

House of Darkness



House of Light

The True Story

Volume One

Andrea Perron

"Consider infinity. When Hubble gazed into the deep field, staring into what appeared to be a vacancy in the cosmos: the eye of this beholder saw the Light. From a distance it was observed to be a black hole of darkness in the Universe, presumed to contain nothing of any consequence. Focused upon a fixed point in space, this is what Hubble found. A sight for mere mortals to ponder: a wonder to behold, a humbling observation prompting a collective pause for reflection."





"We do not need to see to believe our eyes. We are connected to the cosmos as a speck in space, a ray of light from the darkness, as significant or irrelevant as any other piece of the expansive whole. Incapable of conceptualizing infinity, mortal beings stare into it hopefully, searching beyond ourselves in an effort to find ourselves; seeking contact with our Creator, in pursuit of epiphany's God. We need only peer within ourselves to find the purest essence of our Divinity."

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For my Mother

The Twenty Third Psalm

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
He leadeth me beside still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness, for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

House of Darkness ~ House of Light
The Trilogy

Prologue in Prayer
A Proper Introduction

I. A Place in the Country

*let there be light *frozen stiff *sounds of silence
 *a matter of time *contact *a chill in the air
*creature discomforts *the devil's pets *safety in numbers
 *sword of Damocles *a very fine how do you do
*familiarity breeds contempt *cold as stone *dusk 'til dawn

II. Fire in the Hole

*bless this mess *close that door *smoke and mirrors
*spirit matters *scorched offerings *apple blossom time
 *kiss of death *omens *from frying pan into the fire
 *blue light special *an old torch carries a flame
 *fire and brimstone *trial by fire *lady bug
*burnin' down the house *feet to the fire *bats!

III. Wicked Woman...Evil Ways

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 *things that go bump in the night *reality *Baker boys
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*more harm than good *wrack and ruin *this too shall pass

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*clearing the air *epiphany *the foreseeable future *amen

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Volume One

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- * frozen stiff
- * sounds of silence
- * a matter of time
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- * a chill in the air
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*“When the moon’s full those creatures of the full
Are met on the waste hills by country men
Who shudder and hurry by: body and soul
Estranged amid the strangeness of themselves,
Caught up in contemplation, the mind’s eye
Fixed upon images that once were thought,
For separate, perfect and immovable
Images can break the solitude
Of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes.”*



~ the barn at twilight in snowfall ~



~ House of Darkness ~ House of Light ~

*“Because all dark, like those that are all light,
They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,
Crying to one another like the bats;
But having no desire they cannot tell
What’s good or bad, or what it is to triumph
At the perfection of one’s own obedience;
And yet they speak what’s blown into the mind;
Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,
Insipid as the dough before it is baked,
They change their bodies at a word.”*

William Butler Yeats

A Vision

Prologue in Prayer

“Convinced myself, I seek not to convince.”
Edgar Allan Poe

The telling of this true story is not intended to persuade the reader of its authenticity. Those who believe in the existence of the spirit world will not require convincing; those who do not believe so will likely remain skeptical. It matters that this tale be told with honesty and integrity. Embarking upon the journey has been scary in its own right. For the past forty years the family involved has remained guarded and exclusive about their mutual experience. Delving into the painful memories has proved difficult; rekindling imagery, disturbing emotions long repressed. Exhuming the dead spawned its share of nightmares and yet it is a tale worthy of telling because it is true; a collective memoir worthy of sharing because of the message a family received.

It is a tale of good and evil, life and death, darkness and light. Evil exists. One need only tune in the nightly news to establish this sad, distressing fact. It is as powerful as invisible. We witness myriad manifestations of evil yet it is essentially an intangible force; an intention to deliberately inflict harm. At times it appears as if evil is winning the battle against what is good and pure, kind and sane in this world. The balance seems skewed. Earth's news is very bad indeed: omnipresent issues of war and peace.

Let there be Light. Truth be told; the human race is immersed in goodness and light. Evil has yet to prevail, though the struggle between them is real. Philosophers and laymen alike, from the greatest minds in history to those merely curious, have wrestled with the concept. Presuming the existence of good and evil, this narrative explores the Nature of life and Transcendence of death. It poses questions yet does not seek answers; nor will it provide any substantive guidance. There are no definitive answers in this realm. For those who lived through it, the mystery remains. It is time to divulge their closely guarded secrets; the time has come to tell the truth.

Acquiring knowledge through direct experience is a blessing and a curse. It defines then redefines. Once something so extraordinary has been witnessed,

there is no escaping the imagery impaled in a memory. It cannot be explained and it cannot be denied. There is no legitimate reason to dismiss otherwise consistently reliable senses. Ultimately, we do believe our eyes. We should. Certainty of knowledge informs all else in life, including the inevitability of death and the consequences for souls who linger, suspended in the ether. In the vast continuum of time and space, there are ramifications for mortal and immortal alike.

The following story chronicles this series of phenomenal encounters and metaphysical moments, events which transformed the seven involved in the saga. What the family endured together was absorbed individually, resulting in an intensely personal search as each one discovered their own spirituality, developing a fundamental belief system based upon what they experienced dwelling for a decade in a house alive with death. Those years provided them with hearth and home then gifted them with an explicit knowledge regarding the inherent complexities of life as it intersects the mysteries of death. Each member of the family believes they were privileged to have a powerful truth revealed in their presence, considering what they had shared was nothing less than the stunning realization: there is indeed some form of existence beyond mortal death. Affirming a belief in Spirit, what became their core assumption gradually evolved into simple, certain, steadfast faith.

There is a tendency for time and distance to ease and clarify consciousness; distilling the truth, instilling a sense of peace; replenishing hope where once only torment prevailed. A family's private recollections, intimate knowledge of Spirit is no longer burdensome to them. Instead, they consider it to be an awe-inspiring responsibility, sharing the belief they have kept their secrets long enough; perhaps too long. The writer believes everything happens in its proper moment in time, with purpose and reason; perfection intrinsic to the Universe.

The cast of characters, both living and dead, is extensive yet the house has the lead. Many have come and gone from this place in the country, some far more quickly than others. It has acquired quite the reputation over the years,

legitimately so. Some have departed in reverence. Others have reportedly run for their lives, literally and figuratively. Then there are those who were born, spent their lifetime and died in this fascinating farmhouse, some of whom never left it at all. What happens in this house is infinitely more significant than to whom it happens; the essential truth of the story.

The Perron family requested this tale of darkness and light be honestly told. It contains no embellishment; merely a modicum of literary license regarding dialogue, though some is quite precise. Their intention is not to entertain but rather to inform. The writer humbly respects their request yet as daughter and sister, as one of seven dwelling in the shadow of death during an illuminating decade of life, it is a given. This story is something sacred. Amen.

“It’s not the answer that enlightens, but the question.”

Eugene Ionesco

A Proper Introduction

*“You are whatever a moon has always meant,
and whatever a sun will always sing is you.”*
e. e. cummings

During those final desperate moments of her life, was she frightened by her own intentions or steadfast in her resolve? How could the woman of such an advanced age climb a rickety ladder to the hayloft of the barn then reach over to a beam from which to suspend the rope? Had life become so intolerable to a beleaguered old soul, the drastic measure appeared to be her only option for retreat? Perhaps she'd been ill and had suffered too long in her own wrinkled skin. What measure of pain prompts the notion to deliberately end a precious life? Had she carried her woes up that ladder or had she made peace with the concept and her creator? Did she believe the decision was her own privileged one to make, or did this woman suspect she risked punishment from the God who reserves such judgments as His own, unforgiving of those who take this matter into mortal hands? Only one thing is known for certain; far more than a century ago Mrs. John Arnold decided to claim her life at the age of ninety-three and was discovered, cold and gray, as stiff as the wood from which she was found dangling in the rafters of a barn. Now, suspended in the ether just as surely as she was detected hanging at the unraveling end of a makeshift noose, her immortality lives on as the stuff of legend and folklore; a mystery from the ages...for the ages. She may well have considered it her only escape and yet, truth be told, there was no escape for her wounded spirit. Whether as an act of eternal damnation for an ill-conceived exit from a mortal existence, or as the dire consequence of the premature departure, her spirit lingers still, remaining in her old home place in the country; a farmhouse where she once lived out her days then died by her own hand. May Almighty God have mercy on her immortal soul.

This woman is not alone. There are others, many others who share her fate; what some might describe as a fate worse than death. Perhaps she is the one who tucked the girls in at night, the one who'd loved them well and tenderly kissed their foreheads and smelled of flowers and fruit. It was a presence of comfort and caring; one who never meant to frighten or disturb youngsters in

their own beds. Instead, she was a light in the darkness of night; someone to watch over them. It was this holy presence which tempered their fear. In the framework of an inexplicable existence for a family dwelling in a house alive with death, it was a welcome presence, a protective influence in an otherwise scary place. She was not the only one. Johnny Arnold, presumably a relative, made the same critical decision to take his own life in the eaves of the house where he remains. As gentle a spirit as this elderly woman was, he too made his presence known. He was an omnipresent spirit, from the day they arrived at the farm, there to greet them in the dark shadows of a doorway, one cast as the figment from another dimension. Leaning back into his perpetual pose, watching, no doubt wondering about a sudden changing of the guard, he too would soon become a familiar part of the new landscape. And then there was Bathsheba...a God-forsaken soul.

Consider this a proper introduction to but a few of the many who still dwell among the living in a house revealing as many secrets. It took some time for the seven mortals involved, decades to realize, ultimately, they were glad to meet them. What they learned was worth it, though it cannot be simply stated as *in the final analysis* because *this* subject will *be* subject to analysis for the rest of their natural born lives. A lone fear remaining among them now is the potential for an unwelcomed postmortem return to the house they abandoned so long ago as each will eventually, inevitably enter the realm of supernatural life at the threshold of death's door: a fear of being drawn *home* again, there to resolve the questions left unanswered during a mortal existence; a dreaded possibility. Best to reconcile spirit matters in life than to face them in death; or risk becoming one of the restless spirits of a house drawing souls back to a place in the country, as it had done in life, perhaps with purpose and reason.

"Nothing in the entire universe ever perishes, believe me, but things vary, and adopt a new form. The phrase 'being born' is used for beginning to be something different from what one was before, while 'dying' means ceasing to be the same. Though this thing may pass into that, and that into this, yet the sums of things remain unchanged."

Ovid

Metamorphoses

I. A Place in the Country

“And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

Genesis 2:9

So it began. Long before Carolyn Perron ever considered picking up that newspaper at the corner market, the wise, infinite Universe began conspiring with elements on Earth to provide an extraordinary pathway for her family. Perhaps it was fate or their destiny. Whatever it was, powerful forces beyond mortal imagination intervened on behalf of those who sought respite from an intense and chaotic existence. During the summer of 1970 cosmic confluence occurred in the firmament; their journey commenced.

Lo! And Behold.

Carolyn was at once thrilled and overwhelmed to have all of her children at home again. It was a breezy balmy end of June, a later than usual dismissal due to an inordinately high number of *snow days* spent at home the previous winter. Finally, school was out for the season. Instead of having only one to watch, there were suddenly five. All of them arrived together, report cards in hand, waving like flags in the wind. Bedlam: Each young lady wanted to be the first in line with a piece of paper certain to solicit praise from her mother. Andrea was at the head of the line. As the eldest, an expectation of deference came with the territory; a claim staked. Nancy stepped forward, followed by Christine; Cynthia presumed to be the last. April was the baby, still at home, watching as her sisters begged for the same type of attention she received all day, every day. With a usual thoughtful and kind consideration of each child, Carolyn perused their grades, acknowledging her girls for any efforts made. Education had become a friendly competition in the family, due primarily to a positive emphasis placed upon it. As Carolyn was well aware, the children worked diligently merely to please their parents. In those days there was no such thing as an allowance, at least not in their household. Encouragement

and approval meant everything; their greatest reward. The rest of the payoff would have to wait until later in the evening when their father arrived home. His acknowledgements were always more subdued and understated, always a critical mention of room for improvement, though meaningful nonetheless.

As years passed, a young mother noticed summer vacation becoming a less daunting task as her eldest daughter assumed more responsibility, though it remained a fulltime job. The planning of activities became less of a necessity as the girls grew and began to effectively amuse themselves. A mother could relax and enjoy her children. Less a caretaker and more a playmate, she took great pleasure in the company. Within a few days, a good start to the season, what began as a perfectly fine summer holiday was transformed into a mean season of high anxiety and immeasurable pain.

Roger and Carolyn Perron purchased their house in the suburbs in 1964. It was an adequate, modest “Cape Cod” style house with a generous back yard. They had made the deliberate choice based on the quality of the schools their children would attend. Cumberland, Rhode Island held promise as a peaceful and quiet community in which to raise a family. During the summer of 1970 the changing society around them began encroaching, imposing itself upon their idyllic existence. As a result, a childhood innocence was lost, a sense of security was sadly forsaken and everything was about to change.

Within their first few days of school vacation a traumatic loss struck the whole family. A year or so earlier the children had been gifted with a puppy. She was the sweetest, most magnificent creature they had ever known, a rare and exceptional specimen of canine. Her breed was African Basenji. Carolyn was as delighted by her arrival and told her children that such an unusual dog deserved an equally unusual name. After a thoughtful moment she suggested a unique one, apparently coming from the ether. Though it was an unfamiliar name they all liked the sound of it and it stuck: Bathsheba.

The eldest child, Andrea had fallen so in love with the creature, she hardly went anywhere without her. Though the dog had been intended as a gift for

all, Andrea felt a special bond with their pet. One afternoon Andrea asked her mom if she could take Bathsheba for a walk. Only ten years old at the time, Andrea had already displayed maturity beyond her years. Carolyn had no qualms about the request. Sisters suddenly popped out of nowhere and the walk became a group activity. Andrea held onto the leash as her siblings followed. They traveled up Mohawk Street to Diamond Hill Road. Without warning, a car loaded with teenagers drove by at approximately the speed of light. The crew must have been cheerleaders because they were shouting out something in unison while shaking brightly-colored tassels from their open windows. Bathsheba was an obedient dog but the tassels caught her eye and, in an instant, she bolted across the road to chase after the car. Andrea began screaming out loud in panic, calling the dog back; a tragic mistake. Standing safely on the sidewalk at the other side of the road, Bathsheba immediately obeyed a command. The elderly couple that hit her never even saw the dog. Her leash got wrapped around a wheel well and the damage to her skull was so extensive, there was no question...no saving her. A passerby drove to the police station about a block away and within minutes a police officer was on the scene. He yelled at the girls to return home and as they ran back toward the house they heard the gunshots, two of them, enough to mercifully finish the dreadful deed. Hysterical, all the girls ran to their mother who soon began sobbing with them; not only was she grief-stricken by the loss, she knew Bathsheba had suffered...and her girls had suffered the sight of it.

The entire family caved in; succumbing to a deep despair which had, at its core, their unspoken pain. The silence on the subject was almost unbearable. Though it slowly passed for the others, Andrea withdrew into a kind of grief reserved only for a guilty conscience. Believing she alone was responsible for an unspeakable loss, no one, not even mom could convince her otherwise. Sadness consumed her. Andrea stopped playing outside, barely interacting with her siblings. Carolyn became very concerned; doing her best to distract her eldest daughter, giving time itself the time to do what it does best. Heal. Meanwhile, during the first few weeks of July, a series of events transpired which would cumulatively become the catalyst for an abrupt and a unilateral decision made by an anxious mother on behalf of her children.

There were many adolescent boys in the neighborhood. That summer they formed a pack. Wild dogs had nothing on them! Evil does exist in the world. As individuals they all seemed to be acceptable but, as a group, they became the personification of what is ugly and mean-spirited in society. Classmates became hoodlums. A number of these boys were familiar to the Perron girls and some of them were considered friends, including the boys who lived next door. As incidents began occurring, no one ever suspected the problem child, the leader of the pack, was lurking so close to home; a wolf in the woods.

A list of minor and major infractions included a number of petty thefts then the gangland assault on their schoolyard playground; from vicious pranks to more threatening encounters with rumors of weapons involved. For the most part bad boys were fighting amongst themselves resulting in a series of black eyes and fat lips. When they began aggressively targeting several girls in the neighborhood, Carolyn disdainfully announced they were toxic; testosterone poisoned. A vigilant mother forewarning her own away from all of them, on the day she was informed of an attempted sexual assault on a young girl who had been gagged, bound to playground equipment at their elementary school, they instantly lost their freedom. Once relegated to the back yard the children began wondering what was going on around them in a place where they once felt so safe. Not one considered they might be the next victims of the sinister souls doing the devil's footwork.

A family vacation had been planned well in advance. Everyone was excited by the prospects of a big field trip. It meant restaurants and swimming pools at motels. It meant shopping for bathing suits and ice cream cones at roadside stands. For all six gals, it meant quality time spent with the man of the house. Most importantly for Carolyn, it also represented a necessary distraction. She enlisted Andrea to assist her with their many preparations. As packing began, Carolyn made arrangements with her mother-in-law for the care of the house and what cherished pets remained. There were four kitties: two very loud but lovely Siamese and two strays which found their way into heart and home.

It was late afternoon when the family returned from what was a thoroughly enjoyable, relaxing trip together. It had only been a few days away, yet the healing effects were remarkable. The Perrons had been restored to a one-big-happy-family status. Andrea started smiling again. When they pulled into the driveway Roger immediately noticed that the door to the sun porch was wide open. His mother had been watching over their house and he assumed when she last came, had forgotten to close or lock it. Then Carolyn saw something lying limp on the picnic table. By the time she could intervene, Andrea was already out of their car, running to greet her normally frisky kitty, Scrunch. Andrea called her by name. There was no response. No movement. The child could not believe her eyes; the gruesome discovery dropped her to the knees. Her precious cat had been brutally killed...murdered. Her skull was crushed; every bone in her body, shattered. It is unnecessary to describe what ensued. Carolyn comforted her while Roger removed the stiffened carcass. He then entered their house to find that it had been thoroughly ransacked; food from the kitchen cupboards poured all over the floor, their furniture overturned, mirrors shattered. A freezer full of food was open, provisions saturated with motor oil. All the cats were missing. With a frantic phone call Roger learned that his mother had been there only a few hours before their arrival and had indeed locked the house. She left their Siamese cats inside and let the other two out to play, as the weather was fine and her son was expected home later in the day. As Roger searched their house, utter despair turned into wild rage. The freezer in the basement, fully stocked with meats, was destroyed beyond repair. Nothing could be salvaged. He peered inside at all the food intended to feed his family, trembling with justifiable anger. The police were there for hours, surveying and documenting extensive damage done; a loss sustained. Their normally rambunctious neighborhood fell eerily silent; a conspicuous absence of movement and sound from the three boys who occupied the house next door. One peered reflectively out his bedroom window.

Carolyn later found Juliet, mother of Scrunch, hiding beneath thick shrubs. The cat had been brutalized but apparently escaped her captors; surviving the ordeal she'd obviously endured. Both Siamese cats were gone. Within a few days a tortured soul arrived at their door. A boy from the next street over had witnessed, if not participated in this horrific attack. With tears in his eyes as the tremendous burden of some unspoken guilt weighed too heavily for the

youngster to bear, a conscience dictated this confession. He told Mrs. Perron what had happened and who did it. Apparently it was a twelve-year-old boy who lived next door. He had planned the scheme then initiated the break-in, and when he and his thug buddies were finished destroying their house, they held Scrunch down inside a pothole in the road then beat her to death with a baseball bat. Juliet fought back and finally escaped. One of their cohorts stole then sold the Siamese cats to an unscrupulous woman who never bothered to ask any questions. Carolyn called the police. They went directly to the house and confronted the mother of this boy. She denied everything; lying to cover for her mini-criminal. The officers seemed unwilling to pursue the matter any further then discouraged Carolyn from acting on her own, but she refused to let this rest in peace. She later went back to their house, against the advice of law enforcement, speaking firmly with a woman hell bent on protecting her own. The terse conversation deteriorated into argument and accusation as the responsible party emerged from his bedroom; both arms visibly scarred with scratches, evidence of a cat fighting for her life. His mother instantly ordered him back into his room, wedging her bulbous body between the door frame to block the view but Carolyn was convinced of his guilt; there was as much metaphorical blood on his hands as residual scars on his serrated arms. The next day she and Roger went to the Cumberland Police Department, there to file charges against that juvenile delinquent; an assault addressed as animal cruelty. In spite of the ample evidence these assailants remained on the loose.

Breaking and entering; Destruction of property: Demon seeds. Andrea was unwilling to wait for the court or an act of divine retribution. Distraught, she began quietly plotting a vigilante attack on someone who deserved the full weight of her ungodly wrath; a lesson in smiting she learned the hard way.

Andrea had not yet really recovered from the tragic death of her beautiful Bathsheba when a sadistic execution of her precious cat occurred. These two traumatic events prompted a metamorphosis in the child, one nobody would have ever expected or predicted, effectively transforming her from a demure little girl into someone angry, vengeful; she suddenly became as evil as those who had committed a heinous crime. Carolyn had divulged the identity of the culprits as she explained to her girls that they must not have anything to do with those boys anymore. Andrea blatantly defied mother's order, devising a plan of her own when she knew who was responsible. She couldn't get to all

of them at once, but truly believed she should punish the leader of the pack. Enlisting the assistance of friends sworn to secrecy she used the telephone to track the whereabouts of her intended victim. It took three days to carry out her plan as she stalked him throughout a neighborhood; poised, knowing the moment opportunity presented she would confront the criminal, causing him to suffer as much as her cat did for the duration of her torturous death. When she located him near the corner of Mohawk Street and Diamond Hill Road, unaccompanied by his bodyguard brother she pounced in a way which would have made her feline proud. Though both youngsters were roughly the same age and size, his was no match for her intensity in the revenge-driven assault. Then there was the infamous element of surprise. He never saw it coming.

Not once in her life had Andrea displayed any type of violent behavior, yet there she was, on the side of the road, beating this culprit bloody. Though her physical strength was equivalent to his, an emotional outburst was something supernatural. Adrenaline coupled with pure, unadulterated hatred: dangerous in combination; a lesson the recipient of her self-righteous rage soon learned. She broke his nose, punching him repeatedly. Once his eyes sealed shut she throttled his scrawny neck, muffling his pleas for help then took aim at every vulnerable part of his body; ribs to groin. After several minutes of relentless, inexhaustible brutality, no mercy bestowed, the witness to this vicious attack came to his rescue, pulling the girl from her prey. “Go! Home!” Reluctantly, she did as he ordered. It was over. Andrea failed: her evil intention had been to commit **justifiable** homicide; planting the demon seed six feet under.

The police officer was sympathetic. He had no choice except to file another report. Roger had to handle this problem. Whatever he said on her behalf in a courtroom was sufficient to fully explain and likewise excuse her behavior. Though the charges were dropped, much animosity remained. No longer the quiet and placid neighborhood in which to raise her family, Carolyn began to press her husband about relocation. It was her fervent hope, in fact, adamant intention to remove her children from the negative and unstable environment. She became watchful, distressed by what was happening to her eldest, a child transforming...increasingly sullen and withdrawn. She knew the only way to mitigate an adverse impact on all the girls was to extricate them from such an increasingly volatile place. Their

anxious mother decided and then *insisted* her children be raised surrounded by wild Nature instead of wild criminals. She wanted them to have a place in the country.

Roger did his best to placate his wife. He knew they were in no position to afford the expense of moving at the moment. There was hardly any equity in their current home. Likewise, he realized an agitated demeanor complicated matters; disturbing what peace lingered amidst turmoil. Timing is everything in life; though he regretted having to do so, especially considering the events occurring all around them, Roger announced his plan to leave on business for several days, effectively abandoning his spouse to deal with the dilemma: an emergence of a theme. Stress spiked. The man had no choice. He had clients waiting, appointments pending. An astral convergence began as a Universal plan began spinning in perpetual motion, stirring up the cosmos. Change was inevitable; the only constant. There'd be no predicting what was to come.

It was early in the morning on the day of his departure. While Roger and Carolyn stood in the kitchen sharing a cup of coffee, an explosion rumbled through their front yard. It sounded like cannon shot; echoing throughout the community. Alarmed, they raced outside. Carolyn had created a rock garden near the entrance of their driveway soon after they purchased their humble home. Friends often teased her about it, reminding her that the centerpiece resembled a tombstone. They were right. It accidentally did. The only thing missing from the gigantic ice-aged edifice was a deeply chiseled inscription denoting the name of someone using the natural relic as a final resting place.

The man residing below them climbed into his truck that chilly morning. He cranked the engine, had a massive heart attack and died behind the wheel; his lifeless foot collapsing onto the gas pedal. The truck raced up the narrow lane, stopping only when it lodged upon the massive stone; wheels spinning. Roger scrambled to his aid while Carolyn called for help. Mister Curtis was already deceased; nothing Roger attempted would revive him. As neighbors poured into the road, the adversarial mother next door shouted vile remarks toward Carolyn about the *graveyard* on her lawn. Once the police arrived she

waddled back inside her house. After the ambulance left with the body, only then did Carolyn break down, spilling tears of grief. Still shaken, Roger had to leave but she wanted him to cancel the trip. The sudden death upset him as much as it had his wife. They exchanged few terse words before he departed. Stress was taking its measure of the man...and the woman.

Carolyn expended a great deal of energy attempting to suppress her grief, a strain causing her to tremble while she prepared a cake for the Curtis family. Bringing it over to their house in the afternoon, she was promptly rejected, dismissed at the door. Returning home, still carrying the cake she'd baked in the worst heat of summer, Carolyn knew it was time to go. Later confiding in her friend Cathi, she explained: Mrs. Curtis actually blamed **her** for the tragic death of her husband; the woman blatantly accused Carolyn of being a witch. That was it. Enough. No more.

When Roger came home, she explained what had happened in his absence. She sat him down at the table. Expressing her heartfelt sentiments about the death of their neighbor as well as legitimate concerns she had for the safety of their children, his wife begged him to reconsider selling the house to leave its whole community behind. Recounting a series of unfortunate events, what became the basis of her conclusion, he agreed; these were serious problems. He empathetically reiterated: they were in NO position financially to make a move, certainly not a sudden one. Carolyn was fixated on getting her girls to a place in the country. The couple spent well over an hour discussing limited options. When they went to bed it was with a mutual understanding; it would take some time to transform this dream into reality. There was no obvious or immediate remedy available. According to Roger, there's no point dwelling on what they could not change. Carolyn acquiesced. She did not mention her distress again. Within the next few days he would leave town on yet another business trip; one which kept him away just long enough for the Universe to intervene on their behalf. A cautionary tale: Be careful what you wish for...

While waiting outside enormous doors, examining the impressive façade of **Mount Saint Charles Academy** Carolyn suddenly remembered that she had neglected to bring something to read. Rarely taking Andrea to music lessons, the child usually traveled with a friend who also studied flute. It was only an hour but, in the heat of June in Woonsocket, it was becoming a stifling wait. Seeking a shadier spot, she noticed a newsstand in front of the corner market. There, Carolyn purchased a copy of **The Woonsocket Call**. Having enough time left to scan a few of its pages, she tucked it beneath an arm, crossing the road to meet her daughter as the budding musician popped out from behind one of the massive, ornately carved wooden doors, seeking her mother on the crowded city street.

When they arrived home, the newspaper was temporarily discarded; tossed into a corner of the kitchen counter: Time to make the dinner. Revisiting the newspaper later that evening, once the children had gone off to bed, Carolyn spread it wide on the table then settled back in a chair; it was such a luxury to relax with a newspaper. Nursing a lukewarm cup of coffee, the woman read page after page with nothing on her mind except whatever her eyes fell on at any given moment; she had no ulterior motives or hidden agenda. Arriving in the classifieds, she paused. Only then did the idea occur to her: "No harm in looking." So she did. Knowing precisely what she was looking for, locating a "**Land and Farms for Sale**" column, Carolyn began the search, reading one little box at a time. **The Woonsocket Call** was a comprehensive newspaper, covering all of Northern Rhode Island, including rural or remote areas of the state. Though there was substantial acreage for sale she found nothing which included a suitable house for their family. Her eyes continued wandering the column. There it was: the pipe dream. "**9 room colonial farmhouse w/ barn + 200 acres Harrisville \$75,000.**" It was well past 9:00 p.m. when she spied the advertisement. In spite of the hour, Carolyn called the realtor then made an appointment to view this property the following day. That night she went to bed then laid there, alone in the darkness, unable to sleep; disturbed by the persistent, nagging regret at having made the call at all. What was the point? Roger had been quite clear on this topic. There was no extra money; no hope of moving anytime soon. Carolyn struggled with the idea. In one moment she felt selfish; altruistic in the next. It was for her children that she so longed for a place in the country. As the listing agent, Mrs. Hertzog had been gracious;

understanding about the late hour of the call. Carolyn felt fraudulent; tacitly misrepresenting their situation with total silence on the subject; a covert and deliberate sin of omission. During their extended conversation she failed to disclose the fact there was no *Earthly* way they could afford to buy property, yet she made an appointment to view it anyway. Compelled to do so, swept up by the notion of a home place in the woods, the enticements of it evoked intense emotions, over-riding an otherwise formidable conscience. Slipping into the dream, a final conscious thought occurred: "It couldn't hurt to look."

Up and on the phone at first light, Carolyn called upon her closest friend. Cathi was there within the hour. Lingering over their coffee at the corner of the kitchen, the women whispered their conversation as girls mulled around, anxious for some undivided attention. Neither of them wanted to arouse any suspicion regarding a sudden excursion; likely nothing more than diversion: an adventure. Cathi encouraged Carolyn to go and have a good time house-hunting; certain it was pure folly which would culminate in little more than a few welcome and well-deserved hours away from their house. The girls were all more than willing to remain behind with the favorite friend, never asking where mom was going. A chance to be with Cathi meant playtime: **Weebles!**

As a lark, perhaps a lapse in judgment; Carolyn considered her behavior as she drove along, chastising herself repeatedly. It felt like an especially long ride which meant it would probably be the same for Mrs. Herzog. When she finally met the woman at her real estate office in Harmony, she was, at once, ashamed yet excited by the prospect of seeing a grand old estate up for sale. It would prove to be an historical journey; a whimsical passage through time and space: the ultimate of magical mystery tours. All reticence was about to subside; inner conflict, pangs of conscience about to come to an abrupt end.

Mrs. Herzog was kind; very generous with her time. Inviting Carolyn into her car, they drove many miles of winding country roads, dodging neglected potholes along the picturesque route. Entering the village of Harrisville from the south, the realtor did a great job pointing out various landmarks: schools, library, theater, town hall and churches. The lush landscape was remarkably

uninhabited. There was ample space between its homes; land even within the village proper. ***This*** was it; the place Carolyn had searched for in mind.



~ The Assembly Theater ~ Harrisville, R.I. ~

Passing beyond the quaint little town, heading north onto Round Top Road, Carolyn became breathless with pure anticipation, longing to view what Mrs. Hertzog had been so busy describing as they traveled their rural route. It was more than magnificent...it was everything she had dared envision in dreams; pastoral pleasure beyond mortal imagination. The farm defied all description: Technicolor in comparison to black and white... Dorothy stepping through an open door, over the beckoning threshold...upon entering the Land of Oz.

Rounding the final corner, Carolyn first saw the barn, then three enormous evergreen trees lining the front yard of the farmhouse set back a considerable distance from the road. As they pulled into its earthen circular driveway, Mr. Kenyon emerged from the house, waiting patiently on the porch to receive his guests. This elderly gentleman: as gracious a host as the realtor. He escorted his company around the property, through the barn, then into the house. She was enchanted. Mr. Kenyon told her what he knew of the history of this old estate. As she admired the lone apple tree, he then explained the Hurricane of 1938 claimed thirteen others from the grounds. He suggested the only reason the barn survived that horrendous storm when so many others did not fare as well was because centuries before, it had been painstakingly constructed by a master shipwright; its solid oak center beams deliberately arched to sway in the wind. Entering the farmhouse, Carolyn instantly noticed how cool it felt

in the worst heat of day. Together they strolled from room to room. It seemed gigantic compared with a humble home in the suburbs. Wide-planked floors creaked beneath their feet; hinges on each door seemed to sing a unique tune. She was intrigued by its ancient fixtures; wrought iron latches at every twist and turn; cubbyholes in every corner. So many aspects of it were authentic to the centuries old structure. Carolyn was amazed by the living museum.

Though Mr. Kenyon knew little about the earliest history of the house or its inhabitants, he did tell Carolyn the estate was one of the original ***Providence Plantations***; the property deeded in 1680, house completed in 1736. It was a veritable journey through time. She drank it in like sweetest nectar, savoring every sip as if it would be her last. Apparently it was a love potion, working wonders on a dispirited soul thirsting for unbridled beauty, seeking space far from the madding crowd. ***This*** was the place; her elusive vision of a country home. It beckoned her as siren song does a sailor, disguised as a clarion call. She was swept away...utterly overcome by her own heart's desire.

Walking them over to their car, Mr. Kenyon extended his hand to Carolyn, holding hers gently within his own as he spoke: "This is a wonderful place to raise a family." A singular statement, delivered with sincerity, convinced the young mother her intuition was trustworthy. He departed for the farmhouse. Mrs. Hertzog silently studied Carolyn's facial expression. Reaching into her handbag, retrieving the checkbook tucked discreetly between the leather and a ragged tear in its tattered satin lining, the woman met her realtor's gaze.

"My husband is out of town. How much would it take to hold this place?" Carolyn presented a delighted real estate agent with a check for five hundred dollars, earnest money to seal the deal, effectively emptying a bank account. A single impetuous act secured the farm for her family. Likewise, it all but assured certain conflict would erupt when her husband arrived home. It was worth risking Roger's wrath. Looking back toward the house, she spied Mr. Kenyon pacing the porch, hoping to overhear some good news, no doubt. He raised his hand, holding it in place until she returned the gesture. He knew. Roger would soon breathe the sweetest air and drink the purest water. He too would sip the irresistible nectar and would, in time, ultimately succumb to a

potent hypnotic spell cast by the natural beauty of this mysterious, magical place in the country. She need only convince him to come take the tour.

A long drive home seemed brief by comparison with an initial journey into deep, dark woods. Carolyn floated euphorically through their front door then grabbed Cathi, embracing her tightly. Shocked by this outburst, she realized what it meant. Oh, my God! What had she done? It was obvious; her dearest friend, the woman who could not even afford to *pay* the babysitter, had done something supremely impulsive. Her suspicions were instantly confirmed.

“I bought it!” Wild-eyed with excitement, she screamed out the news with a whisper the girls could not possibly hear...it was a secret.

“You bought **what**?”

“The farm!” Carolyn’s enthusiasm was almost contagious. Almost.

“With **what**!” Cathi’s incredulous expression said the words well before her lips could form or utter them aloud. “You *bought the farm...or you will!* when your husband gets home! You, my dear will *pay* for this!” Her sardonic sense of humor was lost on Carolyn that hot afternoon. Instead, she chose to take these phrases literally, ignoring the intended intimation.

“I put money down on the place.”

“How much?” Cathi felt her stomach twist...*knot* such a good sensation.

“Five hundred. Earnest money: a good faith payment to hold the property.”

“Five hundred...*dollars*!”

“All we had...well, not *all*; there’s enough left to buy milk and bread!”

“Oh, my God...” Cathi’s voice seeped out of Carolyn’s consciousness. It seemed to trail off into the distance as the ecstatic woman allowed herself the freedom to project into the future, to imagine her family in such a remarkable

place. Cathi jolted her back to reality. “Listen to me!” Still somewhere else, lost on a fine piece of property in Harrisville...Cathi persisted. “Carolyn!”

“What! I know...I know...he’ll love it! We’ll find a way...we will!”

“You **hope** so.” To which Carolyn promptly responded, “I **know** so.”

The children were all playing outside. Carolyn decided not to say anything yet. Cathi concurred, suggesting she return in a few days to take them all out for ice cream after Roger’s arrival home; aware Carolyn would require some private time to discuss this matter with her husband. They concocted a plan. She would call Cathi to come get the girls as soon as he pulled into the yard. While watching kids taking turns on the swing set, staring through dozens of prisms provided by rays of sunlight intersecting water spots splattered on the kitchen window, Carolyn described in full detail where she’d gone and what she had seen on that fateful summer day. Pure delight sparkled in bright eyes; the incredible Lightness of being Carolyn. A broad smile had graced her lips while speaking of its endless walls constructed of stone, rooms which echoed with a whisper; an apple tree gnarled by age and Nature’s relentless assaults. Enraptured, the woman seemed all but transported back to the place she had just returned from; a magical, mysterious place on Earth where a barn could survive a ferocious storm by dancing with the wind.

It was love. Carolyn had fallen deeply in love. It is said that love is blind.

Cathi left the house that evening repeating a promise to return after Roger’s scheduled arrival. She was as torn as Carolyn had been prior to writing the check. It was a leap of faith, to be sure, but also a serious lapse in judgment. Her downright sensible friend made a unilateral decision which was going to affect her entire family. It was at best, disrespectful of Roger and his position on the matter. At worst, it meant a loss the family could not afford to sustain. Five hundred dollars: a great deal of money; their hedge against a disaster. It became, with the drafting of the single check, the

potential root of another; a foundation for upheaval. Cathi had reason to be worried. She traveled along considering the leap and lapse of it all. The impetuous act, so out of character for the mother who would do anything to protect and defend her family, may have placed them all in jeopardy. She likewise considered this was precisely what her friend was attempting to do; protect her young with an effort made to remove them from the place she believed to be unsafe. Carolyn had done something radical. In time and space perhaps it would prove to be as brilliant as any gathering cluster of stars in the firmament. Time would tell the tale.

“I believe in God, only I spell it Nature.”
Frank Lloyd Wright

let there be light

*“Hope, like the gleaming taper’s light, / Adorns and cheers our way;
/ And still, as darker grows the night, / Emits a brighter ray.”*

Oliver Goldsmith

Roger was not a bit pleased; his grimace as proof. Neither was he intrigued by his wife's vivid descriptions of this property; his main concern revolving around devising a means of retrieving a check. Carolyn remained unscathed by his objections, her position firmly held: steadfast...resolute, insisting this place was the real estate deal of a lifetime. Roger was purely a businessman. If his wife could convince him of its worth, the intrinsic value of this estate, he might become far more amenable to an otherwise outrageous proposition. Persistently on point, entirely unyielding, her husband relented. He agreed to a tour, though he made no promises during their tenuous negotiations.

A discussion not yet concluded, Roger pressed Carolyn on the issue of her unilateral decision, one made without regard; without his knowledge, opinion or consent. She did not plead her case nor apologize, however she refrained from reminding him of numerous times he'd done the same, expecting her to understand his motivations. What she had done was provocative enough; no need to be defensive. Carolyn simply stated, when she saw the ad it sparked her curiosity so she acted immediately, never imagining one call would result in what she had discovered; something rare and exceptional. His wife made it clear, despite objections, she was determined to begin the process of finding a more suitable home for the children; reassuring him she was as shocked as he was when that search met its end with one single viewing on a single day. There wasn't any way to reach him out on the road and he did not dare refute the claim, having neglected to call home during the trip. Once she'd seen the farm, unwilling to risk losing it to a delay or indecision, she acted; what she considered to be her responsibility: do the right thing on behalf of her family. The funds in their joint bank account were just as much hers as his, as far as she was concerned. In his noted absence, as his equal partner in a marriage, permission should be implicit; not required. She did what she did for all of them. This he seemed to understand.

Many months would pass before Mrs. Hertzog could finally reveal the truth of their situation. Carolyn's call had been the one and *only* inquiry she'd ever received on the listing. It had come on the first day the farm was advertised. Nobody else seemed to want a place in the country. It was as if the Universe had reserved it for her. There had been no risk of losing the farm; none at all.

The next morning everyone piled into the family car, a Bonneville with no room to spare once all were present and accounted for; off they went for a ride. Carolyn had deliberately tempered an enthusiasm, never divulging their destination. When they arrived at the farm, Mr. Kenyon was working beside the barn. Carolyn then noticed his height for the first time, towering over her husband as they shook hands. He was a thin, lanky man with deep grooves etched into his face, as pronounced as the ruts in an old wagon road they had walked together a few days before. His watery, pale blue eyes seemed to smile. Delighted by their arrival, Mr. Kenyon warmly welcomed his guests, even though no formal appointment had been made through the realtor. He knew precisely why they had come and could not have been more pleased with the company he kept on a day he thought was destined for solitude.

Instinctively focusing all his attention on Roger, the gentleman realized the significance of this man's presence and the necessity to impress him. Carolyn appreciated an effort being made for her husband, though he'd taken time to interact with the ladies, too. Excusing himself for a moment, he slipped into the house, returning with pockets full of candy. Generously dispersing these sweets, Mr. Kenyon was quite enchanted with their children. Complimenting good manners, he'd included the parents for the job well done. Then without any parental consent requested, suggesting children need freedom, Mr. Kenyon made his own unilateral decision. Releasing the girls to their greatest good, providing unfettered access to his property, he suddenly said: "Go and play!" As explorers in uncharted territory, they all bolted...no compass required; no directions given or necessary. They could *feel* their way around,

by instinct.

Carolyn was mortified. She knew a wild child lurked in the heart of each of these urchins. A glance instructed her eldest to maintain a head count at all times. It was understood but it was also impossible. Carolyn reminded all of them to remain within the confines of the yard, inside stone walls, but it was more than six acres of land. Andrea did her best for the first few minutes but such freedom is enticing to youngsters; they scattered like thieves in a crowd of tourists. The polite little girls instantly transformed into raucous banshees. Before long they were swinging from the rafters of a barn, scaling the apple tree, climbing up into the loft of a woodshed and pretending stone walls were balance beams built exclusively for their amusement. Unleashed into such an unfamiliar setting, the girls seemed so agile and able to navigate it with ease. It was strangely familiar to them. As for Andrea the scenario quickly evolved into chaos; quite beyond her ability to control this beautiful but foreign land or those making mischief in it. She chose instead to join her siblings in folly.

As Mr. Kenyon stood beside the young couple, on the hill overlooking the opulent grounds a subtle yet discernible pride snuck in, tucking itself into the corners of his wry little grin. He was so pleased; certain he'd found the right family for this old house. Carolyn gently nudged her husband, prompting his notice of the perfect garden spot. The adults listened as sounds of laughter, a distant music, wafted throughout the valley; a joyful noise evoking echoes of their past. Revisiting their childhoods during those moments, each listened in reverence. His contemplative expression, one of placid repose, betrayed Mr. Kenyon's journey through memories which lingered with him for a lifetime. Back he went to a simpler life: back-in-time travel.

Cordial, eager to entice his prospective buyers, Mr. Kenyon asked Roger if he and Carolyn would enjoy a walk down to the river. They quickly accepted the invitation. Pressed for time, Carolyn had not gone during her initial visit, though Mr. Kenyon had graciously offered to take her there. As if what they had already seen wasn't paradise enough, a soft-spoken gentleman promised his welcomed guests a virtual oasis, respite from sultry summer heat, some shade from a brutal Sun only a few hundred yards away. A whistle from dad called the clan. They all knew a clarion call to assemble the troops and from

which direction the familiar signal had come. Fall in! Roger took the plunge.

It was a lovely stroll down to the Nipmuc River. There had been abundant rainfall that year, producing the thick, bountiful grass which cushioned every step of the lush lawn sprawled along three gently sloping tiers. Roger paused on top of its second plateau, turning to reexamine the place from a different perspective. He marveled at the stone walls enclosing the “yard” prompting a comment on the incredible amount of work it must have required...countless hours of hard labor to create those granite edifices. Nearing the bottom of the hill he noticed several stones had been removed, providing a narrow pathway as easy-access to a wagon road leading them onward to the decayed remains of an archaic wooden bridge: a lovely vision of rustic old New England.

As they walked together the air began changing. If possible, it became even sweeter; an aroma more fragrant than any perfume produced by beds of old stock flowers framing the front yard. Pine straw, as slippery as silk, lined the surface of the road. A dark tunnel formed as the heavily laden limbs hovered overhead in loving embrace; their dense outstretched branches had seemingly grown together over time. Approaching what was described as a *creek* during the height of summer, each step was cooler than the last; each breath became deeper within surrounding woodlands. They began to hear running water still at quite a distance. Even though blossoms had passed, fragile dogwood trees gratefully gathered beneath aged oaks. Humbly accepting a protective cover, slender branches trailed off as delicate tendrils, bowing gracefully toward a forest floor sprinkled with lady slippers. Nature’s finest features of a season, wild orchids would surely be difficult to avoid should one venture too far off that beaten path. Roger took Carolyn by the hand. As they walked along the steeply descending road, cautiously slowing their pace, perspective changed. Arriving at river’s edge, shadows surrendered to light.

Behold! The creek; lined with majestic maples shedding leaves as large as dinner plates. They paused, awestruck by a spectacle. Roger stood quite still; stunned: a breathtaking scene overwhelming his senses. Mounded mountain

laurel kept a silent vigil, draped elegantly over both sides of the river bank. It sprung forth from earthen walls, clinging precariously to the moist black dirt, watching over its meandering stream of crystalline water. Drenched, dripping with delicate blossoms, each bush could have been admiring its own splendid reflection. Roger peered over the edge, gazing into the mirror, examining his own startled expression; the picture of youth in a fountain. All signs of stress had been erased from his features, as if cleansed by the cool, babbling brook traveling beneath him. There he found his future smiling back from its glassy surface. Carolyn was quietly observing her husband. He was doing it; sipping the potent nectar of Nature, like bird from bloom. It was love at first sight.

Through the purest water Roger stared at fish, studying the fluid movement of dozens of rainbow trout; the dancing and prancing in and out of cascading spotlights, shifting with the breeze. The markings on each one appeared to be distinctly its own. Patterns emerged. Perceptible traits, characteristics such as those shared among families were enhanced and magnified by this elemental interplay of water and light; perfection: Simpatico in Nature. Each excursion through beams of sparkling sunshine further revealed their essential nature. It *was* magical; something beyond beautiful: Technicolor rainbow fish gliding through a shallow pool illuminated with rays of divine light from above.

This rippling flow was inhabited by a multitude of creatures. Frogs leapt as snakes slithered, skimmers skimmed while minnows paddled by in its muddy puddles. Crayfish scampered beneath flat rocks protruding from the rugged shoreline. Roger could no longer resist it; this call of a cool pool. He quickly removed his shoes and socks then tightly rolled up the bottom of his trousers. His kids begged to follow. He'd denied their request for a legitimate reason, not wanting mud pies leaking in their car. A father already knew in his heart; his children would spend endless hours in this river. Satisfied with "no" they perched themselves along the bank and watched their daddy play; man of the family transforming into a boy, traversing its steep embankment with the full vigor of youth. Wading through shallows, walking along shoals, he inspected multi-colored stones layering the riverbed, worn smooth over time. After an inspiring few minutes he peered upward to find his wife, poised at the center of a single weather-worn beam, precariously placed across the wide expanse, resting on two giants: slabs of granite, facing off from opposing sides. It was

a pitiful excuse for a bridge. Roger would later decide to replace it with a far more substantial version. "You be careful up there." Carolyn was a beautiful woman yet, this day her husband gazed at her with a renewed appreciation of grace. She appeared as an ethereal vision; an angel awash in Heavenly Light.

"Roger. Can you believe this? The Lord works in mysterious ways..."

"...His wonders to behold. I see." He was still staring up from the riverbed.

"Look at the water!" She pointed downward. Illuminating the deepest part of the pool was a perfect circle; white hot spotlight. Craving sudden warmth it provided, trout gravitated to the hot spot like heat-seeking missiles. At first it was a frenzied approach, involving a few awkward intersections. Then they all figured it out. The fish began swimming in tandem within the mobile and temporary perimeter established by the instant infusion of midday sunshine. Their synchronized movements created a whirlpool on the surface. Everyone present was mesmerized. As the beam shifted the crowd dispersed, following the light. Roger actually giggled as he scaled the riverbank. He went directly to Carolyn. Leaning toward an embrace she whispered some poignant words. "It's a wonderful way to spend the day." He wrapped her tightly in his arms.

The children ran ahead as instructed, back up toward the farmhouse, each claiming a portion of its grounds as her private pastoral pathway. The couple thanked their host for an exceptionally generous gift received. Roger finally entered the house. He became instantly distracted; lost in space too ample to absorb it all at once. Mr. Kenyon remained in the kitchen. He sent Roger off to explore, offering him free reign to investigate the place at will. Wandering room to room, the indelible imagery of a riverbed impaled an over-stimulated mind. The father of five lingered here and there, attempting to regain a focus fractured. Effectively house-inspecting, he'd continually reminded himself to remain on alert. A checklist: the heating system, plumbing then wiring; make mental notes; questions to ask. It was his job to determine its adequacy; what the house might lack, what it may need in terms of future improvements and

of course, what the fixes would cost. Utilizing all the self-discipline he could muster, denying himself the luxury of wallowing in the sheer spectacle of the house, he forced himself to overcome the temptation to simply admire it, to walk it as one would a museum, merely to celebrate its existence. This home offered an abundance of space in which to raise a big family. There would be time to enjoy it later. In the interim, it was Roger's responsibility to inspect it as thoroughly and objectively as possible; to look at it with different eyes: to observe it with *indifference*...as a pragmatic, *devil may care* advocate.

Carolyn gathered her children on the front lawn. Exhausted, they collapsed into a pile to rest. She settled in beside them, taking in the aromas, beckoning the supple blades of grass to stroke her slender fingers. Mr. Kenyon emerged from the house holding a tray with a large pitcher of water and four matching glasses, all he had on hand. The temperature was climbing; humidity equally oppressive: Ah, it was summertime in Rhode Island. With the excitement and adventure, everyone was drenched with perspiration, sporting flushed, ruddy cheeks as proof. The young ladies shared, passing glasses, drinking heartily. Carolyn waited for them to replenish their fluids before helping herself. She was startled by the cold pitcher; almost painful to the touch. Filling a glass to the rim, she placed it up against her lips. Shocked, as if jolted by an electrical charge, eyes widened and brightened in equal measure with the first swallow. Never before in her life had she tasted water so frigid or pure, like something straight from the heart of a glacier: Refreshment!

“Mommy! It hurts my teeth!” April, only five years old, was not normally shy about expressing herself. Garbled words were barely intelligible as she'd stuffed a few warm fingers into her mouth, to ease the pain of the oncoming brain freeze. Wrinkling up her face in a disapproving grimace, she obviously took exception to laughter erupting at what she perceived to be her expense.

Mr. Kenyon smiled at the baby of the family, long blond hair plastered to the sides of sweaty cheeks; sea blue eyes peeking out and up at her mother. The cherub stole his heart. In fact, the family's presence brought a sudden ray of light into the life of a lonely old man who feared the darkness of night. He made himself clear in a moment: they were *always* welcome at his home. Carolyn believed she'd rediscovered a long lost friend. His kindness was so

endearing, sincerity so compelling, the instant connection she'd felt with Mr. Kenyon when they first met was coming to fruition; a blossom as fragrant as mountain laurel...as delicate as lady slippers. She recalls it as an inexplicable familiarity, as if it were a well-established friendship with a man who was, in reality, a virtual stranger when they were introduced. Neither seemed to feel the initial reticence associated with such an awkward circumstance. Instead, they'd tacitly accepted the feeling with a knowing silence. The sensation they shared did not require any further acknowledgement.

As she sat there observing a man reveling in laughter, an insidious sadness crept into Carolyn. Diverting her eyes so to avoid anyone's perception of the suddenly languid mood, the woman looked down, studying a glass cradled in her hands. Beads of water resembling tears trickled down the face of the vessel, leaving streaks to mark a journey. Chasing the frost from its surface, droplets paced a solitary dirge, tracing icy paths. The vivid, haunting imagery instantly evoked a memory; a somber reflection, one entirely contrary to her formerly uplifted spirit; the pure elation she was experiencing only moments before. Several lines of poetry, pensive words Carolyn memorized in youth, consumed her mind then began escaping her lips. They listened attentively, familiar with the practice as well as their mother's proclivity for drawing on fine literature during more poignant moments in life. Her tone softened; the reverence in her voice stilled the birdsong and stunned their host. It was as if the garden flowers humbly bowed their blossoms as surrounding stone walls knelt in prayer. Reciting the lines betrayed her melancholy mood:

*"And still other brothers and sisters,
Linking their arms together,
Walked down the dusty road where once he ran
And into the deep green valley
To sit on the stony banks of the stream he loved
And let the murmuring waters
Wash over their blood-hot feet with a springing crown of tears."*

Mr. Kenyon leaned back, observing the gentlewoman while she spoke. He

was visibly moved by her rendition of the poem with which he was familiar; asking what caused her to recall this particular passage when she'd finished. The children remained respectfully quiet for the duration. They all listened.

"Look." Lifting her glass as delicate droplets mournfully descended, "They resemble human tears." Searching Mr. Kenyon's moistened brow and soulful eyes for acceptance; she found only sadness akin to her own.

"It was beautiful, mom: Joseph Langland." Andrea shared an appreciation.

"She says poems like that to us all the time." Nancy directed her comment toward Mr. Kenyon apologetically; apparently the nine-year-old spitfire felt the necessity to expound. Leaping to her feet, hands propped on skinny hips, she made an impatient plea, a rather terse request of her mother. "Can we go back to play in the barn again?" Her precocious stance demanding an equally terse response, if not another form of covert discipline, Nancy was officially bored and everyone knew it; a hard to *little miss* moment.

"I do not *say* poetry, sweetheart. One *recites* poetry." Infinitely patient, the mother had to be so, especially with her second-born, condemned as she was to a life of trial by spitfire.

"No...you *say* it right out of your head!" This persistent pixie had a point.

Having been a poet since childhood, becoming the mother of five left no time for writing it though she conceded to sharing whatever her memory retained.

"Yes. I suppose I do."

"You do." Several spoke in unison.

The familial interaction completely engaged Mr. Kenyon's imagination. He listened intently to every word uttered by a bevy of ladies at rest on his lawn. It was obviously his pleasure to do so.

"So? Can we *please* go back into the barn now?" It was Nancy again.

"No, we have to go home soon. It's getting late." Carolyn had rendered her verdict. Before Nancy could challenge it again Andrea pulled her sister to the ground, planting the child firmly beside her: Argument over.

Roger joined his family and host on the front lawn, discreetly thanking Mr. Kenyon for allowing him such an extensive tour of this property without the presence of a realtor. Gratefully, he accepted the last glass of water.

"Isn't it great?" Soliciting a response, Carolyn realized Roger could not yet speak for gulping. Nancy followed up on the subject in his hand.

"Mommy said poetry about it." Thus, divulging no particular secret to dad.

"She did, huh? I'm not surprised." Patting his daughter on the head, Roger asked Mr. Kenyon the next logical question: "Where does *this* come from?"

"There's a spring...over there." Pointing with pride at a sharply rising hill on the other side of Round Top Road, Mr. Kenyon informed them that half of the two hundred acres was directly across the street. Escorting Roger away from the family, he spoke privately with his prospective buyer. After awhile they rejoined the group; time to bid a fond farewell. Cordially, Mr. Kenyon first extended a firm handshake to Roger; then held Carolyn's hand tenderly in his own while they spoke, not wanting to release her delicate fingers from his grasp. Exchanging pleasantries, their children loaded up as a resounding chorus of *thank you* and *goodbye* rang out from their car. Then pulling onto Round Top Road from the far side of the circular driveway, everyone waved as they passed, leaving dear old Mr. Kenyon standing alone in his front yard. Carolyn looked back longingly toward the sympathetic solitary figure; a man for whom she had developed an abiding affection; an isolated man who now seemed quite frail, somewhat smaller than she had previously perceived him to be. As they departed, Carolyn again became plagued by the same insidious sadness which seized her on the lawn. The vision of him as they drove away infused her consciousness. Committing him to memory, as if he was a poem, the haunting image lingered. Her troubled soul had sensed its own captivity, caught in the clutches of an inescapable remorse she could not comprehend. She could not bear to leave him behind and did not want to leave the farm.

As expected, the girls promptly fell asleep. The parents felt drowsy enough to do the same while traveling at light speed. It had been quite an adventure. Roger kept his eyes focused on the unfamiliar roads, searching for landmarks or memorizing the route, for future reference. He did not utter a sound until Carolyn asked what Mr. Kenyon had said as they walked off together. Roger leaned toward her, whispering, so as not to be overheard from the back seat.

“He wants **us** to have it; he’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

With a single glance, the light in her husband’s penetrating eyes released a surge of adrenaline through Carolyn’s veins, causing her to shudder. Though appearing aloof, unattached to the notion, she easily read his tone of voice; Roger wanted the old farm just as much as she did, maybe even more. As the weight of self-doubt lifted, her spirit soared. She was suddenly wide awake. The couple remained silent for the duration of the lengthy ride back to their little house in the crowded suburbs and did not speak of it again until much later in the evening, after their children had gone off to bed.

Having checked in on the girls, Carolyn rejoined her husband in the parlor. Settling in on a sofa together, there was much to discuss. They spent the rest of the night relaying impressions and exploring their options. A conversation began with an unexpected announcement.

“Andrea asked me why we went where we did today; if it was because we were moving to the farm.” Exasperated, motherly sighs escaped as her lungs collapsed. Their eldest daughter was known to be precocious and a bit too perceptive at times...and this qualified as one of those times.

“What did you say to her?” Roger was concerned. Neither of them wanted to set their girls up for another loss or disappointment, especially considering the devastating events they had endured that summer. Neither was willing to make a promise they might not be able to keep.

“I told her to get some sleep and we’d talk in the morning. I put her off.”

“She knows.” Roger appeared distressed, his furrowed brow as evidence.

“She knows **nothing** yet...that’s why she asked.” Carolyn reassured him.

“**We** don’t know anything either...so what are we going to tell them?”

“The truth...” Roger nodded in agreement. “...we’ll tell them the truth.”

The children had not asked any questions that morning. They were thrilled just to go somewhere, **anywhere** with mommy and daddy. The nature of their excursion prompted suspicion in the eldest as Mr. Kenyon was a stranger to them, not among a group of friends with which she was familiar. Andrea had observed the way he’d spoken with her parents; the way they spoke with one another. Naturally curious, by the end of the trip she was listening for clues, whereas her sisters remained oblivious to the process embarked upon, merely enjoying their day moment-by-moment in that grand and fascinating place, entirely unaware of the significance of their fateful journey into the woods. Resolving to tell all of them the next morning, the couple moved on to other equally relevant issues. This was, after all, a very old house begging for some long overdue attention. To determine the extent of renovations required and at what costs incurred, they revisited their place in the country...in mind.

“The house is dark and dreary and the ugly linoleum has simply got to go!” It had not escaped the woman’s notice...several floors covered up in plastic!

“It has **no** insulation; none. The heating system is antiquated, the electricity is original wiring. It hasn’t been updated since it was installed in the twenties and it needs a paint job. Then there’s the plumbing. That septic system has to be inspected and **ONE** bathroom is totally inadequate for seven people. Did you see the in-house/out-house in the woodshed? Can you imagine using **that** for a bathroom, not **if** but **when** your pipes are frozen up?” They were giddy. They were playful. They were already in over their heads.

Roger was doing his best to be sensible and responsibly critical about this property but he’d been bitten and smitten, like a man who had fallen deeply in love at first sight with a mysterious maiden and was then unfairly expected to point out all of her flaws. He didn’t really see them. Love is blind, so they

say. In terms of scrutinizing a house with major faults, his heart wasn't in it; yet his heart was in it, envisioning the beauty of a place he secretly longed to call ***home***. The man was already invested, having nothing to do with a check.

"You love it as much as I do!" Carolyn felt compelled to state the obvious.

Flustered by her innate ability to see right through his false bravado, Roger pulled Carolyn over to his chest and began stroking her dark, flowing hair as he scrambled for a response.

"I know you want a place in the country." He was placating her again.

"No. I want ***that*** place in the country." She had pulled away long enough to stare directly into his eyes as she made her request; a veritable demand made of the Universe. There it was: Light. She had seen it down by the river; she'd seen it in their car. Snuggling beside him again, Carolyn paused, awaiting his next argument against the purchase of a farm; but the opposition never came.

"It will be a lot of work." Roger was all business...even in matters of love. "For both of us." No time for a congratulatory pat on the back, no money for the finder's fee, let alone the farm; Roger understood the ramifications of this decision, the nature of the challenge ahead of them. "I don't know if we can pull it off...but we can certainly try." Carolyn squeezed her husband's neck. Those were precisely the words she'd wanted to hear...a lover's leap of faith.

They talked late into that night; preliminary plans being made as potential resources were being reviewed. Ideas explored. A heady conversation began yielding to exhaustion. It was when Carolyn began to divulge having a rather unusual reaction to their return "home" earlier in the evening.

"When we drove back into Cumberland I had the strangest feelings. It was like coming into a foreign land; unfamiliar territory...and yet I knew my way around...as if going somewhere I've never been before but knowing where I was...the ***identical*** sensation I have at the farm. Diamond Hill Road, Chapel Four Corners, even the Monastery looks...I don't really know how to explain it...***different***. It was as if I was having a *déjà vu* experience. It was surreal."

Her transition had begun: Metamorphosis. Roger listened attentively, without passing judgment, his silence; a tacit approval of her previous observations. He'd grasped what Carolyn meant, though she continued to explain; unaware his experience had been quite similar to her own in many respects.

"When we turned on to Mohawk Street, it was even more bizarre; this road looked so narrow and crowded; these houses seem much smaller to me now." Frustrated by a perceived inability to articulate the sensation, she pressed on: "You know, that feeling you'd have if you left home as a kid, then went back to revisit a childhood home years later; how small it would appear compared to your memory of it. God! We were away from here for less than five hours! ***Everything*** feels so different now, as if we don't even belong here anymore, like we've already moved on...out to the farm. Isn't that weird?"

Thoughtfully considering her comments, Roger admitted to feeling several oddities all his own. Carolyn was relieved, having been initially reluctant to share these perceptions with her husband. It soon became evident: he too had a reaction; closely akin to her own. He found himself plagued by the aromas of the distinctly earthy scent; the cellar of the farmhouse. It was as if it had been trapped, embedded in his sinuses; an unusual scent strangely enticing to him. He divulged having been distracted by visions; recurring images of the farm, especially by the river. He then revealed his deepest and most personal reaction: he'd never felt so attracted or attached to a place before; so anxious to return: like being drawn into a magnetic field of streams and dreams.

A quiet evening spent together renewed something lost between the couple. Though exhausted by the eventful day, they regained enthusiasm squelched over time by the burdens of responsibilities which come with a large family. Ironically, it was a mutual decision to assume more responsibility which had restored energy and vitality to a withering relationship, by necessity; a union replenished by sipping the nectar: a love potion. Once again, a loving couple with a common purpose, it would require every reserve of strength, resilience and fortitude they possessed to complete this transaction. It may require more than mere mortals could muster; perhaps

some Divine Intervention would be called for as an act of God: The Holy Spirit. A Guiding Light as a beacon in the night. A clarion call disguised as the wind; all, calling them home...again.

A single conversation solidified an intention; a commitment to one another strengthened their resolve to do whatever was best on behalf of their family. Providing the children with a secure, wholesome environment, one ordained to foster growth and creativity had become a priority for both. While honing his skills in the fine art of personal communication, Roger paused to reflect, seemingly lost in thought. He made an unsolicited, unexpected statement:

“I hear confession is good for the soul.”

“What have *you* done?” Carolyn snapped to attention. “Roger...what.”

Mr. Perron had apparently made his own connections with Mr. Kenyon. He told her about the talk they had just prior to leaving the farm that afternoon. They’d struck an agreement; two men reached an understanding regarding an amount of time necessary to pull all of this together. Essentially, Mr. Kenyon had given Roger some breathing room with his “as long as it takes” attitude, insisting he wanted his home to go to their family. Roger admitted making a conscious decision to pursue this property from the moment he’d pulled into the yard, long before he stepped foot across the threshold of a dream house. He had become captivated by an old man and an older farm, thinking it *was* indeed the perfect place to raise a family. Roger confessed his belief in their destiny being revealed. He, too, envisioned them living there already.

“You let me sweat for nothing.” Her feigned resentment was transparent.

“It’s been a hot day. You’d be sweating anyway.” He winked...a sly one.

“Not so hot down by the river.” Reminding him of the respite they enjoyed, his wife admitted she *knew* it was a done deal the instant he pulled the shoes off his feet and rolled up his trousers.

“The river.” Roger’s eyes sparkled like sunlight dancing on its surface. He

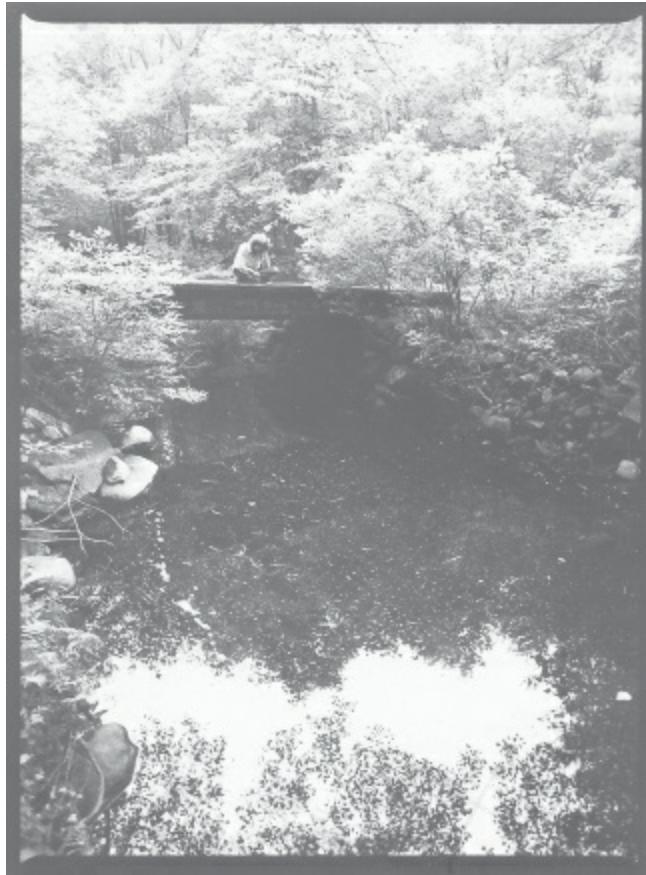
was enamored with the place; Carolyn knew her husband would do whatever he could to procure the piece of property. While they frolicked there in mind, absorbing magical imagery, it felt as if they had been transported to another dimension, an alternate reality. Describing the sensation to each other as an odd combination of *déjà vu* and surrealism, they wondered why they'd been so comfortable there. Why did the farm feel so familiar? It was as if they had both been there before, perhaps in another space and time? (A little spooky.)

"I think we found the Garden of Eden. It even has an apple tree!"

"**We** found it?" Carolyn skeptically cocked an eyebrow in his direction.

"Better be careful about eating the fruit." Roger found himself so amusing.

Carolyn settled into total relaxation; a true indulgence for a mother of five. A few more words residing in the recesses of her mind found their way to her lips; private suggestions floating on whispers aimed toward a husband's ear; some shameless hussy remarks regarding Adam and Eve. Roger, embracing a suggestion, along with his wife, they went off to bed, prepared to share more with each other...undercover...cloaked by the darkness of night.



~ Carolyn gazing into a fountain of youth ~

Children eagerly gathered around the table for breakfast as Carolyn did the honors; filling their bowls with maple oatmeal. Roger passed the toast along.

“Did all of you have a good time at Mr. Kenyon’s farm?” She had to ask.

“Oh mommy, I loved the barn!” Really? Nancy was bound to outburst first. “All it needs is some horses!”

“And cows!” Cindy thought it could really use some cows.

“It’s beautiful.” Andrea developed a keen appreciation of nature at a young age and found her true contentment on a lovely trip to bountiful; the farm: a place where she desperately wanted to live and never wanted to leave again.

Spontaneous chatter erupted in the crowd. Carolyn glanced toward Roger.

He promptly stood and began wandering the room, reveling in a *Santa Claus* sensation, like watching over the girls while they opened a big gift intended for all of them. He couldn't help himself...he simply had to interrupt.

"How would you like to live there?" Suddenly inundated with flailing arms wrapped around his torso, Roger laughed. "Guess I got my answer." Andrea leaned into her mother; their brief exchange of "I knew it!" and "I know it!" whispered before turning to embrace her father. It was a family reunion, the picture of hope for a brighter future...a place in the country for all to enjoy but not just *any* place in the country. This place was miraculous and they all knew it from the moment their family arrived on the property.

"All right...all right...everybody sit down. We'll have to talk about this." Following directions, the girls reclaimed their seats as Roger took his place at the head of the table. "Your mother and I have decided to *try* and buy the farm. But all of you need to understand that it won't be easy and we might not get it, no matter how hard we try. It's a lot of money. A lot. We promise to do our best and that's *all* we can promise. Any questions?"

April raised her hand. "Are we moving in with Mr. Kenyon?" Apparently she'd not yet grasped the notion of relocation. April was just an infant when the family moved to Cumberland. It was the only home she had ever known. Their house on Mohawk Street seemed smaller to them, as well. These ladies were enthralled by the property they'd visited. Her mother responded.

"No, honey. Mr. Kenyon would sell his house *to* us then he would pack up all his things and go to live someplace else." Carolyn explained an unfamiliar process to the perplexed child as simply as she could.

"But where would he go?" A logical question: as a follow-up from Cindy.

"I don't know. It would be *his* decision; probably a much smaller house."

"Can he stay there with us if he doesn't want to leave, or if he doesn't have a place to go?" Christine always had a generous spirit...and a keen intuition.

"But he would not be selling the house if he wanted to stay there." Carolyn

inadvertently uttered a false statement. The sweet old man was as attached to the farm as anyone on Earth could be and he had already begun the painful process of mourning the loss of it, long before it went on the market. It had been his home for so long he could not imagine leaving it behind.

“Would we get the barn, too?” Nancy was fixated on the rustic structure.

“Yes, of course.” Carolyn smiled. Curiosity suddenly seemed a natural trait in all of her children.

“And the river, too?” Chris had most wanted to go wading with her daddy.

Mom laughed. “Yes, the river too...yard and barn and river and much more you haven’t even seen yet. The farm has two hundred acres of land, a pine grove, a river, a pond and an old cellar hole to explore!”

“Where’s the pond?” Andrea was anxious to explore it in her imagination.

“What’s an acre?” Chris was looking forward to mathematical calculations.

Roger fielded this question with words which could be readily understood. “You know how big the yard is, right? If you walk from the backside of the barn and then follow the stone wall down and around to the other side of the house then back up to the road again...***that*** is six acres of land.” They could not yet conceive of it; could not absorb the idea of having perpetual access to so much space...land overwhelming to the senses...like imagining the size of the Universe! Their faces were flush with excitement, the promise of new life in a virtual paradise, what they perceived to be an extraordinary place...even if they could not yet think that BIG.

“And now for the ***bad*** news...” Listening attentively as their father spoke, the girls became as sober while searching their mother’s face for her reaction to his words of forewarning. It was only fair and they agreed to tell the truth.

“No more trips this summer; no more trips for awhile. No more dinners out or ice cream cones or shopping for clothes, except for school. No more rides at **Rocky Point** or chowder and clam cakes at the **Shore Dinner Hall** and no

more boat rides to get there, either. We'll have to sell the boat and that means we have to scrape it down and paint it first." Reality began to settle into their young minds yet there weren't any complaints forthcoming; what their father was saying translated into dollars and good sense. No one felt deprived. They all understood what their parents were trying to do for them. The girls were grateful, confident in the mission. They had faith in mom and dad.

"We will all have to work together." Carolyn spoke. "Your father and I will do everything we can to buy the farm but it means we will all have to make sacrifices to have the home of our dreams. Do you understand?" One of her children took the words more literally than the others had. Nancy would soon reveal her innovative entrepreneurial spirit.

After breakfast, Carolyn phoned Mrs. Hertzog. She arrived that afternoon with the purchase and sales agreement, explaining how she would hold onto the five hundred dollar check until their closing date and could then apply it toward the down payment. The welcome pronouncement took some financial pressure off the couple in the short term but both of them knew, by signing that document, they would be literally signing their life away...life as they'd known it, anyway. In the coming weeks their initial euphoria would subside, replaced by a steadfast resolve involving the entire family. It meant sacrifices made; it meant giving up and pitching in. Everyone was expected to make an investment; no matter how small, it would prove to be significant. The girls put their heads together to develop a plan, including some ingenious ideas.

Roger literally disappeared; lending new meaning to his job description as an "on-the-road" salesman. As it turned out, he was not the only entrepreneur in the family. Several of them were enrolled in a summer activity camp at the elementary school. They took a course in arts and crafts. The house became cluttered with festive wares. Christine had a brilliant smile, platinum blond hair and deep blue eyes the size of cup saucers. Secretly knowing she was an adorable eight-year-old, Chris decided to take her show on the road, just like daddy. Gathering up all the macramé potholders she could get her hands on, she even emptied her mom's linen drawers for good measure; taking aprons and hand towels along with **real** potholders the woman used on a daily basis. Off she went, bodyguard in tow; biggest sister. Nobody in the neighborhood

was going to mess with *her* anymore! As they went door-to-door, primarily to neighbors they knew, sisters told their story about the beautiful farm their mother found and how they were all helping to buy it. In a few days, Chrissy was flush with cash...and flat out-of-stock. Of course, the next time Carolyn needed a potholder from the linen drawer she was shit out of pot-holder luck! Though the girls worked feverishly during their last weeks of summer camp, manufacturing as many items as time and materials allowed; the kids simply could not keep up with demand: a not-so-subtle message received? Perhaps.

Piggy banks overflowed into the ginger jar tucked in a corner of the kitchen counter. It was their tangible testament to a commitment made by their entire family. Carolyn was impressed by such moxie: a willingness to work beside their parents with common purpose. They too had a dream; a vision quest in mind, imagining what it would be like to live in an old country estate. Nancy had one particular vision quest: Horses! This is why she took it so seriously, bringing the profession of “door-to-door” sales into another dimension.

Late one afternoon in August Nancy approached her mother in the midst of preparing dinner. Carolyn was distracted; she did not notice that her highly motivated daughter had an ulterior motive while offering to “help” clean up food debris from the kitchen counter. Collecting all the discarded waste from ingredients required for Yankee pot roast, placing them into a brown paper bag, the nasty concoction included an assortment of onion skins, potato peels and carrot shavings, as well as other sundry items: a wide variety of wet and smelly yucky stuff from their kitchen garbage pail. With her covert mission accomplished, she disappeared. Prancing proudly up their street toward the home of her very best customer, a stained paper bag swinging in the breeze, Carolyn thought nothing more of it. She sealed the lid on the pressure cooker then settled down with a cup of coffee. The other girls were outside playing with Cathi. Assuming Nancy was with them, she was surprised as the perky little pixie flew back through the kitchen door, frantically waving a crisp new dollar bill. Big brown eyes all but hidden beneath that windblown mass of sandy blond hair, she had run home so fast, it tangled in the wind she created with friction caused by traveling at the speed of light.

“I’m back! Look what I got, mom!” The girl resembled a sunbeam bursting through a cluster of billowing clouds.

“Where’d you go, honey? Where did you get *that?*” Carolyn was delighted, for the moment.

“From Mrs. Hill!” Glowing with sweat, innocence and certain satisfaction of the sale, Nancy presented her mother with all the profits. “She paid me for bringing her our scraps...for her garden!”

“What?!?” Carolyn leapt from her skin...a virtual out-of-body experience. A bit overzealous, Nancy had over-stepped in a way she did not understand.

“She said she *needed* it for the milks pile.” Nancy was glowing aloud.

“Her *mulch* pile?” Carolyn’s heart began to pound. Her face flushed. What would people think? “Honey, you *can’t* sell our *garbage* to the neighbors!”

“But she told me she *needed* them!” Nancy’s full lower lip began quivering uncontrollably. “Mrs. Hanaway bought some of it, too!” The child retrieved three more quarters from her pocket then laid them on the table as her sweet little face wrinkled up like the soiled paper bags she had just delivered to the kind-hearted women who lived at the top of the street. Carolyn sighed aloud, “Oh, my God” then quickly hugged a very resourceful daughter, praising her efforts on behalf of the family. Cathi entered the kitchen; she could not help but notice remnants of distress on a good friend’s face. A stream of siblings followed. Carolyn gently explained their situation, so as not to hurt Nancy’s feelings any further. Cathi’s hearty laughter erupted abruptly, startling them. *“Brilliant! Pure profit! A stroke of genius! What outstanding initiative! Hire that girl!”* Nancy’s trembling lower lip curled back up into a smile. She then issued a heartfelt plea, promising never to do it again...at least not with the garbage. All was forgiven. (Carolyn would return the money later on.)

Cathi Urbonas was a friend indeed. She had known their family for several years and established an endearing relationship with Carolyn both cherished. Cathi adored the children; the sentiment was mutual. Astonished by Roger’s

demure reaction to his wife's impulsive decision to purchase the farm, it was the last response she expected. However, since everyone else was onboard, she decided to help. Practically worshipped by them, thrilled to spend time with Cathi whenever possible, she kept kids very busy. In spite of what their father predicted, the trips were *not* over. Cathi moved in for the summer. She took the girls out to parks and concerts, festivals and any other *free* event she could locate in the area. Once, she took all of them to Harvard Yard. On the way through Boston Common another Vietnam War protest was underway. No sheltering them from *that* storm, though she tried to divert rapt attention from that raucous rally. Cathi was a bona fide hippy chick, as free a spirit as they'd ever know in life. Supremely happy, spreading her joyfulness liberally throughout the land of the free, her family was equally inspiring, especially her mother, Elsie. The children frequently spent time at their lovely home in Seekonk, Massachusetts. There they learned much in her presence, instilling an appreciation for classical music and the fine arts in each one of them. The house was much like a lived-in museum; brimming with elegant antiques and fine collectibles Cathi's mother acquired over the years, many of which she'd found displayed on someone's lawn at a yard sale.

What remained of that summer was spent in Cathi's company. If they were not swimming in her pool they were packing a lunch for the beach. Instructed to locate the smoothest stones, the most interesting shells in the sand, Cathi would then gather their load into a towel and bring once-buried treasure back to her house. There they'd spend hours in her mother's artist studio painting faces onto their *pet rocks* or dipping tie-dyed tee shirts. Days passed weaving sandals or bracelets or anklets, making wind chimes from rawhide and shells, drawing *happy faces* and *peace signs* on anything they could sell within the neighborhood of people apparently eager to see them all go, based upon the number of items the girls continually sold around town. What Cathi did over those months was of immeasurable importance. It provided Carolyn freedom to take contract jobs here and there; she did some modeling and knew people in the fashion industry who kept her busy designing for them. Roger was on the road. During the month of August he spent only four days at home. When he was there, everyone hung around with him, so he put them to work. It was quite the chore to scrape and clean; to sand and paint a twenty-four-foot boat. As barnacles are hazardous, especially to tender young skin, Roger took that

task on himself. His daughters observed, longing to pitch in. There would be plenty of work ahead. A chore nearing completion, no one felt left out of the process. Over the course of four Sundays the older kids learned and perfected an entire series of skills as the two youngest got their first taste of real labor. They experienced the satisfaction of a job well done. The boat was gorgeous. It had never looked so good and looked far too good to sell; then it was gone. Though they all briefly lamented the loss, the gain was becoming substantial: a down payment kept growing and growing...by some saving grace.

Back-to-school shopping was less extravagant that year. Necessity was the norm. No one complained. The girls studied hard and did their best, excitedly sharing news of an impending move with friends well before they knew for certain they were actually leaving. Roger worked incessantly. Carolyn staged the house to the extent she could. Time to put it on the market; another listing for Mrs. Hertzog, who'd remained helpful in every way she could, primarily with the paperwork involved in this complicated transaction. In preparation, Mr. Kenyon made arrangements for a survey of the land. Things were going along as well as could be expected...or unexpected! No trouble yet, but...

One Saturday morning in early September, Carolyn called Mr. Kenyon. He invited the family up to the farm for a visit. Roger was away but Cathi went along. It was on this day she realized what all of the sacrifice had been for, redoubling her personal commitment to help them acquire the farm. Another splendid day, though considerably cooler than their previous visit, this time the girls were permitted to go jump in the river! The host stood with Carolyn on the bank watching them, Cathi included, playing for an hour or so in the shallows while Carolyn quietly spoke with her gentleman friend. He seemed content, obviously enjoying the sight of his company. A peaceful expression on his face, Mr. Kenyon told her he'd wait until they were ready; no rush, no pressure...no hurry. It was the first time Carolyn suspected he did not want to leave his home. She sensed his grief; a reluctance to part with the place. A difficult decision, one likely made by necessity, due to his advanced age. She likewise sensed hopefulness in the patient man, someone reconciling a loss before it occurred; a faithful belief that *this* was the family to take his place.

The bond, a genuine affection between them coupled with a determination to create a new reality from something as ethereal as desire.

All six ladies got filthy! They had come in Cathi's car, so, if it was all right with her, Carolyn did not question the wisdom of taking the plunge. Its water was low; crayfish abundant. Stones were gathered up and stuffed in pockets. All was right with the world. Preparing to leave, Mr. Kenyon held Carolyn's hand a bit too long...again. He loved her. Embracing him spontaneously, her impetuous outburst caused him to blush. Imagine that. No further words were spoken. None were necessary.

That afternoon the girls remained lively; no naps, in spite of all the energy they had expended. It was time for some excited sightseeing. The village was compact but charming, speckled with historic homes and lovely landscaping. Weaving her way through town, Cathi was prone to sudden turns: jerking its wheel, pointing the car toward roads which looked particularly inviting. It was better than a trip to **Rocky Point**; a thrill-ride with the wild woman beat out the **Wildcat**. The library seemed small but the general store appeared to be adequate. It was important to the girls to see their new respective schools. Crossing over the narrow bridge at the waterfall, astounded by the beauty of Mill Pond, Andrea was delighted to see the vintage theater beside it, a place "Now Showing" movies every weekend. Once they were out on the highway again, each sweet urchin began emptying saturated pockets, examining their haul; something to occupy the time during a long haul back to Cumberland. A festive outing, it would be their last before officially moving to the farm. Harrisville would be their destination: a new hometown on the horizon.

The next few months were exasperating for Roger and Carolyn. They had to sell their house at a substantial profit in order to afford to buy their farm. Mrs. Hertzog listed it, repeatedly showing the place. Working diligently to close the deal, her relentless efforts finally paid off; it wasn't enough. Family and friends rallied around the couple. Roger **sold** in his sleep. He then sold back the cash value of his life insurance policy: whatever it took. The down payment slowly accrued. Another expense would suddenly emerge to gobble

it up. Weeks passed. Their house in the suburbs was sold; they had to leave! Waiting patiently, Mr. Kenyon kept his word. A survey of the farm came in ten acres short, for some inexplicable reason. Their down payment was *still* coming up short. Reassuring them the land *was there*, Mr. Kenyon offered to lower the asking price, an incredibly generous gesture on behalf of a family. Finally! In mid-December of 1970, they closed on the farm: bought and sold. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord and pass the nectar! They were homeward bound.

