I realize this is going to be a struggle, but it’s looking better,” Olivia said patting my leg. “And, when this is all over with, I’m going to bake you a whole batch of chocolate chip cookies just like the ones I made the first day you were with us.”

“That’s a good enough reason alone to pull through this,” Iowa remarked.

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Noticing me, Pete walked into the room. “Hey, Tim!” He suddenly noticed my three guests. “Oh. I’ll catch you later, I guess,” he said turning to leave.

“No, wait!” I called out. “Stick around awhile. I want to introduce you to some of my friends from Pleasantville.”

Pete’s eyes lit up. “Really!?”

“Yeah,” I answered motioning to my closest guest. “This is Mary Jane Wesleyan, and this is Oliv--”

“Timothy, I can speak too,” Olivia interrupted. “My name is Olivia Seneca.”

“Oh, you’re the family Tim stayed with,” Pete commented.

“Yes,” Olivia replied. “Well, I’m one of them at least.”

I pointed to my last friend to be introduced. “And, this is Iowa.”

Iowa stuck out his hand and shook Pete’s. “Iowa J. Johnson...Iowa Jefferson Johnson.”

Pete chuckled. “Just like Tim said about you...larger than life.”

The rest of us laughed and it was obvious that Pete was going to fit right in.

“Have a seat and join us,” I said offering Pete an available chair.

Pete sat down. “It’s so great to finally meet you guys. Tim’s full of bedtime stories about you all--some of them so excellent that I often wonder whether he wasn’t just making them up in his head.”

“Well, we’re certainly real,” Iowa responded.

“I hope we aren’t too much of a disappointment. You’re expectations were probably much higher,” Mary Jane playfully remarked.

Pete laughed again. “No, you guys are exactly what I expected. I mean, after all Tim’s told me...building a barn, playing softball, working a farm, going fishing...you all must be incredible to hang around with.”

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“Well Pete, don’t get too caught up in those visions,” Olivia spoke. “Those are just the highlights. Life out there can be pretty hard. Take for example the drought going on right now.”

“Maybe you don’t know where I’m coming from,” Pete responded. “Hardships are all my life has ever been. I would gladly trade it all and take on your problems, if I could experience those good moments Tim talks about. Your type of life just doesn’t exist around here.”

“It’s because people are losing the old values. It’s signs of the times,” Iowa remarked. “The world certainly ain’t getting much better.”

“I’ll tell you, Mr. Millington saw the modern world coming to this,” I said. “I’m going to hold on to Millington’s simplistic wisdom and avoid falling into the troubles.”

“It ain’t easy to avoid,” Iowa commented. “It ain’t difficult to fall in either, and people are slipping in all the time. Maybe Pleasantville and a few other small towns here and there are the last places that keep the old values--say for example something small...like businesses closing up in the evenings and all day on Sunday. Pete, is the city pretty much closed on Sunday?”

“The city is open all the time. You’ll never find a time when some place here ain’t open,” Pete replied.

“See what I’m saying?” Iowa asked the group. “Times are changing and the pressure’s on us all.”

“We all live in a town rich in tradition,” Olivia stated, “with the exception of Pete--”

“I wish I lived there,” Pete spoke in.

Olivia continued. “I don’t expect that it would be as hard for us small town people to keep our old values.”

“What about the old Pleasantville Fairgrounds?” Mary Jane inquired.

“What about it?” Iowa questioned.

“Years ago, people used to take the train to Pleasantville to go to the fair. Now the train station and the fairgrounds are long closed and pretty much forgotten.”

“Yes, but that’s just an old fairgrounds. That was only a small change,” Olivia said glancing at Mary Jane’s slightly offended expression. “However, it is kind of sad that it’s gone.”

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“That’s my point,” Mary Jane went on. “Back when they closed the fair, they might have thought it was just that, a small matter. Today we’ll never know just how grand that fair was. We can feel the loss of it.”

“When times change, it doesn’t always happen in a big way. Most of the time it creeps up in small insignificant changes, and before anyone knows what’s happened, something else we valued is gone.”

“I do believe I understand what you’re saying,” Iowa commented. “Still, how does someone avoid good things from slipping away and bad things from slipping in?”

“I guess we just hold to the good values and be on the lookout for the bad things,” I answered.

“What a nervous life you’d lead that way,” Iowa retorted. “That’s nearly impossible to do.”

I crossed my arms. “I figure that’s the same reason why most of the world is losing their old values.”

“That is impressive the way you guys start talking and go on and on, deeper and deeper,” Pete remarked.

“I’m not sure I’m following you,” Mary Jane said tilting her head to the side.

“It’s just that you guys can dive so deep into what you’re talking about,” Pete responded. “I like talking that way too, but no one I’ve ever met here likes to discuss things that way. For the most part they’re pretty shallow around here.”

“Well, you’re welcome to join in with us all you want,” Olivia declared.

Pete smiled. “I know this is gonna’ sound stupid, but after hearing all of Tim’s stories, it’s like I’m already friends with you guys. Does that sound dumb?”

“No,” Mary Jane replied calmly. “I don’t think that sounds foolish at all. Sometimes when people first meet they can hit it off just like old pals. Take Tim and me for instance. We met one evening at a footbridge in the woods. I threw a rock at him and we’ve been close ever since.”

“That’s a strange way to start a friendship,” Pete commented.

“But sometimes it simply occurs that way,” Mary Jane went on. “I just knew that first night as Tim walked me home that he would play a special part in my life.”

“You knew that the very first night?” I inquired intrigued by her words.

“Actually, I knew it the first time I saw you when you were receiving a blue ribbon for winning the wheelbarrow race,” Mary Jane answered.

I scratched my head. “That’s funny. I didn’t know anything at that time.”

Mary Jane squeezed my hand. “It was probably just woman’s insight.”

“Good story!” Pete exclaimed.

“Well, friendship can also happen in the more regular slow way as well,” Iowa mentioned readjusting himself in his chair. “Take Olivia and me. We’ve known each other since we were kids. Our friendship has lasted all these years and we know each other like we know ourselves. Yup, we’ve been through thick and thin together, and we’ve made it through fine. It’s a grand friendship we have, and it’s perfect just the way it is.”

Olivia glared at Iowa. “Speak for yourself!”

“What’d I say?” Iowa asked her somewhat confused at her reaction.

“Iowa, sometimes I’d swear you were as blind as a bat,” Olivia commented.

“What do ya’ mean by that?” Iowa inquired. “Ain’t things going smooth between us?”

“Never mind,” Olivia grumbled with an expression on her face that indicated both annoyance and embarrassment.

Stephanie Owens walked into the room. “So, this is where you are.”

I was happy to see Stephanie considering the story Olivia said about her visiting Pleasantville, but I was even more ecstatic to see the guests she brought with her.

“Timothy, dear!” Sally cried out rushing toward me with her arms open wide. With one sweep she pulled me up like a worn rag doll and squeezed me into a strong embrace. She held me so snugly that I was gasping for air.

“It’s...nice...to...see...you...too,” I uttered in what little breath I had left.

When Sally finally released me I fell into my seat and discovered that Stephen had also entered the room.

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“How are you doing, son?” He asked with a warm expression.

“Recovering,” I replied trying to stretch my body back into shape.

“Timothy Reye, I am pleased to announce that after performing a few home studies with the Seneca family, I have found them and the town of Pleasantville a more than adequate...in fact, an ideal environment for you to be placed into.”

Cheers filled the room but I did not join in. I impatiently waited for it all to die down so I could ask a very important question.

“So, I can go home now?” I inquired.

“I wish I could say yes,” Stephanie answered, “but I’m not the one who can make that decision.”

“Who then?” I immediately questioned.

“The decision will be made during your hearing,” Stephanie responded. “The judge will make the choice, but I am fully willing to recommend you being put into the custody of the Seneca family.”

Iowa and Mary Jane had to leave, but they promised they would be at the court building the day of the hearing. After they took off and Pete left also, Stephanie explained what would happen during the hearing.

The judge would have to be persuaded that the Seneca family and their home would be an acceptable atmosphere for me to be placed into. Since Stephanie was already convinced of this herself maybe this would be simple to do. However, problems could arise concerning the fact that the Seneca’s never reported me when they discovered that I was a runaway. This was an obstacle I had heard too many times already, and it was starting to annoy me greatly.

“As heartless as it seems,” Stephanie remarked to Stephen and Sally, “it would have been legally better on you all had you two turned Timothy over to the county rather than keeping him in your home.”

“We weren’t sure of the law,” Sally said. “Besides, Timothy needed a family. He needed someone who could care for him.”

“Perhaps the judge will be merciful considering the circumstances that you two did not know the law but were willing to cooperate with me once informed of it,” Stephanie responded.

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“And what if the judge doesn’t decide for me to be placed with the Senecas?” I inquired nervously.

Stephanie’s eyes were sympathetic toward me. “Timothy, you’d probably return here and stay until you turn eighteen.”

“That’s like an eternity from now,” I uttered in despair.

“First of all, the decision has not been made yet,” Stephanie told me trying to comfort me with hope, “but, even if the worse happens, remember that your eighteenth birthday is less than a year away. Once you turn eighteen, you can return to Pleasantville or anywhere else you want to go.”

It was relieving to know that, even in the worst situation, there would be hope in the end. Nevertheless, I did not want to wait any longer than I would have to to be with the Seneca family again.

I based my entire prayer that evening on that concern. I wanted to make sure Heavenly Father knew my yearnings to be home in as short a time as possible. This prayer I said without verbal words because it was too personal to share with my bedroom guests. After about ten minutes of pleading with God, I ended my prayer and got into bed.

“I hope things turn out well for you at the hearing,” Pete commented. I turned to see Pete staring at me in the dim window light and Paul rolled over into a silent black lump on his bed.

Pulling the blanket up to my neck, I answered, “So do I.”

“The way your friends carried on with you and the way that lady hugged you...I wish I had people who liked me that much.”

“Pete, I never thought I’d find folks like them. They’re a dream come true.”

Pete stopped talking for a moment. “I guess that means that I have had the same dreams as you, but I’m starting to think mine will never come along.”

I glanced at him. “What are you saying?”

“It’s plain to see, don’t you think?” He asked not expecting to hear an answer. His voice was slightly strained with suffering. “I was doing all right with accepting the callousness of the world. You suddenly came along with all your stories about a wonderful town far away. At

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first I wasn't sure whether I believed you or not, but then I actually met your friends and I knew they were real. They were, beyond a doubt, everything you told me they were."

Pete paused and his voice came back more weakly and his very tone broke my heart. "I was fine knowing my dream wasn't going to come true, but it did...but it's not mine to have. You got everything I wanted all this time. You've got them. And, sooner or later, you'll be back there, and where will I be? Right here, man. I'll still be here knowing that my dream exists in some pleasant town far away, and I can't be there."

I was not sure what to say to Pete because, although I wanted to help him, there was nothing I could offer. Along with this, I suddenly had deep guilt for telling him the marvelous events in Pleasantville and wished I had kept silent.

"I guess it wouldn't help if I told you I know how you feel," I said.

"What does that do for me? Huh? It ain't gonna' change anything is it?"

"Pete, if there's one thing I learned over this summer, it's that things do change, but they don't always change when you want them to," I replied. "Remember what we talked about while Olivia, Mary Jane, and Iowa were visiting? Maybe we should consider that things don't always change from bad to worse. Sometimes we can make them go the other way, but it's hard to do it alone. Sometimes it's even impossible. For one thing you've got to have faith that life will get better."

"That's easy for you to say," Pete spoke up. "You already got what you're looking for."

"But it wasn't always like it is now," I responded. "It seemed fate was never fair to me. I could explain what it was like for me before Pleasantville, but I know you have already felt the same anguish."

Pete rolled over away from me obviously not interested in my pity.

I contemplated for the next few minutes trying to find the words that would ease his pain, but nothing seemed to come to mind. However, that was not good enough, so I continued searching.

After awhile, I recalled something Iowa had told me the evening he and I first met. It was almost like Iowa knew my thoughts because he was such an expert at reading people. His message also seemed to apply to Pete as well.

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“Maybe I don’t know all the agony you’re feeling right now,” I began breaking the silence in the room, “but I did at one time. I remember how it was torture to me...alone, barely holding together, thinking I was nothing to anyone.”

Pete did not react to my words but I kept going.

“You know, we’ve talked about God before. He was never a friend of mine until I learned to trust in Him. Suddenly, I started to understand why certain things happened. Not everything...I still don’t know why my parents had to die, and I don’t understand why Heavenly Father allowed Eric Gerris to beat me up. But, I do know why I came across Pleasantville, and why I was stopped by the police.

“Had Sheriff Frazey not caught me and brought me to the court house, I wouldn’t have been discovered by Sally Seneca. I would have just ridden straight through town thinking not much more of it than any other small town I’d traveled through. I would have kept on riding until I reached the first farm field I came across and gone to sleep.

“Now that I think of it that field would have been Iowa’s, and I would have been caught anyway.” I chuckled lightly.

“Why are you laughing?” Pete defensively asked turning to glare at me.

“The irony that I see looking backward,” I replied. “The night I entered that town I hadn’t a single friend and my life seemed so misdirected. I didn’t know at the time that Heavenly Father was actually guiding me right to the arms of safety.”

“Who’s gonna’ rescue me?”