As the Perrons celebrated Christmas for their final time in Cumberland, the children were instructed to hang onto all the empty boxes for their toys. That year gifts came from everywhere; seemingly from the ether. Friends close to them *knew* their cupboards were bare, coffers depleted by the purchase of a farm. From an attorney to real estate agent; neighbors to teachers, Santa had some serious competition! Cathi brought gifts...books and more **Weebles!** Family members and friends alike emerged to assist in a *moving* endeavor. It was a glorious celebration; a testament to precious, enduring relationships.

Well beyond weary, an ambitious couple had over-extended themselves in every conceivable way. They decided to take a few days off to rest and relax, spending time with the ladies instead of hovering over notarized documents. Grateful for these many blessings bestowed upon them, it was time to pack; what that entailed was much more than Carolyn could handle alone; Cathi came to help. When she arrived, so did the running joke which had begun the previous summer, feigning the *deprivation* associated with buying the farm.

Kids to Cathi: “What’s for dessert?” Cathi to kids: “**J-E-L-L-O...Nothing!**” To this day, it remains the standard answer to the question.

During the second week of January 1971 the real adventure began. All else had been a prelude to it. Snow flurries cluttered the sky that frigid morning, a precursor to the storm to come. Their truck arrived on schedule. By the time it was loaded and all ready to go it had been repeatedly swept clean of an icy, impacted residue. Still, in spite of that maintenance, the driver could not see through a frozen, crystal-encrusted windshield. Roger had to engage flashing

lights and lead the way. By necessity, they would be forced to crawl along to their place in the country, no matter how anxious they were to head on *home*. In spite of the trial, spirits were high. At last! The Perron family was moving to the farm; the home of their dreams...and eventual nightmares.

Their caravan, including the truck and three full cars, labored through the countryside. Though state highways had remained relatively clear, the same could not be said for the narrow, winding roads ahead of them. It took more than two hours to arrive at their destination, less than thirty miles from that journey's point of origin. A snowstorm is nothing unusual in Rhode Island so everyone took it in stride. Mr. Kenyon; waiting for them with hot chocolate and cookies, fresh from the oven. It took all day to complete the task but by evening, rooms had been chosen and beds assembled. The whole family went down for a long winter's nap...all except for one.

Roger waited for his wife to fall asleep before rising again. He roamed the place, their new old home as quietly as wooden floors allow. Reflecting upon an eventful day he cautiously made his way through the darkened dwelling, a few rooms still clinging to an echo. Though his mind was racing, the pace of his feet deliberately slowed; obstacles at every turn. Passing by several boxes precariously stacked beside their upside down rocking chair, Roger paused to reflect upon the necessity of having to move something else, anything else at the end of a very long day. He did, and managed to do so without waking the dead. No cause for alarm until the morning when several fast little feet would complicate an equation. Nearly tripping over the toy which had no business being where it was in his path, Roger quickly decided he required more light to navigate a treacherous space. A lamp stood alone in a dim recessed corner of the dining room. Reaching for it; murmuring: "Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, or the kids." Roger was grateful there was a bulb inside and pulled on its chain. Illumination: Let there be Light. The shadowed space instantly consumed a soft yellow glow it cast into the night. Suddenly Roger recalled the rather ambiguous statement Mr. Kenyon had made earlier in the day, just prior to leaving his lifelong home. It knocked on the closed door in his mind, requesting entry and proper consideration.

The father of five righted an old rocking chair then claimed it for himself. Though the snowstorm had subsided, its residual wind was still howling like wolves in the woods. Motionless, he sat in moonlight filtered by lace curtains which had found their proper windows in day one. Carolyn had worked hard. The happy homemaker was on task inside before their last piece of furniture came off a truck outside; she had already begun decorating. He admired her efforts and her stamina. Though he found the house chilly, undoubtedly due to a brutal cold front plunging temperatures to single digits, he was warmed by thoughts of his family. The girls would now have the chance to spend an idyllic childhood in a place quite different from the harsh city streets he had known as a boy. A father smiled with pride and certain satisfaction. This was a blessing...no curses in sight that night.

Lamplight flickered; tightening the bulb Roger heard Mr. Kenyon's cryptic words streaming throughout his consciousness, forewarning him to leave the lights on at night. It had seemed innocuous enough at the time, even sensible advice regarding a house full of girls trying to find their way to the bathroom in darkness. Still, he had found something troubling about those words. The phrase haunted him, perhaps in its delivery. Just before taking his leave from a home all his own for so long, Mr. Kenyon invited Roger outside for a walk. Horizontally blowing snow would have deterred even the heartiest of Yankee souls and yet an elder gentleman seemed entirely unaffected by the elements. Roger accompanied him, as requested. Though the men had walked together before, this time they appeared to be a single solitary figure obscured by the swirling gusts of icy-white, wind-driven haze. Mr. Kenyon paused prior to issuing a statement as opaque as the air. His thoughtfully considered words were spoken in a foreboding tone Roger found foreign. An unusual phrase; Roger dismissed it in mind, as it made no sense to him at that time. He said: ***"For the sake of your family, leave the lights on at night."*** With no further explanation forthcoming, without one being requested, Roger presumed it to be entirely benign; the well-intended ramblings of an old man who had lived alone far too long. The suggestion tapped Roger on the shoulder as he leaned in toward the lamp. Raw nerves had been frayed ragged by events of the day. The man was exhausted. He stared at the brass pull chain dangling beside his fingertips. Mr. Kenyon was right. Though moonlight was nice enough, it was insufficient for guidance in the dark of night; it ***was*** too dark in the house. He

left the amber lamplight glowing for his girls then went on back to bed.

Harsh winds whipped and curled around the chimney like a cat in perpetual motion; a dog frantically chasing its own tail: the frenetic sounds of creatures stirring things up, not of those attempting to settle into a comfortable position for the night. The valley cried out in shrill tones, begging for mercy from the relentlessly rushing gusts of icy air. Go ahead. Make yourself at home.

They had entered unfamiliar territory in a house which had a secret. Pulling bare legs in beneath a warm quilt, Roger was far too weary to sleep; his mind preoccupied, riddled with images of the tumultuous day. His over-extended muscles ached and throbbed. The man lay there beside his wife, wondering how they'd actually pulled it off. Closing his increasingly heavy eyelids, he remained quite still, listening to new sounds from within a very old house.

Several months would pass before Roger again recalled the cryptic words left with him on this day as two men shook hands, bidding a fond farewell in a snowstorm. It took some time for him to fully grasp the significance of this remark; a legitimate warning. When that time did come he would divulge the content of the conversation to his troubled wife. With a few simple words the dear old man had relayed all he knew or understood about the farmhouse; all he could convey without running the risk of being perceived as a madman by a couple of new friends. It was their initial clue; a foreshadowing of things to come, appearing in the darkness of night...from dusk 'til dawn.

*“Think of yourself as an incandescent power, illuminated and perhaps forever
talked to by God and his messengers.”*

Brenda Ueland
frozen stiff

“Let your joy scream across the pain.”
Ezbeth Wilder

A family was virtually sequestered for the winter; a merciless season beating relentlessly upon their doors and windows, repeatedly threatening to intrude. During the first six weeks or so, their house felt more like an igloo to its new inhabitants. Blowing snow latched onto its rusty screens, which had not been removed in many years. Neglectfulness created conditions which invited the elements, resulting in a visually stunning, brutally cold whiteout from within. Every morning this thin coating of ice laced their windowpanes with unusual patterns splendidly displayed against a backdrop of sunlight, delicately lining the inside of each pane of glass. Every prism promised another cold day. The children, fascinated by one of Nature's marvels, used their hot little hands to leave their personal imprints behind; a patchwork of palms. Fingertips etched names on the artwork, claiming God's work as their own...until their mother noticed the new pre-school ritual; she was the one who would have to clean those windowpanes with her own fingers, too stiff and sore to move without magnifying her pain. Art class dismissed.

Outside, snowdrifts were trapped and jammed into corners of the structure, stretched upward by punishing winds, then narrowed into shafts resembling fingers, each one appearing to point toward the second story of the dwelling, as if with purpose. Storm after storm, week after week, frosted windowpanes shuddered and shivered and shifted in place. Doors trembling with gusts as each swept through the valley; victims of a blustery and unforgiving wind. It was wild and free: Nature on a rampage. Winter was a mesmerizing event.

Enormous icicles clung to the edges of their roof line, as if in desperation. Attached by balls of ice resembling clawed feet, talons latched into the ridge where clapboard met shingle; each one of dozens dangled precariously, their existence contingent upon the temperature and the angle of the Sun. Many of these ice monsters shared the same circumference as those of a smaller tree, creating a fortress-like effect, surrounding the house on all sides. A veritable fence of swords, equally as dangerous, perched ominously overhead, capable of impaling anyone foolish enough to stand beneath them, with catastrophic damage potential. Roger and Carolyn rarely made demands of their children. This hazard was the exception. Naturally, the girls were intrigued. They were ordered to keep a safe distance, to avoid the façade of the house at all times. It was as non-negotiable a point as was the rigid spike that plunged from the

rafters into the ground during one brief thaw, driving itself upright through frozen solid tundra. Carolyn photographed it for emphasis, posting a copy of the picture, a health ***hazard*** on the refrigerator door as a constant reminder to all; these icy giants preserved for posterity, as some proof of their existence. Otherwise, no one would ever believe it! Not unless they saw how a common icicle could, in time, evolve into uncommon weaponry: a mystery of Nature; elemental interplay of water and air conspiring to create: a wonder to behold.

Their harsh environment isolated them. Most extended family members too faint of heart to brave that bleak mid-winter would wait until spring to come out to the country. Carolyn left that ominous photograph in place to show the cowards what they had missed. Their first winter there introduced many new challenges. By comparison, the clan had been coddled in suburban sanctuary. Having a home hundreds of feet away from the road was lovely and private, ***until*** it was time to carve out a narrow path to their bus stop; then it became treacherous and exhausting work. “Digging out” adopted some new meaning. Roger purchased several snow shovels, anticipating the necessity for a group effort, especially whenever he was away on business. He could not always be there to heave and ho, hoist and bail them out. Instead, he taught his girls the finer points of shoveling snow. It was drudgery, to be sure, but could still be accomplished quickly and efficiently when maintenance ***staff*** was properly trained: bend at the knees, use legs rather than arms and the back as leverage. The baby was exempt from the chore, though everyone soon learned valuable lessons regarding teamwork. Their boat had been but a prelude; warming up before the ***real*** workout. So began the building of muscle mass, and a serious Yankee work ethic. In time, cutting, hauling and splitting of wood developed into another exercise regimen, but that’s another story entirely.

Snow: What had been merely an occasional nuisance in Cumberland soon became a ritualistic punishment in Harrisville, with a corresponding penance. Just a few miles north of Providence, Cumberland shared the relative warmth of the Atlantic Ocean; a fringe benefit of their former location had apparently been overlooked. It was almost always five degrees colder and several inches deeper at the farm. It would have been much simpler to remain house-bound for the winter. Seclusion was preferable. Day after day, there remained much

to do to transform their new house into an old home place suitable for them. However, reality intruded. Children had to be registered in school; that meant digging out. Roger needed to return to his business ventures. That too meant digging out. They had to bring in an adequate supply of provisions, usually in preparation for the ***next*** forecast: major snowfall! Parked beside the barn, just getting to her frozen car meant, yes indeed, more digging out. According to Carolyn, a poor old bastard named Sisyphus had it easy.

The bleak season soon became Carolyn's winter of discontent. A pervasive cold, coupled with all the overwhelming work, conspired to create an utterly inhospitable environment. It was the chronic dampness; a chill to the house. It was virtually inescapable, undoubtedly due to the presence of a spring and a deep well in an earthen cellar. A water source which had been so cool and refreshing at the height of summer had become an adversarial opponent in winter. What poured from frosted faucets was unbearably cold to the touch; literally undrinkable until it was warmed on the stove. Imagine being the first one up at dawn only to find a sheet of ice in the toilet: Reality: check it out!

The children seemed to be completely impervious to this ubiquitous cold, spending free time exploring their new old home, albeit swaddled in woolen socks and bulky sweaters. Arranging, then rearranging the bedrooms to their liking kept the blood flowing. They did not seem to notice they were freezing to death, except at night. A sudden influx of heavy quilts helped mitigate the situation somewhat but there were many cold nights when howling wind and bitter temperatures chased the children into others beds, seeking the warmth of a sister who was grateful for the company and an extra body: heat. Andrea had the only full-sized bed among them, able to accommodate two siblings. One rude awakening of a winter season; she rarely woke up alone.

The companionship existing between the children sustained them as they adjusted to new schools and began making friends. Word on the school bus: the power lines were ***excellent*** for sledding! So was their back yard, for that matter. One glorious day Roger came home with a trunk load of new-fangled contraptions aptly named ***flying saucers***; a wild ride better than ***anything*** at ***Rocky Point***. Winter became less daunting; far more amusing. With serious trepidation, Roger and Carolyn took their children up the power lines; father

somewhat less reluctant than the mother, knowing children ***do*** bounce...and bounce they did, straight down the forty-five-degree-angle-hill with enough twists to turn ***any*** stomach, especially the one tucked inside of their mother, heaving up into her throat with every CRASH! Roger had taken precautions, loading bales of hay into the trunk of the car then placing them strategically along that treacherous route to shield his girls from all those granite boulders dotting a rugged landscape. Survival was a prerequisite. Among five siblings it remains one of their fondest memories of childhood; downright dangerous. Death-defying: The Hill of Insanity! Remembered as ***a real scream***; it was a truly slippery slope: good times had by children whose parents would rather forget those adventures and loathe admitting they even allowed it to happen!

On a bright, sunny day in February, Mr. Kenyon arrived unexpectedly for a visit. The children were as delighted as their parents. They all ran outside to greet him as he emptied the pockets of his heavy wool overcoat, bulging with candy. Their gloves had dried, socks were changed, and the wild child crew was about to head out on another ride when he pulled into the yard. Carolyn put on a fresh pot of coffee as she rustled up something sweet for him to eat. Roger joined him in the yard and they stood at the top of the hill, listening to screams of joy. Mr. Kenyon was gratified, at peace with his painful decision to part with the farm. His tired eyes beholding a race to the finish, it was all downhill from there! It was precisely what he envisioned for the family when the time came to relinquish his patch of paradise to those who would become its future caretakers. Though his son had built him a lovely house on his own property, complete with every amenity, it was obvious the gentleman missed his old home place. Roger comforted him with the reassurance of a standing invitation...a warm welcome home, anytime. In heart, it was still his home.

Old Man Winter: Mr. Kenyon appeared to be the personification of this mythical figure. His soft, round brimmed hat was the finishing touch. It did nothing to protect his ears but suited him well nonetheless. Roger asked him to remain for Sunday dinner: Yankee Pot Roast. (Carolyn loved her pressure cooker, especially during the season when it did double duty, functioning as an alternative heat source.) Though gratefully declining their offer, due to a prior commitment with his family, he gladly accepted the hot cup of coffee. With an occasional sip of the steaming brew warming his hands, Mr. Kenyon

began their conversation praising Carolyn's efforts. The kitchen had a whole new personality, one he instantly noticed and found quite fetching. Its many window ledges displayed an assortment of miniature glass bottles along with other collectibles she had gathered over time; each pane delicately lined with lace. The flimsy fabric did nothing to keep down drafts but certainly allowed for some light, creating at least an illusion of warmth. Acknowledged as their first official guest, therefore Carolyn's greatest admirer thus far, he smiled.

"No one will come to see us." Carolyn seemed as relieved as disappointed.

"Can't say I blame them." Empathetically; the elder gentleman understood. He too had known isolation and loneliness on the farm during colder winters. "They come in the spring...then *stay* through the summer." A glint in his eyes hinted at delightful memories made in this setting of a lifetime; a place where he'd spent a lifetime creating precious moments worth remembering. No one knew the extent to which Mr. Kenyon longed to return home.

Carolyn mentioned how cold she found the house, expressing regret that all the fireplaces had been sealed tight. Though this process had occurred during his tenure in the home, he was evasive, avoiding any discussion of it. Instead, he shifted focus outside, telling them the story of two men who got caught up in a blizzard while walking from Webster, Massachusetts toward Harrisville. It happened during the early 1800s when an old blacksmith shop still stood at its right front corner of the property. Apparently the storm was a vicious one; wind so intense it created whiteout conditions, effectively blinding both men. They could not make it to the house; perhaps they could not see it was there: a tragedy. Seeking shelter from the storm, these men crawled up beneath the foundation of the blacksmith shop where they'd met a bitter end: frozen stiff. The decomposing corpses were not discovered until a sustained spring thaw, due primarily to the smell of death in the air.

"Oh my God! That's awful!" Carolyn was shaken by the vivid imagery.

"I'm not surprised." Roger, nonchalant about it. "I'm from Rhode Island and I have never been this cold in my life. And the snow...!"

"You're in the Worcester Valley here; it makes Providence feel more like

Miami Beach...the kind of cold that can freeze you to death." How ominous.

Mr. Kenyon spoke about other fascinations of their property, including an old cellar hole and a giant piece of granite in the shape of a bell covering the abandoned well. He took them for a ride: on an excursion of the imagination through the pine grove, out to the pond toward the back of the property, just inside a borderline to Massachusetts. He told them other stories, too. Rumors persisted about the house being used as a part of the **Underground Railroad** network; speculation still circulating in the village well more than a hundred years later. Reflecting on the history, what little he knew of it, Mr. Kenyon's expression turned suddenly somber. He looked Carolyn directly in the eyes then asked her an equally direct question.

"Is everything all right here?" She didn't know how to interpret his inquiry. It had a strange ring to it; what felt in the moment like some hidden meaning.

"We're settling in just fine; still a few boxes left to unpack but for the most part, we're done. The girls have work left to do upstairs...its getting there."

"Any problems?" The couple couldn't determine what he was asking them; if the question was one of a concerned seller seeking to be of some assistance or if he had anticipated the emergence of a problem known only to him, one which had not been disclosed. Roger responded.

"Other than being chilly most of the time, we are really enjoying the place. It *is* very drafty. I may need to replace that tired old furnace soon. No matter what we do this house just won't hold the heat...it has some very cold spots." There was nothing remotely critical in Roger's tone or content. He was well aware the house had no insulation long before they bought it.

"Clapboard." The former caretaker absolutely knew how cold it could get. He'd done his share of shivering there.

"The house makes some rather unusual noises, even later at night after the wind dies down." While speaking, Carolyn nudged a Danish roll toward their houseguest. She knew he had a sweet tooth.

“It’s old and creaky, just like me.” Mr. Kenyon smiled a coy grin they had all come to know: “Swallows in the chimney.” His quick wink in Carolyn’s direction seemed oddly misplaced, as if she was supposed to understand his cryptic message received with subtle skepticism: “Swallows in the chimney.” Fixing his gaze on the mistress of the house, he attempted to covertly express the esoteric comment. Not sure how to read it or how to reply, Carolyn raised another issue instead. She had accumulated a series of questions during their first few weeks in the farmhouse.

“I wish we had a proper set of keys. None of these keys fit any of the locks. I’ve tried them all.” Carolyn conveyed her concerns with some tension in her voice, a reflection of the trepidation she felt about often being home alone.

“Lost, I suppose. Years ago.”

“Does your son have a set?” Carolyn sought resolution. He shook his head.

“I never locked the doors. No need. No one will bother you here.”

The kitchen door blew open; wind and five snow bunnies entered en masse.

“Straight to the bathroom. Wet clothes into the tub.” Carolyn pointed one finger in the direction she wanted them to travel. They dutifully obeyed.

“Close that door! You’ll let all the heat out!” Roger was the door police.

“What heat would that be?” Carolyn briskly rubbed her hands together as a brutal gust of wind followed behind her children like an uninvited playmate. “God bless friction. Any advice?” The elder gentleman just shook his head.

“It comes with the territory.” He seemed sincere. “Ya get used to it.”

Carolyn doubted she’d ever adjust to the chill in the air; a Georgia girl who never quite acclimated to New England, even though she had already lived in the frozen tundra for more than a dozen years.

“It’s late. I should go.” Mr. Kenyon began slowly rising from his seat.

“Stay a little longer, please. I’m sure the girls want to spend time with you. They do thaw out!” Carolyn had an ulterior motive, as she had yet to pick his brain to her complete satisfaction. Only he knew what was really meant by what he said: “Swallows in the chimney”?

“Are you sure you can’t stay for dinner?” Roger was as anxious as his wife. Both cared for the old man and loathed to think of him being lonely.

“Thank you, no. I’ll come by again soon...if that’s all right with the lady.”

Reaching for his hand, Carolyn reassured him: welcome anytime. A blush rushed his cheeks, betraying his heart. Citing a previous obligation as reason for his departure, Roger walked him out while Carolyn went into the pantry, dutifully hovering over the pressure cooker; it did not require her assistance. She was seeking steam heat. Roger entered the kitchen, pausing at the pantry door. She felt her husband’s stare then glanced in his direction.

“What is it?” Roger’s quizzical expression prompted Carolyn’s question.

“That was strange.” The man seemed distracted.

“The visit?”

“*And* the conversation.” Carolyn agreed. “Swallows? What was that about? I think he knows something he’s not telling us.” Sounding a bit suspicious.

“I think he just *did* tell us...it was an admission.” She was right.

“An admission of what?” Roger’s question was oblivious but honest.

“I’m not sure....I think *something* is living in the chimney!”

“I think the old man has fallen in love with you.”

“Jealous?” A wicked grin pursed her lips.

“Maybe.” Roger was only slightly indignant, not threatened in the least by his competition.

“Good. It’ll keep you on your toes!” Carolyn continued the tedious chore at hand, yet another Sisyphean task involving the mindless peeling of onions, carrots and potatoes, which was fine, as her mind was otherwise preoccupied with far more ethereal matters...a persistent vision of swallows in flight.

“Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer and wish we didn’t.”

Erica Jong



~ Cynthia tempting fate again ~

sounds of silence

“God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.”
Mother Teresa

Solitary confinement is frequently utilized as a cruel form of punishment; with purpose and reason. Carolyn spent many hours alone; even though April was at home with her, the baby of the family often occupied her time playing upstairs with *sister* toys while they were away at school. The farmhouse was enormous. Both remained isolated within a shared space. Carolyn sometimes heard April off in the distance, chattering incessantly, dragging her multitude of toys across the floor from room to room through an expansive upper deck. At times an object would get wedged into one of the holes of ornate wrought iron grates installed in the ceiling. Carolyn would answer a damsel in distress call, poking them back through with a broomstick: “Thanks, mom!” drifting down from above; a bright, angelic face appearing in the portal.

For the most part, Carolyn relished this solitude. Once all obligations were met she'd steal some time for herself. It was always time well spent, wrapped up in a warm blanket, cradling a book. The ladies often checked in with each other. It was understood; a reasonable expectation between mother and child. April knew her mom would prepare lunch. They would come together in the kitchen around noontime to share a meal. Mom knew her baby would nap for an hour or so after her belly was full. It was their routine; the calm before the storm which inevitably blew in as gale force wind once four siblings arrived; quite like clockwork, appearing on the threshold each and every afternoon; as predictable as sunrise...sunset...sunrise...sunset. Quickly fly the years.

The house absorbed light and sound. It was a vacuum of sorts, like a black hole in the cosmos. Windows upstairs were rather small; the middle bedroom a beneficiary of only one rectangular light source tucked into the outside wall above the eaves, a window which seemed to belong in the captain's quarters of a great ship. The chimney closet was always warm and cozy. It was space

April chose, assembling an elaborate village for the **Little People**; gifts they received at Christmas: a collection of wooden miniatures, each figure painted with primary colors. Combining figures to create a community, during school days April had them all to herself or so thought her mother. With benefit of only one bulb the space a child shared behind a chimney became illuminated. Safe haven: an escape hatch from the cold. From one reality into another: as a rendezvous point where ethereal met corporeal...to play. April had a secret.

As Carolyn stood at the sideboard in the kitchen, she distinctly heard the familiar sounds of movement upstairs. It provided a certain comfort to hear a little one above her, smiling at the thought of her daughter having so much time and space to be a child. At this exact instant, April appeared beside her mother; sound silenced overhead. Bright blue eyes peeked out from behind a mass of blond; a meshed web of shiny strands requiring the stroke of a brush. “Hi!” Carolyn leapt from her daughter, a spontaneous reaction she could not avoid, startling both of them. She peered up toward the ceiling, trying to hear anymore movement. Her immediate thought was of an intruder in the house. She bolted through a hallway from which April emerged; climbing stairs two steps at a time; mind flooding with regrets at an obvious oversight: failing to bring along something made of cast iron...as a weapon. Searching bedrooms one at a time, Carolyn found nothing amiss. Quickly returning to find April, anxious to make amends, as she had frightened the child, they met halfway in the middle bedroom upstairs. Carolyn had been followed. April’s unexpected presence again startled the woman, a bit on the jittery side of a new reality.

“What’s wrong, mom?” Breathless, April was curious and equally alarmed.

“Nothing honey; I thought I heard something. That’s all.”

“Maybe you did.” An innocent voice: “I hear stuff up here all the time.”

“What kind of **stuff** do you hear?” April shrugged her shoulders then took her mother by the hand, leading her out of one bedroom into another.

Her heart still pounding from the sprint, Carolyn did not follow up on these remarks at the time. April asked if she could go back into the chimney closet to play but her mother was reluctant to allow her to return. Instead, she took her daughter downstairs into the kitchen where they'd play a spirited game of **Chutes and Ladders**. April won. Her mother made sure of it.

Over lunch, Carolyn inquired about what April had heard in the house. The child had already moved on, other thoughts occupying her mind. She did not respond in any depth of description, only telling her mother she heard noises coming from other rooms when she was in the closet. This was true of all the residents, especially during the night. Whether it was a brisk wind whistling through the eaves or a poorly stacked log in the woodshed taking a tumble or the natural expansion and contraction of the structure, the *quiet* home made a great deal of sound in the darkness; no silent nights there but it was daytime.

Carolyn put April down for a nap. Indulging a cup of coffee, in preparation for the chaos which would surely ensue when her darlings disembarked from a bus in the coming hour, she leaned into the sofa, listening to the house with new ears...looking with new eyes. She began wondering if the seclusion had tricked her senses or bewitched her mind. No. Her senses were working fine.

There was no doubt about it. Their farmhouse was cavernous. As the light dispersed it would dissipate, as if being absorbed. Sounds were warped and distorted within plaster walls; it would either become magnified or be utterly lost in the ether. When amplified, the home seemed to be wired for sound: no privacy in even a whisper. At other times, an opposite effect occurred and the most vehement shout was inaudible at the slightest distance. The house broke all the basic rules of physics, what human beings have long presumed to be a given: Immutable Laws of the Universe. Having never before encountered something so bizarre, she marveled; its acoustics defied logic. Had she been a natural scientist, perhaps it would have made some sense. No longer merely a matter of intellectual curiosity, Carolyn found herself concerned about the welfare of her child this February morning; she could not attribute the sounds she'd heard overhead to anything or anyone, yet she experienced it. Until that morning she had assumed there was a rational and reasonable explanation for everything; a sensible notion being formally challenged. Imagine.

Unique acoustics could not explain the event. Contemplating exactly what happened and when, Carolyn re-created the moment in mind when April was standing beside her. She recalled reverberations in the floorboards overhead. Impossible! Considering what had transpired from every conceivable angle, she could not reconcile the event or comprehend any scenario which satisfied the physical science, short of an intruder being in their house; the fear still at work lurking in her consciousness. So many places to hide, so many different ways to enter; their only security was born of isolation. With April a few feet away on the sofa comfort came in watching her daughter sleep as it had when listening to her play upstairs. A perceived threat prompted visceral reactions: alarm; sensory signal indicating a violation of sanctuary: Fear: the intruder.

For the first time, Carolyn sensed another presence. An odd queasiness, a sickening bile-driven twisting of her stomach occurred, one which she could not ignore. Blaming the coffee, she pushed it away in disgust. This dis/ease persisted for several minutes, a perception that she was not alone. The light was changing. The air felt heavy; thick and dark. Carolyn lowered her head, waiting for it to pass. It did. The pallor lifted as if evaporating and then it was over, as quickly as it had come. Slowly raising her head, as if retreating from a solemn prayer, she distinctly heard her baby breathing softly from across the room. Shaking off an eerie sensation she glanced down at her wristwatch. The girls were due home at any minute! Shocked to realize so much time had lapsed, certain it'd been only a few moments, Carolyn reached for her coffee. It was ice cold, as was the parlor. Glancing up toward their antique clock, it was no longer keeping proper time. It had stopped almost two hours before; about the time she'd put April down for a nap. Disoriented, she stared at the silent timepiece. Roger had relocated it from the kitchen wall because of the same problem. A reliable heirloom he inherited after his father's untimely death, Roger's most prized possession, a familiar tick ~ tock just stopped; its pendulum stilled by some unknown force. Why it kept failing was anyone's guess. Perhaps the walls were uneven; one theory. As Carolyn made her way over to April, bringing a warm blanket along, she gently placed it across her daughter. Soundly asleep, April did not stir, no notice taken of the extra layer being added to her nap. Carolyn was relieved she hadn't awakened while her mother was stricken by whatever it was that had a hold of her. There was no time remaining to consider this anomaly further. The school bus had arrived

and she had to head the girls off at the pass before they woke up their sister. Racing through the house yet again, she caught them at the kitchen door. A promise was issued: hot chocolate and cookies if they'd only be *quiet* while April slept. Agreed! While all the ladies gathered around the table enjoying a snack, their littlest sister wandered into the room, wrapped in the blanket her mother had provided. The disgruntled youth quickly confronted her siblings, demanding an explanation: a reason *why* she had been so rudely awakened a few moments earlier! Boo! Who?

“Who shook me like that!?” Rubbing her eyes, the angry pout seemed cute to her sisters and they laughed but Carolyn was not amused. She left the baby behind in the parlor to spare her such an intrusion and none of them had left the kitchen since their arrival. Maybe adding the extra blanket disturbed her sleep, after all. Carolyn pulled her five year old into her lap, comforting the tearful child, speaking softly in her ear; a reassurance *no one* had approached her. Was it a bad dream? No! Adamant one of her mischievous sisters struck, shoved then ran, there was no convincing her otherwise. Her siblings became regretful and equally sympathetic, acknowledging their baby sister’s distress. Carolyn, once again overcome by the same sickening feeling she’d struggled to dispel, cringed in disbelief. What...*who* was happening in her house?

Cheerful children spent their evening dour and withdrawn. Whatever *it* was that woke April also scared her; when it came time for bed, she refused to go. Andrea invited her to spend the night but she insisted on staying with mom, and mom agreed, grateful for company. Anxiously awaiting Roger’s return, they had much to discuss; she hoped he would shed new light on the matter.

Unable to sleep that night Carolyn sat quietly on the sofa, listening intently, absorbed in the sounds of silence. Moon nearly full, it bathed the house with its soft night light, reflecting off the surface of the snow-laden Earth. Winds were calm; barely audible. Tranquility reigned. A jittery mother had begun to relax, feeling somewhat foolish about her initial reactions to events earlier in the day; episodes which had severely rattled her nerves. Dismissing her own reliable senses, Carolyn began reconciling with herself,

coming to terms with her own self-doubt. Any conflict internalized is one always lost. A resolution came quickly once she allowed herself the room to be wrong. Yes. Of course a nimble child could make it down a set of stairs *just that fast*. Yes. All kids have nightmares from time to time, even during the day. She disturbed April herself...the only one to blame. Later, crawling in bed beside her littlest girl, Carolyn finally fell asleep.

Returning home to an exceedingly warm welcome, in spite of the season, Roger greeted his girls as they got off the bus the next afternoon. He arrived earlier than expected, due to a fierce, impending snowstorm which followed him home from upstate New York. Having gone shopping somewhere along the route, he promised his girls, if they would all help him dig out (like it was optional) he would have plenty of snacks available as a reward. A perfect snow day was pending: a day off from school for sure, maybe more than one! A snowstorm held great promise; shoveling, sledding and, oh yes, Twinkies! Long before *junk food* became a common phrase, let alone a staple of the American diet (with the status of *food group*), Carolyn knew what to avoid. She allowed it only occasionally...and this was one of those times. They had a deal. Roger seemed excited by the prospect of being house bound for a day or two. He had just come from a very successful trip and needed some rest. Well aware he had been on the road and away from his family an inordinate amount of time in recent weeks, it was his chance to spend a little time with them before heading back out on the highways, forced to sleep in roadside motels at ten bucks a night. It was one tough way to make a living to be sure, but he was growing a business, affording his family the farm. For this reason alone, Roger found it gratifying. Over the next few days it would be *his* turn to enjoy the place he was working so hard to provide for his loved ones.

Right on schedule: snowstorm blew in with a vengeance. What had anyone done to deserve such an onslaught? It seemed like an explosion of snow. One moment dark, brooding clouds gathered like a gang plotting on the horizon. The next, it was beating on their windows and doors, attempting an unlawful

entry. That night Roger did the honors, tucking his girls into bed, presenting each of them with a brand new electric blanket; gifts warmly received. April had forgotten about any trepidation she had the night before, going happily to her own bed with her very new very pink blanket, one with soft satin trim, so bright it seemed to glow in the dark...like a night light!

“Wow! Thanks, daddy! It’s better than Twinkies!” Roger was delighted; he didn’t even care how much it would cost to heat those cozy comforters.

“As long as we don’t lose the electricity you’ll be nice and warm tonight.” Roger said goodnight to all the girls then rejoined his wife downstairs. She’d been preparing for the worst. Dozens of candles laid out, sprawled across the dining room table, several oil lamps placed on the sideboard in the kitchen, each one an excellent source of light and heat when everything else around them went cold and dark, all but inevitable based on the sound and fury of a howling bitter wind. It proved to be quite a snowstorm; perfect for cuddling. They sat together quietly, listening to the raging storm striking the house like a battering ram. Roger had been sure to catch the evening news. Relaying the blood-curdling message, he bluntly stated, “It has already dropped over three feet in Buffalo...the same in Syracuse. The Berkshires are buried.”

“What will it do for us?” Carolyn’s sarcastic inquiry required no response. Both knew precisely what it meant for them: digging out, again. Gusts lashed at their house from every direction. Snow was setting up like Plaster of Paris; whiteout conditions beyond windows and doors meant they would play hell getting out of it in the morning. Forget about the shovels; try a chisel instead! Roger’s concerns had less to do with a snowstorm and more to do with some snuggling up with his wife. His mood was jovial; his touch, sweet and gentle. She did not want to spoil the moment but Carolyn could not disguise her own legitimate concerns any longer.

“What’s wrong?” Roger sensed her distraction.

“Maybe it’s nothing, really.”

“Really? **Something**, I think.”

“Could we just talk for awhile?” Her ardent appeal was lost on the man.

“Well, talking was not *exactly* what I had in mind!” He might as well have been holding a cigar. Having inadvertently married Groucho Marx, his wife pulled away as he rubbed his moustache into her neck, thinking it a far better distraction. Resisting overt advances, Carolyn remained ardent. She hesitated then stared into his eyes as she spoke, searching for an open, honest, *serious* reaction from her husband. She could read the thoughts behind his gaze.

“Roger, I’m hearing strange sounds in the house and seeing strange things. Maybe I’m getting paranoid but it feels like I am always being...watched.”

“Maybe **Perronoid!**” A disapproving glance instantly settled his silliness. “The light *is* strange here. It plays tricks with your eyes. I’ve noticed it, too.”

“It’s not just the light. Sounds I hear...as if there’s someone in the house.”

“What do you mean?” Roger was now paying proper attention to his wife.

“Something invisible...like some presence...I don’t know exactly what I’m trying to explain...impossible to put the *feeling* into words that make sense.”

“You spend too much time alone...and *way too many* nights alone.”

“Not *last* night...April was so scared she slept with me. I think **I’m** the one who scared her. I heard noise from upstairs. I searched the house and thought someone was inside the chimney closet.” Roger listened. “I could’ve *sworn* I heard someone. There are no keys for this place. We can’t lock a single door and you’re gone all the time.” Her voice began to tremble. Averting her eyes to hide the fear, Roger tilted his wife’s head upward with a lift of the chin.

“You lived in Cumberland too long. Remember what Mr. Kenyon said: no one will bother us here.” His voice was reassuring. The words were vacant.

Carolyn regretted saying anything about it, considering it her responsibility to “hold down the fort” whenever Roger had to be away from home. She did

not want to complain or worse, to be perceived as some weakling. A subject dismissed as quickly as it had been addressed, Carolyn smiled her reluctance away, reminding herself to relax because *finally* her husband was home. She felt safe in his presence; a pair of muscular arms wrapped securely around her torso. Gazing up into his eyes, admiring a confident grin with which she was so familiar, she plucked at the corner of his moustache. Talk over.

Time for bed: the way to stay warm in a storm on such a bitter winter night. Whatever threat she perceived had subsided with a few words uttered by her fearless husband. No bluster or bother, at least not inside the house. At the time Carolyn had no way of knowing, contrary to appearances, her husband's inability to assist in a crisis would play a leading role as the drama unfolded. Even when he *was* home, laying beside her in the darkness, he would possess no capacity to intervene on her behalf during an ungodly ordeal, one destined to change her life. Abandonment issues abound: his reassurances, no matter how sincere, were utterly meaningless...when push came to shove.

What had been merely an anomaly, the absence or magnification of sound in the house would, in time, take on a fever pitch. There would be incidents; serious and terrifying incidents that precluded screaming children from being heard by parents in the next room. It would come to be described as a *sound barrier* and a *force field*; a state of being imposed by the spirits so they could communicate privately with their own mortal of choice: being *in the bubble*. Though sounds they created were solicitous of attention or acknowledgement this uncanny ability to nullify *all* sound within the realm of their presence, including their own, would prove to be miraculous in Nature. Turning off the stereo, lights out, Carolyn went to bed with a favorite song still ringing in her head. *"Hello darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again, because a vision softly creeping left its seed while I was sleeping and the vision that was planted in my brain still remains..."* Ah, Sounds of Silence. In a moment of recognition, she smiled...the words finally made some sense.

"One need not be a chamber to be haunted;

*One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.”*
Emily Dickinson
a matter of time

*“How cunningly nature hides every wrinkle of her inconceivable
antiquity under roses and violets and morning dew.”*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Timeless beings; lost in the Cosmos, suspended in the ether. No concept of their own hereafter-life; not even aware they are deceased. No need to mourn them...they're not really gone. It was all too much to take in, to absorb into a mind unprepared to receive their message. A quantum leap in consciousness had to occur for seven mere mortals to comprehend what they'd witnessed, to accept the existence of spirits in a shared space; disbelief in the concept of time was a prerequisite to its understanding. Human beings seem to process information linearly. The new paranormal required a substantial adjustment; thinking in an entirely different way about an otherwise commonly accepted system of measurement. Each member of the family was being forced to step across the threshold, beyond their comfort zone; an acknowledgment of truth. It was only a matter of time.

TIME: There is no adherence to the notion in the netherworld. Either *they* come and go as they please or else they have never left...but the spirits in the farmhouse were, at the very least, capable of manipulating the continuum. If time and space exist together or they are mutually exclusive, *whatever* exists in Nature allows them a certain freedom to manifest at will. Perhaps in death they no longer suffer this narrow interpretation of a far greater concept. Yet, these spirits seemed to manipulate mortal time with purpose and reason; the stopping of an antique clock, seeming to be specifically intended to coincide with their arrival: apparitions coming and going under cover of darkness then dissipating with the light of dawn. There had to be some logical connection. Their behavior appeared to be deliberate.

When the girls began divulging and withholding various experiences, each had already come to terms with the fact: not everything in life is at it appears or disappears; each understood she was seeing and hearing some phenomena unlike anything she had ever encountered before. This fundamental shift had to occur before they could begin describing what they were sensing to others. Once the pervasive skepticism subsided in their father, he too was obliged to acknowledge the truth. His tedious, often obstinate denials made disclosure much more difficult for his family. The girls would turn instead to a sister or mother, but their father was off limits in terms of discussing whatever scared them. The one they needed to protect them did not believe them and he was rarely home long enough to see for himself. Abandonment issues abound.

When they discovered what was happening in the house, in their lives, the Perrons had to make the critical decision of whether or not to remain at their farm. They were all in love with a place which also frightened them. As they watched events transpire in their home each sought refuge away from it and each was blessed with complete comprehension of time as we know it based upon the Nature unfolding around them, season by season, year after year. They lived in a house which divulged secrets of its own as a series of “ages” revealed themselves: a variety of entities dressed in the apparel of another era, another time in history, as if in the Colonial period when their house was built; or as some esoteric apparition appearing to be the same man at various stages of his life. The lines of time were blurred and then erased. The family began to see an open path existed in their home, a passageway; a portal to the past as well as to the future. Essentially, the house is a time machine through which everything passes to everywhere else.

The children were not afforded the luxury of growing up simply accepting the parameters of existence. Instead, they were all compelled to reconsider concepts they had been taught. Prior to moving to Harrisville the lessons they had learned, something as innocuous as how to **tell time**, suddenly seemed so complicated and incomplete in comparison to the information they required to navigate a treacherous voyage through time and space. It was stressful for them as what these girls strived for was some semblance of normalcy in their otherwise chaotic lives. Imagine being tucked in by a spirit! Imagine being forced to listen to voices telling secrets in the darkness; where to look to find

their bodies. Imagine getting up in the morning to have breakfast then go off to school, as usual, where what occurred the night before cannot be revealed; a rude awakening, to say the least...and that was all they could say!

To describe these children as isolated is only a small part of the story. They had no choice but to adjust then adapt to an ethereal environment, one totally contrary to what each discerned as *reality*; what they knew of the world had changed abruptly, compelling them to reconcile heady concepts for ones so young. It took time. As human beings have a tendency to tick ~ tock through life, they did the same. Whenever **IT** happened and a youngster felt her body trembling from inside out, time was suspended. It ceased to exist...if it ever did. During these moments, what Cynthia describes as being *in the bubble* occurred; that certain icy tingle, a surge of energy or synergy charges in and everything becomes one thing, frozen in time. No matter how frightening or ugly it is, what is there is amazing. That this happens is miraculous. Stepping through time, feeling its irrelevance is awe-inspiring, a powerful emotional experience. It challenges all former beliefs; questions everything presented as fact, accepted as law. In these mesmerizing moments life feels surreal, like a drama being played out on an infinite stage; its characters showing up at will out of nowhere. Any mortal with a leading role is at once captivated yet free to drift into third-person narrative. As body and mind separate temporarily, so to watch from above, a principle player transforms into audience, as well. As the newly introduced element of reality, it was difficult to discern why the supernatural world intermingled, overlapping with present reality; how could this possibly occur? To comprehend the manifestation of these apparitions, friend or foe, one must first endure a wholly consciousness-altering event.

A wise friend once said: "If you can only speak Chinese then you can only speak Chinese." One cannot understand what one cannot understand. That's how it was for their first few months; inconceivable. It was difficult enough to believe one's own eyes; like an existential nightmare. Initially, all of their encounters were terrifying, simply because they occurred. There was no way to factor in their true significance, the extent of their power or its source. An unknown quantity did not fit into a specific mold or any construct with which they were familiar. An anomaly persisted: Now for something entirely NEW! This aspect of their existence would consume the attention of all concerned

mortals, precluding any deeper reflection. They were blown away.

It was only a matter of time before Roger's consistently belligerent refusal to acknowledge or accept their predicament festered into a poisonous pocket of disease in the heart of a marriage; only a matter of time before these spirits became an ordinary part of life at the farm. In time everyone would learn to measure precious moments on Earth according to the sunrise and sunset, the depth of the darkness and lilt of the light. Theirs would not be a conventional pathway to enlightenment; no ordinary journey. It all began with the singular realization...time is not the tick ~ tock of a clock marking the minutes of life but rather an exquisite nothingness; acceptance that time is not what it seems and may not *be* at all. It was an expansive concept for mortals to embrace but it was necessary for each one to do so before anything else could make sense. The mother often reminded her daughters: "***To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven.***" Actually, she sang it to them. This realization defined a collective childhood, causing girls to seek time in Nature; going forth into the woods where any concept of time is irrelevant, as when being visited by an entity capable of stepping across this threshold in time and space, through a portal, in much the same way children hop across a creek; a quantum leap into an alternate reality, there to behold the wonder, to marvel at the antiquity and newness of Nature; to worship it as God.

Galileo told humanity to look up; his concept of time and space Universal. Whitman told humanity to look down, describing a single blade of grass as the journey work of the stars. Truth be told, everyone must find their path to travel through life, hopefully one which leads out of the darkness and into the light. As a method of measurement based upon Nature itself, the invention of time was brilliantly conceived and still functions splendidly as the system by which humanity marks its existence: a precise, entirely arbitrary assignment yet, by its mere presence, establishing the concept of past, present and future. It is a calculated attempt to control and manipulate environment, providing a specific structure to be learned, accepted and followed by mortals in search of a purpose and meaning to an otherwise chaotic world. However, when one is close enough to touch, to smell and hear someone else who died centuries before they were born, this contact warps time and skews space for eternity. Nothing is ever the same. Nothing is ever small or compartmentalized again.

An encounter of this kind rapidly expands *any* consciousness impacted by a vision that cannot be explained and cannot be denied. It does not fit the mold, that tidy little package of precepts constructed by humanity as the method to tally its toll. When mortals stare into the liquid blue eyes of an immortal soul, all time is suspended, fractured and dispersed into the ether in this moment of recognition. A tingling sensation, this infusion of energy forces any thinking being to reconsider time in a far more expansive context: Alternate Reality. Questions persist. What creates the vacancy at contact? Is there another place in space that has its own time? Does the existence of one preclude the other; functioning in terms like an over-write program superimposing itself on the instant it's perceived? Is time significant, observed or necessary where spirits dwell? Do they attempt to measure infinity? These entities do not seem to adhere to constraints and limitations mortals impose on their own existence. Instead, they manifest in places where they do not belong, at least according to the current occupants. But what if they *do* belong? What if they never left? Suppose it is perfectly natural for them to be there...at home. There was so much to contemplate, as each encounter caused a pause for reflection. It was a stunning realization for each and every member of their family, compelling seven mortal souls to reconsider what time is and is not; to think about what it means to go backward, to have spirits come forward into shared space void of the concept of time, prompting a moment of silence. These ethereal beings are *present* in the world. No matter where they come from or where they are going, they are also here...simultaneously. Do human beings witness them as manifestation of memory? Is thought-energy so vivid, precise and intensely focused that a distant memory is capable of *appearing* in the setting where a thought or an action originally occurred? Is time an illusion, practiced by the illusionists who created it to provide them a creature comfort? Thoughtfully considering the concept, Carolyn explored while her husband continued to be actively uncomfortable with the notion. For Roger, it was only a matter time before he too would be confronted by this inconceivable, unacceptable truth; only a matter of time before he could no longer deny his own Reality.

The simplest solution to this dilemma was also the most obvious; five little girls who could not understand what they sensed, seeking respite and refuge,

escaped into the woods. Nature is not abrupt or abusive. It does not come and go; it is. It is patient and passive, teaching its lessons by osmosis. Gradually retreating into four seasons, so to measure their passage of time at the farm, children were blessed to discover a certain timeless quality about the floor of a forest. In the woods, everything made perfect sense: Simpatico in Nature.

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.”
Lao Tzu



~ the meandering Nipmuc River ~

contact

“Unless you believe you will not understand.”
Saint Augustine

To become one with spirit: to be touched by an ephemeral being, no matter how briefly, is a wholly breathtaking experience; an ethereal journey through time and shared space. It leaves one profoundly and permanently altered. A perpetual questioning of the senses is abandoned over time, replaced with an unquestionable belief as mortal minds are forced to absorb then reconcile an irreconcilable difference between dimensions: alternate reality in new Light.

The front hallway connecting the kitchen to the dining room was the most frequently traveled route and least comfortable place in the house. Their dog refused to pass through it, regardless of any enticement offered. Over time it would be recognized and accepted as a veritable hot/cold spot of supernatural activity, though no one immediately understood its full implications. Instead, they'd scurry through this oddly disquieting passageway, ignoring what they could not see. Children moved quickly through that corridor, unconsciously sensing the presence, always feeling **watched** within its dark spaces. Nobody ever lingered long near a cellar door; no tempting fate allowed. It was where two of them had seen this man; a phantom standing in the corner behind the door, on the day they moved into the house. The other three had not yet seen him but felt a natural aversion to that cold dampness; the smell of an earthen cellar seeping through the cracks of the door to avoid. Months later, when the children began comparing mental notes on the subject, each of them reported a specific, identical sensation evoked in the hallway; a need to evade a space. Unfortunately, it was a main route through the house and went to a bedroom upstairs as well. Both of the stairwells posed their own series of hazards.

Cynthia was the first to make contact; physical with metaphysical contact. The school bus had arrived. She was not ready to go. Her books were stacked in a pile in Andrea's bedroom stairwell, clear on the other side of their house,

right where she'd left them on her way down for breakfast. All of her sisters were leaving as she rushed through the kitchen, into the hallway, her mind focused on one thing: books. Their driver was beeping the horn: "Let's go!" Cynthia wasn't thinking about a spooky feeling she often had in that hallway, running far too quickly to care at the time.

Perhaps that fact is precisely what left her vulnerable to attack; open to this encounter, as her defenses were down; virtually non-existent in the panic of that moment. As she stepped across the threshold of the kitchen door, Cindy was intercepted by a silky, smoky figure emerging through the cellar door. It placed itself directly in her path. There was no time to stop. No time or react. She'd inadvertently body-slammed the intruder; as she did so, it disappeared, vaporizing instantly. The apparition was indistinguishable, more a mass than an actual form. At point of impact, its intense odor and frigidity all but halted her momentum, knocking her back in her tracks. She breathed it deeply into her lungs with a gasp of frozen air. This sudden, foul influx caused her body to lurch into spasms, coughing convulsively; propelling the girl forward with violent jolts: a reflex reaction. It had literally stopped her cold. As her sisters boarded the bus their driver waited less impatiently, reassured that Cindy was on her way. She'd finally made it to the bus stop but her mother was picking her up from school within the hour. What happened adversely affected the youngster in a way she could not recognize as cause. The normally boundless energy of an eight year old had been depleted, her sprint rudely interrupted; abruptly and inexplicably, by something wicked. When Cynthia fell asleep at her desk, the teacher called the nurse. Carolyn put her into bed and there the child remained, sleeping for the next two days and straight through the night. Nobody suspected anything more sinister than the onset of a cold. In a way, that's exactly what it was. It took time for her to fully recover from a contact which occurred between mortal and immortal one chilly winter morning.

This metaphysical intermingling, though brief, effectively robbed the child of her life force; it required an inordinate amount of time to replenish. Cindy didn't have a virus or a cold; she had an encounter. Contact was made. It was what they did and how they did it...how they could and would usurp then

divert a form of energy for their own nefarious purposes; they *took* whatever they wanted from whatever source was available, so to manifest as form. The spirits drained energy from the house and its inhabitants in a variety of ways but nobody realized it or suspected anything of the kind for months to come. Even when this did occur to Carolyn, she doubted her own intuition about it. This concept seemed entirely implausible and yet it was precisely what was happening in the house. Cynthia was the initial point of contact; the first one to feel the stunning sensation: the passing essence of death itself, stealing and stocking whatever it could as a method of manifestation...as an infiltration.

*“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead
and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”*

Thornton Wilder

a chill in the air

“Whenever evil befalls us, we ought to ask ourselves, after the first suffering, how we can turn it into good. So shall we take occasion, from one bitter root, to raise perhaps many flowers.”

Leigh Hunt

The frigid dampness of the house could not be overcome. It had an adverse effect on everyone, but Carolyn seemed to sense it most profoundly. Within a few days of moving into the ancient structure, her joints began to throb and ache and her knees began visibly swelling. It quickly became a chronic pain, primarily attacking the joints and connective tissue of this young, strong and agile woman. Attributing her pain to the grueling process of moving, Carolyn had invested countless hours packing...and then unpacking their belongings. The boxes were heavy and she'd lifted dozens of them. Though stiff and sore every morning, she usually ignored it, far too busy to focus on much else but her kids and their needs, especially on school days. She got up and got going. Moving around was its own form of therapy. A hot shower handled the worst of the pain, most of the time. Carolyn thought this was a temporary malady, one which would surely subside once they were settled in. It was an improper assumption to make; thinking it would heal in time and she would have time to heal. Struggling through those few remaining boxes was its own reward. It was a Christmas celebration in February. She discovered a bevy of treasures missing for months and in some cases, years. Several of these boxes yielded memories from her youth, things she'd tucked into the back of her bedroom closet well more than a decade earlier. In spite of all of her stress and strains, Carolyn kept her spirits up, taking pleasure in the little delights; simple gifts. A long lost trinket found, a book of poetry longing to revisit anxious eyes.

In spite of pain, she persevered, certain it would subside. It never did. She would often shake her head and say: “I’m too damn young to feel this old.” It was awful; a mean-spirited season. Winter was relentless; no respite. Though physical labor finally came to an end, the pain lingered, gradually worsening. Opting out of chores requiring too much of her joints, especially shoveling, Carolyn began to withdraw into a shrinking form, cocooning in blankets and

heavy sweaters; doing whatever she could to avoid freezing to death though she was never really warm. Nothing helped. Eventually, this insidious aching spread throughout her entire being, as if possessing a pulse of its own; a life force, reserving the worst of its cruelty for her slender neck, settling in as if planning an extended stay. Carolyn began to complain: it felt as if something was broken. The local doctor told her to ***take it easy and stay warm.*** “A total waste of time and money!” was how she described the appointment. Not long afterward she realized this was a strange and different dis/ease; it had nothing to do with muscles being pulled by moving heavy objects. A dank dampness had penetrated her body. She recalls it as an oppressive weight crushing her rigid, frozen joints. The woman was becoming too cold to move and too tired to care. Retiring to the relative warmth of her bed for hours a day, the young mother felt old; decrepit. A fierce primal urge begged to be satisfied; Carolyn required the elemental comfort of fire to survive this ordeal called winter.

Why? A naturally inquisitive woman could not help but wonder why all of the fireplaces had been sealed shut. Why had Mr. Kenyon been so evasive on the subject when she broached it with him? Why were there certain spaces in the house which felt so much colder than others did? How could Carolyn see her own breath when someone standing right beside her would claim to feel perfectly comfortable at the mere mention of this observation? Increasingly agitated by a pervasive chill in the air, she began demanding answers. There had to be a logical explanation; a sensible solution to this problem. It was as though she was being held against her will; forced to stay, to live in a harsh, inhospitable environment with no hope of escape. HELL! She just got there! As if buried alive under snow, trapped in her dream home, it was the first of many nightmare scenarios yet to manifest as her destiny. Try as she might, it soon became evident to all; Carolyn could not dig herself out of this one! In too deep...already in over her head...drowning in despair and discontent.

One morning Carolyn awoke to become instantly aggravated. The bedroom was bitterly cold; she shuddered at the idea of removing the covers

from her shivering body. Their dream of this supposedly placid and peaceful place in the country was being shattered by the reality of it; the incessant discomfort she'd battled caused her to feel totally defeated. A perpetual pain in the neck had become so intense she began to think something inside of it had snapped; bones too brittle to withstand the weight of a skull on its shoulders.

Her stomach was on fire; a persistent burning sensation undoubtedly due to the vast quantity of aspirin she felt forced to ingest on a daily basis, in order to remain barely functional. Gradually Carolyn's sweet disposition began to sour, presumably altered by chronic pain; the adversity she came to perceive as an adversary, one associated with harsh conditions in an extended winter. Later on she would attribute her woes to the equally strange circumstances in which she'd found herself, living with the dead. Increasingly reclusive, her moods grew darker; a black hole had developed in the cosmos of her soul. A corresponding vacancy appeared in her eyes as it began consuming her spirit. It was time to build a fire. Carolyn craved the presence of light and heat.

That cold spring morning she sent her children off to school. Walking them out to the bus stop, she and April made a pit stop at the woodshed on the way back into the farmhouse. Carolyn stood at the entrance, staring at a solid wall of aged hardwood. Resentful about it; cord after cord of long-seasoned logs languished in its neatly-stacked piles, never put to good use. "What a waste!" was the only comment she could muster in disgust. Roger was again away on business and he would be gone for the next few days. Again, his wife had a moment of divine inspiration. What had been stocked and stacked out in the woodshed would be drafted into service...Carolyn concocted the grand plan. Suddenly frustration had an outlet; a dour mood lifted with the promise of a solution. Later in the day, a rusty crowbar in hand, she decided to expel the demon chill from her home. A broad smile crept to her lips as she vowed **not** to succumb, **not** to surrender but to fight; to vanquish what was haunting her.

Carolyn was about to unleash a torrent of supernatural activity, through no fault of her own. She was cold. Her children were cold. The fireplace called to her in mind. It was still functional, according to Mrs. Hertzog. Apparently Mr. Kenyon had been willing to discuss its status with the realtor, if not the

purchaser. Although the center chimney (which once served the kitchen and dining room) had been removed, by necessity, due to its advanced age and dangerous disrepair, many decades before she inhabited the house a smaller chimney in the parlor had also been sealed shut for some inexplicable reason. It offered some hope of warmth and renewal to the woman who felt crippled with pain. The stark absence of heat, the marked inability of an old clapboard farmhouse to retain it, became her primary concern as lingering winter kept churning out one brutally cold week after another in spite of the fact that the calendar said it was spring! Carolyn believed there had to be another way to generate some warmth from what was the most obvious source. She craved the pure heat of fire. She'd needed something to effectively banish the chill penetrating her body to the bone. Staring into the woodshed had provided the point of epiphany. It would not be long before that wood went up in flames.

“I am still determined to be cheerful and happy, in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances.”

Martha Washington



~ woodshed in a winter wonderland ~

creature discomforts

“Adversity is the first path to truth.”
Lord Byron

Their family cat wanted no part of her new home. Juliet refused to cross the threshold then had to be carried into the house, in howling, vehement protest. A normally docile, affectionate cat became suddenly hostile and frightened. She chose to hide underneath the sofa for the first few days, emerging only reluctantly when hungry or in a desperate need of the litter box. Naturally, all their chaos and confusion had been quite disconcerting and her distress was understandable. Assuming some type of adjustment would be required of all the new occupants, no one thought much of it at the time.

After a few weeks passed, the lovely feline seemed to settle in to her new digs. It was typical of her to snuggle up with one child or another every night and it was usually Andrea. She would tunnel her way beneath the quilt and purr contentedly until she fell asleep. At least this had been the case when the family lived in Cumberland. Once the ritual, it was no longer; a formerly soft demeanor changed abruptly; radically so. She continued to choose a child to sleep with but their routine was decidedly different. Juliet would cautiously slink into the bedroom and look around before pouncing onto the bed. Then, instead of seeking any attention or affection from her roommate, she scurried beneath the covers, as if in hiding. Once she was under the blanket she would growl and moan for several minutes, moving restlessly before settling down for the night. When morning arrived, the cat would emerge from the bed just as cautiously as she'd entered it the evening before, surveying the room then bolting for the kitchen as if her life depended on it, perhaps seeking safety in numbers. No one could explain it; this sudden change in her personality after moving into the farmhouse. She began avoiding contact with the children and spent most of her time alone, either poised on top of a dresser or up on back of the sofa, high off the floor, where she could better see whatever it was she was watching...and she was always watching something. Fur puffed up, ears slicked back as if tacked to the sides of her head, whatever she thought she

saw was frightening the furtive feline. Based on her adverse reactions, it was definitely threatening...something wicked this way comes.

On numerous occasions Juliet would enter a room then literally stop dead in her tracks. The kitty would hiss and bare her fangs, staring wild-eyed into thin air. Then she would go into attack stance, ears plastered down, fur fully extended from her body. Rearing up onto her back feet; horrendous sounds emanated from a petite feline: threatening, ominous sounds which could only be associated with self-protection. Claws fully distended, moaning deeply, she would viciously lash out at **nothing** then run from the room and hide for hours, impossible to locate.

April received a puppy for her sixth birthday and the child was overjoyed, as were her sisters who had mourned the terrible loss of Bathsheba and also longed for another dog. She was a mix of Labrador and German shepherd; a beautiful specimen. Adored by all the girls, Jennifer Rebecca became a truly cherished member of their family. She was sweet and kind, gentle and highly intelligent. However, whenever it came time for her to pass through the front hallway, this normally jovial, cooperative puppy became a different creature. Instantly defensive, Jenny's posture warped, twisting into that of an animal which had been traumatized or abused. She had become absolutely terrified. Jennifer would belligerently lie down on the floor, refusing to move beyond that doorway. One time Roger tried to pull her through and she began to cry: whine and whimper. He pulled a bit harder, trying to coax her through into the kitchen. The dog would have no part of it. Perplexed, he retrieved a steak from the refrigerator, extending it toward her from the kitchen doorway. No response at all. Frustrated, Roger approached their pet. Tugging at her leash, attempting to guide one reluctant pup through the dark hallway, she growled and snapped; behavior totally out of character. Roger released her and never tried again. He respectfully accepted her will, wondering what she knew that he did not, at least not yet. It was one of many incidents involving animals sharing space within the dwelling over the course of a decade. It is said that every creature knows more than any human being; a hypothesis proved beyond dispute at the farm.

There would be more cats and dogs, horses and ponies, a drake named Sir

Francis, a rooster named George and two precious bunnies named Trumpet and Flute; Christine's special pets. Pineridge and Royal; Honey and Bessie; Pooh Bear and Lady Victoria, the blue-eyed albino cat. There would be a big, Black Angus bull named Heyboy. The kids loved them, not just peripherally, but principally loved and cherished each one; the kind of love and affection requiring a father to lie to his children when Heyboy went for a ride then the freezer in the woodshed was suddenly stocked with meat the following day. In mourning, they refused to eat until he swore to them he **sold** Heyboy and bought another bull to replace him; a bull they did not know personally. He had to promise their boy was alive and well before dinner could be served. It took more than twenty years but eventually, the confession came. No one has forgiven him yet. It would take some time before mere mortals realized all the critters knew more than they did. What they were sensing was a precursor to an inevitable contact. It was a **heads up** of sorts but no one recognized the significance of reactions occurring in a house where space was being shared by so many souls. Human beings are oblivious. Their animals were re-acting out based upon what they could see, including the dead animals appearing as entities, running through solid walls. Mystery, as well as beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Their eyes were sharp, their senses keen; they were reacting out of fear, an instinctive response to intrusion. Their discomfort existed with purpose and reason. What they'd sensed and seen was a warning. Best for all creatures, great and small, to pay close attention to messages they may receive from Nature.

Bless the beasts...and the children.

*“Fear is a question. What are you afraid of, and why?
Just as the seed of health is in illness, because illness contains information, your
fears are a treasure house of self-knowledge if you explore them.”*

Marilyn Ferguson

the devil's pets

*“A misery is not to be measured from the nature of the evil,
but from the temper of the sufferer.”*

Joseph Addison

Within a few days of moving into their farmhouse, an interesting anomaly occurred. No one thought anything about it at first, other than how strange it was to have houseflies buzzing one's head in the middle of deep winter. The weather was bitterly cold. Nothing could survive outside for very long, so the next logical question was: "Where the hell are *these* coming from?" This was what Carolyn asked of her husband as one of the enormous soaring vermin attempted to land on the top of her head. Swatting and swishing the vile thing away, it returned, repeatedly trying to tangle itself in her dark, flowing hair.

"I think it's in love with you." Roger watched an obsession unfold.

"Kill it!" Doing his best to oblige, Roger grabbed a handful of newsprint (hardly the best tool for the job) from one of the open boxes; quickly rolling it into a weapon designed to finish off the unwelcomed houseguest, his sharp reflexes were no match for the apt agility of the elusive little devil. Instead of fleeing the scene, fearing for its life, this house fly taunted him. The intruder was ugly, its features distinct, especially the eyes. As it kept moving around the room at a deliberately slow and tedious pace, it circled once again...then returned to Carolyn. Something wicked...flies in the face of disbelief.

"Kill the goddamned thing!" The man tried. He could not make contact. As if possessing innate intelligence, the insect managed to escape a vicious swat. Evasive maneuvers engaged, as if anticipating in advance which direction the next strike would come from, it was more than mischievous. It was smart.

"Maybe it likes the smell of your *girly* shampoo." Roger's feeble attempt to lighten the mood backfired before he even knew it. His marked proclivity for escalating a situation applied to all creatures, great and small.

“I’ve been too damn busy to wash my hair!” As annoyed with her husband as she was by a fly, she glared in his direction.

“Maybe **that’s** the big attraction!” Without question: the wrong thing to say at that moment. Making matters worse: a dastardly chuckle escaped his lips, amused as he was by his own juvenile joke.

“Go to hell!” His wife did not share the joy, especially if it came at her expense. The phrase she uttered triggered a response, not in the man...*in the fly*. Unable to expel their intruder, Roger lowered his arms just as the demon dive-bombed her. “Get this goddamned thing away from me!” She leapt from its path. It followed her. She went down to the floor. It followed.

Surrounded by boxes, she was stuck in the center, possessions scattered at her feet. It was like playing Dodge Ball in hell; no viable route for a timely retreat. Forced to rely on her husband, in a critical, accusatory tone, she said:

“You’re not trying!” His pitching arm went instantly back into service.

“I am, too!” Naturally, Roger became defensive, due primarily to his wife’s sudden loss of a normally good sense of humor. Agitated, he flailed his arms wildly; a madman on a mission.

He really *was* trying and she knew it. They became equally frustrated. She wanted to return to the task at hand and get the job done. He wanted to take a life...or two! Darting between them, neither could reach the evil spawn; not even close enough to wound or disable it. With a concerted effort to do so, Roger accidentally struck Carolyn instead. Oops! She leered at her husband for a moment then recited an appropriate reference; a quotation on her mind: “I’m beginning to wonder if your aim is intentionally *off* target...or is it right *on* target! You know, there’s an old Chinese proverb: ‘Do not remove a fly from your friend’s forehead with a hatchet.’”

“This is **hardly** a hatchet and you’re not my friend...you’re my wife!” Ah, truer words were never spoken. Even tired and cranky, Carolyn had found it amusing. They laughed, realizing the absurdity of their futile endeavor.

Suddenly it backed away, exhibiting another unusual skill. The fly stopped. It hovered in midair, lingering in place as if suspended on a string. Floating directly in front of her face, almost still, the insect seemed to pause in flight and **watch** Carolyn as if she was some sort of curiosity. It then did precisely the same thing to her husband. The residents had every reason to believe they were being observed; it was how the encounter appeared to the couple. When it finished taking in the sights, the fly buzzed their heads one more time then fled the dining room. Roger watched as it went up the bedroom stairwell.

“Go kill it! Did you see that thing? It is some kind of mutation!”

Roger considered himself above such things as hunting down errant pests; an attitude destined to be altered over time...with a pending infestation.

“It’ll be back.” He was correct. The villain would return...with friends.

“That’s what I’m afraid of! Find it and kill it! Please, before the filthy thing lands on a pillow...or in a plate of food.” Carolyn was serious. Roger refused. They didn’t speak again for an hour. Before long, morning would be entirely usurped by the practice. Gradually the man would become preoccupied, later consumed by his own relentless pursuit of the devil’s pets.

They seemed to come from nowhere...then everywhere. Day after day more flies invaded the house. They all appeared to be the same, perhaps a different visit from the same freaky fly; fat and happy; slow as bumblebees...fast as hummingbirds. Pitch black, the color of coal, their size was uniform: Large. Simply put, these flying things were **not** normal, not average, run-of-the-mill houseflies. In the beginning it was only one or two, here and there, present long enough to be noticed as the oddity they were during that far-from-mild winter. The ubiquitous swarm came a few weeks later. No longer a nuisance, these persistent pests were a problem quickly evolving into a veritable health hazard. No doubt about it...they **must** be breeding in the house.

There was no need for Carolyn to bring the worsening situation to Roger’s attention. Their infestation was obvious. It had his full consideration within weeks of moving into the farm. Perplexed by it, Roger and Carolyn discussed

their options and potential solutions. What was happening in their home was not just an unfortunate aside or some normal liability of living in the country. They had no choice but to acknowledge the flies as peculiar, their experience of them, noteworthy. They were crafty and sly, covertly insidious, certainly not common, ordinary houseflies trapped and disoriented inside the dwelling. In fact, they seemed quite alert, on their game, but it was more than a game. It was an *occupation* which would soon become Roger's nemesis. After their creepy close encounter occurred while unpacking, the couple took notice of them to a far greater extent. Essentially, they watched them back; not merely pests but pestilence deserving to be as detested as any intruder in their home.

Thoroughly disgusted, Carolyn had genuinely loathed houseflies since her youth; a childhood plagued by the existence of nasty things thriving in steam heat and humidity. Her tolerance had diminished further over time. Having been raised on a farm deep in southern Georgia, surrounded by animals, (the perfect recipe for breeding vermin) she developed this aversion at a young age. According to her, as it was with her mother, flies were to be categorized with all other evils...fleas, ticks, chiggers, cockroaches, mosquitoes, spiders and lice: all the devil's pets. In spite of her reaction to their presence, she was reluctant about the necessity for hiring an exterminator. Treating the house with pesticides was not an option. She preferred instead to use other methods to eradicate a population well before they became a presence beyond control. Roger concurred. Neither wanted anyone exposed to harmful chemicals if it could be avoided; nor did they want anyone exposed to the filth and potential disease such insects introduce into any home. Roger decided to begin with a trip to a local hardware store. He purchased several swatters, enough to outfit every single room of their residence with its own weaponry. A general issued instructions to his lieutenants: **kill on sight**. It was everyone's responsibility to eliminate them at every opportunity. Carolyn's idea of stuffing mothballs in closets and eaves was ineffective, a mild deterrent at best. The following weeks would prove to be a trial by firing squad; the beginning of a war: a test of wills on both sides of the battle.

Even their children, generally oblivious to such things, began to notice the very strange behavior of the flies. In spite of the efforts made, the population increased at a rate which was staggering, yet they were all the same size; no

sign of any juvenile delinquents among them. Gathering inside the windows, the incessant buzzing became quite the distraction. Clusters of them huddled together, as if plotting the next move. They seemed to be scheming, devising a flight plan; a strategy for attack. Who'd like to buzz the room next? Whose turn is it to taunt another one of the girls out of her mind? One at a time, one after another, they would soar from the sills of windows only to target a poor soul somewhere in the room; then maliciously torment this individual to the point of insanity: All a part of the plan.

Approaches varied as targets were **not** arbitrary. Everybody had the chance to be picked on then put upon at some point or another during their selection process. As harassment followed, not one member of their family was spared the indignities of a sudden surge, having one of the vile creatures commit the ultimate intrusive antic: an excitable "Charge!" then in the nose or worse yet, into an open mouth. At times passive, at other times overtly aggressive, their movements appeared preconceived; the deliberate actions of thinking beings. The **chosen one** would take flight from the sill and begin buzzing the head of its intended victim. The space invader would begin circling, again and again, making one blatant attempt after another to tangle up in some unruly mass of morning hair; land on a face: wherever there was an enticing surface in sight. Each arrived at its intended destination to have its folly then abruptly retreat. Batting them away proved futile and it was especially aggravating when one would light on a utensil or inadvertently land in a bowl of cereal. Watching an errant fly drowning in milk was never an ideal way to start the day. It was entirely unnerving to hear the recurrent slap of the swatter. Roger monitored the kitchen while his children attempted to eat their breakfast. This practice was unappetizing at best. Though the girls accepted their father's nasty chore as a necessary evil, it was sometimes worse than the presence of pestilence. Their assessment would change over time. As this situation worsened it put a real damper on many a meal. The ritualistic practice of extermination became as distasteful (and fruitless) an endeavor as anyone could have imagined.

Disposing of the carcasses was an equally obnoxious chore. The gruesome task fell to the mistress of the house. As windowsills incessantly littered with the shriveling corpses offered no appeal, their removal became a daily ritual but she learned something in the process. By early afternoon the flies would

all die together, en masse. Within minutes, their perpetually humming house would fall silent for a brief period every day, before reinforcements arrived. Windowpanes vibrating with activity in the morning became as still as ghost towns, literal death traps for those who lingered while the Sun made its way across the sky. What light was allowed through etched and icy panes of glass melted frozen prisms in its path. Only then would this curious phenomenon occur. Once the hideous intruders were bathed by the brilliant illumination of direct sunlight, exposed to the radiating heat penetrating each pane of glass, they quickly perished. In the morgue-like atmosphere, silence was more eerie than the monotonous buzzing which came before it. By early afternoon each day what was left, rapidly decomposing remnants appeared shrunken, barely distinguishable. Hollow figures; nothing of substance preserved for posterity. A quick glance revealed the indistinct skeletal remains, mere shadows of the former creatures. Wings disintegrated into ashes. Perforated torsos appeared impaled by bright sunlight. Piles of debris as flimsy as dust accumulated on windowsills; it seemed as though magnified light reflecting through panes of glass burned them to death, cremating their wicked wretchedness where they landed in repose. Within hours their house became inundated again as if each one was a phoenix able to regenerate itself, as if rising from the grave...from the ashes of its own morbid demise: Reborn! It became as predictable as the sunrise or a chill in the air.

After a few weeks of conflicts Roger finally convinced Carolyn it was time for them to seek some professional help. He contacted an exterminator. What the man said was as startling as enlightening. Once he completed a thorough inspection of the premises, he rejoined the couple in the kitchen. Carolyn was disgusted. The one and only time she wanted the flies to make their presence known, to become as obvious to him as they were to everyone in the family, those despicable flies completely disappeared. A conspicuous absence aside, residual evidence remained, making this discovery all the more mysterious. She showed him carcasses; bodies not yet cleaned out from the windowsills. He gasped. His reaction told them something remarkable was happening. His simple, straightforward assessment followed: No BUGS! Other than what he had witnessed languishing in death there was no further evidence of anything at all; nothing breeding in seclusion.

In a quandary, Roger and Carolyn sought his advice. Reassuring the couple no harm would befall the family, he suggested he be allowed to apply a toxic treatment to see if this made any difference. Carolyn remained skeptical but he finally persuaded her; it was the right thing to do. His main concern; flies were breeding in the ancient timbers and though he had not located an outlet for their intrusion, it didn't mean one did not exist. It might have escaped his notice. Room by room, he canvassed the house doing his dirty work. Perhaps it would do the trick; resolve the dilemma. With their thanks, he departed.

Later that afternoon they were back with a vengeance, apparently immune to whatever it was in the chemical tank. The only purpose it had served was to "piss them off" according to Roger. He drove back into town then returned from the local hardware store with something more toxic than anything their exterminator had on his truck: Sticky Paper. It smelled worse than it looked. He went throughout the house, suspending the sappy substance from ceilings then waited for the flies to impact the obstacle in their path. As gravity pulled the spiraling sheets open, each one began capturing its victims in flight. With their gauntlet officially thrown down, an arsenal of weaponry procured then dispatched, it was time to issue a formal challenge: A Declaration of War.

Swatter in one hand, cup of coffee in the other, Roger aimlessly wandered the house for hours...morning after morning. Whenever he was at home, the man would rise before dawn, make the pot of coffee; then await their arrival. Something wicked...indeed. What began as an altruistic attempt to protect a family became much more a demented hobby, evolving into a preoccupation, gradually transforming into obsession. The man of the family took command. Mission: Decimate the fly population. Stalking his prey with single-minded purpose, the killing spree was always well underway by the time his girls got up for school. Focus intensified over time to the point, though his penetrating gaze was in constant search mode he'd stroll past his children, neglecting to greet them as if they were ghosts he couldn't see. He wouldn't respond when spoken to, not because he was being rude or aloof. The man simply did not hear a question or comment posed. His face wore a perpetual grimace during each moment of the hunt. Roger did not merely swat the flies; he crushed and splattered them with a sharp, angry "crack", startling everyone around him. Negative energy oozed from his pores. It was hatred, as evil as the miniature

demons he was aiming to eradicate, one at a time; nothing subtle about it.

In spite of all the watching and listening going on, Roger was missing a lot. His children were avoiding interaction with him, especially in the morning. As this transpired over more than three months, the ladies began mentioning their father's behavior to their mother. They were all becoming increasingly distressed and could no longer ignore this problem the same way their father had mastered ignoring all of them. Andrea asked her mother to intervene, to confront him about it. They recognized it: something was wrong with daddy. Likewise, they were all disturbed by horrendous sights and sounds of a slow, impending, inevitable death. The sticky paper was beyond gruesome; it was downright cruel. Objections flew from the beginning as these noxious fumes emanating from the strips permeated the household. It seemed to attract then disorient the flies, as did the vision of others struggling to escape their tomb. Those still free would repeatedly circle, approaching out of morbid curiosity or perhaps a desire to liberate their comrades. In so doing, they would fly too close to the prison wall, becoming its unwitting victim as an intended target. Witnesses soon became captives of this toxic substance; mortal witnesses of their torture were victims of it, as well. Death itself was the only mercy; their only escape from a Hellish-on-Earth existence; a tedious, lingering demise. It took time for them to die, if not from the poison, then from sheer exhaustion of the struggle. Their protests were vehement; loud, angry buzzing became a maddening sound vibrating throughout the dwelling. These creatures fought relentlessly for release from glue-based death traps offering only the promise of a miserable end. They continued to fight through various stages of death. It seemed to take *forever* for them to die. They languished for hours before being silenced by its poison. After weeks of the disgusting sights and sounds, revulsion for everyone concerned, Carolyn removed all the sticky paper. She could no longer condemn her enemies to such an evil end. This was immoral: Unethical. According to a compassionate soul, there **had** to be a better way!

Roger returned home to challenge her decision. Carolyn remained resolute, in steadfast opposition to a gross method of pest control. He acquiesced only after she'd agreed to allow another treatment of pesticides. The exterminator sprayed poison liberally throughout the eaves, the cellar and the woodshed.

Even the foundation got a dose of the destructive contaminant, to no avail. A bad attitude emerged as: “***Kill me! THOUSANDS will come to my funeral!***” Employing kamikaze tactics; flying their erratic patterns, evasive maneuvers more aggressively than ever before, the insects resorted to surprise attacks: a strike-from-behind approach. Belligerent creatures developed an obnoxious case of oppositional/defiant disorder; re-acting out by attacking all at once. Communicative by nature, this peculiar anomaly persisted. All knew of their displeasure, as if they were claiming the house from mortal intruders: Ironic.

It is important to note, as all of this transpired over their first few months in the house, other events were happening with such frequency that it made this chronic problem seem virtually irrelevant by comparison. Dynamics altered. Perspective was gained. Anxiety levels heightened. Roger and Carolyn began this odyssey believing the flies were a natural, albeit irritating occurrence. As time passed, minds changed regarding the Nature of the aberrant existence in the farmhouse. It was far more than infestation. It was manifestation.

Incapable of recognizing or identifying this odd disorder, ill-equipped to treat a malady, Roger’s all-consuming crusade to conquer the flies continued unabated, resulting in a rather ugly altercation. One morning, early in spring, (glorified winter in Rhode Island) the girls were seated around their kitchen table when Carolyn entered the room, appearing to be exhausted. Roger was swatting at pests with abandon as she pulled out a chair then sat down beside her children. Andrea went to pour her mom a cup of coffee. Frustrated by his pointless task, Roger abruptly and gruffly announced his intention to call the exterminator back to have the house treated again. It was the trigger. Carolyn exploded, firing in his direction...her aim, dead on:

“No more! They’ll poison my kids with that shit! I don’t want it in this house! I’d rather have the goddamned flies!” Slamming her fist down onto the table, a room went deathly quiet. Even roly-poly-fat-black-demon-seeds

hushed! Roger was blown away, shocked into silence by her vulgar outburst. Children choked a breakfast down, several with teardrops on their eyelashes. None of the kids had ever heard their mother yell like this before, as Carolyn simply did not talk that way, certainly not ever in front of her children. It was venomous, coming like the sudden strike from a poisonous snake, as toxic as any chemical on the planet.

“Roger! Put that thing away! Give it up! You’re **so** neurotic!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Roger’s comment was issued more as a statement of fact, not posed as one might a question or matter of concern. He was absolutely furious, embarrassed by her harsh assessment of his behavior. A confrontation between them appeared inevitable...what next?

Children scattered from the kitchen, grabbing their books and coats, fleeing the scene, racing for the bus stop. Escape. Carolyn escorted them to the door, apologizing for her sudden outburst; her uncharacteristically foul language. They all understood. Embracing each of them, sincerely remorseful, sending her girls on their way, the woman stood alone in front of the fireplace. She’d have to return to the kitchen, there to make amends, though she stalled for a few minutes, allowing some time for Roger to calm down. It later occurred to Carolyn, considering the many shrew-like symptoms she had been suffering; this chronic condition, her reaction was a direct result of both mind and body under siege, overwhelmed by anxiety and stress. It had everything to do with what happened while her husband was away. She determined the time had come to tell him the truth; tell him about what was occurring in their house, things he knew nothing about because he was always gone. He was like the spirits: out of sight but never out of mind. A baby girl approached her mom.

Propping April up on an oversized pillow directly in front of an episode of **Sesame Street**, Carolyn returned to the kitchen. Roger had cooled off. He’d been sitting at the table, holding a cup of coffee in hand; no swatter in sight. She sat down beside him. They remained silent for a time as she attempted to gather strength; organize her thoughts. She had a story to tell.

"I'm sorry." Carolyn began crying, something she was not frequently prone to do. After several frazzled minutes she talked with her husband for nearly an hour, detailing the many events she had deliberately kept from him. Once confessing she'd called their attorney Sam to express her concerns, it added credence to her otherwise outrageous claims. Carolyn would never have told Sam she thought they'd made a terrible mistake buying their farm; not unless she really believed it. Roger listened attentively. Based on the subject matter, he too had something to divulge, mentioning the conversation he'd had with Mr. Kenyon on the day of their arrival... an ominous welcome home.

Her gentle intervention ensued. Carolyn explained to her husband that his seemingly maniacal hunt was disrupting a family and profoundly distressing their children. Each was forced to reconsider things neither of them had ever been confronted with before, compelling them to explore concepts beyond the realm of any personal experiences. Conclusions eluded the couple; logic failed them. How does one make common sense of an uncommon dilemma? A presence, demonic in Nature, was exposed by this necessary conversation; acknowledged and empowered in the process. They were utterly unprepared.

During the following week everything changed. Inexplicably, the phantom flies disappeared. Years later a woman would arrive and explain that the flies were there with purpose and reason, as the harbingers of things to come. She would look Carolyn in the eyes and speak from her heart. "You can't really kill what's already dead." The woman who would see that ugly truth of their situation and share these quiet words of wisdom was someone familiar with what was an essentially malevolent onslaught; painfully aware of its darkest point of origin: Mrs. Lorraine Warren. She'd come a long distance to observe their household and *all* of its occupants...to observe; like a fly on the wall.

"To know the road ahead, ask those coming back."
Chinese Proverb

safety in numbers

*“Who can hope to be safe? Who sufficiently cautious?
Guard himself as he may, every moment’s an ambush.”*

Horace

All the children learned quickly to gather and travel in groups. Their house was spooky enough, cavernous in comparison to where they had come from. Their first little house in Willimantic, Connecticut was practically a glorified apartment when juxtaposed to the farmhouse in which they'd come to dwell. Echo chambers abounded as shadows danced within its light. Bedrooms were gigantic. The woodshed was like having a second home attached to the main one. There was plenty of space to explore but all of the girls had the feeling it was shared space and after their first few days there, none of them traversed it alone, unless absolutely necessary. Though no one spoke of it aloud, all of them had the in-common sense: they were **not** alone. Children are perceptive, sensitive and vulnerable to the spirit world. As this was their initial point of contact, no one knew precisely what to make of it, but they knew something was around them all the time...and sometimes it was something wicked.

Peculiar children, they would go off to school all day long then come home and “play school” together for several hours. They owned an enormous slate blackboard on its solid oak swivel frame; Andrea’s most prized possession, adorned with all the accoutrement: chalk of every color, erasers: the works. Andrea was their teacher. She would instruct her sisters, show them whatever she’d learned that day in class. Though most of it was too advanced for them, some of it stuck; her own personal **Head Start Program**. Class convened in the middle bedroom during the winter but this location became problematic so when inclement weather finally broke, they moved it out to the woodshed. Adjusting to the new paranormal took time; it required an inordinate amount of patience. Some scoundrel spirits from the Netherworld did not appreciate having to attend school and would play nasty tricks on mortal children who took **their** studies seriously. Andrea became distressed when her chalkboard was repeatedly smeared, often erased. Detailed sentence diagrams would be lost. History lessons wiped clean away. Tediously transcribed lines of music

were smudged beyond recognition; irretrievable. She wondered privately if it was mischievous activity or malicious in Nature, but never said a word.

There was an unspoken Golden Rule in the house: ***Do unto others as if you were the others.*** No one was ever sent off alone because no one would want to be sent off alone. If the children were playing school and someone needed to use the bathroom then “recess” was declared and everybody went along. Not always, but often when they returned to the ***classroom***, their lesson was destroyed. At times, the chalkboard was wiped completely clean; pitch black again, as if it had been swabbed with a wet rag then allowed to dry. In most instances the board was so marred with streaks the information was illegible and could not be preserved. Andrea would have to finish erasing it and begin again. Oddly, nobody remembers discussing this anomaly when it happened. Andrea would re-enter the bedroom and heave a heavy sigh; sisters remained silent on the subject. Everyone could see what had occurred in their absence and ***knew*** it was none of ***them*** who’d done it, but no one ever spoke about it. Part of the new paranormal: accept it and move on.

Disgusted with all this unnecessary repetition, Andrea enlisted her father’s assistance. One spring day they moved the chalkboard out to the woodshed. He seemed puzzled by her desire to set it up elsewhere because he did not know about their numerous class interruptions. It was quite heavy. Carefully navigating it back down her winding bedroom staircase then out through the summer kitchen, they located the level spot on the wide planked floorboards. School was in session again. He made certain it was secure then went to open the large sliding door. Let there be Light! The children enjoyed the warmth; breezes and bright sunshine while learning their lessons well. Satisfied with the effort, Roger returned to a former chore and a class re-commenced. April did not grasp most of what they studied but she wanted to participate anyway as she was alone so much of the time and wanted to be ***in school*** like her big sisters. The smallest chair was in front, for her. After several days of peaceful sessions, with no interference from beyond the grave, Andrea was relieved. It was her idea and had been a successful one, or so she thought.

Respite was temporary; relocation had virtually no effect. One afternoon as waning sunlight began casting shadows upon the surface of their chalkboard

Cindy announced she was starving, having skipped the afternoon snack to get to class on time. Everybody was hungry and wanted something to nibble on before dinner. Traveling in a pack, they all went back inside the house, intent on spoiling their appetites. Returning to the woodshed, about twenty minutes later, the girls found the chalkboard completely smudged; twisted at a ninety degree angle. Andrea became visibly upset; her frustration, palpable. Angry, struggling to replace it in its proper upright position, erasing smeared lessons from the surface, she finally abandoned the effort in disgust: Class dismissed.

Four children went outside to play in what light lingered of an evening sky. Remaining behind to close the woodshed door, Andrea uttered a vulgar curse beneath her breath. Thinking she was alone, unable to resist the temptation to speak her mind on spirit matters, she expressed her opinion with a naughty phrase, especially for someone so young. Having learned a few new words at school, she put them into practice. Confounded, Andrea truly hoped moving the chalkboard would resolve their dilemma. She was wrong on both counts. No. It didn't matter *where* it was placed and yes, someone *was* listening.

Several more days passed uneventfully; the children played well together. Andrea revised her strategy. Whenever someone needed to leave the group, *one* sibling would accompany her for protection. It worked: their chalkboard was left undisturbed. Someone always stayed out in the woodshed to protect IT from being tagged; a unique form of vandalism. Having determined their offending presence was only *present* during school; lessons were no longer being defaced due to an absence of mortals. Is everyone satisfied? Hardly.

One weekend the family had chores and plans so school was not in session. Roger went out to the woodshed to gather their trash for a trip to the dump, a bi-weekly ritual. He yelled to his eldest daughter who dutifully answered the call, assuming her dad required some assistance. When she entered through the door of the summer kitchen, Andrea gasped. Her father was staring at the mass of wood and slate smashed to pieces in a pile on the lower level of their woodshed. She ran down the stairs, touching fragments of slate shattered like glass, its spindles snapped off at the base, its solid oak frame splintered into

kindling. There was nothing left to salvage. Roger was as stunned as she by the shocking sight, a loss sustained; he did not accuse anyone of anything. It was obvious none of the girls would have or could have destroyed the object. None of them were even capable of lifting the chalkboard, let alone heaving it the twenty feet it had traveled; an act as malicious as it was mysterious. He knelt beside his daughter, warning her away from hazardous shards, carefully placing each fractured piece inside a paper bag for a safe disposal. Her heart was as broken as their chalkboard. Tears obscured the path as she ran into the house, seeking then finding comfort within the arms of an equally-perplexed mother. The logical question was: "What the hell happened?" Hell happened; an evil intention to deliberately inflict harm: damage done.

Gathering together on the front lawn, watching Roger load its remains into the trunk of a car, by then all the children were crying. No one could believe their eyes. How *could* this have happened? *Who* would have done such a vicious thing? For what purpose or reason? Why hadn't any of them heard a crash? So many questions...so many tears. This mean-spirited, destructive act effectively robbed five children of their favorite pastime. The chalkboard had been a very expensive gift their parents could no longer afford to replace.

A painful lesson learned. Class dismissed.

"Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterwards."

Vernon Sanders Law

sword of Damocles

“The day which we fear as our last is but the birthday of eternity.”
Seneca

During her original tour of the property, Mr. Kenyon had directed Carolyn into the barn. He was so proud of it, as he should be; a magnificent structure which had weathered the worst storm on record in New England history. The Hurricane of 1938 claimed many historic buildings, even that far inland, but not the old barn up on Round Top Road. It survived. The master shipwright who built it was a genius. Carolyn marveled at the hand hewn beams, finely bowed arches visible to the untrained eye. However, she had no recollection of seeing that hand scythe hanging overhead, dangling precariously from its highest beam more than thirty feet from the ground. This barn was very dark. Perhaps she had not noticed it before. Perhaps it was not there at the time.

A few weeks after moving in, while the children were in school (except for April, who was taking her nap), Carolyn slipped out of their house for a few minutes to admire their beautiful barn. She had been fantasizing about using it for the purpose intended...maybe getting a pony or a horse for the children, and she wanted to see if it was properly outfitted to receive an animal or two. Entering from the smaller side door, she'd left it wide open to provide some additional light. Standing in a vacuum-like cavity, having been cleared of all Mr. Kenyon's accumulated tools and its machinery only a week or so earlier, she listened to the echo of her footsteps as her boots struck the wide planked floorboards. The old barn was brutally cold inside; the air deathly still. It was eerily silent, completely quiet within the structure. Carolyn could hear herself breathing...could hear the beating of her own heart. She wondered why it felt so much colder inside than it had been outside; as warmly dressed as she was with a thick cotton turtleneck, a woolen sweater and her heavy leather flight jacket, Carolyn shivered. Cold swept through her delicate frame, seizing her attention. Even though her choice of clothing seemed utterly inadequate to effectively cut the chill, failing to keep frigid air from penetrating her body to the bone, ultimately that outfit would serve her well, protecting her in a way

she could never have anticipated. Quaking, Carolyn quickly determined the building was perfectly acceptable; quite suitable for welcoming any resident of the four-legged variety...with a fur coat. Anxious to return to her sleeping child and relative warmth of the farmhouse, at least when compared to a barn exposed to the elements, she turned around to exit the building. In so doing, she distinctly heard a strangely disquieting sound above her head, magnified by still, silent air. Heads up!

Could a bird have become trapped? Had one entered that cavernous space when she opened the door? It sounded just like the frantic fluttering of wings. The rapidly repetitious noise startled her: "whoosh whoosh whoosh" slicing through acrid, stagnant air. A disconcerting sound, Carolyn located its origin. Was it an owl? No. A hand scythe (a sharp, rounded tool used for cutting and baling hay) was flying directly toward her. It resembled a kind of boomerang thrown with velocity, spinning in circles, whirling like a dervish...again and again. This object appeared to be hovering overhead, literally defying the law of gravity. Suddenly it plunged toward her; the woman was in grave danger. She watched. It flew precisely in her direction, yet Carolyn could do nothing to rescue herself in the moment. She was frozen in place, unable to move her legs, incapable of stepping aside. A dangerous airborne device; weapon fixed on its intended target: vital to brace for impact.

Carolyn recalls becoming instantly transfixed, mesmerized by the object as it approached. She was paralyzed, unable to retreat. Though her mind was as provoked as her body, speaking to the subject of self-preservation, trembling legs would not cooperate. Carolyn stood there, rigidly in place, watching the trajectory of the scythe. As it struck her slender form, its blade slicing hard across both her neck and shoulder, the violent force of a blow she expected was stunning nonetheless. There it lay, beside her boots, on frozen planks of wood, as still as the air, its momentum stifled; its threatening tone silenced by the strike. Carolyn stared at the wayward tool as she slowly reached up to touch the wound, fearful of what she might find in its wake. It was then she'd realized the multiple layers of clothing she had worn as protection from cold morning air had proved to be a blessing in disguise; nothing less significant than her salvation. That bulky, cumbersome outfit literally saved her life. In spite of its accurate aim and high speed, the strike of the scythe was unable to

penetrate leather, though it left quite a gash. The jacket was destroyed but it was the scar it had left on a mind which would become troublesome. Equally frightened as fascinated by this strange event, she stared at it, in shock, then picked up the hand scythe, latching it onto a protruding nail nearby.

Taking a moment to recover and re-establish equilibrium, she was stymied by her own reaction (or lack thereof) to the occurrence. Even though a surge of adrenaline still pulsed wildly through her veins, the chill of the air began to claim her attention, consuming her being. It felt as if she was frozen stiff, barely breathing, incapable of standing upright. It was surreal. She had been raised in the swamps of Georgia and, in spite of those numerous hazards, had never come so close to death before. Gazing at splinters of wood beneath her feet created by the tool as its tip impaled the wide wooden plank where she stood; Carolyn knew instinctively just how close she had come to a disaster. Finally regaining her composure, she raced out of the barn and back into the house and checked in on April, still soundly asleep, entirely unaware of what happened to her mom. A chill overtaking her in the barn apparently traveled home with the shaken soul. As she sat on the sofa, cocooned in a blanket, she quivered; incapable of controlling her breathing for quite some time. Unable to shed the imagery or dispel the fear, haunting sounds of the close encounter rang out in her mind. It could have been much worse. Considering a thought; it could have conceivably robbed her children of a mother. Awestruck by an incident she could not comprehend; her thoughts became mired in questions, riddled with one deeply disturbing concept: It could have been a fatal blow.

Carolyn was consumed with curiosity, asking herself many questions she could not answer, primarily among them: Why had she been unable to move, to simply step out of the way of a hand scythe? How on Earth was it *possible* that such a dangerous tool had been placed so far out onto the narrow beam, suspended more than thirty feet high? How could it have possibly achieved that rate of speed or the accuracy of its aim without having been deliberately thrown by someone? Carolyn was the only living soul in the barn at the time. Most puzzling; how could merely stepping inside a barn expose her to such an incongruous situation; involving imminent peril? A decidedly horrifying circumstance, yet Carolyn did not feel the full impact of it nor bear the real burden until much later. She did not sense the perceived threat immediately.

Actually she was far more amazed than frightened by it. What are the odds of something like this happening to her...to anyone! In time, she'd fully realize the danger she was in; came to appreciate a saving grace in moments of peril. What happened to her had been no accident.

The girls returned from school to find their mother shivering, bundled up in a blanket on the sofa. She was entirely preoccupied...lost to them...lost in thought. If she could have she would have been responsive to their greetings. Instead, there was only a vacancy there, a blank stare, startling to all of them. Their mother was incoherent; incapable of communicating. She had begun to process this incident, acknowledging what happened. Carolyn didn't notice a few children had entered the house. Essentially, they were left home alone.

Several months would pass before she finally disclosed these events to her husband, along with a number of other equally disturbing episodes. A bizarre incident: contrary to accepted laws of physics; Nature. As Carolyn began to grasp the true gravity of it; being in jeopardy...inside an old barn, eventually she understood what had befallen her was a legitimate threat, the warning of impending doom. Targeted by a supernatural force far beyond her cognitive ability to interpret, it was the visceral triggering of an internal alarm system. Instinct; intuition told her she was not wanted, unwelcome in her own home. The deep bruise on her shoulder would heal in time though it left an invisible mark; a permanent scar on her psyche. Perhaps it was an omen; an ominous harbinger of things to come. It served its purpose well; attention being paid.

Years later Carolyn would learn of Mrs. John Arnold; the woman who died by her own hand, found hanging in the barn on precisely the same beam from which the scythe had fallen. The looming threat remained, hovering above. Next time, it would appear to be the face of evil itself. Heads up! Attention! A myth? True after all; the proverbial Sword of Damocles does indeed exist.

“One of the greatest pains to human nature is the pain of a new idea.”
Walter Bagehot

a very fine how do you do

"I see her not dispirited, not weak, but well, remembering that she has seen dark times before; indeed with a kind of instinct that she sees a little better in a cloudy day."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Intrigue mounted; an evil chill seeped deeply into Carolyn's bones and then it crept into her soul. Roger complained incessantly about exorbitant electric bills. As the price of heating oil went up their thermostat came down. Strange sounds persisted in the night. Flies attacked at will. As tragic violence raged on in Southeast Asia, very bad news became too difficult to watch. She had absorbed too much too fast, souring her mood further. The miserable woman finally snapped. It had been, without question, an intolerably mean season of snow and bitter temperatures in and out: the winter of Carolyn's discontent.

Pacing the house, a rusty crowbar in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other, Carolyn knew the fireplace in their parlor would bear the brunt of her wrath. This chimney appeared to be entirely intact. It was the logical choice; where their family most frequently gathered together. As she pried the face from the molding, careful not to damage the original mantel or wainscoting during the arduous process, a certain satisfaction replaced a resentment and frustration she'd harbored for months while she shivered and stared at the woodshed full of free heat: going to waste! It was a sin. It was a crime against the humanity she knew as her family. Why should they suffer cold? Why not do something about it if one has the tools at hand? Where there's a will...there's a way!

"What a mess!" Once the front panel was removed, Carolyn was no longer chilly; puddles of perspiration beading up beneath the rim of her glasses. At the task with pure vengeance, tearing the face off a fireplace with energy and enthusiasm she thought had been lost to her, what it revealed was daunting: bricks, horsehair plaster, newspaper and twigs. Whoever sealed the hole used

anything and everything at their disposal to do so. As the room began filling with debris, April was enlisted to assist in this effort, filling up garbage bags one at a time...up to her knees in trash! Bag after bag accumulated, piling up like an instant landfill in the parlor, requiring both of them to drag the heavy load off into the woodshed. Soon April was just as hot and filthy dirty as her mother. Together they stood, examining results of their efforts. This tag team had made great progress in a relatively short amount of time.

“Bless this mess!” The child made the sign of the cross...backwards. Later in the afternoon, as her sisters arrived home from school, April relinquished her duties. She went to take a hot shower then a well-deserved nap. She was exhausted. Her mother was just getting started. They all labored well into the evening, breaking for dinner with the unspoken hope of an early bedtime.

Carolyn was not allowed to touch food until she'd hosed off. While Andrea warmed leftovers, her mother, beyond messy, went to take a shower. A sight to behold: the woman's dark, flowing hair was encrusted, matted with white plaster; corners of mouth pasted shut. Bless *this* mess! Peeling filthy clothes from her moist, sticky skin, she stepped into the soothing shower, grateful to her eldest for pulling a dinner together. She dared to relax. Had she realized, by disturbing a long-sealed fireplace, she'd inadvertently trigger a deluge of supernatural activity in the house, she would have definitely left it alone and would certainly not be alone in the bathroom.

While Carolyn was preoccupied, there came a knock at the kitchen door. It was a neighbor, Mrs. Pettigrew, the mother of five boys; a lovely woman in every way. She had called earlier, learning of this massive project underway down on Round Top Road. Knowing Roger would be out of town for several days and Carolyn was quite busy, she had kindly baked a cake for the family, a truly thoughtful gesture. Andrea invited her in then cracked the bathroom door open to announce a pleasantly unexpected arrival. She then put a fresh pot of coffee on to brew before her mother even asked; a conditioned reflex. Duly informed, Carolyn stepped out of the shower and went directly into the “warm room”, a term affectionately used by the girls to describe cozy closet space off the bathroom, formerly occupied by an enormous center chimney, the one original to the farmhouse. When a significantly smaller replacement

was installed years before, serving only to vent the furnace in the cellar, this space effectively trapped heat, creating a dry environment; providing escape from unrelenting chill: a private spot in which to change clothing in relative comfort and ease.

As she began removing her robe to dress, a large coat hanger *lifted* from the rack beside her then struck the woman repeatedly on her head and neck. Carolyn began to scream; an alarm beckoning everyone in from the kitchen, including their houseguest. Entering the bathroom en masse, they witnessed a vicious attack...nobody believing her eyes. Once that beating subsided, the coat hanger fell to the floor. Those gathering around stood in stunned silence. Carolyn too, was muted...in a stupor; only the vacant expression in her eyes spoke of the ordeal. Slipping the robe back over her wounded shoulder, she quickly moved out of the space where the attack occurred, ushering a crowd back toward the kitchen, securely closing the bathroom door behind her.

This was a traumatizing event for all involved. Carolyn appeared to be in a state of shock. She sat at the table, fidgeting with her fingers, trembling from the effect of adrenaline still surging through her body. Andrea returned to the stove in the pantry, staring into a sauce as she stirred it, wondering what just happened and how it could have possibly occurred. Mrs. Pettigrew remained quiet, perhaps attempting to absorb over-exposed images. Her ruddy English complexion deepening to an auburn tint, the hue matching her hair; once she was reasonably sure Carolyn had sufficiently recovered she decided to forego coffee then politely excused herself. It was so upsetting. Carolyn had been so anxious to find a friend; and now this? They walked into the parlor together. Before departing, Mrs. Pettigrew leaned closely toward Carolyn and uttered a rather esoteric message of her own, forewarning: "The Kenyons always kept the lights on overnight: All the lights...every night." Reaching for Carolyn's hand sympathetically, after she left, Mrs. Pettigrew never returned again.

The children began asking questions which their mother was incapable of answering. Eventually they gave up, finished dinner, did their homework and went to bed. This was beyond anyone's ability to comprehend though each of them had, to a certain extent, become its unwitting victim, as well. That night they all slept together in groups, anxious and frightened, wishing their father

was home. Carolyn did what she could to be a calming influence, to no avail. They'd each witnessed something bizarre; something of supernatural origin. Though their children were too young to understand what had happened, they all knew it was something phenomenal...something wicked this way comes.

Concerned about her mother, Andrea crept downstairs after her sisters had fallen into an uneasy slumber. She found her near the bottom of the bedroom stairs, gazing into the hole she had cleared out earlier in the day. Embracing her daughter, Carolyn tried to reassure her eldest, but there was no comfort to be found in their dark and dreary house that night. Andrea helped replace the wood enclosure over the face of a vacant space, so to cut down on any drafts. They studied the abandoned bird nest. It had fallen from inside the chimney during demolition. Having rescued it from the pile of debris, Carolyn placed the specimen onto the mantelpiece for all to admire. At her mother's urging, Andrea reluctantly returned to bed: no rest promised...none gained.

Sensing an intrusive presence, Carolyn remained alone in the parlor, as sole guardian of the dwelling. A mother considered what happened; the impact it made on their children. She then examined the obvious bruises on her body, having been struck in precisely the same place where the scythe hit her a few months earlier. Certain her husband would surely insist on there being some "reasonable explanation" she decided not to tell him, forced to reconsider the position when she realized the girls **would** divulge the incident. It was time to have a talk with him, to describe recondite events; time to suggest perhaps an "unreasonable explanation" existed instead. It was so obvious. She was being targeted; **she** was the one unwelcomed in her own home. Sitting in silence on the loveseat, ignoring the book propped in place against her knees, Carolyn began to pray. Tears welled in her eyes as she contemplated the possibility of being expelled from a place she wanted for her children. No longer an issue separate and distinct from the family, they too were now being exposed to an insidious malfeasance, the likes of which, begrudgingly sharing its space.

Carolyn hesitated to confront Roger with these disturbing allegations. Her suspicions confirmed: they were not alone in their house. Leaning back into a soft pillow, she observed two ominous flies-in-residence entering the parlor,

buzzing in a circle, one perching itself on the binding of her book. It stared straight at a woman too weary to swat it away. After a moment, the intrusive, contemptible creatures flew, presumably returning to the place from whence they'd come, though their specific point-of-origin still remained a mystery: an undisclosed location. A very fine how do you. Overcome with a sense of dread, Carolyn felt bereft; void and vulnerable to attack. Exhausted, fighting the sleep her body and mind desperately required, she slowly closed heavy eyes with an intention of doing so for only a minute, awakening hours later at the break of dawn. First light flirted with her sight. Gray and gloomy was all the morning held as a promise for the day. Acrid odor stung her nostrils. The house was something more than cold; it was absolutely frigid. Her body had stiffened beyond measure or movement. Wrenching herself up from the sofa, Carolyn walked directly toward the thermostat. Nope. No way. There was no conceivable way the device could be correct. The heat was blasting; its gauge read seventy-two degrees, yet it would be warmer if every door and window were opened, which is precisely what Carolyn did to vent a powerful stench, attempting to rid the house of its putrid fume which had evidently permeated the dwelling while she'd slept. Disoriented, unable to dispel the smell or the penetrating cold holding her captive, Carolyn knew something was with her; an evil presence she could not see or hear, but felt. There it was; right there at the crossroads of night and day. It was in the parlor. There was no denying it, in spite of the fact that nothing was visible to this bleary-eyed beholder. She felt an unmistakable, inescapable sense of false imprisonment, the sensation of a being in certain peril, grave danger; evoking a response primal in nature, that visceral human reaction of fight or flight. Her children were all sleeping upstairs. Defiant; there she stood, firmly holding hallowed ground, preparing for something to rear its ugly head. Protective instincts deeply entrenched, like soldiers in a ditch, weapons drawn; laying-in-wait prompted the timely retreat of her unwelcome companion. It swept from the room as the whisk of a broom at the flick of a wrist. Clearing the air, temperature rising steadily, it was there and then it was gone, precisely at the break of dawn: wake-up call.

*“At first cock-crow the ghosts must go
back to their quiet graves below.”*

Theodosia Garrison



~ a pause for reflection ~

familiarity breeds contempt

“In time we hate that which we often fear.”
William Shakespeare

Spring refused to arrive on time. It stalled; delay tactics coming in the form of snow and sleet, freezing rain and biting bitter winter wind. A season toyed with the fragile emotions of those waiting with pressed patience; a virtue that was wearing thinner than cold night air. Breathe deeply, my dear. Breathe in.

An adversarial marriage has repercussions throughout an entire household; a low level hostility which tends to vibrate through children. Both Roger and Carolyn did not seem to notice what they were doing; it came naturally. The girls were paying close attention; reading moods, gauging every interaction in comparison to everything else they'd known of their parents prior to this time. Quiet when it was not loud; a study in extremes: darkness and light.

Based on personal reflection of those involved, it appears the root ball was born of an insidious, deep-seeded contempt; this core issue remained buried beneath fertile ground; fertilized with quips, sarcasm and subtle imagery: an eager comment ignored, a shy smile left as an unreturned gesture. Silence, as much a weapon as words, created distance; marriage seemed a mere illusion. It was the root ball of a relationship beginning to rot, kept perpetually moist, drenched with tears. Over time it would turn black in the darkness, deprived of light and hope in the place where no one could watch it die...where no one saw it disintegrating from within. In retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise.

Plagued by normal aches and pains associated with a major move, Carolyn was certain it would subside. It never did. Over time, it worsened, spreading through her being like the wild rivulets remaining after a flood; outstretched fingers trickling over a landscape attempting to return to its source in Nature. A once vital woman was rapidly deteriorating, becoming crippled, struggling through each and every day as the cold infiltrated her bones, her psyche then

her soul. Formerly firm muscle mass was compromised; elements conspiring against her caused joints to throb, a wounded heart to break. The strong, agile woman began aging at a remarkable rate...well before her time: Frightening. It altered her demeanor; a soft disposition began to harden, primarily because her husband was convinced it was all in her head.

Why had the farm felt so familiar? Why did this place call to her then reject this woman in every conceivable way? Carolyn routinely wondered about it; somewhere lost in thought, pondering questions plaguing her as much as the pain. It seemed grossly unfair. The longer she lived there the less she liked it; its charms becoming easy to overlook; too many challenges...too many souls. She began to perceive the pain as cruelty; punishment: as part of the process of dismissal. Carolyn felt as if she was being run off her own property. It was obvious; something or someone did not want her there: contempt born of a familiarity growing stronger and stranger by the day.

During their first several months in the farmhouse so many awful incidents occurred, it became difficult to keep track: spooky sounds, a fly infestation, disturbed animals in conflict with invisible foes, demonic doors opening and closing at will; mind-numbing manifestation, finger-numbing cold. What was one to think? Noxious odors: the smell of death. Coat hanger and scythe: an omen or two of animosity shared in kind. Carolyn was under attack. It would soon become evident she was the target of someone's disdain. How to defend against those which cannot be seen? How to face one's fears in the midst of the battle? Uncommon valor was called for in circumstances so preposterous, it was impossible to identify the enemy in a war with no end. Existence at the farm functioned as a metaphor, its description suited to ongoing conflict over in Southeast Asia. Vietnam had become a major point of contention between Carolyn and Roger. Juxtaposed positions on the war spawned many a heated debate often culminating in discordant argument. She loathed Richard Nixon. He wholeheartedly supported the president and would vote for him again. As bad news grew worse, Roger became utterly belligerent about it, defending

indefensible positions; poor political decisions escalating as the bloody body count continued to rise unabated: rabid Republican versus staunch Democrat. Theirs was a mixed marriage; not a political love fest, by any measure. It was just another reason to fight. Their relationship became even more adversarial over time; uncivil discourse, one symptom of the disease with no cure. It was an element of a combative nature between them. At its center, a presumption in both camps: the enemy is ignorant and misguided; incapable of admission or compromise...issues of war, no promise of peace.

Carolyn had hesitated to discuss spirit matters with her husband. Initially, she could not believe it herself so there was nothing to convince him about. However, as strange incidents accrued a body of evidence grew substantially. Sam Olevson offered a unique perspective; his opinion factored in, lending credence to Carolyn's speculation, creating less dark space for dispute. Still, in spite of his respectful appreciation of Sam's position, Roger continually questioned her perceptions, maintaining what he'd considered to be a healthy skepticism...for years. His stubborn streak was magnified by the subject. He remained suspicious; not a person ever easily persuaded. This point of view served to antagonize Carolyn further. She considered it highly disrespectful, especially because she'd never given him any cause; no reason to doubt her voracity on any subject in the past. A level of honesty and personal integrity she brought to a relationship from the inception was being overtly challenged by disbelief, as though her opinion was entirely irrelevant, her recounting of events, fraudulent. His doubts and the accusations, implicit and explicit, were leveraged as weaponry throughout a campaign founded on a mutual distrust. Moving to the farm altered them as individuals. In the beginning, well before Roger saw the Light, as luminescent as any which danced upon the surface of the river when he first made the trip to water's edge, he simply did not, **could** not believe her. Then he began to blame her. Carolyn felt abandoned in their marriage, unwanted by a house and husband alike; rejection on all fronts. An ugly war of words was being waged. Casualties were all but inevitable. As an increasingly fiery relationship fed the beast within, flaming passions stirred up the spirits. What they really needed was less heat and more light.

“You don’t believe a goddamned thing I’m telling you...” Carolyn shook her head in disgust.

“It’s not that...”

“Yes it is **that!** You think I’m delusional...I’m making all of it up just for the HELL of it! I have **never** lied to you, Roger. Not **once** in all these years have I ever told you anything but the truth...and you know it! How **dare** you question me now! How dare you suggest...”

“**I don’t believe** in ghosts!”

“Roger, you don’t get it. Your belief or disbelief has absolutely no bearing on their existence whatsoever. They don’t give a damn what you believe!”

“There **has** to be some logical explanation for it...” And so it went, until the root ball was rotted and nothing would grow.

By the time Roger finally became a **believer** it was too late: needle and the damage done. A sharp point of contention evolved into the muck and mire of irreconcilable differences. Though they’d remain together for many years to come, a couple was no longer together in spirit. They shared a life, a house, a family and even a bed, yet a deep chasm of resentment developed in between them; no bridge wide enough to cover that expanse. No meeting one another half way. The more familiar Carolyn became with Roger’s bad attitudes and predispositions the less likely she was to try communicating with him on **any** subject. The abyss gradually widened, attaining a dark, immeasurable depth, like staring into what appears as a vacant black hole in the Universe. The Big Bang Theory: a huge explosion then silence and darkness. No sign of Light.

What a shame; a very sad turn for the worse. The negative energy seethed, oozing from every pore whenever Roger was confronted by that which he’d resisted a belief in; gradually transforming him. Unfortunately, his anger was not reserved for the supernatural culprits but spilled profusely onto anyone else in his path. By comparison, Carolyn tempered a reaction she could not disguise but frequently muted (for purpose of keeping the peace) by adopting an insouciant demeanor intended to counteract Roger’s irascible nature; her

passive approach, measured and deliberate, to offset his own fiery outbursts. Recognizing the union as one of diametrically opposed forces, a war wife did anything necessary to avoid further enflaming the passions of her husband.

She was not the only one changing. As the months passed everyone in the family was adversely affected by manifestations and reactions alike. Anxiety and dread became a paranormal part of life; fear, an ever-present emotion. It was layered like phyllo dough used in a recipe for disaster: Roger was afraid his wife was losing her mind...then **more** fearful that she was **not** losing her mind but was instead **really** seeing what she'd claimed to witness. He feared for her health and well-being, mentally and physically. Her deterioration was increasingly evident to all; a specter far more frightening than anything their house had yet to muster. Carolyn's rapidly aging and shriveling form was the most horrifying apparition of all...one everyone witnessed...all of the time.

Both feared for their children; Roger, because he sensed they were quickly becoming motherless and Carolyn, because of what these children might be observing. She was terrified; the incidents colored her world: shades of gray. Impenetrable shadows did not yield to the light. The more familiar Carolyn became with the characters of various entities, the less she understood about the true Nature of what was happening in this house. Roger would not listen; he did not know how. Resentment brewed; each stirred the curdling cauldron of incomprehension. It festered at the surface while coming to a boil. Toxic bubbles: not fit for human consumption.

All of the children feared for their mother and likewise feared their father's unpredictable moments of spontaneous combustion, as it was Wrath of God: "This house smells like death!" exploding from within him more than once; they'd tremble when he yelled, hide when he hollered, becoming as invisible a presence as those with whom they dwelled. As the two of them fought their own battles the war of words escalated. Seven mortal souls got caught in the midst of an immortal experience, all ill-prepared for their transformation. It spawned a host of unholy emotions; reactions which threatened to intrude on a family which had been, prior to arriving at the farm, a rather peace-loving clan who enjoyed life together. Their idyllic setting was a mirage; the pursuit of happiness merely an illusion. A marriage riddled with conflict and distrust

colored their landscape black. A pastoral tapestry Carolyn once admired was being torn to shreds, unraveling before her eyes, and yet she could not see the invisible manifestation: the changeling did not sense her own transformation. An exhaustive attempt to understand the many subliminal messages received incrementally began taking a toll on her soul. Too gradual a decline in assets to feel the fee being assessed...too distracted by the culprit to realize she was being robbed. Like common pickpockets, they were...thieves stealing youth from a beautiful woman one terrifying moment at a time.

There were some whimsical moments of clarity, such as the day all of her children gathered and began to sing a song Carolyn found poignant; perfectly appropriate to their situation. Andrea was teaching her sisters a tune she had learned in **Chorus**, staging a mini-musical production of "**The King and I**" on their expansive front porch; a wonderful scene. Words rang out as music through the house, beckoning a mother from the kitchen. Spring had arrived, allowing for open windows. Proudly peeking through from the dining room, Carolyn saw her chorus standing in a circle, shaking hands on the downbeat, as directed. Each one sang an assigned phrase; sweet and simple lyrics with a profound interpretation, as the subtext had not escaped an observant woman. During a few moments of childhood innocence playing out, while leaning on the windowsill, applauding her theater troupe, an insidious concept crept into Carolyn's consciousness...a notion few parents ever have need to consider.

Resenting the intrusion, a grimace belied her joy; that glimpse of a shadow cast from the Light: Evidence of an intruder. As it leapt through her mind she dismissed it. An attempt to expel it from the class failed. She reconsidered its presence, wondering if it had come to watch the lesson learned, or teach one. Carolyn recalls feeling conflicted, plagued by negative thoughts which came in the most unexpected moments, yet mindful of the messages received. The lyrics said it all: "**Getting to know you...getting to know all about you...**" had struck an ominous chord. Why wasn't she free to merely appreciate the moment? Why must its light be colored by darker thoughts? What purpose did they serve? Truth be told, she **was** getting to know "**them**"...getting to know all about them...like it or not. Smiling, she shook it off and sang along.

Fear is the only mortal emotion more powerful than love. As every member of the family continued to witness manifestations of souls with whom they'd shared space in a house alive with death; Carolyn's terror turned into a hatred of souls past, and one present. Fear transforms what it touches, for better or for worse. Among dead and living alike, fear conquers love. Lesson learned:

In quarters too close for comfort, familiarity breeds contempt.

“It is not necessary to understand things in order to argue about them.”
Pierre Beaumarchais

cold as stone

*“In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe
and enough shadows to blind those who don’t.”*

Blaise Pascal

Spirits do not always seem to be aware of their surroundings, as if they're just passing through on their way to somewhere else; as distant as they are present: remote, disinterested beings. When they did engage members of this family it was brazen; a dramatic spectacle, sometimes threatening in tone and demeanor. An attempt made to entice a girl to **come along** for a dimensional journey through time and space was no small spirit matter. Though negligible intrusions occurred frequently, just a part of the new paranormal, when major manifestations occurred it was quite enough to make mortal blood run cold, especially considering the fact that an appearance was often accompanied by a brutal chill associated with the passing essence of an immortal soul; Death.

Even after years in their presence no one in the family ever knew what next to expect; a visit could be highly disruptive, moderately annoying or entirely benign. With their inexplicable power to manipulate objects at will they often received acknowledgment and attention...simply by lifting up the telephone receiver or sweeping the bristles of straw brooms across a floor which clearly required some attention of its own. Disapproval was quite a common theme; sometimes it was a blatant reaction. One of the spirits preferred their kitchen be kept a certain way; another one preferred the musical genre of the 1940's, singers and standards; **not** Rock n'Roll. Theirs was an omnipresent influence, even when it remained relatively quiet for extended periods of time. It was a strange way to live and let die; always sensing something unseen just beyond the shadows...afraid to look more closely...afraid of what might be there.

Nothing would happen for weeks, even months at a time, unless, of course an argument erupted. Such discord inevitably provoked some responses from the other side; the darker side. A few harsh words; all it took to unleash **some**

reaction. Most of the spirits hated these altercations. One of them apparently thrived on this upheaval; the uglier, the better. It was not necessarily an overt acknowledgement in that moment; not a manifestation as entity. Instead, an object would suddenly fly across the room, perhaps as shock value to break up a disturbance *or* to prompt its escalation. No one was ever certain of their underlying motivations. Ultimately, it proved irrelevant, as any interruption served its purpose, altering the focus of an argument, silencing it completely. Often just sensing a presence was enough to quell a brewing storm; a sudden chill in the air, cold as stone in winter. The odorous whiff of death infiltrated; it lingered, functioning as a calling card of sorts...enough to redirect the rapt attention of those involved in any dispute, regardless of the subject matter.

Reconciliation eluded an unhappy couple; they'd frequently allow weeks to pass before properly addressing an argument with an eye toward resolution; hostility became an unwelcomed state-of-being during this difficult period. They maintained a certain physical distance, passing in silence like ships in the night; extending little else than a cold shoulder. At a perpetual impasse, no meaningful conversation occurred. Their house muted; a shrouded hovel. Roger would crash on the sofa or find a good reason to hit the road: Be gone! It was the kind of quiet known to shatter the nerves of children, keeping them fearful of saying the wrong thing, afraid of creating any disruption at all. A sad irony as side effect: they too hid in the shadows to avoid detection.

During these most tempestuous of moments, one familiar spirit repeatedly appeared. He would intently observe this household and its many occupants. An innocuous figure lurking in shadows behind an open door in the hallway, becoming the shadows as his translucent form disappeared in the moment of mortal recognition, as soon as somebody saw him he would vanish and then return when everyone was preoccupied. It was Manny; the spirit Nancy spied the day the family moved in; he was perched inside a doorway, watching Mr. Kenyon finish packing. Cindy caught a glimpse of him as well. Obviously he was not a threat but was instead a kind and gentle spirit; his mild expression was always one of bemusement or concern, depending on the circumstances. He was peaceful; a benevolent apparition who stood constant vigil, keeping a watch over mortals in his presence. Even though he never once attempted to

directly contact anyone in the family or intervene in any dispute, his warmth transcended the pervasive chill of death constantly surrounding him. Manny was a sympathetic soul; his goodness evident to all who sensed this presence. Though he'd always seemed aloof and unattached to the places and spaces in which he appeared, visually distinctive facial expression indicated an interest in those he was observing. It was a passive/aggressive interaction; overt in its actual manifestation but placid once present. The girls were never frightened of him, considering him a rather protective influence, someone to watch over them, which he did with considerable frequency. As years passed, this warm, especially unobtrusive entity became a peripheral member of their family. He seemed to belong there; seemed to fit in the larger picture: as if in a portrait.

His was not the only integration which occurred, though, for the most part, the other spirits were more circumspect, far removed from those with whom they shared space, as if **mortals** did not exist. The Baker boys never noticed the presence of human beings. Not once. Not that they were evasive. Instead, they were oblivious to the family with which they shared common ground. It was strange to encounter them, usually on the landing of the bedroom stairs. They'd stare straight through those who witnessed them as the father and son serenely surveyed their fine property from the portal disguised as a window. Carolyn would soon **be wretched** by their passive/aggressive behavior in her own bedroom, in the form of a chant and incantation delivered before dawn, intended to taunt and terrify; the threat issued by those who did not seem to notice the victim they haunted. Cold, they were, while carrying flames aloft.

Carolyn was often found brooding upon the hearthstone, on a solid slab of granite. As her heart became as cold as the stone beneath her feet, the woman considered a tear in the fabric, the shredding of a marriage, acknowledging a stark vacancy: black holes exist. Distance she felt from Roger had nothing to do with proximity or his travel schedule; it was as omnipresent as the spirits. Ultimately, she concluded the dissent between them was a matter of faith. He had no faith in her. In time, his disbelief would be countered with a mutual, identical sentiment. She had no faith in him: An overt alienation of affection.

*“There is in every true woman’s heart a spark of heavenly fire,
which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity but; which kindles up, and
beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity.”*

Washington Irving

dusk ‘til dawn

“A sensible man will remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways – by a change from light to darkness or from darkness to light; and he will recognize that the same thing happens to the soul.”

Plato

Twilight was often when it began; a time of day when it becomes night and there will be no halting this natural conversion of light to darkness. Better to embrace an inevitable transition. It was the same time when the spirits began crossing over, in and out of sight as shadows cast by a soft, waning sunlight. Incidents frequently occurred as it became difficult to distinguish what it was one witnessed, as if spirits were taunting mortals with their obscure presence. Apparitions: cries and whispers from beyond; beings who flirt with darkness: beings who exist somewhere, and everywhere, just beyond the speed of light.

Those who made their presence known during the day were mischievous or simply oblivious to the mortals they spooked. Sometimes the manifestations were deliberate in nature, intent upon making a point; sweeping their kitchen floor or changing the station on the stereo. Sometimes the visitations seemed entirely arbitrary, as if they were passing the time by passing through time. The farmhouse; their place in the country, was nothing less than a portal for the immortal. They didn’t seem to have any concept of time in the same way human beings measure existence. Apparently they have no more need of it. However, they did seem to acknowledge the measurement on *this* side of the Universe, stopping a clock at a precise time coinciding with their appearance. Perhaps their marking of time is based upon its significance in their former lives, to the extent that it is used by them as a marker in death.

The one who often made her presence known at night came specifically to frighten; delivering her messages as a warning to those left alone in the dark. **Mortal fear** is ancient and primal; the visceral reaction exclusive to humans who are terrified by that which they cannot see, due primarily to absence of

Light. Yet, in retrospect, the mere existence of these tortured and torturing souls *is* the Light, the proof of something beyond this realm. In light of day and dark of night, they are the source of all Enlightenment.

Night becomes day...then becomes night. A journey the Perron family took through space and time, night and day, year after year, changed each of them in fundamental ways they couldn't fathom. Becoming increasingly sensitized to their supernatural environment, these individuals assimilated experiences incrementally; accumulating then storing information in memory: the more shocking the encounter, the more vivid the imagery retained for posterity. It becomes a matter of history, even when recalling what one would rather not.

Every upstairs bedroom had a different, rather unique hue, at precisely the same time of day: twilight. All three of the rooms had distinct personalities. The windows were small and each gave the bedroom a quirkiness all its own. Regardless of the season or angle of the Sun, the bedrooms glowed at sunset. Depending on the weather, light at dusk or dawn possessed a magical quality. It was not of this world; it was a Holy Light. Often it appeared to signal their arrival. A vision of a beautiful child wandering through, as if lost in eternity: a mournful soul in search of comfort, calling for her mother. Her pitiful cries brought tears to the eyes of a mortal child who witnessed her pain and could do nothing to help lead her home. Perhaps she *was* home, in another time and space: in another dimension. Could it be a memory so intense, it is capable of transporting her back to the time and space she once occupied in the midst of a life lived in torment? At dawn, with the first glimmer of light at sunrise she would emerge as an opaque shadow huddled in a corner of Cindy's bedroom, silent and motionless, as if waiting for something or hiding from someone; and then she was gone. Then, at dusk, she would reappear again. What was it about this time of day becoming night and night becoming day which opened a portal to the past as windows into other dimensions? There is no answer to this question, yet it is worthy of posing simply for the sake of exploring those

impossibilities which routinely occurred in the house, often on a daily basis.

As the cycle of day into night revolves in perpetuity, momentum by design, dictated by the natural rotation of Earth in the cosmos, something mystical is revealed at the point of transition: at the intersection of life and death. Is this flickering hue of twilight some signal from beyond the grave as spirit travels across the Universe, dancing upon fringes of shadows cresting the horizon? It may be when an intermingling of Spirit occurs, as a molten melding of souls; the time between night and day when corporeal souls become aware of being inextricably entwined with ethereal disincarnates, in loving embrace of those who came before; entangled with and indistinct from one another, yet whole. During these moments a confluence of darkness and light known as dusk and dawn may be precisely what mortal eyes require, so to behold what is always there, just beyond the speed of light, otherwise obscured by a lack of vision. Integration: So I see.

“Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear.”

Mark Twain

The Incendiary

You are completely free of affectation:
silent you sit, watchfully tense,
just as silence itself pretends to nothing
on a starless night in a fire-gutted city.

Consider that city—it is your past,
wherein you scarcely ever managed to laugh,
now raging through the streets, now sunk in self,
between your insurrections and your calms.

You wanted life and gave it all your strength,
but, sullenly spurning everything alive,
this slum of a city suffocated you
with the dreary weight of its architecture.

In it every house was shuttered tight,

in it shrewdness and cynicism ruled,
it never hid its poverty of spirit,
its hate for anyone who wasn't broken.

And so one night you burned it down
and ran for cover, frightened by the flames,
till chance produced me in your way, the one
you stumbled on when you were fugitive.

I took you in my arms, I felt you tremble,
as quietly your body clung to mine,
not knowing me or caring, but yet,
like an animal, grateful for my pity.

Together then we sallied...where did we go?
Wherever our eyes, in their folly, took us.
But intermittently you had to turn
to watch your past ominously burning.

It burned beyond control, till it was ashes.
And I remain tormented to this day
that you are drawn, as though enchanted,
back to that place where still the embers glow.

You're here with me, and yet not here.
In fact you have abandoned me. You glide
through the smoldering wreckage of the past,
holding aloft a bluish light in your hand.

What pulls you back? It's empty and gray there!
Oh the mysterious power of the past!
You never could learn to love it as it was,
but yet you fell madly in love with its ruins.

Ashes and embers must be magnets too.
How can we tell what potencies they hold?
Over what's left where once she set her fire
the incendiary cries like a little child.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko from: **Stolen Apples**
Translated by Stanley Kunitz with Anthony Kahn



~ a mother keeping vigil on the hearthstone ~

“Life is not separate from death. It only looks that way.”
American Indian Proverb

II. Fire in the Hole

“He was a burning and a shining light.”
John v. 3

With her usual curt impertinence, Nancy stood rigidly in place, hands upon her scrawny hips, deliberately located, so to make a grand proclamation with more panache. “Dad is gonna freak out!” Then for emphasis, as if staking her claim of a position: “Yep! He is just gonna freak!” Shaking her head in total opposition: “I know it, mom. Dad is gonna...”

“***Going*** to freak out. I heard you. Now, if you are going to say it at all, then please, try to say it properly!”

“Okay! GOING to freak!” Scanning the parlor, throwing her hands into the air as morning light revealed what dusk in twilight hue had hidden from sight the evening before: dust was everywhere. The parlor was coated; smothered by the thin pale white residual debris it wore like a shroud.

Carolyn was in no mood for any criticism; what she would have normally found adorable did not amuse her in the least after such a difficult night.

“Save it for the stage, babe. You can go to the bathroom through my room. Please close the pantry door on your way.” Having already closed the pantry door a few times that morning, she did not know whom she should blame for leaving it wide open again. As far as she knew, Nancy was the first one up on a dreary Saturday perfect for sleeping in. No one was busy doing laundry.

“What died in here? God! It smells so bad!” Nancy wrinkled her little nose while shutting the pantry door very quickly...with a grand slam.

“I don’t know. Put a sweater on. I had to open the windows.”

“I’m not cold...it just stinks in there!” The comeback kid had spoken.

“Put a sweater on, young lady. Get one from the warm room.”

“I’m ***not*** GOING in the warm room!” The petulant child had a valid point, based on the legitimate fear of an incongruous image lodged in her mind.

“Then get a sweater from your bedroom. You can probably find one in that pile of clothes on your floor!”

Carolyn instantly softened her stance, recalling how frightened her children had been by an assault they witnessed the evening before. Nancy stood there, staring at her mother as if confused, anxious to remain with her in the parlor. She appeared to be terrified. Suggesting her child retrieve something warm to wear from inside the laundry room, (the pantry with a door suddenly opening of its own volition), Nancy snatched the bathrobe then fled the stinky scene. Carolyn saw her close the door and secure the latch... again. The two of them went into the kitchen together. Mom prepared breakfast for her early-riser. A few minutes later she returned to the parlor to continue the cleaning process which would claim many hours of her day. The room was ice cold. It smelled like something dead. The pantry door was open...again.

Roger returned from his road trip later that evening. Carolyn was relieved to have her husband at home. It meant she could get some peaceful sleep. It also meant she would have to deal with the inevitable fallout; his reaction to her ongoing project. As he walked in through the parlor door, children all but mauled the man; apparently their job, as the greeting committee, to keep their father feeling loved and missed, and then kept well-informed. They were all talking at once, which made it impossible to understand any one of them.

“Look! Mommy...WE all opened the fireplace!” The baby chimed in first.

“And she got beaten up by a coat hanger in the closet!” Nancy ***had*** to tell.

“Mrs. Pettigrew saw it happen, too!” Christine felt the need to validate her sister’s impetuous disclosure.

“I saw it, too.” Andrea’s somber tone reflected concern...in a whisper.

“Can we please get a horse?” No one knew where ***that*** question came from but it had been on Cynthia’s mind and since her daddy was in a great mood, it seemed as good a time as any to ask.

“Hold it!” Roger was overwhelmed by the attention; too much information. “Girls! I just walked through the door! Give the old man a break!” Reaching out to haphazardly embrace his eldest, standing on the sidelines, she’d been unable to penetrate the madding crowd. “Okay, everyone relax. Calm down. Did you save me something good to eat? Hope so...I’m starving!”

They had indeed. Roger was hungry and exhausted. He’d been driving for many hours and only wanted to do what he had suggested his kids do: relax. Andrea went into the kitchen to retrieve a bowl of beef stew from the famous pressure cooker. Carolyn escorted Roger into their bedroom, closing the door behind then began to unpack his suitcase. She’d worked all day to clean up a mess in the parlor. Dust traveling the air settled everywhere; to infinity and beyond! Removing sheets from furniture just minutes before his arrival, she was pleased and satisfied with the results: quite an achievement. The parlor looked great; Roger hadn’t noticed. Instead, the road-weary traveler stretched out on their bed, kicking the shoes from his feet.

“You look so tired.” Carolyn glanced up from the task at hand, responding to his comment with a deflated expression then her sparse share of whispered words, indicating a willingness to speak with little energy left to do so.

“So do you.” She abandoned the task and sat down beside him, running her fingers through locks of his thick, black hair. He was a handsome man, easy on the eyes, especially so that chilly spring evening. She was grateful to have him home. He needed to know what had occurred in his absence.

“It was a really good trip. I can afford to take a few days off. Now, what’s all this about a fireplace, a coat hanger and a horse?” He smiled, prepared to indulge a lengthy diatribe, if necessary.

Carolyn had cleaned the parlor so thoroughly her husband did not notice: it was ***different***. Likewise, she had effectively vented the putrid smell from the house. Assuming its presence was primarily due to disturbing so many years

of accumulated debris from a chimney which had seen its fair share of birds and bats (and Lord knows what else had gotten trapped in the narrow shaft); as he had not detected an odor she didn't even mention it. Instead, she began her explanation of the fireplace by exclaiming the *free* wood in the woodshed was going to waste, something he'd been well aware of; a point upon which they agreed. Roger was not the least bit upset with his wife's initiative taken in the matter. In fact, it sparked his interest. A drowsy man rose from his bed with renewed vigor, returning to the parlor to examine a hole in the wall.

As she removed its wooden façade, exposing the black hole, Roger's face spoke of impending firelight; he glowed like kindling igniting the flames of desire. Never expecting to find a pristine enclosure suddenly at his disposal, Roger crawled up inside to assess it from within. It appeared the flue was in excellent condition though he presumed they would need a chimney sweep to be properly prepared. Roger was literally awe-inspired. He had not thought it through, having yet to consider just how many months of his life would be spent tromping through the woods, out in cold and snow, a chainsaw roaring in his hands, once their ample supply of wood was depleted. He did not think of all the work involved...the former Boy Scout wanted to build a fire.

Pointing out the splendid beehive oven, when prying it open, a piece of the paint chipped away. Carolyn picked it up to study. Dense and multi-colored; layer upon layer of paint had been amply applied to the mantel board and its wainscoting, undoubtedly gorgeous wood beneath. Suggesting they strip the paint and restore the fine colonial specimen, she was surprised when her idea met with no resistance. Her husband was not only willing to see a huge chore accomplished, he was more than willing to pitch in. Likewise, he suggested they remove the old hearthstone replacing it with granite. A plan set in stone. The salesman took a full week off road; he stayed home, there to transform a fireplace into an amazing centerpiece of a farmhouse, if the **Zip Strip** fumes did not prove to be the death of him.

As the couple stood gazing into the open façade, discussing what to do and how next to proceed with this project, they heard the distinct "click" behind them; wrought iron against wrought iron. Turning to see the latch had again dislodged from the pantry door, it slowly drifted open...of its own free will.

Roger was puzzled; Carolyn, exasperated. She clearly did not appreciate the exposure of a messy, musty laundry room detracting from their parlor. It had no heat or particular charm and the house was drafty enough!

“Now **that’s** a problem. Ever since I opened the fireplace this pantry door **refuses** to remain latched. I’ve been blaming the kids. You saw it. There’s no one else in here. The door opens by itself.” The woman was disturbed by it.

Roger considered the dilemma for a moment: what could have caused it to happen? He then calmly and methodically explained his theory...as there **is** a logical explanation for everything.

“I think when you yanked all the stuffing out of the fireplace it shifted the balance of weight in floorboards. It’s probably why...I’ll tighten that latch.” He’d closed the door, looking it over in the process. The piece fit snugly into its groove; a mystery. He reopened it, stepping back abruptly as if stricken, overcome by a sudden nauseating stench, prompting his sour expression.

“Jesus Christ! Do you smell that? What the hell died in there?” Slamming the door, Roger jammed the latch down; wedging it into its place. He fled the scene with his usual dramatic flair. “It’s awful! Something **is** dead in there!”

“Maybe a mouse got trapped in the pipes. I don’t know. The house reeked this morning, the **same** odor; not something I would forget. It must have been coming from the pantry. The door was wide open when I woke up and it has stayed that way ever since. I had to open doors and windows to get rid of it. At least I **thought** I got rid of it. Did you smell anything when you came in?”

“No. **That** disgusting stink I would have noticed right away!”

Moving quickly out of the parlor, in a futile attempt to escape the pungent odor, they noticed a drastic plunge in temperature; each could **see** the breath of the other as they spoke. Roger was already annoyed. He marched over to the thermostat to inspect the **next** problem while his wife shivered, grabbing a nearby blanket as she followed her husband into the dining room. As if the space around them had suddenly sunken into a deep freeze, a chill dissipated as rapidly as the stench once they both acknowledged it. One moment it was

there and then, in the next, it was gone.

"I think the thermostat is broken...the same thing happened this morning." Carolyn wrapped herself snugly inside the blanket; the joys of haunted home ownership. Seating herself at the table, Andrea arrived with the large bowl of beef stew for her father. Waiting for Roger to join her, he was pacing again.

"I've lost my appetite." He'd scowled at the food then changed his mind as the aroma wafted up, drifting into his nostrils, replacing the formerly horrid smell trapped there, lingering too long. Andrea disappeared into the kitchen, attending to the chores her siblings had artfully avoided. Carolyn remained with Roger. There was another subject to raise. He did so before she could.

"What's this about a coat hanger?" His appetite indeed returned. Indulging himself, Roger listened with only mild interest as Carolyn tried to explain.

"Yesterday I went into the warm room to change after taking a shower. As I walked in, I was attacked; something beat me with a coat hanger." Her tone was somber but direct.

"You were what?" She had his complete attention. "What did you say?"

"I can't figure out what it was...how it happened. A hanger lifted up off the rack then struck me; hit me again and again. Everyone saw it, including Mrs. Pettigrew. She stopped by to visit. I yelled out from the shock of it. Everyone in the kitchen came running. It's not my imagination, Roger. It didn't **bounce** off me. It **hit** me, hard; over and over again. That is exactly what happened."

The incredulous expression on his face spoke of doubt about the incident as described. He could not believe his ears. His eyes might convince him.

"You **accidentally** knocked a coat hanger off the rack and it hit you before hitting the floor: Gravity." There was no question in his mind. He understood the cosmic laws of the land, or so he thought. **That's** what happened. Period. No need for further discussion: speculation. As the world's leading authority, he stated his claim as a matter of fact then returned to the stew in earnest.

“You weren’t in the warm room, Roger. You didn’t see it happen.” Having anticipated his reaction, Carolyn was no less defensive simply because she’d known what was coming. He would need to be persuaded to think about this incident in a different way. Carolyn allowed the throw around her shoulders to slip back over the chair. She began unbuttoning her shirt.

“What are you doing?” He glanced at her suspiciously.

“Offering proof: So you don’t believe me? Then look at this.” Peeling back the fabric hiding the wounds from sight, Carolyn exposed the bruises on her neck and shoulder to the man who’d questioned her voracity.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” He stared at her then stood to examine the bruising more closely. “You must’ve done this while you were opening the fireplace. There is ***no way in hell*** a coat hanger could have done ***this*** kind of damage!” He’d reached down to touch the tender spot but she pulled away from him, to avoid contact or any further pain: Inspection over. Carolyn buttoned her shirt and gingerly reached behind to pull the blanket back over her cold shoulders. Roger assisted his wife, not knowing what more to say.

“I broke three fingernails opening the fireplace, not the blood vessels in my neck. I didn’t want to tell you in the first place. I ***knew*** you wouldn’t believe me.” The disgust in her voice instantly put Roger on the defensive. “I am not a liar. After thirteen years of marriage you ought to know that by now. I have ***never*** lied to you and I’m not about to start now.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you. I think you’re confused.” He was certain.

“I’m ***not*** confused. I’m convinced. Something happened in the closet that I can’t explain and neither can you but since you weren’t there to see it, don’t bother trying.” Those sharp words and harsher tone told Roger to save all the theories and skepticism...and swallow them down with his stew. “Go ahead. Finish your dinner. It’s getting cold...little wonder in ***this*** house!” Carolyn stood abruptly, prepared to abandon her husband...so to return the favor.

“You’re being ridiculous.” The irascible one had to make matters worse.

“Oh, really? Fine. You can eat alone *and* sleep alone. Welcome home.”

Metal against metal, a “click” echoed through the room, silencing a debate.

“Your turn.” Pivoting in place, Carolyn left the room, joining her eldest in the kitchen. Assisting with evening chores, she stewed as long and hot as the sumptuous meal she’d prepared for her family. Hoisting the heavy stainless steel pot from the surface of the stove, it occurred to her: a *pressure cooker* was becoming a metaphor of her marriage. A symbol. An omen.

Bolting back into the parlor, Roger found the putrid stench overpowering, spoiling his dinner and souring his foul mood further. He saw the pantry door propped wide open as if it had been pushed back rather than drifting open as before. Slamming it shut, wedging the latch down into its slot, Roger glanced behind him while walking back toward the dining room, sensing a disturbing presence...one other than his own. Of course, it was only his imagination. A startling chill swept through his frame, stilling him en route. Contact. Fear. It seized him. Roger knew of only one reaction to have to fear and frustration; anger. All his huffing and puffing appeared in the air, visible as mist from his lips; a jolt of unfamiliar sensations caused a shaken soul to pause, reflecting upon the circumstances in a feeble attempt to identify an unidentifiable force. A power beyond mortal recognition had claimed him for a moment. Thinking someone just touched him, Roger swung around as if to take a swing at the intruder but she was out of sight, yet not out of mind; his mortal eyes did not behold her. Dismissing it as so much nonsense, he sat down hard in his chair, punishing *it* for being there, no doubt.

To this point, the dining room had been remarkably free of flies, especially so considering the presence of fragrant food. This was no longer the case. An absence went unnoticed until their presence filled the void. Buzzing his head with a vengeance, Roger swatted it away; worse yet, one of the evil demons perched itself on the rim of his bowl, effectively squelching his appetite, this time, permanently. It taunted him until the man exploded. Pounding his fist on the table...good aim; crushing his tormentor into the surface. Pushing the bowl away, he raged through the kitchen then into the bathroom to wash his defiled hand. All the overt grumbling beneath his breath was barely audible.

Carolyn and Andrea remained in the pantry, grateful they could not hear the words flowing from this disgruntled man. As he passed through the kitchen again, Andrea peeked around the corner of the pantry to observe. Returning to her mother's side, a nervous child asked what happened. She had vaguely heard an altercation; details escaped her at a distance but no one had missed the impact of his fist on solid maple. Andrea whispered her question.

"Mom. What's wrong with dad?" The inquiry was sincere, full of concern.

"Well, now **that's** the million dollar question." Carolyn could muster only the weakest smile. "I think he's having a temper tantrum. Don't worry. He'll calm down. All boys do in time, usually by the age of fifty...though that's not true in **every** case!" she forewarned.

Attempting to make light of the situation, Carolyn was well aware her little Libran abhorred discord of any kind, especially in the home. Obviously upset by the ongoing dispute, a mother felt the need to reassure her eldest child.

"Is he mad about the fireplace?" Andrea's dewy eyes tugged for an answer.

"No honey. He's just MAD." By lobbing a dollop of soapsuds on the tip of her daughter's nose, Carolyn indicated she did not care to discuss it further. While scrubbing the thick steel wall of a bulky pressure cooker she lifted it from the sink, wincing as its weight pulled against damaged shoulder muscle, reminding her of the REAL issue on the table.

Unaware of the extent of the injuries she sustained, Andrea was concerned and gently pressed her mother for some answers.

"Are you all right, mom? Does it hurt much?" Her alarm was evident.

"I'm fine." She raised the arm above her head to prove she could. "See?" It relieved some tension in the muscle...and in the room.

"Let me see." Andrea longed to comfort, sensing her mom's vulnerability.

"It's my heart that hurts right now, not my shoulder."

Based on the child's reaction Carolyn regretted making a somber comment; in lieu of sharing too much she suggested it was almost time for bed. Having divulged her sadness, something she'd tried to avoid, Carolyn decided, rather than risk any further inquiry, to instead send Andrea on one last errand; to collect a bowl from the dining room table. She would use this time to gather herself. Her daughter dutifully retrieved it, discovering the napkin had been thrown, shroud-like, over the remains of a fly. It explained a loud sound she heard, as well as her father's race to the bathroom sink. She'd cleaned up the mess he'd made, kissed her mother goodnight then went off to her bedroom. Carolyn abandoned her efforts in the kitchen: Lights Out. She made her way through the house finding her acrimonious husband sound asleep on the sofa. There she left him, securing the pantry door one more time as she passed it.

Roger was up with the flies. Based on his cheerful demeanor, no one would have suspected he had a less than pleasant encounter with his wife the night before then slept on the sofa. If he did come to bed, Carolyn hadn't noticed. In any event, he was up and very busy well before she emerged from beneath the relative warmth and comfort of their quilt. When she finally entered the kitchen, she could not believe her bleary eyes. Roger had already prepared a pot of oatmeal and the girls were gathered around the table, devouring their scrumptious gruel in peace and quiet. Their father had forsaken the morning murder and mayhem regimen in favor of joining his children for breakfast, monitoring the surrounding area from his seat. He glanced up and smiled as she came into the kitchen then winked. Carolyn knew it was as close as she'd ever come to a formal apology, though she found herself gratefully accepting it nonetheless; another kind gesture to follow, her husband then rose from his seat to get her a hot cup of coffee. He was making an effort to make amends. Carolyn acknowledged it. He gently placed his hand on her bruised shoulder. She reached up to touch him, patting his fingers, releasing an almost audible sigh of relief. Then, as if nothing had happened between them, as if nothing happened at all, an odd couple chatted about restoration plans. Each guilty of ignoring an issue they could not comprehend, their discussion was a prime example of the tendency. Problem

was, in that house, dismissing an anomaly never resulted in its disappearance. Deciding on three slabs of granite for the hearthstone, Roger suggested they first prepare the space. It meant removing the existing rocks, piece by shattered piece. Then they should go to a nearby quarry to choose a more desirable stone. Carolyn agreed. (Note: prerequisite of living in New England requires having a well-developed appreciation for granite.) As they'd done so many times in the past, the family made a project of it, working as a team. Once breakfast was finished, everyone got dressed then hard labor began. **The Bugs Bunny / Road Runner Hour** kept the kids entertained as they toiled. Late in the afternoon Carolyn excused herself from the project, going off to begin another chore: dinner. Everyone else remained on task until that dirty job was done, revealing the gaping hole in their floor, nearly two inches deep. Two-by-six feet across: all that remained where the once cracked, damaged-beyond-repair hearthstone had rested undisturbed for decades, if not for centuries. ***Well done*** according to Roger; an enormous but well-worth-the-effort restoration project was only partially complete.

Congratulating themselves over a hearty meal, the girls were exhausted and went to bed early, leaving their parents behind to admire all their handiwork. Even with a massive removal effort, a shifting of weight, Carolyn noticed the pantry door had not been a problem. It stayed closed and latched throughout the day. Though she kept it to herself, she felt a certain sense of satisfaction, a realization: Roger's theory of "unbalanced floors" had apparently been shot straight to hell. No animosity; just vindication in her grin.

Though everyone else had the chance to hose off before dinner, Roger was the only one yet to enjoy the many benefits of a hot shower; ladies (and more ladies) first. When his turn finally came Roger was grateful there was any hot water. He left his wife standing in front of their fireplace...smiling. When he returned to the parlor several minutes later, her mood had abruptly changed. In the brief time he was away the room had become frigid, the air had turned rancid and the pantry door had, in death, taken on a life of its own. Carolyn stared at the man in silent desperation.

"What's the matter?" He waited for her response. Standing rigidly in place,

only the movement of her eyes indicated ***the matter***; her gaze shifting slowly toward the door. It was swinging open then closing, as if fanning an invisible flame. Roger rushed over to it, stopping the momentum, pressing his weight against the wood then holding it still in the frame. He secured the latch with a small piece of cardboard from the nearby desk, wedging it tightly in between the fixture. Once he'd jammed the paper into place, a fit so snug it wouldn't budge, he went back into the kitchen, there to locate the roll of twine in the sideboard drawer. Winding the string around the latch, over then under again, he tied a knot that would have made any sailor at once envious and proud: A Navy man. The recurring chill and odor dissipated in the time it took him to traverse the farmhouse back and forth then back into the parlor again. Roger wrapped the latch then wrapped his wife protectively in his arms, as secure an embrace as twine binding a latch; her gaze fixed on the door...what next?

"That'll do it." Yep, that oughta do it. Treat the symptom...not the disease.

Shocked as much by the fact that he had virtually ignored the odd behavior of a pantry door (as doors don't normally have ***behaviors***) as she was by the episode itself, she could not believe he'd virtually dismissed blatant evidence of supernatural activity in the home. The man acted as if it was nothing at all; perfectly natural. Actually, this was perfectly ***supernatural!*** With his silence, Roger refused to acknowledge or discuss it. After the news they went to bed.

The following morning Roger rose early, up before dawn. He opened their bedroom door and could not help but notice the mounded pile of twine on the parlor floor. That pantry door had opened again...sometime during the night. The room was flooded with a foul, acrid odor he had become all too familiar with in recent days. The awful air was thick with a stench attributable only to decomposition; the aftermath of death. Roger's angry heavy sigh appeared as mist in the frigid room. Fighting fright which swept through him like a wave of nausea, Roger stood before the open door, staring down his demons. What was tormenting them apparently fled the premises. It was beyond his mortal comprehension. Instantly, the laundry room became as warm as sunshine and smelled of detergent; a clean, fresh aroma penetrating his nostrils. The twine

at his feet had been shredded into thousands of tiny threads, as if having been clawed at for hours with sharp fingernails. Did their cat do that? A tight knot woven to secure that latch the night before was virtually indistinguishable; its thick cotton twine resembled a wad of sewing thread. No way.

By the time Carolyn awakened her husband had emptied the laundry pantry of all its contents, except the washer and dryer. Those had been disconnected then dislodged, so he could examine the dead space behind them. There was nothing there. They had not lived in the house long enough to even build up the predictable lint often found behind such appliances. Roger was stymied. There were no rotting carcasses in the room, no evidence of mice or anything else, for that matter. Just the flies, alive and well, buzzing his head while he worked. Pausing long enough to splat one whenever he could, Roger decided to trap them inside the long, narrow pantry by closing the door behind him, effectively trapping himself in the process. It was an opportunity to wipe all of them out at once. No exit. Roger *did* think twice before closing that door. The man was officially spooked.

An ungodly racket disturbed Carolyn's deep and restful slumber. She rose to find Roger vacuum cleaning in the pantry, cornering flies in windowpanes, sucking them in and pulling them down through the hose attached to a bag of dust, there to slowly but surely suffocate; to go back to their father, the devil. Roger clearly derived some sadistic pleasure from the effort, engrossed as he was, taking aim at those who had so often taken aim at them.

"Jesus Christ!" He did not hear Carolyn opening the door behind him and her sudden, unexpected presence shook him to the core. Touching his elbow, Carolyn got Roger's attention, all right; then she witnessed terror in his eyes. Such an adverse reaction was quite unlike her husband. He was not one to be easily startled. To her knowledge, the man feared nothing. According to him, there was nothing to fear but fear itself; apparently his attitude had changed. In the instant prior to mortal recognition of his wife he looked at her as if she was a ghost; an unholy apparition manifesting through dim morning light.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. What are you doing in here?"

"Look at this." He stepped out of the pantry to show her the pile of twine.

"Did you do that?" Carolyn had already sensed the answer to this question. Roger shook his head in disgust then picked it up to examine it more closely. "If you *didn't* do this...then who did?" His expression told the truth. Afraid: Be very afraid. He did not know who shredded the knot of twine overnight. "I'll go make us some coffee." Carolyn headed toward the kitchen.

The children got up to watch cartoons, only to discover the sofa space was taken by whatever had been formerly stacked on all the pantry shelves. From bleach bottle to blankets, washcloths to linens, every seat was spoken for this Sunday morning. It was a day much like any other; bright and full of promise as any spring morning could be. The Sun crept up over the tree line, peeking in through their kitchen windows as breakfast was served. Roger entered the kitchen. He looked pale and drawn, tired before the day had begun. Sitting quietly at the table for a few minutes, he made a declaration no one expected, suggesting the girls finish eating then go upstairs and get dressed for church. Carolyn was as stunned as their children. It had been quite awhile since they attended services, having had a falling out with the parish priest at the church in Cumberland. He'd been a brutal, abrasive man; unkind to several children attending catechism. As reports of this abusiveness began running rampant in town, finally reaching Roger, this resulted in a serious confrontation between the Father of a church and the father of a family. Mr. Perron withdrew them as parishioners from Saint Aiden's Parish. Not since then had there been any mention of returning to any place of worship; not until that Sunday morning. Carolyn knew precisely what prompted him to make the abrupt statement; as rapid a reconsideration of an issue as she had ever heard from him before.

Rather than parking in front of a television; within an hour all of them were packed into a pew at Saint Patrick's Church located in beautiful downtown Harrisville. As they'd entered the quiet church every head turned, not simply because they were so late for Mass, but also due to the sheer volume of them! Approaching the family afterward, the kindly priest welcomed them into the church and then invited them to join the congregation. Roger and Carolyn gratefully accepted on behalf of their family...as a way to leave the Light on.

After several more days of labor-intensive restoration and a visit from the chimney sweep, their fireplace was ready for burning. Carolyn found all the necessary hardware tucked in a corner of the woodshed, as well as a wooden box covered by a tarp. It was finally time to dispel the chill from their home. The children gathered around their father while he layered kindling so dry, it splintered between his fingers. Carolyn stood on the hearthstone beside him, anxious to feel the burn destined to be welcome respite from cold unlike any she'd ever experienced in her life. Fire was more than elemental...a blessing and a curse of Nature. It was the promise of comfort, the release from a kind of pain unfamiliar to Carolyn, made all the more daunting by her inability to control it. Now she would possess the means of escaping what she perceived had been haunting her: relentless unforgiving cold. With the balmy, bountiful spring season poised on the horizon, Carolyn had, at last, allowed herself to sense the pleasure of relief. It was nearly over; winter was almost gone. This was a false sense of security, but one which she relished. With a single strike of a match, Roger created a towering inferno. Whoosh! Flames crackled and sputtered, leaping up to lap at the logs. "Fire in the hole!" He was so pleased, pride beaming as brightly as the blaze. Scouting skills had not been lost with time. As long-seasoned wood burned fast and hot, permeating the parlor with its welcome-home warmth, it was the first time Carolyn could recall feeling completely comfortable in the old farmhouse; at times, too close for comfort! Worth the work but not the wait; for months she endured sub-zero conditions outside and sub-human conditions within. While baking a body to the bone, this grateful woman spoke her mind. "The swallows just lost their chimney." Perhaps so; maybe Mr. Kenyon knew, when he'd closed that fireplace, it had something to do with bizarre sights and sounds manifesting within the house. Maybe he knew something more than he shared. There was purpose; a reason why he sealed it shut decades before they arrived; a decision made with some intention. When a portal once closed is reopened, some say it creates a crack in the Cosmos; presumably, following logically, that's how the Light gets in.

"Hope is the feeling we have that the feeling we have is not permanent."
Mignon McLaughlin

bless this mess

“Feed your faith and your fears will starve to death.”

Author Unknown

Comfort finally found its hearth and home in which to dwell. Carolyn kept the home fires burning, day and night. Though the fireplace was deeply inset, Roger bought a screen as extra protection from its flying embers. It freed her; she could leave the parlor without worry though she'd never leave it for long. Forever gravitating toward this constant source of heat, she'd evolved into a veritable fixture on the hearthstone; as *there* as the slabs of granite beneath her feet, inlaid with her own hands. She was a part of it...it was a part of her: Simpatico in Nature. At times, it required a chisel to remove the woman from her post, her station in life...pain, her cross to bear.

Inspired by their restoration project, Roger insisted upon doing it right: life lessons for those who paid attention in his class. Days of lifting and hauling, sanding and scraping revealed its essence: an original Colonial mantel board. A masterpiece: It was simply beautiful. There was nothing ornate about it; no fancy carving or inlaid tiles. An authentic specimen, it was a treasure hidden in plain sight, buried beneath countless layers of paint and many decades of neglect. A project beyond Roger's mortal imagination became his gift, more than he could have ever hoped to discover. A vision: A wonder to behold.

Contemplating their next big project, he already knew what he wanted it to be: kitchen ceiling. It was quite low and made the room feel smaller and look darker than it should. Carolyn agreed with him, especially because a pestilent infestation they battled might be revealed in the process. The mere possibility of flies breeding in the ceiling was reason enough to tear it down. Exposing the beams was secondary to resolving the more pressing problem. The couple actually agreed on something twice in one week; a milestone. It would be the next priority on the long list of needed *home improvements*. One suggestion yet to be included on the list: treat the damned house for ghosts!

Amazing what must first be destroyed in order to restore, then recreate, an

era lost in time. They were only beginning this process, destined to consume years of their lives. Debris fields expanded; every room in the house would eventually be transformed, along with everyone in it. Before he could begin, Roger had to restock his wares then hit the road for several days. He'd been home for nearly a week and had to get back to work so they could afford to demolish their kitchen. A few customers in Connecticut and New Hampshire were due for a visit. He made the customary trip into Providence; a quick pit stop at a supplier's place in Cranston, then left the city: a beautiful drive, due west on Route 6 into Hartford. No major highways existed between the two New England cities at that time. The scenic route was literally the *only* route.

The family dys/functioned in make-it-and-spend-it mode, a hand-to-mouth method Carolyn found extremely disconcerting. Though as patient a woman as possible, she was anxious to begin; so, deluding herself into believing it may be helpful to get a start without her husband, Carolyn brought the ladder into their kitchen and proceeded with the demolition. A theme was emerging: wait for Roger to leave home then buy a farm and pick up a crowbar. Within a few minutes she had punched through the corner nearest the front hallway, creating a hole: two feet wide and nearly a foot deep. Dust rained down upon her head followed with chunks of plaster, accumulating at an alarming rate at the base of the ladder, scattering as it hit a hard floor. April wandered in the room to see what all the commotion was about. The cherub appeared angelic; yet never more so than she did with her mother that morning. Carolyn gazed down on her daughter as April looked up with pleading eyes. The small child seemed otherworldly in the gauzy white haze, her delicate features strikingly beautiful in natural light filtered through floating specks of a weightless dust, motionless, suspended in the air.

“Again, mommy?” By the tender age of six, April already knew what *work* looked and felt like and how to pitch in and help...but this was one chore she longed to avoid. Her mommy had every intention of letting her off the hook.

“I’m getting a head start for dad...not the whole ceiling...just this corner.”

“Your hair is all white again...just like when we did the fireplace.” Nothing like pointing out the obvious: “You looked so funny that day!”

“Ah, yes...I remember it well. We sure did work hard, didn’t we, honey?”

“And we made a really bad mess...remember? It was everywhere!”

“I know, baby doll.” Carolyn laughed then spit out what fell into her mouth while she spoke. An effort to enhance the house literally backfired in her face again; same results. “I think *this* will make an even *bigger* mess, if possible! I guess we’ll see, won’t we? If I keep at it...I won’t be able to *see* anything!”

“Do I have to help clean it up this time?” Clearly, April wanted nothing to do with the task. She’d had her fill of it with the fireplace and was certain her day could be better spent working hard at play.

“No. I want you to go into the parlor so you don’t breathe in all this dust.”

“Okay!” As April turned to make her great escape, she paused then turned back toward her mother. “I know how I can help you!” Closing her eyes, the child solemnly bowed her head, placing her hands together as pudgy fingers pointed upward toward the desired destination. Uttering a few Heaven-bound words, they spilled awkwardly from her lips as she mimicked what she heard during her first memorable trip to church the previous Sunday.

“Dear God...bless this mess!” An ethereal creature: making the sign of the cross...backwards, by mistake. “The Father, the Son...and the Holy Ghost!” Eyes reopened, glowing with pride. April raised her head, shouting, “Amen!” toward a ceiling...with an enthusiasm generally reserved for Southern Baptist revivals. Her mother was delighted by the blessing of the mess.

“Very good! Now scoot!” Carolyn watched as she took off, bolting through the house as if it were her one and only chance to abscond from the worksite; hence the nickname *Scooter*. It stuck like plaster to hair moist with sweat.

Having the forethought to tote a flashlight up the ladder with her, Carolyn

peeked in through the hole to examine the enclosed space. She could not see any evidence of breeding flies; no signs of life at all. So where were the little bastards coming from? Running out of theories, at least a curiosity had been satisfied; they were ***not*** coming from inside their kitchen ceiling. Descending the ladder, she felt a sudden shiver traveling her legs then distinctly heard the crack of a door; the suction seal on a refrigerator door, so assumed April was rummaging for a mid-morning snack.

“What are you doing, little miss nosey?” No answer. Carolyn’s back was to the appliance as she stepped down the sturdy ladder, closely watching at her feet, checking her balance, due to steps suddenly covered with debris; pieces of plaster and slippery dust. Once safely on the floor again she turned to look around the kitchen. The refrigerator door instantly caught her attention, as it had been left opened. Agitated, Carolyn pushed it closed, shedding whatever she could from her hair before launching a search for the culprit. Based upon the faulty assumptions made, a mother was seeking a child who knew better than to behave this way. She found April in the middle of the parlor floor, in front of the fireplace, playing with Nancy’s stash of Barbie dolls; a plethora of miniature accessories scattered around her on the rug: fully engaged.

“Why did you leave the fridge open? And why didn’t you answer me?”

“When, mommy? I’ve been in here playing dolls...wasn’t this okay to do?” Her innocent voice was filled with the truth, as was her quizzical expression. April had not been in the refrigerator and had not gone into the kitchen at all. Dropping the subject, Carolyn did not want to arouse any suspicions or try to explain something she could not, frightening her daughter in the process. An odd sensation: Alert. Her internal alarm system rang. ***Something*** opened it!

“Sure honey, that’s fine...my mistake.” Patting her baby girl on the head, a mother asked, “Do you have your sister’s permission to play with her dolls?”

“Nancy ***always*** lets me play with them as long as I ***don’t*** lose their shoes!”

“All right.” Glancing down upon squalor, Carolyn said, “Bless ***this*** mess!”

Gathering several dolls and all of their stuff together, hastily loading it into its carrying case, a giggling little girl closed then latched the lid with a single, sweeping motion.

“**What** mess?” A budding sense of humor officially entered into evidence.

Carolyn grabbed then dumped the case of dolls upside down. “**That** mess!” They played together for awhile...dress up instead of clean up.

Reluctantly returning to the kitchen, Carolyn again found their refrigerator door wide open. A chill in the room had nothing to do with cool air escaping from inside the appliance. **That** kind of cold was something else entirely, of a different sort: a signal, a clue or perhaps an announcement. It was the kind of cold which told her she wasn’t alone in the room; a sensation with which she was becoming all too familiar. Deciding to simply ignore it, (a lesson learned from her husband), Carolyn closed the door and folded the ladder then out to the woodshed it went. Later on, she’d bravely venture back into the kitchen to find its morbid chill dispersed and the refrigerator door securely fastened. Whatever **it** was, it was gone...over for the moment.

Looking up into a substantial hole she created in the ceiling, Carolyn could plainly see one of the hand-hewn beams she’d exposed with the effort. It was beautiful. Though tempted to keep going it was time to clean up the mess left behind by this demolition. At least Roger would see: if flies **were** breeding in the house it was happening elsewhere, in an undisclosed location, yet to be determined by the process of elimination. Having taken the same initiative as with the fireplace, Carolyn felt good about the project, in spite of the fact that she was not alone doing it. Whatever deliberately distracted her was likewise working on her nerves. While dragging a canister vacuum across the kitchen floor, pulling up pieces of plaster wedged between planks, she remembered watching Roger attack intruders inside a laundry room, suction his weapon of choice. Staring at the hose, considering the possibility she just might have the stomach for it, she lifted it to the windowsill. Carolyn soon discovered Roger was right. It was good **unclean** fun, if a trifle sadistic, sucking all these filthy beasts into a hose, down a pipe; going for a helluva ride toward certain death.