“There’s more,” I said. “Pleasantville wasn’t just where I needed to go. They also needed me. The Seneca’s needed someone else to care about so they wouldn’t suffer as much over Keith. Mr. Millington needed someone to treat like a son, and Renee...well, actually I think Renee and I needed each other from time to time.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Pete inquired.

“It’s got everything to do with our conversation,” I answered. “Pete, it isn’t just an old scripture saying that ‘there is a time to every purpose under the heavens.’ It’s like God has a plan for all of us, and it isn’t just how to get back to Him either.

“There seems to be things he wants us to go through on earth--tests that will shape us in some way. When the time is right, he’ll place us somewhere where our presence is essential in the

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lives of others. Maybe that's why my life has had so many troubles. That could be why you're struggling too."

"But when will God place me where I'm needed?"

"I'm not sure, Pete. Maybe you're supposed to be an influence on Paul right now, or maybe it's some other reason that hasn't presented itself yet. Perhaps you won't even know it until it's over. Just keep praying and believe that Heavenly Father knows what He's doing."

"That sounds O.k., but I'm frightened of my future," Pete commented. "I don't know what's going to happen to me."

"The future can be terribly stressful if you try to figure it out before it comes," I responded. "You can take my word for it. Keep believing that your life has a higher purpose than you think it does and be patient. Things don't always happen immediately. Let Heavenly Father guide the way. Sometimes only He will lead you to places where you can live that life you've always wanted to see. For now, I think that's the best answer I can give you."

Pete was quiet and I was concerned about how he took my response. Finally he sighed and uttered, "Well, I guess that's better than having no answer." He then pulled the blankets tightly around him and rolled over again.

"Indeed it is," I whispered and closed my eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Heroes”

It is difficult to describe the condition I was in on the morning of the hearing, and I’m not just referring to the fact that I had been having incessant insomnia the couple of nights before. It was a terrorizing feeling to realize that my future was in someone else’s hands.

Stephanie Owens informed me that Judge Katherine Clarey would be handling my case. Compassion would play a large role in Judge Clarey’s decision. I feared whether she would understand our situation or go strictly by the book.

Other thoughts bothered me as well. What would happen if I was forced to remain in the custody of the county until I was an adult? Would Pleasantville forget me after being gone that long? Would I end up being an outsider again and be distanced from them? These horrible images were difficult to shake off in the stillness of the night when there was not much else to distract me.



“It will be all right,” Stephanie said placing her hands on my shoulders. “All of this will be over shortly.”

I cringed and gripped my hands more aggressively on the wooden seat.

The courtroom was beautiful. I appreciated the ornamental designs in the wooden walls. The craftsmanship was quite remarkable; nevertheless, the room was hard and cold. The sunlight flooded the room from large windows and I could see thousands of dust particles floating through the air.

Across the room I spotted a statue of Justice, the woman blinded by a mask and holding a scale in her hand. I questioned how Justice would decide my fate if she could not see the faces and had to balance a conclusion between mercy and law. I wondered if I could stand a chance of making it back to the Seneca family, if it were up to her?

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Sally smiled at me warmly, but the stress was evident in her expression. Stephen showed it even more as he fidgeted with an empty paper cup in his hands that he had retrieved from a drinking fountain. He wore a suit which looked pretty awkward on him considering he preferred greasy work pants and worn cotton shirts.

It was a strange environment for all of us. More than likely, it was the first time Stephen and Sally had to confront anything like this. They were so out-of-place in those judicial surroundings. I regretted burdening them with the strain I had caused.

“I’m sorry for all this trouble, Sally,” I spoke quietly to her. “If it wasn’t for me, you two wouldn’t have to be here.”

“Don’t apologize, dear,” Sally responded softly. “We’d take on worse than this if it would help you.”

Instantly, some of the strain fell off my shoulders. “You two really care about me, don’t you?”

“It’s not care, dear” Sally replied. “We love you.”

Love...this was a term that had strong meaning to me, and Sally said it so effortlessly. There was no doubt in my heart that her feelings were absolutely as real as she described them. How could I be skeptical about her? Not one person I knew before had ever worked so hard to help me out of my despair. I could not imagine a more perfect family to be a part of.

Stephanie sat down next to me. She patted my arm to comfort me as we waited for the hearing to begin.

After a short while Judge Clarey entered the courtroom. She was an older woman with short gray curly hair. Her wrinkled face and sagging frown indicated to me that she was both strict and unmovable. As she sat down, she quickly glanced through a couple of papers on her bench then peered out at us through her wire-framed spectacles. I gripped my chair tighter as her eyes fell upon me.

As the hearing began Stephanie proceeded by establishing my background: how my parents had died and the years I spent with the Gerris family. Judge Clarey was already familiar with this because of the documents she had looked over. Stephanie went on to tell the judge about the alleged child abuse and how I ran away as a result of it.

It was then discussed between everyone how the Seneca family found me and took me into their home but failed to turn me in. Sally pleaded that Stephen and she were ignorant of the law. They were indeed concerned that I was a runaway but were more worried about my

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health and emotional state. They made a decision to keep me in their home and determine what to do later.

“Before making your decision,” Stephanie said to the judge, “I would like to state some things that happened to Timothy as a result of his stay in Pleasantville.”

“Go on,” Judge Clarey responded.

Stephanie continued. “We’ve exhausted just about anything of legal significance to Timothy’s case, but there are reasons that I feel for recommending Timothy Reye to be in the care of Stephen and Sally Seneca.” She placed some papers on the judge’s bench. “After being taken into the Seneca home, Timothy became employed at the general store by the owner, Mr. Phillip Millington. His employment record with Mr. Millington was exemplary. In Timothy’s spare time, he assisted Stephen Seneca on his farm and performed service projects for the community. He helped to put out a fire when a barn ignited during a storm and was on hand during the construction of a new one to replace it. Timothy also worked along side a friend of his, Iowa Johnson, to meet Iowa’s goal in a 4-H horse show project. I also received a letter that Timothy Reye once drove a lawn mower across town to tend a family’s yard and that he voluntarily organized a group to improve the dilapidated town fairgrounds as well.”

Those last remarks confused Stephen who did not get the opportunity to hear about Mary Jane’s birthday surprise. He glanced over at me and I nodded grinning back at him.

“There is an official letter from Mayor Benjamin Smythe also in those papers,” Stephanie went on. “There are also a couple of letters attached to it. These documents commend Timothy Reye on his heroic act of saving a young woman from being raped and possibly murdered. During the incident, Timothy suffered the stab wound that sent him to the hospital and lead me to him.”

Judge Clarey peered over at me again with a little less sternness. At that time, we started to hear voices outside the courtroom in the hall. Stephanie carried on regardless of the noise.

“Timothy has benefited greatly from the lessons and way of life that Pleasantville has offered him. The Seneca’s home is rich with affection, compassion, and a stable family atmosphere. Stephen and Sally are very fond of him, and Timothy has made it clear to me that he would like to return to them. After studying their home, I also strongly recommend Timothy being placed--”

“What is going on out there?” Judge Clarey asked staring at the door.

“That’s probably my fault,” Stephen said standing up and adjusting his tie.

“Explain, please,” Judge Clarey inquired.

“Well, Your Honor,” Stephen answered, “there was a town meeting last night concerning Timothy here. Because he’s been such a fine member of our community, folks were wondering if they should send representatives to support Timothy if they were needed. We all kind of felt the letters weren’t enough to express what we think of him.”

“So you selected some people to speak on his behalf?” The judge asked.

“Yes, that’s what we had in mind,” Stephen replied.

“I see,” Judge Clarey commented. “So who came?”

“The town of Pleasantville, Your Honor,” Stephen answered.

Judge Clarey adjusted her glasses. “You’re referring to local officials?”

“No, pretty much the whole town volunteered to come,” Stephen responded glancing back at the door the voices were coming from.

Stephanie took a sudden gasp of air and put her hand to her chest, and Judge Clarey in amazement raised up in her seat. I could not believe my ears but I could not deny what I was hearing. The town of Pleasantville came to my rescue in my time of need. I questioned what must have been going through Stephanie and Judge Clarey’s heads. I tried to imagine what it looked like outside those doors to see the whole town crowding the city courthouse. I stared in amazement to where the noise emanated.

“Your Honor,” Sally spoke up, “Timothy is not just a wandering vagrant to our town, although that is the nickname he has received from the day he first arrived. In truth he is a well-respected and appreciated citizen.

“Our home is where he belongs. To my husband and me, Timothy isn’t just someone’s foster child. He’s one of our own children, and we care for him as much as we do for our own daughter. If being foster parents is the only way we can keep him in our home, then please allow us to be that for him.”

“You consider me one of your own children?” I asked Sally in quiet awe.

“Of course we do,” Sally replied.

Judge Clarey sat down and thought for a moment. For awhile no one spoke in the room leaving only the growing sound of the people outside the doors. Finally, Judge Clarey looked

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out at us and declared, "I've heard enough!" She paused. "This is very interesting...Open those doors! Let me see who has come to support this young man!"

"Are you serious?" Stephanie asked in astonishment.

"I don't think this room will fit all of them," Stephen stated.

"As many as can fit, then," the judge responded. "Let them fill up the chairs and the aisle...and leave the doors open for the others."

Her instructions were followed and the folks of Pleasantville were welcomed into the room. The horde easily filled in the seats available for onlookers as well as the aisle with plenty to spare still out in the hall. Olivia, Mary Jane, Iowa and the rest of the gang forced their way to the front so they could see me. Iowa reached over and patted my shoulder to keep my spirits up but it was not necessary. The town showing up for my sake alone was enough to make me happy.

"Order! Order!" Judge Clarey exclaimed as she pounded her gavel. "Remember that you are in a courtroom!" She persistently continued until the noise finally died down.

Satisfied, the judge directed her attention on me. "This is quite impressive. Look at all these people who have shown up for your sake, young man." She glanced at the town's folks. "I don't think I've ever seen anything like this in all my years as a judge. This is certainly something I won't forget."

"Timothy is a fine kid!" I heard Mr. Millington yell out. "He's worth showing up for!"

"So I see," Judge Clarey responded. "And I trust all of you feel the same way about him?"

"Ya' got that right, Your Honor!" Alexander Johnson called out with the rest of the crowd supporting his response.

"Well, I have a few words to say before giving my decision," the judge stated readjusting herself. "I am shocked with the mayor and sheriff of your town for allowing this minor to reside in your jurisdiction without questioning the young man or attempting to notify the proper authorities. Had this boy's parents been alive, who knows what troubles and agony you all would have put them through. I am not even going to go into the problems Children's Services has had as a result of your negligence to report Timothy Reye."

Judge Clarey's eyes cut short to Stephen and Sally as she continued. "I can understand your ignorance of the law Mr. and Mrs. Seneca, but it surprises me that you two did not eventually realize that there was something wrong with keeping a runaway in your home. Although the

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two of you may have had good intentions, you were not doing what was right for Timothy Reye. Children's Services was established to help children. There is no need to hide runaways from them."

Her eyes moved back to the others. "And as for the authorities of Pleasantville, I would not recommend your failing to follow this law or any other law in the future! Your positions in your community should be an example for others!"

"We are indeed sorry for any problems caused," Mayor Smythe said stepping in front of the crowd, "and as Mayor of Pleasantville, I take full responsibility for the legal authorities of our town for not acting promptly and in accordance with the law. I guess sometimes one's heart gets in the way of one's better judgement."

"Fortunately, one's heart is not always out of harmony with what is right," Judge Clarey continued. "There is such a thing as mercy in the judicial system. There are situations, such as this, where the law alone is not enough to make the best decision. Without mercy there could be no balance to justice. As a judge I must know how much of one or the other needs to be applied."

Judge Clarey peered down at me. "Young man, do you want to stay with the Seneca family?"

"Yes I do," I replied fervently suddenly feeling tears beginning to seep from my eyes. "I really want to stay with them."

Judge Clarey directed her attention to Stephen and Sally. "And the two of you want Timothy Reye to remain in your family for you to take care of?"

"Yes we do, Your Honor," Stephen answered.

"I don't believe we could express how much we want Timothy returned to us," Sally added.

"No matter how many mistakes were made," Judge Clarey commented, "Pleasantville has improved Timothy Reye beyond what any foster home or the county has been capable of doing. It is only my opinion, but it pleases me to know that there are still good people out there that will unselfishly do for others even when the sacrifices are great. Yet, I feel such matters can be handled within the bounds of the law.

"Nonetheless, Timothy Reye is at an age where he can reason out his own desires. He wants to be with the Seneca family, and the Seneca family wants Timothy Reye. With that in mind, and because of the recommendation of Stephanie Owens, I grant full custody of Timothy Reye to Stephen and Sally Seneca."

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I don't think there is a need to describe the instant reaction everyone had to the judge's decision, and I probably would not be a suitable witness for it anyway. Before I could look around, I was overcome by embraces from the gang. Cheering and applause was all I could hear echoing throughout the room. It was like a celebration if that word properly fits the event.

When the gang finally released me, Stephanie Owens came over to me.

"Congratulations," she said shaking my hand. "You got what you wanted and more. I am happy for you."

"Thanks," I replied cupping my ear to hear her. "I couldn't be going to a better place."

"It's sad for me, though."

"Why is that?" I inquired.