She thought it strange they did not protest, resist or even evade their attacker. No fear. They didn't flee the scene. Fly away you go! It was as if they agreed to willingly go...back to where they came from. Why? No matter: spiritually speaking. Her conscience, as clear as windowsills; sucking it up, she obliged. No need to feel guilty about it. You can't really kill what's already dead.

“The beginning of knowledge is the discovery of something we do not understand.”
Frank Herbert

close that door

“God made Truth with many doors to welcome every believer who knocks on them.”
Kahlil Gibran

Their house was coming to life. Not only was the pantry door in the parlor refusing to remain latched, the demon door beside it (an alternate route to the cellar) began some shenanigans of its own. Opening at will, it filled the room with an earthy, acrid odor. The door no one **ever** opened, (an order, due to its unsafe stairwell) kept opening over and over again, throughout the course of the evening. It unlatched then drifted a few inches, stopping in the same spot, as if someone was peeking into the parlor. A cellar as creepy as any on Earth was on the other side of it; down the dark corridor and a rickety set of stairs. The anomaly began after dinner, once Carolyn built a fire.

Squatting on the hearthstone, she struck a match, snapping it sharply across the cold, dappled surface of granite. In a flash the kindling caught, ignited by the flames of a single piece of paper stuffed beneath a grate. It is no chore at all to make a fire when the wood is well-seasoned, the kindling dry to brittle. Heat baking her cheeks; she felt its warmth folding into flesh as she smiled. Whoosh! There it predictably went, up in smoke and flames, as it had done every other night since the completion of the fireplace. Its restoration brought elemental comfort to an otherwise dreary dwelling as fire in the hole blazed. Though generated from the compact space, it seemed to heat the entire house every time it burned, proving to be the only means of dispelling an insidious chill too cold to be imagined; the sensation too weird to be explained. Having been plagued by it for the duration of a brutal winter, this family welcomed a respite long overdue, even though it officially arrived in springtime.

Click. The cellar door unlatched behind her back. Carolyn didn't even turn to see what happened, presuming the pantry door to be the culprit. She felt a rush of air at her feet; its smell gave up the ghost. The scent from their cellar was distinct unto itself, unlike anything else from anywhere else. She turned to confirm her suspicions. Indeed, the cellar door was open, only an inch or so, just wide enough to flood the parlor with an unmistakably pungent aroma.

Rising to walk the few feet over to the errant door, a sensation swept through her, one she identified as fear. Mustering courage required, Carolyn opened the door further, peering down into the black hole. Being void of life did not mean the space was unoccupied. Nothing and no one was visible. She closed the door, securing the latch, as it had been prior to the recurring incident. She could not fathom the idea of it dislodging without considerable assistance. Of the many doors in their house it was the only one with hardware so warped it was a struggle for human hands. As with most antique wrought iron latches, relics of the past, they are authentically rustic, quite charming, but have lost some function with age. On those few occasions this cellar door needed to be opened, Roger's strength was required to accomplish the task. After the third time it happened during the evening, a normally jammed shut latch released with ease, she did the only thing she could to resolve this problem, soliciting help from above: her eldest daughter upstairs.

"Mom, it reeks down here!" Arriving from her stairwell, emerging through a barely perceptible white-to-grayish vapor, she was moving far too quickly for it to interfere with or halt her momentum. Instead, Andrea felt cold waves passing through her body, dispersing its natural heat. She knew the smell of death. An instantly identified odor permeating the fog she'd intercepted kept her moving; straight to the fireplace to warm the cold, saying nothing of it.

Without disclosing the reason, Carolyn convinced her to help remove the antique desk from her bedroom, placing it directly in front of the cellar door. Andrea hoisted her half without question. Once properly situated, she went to retrieve her homework, returning to stake a claim at the desk. Carolyn was so grateful for some company. As the parlor warmed again, Andrea found it far toastier than it had been at her own desk upstairs. The rancid smell seemed to fly up then out the chimney. Carolyn stoked a crackling fire. Neither of them spoke about what they'd both sensed in the space they were sharing.

Click. Laundry room: its cranky door cracked open. The pantry: making its presence known, again. Andrea glanced at her mother for a reaction. Carolyn hid her frustration well. There were no words to explain it. She possessed no ability to attribute it to anything; clearly something she did not comprehend. Still, she knew it was **not** floors "settling" in a house which was, at this time

in its history, nearly two hundred and forty years old. Carolyn didn't want to have her girls exposed, especially by her own acknowledgment, to whatever cryptic oddities kept occurring in the house, as if that could be avoided. Their mother had, by necessity, learned how to control a household and yet, there she stood, feeling decidedly out-of-control in an old farmhouse, to the extent that it did not feel like ***home***. It felt frightening and hostile, complicated and inexplicable; as if the incongruous household was instead controlling her.

"Dad says it happens because of the floors." Andrea leaned over and closed the door. It was a relief to her mother, not knowing what to say in response to the question in her daughter's eyes: "Is that true?" She could hear the thought as if it had been spoken aloud.

Opting for silence, Carolyn nodded in agreement. Of course; certainly that was the reason...it must be. Andrea returned to her homework while Carolyn remained close by, peeking over her shoulder, seeking a progress report. Her nonchalance was becoming a substitute emotion as a passive, benign defense mechanism utilized in lieu of experiencing supernatural activity for precisely what it was: bizarre. Instead, Carolyn resorted to minimizing it, dismissing it entirely if need be, as a skill; as a means of coping with whatever she did not understand. In fact, she deeply resented ***feeling*** anything at all in the house, especially one persistent, nagging sensory perception: the feeling she was not alone. It rattled her nerves; made her angry whenever she sensed a presence. It caused her to repeatedly question herself and that made her uncomfortable. It was foreign; made her skin crawl. Those who knew this woman considered her as an intellectual: a deep thinker. She found visceral sensations a cerebral intrusion into an otherwise staid and orderly mind. Though she had no notion of it at the time, her negativity was feeding that which dwelled among them. As she became increasingly preoccupied with disturbing thoughts she found it necessary to keep them private, as if ashamed...as if there was something wrong with ***her***. Feeling guilty, having been the one who lobbied to buy this place, her girls were now in an environment she was incapable of controlling. They'd seen a coat hanger flailing in midair. They heard noises and watched doors open at will. Their house expressed itself in a wide variety of ways and it was just the beginning of their odyssey. Carolyn's angst began burgeoning; her protective instincts remaining on high alert. Not caring to seek validation

from the skeptical husband for her sake, it brought Carolyn no comfort to see their children running to him, divulging what they had seen for themselves, as was the case in the aftermath of the warm room incident. Clearly it would be her preference to keep them sheltered from the cosmic storm. But if they were so terrified they went to their father, then he simply ***must*** believe them. Carolyn did not yet know the truth. Without exception, all the girls had been approached, each one enduring a close encounter of one kind or another with whomever it was dwelling within those ancient walls.

None of the girls disclosed these incidents to their parents or to each other, for that matter. Like mother, they'd kept it to themselves. Eldest to youngest knew of a presence. They knew something shared space with them and each had been touched by its mere existence; each was equally motivated to keep secrets for personal reasons. Carolyn didn't want these suspicions confirmed; ***wanted*** to be dead wrong. Andrea wanted to ease her mother's stress. Nancy thought it was "kinda cool". Christine resorted to a "planned ignore" strategy and Cynthia was too frightened to breathe, let alone speak of what she'd seen and heard. April did not want to disclose a newfound playmate. Deliberately withholding vital information kept their astounding discovery quiet. Each of them used specialized survival techniques and developed coping skills which kept the peace and kept special secrets safe. Roger seemed oblivious to what was happening to his family. Though he privately harbored suspicions of his own, they were of an entirely different nature. His fear was rooted in the real possibility his wife was facing some sort of a breakdown; transformation. All of them eager for spring to arrive, anxious to escape the confines of a spooky old house, they craved a peaceful and boring existence. It was not to be.

Lingering in front of the fireplace, Carolyn considered her own words. She felt guilty. Having used them frequently, at times accusatorily regarding the doors of the farmhouse, "Close that door!" had become more a mantra than a phrase. She had repeatedly blamed her children for something they had not done wrong and it was this realization troubling her deeply. If they were not the ***irresponsible*** party, who or what was responsible? She silently vowed to avoid it in the future. Click. Appearing reflexive, without looking away from her homework, Andrea reached over, closing the pantry door. Like mother, like daughter: she'd learned her lessons well. Carolyn turned around to throw

another log on the fire.

It was getting late; the dutiful mother went to the stairwell then hollered up, “Time for bed!” Yet another familiar, if unwelcome phrase often uttered by a mom. Within moments she heard the shuffling of feet overhead accompanied by the sound of dresser drawers opening and closing. In pajamas, the motley crew came downstairs all at once to say goodnight.

“Did everyone finish their homework?” Nods all around; Chris had hers in hand as proof of the assertion.

“Not yet.” Andrea’s hand went into the air though her gaze remained fixed on a notebook at the center of the desk.

“Not yet!” April’s hand went in the air. She often mimicked her big sister.

“You don’t **have** homework, silly.” Chris sweetly chastised the littlest girl.

“She could do mine for me!” Nancy was a bit too quick with the suggestion meant to be humorous, arousing some suspicion.

“She would probably do a better job!” Cindy’s quip; too close to the truth. Nancy had quite a reputation for flying through her work on her way to play. Mom needed to inspect it to be certain, so requested a hard copy as evidence.

“Why me? You never ask anyone else!” Instantly defensive, Nancy knew it was **not** finished; a string of heavy sighs trailing behind her as she went back upstairs, returning to her desk. “I’ll check it over first.”

“Sure, Nance. That means you’ll finish it now.” The deadpan comment had come from beneath her breath; Andrea closed a notebook. She **was** finished. Everyone else began to giggle because **everyone** knew it was true. Nancy had earned such scrutiny. Carolyn sent her girls off to bed with grins on their lips and a hug around the neck. Nancy grumbled all the way back upstairs where she would spend another thirty minutes completing her assignments. Andrea went along to help. After awhile Carolyn made the rounds...a normal nightly walk-through to which her children were accustomed and especially grateful

for since moving into a spooky old farmhouse. Lingering for several minutes, checking over Nancy's work, she found April, fallen fast asleep. Chrissy and Cindy were chatting but both appeared drowsy and would not be long for the world. Andrea was still reading in bed. Pausing to thank her for helping with a desk downstairs and a homework situation upstairs, Nancy was grateful for the help, too. Mom was passing the message along. They spent a few minutes discussing the book she was into and then, before heading down their narrow stairwell a mother cautioned her daughter not to stay up too late. Returning to the parlor, Carolyn stoked the fire then took up with a good book of her own. Girls in bed, it was time to relax and settle in for the night. The house would be infinitely more peaceful and quiet, or so she'd assumed. Click.

“Let him who desires peace prepare for war.”

Flavius Vegetius Renatus

smoke and mirrors

“Death, the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.”
George Gordon, Lord Byron Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage

The fireplace was so warm and lovely. It burned with a brilliance reflected throughout an old farmhouse infusing it with something it had lost over time. Banking its auburn ashes against the back wall, Carolyn placed the screen in front of it then prepared for bed. The night had been long and the woman was weary. Her usual routine involved the walk-through, first upstairs to tuck the girls in and then around its ground level to turn off the lights. Emerging from the bathroom into the kitchen, the odor rushed her nostrils: the eerily familiar aroma. Her sensory perceptions were fine. It was her extrasensory perception working on her mind. In spite of the fact that she had, just moments earlier, passed through the front hallway, finding it quiet, nothing unusual, Carolyn sensed it was where she should look. The cold scent in the room indicated a door had opened somewhere. It was not the intensely pervasive cold she had begun to associate with some unwelcome guest. Crossing the kitchen then turning the corner into a dark hallway, Carolyn found the cellar door propped wide open as a draft of some velocity swept up the stairwell, reeking of damp earth, old and moldy horsehair plaster. Spoiled air infiltrated her nose as she tightly closed the door. There was no point in asking their girls; it would only alarm them. A mother *knew* none of them had been out of bed; no one snuck downstairs to open the cellar door. No tricks being played by mortals on that night or any other night, for that spirit matter. Nefarious forces were at work: something wicked this way comes, arriving as a chill in the air on the drafts from below, accompanied by an unmistakable aroma; too close for comfort.

Securing the door, she returned to the parlor to check on the fire once more before retiring for the evening. The seasoned wood burned fast and hot; by that time, only a few glowing embers remained. One quick stir told her it was just about out. With a screen for protection, Carolyn went to bed, closing the pantry door as she’d passed by. Her bedroom was just off the parlor, the only bedroom on the first floor; an adequate vantage point for monitoring a house.

She could see into the parlor and could hear anything going on overhead. As was her habit whenever Roger was away from home, she'd always leave her bedroom door open. Cuddling up beneath her ample quilt, Carolyn had yet to close her eyes when she'd distinctly heard the sound of ignition, that curious "Swoosh!" made by kindling when fire and air collide with wood. She leapt from bed, peering out into the parlor, directly into the fireplace, a distance of no more than fourteen feet from where she stood. It was not even smoldering and had gone completely dark; no sign of firelight. It was then she realized; a threatening sound she still succinctly heard, a horrible crackling, combustible noise was coming from behind her...from inside her bedroom.

Wrenching her torso around in a panic, Carolyn saw the top of her dresser erupting into flames. It was ablaze with light: sparks jumping from a fireball, the core of which burned so brightly she could barely gaze into it. Off-shoots sprung from its center, appearing like wild sparklers out-of-control, pinging then popping in every direction. Paralyzed by an all-consuming fear, she was literally scared stiff. Describing the shock of this moment as mind-bending, Carolyn tried to react, tried to bolt; tried to breathe. Her mind was as frozen as her body. It remained fixed on the fire and five children sleeping upstairs. For the duration of this episode, Carolyn thought of nothing else. She could only watch as the fire and light intermingled, dancing with its own reflection in the mirror, magnified by the glassy surface, threatening to claim her entire family. In abject horror she watched. It continued unabated for what Carolyn describes as more than a minute, though she would be the first to admit, time becomes distorted or suspended: altered by terror. It felt like eternity. Flames catapulted through the night across the room, searing the darkness with light; a splayed spray of fiery shards flying toward lace curtains, dropping onto the quilt, bouncing off the wooden floor as do the remnants of fireworks hitting a roof. The pulsing surge of adrenaline vibrated through the veins of Carolyn's trembling body; an overwhelming rush. Observing in stunned silence, unable to draw a breath, her eyes burned from staring into the spectral light. It hissed like a snake and flew like a bird. Moment after agonizing moment fire hurled itself around the room and then, in a mere fraction of a second, it was gone. Carolyn fell onto the floor as if having been suspended then released from an invisible wire: an intentionally captivating encounter. She cannot recall how long she remained there before recovering enough to stand up. It took quite

awhile to collect herself. Rising slowly from the floorboards, then fumbling around in the dark for the switch, once a light was on in her room the woman was able to regain shaken bearings; sitting on the side of her bed, sliding her quivering fingers across the surface of the quilt. Glancing into the parlor, she could see the fireplace was dark; fire completely dead. Whatever happened to her had nothing to do with shooting embers or an errant reflection of flames.

Though her lean legs remained as limp and liquid as over-cooked pasta, an unbelieving soul who did not trust her own eyes righted herself to the extent she was able. Wandering around the bedroom, searching for debris; a spot of singe, *some* indication of fire, Carolyn found no evidence to substantiate her claim. No lingering odor of smoke; no residual spots: nothing to signify this event occurred. Impossible: lace curtains escaped unscathed; the cotton quilt, bearing no visible signs of injuries to its pearl-colored patches of fabric, lay sprawled above the sheets. Rounding the bottom of her bed, approaching the large dresser at the far side of the room, she was certain there would be some evidence of this event where it had manifested. Fixing her stare on its broad, flat surface, Carolyn detected only a thin sheen of dust on an otherwise clean, undisturbed piece of furniture. Dragging fingertips across it, this motion left streaks behind, a telltale sign of her presence; not the elemental force of fire. Until this instant, that surface remained untouched. She was certain of it. No soot or signs of burn holes on lace doilies. No marks on the mirror. No scars on the wood; apparently no effect from an explosive ball of fire shooting off sparks from the surface of maple veneer. Roger would *never* believe this!

Overwhelmed, Carolyn wandered into the parlor, allowing her weary bones to collapse onto the loveseat directly across from the fireplace. Her mind was still racing as her body shut down. Sleep would elude her this night. Instead, she would spend the time reliving the ordeal in an attempt to resolve it; find a logical explanation for it. Questions loomed along with a foreboding sense of danger. She'd begun to believe a presence had awakened something dormant, something evil in their house: the presence of her family. Carolyn rightfully perceived an ominous event as a threat. Hour after hour, as thoughts wrestled with perceptions, conflict was taking a terrible toll on an increasingly fragile creature. Dread consumed her: afraid to close her eyes, afraid to deflect rapt attention; fearful of lighting the fire. In spite of fear, still

cold and trembling, shivering beneath a blanket, she steadfastly rose to meet the threat. Carolyn rekindled the fire, fully extinguished, certain it had not been the source of the spectral display in her bedroom. There she remained, alone on a hearthstone, keeping vigil. Studying the brilliant flames, watching and wondering how to react to space invasion which **must** have been an optical illusion, a mirage in a mirror, Carolyn was cautious yet equally curious. She began to examine the angles, distance; the reflection of light in the parlor. Poised in the doorway of her bedroom, she measured the distance between a dresser and fireplace then gazed at its mirror. There was no reflection of flames leaping up and lapping at chimney walls, no hint of a hue or its golden glow; no sparks of light at all. The height of the mirror precluded a direct reflection of the fireplace. Even if the mirror had been propped on the floor the location of their bed would have blocked its path, refusing to allow the surface of glass to mimic the firelight dancing around a dark parlor: Inconceivable. This harrowing episode was not a natural event. It was supernatural in origin; defying all established laws of physics. It defied all human comprehension. During her pause for reflection, despair began to settle into a mortal Soul.

Bundled tightly inside the blanket, Carolyn returned to the loveseat, staring suspiciously at the fire, as if watching over some naughty child who claimed to be nothing but goodness and light but was instead an omen, a threatening display of darkness and death. She found a disquieting comfort in acceptance of her circumstances. Primal instincts kept the woman awake: the protective urge dictated an unwavering maintenance...a state of alert in consciousness. It was **not** a nightmare; not some smoke and mirrors illusion. It was a threat. It was real and true and it was time to tell. As those few final glowing embers surrendered to the darkness of night, Carolyn reluctantly closed her eyes.

Another theme emerged: Fear of fire. Carolyn was well aware of the threat. Their house was a virtual tinderbox. Nobody took it more seriously. It was an omnipresent notion. What better way to scare a mother right out of her mind? What better threat to issue? It had not been an illusion or a nightmare but was instead, a harbinger of things to come; the first, though certainly not the last

time spirits would be caught like naughty children playing with fire and light.

Where there's smoke...

*"Our time consumes like smoke, and posts away;
Nor can we treasure up a month or day:
The sand within the transitory glass
Doth haste, and so our silent minutes pass."*

Rowland Watkyns

spirit matters

*“Be like the bird that, passing on her flight awhile on boughs too slight,
feels them give way beneath her, and yet sings, knowing that she hath wings.”*
Victor Hugo

At first light Carolyn stirred. Her limbs were weak. It was a difficult task to steady her gait on her way to the bathroom. Though she expected a different outcome, all the doors in the house remained securely fastened. Staring at her image in a mirror on the wall, the young woman was startled by how her face had aged overnight. If she did not know better, she would have thought she'd been asleep for twenty years, awaking as a much older (and wiser) soul.

The house was still. Actually, it was strangely silent. While Carolyn put on a pot of water for oatmeal, she listened intently, noting the absence of sound, unable to discern the nature of it. The dwelling felt warmer than usual though the Sun had yet to crest the tree line. Sitting alone at the kitchen table, alone with her thoughts and a hot cup of coffee, the truth was she was never alone. A steaming brew did nothing to mitigate her exhaustion. Only an intravenous infusion of undiluted caffeine would make any measurable difference. Sleep deprivation caused her to feel rather punch drunk; she had to shake it off fast. Getting the children up and ready for school was the immediate priority.

Carolyn was desperate for help. Rising abruptly, she marched over to their telephone, centered on the kitchen wall between two windows. Only then did she realize why the room was so eerily quiet: there they were, lined up along the windowsills, staring at her. Haunted houseflies were no longer buzzing as usual low-level racket. None of them were flying. Barely moving, they stood as still as statues, as pillars of stone in miniature, observing every move she made as if they somehow knew she was about to rat them out. Carolyn dialed the number from memory. Sam was not only a well-respected attorney but he was also a close personal friend. He had always been their greatest advocate, encouraging the couple to buy the farm from the moment he saw the place in the country; a piece of paradise, he said. Though his office in Providence was empty at such an early hour of the morning, she called him at home, knowing

she would be instantly forgiven for this way-too-early intrusion of reality.

“Sam, I’m afraid I have made a terrible mistake.” Her hushed tone and the fact that she had just dragged him from a deep sleep caused Sam to hesitate a moment as he identified the distant voice.

“Carolyn?” Though she could hear his grogginess, he could hear her panic.

“I believe I have made a grave error in judgment.” She sounded so serious; downright grim. He could hear the tears in the back of her tightening throat.

“Hold on a second.” Coming to attention, Sam sat up in his bed.

Recounting everything which happened the previous night, Carolyn’s voice trembled as she spoke. It terrified her to relive it, if only in words. When she finished this story she moved on, without affording him any time to respond. For the next few minutes she whispered into the receiver, trying not to wake the children overhead. Listening intently, Sam reserved judgment of his own. She told him about the scythe and a flailing coat hanger and doors opening at will. She leered at those nosy flies as she attempted to describe their intrusive existence in her house. Sam Olevson was pure gentleman; a supremely kind, understanding soul. She felt safe sharing these fears and suspicions, without any reservation. She told him about her ordeal: fire in the hole; then spoke of smoke and mirrors, feeling threatened and unwanted, the *feeling* she was not alone. Describing a pervasive cold and repugnant odor often accompanying such perceptions, when she finished, the depleted woman took a deep breath, relaxing into a chair...awaiting his response. For a moment there was silence then a single statement spoken with the utility of an attorney’s own language.

“Sweetheart, sounds to me like you’ve bought yourself a haunted house.”

Carolyn was shocked. In all the time invested thinking about this dilemma, her boggled mind had yet to fuse two simple words together. He was right. It *was* a haunted house.

“You think so?” Her voice was as small as that of her youngest child.

“I do.”

“So, you **do** believe me then.” An element of self-confidence emerged from Carolyn’s voice as she posed the normally probing question as a statement of fact. She trusted the man implicitly, relying upon his objectivity as well as an overdeveloped sense of justice; his more than fair share of common sense.

“Of course I believe you! My house on the East Side is haunted.”

“Really? You’ve never mentioned it before.”

“You learn to live with it. In time, it gets less shocking, more **paranormal**. ”

“Sam, what should I do about this?”

“Nothing, dear. When in doubt, do nothing. Fear the living...not the dead.”

“My mother used to say that. I never understood what it meant, until now.” Smiling at the distant recollection, she asked, “Can’t you file some kind of a lawsuit against this THING and **make** it leave the premises?”

“Afraid not; these are **spirit** matters. No court in the land will hear our case. On second thought, **maybe** a judge would issue a Restraining Order!” Sam’s warped sense of humor had apparently awakened with him. Carolyn laughed, having been put oddly at ease; comforted by the conversation. Sam promised to visit that weekend; the news of his pending presence, a welcome relief.

Their privacy was suddenly jolted to an abrupt conclusion by the sound of alarm clocks chiming overhead. It took all of her strength to make it through that day. Carolyn fed her children then sent them off to catch their bus. Then she had to get April settled in before she could rest. By the time she allowed her body to drop onto the sofa it was mid-morning. Pure dread kept her eyes from closing. She did not want April out of her sight. After the incident only hours before, the terror still so fresh it was palpable, her baby had to remain close by and her eyes **had** to remain open. She was afraid of falling asleep.

What she most feared was something happening to her daughters. (Too late!) Sam told her not to be afraid but she did not know how to dispel the fear she had not conjured. It was *not* her imagination. Instead, it was a reaction to the phenomenon she had never before encountered and could not comprehend. Though disquieting, fear seemed the natural reaction to these circumstances. When her husband did arrive, she would offer no apology for her emotions or corresponding mood. He could not get there soon enough. Her eyes began to close. Resisting the urge, deliberately rising from the chair fast becoming too comfortable, Carolyn wanted out. She wanted to sell the house.

The school bus arrived on schedule; still no trace of her husband, in spite of assurances made: he'd be coming home that afternoon. Carolyn resented his absence. It was all too much to handle alone. Placing April in the care of her eldest sister, the weary, brooding mother sent her children out to play. Shrill screams of delight announced their father's presence in the driveway, though their mother remained quite calm, waiting for him in the parlor. When Roger entered the house, surrounded by his flock of little lambs, her eyes, two dark orbs, stared disdainfully in his direction. She did not care if he was tired from a road trip; she was exhausted, having been on a journey of her own, one he could not imagine. She didn't care about anything except getting some sleep.

"You're in charge." It was all Carolyn said while rising from the sofa.

"Well, that's a very fine how do you do!" His wife did not respond. "Some greeting! What the hell is the matter with you?" Roger became belligerent. She said nothing more, passing him by as she went straight into the bedroom. Closing the door firmly, the man wasn't welcome to follow. April pulled him down to kid level to whisper in his ear. As an authority on the matter, having spent the day with her mother, she explained to the best of her ability:

"Mommy doesn't feel good. She's really tired and in a *really* bad mood."

Roger wondered what the problem could be but did not pursue the issue. If his wife was not well, best to let her sleep undisturbed. Instead, he got busy

in the kitchen preparing dinner and catching up with his girls. Nobody spoke of their mother's dour mood. Instead, they hovered around their father, each seeking some form of favor. April brought their most recent renovation to his attention. Roger stood directly beneath it, staring into the gaping hole in the corner of the kitchen ceiling. Knowing he must be curious about it, the baby tugged at a daddy's shirtsleeve again telling him how she had blessed a mess, showing him how she'd made the sign of the cross; backwards, by mistake. Too damn cute to correct, he let it go, all the while wondering about his wife: So, what the hell is the matter? Spirits: They form and substance and matter.

“Mistakes are the portals of discovery.”
James Joyce

scorched offerings

“You can discover what your enemy fears most by observing the means he uses to frighten you.”

Eric Hoffer

Roger became distracted and burned the food; not too badly, but enough to taste the scorch from the bottom of the skillet. They ate without complaint; a few (faux) compliments bantered about to spare his feelings. Some food was put aside, in case Carolyn woke up hungry, but that night she never came out of their bedroom; the girls had him all to themselves. They enjoyed spending time with dad; observing as he'd built a fire like a pro, gathering in front of it as the evening chill began settling in. Spring was quite young though it had, thus far, proved no warmer than winter. Watching television, volume down, so to avoid waking their mother only a room away; after about an hour it was time for homework then off to bed. April reminded him to tuck them all in. It was his pleasure, having been gone for several days. Finally, Roger was able to relax, stretching out on the sofa where he promptly fell asleep.

Waking just before dawn, the man's body was stiff and sore. The fire had burned out hours before; he had weathered a cold night without the benefit of a blanket. Rekindling the flames around one large scorched log left behind, piling on a few pieces of dried splinters for good measure, Roger warmed up and thought about his wife. Their bedroom door was still closed. The pantry door was open. He closed it but could still smell the scent of stale cellar air. He felt a draft as he sparked a fire. Glancing behind while leaning toward the fireplace, Roger noticed the cellar door, barricaded by a desk, was now open about an inch; displacing the desk by the same distance. He had not asked the girls about it the night before, assuming Carolyn simply rearranged, creating extra space in their bedroom. It never occurred to him that she did so to keep a door, difficult to open, from doing so on its own. Kindling ignited as usual. Swoosh! Roger closed the cellar door then secured it. Hoisting the desk back in place, the crackling of fire disguised the *click*. From the corner of his eye Roger watched the latch lift up then snap back down in its slot. A shiver went through him, having nothing to do with the temperature in the parlor. Perhaps

his wife could shed some light on the situation. He opened the bedroom door and found her bundled beneath the quilt, still fast asleep. Rather than disturb her rest, Roger stoked the fire with a few logs, replaced the screen then went into the kitchen. Once the coffee was perking he put a pot of water on to boil. Examining the hole in the ceiling, he considered it a good start and wondered if the flies might be breeding above. (Far more likely: *below!*) There the little devils were, perched on the windowsill, poised and waiting for him. Agitated by the sight, Roger grabbed the swatter, resuming his task, obliterating every insect he could contact; a fruitless attempt to decimate the population. It was *their* decision when to vacate these premises...not his...the man had much to learn. Children began emerging from their bedrooms; a line, quickly forming at the bathroom door. While patiently waiting her turn Chrissy inquired about breakfast, secretly hoping it would be something her father could not burn, a hamburger from the night before still sitting like a stone in her stomach. He'd been distracted; tired from his long trip, out of practice in the kitchen (mom was the *regular* cook) so the sin was forgivable. Christine was destined to be an accountant; quietly calculating the odds of eating scorched oatmeal, then suggesting they have cold cereal instead. Dad agreed. Turning off the burner as water boiled away, fogging up the pantry windows; steam heat it provided was warmth welcomed by all. Casually resuming his self-imposed charge as the local exterminator, while the girls ate their breakfast, Roger patrolled the kitchen, coffee in one hand, fly swatter in the other. Splat!

Carolyn staggered out of bed, dazed and a bit disoriented. Gathering her wits, she realized, amazingly, her extended nap had passed entirely uninterrupted. Momentarily lost in time, she sat down on the bed again, bare legs dangling, studying the clock. She did the math. It had been more than fifteen hours of deep, restful sleep. Opening her door, a fireplace beckoned. By this time the wood was fully engaged in flames; the warmth of its embrace spreading over her like layer upon layer of blankets. She could smell the coffee and hear her children. As the sharp slap of the swatter intruded, Carolyn remembered her husband was home...and apparently back on task. Though her sleep had been undisturbed, the same could not be said for her waking. This habit of his was something more than irritating. She considered

it to be an unnecessary evil. Her expression distorted as Carolyn thought about the girls trying to eat their breakfast in peace. The sounds of assaults impaled her mind like tiny bolts of lightning striking at the peaceful silence. What a way to start a day. Carolyn followed it, prepared to do whatever necessary to make it STOP!

From the look on her face everyone knew something was wrong with mom. Claiming her spot at the table, Andrea went to get her mother a cup of coffee. Roger chose this opportune moment to announce, in his typically aggravated tone, it was time to call the exterminator back again.

Carolyn exploded: "No more! They'll poison my kids with that shit! I don't want it in this house! I'd rather have the goddamned flies!" Pounding her fist on the table, the kitchen fell silent. Children were mortified by their mother's hateful, contemptuous words; her spontaneous outburst not quite concluded. "Roger! Put that thing away! Give it up! You're **so** neurotic!"

"What the hell...is the matter with you?" He stared at his wife as if he had seen a ghost. A ~ who are you and what have you done with my wife ~ look.

What had begun as an ugly altercation one chilly spring morning ultimately resulted in the first meaningful communication between Roger and Carolyn on the difficult, complicated subject. It had indeed become a pressing matter; spirit matters...requiring immediate attention and necessary acknowledgment. It would prove to be rather tense, even terse talk, but one which had to occur. Carolyn had a story to tell. Roger did as well. It was the end of the beginning.

The children quickly finished breakfast in silence then bolted for the door, grateful to have someplace else to go. Their remorseful mother escorted them into the parlor, apologizing for the rude eruption which occurred at the table. Hugs and kisses all around, forgiveness was as much in their nature as it was in her own. Setting April up on the corner of **Sesame Street**, she returned to

the kitchen. It was time to tell the truth. Carolyn sat down then stared into her coffee cup, unable to lift it to her lips. A soft humming of wings fluttering in glee provided a queer soundtrack in an otherwise silent kitchen. The flies had come alive again. They seemed delighted by the reprieve *or* the explosion of hostility, suspending certain death sentences for all who made their presence known. Roger was awaiting an inevitable exchange. Examining Carolyn at a distance, keenly aware she had become deeply disturbed by something more than his nasty little habit; he joined her at the table. Trembling with distress, a wife turned abruptly toward her husband, noting his cold, hard expression.

“I’m sorry.” The tears came against her will. Carolyn rarely cried; in many ways she was as pragmatic as Roger was, so she struggled to maintain a stoic composure. Tears ruptured a secure seal on the well of loneliness and misery; another chronic pain. Isolation and self-doubt had plagued her for months. It was the release of all she feared and all she felt. Roger did not know how to react. For once, there was no overreaction.

“Tell me what’s going on with you?” His tone was an odd mixture of harsh and tender; raw emotion twisted into a knot tightening in his stomach. Roger wanted to be sensitive to his wife yet she had deliberately humiliated him. He was deeply offended by her earlier accusation.

“Night before last the dresser in our bedroom caught on fire.”

“What?!” Alarmed by the scary image Roger became transfixed, prompting her for more information: Details. “What do you mean? How did the dresser catch on fire...did you leave a candle burning?” Question posed as demand.

“No. I don’t know what happened. There was a fire...and then it was gone. It was a fireball on the dresser, bouncing around; shooting sparks off in every direction. I was terrified out of my mind! At first I thought it was a reflection in the mirror from the fireplace but it *wasn’t*...it was a ball of fire, leaping all over the bedroom...and it didn’t leave a single mark on anything it touched.”

“You were dreaming.” He relaxed, smiling knowingly. Judgment rendered. Issue resolved, at least as far as he was concerned.

“I was standing in the middle of our bedroom, Roger. I was wide awake!” Carolyn was not smiling. Apparently she did not ***know*** as much as he did.

“You had a nightmare.” He was convinced, based on her description of it.

“I called Sam.” Carolyn finally sipped her coffee. She knew disclosing the situation to their mutual friend would finally get Roger’s attention. It did.

“You did what? Why’d you do that? What did you tell him?” Roger closely scrutinized his wife. He did not want the subject discussed, especially outside of the family, but Sam ***was*** family. Roger knew it must be serious if Carolyn felt compelled to tell him about it. Perhaps he should learn to listen up!

“Everything; I told him everything.” Her torso heaved a sigh of relief.

“What do you mean by ***everything***; what did he have to say?” Curiosity got the best of him; he ***had*** to pay attention to Sam, if vicariously through her.

“He said calm down...***be not afraid***...nothing to fear but fear itself; he said ***they*** couldn’t hurt us and then he quipped: ***fear the living, not the dead***’ and suggested I go get some sleep. He said his house on Benefit Street is haunted, too.” (The East Side of Providence has a well-deserved reputation within the corporeal and spirit worlds alike. They ***all*** know how to party on the hill.)

“***They*** can’t hurt us? I do not believe in ghosts.” Roger withdrew, suddenly as rigid in demeanor as was his staunch denial of her claim. He didn’t believe in ghosts, ergo, he didn’t believe his wife. If he denied them they didn’t exist.

“Well you know what? I didn’t believe in ghosts either, not until we moved into this house. I thought dead was dead and that was it. I was rather looking forward to it...a nice long nap! Imagine MY disappointment! Over the past few months I have seen enough, heard enough and felt enough to know that ***something bizarre*** is happening in this house! I don’t know ***what*** or ***who*** it is but I am telling you, Roger, its real, its evil and it doesn’t want

me around!"

"You're being..." He almost went there again.

"Don't you **dare** say I'm being ridiculous!" Her hackles, expectantly up.

"It could be your imagination..."

"No! I don't know what this is but I **do know** it is **not** my imagination! Sam believes me, so it seems you are the one with a problem here...odd man out."

"Lower your voice!" Roger pointed in the direction of their youngest, who was engrossed in an episode of a favorite show. She couldn't hear them from such a distance but her father was taking no chances. Roger suddenly rose to close the kitchen door; a precautionary measure. No need to frighten a child. Neither parent considered what strange and wondrous stories their children could have told had they only been given the opportunity; had they not been excluded from the privileged conversation. Time would tell their tale as well.

"Wait. I'll go check on her. I'm sure the fire needs some tending anyway." Carolyn began to rise. Roger volunteered to go instead. Settling back into her chair, staring at streaks of gray light slicing the table in half, her mind drifted back to the incident in question.

"Get another cup of coffee. I'll be right back." He'd left her alone with her troubled thoughts: the recurrent theme re-emerging in morning light.

When he returned to the kitchen a few minutes later Carolyn appeared as a figure set in stone. Fixed and motionless, she remained in place at their table, gazing into her empty coffee mug. Held captive by the contemplation, as she was by their house, startled by her husband's arrival, she hadn't noticed his presence until he reached in to retrieve the mug wedged tightly in her hands. As he turned toward the pantry she gave voice to a winter's silent discontent.

"I want to sell the house." Transfixed; six words uttered in a whisper stilled her husband. He had to stop and think...what to say...how to react. It

could have so easily erupted into an argument. “I want out of here.” Her eyes found his as pleading as her own, for different reasons. Roger promptly returned to the table, lifting her into an embrace; a good decision made in the moment.

“Now sit down and tell me what you told Sam.” No longer placating, when Roger realized their situation had escalated beyond his perceived control, he had to reclaim it, as if he’d ever had any control of it, anymore than she did. “What did you mean by *everything*? What haven’t you told me yet? Really, isn’t it at least a *possibility* you were having a nightmare when, as you say, you saw a fire on the dresser?”

Carolyn’s body stiffened, adopting a defensive posture again. She *knew* it! She just *knew* he would not believe her! “Please let me go.” He obliged. She dropped into her seat, momentarily defeated. In the next moment, Roger was seated beside her again, this time ready to listen...and listen he did. Carolyn proceeded to go through the litany of experiences, beginning inside the barn, detailing instances in which she’d felt another presence; every time she’d felt threatened, harassed or otherwise put upon. The diatribe was a dissertation of sorts, delivered as a lecture to a skeptical student who’d finally have to admit the teacher had an all too real grasp of the material. He sat quietly. There was much to absorb, but were they lessons learned?

At its conclusion, Carolyn slumped back in her chair, intensity diminished by exhaustion. Roger was speechless. He rose very slowly then crossed to the window, searching his troubled mind for a response while gazing through the panes of glass. After a minute or so, he came up with something perfect:

“So you *really* don’t think it was a nightmare.” An attempt to shatter a dark spell cast met with some success. Carolyn allowed herself to grin. She looked at him and simply shook her head at his incorrigible, impenetrable skull.

Roger turned toward the window again, recalling what he had meant to tell her long before that morning, remembering this event while surveying their property with tired eyes. “You know, the day we moved in, old man Kenyon said something very strange to me.”

“No. I *didn’t* know.” No. He had not mentioned it to her before.

“He asked me to go for a walk...in the middle of a snowstorm...a walk.”

“I remember. I could barely see the two of you standing out on the hill.”

Roger sat down beside her again. She sensed his seriousness; on the verge of divulging something relevant to the difficult discussion though she didn’t expect what she heard. “He stopped me, took my arm then said, ‘For the sake of your family, leave the lights on at night.’ That’s all he said.” His wife was astonished; intuition validated. Mr. Kenyon did know more than he revealed; his statement confirmed her suspicion.

“He knows. Why didn’t you tell me this before now?”

“I didn’t think it was important. It didn’t make any sense to me at the time. He’s an old man.” Roger had not deliberately withheld such crucial evidence though he had failed the math portion of the test: $1+1=2$.

“Mrs. Pettigrew said the same thing, after she saw the coat hanger hit me.” An equation quickly coming together: “She told me the Kenyons kept all the lights on...all the time. All night...every night. **That’s** why he was asking us questions about the house. ‘Swallows in the chimney’ my ass! He should’ve told us the truth **before** we bought this place!”

“Should’ve told us what? ‘Oh, by the way, this old farmhouse is haunted.’ You can’t blame Mr. Kenyon.”

“The hell I can’t! If he knew it had spooks then he should have told us so!”

“Spooks?” Roger was perplexed by her reaction. “Did it ever occur to you he may have some doubts of his own? Maybe he asked questions because he thought he’d gone around the bend, living here alone for so many years after his wife died. ‘Swallows in the chimney’ may have been how he explained it to himself for all we know. You can’t blame him about it. He’s a good man.”

“I know he is; I care about him too. But for God’s sake, we have children!”

Roger paused to take it all in. The man began questioning his perceptions.

“The desk you moved into the parlor...it was pulled out...or pushed away from the cellar door this morning; while I was moving it back the latch lifted. I had just closed it. I really don’t think it’s a matter of the floor being warped. This house settled a long time ago.” Roger briefly reconsidered his position.

“Thank you.” Though tempted to gloat, Carolyn kept it sincere. “All of this is pretty *unsettling*, if you ask me.”

“I’ve always assumed there was a logical explanation. Maybe there *is* and I just don’t see it yet.”

“Well, Roger...if ghosts actually *do* exist...then it *is* a logical explanation.”

“So, what do you propose we do?” Roger was genuinely seeking a rational suggestion, acknowledging something strange, though still unidentified.

“I want to put it on the market. I don’t think we’re safe here...any of us.”

“We have zero equity in the place. We can’t afford to be impulsive again.”

“Is that some kind of slam? I put money down on this because I thought...”

“Stop it. I know what you thought and I know why you did what you did.”

“We should leave lights on at night; maybe it’s what keeps them away.”

“We can’t afford it. The bill is already three times higher than it should be, for some ungodly reason.” Truer words were never spoken.

“Sam is coming this weekend. He told me to relax. I don’t even know *how* to relax anymore! I’m a nervous wreck all the time...waiting for whatever is coming next! Last night was the first good night’s sleep I’ve had in weeks.”

“So, what else did Sam have to say?” Roger held his friend in high esteem,

always taking the sage advice freely offered in abundance. He was willing to listen to anything Sam had to say but Roger was very surprised to hear of his belief in the spirit world. They had known each other for years but it was not a subject which ever found its way into one of their numerous conversations. Roger looked forward to the promised visit as a point of clarity.

“You learn to live with it. That’s what he said. I don’t know if I can learn to live with this and I told him so. He said, ‘When in doubt, do nothing.’”

“Now **that** sounds just like Sam.” Roger grinned, nodding as if knowing a secret and keeping it. “We should follow his advice. When he comes we will take a walk and have a talk together...the three of us. All right?”

“Don’t leave. I feel safe when you’re home. I can sleep when you’re here.”

“So I’ve noticed!” It was not a mean-spirited comment. “I’ll work this area for awhile; pick up some local accounts. I’ll be home every night; maybe late but home.” Carolyn was visibly relieved; a welcome appeasement.

“Thank you.” Grateful for a promise she knew he’d keep, it meant freedom from worry, safety in numbers and another set of senses bearing witness to events beginning to redefine a family. It meant her burden relieved by half.

“I had a really good trip. Tell you what; we’ll all go out for dinner tonight. **The Purple Cat.**” An evening spent out at an upscale restaurant was Roger’s salve for every mortal wound, at least an adequate distraction, as if prime rib was delicious enough to make them forget they were living with dead people.

“I’m a mess. Take the girls...and please don’t bring the fly swatter along.”

“And what was **that** about! You never talk like that. It scared the kids.”

“It’s what you do every morning while you’re home which scares the kids! Imagine how unnerving it is for them to have that thing flinging around their heads while they’re trying to eat? It’s worse than dealing with the flies!”

“I’m **so** neurotic?” The terse question causing Carolyn to pause while her

husband reflected on her previous comments: “So...you’re a psychoanalyst?”

“Roger, this compulsion is very unhealthy behavior.”

“Well, it certainly is unhealthy...for the flies! Remember when you told me to kill them? You got pissed off because I wouldn’t chase them through the damn house, track them down and kill them. Remember? Do you recall when you told me how *unhealthy* it was to have them around the kids...how you didn’t want them to land on a pillow or in a plate of food? So which is it?”

Roger was right. She had vilified him for doing precisely what she’d asked him to do in the first place. Oh my God! He *was* listening to her, after all! As Carolyn softened her tone then lowered her eyes while speaking difficult but honest words, he expected an apology. “You’re obsessed with killing them.”

“Obsessed? Now I’m obsessed?” The dynamic had shifted, taking a sudden turn for the worse. Incumbent upon Carolyn to alter the nature of this uncivil discourse immediately, she did not have enough energy to argue with him.

“I really am sorry about that. I should not have said it in front of the girls.” Their joust required nothing less than an act of contrition on Carolyn’s part, something meaningful to quell the brewing storm; trooper to the rescue.

“You shouldn’t have said it at all.” Roger was stern with his mate.

Carolyn obliged, removing brisk wind from the billowing sails of a mighty warship. No bellowing allowed. An abrupt change-of-subject was called for; at least there were no flies breeding in the ceiling! Moving on...

Suggesting he take a week off to work on their house, finish what had been started overhead, Roger pointed up at the gaping hole leering down on them. Carolyn smiled, her sigh of relief subtly diverting a warship off course.

“You have no idea what a mess it made! The dust went everywhere! It was worse than the fireplace...this plaster is so old, when you touch the stuff it literally disintegrates! It turns into talc...but no flies up there. I looked.”

“So, we’ll clean up the mess...and April will gladly bless it afterwards.”

“She showed you? Did she do it backwards?” Roger nodded. Both laughed.

Once completing the thought, Roger’s facile mind focused on where to go with all those dangling wires. He realized there would be no place left to hide them once the plaster was gone, beams exposed. He began devising a plan. In a minute it was figured out...smart cookie. Roger left to check in with April and the fireplace while Carolyn brewed another strong pot of coffee, certain it was what kept her conscious. There was much more to discuss.

The fire had burned down to cinders and the kid was nowhere to be found. Roger looked around downstairs then followed a voice heard from a distance. Climbing the bedroom stairs, the sounds became more pronounced. Entering the middle bedroom, he paused, listening to his youngest; at play. April had apparently relocated and was now inside the chimney closet, at the far end of the room, its door left slightly ajar. A sliver of light shone through the crack, illuminating the floorboards of a darkened bedroom, creating the narrow path for him to follow. Quietly approaching, he could distinctly hear April happily chatting, explaining how this piece of one toy fits into another; how they lock together. So sweet: a charming child. Rather than interrupting her, he left his imaginative daughter to play being **teacher**. It never occurred to him that she might actually have a student with her...one discreetly hidden in the closet.

“Modern man’s besetting temptation is to sacrifice his direct perceptions and spontaneous feelings to his reasoned reflections; to prefer in all circumstances the verdict of his intellect to that of his immediate intuitions.”

Aldous Huxley



~ a tree of life as the lone survivor ~

apple blossom time

“Some tension is necessary for the soul to grow, and we can put that tension to good use. We can look for every opportunity to give and receive love, to appreciate nature, to heal our wounds and the wounds of others, to forgive and to serve.”

Joan Borysenko

An expected arrival, spring was painfully slow in coming; so long overdue. Even though the days became warmer, the nights were often frigid by dawn; frosty. Grass still crunched beneath their feet as the girls ran across the lawn, sliding their way all the way to the bus stop. Leaving their house bundled in coats, by the time they came home in late afternoon, the outerwear had been shed and it was time to wear shorts and pretend spring had sprung, including some playtime before dark; sunset a little later every evening: a blessing.

The mother's mood lightened and brightened with each passing day. Roger kept his promise. He was returning home every night, even if he had to drive a hundred miles to do so. She felt a burden lifting, comforted by knowledge her husband would be there. For nearly three weeks, Roger had been like a fixture in the house. He stayed very busy, spending several days trashing the kitchen floor with debris from the ceiling above. It was the project promised, and then some. Enough time had lapsed for a skittish mistress of the house to develop a false sense of security as something far more dangerous took root: complacency. She'd thought of herself as impervious to any threat of harm, if her husband was there for protection. She was sadly mistaken: abandoned.

During this period a fascinating phenomenon happened. At the time of year normally reserved for common houseflies to *begin* emerging for their annual siege, those who had tormented the family all winter long suddenly vanished. They all died or disappeared in one day; the same day Carolyn confessed her experiences to her husband; a rather uncommon occurrence. The sound of an eerie silence was haunting; an absence noted. Though an in-depth discussion triggered changes, neither expected the outcome. By evening the windowsills were littered with carcasses, as if an overt acknowledgment of a predicament brought one aspect of it to an abrupt end;

dispelling harbingers of doom and gloom, banishing the beasts back to hell to dwell with their father, the devil. Perhaps it was a coincidence. Perhaps their work was done.

Sam's visit was delightful, as usual. After greeting the children he went for a long walk with their parents under the guise of touring the enormous barn. Carolyn showed him the antique scythe, pointing up to the spot from whence it came during her too-close encounter. He spoke with his friends about their house and its inhabitants, both living and those presumed dead, in his typical deadpan manner. He told ghost stories about an old haunted house on the hill near Brown University in Providence, his own home; informing them about his neighborhood, atwitter with supernatural activity. He used language with which they were entirely unfamiliar: *poltergeist*, *apparition*, *entity* peppered his description of an otherwise benign residence. Roger remained aloof. He did not consent to these hocus pocus theories posited by his learned attorney. Consistently maintaining his staunch opposition, his “there **must** be a logical explanation” approach, Roger was startled when Sam abruptly announced it: “There **is** a logical explanation. You live with a ghost; at least one spirit and maybe more than one.” (Where had Roger heard that before?) Sam dismissed his skepticism as naiveté, declaring him unsophisticated on the taboo subject he knew nothing about. Then he did his best to reassure Carolyn; if the house **was** haunted, the spirits posed no threat to her or the girls, finally concluding: if the ghosts intended to inflict harm on anyone, they would certainly choose Roger as their primary target! The extensive tour continued. Strolling along, Sam paused to marvel at the sheer volume of blossoms laden upon branches of the lone survivor of the storm of '38; the apple tree halted his momentum. Carolyn told a story of her own, one borrowed from Mr. Kenyon, explaining how a dozen others just as lovely did not survive the ravages of an incredible hurricane, one which left most of little Rhode Island in shambles. She told an old friend how the barn was spared by dancing with the wind; a saving grace.

A jolly man, Sammy sought then found the best in every soul and situation, scattering his natural joy like blossoms on breezes wherever he went. He had always attracted females in droves, including the five girls clinging to him as

he began singing a sweet, old-fashioned tune, dancing with his fair maidens beneath the apple tree. "*I'll be with you in apple blossom time / I'll be with you to change your name to mine / Church bells will chime / And you will be mine in apple blossom time!*" A grand old song, each child was charmed beyond measure, as was their mother. Why Sam was so happy mattered not; it rubbed off like chalk dust on all he encountered. It had been a marvelous day. Carolyn smiled warmly, watching her friend while he sang with April in his arms. Then, as any perfect dance partner would, he invited her to stand on his feet while Sam took the lead. All of them were ardently in love with this short, stout, jovial little gentleman, including Carolyn. He finished his round with the ladies in dappled sunlight shining upon the grassy dance floor below its resplendent branches, his lyrical voice ringing throughout their secluded valley. His was a full, deep voice; a pure tone rich in texture and nuance, one in perfect harmony with Nature. For all souls involved in this festive family outing beneath an apple tree, it was a lovely memory to make; a keepsake.

Staying for the day, Sam had a chance to leisurely enjoy all the farm had to offer. His walk to the river convinced him; no matter what was happening in that old farmhouse it was worth tolerating to have the rest of many blessings. His assessment of these spirit matters was based upon his own experiences. Therefore he was unaware of the true personality of the problem. Essentially, his ghost was peaceful and innocuous; mischievous. Sam's error in judgment came in the form of advice imparted, borne of the assumption that he knew more than he actually did on a complicated subject. He told Carolyn to relax, not to worry; to simply ignore the problem. Later in the evening after dinner, Sam sat on the porch with his hosts discussing their plans for the future, all the while insisting they should not, *could not* sell this wonderland he'd spent the day exploring; it was inconceivable to him how they would even consider parting with the place. He had no idea of what would come if they remained. None of them did; circumstances provoking a fear of the unknown.

Carolyn had great faith in their friend. Accepting his encouragement she let her guard down. If she could only let go of this fear, her omnipresent anxiety, everything would be fine. Sam was certain of it. She had been making herself a nervous wreck in a constant state of agitation anticipating the next incident, with good reason. Carolyn agreed to dismiss the notion of selling the place, at

least for the time being. Yet, lingering doubts, pure dread she attempted to dispel or suppress would continue to haunt a reticent mortal soul, working on her mind in destructive and insidious ways.

The sweet aroma of apple blossoms saturated the evening air. Sam became intoxicated by it as they'd walked the grounds again, returning to his favorite spot beneath the canopy of an apple tree. He plucked a few fallen petals from dew-laden grass, souvenirs to take home: always the hopeless romantic.

"Carolyn, you've purchased the **Garden of Eden**. Promise me you'll never let it go." Had a Jewish man been more familiar with precepts of Christianity he might have extrapolated some deeper implications based on this analogy. According to scripture the garden was not only beautiful; paradise on Earth. It was more complicated: a place riddled with danger, the evils of temptation; something wicked having to do with mortal desire, an apple tree and a snake. Carolyn stooped beneath the specimen, bursting with blossoms, preparing to bear its sweet fruit. Perhaps the tree of knowledge bore all the lessons she did not care to learn in this life...or the next, for that matter. God only knows.

"What are you looking for, my dear?" Sammy was willing to help.

"The proverbial snake; you know, the one supposedly lurking in the grass." It is important to retain one's sense of humor, especially when under duress; during times of trial and tribulation. So it is written. So it's been said.

Twilight: Sam had to leave before dark, *fearful* of being lost in the woods. How ironic! While humming the same heartfelt tune he'd sung for his ladies, Sam scattered petals he gathered, blossoms reclaimed from the tree of life, all over the seats inside his Mercedes, departing with a promise to return soon. He had come to be with them at apple blossom time and his heart never left.

"There is nothing in the world more peaceful than apple-leaves with an early moon."

Alice Meynell

kiss of death

*“Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed;
/ The motion of a hidden fire / That trembles in the breast.”*

James Montgomery

Another week went on by with no further interruptions; no incidents. Doors remained latched when closed. Flies: all gone. Everything was peaceful. The kitchen ceiling was a chore and a half but once complete looked spectacular. Hand hewn beams were exposed and the room felt larger, more welcoming; job well done. Roger worked the immediate area, seeking out new clients for his wares in quaint little villages scattered along the coast of Southern New England. Making his way home to Harrisville every night, Carolyn made no secret of it; she'd been comforted by his presence in the house. Spirits lifted. Her mood improved dramatically, much to the relief of her children.

Sam reassured them; attitude was everything when it came to spirit matters. She was beginning to believe him, absorbing sage advice into consciousness as spring days began blending together. Life became what she envisioned for her own the day she found their place in the country. Relaxing into a routine, everyone began taking for granted; this was how it would be. Mom: cheerful. Dad: home. It wasn't Norman Rockwell but something resembling normalcy.

One balmy evening Roger surprisingly suggested they find a babysitter and go out on a date. Neither of them could even remember the last time they had done anything together as a couple. Dinner and a movie? A distant memory. Carolyn graciously accepted his invitation and began scouting for a sitter. A local teen came highly recommended by their neighbor. Carolyn made a call, grateful the young lady was available, especially on such short notice and on a Saturday night. Arrangements made, the excited woman chose a nice outfit from the closet, hopped in the shower then had a fine time putting on makeup for the first time in...forever. Five fascinated girls intently observed as their mother pillaged through a rather sparse collection of cosmetics, playing dress

up alongside her at a mirror. She powdered their noses and painted their lips. The bathroom became crowded, loud with laughter; a rambunctious crew at a festive event: all the girls playing together...making up a fond memory.

Margie missed their driveway three times before pulling into the yard. Her father's old beat up Chevy truck was full to brimming with junk, like a tinker carrying his wares in a covered wagon in olden days. It was Margie Bailey! Andrea was thrilled. They had spent time talking on the bus. Margie brought her guitar then taught Andrea how to play it in one night; a quick study. They became close friends over time. Margie was safe; someone who could always be trusted to keep a secret...a person of good character and stellar reputation: a great choice for a friend. The eldest child required a confidante.

Italian was the most romantic food. Roger was willing to see whatever film Carolyn desired, a deference she appreciated as they had such contrary tastes. Roger knew it probably meant seeing something British or even, God forbid; a "foreign language" film with subtitles. He considered it a risk worth taking, determined to provide Carolyn with a memorable evening. It was destined to become just that but for an entirely different reason. Carolyn does not recall where they dined and what film they saw that night, but she will never forget what happened when they came home. Date night had only just begun: a date with destiny for a mistress of the house...but with which one?

It was a quarter past midnight when they walked through the door. Margie was doing some homework. Gathering her books, the mother asked typically parental questions, inquiring about their kids' behavior and the like. A good report eased her mind. Roger paid the charge, offering to drive Margie home, due to the late hour. Declining this offer, she reassured the couple she lived a mile away and would be fine. They could hear her rattling through their yard, tools sliding, crashing together as the rusty truck navigated through deep ruts in an earthen driveway...then she was gone.

Though their day had been long, this night would prove longer, still. Roger

was sleepy due to a lengthy drive. From the farm *anywhere* promised to be a long journey. Rhode Islanders are provincial people. A ten-minute long ride always prompts a complaint of five minutes too far. For Roger, it always felt as if the place in the country was light years away from civilization as he had known it all his life. A city boy...forced to make the necessary adjustments. He crawled into bed while Carolyn went upstairs to check on their children. All was calm; very quiet. They were sound asleep, as was her husband by the time she'd returned. Within moments, she too would fall deeply asleep. Rest, dear woman, for you will need your strength.

Unaware several hours had passed; Carolyn stirred to a distinct vibration of footsteps crossing the wood of her bedroom floor. Sensing a presence beside her, presuming it to be one of the girls, she began to extricate herself from a heavy slumber, softly muttering: "What's the matter, honey?" Stretching her arm out toward the sound, knowing she could instantly identify the child by touch, by the whisper of a voice in the night; there was no response. Opening her eyes, pale dawn light revealed the grotesque figure of a woman hovering above her. Carolyn was staring directly into the torso of an apparition which had usurped the bureau beside the bed, standing in its place. The sudden rush of terror pulsed throughout her body, jolting the woman awake; sending one horrified soul scrambling for cover beneath a cotton quilt.

The image of it leapt through her eyes into her mind, impaling her memory with a spectral wonder so vivid and compelling, it had to be processed in tiny patterns and fragments. As still shots...appearing in a series of freeze-frame photographs slicing into her consciousness; inescapable split-second imagery bombarding the senses, creating the complex memory from scraps and shards of a gruesome vision. Immobilized by fear; its petrifying cold cut like a blade to her bones; its noxious odor: utterly repulsive. With staccato-like precision, an incongruous concept underwent rapid-fire conversion into language as the overwhelmed woman absorbed details of an entity she observed; perceptions unfolding in mind. Exposing itself solicited scrutiny while breathing abject terror and loathing into its victim, forcing its putrid stench deeply into her breathless lungs. A description conjured was beyond mortal comprehension:

the dress rusty green jersey handmade hand-dyed fabric belt cinched at the waist with an oval buckle covered in same fabric vintage clothing a being from another time ugly beehive head a hornet's nest broken neck snapped hanging to the side no eyes no mouth grey mesh cobwebs no hands no feet just floating above me cold so cold can't breathe vile evil death no bureau gone coming closer cold can't breathe so close too close wants to touch me don't touch me head draped at an angle wants a kiss dear Lord Oh my God

There it stood, its cockeyed head leaning sharply forward at a crooked angle, broken neck; no question. Standing *inside* the bureau beside their bed, a solid wooden object, it had fused with the furniture for its own nefarious purposes.

The hideous creature approached silently, as if closing in to steal a kiss or claim a life. Carolyn heard herself shrieking as the spirit drew nearer but still, not a sound would come; nothing but a squeaky whimper would penetrate the frozen knot of vocal chords lodged within her throat. Digging her feet deeply into the covers beneath their quilt, Carolyn kicked Roger repeatedly, scraping his shins with her toenails. It drew closer. One black stick of an arm flopped down across her pillow as the entity leaned over, its head curiously cocked to one side, as if it was studying her. Terrified of being touched, Carolyn's first instinct was to hide; an inclination to cower beneath the quilt, though she had kicked her share of it too far beyond reach. Breaking backward, frantically scampering away, Carolyn catapulted up against the headboard of their bed, crashing it into wrought iron hardware on the doors directly behind it, loudly enough to wake dead and living alike. Eyes sought a face...there was no face; only a swirling, rancid mass of rotting flesh resembling a desiccated hornet's nest, covered in what appeared to be a mesh of blackened cobwebs; flimsy wisps of wiry hair clinging to the crown. Grabbing a fistful of disheveled hair Carolyn jerked Roger's head severely back and forth in her desperate attempt to wake the motionless man. His body was limp...lifeless. His wife was sick inside, certain her husband was dead. Uncontrollable panic ensued, believing the intruder had killed him and was about to claim her; an intention to stop her heart: to literally scare her to death. An evil entity stalking its prey began moving in for the kill. As a spontaneous reaction she slammed her body up

against the headboard. Sliding aside, she landed on Roger: fighting for some distance...fighting for her life. The woman's silent screams were deafening; her mind manufacturing at full volume what her body had refused to provide. The wretched being floating cloud-like above her, inches away; becoming a part of whatever was in its way, on its way to a target. Aversion so intense, its repulsive odor overwhelming, it caused her stomach to heave reflexively. Carolyn fought for control; taking shallow, panting breaths, forcing out fine mist from her lips, obscuring the appalling view of what she presumed would be her bitter end. In those few dreadful moments it never occurred to her that she might survive this ordeal. The ghastly apparition aligned its hellish head with the face of its intended victim. In the last instant before contact Carolyn whispered the only words she could form or utter in a moment of pure panic. "God help me." Gasping for air, grasping an edge of the covers with gnarled fingers trembling, she braced for impact. Yanking the blanket toward her had caused it to shift, falling off of Roger, revealing his torso; the shocking sight, momentarily diverting her rapt attention from the imposing apparition. She'd ceased breathing, her mind shrieking in horror; his back and shoulders, even his ribcage was scored; deeply abraded with scratches, as if he'd been clawed to death by a wild animal. Seeking out the entity, she knew she was next.

It was gone. Proving to be a powerful prayer, no matter how quiet or brief, Carolyn saved herself with a faithful request of her Savior. Having had the presence of mind to invoke the presence of God in such a moment of crisis, murmuring words possessing potency enough to cause an intervention on her behalf, "God help me" vanquished the evil spirit, the menacing manifestation imposing itself upon her at dawn. During those stark moments spent awaiting her own pitiful demise, Carolyn could do nothing but hold her breath, clench her fists and pray for salvation; a plea for tender mercies.

She cannot recall how long she remained locked in position. Roger began to moan, trying to move beneath her. Relief startled her back to life with him. As she slid off his body, Roger rolled toward the edge on his side of the bed and went instantly, deeply asleep. The disgusting smell began to dissipate. A mind-numbing cold suddenly escaped her sense of it. She'd found the room emptied of tortured souls, save her own. What Carolyn witnessed had a hold on her still. Knowing then she would never recover and could never forget

what happened to her just before dawn on a spring morning, grateful to God for rescue and respite, she touched Roger's chest to be certain he was *really* breathing. It took time for her mind to correlate the fact; he was actually still alive. This had been the most harrowing experience of her life, to date. The woman could barely move, as if all of her energy, the life-force of her being had been drained. Weak; as if all of her muscles atrophied while languishing, twisted and contorted up against the headboard, awaiting a horrible end.

Though the worst of it was gone, a distinctly foul odor remained embedded in her sinuses; she could not evade a nauseating stench. It lingered internally. The cold went with the apparition, yet Carolyn could not escape its grasp. To her core, she was frozen stiff. A persistent sensation of bloody chunks of ice adrift in her veins caused the shaken soul to quake. Stumbling into the parlor, dragging a blanket along, she struggled to wrap inside it. Disoriented, unsure of her surroundings, she needed rest; the loveseat caught her frame as it fell. Head spinning, limbs quivering...chatter in her mind could not be silenced; rivaled only by the sound of her chattering teeth.

There was no time to waste. NO time to think. She *had* to write this down, draw it; record what she'd seen. It was a compelling imperative; critical she have something scribed for her husband, something to prove her claim. In the aftermath of this ordeal, Carolyn realized she had been to the precipice. By the grace of God, she survived. No question in her mind. Carolyn *did* believe her eyes. Over time, she would grapple with various concepts regarding the haunting in her house but the reality of it would never come into question. A compulsion to provide evidence for her husband resulted in Carolyn standing too quickly. Crumbling like stale cookies, she tumbled onto the loveseat; too soon to walk on scared-stiff legs. The urgency of it was motivation enough to carry her wobbling frame to the desk. Retrieving a pencil and the notebook usually reserved for grocery lists and lines of poetry, Carolyn scribbled and scrawled words as they'd come into mind: *a hornet's nest cobwebs vermin* Huddled up on the sofa, she continued: *no eyes no mouth sprigs of hair no facial features gray ancient corpse* It pained her, every word of it. Fingers crippled with the cold; her handwriting was practically illegible. Carolyn was struggling to write, fighting to describe the grotesque, mutilated apparition; increasingly difficult as she went along, not because the imagery eluded her.

Quite the contrary, visualization permanently penetrated her consciousness, it infiltrated her memory; details as vivid as the instant in which they occurred. There would be no escaping the imagery...not in this lifetime. The difficulty came in feeling forced to relive it; revisiting moments during which Carolyn believed she would surely perish from this Earth.

Pressing on, the process made her queasy, like having a hot plate of rancid food thrust before her, something she was being forced to consume but could not digest: a recipe for disaster. This sensation magnified as minutes passed, like staring into the white-hot core of a fresh, gaping wound: it was raw. Intense. Bloody hell. The adjectives chosen paled in comparison to the event, appearing foreign and inadequate as a description of her too-close encounter. She tried to steady her grip. Out-of-body...watching her own hand...writing:

Vile evil decomposing flesh repulsive stench decay putrid odor - need to vomit - want to scream oppressive diabolical not of this world - what is this thing? Bureau gone! Roger dead! Hovering over me breathing into me studying me head cocked neck broken - fighting to breathe can see the mist

Carolyn's heart convulsing, it raced with her fingertips while she scratched words onto the page: *a green brown jersey dress plain long w/ pockets on both sides of bodice/ arms but no hands dress went to the floor but no feet floating above threatening / intimidating wants to kiss me wants to kill me wants me dead this thing killed Roger demonic cold can't move can't speak jaw locked desperation grief fear no evil not a head / an orb a beehive not rounded/oval snapped sideways hanging off sunken hollow shoulders over a high collar vermin crawling a mass cobwebs alive with death despicable to take me away from my children saw his body gasped turned back again to see the bitch from hell gone! No nightmare - this was real! God help me.* Furiously etching the words sideways across lined notebook paper, the pencil tore at it as she wrote, until its point snapped. Her breathing labored, delicate features dripping with perspiration, chronicling this event had been another ordeal all its own; recounting the moments so painfully clear in her memory.

As dawn light seeped into a dim, dusky parlor, no warmth accompanied it. Quivering, Carolyn laid the notebook aside then went over to the wood box.

Though legs stabilized her mind remained flooded with images too gruesome to recall. She had no choice. There was no evading or avoiding this intrusion. Glancing nervously around, it suddenly occurred to her; the apparition might return. Thought of it unleashed another violent surge of adrenaline; ravaging fear raging throughout her body. Hands trembling, Carolyn loaded the wood onto the grate then tried to strike a match. Looking back behind she saw the antique banjo clock, the timepiece Roger had moved to the parlor, claiming the walls were too uneven for it to work properly anywhere else in the house. It had stopped. No chimes. No familiar tick ~ tock. Startled, she peered at her wristwatch. The time was fast-approaching 6:30 a.m. Their vintage clock had stopped at precisely 5:15 a.m. Carolyn did the math concluding the timepiece ceased when the apparition first arrived. It had been working fine when they went to bed and had fallen silent since. The same peaceful chimes that sung her to sleep this fateful night went quiet at dawn. Was it a clue, an indication of a presence powerful enough to suspend time itself? Time itself would tell.

A tenuous tranquility had been irrevocably shattered; nothing would ever be the same. Coffee. She needed coffee. As quietly as possible, she made her way into the kitchen. While a strong brew began sputtering along in its pot, a cauldron of caffeine, she sat alone at the table, head in hands. Something was missing: Cigarettes. Where had she left them? On the desk. Returning to the parlor, her approach was halted by a dreadful sight. Andrea was staring at the open tablet she'd left behind on the desk, beside a broken pencil and her pack of cigarettes. No! Carolyn's heart sank, instantly doubling the weight of her body where she stood, settling into her feet.

Naturally curious, Andrea stared at her mother with a peculiar expression, one difficult to interpret from a distance; strangely sedate, even serene. She then fixed her gaze on the scrawled images and scribbled words scarring the pages of a notebook as they had her mother's mind. The otherwise innocuous spiral bound tablet contained all the sordid details of that terrifying incident, an unholy encounter Carolyn had **never** intended to share with her children. Surveying its contents, examining rough sketches, it was too late to stop her. Andrea had passed beyond mortal recognition on the pathway to epiphany.

“Mom, I **know** her. I dreamed this; it woke me up. She wants to hurt you.”

“I’m fine, honey. Let me have this, please.” Carolyn rushed to her side.

“What is this? Was it a bad dream? I had a nightmare, too. You were there. She was, too...hanging over you. It woke me up but then I couldn’t move. You were screaming and I couldn’t come to help...but I could hear you.”

Feeding the beast at first light, Carolyn felt pure hatred rising up from her soul; sheer contempt for whatever it was which had touched her life and was now threatening her eldest as well. It would not stand. Consumed with anger and frustration, exuding a negative energy almost as palpable as the fear, the woman was furious. At this instant she wanted to rattle the rafters of a house possessed, to scream out loud: **“LEAVE MY KIDS ALONE!”** Carolyn knew she’d have to disguise her emotions in those critical moments so to rationally address Andrea’s experience without divulging too much of her own.

Her mind was riddled, tormented by the thought that somehow, some way, one of her girls was exposed to this heinous creature from beyond the grave. Desperate to achieve balance, to establish some semblance of control before engaging in discussion with the youngster who’d surely see through anything other than the truth, Carolyn began breathing deeply. Mother’s intuition told her what Andrea experienced was not a dream at all. This entity approached her at the same time! Centering herself, in spite of a presumed inability to do so, Carolyn reached over and removed the tablet from her daughter’s hands; taken from a youngster who had already seen too much.

“Let me have that.” Andrea relinquished the notebook without question. It belonged to her mother. Carolyn placed it back inside the desk drawer then invited her eldest to join her in the kitchen. Over coffee and hot chocolate the ladies conversed about an encounter they had shared on some cerebral level, attempting to make sense of it all. Carolyn could not lie to her about this. She didn’t know how to tell a lie, especially to one of her children; it was foreign to her nature and would have certainly been revealed on her face, should she even try. Instead, the twelve-year-old, capable of grasping complex concepts, described her intrepid journey through the darkness of a dream in disturbing detail. Carolyn did not consider it responsible to converse in kind, unwilling to frighten her child further. Rather, she simply listened to Andrea processing

the event aloud. Withholding her sordid details may have qualified as a sin of omission though Carolyn did not consider it such; not a lie: more of a secret. Keeping her own counsel, a shaken woman had reason to withhold. In lieu of divulging her ***nightmare***, Carolyn speculated about the nature of “dreams” and what, if anything, it meant. Calm and collected; blunt in her assessment:

“I have no idea what happened...to you or to me. Sometimes when people are really close, connected to each other, they think the same thoughts or feel the same emotions at the same time. It’s as though we share a mind. It makes sense because you’re a part of me. Maybe that explains it.”

“Mom, were you scared, too? I was scared **for** you!”

“Yes, Annie. I was frightened by it, too.” Any other response would have been unacceptable...and unbelievable.

“I see things sometimes...I hear sounds...spooky things happen here.”

“What have you seen?” Carolyn’s probing eyes searched her weary face.

“I see shadows in my bedroom, even when the moon is small, in the dark.” Andrea spoke in whispers; telling secrets. “Sometimes I hear voices before I go to sleep. I can’t understand what they’re saying to me. I don’t like to be in the bathroom alone. It feels like I’m being watched; like I’m being looked at while...you know. It’s embarrassing! Stuff moves around on my desk while I’m doing my homework...and you **know** what happened to our chalkboard! Mom...you can tell me the truth. Do we have ghosts?”

Carolyn became increasingly alarmed with each passing statement uttered, culminating in a revelation punctuated by the shocking question. She did not want to answer it, especially for her children, or even for herself. Asking yet another question in reply; “How do you know about ghosts?”

“I told Margie about some things I have seen and she says we have ghosts.” Innocence in her voice belied the knowledge she had attained in life thus far; the perceptive youngster was too open, too willing to share her thoughts. An anxious mother knew it was best to avoid discussing the topic

with others but it was too late to forewarn her eldest; the damage done. She was too young to be jaded by the skepticism of adulthood. Andrea harbored no preconceived notions and was unaware of the stigma attached to supernatural phenomenon. Children are supremely receptive beings, frequently observant, accepting of the world as they find it, including the netherworld. Far more often than their adult counterparts, children ***do*** believe their eyes. They should.

“There are many people who don’t believe in ghosts.”

“Why not? The priest at church talks about God and the Holy Ghost as the greatest spirit of all. At least all Catholics believe in ghosts, don’t they?”

“Annie, I don’t know how to answer your questions. It’s really a matter of personal faith. I’m afraid it is more complicated than what the priest said.”

“Okay, mom; I’m really tired, anyway. I need to go lay down again.”

“Go rest. When you get up we will have a nice breakfast together, all of us. Honey, I think it would be best not to mention anything about this to your sisters. It would only scare them...no need.”

“All right.” Embracing her mother, Carolyn escorted the girl to the bottom of her stairwell. There they encountered the wide-eyed, tear-streaked face of another child running downstairs, frantic to find her mother.

“Mommy! I had a ***really*** bad dream. It was terrible!”

“Oh, my God.” Carolyn scooped Cindy up in her arms.

Andrea searched her mother’s eyes, kissing her little sister on the forehead before going back upstairs to bed. Carolyn led Cindy to the sofa, listening as intently to an eerily similar rendition of a nightmare she had heard described with identical detail only moments before. Reassuring her that it was all over, she tucked her into the soft corner of the sofa where she promptly fell asleep. Rising to tend to the fire, Carolyn paused, staring into the flames. Retrieving her tablet from the desk drawer, she stared at the figure she had sketched in

some haste; an issue compounded by its discovery. The obsequious dilemma worked on her mind while she sifting through the pages of a notebook which needed to remain well-hidden. **Milk Bread Salt** Coming across a recent grocery list, Carolyn took comfort in its normalcy, reminding her of how life used to be. **Mayo Butter Coffee Sugar Flour Cheese** Standing on the hearthstone, she examined what had been nothing more than a notebook the day before. Yet, with this inclusion of her incoherent scribbles and sketches, scraps of words, notes and images transcribed onto its lined pages of paper, it was inadvertently transformed into an object of some significance.

Feathering through its pages with her fingertips, she continued perusing the manuscript. Delving the depths of a tablet, she found a hodgepodge of notes and lists and lines of poetry. Addresses, phone numbers, dates to remember peppered the pages with ink spots: a series of drawings, from apple blossoms to dress designs, a list of home improvement ideas filled pages; pipe dreams. Carolyn picked up another pencil. Beneath “Replace the kitchen sink” she wrote, “Get rid of the goddamned ghosts! **That** will improve the home!” Her disdain of an evil fiend duly noted beneath its proper heading, she moved on.

Myriad images scattered in no discernible pattern, juxtaposed against most recent entries in the register, caused her to pause and reflect on the journey. It was surreal. Metamorphosis occurred on two fronts, permanently altering her concept of reality as well as the formerly utilitarian status of the simple spiral notebook. In Carolyn’s hands lay a tablet of secrets, as precious as any diary, considering the sensitive nature of insights contained within. From mundane to morbid, silly to profound, she held a virtual treasure trove which, with the lone admission of a single event, became an object to hide, covet and protect.

With the turn of another page, Carolyn came across a few precious lines of poetry which touched her heart years before; lines she would unconsciously commit to paper during moments lost in thought, giving a hand something to do. Reading the words again, it suddenly struck her; these were the lines she had recited while sitting on the lawn with Mr. Kenyon, watching as beads of water trickled down the side of a glass, resembling teardrops.

*“And still other brothers and sisters,
Linked their arms together,
Walked down the dusty road where once he ran
And into the deep green valley
To sit on the stony banks of the stream he loved
And let the murmuring waters
Wash over their blood-hot feet with a springing crown of tears.”*

Carolyn closed the notebook. Lodging it toward the back of a drawer inside the desk, well aware she'd need to find a more secure place for safe-keeping, there was a more immediate concern. That staggering fatigue she battled had returned with a vengeance. She again sought salvation in the kitchen; another cup of coffee...this time with a cigarette.

Head hanging heavily over a steaming cup she considered her predicament. The lethargic stupor she suffered was something beyond fatigue: Exhaustion. No. It was beyond exhaustion. Not natural; supernatural in Nature. It was the same kind of tired she had seen on her eldest daughter's face before the child went back to bed. She recognized it. Andrea left her that morning appearing as if she'd aged overnight: a burdened soul. Cindy emerged from a stairwell in a panic; in pure desperation. Had they been the only ones? What had three other children endured in the night? Was this truly a family affair?

During her unexpected report, Andrea divulged hearing her mother scream in a nightmare of a wakened dream. Carolyn was certain she had been unable to utter any audible sounds in the midst of this crisis. Perplexed, wondering if the girls had been witness or participant, (perhaps both simultaneously), no question remained in her mind. Her children had been approached. Residual waves of nausea crashed against her stomach. This perpetrator committed, at

the very least, a psychological assault, detrimental to all of its victims. These thoughts evoked an oppressive sense of foreboding; a sense she feared would be forever. This was not over...not by a long shot. Carolyn began humming a sweet song Sam left behind, his rendition of *Apple Blossom Time*. It was her futile attempt to recapture the life she once knew; naïve. Perhaps her troubled mind went where it was most comfortable; a pretty place in a happy moment, longing for a time before abject terror informed, colored and time-warped her world. Carolyn's perception of everything changed. It happened so suddenly, so drastically, she barely recognized herself in the midst of this new life in an old farmhouse coming alive with death. How to preserve a memory against a vicious onslaught? How to restore sanity to an irrational situation? How then to protect the kids and defend herself? It was war. Peace was an illusion.

There was no solace in suspicions confirmed. Carolyn lifted the cold cup of coffee to her lips, unaware so much time had lapsed while pending dilemmas brewed in her thoughts. Startled by the sensation, she drank it down anyway; bitter but potent. Needing all the help she could get during these trying times, she struggled to reconcile rapidly expanding perceptions of Life and Death.

She was cold...frozen stiff. Carolyn could barely lift her body up from the chair. As she did, carefully, deliberately, as if crippled by frigidity, thoughts occupied her mind which would haunt her consciousness for years to come; the duration of her lifetime. Each time she looked into a mirror a mother was forced to bear witness; the result of an aging process inexplicably accelerated while living in a farmhouse she had chosen, a place which would insidiously rob the young and lovely woman of her youth. "So this is how decrepit feels. This is what it looks like, feels like to be old." Her beauty was the sacrificial lamb destined for slaughter upon an unholy altar. Transformation had begun.

Carolyn dragged her body back to the fireplace. A pile of ashes and embers required more kindling, which she slid beneath the lone charred log: Ignition. Seeking the warmth so often eluding her, Carolyn put her feet to the fire. Too close...she always stood too close to the flames. An attempt to warm oneself

from without when the chill comes from within poses hazards to one's health as a thoughtless, distracted act; like playing with fire. Leaning forward to rest her head on the mantelpiece, Carolyn allowed her eyes to close momentarily. She knew what had dispelled the demon in their midst. It did not go away on its own. An entity departed, not of its own volition; only because something even ***more*** powerful had intervened on her behalf at dawn. Bowing her head against the ancient wood, as though seated in the darkness of a confessional, she'd closed her tired eyes in search of Light, seeking the Holy Spirit of God. Silently engaged in a private fireside chat with her Creator, perceived as her savior, a contemplative woman felt utterly depleted, though her gratitude was entirely pure; sincere. Lamb of God...who takes away the sins of the world; have mercy on us all: A mother's prayer...for her children.

"Jesus Christ!" Roger was awake. Due to this outburst, so was Cindy, still bundled on a sofa. No one took offense, except perhaps for God. His frequent proclamation was presumed by all to be his exuberant form of prayer; as an overt request for help. Opening their bedroom door, he emerged, battered and bruised; raw, bloody abrasions stinging in the cool morning air. Rubbing his tender scalp, Roger demanded to know what the HELL had happened to him! Hell happened. Turning her back toward a fire Carolyn stared at her husband. He found her eyes vacant; orbs void of hope, as cold as the hearthstone upon which she stood. Appearing calm and composed, she peered directly into his angry gaze, indicating the presence of a child in the parlor, informing him in silence with a nod. It wasn't the time or place for any indiscretion on his part. It was clear; a serious conversation was called for, but it would have to wait. Instead, Carolyn quietly issued a proclamation of her own, a singular demand made of a man distraught and confused; one who did not want to understand what was occurring in the house, in their own bedroom, for that spirit matter. These words, as did her eyes, pierced the light of sunrise with their darkness, telling him all he needed to know at the moment.

"Get dressed. We're going to church."

Some date night: A date with destiny. A date with death. The kiss, bestowed. Roger's night out with his wife struck a chord in the Netherworld; the timing of it, too suspect. Good and evil in bed together. Carolyn wasn't the only one to experience an encounter too close for comfort, but her husband had been spared the curse of consciousness in the midst of evil. His wife: not as lucky. Roger dared to take a lady out to dinner and a movie and there would be hell to pay when he got home. Only a date: but with which mistress of the house?

*“Oh God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray and gather my thoughts to you, I cannot do it alone.
In me it is dark, but with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not desert me;
My courage fails me, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace;
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;
I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me.”*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

omens

“Hope is some extraordinary spiritual grace that God gives us to control our fears, not to oust them.”

Vincent McNabb

Nearly another year passed before Carolyn was visited again. In the interim much transpired. Roger did his best to stay as close to home as possible but their emotional turmoil kept driving him away, literally, for periods of respite under the guise of doing his job. There were times when it seemed as though all of his business was elsewhere...*anywhere* else! His spouse was no longer concerned about having him around as a protective presence; he had virtually no influence or power to prevent an assault sustained and could not even help himself: as it was one thing to be lulled into a false sense of security but quite another to be lulled into a coma. Rescue came from a higher power. Touched by a benevolent spirit which vanquished an evil presence in darkness before dawn, Carolyn had become forever changed. She did not need him anymore.

Though the entity vanished, perpetual fear of it remained. A constant sense of dread tormented Carolyn, as if the stunning apparition were omnipresent; merely invisible. It occurred to her: she had no viable options; all she could do was wait to see how powerful her prayers had been. Was an evil presence gone for good? Did she dare to hope it was over? Was the home repair prayer a real fix...or a temporary patch job? Anxiety proved a thief in its own right, depleting her energy and stealing an enthusiasm for life. Partnering with fear, together they had spawned a toxic environment; a persistent, low-level terror. The terrorist among them won initial battles of this war, as success in conflict is measured by the attack...likewise by its aftermath. A terrorist takes certain satisfaction by instilling the permanent sense of foreboding within the psyche of its victims; establishing an expectation of future attack: what next? When?

Stress was magnified further by the pressing need to keep a secret. Carolyn

had to be discreet; exclusive, reserving her supernatural suspicions for only a few close personal friends. It was critical she be selective, choosing souls she trusted implicitly; Cathi Urbonas and Samuel Olevson: a short list to be sure. Roger was duly informed, provided with all the gory details of the encounter, pictures as proof. He claimed to accept her account of events at that time, his body bearing the evidentiary scars, having been subject to a *nightmare* of his own. Secretly, he blamed her for his wounds...and vice versa.

Carolyn had rightfully perceived the visitation as a warning and a threat; an omen. Wandering the house in light of day, certain knowledge cast a constant shadow over her consciousness. Awake and watchful in the dark of night, she kept a constant vigil. Withdrawn and withering away, Carolyn made a valiant attempt to disguise the all-consuming fear devouring her. Insidious thoughts became a perpetual distraction, plaguing her, depriving her of the happiness she sought: joy interrupted. Flashbacks to trauma lurked within her troubled mind, traipsing through it, running like an incessant series of film clips. The girls knew; something was wrong with mommy. Andrea knew precisely what that *something* was yet had to abide by her mother's wishes. Keep the secret. Play pretend. It proved a futile effort. Spirits who dwelled among the living were revealing themselves in death, haunting all the inhabitants of the house. The phenomenon had effectively touched every mortal, sometimes literally, at one time or another. They'd simply neglected to talk about it, but that was about to change. Within weeks of the manifestation there would be no more secrets kept; disclosures forthcoming with a stunning rapidity. Sisters began approaching the eldest among them, offering anecdotal evidence; disturbing revelations: cause for alarm. A clarion call to arms prompted by a truth being told, the girls were seeking nothing less than validation. Enlisting a sister, her role as a formal representative on their behalf, they sought relief but were all hesitant to burden their mother further. No parent could ever be prepared for what they would share in confidence...they all had a story to tell.

“Sam. You were dead wrong.”

“I beg your pardon? Who...is this...Carolyn?”

“You might be keeping Casper as a pet in Providence but I’ve got a serious problem here, one in particular. She’s mean and ugly and wants me dead just like she is...and this is nothing to ignore!”

“Why do you...you sound so...different.”

“**I am** different. I will never be the same again. No one ever could be after something like this. Sam, you don’t understand.”

“Carolyn, what the hell happened? What’s wrong?”

“Hell happened. Something terrible, something evil happened in this house and everything is wrong; I have seen things that changed my mind...my life, forever. Sam. We have to sell this place. We have to get out now.”

“Calm down, dear.”

“She’s dying to live in my house...she practically crawled into my bed!”

“I know you’re upset.” Sam could barely wedge his words in between hers.

“The bitch can have it! And if she wants my husband so badly she can have him, too. I’ll take my kids and go!”

“Take a deep breath. I’ll be there in an hour.” Click.

Having received some bad advice from an otherwise good attorney, she’d prepared for Sam’s arrival; her spiral notebook ready...something tangible to enter into evidence. Sam would consider it proper documentation; hard copy regarding an infinitely harder event. Common knowledge: lawyers prefer to have something in writing. Friends see with blind faith eyes; vision based on personal relationship; she wanted him to see what was etched on those pages with the eyes of an attorney; no personal validation required. Carolyn sought understanding instead. If he grasped the notion, perhaps he too would change

his mind, realize this threat as posed; recognize the gravity of their situation: Nothing cute or friendly about it. She required his help. Sam was enlightened by the darkness of a story she told; yet another rude awakening at dawn.

As promised, he was there within the hour. She sat him down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and stale sweet roll. They had some privacy to talk. April was in the parlor, engrossed in the Letter **B** and the Number **3**. Big girls had gone off to school. Roger was on the road, again. Carolyn had waited as long as she could; a few days, before phoning a friend. It took time to absorb what happened; to process before attempting to discuss. Morning light sliced across the table, landing on the tablet with laser beam precision. Sam studied its tattered surface, cloth stained by many years of handling. Pencil streaks and doodles adorned the shabby cover; its cardboard base bent at the corners.

Fighting to maintain her equilibrium, bracing against fear, Carolyn opened the notebook to precisely the pages revealing her secret, as if marked for easy access. There it was, hiding in plain sight: the deeply disturbing images of an entity which qualified as something wicked; infinitely shocking, yet more so when it was in her bedroom and in her face; an up close and personal affront.

“Here you go; now you have it in writing. As I told Roger...I’m not insane. Sam...I am **not** a liar.”

“Carolyn. No one has thought or said anything about you being either.”

“Roger doesn’t believe me. Not a word of it.”

“He **said** that to you?”

“He doesn’t **have** to say it; not in those words. I know how he feels about all of this. He thinks I’m to blame...somehow all of **this** is my fault!”

“I’m sure he doesn’t think you’re responsible for...”

“I’m sure you’re wrong. Look at this thing. The smell of it was nauseating. See the head? Well, it really wasn’t a head, more like a mass of rotting flesh, all gray covered with a mesh of darker cobwebs. Like a hornet’s nest; flimsy paper held together with this...stuff. Look how it hangs off the side, a broken neck I think and there were arms but no hands, only wisps of shredded fabric and broken bones. The dress was greenish brown, a slender belt here with the same fabric on the buckle. There were pockets, here...and on the bodice and here, a narrow ribbon of lace at the top of her collar.”

“Amazing detail...Carolyn, this is remarkable.” Genuinely impressed with her rendering; Sam saw a memory captured on paper for posterity and proof.

“Not something I could forget...from the moment she was in my face.”

“This has to be the most fascinating breakfast conversation I’ve ever had.”

“Smartass! Listen up! There’s something to learn here.” Class: in session.

“I assure you, my dear. You have my undivided attention.”

“Sam, there is **something** beyond death; beyond life as we know it. Here is proof.” Carolyn sharply snapped her fingers against the page. Sam appeared grim. He studied the illustrations, pulling the notebook closer, using glasses for a better look. It took nearly twenty minutes to tell her story. Difficult as it was to relive, she had to share the sordid details with him. When finished she felt assaulted all over again. It left her squeamish. Cold: a vivid description, chilling. Sammy suggested they gravitate toward the warmth of the fireplace. Tucking the tablet into a dark crevice of the sideboard, Carolyn’s companion lead the way; a gentleman escorting the mistress of the house. Heartened to leave the heavy air behind, he sighed, feeling each thickly laden molecule of it weighing upon him; the density of reviled imagery evoked with sketches, a few words. She’d stoke the waning fire while Sam greeted April. Throwing herself at his belly, she held on tightly to his suspenders while he kissed her on the head. Click. The pantry door unlatched. Still in his arms, she turned to watch as the door drifted slowly open, its rusty hinges whining mournfully.

“Something bad happened in there.” The child returned her full attention to

Sam then back to **Sesame Street** as if nothing had happened; a commonplace occurrence. Her simple words were telling. Exchanging glances with Carolyn told the rest of the story. Shivers passed through him; the gentleman, visibly shaken. Carolyn knew then; Sam did understand. Having observed her as she crossed the parlor, closing the pantry, Sam could not help but notice how her vibrancy had severely diminished; her youthful glow was gone. Stooped over while tending to the fire; a beautiful woman suddenly seemed so much older: an equally disturbing realization. Five months since his friends purchased the home of their nightmares...at his urging and with his assistance.

After several minutes huddled near the fire, Sam was sufficiently warm and ready to go. Overwhelmed by what he had seen and heard during their hastily arranged visit, Carolyn did not press him further, knowing the man had been inundated with information. It would require time to digest, as it had for her. She helped him with his jacket then embraced the man, the one she trusted; the one who could help her...if anyone could. Carolyn walked him outside.

"I'll do some research. We may be able to void the contract and get you out of this deal and out of this house...on the basis of a failure to disclose."

"Anything you can do. I can't just live with it, Sam. I can't. I won't."

Before leaving, he gathered up more blossoms from beneath the apple tree before they passed for the season. It occurred to him it may be his last chance to collect the delicate treasures. They could soon be gone; an escape from the evils of paradise. He seemed sad as he departed; distracted by the thought.

Once Sam was gone, Carolyn retrieved the notebook, tucking it discreetly, secretly away into a dark hole she had chosen specifically for its safekeeping. Her only other friend destined to see it was in Nova Scotia for the summer. Cathi fell madly in love with Canada on previous trips, deciding to explore as much as possible during the few months a year when it was easier to navigate the frozen tundra; she was due home later in September. Though they stayed in touch, Carolyn had not disclosed details of the ordeal, deciding instead to

wait for her return. It was not the kind of information which lends itself well to a letter; necessary to have an “in person” conversation with a friend. Their time would come. Having shown this notebook to Roger, as her evidence, he would later disavow his initial reaction, claiming to remain unconvinced. In Sam’s presence, Roger would again describe their encounter as a ***nightmare***, discounting the real wounds he’d sustained in battle, as if they never existed, explaining in his usual patronizing manner how Carolyn was the victim of a vivid imagination: Told you so, Sam.

Roger was afraid to believe her. His disbelief was no reflection on his wife but she did not see it that way, taking great exception to his doubt and denial. Relocating the sacred text far from the prying eyes and curious minds of their children, the tablet would come out of hiding only twice before disappearing forever. Carolyn showed it to Cathi when she returned the following autumn. In the interim, it kept space and time inside the beehive oven, buried behind a stack of antique books the children knew they were ***not*** allowed to touch; an off-limits area where they were not allowed to go. Carolyn was quite clear. It was a non-negotiable closet; warm, dry and dark: a perfect place to hide. For three years this notebook remained there undisturbed. Nobody knew where it was, not even her husband. The highly principled woman never attempted to lie about it...but she knew how to withhold; learned how to keep a secret.

Cindy crawled in bed beside her big sister. She was just a peanut, really; a little girl with concerns of her own. Andrea threw back the receiving blanket, warmly welcoming her, inviting Cindy to sleep over on another chilly night. It was late. Cindy was trembling. The child was scared to death.

“Annie, I keep seeing things in my bedroom. My toys all move around. If I run downstairs to go pee or tell mom something my toys are all moved when I come back. I know it’s ***not*** April doing it. The last time it happened I was the only one playing up here. Everyone else was outside the whole time. We have ghosts. They talk to me. I see them. I can feel them all the time.”

“I’ve seen strange things, too. Don’t worry. Do you want to tell mom?”

“No. I want **you** to tell mom.”

“Why? Do you think she’ll believe me more than you?”

“No. You talk better than I do. Tell her about the lady who comes after she tucks us in, how she leans over me to kiss me but I never feel the kisses. It’s **not** mom. I **know** it’s not. She smells different than mom does...mom smells like soap but this lady smells like flowers and fruit. But then, after she leaves another lady comes late at night. It always says threes on the clock when she wakes me up. I feel her first. She makes me so cold and then the room stinks! She’s the one who hates mommy. I saw her in my bad dream when mom was screaming and the ghost wouldn’t let me go help her. I saw it happen.”

Testimonials began within days of the manifestation in Carolyn’s bedroom. One after another, the girls came to their eldest sister, reluctant to share their many unusual experiences, feeling safe to do so with her. Their stories were disturbing; everything from vibrating beds to shadows crossing through their bedrooms to multiple voices whispering in tandem at night. It was one thing after another. Andrea was concerned knowing what happened to their mother was **not** a nightmare. This was something else: something wicked. She didn’t want to distress her any further but these confessions could not be ignored or dismissed; she could not keep anymore secrets. Time was fast approaching to have a serious conversation about what was occurring in their home; again.

Andrea waited impatiently for the right opportunity. She felt guilty having to burden Carolyn; a necessary evil. One evening in early June, the first real hint of pending summer warmth carried softly, like a promise on the breeze, Andrea went to her mother, asking to speak with her privately. It might have been a tone in her daughter’s voice or a secret they shared which caused her to drop everything and follow her lead. They went onto the porch together.

“Mom, I really hate to tell you this but I have to do it anyway.” Remorse in her voice was telling: very bad news...nothing a mother wants to hear.

“What is it, honey?” Carolyn knew. She could feel it like cold in her bones.

“My sisters keep coming to me. Everyone except April has told me about it and I have to tell you. They are scared about what they have seen or heard in the house. They’re scared, mom. I know what happened. I *saw* it happen and I couldn’t help you...I couldn’t even move. I know it was **not** a nightmare.”

“I know. What have they been telling you?” Carolyn felt her heart race; her face flushing with blood. An internal alarm triggered. Fear of the unknown.

“To tell you the truth, mom, it’s more than I can even remember. I’m pretty sure Cindy’s the one who sees them the most; I’m so sorry to tell you this but we have more than one ghost...they need to tell you about all of them.”

Carolyn stood abruptly. Remaining in place for a moment, frantic thoughts muddling her mind, she considered what to do next. Instructing Andrea to go and quietly gather her sisters, except for April, then meet her in the kitchen; a message received. Let the baby sleep...sweet dreams.

During the time required for the eldest to collect three of her four siblings, the blood drained from Carolyn’s face. She appeared gaunt; a ghostly shade of pale. Sitting alone in silence, waiting at the table for the girls to arrive, she cursed a demon beneath her breath, angered by this intrusion; the disruption its deathly presence was deliberately creating. Infuriated by the thought of it, the mother wanted to know how this bitch from hell could approach innocent children. An odd question; as if something essentially evil might possess any decency or conscience at all. Of course it would **want** to exploit those among them who are most vulnerable! Logical! Overcome with a sense of urgency, panic brewing in the mental cauldron Carolyn realized she’d imbued a corpse with qualities it couldn’t possibly possess. Another thought occurred to her: ***What the hell are you thinking!*** Far-fetched as the concept of having a ghost was in the first place, to then attribute it with mortal characteristics; to assign it an intellect and emotion was absurd. The journey of discovery upon which Carolyn had embarked would yield many revelations over time. In stressful

moments, anxiously awaiting the arrival of her girls, she chastised herself for entertaining ludicrous notions which were summarily dismissed. Carolyn had no idea how precariously close to the truth she had come.

Clasping her hands together, she implored God to help her endure whatever she might hear from her children. Carolyn felt defeated before it began. That a group discussion was even necessary was upsetting enough in its own right. Unprepared as she was to receive their news, reactions all around would be curious indeed. As her girls entered the kitchen from several directions, they all remained calm and quiet. Each child claimed her familiar spot at the table then waited for her mother to initiate the conversation; an apprehensive and awkward moment for all involved.

“Annie tells me you’ve all noticed strange things happening in this house.” Silence. “It’s important to tell me what’s been going on.” Silence. “If there is anything...if something is frightening you, then I want to know about it.” An ordinarily loud, rambunctious bevy of kids had fallen suddenly mute. “Well, I hadn’t planned on telling you about this, but I’ve seen a few things myself.” It was the key...unlocking the floodgates. Carolyn was blown back, swept in then swept away by the deluge: torrential information spilling into her mind.

“My toys move around all the time.” Cindy was perturbed. “I’ll set up all of my **Weebles** and the **Little People** in the village and the farm animals too, and they’ll all move around when I leave, even if it’s for a couple of minutes, like when I come down to go pee; the airplane goes up under my bed and the bus goes into the closet. It’s why I used to blame April, because that is where she plays all the time...but it’s **not** her doing it because the village gets set up all over again, **a whole different way**, and it happens **really** fast! Faster than any of us could **ever** do it. The farm and all the animals, too. It’s impossible! Mom. For it to happen that fast is...well, it’s impossible!”

“I keep hearing footsteps. Loud and heavy.” Nancy was unusually subdued. “In the closet...but also on the stairs to my bedroom...always coming **up** the stairs...but then it stops at the door. I keep thinking the door will open...the waiting...that scares me the most; not knowing who is on the other side of it. Sometimes when I’m in my room the closet door opens all by

itself. When my stuff is missing I find it in weird places...where I ***know*** I didn't leave it."

"How ***do*** you know? ***Stuff*** is all over the place!" Chrissy had a valid point.

"Because I ***know!*** When that door thing happens it gets cold and it stinks!"

"The smell could just be a sandwich under your bed." Chris was quick with the wit and so pleased with herself because of it. Nancy got instantly pissed! Her defensiveness drew nothing more than a coy, dismissive shrug from her not-much-younger sis. Letting it go, relishing the pure satisfaction of having said it at all, Christine decided to divulge her own experiences in their middle bedroom, quite similar to what Cindy described about the space they shared.

"My trolls and my glow-in-the-dark finger puppets move, too." Christine had a pragmatic way about her; making a hands-folded-matter-of-fact statement, just like her father...as no apple falls far from the tree of life.

"It feels like I'm being watched all of the time!" Nancy said. "When I look there's no one there but I know ***someone*** is in the room with me. It creeps me out...***especially*** in the bathroom. I always make Cindy come in to guard me. I ***never*** go in the warm room without her!" Finally, a reference made.

"She does it for me, too." Teasingly tugging at her guardian's robe, Cindy added, "Unless she gets an ***important*** phone call...and then I'm on my own!"

"Yeah, the phone!" Nancy recalled what she'd seen. "I was running down my stairs and when I came around the corner I saw the telephone was off the hook, up in the air at least ***this much***; when I walked in here it dropped down so quick the cord kept on swinging back and forth. I saw it just plop down on the hook...but nobody was in here to see it ***with*** me, so I didn't tell 'til now."

"And the fridge opens by itself and stuff spills out of it!" Cindy chimed in.

"***All*** the doors open whenever they want or slam in my face right when I'm trying to go through into another room!" Punctuating the previous comment,

it was obvious Nancy was equally exasperated by the supernatural activity in the home. “I see shadows on the walls in my bedroom at night; a black cloud. I cover myself up with the quilt and pray to God to make it go away!”

“Why does it get so cold only in one room; when that *creepy feeling* leaves it warms back up again. I saw a cat running through the bathroom door and it wasn’t *our* cat and the door was closed!” Cynthia was growing more anxious by the moment. Her voice began to tremble. “Sometimes my bed shakes and moves around. It wakes me up. Chrissy helps me put it back in the morning.” Cynthia began to cry as she spoke to her mother. “I know you always tuck us in at night but so does another lady, too. She leans over to kiss me goodnight. I never feel her touching me but I know when she’s there. It’s not you, mom. She smells different than you do...like flowers and fruit. Then someone else, another lady comes late when everyone’s asleep. She makes it stink *so* bad in the room...*really* bad...like something died. When she leans over me it feels so cold but when she leaves it gets warm again. That’s how I know when she is gone. I hide under the covers and pray. She looks at me for a real long time whenever she comes. I don’t know why...then there is a little girl who walks through my bedroom crying for her mommy. Her voice is so sad it makes *me* cry. Maybe *she*’s the one who plays with our toys. She can. It’s okay by me.”

Carolyn felt faint. In the midst of the visceral reaction twisting her stomach inside out, she could taste bile in the back of her throat. A mother stricken ill, head spinning; sickened by what she was hearing from her dearest daughters.

“That’s it! We’re selling this God-forsaken house!” Adamant: no discussion.

Instantly, the last thing Carolyn expected to happen did. A chorus of “NO!” rang throughout the kitchen; girls voicing one vehement protest after another, in unison. She could not hear who was saying what because all four of them, in concert, were whining at once. “No mom! We love it here! I don’t want us to move! I have new friends here, now! We don’t want to leave our farm! No mom, I love my room! We can make them go away; it will be all right, you’ll see. You promised we could have a horse! I love my teacher! I’m not scared! They won’t hurt us. We’ll be all right. Please don’t sell our

house, mommy.” Carolyn was stunned by a collective outburst. Observing pained expressions, listening to their pleas, she knew this was entirely sincere; heartfelt from all. Awestruck, she couldn’t comprehend why they would want to remain behind in a farmhouse which offered them little else than a promise of numerous and unwelcome intrusions. She thought they’d want to leave a spooky old house. Quite the contrary, they were more than willing to make an unusual sacrifice; prepared to share; to co-exist with spirits to keep their place in the country.

“How long have these things been happening?” Awaiting a response, their mother suspected the answer as they glanced around the table at one another.

“Since the beginning, from the day we moved in.” Cindy confessed the sins of omission with some shame and regret; secrets kept: a failure to disclose.

“Six months! This has been happening for six months and nobody told me about it before now? Why didn’t any of you trust me? I am your mother!”

“It’s not that, mommy. We didn’t even tell **each other** for the longest time, you know; what we were feeling in the house or the barn. I guess we thought we were just seeing things.” Nancy’s explanation was not yet finished when her mother abruptly interrupted.

“You **were** seeing things...**things** you should have **told** me about!” Carolyn was persistently on point. “What about the barn; what happened in the barn?” Her focus on Nancy; an immediate reply expected.

“Stuff...mostly up in the hayloft. It shakes and hums like it’s singing when we play up there. It makes me feel kinda queasy...like I’m falling down. The tools move around and jingle like bells and sometimes our things go missing; toys we bring out there to play with...then we find them later someplace else in the barn or sometimes we find them back in the house! It’s so weird!”

“Nobody goes up on the hayloft again; no one. Do you understand? In fact, I want all of you to stay out of the barn.”

“Aw, come on, ma...that’s not fair!” Nancy could whine like a steel saw in a Kentucky bluegrass band. “You ***know*** it’s my favorite place in the world!”

“Absolutely not, young lady.”

“Tell her about the chimney.” Cindy whispered these words to Nancy, as if it were still a secret kept; one about to be told. “Tell mommy what happened to you in the burning room...when you got stuck behind the chimney.”

“What happened in the burning room?” As disconcerting as it was to hear, Carolyn remained vigilant, in relentless pursuit of information. She needed to know everything. Clearly, Carolyn underestimated the dramatic impact these events were having on her family...they had only just begun.

“We were all playing hide ‘n seek, and I went to hide behind that chimney. Then, all of a sudden I got frozen stiff. It got **wicked** cold! I couldn’t move at all! It felt like something was squeezing in against me while I was standing there and I couldn’t breathe...like I was locked in a bubble with no air inside it and it was pushing on me from every side. I was stuck there for a long time and the bubble didn’t burst until Cindy came to find me. God! It was so cold and dark in there! It smelled so bad and I was being crushed and thought my bones were gonna break! I got really scared and started to cry...tears poured down my face but I couldn’t make a sound. I could hear myself screaming in my head but nothing was coming out of my mouth! But Cindy heard me!”

“I think they play their own kind of hide ‘n seek...now you see them...now you don’t.” Cindy was so perceptive...out of the mouths of babes; she knew there was more than one spirit afloat. “I felt her...I ***knew*** she was in trouble.”

“Jesus Christ.” Carolyn hung her head, whispering a holy name as a prayer; another call for help, spoken with reverence, unlike her husband’s pleas.

“Remember when you yelled at dad for pulling a chair out from underneath me when I tried to sit down?” Cynthia triggered a bad memory. “It happened right here! We came in from sledding and I still had my hat and

coat on and I went to sit down in my chair and then, all of a sudden, it got pulled out from underneath me...straight away from me...and you blamed it on daddy.”

“I remember it. I was **furious** with your father!” Her grimace confirmed it. “Well, it was a stupid thing to do! A nasty rotten trick. You hit your head!”

“Daddy didn’t do it, mom. I was sitting here, too. I saw what happened. He didn’t do that.” Nancy felt obliged to state the obvious. “You were **so** mad!”

“I had my hat on. It didn’t hurt. Well, it hurt my bum a little. I was okay.”

“Mom.” Andrea’s turn to interject. “I was standing over there...” pointing toward the alcove near the entrance of the bathroom. “I saw what happened. Dad didn’t do it. The chair pulled away from Cindy. It moved all by itself.”

“Mommy, haven’t you noticed how we hold our chair when we sit down?” Christine, the problem-solver in the family: devising a solution after she too, had become the unwitting victim of the terrible taunt...or haunt.

“It has happened to all of us since we moved in; a rotten trick but it wasn’t dad who did it. He wouldn’t do that, mom.” Cindy felt the need to defend her father. “Maybe it’s the man who stands over there; in that corner. He watches us all the time.” Cindy’s comment was subdued; it almost got lost in the fray, though it was heard...followed up by another one of Nancy’s outbursts.

“Yeh! Maybe it **was** Manny who did it! I saw him, while Mr. Kenyon was packing, on the day we moved in. He stood right behind the door with his leg up and he has a funny smile.” Competitive in every way, Nancy **had** to claim credit for the first official sighting. He lurked in darkened doorways, moving as shadow throughout the house from the moment they crossed the threshold. “Cindy saw him, too! We both looked at each other when we saw him but we didn’t say anything about it. You saw him too, right?”

“I did...but I don’t think he’s the one pulling the chairs out. He’s not mean like that. I think he was there to say goodbye to his friend. He didn’t look at us at all but he smiled at Mr. Kenyon.” No false accusations allowed.

“I named him Manny ‘cause he’s a man! I think he’s cool. He’s not scary!”
Far be it for Nancy to dislike a man, in this dimension or any other.

A lethargy which plagued Carolyn suddenly dissipated, replaced by panic: wide-aware and fully alert, her mind reeling with images and fresh insights into what had been going on in her home, with her children. Though she said nothing further about selling their house, she remained determined to do so; resolute. As they discussed a variety of outrageous episodes occurring within those walls, Carolyn refrained from divulging her own experiences. Nobody used the word “ghost” to describe or assign an identity to any apparition. The ladies were relieved, having disclosed something so unusual; having shared secrets kept too long. It was getting late. Carolyn suggested she escort them to bed. All her children were tired yet their mother felt an inexplicable rush; kinetic energy pulsing through her temples, as if her mind had absorbed more than it would hold and was throbbing...about to burst through her cranium.

Tucked in with kisses, their mother asked four of the five to keep her well-informed; immediately notified if April should say anything to anyone about this, requesting they not discuss it with her unless she says something first. It was Carolyn’s fervent hope that her youngest be spared the sights and sounds the others had endured. It would be another thirty-eight years before Carolyn learned the full extent of the impact on her youngest daughter; the truth about a haunting which touched her baby girl; what April revealed broke the hearts of everyone who learned of a secret kept for decades.

“Mommy.” Cindy approached, speaking solemnly. “It’s not God-forsaken. God is here all the time. It feels like living in church. God is always with us.”

“What do you mean, sweetheart?”

“You said this is a God-forsaken house. It’s not.” Leave it to Cindy to point out a common misperception among mortals; the adult variety. Explaining it as simply as a child would, she continued. “God is here. Can’t you feel it?”

“Yes, feel the presence of the Lord. You’re right. Go say your prayers.”

"Just because someone is different doesn't mean they're bad. If God is the one who made everyone, then didn't He make our ghosts, too?" There it was; Carolyn kissed Cindy goodnight; a kiss she felt all the way to her heart.

Wandering aimlessly through their house, sleep was not an option. A weary woman disturbed by multiple assertions, had much to reconsider. Knowledge of these episodes changed everything. No one even mentioned the incident in the warm room. As shocking an event as it was at the time, it was treated as old news in comparison with so many other occurrences.

The fire burned hot well past 2:00 a.m. and still, she shivered and could not get warm enough to save her soul. It was June and Carolyn sat huddled on an icy hearthstone; hard to feel warm on the outside when the cold comes from within. Finding the inner strength to heave one more log on the grate, she did so pondering a future free of spirits; free of fear. Wondering what had drawn her there, what called to her; the curiosity was building. Why did it appear as some grand conspiracy, as a virtual gift from above? Why had all the pieces of the puzzle fallen so perfectly into place, one in the country? Good fortune befalls few in a life often riddled with disappointment. What seems too good to be true: she was living proof of the theory. Could such a rare happenstance be purely coincidental? Her ambivalence was magnified four-fold by a single conversation. Why would her children beg to stay in a space filled with fear? Why did they love it? It was so damn cold: Dark. Why would they want to be there; to remain in a farmhouse they had no choice but to share? Hoisting her burdened body up with some assistance from the mantel board, Carolyn went upstairs one more time. Beginning this night, another ritual; to be certain the girls were safe and sound asleep: second time around. They needed to know someone was there to watch over them; someone mortal.

Upon returning to the parlor, Carolyn allowed her head to fall into the soft center of a pillow. In spite of its comfort, much-needed rest eluded her. The scenario seemed implausible; she could not fall asleep. Frustrated, up within minutes, pacing again; her body ached and her mind reeled in equal measure. Rather than considering this grave subject, Carolyn chose instead to reflect

upon things of somewhat less import. Her children were becoming lazy with the language. She'd noticed. Catching mistakes during their group exchange, she chose to postpone usual corrections or mild admonishments due to a need to listen closely to content. Determined to address lapses in syntax and some poor grammar skills at breakfast in the morning, Carolyn drifted off to sleep.

Awaking before dawn, a singular thought occupying her mind, their mother was marveling at the bravery of her children. She could still hear little voices speaking in tandem: "We love it here!" Good God; what were they thinking? "We don't want to leave our farm! Please, mom!" Pleas for mercy: it wasn't something Carolyn thought she could or should have to handle alone. When would her husband be home and why hadn't he called? Out of sight...out of mind? Feeling powerless, she required a conference: a meeting of the minds in the home of the brave, minus five children much too young to make such a life-altering decision based on raw emotion. (Ironically, her criteria as well.)

Roger arrived along with the electric bill. He plucked the mail from the box as a delivery truck drove on down Round Top Road. Several days had passed since Carolyn's disturbing conversation with her children. Roger called only once during a week away, though his wife told him nothing of her encounter with their girls in his absence. He walked in through the kitchen, throwing a pile of bills into the center of the table. Having tucked April into bed for the child's usual afternoon nap, Carolyn was making her way back to the same room from the opposite direction, with a load of folded laundry in her arms, destined for Nancy's bedroom, there to reside in yet another pile on her floor. Literally walking into her husband, an armload of neatly-tended clothing hit the floor earlier than anticipated. It startled the woman so badly she shrieked; an automatic, if spastic response to one's own mate; to be sure. No hugs. No kisses. Quickly picking up the clothes, Carolyn threw them onto their dining room table then had to sit down to recover from the fright of this encounter.

"Well! That's a very fine how do you do!" Roger was just as startled by her reflexive reaction as she was by finding him in the house.

“Sorry. I didn’t expect you home yet.”

“What’s wrong with you? You’re beginning to act like the cat!”

“I have reason.”

“What reason is that?”

“What do you think?” Carolyn leapt into a defensive posture. “You’re gone more than you are home! Roger, you have **no** idea what has been happening with your own family! You leave me here, all alone, night after night to fend for myself and the girls, on a wing and a prayer. I don’t even dare fall asleep; **someone** needs to watch over them.” She went into the kitchen. He followed.

Retrieving the stack of mail from the table, he sought a particular envelope.

“I’m **gone** so that when I **do** come home I can pay the bills...like **this one!**” Roger ripped open their electric bill, presenting it to his wife by flinging it in her general direction. He jerked it back then read the charge. “**Look at this!**” Plunging the invoice toward her face as if it **was** all her fault: “I guess I am **not** home enough to keep you from running it up through the roof!”

“Really? So I’m to blame! Roger, take a walk through this house right now. It’s a morgue in here. Cold and dark. It is eighty degrees outside, bright blue skies and sunshine all around this house...but in here? Nothing but an unholy tomb! Go ahead! Take a walk. Inspect the place! We live in a cave, but if you see any sign of light you’ll be sure to snuff it out! **Find** a bulb burning. **Show** me where I can conserve anymore than I already do. Check that old furnace while you’re at it. Go see if we used any oil while you were away. Just don’t wake up April. She’s sleeping in our bed...I don’t sleep there anymore and you’re hardly ever home so I suppose it should get some use.”

“Will you please calm down? **You’ll** wake her up!”

“You come in here accusing me of wasting the money ***you*** earn; you blame me for ***everything*** when all I am trying to do is keep this house comfortable; some place fit for human habitation!”

“I don’t understand this! Kenyon showed us his utility bills. They were less than half as much! Month after month...they keep rising!”

“He was alone in this house. There are seven of us. Big difference.”

“Not ***this*** big. Something’s got to be wrong here. He kept ***all*** these lights on ***all*** the time...day and night, according to every neighbor I’ve talked to since we came. Something’s wrong here!”

“Call the electric company. Have them check the meter. Simple enough.”

Carolyn’s energy was spent; her venomous tirade...over. Standing abruptly, she turned and walked out the kitchen door. Her husband remained behind to study the power bill which made absolutely no sense. Months of complaints regarding their use of electricity; it was bound to erupt as pressure mounted. It was equally frustrating for Carolyn to watch the bills come in and have no money to pay them. She recognized the gravity of their situation and knew it was becoming volatile. Based upon Roger’s demeanor, his trip had been long and woefully unproductive: Time to hit the road again...in another direction.

Energy is as invisible as evil. Roger and Carolyn had no means of knowing the negativity they were exuding toward one another was fanning a nefarious flame. In moments of supreme volatility, emotional outbursts were occurring more frequently; the making up was getting harder to do. There remained an obvious distance between them, even when appearing affectionate with each other. Acrimonious matrimony breeds distrust; enflamed passions functioned as incendiary devices. Anger spawns resentment spawns contempt. During a difficult first year at the farm they began to alienate one another, to such an extent, the couple separated emotionally. The two fought about money; from utility bills to groceries. They argued about politics; routinely confronting the

other: issues of war and peace. The conflicts they willingly engaged in were detrimental in ways they could not yet imagine. Carolyn became increasingly remote, eventually untouchable. She perceived Roger as disengaged with his family and intended to return the sentiment in kind. Distance was preferable to ongoing debate: mouth-to-mouth combat. Disdain could not be disguised. It was volcanic in Nature, bubbling to the surface; molten lava with nowhere to go but up and out as hostility seething from words they used as weaponry. He no longer cared what she thought. She no longer looked into his eyes.

“What could you possibly want?” Carolyn’s terse response to his cautious approach was not unexpected. He knew he had to make amends, if she would only allow him to do so...the times that try men’s souls.

An unyielding figure against the malleable landscape, Carolyn stood rigid; in her place at the back of the house, overlooking the property from her perch along the foundation wall above the garden spot, plans abandoned, the good Earth left fallow for yet another year; a nightmare in its own right.

“I thought you wanted to plant a garden.”

“I **wanted** to do a lot of things.” The words were crisp and sharp, lashing at him like a whip. “I had sweet dreams for this place.”

“Then I’ll plow it up and you can plant...it’s not too late.”

“What’s the point? We won’t be here for the harvest. We can’t stay here. It is not safe for any of us, especially the kids. It’s too dangerous.”

“This again? How many times do I have to remind you we’re in no position to sell this house? Where do you think we will go? There’s no profit here yet. None. We couldn’t break even in the best of circumstances.”

“If you were home now and then you’d know I’m not the only one seeing and hearing things in this house. Your children are being affected by it, too.”

“What the hell have you been telling them?” An accusation levied against an innocent victim...one of planting seeds; no doubt.

“What the hell are ***you*** suggesting?” Carolyn became instantly enraged by a thoughtless comment. “I haven’t told them anything! It’s what they’ve been telling me! You think I am unaware of how impressionable children are; it is at the root of my concerns. Look at this garden spot, Roger. That’s what kids are...fertile ground. When you plow it up and plant seeds, this land will grow whatever you plant! It’s why I’ve kept as much from them as possible. They all saw the coat hanger incident and there was nothing I could do to avoid the outcome of it. Andrea knows what happened in our bedroom. She never said a word about it to any of her sisters. They came to her.”

“How does she know about that?” He was clearly disturbed by the thought.

“She ***saw*** it happen.”

“What?” Roger’s own alarm system chimed in. “What are you saying?”

“She thought she was having a nightmare but when it woke her, Annie said she couldn’t move. She could ***hear*** me screaming for help. She saw an entity; an apparition ***identical*** to what I saw! When she came downstairs, she looked at the notebook and recognized the image; the figure I drew. I can’t explain it and neither can she. We can’t begin to understand how it happened but it did. We talked about it afterward. I ***didn’t*** tell her what happened; she ***knew***...and what she saw she has kept to herself. A few days ago I found out what’s been happening with her sisters. They’ve been going to Annie, all of them, except for April...so far. Roger. Listen to me. We cannot stay here.”

A beautiful day belied the darkness in her stone cold heart. Carolyn openly divulged critically important information and expected a series of questions; anticipating that a concerned father would solicit further details pertaining to the experiences of his children. Instead, Roger continued to persevere about an electric bill, still in hand.

“Something’s wrong here. Old man Kenyon showed us all his utility bills. This is almost triple the amount of his highest month in January...in the dead of winter! I don’t understand what the problem is here; this doesn’t make any sense! There has to be some reasonable explanation!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Carolyn glared with contempt, directly at her obtuse spouse. “Didn’t you hear a single word I said? Our children are in danger and all you can do is bitch about electric bills. ‘***Something’s wrong here***? You’re goddamned right...something’s wrong here!”

“No one is in any danger. Stop it. You’re putting ideas in their heads.”

“You’re an idiot! Get away from me!” Carolyn’s rage was so powerful, it silenced her adversary. He left her to gaze at their unturned garden spot.

While Carolyn stood alone contemplating the cosmic secrecy of seed, the school bus pulled up in front of the house. Roger was making his way to the kitchen. The girls saw his car in the yard. Leaping down the steps of the bus, running straight for their father, the long-awaited reunion was short-lived. By the following day he was gone again. There was an exorbitant electric bill to pay. Roger was away for more than a week. He did not ask his wife anything more about what she’d already told him regarding their children, as if he was not even interested. They didn’t discuss much before his departure and didn’t address it again until his return. By that time, there was more to tell.

It was true. Mr. Kenyon had provided an ample supply of utility bills for an anxious couple of prospective buyers to peruse. Yet, as months grew warmer, even as the season shared far more natural light, the bills continued spiraling upward, as if the house was being deliberately drained of energy. There was an incessant, low-level humming they could not identify. Long after all of the flies disappeared, omnipresent sounds of them lingered in the still chilly air. It was an unusual anomaly occurring during the last week of school.

The vacant garden spot haunted Carolyn as much as any apparition. It had been a part of the appeal of the place, a reason why she longed to buy a farm. Lamenting the loss, she would often stand out behind the house staring at the unturned earth, imagining what it would have produced for her family. It had been years since Carolyn knew the divinity of such toil. Nothing pleased her more than the aromas, the sensation of cool dirt between her fingers. It was a significant loss for a woman having some difficulty measuring the gains of a

major investment made on a place quickly losing its charm.

During the last few days of the school year, typically a time when kids find they've got way too much time on their hands, Margie approached Andrea. While chatting on the school bus, Margie asked if anything had *happened* to them lately. Their brief conversation was inadvertently overheard by several students who quickly spread the word. In no time Margie was being routinely questioned about the Perrons and the house where they lived. It was common knowledge in the community; Mr. Kenyon always kept the lights on. He got a pass because of his advanced age then because he was alone so much of the time. No one inquired or gossiped about him; the sweet old man who lived in that spooky old house up on Round Top Road. Margie kept the confidence.

Children are intolerant of others; some possessing what appears as a natural predisposition toward cruelty. Whispers persisted throughout the summer. As ghost stories were fabricated, blatant lies were told. By the time the Perrons returned to school the following autumn they were infamous; lives altered by rumor and innuendo. All five, ostracized and shunned by kids they had called friends the year before. Though their house had a reputation for ages prior to their arrival, it was no more than a smoldering story; where there's smoke, an unholy fire is often fueled by indiscreet comments fanning nefarious flames. Eventually it burst into a powerful pyre. In time, it would burn out of control. Fear the living...not the dead. Sage advice: Words of wisdom.

None of the girls were aware of what was being spread around about them. So, on their first day of summer vacation, spirits were high. Everyone was up early, making big plans. After breakfast the girls scattered, except for Cindy, who went upstairs to play with the toys her sisters abandoned for the call of the wild. An excursion through wonders of imagination was an all day affair. Many hours passed without her realizing; it was nearly dinnertime when she recognized the gruesome creature tormenting her mother, having seen her in a

dream. Squatting on the floor, Cindy had all the figures spread out; her rapt attention fixed on farm animals, finger puppets, trolls and the **Little People**. It didn't occur to her anything was amiss. The bedroom was suddenly awash in a soft glow associated with twilight, still several hours away. As the closet door opened Cindy assumed it was someone coming to fetch her for supper. Preoccupied, she did not look up immediately. A companion remained quiet. After a moment of silence, a quick glance upward instantly paralyzed Cindy. Frozen in place, the child was in shock. Directly before her eyes an entity of substance slowly approached, floating above the surface of a bedroom floor. Horrified, an eight-year-old could not move, could not breathe the putrid air. Steam escaped her lips; the result of a sudden rise in heart rate, coupled with a sudden drop in temperature. Appearing as some form of a solid mist, Cindy identified the apparition as a woman by her garb. She had no features, only a grayish oval mass cocked hard to one side. She drifted across the room, arms outstretched, extended toward the terrified child. Speaking sweetly, tenderly, with a solicitous voice Cindy could clearly hear in her head but not actually inside the room: she was petrified, in the bubble, unable to burst free of it. "Come here, little girl. Come to me."

Time was suspended. It ceased to exist...if it ever did. The object of desire was mortified. Odor accompanying this spirit was atrocious; as grotesque as the approaching image itself. A matter of seconds felt like hours trapped with something dead. As it drew closer, she could see stark details of the figure. A white handkerchief dangling from beneath the ruffled edge of a shirt sleeve; the gray flannel blouse with pockets synched tightly at the waist by a flowery apron covering a full-length skirt. No feet. It positioned itself directly in front of her then began leaning in toward her, closer and closer; she came. The air pressure was stifling, pushing on her from every direction. Anticipating the contact, Cynthia begged God for release from an imposed captivity: Granted. She bolted from the bedroom, running through Andrea's room then down the staircase. Losing her balance, she fell, bouncing over the last few stairs; off the wall then straight into the arms of a startled mother standing at the foot of the stairs, about to come up and get her daughter for dinner. Tears streaked the soft skin on her flushed face. Cindy clung to her mom...for dear life.

"Good Lord! What's going on?" Carolyn knew it was something wicked.

“A lady came through the chimney closet door and she tried to take me!”

“What? Calm down. Breathe. I can barely understand what you’re saying!”

“She came into my room while I was playing...and tried to take me away! She tried to hug and kiss me and then take me with her!” Cindy’s words were frantic; almost indistinguishable, as vocal tremors vibrated through her torso. Wrapping the youngster securely in her arms, sheltering the traumatized soul the only way she could, Carolyn escorted Cindy over to the sofa. Once there, she tried to calm the girl, still unsure of what occurred. When she noticed her elbows were both scraped and bleeding, Carolyn lifted her shirt to find other abrasions along her back, sustained in a hard fall down the narrow stairwell. Bless her heart. Cindy got hurt. She had not escaped unscathed; not this time.

“Breathe, baby. Breathe in and out. It’s all right. I’ve got you.” Carolyn felt sensations rising she could barely contain; heat on her cheeks, nausea in her stomach. With all the calm she could muster, Carolyn took her daughter into the bathroom, there to tend to physical wounds; uncertain what to do about a psychological impact. While busy with a necessary task, a mother listened as her child choked out hysterical words. Bathing her wounds, applying gauze bandages as needed, Carolyn faced what few mothers ever do. Astounded by the vivid description, she soon realized her daughter’s encounter shared eerie similarities with her own. Head: resembling a hornet’s nest, encased in dense mesh of cobwebs. The smell. The cold. The kiss of death. Floating on the air; hovering over its intended victim. Sleeves with no hands. A skirt but no feet. No features. No face. Snapped at the neck. A desire to be close to its victim; precisely what her mother remembered so well: not something she could ever hope to forget. Time does not heal all wounds. Motivation for the unexpected visit was what seemed quite different, yet proved equally disturbing.

“She loves me, mom!” The words impaled a mother’s heart. Gazing into an innocent face, her child’s wide-eyed-with-wonder expression; Carolyn knew this was something profound: Significant.

“What do you mean...she loves you?” With a voice weakened by her fear,

Carolyn softly inquired; by this time she was trembling, too.

“She wants me to be with her.” Terror still dwelling within her daughter’s bloodshot eyes, Cindy was silently pleading with her to make it go away.

“My God.” Carolyn suddenly reached for the side of the bathtub, lowering herself slowly to its porcelain surface; feeling faint. Stunned into submission, she steadied her body and readied her mind, preparing to receive; needing to know if Cindy had anything further to reveal. Was this spirit evil in disguise or had she encountered a benevolent soul; a spirit lost in the ether? She need only listen to know.

“She wants me, mommy. She told me so. She wants me to go with her!”

“**How** did she tell you this?”

“In here.” Cynthia touched the center of her forehead. “And here, *inside* my ears. She talked to me inside my head. I could hear her...I could *feel* it all happen inside me...then the bubble burst. It was *real* strong. She loves me!”

“Well, she can’t have you!” Instantly threatened, a mother began shedding tears of her own; Carolyn’s outburst startled the child. Cindy quickly went to her side, this time to provide some needed comfort: a reversal of misfortune.

“No, mommy! She *can’t* have me...I’m yours!” Holding her mom’s hand, the sweet little girl was too precious for words. Carolyn clinging protectively to Cindy; it was a moment shared. She was frightened for all of her children; at an impasse with a spouse she was beginning to despise. Having patched up the external wounds, Carolyn took Cindy into the kitchen. They spent the rest of the evening together. That night Cindy slept with her mother, as if that bed was any safer a place to be than her own. Truth be told, each of them were equally susceptible: both in jeopardy. Carolyn waited until the children were asleep before telephoning Sam. While sitting alone in the parlor, preparing to call, it occurred to her; she had failed to ask Cindy the most obvious question of all: **Go where?** Where did this entity want to take her? Perhaps a question she was too fearful to ask. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Sam promised to come the next morning and when he arrived, had his two daughters in tow; the mistress of the house was shocked. Considering a story she'd told him the night before either he did not perceive the threat described or it was empirically true: the man feared no evil.

"Sam. I'm telling you, this bitch wants to run me off and take my kids!" As Carolyn revisited the hellacious story, she became emotional. Sam took her hand then walked her away from the house. His girls were off playing with Nancy, Christine and April. Andrea was playing school with Cindy. The day was glorious. Sam and Carolyn strolled out beneath the shade of an old apple tree, revisiting a happier time and place, by then laden with its supple leaves; blossoms having passed for the season. He had some news of his own.

"I'm glad you called; I wanted to tell you in person. There is no way for us to pursue a case...no way to null and void this sale. Unfortunately, you have no legal recourse in Rhode Island. It has no disclosure laws pertaining to the supernatural. I'm sorry, dear. I know you were counting on it."

"So you mean we can sue for a leaky roof or demand restitution for a faulty plumbing job but we can't do a goddamned thing about *this*?"

"I'm afraid not. There's nothing on the books. These are spirit matters. Our courts won't touch it; can't litigate what the court won't acknowledge exists. There are several attempts on record. All of them failed; refused a hearing."

Disheartened, Carolyn hung her head. "I don't want to put my girls to bed at night. Weeks go by when nothing happens at all and then, all of a sudden, I'm catching a kid as she flies down the stairs, terrified out of her mind. This is no way to live. I am trying to provide my children with a normal life in an abnormal environment. It's out of my control. Everything is out of control! I can't predict what the next day holds or the next night, for that *spirit* matter! I don't know where my husband is most of the time and I don't know if he'll come home with enough money to keep us going for another month...in hell! I'm exhausted all the time. Sam, I'm getting old too fast."

Sam did not respond. He didn't want to lie, nor did he want to tell the truth. Instead, he looked overhead, up through the gnarled, twisted branches of the

ancient apple tree. Admiring the view, dappled sunlight splashed across his eyes. Sam studied its tender leaves, left behind once the blossoms had fallen. He could see the pips scattered throughout the branches as it began to bear its fruit for the season. Excited by the prospect, Sam hoped, in spite of his news, the family would still be there at harvest time.

“I wonder how they’ll taste...probably Delicious...maybe Macintosh.”

“With my luck, it’ll be forbidden fruit.” Carolyn was beyond discouraged. She did not see the beauty of the moment or appreciate her country place for what it had to offer besides the obvious; the summer of her discontent.

Roger returned home a few days later with better news, having established solid contact with a wealthy new client who owned a tourist-trappy business in Newport. He was not afraid to spend money even though the economy was in trouble and the season had been slower than usual that year. One customer lined Roger’s pockets with cash; he took every bit of it, sending the salesman home with an empty trunk to show for the trip and his efforts. Spirits soaring; Roger was always like a kid at Christmas whenever success smiled upon him and always generous to a fault whenever it did.

“I sold half the load in Jersey. I don’t know what made me think to run the coast on the way home. Before I knew it I’d crossed the bridge and parked in front of his store. It was hot so I stopped to get an ice cream cone. We started talking...I told him what I had. He bought all of it for his gift shop!”

“You could sell snow to the Eskimos, Roger.” Carolyn’s deadpan comment was delivered in monotone.

“He took ***all*** the gold. All the silver earrings. Chain. Rings. He paid cash!”

“Great. What do you want for dinner...there’s nothing in the house.”

“Let’s go to **Rocky Point!**” (Someone wanted to ride the *Wildcat*.)

“Are you out of your mind? We can’t afford to waste a dime of that money. God knows when we’ll see more.” Conditioned reaction; reflexive response.

“The **Shore Dinner Hall** is cheap enough. I’ll get you a lobster. What will the **Arcade** cost...maybe ten bucks?” He could be so congenial.

“It’s ten bucks too much and forty miles too far.”

“Come on. We’ll have a great time!” Roger’s prompts did nothing to soften her stance in the least; not in the mood for an amusement park. Not amused.

“Then take the girls...I’ll stay home.” Growing more reclusive by the day, Carolyn had no interest in driving more than an hour for clam cakes destined to sit in her stomach like stones. Her lack of enthusiasm was apparent to the children as well, as their father suggested the outing to them in her presence: subversive, coercive, manipulative man; he *knew* they would convince their reluctant mother to come along, and they did...and they all had a wonderful time, though no one understood how dad would be willing to drive another mile after returning from his long trip. The *Wildcat* was quite the temptation: Best roller coaster in Rhode Island. (The *only* roller coaster in Rhode Island.) Carolyn actually smiled; she laughed again! That night it remained warm and breezy on the coastline. As tempestuous as a relationship had been in recent months, this night Roger and Carolyn shelved their differences then focused exclusively on their kids; what made it such a fondly memorable excursion. The girls heard “yes” so often they’d eventually stopped asking for anything, so as not to take unfair advantage of this generosity extended. Pure ocean air knocked everyone out cold. All the girls fell asleep on their long ride home. Their parents traveled in silence, allowing them to rest without interruption. It was welcome respite for all. Peace and quiet replaced sarcastic bickering. A cooling wind swept through open windows. Moonlight guiding the troupe, homeward bound along a lonesome path, country roads as dark as death; life had become a study in extremes. Finally arriving home...out went the Light.

Since Roger’s arrival, the couple had managed to avoid discussed anything

pertaining to what transpired in the house in his absence...or what occurred prior to his departure, for that matter. As they drove the front seat of their car became crowded by thoughts with no voice. When they returned to the farm, the light-hearted mood dissipated into stagnant, moist midnight summer air.

"This house smells like death!" Roger's demeanor changed so abruptly that it left everyone else speechless; bleary-eyed children stunned. As he opened the door, stepping across the threshold, the chilled stench of the house forced him back out onto the porch. It was loathsome; a vile, disgusting odor, as if a ten-day-old carcass was buried and rotting beneath the dwelling.

Both cellar doors were open wide. Pantry doors...open. In their absence, a haunting had occurred. When the cat is away...but their cat was well-hidden, huddled in a dark corner of the parlor behind the sofa. The dog was whining, cowering beneath the dining room table, too terrified to run to her own kids. Before Roger could spoil an otherwise perfect evening, Carolyn sent them to bed. After closing all the errant doors, she rejoined her husband on the porch. Sitting beside him, she began to speak in a somber, sedate tone reflecting the gravity of their situation. He never spoke a single word in response. Instead, he listened; really listened to his wife. She told him what the girls disclosed the night they shared their horror stories; nightmares...he could not imagine. She described Cindy's abject horror at having been approached by an entity, one with which Carolyn was all too familiar; a spirit hell-bent on taking their daughter away. He had seen the illustration but Cindy never did. Explain it? He could not. Recognizing this apparition from the ***dream*** she had while her mother was under attack...he just shook his head. Bestowing a kiss; contact had been made, whether or not he knew it at the time. His skin serrated while he was ***asleep***...a clock stopping at exactly the time these incidents occurred. There could be no shadow of a doubt left in his mind.

When Carolyn finished recounting mournful tales, Roger leaned forward, propping elbows on his knees, head in hands. Several silent moments passed. The man felt defeated. He was overwhelmed in the same way his spouse had been, time and time again. He stood, walking into the house: No Comment. In the interim, the house had returned to ***normal*** and, noting the absence of a presence, part of the new paranormal, Roger promptly went to the bedroom.

This night, there would be no rest for the weary...for wicked and good alike.

The following morning their bed was moved halfway across the room, then placed at a crooked angle. As the couple slept they were visited again though neither had any recollection of the incident. Roger's booming voice woke his wife just past six...dawn breaks on Mr. Marblehead.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell is going on here?" Both doors open behind it.

"I told you last night, Roger." Carolyn rolled over, indicating needed return to sleep. "Hell is happening here." Her muffled words came from the pillow.

"Get up...help me move it back in place!" Roger was obviously aggravated by his wife's lack of interest. Her husband was not home frequently enough to realize; this was something the woman dealt with all the time. Carolyn sat up in bed to survey her surroundings from an alternate perspective. Likewise, she was determined to address their situation head on. Still groggy, she spoke softly, in a firm tone, the message direct, so to be properly received.

"Roger, whatever power is present in this house is capable of manipulating objects, even a bed. When will you listen to me? Why move it back in place? What's the point? This will only happen again...and again." White flag up.

"This is crazy! Absolute fucking insanity!" He wanted to scream the words he'd whispered instead, remembering that children were sleeping overhead.

"Regardless of your opinion about this, **this** is life as we know it now...and Sam says we can't do a damn thing about it." Carolyn felt defeated.

"What does **that** mean?" Less a question...more a command.

"No disclosure laws. Not a legal leg to stand on. We are stuck here; unless we sell it and lie to a prospective buyer who asks why we're leaving so soon.

I don't know if Mr. Kenyon deliberately withheld it from us or not but I can't believe he lived here for a lifetime without knowing this house was haunted. Nor do I believe the man would knowingly place this family in harm's way. I would certainly hope not. Maybe you're right; maybe he was questioning his own sanity, but birds in the chimney? A little hard to *swallow!* I don't know what to think about Mr. Kenyon but I do know you don't think it's dangerous here and I don't think you're right about that. Please, leave me alone now."

"Cup of coffee?" He rarely requested her companionship. She ignored him.

Closing the demon doors, Roger shoved the bed back to its former position while his wife huddled beneath the blankets. It was well past time for him to come to terms...on his own. He went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. Standing alone in the pantry, measuring out the grounds into a basket, he felt the steady, gentle stroke of a woman's hand across his shoulders then down, along his back; Carolyn had reconsidered joining him for a cup. Of course.

"Changed your mind?" Roger turned to discover he was entirely alone. The hair on his arms rose before the Sun. "Where'd you go?" No reply; she was not there. Peeking into the vacant bathroom, he'd returned to their bedroom where he found his wife sound asleep. There she was; and there it was again: behind his back, as strokes of midnight at dawn. Roger cringed, pulling away from perceived fingertips pressing into his skin. He felt the waves of nausea barrel through his stomach. It was not clam cakes or chowder *or* the *Wildcat* turning inside the shaken soul. Reality was sickening enough.

When Cynthia got up she found her parents hunkered down at the kitchen table, deeply engaged in a private discussion; she had to interrupt. Asking her mother to follow her into the bathroom, the child appeared grim; forlorn. As she closed the door Carolyn became alarmed. A mother recognized the face of fear on her girls, having seen it there before, but this was something else; a different expression, one she instantly associated with grieving a loss.

"Mom. I saw, I don't know what I saw, last night while Chris was asleep."

“What is it, honey? Tell me what you saw.”

“Something happened to her. You know how our beds are...I woke up...I don’t know when but it was still dark. The nightlight was on so I could see. I heard something...like the cat was growling. It woke me up. I rolled over. I thought Chrissy was sick or talking in her sleep. Oh, Mom...it was terrible!”

“Sweetheart.” Carolyn was fighting demons of her own, hiding the anger.

“God. It was so terrible.” Cindy wrung her trembling hands. “It was not my sister Christine. The eyes popped open and it stared at me. I couldn’t scream. I tried. Mom. The eyes were black. It wasn’t her eyes! They weren’t human.”

Carolyn listened intently as a frantic child described what she’d witnessed. Chrissy was no longer. Her face: twisted and distorted. Her features; gnarled and mangled. Cindy said it looked like snakes slithering underneath her skin, like something had crawled inside her and was trying to escape. It was not her sister’s face at all. Cindy was terrified by what she saw...what she heard. Growling. Moaning. Pain. As two hollow, vacant orbs peered in her direction she’d covered her head then prayed, begging God to make it go away. It did. She cried herself to sleep, too afraid to lower the blanket, to look at the bed beside her own; too terrified to check on her sister’s condition. Instead, she’d crept as deeply beneath the blankets as she could, making certain nothing of her was exposed beyond its border: an act of self-preservation. There she fell asleep. When she awoke, Cindy saw the edges of their blankets were singed; scorched all around: Burnt offerings. She could see a lump in Christine’s bed but did not peek beneath the torched blanket. Carolyn opened the door.

“Roger. Go upstairs. Check on Chrissy. Go now.” Responding to an urgent tone in her voice, the equally alarmed father bolted for the nearest staircase.

Returning to Cindy, Carolyn bathed her flushed and tear-streaked face with a warm washcloth. Getting her breathing under control, the child had come close to hyperventilating. A knock on the door was Nancy, just about ready to bust. Carolyn relinquished the bathroom, taking Cindy into the kitchen. A

few minutes later Roger returned with Christine in tow. Relieved to see her, Cindy ran over for a hug. Chris appeared exhausted; older, as if she had aged a decade overnight. Carolyn studied her face; the youngster was puzzled by the shower of attention. It didn't make sense. She was interested in pursuing the hot pot of oatmeal prepared and waiting for them on the stove.

"What's going on here?" Roger was rightfully confused.

"I'll tell you later." Accepting this dismissal as necessary, what mattered at the moment was a hoard of hungry kids gathering in the kitchen. The family of seven had breakfast together, talking excitedly about their great outing by the seashore. As the warm summer breeze filtered through their screen doors, the fresh scents of sweet air (compared to what they'd walked into the night before), Carolyn wondered silently if what occurred since their arrival home the previous night had been some kind of retribution for having left the house en masse: punishment. Cindy sat quietly as Carolyn slipped off to inspect the bedrooms. Their blankets were burned as she had described; all five were the same, like a ring of fire surrounding each one of her children. Carolyn could barely breathe; touching the scorched edges of each blanket, she shuddered. The burn marks were identical, as if someone had taken a blow torch to satin binding. Yet another incendiary threat: torch and spark, rekindling her anger, enflaming a passionate hatred...reigniting a mother's fear of fire.

After breakfast the family went for a walk down by the river. The children ran on ahead as Carolyn informed Roger about what happened. He suggested it may have been a nightmare. She told him about the blankets. He suddenly stopped walking...dead in his tracks: Frozen in time on the knoll of a hill.

"Roger. Are you among the living? Roger! Didn't you see the edges of the blankets when you went to get Christine?"

"I wasn't looking at her blanket. I was looking for the kid underneath it!"

"Are you completely oblivious to what is happening here? Don't you **dare** try to tell me this isn't dangerous! Wait until you see it; all five are scorched!"

All of their electric blankets are burned and not one of them was plugged in. I checked. No power surge. There is no *logical* explanation for it. Don't you see? This is a threat to me! That bitch is playing with fire; trying to scare me to death!" As desperation dissolved into anger, he listened to his wife but he did not comprehend the fullest implications, as if a slab of granite kept this message from penetrating his thick skull. This time it was different; this time he felt it in his gut. It was a power surge of sorts. Roger felt overpowered.

"I was touched by something...or someone...on the shoulder and down my back. I thought it was you." Contact: taken by force.

"What are we going to do?" Carolyn actually sought her husband's advice.

"I don't know." His perplexed gaze found hers. It had been awhile since an at-odds couple felt like-minded, unified by a protective purpose: an intention. Roger had told her the truth. He did not know what to do...or what to think.

The days grew long and warm that summer. Hot. By August everyone was wrung out, wilting in the relentless heat. The house remained relatively cool; a place to escape the worst of it: Ironic. Carolyn felt certain dread of another winter, promising more of the same punishing cold. A Georgia girl preferred sweat to sweaters and spent her days with her children at the river's edge.

The couple discussed listing the house in an attempt to sell it during a year when property values were dropping by the month. They spoke with Sam. He suggested they wait to see when the market rebounds which was inevitable; it was only a matter of time. Ambivalent, Carolyn wondered what time spent in this house would hold; the constant anticipation of impending threat haunting her more than the looming winter. Breaking even didn't matter anymore.

Cathi returned on cool September breezes. She and Carolyn spent the entire day together, well into evening, an arrival coinciding with Roger's departure: perfect timing. All the "girls" enjoyed a fine reunion. They played

and sang, danced and made a joyful noise created by so many females in one place, at one time. It was wonderful to see her again. Both women spoke at length on a variety of subjects. There was news on both fronts...Cathi met a man and fell in love. She left him behind in Nova Scotia. The ladies snuck off into the pantry like two giddy schoolgirls. Later in the afternoon there were sobering moments between them when Carolyn discreetly retrieved her notebook from its not-so-final resting place and they poured over it privately. She shuddered at seeing those images again. Cathi was far more fascinated than frightened; something with which to tease her facile mind. She wasn't intimidated by it except on behalf of the kids, concerned about the potential impact made on a bevy of impressionable youth. Curious by nature, Cathi asked thoughtful and erudite questions, most of which Carolyn remained unable to answer in full. She believed in the existence of supernatural phenomenon but did not believe the spirits were dangerous; more of a nuisance. Explaining multi-dimensional aspects of such theory, it precluded actual physical involvement; interaction between the living and the dead. Apparently well-informed, Carolyn listened carefully to her young but learned friend, wanting to believe this theory to be an accurate one...for the sake of her family.

"How do you know so much about the supernatural?"

"I don't know much. Reading...things I've heard from reliable sources."

"So you think the same way Sam does; there's really nothing here to fear."

"Well, I have not had to live with it. This is more of a cerebral exercise for me, but for you; I'm sure you've seen and felt things you'll never forget. I'm sorry to say...I wish it weren't so. I know how much you wanted this place."

"That's what I'm afraid of Cathi; images trapped in my mind for eternity."

"There are things we see in life we're not supposed to forget." A wise one.

Though invited, encouraged to spend the night at their farm, Cathi declined the invitation. It was nearly 10:00 p.m. by the time she left for home, calling her mother first to announce she was on the way. Elsie was anxious to spend

some time with her daughter after such an extended absence. Cathi promised she'd be coming home and had to go. With hugs and kisses, Carolyn sent her off into the darkness. The ride was a long one back to her neck of the woods; Seekonk, Massachusetts. Plenty to occupy her mind, Cathi cheerfully cruised down Round Top Road. Nova Scotia had her by the heart. Rather than dwell on all Carolyn disclosed, she instead revisited the place where she longed to return...to the man waiting for her north of the border.

Suddenly Cathi smelled something foul in her car; she hadn't driven farther than a mile or so when a putrid stench permeated the vehicle. Something was wrong. Gripped by unbearable cold, it felt as if her fingers had frozen to the steering wheel. Someone touched her long, flowing hair. Panic; pure dread consumed her being: petrified in place. She glanced into the rear view mirror and caught a glimpse of it; a fleeting image of something wicked turned her heart to stone. Jagged, yellow teeth: Death. She was in the presence of death. Her mind refused to absorb what she witnessed with her eyes. Cathi couldn't stop the car; flee the scene. Knowing she was not alone, she kept on driving, faster and faster, racing toward the safety of home...the arms of her mother. Though the apparition vanished almost as quickly as it appeared, its putrid stink lingered for the duration of the trip, trapped within her sinuses, perhaps trapped in her own memory forever...somewhat more to fear than fear itself. Calling Carolyn as soon as she finished debriefing her mother, there was no making light of it allowed...not yet...not ever; this was a too-close encounter of the bizarre kind and Cathi knew firsthand what a dear friend had endured.

Her spooky status report was equally disconcerting to Carolyn. She offered an awkward apology then went into her bedroom to look at it again, an image revealed in the open tablet. Furious, she slammed it shut and held it in the air.

"You bitch! If you cost me this friendship I'll hunt you to hell and back!" The irate woman issued a formal threat of her own. Though a confrontational approach was not in her best interest Carolyn felt compelled to state her case. Replacing the notebook in its hiding hole in the wall, to rest undisturbed for years to come, there it would remain until the day two strangers appeared on her threshold with a genuine offer of help. As a solid bridge of trust was built

between them over time, Carolyn would eventually agree to relinquish this notebook, along with all of her research, with an explicit promise made for a timely return. All of it...placed into hands where it was laid to rest; out of her possession...never to return.

Autumn ushered in yet another brutal winter. Carolyn remained watchful; pensive. Though an extended period of time passed without a major incident, she was perpetually on guard. Electric bills continued to spike, rising steadily month after month, even though Roger had their original meter replaced that previous summer. As a constant source of consternation between the couple, the blame game got old. Carolyn became increasingly intolerant; resentful of her absentee husband. Snide comments, harsh accusations were taking a toll as their relationship deteriorated into a series of caustic remarks; arguments. They were unknowingly feeding a force within those walls...and it was quite likely returning the disfavor. Negative energy is powerful. Hostility is potent. The inimical approach toward one another bred contempt, neither willing to make amends. They felt no desire to reconcile issues as differences between them became too stark; the depth and breadth, a chasm too wide to traverse. Roger and Carolyn were two opposing forces...at war on uncommon ground. The occasional peace treaty drafted would then be mutually agreed upon but the truce never lasted very long; their once marital bliss had evolved into so many blisters: deep, festering wounds...so occurred the scarring of the heart. Over time, they would prove to be permanent, irreparable: wounds too deep to heal became infected...irreconcilable differences; deadly to a marriage.

Rumors spread, wildfire-style, through town; inflammatory and inaccurate. Though the girls remained relatively isolated over the course of the summer, socializing with just a few close friends and neighbors, when they returned to school the reception was distinctly different; as chilly as the raw autumn air. Teased and taunted on a regular basis, the five girls began withdrawing from those they'd perceived to be friendly the year before. They learned important lessons very quickly, including who their *real* friends really were, receiving

quite an education about ignorance, intolerance and the roll of thrill-seekers in their young lives. During this time, all five children forged bonds based on sound protective instincts, defending one another against this onslaught on numerous occasions; unity which lasts a lifetime. They stopped blaming each other for such annoying anomalies as rearranged toys or missing objects and they soon discovered the intrinsic value of a sisterhood. What the girls faced was nothing less than blatant unabashed discrimination. Circling the wagons, warding off the evil spirits, living and dead, those who intended them harm; they found their way through it within loving arms. As their parents waged a civil war with uncivil discourse the children prayed for peace. Watching over one another, setting an example of civility, they practiced the presence: God.

Carolyn cursed at the spirits and husband alike while Roger played the role of Devil's Advocate. An abundance of evidence at his disposal; how much of it was required to convince him? How could it be that he did not recognize so many omens for precisely what they were? Why did he feel justified arguing the logic of an illogical situation? It was an argument he could not, would not win in reality and yet he persisted, sometimes amenable to Carolyn's point of view, sometimes staunchly opposed as if to taunt her, deliberately making an obvious spirit matter worse. Why was it so important for Roger to be right? Opposing forces: Perhaps what was called for was a happy medium. In time, she would appear at their door. Then he could begin not believing in her, too. At least Carolyn would no longer feel so desperately alone. She would listen to the terrified mother, pass no judgment; recognize the omens as harbingers of things to come and realize a danger; the true Nature of an imposing threat.

*“In this unbelievable universe in which we live there are no absolutes.
Even parallel lines, reaching into infinity, meet somewhere yonder.”*

Pearl Buck

from frying pan into the fire

Murphy's Law: "What can go wrong, will go wrong, and at the most inopportune time."

Sizzled and scorched, over-fried chicken clung to the bottom of a cast iron frying pan, cemented in place. It was so unlike Carolyn to lose concentration when cooking. A long-standing reputation for preparing the best Southern fried chicken, she was mortified by her own lapse of attention paid to dinner. It was ruined. Good food wasted. Thank God Roger was not home to see this happen then critique her skills accordingly. Bouncing down the stairs, Nancy emerged into the kitchen, inevitably prepared to state the obvious:

“Something’s burning! I can smell it upstairs!” Smoke does tend to rise.

“No shit, Sherlock!” The cook’s response was slightly defensive.

“Who’s Sherlock?” Nancy’s question met with some intolerant resistance.

“Never mind.” Disgusted, Carolyn was in no mood to teach from a primer on English literature at the moment; she was much too busy learning her own lesson while trying to salvage what she could of their supper.

“Elementary, my dear sister. You should know it already. Doctor Watson? Sherlock Holmes? You should try going to the library once in a while.” Quite snippy, Andrea’s attitude toward her next of kin was sarcastic, dismissive at times. “Instead of the sand banks!” Ouch! Calling her sister a super-slacker, all Nancy had done was bring the aroma of charred grease to their attention. Out the door she went, ignoring the blatant insult, perhaps oblivious to it.

“I’m goin’ fishin’ down at the river.” The great escape artist was gone.

“No problem, mom. I can scrape off the scorch. It’s still good.” Consoling her mother, Andrea took over the task at hand. Returning to the potato salad, Carolyn remained quiet, reflecting upon time lost; on her inadvertent lack of

concentration when cooking on fire (albeit electrical heat) and knowing how dangerous it was to be anything but mindful when grease is boiling in a pan. Upset with herself, she mixed her salad, allowing the distracting thoughts to continue doing their work, pulling her further away from the mindless task, compared to the more serious one she'd relinquished to her eldest daughter.

It was a sense of dread consuming a soul, this watching and waiting, taking its toll. Nothing happened to provoke it; nothing seen or heard which would indicate the presence of a nefarious force. No apparitions; nothing unusual of late, so why was Carolyn so preoccupied? Why was her mind wandering into dark spaces? She'd felt an oppressive weight which she did not generate and could not shed. It occurred to her that this process was, in itself, a malignant blight; an omnipresent influence working its blackest magic on her thoughts, keeping her fearful, robbing her of time. This was not the first time. As hours passed at the sink, she'd stare out the back window and lose track of time; an afternoon gone as if it were an instant, reliving moments she longed to forget while knowing she never would. Time lost lingered with an evil spirit which was haunting her in absentia, or was it actually gone? Carolyn continued to sense an overwhelming presence and yet nothing had manifested in form; no one had issued any threats. Yet, was it not a threat unto itself if she had been unable to properly tend to a skillet which posed a hazard of its own? Maybe Roger was right. Perhaps her imagination was getting the best of her...maybe the memory was enough to do this damage on its own. Why sense impending doom when some sense of normalcy prevailed? Truth be told, it was fallacy; no such thing as normalcy in their house. "Normal" **was** the new paranormal. Their family had purchased a piece of surreal estate. Carolyn didn't dare trust her intuition, didn't dare believe she was alone, because on some level, she knew it was not true. A wounded woman in the midst of a transformation she could not fathom, her real sense of foreboding was omnipresent with purpose and reason, if for no other reason than to warn her to prepare for what was to come. What she sensed was not coming from beyond her; she sensed it from within...the most frightening sensation of all.

"Mom!" Apparently Andrea had splattered some grease on its burner while removing the seriously crispy chicken from a skillet. Flames shot up from the surface of the stove, around the outside of the cast iron frying pan. Fire in the

hole! Rushing into the pantry, Carolyn slapped a metal lid over the exposed oil while pulling her daughter away from a stove. Checking to be certain that burner was off, as she'd suspected, she had indeed turned it off when initially discovering the problem: what is done can be overdone! The heating element was totally cool to the touch. No grease had splattered after all; no fuel added to the fire. No fire! Message received.

Cutting the crusty skin away from the meat, it became dinner for the dogs. In spite of a mishap, it turned out to be, as Annie predicted, a delicious meal. Carolyn might have been more gratified by this outcome if not for a niggling sensation which continued to trouble her. Had the sense of foreboding been her intuition at work, as warning of a pending situation in the pantry? Or had the pantry provided another venue for yet another manifestation of the spirits playing with fire? She considered the scenario as metaphor: out of the frying pan...into the fire. Something told her a haunting was not over. Looming on a darkening horizon, ominous clouds were gathering, creating the solid wall of worry, shrouding her mind in despair. Carolyn could feel it all around her. She could feel it inside her. Omnipresent...like God. It could not possibly get worse...or could it? Of course it could...and would.

It was only a matter of time; this period of intense sensations of doom and gloom finally subsided. A heavy shroud of clouds lifted, no damage done by its darkness, or so she thought. Inexplicably, this gathering threat seemed to dissipate. She returned, escaping unscathed from its grasp; as energy robbed was naturally restored by warming breezes and bright blue skies. Regaining her sense of direction, soaking in the summer...things were looking up. She had forgotten about Schwartz's Law: Murphy was an optimist!

One need not see to believe and one need not believe what they see. A seer is one who is looking at life, observing its intricacies or revealing its secrets, at times, in equal measure. Carolyn paid attention. She was right to be wary. It would have been easy enough to dismiss these sensations as a brief bout of depression, yet she knew better. This was an omen: powerful and oppressive and greedy; the voracious, vociferous silence in her mind, forewarning her of

things to come. This was a mental infestation as manifestation. Soon enough Carolyn understood what she'd been experiencing; the deep, despairing sense of dread, the vision of fire surrounding a skillet as the precursor to a circle of fire destined to surround the woman in her bed. Paying attention, monitoring one's own thoughts and emotions: of critical importance when dwelling in a house alive with death. What was invisible was equally powerful; fear of fire. Elemental, my dear Carolyn: Fear is the most powerful element of all. It was almost time to take the plunge, make a leap of faith out of the frying pan into the fire. Time to learn that faith alone can keep a soul all fired up safe in the midst of a crisis. It wasn't over. What can go wrong, will: Best pay attention.

"I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts."

John Locke

blue light special

“Each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.”
Edgar Allan Poe

Though another spring had officially arrived its nights were still quite cool, chilly enough to warrant a fire. Burning low in its grate, embers needed some tending. Carolyn was distracted, in rapt involvement with characters of note from a beloved novel; revisiting a few old friends. The parlor was practically silent. She sat on their loveseat directly across from the fireplace. The ladies, poised on the floor, books scattered around them on the Oriental rug. Andrea required more space, so had spread out at the dining room table, materials for her current project turning its wooden surface paper white. Everyone present was engrossed in a project or assignment; homework time early one evening.

Andrea finished her work at the table. Heading into the parlor to inform her mother she was free to help with dinner, as Carolyn looked up from her book an incredible event occurred. A solid blue tubular beam of light shot down the chimney, snuffing out the flames. It turned at a hard right angle and came out across the room, landing directly in Carolyn's lap, impaling the book she was holding. A collective gasp filled the stilled air. A split second later this light retracted along precisely the route it had traveled, withdrawing up the chimney. It all occurred in about two or three seconds. No one could believe what they had just witnessed. Andrea was in shock but retained the presence of mind to assist her mother. Carolyn's facial expression appeared frozen in time, eyes fixed; wide and alert with her mouth partially open... aghast!

“Mom! Are you all right?” Andrea was frantic, afraid her mother had been injured. A light struck directly in the center of her torso and her daughter had no idea what damage this might have caused. The tube of light was perfectly cylindrical, solid blue, roughly the diameter of a walnut. A stunning thing to see: this event, defying the basic laws of physics. Light travels linearly. Light does not bend at right angles. Light does not snuff out the flames of a fire nor does its absence or retraction reignite the flames in a fireplace. Had it been a

bolt of lightning? Carolyn seemed fine. The girls recovered momentarily and approached their mother en masse. She stood, examining the point of impact. There were no signs of any injury; no scorch or burning book; no pains at all. Reassuring her children, all was well, she suggested they *all* relocate...away from the front of the fireplace. Compliance was not an issue. Carolyn moved across the parlor toward the sofa, there to finish her chapter undisturbed.

This was the first of three times that phenomenon would occur within their house and each time it was as shocking as the initial encounter with this very special force; a blue light with a mind of its own. Though she was apparently uninjured by the event, Carolyn would speculate about the effects of the light for many years to come, especially with regard to their friends, two of whom would eventually have an exceedingly close encounter with the beam of light as it sought them out. When the Warrens became involved, Lorraine offered a detailed explanation of it as a presence. The ray was a beautiful and bizarre display of pure light. Its power defied natural law. Claiming familiarity with such phenomena, Mrs. Warren later described it as one form of supernatural plasma, manifesting as a beam of Cosmic Light traveling through space and time, then entering a specific portal; delivering a message received by mortal souls who have witnessed its affect yet remain unable to discern its meaning. Some see it as a blessing. Some see it as a curse.

The explanation seemed as implausible as the episode but Carolyn listened attentively, trying to make sense of it. Mrs. Warren assured her, it was not as uncommon as she might suspect, claiming it as another supernatural Light in manifestation; an *entity* in its own right. Though Carolyn was skeptical, she was Roger's polar opposite. He assumed he knew everything. His wife, sure she knew nothing. Lorraine, the happy medium, would try to convince both of them that this was another aspect of the paranormal activity in their home. The mistress of the house had no apparent residual effects from an encounter which could not be explained and could not be denied; too many witnesses for Roger to question these identical reports among his family. However, the same could not be said for others touched by Light; one coming from above.

“The illuminable, silent, never-resting thing called Time, rolling, rushing on, swift, silent, like an all-embracing oceantide, on which we and all the universe swim like exhalations, like apparitions which are and then are not: this is forever very literally a miracle; a thing to strike us dumb, for we have no word to speak about it.”

Thomas Carlyle

an old torch carries a flame

*"The communication / Of the dead is tongued with
fire beyond the language of the living."*

T.S. Eliot

Winter had found its way to spring. Though it had been as cold as the first, it was made bearable by the existence of a fireplace, a major advantage over the previous year. Carolyn huddled on the hearthstone for the duration of the season. She'd discovered, given the opportunity, a house will not keep itself. It was obvious. Her energy continued to dissipate; evaporating into the ether. She appeared gaunt and frail. April started school in the fall so Carolyn used much of her time alone to read and sleep...all she had energy to do. Bless her heart and soul. It was only the beginning; the worst was yet to come. Do tell.

The Perron family enjoyed their first Christmas together in the farmhouse. Roger was a Santa unlike any other, doing everything in his power to lighten Carolyn's burdens. He'd done the shopping, even some cooking, spoiling the girls and his beloved wife. They had gone deep into the woods to cut the tree. Carolyn stayed behind at the house, preparing sugar cookies and hot cocoa. It was quite picturesque; a rare Norman Rockwell moment. Invoking the spirit of Charles Dickens might have been more appropriate to this scene, as ghosts of Christmas past were making their presence known.

An armistice was declared for the holidays. All bickering subsided; it came to an abrupt HALT! Words are weapons. In the spirit of the season, the milk of human kindness flowed with the eggnog on a Christmas Eve. Decorating the tree proved to be quite the festive event. Carols were sung as bells rang in the church steeple. Though their family didn't attend Mass often, on a sacred night they decided to attend at midnight so the morning would not be rushed as the children opened their gifts. Roger had excellent taste. He'd purchased a beautiful suit for Carolyn which he'd presented to her after dinner. She was excited and so grateful, anxious to try it on...then show it off. As she stepped

through their bedroom door her expression revealed a sentiment expressed by all of them as a collective gasp, though not for the reason one might suspect. Knowing why everyone reacted, the elegant pantsuit hung like a sack on her withering torso. Roger tried to hide his alarm, though it was clearly evident. "We'll go to exchange it next week." Holding her in his arms, he whispered: "You need to call a doctor; make an appointment." She nodded then changed into something more fitting. They went to church.

Upon entering St. Patrick's, heads turned. Carolyn wondered if it was her dramatic weight loss drawing attention. Their parish was rather small and the Perrons nearly filled an empty pew by themselves, though quite noticeably, nobody joined them in the remaining seats as the crowd filed in for service. Once Mass began this scrutiny ceased. Everyone focused on the altar. It was fine until the priest uttered familiar words: "The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen." As excited as she was uninhibited, April shouted a few words with such jubilance, from choir to altar boys to the priest, everybody heard.

"Mommy! Did you hear that? God has a ghost too, just like us!" She knew; mystery solved. It was an innocent statement from the child whose innocence was in jeopardy. Carolyn covered her baby's mouth in that moment of panic. Too late. They left as discreetly as possible within a few minutes; vibrations of disapproval driving them away from the House of the Holier than Thou. Merry Christmas to all...and to all a good night.

Roger and Carolyn tucked their children into bed then spent the rest of the night silently assembling toys and drinking coffee before a raging fireplace. Lights adorning their tree illuminated a parlor, bathing it in a glorious glow. A chorus of carols played softly on the stereo, so not to wake the youngsters, providing the home with peaceful notes to end on, a splendid soundtrack for another gift-wrapping session. It was past 2:00 a.m. when the tired but happy couple finally went off to bed, knowing their children would be up and out of bed by dawn. They'd remained silent about what happened in church, neither one of them willing to put a damper on an otherwise perfectly holy night.



~ warm but weary on a Christmas morning ~

Carolyn stood in front of the fire, her coffee cup on the mantel board, never far from her fingers. Roger sat across from her on the sofa. They watched the children shred wrapping paper and toss bows at one another. It was as joyful for them as it was for the kids. Carolyn received a pair of very fuzzy slippers from Santa, warm and soft and very pink. While opening a simple gift, Roger stoked the fire, placing a Yule log he saved for this special occasion directly on top of the pyre. Carolyn put them on her feet then resumed her position on the hearthstone. Igniting quickly, the log burned with a brilliance everybody noticed. Warm and cozy on that chilly Christmas morning, Carolyn, as usual, was standing too close to the flames.