"Because all these years you've hardly had a thing to say," Stephanie replied, "and after Pleasantville, you've suddenly had lots of things to talk about. I'm just sorry we could not have gotten you to this point sooner."

"There's a time for everything," I remarked. "When I hold to that concept, life seems easier for me."

"Keep thinking positive thoughts and life will be easier," she commented. "Now, you should go to your new guardians."

"Good bye, Stephanie Owens."

"Have a wonderful life, Timothy Reye."

I smiled turning around and went over to Stephen and Sally.

"Welcome to our family, son!" Stephen declared.

"I've been there before, sir," I responded.

"But now, no one can take you from us again," Sally said wrapping her arms around me. "You're ours now."

I belonged to them and nothing else could have pleased me more aside from having my own parents back. Nevertheless, somewhere inside I knew that the Senecas were special people

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that Heavenly Father had guided me to. With the judge's decision, I knew He wanted me to remain with them.



“Is this mike on?” Mayor Smythe asked thumping his finger against the microphone. “Can y’all just simmer down?! We’re trying to get this ceremony started!”

That evening, many of the town's people gathered at the high school auditorium in Pleasantville for a meeting Mayor Smythe was conducting.

“Please folks,” Mayor Smythe pleaded. “Y’all had your chance to carry on at Timothy's hearing! Can we have a little peace this evening!”

Eventually everyone quieted down and the mayor began his address.

Olivia, who was sitting next to me, looked at me with a warm expression and grinned.

“What?” I whispered leaning toward her. “Is there something on my face?”

“Yes,” she replied. “There's a certain glow to you tonight. Also, I'm relieved to have you with us again.”

I glanced around at Stephen, Sally, Mr. Millington, Mary Jane, Iowa, and the rest of the gang, all of which were seated near me. “I'm really here for good, aren't I?”

“You better be,” Olivia threatened. “I don't want to worry about you anymore, so no more of these crisis stirring up. This one was scary enough to deal with.”

“I'll try to stay out of trouble.”

“Yes, you do that.”

“Say, didn't you promise me some cookies when all of this was over?” I inquired.

“I did,” Olivia said peering toward the stage. “I'll bake them for you tomorrow.”

“No way!” I whispered emphatically. “I want them tonight before I go to bed--”

“Sh!” She interrupted pointing up front. “This is the part that involves you.”

I listened as Mayor Smythe continued his speech.

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“This lad courageously risked his life to save one of our young ladies from being the victim of a horrible crime. Truly we are all indebted to him. Well, come to think of it, maybe things are evened up since we showed up to rescue him from court.”

The audience laughed.

The mayor reached down and picked up a shiny medal on a blue ribbon. “To show our appreciation for his heroic effort, I would like to award Timothy Reye with this medal and pronounce him Valiant Citizen of the Town of Pleasantville.”

Everyone applauded enthusiastically.

“Go get your award,” Sally coaxed me. “You deserve it!”

“This is embarrassing,” I commented standing up.

“Ah, ya’ like us anyway,” Iowa responded who was sitting next to Olivia.

I made my way to the aisle and up to the stage. The mayor placed the ribbon around my neck and motioned me to the podium. I hesitantly moved over to it and gazed out at the large amount of people staring back at me.

I cleared my throat. “Thanks,” I spoke into the mike.

I stepped away but Mayor Smythe grabbed my arm. “You’re expected to say a little more than that,” he said directing me to the microphone.

I looked again into the many faces. “Uh,” I uttered nervously, “thanks...y’all.”

“SPEECH!” Iowa started calling out which encouraged the rest of the audience to join in. I was intimidated for a second but managed to confront the microphone yet again.

“Uh...what can I say?” I asked the crowd. “I’ve never had to give a speech before.

“When I rescued this fine young lady, I wasn’t thinking about the recognition I’d receive. All that concerned me was she. She is one of my closest and dearest friends, and I would do anything to help her...even if it meant taking another stab wound.”

The people applauded at my statement. Suddenly, I felt like a candidate running for office. I did not want to say something powerful that would make the gathering cheer. It was not my intention to be dramatic, so I focused my words more toward Renee herself.

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“I’m not just saying that because it sounds good. I’m very serious,” I went on. “I will always be there for her whenever she needs me, because she was the first person I could confide in. Our friendship is a very special one.

“I guess friendship is a pretty open thing in this town. I could mention a number of people here who have done so much for me. I could start saying names, but I’d be talking longer than you folks probably want me to.

“So, I’ll just make it brief. I would not be able to find any place more perfect than this town. If Adicas Johnson were here tonight, I am sure he’d be mighty proud of what type of people live in Pleasantville. You guys are...well, you’re just incredible.” I held up my medal. “Thanks again.”

There is nothing like what compliments can do to folks, for that crowd carried on for me like I had said the greatest words ever presented before an audience.

“Those were very nice things to say,” Sally remarked as I returned to my seat.

“Now that didn’t hurt much did it?” Olivia asked.

“On the contrary,” I replied, “I was terrified.”



After the meeting, Sally asked if I was ready to come home, and I gratefully answered yes.

Although I was worn out from all the day’s events and was ready to rest, my closest friends were not tired at all. Iowa, Mary Jane, Renee and Olivia had me chat with them in the Seneca’s living room for another hour-and-a-half. All that time we spent reminiscing over the summer we spent together and the things that were to come.

Iowa mentioned that Lincoln High would take some getting used to since I never attended a small town school before.

“One of the first things you’ll notice is that there won’t be nearly as many kids as in a city school,” Iowa went on. “Ya’ can’t always rely on some new click to hang around.”

“I thought I’d just hang around you all,” I responded through a long drawn out yawn.

“Ahhhh,” Mary Jane commented sympathetically. “Looks like the hero of our town is getting sleepy.”

“No,” I said widening my drowsy eyes. “I can go on all night if you guys want to.”

“Sure you can,” Olivia commented.

“Well, I guess it has been a big day,” Iowa remarked standing up and stretching. “I’ll give ya’ a ride home, M.J.”

“O.k.,” Mary Jane said. She gave me a large hug. “Good night, you Valiant Citizen.”

“Good night,” I retorted in another yawn.

Iowa and Mary Jane left the house and I propped my feet up on the couch.

“Timothy, are you awake enough to walk me home?” Renee inquired.

I forced my eyes open again. “Oh, of course.”

“Barely awake enough, he means,” Olivia corrected.

I stood up. “I feel better already.”

“I’ll see you later,” Renee said to Olivia as we went to the door.

I opened the door for Renee and stepped outside behind her. The cool breeze of the evening refreshed my constitution and I was fully awake again.

“I thought the streets were safe once more,” I uttered descending the porch steps.

“They are safe again,” Renee responded, “but why must a lady have to walk home alone in the dark?”

“I guess she doesn’t have to if she doesn’t want to,” I commented. “Mary Jane doesn’t seem to mind.”

“I’m not Mary Jane,” Renee stated curtly.

“I didn’t mean to say something wrong.”

“When people are sleepy they usually don’t take the time to censor what they say.”

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“I’m being honest, Renee,” I clarified grabbing her arm to stop her. “I apologize for hurting your feelings.”

She was startled when I grabbed her, but she relaxed upon hearing me. Renee nodded her head and we began to walk once more.

“Those were pretty words you spoke in front of that audience tonight. Did you mean what you said?” Renee inquired.

“Yes I did--every sentence,” I answered. “Especially the part about you.”

“Why did you say we were special friends?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a friend like you before. When I reminisce about everything we’ve discussed and been through, I come to the realization that what we have together is more than most other friendships have. It’s like we know each other extremely well. I was there for you when you needed me and you were there for me--”

“I was there for you?” Renee interrupted.

I smiled. “Remember that night I discovered that bruise on your shoulder? If you’ll recall that evening, the gang found us in an awkward situation.”

“They found us alone next to the dance barn with my torn blouse,” Renee commented. “Yes, I remember that night.”

“If it wasn’t for you revealing your dark secret to them, who knows what they would have thought of me.”

“Timothy, I was keeping them from coming up with their own conclusions,” she responded.

“No,” I contradicted, “you were being my hero that night. I knew how much you hated having to expose that controversy in your life, but you did it to help me.”

“I don’t think that even compares to what you did for me,” Renee uttered.

“I guess that all depends on who was in need of help at the time,” I said.

We walked up to her front door.

“Would...would you like to come inside for a moment?” Renee inquired.

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“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied. “It’s kind of late and your mother would probably have a fit.”

“My mother’s asleep, but if you feel uncomfortable with it, I’ll understand.”

“I could stay a few minutes.”

I followed her inside and into her living room. The house was exceptionally quiet which made our footsteps very loud--so loud that I was sure they would wake her mother.

“Would you like something to drink? A glass of milk maybe?” Renee asked.

“Not milk,” I answered. “I might doze off here if I drink that. Do you have any juice?”

She smirked. “Prune juice.”

“Prune juice. I should have remembered that,” I retorted chuckling lightly. “Water would be just fine.”

Renee went into the kitchen to fetch our drinks.

I remained standing and glanced around the room. On their old piano was what appeared to be a sheet of song lyrics propped up over the worn keyboard. I bent over to get a closer look at it.

The song was written in elegant handwriting. It was a love song that talked about feelings and desires that were longed for by the writer but not fulfilled. Before I could finish it, Renee came back into the room.

“This is beautiful,” I remarked pointing to the sheet of paper.

“You think so?” Renee inquired.

“Absolutely,” I answered. “Who wrote it?”

“I did,” Renee said handing me the glass of water. “I wrote it while you were away.”

“I had no idea you wrote songs,” I stated in amazement.

“Timothy Reye, it seems that you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“May I hear it?”

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“And wake up my mother?” Renee questioned picking up the song sheet from the piano. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I responded. “Will you show me later?”

“You’re really anxious aren’t you? Unfortunately, I probably won’t show it to you,” she answered. “I don’t want to put anymore stress between Mary Jane and you than I already have.”

“Showing me your song won’t change anything.”

Renee’s mood suddenly shifted and she glared at me. “That was a cruel thing to say. I wrote this song for you.”

“I didn’t mean that to sound that way,” I explained.

A tear escaped her eye. “I am trying to hold back feelings I have for you because I care too much to let them ruin your relationship with Mary Jane. I’ve failed at times but understand that they are difficult to keep inside. Timothy, please don’t insult or belittle my emotions. It hurts enough already.”

She sat on the couch pressing the paper against her chest.

“Renee,” I said sitting down next to her, “I’m so good at saying the wrong things, and it takes me forever to pick up on clues that aren’t obvious. I guess I’m as dense as a block of wood sometimes, but I assure you that I don’t take your feelings lightly.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t see each other anymore,” Renee suggested refusing to make eye contact with me.

“No!” I exclaimed. “No-no-no, Renee. I don’t and I absolutely refuse to lose your friendship again. It was bad enough when you kept a distance from me before.”

“I can’t think of any other way to handle this, Timothy,” Renee commented. “I’ve never felt so close to someone before. I’m not sure I can go through this and have you near me all the time.”

“Maybe you can’t get through this, but maybe we can together,” I responded. “Let’s just be friends for now.”

Renee sighed. “The classic let down line.”

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“I didn’t mean it that...well...never mind.” I was so confused as to what to tell her. “Renee, why can’t we try being friends? Let’s just be the way we were for awhile and see if things don’t improve.”

She shook her head. “I should have known I couldn’t handle being alone with you.”

“I wish we could work this out so we can,” I said resting my hand on her shoulder.

She covered her eyes as more tears began to appear. “Good night, Timothy.”

“Let me stay and we’ll just talk.”

“Please,” she whispered through her trembling lips. “I’ll work this out myself. Good night.”

I could not stand to see her heart breaking, but I could not mend what was damaged. I felt the only way I could help her at the moment was to do what she wanted, so I stood up.

“Renee, I will always be your friend no matter what. I figure you will distance yourself from me once more, but I will wait for you.”

I sat my glass down on the stand and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“The Bonfire”



Just as I expected, Renee did avoid me, but she did not distance herself from the rest of the gang. Olivia and she began to do much more together than normal. It was as if Renee was submerging herself deeper into her friendship with Olivia so she would not have to deal with the sadness I caused her. However, it could have been because she was trying to get to me by hanging around and not speaking to me.

I could have just been arrogantly thinking Renee thought about me every minute when actually I was hardly on her mind at all. Regardless of the reason I was very happy to have her near.

After a few more days of summer vacation freedom, school started. It was not as much of a culture shock as Iowa suggested with my being a senior at Lincoln High. The decreased student population was a welcome alternative to the city schools because I recognized most everyone there. And, I had a close friend nearby in some of my classes. I had Barbara in my geometry class, Mary Jane in gym, Olivia and Iowa in English, and the whole gang met together for lunch and ninth period study hall.

I did not have to worry about what to do on Friday evenings. The barn dances were temporarily replaced by the high school football games. Jack and Fraun were both on the team and they were exceptional athletes...especially Jack. He had a talent that was sure to take him places someday, but he was not the only one who was gifted.

Barbara was one of the most energetic of the cheerleaders. She and her squad could stimulate the audience into an excited roar whether the team had made points or was in need of making some.

I guess all of this along with the marvelous months I had already experienced with the people of Pleasantville gave me a chance to be happy without regret or fear of what was to come. This sensation in me was established by the wonderful family that I was now a part of.