Leaning down to see what Santa Claus brought to one of the girls, Carolyn stood abruptly then grabbed a hold of the mantel board. Collapsing onto the granite hearthstone, she hit it with such force, everyone froze except Roger. He sprung up from the sofa, leaping over the children so quickly, no one saw him go but there he was, pulling her feet out of the fire. He lifted his wife as if she were a rag doll and placed her on the long sofa at the front of the room, away from the flames. This fainting spell would have had dire consequences if not for his rapid response on a rescue mission. Carolyn came around as the children scrambled to her side. Insisting she was fine, just tired, their mother made light of the episode, encouraging everyone to return to the pleasant task at hand. It would be the first of a series of spells, threatening Carolyn in other ways as well. Her energy was being depleted; resources challenged...nothing

left in reserve. As her strength continued to diminish, as if the life force was being drained from her body, no one knew why, not even the family doctor.

Weathering their second winter fairly well the family again looked forward to spring. The girls were thriving in school in spite of an occasional harassing comment from fellow students who didn't even know them or what they had endured. Their real friends remained their friends and some were even brave enough to visit the house from time to time which took wind from the sails of their harshest critics. Guess it wasn't so bad after all if so and so would go.

There was a long period of calm; several months during which nothing of consequence occurred; nothing noteworthy...so peaceful and quiet Carolyn's fears began to subside. She'd gained a few pounds, looking healthier than she had in quite awhile. The house became dormant. Its doors stayed closed. The telephone did not lift up or float away from the receiver; the refrigerator was sealed tightly. No perceptible footsteps on stairs. The temperatures remained fairly constant. Had whatever it was wreaking havoc simply given up? Given in? Had they accepted the presence of mortals in their farmhouse? Hardly.

Easter marked the last attempt made to be part of the congregation at Saint Patrick's Church; the morning they'd discovered the depths of discrimination within the parish. Slightly late for Mass, they assembled in a pew at the back of the church. Heads turned. A few people sneered. An elderly woman seated in front of them, sporting a fresh bottle of blue hair, turned around in her seat then stared at the family, shamelessly leering at Carolyn. Turning toward the altar this presumably Christian woman growled out the hateful words: "Satan worshippers." When service was over, the Perrons left their church, for good; an awkward priest made mention to Roger, suggesting he seek another place of worship. Treated as if they were pagans who'd crawled in from the woods; rather than offering help, he too shunned them, based on rumors. Indiscreet, instead of fulfilling the role of spiritual advisor he chose to be judge and jury, tacitly expelling them from a parish with a few thoughtless words. Obviously confused about that separation of church and state thing, a chronic condition in Rhode Island, he was clearly unsure of what century it was, but at least no

one got drowned in the lake or burned at the stake. In a cloistered community ignorance often abounds. There are those who wear it as a badge of honor.

After Carolyn nearly went up in flames, she altered her hearthstone habits, keeping some distance because there's warm and then there's hot! So few of the paranormal anomalies occurred, she nearly forgot about the threat, even though their dog still refused to cross in front of the cellar door, regardless of any enticement. Complacency is dangerous leaving one woefully unprepared.

June rolled around, as gorgeous as their first at the farm. Old gardens were resplendent with fragrant blooms; an old apple tree full to bursting with pips. They were still enjoying the succulent fruit from the previous year when new buds appeared. Days were warm; children excited about a pending vacation. Their mother; perplexed about but grateful for this stark absence of activity, as the once omnipresent problems seemed to vanish; not just invisible: Gone. Perhaps it was safe to stay at the farm after all.

Remnants of previous encounters still lurking in the recesses of her mind, she was able to exert more control over the impulses by banishing imagery at will...whenever it reared its ugly head. Carolyn found it ironic; the closer she felt to God the more she abandoned religion, as mutually exclusive concepts: revelation. Refusing to seek another church she chose instead to go within, to explore her own spiritual Nature from the center of a more welcoming place. Resentful of Catholicism, a religion she'd been forced to embrace in context of marriage, compelled to convert by a mother-in-law who would never have it any other way, Carolyn felt liberated by tacit dismissal from the church. It excused participation altogether. This mother's prayers were reserved for her grand garden spot while her children practiced the presence bedside or in the woods they worshipped by Nature. Roger turned the soil; rows were planned and planted. Carolyn worked countless hours in its rich, black earth, relishing each moment while teaching her children how to plant and tend the garden as the circle of life; engaging imaginations. She taught her young to worship the cosmic secrecy of seed...absorbing its treasures by *cosmossis*: a new theory.

Soon thereafter Carolyn experienced the most horrifying encounter she'd ever have in the house. Roger was there; the couple went to bed as usual after the news and slept peacefully through the night. Just before dawn disturbance erupted in the bedroom; Carolyn awoke to a distinctly violent vibration in her headboard. Their bed was moving. Disoriented in the darkness, she could not understand what was happening until the room became frigid; a foul, familiar stench flooding the space, filling the air with something toxic: un-breathable. The woman could barely move her body. Her boggled mind was fully alert.

Swoosh! The room was suddenly ablaze with light; an ominous fiery glow, illuminated by flames on top of torches carried by the dead. As unbearable as it was to watch, Carolyn could not look away; her gaze transfixed on objects which meant certain death to her family. She expected her heart to stop. This would be their end. So many of them! Perhaps eight or ten spirits standing in the bedroom, each holding a wooden torch with something atop it resembling brittle broom straw, each fully engulfed in a ball of fire. There was nowhere to hide. The house was humming with a reverberation Carolyn could feel in her sternum. It was deafening, loud enough to muffle a mother's screaming if she'd had a voice to use but the woman knew she'd been muted. She yanked on Roger's hair, shoving him repeatedly, jerking the covers from a cold, limp lifeless body. Again, his back had become serrated, scratched beyond mortal recognition by the claws of a demon. A precise cadence emerged, established by the perpetual pounding of torches striking a wooden floor. This primitive syncopation echoed throughout the house. Their rhythmic chant; a torch song incantation uttered in tandem by spirits who didn't seem to notice the victim cowering in her bed which had been dragged to the center of the room. There they stood, gathered together in front of both windows, encircling the bottom of the bed, a small child posted at each side of the footboard. Carolyn's rapt attention remained focused on the fires; she listened to their words, what they had come to warn, only as an afterthought, as flames leapt toward the ceiling. Fire was her enemy...her greatest fear.

"Beseech thee, leave! Afore ye go, beware the flame, the fiery glow.

Was mistress once afore ye came and mistress here will be again.

Will drive ye out with fiery broom.

Will drive ye mad with death and gloom.”

Mesmerized, as if suspended in some type of post-hypnotic trance, Carolyn stared at this group of lost souls, appearing as a coven of witches engaged in a ritualistic initiation ceremony. Their language spoken grew louder, shaking the structure, rattling the glass in its windows. The apparitions included two children, a young girl and an even smaller boy. It was difficult to distinguish their features due to the intense glow of flames; a haze, obscuring her view. She saw a few of them grinning, as if attending some festive event. An entity emerged from the crowd and began her approach. Carolyn recognized her as the one who'd come before, the same spirit who petrified Cynthia in her own bedroom. She began slowly floating forward as many other spirits continued chanting the incantation, impaling words into memory. Her movements were tediously slow and deliberately threatening; Carolyn could never mistake this entity's evil intentions. It was reading her mind. She had time enough to run if only her body would allow her to escape. She could not. In complete panic, during the fraction of a second she'd spent considering flight over fight, the bedroom door slammed shut, effectively trapping her inside. Flames leapt up from straw on top of torches, yet there was no heat, no smoke in the room. It burned like wildfire, lapping toward the ceiling with every brutal blow, each strike of the floorboards resulting in the torches being raised once again, in preparation for the next heavy blow. The drumbeat was relentless, deafening as they stood beside her and still, the demon advanced. An emaciated figure: no hands or feet, snapped at the neck; death by hanging, or so she presumed. This time though, it had a face as hideous as anything she had ever seen. The eyes were black: hollow sockets peering into her soul. The nose appeared to be rotting off. What remained of that grotesque appendage was nothing but a few pieces of decaying flesh dangling loosely beneath a mesh of cobwebs. Its horrid sight and smell caused Carolyn to wretch. Its mouth, drawing closer to her with each passing moment, uttered these threatening words with pleasure. As this wicked creature smiled, reveling in the terror expressed on the face of it victim, it revealed a set of chipped and jagged yellow teeth protruding from beneath thin, shriveled lips. Carolyn was certain she would lose her mind before she lost her life. None of the others even acknowledged her presence.

The spirit crept and conjured around her bed as light of dawn began to break, illuminating a gruesome scene in lurid detail. Leaning over then in toward its victim, the apparition issued the threat it had come to deliver; with purpose and reason, a message received...loud and clear:

*“Was mistress once afore ye came and mistress here will be again.
Will drive ye mad with death and gloom. Will drive ye into Satan’s tomb.
Thus has been spoken, thus has been read.
Take leave of this place or ye too will be dead.”*

Suddenly the bedroom became flooded with thick acrid smoke; an ominous haze surrounding the emerging beast. Carolyn’s aversion to this dark demon was so intense violent tremors began to erupt throughout her trembling body, traveling uncontrollably through her frozen limbs, responding to the jolt as if being struck by a bolt of lightning. She lurched forward in bed, inexplicably drawn toward that which repulsed her. As Carolyn was about to receive the kiss of death, the apparition slowly withdrew from her then began to encircle the bed again, floating toward her husband. Arriving by his side, it hovered over him for a moment then glanced upward, those black vacant orbs staring through her. Grinning again, baring its evil along with its fangs, the creature leered at a paralyzed woman while leaning in toward her man. Roger was the one; the recipient of a kiss bestowed. Carolyn closed her eyes. She prayed, speaking words in mind which would save both of them. “Lord, be with me now.” Whispering the 23rd Psalm: “I will fear no evil...for Thou art with me.” No question. It wanted her to observe what it was about to do to her husband.

The identical sound announcing their arrival, the combustion of flames in the bedroom, occurred once again. Carolyn waited, certainly knowing fire would consume them all. She could not move her mouth but instead, prayed from her soul. “Bless me Father. Take me if you must but spare my children. Dear God, I beg of you...have mercy on us all.” Her prayers had been more

potent than any words the woman had ever uttered in her lifetime; silently or aloud. Moments passed; she dared to open her eyes. Roger turned over, groaning in pain. She peered through tear-drenched eyes to behold the vacant bedroom. Flames extinguished. It was over. They were gone.

The bed was in the center of the room. Soft, warm breezes filtered through open windows, fluttering lace curtains. Rancid odor and bone-numbing chill began to dissipate in thin morning air. Carolyn wept as she never had before, sobbing uncontrollably, thanking God redundantly for sparing all their lives. It took some time for her to gather herself enough to climb out from beneath the covers. Certainly still in shock, stumbling toward the parlor, arriving at the loveseat she glanced toward the clock. Roger recently tinkered with the old family heirloom and had gotten it running again. The pendulum was still. Again, it had stopped, precisely as it had at her first visitation; at 5:15 a.m.

Though immediate peril had passed, Carolyn could not dispel its imagery. Wandering the house, upstairs to check on their children, they were all asleep and seemed undisturbed. She came downstairs then went into the kitchen to brew a strong pot of coffee. While standing alone in the pantry Roger walked up behind her. His presence so startled the woman, she dropped the container of coffee on the floor, spilling it everywhere. She instantly fell to her knees, distraught, attempting to reclaim what she could. He did not realize she was crying, far too concerned with pressing issues of his own.

“The goddamned bed is sitting in the middle of the bedroom again and my back hurts like hell!” He watched as her torso lurched, heaving in sorrowful spasms. “What the hell is wrong with you?” He offered to clean up the mess. Carolyn stood then looked directly at her husband. Streaked with tears of her ordeal, the expression on her face frightened him. Roger grabbed her in his arms then held her there until sobbing subsided. He knew something terrible happened. He had never seen his wife so upset. It took time for Carolyn to be able to speak. When she did it was to ask him to escort her into the bathroom. He thought she was sick but when the door was closed she took the man over to the mirror, exposing deep, bloody abrasions to the cold light of dawn. He too felt panic. She might have described the man as “white as a ghost” except Carolyn knew for certain the ghosts were not white at all. Shaken and stirred,

Roger trembled, asking if she knew what was happening. Yes. She did know. While cleansing the wounds she told him a tale still omnipresent in her mind, the details of which were destined to remain part of her life for the rest of her life. At this moment Carolyn can close her eyes and conjure the image again, as if the manifestation had occurred only a moment before. Once something so extraordinary is witnessed, there is no escaping the memory.

Though Carolyn had been angry with her husband after the first visitation, falsely accusing him (albeit privately) of abandoning her to the forces of evil, powers that be; it was not the case this time. She felt compassionate instead; sympathetically tending wounds as he cringed in pain. He too was its victim; unconscious and unwitting. Though she couldn't comprehend what occurred, she realized it was not his fault. Reserving her blame for the spirits, she knew instinctively he had somehow been placed in the bubble, a suspended state of being, rendering him virtually helpless, not helpful at all...as if he was dead.

"I don't know who she thinks she is...some old flame who literally carries a torch, but she wants you, Roger. A **very** old flame by the looks of her! And the smell! She wants **you**, she wants our children and she wants me dead and gone from this house. There is no doubt about it. I **know** her intentions now."

No making light of it...not then...not ever. No need to draw an illustration this time 'round; Roger got the picture. He'd seen a reflection of the damage done in a mirror, as if needles gouged the skin off his back. He saw the shock and horror of the ordeal reflected in his wife's eyes. They felt pure empathy for one another. There was no one to blame, save the spirits haunting them in the night at light of dawn. She took him into the parlor, there to examine the clock, repeating the incantation line by ominous line. No doubt about it. His only reply uncharacteristically muted, almost prayerful: "Jesus Christ."

During the month preceding this episode, their electric bill quadrupled. The following month it was reduced to a fraction of the amount required to run a household and feed a demon. It took some time for the proper connections to be drawn between manifestations and their power source but

finally, Carolyn realized the expenses incurred had nothing to do with leaving their lights on. The house was being utilized, as was its inhabitants; its main energy supplies being routinely circumvented with reason, for nefarious purposes. After this, the most dramatic of manifestations, the energy drain on their house abruptly ceased. Spirit surge accomplished; they required respite and replenishment.

“The countenance is the portrait of the soul, and the eyes mark its intentions.”

Marcus Tullius Cicero

fire and brimstone

“No religion is a true religion that does not make men tingle to their finger tips with a sense of infinite hazard.”

William Ernest Hocking

There was a subtle vacancy, a longing in the child. She needed to believe in God, to feel some kind of spiritual connection; something more than prayers by moonlight: Contact. Andrea began seeking the truth about life and death from a young age and this deep craving for knowledge grew along with her. By fourteen she was attending church sporadically, whenever she could get a ride, she would go on her own. By fifteen, she was singing and playing guitar in the choir. Confirmation classes began. She had taken the plunge, attending several sessions just prior to being summarily dismissed from Saint Patrick's Church in Harrisville, Rhode Island. Thank God!

This youngster was a misfit from the start. She never felt any true sense of belonging but wanted to attend, to be wherever her two closest friends were, so she went where they worshipped; back to Saint Patrick's, there to receive formal instruction in creed, doctrine and dogma of the holy Roman Catholic Church. Confirmation classes were supposed to be a type of school of *higher* learning; ironically, held in the parish basement every Wednesday evening. She attended the sessions for three weeks; until her intellect interceded. Once her sense and sensibilities were offended, she returned the favor in kind.

Raymond Perreault and Timothy Robidoux were a tremendous influence in Andrea's life and remain so decades later. Both are brilliant. They met on her first day of school, as desks were reassigned to accommodate a new student. They met alphabetically; a perfect metaphor to describe their shared love of literature. Timothy sat directly behind, Raymond in front: wedged together as they were in room B-3 of Burrillville Junior-Senior High School. It was to be her greatest blessing; a gift. Their friendships generated spontaneously in the form of cerebral combustion. She has treasured that fire they set in her soul ever since. With so much in common, the three of them soon began spending a great deal of time together outside of their classroom. Tim played trombone

in the band; Andrea, flute. Raymond convinced her to become involved with him in Poetry Workshop. They attended nearly every class together and were often involved in projects as a team. The odd triptych of personalities proved a wonderful blend, providing quantum leaps in consciousness as they learned what they shared and shared what they learned. During the time of “The Mod Squad” they were the original Geek Squad, all but inseparable. Both young gentlemen were frequent visitors to the farm, though she’d spent time at their homes as well, and all three families integrated with a delightful ease. When the time came for two former altar boys to make their pledge to the church in Confirmation, she was cordially invited to join them on the spiritual journey; an ill-considered decision they would all soon come to regret.

As both had been spared any altercations with spirits, it was not a topic for conversation. They did not know her family had a strange reputation in town or, for that matter, within the church. Neither of them was prone to gossiping nor tolerant of those who did. They had accepted Andrea on her own merits, without prejudice. Timmy and Ray were mature, open-minded, well-adjusted individuals who came from loving homes. Their parents welcomed Andrea, embracing her as a member of their family; welcome respite for a young lady whose tumultuous life frequently required a discreet escape. Faith Perreault was a fabulous cook and Lorraine Robidoux had a concoction brewing in her glass ginger jar on the kitchen counter, known to all as Brandied Fruit Sauce; a delicacy when drizzled over a bowl of French vanilla ice cream. Access to it was based on threats made / promises kept; good, you get some...bad, you don’t...how she’d kept her five rambunctious boys in check. Andrea realized how fortunate she was to know such remarkable people. Her extended family provided kindness and support, a sense of normalcy for a child whose home life was anything but...and nobody ever mentioned anything about what they might have heard around town. Even if they had known the reputation of the farmhouse and the family who dwelled within it they would never abandon a friend or pass a harsh judgment upon the Perrons. Heads turned when Andrea entered their church basement. There she sat, wedged between two altar boys whose families were prominent members of the church and their community. All three of the youngsters felt the scrutiny. Parents talk. Kids listen.

The first couple of sessions were designed as a refresher course, reiterating

much of what Andrea already learned of the Catholic religion, including the structure of its hierarchy: Pope, cardinals, bishops, separate (though entirely unequal) priests and nuns, Mass, Immaculate Conception of Mother Mary, the saints, the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross. The third class began and presumably ended with the subject of **SIN**, concluding about an hour earlier than anticipated for Andrea. As the students entered the hall they saw a large reversible chalkboard boldly listing **The Ten Commandments**. On the other side, beginning with Original Sin, then listed a breakdown of **all** other sins, both mortal and venial, in order of significance. As this lesson progressed the students listened attentively, never questioning their ongoing indoctrination. The room became stiflingly hot, as if Satan himself was present; undoubtedly due to the fire and brimstone, a frequent mentioning of Hell and Damnation. Fear. Guilt. Sin. Shame and more shame. Andrea found herself becoming an increasingly uncomfortable participant, disapproving of the priest's treatment of subject matter. He, too, appeared to be uncomfortable, though not for the same reasons. It was as if he had drawn the short straw and had to be the one to impart information on issues he did not care to discuss. Yet there he was, up on the podium, stoically stiff, talking to a group of teens who longed to be anywhere other than where they were on a Wednesday evening. Even though the floor remained open to questions for the duration, not a single hand went in the air until the precocious young lady heard something she found utterly unacceptable. It was time to mount her challenge, which would culminate in confrontation. Up went the hand. Down went two friends low into their seats, undoubtedly wanting to crawl behind or hide beneath metal folding chairs.

Out of character for Andrea, the girl was not one to instigate or antagonize anybody, especially an elder or any authority figure. However, she believed this challenge was warranted. She asked for an explanation of "Solitary Sin". Ray and Tim were mortified. Crouching down on either side of the culprit, it was the only way to avoid detection...or guilt by association. A penetrating white hot glare: the eyes of a priest spoke to what he obviously considered an inappropriate comment. He refused to answer her question as posed. Andrea pressed onward, perched at the edge of her seat in anxious anticipation of an answer she already knew. Suddenly, the priest had the rapt attention of their entire classroom. His face began to redden and swell, as if he'd been hit with a flame-thrower; a voice steadily rising with his blood pressure. Throughout

this altercation he refused to refer to the word “masturbation”. Unimpressed, Andrea asked him why sex of any kind was such a taboo issue in the church; why married couples could not practice birth control and were only allowed to envision procreation while engaged in sexual activity. She wanted to know why he was reluctant to openly discuss it in a room filled with adolescents at a critical time in their physical and emotional development. He became angry and even more embarrassed while she continued her commentary unabated. Since sex seemed to be a topic by proxy, Andrea wanted to discuss abortion and homosexuality as well as celibacy and the ecclesiastical elevation of men as juxtaposed to their overt subjugation of women, dispossessed of any real authority or position in the Catholic Church, as if suffering some diminished capacity to spread the word of God; based not on heart or mind but genitalia. A flustered priest lost his temper, accusing Andrea of deliberately interfering with his lesson then insisted the tenacious teenager leave class immediately. She did so, never to return. It was a long walk home on a frigid spring night. She took every step wondering if friends would be as angry as their priest or forgiving of her; equally fearful of a reaction she'd receive from her parents. It was wasted worry...on both counts. Mom was upset because she had not been called for a ride home; distressed her eldest daughter had walked so far, alone in the dark. Carolyn did not consider the questions she had posed to be disrespectful. Instead, she found them thoughtful and erudite, as did her two Catholic friends. “Told you so” was her mother’s frame of reference; having forewarned a youngster anxious to establish an association with the church, knowing she might not like what she heard.

About a week later a terse letter arrived from the bishop of the Archdiocese of Providence: message well-received. Carolyn informed her eldest she was no longer welcomed to participate in Confirmation. Class dismissed! Andrea was not considered to be *a good fit*, finding fault with principle tenets of the church. Mother reassured daughter of her worth and place though she always privately doubted it would ultimately be inside an oak pew. The two spoke at length about faith and freedom of religion. Carolyn never did try to channel her children in any specific direction; she was not that kind of indoctrinating influence. Rather, she encouraged them to explore the world as they found it, as each intrepid spirit endeavored to find her own way along the path of life.

Though she perceived it as rejection, Andrea had no intention of returning to the church. She'd accepted the fact that she was a misfit, gratefully so. Her vision of a higher power, the concept of God she had already developed was far more expansive than any religion she knew which existed on the planet. A conscious decision made to learn more, to study God; thus began a lifelong fascination with philosophy. Andrea would soon discover immersing oneself in religious study does not necessarily bring one closer to God. Truth be told; it prompted more doubts, which is, in itself, an avenue toward faithfulness. It was then she found the metaphysical poets; transcendentalism was appealing. **Emerson's Essays**, Thoreau's **Walden** and Whitman's **Leaves of Grass** were three fine volumes commanding her attention. These thinkers seemed to find solace in concert with Nature. A reverence and respect they'd bestowed upon the natural world captivated the youngster, an element of their literature to which she could wholly relate; the worship of Nature as God. During this period of rapid growth, an occasional pause for reflection was called for as a Natural conversion began; transformation, turning her away from organized religion and into the woods. She came to consider religion incompatible with common sense and sensibilities. Seeking inspiration, she'd gone to the forest, looking down, then up. Locating a proper niche; perhaps she was a pagan.

The recovering Catholic was not offended by the dismissal, knowing in her heart and mind she did not belong there in the first place. Her concept of God was unrestricted; not based on the limitations imposed by doctrine or dogma. Essentially, it was bigger than they could imagine, continually evolving as a perception of power as being; God as infinite mind. Not harsh or judgmental in application of Natural law; not cruel or exclusive; no intolerance allowed. A not-so-subtle predisposition toward natural science was taking root in her consciousness. The notion of Original Sin was, in particular, pure absurdity: anathema to the young lady who knew the difference between good and evil, right and wrong; darkness and light. Self-righteously policing her behavior; recognizing it as a matter of personal responsibility, the idea of being **born** in sin was idiotic. Andrea did not rely upon a higher authority. She **was** a higher authority; a living manifestation of God-consciousness. Ultimately, she alone would determine how best to live her life. Neither Holy Ghost nor dastardly demon had the right to interfere or intervene in a supremely personal process.

The spirits were not culpable in any conceivable way; not even a rumor or innuendo of their existence appears to have factored into a decision made by a bishop to expel her from the Catholic Church. Innate intellectual curiosity was quite enough to do the trick. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

“Christian fundamentalism: the doctrine that there is an absolutely powerful, infinitely knowledgeable, universe spanning entity that is deeply and personally concerned about my sex life.”

Andrew Lias

trial by fire

“The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire.”
Ferdinand Foch

Curled up into a ball at the center of the loveseat, knees to chin, a wounded woman gazed pensively into the fireplace, studying the sights and sounds of flames. Fire: A beautiful, powerful force of Nature; an unparalleled source of fear. It had become a test of wills: trials and tribulations to the infinite power. Carolyn closed her eyes and she prayed, hoping faith alone would sustain her through an ordeal; intangible, invisible faith. It was all she had left to rely on, all she had to call upon in the dark of night; this...and her own restless spirit.

The clock above her head remained silent, its slender tendrils fixed in place at 5:15 a.m. The timepiece seemed destined only for display, hanging in their house as vintage artwork; a legacy piece, otherwise abandoned, as if a license to claim what it all but demanded was bestowed by right (or rite) of passage. An evil presence marking her moment, from then on it remained undisturbed, eerily absent its chiming; at rest, set at precisely the time it had *twice* chosen. (Or at an hour chosen for it; a timely reminder: *all of them* are always there.) Perhaps if this clock was left alone, unwound and unprovoked in its singular position, such a passive acknowledgement might insure the absence of future manifestations. A purely superstitious notion was enough to foster a renewed sense of hopelessness in the woman; she was lost in dark shadows of fear and despair; terror illuminated by the light of torches. She stared for some time at the face of the elegant timepiece, wondering...what if it were left untouched; left to keep the time it covets: in suspended animation...appearing to be dead.

Returning to the hearthstone of a fireplace, its imagery swirling in her mind as Carolyn gazed upon the feral flames, she became transfixed by its power. Lapping at sides of logs like a wild animal licking its lips after the kill; after a brutal slaughter of something smaller than itself, something helpless locked in its jaws, crackling sounds were like its bones being

crushed alive by a grip precluding all struggle, haunting the air she breathed; those invisible currents on which sound travels. Piles of gray to ghostly ashes mounded into corners, flickering with sparks of light, embers eager to reignite, as would any life on the verge of extinction, anxious to survive. Its glow resembled melting gold, glistening in the light of its former existence, always able to be rekindled, as if at will, blown back to life with the wisp of one solitary breath. Fire finds a way to persevere, much like the Phoenix reborn from the ashes of itself. She closed her eyes and saw again the vision of torches fully engulfed in flames; no smoke. She saw the face of evil illuminated by an unholy light. She heard threatening words: "Was mistress once afore ye came and mistress here will be again." Carolyn prayed: "The Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want...He maketh me to lie down in green pastures...leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. Amen." Death's prayer in life.

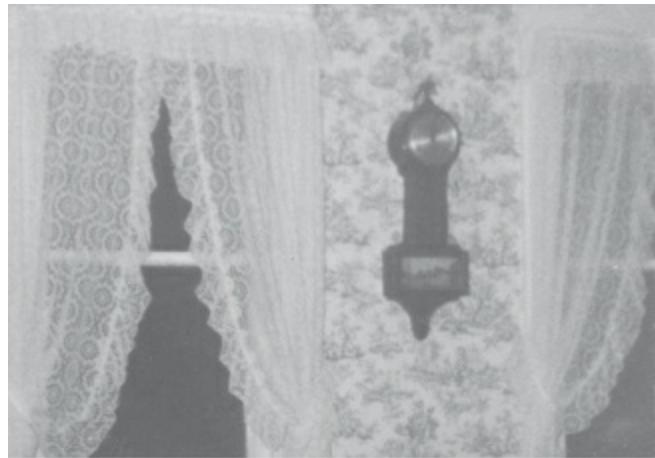
Returning to the loveseat, she buried her face in the blanket. Suddenly, the heavy pendulum of their clock, a timepiece possessed, began to swing again. Its docile rocking restored, the lilting sound sang Carolyn to sleep, as it had done so many nights of her life. She did not twist around to inspect it nor did she seek an explanation for what she'd instantly perceived to be a benevolent gesture; a prayer acknowledged then answered. Carolyn crawled beneath the quilt and bowed her head in gratitude. On this night, her faith took a quantum leap, touched as she was by a force more powerful than anything manifesting in her home. She knew it was there; a holy protective influence always came when called, perhaps because it was always there, as well, as omnipresent as the spirits. Had the ghosts been the *real* gift? Was their presence a conduit to Carolyn's burgeoning faith? Would she have discovered her beliefs without them to guide her along a journey to spiritual enlightenment? She wondered.

In time, the antique clock would stop again, at precisely 5:15 a.m. The next hiatus would prove to be its final pause for reflection in an old farmhouse. The timepiece remained quiet from then on, for the duration of its tenure. Its silence was deafening to those so familiar with its song. As the years passed,

Carolyn studied its peculiar face, wondering why it would not sing anymore. It was left alone, hardly touched, displayed only as vintage artwork on a wall. The finely-crafted timepiece was not dead, merely dormant. In time the clock would sing again, once relocated to another wall entirely, in another time and place. It would not chime again until it was dwelling in a land far, far away.

“Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.”

Jorge Luis Borges



~ tick tock time stands still ~

lady bug

*“Let the fear of danger be a spur to prevent it;
he that fears not, gives advantage to the danger.”*
Francis Quarles

Mortal fear is visceral; a twisted gut wrenching clenched jawbone grinding sensation which consumes the soul from within. Fear has a life of its own. It lives vicariously through those who'll provide it safe passage; a harbor in any given storm. The spawn of evil, it lurks in consciousness, beyond the shadow of a doubt, ready to spring forth into action, to make its vile presence known at a moment's notice. It does not require a specific spark to reignite. Merely considering a concept in mind can rekindle it, as if on a whim, with a breath of fresh air blown beneath the grate of its unholy pyre.

So it was with Carolyn the day she drove into their village to do something as innocuous as buying two loaves of bread and a gallon of milk, all she had enough money on hand to purchase until Roger came home again. Perhaps it had been the trigger, what prompted a panic attack. Feast or Famine: a tough way to live, in perpetual fear of the unknown quantity of money available to properly care for her family. This was her constant burden; a permanent state of mind now known in the vernacular as a poverty consciousness. How many times she had rolled loose change, grateful she'd had it to roll, wedged as she was between the proverbial rock and a hard place to live. But why the sudden sense of dread? It was a beautiful morning, there was an ample supply of gas in her tank and a meager purchase had been made with change to spare; good omens all around: a favorable circumstance which would ordinarily be cause for celebration! So where was this terrible trepidation coming from and why?

On her way home, meandering along Round Top Road, Carolyn was quite startled; struck by the inexplicable urgency seemingly coming from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. As she had done many times, she dismissed it from her thoughts: “Don’t bug me!” A gut feeling persisted, in spite of her normally successful approach to resolving such problems. Again, knocking at the door of her consciousness, attempting to make entry, Carolyn implored it

to go far, far away...all the way back to the devil. The hellish image began to form. Thus began a quarrel raging inside her mind. Intuition sounding the alarm, the woman could feel her foot, as if it were unattached from the rest of her body, pressing pedal-to-the metal against the gas. This was that moment; a shadow of a doubt. It was when she least trusted her own instincts because of a fear so powerful it altered her behavior, forcing her to take action against her better judgment. Faster she went...at light speed...to get to her children.

A nursery rhyme traveling the ether had lodged in her brain. She'd listened:

*“Lady bug, lady bug, fly away home.
Your house is on fire, your children all alone.”*

Where the hell did that come from? Hell, presumably. It was not as if one of those delicate creatures had been trapped on the dashboard, reminding her of the limerick. This poetry was potent. Best to fly away home. Better safe than sorry! The imagery haunting her was automatically suspect because its origin was likely spawned from the encounters she'd had with a spirit who enjoyed tormenting the woman with fire. Her children **were** home alone: Danger! Had she been able to truly trust adept protective instincts, they alone would have told her that the girls were fine and everything was as she left it when she left but it was not to be. Instead, she raced up the road; a calculated risk taken as she floored the pedal and pressed the engine into service. They had come too close to disaster too many times in that house already, and she was not going to relax and dismiss this persistent and perilous notion: better to risk feeling foolish when she arrived...a small price to pay for being wrong...being right was something wicked she simply could not tolerate in mind and so she sped up, revving her mental engine into high gear, along with her automobile: Try to avoid becoming nervous wreckage in the process! Invading thoughts were impairing her sense of direction; knowing the way, yet feeling confused by familiar surroundings, trying to gauge where she was along the rural route. In panic; mortal fear taking its toll on the road of life at an intersection of death. Critically important; imperative she get

home as fast as possible...but what if this was a part of the plan? As a ploy to compel her to drive too fast? Charge! Paranoia strikes deep...it was creeping through her mind, in every cell of her being. "Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed." (Michael Pritchard) Carolyn's fears were being used against her, no matter the source, which was never actually established. Point of origin was not the point at all. When the niggling little voice speaks it's best to listen; ***better safe than sorry*** assuming an entirely new meaning. An urgent sense identified, it was always best to err on the safer side of self-doubt. That is what she told herself as she crested the top of the driveway to see all of her children playing in their yard, right where she left them. She had only been gone a few minutes yet returned to them feeling somehow altered by an absence. Having questioned her sense of direction along that intrepid journey, she looked up, getting her bearings and giving thanks to the over-riding power which got her there. Perronoid?

***"I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act;
but I do believe in a fate that falls on man unless they act."***

G. K. Chesterton

burnin' down the house

“Fate is nothing but the deeds committed in a prior state of existence.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

The inclusion of these mysterious episodes may not in fact, be warranted. It could be they were not supernatural in origin, but were instead several rather strange flukes of fate; bitter but random happenstance. It's impossible for the family to determine if the odd incidents were the result of a nefarious force at work or blessings in disguise. Perhaps both apply. Nobody in this life can be certain. However, in every case, something frightening occurred: Dangerous! Whether natural or supernatural at its source it certainly did appear as if there was someone benevolent in Nature intervening on their behalf to preserve an ancient farmhouse and protect the family living within its clapboard walls.

Their second winter proved to be as brutal as the first. “*Ya get used to it.*” Not so. Everybody in the family heard the phrase somewhere in their travels on a consistent basis. It was always snowing; whether a lot or weather a little, its presence was *Omni* in Nature. Frozen ground never had a chance to thaw or get all filthy dirty before the next layer arrived, the pristine cover of winter whiteness obscuring previous blemishes. As the fireplace raged on in protest, the family gathered to absorb whatever warmth could be generated from that simple hole in the wall; its smoke stack doing double-duty, and then some. It seemed, at times, as if most of the precious heat was being swept up then out the chimney...carried by the winter wind to places and spaces far, far away.

During the previous autumn, after a full summer of nesting and perching no one noticed, the chimney had become littered with debris. One chilly night in September Roger decided it was time to fire her up! A few pieces of kindling were ablaze in moments. Suddenly, the lining of a chimney ignited in a flash. This powerful force, a rush of fire erupted into an inferno; a chimney fire so spectacular, it literally stopped passing traffic. The chimney

burst into flames with such fury it sounded like a distant, muffled explosion. “Whoosh!” Bird nests began falling onto the flames, each fully engaged with the furious burn. Engulfed, crackling and hissing; tiny, meticulously twisted fragments of dry timber sprinkled the landscape with flecks of fire. It was twilight. Roger flew outside to examine the extent of the damage occurring. Carolyn propped the screen in place then ran for the hose behind the house, shouting at everybody to ***get out!*** It was a frantic few minutes, everyone scrambling to evacuate the premises, children directed to follow their parents in one direction or another. The spitting, spewing ashes and embers were rapidly escaping their chimney, bouncing off the roof then scattering on the lawn, producing a vivid display: a frightfully cruel intermingling of darkness and light. Fire in the chimney!

Moments past sunset, lingering colors of daylight created a backdrop for an awful event. Wildfire: lapping at chimney walls like the flaming tongue of a trapped dragon, captive; fighting for release. A potential for disaster was real. Fire flailed through every orifice of a solid metal topper which was supposed to prevent such occurrences. Roger’s lapse in judgment could have resulted in dire consequences for a family; his nearly tragic mistake was in neglecting to call a chimney sweep, logic based on time in service. It had not been long since the fireplace had last been in relatively constant use; not enough time having lapsed for the edifice to require such tending. He was wrong.

A thick smoke drew a gathering of neighbors from near and far, like Indian signals summoning the tribe together. Everyone watched as the fire raged on; curious onlookers were at once mesmerized and terrified, as was the family whose home was in jeopardy. By the time the trucks arrived from the village, it had nearly burned itself out. The chief said: “Let it burn.” He’d said water would only damage the stone and the house. Though he didn’t chastise Roger for this oversight, a gentleman farmer’s agreement, he did mention how ***very lucky*** they were. The house had been in serious danger; an emergency posed by the sheer fact that it was a two hundred and fifty year old tinderbox.

That incident was not the only time their house was in jeopardy. Roger and Carolyn asked two friends of the family, a married couple, to come stay for a few days while they traveled to New York City, there to market their wares at a trade show. Though they did not mention anything to Lois and Joe about unusual **activity** in their house, not wanting to scare away these prospective babysitters, they were each spooked by this place in the country, nonetheless. However, nothing supernatural occurred over the course of a weeklong stay, unless of course one considers a miracle to be a paranormal event. There was only one anomaly...frightening enough to qualify as spiritually significant.

Joe was a city boy. He did not know much about building a fire but decided to set flames aglow in spite of his ignorance on the subject. He'd stacked the fireplace with several huge logs, placing them on top of an enormous pile of dried kindling. Ignition was virtually instantaneous. The blaze raged almost out-of-control, creating a white heat, far too intense to approach. Everyone remained silent. The snapping of crackling wood, a high-pitched hissing was an alarm: Danger. Andrea monitored from a safe distance in the dining room. She waited for more than an hour, watching it burn itself out, ever mindful of where her sisters were inside the house, an evacuation plan rumbling around in her mind, by necessity. When the wood finally simmered down, a palpable sense of panic at last subsided, replaced with relief. Fear and trepidation had been running rampant through the vulnerable old farmhouse. These children remembered well the terrible threat of watching a chimney fire burn.

Hours passed. Long after the flames were extinguished, the house began to quickly fill with dark, acrid smoke. Lois and Joe were mortified. He raced to the telephone. She ushered all the girls out their kitchen door. It had become bitterly frigid outside, below freezing; she'd sent them to wait inside the car. Sirens blared in the distance. All the girls fixed a frozen gaze on their house, observing through foggy glass steamed over with anxiety, as two fire trucks flew down the driveway, into their yard. They clung together, huddled in the car as each spoke of wishing mom and dad would come home...immediately. It was a frantic scene; firemen running in and out, smoke billowing through it

as open doors and windows vented voluminous waves of smoke a brisk wind carried into the sky. When this crisis finally passed everyone involved with the rescue remarked about the great good fortune of salvaging the farmhouse. According to those in the know, regarding the true force of fire, it had been a miracle. As so much wind rushed through a structure from so many different directions, the fire chief was stymied that the flow had not actually caused its ruinous demise by fanning a few sparks into flames. He stated rather bluntly: "This house should have burned to the ground." The man shook his head.

Within minutes the source of the problem was located; threat extinguished. Apparently the earlier fire had become so hot, it fractured a stone beneath the grate, allowing ashes and embers to slip through a crack, igniting an exposed timber beneath it; an ancient beam smoldering in the cellar. It glowed; a red, ominous hue. When firemen finally reached it they knew the slightest breeze would have set it ablaze, erupting into a disaster: spontaneous combustion.

Those who came to help doused it just in time. Roger returned to discover the damage and had no choice but to replace the heavily compromised beam as well as the cracked stone inside the fireplace. There was nobody to blame. Everyone concerned considered this incident a blessing in disguise. The base of their fireplace was as old as the house and it was susceptible to cracking at any time. Had it happened during the night or while their family was outside, away from the house, perhaps off enjoying another winter sledding session, there would have been no way to salvage the house. The elemental power of fire is as frightening as it is comforting...both a blessing and a curse.

Andrea was home alone, working on a school project. All of her papers and materials were sprawled across their dining room table. She was about fifteen at the time. The rest of her family was off on a festive excursion, a trip to the local bakery down in the village; a favorite haunt. Far too devoted a student, she preferred the quiet (a rarity in such a crowded household) to a doughnut, especially since something special was bound to later come her way. While hovering over a muddled mass of notes begging to be organized, she detected an odd scent in the air. At first Andrea thought she might be

about to receive a visitor as the air would often become damp and acrid just prior to a spectral show, something she'd accepted long before. ***That*** she was prepared for...

But it was not that type of odor. In fact, it was something more threatening. The metallic smell triggered her internal alarms. She knew it was something serious. The house began filling with a gauze-white smoke. She yanked open the windows in the room then ran into the kitchen. As she'd passed the cellar door, it was obvious from billowing smoke squeezing itself through cracks in the wood: the cellar hole was at its source. It was the most frightened she had ever been in her life. Seizing the telephone, placing the receiver to her ear as she dialed, Andrea was petrified to discover there was no dial tone present. Their phone line was dead. Dread instantly transformed into a panic-stricken attack. The telephone was not working and there was fire in the hole.

Plowing out the door, the youngster ran as hard as she'd ever run; knowing time was of the essence. It was critical she get to someone fast, someone with a phone. The house was secluded and the neighborhood was so in name only. At that time, there were a few neighbors particularly close by. Running to the closest house, nobody was there. God! She moved on, heart pounding out of her chest. Tears began pouring as she realized how far away the next house was; and what if no one was there? As she cried it became harder to breathe, harder to see. The aroma of rotting leaves was all she could detect in autumn. The earth was wet beneath her feet; she slid and fell on slick leaves. Moving into the middle of the road, Andrea focused all of her attention on the double yellow line, unable to bear thinking about what might be happening to their house. There was very little traffic on Round Top Road during those days; it was safe enough to race head down, for speed. She finally found her way to Mrs. Dublin's door. Collapsing in a distant neighbor's open arms, trembling and exhausted, she begged for help. Barely able to breathe, let alone speak, the woman placed the distraught child into a chair; a sip of cold water cleared her throat. She uttered only one word: Fire! Instantly on the telephone, Mrs. Dublin summoned assistance. She and her husband dashed to their car with the terrified teenager in tow. It required far less time to drive the mile than it had taken to sprint the same distance. Sirens were not far behind them.

The farmhouse was filled with white-to-yellow smoke. Mr. Dublin insisted the ladies remain outside while he went inside the perilous structure. Having identified the problem before the firemen arrived; he took them directly into the cellar, where he'd discovered the boiler had run dry. It took hours for the house to clear once the boiler was shut down. The fire chief shook his head, knowing how close this family had come to losing their house...again. Three times over three years. A pattern was emerging. It seemed the element of fire and this particular home were inextricably linked.

The rest of her family pulled into the driveway directly behind the red fire engine. One can only imagine how they must have reacted to the sight. Roger leapt from their car then ran to his eldest daughter, anxious to know what had occurred and if she was all right. Her brief explanation of events sent him in search of the fire chief, who had returned to the cellar. Roger caught up with him and saw for himself how close they had come to complete destruction of their property. It was chilling. The telephone wires were literally fused to the beam overhead, bonding together with the other electrical wires nearby. The intense heat emanating from a broken boiler system melted every wire in its wake, rendering useless the telephone in a house gone entirely dark, due to a piece of malfunctioning equipment on the verge of exploding. Roger stood paralyzed, staring at the scene; a potential disaster mercifully circumvented.

Though the crisis was averted, fallout was extensive; serious damage done. Roger would soon have his hands filled with bills though he didn't complain. There was nobody to blame. Roger knew how this could have gone, how the inflammatory scenario might have played out without the intervention of his daughter and their newest family friends. With sincerest thanks extended, the couple sent the neighbors home. Andrea remained in the back seat of the car, trying to regain her composure. Cynthia sidled up beside her, wiping tears from her biggest sister's eyes; she saw how upsetting the ordeal had been and offered to help with the distraction of a sweet treat, a kind gesture of support. Cindy placed her jelly doughnut in Andrea's hands, the damp napkin first.

"Here, Annie. I got the **best** one in the case! You can have it. It'll make you feel better. Daddy said you should be proud! He said **you** saved our house!" Ah, comfort food...the beginning of a dangerous trend. Andrea took

a deep breath, accepting the tasty morsel, a special gift from an even sweeter sister. They shared the doughnut, though Andrea's portion did not have far to travel to reach its intended destination, as her stomach was still in her throat.

"Is it eradicating evil? Or are we like children, left alone in the house at night, who light candle after candle to keep away the darkness.

We don't see that the darkness has a purpose – though we may not understand it – and so, in our terror, we end up burning down the house!"

Margaret Weis

feet to the fire

“A spark neglected makes a mighty fire.”

Robert Herrick

Carolyn stood too close to the flames. It seemed as if she was begging for a disaster or perhaps secretly wishing the pink fuzzy slippers dead. Sometimes the smell of singed polyester, mixed with the distinct odor of melting rubber, would indicate a potential problem. In spite of the repeated warnings from a concerned family she would tempt fate unconsciously, coming within inches of white-hot embers. Had she been barefoot, it would have blistered delicate skin. Instead, fire shriveled the protective slippers, crinkling the only barrier between her toes and a blatant health hazard. On a few different occasions it posed a real danger. Her children wondered if she could feel the heat at all. It was obvious their mother was otherwise preoccupied; lost in thought of word or deed whenever these frighteningly close encounters occurred. Unaware of her surroundings, there was a vacancy in her stare, startled as someone pulled her away from the flames. In no way deliberate on her part, not a death wish, whenever it happened she was distant; not fully present. It happened several times...too close to the flames...too far away to notice.

How could it be, Carolyn had no sense of danger; no sensation at all while standing on the hearthstone, on the verge of combustion? What was it about a fireplace which produced this ethereal affect, soliciting then deflecting her attention away from what she should have been watching most attentively? There were times when she kept a safe distance, enjoying its glowing warmth along with the rest of her family. Then there were times when she'd virtually covet the flames, hovering above them; moments when she would claim to be cold to the bone; cold as death. Huddling up, feet to the fire, she could not get warm, no matter how close she'd draw her shivering torso to the inferno. Carolyn was not accountable for this behavior; she was a vehicle for it.

The fire was a life force, sending cryptic messages from within its flames. It smoked and spoke by hissing out its own language, never the same twice. Numerous manifestations occurred on the slab of cold granite beside a metal

grate, logs lapped at by flames licking its lips to escape. The hearthstone was a magnet: a special place, the specific portal where dimensions intermingled. Over the years in the house it proved to be the point of passage. Apparitions made an entrance there and its blue light bent the established laws of physics: visions and visitations...a point of grand entrance for the stars of the show.

The mistress of the house was tired and overwrought one night. It had been long, hard labor cutting wood all afternoon. Everyone was tired. Most of the family was in the parlor as Carolyn entered, fresh from the steaming shower. Emerging from her bedroom, she passed by her husband, feet dangling from the loveseat; her deliberately antagonistic gesture startling the dozing soul, a single swat from the belt of her robe. "It's your turn." Crossing directly to the fireplace, she dried her hair beside an open flame. After a few minutes, while leaning forward to rewrap her flowing locks in the towel, she suddenly lost consciousness and crumbled to the floor, landing in a pile on the hearthstone. The sound of impact was so alarming, the sleepy man sprung from his prone position before anyone else had a chance to react. He leapt over his children like a terrified gazelle evading a pursuer, running for its life on the Serengeti Plain. A stunning achievement: instantaneous, heroic rescue as an act of love. Carolyn's feet were on fire.

Defying gravity, he was beside her with a bounce from sofa to hearthstone. A single yank had pulled her feet from the slippers, fully engulfed in flames. Cradled in his arms, he carried her away from danger while Andrea ran for a cool washcloth to place on her forehead. The putrid odor of melting polyester fibers and rubber permeated the air. While the girls rapidly opened doors and windows, Roger closely examined his wife. She had escaped unscathed from an ordeal with a potential to claim her, had circumstances been different, had she been home alone. It was no time to chastise her for standing so close, too close to the fire. It was no time for any kind of reprisal. Instead, her children gathered around to welcome her back to them. Hearts raced. Hands trembled. A few fearful tears were shed that night...the fear of what could have been.

Remarkably, both her feet were uninjured, not burned at all. Roger's quick

actions spared her the horrible pain of blistered skin. As Carolyn was able to speak again, she did so by gratefully acknowledging his efforts on her behalf. The girls described those few tense moments to their mother, explaining how daddy had sprung into action. Roger seemed embarrassed by all their praise, disguising it with the devilish grin he kept in reserve for awkward emotional interludes. Playfully accusing his wife of hating those damn Santa slippers enough to set them on fire, while she was wearing them...she finally smiled. A crisis averted...this time. She would have to be more careful.

Carolyn continued to suffer from the fainting spells. It was not an isolated incident. This persistent dilemma worsened over time. Within several weeks Roger would be, once again, plucking his wife from the jaws of a fiery death. They were home alone. She collapsed in a pile on the hearthstone and both of her legs folded into the open flames. A pair of heavy denim jeans bought her husband time enough to snuff out the fire; another disconcerting episode, to say the least. His fears coupled with frustrations; he had legitimate concerns. What if he had not been home that morning? But he was...and used this near tragic opportunity to confront the severity of the situation; time to address the issue...to acknowledge the inherent dangers to heart, hearth and home. It was time to resolve the dilemma. He had his wife's attention. He'd saved her life, and she knew it. Carolyn felt increasingly weak and vulnerable; frightened again by what might have been.

Roger insisted and Carolyn agreed to visit another doctor. There had to be an explanation, some remedy for a condition which became life threatening. In time they would discover the truth; a mystery more than medical in nature. The will of another was being exerted upon this mistress of the house, with malice and forethought...with deliberate intent: A bitch from hell.

Her light was being excised and extinguished. Carolyn began entering the realm she could not comprehend and was therefore unable to fight its entry. Flight was no longer an option, no fight left in her; there was nowhere to run, not a peaceful place to hide away from herself. The woman was beginning to experience an **oppression** imposed, inevitably leading her where she did not

want to go, leading her to experience the terrifying presence of another in her consciousness. It was the presence of a spirit so cold she could not get warm. Ultimately, Carolyn would begin to see the world through the evil eyes of an intruding soul and come to know the unbearable darkness of being.

*“If you follow reason far enough it always leads
to conclusions that are contrary to reason.”*

Samuel Butler

bats!

“Adventure is not outside; it is within.”

Ray Stannard Baker

There were thousands of them. Their property was littered with bats; in the barn and in the trees; amazing displays at twilight. Darting frantically across the yard, diving and flirting with the horizon as the sky turned shades of rose and lavender; they were a wonder to behold. Mosquitoes were never really a problem, even though they grew to approximately the size of these predators themselves, destined to be meals for hoards of brown bats dotting a skyline; flying across the landscape at light speed. Though relatively harmless, their number was intimidating. At first the children were terrified and their parents were overwhelmed by the sheer volume, but, as with all things at their farm, “Ya get used to it.” Lining the rafters of the barn, hanging upside down like little vampires, they’d sleep all day and come to life only as the Sun began to wane at the strange time wedged between day and night. From dusk ‘til dawn the nocturnal souls re-emerged: creatures of the night. Whenever moonlight illuminated their wild journey, it was pure spectacle.

It was late, sometime after eleven o’clock when an evil onslaught occurred. Roger and Carolyn were watching the news when the shrill, squeaking beasts made their presence known. During ten summers spent in a farmhouse prone to remain cold regardless of the weather, there were only a few stifling nights when it was too hot to sleep upstairs. The heat of the day would rise and get trapped; bedrooms would become intolerable if the wind died after sunset. It was one of those nights. There was a sleeper sofa out on the porch. Christine and Cindy asked if they could camp out there for the night. Roger pulled the heavy monstrosity open as Carolyn gathered sheets. The porch was spacious, even with the full-sized bed sprawled wide open. It was fully screened in and well-protected from the elements and insects. Andrea had intended to crash out there, too. Nancy and April braved their own bedroom with nothing but a box fan and wide-open windows but no one was asleep yet. The temperature

topped one hundred that day. No one *could* sleep!

The night remained quiet; moist air was stagnant. Even the crickets seemed lethargic from steam heat. Suddenly, a screaming rush of bats flew down the chimney, filling the parlor with wings and things. Parents began bobbing and weaving to avoid impact. A farmhouse was instantly alive with exceedingly unpleasant activity. As the bats, five or six in total, realized the error of their *way*, a mistaken path taken directly into the house, they did of course become as panicked as their hosts and tried to promptly exit the premises. Both front doors were wide open onto the porch and they followed the scent of fresh air. Where did it lead them? Onto the front porch: Shrieking is never as loud as when it comes through the pinched vocal chords of an adolescent girl...times two. Christine and Cynthia were hysterical. Ducking beneath the sheets with each pass, they begged for deliverance from the wretched vermin. Roger sent Andrea running to the woodshed to retrieve the set of badminton rackets: Let the games begin! Had anyone been outside watching in the bright moonlight of the night they would have witnessed events at once comical and traumatic. With eyes closed, it would have sounded much worse than it actually looked. Upheaval reigned supreme. Nancy and April came running downstairs to see what huge disruption was happening on the ground level of their house, thus plowing into a pair of bats circling the dining room. Both girls had an ample head of hair in which to tangle, which naturally happened. Chaos! Bedlam! There are no words which adequately express a frenetic scene as it unfolded. Roger threw one racket to Nancy. She began flailing wildly through thick air, not really aiming, but relying instead on a lucky strike. Carolyn was on their porch trying to open the door, providing access to an exit, swatting at them with each pass; not to injure, but rather to usher them outside. Andrea joined her, weapon in hand. Roger covered the parlor. April hid up underneath the dining room table, making a bit of a racket. One down...at April's feet...only wounded. She instantly retreated from an insecure position. Roger bounced one off the wall, finishing the job with a single swat. Meanwhile, mother and eldest daughter were proving to be lousy doubles partners; a poor match for crafty critters. As formidable adversaries, these bats used uncanny evasive maneuvers, outwitting their opponents. Finally, at precisely the same time, both ladies made contact and each bat went flying into the bed: a grand slam. One fluttered furiously in protest at the center of Cynthia's lap and one was

caught in the web of Christine's hair, wounded and fighting to extricate itself from an impenetrable blond mass. Chris still has nightmares about this brief but horrific event and has never recovered from her fear of bats. Nor has she forgiven her eldest sister for having such pathetically poor aim. Cindy cannot tolerate anything flying near her head; she's instantly transported back to that terrible night of her life whenever a bird or even a butterfly draws too close. Childhood trauma: the gift that keeps on giving.

Perhaps it was an innocent mistake as a single bat chasing something under cover of darkness could have been followed by others in search of a meal and then down the chimney they all came. Though it would happen several more times during their decade on the farm, there was nothing necessarily sinister or supernatural about these bizarre occurrences. It may well explain why the chimney had been sealed...perhaps mistaken as swallows? Yet, the bats did seem to gravitate to the structure and they were repeatedly found dead in the house; one thirsty creature drowned in their toilet! The first one up and out of bed that unfortunate morning let everyone else know about an intruder with a single high-pitched holler, vibrating the household, walls to foundation: poor Nancy. It was always a rather unsavory encounter. The odd and inexplicable occurrence cannot, in good faith, be attributed to anything other than the law of averages; with that many bats incessantly circling their property someone was bound to take a wrong turn from time to time. It was certainly a spooky but apparently natural phenomenon, or so they presumed. Mrs. Warren later claimed it was yet another manifestation of the resident demon attempting to possess the mistress of the house, though no one in the family subscribed to her lurid interpretation of its meaning as an evil threat or omen; harbingers of things to come. Like the flies; only bigger. It warrants inclusion because, for *some* members of the family, it is still a delightful tale to tell, though others are not quite so fondly amused. Carolyn steadfastly maintains her position on the subject of bats: of all the occurrences in the house over the years they lived there, natural or supernatural, her most horrifying memory is the sound of a bat flying over her face in the darkness of night. Nothing ever touched her core fears more profoundly than these creatures. No one could afford to forget an obvious connection made. The name Bathsheba begins with B-A-T.

"May you have warm words on a cool evening, a full moon

on a dark night, and a smooth road all the way to your door.”

An Irish Blessing

The Child in the House

Walter Pater (1839-1894)

“For sitting one day in the garden below an open window, he heard people talking, and could not but listen, how, in a sleepless hour, a sick woman had seen one of the dead sitting beside her, come to call her hence; and from the broken talk evolved with much clearness the notion that not all those dead people had really departed to the churchyard, nor were quite so motionless as they looked, but led a secret, half-fugitive life in their old homes, quite free by night, though sometimes visible in the day, dodging from room to room, with no great goodwill towards those who shared the space with them. All night the figure sat beside him in the reveries of his broken sleep, and was not quite gone in the morning — an odd, irreconcilable new member of the household, making the sweet familiar chambers unfriendly and suspect by its uncertain presence. He could have hated the dead he had pitied so, for being thus. Afterwards he came to think of those poor, home-returning ghosts, which all men have fancied to themselves — the revenants — pathetically, as crying, or beating with vain hands at the doors, as the wind came, their cries distinguishable in it as a wild inner note.”



~ A figure gray and ghostly ~
Christine as a 19th Century maiden in a vintage fashion show

“In death, I am born.”
American Indian Proverb

III.

Wicked Woman...Evil Ways

“Judge not according to the appearance but judge righteous judgment.”
John VII v. 24

Once the worst of the shock subsided from the “*torches*” incident, Carolyn became hell bent and determined to identify the demon who wished her dead. As months passed she became increasingly sad and preoccupied with morose thoughts, all revolving around death. She began serious historical research. Carolyn became as a tortured soul; the one who did the haunting. From local graveyards to dusty record rooms, archives of libraries to tattered parchment of old family Bibles; whenever and wherever she could find a reference to the house and its history, she took detailed notes, compiling a story centuries past and personalities passed. Who were these spirits? Why do some remain when most move on? Would there be any salvation for their souls? She was compelled to resolve this dilemma; send them on their way to the other side. But weren’t they already on the other side? So how could they be in two very different spaces simultaneously? In spite of numerous, sometimes horrifying encounters, it was the mystery she longed to absorb intellectually; the only thing she and her husband were in total agreement about: there had to be a logical, scientifically-based explanation for what was happening. There had to be some reason why the spirits had lingered after death; some way to usher them onward, to achieve a release from what she perceived to be a perpetual imprisonment. The woman **needed** to understand; a moral imperative on two fronts. First, she’d longed to spare her family and herself this gross intrusion. Likewise, she’d wondered if she had been called to this house to help these spirits escape it. Carolyn believed if she had the power and knowledge to do so, it was her ethical obligation to provide an escape hatch for them; a portal from which they could flee but one which could also be sealed shut; the door closed so tightly they could never return: Part of the plan...selfish by design.

Before Carolyn could be an usher in the grand theatre of life and death, she had to know far more about whom and what she was dealing with; it required educating herself on a taboo subject with which she was formerly unfamiliar. There were no tickets; no assigned seating for these patrons. How would she

lead them down dark corridors to a proper place in the cosmos if she did not know where they belonged? And what if they belonged precisely where they were? And what does God have to do with any of it? Emotionally conflicted, she possessed little compassion for their plight. Beyond unsympathetic, she felt nothing but contempt for the wicked one who was known as Bathsheba. Feeling at once defeated and empowered by this process, she applied skills of a studious observer to a problem made manifest in her home.

Carolyn began to consider other aspects of their existence, spawning a holy host of questions mulling around in her mind. An intellectual evolution born of her natural curiosity quelled some of the intrinsic fear which had become a prominent aspect of her daily (and nightly) existence; never a time when she did not look and listen around the house and wonder what was coming next; never an hour when she slept peacefully even in the presence of her husband, as he was utterly incapable of protecting her, through no fault of his own. He too had become its unwitting victim and this could happen again, at virtually any moment. It could happen to her children again with her presence in their farmhouse, a few feet away, incapable of hearing them scream out for help; unable to intervene on their behalf...no means of protecting her young.

Not for an instant did she lose sight of Reality: the new paranormal. It was what perplexed her most; the love her children had for a place offering only a promise of pain and torment. Carolyn felt nothing more than self-righteous indignation for those who'd disturbed her lovely dream, converting it into a nightmare; ones who refused to relinquish their hold on a place she rightfully considered to be her own. It had called to her. It had tempted her and begged her to come. The farm all but beckoned the family to love it, to come and call it home. Then, in a home place they adored, the farmhouse did everything in its supernatural power to drive them out; after embrace came total rejection. It made no sense at all. This farmhouse had robbed her of so much, including motherhood. It was impossible to be the mother she had been prior to taking up residence. Her rapt attention had been drastically diverted. She'd become a fear-based mortal whereas once she had been carefree, happiest when with her children. Believing *all* she could do on their behalf was be watchful and listen; to do her best to protect them against this supernatural onslaught, she wondered: how could she possibly intercede? As long as the family remained

in the house she believed her girls would remain continually subjected to the whims of the dead; one scary scenario after another. She had no conceivable way of defending them, short of abandoning the house altogether. According to all of her children and her husband, for entirely different reasons, this was simply not an option. Their complicit willingness to dwell in the midst of the constant fear of intrusion was unbelievable to her.

Questions persisted, magnified further by so many discoveries made within the dust-laden shelves of the town library. Writing for hours, the woman was well aware the books she was using could not be removed from the premises. They were simply too old and fragile, far too valuable; she had no choice but to read / write simultaneously, often recording pertinent entries in shorthand. Learning much about the folks of a town, time allotted for this task was brief, usually only two or three hours. The library kept odd hours so it was a matter of getting there when she could: reading and writing until the librarian began turning off the lights. A chore with its own reward: Uncommon knowledge.

The same held true for Burrillville Town Hall. Carolyn was free to browse through archives but there were only certain hours to do so. It took months to compile the historical docudrama of a region; only the beginning of a project which consumed a great deal of her time. Mindful she had to return home, there to decipher the details of scrawled and scribbled notes, writing again in more thorough language what had been transcribed then interpreted earlier, the work frequently continued late into the night. Carolyn did not notice her attention slipping away from the children...but they did.

From pure fact to folklore she dug through piles of books the way she'd dig through a mound of earth, in search of buried treasure. It was never tedious work but was instead the most fascinating endeavor, filled with the history and mystery of those long dead. It was in fact, a labor of love, in spite of the original reason she considered the chore to be a necessity. Cold winter days kept her inside for the duration of that mean season but once spring arrived, Carolyn was gone, off to some old building, sitting among volumes of even older pages; writing feverishly to chronicle extensive information at

hand: a what-when-where-who-why and how; abridged version, as she summarized everything even remotely associated with her house and its history. Seeking stories of everyone who ever lived there, Carolyn believed the manifestations were people, albeit dead people, whose history within those walls left them with a reason to remain there. It was not happenstance. They were not some random spirits passing through; floating in on a lark. Of this, she was certain. They were a sudden chill in the air, recognizable figures; familiar characters by the time any attempt was made to identify them. Her children had given them names, as if they'd been pets: Manny. Oliver. As always, Carolyn held steadfastly to a belief which presumed a direct correlation between entities as former occupants. The task to prove it such was formidable.

While Carolyn worked diligently to establish the identities of many others, her own was undergoing a radical transformation as two disparate elements were combining in a conspiracy to create a woman nobody recognized. She'd shriveled up like fruit left out in the Sun. Her voice became hollow and shrill compared to the deeper, richer tones with which everybody was accustomed. Tastes and interests changed. Her language became peppered with archaic words and terms seldom heard in modern society. Presuming it was because of books in which she was immersed, her constant exposure to centuries-old terminology, no one thought much of it at first, passing it off as the result of repetition, the power of suggestion tucked within the pages of time. Carolyn assumed a variety of different traits, a collection of quirks and foibles which had not been present in her personality prior to living in the farmhouse. For a while it seemed as if death and darkness blocked all the light, shrouding her existence, bending her mind to its will beneath a blanket of utter despair. To a certain extent her identity was slipping away but it was being replaced with a more well-established understudy who brought a personality all her own to the stage. The children could see their mother changing though they'd never discussed what it was they saw happening. It was a gradual decline; the slow descent into hell for those who had to witness the metamorphosis, just as it was for the woman feeling the ravages of its effects. Though she had always been a thoughtful, self-aware woman Carolyn did not, could not comprehend the transition she was experiencing. In time she would relinquish her being, allowing the change to occur naturally; no idea of the difference perceived by

others, family and friends alike. It seemed as if she simply gave up, stopped fighting it; acquiescing to the will of another. Sam had noticed within a few months of the move. His eyes did not lie. He witnessed how rapidly Carolyn was aging, how depleted she'd become. Her youthful glow extinguished, the vibrancy muted: Technicolor turning to shades of gray. Diminishing further with each passing day, deteriorating rapidly, her lust for life itself, a formerly insatiable appetite, appeared to be wasting away with her physical form.

Cathi, too, could not help but notice her friend being adversely impacted by experiences she'd endured, depriving her of something elemental, essentially altering a woman she knew well. It was distressing, especially for those who had not seen her in quite some time. When they returned to witness her state of being it was shocking, as if decades were compressed into a few months. Beyond startling, it was disheartening: Spooky. No one discussed it with her, afraid to bring up a difficult subject. Boo! Who the hell are you?

During this period, Carolyn's saving grace arrived. As if this presence was intended to counterbalance the malignant character tormenting her, no matter how wicked, this evil spirit was no match for someone so pure of heart. Fran Sederback was a loving soul, an ethereal entity held captive by the corporeal world. She did not belong here...too damn good for the place. Yet, she took full advantage of her pause on this planet to reflect upon the true Nature of existence...the gift of life. Enjoying a lifetime of adventure and discovery, when the time came, she would not willingly relinquish it. Magic manifested when this friendship formed, as another confluence of events occurred.

Carolyn headed into Gloucester, there to rummage through their archives at the town hall. Before the town of Burrillville was incorporated, it had been a part of its neighbor to the south. She was told by the clerk in Harrisville that some of the documents she was seeking could be found there. She had a very productive session in Chepachet, due primarily to unfettered access, having met a historian in the records room who'd been eager to assist in the effort.

Driving through beautiful downtown Chepachet was a sensual pleasure in any season; a sight to behold. There were no traffic lights and only one main drag through this village; don't blink! To do so meant missing the quaint old haven entirely. Anxious to return home before the bus arrived, Carolyn was rushing and nearly forgot what she had intended to purchase while there. She quickly looked around, locating a perfect parking spot. There were several. Chepachet was a sleepy little hollow. Most of its residents had no choice but to travel elsewhere for work, into the city to find gainful employment. At this time of day it was all but deserted; a veritable ghost town.

No need for a list. There was only one item Carolyn wanted...and just one place to buy it. She pulled into the space right in front of **Brown & Hopkins Country Store**, there to purchase a wedge of Vermont cheddar cheese. Any excuse was a great one to step across the dimly lit threshold of this charming business establishment: America's oldest, continuously operated retail shop. It was splendid; an antique lover's paradise: a destination. All of the display cases and fixtures were authentic, hundreds of years old. REAL penny candy in heavy glass jars lined their oak shelves, awaiting little fingers to pillage for favorites from red and black licorice to Squirrel nuts to Mary Jane bars...and everything else imaginable. Carolyn felt guilty coming without the girls but she had only enough money to purchase the cheese so it was best if she went alone. Glancing up at the clock bought her a few extra minutes to peruse the premises and still make it home on time. High up on a shelf, deliberately out of reach, she spotted the display of old bottles. One of them caught her eye. Admiring them from a distance, the clerk asked if she would like to look at anything more closely. Yes...that one, please. It was free blown, lopsided, with a beautiful apple-green tint. The word COCAINE was embossed across the front. While studying its raw pontil bottom, deeply inset at the base, an unusual woman approached her. Without any formal introduction, she began explaining how all free blown bottles were snapped off at the stem of the blow pipe. Thus began a lively conversation regarding the digging of bottles from centuries before their own, from abandoned dumps of households like their own: old. Each had discovered a treasure trove of bottles on their own property and each knew the intrinsic value of every one of them.

"Cocaine, huh? That'll cure what ails ya." The petite woman was joking;

an equally diminutive giggle escaping her lips as she handed the bottle back to Carolyn. Bewitched by the charming demeanor of the little lady she would soon consider a cherished friend, in a matter of moments their bond began to form. As for Carolyn, a casual acquaintance proved to be her salvation.

“Never touch the stuff myself.” Carolyn smiled at the woman, watching her pale green eyes through the round, wire-rimmed granny glasses which suited her face to perfection. “Can you even believe they used to sell cocaine for medicinal purposes at *ye olde apothecary shoppe*...cheap as dirt?”

“Ah, the good olden days!” The ladies laughed and soon lost track of time.

“Fran.” Extending her hand, she juggled her few items so not to drop them.

“Carolyn. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Returning the gesture in kind.

The price of the bottle they’d examined together was \$6.00; more than fair. Carolyn knew she couldn’t afford it, offering it to a newfound friend instead. Neither of the women could justify the expenditure with a bevy of children to feed. Handing it over to the clerk with their thanks, they wandered the store together, discussing 17th and 18th Century glassware, including old medicine bottles they had salvaged, snatched back from the jaws of time and depths of Earth. The chimes of a clock struck, startling both of them. It was 3:00 p.m. and Carolyn had yet to choose a block of cheese. Fran lived close enough to make it home on time, but Carolyn knew she could not do the same without breaking the speed limit or the sound barrier. Quickly exchanging telephone numbers, as Vermont cheddar happened to be on sale, there was money left over so Fran helped her choose several pieces of candy for the girls. Waning light cast shadows as they stepped from the curb. Each departed with a wave, smiling broadly, bubbling with enthusiasm. Carolyn raced the sunset home, arriving at the farm in record-breaking time, carrying the small brown paper bag as a token of her affection and apology. Her girls were all out in the yard, wondering where their mother had gone; no note left on the table. Once they saw the bag, they knew where she’d been...and all was forgiven.

Fran called early in the evening, anxious to make sure she had written the number down correctly in all their confusion and haste. She was lonely, too.

The women spent an hour or more on the line. Thus began a friendship with Fran Sederback; one which would last the duration of her lifetime.

During their initial visits, Carolyn chose not to disclose anything about the “trouble” in her home, afraid to scare her away. Fran was a history buff. She fell madly in love with their old farmhouse. Carolyn was equally enamored with Fran’s house, a magnificent Federal style built in the 1770’s, as large as her own. It too was constructed on a splendid piece of property, about five acres, adjacent to the Smith and Sayles Reservoir on Chestnut Hill Road, just beyond the village of Chepachet. The two women began exploring what they had in common; neither of them especially anxious to discuss the one thing they each secretly feared might chase the other to a land far, far away.

One warm summer morning Carolyn loaded her brood into the car headed for Chepachet. Fran had big plans for their day. The women would tote eight children to the flea market in Foster. It was an out-of-doors outing, open only on weekends, (weather permitting); about twenty-five booths set up to please anyone interested in anything old. There they discovered one treasure after another, none of which they were able to afford, of course, but it was most certainly enjoyable to peruse: vintage clothing, antique glassware, tools that had been well used hundreds of years before. It was a fascinating trip back in time. Fran’s three children were as well-behaved as five girls, so two mothers were free from worry as all their young ones scattered throughout the market, according to interests. Christine gravitated to anything in miniature and was found admiring hand-carved doll house furniture and tiny tea sets. Michael, Fran’s eldest, was located within a vast array of fine china and collectibles. All in agreement: a balmy summer Saturday is a wonderful thing to waste.

Returning to her home, Fran began to brew a pot of chamomile tea as their children played together outside, all but Andrea, who was instantly drawn to Fran’s lovely antique piano, located on an inside wall of the parlor beside an open window. From where she was sitting on its bench Annie could see Fran standing at her kitchen sink. Leaning over, she asked permission to play the ancient and elegant instrument. Permission granted.

“Help yourself! No one ever plays it...that poor old thing must be lonely!”

Fran's kindhearted words were a premonition of sorts, as *someone* warmly welcomed the youngster's nimble fingers to its yellowed ivory keys.

While the women shared a hot spot of tea at the kitchen table Andrea began sight-reading from the fragile sheet music adorning the instrument, displayed before her eyes. "Simple Gifts" a traditional Shaker hymn. Approaching the end of the page, it turned by itself. Andrea stopped playing, a bit startled by the odd timing of the event, though she assumed the breeze from the nearby window must have been her unwitting assistant. Finishing the piece, Andrea went back to the beginning, a creature of habit. One thing she'd learned over years of music classes: repetition was her friend but apparently not her only friend. Practice *does* make perfect. When she again arrived at the end of the page, it turned. The tune abruptly ended. Andrea's fingers froze on the keys.

"Excuse me, Fran? Do you have a ghost?" A question: to the point, as blunt force trauma; the kitchen suddenly became as silent as a piano. Andrea rose from the bench, joining muted mothers at the table. Fran finally responded.

"Why do you ask?" Some trepidation detected in her quiet voice, Fran had no idea how familiar her guests were with such anomalies. Andrea explained what happened...twice. Fran went into the parlor. Sheet music left open had been folded shut, neatly placed at the center of its upright stand. Proof!

"You *do* have a ghost! We do, too...more than one. We even have a spirit who *plays* our piano!" Andrea was entirely forthcoming...nothing to hide.

Newsflash: Fran looked at Carolyn, who then nodded knowingly. A shared glance opened a whole new chapter of friendship as a mutual secret kept was instantly revealed; a subject on which to dwell and often commiserate during difficult ordeals: stories to relate, images to describe over tea. Fran returned to the kitchen; conversation began in earnest. Andrea had a tune stuck in her head, one she wanted to master. Remaining at the piano, she sat down beside a harmless, helpful new friend, someone who obviously appreciated hearing the beloved instrument played once again.

There was one particularly emotional story to tell. Carolyn found herself on the verge of tears as she told Fran about a wicked woman and her evil ways, recounting the life-altering events she had endured. Fran was astonished. She tried to comfort the tortured soul sitting across from her at the table; reaching out to someone she cared for but could not help in any way, except to listen. Her own situation was benign by comparison; the spirit in Fran's house was rather innocuous, appearing occasionally, no hint of malfeasance attached to her persona. She too had a woman wandering the halls of her house yet she never challenged Fran's status as mistress of the house. Instead, her behavior was consistently kind, seemingly grateful there was a caretaker in her home, one who loved the place as much as she had in life. Though Fran was unable to determine who this was, she identified her as a former occupant, perhaps the original mistress of the house, based in part on the clothing she had worn; 18th Century garb, always the same simple dress with wide, worn pockets.

Later in the afternoon, believing Carolyn could use the fresh air their walk would provide, Fran invited her to come along as she fed the birds. Andrea went as well, satisfied with her progress on the piano. Following Fran deep into the woods, after a brief pit stop at the back of the house where she filled her pockets with seed, both of her guests became mesmerized; inspired by the sight of something holy. The diminutive woman walked quietly into thick woods, silently motioning for her guests to lag behind. Wading through the thicket grown up beneath towering oaks, she stood in the center of a natural clearing, filling both palms with bird seed. Slowly raising her arms up to the heavens, they came...descending from branches above. A symphony of bird song erupted, filling mild air with nature's sweetest sounds, graciously and gratefully welcoming her into their home. Swooping down from their limbs overhead dozens of birds landed upon her outstretched arms waiting to be fed by hand, as gentle with her as she was with them. When her palms emptied, they hovered as if trained to do so, anticipating a refill they'd clearly come to expect; Fran kindly obliged. The birds, waiting patiently, perched upon her shoulders or head, anxious but polite, each ready for its fair share of the daily feast: holy to behold...a miraculous sight. The few precious moments spoke to Carolyn in heart. She'd been blessed to find this special soul, someone she could trust and confide in; someone close to God. Theirs was spiritual union,

precisely what Carolyn required; so to restore her faith in humankind. Fran's daily ritual was as intimate as a prayer, as lovely a sight as Carolyn had ever seen in her lifetime. Her friend was truly an ethereal creature, in touch with Nature, in concert with the Universe: a poet. Fran had much to teach and in those moments, Carolyn saw she had much to learn from this extraordinary woman. They would have years together; each free to explore the recesses of the other's heart and mind; destined to become the dearest of friends.

Andrea watched in awe, silently observing a process, wondering how this kind of trust was born. She too had an affinity for birds, an innate ability to communicate with the delicate creatures, though she could not even imagine being able to entice them in such a manner. At the time, she felt the slightest twinge of envy seep into her thoughts, instantly dismissing it as shamefully inappropriate. As the birds gracefully ascended through dappled sunlight, she marveled at the variety of colors exposed beneath their extended wings. Like the spirits, the color is there all the time; one simply needs to know where to look and how to look up. Otherwise, their magic remains invisible to mortal eyes. Sated, returning to their nests, a child hoped someday to possess a spirit Light enough to attract birds from the heavens above.

It was a joyful day. Friends parted wishing it was dawn instead of dusk. In time there were many visits between the homes and several dumpsites to dig. Fran came into Carolyn's life as an act of God; as Divine Providence County residents who first met in an olde country store: Perfect. Neither could afford the six dollar medicine bottle: Typical. Both husbands, virtually in absentia: Irrelevant. So much in common; so little time. No doubt; Fran Sederback was the good witchy woman, in touch with The Mother...Nature. Her presence in Carolyn's life was indeed a Godsend; her saving grace. If not for Fran, her friend would not have made it through what was yet to come. Together they scoured the archives. In the village of Chepachet, they soon discovered the identity of Carolyn's arch rival and nemesis; one evil mistress of the house. Bathsheba Sherman. Based on what they learned of her life, she became the principle suspect in death; the likely culprit: The bad witch.

Power is power. It is how this is utilized, what is done with it which counts. What emotion and intention human beings possess is energy expended in an infinite variety of ways. Free will determines choices which shape a destiny; whether or not of divine design the future unfolds through the consciousness: (I am, therefore I think.) If mortals choose to use this power wisely, for good works and acts of kindness it leaves a mark; permanent imprints on a world which could use all the love it can get. Instead, when a dark heart exists, any soul void of good intentions, this too leaves a mark; a permanent scar. We make decisions in every moment of life. Internal conflict is often resolved in conscience, though most people struggle at one time or another with simply doing the right thing in a given situation. Those without conscience; void of Light, both mortal and immortal, are the scariest souls of all.

If what they discovered was correct, if the accusation was true, Bathsheba Sherman had no conscience. If the whispers were accurate she was the devil incarnate; a criminal who got off the hook. According to the town historian, her inquest was infamous, drawing hoards of interested spectators from many miles away. It stands to reason that the courts worked diligently to separate fact from fiction; such a young woman with her whole life ahead of her, with much to lose; there was a lot at stake and there were those who thought she should be burned at the stake, those at the time who proclaimed her a witch, accused of performing a satanic ritual, resulting in the sacrifice of an infant. It was all too gruesome; the mind-bending description of a baby convulsing then dying due to a needle impaled in its scull. They could find nothing in the records fixing the location of what she would plead was an accidental death but Bathsheba was an Arnold and she'd lived on the Arnold Estate at that age so there was every indication to believe the event occurred in Carolyn's own home. There would come several psychics who assured her of this over time. In the interim, these ladies could only speculate, in much the same way town folk had done so many years before. The mid 1800's seemed so long ago and far away, yet if indeed the woman had returned to claim what she perceived to be her rightful place as mistress of the house, Carolyn could do little else than jockey for position or relinquish it altogether. Her choices set in stone:

Stay and fight or flee the scene of an alleged crime.

Who was this spirit appearing in the night? What motivation possessed her; for what ungodly purpose or reason does she manifest in form and threaten? What was her intention toward Carolyn and the rest of her family? Questions without answers became a burden on her consciousness while attempting to comprehend why some souls defy the Universal rule of law: Physics. Perhaps they adhere to established laws mortals have yet to recognize and interpret. Why do some return when most move on? Time does not always tell or heal.

Bathsheba either escaped the mortal rule of law in a courtroom or she was quite rightfully acquitted. If she was the one who came to haunt and taunt the occupants of the old Arnold Estate, she was capable of bending cosmic laws at will. Her presence, and that of the others, defied everything – from gravity to time and space – as mortals grasp the concepts. Perhaps the time had come to broaden narrow-minded precepts, to determine what forces were at play or how to circumvent their power. Two heads are better than one.

Fran did her utmost to become a resource of support, to offer guidance and encouragement to her friend. Pure of heart, this esoteric being was as close as Carolyn would ever come to an angel in the flesh. Her advice was invaluable; distraction she provided was welcome respite for this troubled woman who could only escape her circumstances when lost within the Earth...up to her elbows in dirt. So that is what the ladies did for fun: intense, focused efforts to detect and exhume lost treasures from shallow gravesites. Plowing through mounds, discovering relics buried beneath the surface so many years before, Carolyn and Fran salvaged rare and valuable fragments of history, someone's trash, assembling quite a collection of perfectly preserved glassware from centuries gone by. The tiring drudgery of the task at hand kept Carolyn from losing her mind. Fran was like a potent antidote, the remedy to counteract the effects of poison, as if God said: "Here, dear...this'll cure what ails ya." Fran was living proof that good triumphs over evil, as Bathsheba never once dared to rear her ugly head in the woman's holy presence. Fran's power was great: pure white Light, casting no shadows, disallowing of the darkness. Whoever or whatever she was, the wicked woman kept her evil ways at some distance for a time, incapable of penetrating the veritable fortress of love surrounding

Carolyn. In the perpetual battle between good and evil, Fran Sederback was a formidable opponent, a queen of passive resistance. As a mighty force to be reckoned with, her purity was so intimidating, Bathsheba never attempted to infiltrate it. Friendship is a blessed gift of human Nature. Fran was evidence of a higher power, proof of the existence of God, destined to become one of the angels she emulated on Earth...as an everlasting Light in the firmament.

“Have you learned the lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside for you? Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced themselves against you, and disputed passage with you?”