Stephen had always called me son, but it had begun to ring more sincerely. I am not saying

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that I forgot about my actual parents, because the pain of losing them did not leave me. The Senecas could never take the place of my real family, but they were my family all the same. I could be part of both and never separated from one or the other.

Olivia asked me one night if it would offend me if she called me her brother. I told her that it would not as long as my presence did not distract her from her memories of Keith. She said that Keith could not be replaced in her heart, but there was always room for someone else to care about just as much. Of course, I then accepted and have referred to Olivia as my sister ever since.

I did not lose track of my friend Pete. I knew the pain and loneliness he felt. Instead of letting Pleasantville slip out of his memories like some dream, I wrote to him quite a bit and informed him of how everything was going for me. Sometimes he would write back and sometimes he would not, but when he did it was clear that he appreciated every letter I sent.



The holidays were celebrated in town with grand style. This included Halloween which kicked-off the season. The night before, the children of the town dressed up in their costumes as clowns, hobos, and other creatures and begged for treats from every door. I had seen this tradition kept in Columbus but this small town had much larger crowds roaming the streets.

In the city, the children had to end Beggar's night early to keep them safe, and the candy collected would have to be inspected for possible hazards. The Pleasantvillians did not appear to have the same concerns. Kids would eat candy right out of their bags as they walked along, as did their parents if they were with them.

My new family had carved our pumpkin with a gruesome expression on its face earlier that evening and placed it outside. I was watching out the window to see if our horrid creation would scare the children as they came up on the porch. However, the effort was in vain because the kids just passed our Jack O'Lantern without any kind of hesitation.

Sally and Olivia stayed near the front door sitting on the steps waiting for each group of trick-or-treaters to arrive. They would then admire the children's costumes whether they were fairies, ghosts, or something else. After that Sally and Olivia would stuff goodies into their bags and send the beggars on their way. I preferred to sit on the couch and laugh at the ladies' shrills of delight they made over the kids' homemade outfits. Stephen favored sitting in a chair and reading his newspaper and only glancing up once in awhile if the costumes were particularly interesting.

Stephen did not seem to mind the distractions or much of anything else because his corn crop came in better than he expected as did the rest of the farmers'. This put the whole town at

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ease because the worse was over. The drought did not do as much damage as it had threatened to, so everyone's worries were not nearly as great.



The evening at the end of Halloween was slow at the store, which was expected because there was going to be an affair at George Susan's farm later that night. This activity would include a dance and a weenie roast. Most people were at their homes either getting into costumes or baking treats for the event.

Although the store was open, Mr. Millington and I were across the street with the guys from Jesse's who were also not doing much business at the barbershop. The chilly weather did not keep the men from gathering at the bench outside to croon away their nostalgic quartet songs into the nearly empty street. After finishing a couple of charming ballads, they were joined by Angelina McNeal who had walked over from Lenora's clothing store.

She had to be in her mid-twenties. She was thinly built with blonde hair and dark eyes. I had not seen her much before at all because I was not fond of clothing stores and was never around when she rehearsed with the men.

"Slow night, fellows?" Angelina asked in a flirtatious tone.

"I do declare, ya' always look prettier than the last time I saw ya'," Mr. Harris commented.

Angelina smiled and glanced over to me. "Well, we really haven't been introduced have we?"

"Um...no," I replied.

She made me nervous and it was because of the rumor about her. All of her friends were in college and she had no one to talk to most of the time. It was said that she was fond of men in general and would gladly take any husband she could get. I heard that she dated Wilbur occasionally but that was about all.

"I'm Angelina," she stated holding out her hand.

"I'm Timothy," I responded and reached out to shake it.

She smiled again then turned back to the men. "Would you all like to sing a few tunes together?"

"Why sure we would," Mr. Millington responded.

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I could not believe how remarkable Angelina's voice was or how well it blended with the harmonic strains of the barbershop quartet. By the time their first song was over, I just about believed every male quartet should have a female lead. I was so impressed I gave them a standing ovation.

"I thought Mr. Millington and the boys from Jesse's were good, but you make the music simply splendid," I commented to her.

"Well!" Angelina responded taking in a breath. "That was a very sweet thing to say, Timothy. Maybe you and I should have been introduced sooner. Having you around could do wonders for my ego."

I sat down. "Another song please."

"You heard him," Jesse said facing his fellow vocalists. "How 'bout we do one we haven't done in awhile."

It only took a few seconds before they agreed on a tune and began. Angelina sang the verses in a soft and fragile tone but would conquer crescendos with beautiful strength and emphasis. I marveled how refined her voice was and questioned myself why she did not sing with the men all of the time.

Occasionally, Angelina's eyes would meet mine, and they seemed to brighten when they did. Maybe she did not receive many compliments over her musical abilities and mine cheered her up greatly.

My eyes drifted away from the group and caught sight of Renee who was walking toward us on the other side of the road. Renee looked over a few times to admire the singers and then she walked into the general store. She stepped back out finding no one inside and waited for the song to end.

"Is the store closed?!" Renee called out.

"No it ain't, little lady! We were just taking a break until some customers came by!" Mr. Millington replied. He turned to me. "Timothy, I'm gonna' go ahead and shut my doors early tonight. You go help Renee Howell, and I'll let ya' go on home afterward."

"Fair enough," I responded and went to the store.

As Renee and I walked inside, I grabbed an empty bag and said, "I'll fill your sack for you, if you'll tell me what you want."

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She paused and nodded her head. I followed her around the room packing everything she pointed to. A lot of the items were snacks that Olivia and she were going to take to the activity that evening. At the counter, I pulled the items out of the bag and proceeded to ring them up. As I lifted a package of marshmallows, Renee grabbed it at the other end. I glanced up at her with a curious expression.

“Wrong brand name?” I inquired.

“I don’t want to fight anymore,” she replied still clutching the package.

“I didn’t know we were,” I responded. “I was just waiting for you to come around.”

“I’m tired of not being friends,” she stated firmly. “I’ve been really foolish lately, haven’t I?”

“You’re crushing the marshmallows, Renee,” I commented.

She released the package. “Timothy, I don’t know what I was thinking. Aside from Olivia, I’ve never been closer to anyone. You saved my life.”

I sighed. “It’s not necessary to mention that--”

“Yes it is,” she interrupted. “If I didn’t think of everything you’ve done for me, I never would have realized how silly I was being.”

Renee took my hand.

“I want to be more than friends,” she continued, “but if I can’t, I want to be your close friend. I don’t want to lose you, so I’ll take you any way I can have you.”

“What about Mary Jane? Won’t it hurt you when we’re together?” I asked.

“Of course it’s going to hurt me,” Renee answered, “but it’s going to hurt no matter what. At least this way, I’m still near to you. I can talk to you. We can be...like we were before this mess started. Like that night we leaned against this counter and waited for the storm to end. We can be like that again.”

“Except there won’t be Karl ruining you life.”

“That’s right. I won’t have anything to be scared of anymore.”

“That puts my world together again,” I mentioned as I went on ringing up her groceries. “Can I walk you home?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s obvious, Timothy Reye,” Renee answered. “So I don’t have to carry the groceries by myself.”

I finished the transaction and stepped around the counter.

“May I hug you?” She inquired.

“Iowa told me hugging was a good thing, I figure I feel the same way,” I replied.

I held her for as long as she wanted. She stayed for awhile but pulled herself away after a moment had passed.

“Now come on, grocery boy,” Renee said. “I don’t want to take all night getting home.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I responded grabbing the sack.



I walked Renee home and gave her the groceries at her door.

“Are you wearing a costume tonight?” Renee asked.

“Sort of,” I answered. “I thought I’d come as a wandering vagrant.”

“You do that,” Renee responded. “You did that so well over the summer.”

I left her house and continued home. Mary Jane came running off the Seneca’s porch to meet me and leaped into my arms. She came with such force that it almost knocked me over.

“Whoa! How are you doing?” I inquired.

“I was sitting on the swing wondering when you were going to come,” she said squeezing me once more before letting go.

“Kind of chilly for sitting outside, ain’t it?”

“It’s not that bad under this jacket,” she replied. “Besides, Sally Seneca let me use a quilt to

wrap up in.”

“I was on my way home but I had to stop by Renee’s house along the way.”

“I know,” she stated in a serious tone. “I saw the two of you from the porch.”

“I was delivering groceries,” I explained.

“So I saw.” Mary Jane put her arm in mine. “Walk me back to the Seneca’s, sir?”



Iowa dropped by to pick Olivia, Mary Jane, and me up. We were trying to leave early enough to help set up at the Susan farm. Iowa was already in costume and was dressed as a cowboy. His choice of clothing was not that different from his usual wardrobe. Olivia came downstairs dressed as a princess. She wore a lacy white dress and a crown she made from wire and paper. Olivia certainly appeared angelic in her attire.

“My lady,” Iowa uttered bowing before her highness, “a carriage awaits ya’ outside.”

“Where’s your costume?” I asked Mary Jane.

“I’m wearing it,” she answered sounding shocked. “You mean to tell me you couldn’t tell?”

“I regret to say I couldn’t,” I responded. “What exactly are you?”

“I’m an accountant.”

“An accountant!?” I questioned surprised she chose such a theme.

“Uh-huh,” she replied grinning widely, “and I’m a’counting on you to spend the entire evening with me.”

“Oh, it’s a joke.”

“Maybe.”

“If it was, it was terrible!”

“Hey! I thought that up myself!” Mary Jane protested.

“Think harder next time,” I responded. “You keep telling bombs like that one, and people are

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going to think you're humor's as bad as mine."

"Actually, my sister's bringing my costume later to the activity, so you won't have to be around an accountant all night."



When we arrived at the Susan farm, we saw the general layout for the night. A few tables and benches had been moved around the area designated for dancing. The place would be later used for a bonfire. George Susan and a couple of other men were stringing lights up around the area.

Some women were making final preparations on their food inside the house. Olivia left to join the ladies and Iowa went to assist with the lights.

Mary Jane and I volunteered to collect some kindling for the fire. We made a few trips to the trees by the creek and back but decided we would find a better selection in the woods across the field. After grabbing several garbage bags to carry the kindling in, we went on our way.

The fall foliage was stunning in its brilliant blaze of reds, yellows, and oranges with dark brown limbs shooting jagged lines through them. When the wind blew, a shower of new leaves would descend from the trees onto the covered ground below. The woods had taken on a different scheme than the many shades of green that appeared that summer. The new colors made our trip an attractive adventure. No artist or photographer could ever capture the splendor of that scene. One had to be there to really take in its loveliness.

Upon our arrival, Mary Jane and I started a competition. We wanted to see who could fill his or her sacks the fastest. Of course the large fallen branches were favored items for bag stuffing if one could get by the fact that the limbs often had to be broken into pieces small enough for the bags. Another difficulty was that the sticks easily ripped holes in the sacks, so we had to be careful when placing them inside.

With the multitude of dry leaves on the ground, I chose to use them as filler between the sticks. Mary Jane found chopped logs and put them in her bag. Unfortunately, they gave her a heavy load and slowed her down immensely. Since the ground was cluttered with more fallen leaves than I would need for stuffing, I discovered an alternative use for a pile of numerous extras.

Mary Jane was too far behind dragging her bag to see me. With the time I had before her arrival, I searched around for an area where branches were plentiful. Eventually I found one that I knew Mary Jane would not pass up. I piled a bunch of leaves in the path she would have to take to retrieve the desired limbs. Then, I lay on my back and covered my body with them

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until nothing but the leaves could be seen. The smell under the pile was thick with the autumn aroma leaving me with no doubt where the season got its smell.

Unforeseen by me, Mary Jane left her heavy burden behind and carried on with a new bag. Also I did not realize that she would be running to catch up with me. All this I found out a little too late. Before I could react she sprinted up the path calling for me and tripped over my body ramming her knee into my stomach as she tumbled.

I yelped in pain.

“Is that you?” She asked removing the leaves.

I sat up gripping my aching stomach.

“What were you doing?” Mary Jane questioned.

“It was a cave in,” I replied pointing to the tree above. “All the leaves dropped at once and I collapsed under their weight. It was a leaf avalanche.”

“Yeah,” she remarked with disbelief.

“Would you believe that the leaves ambushed me and I was overcome?” I inquired.

“Uh-huh,” Mary Jane said. “They certainly did get you, didn’t they?”

“No, you did that,” I commented holding my suffering abdomen more intensely.

She brushed the leaves out of my hair. “I’m sorry. Are you going to be all right?”

“Maybe after some medical care. Perhaps I’ll live till morn...”

I stopped as I glanced up. Her face was so close that I could sense her breath against my cheek. We were frozen in silence and just stared at each other for a few seconds.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt this way before,” I commented.

“What way?” She inquired.

I did not know if she knew it, but her being that near was filling me with excited desires. I wanted to kiss her. I could imagine her lips on mine. But fear also built up in me. There was no telling how she would react if I went through with it. I was in a mental crisis. I wanted to pull away, yet I would have regretted not having taken advantage of that perfect opportunity.

“What’s wrong, Tim?” Mary Jane asked still remaining near me.

I opened my mouth but not one word came out. Her eyes gazing into mine somehow made my chest and arms tense and stole the voice from my throat. I figured both of us could hear my heart pounding.

I could not help myself any longer. I crept toward her fearful she would evade my attempt but at the same time captivated by the reward of my intentions. To my surprise, she did not move away from me. She shut her eyes as I gently touched my lips to hers. I pulled away as slowly as I had approached her. Her eyelids lifted and a soft smile appeared on her face.

“I hope you didn’t mind that,” I uttered experiencing some amount of guilt.

“Mind it?” Mary Jane questioned. “I’ve been waiting for you to do that.”

“I am overwhelmed with emotions right now,” I commented. “I’m pretty new to this stuff.”

“And I’m not?” Mary Jane responded chuckling. “This was my first kiss.”

“Really?” I inquired with subtle excitement.

“Well, it’s my first romantic kiss,” she replied.

“So...how was it?” I asked.

“That’s impossible to judge being that it’s my first,” Mary Jane answered, “but I could not have wished for a prettier place or want a better person to have that kiss with.”

“So, I was O.k.?”

“O.k. is definitely too weak of a word to describe the kiss you gave me.”

“That’s great!” I remarked. “I didn’t know I was that good. May I give you another?”

“I hope so,” she replied.

I leaned forward and kissed her again. This time it lasted much longer. Afterward, I collapsed onto my back on the ground. “I like kissing you.”

“I guess that makes two of us,” she responded appearing slightly dizzy. “However, we should return to the others before they think something’s happened to us.”

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We got up and brushed the leaves off each other. We then returned to the Susan farm grabbing our bags along the way.



The dance was set up among what was left of the dried standing corn stalks. Some straw bales had been added for extra seating because a lot of folks were attending the event. Mary Jane went to the house to put on her costume and I took a personal tour of the collection of Jack O'Lanterns placed around the area.

"Are you lost, city slicker?" Renee asked.

"City slicker?" I questioned turning toward her. "First 'grocery boy', now 'city slicker'? What are all these names about?" I suddenly noticed her outfit. "Wow! That's some cat costume!"

Renee was dressed in all black from her blouse to her leggings to her leather cowboy boots. She had cardboard ears attached to a headband and black pipe cleaners taped to her face to make whiskers.

"I've never found a feline so gorgeous before," I went on.

"Thank you," Renee said looking over her own attire. "Do you really like it that much?"

"Indeed I do, ma'am," I answered nodding my head.

"I've been trying to figure out a new nickname for you," Renee said removing a few fragments of dry leaves from my shirt. "It seems 'wandering vagrant' is not a suitable title anymore."

"Oh no!" I rebutted. "I've come to like that name. It's almost a title of affection now-a-days."

"'Wandering vagrant' doesn't sound overly affectionate to me."

"But you're not seeing the value of that name," I reasoned with her. "When I first came to this town, I didn't mean much more to most people than a dime-sized pebble buried three inches below the muck at the bottom of the creek. And now I, the wandering vagrant, am as significant to this town as the Pleasantville Road bridge that crosses that creek. Yup, anymore 'the wandering vagrant' is a pretty terrific someone to be."

"Timothy, if I never understood the change that happened to you since you came here, that

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overly descriptive explanation sure did do the trick,” Renee remarked.

“Glad I could help,” I stated grinning broadly. I then glanced around. “When does the music begin? I want to dance.”

“I hope you’ll save a few for me.”

“My! Don’t you look nice,” Iowa commented walking over to us.

“That’s very kind of you, Iowa,” Renee responded.

“I’m sorry, you’re simply a radiant kitty, but I was referring to Timothy,” Iowa said putting a hand on my shoulder. “Is this your costume, young man? I mean, what exactly are ya’?”

“I’m a wandering vagrant,” I replied.

“A wandering vagrant,” Iowa repeated rolling his eyes. “Ya’ sure have a good imagination there.”

I looked at his costume. “Hey! I wouldn’t talk, cowboy.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Iowa said adjusting his hat. “I’m traditionally a country boy. Tonight I’m trying out some of those western fashions.”

“I can’t tell the difference,” I remarked.

The music started and people began to enter the dance area.

Olivia stepped close enough to us where she was in sight of Iowa and sat down on a straw bale. Unfortunately, her chosen partner for the evening did not notice her and continued describing the differences between country and western styles to me. Iowa chatted away pointing to each article of clothing he was wearing. Finally, Renee put her hands on either side of his face and directed Iowa’s immediate view to Olivia who pretended not to see what was going on.

“Someone’s waiting for you to ask her to dance,” Renee spoke as she did it.

“Oh, I’m in trouble,” Iowa uttered quietly. He lowered his head. “I’ll talk to y’all later.” He strolled over to Olivia and asked for a dance.

“They sure are a marvelous couple,” Renee commented watching them step into the crowd.

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“Yeah, I foresee good things in their relationship,” I said in agreement.

“There aren’t that many wall flowers sitting around tonight,” Renee commented. “It seems like most of the young ladies have already been asked to dance.”

“That’s true. Aside from the women in the house, you’re the only lady not dancing.”

“I don’t have to be the only one, do I?” She inquired. “I mean, I don’t have a jacket handy and a dance might take the chill of the night away.”

“So it would,” I replied bowing before her. “Dear charming young lady, may I have this dance?”

Renee gave me her hand and I lead her to the others. We danced several times together until Fraun came over to cut in. He was completely covered in aluminum foil and had mirrors tied to his front and back.

“O.k., the two of you have been together long enough this evening,” Fraun complained.

“And what exactly are you supposed to be?” I asked him.

“I’m your reflection,” Fraun answered pointing to my image in his mirror, “and what are you?”

“I’m an average teenager,” I replied.

“That costume sure didn’t take much thought,” he smartly remarked.

“Listen, metal man,” I said grabbing his aluminum sleeve. “I’ll let you dance with Renee only because she’ll be able to rely on your mirror to give her something attractive to look at.”

“Oh, that’s clever,” Fraun sarcastically commented as I walked away.

“Tim!” Renee protested. “Fraun, you robotic weirdo! I’ll dance once with you but that’s all!”

As I went to sit on a straw bale, I caught a glimpse of Jack and Barbara who were also twirling around the dance area. Jack was done up in his football gear and Barbara in her cheerleading uniform.

“Surely months of planning went into those choices,” I mumbled to myself. I almost burst out laughing at my own cynical remark, but I remembered that I did not even dress up at all.

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Olivia and Renee came over after awhile and sat on either side of me grabbing my arms.

“What going on?” I asked them as they stared into the crowd.

“Iowa and Fraun were called away from us to move a picnic table,” Renee replied.

“We didn’t want to appear alone and fall prey to Wilbur since he’s roaming around,” Olivia added.

“Now you girls should give that guy a chance. You two might do well by him,” I told them trying to locate Wilbur myself. “After all, he is the deputy of this town.”

The two of them gave me a repulsive glare and I reconsidered.

“Well,” I spoke trying to salvage my words, “then again, maybe he doesn’t deserve a chance. And, maybe I should just keep my mouth shut.”

The rest of the gang soon joined our threesome. Fraun brought some refreshments with him and was willing to share. We graciously took his offerings until there was nothing more to give. So, we started to poke fun at Fraun’s aluminum garb some more, except Renee who was using his mirror to fix her hair.

Suddenly, Fraun’s attire lit up so brightly that we had to turn our heads away. The source of the light came from Mary Jane who had come over to us with her sister. Mary Jane was wearing a clown outfit with a few dozen lit flashlights pointing directly in front of her.

“Glowie the clown!” I exclaimed in amusement. “That’s an ingenious idea!”

“I must give credit where it is due,” Mary Jane stated gesturing to her sister. “Therese designed it.”

We applauded Therese’s efforts, which she accepted with a curtsy.

“This design was my masterpiece, so I didn’t have time to make my own costume,” Therese commented.

“I’ve never danced with a clown before,” I admitted to Mary Jane. “I’d like to give it a try.”

“Sure,” Mary Jane responded. “Just don’t grab my rubber nose. I think it might fall off.”

We joined the other dancers who were shielding their eyes from the illumination of Mary Jane’s suit.

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“I feel like I’m in a spotlight,” I commented squinting at her.

“I can’t help it. I’m all aglow over you,” she said squeezing my hand.



When everyone was tuckered out, the dance area was stacked with the kindling and the bonfire was started. Those who still had an appetite roasted hotdogs and marshmallows. Mary Jane took the time to teach me the way to roast a marshmallow evenly without letting it fall into the fire.

For those who were not fond of roasting snacks, there were powdered donuts and cookies available along with warm cider to wash it all down with.

I enjoyed listening to the folks carrying on about the harvest and the weather. It seems there were rumors that winter would be coming early that year.

I heard someone ask how Jack O’Lanterns came into existence. The question was passed around to several people but no one had an answer.

“Ask Michael O’Brien!” A voice interjected from the crowd. “He’s just full of useless information!”

The people who gained enough curiosity to seek his response finally located Michael, the learned barber.

“Aye, I can tell ye the story of the Jack O’Lantern,” Michael declared.

Everyone sat down near him and patiently waited for Mr. O’Brien to continue. Michael, in the meantime, took a drink of his cider and sampled a donut from his plate. “Jack O’Lanterns come from an old Irish custom, which is only appropriate for a cherished tradition. Of course, they were not always pumpkins. Turnips were the choice in the homeland. It was hollowed-out and a candle was placed inside.”

“There’s a fire in the corn!” Someone yelled standing up.

Instantly, eyes were directed at the flickers of orange and yellow in the corn stalks--flickers that were only the reflections of the bonfire in Fraun’s costume.

“It’s only Fraun!” Jack called out.

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Embarrassed, Fraun found a seat further away from the flames.

“I guess there’ll be no need in fetching Bob Farthing then,” Michael commented relaxing again.

“Do you know why we call the pumpkins Jack O’Lanterns?” Mary Jane inquired.

“Why, certainly I do, lass,” Mr. O’Brien answered taking another sip of cider. “As legend goes there was once a clever man named Jack who almost lost his soul to the Devil. But, because Jack was so crafty, he tricked the old demon out of it. When Jack finally died, he was too evil to be accepted into Heaven and the Devil wanted nothing more to do with him. Jack had to wander alone forever in outer darkness with only a glowing coal in a turnip to light his way.”

“That’s the largest load of bunk I ever heard,” Mr. Thompson bluntly remarked.

“Are ye calling me a liar?!” Michael questioned suddenly angered by the insinuation.

Mr. Thompson smirked. “I never said that word at all, but if the shoe fits--”

“How dare you!” Michael exclaimed. “If you’re so smart, why don’t you tell them how the Jack O’Lantern came about?”

“Very well,” Mr. Thompson replied. “If the truth be known, the carved faces in the pumpkins have a much more darker history.”

A hush came into the audience as Mr. Thompson began his story. He glared at all of us for a moment in silence as the light from the flames flickered upon his face. This intensified the feeling in the air.

“It was definitely a heathen ritual performed by blood thirsty savages,” Mr. Thompson began slowly in a low coarse tone. “It took place hundreds of years ago in the darkest corners of the world--beyond the eyes of civilized men.

“These merciless barbarians would kidnap weary travelers during the night and take them miles and miles from their homelands. They would take their prisoners back to their beastly tribes in places too unspeakable to mention. There these ferocious human brutes would throw their victims into primitive cages and torture them throughout the year until All Hallows’ Eve. Then these savages would remove the heads of those suffering captives and throw the heads into a great fire not unlike the one here tonight.”

“Wha-What about their bodies?” A youngster asked in a shaky voice.

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“Oh yes, the bodies,” Mr. Thompson went on. “That’s the worst part of it. They would hollow pumpkins and carve horrid disfigured faces upon them, and place candles in them to make the faces glow terror into the night. Then, they would set the bodies up in chairs and place the pumpkins upon their shoulders where the heads would have been. They’d chant and they’d scream to welcome the spirits to enter the bodies and celebrate their festival of the dead.”

Everyone sat frozen in silence as Mr. Thompson paused for a long time. He leaned back and drew in a deep breath. Coming forward he bulged his eyes wide and let out a frightening growl which took us all by surprise. If his story was not enough to scare us, his roar sure did.

“That story is wicked and is a total falsehood,” Michael O’Brien commented.

“Well, that may be true,” Mr. Thompson said turning to him, “but it sure was a lot more horrifying than yours. And that’s what a good ghost story’s all about!”

“I was not telling a ghost story,” Michael argued.

“You should be!” Mr. Thompson responded. “After all, this is Halloween.”

“Alright! Enough of you two bickering!” Mayor Smythe shouted walking into the crowd. “Remember this is a holiday and we’re gonna’ start bobbing for apples at the barn. Come on folks!”



The barn was much warmer than the cold night air, which made a lot of people decide bobbing for apples was definitely the attraction to attend.

I had never bobbed for apples before, and I found the whole experience rather slick to deal with. When it came my turn, many of the apples in the large metal washtub were already gone which made the task of seizing one more difficult. This was because the few that were floating around in the water had more room to escape being bitten. Still, I was determined in my pursuit to clamp my teeth in one of them.

Hovering just over the surface of the water, I attacked whatever apples were near my mouth. Yet as I would close in on my targets, they would float away or duck under the water. Patiently, I herded the fruit around the washtub until I trapped one against the side and came up victorious with the apple clenched in my teeth. Iowa grabbed my hand and raised it into the air cheering for my heroic achievement.

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The activity pretty much ended at the barn and everyone decided to go on to their homes.