Walt Whitman

demon doors

*“Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering.
/ There is a crack in everything, / That’s how the light gets in.”*

Leonard Cohen

The farmhouse had a life of its own. Its doors were not simply wooden and hardware barriers between rooms. They were passages between dimensions; the form and function of time travel. Each door in the house was a portal to the past and future, as well as present, but they were also utilized as an overt method of communication; for the pronouncement of a presence. The spirits were all perfectly capable of coming and going without the benefit of doors and windows. They often walked right through them, especially the children. None requiring anything tangible to make a grand entrance; their presence alone was enough to capture the attention of any mortal and yet, the wrought iron latches would mysteriously lift, creaky doors would slowly open, as if for dramatic effect. Click. Thankfully there were no doorbells; based on how they misused the telephone, a doorbell would have been, at best, an incessant nuisance. They manipulated many objects with ease. It was rather unnerving, walking past their cellar door as something wicked pounded on it from the other side. Even more rattling: to be a child trapped inside a dark space with no escape due to a door which refused to open...because that's how the light gets in. Or, to be suddenly and inexplicably released during the course of the struggle, the violent thrashing; the begging and screaming with tears pouring from eyes which could not see in the darkness, knowing no one could hear it. Click. A vicious joke played time and time again; a hideous game of cat and mouse: the haunting and tauntingly common occurrence in their household. Click. It became an identifiable sound, an eerily familiar snap to attention for whoever was within hearing distance, prompting immediate notice. A trigger. A calling card. A warning. A threat. Click. Whoever heard it happen would instantly question: does someone want a sweater or is it the essence of death entering the room? Those few seconds were the most intolerable of all; fear of the unknown. The time to be scared; nobody knew what was coming from the other side: Next. Fear is born of the unknown; mortals are captivated by

the darkest recesses of imagination. Boo! but who was holding them captive? To be locked inside a space where no lock exists on the door one is wrestling with...this is the definition of fear. The demon doors would not always allow access or escape. An incredibly powerful force could keep them closed, as if locked, when it came time to run for one's life. The series of pathways and portals throughout the house were completely benign one minute, malignant the next. Cellar doors, pantry doors, bedroom doors, burning room, chimney closets, every entrance to the eaves: all problematic at one time or another. Each was a potential prison, all twenty-four of them. No Exit. No Entrance.

Click.

Yet another definition of fear: being the sister on the other side of the door fighting to release her captive sibling; a story all its own. So many incidents happened, it would become redundant to tell every tale, but those of marked significance have been included. Of greatest importance to note is this fact: the farmhouse was alive with death. Those who'd passed, desiring to make a grand entrance, did so in terms mortals were capable of understanding. Click. It was a signal. A clue. An omen. A harbinger of **someone** to come, perhaps (but not necessarily) someone wicked. As a putrid odor and a pervasive chill frequently accompanied whatever spirit flipped the latch, it became easier to distinguish friend from foe relatively quickly. High alert was the paranormal reality of life. After awhile, everyone came to accept it as such. Just as every spirit had its own personality, every door made an original sound all its own, based upon its weight and depth, how warped the wrought iron had become over centuries of use. So many variables; never the same sensation twice: so many souls...prepared to make a grand entrance.

It was frightful. It was likewise a gift. Not everyone on the other side was so frightening. That's how the Light gets in; the crack of a door could often be quite illuminating. Click. Boo who knows? An intrepid journey continued.

In time, a conditioned response, a reflexive reaction became the norm with every member of the family as they learned it might **not** be a mortal entering

the room. Heads up! Cynthia made this mistake only once. Lesson learned. Hide ‘n seek was destined to be abandoned as a pastime. Roger would offend a friend and April would make one. Holly felt comforted, as someone was watching over her in the night. Carolyn would find herself comforted by an unlikely confidante; a spirit who had likely been in the same position at some point during her lifetime. To hear the sound or see the light from beneath the crack of a door opening was never a mundane event, not simply a promise of procession, of someone coming and going. It was often far more significant. There was a reason to take notice; reason enough to remain mindful of who was in the farmhouse and where they were located. Mommy’s in the kitchen. Daddy’s in the parlor. Few children grow up in such circumstances, though it does make them exceedingly self-aware, with purpose. When space is shared it is best to know who is languishing in the shadows and emerging from the light; best to be alert. Friend or foe...you never know.

Opening the fireplace was essentially an overt act of removing a door, thus exposing a portal. Once that dirty deed was done, open, everything changed. Ultimately it would prove to be a pathway to uncommon knowledge; another way for the Light to get in...creating a crack in the cosmos.

What prompts a five year old child to hear a *click* then look toward a door, pointing out the true nature of the problem? How could she know *something bad happened in there*? Was its opening an invitation to discovery? No one knew. A declaration? Perhaps. It was intentional and it was a paranormal part of life: Familiar. This chapter of their story began when opening the fireplace as the pantry door in the parlor soon became a persistent dilemma. It had not “behaved” this way prior to the demolition process. As these two events had coincided, it followed logically. Some connection must exist between them, though no one has been able to determine the precise nature of this presumed attachment. April believes someone in there was trying to escape and did not succeed; she was the one who sensed a persona related to the space, insisting something awful happened to the spirit in the pantry. But why the delay? Had restoring a fireplace disrupted the Universe? Had it somehow created a ripple effect? Sent a shock wave through the space / time continuum? So it seems.

One explanation seems as good as another when no one knows what they are talking about. Over time, one entirely dismisses the desire to know. Truth be told, there is no rational explanation for it. Period. A single event triggered something supernatural, unleashing an evil influence. A cosmic presence: A vital force of Nature as a wonder to behold. Something was already present when this family arrived at the farm, so it matters not, the reason why. It was there and it had always been there, long before they crossed the threshold. So why wonder? What difference does it make? Why does this insatiable thirst for knowledge persist when it serves no purpose? The spirits were not going anywhere and coming from everywhere? Why not accept defeat gracefully? Let the chips fall and the doors slam. Attitude is everything. Sam had said so.

It is said by those who claim to be *in the know* that when God closes a door He opens a window. But what happens when He opens a door? Who knows?

“If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come.”
American Indian Proverb



~ click ~

knock knock knock

“Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. And lo, no one was there.”

Author Unknown

Stagnant air refused to move, refused to breathe a breeze through any open window: Oppositional. Defiant. August was brutal, an unforgiving month in the valley. Antagonistic. Belligerent. Relentless heat settled like squatters in pastures thick with fog, moist with morning dew as mist descending to Earth on a moonless night before attempted to rise and reunite with the Sun, but the air was heavy as honey and the day had just begun. A run down to their river would be the only respite. But first...Carolyn made her list. Destination: the A&P in Pascoag, there to do their shopping for the week. Under the guise of helping mom, the children went along in hopes of catching a refreshing wisp of air conditioning from the only place they could; the frozen food section of the blissfully cool business establishment. There was no point in buying ice cream. It would never survive the ride home. The delightful dairy treat would succumb to this heat; it could not endure the trunk and would surely liquefy by the time the carton made the trip, much like the kiddies crammed together in the back seat of the car. No harm in looking, though...or breathing it all in.

The vehicle was like a pressure cooker, wide open windows barely venting an unbearable steam heat. As the crowded car made its way back through the village onto a desolate Round Top Road, all but deserted of traffic during this time of day, air unfit to breathe was suffocating the lot of them, including the driver. Carolyn glanced in the rearview mirror. An artificial breeze feathering through their flowing manes, carefree kids stuck their heads out of windows, urging her to drive faster...faster...pink tongues flapping in feigned protest, wagging like a pack of wild dogs rounded up and out on a joyride. Everyone grabbed the brown paper bags from the trunk then dutifully folded them for reuse once groceries found their way onto pantry shelves, perishables into the fridge. In a few minutes, the task at hand complete, they made a break for it; downhill racing...escaping a hot house for a cool riverbed.

There was a special kind of freedom all the ladies enjoyed when Roger was

away. They loved him dearly though could not help but frolic in his absence; no schedules, no expectations: Liberation! Whenever he was gone it afforded the six who remained behind an opportunity to relax, to abolish the routine; a luxury they did not have when he was home...unless it was *his* idea. Dinner was served around eight, maybe nine; whenever it was ready and everyone was good and hungry. It tastes better that way! Nothing too elaborate: simple soup and sandwiches as a main meal; something Roger would *never* tolerate: a meat-and-potatoes Frenchman. Its timing to the table was dependent on so many other activities...not the other way around. Their music was too loud, the laughter raucous; frolicking was encouraged. In fact, it was a compulsory program during the summer, if for no more purposeful reason than to create a counterbalance to the many chores and responsibilities the children assumed as occupants of the farm. During the dog days of summer it was a priority to play with the dog, romping through the river. She got hot, too. The water was safe; low and easy to navigate. The shoals were brimming with activity, alive with the excitement of discovery. **Scrabble** and **Parcheesi** were reserved for evening hours. While the Sun was still shining a day was not done; as long as there was sufficient light to see where they were stepping, the girls retained a blissfully unfettered access to the river. There was no such thing as boredom on the farm; for a variety of reasons...never a dull moment.

Returning several hours later, everyone agreed; the only thing missing, the only one who'd kept it from being a perfect day was Cathi, her stark absence duly noted. She had recently returned to Nova Scotia again and was missed. Other than this, all the ladies thoroughly enjoyed their outing into the woods. Tick inspection time. When the unsavory ritual was finished and the girls had picked each other's bodies like monkeys in the forest, they turned the parlor into a flop house: Crash...naps all around. The house was quiet. Carolyn was the first one off the sofa, heading for the kitchen; a pantry full of provisions giving her an array of ideas for a dinner plan congealing along the route. She decided on tuna sandwiches and tomato soup; a quick fix well-received by a drowsy crowd. Sated; time for a shower then early to bed. Early to rise: much earlier than anyone could have expected or predicted.

By 10:00 p.m. Carolyn was sloshing around in their king-sized waterbed, once all the girls were soundly asleep. Having recently renovated the summer

kitchen so to escape the many perils of their unusually super/active bedroom, supernaturally speaking, Carolyn was in her new digs, minus one husband on this particular night. Exhausted by the heat, wrung out like a wet dishrag, she began falling off to sleep almost immediately. As she began to relax, a jolt of electricity passed through her, converting her body and mind instantly rigid with panic; fully alert. Danger! **What the hell was that!** The house shook. It rumbled and groaned from the impact. Jennifer was suddenly up on all four, as alarmed as her family, barking hysterically. Carolyn could not move. Her natural instinct was to rise up and investigate; to go protect her children and vanquish the intruder. Someone had pounded on the door with such force and fury it rattled a rib cage. A body oppressed by a power she couldn't discern, it held her in place. Struggling to free herself from a virtual stranglehold so intense she could barely breathe, Carolyn heard the footsteps of her children. They were running to their mother, terrified, certain someone was attempting entry under cover of darkness. At first Andrea, then Christine and Cynthia came thundering down their bedroom stairs. Nancy and April came from the far side of the house. They'd found her lying in bed, her eyes searching their faces in desperation. Andrea went to get the flashlight and began peering out windows, peeking onto the porch. It sounded as if it had come from the front door in the parlor, or possibly the other front door situated in the hallway to the kitchen. Nancy insisted it happened on her side of the house, nearer to the kitchen, though nobody knew for sure because the explosive, booming noise reverberated throughout their farmhouse. April hovered close to her mother. An apparent paralysis afflicting the woman began to subside. It was a frantic few minutes of girls scampering beneath the overlay of a frenetic soundtrack; an incessantly barking dog. The frontal assault sounded like a battering ram striking the structure – three heavy blows in perfect syncopation – blunt force trauma for all involved. Everyone wished dad was home. Freedom isn't free.

Carolyn rolled over the side of the waterbed. After a few minutes of feeling shaky and unstable, she regained her equilibrium then joined her eldest child in search of the culprit. Overcome with a sense of dread, she'd immediately suspected the event was of supernatural origin for several reasons. No mortal being could have generated that kind of power, nor its subsequent sounds. A preponderance of evidence lacking, there was no sign of any damage done to the structure; neither door. Inspecting the façade of the house the following

morning, Carolyn found no indication anything had struck the surface of the clapboard. Based on the volume of sound it created, whatever made contact with the farmhouse would have surely left a mark...as it had on a family.

It was what happened to her body during this episode which solidified her belief in it as supernatural in Nature. There was no one at the door that night, certainly no one visible. As Cindy later described it, her mom had been put in the bubble; the type of force field with which they were all familiar had kept her from responding to a threat...and it was a threat. Carolyn believed it was an intentional act to immobilize and terrify her; to instill fear and render her helpless, unable to protect the girls. She was its target. Message received.

Carolyn did not sleep that night. Instead, she wandered the house, guarding her young, watching through windowpanes, a view increasingly obscured by low, dense fog enveloping the valley. Every light in their farmhouse was on. Finally she settled into the rocking chair, there to keep a constant vigil with a .22 as her companion, draped across her lap, just in case her initial conjecture was erroneous. There she sat, hour after hour, thinking about a tacit threat of invasion, considering it quite impossible to defend against something unseen. What choice did she have but to lay in wait? No keys, no locks, three knocks at the door and no husband at home to answer the call. It grated at her frayed nerves; ate away the lining of her stomach as she rocked, not to sleep, only to stay awake. A force to be reckoned with; so who is the boss in this house?

Carolyn felt decidedly out of control. Fighting sheer exhaustion, she began wondering what on Earth (or beyond) was powerful enough to cause a house to tremble from rafters to foundation; thought about the tale Mr. Kenyon told of two men who had crawled beneath the floorboards of a nearby blacksmith shop for shelter only to meet their bitterly cold end in the midst of a blizzard. Were they afraid? Could they see an old farmhouse off the road? Were these poor souls out there again, seeking sanctuary? Three deafening blows against a door in the dead of night...a shotgun in her hands...what a way to live.

Three times: This happened three times over the course of nearly a decade.

The next episode was far more dramatic in nature, because Roger was home. He arrived late for dinner, having been detained by the various obstacles so often associated with a blanket of fresh fallen snow. Seated at the head of the table, dining alone, Roger voraciously devoured the contents of a platter, still hot from an oven where it laid in waiting while the family nervously awaited his long overdue arrival. He watched as the children, gathered together near the fireplace, became involved in a heated game of cards. Enjoying the scene playing out before his road-weary eyes, Roger was finally able to relax. He did not expect to be literally knocked from his chair by three extremely loud, heavy blows against the front door; invasion of a space he called home. As a flying chair was literally pulled out from beneath him, Roger leapt from his seat simultaneously, flying to the door. Alarm, anger and adrenaline: mighty forces converged to provide him super human strength and speed as he flung open the heavy door and raced out onto the porch. The strings of their piano were still buzzing; humming from the syncopated series of powerful strikes, causing the entire house to vibrate.

It was a disturbing sound; violent and threatening; the rage to rival Roger's own. The girls huddled near their mother as the protective father ran outside, surveying the property then rushed in through the front door, into the parlor. Jennifer was hysterical. So was her son, Pooh Bear...twice her size and twice as loud. Their dogs had no concept of "inside" voices; they were distressed, expressing alarm at the highest pitch and volume possible. Roger had to yell out in order to be heard over them: "Get my gun!"

"Why bother? There's nobody out there." Carolyn snapped the words like a wet towel against his ruddy cheeks. Leering at the woman as he galloped past her, making his way to the bedroom, he returned a few seconds later with his handgun then was instantly out the door. No one could recall ever seeing him move with such velocity. He was scared. He knew the truth. Roger knew in his gut where he'd viscerally *felt* three tremulous reverberations of perfectly timed blows; NO mortal could have made that kind of impact. He knew his chair had become an identified flying object and his speed out onto the porch precluded an escape by any human being; none quick enough to evade notice or capture. He knew Carolyn was right...and had been all along.

Searching their property thoroughly, a flashlight in one hand and a weapon in the other, Roger returned to his cold plate of food. There he sat, quiet and contemplative, as he finished his dinner. There was a vacant stare in his eyes, an odd expression on his face. No need to ask questions. The family knew. It was time for bed. Each child approached then kissed her father goodnight, grateful for his efforts on their behalf; grateful for his protection. They could sleep peacefully knowing he was home. Carolyn was in an unyielding frame of mind, grateful only because her husband finally heard what she'd tried to describe to him once before, something he'd dismissed as a falling limb or a barn owl striking the side of the house; as natural as the wind. Now he *knew*; his sternum still vibrating with the supernatural aftershock.

Their house remained quiet; Roger settled into his favorite chair to read the newspaper. Carolyn huddled near the fireplace with a book. He never said a word. For more than an hour only the sound of turning pages passed between them. Flipping then folding the paper in half loudly enough to capture her attention, he abandoned the sports section to address what was really on his mind. Roger had a tendency to hide behind the paper when he did not want to be disturbed: too late; he was disturbed. Emerging from crumpled newsprint, Carolyn looked up from the book.

“Do you suppose it might be those two men who froze to death underneath the blacksmith shop?” Carolyn could not believe her ears. He actually asked her opinion, literally suggesting a *supernatural* explanation! Shrugging her shoulders, a muted response, she considered his question, albeit speculative, a bold admission; an insightful and erudite sign of progress made. Roger then retreated, tucking himself behind the sports page again; untouchable. There he remained for the duration with no further mention of the event. It was the first time and the last time he ever discussed it; as close to a conversation as they would come on this subject. Still, Carolyn listened, absorbing his words into her mind as manna from heaven, intuiting some sense of him attempting to tell her she was right without actually breaking down and admitting same. She was as warmed by vindication as she was by that fire raging at her back. It was a long time coming; quite a wait for an appropriate acknowledgement of circumstances beyond mortal control. Carolyn had always been the one to introduce the concept, to initiate a necessary communication regarding spirit

matters in their house. Roger had always been the one to dismiss anything his wife had to say, as if her intellect, her sensory perceptions were either faulty or irrelevant. With a single sentence he had effectively reversed that trend. It revealed a subtle shift in his thought process and qualified as a breakthrough. Validated by his willingness to accept her initial assessment of this intrusion, satisfied with the outcome, Carolyn left her husband alone to reflect upon the realization she had experienced well before he ever considered opening his eyes to behold the new paranormal: Reality.

Another incident of supernatural origin; the triple knocking, presumably at the door, would occur one more time during the family's tenure at their farm; the next proved far more traumatic. Everyone was present in the house; time to rock 'n roll: a pounding, shaking, trembling incident is detailed along with another phenomenon occurring simultaneously; one of the most horrifying, significant encounters they would experience together. Suffice to say, it was not bats or a barn owl or falling limb or even swallows in the chimney. It was not the wind...but they would all be blown away.

Mrs. Warren later described these specific incidents as *demonic* in nature, explaining this particular phenomenon has a history. It is often referred to as "**Mocking the Trinity**"; in her opinion as the devil's footwork. Once Carolyn told the Warrens about these and many other occurrences, the scenarios were repeatedly mentioned, details revealed during seminars and public speaking engagements, sparking the nefarious interests of those attending; those with dark hearts and warped minds. The information disseminated and subsequent knowledge gained resulted in an unimaginable consequence for their family, as it was eventually used against them in the most hideous conceivable way.

Fear the living...not the dead.

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."

Matthew 7: 7

blown away

“We rarely forget that which has made a deep impression on our minds.”
Tryon Edwards

A Nor'easter is to be respected; a formidable force of Nature. New England is often the prime target of coastal storms, jutting out just far enough to bear the brunt of whatever barrels up the Eastern seaboard; land and sea monsters. When one is forecast it is best to prepare for the worst and then quite literally batten down the hatches. It was spring, officially, and it had been for several weeks, but one would never know it, stepping out into a bleak landscape and wild elements. Savage wind gusts had already begun doing damage; only the beginning. The calm before had passed; an impending storm looming on the horizon. The sturdy farmhouse weathered many a harsh gale during its time, including the most infamous of all; Hurricane of 1938. Cindy felt safe in the house but was worried about their horses, hoping her mother would get home soon enough to help her barn them. They were in the corral and needed to be put up in their stalls, secured as soon as possible. The rain had not yet arrived but it would soon begin whipping at them like some maniacal rider anxious for an increase in speed. Both boys were already nervously pacing, especially Pineridge. He was naturally skittish, hyperactive at best. Royal was infinitely more patient; more demure than his companion though he too was starting a protest, frantically prancing to and fro along the fence line of the corral. This threatening storm was practically on their doorstep. Gazing outside through kitchen windows, Cindy paced as nervously as her four-legged friends. Soon they would become too frenetic, too hard to handle alone. She needed help. It was obvious; a threat issued by the sky. She didn't have much longer to wait.

Roger was away; again. Carolyn had gone to town to stock up on groceries. Chrissy and April went with her to expedite the process. Nancy was at home, upstairs in her bedroom, sequestered in a reclusive huddle over her desk, in a valiant attempt to finish an overdue term paper. Ignoring Cynthia's pleas for assistance, abruptly slamming her door, Nancy did not

wish to be disturbed: too late. Cindy knew all too well, she was on her own; abandoned, left to her own devices on a blustery afternoon. Preparing to go outside to deal with this dilemma alone, coat and gloves a must, a sharp crack split the howling wind. She ran toward the window, thinking a tree limb was about to come crashing to the ground. Instead, she saw the terrifying sight: one of the wide planks on the corral had blown off its post and was dangling by a single nail, creating a natural escape route for the horses. Cindy was seized by panic. She had only a few moments to avert a disaster.

The horses became increasingly agitated; highly vocal about their distress. Cindy raced into the woodshed, retrieving a hammer and nails. A brisk wind carried their voices across the valley; the high-pitched whinnying and hissing squeezed in between unmistakable snorts; they were both about to bolt. What began as the sensation of helplessness instantly transformed into frustration; Cynthia was furious with Nancy. The only one available refused to assist her sister in a crisis. No time to “Whoa! Nelly!” as she passed the bedroom stairs in a full gallop. Instead, Cindy yelled loud enough to muffle the raging wind, as she flew within earshot of Nancy’s bedroom. It was useless; no movement at all from above. Slamming the kitchen door, she ran across the yard, yelling at the horses to get away from the fence, attempting to spook them to a safer side of the corral. They were preparing to jump and run. Cindy was left alone to handle this potentially disastrous dilemma...or so she thought.

Savage wind was her nemesis. It beat up on the plank; gusts from multiple directions, tugging at the two remaining nails intended to secure it from the other side. Had they held, it would have been a simple fix. As that eight inch wide slab of wood went flying off its post, Cindy turned, screaming toward the house for Nancy to come: Help! The board was heavy. She *couldn’t* do it alone. Her sister would need to hold one end in place as she nailed the other back on the post. No response. The child literally could not abandon her post. Her presence there was all that kept two creatures from unfettered access and total liberation. Nancy never did emerge through their kitchen door. Cindy’s anger began bubbling up in her eyes, spilling profusely forth with the curses.

Left to her own devices, with a heavy hammer and about half a dozen nails, a child not quite thirteen had a huge responsibility in hand as she

attempted to stabilize a flying object, balancing the precarious plank in such a way that she'd be able pound a few nails into it before the next gust sent her reeling. The plank fell from its place over and over again; it was not a one person job. Poor Cindy; as frantic as their horses, she could feel the wind whipping and lashing at her tears, streaking drops across her cheeks. Her natural inclination was to pray in a crisis though she only did so during episodes of supernatural origin. It never occurred to her to request a divine intervention in this case, as Nature itself was the culprit. Instead, she cursed at her sister then cursed at the horses then cursed at the storm. In an instant, she would be blown away, not by the wind but by an intervening force; one there on her behalf.

The far side of the plank lifted up off the ground. Someone had come to her rescue. It rose several feet from the grass and was held in place, suspended in midair by someone invisible. Cindy stood up and still, shocked into silence, disbelieving her own saturated eyes, stinging tears evaporating in the wind. The heavy plank securely held in place and ready to receive ten pennyweight nails, she put her end of the board up against the post and began banging into the dense pine, anxious to finish the task quickly lest her assistant suddenly dissipate with another gust of wind; heart pounding as hard as her hand.

Amazed, stunned by this revelation, Cynthia walked cautiously toward the other post, pulling a few more nails from her pocket. When she arrived at the spot where the plank was obviously still being held off the ground, precisely where it needed to be nailed, she humbly uttered "Thank you" then resumed the chore. The heavy board never moved. It was held in a proper position for the duration of this task. When completed, Cindy did not know what more to say. The horses were safe. She was able to bring them into the barn, one at a time, before the brunt of the storm was upon them, all the while sensing she was not alone in the effort; someone was there to watch over her, to intercede if anything went wrong. The jittery horses were responding to something but it was impossible to interpret; it could have just been the inclement weather they were reacting to by acting up. It may have been an invisible companion; no way of knowing for certain. However, Cindy was able to get both of them fed then watered then blanketed without any further disruptions. On her way

back to the house from the barn, Carolyn pulled into the yard. The next chore was a very quick offloading of paper bags before rain arrived in force. By the time this was accomplished, groceries safely stowed away on pantry shelves, Cindy sensed her helper had departed; services no longer required.

The other children scattered but Cindy remained behind in the kitchen with her mom. There must've been a rather odd expression on the child's face as it prompted Carolyn to ask: what's the matter? They sat together at the table. Cindy began to tell her story. When she arrived at the sentence regarding her sibling's unwillingness to help, Carolyn stopped her abruptly, yelling out the name of the offender, the one who'd shirked a critical responsibility. Uh-oh! Nancy knew **that** tone of voice; her desk chair scraped across the floorboards overhead and she sailed down the staircase. Time to be held accountable for her inaction: gross negligence in a time of crisis. It was strange, considering the severity of the infraction, yet Cynthia harbored no grudge against Nancy, having subsequently forgiven her sister, without so much as a well-deserved apology. Carolyn was not quite as forgiving. Confronting Nancy, Cindy tried to re-establish eye contact with an angry mother, a gaze focused elsewhere.

"Mom! Listen! I'm trying to tell you something important!"

"You **begged** for horses; then left your sister alone with them in a storm!" Carolyn was as disappointed as she was livid with Nancy. "How could you? Cindy needed your help. She would **never** have done that to you!"

"But **that's** what I'm trying to tell you, mommy! I **wasn't** alone!" Grasping her mother's full attention along with her forearm, Cynthia sat back down on her chair, prepared to continue telling a miraculous tale. "Someone **did** come to help me...someone held the plank for me while I nailed it in!"

"Who came to help you? No one else was home." Carolyn was confused.

"I don't know who it was!" There was a serene expression in Cindy's eyes.

Nancy was summarily dismissed. Suddenly, just as curious as their mother was, Nancy was clearly not invited to participate further in this conversation; her totally inexcusable behavior destined to be addressed at some other time.

Meanwhile, Carolyn listened thoughtfully to her daughter's description of the event as it unfolded like blankets used to warm the cold horses, providing the equivalent sensation for her mother. Carolyn had not been there to help her, to intervene during a perilous situation, but someone else had done so in her absence. For the kindness Carolyn was deeply grateful but to what or whom? Acknowledging the episode occurred, never doubting for an instant the child was telling the truth, her mother marveled at the news, wondering aloud with Cindy about the source of such an inspiring intervention. Obviously someone was watching out for her...and watching over her.

"Maybe it was your Guardian Angel. How did you feel when it happened?"

"It felt all warm inside me even though I was freezing then all of a sudden I stopped being mad and I stopped crying. I was too shocked to cry anymore! It held the board in place for me, mom...***it did***...until I was done hammering. It held the board right where I needed it to be and it never let go!"

"I believe you, honey." Carolyn smiled, embracing her daughter.

"Mommy, I felt love...so much love it made me stop being mad at Nancy!"

"Oh, baby doll..." Carolyn winced. "That was one pitiful sentence but I ***do*** understand what you're ***trying*** to say."

As wind-driven rain pounded against their windowpanes, billowing clouds released a torrential flow of fluid from the sky. Carolyn made cocoa. Mother and daughter discussed the effects and importance of gratitude over mugs of heavenly hot chocolate. Cindy was grateful to have the horses secured in the barn. Above all else, she was truly thankful to her saving grace. Carolyn was grateful her daughter had not been injured in the process and was supremely appreciative of the supreme being who'd come to provide rescue in a time of need, no matter from whence it came...it was there when she needed it most.

"Do you think it was one of ***our*** spirits?" Cindy searched for an answer.

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I really don’t know how to answer that question. Whoever it was obviously cares for you and could see from *somewhere* that you were in trouble.”

“But I didn’t even pray for help this time! I just yelled at Nancy’s windows from across the yard. I’ll bet all the neighbors heard me way down the road, I was yelling *so* loud! I said some really bad words, too, mom. I’m sorry. I was *really* mad...and really scared the horses would get out. Sorry for swearing.”

“Maybe the wind carried your voice all the way to Heaven and it *was* your Guardian Angel who came running to the rescue.” No less plausible a theory.

“Maybe it was Mr. Kenyon.” That thought had not yet occurred to Carolyn. Cynthia had an innately reliable sense of all things pertaining to the Cosmos. The mother had learned to listen closely to her daughter well before this day. He had not been gone long and perhaps he was not long gone. In her heart, Carolyn hoped Cynthia was right; perhaps her dear old friend had helped the hapless child. She hoped he had come back to this farm he loved so much in life...back where he belonged. Even though she would never wish upon him a presumed curse of remaining an Earth-bound spirit, she privately hoped he’d been dispatched from afar for the useful purpose served.

“It doesn’t matter who it is as long as we say ‘thanks’ they get the message. I believe it was a good spirit; it’s all that matters. You said you felt loved and protected. It’s all we *can* know and sometimes, it’s enough.” Carolyn cradled sweet little Cindy in her arms then enlisted her as the little helper; assistance required in the kitchen. Pay it forward; an important lesson to instill in one so young. (Perhaps *pray it forward* was an equally important lesson to learn.)

Boo! Who in God’s name was it? Cindy has since wondered often where a kind assistant from beyond originated; too many times to count. She remains as awestruck by a memory as she was by the event, that such powers exist; a force capable of manipulating objects at will or rescuing a damsel in distress. About the will; the intention behind an action: the child was in an untenable predicament. At precisely the moment she required another set of hands and a

stronger back, it *appeared* as an invisible manifestation. It *knew* what she needed and did her bidding, in spite of the fact she had requested assistance only from a mortal soul; a corporeal problem causing her to seek an equally corporeal solution. A truly benevolent soul was watching over her; someone willing and able to help in a crisis. To this day, Cindy is as blown away when recalling that encounter as she was on the blustery day it occurred; the day a rogue plank from a horse corral went sailing with the wind: a pivotal moment in her spiritual development. She did not just rebuild the fence with a savior that fateful day; she built a bridge to a higher faith. Whoever it was, whatever altruistic spirit intervened on her behalf, whoever the metaphysical force was coming to her aid in a storm, it stunned away her tears and warmed her to the bone. Holding that heavy plank in place, it steadied the weight of the wood in spite of a gusty wind whipping against it. Cynthia made contact, the implicit messages clearly received in both directions. It was something miraculous; someone wonderful stepped through the portal of eternity. In return for effort extended, it received the eternal gratitude of a child as an everlasting Light.

“Will is to grace as the horse is to the rider.”
Saint Augustine of Hippo



~ going for a joy ride ~

Bathsheba

"A wounded spirit who can bear?"

Proverbs xviii. 14

Could it be true? Was this the evil temptress so many proclaimed her to be in her own time and since? Was the young woman accused of impaling the skull of a baby with a needle the same old woman haunting and threatening and chanting incantations in the night? There is no written history of the life of Bathsheba Sherman, save what records remain of her inquest regarding the death of an infant. Folklore and fable, rumor and innuendo: all that remains of the one called Bathsheba; scary stories handed down over the generations as she became more a punch line than a persona. Anecdotal evidence alone does not make a spooky story true. There was something deeper to discover.

Carolyn had to know more about her. Fran became the sidekick, her partner in pursuit of the whole truth. On a raw November afternoon, Carolyn scoured through dusty archives at Gloucester Town Hall. This time, though, Fran was there beside her. On their way through the front door they literally ran into a local treasure. Edna Kent was the woman who knew more than anybody else about the history of that region; a sauntering encyclopedia. She was quite the lady; stately and majestic, gracious and good-humored, willing to share what she knew with anybody interested and inclined to listen. The natural historian possessed a voracious appetite for knowledge, much like Carolyn. Edna Kent devoured every old book she could locate; anything pertaining to their area: Foster, Gloucester and Burrillville; rural, remote northwest corner of the state. Most of the earliest homes had survived, many as farms, including her own; a spectacular Colonial specimen surrounded by rich, fertile lowlands on the outskirts of Chepachet. Fran's instinct dictated she detain her friend; keep her from whatever chore had brought her there by introducing Carolyn. The three women shivered as they stood beneath black, billowing clouds...an ominous promise of winter: an impending doom. It was really quite spooky; perfectly suited to their subject matter. There they

huddled blocking the main entrance, outside in the cold damp air, chatting for the better part of an hour. Three fair maidens spoke of ancient graveyards and an assortment of obscure dumpsites they had discovered over the years; the earliest homes and names of original families in the area going back to the Colonial era. Lost in thought, distracted by the content of their conversation these ladies apparently forgot the three of them were free at any time to step back inside an almost too toasty town hall. It never occurred to any of them to do so.

Mrs. Kent asked Fran what and who they were researching. Fran divulged the mission. Carolyn was anxious to hear Fran's longtime friend expound on anything she knew though she knew little of Bathsheba. However, Edna did know Mr. McKeachern, deeming him a reliable source of information as well as a lovely companion. Her endorsement was in keeping with his sterling and gold reputation in Harrisville. This gentleman knew well his own neck of the woods and everyone dwelling within them, past and present. Explaining how well-acquainted she was with him, the man as kind and gentle as their mutual friend Mr. Kenyon, Carolyn told Edna how they first met.

"We were just out joyriding again...searching for cellar holes, graveyards, abandoned dumpsites; the usual." Carolyn remembered details of excursions. "Fran knows this local area better than I ever will. We drove past his house off Sherman Farm. I noticed all the outbuildings and wondered if he had any old tools for sale so I went back a few days later. We never did talk about his tools but we've discussed **everything** else ever since. He's a wonderful man."

Mr. McKeachern befriended Carolyn, passing on whatever he knew of the infamous Bathsheba Sherman. He'd found her eagerness refreshing and must certainly have enjoyed her fascination with all things historical, closely akin to interests of his own. Sometimes they would meet in passing at the village butcher shop or inside their local bakery, prompting a cordial chat. There was a genuine fondness between them, one transcending time. He was an elderly gentleman whose attempt at discretion caused him great consternation as he struggled to describe the Bathsheba **he** knew in terms he considered suitable for feminine ears; a most endearing part of his eccentric personality. She got the message. Euphemisms aside, Bathsheba was implied a bitch from hell.

Delighted to know of their association, Mrs. Kent graciously offered access to her library as these women delved deeper into local historical records. She had an extensive collection open for lending only to close friends; a generous offer Carolyn accepted as a compliment. Edna owned an enormous collection of vintage clothing, all carefully preserved in trunks, some dating back to the early 1600s. Her mind-boggling assortment became an invaluable resource as later, when Carolyn was enlisted to be a **Band Booster**, (parents coerced into fund-raising for the high school) she put her new contacts to good use. It was a more than worthy cause. Fran and Edna produced the clothing and Carolyn willingly produced and coordinated an *antique* fashion show. Along with the tireless help of a group of fine ladies, mothers of musicians, they put on quite a display. Word was out by that time. They may have whispered a bit behind her back but presented nothing but respect for her many talents and abilities. Mrs. Kent gave Carolyn unfettered access to an attic stuffed full of vintage clothing and their fashion show was a standing-room-only success, raising a huge chunk of the money required to purchase new band uniforms and send their troupe (including her eldest daughter) off to Florida to play at the grand opening of **Disney World** in February of 1974. As Fran's friend, Edna Kent embraced Carolyn by proxy, doing her utmost to assist in that effort any way she could. They supported one another sharing information, tossing reference materials around like so much penny candy. Each enjoyed their like-minded companions; an association beginning on frigid granite steps in Chepachet.

The three bolted for shelter when cold rain began as light showers. Carolyn said goodbye then raced for the car. Though her search through the archives proved fruitless on that day the greatest discovery had come from outside the building as she rummaged through the mind of a learned soul sister, gaining more insight than expected from this trip. Immersing herself in the history of local villages was exciting; meeting the grand dame of historians...inspiring. Finally, after so much time feeling isolated and alone, Carolyn made friends who understood her compulsion to know more, to learn as much as possible about the former inhabitants of her home. As if it was a given, as if everyone lived in a haunted house (as many in this area do) the ladies never discussed the ghostly manifestations in their homes. Research had a presumed purpose; to identify the characters with whom they had become familiar over time and

space. No need for gossip about them, no point in divulging the details; what mattered was the answer to the questions: who was it and when did they live? How did they die? Where had they been buried and what did they do in life which might have compelled them to remain behind, Earth-bound in death? These were pertinent inquiries; all else qualified as peripheral to the process. A hunt for Bathsheba was on with a vengeance: Time to visit a friend again.

Mr. McKeachern happily welcomed the company, inviting Carolyn into his house. She told him about meeting Mrs. Edna Kent and he told her where to find the “old” Arnold cemetery, tombstones dating back to the 1600’s. While sharing a cozy cup of tea, some warmth to ward off the chill of another harsh winter looming, he made a veiled reference to a longstanding rumor he could repeat but not substantiate; some question regarding the final resting place of Bathsheba. He was not at all certain she had been buried in hallowed ground, after all, even though her gravestone rested in the center of the quiet village. An intriguing notion, Carolyn wondered if she was buried somewhere on the Arnold Estate, perhaps beneath the unmarked bell stone out on her property near the old cellar hole. It became her fervent intention to investigate further, come spring. In the meantime, she asked what he remembered of Bathsheba. Bitter. Vindictive. Hateful and Unholy; only a few of the words he’d chosen to describe an evil woman. She was horrible to the help; he’d accused her of starving and beating the staff in her charge at Sherman Farm. Womenfolk of the village considered her a harlot; men folk leered the same way except they did so with rapacious eyes. Bathsheba was a ravishing beauty in youth but he claimed she sacrificed both due to choices she made in life. Mr. McKeachern never tired of discussing historical aspects of this area, apparently enjoying a little gossip on the side; a pleasant perk of the research. Carolyn marveled at his memory and a resplendent Christmas cactus displayed in his kitchen. He beamed with pride speaking of his prized plant: “It’s more than one hundred years old; older than me...but not by much.” As Carolyn departed, he waved, sending her along an intrepid historical journey with an old Scottish proverb: “Be happy while you’re living...for you’re a long time dead.” His new friend got the message as prophetic advice.

Bathsheba: A God-forsaken Soul. By all accounts, her life had been tragic. It was easy for some to believe she was evil; to pass swift judgment and then suggest a harsher punishment. Harder still to listen to such a horror story and ***not*** believe there was at least some merit to an accusation leveled against her. In her time, there was not DNA evidence to exonerate her or, for that matter, conclusively pin that event upon her as a brutal crime committed. She'd said it was an accidental death. Some said she was a witch, proclaiming her actions those of an evil temptress, a child used as lamb in a sadistic ritual, a sacrifice made; a deal struck with the devil...in exchange for preserving her youth and beauty for eternity. Words are weapons...as sharp as any needle on Earth.

*“When one tears away the veils and shows them naked,
people’s souls give off a pungent smell of decay.”*

Octave Mirbeau

a stitch in time

“Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”
Carl Sagan

The evening never did relinquish the heat of the day, coveting it instead. A refreshing breeze tickled the lace curtains as it feebly attempted to enter the house, causing the fabric to flutter, dancing gracefully inside window frames. Carolyn had no objection to the heat. She always warmly welcomed summer, embracing it as some long lost friend, inviting it in to stay as long as it liked; welcome home. It was quite late, perhaps 1:00 a.m. as Carolyn lay sprawled across their long leather sofa, belly down, taking full advantage of lamp light from the end table. Engrossed in a book, she felt nothing but a comfort zone of calm around her as familiar words she'd revisited many times in the past. Entire passages of it had been memorized long before, but she went back to it whenever sleep eluded her, using these words as a natural tranquilizer.

Dressed in a sleeveless blouse and white cotton shorts, quite comfortable in every regard, Carolyn's thoughts remained uncluttered. The house had been quiet for hours and she had nothing pressing to resolve. There had been no manifestations for months; such a prolonged absence of activity, duly noted. Of late, everyone had been feeling much more at ease. While laying in place, enjoying the solitude, relishing beautiful language unfolding page after page before her eyes, Carolyn was abruptly struck...attacked from behind.

She felt a sharp stabbing pain in her calf. Turning quickly around to see if a bee had stung her, Carolyn saw nothing on her leg except a mounding puddle of blood at the point of impact. The wound was deep, plunging well into the muscle. She leapt up from the sofa, certain a creature was loose in the parlor, preparing to strike again; perhaps a wasp or maybe a beetle. It did not occur to her this event was anything other than a *natural* phenomenon; to consider she was not alone. There had been none of the normally expected indications usually accompanying paranormal episodes; no sudden drop in temperature, no odors in the room; nothing which would compel her to believe otherwise. The pain was real; the blood was real. Her muscle went

into spasm, hobbling the woman. As the “Charlie horse” subsided, she began looking around in the parlor, initiating a thorough search of their premises to determine where the culprit might be hiding. She checked the sofa over for sharp, foreign objects. The windows were clear of flying critters, as were the curtains, a cozy place to cling. The notion of a bee sting was remote; little chance a bee would have stung her at night. She pulled the sofa away from the wall, peering behind it. There were no insects or stray objects on the floor; no empirical evidence of anything unusual, nothing protruding from the cushion of the sofa on which she’d been laying, nothing on the coffee table: Nothing.

Carolyn finally abandoned her search. She went in the bathroom to cleanse the wound inflicted. It was still bleeding profusely. Once the point of impact became visible, she noticed the size of the puncture wound. It was distinctly round, quite deep, as if a large sewing needle had impaled her skin, leaving behind a perfectly concentric circle; a sudden stick doing more damage than merely scratching the surface. Her calf was very swollen, though not the way it would have been had some type of venom been injected into a tender area. Limping as she went along, Carolyn tried to walk off then rub out the spasm. Returning to the parlor, a perplexed woman investigated the immediate area around the point of contact, attempting to determine the nature of an injury sustained. Confounded, she gave up and revisited her book.

Dismissing this event as some sort of anomaly, several days passed before the wound healed, stiff muscle softened and a painful leg returned to normal. Life went on; time to prepare for the girls’ return to school in September. She was a busy mother and simply forgot about the queer incident, shoving it into the back of her mind. It would be a couple of years before she recalled this episode, during a conversation she had with Ed and Lorraine Warren. While Carolyn was displaying her research to the couple, she told them the story of Bathsheba Sherman: The needle. Was it even possible? Could it be true? Had the woman taken a weapon with her into the afterlife? Could she use it from beyond this world...beyond the grave? Lorraine posited a theory of her own: demons are indeed capable of inflicting pain upon mortals; capable of doing harm across dimensions, defying **time** as we perceive it. Their conversation triggered her memory of this strangely disquieting incident and so it remains;

a painful consideration. Intuition revealed a likely suspect; a logical lead to a culprit. Divulging the tale of a woman supposedly wielding a weapon in life, from that point forward this psychic presumed it was *her* needlework doing the devil's footwork; a needle and the damage it had done in life and perhaps in the afterlife. From then on Mrs. Warren referred to the God-forsaken spirit as the lone demonic presence in their house, calling her by name: Bathsheba.

“Since we fear most that which is unknown to us, defining moments of change occur when we choose to know our fear.”

Lee J. Cohen

from insult to injury

“Think twice before you speak, and then you may be able to say something more insulting than if you spoke right out at once.”

Evan Esar

Roger would never believe this! What would be the point in telling him? A needle or some other long, thin, sharp object had been plunged into her leg. It drew a substantial amount of blood then caused her calf to cramp into a knot; a striking sensation in every conceivable sense of the word. It was a can-of-worms moment. Pandora wanted in on it. No ugly bugs lurking in the parlor. Nothing had flown into the room to bite or sting her that evening. Instead, the woman had been blatantly attacked from beyond the grave: physical damage done. Extrapolating out, it meant the spirits were capable of inflicting injury. It *felt* like an evil intention to deliberately harm another, albeit from another dimension! If it was indeed crossing over which culminated in an aggressive encounter, it posed a physical threat: Punishment. The weapon of choice was an interesting pick; jamming into her skin with some force and real velocity. It was no accident, not a coincidence. Not a beetle or a bee; the depth of this wound precluding any insect from a list of usual suspects. In fact, the suspect in this case was quite unusual and she had a history: Bathsheba.

Was she capable of reaching through time and space to draw blood? If so, was it a clue to her identity? As an omen: as the harbinger of things to come? Carolyn was learning much of her sordid history, accusation levied; details of a crime she had supposedly committed in life which some said claimed her in death. If she was the culprit, one suspected of using a needle to get her point across, the only evidence left behind at the scene of the crime was blood.

However, it was a corresponding lack of evidence which caused Carolyn's investigation to continue. The parlor had been thoroughly searched after this assault occurred. There was no explanation for it in the natural world and, as strange as it may seem, a supernatural explanation was the most likely and *logical* regarding the recondite event; a viable option, after all. Over time and with a concerted effort, research revealed Bathsheba Sherman's personality.

Mr. McKeachern did much to advance the cause. He'd described her as being prone to violence; a spiteful, vindictive woman capable of inflicting physical harm on another as she'd been known to do with her servants or farm hands; loathed and feared, in equal measure. If she had shown someone compassion in life, it was later kept as a well-guarded secret in death and was certainly in conflict with her reputation. She was considered diabolical by many souls.

Considering the possibilities as well as the improbabilities in earnest, it was incumbent upon Carolyn to piece this puzzle together. If she wanted to solve the riddle it would require her rapt attention. As spiritual enigma, Bathsheba worked on Carolyn, consuming her mental and physical energy. The insult: Get out of *my* house. The injury: self-evident. A mortal soul felt increasingly imposed upon, clearly unwelcome in *her* home. She'd had wanted to inform her husband about it, needed to trust him enough to impart a message which might not be well-received. There was always a risk he would say the wrong thing but this time she thought it was worth the risk and one she should take. If only he would listen...

To tell or not to tell Roger: From injury to insult, he expressed himself in a way which would offend almost anyone except for someone who was just as obtuse. Thick-headed was not just for hair anymore. Beneath that ample load of locks on his head was a thicker skull. He just didn't get it. He did not hear her. He did not listen. He did not know how, preoccupied by formulating his next argument against whatever position she had taken on any given matter. Make matters worse...she finally told her husband...well after the fact.

"That attack happened while you were away...a couple of summers ago. I told Lorraine. She says it is a significant encounter; a demonic manifestation.

"So, now you're both assuming it is the spirit of Bathsheba Sherman."

"It seems rather obvious to me. Yes. That's my conclusion; hers too."

"Want to hear my conclusion? I think you're **both** out of your minds!" His response knocked the wind out of her. Wounded again; his tongue as sharp as

any knife. No reason to go any further with a combative conversation. It had been snapped off at the point of impact: this time...her heart.

According to the wise Confucius, “Ignorance is the night of the mind, but a night without moon and star.” If the shoe fits, Roger, then see if it fits in your mouth, along with your foot! Conflict: “Against logic there is no armor like ignorance.” (Laurence J. Peter) He had insulted her intelligence and integrity; she considered her words as pearls before swine and would not cast another. The conclusion logically drawn; them was fightin’ words...and this was war.

Breaking the icy tingle between them, a husband approached his wife.

“What could you possibly want from me, Roger?” The sincere woman was a little sarcastic, but that predisposition came quite naturally by this time.

“I want you to tell me what happened again.” Roger, equally sincere.

“Why? What’s the point? Other than a sharp implement at the end of your tongue, always ready to strike out at me. I mean, other than unleashing a host of false accusations, another one of your venomous tirades, tell me, Roger, what sense would there be in telling you what happened to me, again, when you didn’t believe me the first time; a waste of breath. I’m supposed to try to convince you? I have much better things to do.” Made her point! With that, Carolyn turned her back on her husband and walked away, abruptly ending the uncivil discourse. He had done the same to her for years. How insulting.

*“He who wishes to exert a useful influence must be careful to insult nothing.
Let him not be troubled by what seems absurd, but concentrate his energies
to the creation of what is good. He must not demolish, but build.”*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

is this the party to whom I am speaking?

*“There are no guarantees. From the viewpoint of fear, none are strong enough.
From the viewpoint of love, none are necessary.”*

Emmanuel Teney

No one dared presume the spirits were gone. Even though there had been a long period of relative peace in the farmhouse, this had been the case before. Something always shattered their silence. In fact, there were frequent periods of tranquility; respite from a disruptive influence everyone came to expect. A return to normalcy was always welcome...never taken for granted. The mood was lighthearted this night. Everyone had settled in front of the tube to enjoy another raucous, hysterically funny episode of **Laugh-In**; the family favorite.

Apparently, it was sock-it-to-me time...again.

The telephone had been an issue in the past. Those incidents seemed rather mischievous in nature, as the tampering committed by an invisible force with too much time and outer space on its hands, capable of manipulating objects; lifting it, dropping it, pulling it from human hands at inopportune moments, but this was different. It was around 3:30 a.m. when their telephone began to ring. Roger and Carolyn instantly arose from bed, each sprinting to a separate part of the house. Carolyn went straight to the parlor, Roger into the kitchen. Any call coming at that time of night is usually not very good news. Each of them alarmed, both jolted from sleep, they were equally anxious to silence an intrusive presence of noise before it woke their entire family. Arriving at her destination quickly, Carolyn expectantly answered the telephone. “Hello?” It continued to ring in her hand. Roger arrived in the kitchen and answered the phone, not realizing his wife had already done so. His receiver continued ringing as well. It seemed so loud; perhaps because the house was quiet. The normal sound of it became magnified. “Hello?” Husband and wife met in the dining room, each aggravated by a disturbance. “Mine’s not working!” then “Neither is mine!” “Try tapping the receiver!” and then “I did that already!” Both telephones continued ringing unabated with both receivers off of their respective cradles. Roger walked back into the kitchen and hung it up twice,

trying over and over again to make a connection stick. Carolyn did the same, answering it again with certain trepidation in her voice. It kept ringing. Roger slammed the receiver down, unplugging it from the wall unit. It kept ringing. Carolyn disengaged the jack in the parlor. The telephones continued chiming. Roger pulled its wires from the wall, effectively disabling it; under *ordinary* circumstances. Not so. It became a mind-numbing alarm signal, torturous to mortal ears. Roger found his wife in the parlor, attempting to comfort their confused children. They had made their way downstairs, awaking with all the commotion as that monotonous ring tone continued to expand, reverberating within the walls of the old farmhouse, burgeoning with each passing minute. Children were nervous; their parents annoyed by an obnoxious and relentless middle-of-the-night wake-up call: Contact. Roger cupped his hands around Carolyn's ear, virtually the only way she'd be able to receive this message: "*Someone or something is trying to reach us!*" She nodded with its receipt. The frustrated man went into the center of their dining room, a spot where he could and would be heard throughout the dwelling. Forewarning his family in advance to cover their ears, Roger then deliberately unleashed a fast-rising temper, shouting an objection in his deepest, burliest voice...for *all* to hear. "*Stop it! Leave us the hell alone!*" His caustic demand instantly snuffed out the sound. Dead silence. Roger had effectively scared away the ghost.

Sending their children back up to bed, the couple sat together in the parlor discussing what had just happened. There was no sense to make of it at all. The intention of the call seemed obvious; to disrupt the peaceful, quiet home. A restless night after such an unnerving incident, they both stayed up until dawn, waiting for it to happen again. Waiting and watching, listening as one, they sat in silence as deafening as sound which preceded it: keeping vigil.

So far removed from those troubling times, it is now much easier to make Light of such spirit matters. Carolyn recalls the irritating episode with clarity; quipping in jest about something which struck her years later, a notion she still finds amusing. "It's too bad we didn't have an answering machine. Had it even been invented yet? That would have been one *hell* of a message!" A sense of humor can be quite a valuable asset when reconciling incidents such

as these; encounters which would otherwise plunge a somewhat less pliable mind into a black hole: the pit of depression. Ah! Levity! In homage to Lily Tomlin: either laughing in or crying out loud, mortals found a way to cope.

one ringy-dingy...two ringy-dingy...

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”
Philip K. Dick



~Can you hear me now?~

a pain in the neck

*"I reached for sleep and drew it round me like a blanket
muffling pain and thought together in the merciful dark."*

Mary Stewart

Carolyn had taken a sudden turn for the worse. The pain she'd endured was more than distracting. It was relentless. There was no time of the day or night when her neck did not throb. Sometimes sharp and stabbing; at other times, a low, dull ache, but always...always, it hurt. It was not something attributable to any injury she'd sustained. To her knowledge she had not done anything to disturb the bones and muscles of her neck, but she had disturbed the Cosmos.

A theme was emerging; there had to be a direct connection to an apparition whose neck appeared snapped, a head hanging off to one side. Why Carolyn? Why had she been repeatedly attacked on the neck? First, it was the scythe in the barn and then the coat hanger wielded as a weapon in the warm room and now the sensation of her neck being literally broken. As she had never before experienced such severity of pain, not even during childbirth, it was beyond a mortal imagination. Ice packs, hot compresses...nothing provided any relief. She could not turn her head without turning her entire body along with it. As a serious predicament worsened with the pain, Carolyn sought the assistance of the doctor in town. He ordered x-rays and blood tests then kindly provided the prescription for an equally serious pain killer. It made her face itch like a sonofabitch; a small price to pay for a break from the pain of a broken neck. No rest for the weary...Carolyn was exhausted beyond mortal measure.

Certain these films would reveal the true nature of her problem, as it turned out, the Nature of the problem was invisible to modern medicine. There were no signs of arthritis or any obstruction; no swelling or attributable causes for the excruciating discomfort. The doctor was as stymied as his patient. When the results came in and the conversation altered, it was enough to plunge this

dispirited woman into hopelessness. No exit. No way out. Perhaps over time it would heal: the only suggestion he'd offered; Darvon, the lone remedy. For Carolyn, it was like putting a bandage on cancer, in the hope it would heal by benign neglect. Huddled in front of the fireplace, she wondered if she would ever sleep soundly again; wondered if there was a legitimate affiliation to be drawn between the way she had been targeted and this chronic pain. Was it an outcome of assaults she'd sustained at the hands of a demon? Why was no physical sign of this kind of agony evident? What had a hold on her? If there was no logical explanation, should she consider an illogical cause? The root of it had to be supernatural in origin, yet she refused to accept the notion of the affliction occurring to her physical form as a psychic attack. It seemed so implausible. It was actually one element of her transition: Transformation.

In retrospect, Carolyn now believes that period of time was reflective of an assault on her person and her personality. She has listened to her children and knows what they witnessed was real; including her metamorphosis endured a few decades before at the hands of a presence which was literally attempting to usurp her being. Looking back, it makes more sense as a manifestation of the apparition who appeared to her. Which one was it? Boo! Who was it that came to her and then her children? So many women have died there; Arnold, Richardson and Baker: only a few of the family names she would discover associated with the property. Records indicated multiple deaths had occurred there and relatively few of these documents were complete with any details. In fact, some certificates seemed to be deliberately vague and non-descript, especially regarding the cause of death. Was there something to hide?

However, Carolyn had yet to learn of the long, rich and infamous history of the Arnold family at their homestead. Mrs. Arnold hung herself in their barn. There was no way to determine if she'd been the one appearing in the night; no way to know for certain who this entity had been in life. Mrs. Arnold was into her nineties at the time she committed suicide. The form and substance it assumed appeared young and well-preserved. As for Bathsheba, she lived to be an old woman as well, so who could it be? According to Mr. McKeachern she was well into her eighties when he was just a boy. What about the young woman who appeared in the kitchen? Who was it that died inside the pantry?

So many questions...so many souls.

Essentially, the entire story is one gigantic puzzle and, in some cases, it has literally required decades for these pieces to come together, to come into play as this tale unfolds. Yet, this is destined to be a story without an end, a puzzle left incomplete; no means or desires to reconcile the disparate elements or to attain coherence, no matter how rigorously Carolyn had done so in the past. Left unsatisfied, in certain corners, it might be considered a futile effort made from the beginning, unless it doesn't matter who or what caused these events to occur. That they happened at all is miraculous. These missing pieces have much to do with what is unknowable and it is incumbent upon those involved to acknowledge it is so. This story is not an investigation. It is a memoir. The investigation supposedly happened some thirty-five years ago and it was then determined by Mrs. Warren, concluding that the entity with the broken neck was Bathsheba Sherman, but nobody on the planet knows for sure if it is true. Speculation, intelligent guessing is all mortal souls have at their disposal and to claim otherwise is utterly disingenuous. To a certain extent, belief factors into this equation. Anyone present at the time would attest to this fact; based upon interpersonal communications, Mrs. Warren was acting and speaking in good faith because there is no doubt she believed what she was claiming and was certain she felt psychic vibrations of an evil spirit, a demon in the home. One piece of the puzzle at the center of the bigger picture: something wicked was intervening in Carolyn's personality and was adversely affecting her in a multitude of ways: physically, mentally, emotionally, psychically: spiritually.

There was no defeating this enemy, not with conventional weaponry. If this was indeed Bathsheba's doing, she had become a real pain in the neck on too many levels to count. Carolyn had to take an alternate route around an enemy position; the road less traveled. In time, she accepted the presence of the pain as something supernatural in Nature. In the interim, she found her tolerance for pain increasing with her intolerance for the cause of it, each expanding in equal measure. Turning away from the bottle of pills in a medicine cabinet, it was only a matter of time before she'd find a path to peace. The doctors tried but could not help her. Instead, she sought respite where she'd found it in the past, in times of crisis, during trial and tribulation. Ultimately, Carolyn was a victorious combatant in a brutal battle waged

against her invisible adversary. She turned to something far more powerful than the pain then prayed it away.

*“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived,
however, if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”*

Maya Angelou

message received

*"The only way to discover the limits of the possible
is by going beyond them into the impossible."*

Arthur C. Clarke

Whenever Roger arrived home in a good mood from a successful road trip it usually meant a happy family outing was in the offing. **Janet's Ice Cream** in North Smithfield was a frequent haunt; a tolerable drive after days on open highway. The black raspberry was addictive; Carolyn preferred the pistachio, though Roger would occasionally indulge them with banana splits all around. It was always quite a pleasant excursion with the exception of one evening. The car became exceptionally crowded. Seems someone had hitched a ride.

Throughout dinner Carolyn talked about Bathsheba Sherman, recounting what she had learned from Mr. McKeachern just the day before. Perhaps she should not have been so forthcoming in front of the children, unaware she'd been frightening one of them. The folklore he shared with her was gruesome, not the kind of visions one wants planted into a child's gray matter, there to reside forever; the stuff of nightmares. Cindy was being particularly affected, sensitive as she was to the other side of twilight. Carolyn thought of it more as a history lesson and spared no details retelling the tale she'd heard from an old man who knew it well; someone who knew Bathsheba Sherman as a boy. Cynthia finally put the name to a repulsive face she knew all too well.

Roger arrived home to spaghetti dinner, one of his favorites. The meatballs were luscious. He was in a delightful mood. Night air cooling nicely after the very warm day, everyone was instantly amenable to his bright idea. Once ice cream was mentioned, Roger thought Carolyn would drop the sordid subject and move on to another but she continued to further inform him all about Mr. McKeachern's visit; how she created a divining rod with his instructions and what he said about the legendary and infamous figure...Bathsheba Sherman. She told him about the crime of which she'd been accused, about the inquest

which followed and how she got off the hook: Insufficient evidence. Free at last...but not really, because what she was accused of doing haunted her for a lifetime. A bad reputation was further tarnished: a witch who sold her soul to the devil for eternal youth and beauty...a plan which apparently backfired as she grew old and haggard well before her time.

Finished with dinner, the children began squirming in their seats, anxious to go on their promised ride to the ice cream stand. Expediting things, Roger declared dishes could wait and the kids loaded into his car. All the way down Round Top Road, through Harrisville onto Victory Highway, all the way into North Smithfield, Carolyn kept telling her husband and anyone else who was listening, the lurid details of a gory story. She found it fascinating; believing what she'd discovered would answer some questions regarding the house and its history. As a compelling exploration, this was a privileged excursion into the past through the words of a man whose eyes beheld what he spoke of; she considered the elder gentleman a piece of living history, contributing a rarity: firsthand knowledge of events. He was only a boy when Bathsheba Sherman had grown old but he knew a great deal about her life (because children listen to the adults around them) and he'd apparently retained all that information. Carolyn became transfixed by the subject, a point obvious to all.

Though the girls managed to escape a rather lopsided conversation between their parents while seated some distance away at the picnic table, they would soon reunite, traveling together again. Carolyn was engrossed. She seemed to be unaware of this discomfort level, rising steadily. Cynthia had enough of it. Though she was known as the most demure among that bunch, a soft spoken, temperate young lady, her intolerance piqued; a temper reared its ugly head.

“Mom! Stop this! I can’t stand it! I don’t care about Bathsheba Sherman!” Everyone fell silent as she took a deep breath then continued. “You’ve been talking about her all night long! I’m sick to death of hearing it!” Cynthia’s shrill voice grew much louder, magnified by the quiet of her rapt audience. “As far as I’m concerned that old witch can go straight to hell! Right back to where she came from!” The child’s outburst was angry and uninhibited. She did not consider the impossible consequences of such a harsh indictment or a

judgment call made at the top of her lungs. An order issued: Cindy was still too young to be mindful of the concept...what gets put out in the Universe is important and may come back to haunt the one sending a message received.

Fire in the hole! At the precise moment Cynthia shouted her condemnation, Roger threw a cigarette out the front window. The evening air cooled quickly after sunset. Windows were sealed shut all except for Roger's window which was open a crack because he'd been smoking. As he flicked the butt from his fingertips, (away from the car, as was part of this habit) the object defied all physical law. It flew alongside the car, abruptly stopping outside the window. Then it flew through the glass, landing directly in Cynthia's lap. Legitimately awestruck, she could not believe her eyes. Shorts were scorched. Her eldest sister was frantically trying to douse the fire and expel the offending object. Tirade over: the eruption ending as Cindy was rendered virtually speechless.

"Get it! There! Knock it onto the floor!" Carolyn was leaning over the seat, attempting to help. Roger drove erratically, trying to observe the commotion created behind him from the narrow mirror. Having logically assumed he had been at fault, the one to blame for this incident, he felt responsible and guilty about it in equal measure. "There it is! Step on it! Put it out on the mat."

No one got burned. Cindy's favorite shorts were history. A recurring theme emerged: Punishment time. Sassing an elder...disrespecting the dead.

"Everyone all right back there?" Roger waited for an affirmative reply then said: "**That's** what you get for talking to your mother that way!" He winked at Cindy, catching her frantic eyes in the rearview mirror; letting her know in an instant with one sly gesture how sorry he was for his perceived infraction. She was off the hook for saying aloud what everyone else had been thinking.

"Dad, it **didn't** come in through your window. It came in through the glass, back here." Andrea stomped out the offending flame on the floorboard as she said something no one understood, except for Cindy. She saw it, too.

"What? That's impossible." A grimace pinching his lips tugged at the sides of Roger's nose. "If yours is shut then it came back in through mine."

“I’m telling you, dad...I saw it happen! The windows are closed. It came in right through the glass! I can’t explain what I saw but that’s what happened.”

“Sorry, mom.” Cindy’s voice trembled; not the boisterous tone she’d had a few moments before while chastising her enthusiastic mother then dismissing a vindictive spirit, effectively banishing her from the center of conversation.

“The car **does** feel crowded tonight; either you guys are growing up too fast or a witch came along for the ride!” Roger tried to make light of their hectic situation without realizing he may have inadvertently spoken truth to power. “Hey Cin, maybe you’re apologizing to the wrong woman!” Making Light.

“It’s **crowded** because we’re growing **out** too fast! Ate too much ice cream! Thanks, daddy!” Patting her belly, Nancy smiled and waved in the mirror.

“Mom...I saw it happen.” Cynthia gazed pleadingly into her mother’s eyes. “I think I made Bathsheba Sherman mad.”

“I think she was **mad** way before you came along!” Andrea made her point.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. It’s over.” Trying to assuage a daughter’s concerns, Carolyn wondered if Bathsheba had taken offense, if this incident was some form of retribution, as Cindy’s punishment for name-calling: Consequences. According to Mr. McKeachern, Bathsheba Sherman enjoyed being the center of attention. Perhaps she did not **want** the subject changed...

“I swear to God.”

“No swearing...that’s what got you into trouble in the first place!” Tapping number four on the nose, her mother’s playful posturing was called for in the moment but Cindy would have none of it. She wanted to explain exactly how it happened and clearly needed to be believed.

“I swear to God! I saw a cigarette flying out the crack of dad’s window and start to pass by my window about half way down when it stopped! It stopped outside! Then it shot like a bullet! It shot straight through the glass right here, right in front of my eyes! The window is closed all the way! Look! I haven’t touched it!” Desperate to be understood, Cindy cried tears of frustration.

“I believe you, honey. I can see it’s closed...all the way up.” Carolyn tried to calm the distraught child. “Just relax...we’re almost home.”

“It landed in my lap! Sparks jumped all over the place! It landed in **my** lap! **I’m** the one who made her mad! Look what she did to my favorite shorts!”

“Maybe she didn’t like the way you were yelling at mom.” Christine finally had use of her tongue, probably frozen stiff by the ice cream. It had thawed.

“Well, you **did** call her a witch!” Nancy justified this perceived retaliation. “You hurt her feelings. That oughta teach ya!” Test comes first; lesson later.

Never ditch a witch...they have great aim and are usually on target.

History lessons learned: Cindy refused to speak ill of the woman ever again and has never said a single word against her since; a sign of fear and respect. Bathsheba Sherman’s power *is* formidable and it should be acknowledged as such; as two children witnessed the overt manipulation of a dangerous object, likely meant to frighten then to silence one youngster. Mission accomplished. Message received...by all. Perhaps their discourse had divulged her identity.

“I shut my mouth after that!” Cindy recalls details of this incident; a vision she’ll never forget. However, over several decades of reflection she has come to an understanding and has realized how the experience specifically altered her conceptualization of the spirits in fundamental ways. She now asserts the

most significant element of this manifestation was invisible: the evolution of thought. Cindy no longer cares who believes her because she knows what she saw; likewise, she knows what it means. Cynthia changed her mind about the spirits during that evening. She saw them in a different light because of this encounter and realized they are no different than we are...they have feelings, too. Attitudes. Responses. Reactions. No matter what or who it was there, it *was* there: a stowaway had accompanied the family on an outing; someone in (or just outside) a moving vehicle heard the offensive words of the teenager, sparking a consequence. Cindy believes she was *supposed* to see it happen, insisting there was a deeper message imparted, intended as an integral part of her ongoing spiritual development. Her natural reserve made Cynthia nearly dormant in comparison to her sisters, yet on the evening in question, hostility she could not control had suddenly consumed a child, unleashing an entirely foreign, out-of-character spontaneous combustion of negative energy, further charging an atmosphere already enflamed by emotion. The blatantly targeted negative response Cindy received was as immediate as it gets. Her attention was deliberately diverted, drawn to the event as it transpired; her gaze fixed on the cigarette as it flew from her father's fingers then out his open window. She witnessed its momentum as the wind caught the object. Then, watching it stop in midair saw it catapulting back inside the car with a force she could hardly imagine; its fire flying in her direction, passing through a solid piece of tempered glass. It occurred with purpose and reason. It was a Revelation. No one should even attempt to convince her otherwise. Cindy's recollection of those few seconds now run through her mind as if in slow motion, much the same way it appeared to her that night, during one of the rides of her life. The youngster learned a series of valuable lessons in the context of a singular event, primary among them, certain knowledge that spirits are not tethered to the homes in which they dwell. They are free to be. Bathsheba is free to pass judgment in death in much the same manner it was passed on her in life, free to reply to her harshest critic by whatever means she chooses, free to express her feelings and make her presence known, perhaps as an act of retribution. There was no escaping the spirits unscathed. As Cindy so often bluntly states regarding their existence: "No matter where you go...there they are." Death looms larger than life at light speed and they are the source of enlightenment.

"As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human

existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”
Carl Gustav Jung

twisted sister

“Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”
Dorothy Bernard

Christine had the face of an angel. This child, with enormous blue eyes and platinum blonde hair accentuating the smile which could melt human hearts; the middle sister shared a sweet disposition with everybody she met. So often a large family has one who gets lost in the fray, but this was not the case with Chris. Her sisters gravitated toward her; they felt the desire to include her in everything they did. Because of her reliable sense of humor, well developed, they were bound to share some laughter with the one always ready to crack a quick joke. Christine was somewhat shy around strangers though her buoyant personality was fully unleashed around her siblings. Generous to a fault, her very best toys were routinely and graciously loaned. Meticulous about their bedroom and her belongings, incessantly cleaning up behind those who often used her space for play, she did so without complaint, counting the trolls and puppets while she replaced them into compartments of a case she kept neatly beside the bed. Her sense of order, an innate ability to organize things came quite naturally to the child, though it clearly failed to rub off on her siblings. They frequently took advantage of her exceedingly good nature because she made it very easy for them to do so; Christine’s temperate ways were tolerant and forgiving; this predisposition disguising her secret, most heartfelt desire to have a place for everything...and everything in its right and proper place.

Her softness and innocence nicely balanced against an edgy pragmatism, a sardonic sense of humor much like that of Mr. Kenyon; bordering on British, Christine was observant and understated. Nancy, as polar opposite, regularly got on her nerves. Born only eleven months apart (that Catholic thing again) they could not have been more different. If a harsh word or a cold demeanor ever escaped the child, it was, without question, directed at Nancy. However, her kind and gentle spirit would resurface within moments as she’d sincerely apologize for something she had every right to say! Perhaps this is why the rest of the family took it so hard when Christine was hurt or subjected to any

offense. This was why, in spite of the ordeal Cynthia was enduring, she was so upset by what happened to her darling sister while she slept. Cindy adored Christine, with whom she shared a bedroom. They had always been close and were highly compatible, sharing many of the same toys, tastes and habits, so it really was a perfect fit for both. One fateful night it came to be that Cindy witnessed one of the most disturbing episodes to ever occur in the house, one she vividly recalls with incredible detail. It is one story, so many years later, still capable of producing mournful tears. What Cindy witnessed in midnight moonlight profoundly affected her for life. To see it happen to her cherished, beloved sister was more than one young mind could absorb. To observe this event with her own eyes as the face of an angel became a refuge for a demon, was something she will never forget; imagery she will never escape.

Chrissy's lovely face was the picture of serenity as she slept. Cindy saw the flawless, delicate features of that face become infiltrated and then distorted beyond recognition by a demonic presence. Cindy could not move, could not breathe throughout the manifestation. It happened slowly and deliberately, as if whatever it was in their bedroom **wanted** Cynthia to see the face of evil. It woke her just before it went after Chris, the one most pure of heart. Perhaps it was this essential purity, the sheer beauty and innocence of the child which initially attracted something wicked...a demon this way comes.

It began as odd, indistinguishable sounds. Because the girls so often spoke during the night, if one sensed the other was awake, she responded, as Cindy did: "Chris, is that you? Are you awake?" With her back turned, Cindy relied on an answer; it never came so she rolled over beneath the blanket. She could hear the sound of growling and thought it was the cat stalking her shadow in the night, an all too frequent habit she had developed since moving into the house. The sound persisted, growing in volume as Cindy searched their room for the presumed suspect. An ominous, unusual sound deepened in intensity. It began reverberating throughout the bedroom, noticeable enough to awaken her other siblings within adjacent rooms. The distinct sound did not resemble any kind of animal sound with which she was familiar. It was a low, guttural, menacing tone, alarming to the child. Propping herself up in bed, searching the darkness for an intruder, Cindy soon realized the awful noise was coming

from beneath the blankets in the bed beside her own. Only a few feet apart, that slight distance provided an excellent vantage point from which to view a horrible sight. With benefit of the nightlight and the natural moonlight shed, spilling through their narrow window, Cynthia watched and listened intently. In the darkest heart of night the house was so quiet it made the menace all the more disturbing. She could not remotely identify those sinister sounds which were, quite literally, something she had never heard before.

The child lying beside her began to moan. Her sister was obviously in pain. "Chrissy? Are you all right?" Only her placid face visible, in peaceful repose, it was an expression about to be drastically altered. Christine had a tendency to bundle up like a papoose even on warm nights. Distinctly foreboding noise emanating from her bed signaled the threatening presence as something wild: utterly untamed. Just as fear and curiosity ushered Cynthia into a completely conscious state of awareness, Christine's face began to tremble, as if erupting from within. Startled, Cindy sat bolt upright, frightened out of her mind as an utterly helpless sister's features began to bubble up and boil like the cone of an active volcano. Watching in horror as Christine's skin began warping and twisting in muted shades of light, if Cindy could wake her, perhaps it would stop, but she couldn't force herself to crawl out of the bed. Paralyzed by the shock of it, she was rendered motionless by this gruesome image. Breathless, unable to intervene, Cindy watched in abject terror as her sister transformed. What movements appeared beneath the girl's supple skin became even more pronounced. It looked like fingertips protruding, trapped inside; attempting to escape by rupturing the surface. Cindy would later describe it like snakes slithering inside of a pit. Contorting her face, inflicting pain, Cindy remained frozen in place. It got worse. Christine's mouth quickly became gnarled and mangled. The tender skin of her lips seemed to disappear, as if being sucked inside her body and then her features began moving, scrambling and shifting out of place. A pitiful cry for help oozed from strained, pained vocal chords. Cynthia's heart was pounding. She could feel the rapid pulse throbbing in her temples; hear it rushing through her ears as tremors passed through her body. Whatever was gouging at the skin beneath the surface of Christine's face was attempting to puncture it from within, tearing through it like a creature caged, seeking release; escape. What was only moments felt like torturous hours as Cindy begged it to stop in her mind; no words would come. It was a struggle

just to breathe but nothing like the fight her precious sister was engaged in right before her tear-filled eyes. Wanting to scream for help, wake the house, Andrea was sleeping in the next room. Nancy and April **must** have heard this horrendous commotion. Surely **someone** would come...but no one ever did. Cindy was alone as the sole witness to this hideous disfigurement, incapable of saving her sister from a demon. The tormentor continued; just as it seemed Christine would succumb, her once beautiful eyes exploded open, revealing the demon within. That was not her face and those were not her eyes. Black, glistening orbs peered directly through Cynthia's soul, challenging her sanity as it taunted the helpless child in moonlight. Chris became completely still as it stared, penetrating the only one who could identify the evil lurking within. Cindy distinctly recalls hearing herself screaming and gasping for air as the demon slowly, deliberately smiled at her, displaying the remnants of chipped and jagged yellow teeth, resembling the fangs of a beast about to pounce its prey for the pleasure of the kill. Gloating, it shot the stench of its hot breath across the room as steam, into the thick, icy air surrounding the corpse-like body it had chosen to inhabit. A spasm of terror gave Cynthia the strength to pull the blanket up over her head. She wept, begging God to spare them both, her sister and herself, from the grasp of something purely evil; there was no question of its intentions. It had crawled up from the bowels of existence to stake its claim. Cindy could feel a hot, putrid breath at her throat. She prayed. Then at the back of her neck; she pleaded for help, retaining the presence of mind to invoke the presence of God. She could feel evil all around her, intent on consuming them both. Swirling through a bedroom delivering its message with a nauseating stench and petrifying cold, it was hell bent and determined to scare her to death...Cindy prayed. Dear God: Deliver us from evil. Amen.

Evil does exist. It seeks out the innocent to expose itself within. It stretches and taunts to taint all it touches. It covets pure and fertile ground to penetrate and poison. It permeates to mortify its victims; in disbelief. Huddled beneath her blankets, Cynthia waited and prayed. Too terrified to look, afraid of what she might see, she sat perfectly still until the sound had subsided, then lay her body down, hoping it was over. Sobbing uncontrollably, eventually she cried herself to sleep, still praying for her sister. Cindy awoke sickened, unsure if

Chrissy had survived the night, ashamed she had not intervened; but she had. Chris was safe; very tired but otherwise fine. Her prayers had been powerful.

“God pours life into death and death into life without spilling a drop.”

Author Unknown

solitary confinement

*“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark;
the real tragedy of life, is when men are afraid of the light.”*

Plato

Cathi had mustered the courage required to return to the farm; she'd missed the girls and her dearest friend, Carolyn. Her serious concerns for their well being outweighed a certain reticence which weighed heavily on her mind. The horrendous ride home from her previous visit still vividly in memory; an image she could barely tolerate to recall, Cathi felt compelled to take the risk and make the drive again, on behalf of those living souls she loved so well.

It was one glorious late summer day laden with a golden glow of abundant sunshine. The breeze was bound to carry its summer song along. Andrea had all but mastered the guitar she received the previous Christmas and everyone gathered on the front porch, anxious to share a celebratory tune. Music was a normal part of life in the farmhouse and everyone sang as frequently as they spoke, or so it seemed; simply another form of communication. Cathi was as musically inclined. She played bass guitar in a local band and had real talent. Andrea's repertoire had grown over the months. One song after another rang out like bells through the rafters. Sweet tea kept throats moistened as a tray of cookies mysteriously disappeared...and no one dared blame the ghosts. It was as festive an event as a formal holiday...but there was someone missing. Cathi was the first to notice her absence from their formerly crowded porch. "Where's Chrissy?" Everybody looked around. Perhaps she'd gone off to the bathroom or maybe upstairs to snag the tambourine. Cathi called out through an open window but there was no response. The house was huge so it wasn't surprising if Christine could not yet hear her. She went into their parlor then hollered up the bedroom stairwell with a voluminous voice as big as the solar system. Still nothing; no reply from above...very strange.

Having arrived at the farm by mid-morning Cathi left herself plenty of time for romp and play. It'd already been quite a long day when afternoon rolled

around, hours spent down at the river and in the dense woods. Everyone was a trifle drowsy after lunch, yet most fought the fatigue and kept on frolicking. Cathi suspected Chris snuck off to take a nap which turned out to be the case. She initiated the thorough search. At first she went quietly upstairs, so as not to startle the child, assuming she must be in her own bed. If, after the earlier bellowing, (which could have caused the dead to rise) there were no signs of life, then her darling girl must be deeply asleep. Cathi and Christine had the most endearing of relationships. Chris adored her and the feeling was mutual; thick as thieves. Cathi did not have favorites, *per se*. She loved all of the girls equally, much as a mother would. She'd been a significant part of their lives, a magically powerful influence on all of them for many years. Though, if she had a *secret* favorite, it was Christine.

Room by room, she searched for her then ten-year-old cherub. Everyone in the family knew she regularly slept *beneath* her bed, especially if she did not want to be disturbed...or found. It was a quirky habit. No one ever teased her about it. Privacy was a hard thing to come by in their house; a quiet, peaceful resting place, feeling safe when asleep, a more rare and precious commodity. Peeking into every bedroom, reaching under each bed, there was still no sign of Christine. Cathi called out to Carolyn as she descended the center staircase into the front hallway. She was in the kitchen pantry, up to her bony elbows in soapsuds, humming a happy tune they had sung together earlier.

"I can't find Chrissy." Cathi's somber tone indicated some worry. Scraping the lather from her arms in preparation; it was time to join in the search.

"Did you check *all* of the bedrooms?" Carolyn read Cathi's expression as a cause for concern.

"Even yours." Cathi thought she might stay downstairs where it was cooler. She was right; a proper assumption to make.

"That's strange; Chris was just out on the porch with us a few minutes ago. Where did she go after lunch?"

"I never saw her leave the porch."

“Me either.” Carolyn was perplexed. “Did anyone else see her leave?”

“No.” Cathi tried to reassure her mother. “She’s here...just hiding.”

“She usually tells me if she’s going off somewhere. We’ll find her. Chris disappears sometimes...when she doesn’t want to be found.”

“I know it. I checked underneath all the beds...in the closets, too.” Cathi had been thorough.

“How about the eaves?” Cathi nodded. Carolyn began to share her concern. Chrissy was officially missing from the farmhouse.

“I’ll go and check again.” Heading back through for a second sweep, Cathi took off...a woman on a mission. Carolyn sent the others out to look inside the barn and around the property. They all scattered on command, anxious to complete the task of relocating the soprano then return to their sing-along on the porch. Cathi yelled across the yard from the parlor window.

“Check out at the rabbit hutch.” Christine loved her bunnies dearly. Cathi assumed they would find her playing with her fuzzy little friends. The child often slipped away to attend to their needs without being asked. It was never a chore. She thought of it as a pleasure and a privilege.

Cathi realized she had not looked underneath the bed in Carolyn’s room so stepped back inside for another glance. While four siblings were searching outside, Carolyn went upstairs so the house was silent. Leaning down to look beneath the frame of the bed, Cathi heard something strange. It sounded like whimpering; the soft shallow cry of a child. Pulling the quilt away she found nothing under the bed, though she could still hear the sound distinctly. Panic pulsed throughout her body, the startling alarm; fear. The mournful, muffled sounds were coming from the floorboards. Something was dreadfully wrong. Chrissy was in terrible trouble. Cathi could feel it.

Closing the bedroom door so she could hear it more clearly, Cathi listened intently to the distant voice. Desperate to locate the source of a pitiful sound, “Mother of God!” came suddenly, breathlessly, drawn inversely through her

lips; she realized the sound she heard was coming from within the bedroom, from an old trunk tucked into the corner. Latched tightly, it was inescapable from inside. Cathi leapt across the bedroom, nearly ripping the door from its hinges. "Carolyn!" Frantically fidgeting with a rusty iron latch she called out. "Christine? Is that you? Are you in there?" The hardware was ancient; she could not get it to budge. Facing the door, summoning a voice to full volume, Cathi yelled again: "Carolyn! Come help me! I found her!" Returning to the trunk, she was struggling to open it as Carolyn burst into the bedroom. It was a terrible sight, a heartbreakingly tragic image to witness as they lifted the heavy lid.

Christine was curled up like an injured cat, a wad of human flesh contorted into a knot of unspeakable fear. The child was hyperventilating, barely able to breathe. Her face appeared to be scarred; delicate porcelain skin streaked, saturated with tears, hair plastered to it with sweat, eyes wide with disbelief. There, hovering above her was the savior she had begged and prayed would come. Cathi reached into the trunk, lifting the petrified child with one hoist, cradling her securely, releasing her from a virtual death trap, Cathi placed her gently on the bed. Carolyn held the lid steady then let it slam, rushing over to Christine. Quickly grabbing tissues from the night stand, Carolyn leaned in to swab her child's soiled face. Chris pulled away from her mother, lurching backward, as if somehow threatened by the nurturing act; the look in her eyes describable only as an abject terror. Wrapping herself tightly in Cathi's arms, seeking asylum, protection from a perpetrator, the confused and disoriented little girl had been traumatized, profoundly affected by the nearly disastrous event. She appeared to be in shock. The child could barely speak but when she did so, the words were stunning...enough to bring a mother to her knees.