Olivia and I stayed up for quite awhile in my bedroom as I told her about my first kiss with Mary Jane. Because I was happy, Olivia was satisfied with the event, but my sister- like friend wanted to know more about Mary Jane since she was going to take such a significant role in my life. So, we went on for a couple hours talking about Mary Jane and the things the two of us did together. By the end of our conversation Olivia gave me her approval and went to bed.

I glanced out the window and gazed at the empty field behind the house and thought about the way I used to feel when I first came to the Seneca home. It seemed that such an atmosphere as the Seneca family and Pleasantville emanated was only a temporary haven for me then. By the time Halloween rolled around, the whole blessing was a permanent part of my life.

There were many reasons to be greatly pleased by what the people of Pleasantville had done for me. It made it much easier to get a long relaxing sleep that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“The Holiday Season”

I don't think I had ever eaten as much in one sitting than I did with the Senecas on Thanksgiving Day. What a feast! The food was so plentiful that Sally could not find space for it all on the dining room table. We not only had enough for ourselves but also Mr. Millington. He finished four enormous servings before retiring to the couch for a nap.

It was such a grand atmosphere. I thought a holiday could not be celebrated any better until I experienced Christmas in Pleasantville.



The snow came early that year and blanketed the town in a layer of white, but this did not deter anyone from their holiday traditions.

Sally and Olivia, who had been complaining about the cold, had started finding excuses to go out in it. This was not so they could frolic in the snow, but rather so they could run secret errands and sneak packages into the house. Even Stephen and I would make our own “special” trips occasionally.

In our free time, Iowa, Mary Jane and I volunteered our services to a committee that decorated the town streets. We were assigned to a group who placed the strands of lights around the trees at the courthouse and put wreaths on the lampposts. It was freezing outside but we had a fun time doing it. As the final strand of lights was hung at the courthouse, Iowa instigated a snowball fight with another group of the decorating committee passing on the sidewalk.

“Don't let anyone get away without being hit!” Iowa shouted leading our group to conquest.



Mr. Millington must have known every carol. As he displayed his windows with Christmas scenes he would carry on singing and whistling holiday tunes one right after the other.

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Whenever he came to one I knew, I would join in with him but only for the first verse and the chorus. I did not know much more of the songs than that, and I did not think Mr. Millington did either. He seemed to croon away quietly sometimes but come back boldly when he would get to the chorus.

Olivia and Sally dropped by once or twice to pick up ingredients for their baking recipes. When I would come home, the house would be filled with the aroma of Christmas goodies being made. I enjoyed the privilege of being the ladies' official taste tester, and became a big fan of Olivia's shortbread cookies.



As the holiday drew closer the evening came to trim the Christmas tree. This was an important tradition with the Seneca family. Some of the tree ornaments had been passed down through several generations of Senecas. Some pieces were over a hundred years old. Naturally, the tree had to be a very special selection to display these treasures.

A fine specimen grew in the woods behind the farm. Stephen, Iowa and I retrieved it and brought it into the house. The winds were unfriendly and cold that night, so we were pleased that hot chocolate was waiting for us when we returned.

I grasped my frozen hands around the warm mug and let the steam of the hot liquid rise into my face. Meanwhile, my eyes wandered to the ladies who were making strings of popcorn and cranberries.

"Is there gonna' be anything left to eat?" I asked looking at the huge bowls they were taking the edibles from.

"We'll see," Olivia replied pulling a piece of popcorn along the string.

"Here, have some cookies," Iowa said passing me some from his stash. "It goes better with cocoa than popcorn."

Mary Jane analyzed a few cranberries before handing them to Sally. "This sure beats the store-bought stuff we put on the tree at my house."

"I'm fond of them myself," Sally responded. "No beads or foil is suitable enough for our antique ornaments. Nothing modern...except the lights."

"We'd still be using candles if they weren't such a hazard," Stephen said tossing a log onto the fire. "The flames are best left burning here in the fireplace."

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“Do you want to start putting up the ornaments?” Mary Jane asked me.

“Sure,” I replied and pulled a box over to the tree.

We began taking out the prettiest decorations and placing them on the front of the tree.

“Spread them around a little,” Sally said. “It makes the tree look a lot fuller when you place the ornaments all around it.”

“I’ve always liked the way we decorate our trees,” Olivia remarked. “It’s like time doesn’t change it. Generation after generation, it’s still the same custom.”

“That’s similar to the way I feel about my family,” Iowa spoke. “We Johnsons don’t just face the future head on, but we also look back once in awhile to remember where we came from.”

“That’s fine for you I guess,” I told Iowa. “My past isn’t as enjoyable to reflect on. There’s been too much pain in it.”

“In your case I understand, but we’ll make some better times for you to reminisce about,” Sally commented.

“You guys have been wonderful and you’ve just made Halloween a fine memory,” I responded. “I don’t recall ever having as much fun before, except maybe the Friday Night Barn Dances...oh, and Independence Day.”

Iowa slapped his knee. “You see! He’s already collecting some good memories.”

“Maybe I am,” I said cheering up. “Perhaps my troubles are further away than I thought.”

“That’s prob’ly true,” Iowa said standing up and grabbing a bulb from the box. “People go on and on worrying about problems in their past, and they forget how much time has gone by since. Of course, some people hold onto their problems like an old crutch. They’re very gloomy people.”

“O.k. Iowa,” I said grabbing his shoulder. “I’ll try not to be so depressed anymore.”

“Grand,” he replied finding a spot to hang his bulb.

I smirked. “Of course, I know a person who is a pillar of confidence for others but falls to pieces when his own life gets tense.”

Iowa glanced up at me. “I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t know who you’re referring to.”

“If you recalled the State Fair, you’d know,” I commented.

“Now boys,” Sally chastised, “I’d like you two to remember the season and the spirit you’re supposed to be feeling because of it.”

“Oh, I’m full of it,” Iowa responded. “Call me Mr. Christmas.”

Sally glanced at me.

“I couldn’t be more jolly,” I commented. “Does anyone want to sing a carol?”



I noticed that there was something particularly different about the Pleasantvillians’ way of preparing for the holidays from that of some other small towns. Pleasantville did not put up bows and ribbons in hopes of making financial success from the tourists. The town’s people were not interested in the typical travelers with cameras in hand searching for Christmas in the country. The few tourists who actually came were greatly disappointed by Pleasantville’s lack of quaint antique shops, gift stores, and popular fast-food restaurants.

One afternoon while I was working at the store, an out-of-town family stormed into the building. Apparently, they had been driving for quite awhile and were exhausted. The wife was trying to control three yelling children who were running around the room. The father was rather angry that he took a day off to travel to Pleasantville just to find nothing like what he was looking for.

“Who said there would be?” Mr. Millington inquired of him.

“I just came all this way from the interstate only to find this tiny hick town has nothing going on!” The father declared in frustration. “This wasn’t what we expected at all! Where are the carriages and the carolers dressed in old-fashioned clothing?”

“Well, let me think,” Mr. Millington replied glancing at the frosted window. “I’d say the last carriage to go down that street happened nearly eighty years ago and our clothing store next door provides us with the latest styles. As for the singers, the last time we had anybody caroling was the year of that freak blizzard. It hit so hard one night that it froze them rock solid in their tracks. That would be about Christmas Eve 1962.”

“Cool!” One of the youngsters exclaimed running over to the counter. “Did they die?”

“No, they didn’t,” Mr. Millington answered. “When the snow melted that spring, it thawed

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that little band of singers. Why, they even went on caroling until someone told them it was almost Easter.”

Mr. Millington’s sarcasm was probably his way of telling the tourists, “if you’re gonna’ be ridiculous about how we should act around the holidays, I’ll provide you with a ridiculous story in reply.”

The father gritted his teeth at the remarks and herded his family out the door. Mr. Millington watched them disappear from the window then glanced at me.

“We get ‘em every year,” he commented walking to the back of the store. He took off his apron and sat down at the checkerboard. “Come on over and join me in a game.”

“Those people annoy ya’?” I asked going over to him.

“I’m afraid so,” he replied. “Those out-of-towners are always expecting some holiday performance as if we lived in primitive times.”

“Maybe they just want to see something different,” I suggested cheerfully. “It could be that there’s something missing in their lives that they hope they’ll find here.”

“Maybe they should be looking some place else,” Mr. Millington grumbled.

“If that’s the way ya’ feel, sir, why didn’t ya’ say the same thing when I arrived last summer?”

“Well...” he uttered moving a checker. “It wasn’t the same with you, kid. I knew inside that I had to be there for ya’...just like Sally probably felt the night she found ya’ at the sheriff’s office.”

“What do ya’ mean?” I inquired.

“It’s hard to explain, kid. Some folks, like that family, come here to see a show...not the real people of our town. Ya’ needed us, and some of us needed you.

“Take me for example. You’ve been very helpful around the store, and ya’ enjoy fishing with me. All in all, you’re a pretty good fella in my book. To sum it up, I like your company. You’re kind’a like the son I never had. Margerie would have adored ya’.”

“I know my parents would have thought a lot of you, sir,” I responded. “It’s too bad ya’ couldn’t have known them. They were really terrific. ‘Best people you’d ever meet.”

“It’s too bad your parents didn’t live right here in Pleasantville,” Mr. Millington commented.

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“I’d say they would have fit in just fine. Concerning their unfortunate fate all those years ago, we all could have saved ya’ from the trouble of your abusive foster home. I know of several families off hand that would have taken ya’ in immediately...even myself.”

That was a simple but touching statement he made. I do not even think Mr. Millington knew how deeply his words reached into me. I wanted to tell him how I felt about it, but I had to consider the environment. We were just two men playing checkers over a barrel in the back of a general store. Tears were out-of-place and sentiment was to be left at a shallow level. So I grinned while ignoring the sensation inside and, to distract Mr. Millington, I jumped one of his pieces. The game continued and nothing further was mentioned about it.



On December 24th., Mr. Millington closed his store at noon. He planned to spend the rest of the afternoon practicing with his barbershop quartet on a special number they were going to perform at the Christmas Eve Sociable that night.

I decided to perform some volunteer goodwill with the free time I had. I started by shoveling the sidewalk outside the Seneca’s house. Seeing that the neighbor’s walk also needed clearing, I moved on. Eventually, I found myself making my way to the end of the street.

Snow had started to fall as I went along the way, and it started to come down more heavily as time went on. Eventually, I began to wonder if it was defeating my purpose of clearing the sidewalks. I turned around and in despair I saw that the snow was doing a fine job of covering what I had already uncovered.

Renee, whose house was just across the road from me, called out my name from her front door.

“Why don’t you come across the street and shovel our sidewalk?!” She yelled out.

I dumped the load of snow off my shovel. “It wouldn’t do ya’ any good! I can’t keep up with the weather!”

“Let me offer you something hot to drink!” She called out.

I took another glance up the street while realizing no one would know the good deed I had done. Since I was too tired to redo the work, I lifted the shovel over my shoulder and walked across the street to Renee’s house.

There was a warm blaze in her fireplace and I quickly stepped over to it.

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“Who built the fire?” I asked as Renee hung my coat in the closet.

“I did,” she replied. “I obviously have many talents you don’t know about.”

“Yeah, ya’ sure are right about that one,” I commented. “I still have a lot to learn about you.”

“I’ll be back with some hot chocolate,” she responded going into the kitchen.

I sat down on the couch and glanced through the bay window at the falling snow. The clouds had thickened causing the sky to darken.

“Looks like evening is gonna’ come early today,” I remarked out loud.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Renee called back. “It’s winter and the days are shorter. We just had the solstice a couple days ago.”

“I was referring to the storm.”

“I wasn’t,” she commented coming into the room with one cup in her hand. “This should warm ya’ up,” she said handing it to me.

“Aren’t ya’ gonna’ have any?” I asked.

“Oh no, I can’t,” she replied stepping over to the piano.

I examined the liquid. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“Not at all,” she answered chuckling. “I’m just going to give you your Christmas present a little early.”

“Great! Where is it?”

She opened the piano bench and pulled out a familiar document from inside. It was the song she wrote for me while I was away at the teen facility. I recalled the night Renee told me about it and mentioned she would never show it to me.

Renee carefully placed it above the old keys of her piano and sat down.

“Actually, I’m a bit nervous,” she admitted.

“There’s no need to be. I’m not a critic.”

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“Well, this is a very personal song I wrote for you,” Renee commented. “It sounds pretty when I play it by myself but I’ll probably mess it up with you here.”

“Olivia taught me a method for dealing with nervousness. She told me to close my eyes and pretend no one is around.”

“Timothy, I can’t close my eyes,” Renee declared glancing at me. “I won’t be able to see the words.”

“O.k., try just staring at the lyrics while pretending you’re the only one here,” I suggested.

“I’ll try,” she responded turning back to the piano.

Renee lowered her head and paused for a moment. I remained as silent as I could so she could focus on her song. She lifted her eyes to the sheet of lyrics and rested her hands on the keys. She began to play.

The introduction was gentle and soothing--a melody held together with a fragile elegance uncommon to anything I had heard before. It captured my attention with each note. Then she complimented the tender sounds with her soft innocent voice. I was swept away by the loveliness of the piece and how the music emphasized the longing words she intoned with such genuine emotion. I knew she meant every word she had written, and I understood why it was so hard for her to share it with me.

When Renee finished she closed the cover over the keys and faced me. “What did you think?”

I tried to compose in my head a phrase that would best describe my feelings for her music, but I could not come up with a proper description.

“I wish I could tell ya’ what I thought of your song, but words fail me,” I confessed. “I can tell you how it affected me. Renee, your music expressed feelings for me that would be impossible to bring across in any other way. It was magnificent!”

“No,” she replied blushing.

“You’re better than me. That’s for certain,” I remarked.

Renee stood up from the piano and picked up the song lyrics.

“You haven’t touched your drink,” she commented sitting down on the couch beside me. “It’s going to get cold.”

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“I’m sorry. I forgot all about it listening to your music. I really liked it.”

As I took a sip of the cooling cocoa, Renee placed the paper into my free hand.

“I want you to have it,” she announced.

“Oh no, Renee!” I responded returning it to her. “This is an original. I can’t take this from you.”

“Timothy, I wrote this song for you and now I’m giving it to you as a Christmas present,” she declared refusing to take the document. “And with it comes this promise; just like the words of my song, you’ve been my support, my hero, and my inspiration. I give you this song as a token of a promise that our friendship will be an eternal one.”

I stopped trying to hand it to her and glanced at the words on the paper. “With that said, there’s no way I’d give this song back.”



About seven o’clock that night, we all met at the Church. I observed the descending snowflakes in the field where earlier that summer the gang and I had played tag. I could hardly see the trees bordering the far side of the field due to the darkness and the ornamented frozen particles in the air.

Iowa’s truck slid in a parking space next to Stephen’s. He got out dressed in his duster and walked over to me nearly slipping on the ice as he came.

“Cold enough for ya’?” He asked with puffs of breath clouding his face.

“Not really,” I replied. “If you’d wear something more suitable for the weather, you wouldn’t be cold either.”

“Oh, being a smart guy tonight are ya’?”

“Actually, I’m just appreciating the view,” I commented looking at the field.

“The seasons sure change things, don’t they?”

“I remember us playing tag there. I also recall Jack and you tricking me into snipe hunting that same night.”

“Ya’ didn’t take that too hard did ya’?” Iowa inquired.

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“No, I didn’t,” I answered. “As a matter of fact, I had fun that evening. I’ve enjoyed about every evening I’ve had in this town since. Sometimes it still seems all too good to be true.”

“Well, it is true and you’re stuck with us,” Iowa responded. “Now, let’s get inside before I freeze to death.”

We went into the crowded church. Many conversations filled the room as the people seated themselves for the opening activities.

“I got a letter from Pete yesterday,” I mentioned to Iowa as we stepped through the door.

“How is our friend from the city doing?”

“As well as can be expected, I guess,” I answered dispiritedly.

“What’s with the gloom?” Iowa asked as we sat down with the Senecas.

“It’s just that I feel sort of selfish,” I replied receiving a puzzled expression from Iowa. “Pete ain’t gonna’ have a Christmas like us. We’re all gonna’ wake up tomorrow and have a wonderful holiday. What’s Pete gonna’ be doing? I know where his thoughts are. They’re right here in Pleasantville with us...but he ain’t.”

“Listen, I’ve got an idea,” Iowa said placing his arm around my shoulder. “Why don’t we give Pete another visit the day after Christmas. We’ll bring Olivia and Mary Jane along. We’ll even bring Renee if you’d like. Pete hasn’t met her yet. I’m sure everyone will like that.”

“Pete sure could use the company,” Olivia said overhearing us.

“Well, that certainly may help some,” I remarked coming out of my sadness.

“Hi!” Mary Jane greeted us plopping down beside me. “It’s about time you guys got here. I had to listen to my dad and uncle talk shop. Boooooorrrrinng! Did you guys take the scenic route or what?”

“No,” I replied. “Iowa and I were just shooting-the-breeze.”

“Well, shoot it after I find you,” Mary Jane stated. “I don’t think I can stand another conversation about wood screws again.”

“May I have your attention folks!” Sheriff Frazey called out over the microphone. “Can I get

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everyone's attention, please?! Thank you...I trust no one had any problems on the roads tonight getting out here to the church. If ya' had any accidents, however, feel free to see me later on...anyway, here's Mayor Smythe to begin the presentation."

Applause followed as the Mayor came up to the microphone.

"Thanks y'all and Merry Christmas!" He began speaking. "It is so pleasing to see such a grand turn out for the Pleasantville Christmas Eve Sociable tonight. We're gonna' have us a few activities tonight starting with a couple of performances...some of them by people who don't even know their gonna' perform tonight. But let me tell ya'...Once folks around this town hear that someone has talent, that person's gigs are already lined up before they even know it. Also, for ya' children and for ya' adults who never lost your childhood hopes, rest assured we'll have y'all safely tucked into bed before Santa makes his visits tonight. Now to start things off, let me present Angelina McNeal and our own barbershop quartet."

I had heard Angelina sing with Mr. Millington and the boys from Jesse's on Halloween, and she was really something to listen to. So I knew the crowd was in for a treat. The quartet singers were dressed in dark trousers, white shirts, and black bow ties. Miss McNeal came up front wearing a stylish red and green dress.

They sang their first carol with the vocal quality that I had expected, and the selections that followed were just as easy on the ears.

"They really sound great together, don't ya' think?" I inquired of Iowa while enjoying the music.

"I don't think they would have sang together if they didn't," Iowa replied.

Before performing their last piece, Angelina made a small announcement. "A couple months ago, I recall a handsome young gentleman complimenting my singing voice. I appreciated that comment a lot and have often reminisced about that memory. I'd like to dedicate this last carol to him."

I gulped. I thought to myself, "Could she be referring to me?"

"Was she looking at you when she said that?" Iowa asked in surprise.

"I don't want to know," I uttered.

"But I swear she was staring straight at ya'," Iowa went on.

"Iowa, life is calm and fine right now," I confidentially told him while trying to cut him off.

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“Renee and I are friends, Mary Jane and I are just great, and I don’t want to rock the boat. So let’s not make this an issue, alright?”

“Alright,” Iowa answered defensively. “Don’t get yourself all uptight. Sorry I mentioned it.”

Following the quartet, Alexander Johnson opened the scriptures and told the Christmas story. I was of course familiar with the birth of Jesus, the three wise men, and all the rest of the story, but I had never heard the actual tale told from the scriptures. As a result, thoughts crept into my mind that I had never contemplated.

I had never read the scriptures in my life nor had I known much more about Heavenly Father or any of his works except what I heard from others. How could I have expected God to help me in my life if I hardly knew anything about Him? It could be that He had given me opportunities to avoid the pain in my past, but I did not recognize them because I did not recognize God. Perhaps Heavenly Father had indeed tried years ago to help me, but I was not close enough to Him to understand.

“If only I knew back then what I know now,” I muttered.

“What?” Iowa asked startled. He had been dozing off.

“Nothing,” I responded.

When Alexander finished, Mayor Smythe commended him for an exceptional reading of the birth of Christ.

“That’s an ageless story that we should all keep in our hearts tonight and throughout the year,” the Mayor added. “I just want to let y’all know that I’ve traveled a few places in my life, and I’ve seen some of the big cities too...New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Zanesville...It always feels nice to come home. It’s grand to be among ya’ special folks around this time of the season. You’d be surprised how rare it is to find a place anything like this town.

“Well, in a minute where gonna’ serve y’all some refreshments, give some gifts to the kids, and leave y’all to socializing. But, before we end our presentation tonight, I have a surprise for everyone. It has come to my attention that the newest member of our community has quite a gift for the piano.”

“Are they talking about me?” I inquired.

“They sure are,” Olivia replied.

The Mayor went on uninterrupted. “Now, if we can give him some enthusiastic clapping,

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maybe he'll try his hand on this instrument right behind me.”

With the insistence of the audience, I raised out of my seat and walked to the piano. Sitting down on the bench I questioned to myself, “How do I get into these situations?”

When the crowd quieted down, I began to play an instrumental of “The First Noel.” It was not much of anything for me to be proud of. It was a fairly simple rendition, but when I played the last note, the audience showed me they thought more of it than I did. I decided to continue by playing “Silent Night”, but as I made my way through the introduction I halted.

Standing up before the crowd I called out, “It grieves me to know that among you folks is a young lady with a remarkable voice that has not yet been heard. It would be a shame for me to play this carol without her singing to it. Would Renee Howell please join me up here?”

Renee reluctantly rose from her seat and walked over to the piano glaring at me.

“Why are you doing this to me?” She whispered upon arrival.

“Ya’ possess a marvelous voice,” I answered. “I want these people to hear it.”

“What makes you think I want them to?” Renee questioned further.

“Ya’ mentioned once that ya’ wanted to be a singer like Angelina McNeal someday. Why not make tonight that someday?”

“I don’t know, Timothy,” Renee uttered staring at me with fearful eyes.

“Are you two gonna’ perform or what?!” Someone cried out from the crowd.

“Your audience is waiting, Renee,” I commented sitting down at the piano bench.

It took Renee a few more seconds before courageously making her decision to sing. With her hand she motioned me to begin. I cracked my knuckles and played the introduction. She started in a faint voice, so I pressed the keys softly for her voice to be heard. Several times she turned to me wearing an uneasy expression.

“Close your eyes,” I mouthed to her hoping she would remember the method I taught her earlier.

Recognizing what I was saying she closed her eyes. The second verse of the song was something to behold. Renee crooned away the sweet carol with her lovely tones bursting through her timidity. I watched her proudly because I was the one who persuaded Renee to

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present her talent to these folks. I felt they knew her well, but they did not know her well enough.

Renee's singing went over favorably with the audience and she received numerous compliments through the remainder of the evening about it.

As for myself, I spent the rest of the evening enjoying the company of my new family and many friends while trying to ignore the unavoidable glances Angelina was making at me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Christmas”



I awoke the next morning completely engulfed in the insulation of the covers on my bed. Each blanket was wrapped around my body tightly and I appeared somewhat like a multi-colored croissant on a spread white napkin.

It was Christmas morning. It was not any usual dawn for me. I had not thought much of Christmas in years past. The holiday could be rather discouraging when I saw the foster families treating their little ones to a fairytale wonderland while I stood off in the distance. I would receive gifts, but I would not receive the emotions the parents showed to their real children. Although the parents did their best, sometimes, to make me a part of the celebration, there was always a void that could not be bridged between the foster parents and me. That gap would show itself so clear at that time of year. However, that void never came to mind as Christmas approached with the Senecas, and it certainly was not noticeable that morning.

In my mind I just knew it was going to be a fantastic day, so I threw off my covers anxious to get it started. Suddenly, I pulled them back over me because it was chillier out there than I expected. Determined to get on with my day, I wrapped the covers around me and got out of bed. The wooden floor might as well have been made of ice that morning because it was freezing to the touch. This made it all the more comforting to slide my feet into the warmth of my slippers. I dropped the blankets and hurriedly put on my robe.

I stepped out of my room and walked toward the stairs. As I passed Olivia’s room, I saw my sister inside preening at her mirror.

“Must ya’ primp this morning?” I asked. “It’s Christmas! It doesn’t matter what ya’ look like today.”

“There is always a need to look presentable,” Olivia retorted glancing at me through the mirror. “We’re visiting my grandparents today. You sure look like you could use a little primping yourself.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get right to it,” I sarcastically remarked leaving her door to go downstairs.

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Descending to the living room, I saw Sally covered in a large bulky quilt on the couch.

“You’re shivering, dear,” Sally commented with concern. “Come and join me under this quilt.”

As cold as I was, I did not hesitate to accept her offer. I plopped on the sofa at Sally’s side and she wrapped her arms around me laying the quilt over me. It was a much more desirable temperature under the blanket than that of the house.

Sally squeezed me to her. “Our first Christmas with you,” she said softly. “Have I told you how happy we are to have you in our family?”

“About a thousand times I guess,” I replied, “and I cherish hearing it every time. When do we get to open presents?”

“Excited are you?” Sally asked kissing my head. “As soon as Stephen gets a fire going and Olivia comes down to join us.”

“Olivia!” I whined. “She’s still getting ready. At her speed, we won’t be opening gifts ‘til New Year’s.”

“It won’t be too long, dear,” Sally declared. “My daughter’s probably only taking care of the essentials.”

“Sure, take her side,” I complained. “She’s had a zillion Christmases with you guys and this is my first. Ya’d think she’d hurry because of that.”

“Never rush a lady whose getting ready for the day. The best results always take a little time.”

“Ya’ mean like if ya’ want supper quick, ya’ get beans and hotdogs. But, if ya’ want steak and potatoes, it’ll take a bit longer.”

“Something like that,” Sally responded squeezing me again.

Stephen brought in some wood and laid the load by the fireplace.

“Don’t worry,” he said glancing at us. “Ya’ won’t be freezing much longer.”

“Wonderful!” Sally exclaimed. “But, if it’s all the same to you, we’ll stay under here in the meantime.”

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“Ya’ might as well get used to it. Especially you, son,” Stephen commented. “After all, You and Olivia got that sleigh ride tonight. It’s gonna’ be a lot colder this evening.”

“I’ll take that into consideration, sir, but for now I’m staying where it’s warm,” I responded tucking my feet under the quilt.

Olivia wandered downstairs once she heard the fire crackling. Sally decided it was time to distribute the presents. I received a couple of shirts, some jeans, a coat, and a rather handsome bolo tie. When Olivia gave me her gift, I found the contents rather odd. I opened it and saw a notebook binder, pencils, and a pack of paper.

“My school supplies haven’t run out have they? Are ya’ expecting me to study over winter break?” I inquired of her.

“No, Silly,” Olivia replied. “One time you told me and the gang that you wanted to be a story writer. As I recall, someone suggested you writing about us. I figured it’s time you got started.”

“Oh my! I don’t know if I remember everything,” I admitted.

“Just the highlights then. No one wants to read a whole book about us,” Olivia responded.

“What a darling idea,” Sally remarked.

“Whatever,” I said setting the present with my other gifts. “I’ll see what comes to mind.”



Later that morning we traveled out of town to visit Sally’s parents. They lived at a large farm a few hours away. As we walked in, the smell of turkey and ham overwhelmed our senses and my stomach responded immediately with a growl. None of us ate breakfast that morning out of anticipation that dinner was going to be more than we could handle.

Olivia’s grandmother rushed into the room wiping her hands on a cloth. She exclaimed, “I know I have a new child around here! Where’s my grandson?!”

“Here he is,” Sally answered presenting me to her.

The elderly lady embraced me with amazing strength that could compete with Sally’s.

“Oh, look at you!” Sally’s mother declared. “Sally, do you feed this young boy? Come with me. I’ll make you a small snack in the kitchen.”

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On the way out of the room, I met Olivia's grandfather who had just entered through the doorway. "The banana cream pie sure is ripe for eating," he commented licking the yellow cream from his finger.

"Did you dip your finger into my pie?" Sally's mother questioned. "You stay out of my kitchen!"

The lady's age did not stop her from bustling around filling a plate with samples of each item she had cooking. When she finally handed it to me it was heaping with food.

"Uh...thanks ma'am," I uttered gazing at the enormous load I was expected to consume.

"Oh, please call me Grandma," the lady responded handing me some silverware. "You're part of our family now."

"O.k., Grandma."

"Good!" She exclaimed. "I like the sound of it already."

She guided me to the table. "Now eat as much as you want. If you run out of anything you like, just tell me and I'll refill it."

"You bet," I said knowing there was no way I would be able to conquer even half of the plate.



Dinner was served about an hour after we arrived. Although I had already lost my appetite with the snack I ate earlier, I felt obligated to at least finish one helping. I ended up so stuffed that eating dessert was an impossible effort.

Instead, I relaxed on the couch for awhile to recover. When I could once more move around easily, Olivia and I took a tour of the farm.

The landscape around her grandparents' place was so breathtaking that I asked Olivia if she and I could stroll along the fence bordering the fields. She accepted but wanted to put on a heavier coat first.

"It's such a spectacular view. I could write a poem about this," I commented gazing at the endless snow covered hills fading off into the misty distance.

"Maybe that's what you'll do with the writing supplies I got you," Olivia said leaning on the

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fence.

“Perhaps,” I replied. “As far as I can see there is one majestic hill after another. There’s only a few in Pleasantville.”

“We’re in southeast Ohio, Timothy. Our state has many terrains.”

“I know.”

“Do you like it out here?” She asked.

“Yeah, it’s different than what I’ve seen before. If the ground was a carpet, it looks like it’s all crumpled together.”

“If that’s what you like,” Olivia commented.

“No, I like the place where I live right now. I have a farmhouse, a barbershop, an ice cream parlor, and a fairgrounds. It’s everything a growing boy needs!”

“Are you being sarcastic?” She inquired.

“No,” I replied glancing at her. “I’m being serious. It’s the simple things that mean the most to me. A lot of people dream about living in luxurious mansions, owning yachts, and knowing important people. I like farmhouses and Bob Farthing’s boat, but I still prefer knowing important people.”

“But, we’re not important people, Timothy,” she uttered.

“Oh, yes ya’ are,” I stated nodding my head. “You’re very important to me.”

Olivia’s eyes moved away from mine and out toward the hills. She then continued to walk along the fence. I caught up and strolled by her side concerned about her silence.

“Did I say something wrong?” I inquired.

“No,” she answered with her gaze directed toward the ground. “I’m just feeling a little guilty I guess.”

“Guilty?” I questioned in confusion. “Whatever for?”

She looked at me with a melancholy expression. “Everything that’s happened since you came into our lives, Timothy.” She sighed and went on walking. “I don’t know if you could figure

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anything out about my family before you came, but it was much different. I don't think any of us knew how to let go of my brother after he died. We were always comforted with the fact that we would see him again in the eternities, but it wasn't enough to get by with here on Earth. The slightest reference to Keith in conversation or in a familiar place would send a pain deep in my heart that sometimes was too much to deal with. It was like I was empty inside, and the void would never be filled again in this life."

It was one of those moments where it was best not to say anything. There was no response appropriate to her words, so I continued on quietly letting her speak her mind.

"Did you know that it used to irritate me when my brother would wrestle me?" Olivia asked.

I gave her a puzzled expression. What possessed her to talk about something she despised concerning Keith?

"He did it all the time," Olivia went on. "I would just get myself fixed up for the dance and he would tackle me in the living room. I would yell at him but he didn't care. Mother told him he shouldn't scuffle me like one of his school friends because I was a lady. He'd always say the same thing. 'She ain't a girl, Ma. She's my sister.' Keith could always choose the most elegant phrases to grace me with. Yet, I still wish he was around to tousle my hair, poke me in the ribs, toss me onto the couch..."

I gazed at her sympathetically. "I'm sorry. Ya' know, I could wrestle you if ya'd like," I mentioned with a deviant smile.

"Uh...Thanks for the considerate offer, but some things are best left in my memories."

"Come on, Olivia," I said creeping toward her. "It'll be a refreshing change to your serene lifestyle."

"Timothy Reye, I'm warning you!" She growled backing away.

I grabbed some snow from the drift we were walking through and packed a snowball. "How 'bout a game of dodge ball?"

She clinched her teeth together. "You throw that at me and I'll make you regret you ever met me!" She lifted her hand ready to swat me with it. "You will treat me like a lady! Now, put it down!"

"Ah, ya' had to go and throw chivalry into it didn't ya'?" I whined. "Ya' take all the fun out of things."

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“Set the snowball on the ground!” She ordered.

“Fine!” I responded giving up my attempt to play with her. “I’ll put it down, ya’ killjoy.”

I bent over and placed the snowball on the drift. Olivia took me by surprise and kicked snow in my face.

I instantly stood up wiping the crystals from my freezing skin. “Ooooooh, you’re quite the tricky one aren’t ya’?!”

“Don’t take me for granted,” she commented proudly.

With that she kicked more snow on me and ran. I picked up my packed snowball and went after her. From there back to the farm we had one continuous game of snowball tag. It was grand to see that I had brought out the best in her again.



That night, the gang met at Fraun’s home: a large white house on the west side of town past Cemetery Road. After we bundled up in layers of clothing for our planned outside venture. Fraun’s father drove out the massive sleigh from his barn and hitched a couple of horses to it. Fraun then took over for his father, who returned to the house holding his arms around himself against the cold.

“I’m the official driver!” Fraun declared as he hopped onto the sleigh and grabbed the reins.

“Ya’ sure ya’ know how to handle this thing?” Jack asked him. “I still remember what happened last year.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Fraun responded. “I just won’t ride so close to the creek this time.”

“That’s an intelligent move, Fraun,” Renee remarked taking a seat. “I don’t want to take my chances with hypothermia again this year.”

“Yeah, we want to stay dry this time,” Iowa added.

“You all will be fine!” Fraun exclaimed. “The six of us survived last year. We’ll make it through.”

“That’s a good point,” Barbara said glancing at Mary Jane and me. “There’s eight of us this year. Do you guys think the extra load will over work the horses?”

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“No, of course not,” Fraun replied. “Even if it could, we’re gonna’ make this trip shorter than the last one. And if it makes Barbara happy, we can all push the sleigh home ourselves and let the horses ride for a change.”

Barbara glared at Fraun, then she stepped onto the sleigh. “Your cynicism is not becoming of you,” she slurred at him.

“I know,” Fraun replied. “I usually try to go light on Christmas.”

We all climbed aboard silently hoping all would turn out well from the adventure. Fraun began driving the horses along a small road that lead through the field behind the farm toward some woods in the distance. Heavy blankets were collected from the house in case anyone found it too chilly. That proved to be a wise idea because Mary Jane immediately started shivering as the icy breeze whipped across the flat land through the sleigh. I grabbed a blanket and covered both of us and, in order to insure her comfort, I wrapped my arms around her. Mary Jane snuggled against me with an expression of contentment appearing on her face.

Feeling all the better about things in general with Mary Jane being so close, I gazed happily out over the magnificent scenery that winter had provided.

We were all quiet for awhile. Only a few sounds gently penetrated the peacefulness: the muffled thuds from the horses, the rhythmic chiming of the sleigh bells attached to their harnesses, and the sound of the runners gliding through the snow.

“Someone pinch me to let me know this is real,” I said in awe.

“If it’s all the same with you, we’d rather not,” Jack responded repulsively.

“I know how Timothy feels,” Olivia commented. “This just seems like a special night.”

“Well, it’s Christmas!” Iowa declared.

“Yeah, but it’s more than that,” Olivia went on.

“Life couldn’t be more complete than right now,” I spoke up. “I am very delighted with my new family and new friends. It’s like things couldn’t get any better.”

“Things are a lot calmer now,” Olivia added.

“I have experienced more over the past several months than I can recall,” I stated. “I just hope the story isn’t over.”

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“It’ll never be over,” Iowa responded. “There’s things to come that’ll probably make times like this kind of boring.”

“It certainly doesn’t end at our age,” Jack remarked. “On the other hand, ours might end if Fraun doesn’t watch where he’s going this year.”

“Hey! I said I’d avoid the creek! Now would you all just relax?!” Fraun exclaimed.

“I don’t know if the future can offer anything that would make this last summer seem boring,” I commented. “When one’s life changes this drastically, it’s kind of hard to top it.”

“I agree with you, Timothy,” Barbara said pulling down the scarf from her face. “This year could probably be the pinnacle of your lifetime, yet I hope something even better is still waiting for you in the future.”

I drew the blanket tighter around Mary Jane and me to avoid the wind creeping in.

“I used to feel my chances for happiness were demolished when my parents died,” I went on. “I figured my reward would come in Heaven. I even felt that when I ran away. When Sheriff Frazey caught me, I thought the torture would just continue on.”

“Well, you’re safe now,” Mary Jane assured me.

“I know,” I continued. “I didn’t really understand y’all at first. Everyone acted unbelievably nice to me. It was nothing like what I was used to. I never considered my life would be this wonderful again.”

“Timothy, Heavenly Father never intended for us to have continual torment,” Iowa stated. “One of my favorite quotes from the scriptures says, ‘men are, that they might have joy.’ That is true for you too.”

“I had to run away to find joy,” I uttered.

“But, I doubt most people have to,” Renee jumped in. “I never had to go anywhere to find contentment. My problems worked out for me right here. Now my father and Karl can’t hurt me anymore and I can finally be at peace.”

“Eric Gerris can’t hurt me anymore either,” I responded.

“I guess happiness is found in different ways,” Olivia said bringing her blanket up to her neck.

“Yeah, I’d say that’s the truth,” Iowa agreed. “Fortunately for me, I found joy rather easily.”

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“I know someone who could make you even happier, Iowa J.,” Olivia mentioned glancing at him softly.

“Yeah, what about that, Iowa?” I inquired. “Have ya’ given any thought to companionship?”

Iowa uncomfortably shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. “It’s sure is a picturesque view, ain’t it?”

“Ya’ didn’t answer my question,” I persisted.

Jack grabbed Iowa’s shoulder and pointed to Olivia. “How about the two of ya’ start dating?”

“Let’s not get into this!” Olivia snapped at us while blushing.

Iowa smiled and relaxed again. “It’s like I always said. If it’s meant to be, it’ll happen.”

“I’m so sick of that philosophy,” I heard Olivia mutter under her breath, but no one else heard her as Iowa continued talking.

“Things will occur in their own good time,” Iowa went on. “These types of things are always worth waiting for.”

“Well, Olivia’s been waiting for years,” Renee remarked.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you are talking about,” Olivia stated defensively.

“Will we always be friends?” I asked breaking the subtle tension in the air.

“I think so,” Barbara replied.

“I hope so,” Mary Jane added.

“Probably,” Iowa went on. “I’d like to believe this friendship we share with each other is an eternal one.”

“We’re almost to the woods!” Fraun announced.

“Grand! This is my favorite part of the trip!” Iowa stated excitedly.

“I love you guys!” I exclaimed.

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That is how the conversation ended. Everyone looked at me then to each other, and I think all of us realized we felt the same way. Our friendship was not just a common one, but it was something very special that was worth holding onto. It was as if we had known one another a long time ago in a place beyond our memories.

I think by the expressions I saw in their faces, we all knew that we would never grow apart from one another. Time could not challenge the bonds we had between us because no matter how far the physical distance, our hearts would always be in this town where we were only a holler away. With the tranquillity that rested in me, I knew I would never feel the despair of my past again. I truly loved them and I truly loved Pleasantville.

THE END

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with a central infinity-like symbol and elegant curves extending to the left and right.