"Mommy, why did you do that to me?" Christine was continuously gasping for air, her quivering voice, a mere whisper. Trembling uncontrollably within Cathi's firm and steady grip, the stinging accusation was breathtaking to both of the women. Searching for the answer on her daughter's tear-stained face, there was no explanation for the question...only fear. "Why would you do it? How could you lock me inside the box?" There was anger and distrust in her voice. The deeply wounded woman handed the tissues over to Cathi instead, so to wipe away the residual effects of a daughter's entrapment: that horrible state of solitary confinement...left alone

to perish in the dark.

“Get her nose...there.” Carolyn quietly uttered the directive. Cathi obliged.

“I thought I was going to die in there...I was afraid no one would find me!” Pleading words impaled a mother’s heart like daggers. It was utterly surreal; mind-numbing statements had been declared with such sincere intensity, so much belief in the words; there was no point in questioning Christine about the obvious misunderstanding which somehow occurred. During the first few critical moments *all* that mattered was making sure she was safe. She could see. She could breathe. She was alive. Nothing else mattered at the moment.

Convinced her mother was the culprit, the one who had deliberately locked her into the casket-like enclosure, a daughter kept her distance. The place she had gone was dark and deep, she could not see or breathe; suffocating in that heat, a youngster had feared for her life. Carolyn did not know what to say or how to react to this charge. All the girls came into the house then found them in the bedroom. Naturally, everybody wanted to know what was happening. Cathi suggested Andrea bring a moist cloth and a large glass of water for her sister. Meanwhile, she asked Carolyn to escort the others from the room. She needed to understand what occurred; Cathi wanted to speak privately with an overwhelmed little girl in order to grasp the essential truth of the situation.

Gulping the water then wiping the beads of perspiration from her forehead, Chris took a few more minutes to gather her thoughts. Cathi sat beside her on the bed, patiently waiting for some sign of recovery. When Chris was finally ready and able to speak, she stuck like a steel trap to her story.

“I came in here to take a nap. I was real tired from playing at the river and I think I ate too much for lunch. My stomach felt funny and my head hurt so I wanted to go lay down for awhile. I came in here...it’s too hot upstairs.”

“Then what happened?”

“I fell asleep. I don’t know how long I was asleep before Mom came in and told me to go get in the box; she told me over and over again to get inside

of it. I don't know how I got in there because I can't open the lid. I think mom carried me. I don't remember how I got there but I ***know*** it was mom. I didn't see her...but I ***heard*** her...and she told me to go sleep inside the box!"

"Christine. You never actually saw your mother?"

"No. But I ***know*** it was mom!" Adamant, Christine insisted she recognized her own mother's voice, even if she was asleep.

"Honey, it wasn't mom. She was with me the entire time you were missing. It must've been a bad dream, sweetie. Your mother was with me and so were your sisters. We were all out on the porch together. Remember? Then we all went to the kitchen. That's when we missed you then came to find you, baby, and thank God we did." Cathi embraced her little one. Chris would not yield. She was hurt; highly suspicious. She did not accept this version of the truth.

Cathi became increasingly concerned. This was quite unlike the Christine she knew, entirely out of character for her to become so staunchly defensive, completely unwilling to listen to reason. It was as if something had a hold on her. A consistently amiable youngster, Chrissy was the peacemaker, loathing any kind of discord. She would address it diligently in others; repairing rifts, smoothing ruffled feathers; a referee between her occasionally argumentative sisters. Cathi thought it very strange; Chris could not and would not defer on such an obvious misunderstanding. Most troubling of all was her outright refusal to take Cathi's word. It seemed belligerent; as if Christine was trying to pick a fight with her, attempting to force an admission that her mother had maliciously trapped her own daughter inside an antique trunk; hot and dark, frightening and dangerous. An accusation levied, as if the mother of five had deliberately intended to kill one of her own offspring. It was disconcerting to hear or to believe Chris could even imagine such a thing, let alone presume it possible. Cathi began to suspect some nefarious forces were hard at work; an otherwise trusting child's obstinate reaction as evidence. She had repeatedly assured Christine the position was indefensible; promising her the accusation made was unfounded...absolutely false.

After a few more minutes, Chrissy calmed down then Cathi suggested they return to the group. She remained quiet, far more reserved than usual; sisters asked her what happened but Chris refused to discuss the ordeal. Somber, she kept her distance from everyone then went out to the rabbit hutch with a cold pitcher of water for her pets. It was at least an hour before she came back to the house. Carolyn instructed her eldest to keep an eye on her sad little sister. Cathi requested to speak with Carolyn privately.

“What the hell happened in there? What did Chris say to you?” Carolyn’s distress was evident. A frantic woman, keenly aware of the nature of a threat issued, an obviously life-threatening situation could have easily resulted in a tragedy of unspeakable proportion, altering a family forever. Sickened by the mere thought of it, she sat down, placing her head between her legs.

“Breathe, Carolyn...breathe in as deeply as you can then hold it..then out.” Cathi knew what to do; her friend was about to faint dead away.

“I can’t...I can’t breathe...oh, my God...she could have died in there!”

“Carolyn. I don’t know what happened. I only know what Chrissy believes happened...her mother was capable of closing her inside a trunk then leaving her in there to die. This is disturbing. I don’t think I was talking to Christine; certainly **not** the Christine I know.”

“What do you mean?” Carolyn pressed for some explanation while gasping for air; suddenly she was the one who required a cool rag and glass of water but there would be no recovery from this kind of shock.

“I mean some subversive force is involved with this incident. I’m certain of it. She didn’t believe me, Carolyn. She **didn’t believe me** when I told her you had been with me, with all of us out on the porch. Chris all but accused me of lying to her to cover for you. She told me over and over again...it was **you** who ordered her to go lie down inside the “box” and you’ve never referred to it as anything but what it is; a trunk, so where did that come from? She can’t remember how she got there and claims she never saw you, only heard your voice, but she is certain it was you. I couldn’t convince her otherwise. I tried. Thank God I heard her when I did.” Thank God, indeed.

“Cathi, my children are in danger. This was a threat; don’t you see this was a warning to me? That bitch! If she wasn’t already dead I would find a way to kill her myself, I swear I would, with my bare hands if need be...*no one* goes into that room anymore. It’s not safe. No place is safe in this house.”

In time, Christine warmed to her mother again but she has never been able to reconcile the terrible, almost tragic events of that day. Her recollection of this traumatic incident in childhood haunts the woman still, a testament to the profound nature of an impact it had on an impressionable youngster: the gift that keeps on giving. Now, fast approaching fifty years of age, tears well up in her deep blue eyes whenever she dares to think about it: the brutal heat, an absence of air, darkness all around...the abject fear of her impending death.

“No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”

Edmund Burke



~ a favorite gathering place in the country ~

as the crow flies

*“‘Prophet!’ said I, ‘thing of evil - prophet still, if bird or devil! -
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted -
On this home by Horror haunted - tell me truly I implore -
Is there – is there balm in Gilead? - tell me - tell me, I implore!’
Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore.’”*

Edgar Allan Poe The Raven

Though Cumberland had more than its fair share of birds, marshlands filled with pussy willows and cattails, wild creatures on the wing, it was a veritable wasteland in comparison to their farm. Perhaps it was the stunning silence, a sublime absence of humanity which afforded this family the ability to listen more intently, undistracted, as Nature abounded around them. To be outside was to be fulfilled; in touch with sand and stone, wind and rain. Nature filled a void no one knew existed until they moved to the country. The land was so remote, left untouched; most of it unclaimed by human hands. Aged trees of every indigenous variety grew to become giants of the woods, keepers of the forest; their sprawling limbs providing all the comforts of home for countless creatures. Their property was a parcel left free to flourish; to soak up the Sun and drink in the rain. Birds of every conceivable shape, size, color and call took full advantage of the welcoming environment. This vast array of aviary wonders had free reign to live an unencumbered life. Many migrated when the weather was no longer hospitable but always came back and many stayed year round. Cardinals were abundant as were those mean-spirited blue jays. Robins returned with the spring. Nesting bluebirds were bountiful and very beautiful. Hummingbirds graced every summer. Bobwhite and whippoorwill alike would serenade them at sunset, the gift of their music lingering in the moist evening air: twilight tunes. Love songs sung at dusk. The cooing calls of mourning doves; as mated pairs in discussion, perhaps potential partners engaged in their own end stage negotiations. A lyrical debate was sometimes symphonic, at other times a cacophony of dissonant demands and invitations traversing the curvature of a deep green valley as a haunting series of echoes: birdsong. Whimsical and

mystical; these were magical creatures from above, none more so than the stark black crows who came as omens...magicians on a mission...harbingers making their appointed rounds.

Carolyn was often in her garden when the ladies arrived home from school. Whether planting, pruning or weeding, it remained a constant chore. Always something to do next, preparing the ground was as important as tending to its seedlings. Crows would frequent the opulent eatery, fine dining at its best; a virtual cornucopia they treated as a smorgasbord. Brazen thieves, scoundrels, they were; no manners and no regard: rude to each other and inconsiderate of their hostess. A prolonged period of pilfering prompted Carolyn to place an ugly scarecrow in the center of the corn stalks. The culprits would land on it and laugh, stretching out their long lean necks, cackling at the woman as they used it for a perch...the better to see you, my dear: Bastards. Their disgusted gardener would grab her rake and chase them away to the clouds, to no avail. As soon as her back was turned they'd quickly return to rob her blind; help themselves to whatever they presumed had been planted exclusively for their benefit. The crows were pushy and petulant; a self-absorbed lot, to be sure. It was more toil and trouble than she had anticipated, keeping a garden pristine and safe from intruders. And it wasn't just the crows; there were bunnies and deer in abundance. Their family had moved to a place where the wild things are...and the wild things were hungry! It soon became apparent to Carolyn; it was a war she would never win, so a truce was declared. The white flag went up as one generous woman graciously acquiesced, making peace with Nature by planting a larger plot the following season. Problem solved. Much like the house, the land was shared space; the fruits and vegetables of Carolyn's labor of love providing a horn o' plenty for anyone and everyone depending upon the bountiful spot of Earth for sustenance.

Andrea was fascinated by these crows. Once her books were stashed inside the house she would go outside and sit on the retaining wall overlooking the garden; the perfect vantage point from which to study their gawky, awkward movements. Observing their antics was thoroughly entertaining. Andrea went there to converse with her mother and together, they enjoyed the show. There

they were, usually fewer than ten of them at any given moment. Occasionally the crows would appear as a full-fledged flock, particularly at harvest time; loose kernels of corn plucked by the scavengers from the surface of scarred soil. They would hunt and peck, hop and flinch, posture, argue and compete for the grand prize, resembling adolescents released into an open playground. Though she had no way of knowing for certain, Andrea was quite sure all of them ***must*** have been of the male persuasion...like an unruly gang of youths.

As winter set in, their garden was abandoned for the season. This was best for bird-watching because crows prefer the spoils. Rummaging like dumpster divers, experts at gleaning the remains of any landscape, leaving stick-figure footprints in the moist, cool dirt, Andrea admired them. She had an affinity for the sleek, stark feathered friends who clustered around her. Though they never came too close there was a unique form of communication between the birds and their winsome child. Whenever she perched alone on the stone they began the carrying on, squawking an infamous "caw" so loudly others would come to call. Silently, patiently waiting for them to gather in assembly along the granite wall, she'd talk to them; not with words but in thought. The crows responded in kind. They would cock their heads and look knowingly into her eyes. There was no fear; no reluctance with anyone involved in the exchange. It's impossible to succinctly describe the level of trust they attained; the rapt sensation of connectedness she felt with the crows. They knew what she was thinking; she knew why they were there: Birds of a feather flocking together.

December had arrived. The wind was gusting; birds riding the stiff breeze. As her crows flocked in the garden, Andrea remained poised on a stone wall, lost in thoughts of the day. She wasn't watching too closely, but rather, was communing with creatures, writing about them and about herself; perceptions of time in continuum. As words came they were soon committed to memory, as if ordered to stick in her mind. They were meant to mean something. Over time she would comprehend the significance of a few solemn words written as wild wind tore at the sheets of her consciousness. Within weeks she would be confronted by an ugly, agonizing reality of life: Death.

"Either I am losing my mind or finding my way. I am here, now perched

upon the precipice; on the verge of flying elsewhere. I am almost home.”

Papers began to scatter from her tablet. The wind was wailing and her cheeks were freezing...time to go back in the house. Rising from the great wall, she turned away from the flock without any acknowledgment of moments spent together. Those crows had other plans and would not let her leave until their message was received. Andrea's melancholy mood was utterly inexplicable.

It had been such a good day. There was no reason to feel so dispirited yet it swept over her like the abrupt gust lifting birds into the ether. They swarmed like bees from a hive disturbed, circling the house with purpose and reason. Their patterns were distinct and intricate by design, the intention deliberate; dozens of dark-winged souls displayed perfect unison, following precisely, exposing their glossy black feathers, attracting her eyes to the sky. She stood quite still near the kitchen door, marveling at the structure of birds in flight, though there seemed to be some urgency in their sharp cries, as if they were attempting to tell her something. This flitting, fluttering bevy of birds were communicating; trying to tell her. She could not comprehend their message. It was beyond her capacity to grasp. The crows were spirits alive in the sky, an omen; harbingers of things to come...the Angels of Death come upon her.

Nancy was the rebellious child but she was also kindhearted and generous to a fault, especially with her belongings and sometimes those of her siblings. Always anxious to do the right thing whenever a need presented itself, it was no surprise when she befriended a sweet young girl named Lenora, someone fragile and delicate; so vulnerable to attack. She too was one of five children, something these ladies had in common, though Lenora had four big brothers. Nancy could not tolerate the way other children picked on her, shaming the girl for the second hand clothing she wore and snickering about her less than privileged circumstances in life. The unkind whispers offended Nancy to her soul. Having been herself a victim of such cruelty, she well understood how it felt to be shunned by one's peers. Nancy decided to do everything in her

power to protect and fiercely defend her little friend; to be the *someone* to watch over her. It was a unique friendship born of pure sympathy. Initially, Nancy took pity on the tiny girl but quickly grew to love and admire Lenora. Carolyn used to tell the child that she was as bright as a new copper penny. Lenora would blush, as proof of the assertion. All the girls were fond of her. They welcomed her into the fold. As petite as a baby bird, the child appeared frail but could eat like a horse and appreciated Carolyn's skills in the kitchen. She spent several overnights with the family, enjoying her time with a group of sisters, a sensation she had never known...pajama parties and pillow fights were foreign to her but she happily adapted, flourishing from all the attention she received at the farm.

Her first overnight visit came unexpectedly on a school night; one hard and fast rule broken: an exception made. It was during late winter or early spring of the previous year. Nancy came home from school with a series of rather odd questions for her mother. Though Carolyn knew about the girl, they had yet to meet. Nancy was determined to rescue her foundling on a dark night.

"Mom? Do you know how far it is to get to my friend Lenora's house?" It was a rather subtle, sneaking-in-the-back-door request.

"Doesn't she live down the road that's just past the high school?"

Nancy nodded. "Across from the dump."

"That's right. I remember now...as the crow flies? It's about six miles."

"What does that mean, 'as the crow flies'?"

"It means...if you were traveling in a straight line, that's how far it would be without all of the twists and turns you'd have to make in a car to get to the same place." Carolyn tried to explain a linear concept to her confused kid.

"How far is it as the car drives?"

“Why do you ask?” A mother’s intuition hard at work, she suspected what was coming next.

“Do you think she could come for dinner? We’d have to go get her...”

“I don’t know, honey. I just started cooking and your father’s coming home later tonight. I want to be sure we have enough left over for him to eat, too.”

“We always have enough to share! I’ll give her mine. Please?”

“Why is it so important to invite her over tonight? Couldn’t this wait a few days?” Her mother was perplexed. She preferred to plan ahead.

“No, it **needs** to be tonight.” Carolyn could hear the angst steadily rising in her daughter’s thinning voice.

“We could pick her up Saturday morning, instead. She could spend the day with you. Better yet, you could invite her to spend the night.” Working the logistics, Carolyn’s suggestion seemed a more sensible option.

“I want her to sleep over **tonight**.” Nancy was not whining...but remained steadfast in her approach.

“Nance, you said dinner; nothing about sleeping over. You know the rules. It’s a school night.” Her mother stirred the stew as they spoke.

“Please...” Nancy’s eyes began to moisten; dewy brown orbs graced with fawnlike lashes tugged at a mother, breaking her heart. Something happened. Something was wrong. All the girls knew the rules. “She had a really bad day in school. Do you think...just this once...she could come and stay over, even if it **is** on a school night? She can ride on our bus in the morning.”

“I see you’ve thought this through.” Considering the plea, Carolyn listened.

“I don’t know if her mother will even let her come but at least I want us to

try...will ***you*** ask her?" Nancy felt a sense of urgency. "Can I call her?"

"***May*** I call her...first, tell me what happened." Probing a situation further, Carolyn wanted to know what had prompted this sudden outcry for support.

"Some girls were ***really*** mean to her in gym class today. I really don't want to talk about it right now. I'll get mad all over again."

"Did you get suspended for defending Lenora's honor?" Carolyn was only half-teasing. It was entirely conceivable. "Expelled?"

"I wasn't ***there...that's*** why it happened! If I had been there...***may*** I call her now? Will you talk to her mother?"

It then occurred to Carolyn, this kind of compassion was precisely the type of good character trait she wanted to instill then reinforce in all her children. Nancy dialed the number. Carolyn called her eldest to come downstairs and watch over dinner while she was away. Within minutes mother and daughter were on the road; on a rescue mission.

The town dump was one nasty bit of business. As the ladies drove past it a big fat rat ran directly across the street in front of the car, startling both of its occupants. Nancy had the address, pointing out the house to her mother; just around the corner...on the left. Lenora was waiting on the front porch swing, her knobby knees protruding from beneath a cotton dress; this and a sweater, too sparse an outfit for the season, but likely the nicest outfit she owned. The child was excited; she leapt from the steps and ran to the car to say hello. Her mother waved from the window. They were off; an excursion into the woods.

It was obvious why the child was teased and taunted at school. Everyone in town used the local dump. Whenever they did, they drove through the shabby neighborhood beside it; a series of row houses, neglected at best; at worst, ramshackle: "the other side of the tracks" in a town that didn't have a train. Carolyn knew why "Poor Lenora" had become a target of the cruellest among her peers; even the appearance of poverty was enough to provide them with ample ammunition...required to inflict mortal wounds. Words are powerful. Humiliation is weaponry. Lenora finally spoke up.

“You live far away!” She was amazed by the length of Round Top Road.

“It’s only about six miles...as the crow flies.” Carolyn smiled, listened and laughed as her young daughter responded to the question posed by her friend: “What’s that mean?” Nancy recounted an earlier explanation of the phrase. It was a hoot any owl would envy. Lenora was adorable; two girls giggled as their trip home was a delight. To see them together, one would never suspect Lenora had been bullied, enduring the merciless wrath of her often hateful classmates. This child seemed happy and carefree; a blithe spirit. She felt an authentic acceptance from Nancy, allowing her personality to burst into full bloom. The charming cherub was sweet; a bit shy, smart and very funny.

Arriving home, Carolyn checked on dinner. Andrea had taken the initiative to add some vegetables, stretching the stew. The meal smelled sumptuous as it cooked, filling the home with tempting aromas. Nancy made introductions all around. Lenora noticed. “Something smells *so* good!” It was the first time most of them had ever seen her though everyone knew all about her. Carolyn was taken by how much she resembled Nancy...same long mousy brownish / blondish hair, petite-in-miniature; even smaller than the pint-sized version of her daughter. Though both girls were twelve, Lenora appeared no older than eight; nine at most, like a failure-to-thrive child, though she seemed healthy enough. Based on her buoyant laughter and equally hearty appetite, there was nothing wrong with the precious little girl. Carolyn wondered how anyone could be so unkind to her. Andrea stayed in the kitchen; all the other children went upstairs to play *dress up*; everything that fit her went home with Lenora the following day. Carolyn voiced no objections. Nancy was right. They had plenty to share and it *was* the right thing to do. As the first of her visits was a rousing success, Lenora was invited back again. It lifted her spirits to be out on the farm with friends. Truth be told, it did all of them good to share space.

Nine months later bad news hit as blunt force trauma. Word of the tragedy spread like the raging wildfire which consumed Lenora’s home in a matter of minutes. The parents barely made it out alive. Standing in the front yard, they were forced to witness the demise of their own family; helpless to rescue the

children as they begged for help at the bedroom windows. There would be no saving them. Each quickly succumbed to smoke; a tender mercy. Their house was incinerated before fire trucks even arrived; burned to the ground. It was transformed: cinders and embers, ashes and dust; inconceivable devastation.

The road remained closed to the public for weeks afterward, too gruesome a sight to behold. It was later determined an electrical short, a spark from the lights on their Christmas tree had ignited the blaze. Not two weeks before the blessed holiday, a hush fell over the town. No one could breathe. Their mind-bending loss colored black every private thought and muted utterance. Joy was dead. The Spirit of Christmas went up in flames along with its sacrificial lambs. When needed most, a holy, sacred day went unobserved, save the vast outpouring of parishioners who prayed for this family; the churches were full to overflowing, as was the church on the day of their funeral. Five caskets; five lives lost...all, gone too soon. Hundreds, perhaps as many as a thousand people stood outside, braving bitter cold air for the duration of their service, trembling with emotion as tears froze to cheeks. Nancy wept uncontrollably. She had hoped some of the mourners there to pay their respects in death were those who'd treated her friend disrespectfully in life; hoped this apocalyptic event would touch hardened hearts with shame and regret and would change their minds and lives. Do unto others...For Nancy, the loss was inconsolable.

Carolyn had been profoundly moved, haunted by this tragedy. It lingered in her mind for months, as pallor of death on the palette of life. She could not shed the image of coffins from consciousness; she could not bear to know how these five children died; tears erupting spontaneously at the thought of it. Meanwhile, as mother, her role was to comfort her own grieving daughter, to no avail. They mourned together; a painful and prolonged ordeal. To have had it happen at all was shattering enough, but to have known and lost such an exceptional child, as the victim of merciless fire, was more than she could tolerate. Knowledge of it forced her into the darkest corners of her troubled mind, compelling her to revisit painful memories of her own. Carolyn could not comprehend what the parents were going through: it had to be Hell; proof of the existence of Hell on Earth. It **had** to be an excruciating burden to bear; the vision of those final moments seared into their memories forever.

During her time at the farm, Carolyn had known fear. She'd witnessed fire lapping at the walls, tickling lace curtains with the flick of a flame in a room filled with smoke. She'd known the torment of the vile, haunting vision; one which lingered...known the sensation of paralyzed panic, an expectation that her five children were about to burn to death. In those moments it was as real as reality gets; as real to her as the flames which claimed Lenora; that vivid recollection of pure, unadulterated terror. In those moments she'd prayed to God, begging for His mercy, begging to die with her children, knowing she'd never recover, never survive their loss. This too had been a reality, branding her memory with a searing series of images for eternity. She understood. Her children survived an ordeal their mother endured; she had been saved and her girls were spared. No one could save Lenora. No one rescued a little damsel in distress. No fairy tale ending this time. No happy endings at all.

Carolyn's vision was intended to intimidate, provoke a response; to elicit visceral fear. It was a hoax; one perpetrated upon her in the night, appearing to be as real as anything she had ever encountered in life. Lenora and her brothers perished in a way mortals fear to the core of their being. Fire is wild; elemental. It has no agenda; no alliances or ulterior motives. It possesses the ultimate power to create and to destroy. It is, at once, a threat and promise: a blessing and a curse. It does not discriminate. It does not pick and choose. It is and it will, once raging beyond control, claim anything and everyone in its path until extinguished. Carolyn understood the nature of the threat as well as she understood the true Nature of Fire. An acute awareness of its pure power instantly transported her from sympathy to empathy, pressing her to feel in full measure entirely bereft by the tragic loss of a family. During her darkest hours she considered this loss as an evil omen: as a harbinger and a warning: five children...gone too soon. They could have been her own. Such thoughts possessed the woman, casting a spell ignited by pain of grief. Wildfire raging beyond control within her troubled mind; consuming her present, rekindling memories of past experiences she longed to forget, it required several months before Carolyn could extricate herself from a chronic mindset of abject terror and utter despair borne of the intimate knowledge of Fire. Sweet Lenora had broken the surly bonds of Earth and like the tiny bird she resembled, was free to fly away home; to touch the face of God. Lord, have mercy on their souls.

The following spring found Carolyn once again out in her garden preparing sacred ground. It was still frozen stiff in spots the rising Sun avoided along a daily star trek across the sky; icy patches left behind, tucked along the granite wall as plaques to remind an anxious gardener: full exposure was not making an appearance before mid-May. In the interim, places softened by the shining warmth gave her a point of reference from which to proceed for the season.

The school bus loud and clearly required some immediate attention: brake repair; a disquieting thought as Carolyn heard it squeaking and screeching to a halt in front of the farmhouse. A beautiful day though still a bit chilly, she had been outside for hours and was ready to take a break. The girls rounded the hill into the back yard in search of mother, knowing precisely where she would be. Carolyn stowed her hoe against the stone wall. Andrea joined her there. As soon as the woman vacated her own garden spot, the crows came to see what she might have stirred up for them. Crafty little devils, they'd been lurking in the nearby trees, watching and waiting for The Early Bird Special.

"Mom, where do birds go to die?" A morbid question right out of the blue.

"What made you think of something like that?"

"Look at them." Dozens of crows had come to call. "Look up." She did.

There overhead was a pair of spiraling red tail hawks drenched in sunlight, spinning gracefully in circles with the wind. Pointing toward the garden spot, she exclaimed: "Look at the huge one over there!" Staring at the magnificent specimen, hunting and pecking his way through organic debris, she noticed: "His feathers look purple in the light...he's the biggest crow I've ever seen! I didn't know they got this big...probably from eating out of our garden!"

"That's a raven...he's a close cousin of the crow." Carolyn knew her birds on sight, even from a considerable distance.

Andrea considered the circle of life. "There are so many birds in the world. How long do they live and where do they go to die?"

“I’m not sure, honey. I never really thought about it before...I enjoy them in the moment.” In this respect, Carolyn was an existentialist at heart.

“Lenora was like a little bird.” Her somber tone: evidence of a youngster’s reflective, melancholy mood.

“That’s what this is about?” Carolyn achieved clarity on this dark subject.

“On the bus ride home I was going through my notebook and I found this; something I wrote sitting right there on the wall...not long before she died.” Andrea handed a torn piece of paper to her mother.

Carolyn recited the lines of a poem: “Either I am losing my mind or finding my way. I am here, now perched upon the precipice; on the verge of flying elsewhere. I am almost home.” Handing it back to the woeful child, Andrea again presented it to her in return, a gift of remembrance; in memoriam.

“You can keep it. I memorized it as soon as I wrote it down.”

“Those are poignant words, sweetheart. Thank you.”

“I was with the crows when I wrote it. Something strange happened to me.”

“What happened?” A natural element of concern joined the pair for a three-way chat...a cosmic conference call commenced.

“I really can’t explain it but I think they spoke to me. All of a sudden they stopped stomping on the corn stalks then started hopping straight toward me. They got quiet and didn’t squawk or bicker like they usually do. They just sat with me and watched me like they *knew* I was feeling sad and came to cheer me up. I came outside to watch them but they were watching me instead.”

“You had a bird in the hand?” Relieved it was nothing too serious; Carolyn found the image amusing, smiling while she counted crows.

“They never got that close to me; they just hopped on the wall, cocked their heads and looked at me right in the eyes. Then I wrote this down but I didn’t know where it came from or what it meant. Now I think I know.”

“When did it happen?” Carolyn was growing more curious by the moment.

“Last December, a couple of weeks before Lenora died. That day the wind kept tearing the pages out of my notebook so I gave up and got up to go back inside the house. When I left they all stayed behind on the wall. Just before I reached the kitchen porch I heard them calling so I turned around and there they were...flying in circles right over my head! They were flying **for** me! I felt it inside, I swear it! They were trying to tell me something important!”

“No swearing.” Mother gently teased her sometimes-too-serious daughter.

“It was beautiful! All of them were making the most perfect patterns in the sky...what’s the word...when they all fly together?”

“In formation.” Carolyn’s brain functioned as an instant-recall thesaurus.

“Yes! Flying in formation! I **know** this must sound weird. It’s why I didn’t tell you before. When I found my poem again today it made me think; **that’s** what they said to me. They were giving me information! At first I thought it was about me, but it wasn’t...and it wasn’t about them either...it was about Lenora. They were trying to tell me something bad was going to happen.”

“Do you think it was a message...or maybe a premonition? You might have the gift, like Fran.” Carolyn was no longer teasing; she was entirely sincere, admiring her friend’s affinity for all things winged. Fran was known to dwell among angels, doing their bidding on Earth. Her eldest seemed to share the proclivity...if she could only decipher the messages she received.

“I don’t **want** this gift! What good does it do? If it **was** a premonition then why didn’t I know it sooner? Why didn’t I **know** so I could have...what’s the point if the answers to the most important questions come too late to help?”

“You cannot, **must not** blame yourself for what happened to Lenora. It’s a

tragedy, but under no circumstances was it in any way your fault.” Carolyn’s comment arrived in the form of a command. “You are **not** responsible for it. There is nothing you or anyone else could have done to save that sweet child or her brothers. You had no conceivable way of knowing what would happen to them...you could not have known. Annie. Do not blame yourself.”

“And now Lenora is home...with God.” A pause for reflection in the midst of painful thought, Andrea was still struggling with a loss; bewildered by it.

“You can’t give it back, you know...the gift.” With pure compassion in her heart and words, Carolyn peered deeply into her daughter’s tearful eyes.

“I know. I have always known.” Andrea wiped away droplets pooled at the rim of her wire glasses.

“So, about your morbid question...why isn’t the floor of the forest littered with the bodies of dead birds? I do not know why. We walk these woods all the time. I’ve never seen the body of a bird. Have you?”

“No. They **can’t** live forever...or do they? Are they really the spirits of our ancestors? Do they watch over us...from above? Are they like our Guardian Angels? Some say whenever a person dies, a bird carries the soul to Heaven. Is that really true?” A substantive philosophical question requiring an equally metaphysical approach to the response, Carolyn paused; ethereal or corporeal in nature...what is the essential Nature of these delicate winged creatures? A thoughtful mother had to admit having no definitive answers to any questions in this realm though she offered some suggested reading on the subject.

“I’ve been reading from **Ovid**. He wrote: ‘All things are always changing, / But nothing dies. The spirit comes and goes, / Is housed wherever it wills, shifts residence / From beasts to men, from men to beasts, but always / It keeps on living.’ I find his theory of life and death fascinating. Comforting.”

“Me too. Thanks. You **do** believe me about my poem...and the crows?”

“Of course I believe you...that’s one question you never have to ask me!” Embracing her daughter, Carolyn suddenly realized their discussion was the

beginning of a healing...for both of them. "Look at those scavengers!"

"Red tail hawks approaching...warp factor six!" Andrea pointed upward.

"You've been watching too much **Star Trek** lately." Carolyn laughed then noticed the creatures had indeed decided to *drop in* for an afternoon snack, at the speed of light suggested. Both ladies stood quietly beside the stone wall, marveling at the precision technique of two miraculous birds of prey, gasping as they swooped down into the garden. One snagged a field mouse. The other took flight behind its companion, talons empty; along for the ride, no doubt. Their presence, though fleeting, was quite enough to draw vehement protest from the crows...rather selfish creatures...not prone to sharing the spoils.

"Look at their wings, mom. They look like angels."

"How do you know? Have you ever seen an angel?" Carolyn, cajoling her eldest, never expected an answer to her rhetorical question.

"Yes, I have." Andrea's prompt response prompted an "Oh, my God" from her mother. "Mom, do you think Lenora is already up in Heaven?"

"I don't know. But if there really is a Heaven I believe she is there."

"If Heaven is a real place in outer space how far away is it from the Earth? How long does it take to get there after we die?"

"As the crow flies? Who knows...but I suspect it's not far. Not far at all."

It has been scribed in the folklore of civilizations, described throughout the ages: the raven as an omen of death, harbinger of things to come; its ominous presence portends impending doom. In many cultures there remain common beliefs in birds as sacred messengers of the spirit world whose obligation it is to transport the dead: the souls of those who pass on. Foretold is forewarned. It is cruel to cage a bird; to rob it of its essence, its divine purpose and reason for being. These splendid creatures are born with wings so to be free to fly; to

fulfill their destiny. As sacred symbols, they are to be worshipped as holy. Therefore, it is a moral imperative to admire the Angels of Death from afar.

*“Prophet!” said I, ‘thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us - by that God we both adore -
Tell this souls with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore -
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.’*

Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore.’”

Edgar Allan Poe The Raven



~ as the crows fly ~

off the hook

“You can’t run from trouble. There ain’t no place that far.”
Uncle Remus

Bathsheba Sherman may have been able to evade a conviction but not the blame game in life; then was apparently held accountable on some level after death. At least this was the assumption made by many, at that time and since. Town elders still spoke of her with contemptuous condemnation; a blight on the spirit of the village. Mr. McKeachern would often lower his voice and his eyes when he’d mention her name, not with reverence or respect, but disdain. Humanity abhors the vacuum created when a crime goes unsolved or worse, unpunished. According to many, past and present, Bathsheba Sherman was the guilty party who walked away from a heinous accusation free of charge; free as a bird. Some would argue the point. She was imprisoned in her home, shunned by her peers; enough to make any innocent woman angry, perhaps vindictive. Those who know the history suspect she suffered through life and paid the ultimate price in the end, as it was only the beginning for this Earth-bound spirit. In the grand scheme of things, she may not be so free after all.

“I didn’t do it!” Most often this was true. The claim staked, an assertion of this kind was usually delivered in a defensive posture most closely associated with self-righteous indignation. “It wasn’t me!” had a “how dare you” tacitly attached to its gruff tone. During the first few months in the house, a problem emerged which had not existed among the siblings. Personal belongings and precious treasures were missing, disappearing at an alarming rate. **Someone** needed to be blamed. “I did not go near your bedroom!” Arguments suddenly began to erupt where they had never been present before; false accusations became commonplace events and hurt feelings were a matter of course. None of the girls owned much but what they had, they cherished. When these items were missing it was usually cause enough for serious dissention in the ranks. Things would vanish then miraculously re-appear days or weeks later, often found in precisely the same place from which they were taken originally, like

magic, as if there all along and merely invisible; the girls became suspicious. Occasionally things would vanish, never to be seen again. Borrowers became keepers. Sometimes objects would be relocated to especially strange places; a troll found inside the refrigerator, a treasured story book discovered within a dark stairwell in their woodshed. It was odd how frequently, how routinely possessions went missing, as if someone were deliberately misplacing them, to solicit a negative response, thus prompting rather suspicious, contentious, sarcastically terse inquiries among this paranormally close group of five soul sisters: "Well, I *finally* found *my* gray sweater...in *your* room!" In response: "Well, I didn't *take* it! I never even *liked* it and it doesn't fit me anyway!" Inquiry: "And what were *you* doing in *my* bedroom?" In response: "Finding my missing sweater...*stuffed down behind the headboard of your bed!*" The children were sensing encroachment; shared space within a house three times the size of the one they had left behind. Appearing ungrateful at times during such petty discourse; this pervasive, negative energy began pulsing through their veins; an electrical vibration which had never been present before, not in this family, not among these siblings. The blame game didn't persist much longer as the true Nature of the problem soon became apparent to all of them.

No one to hold accountable: No mortal being, the culprit. Boo who? Roger was the only one who refused to accept the fact that there were mischievous spirits in their house. He preferred to blame anyone *visible*; guilty or not. His frustration with these antics sputtered and brewed as in a sealed cauldron, an unstable pressure cooker; the smallest infraction would pop his lid, spewing the contents at a heavenly host of innocent children who did not understand why their father was so upset, again. It was a double-barrel effect: an assault so disconcerting no one was capable of verbalizing it as fear of the unknown. Not only were they forced to contend with a house riddled with an arsenal of invisible weaponry but their father had a hair-trigger and perfect aim. No one ever knew what was coming next or from which direction; a situation which called for courage; uncommon valor in the face of a perceived enemy who'd again become the target of yet another childish prank...victims, one and all.

One late spring afternoon several of the girls were gathered in the kitchen,

chatting about events of the day at school. The sky was bright and beautiful. They were packing up snacks and making plans to escape into the woods: the land of the free! It was warm enough to play in the river or at the cascading waterfall beside the pond. While they busily prepared for an excursion their father quietly entered the kitchen. No one took much notice of him; they had greeted him already and were decidedly distracted at that particular moment, which was probably why nobody noticed him placing his precious fingernail clippers on the corner of the sideboard. He had come strolling through on his way to the bathroom. Emerging moments later, Roger walked back toward the sideboard to retrieve his clippers; the object he insisted had been placed there only minutes before. Suddenly a farmhouse became home of the brave.

“Where are they?” Everyone snapped to attention, hearing the harsh tone of his voice, the familiar sound of an implicit accusation levied. Chatter ceased; the kitchen fell silent except for his booming words. “Where’d my fingernail clippers go? I laid them down right here a minute ago...**right here**...so who took them?” The furrowed expression on his face raised heart rates all around the room. High anxiety reigned. Nancy unwittingly entered the room, coming through the front hallway behind him. Roger leapt at her like a wild beast.

“Did **you** take them?” Caught completely off guard, Nancy did not know how to respond to his stunning demand.

“Take what, daddy?” The child’s voice collapsed into a faint whisper. She immediately moved back, away from him, repelled by the sinister discharge of dark energy. Cynthia hovered nearer her big sister, in fear of the unknown. How loud would he get? How angry might he become? What next?

No one understood how he could stare into the innocent eyes of these girls and think ill of them; maintaining a presumption of guilt. How could he bear witness to their fright then ignore the effects his temper was having on them? How could he fail to recognize this? Their faces told the truth. It should have been obvious to the man. How could he not instantly absolve them of a crime they obviously didn’t commit? Roger **had** to know his false accusations were creating a toxic atmosphere of intimidation and yet he indulged it unabated,

apparently comfortable with his own outburst. Nancy was not afraid of him. She was perturbed; disgusted by his melodramatic reactions. She found him obtuse, as dense as a slab of stone regarding an issue with which they had all come to terms. He was spoiling everything! She looked at her sisters' distress then leered resentfully in his direction; challenging him to make amends for this cruel and unusual punishment. He had taken their smiles away, again. In one moment they were happily hanging out together and then suddenly it's a major crisis, the end of civilization as we know it; paranoia striking deeply in his heart. Roger was feeding the beast...and it was returning the favor.

“I want to know **who** took my clippers! NOW! WHO! Was it **you**? **You**?” Little bodies began to tremble, shaking heads indicating a uniform response. Everyone went mute. Thrusting his hands deeply down into the bottom of his pockets, he must have at least considered the possibility he'd been mistaken, but the search came up empty as would a bucket dipped into a dry well, so an irate interrogation continued: Inquest. Nobody knew what was coming next, including Roger; quite volatile when enraged, he'd often shock himself. This could screw up everything; possessing the potential to cancel an excursion as the highly probable penance. Nancy intervened. She'd had quite enough of it; of him. Displaying an uncommon valor worthy of a medal, Nancy confronted her father on a variety of issues, disarming her adversary in the process.

“Dad! None of us took your clippers! We have our own in the bathroom. I wasn't even in here! And no one else took them either so stop blaming us for something we didn't do!” Her tone was equally abrasive.

Roger was momentarily startled by his daughter's equally fervent outburst.

“Then **someone** is playing a dirty trick on me! Which one of you is it?”

“You're right! Someone **is** playing a trick on you, and it's no joke! But it's **not** us and it **never** has been us! Which **one** is it? **We** don't know...ask **them**! We have lived here for more than three years now, and what happens to you, happens to all of us, too, **all the time** and we don't blame **you** when **our** stuff is missing!” Nancy was not finished. “Maybe you're the one who misplaced your clippers! Or maybe you're just the one **they** decided to pick on today!”

“They were right here!” Roger slammed his fist down on the sideboard.

“Well, they are **not** there anymore...and none of **us** took them!” Nancy was taking one hell of a risk; she could end up grounded until she was thirty!

“Daddy? We could all help you find them.” There was a distinct tremor in Cindy’s sheepish voice. She was scared but so anxious to make things right.

Jaw grinding, veins bulging, temples throbbing; Roger looked directly into his daughter’s pleading eyes: Epiphany. He’d been living in the darkness of denial. Dawn breaks on Marblehead. Let there be Light. No one was lying to him. If there were not human beings to blame, he would **have** to admit it was something or someone else responsible. Glancing around their kitchen at this cluster of mortified mortals, Roger realized what he had done; overreacting in a way which can only be described as Classic Roger. So he got upset about getting upset, as if what he had put them through wasn’t punishment enough.

“I hate this goddamned house!” Arms flailing, huffing and puffing, he blew out of the room, blazing through the place he hated...on a scavenger hunt.

Relief: it was palpable. It was over, or so they thought. Everyone escaping Roger’s wrath unscathed, it was time to congratulate Nancy. Hers was an act of bravery unparalleled in their collective experience. No one had ever stood up to him like that before; none ever dared. It was a moment of triumph for all: Vindication. Validation. Victory! Grins cautiously returning along with a glint in their eyes; no one had forgotten it was gorgeous outside. They could hear the woods calling in a full-throated song of spring. Ladies-in-waiting quickly loaded up their backpacks and were ready to waltz on out the kitchen door, to make their great escape, just as their father re-entered the kitchen. There he stood, inside the threshold, staring silently at his girls as if he had something to say but it had gotten stuck in his throat; perhaps his pride? All movement stopped. All eyes fell upon him. It was not over yet.

“Sorry.” Their father’s voice, indicative of emotions hovering somewhere between humility and shame, had suddenly dropped with his guard. This was difficult to identify because no one had ever heard it before. His expression,

his demeanor was suddenly foreign to them: A milestone moment. This man had more to say in his own defense. “I’m sick to death of it; every time I lay something down around here it disappears.” It was his flimsy excuse, lacking sincerity and substance with the qualifier as a tag. Absolving himself of any blame for his behavior; simply not good enough. Do unto others...

“Yes. We know the feeling.” Andrea finally spoke up, unimpressed by his act of contrition. In his words she heard some attempt to disguise the truth of it, sensing some effort on his part to justify this inexcusable behavior. During his previous altercation with Nancy, Andrea had remained silent and felt like a coward for doing so; it was an opportunity to address several longstanding grievances, to make a few points of her own. “They *like* to get us in trouble, dad, and *they like it* when you get mad! You should think about that the next time you’re tempted to blame us for taking something you can’t find. That is *not* the only explanation. If you accuse *us* then you don’t have to admit what the *real* problem is...it’s not fair to us! We are all used to it; most of the time our stuff shows up again, usually in some strange place we’d never expect to find it. You should think about the times you flipped out for *no good reason* then found what you were missing when they decided to give it back to you!”

A pause for reflection.

Andrea decided to breathe. Roger was shocked. He never expected to be held accountable for his actions, especially to such an extent, but to his credit, he took it like a man. She was right and he knew it. She was firm and serious, as stern with her father as he’d been with them; unwilling to absolve him of the perceived crimes and misdemeanors: to let him off the hook based solely on a single word apology, especially one so long overdue. They lived together in the house of the spirits. It meant every member of the family had to rightfully acknowledge their existence. This mischief was *their* doing and it was about time he recognized the truth of it, the realities of a space shared. There was in fact at least one spirit who enjoyed this upheaval and Roger had always been quick to oblige; to answer the clarion call-to-arms flailing in the wind created by a blow hard; at-the-ready to feed on its negativity while it fed off his own. Andrea intended to become a catalyst, to catapult his consciousness into their presumed realization of oneness; into the “*we’re all*

in this together" mindset which had been sorely missing from him, like so many *lost* objects over the years. How she longed to prompt a series of flashbacks in his mind; wanting her father to explore complex concepts, needing him to remember and revisit these incidents, every time he'd lost his temper, every time he prejudged then punished his children based on insufficient evidence, because something he wanted was missing. Inviting him to examine his own aggressive tendencies with those who'd been watching all along, she wondered aloud if their house was changing him in fundamental ways. Then she insisted his outbursts stop; come to an abrupt halt. It was not a suggestion. It was an order. He complied. Presenting as a solid line, the united front was formed. An all-hands-on-deck approach was effectively emboldened by those most outspoken among them. Words used as weaponry, Roger saw the tactic turned against him. Disarmed and outnumbered, he surrendered. His eldest was not inclined to forgive then forget the sins of the father. Her accusations were not false but well-founded. As far as she was concerned he'd gotten what he deserved. As a former altar boy he should have known with confession comes a corresponding penance.

It was the last time Roger ever accused his daughters of anything, falsely or not, having learned his lesson well. They weren't perfect but they were good girls and he knew it. As the epitome of grace under fire Nancy then issued an open invitation, one designed to make peace. Of course, there was an ulterior motive attached, intended to insure their planned outing occur on schedule. Nancy was no fool. "Dad, do you wanna to come down to the river with us?" He gratefully accepted. There they spent the afternoon chasing crayfish along the shoals. There, he reclaimed his right and proper attitude. It was a start.

Everyone in the family still swears the spirits did it just to annoy hell out of Roger. Empirical evidence sited: this *only* happened when he was home. The telephone rang off the hook. Sure, all the girls had friends and the phone got plenty of use but it would frequently ring and no one was there; nothing but fuzzy static on the line. Sometimes the line would be dead. More frequently there would be an unnerving noise, a crackling rather convoluted sound, as if

someone was calling from far beyond the realm of possibility; from long ago and far away, but their calls could not properly connect. It would ring to the point of distraction. The line was repeatedly checked. It was fine, according to the phone company. Boo! Who is it? Who's there? Can you hear me now?

“Take that goddamned phone off the hook!” Message received. The call of the wild one usually came from the parlor, behind a newspaper; their father’s reverberating voice echoing throughout a massive house, as if attached to an equally massive megaphone. Indeed, it *was* a “mega” phone by design as was the innocuous unit hanging on the kitchen wall...the one driving him mad! In fact, their telephone could take itself off the hook; an ingenious invention: a trick and a treat. Judging by appearances, the party line was being utilized by *everyone* in the dwelling, some by rather surreptitious means; manipulating a common object in uncommon ways, circumventing the current, redirecting energy at will. It was a freaky physics lesson. Interacting with the telephone was always challenging, its form and function far exceeding any purposes originally intended for its usage. Mr. Bell would have surely been amazed! As a common method of communication from a distance it worked perfectly well. Nancy called Katy. Holly called April. The uncommon characteristics it possessed are what made it noteworthy. No one understood cryptic messages they received from the other end of the line; they seemed to come from the other side of the Universe, from somewhere beyond the grave or just beyond the speed of light and sound: testing the patience of mortal souls as well as the outer limits of technology. There is, of course, an implicit question posed by the ringtone of any telephone. “Is someone there? – Is anybody home?” The logical response: answer the call. “Hello?” Perhaps those calls from long ago and far away came through, after all. It could be they all had the proper connection with these intended callers...especially when the line was dead.

“Hope begins in the dark; the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.”

Anne Lamott

no rest for the wicked

“What I give form to in daylight is only one percent of what I have seen in darkness.”

M. C. Escher

Bathsheba. If it is indeed she who haunts the farmhouse, in the truest sense of the word, the one who conjures spells and utters threats as enchanted rhymes before dawn then she is haunted still by what she bartered in life and by that which claimed her in death. Perhaps there is a penance meant to punish those in the afterlife...perhaps the penance is in achieving what mortals often seek: an everlasting life. Be careful what you wish for...for surely you will have it.

No rest. A wounded spirit who can bear; a wounded soul is she: a woman who covets children not her own, one who presumes to claim another life for herself in death. These clues come from a former lifetime: scandalous rumors and innuendo intermingling with folklore and lies spread over the passage of time and space like so much manure in the garden; see how it grows? Smoke and mirrors obscuring the view of most, Mr. McKeachern knew the truth. He had been the one to establish her identity, remembering much about this old woman he'd known as a child, though they were not very pleasant memories. According to the elderly gentleman, she was a mean-spirited soul, angry and resentful, closed off to the world. Bathsheba Sherman had quite a reputation to uphold. Whether because of it, or in spite of it, she was hated and hateful. A wicked woman's torturous life was openly judged on the streets: tried and convicted in the court of public opinion within the village square, well before her final judgment day actually arrived. Reflecting upon history as a whole, it seems many mortal souls are comfortable in the leading role...playing God.

By all accounts hers was a tragic life. Bathsheba was a young and beautiful woman when an infant died quite mysteriously in her care. A mortal wound, presumably inflicted with a needle which was discovered impaled at the base

of its skull, the baby went into convulsions and then died. An inquest ensued; the heinous charge, vehemently denied. Judgment rendered, the court found for the defendant, the judge's ruling based not upon suspicious activity but rather, insufficient evidence: no proof of malfeasance. Case dismissed. Yet, the accusation haunted her for life. People **believed** she killed that baby, as an innocent sacrificial lamb. People believed a criminal, a wretched murderer, a wicked witch escaped unscathed. As Queen of Denial, Bathsheba could not defend herself against the onslaught of something as powerful as belief.

Whether true or not, and who besides herself could know for certain, much speculation circulated within the void created by a dismissal, suspicions that she had ritualistically sacrificed the infant, many at that time and since who claimed Bathsheba sold her soul to the devil for eternal youth and beauty; a dark heart in a pretty package. Many perceived her as evil incarnate and were not surprised when she seemed to age so rapidly afterward, once she was let off the hook for some alleged crime. Word spread as wildfire rumors swirled about this wicked woman and her evil ways: Witchcraft and devil worship. Someone prone to beating and starving her servants; an unflattering portrait painted of the woman considered to be a bit **too** beautiful: yet another charge leveled against her; it **must** have been because of a secret pact with the devil! The womenfolk were as threatened as the yeomen were attracted. Bathsheba had a following; a bevy of secret admirers as well as detractors, but there was no indication she'd paid much attention to any of her suitors. In spite of it she was persecuted; prosecuted out-of-court. She was labeled and libeled, treated as an evil temptress, a murderer and a harlot; looked down upon as nothing more than a whore: an unholy seductress who had been first seduced by the devil, so to do his bidding with promises made but never kept. The town folk quickly dismissed the notion of her innocence, faster than the court dismissed the charge. They had apparently forgotten about her **presumed** innocence, the law of the land, neglecting to consider even the remote possibility she might have been a victim of circumstance. It was a tale of life and death; enough to leave any spirit restless, wicked or not.

Mr. McKeachern imparted his vast knowledge as pearls of wisdom without ever mentioning the *afterlife*. Carolyn was unable to determine if he was an actual "believer" or not, as this concept was never discussed between them.

He spoke of Bathsheba only in terms of her tormented life, describing a bitter old woman; someone filled with rage and contempt. He came to the farm one day, a place he knew well, to instruct Carolyn in how to create a divining rod from the limb of an alder bush. They'd walked the land, talking for hours; he kindly answered every question he could, telling Carolyn all he knew of the woman who once dwelled in her home: a fascinating tale. As the presumed mistress of the house, Carolyn had much to learn and much to gain from this knowledge, assembling an intricate puzzle one obscure piece at a time, until she had a picture in her mind of the woman called Bathsheba. Her temptation to know more had a root ball buried in a dark place. The more she discovered the more she wanted and needed to know. It became as much an obsession as Roger's compulsion to murder the flies; an imperative. A current of negative energy charged a desire to know a woman she was surreptitiously becoming; a woman fulfilling her destiny through the living soul of another. Carolyn's yearning for knowledge deprived her of sleep and deprived her children of a mother's undivided attention for a time. A cosmic confluence was beginning to occur; a convergence of souls: an intermingling of the living and the dead. No one dared speak of it. None among them could fathom the depths of this transition. Essentially, her family could not believe their eyes. Carolyn could not close her eyes to rest. She remained awake, keeping constant vigil, laying in wait, watching over her young for an intruder who may come again under cover of darkness, one already present. No rest...for good and evil alike.

“Time! where didst thou those years inter

Which I have seene decease?”

William Habington



~ A restless spirit who can bear? ~

sink or swim

“Live in the sunshine, swim the sea, drink the wild air.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Carolyn was essentially on her own. As she attempted to unravel a mystery and put the pieces of a puzzle together, she felt isolated and alone; no support from a skeptical husband. Thoughtfully considering all she had learned of the woman named Bathsheba, it occurred to her that she'd been accused of being a witch at a time in history when she could actually survive such an insidious accusation. Not long before her birth, women accused of witchcraft were all presumed guilty until proven innocent, methodology employed to determine their status often resulting in a horrific death. Draconian measures utilized, superstitious at its ignorant core, women were routinely being burned alive at the stake or thrown into the lake. Those who held these poor souls beneath a pool of water would draw their ultimate conclusions based upon whether or not the body floated or sunk: either way, she was dead. Victims, one and all.

Flagrant abuses occurred during this time in history, including those who'd perished just up the road. Salem was not so far away; on a road to hell paved with *good* intentions: to rid the world of powerfully evil women, accustomed to taking matters into their own hands. In moments of contemplation, she had decided to take her children there, to show them the stocks, to expose them to the barbaric history associated with a town where intolerance was the norm. A history lesson learned: men are often threatened by women. Witchcraft as a manifestation is predominately a religion. Wiccan is the worship of Nature as God. Practical magic is essentially creative, the oldest and most potent form of magic in existence. The casting of its spells and gathering of covens in celebration was condemned by those fearful of the inherent power of such practices. Fear...the foundation of actions more evil than anything a woman could cook up in any cauldron. If Bathsheba had indeed been falsely accused of practicing witchcraft, little wonder she spent her life resentful of those who wished her dead. Had she not been punished enough in life? That alone would be enough to keep any spirit Earth-bound, if for no other reason, than

to clear her name in the chronicles of history.

Field trip! Carolyn convinced Roger that it was time; and a crime to live in the lap of history in a region of the country filled with such fascinations and not avail oneself of the lessons history is supposed to teach. Since their girls knew about Bathsheba she thought they should know the true history of New England...the land of their birth. He agreed. It was October during the season of the witch when they loaded up the car and made the drive up the coast to a place with homes older than their own. Andrea was thrilled by *The House of Seven Gables*; a big fan of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The museum was awesome and the tour was grand. On the way home daddy took a huge detour through Cambridge heading west into Lexington and Concord, all the while telling a tale their kids were learning in school. How cool! To see places they studied, visiting Walden Pond, Thoreau's old stomping grounds; to see the house that Emerson built was astounding. They were amazed by how much he retained from his own childhood lessons in Catholic school; Sacred Heart Academy. To apply that knowledge where appropriate was incumbent upon them all.

*“You can swim all day in the Sea of Knowledge
and still come out completely dry. Most people do.”*

Author Unknown

a rude awakening

"A Fear that in the deep night starts awake / Perpetually, to find its senses stained / Against the taut strings of the quivering air, / Awaiting the return of some dread chord?"

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Lorraine Warren had a sense and a vision of a spirit she called Bathsheba, proclaiming her a purely evil entity, portraying her as one of those doing the devil's footwork on Earth; one who deliberately killed an infant in the house, in the very bedroom where Roger and Carolyn slept. She likewise claimed to psychically intuit this spirit, sensing her presence within two specific rooms; assuring Carolyn she was demonic in nature: Satan's foot soldier, at war with a living soul, attempting to capture what she coveted. Mrs. Warren identified Bathsheba as a nefarious and malignant force, feeding off the energy in their house, with an especially voracious appetite for husbands. Insisting this beast dwells in the cellar, near the well, directly beneath their bedroom, it was Mrs. Warren's fervent hope the room be sealed and permanently abandoned. Then another suggestion: Stay the hell away from the well and out of that cellar!

Christine had literally reached the point of **no return**. Unwilling to tolerate the middle bedroom alone any longer, she decided instead to stake a claim on the bedroom her parents had formerly occupied then deserted for a renovated summer kitchen. Even though Carolyn tried convincing her otherwise, it was vacant and Christine insisted...she could not remain in the bedroom upstairs, directly above the one she'd chosen as a replacement. Cindy recently moved, claiming Andrea's space as her own when their big sister went off to college. Though the girls always left the doors open between their bedrooms it proved insufficient to quell the fear. Within a few weeks of Cindy's departure Chris began moving her belongings into an available space downstairs. Though she has never shared what scared the hell out of her, what scared her out of there, something happened...something wicked...prompting a rather sudden move; a necessary relocation. Convinced she would feel safer, being in much closer

proximity to her parents, it made the child feel more secure to be on the first floor with them but no one understood why, not even Carolyn. ***That*** bedroom had been forsaken for a legitimate reason, as the space where all of the major manifestations occurred. Unaffected by the warnings, Christine reassured her mother she'd be just fine. Nancy then claimed the middle room as her own, leaving April behind in the room above the kitchen: musical bedrooms. None of them realized the truth of it yet...no matter where *you* go, there *they* are. No point in wasting time and energy on ineffective evasive maneuvers; there would be no escaping a savage beast when, once again, she decided to return and rear her ugly head.

Placing the bed precisely where her parents once had their own, Christine centered the headboard up against the side-by-side doors opening into their dining room, leaving plenty of space for all of her other belongings. Lying in bed she faced a set of windows overlooking the garden; an exquisite pastoral view revealing expansive pastures, far better than a portal provided overhead. By the time Chrissy completed her own renovation project, the bedroom had a whole new personality; her own. Transformed into a feminine oasis, though not overdone, it was elegant. No frills...Classic Christine. With her presence the room became inviting again. She'd soon receive an unexpected guest.

It had been several years since any manifestations occurred in the bedroom. Though spooky episodes and corresponding apparitions involved continued unabated, the room in question remained eerily quiet. A decidedly false sense of security set in, albeit superficially. They developed an "out of sight...out of mind" mentality; a natural defense mechanism: a coping skill. No one ever assumed their spirits were history, per se. Though they had been ***gone*** a long time they were by no means long gone; perhaps dormant...at last? If they'd only lost interest and then moved on; no such luck. Theirs was an invisible existence most of the time but that did not mean they weren't there, watching and waiting: the Light of the World lurking within its shadows. Christine had always been as fascinated as she was frightened by what she saw and heard in the house. The child frequently exhibited admirable fearlessness regarding the spirits but something upstairs spooked her enough to abandon that space. At fifteen, Chrissy wanted and deserved a quiet bedroom of her own; a room with a view. It was the only other one

available, so, a calculated risk taken.

Throughout fall and winter the house remained relatively docile; no acting up or acting out. During the following spring several incidents occurred but each was benign; no explicit threats issued or insinuated...then it happened. Christine had spent several months in a room with a history and yet, she slept peacefully; unafraid and undisturbed. They **knew** when defenses were down; Bathsheba knew it was time to make her presence known...again.

Yanked from the depths of sleep, Christine was awakened by the presence. Her eyes opened suddenly. Chrissy felt herself being watched and there **she** was, hovering over the child, moving closer and closer, as if leaning down to make contact, perhaps to kiss one she covets. This mind-altering experience: the making of a memory; that image as vivid now as the moment it occurred. Christine could not move...could not breathe. As she tells it, still with such reluctance after so many years have passed, her face flushes, her heart races simply remembering an entirely too close encounter which proved pivotal in her life. Trauma changes human beings. It shocks them into a new reality and nothing is ever the same. This event caused a psychological shift to occur in the child who'd been confident, unshakable in her pragmatic approach to the new paranormal; a visitation transforming her into a mass of quivering flesh.

The spirit moved quite slowly, deliberately toward the girl who could not squirm away. Her body jolting taut, it was all but frozen in place. Reporting an inability to breathe the frigid air in the room, Chris distinctly recalls many details of the entity as her eyes remained fixated on this apparition the entire time. Its manifestation occurred precisely the same way it had with her mom years earlier, in the same location, right beside the bed. There she was again, though Christine insists she sensed no overt threat, unlike Carolyn. Instead, she felt as if she was being lovingly attended to by something so repugnant it literally took her breath away. During the moments which followed, Chrissy recalls hearing herself scream; a frantic, shrill, wholly audible shrieking-out-loud holler for help. She distinctly remembers yelling until her lungs hurt and her nostrils burned. In actuality, Christine was redundantly uttering a single word in monotone: "mom...mom...mom..." Her cry was **heard** by several members of the family. Her mother came running, as did Nancy and Cynthia,

both asleep upstairs, far beyond earshot of the plea. They heard her in heart and felt her fear; that mysterious connection again...as if sharing one mind.

This entity steadily approached until they were quite literally face-to-face. Christine closed her eyes. The next thing she remembered of the incident was her mother bursting into the room; vacant upon arrival, save a terrified child.

Even after Carolyn had grabbed tightly a hold of her daughter, Chrissy kept on chanting, “mom...mom...mom?♦” as the monotone mantra drew more help from above with this consistent repetition. The child appeared to be in shock. It was obvious to Carolyn. Something wicked had rudely awakened Christine in the middle of the night. She found her bundled beneath the covers. Gently rocking the youngster, reassuring her that it was over, assuming she was still in the midst of a nightmare, a mother knew it was a wide-awake nightmare.

Nancy and Cindy arrived seconds later. They took Chrissy out of bed then held on, guiding her trembling body into the parlor where they all huddled together. What Chris described instantly informed everyone of the situation; it was a visitation: manifestation. Her voice was hoarse...the tears flowing.

“Its head was leaning off to one side. It was round and it was gray all over it. I couldn’t see anything underneath it...no eyes or mouth...it looked like the cobwebs hanging in the corners of the cellar.” Christine gasped for air.

Carolyn suddenly felt sick. She knew precisely what it looked like and who it was; Bathsheba had come to call on her daughter...an uninvited guest.

“I smelled it but then I couldn’t breathe anymore. I couldn’t move at all! It kept coming closer and closer and I just kept screaming! I could hear myself! I could taste it in my throat! The arms were up like it was reaching out to me but it didn’t have any hands! Oh mom, it was floating over me, right next to me...right next to the bed!” Christine was overwhelmed. Her throat was raw. Cindy got up and closed the bedroom door then returned to her sister’s side.

“It’s all over. Come and sleep with me.” Carolyn was firm. Her girl needed to feel safe. Roger was away; plenty of room left in the king-sized waterbed.

Encouraging her to come along, Christine followed her mother, as did Nancy and Cynthia. Reassuring all of them, a mother tucked three of her own into one bed then crawled in beside them. All cuddled together, Carolyn stroked Christine's hair. A comfort zone established, she began falling asleep almost immediately. Poor thing, she'd been exhausted by the harrowing ordeal; such a rude awakening in the dark of night; a monster's reach had again grasped the consciousness of a kid. There was an off chance if she didn't dream about it, Chris might escape the vision of this apparition. Perhaps she would forget it while immersed in deep sleep, as so many dreams effectively dissipate this way, evaporating from the conscious mind once fully awake. A mother could only hope for such an outcome. The final conscious words she murmured to her family before slipping away proved to be supremely thought-provoking: "Mom, she didn't mean to scare me...she wasn't trying to hurt me." Gone: Rest in peace, sweet girl, for at least a few hours. It was as if she'd collapsed into a coma. Chris had endured an episode of unmitigated terror; unspeakable fear. Carolyn pondered her words, the last to come regarding this visitation for almost thirty years. It was the first time she had referred to the entity by gender, identifying it as a female. Prior to that point, she had referenced the specter only as "it" throughout her breathless description. Astounded that she did not perceive it to be sinister in nature, Carolyn would later question her daughter about the statement made regarding the apparition. It was too late. Christine had shut down...internalizing the disturbing event: Friend or foe?

Many months into writing this manuscript Christine finally divulged what she had witnessed that night. As she sat quietly on the sofa, stroking her dog Libby, the words finally came, beginning with one blunt rhetorical question: "Why me? Why did Bathsheba come to me?" There are no answers in this realm. Anyone present would have witnessed Christine conjuring images she had long ago repressed; relegated to the far recesses of her mind. The look on her face spoke of the pain a memory provoked. And there it was, instantly, as if it happened last night or only a moment before...as if no time had passed at all...manifestation in the form of a revisititation to the past.

"Her head is hanging off to one side from the neck. The face is round but it

has no features. It resembles a fencing mask; a gray webbed mesh cover. She is wearing a gray dress, like a smock, with large square pockets open at the waistline. It has a wide squared off bodice with a boat neck collar. It looks handmade to me.” Christine paused, as if gazing at a photograph, attempting to describe every detail. “She’s a normal size I suppose...not too tall, not too thin...average. The dress is long but I’m in bed so I cannot see if there are feet beneath it. She floats...she doesn’t need feet. That’s all I see. That’s all I remember about her.”

It was just the beginning. A few questions prompted submerged memories of that dark night, flooding her mind, releasing a deluge of pent up emotions regarding the event. Chris lowered her voice, staring at a fixed point within the room. “I thought they all came because they heard me screaming. I never saw mom come into the room. Nancy and Cindy came too. My lungs burned. My throat was on fire. They said I was calling mom over and over again; not screaming. I don’t understand how they heard me at all from upstairs. It was my one and only encounter with her; Bathsheba. For a long time afterward I wondered about it but then, when we moved away, I tried to leave it behind. It’s been...how long? I suppose it’s an image that’s with me for life. Maybe my fear colored it...when it was happening I didn’t feel at all threatened by her...was she there to hurt me or to protect me? I wonder if **I’m** the one who made it into a negative experience. It was all too disturbing...I was just a kid, scared out of my mind. She was the ugliest thing I have ever seen. Her head was repulsive! That’s what kept me from...oh; I don’t know...that’s enough reminiscing for tonight. I’ve got a good book going.” Escape. Christine was gone, retiring to her bedroom for the duration of the evening; Libby in tow. Sweet dreams, dear sister...what one always wishes for another, especially when growing up together in a house alive with death.

Much like the beloved dogs in our lives, human healing often involves the licking of wounds; properly attending to inevitable injuries sustained in life. However, to identify the wound inflicted is paramount. It cannot be dressed until it is addressed. Truth be told, some wounds never heal. Exposing them to the air, to the light of day can be as painful a process as rubbing salt into

them but it ultimately proves beneficial, as it too promotes healing. Lorraine Warren said ***stay out of that room***. Chris said: ***that's my room now***, refusing to relinquish the claim she had staked. Suppressing fear, she'd courageously claimed this space as her own and defiantly refused to share it. End of story.

“Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in memory as the wish to forget it.”
Michel de Montaigne

a fate worse than death

*"In our nature, however, there is a provision, alike marvelous and merciful,
that the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures
by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it."*

Nathaniel Hawthorne The Scarlet Letter

To be suspended in the ether, timeless in being: to be immortal.
That is the blessing. That is the curse.

Humanity has belabored the notion of immortality for millennium; time to re-examine the concept. The existence of the Soul has been in dispute since the beginning of **argument** as a linguistic high art form, when people began hypothesizing about themselves and their reason for being human. Once the mind was freed from the constraints of mere survival, once humankind could think about something beyond imperative food and shelter, mental evolution occurred. The human race began to consider itself. To know the significance (or insignificance) of one's place in the infinite Universe is important enough to consider. At least it seems so, based on the existence of numerous volumes written on a topic throughout the course of history. It became the imperative. Mortals began by worshipping what we can see with our own eyes: Sun and Moon, Earth and Stars: The Cosmos. Much later, only recently, in fact, that focus shifted to the molecules which hold it all together, as an intermingling of science and faith began to evolve.

Some of the earliest formal religions were based upon the conflict between good and evil; darkness and light. In the heart of the Fertile Crescent a belief system was developed by the Achaemenids and emerged hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The Zoroastrian Religion based all worship upon two opposing forces; two dueling deities. Ahuramazda, Spirit of Light was constantly "at war" with Ahriman, Spirit of Darkness. Its emphasis was placed on Light and Truth in perpetual conflict with Darkness and "The Lie". This religion stressed personal responsibility as relating to proper conduct. Simplistic perhaps, compared with the intricate, multi-lateral diatribe of, for

example, Catholicism yet basic tenets remain intact, standing the test of time.

Most of the major philosophers have weighed in on this complex concept, ever since someone originally sensed or conceptualized possessing a Soul, as humans became self-aware. Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively on the subject. Much of the historical literature available on the Soul is found within religious text worldwide. Though it is often considered to be coveted by and exclusive to the framework of religious doctrine, philosophers consider the existence of the Soul theoretical in Nature; as a point of view to be argued or referenced, either for or against, in challenge of assumption. William Paley derived his conclusions based solely upon logic; deductive reasoning, posited by his theory of the Watch and the Watchmaker. Paley's argument for the existence of God, simply stated, is that God **must** exist because the Universe is far too complicated a place to preclude the existence of a divine creator. Logic dictates that it is too intricate and interconnected to have been created by chance. Much like the multitude of delicate mechanisms encased within a watch, it does not follow logically that these mechanisms would have come together accidentally in the formation of a device to measure time; his argument presumes deliberate intention and vision. In the stark absence of a watchmaker it does not stand to reason that a watch could even exist. If there is no one to create the device, a watch is utterly incapable of creating itself. Thus, crossing into the realm of mathematics, probability and statistics, Paley believed it entirely implausible, in fact impossible that the watch could create itself either by chance or happenstance. Intelligence is a necessary ingredient, a prerequisite, as an invisible component of the time piece. Essentially, he'd suggested: God creates man + man creates watch = God creates watch. An equation: the stuff of science: Imagine that.

The concept of God has been inextricably linked to the concept of Soul, the presupposition being that a soul cannot exist without a god to bestow it upon humankind. But what if the two concepts are mutually exclusive? What if the soul is a vehicle, an energy source which we arrive with and take along the journey through Infinity? God could conceivably exist without imbuing soul upon humankind and Soul could exist as separate and distinct from a Creator. One does not necessarily presuppose or require the existence of the other. It *is* conceivable these two concepts have been inappropriately

intermingled as humankind developed a sense of self and began craving an understanding of the cosmos and our position therein. It is as if human beings, while grappling with notions regarding the origin of the species, came to require something more, something beyond ourselves, to praise and to blame; a parental figure of whom we are made in the image and likeness of; preserved by passing on recognizable characteristics, like a mother's eyes or a father's temperament. Or what if, as Mary Daly suggests, "It is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God." Perhaps the Soul is the God-Consciousness within us; an invisible image and likeness we cannot see but sense by other means. William Paley passed away long ago but went where? On his journey through the cosmos, he may have found the answers to his most urgent and pressing questions in life, but if he knows something which would end all the speculation, he and other curious, like-minded souls should relieve us of the burden of conjecture and return to tell humanity the truth; unless, of course, it is supposed to remain inherently a secret.

Truth be told; we have no earthly idea regarding the origin of the species or the Universe so how can so many speak with such authority on a subject they know nothing about? Why is this subject treated as a matter of faith when it is as much a matter of science? Humankind may never resolve the dilemma of this thing called "life" but it will not be for lack of trying; our attempt to unravel the threads of an infinite tapestry. The greatest minds on the planet, past and present, have kept constant vigil with the concept as a central theme, a proposition of the thought-process, whether the catalyst be spiritual longing or scientific inquiry...whether the point of reference and persuasion begins in the study of faith or physics matters not. They are the same. They seek same. When science and religion merge as one the true enlightenment will begin.

What is *Spirit*: Some remote, esoteric being? An ephemeral state of mind? Real or ethereal? Physical or metaphysical? Natural or supernatural? Normal or paranormal? Or is it something beyond humanity, the touchstone between this and all other dimensions? As ageless sage or symbiotic symbol, Spirit is ghostly and mostly a feeling. Perhaps it is instinct or intuition, the sixth *sense* humans possess; intrinsic knowledge of something beyond ourselves as well as something within ourselves; an attachment to something we perceive to be

greater than ourselves which manifests AS ourselves. Certain cultures have integrated this convoluted sensory perception, sense-of-self, with the concept of Soul, sharing mystical attributes assigned to both throughout time. Debate continues. Call it God-Consciousness. Identify and label it a dozen different ways. It may be just another delusion manufactured to create a comfort zone; not necessarily divine providence; rather, a realization of our own life force. In vast numbers, humanity ***believes*** in the existence of Spirit, if not the spirit world, as long as it remains invisible; an intangible, elusive idea. Yet, while willing to embrace the concept of Spirit on faith alone, once spirits manifest as substantive form it becomes suspect, no longer retaining any credibility in the eyes of those who would otherwise argue for its existence, some of whom stand and preach from gilded pulpits. Once they ***can*** see it they don't believe in it anymore: Ironic. Specifically regarding Roman Catholic doctrine, High Mass and The Liturgy virtually requires a suspension of disbelief, including a presumption of the existence of the Holy Ghost...Spirit.

What if humanity is a manifestation; energy taking form on plane of action; Earth, its current domain? We are all residents, in one form or another. Does a ghost feel any less "real" than we do in our own skin? When they appear do they ***feel*** anything? Do they sense any pleasure or pain, sorrow or joy, or are these sensations merely a distant recollection; a vague, non-descript memory they attempt to recapture or dispel? Are they present with a purpose beyond our ability to reason? Why would a presumably benevolent, omnipotent God allow any human beings access (or exposure) to supernatural entities if their existence was supposed to be kept a secret, unless of course, they ***are*** a gift? When revealing themselves to mortals in form and substance, is it a decision, their intention to do so? Do these beings control their own destiny? Does free will exist after death or is God willing it so as a message to be received from beyond the grave? Is there a predetermined outcome: to frighten or inform? This is a determination which can only be drawn by witnesses, if at all. Only through the Third Eye of the beholder can one discern what meaning, if any, should be assigned and attributed to close encounters of the bizarre kind; odd only because they are so unusual. What if all of the conjecture was no longer necessary? What if ***everyone knew*** beyond the shadows of doubt in which ***they*** lurk, awaiting acknowledgement; if mortals knew spirits dwelled among them, within their

own homes, this would soon become an entirely accepted idea; commonplace...like having pets. As for their farmhouse in Harrisville, some "in house" spirits **were** pets; cats and dogs, to be precise.

Then why do some places seem particularly prone to supernatural activity? They all seem to share a common theme: history. For instance, the majority of people in England believe in spirits because they dwell within centuries old houses where many events have shaped the history, apparently affecting the energy of the places and spaces. As a society, they are far more accepting of the phenomena because it **is** commonplace: the older the home place, the greater the chance someone who once lived within its walls was either unable or unwilling to part with it in the end, to leave it behind in mind. Its ghosts may well be nothing more than consciousness manifesting in form; memory as hologram. The ongoing speculation regarding what holds and keeps spirits Earth-bound generally includes a theory pertaining to sudden or tragic death. It is a common belief that those who meet their end abruptly or savagely may become incapable of leaving this realm with unresolved issues, unable to go: move onward; to where, we do not know. Their transition may have occurred so quickly or traumatically, they either weren't prepared to die or do not yet realize they're dead. Likewise, there is an equally common hypothesis which suggests these souls suffer a morbid existence; struggling through eternity in miserable, depraved circumstances: purgatory. These timeless beings spend infinity wandering aimlessly through space, returning to the only home they recall, to the only place they know to go. In quiet desperation, lingering in eternal expiating darkness, they seek solace, grace and guidance to the other side, unable to follow or even see the Light. An alternative hypothesis: They **are** the Light...the source of all enlightenment...but to please or provoke?

Based upon the numerous observations made over the course of time at the Harrisville house, the Perron family refutes some of these claims. They have both witnessed and interacted with spirits who did not seem to be the least bit uncomfortable in their current circumstances. They have witnessed a variety of apparitions seemingly present with no purpose or reason at all, certainly never intending to scare or harm anyone. The spirits were often oblivious to the mortals sharing space with them at any given moment, as if the mortals were the invisible ghosts sharing **their** space. Several members of the family

encountered the spirit they refer to as Bathsheba, one who apparently loathed Carolyn but adored and coveted her children. Each of the ghosts arrived from the netherworld with personality intact. The same apparition would manifest at different times wearing different outfits, appearing at different ages and stages of *life*: old...then young again...amazing. Immortal beings recognized and acknowledged over time, relationships, bonds of trust formed between individuals based on this familiarity. As an awareness of the spirits gradually increased, acceptance accompanied knowledge and a certain comfort level was naturally attained as these non-threatening entities repeatedly made their presence known within the house. The Perrons perceived them as being quite like "us" in many respects: they retain moods and emotions. From peaceful, loving souls to antagonistic and hateful; sometimes placidly observant and sometimes bemused and mischievous; other times vindictive and belligerent, jealous and cruel. The mix of characters could, at times, seem like a cast of thousands. Bathsheba, mean-spirited in the extreme, is the only troublemaker in the lot of them. However, it was not so unusual for an otherwise benign presence to become equally intrusive, especially when they were receiving company. Some do have a tendency to show off, seemingly relishing **shock value** associated with their presence. Surprisingly, they **do** take **NO** for an answer...even Bathsheba. "**Get out!** Just say it like you **mean** it and they'll go, usually pretty fast! Begging God works, too!" Some advice, according to Cynthia: a reliable source from an experienced perspective. Precisely what are they responding to as they depart so abruptly...as quickly as they came? Are they respecting a request or fearful of divine intervention? Does it hurt their feelings? Do they leave feeling satisfied by the overt acknowledgement received or offended by the dismissal? A mesmerizing, illusory intermingling of dead and living alike; encounters ranged from provocative to disinterested, malignant to benign, imaginable to inconceivable. Encounters occurred quite frequently; sightings so repetitious, they lost a certain "supernatural" quality and became a rather natural part of life to a family forced to adapt to the new paranormal. It is within this context they consider the ghosts as individuals; each one had a hidden agenda...every spirit intrinsically motivated by some incomprehensible desire **to be**. Therefore, assigning any particular meaning to the afterlife is absurd; it is to presume and articulate knowledge mortals simply do not possess. The significance of Spirit lies in its existence instead of its reason for being.

Doesn't the presence of spirit indicate or presuppose the existence of God? Should they be classified as same with the Order of Angels, whether risen or fallen, or are they separate and distinct entities? Does it not presume this *state of being* as a form of divine retribution: punishment; the result of a life ill-lived? Purgatory thus dooms those who occupy it, according to religious doctrine and dogma. It represents a perpetual penance, an infinite reflection upon a lifetime which did not quite measure up to divine expectations...no entrance to heaven but at least it is an escape from hell...or is it? There is no divine presence, no Oracle obvious to humanity at this time; no one available for the purpose of clarification. No one wise Soul to dispense the enigmatic, allegorical predictions we seek; no one to consult as a holy prophetic deity. Messages may come instead from the many who return. Most likely it will be science, not religion which ultimately resolves this ongoing dilemma, settling an age old-dispute while deciphering the ambiguous, revealing the dictates and parameters of our human comprehension of the Universe and this unique role we play within it. Perhaps philosophers and theologians, those scientists and scholars most interested in the subject over the course of time *should be* the ones to return, to reveal exactly what's going on out there in the Cosmos; revisit to answer those relevant questions posed during their mortal lifetimes. Perhaps they have returned over time and we have seen and heard them but did not listen because we did not know how...we could not believe our eyes.

Who knows? Is it a fate worse than death to pass on from this world only to linger eternally in the netherworld? Are spiritual beings plagued by desires of and for Earth? When they visit are they really homeward bound? Are they the haunted or the haunting? Everlasting life may be a quandary; immortality may be both a blessing and a curse. Spirits who currently inhabit the house at the farm do not appear to be particularly miserable, save one. Bathsheba was tormented in life and now torments her successors in death; of this the family is certain. Whether by association with or *as* the demon, she is still serving a sentence self-imposed upon her in life. No. She was not convicted; no jury of her peers convened. No judgment rendered in a court of law: case dismissed. Yet, during her lifetime Bathsheba remained perpetually haunted by a charge and the jury of her peers came in the form of suspicious villagers, assuming she was guilty of a horrendous crime; the murder of a baby as the sacrificial

lamb. Perceived lifelong as one wicked witch of a woman, presumed guilty, Bathsheba's exoneration was meaningless to most. As this grave reputation preceding her, known to others far and wide as the infamous evil temptress in life, Bathsheba remains an enigma in death. There were whispers...that she hung herself in the barn to punish a family she loathed; rumors...that she is not actually buried beneath her tombstone because the church would not allow her interment in consecrated ground. There is still speculation; some who believe she lies in the well beneath the bell stone. As with her spirit, the mystery lives on for eternity.

As for the Perron family, they no longer seek details of her tortured life and death. It matters not. If she does indeed remain suspended in the ether of the netherworld, unable to move on to another existence in another realm it may not necessarily be as punishment or by her own doing, in agreement with and decreed by the devil. Satan may be the fall guy of the tale. Carolyn turned all of her notes and sketches over to the Warrens during an investigation of the house more than thirty-five years ago. Even though she would like all these materials returned as keepsakes for her children, she does not wish to pursue the historical element of this research any further. Her presumption that spirit exists, based upon her consciousness-altering encounters, is to know enough: knowledge integral to faith. Unlike those rooted in **faith** as an occupation, those who claim to believe in what they cannot see yet balk at the concept of Spirit as tangible force in reality, Carolyn knows better. When she witnessed a multitude of manifestations of spirit, in every conceivable shape, size and form, it was with a reliance upon keen senses, (the ones human beings trust), which she based her interpretations of what was there before her eyes...well, they don't call them *visions* for nothing! When sight, smell, taste and touch impact a consciousness it leaves a mark: a memory. A distinct sound can be retained in mind forever. Click. Though she remains curious about Bathsheba Sherman, her origin as well as her ultimate fate, this research ended long ago, well before the family left their place in the country behind; obsession over. It is now with reticence she invokes the name. As decades pass, as time and distance serve to ease and clarify consciousness the burden of this knowledge

has lightened. Carolyn now refers to her spirit in terms of mild bemusement; usually whenever *disaster* strikes: the dog got out of the yard...Bathsheba's Curse. The handle on the hoe broke off...the Curse of Bathsheba. It is best to make light of the darkness.

A natural conversion, this integration of science and religion has begun to reveal a kinship between what was once perceived as two opposing forces. As ethereal concepts such as Soul, Spirit, God and Immortality endure such corporeal scrutiny, as scientific inquiry delves more deeply into the notions once relegated to worship in the pews of churches new beliefs have emerged; relative and relevant discoveries are now coming to Light. Quantum physics is taking another leap forward into the past. "If it can be imagined it already exists" is being revisited in relation to a cosmic consciousness; awareness of self in conjunction with a creator, as the creator of another esoteric concept: Destiny. Oh my God! Perhaps it is our destiny to discover ourselves through the spirits who return. If we overcome our fears we will receive the message.

At some point in the future, when human beings use half a brain, those quaint ghost stories of yore; tales told in the dark to spook kids around the campfire will have perfectly viable scientific explanations. In the interim, supernatural sightings will likely continue to be attributed to a variety of factors ranging from "live" historical drama to hysterical delusion. In the meantime, human beings continue to step across the threshold of churches and worship a power we simply cannot comprehend. We beg for immortality, pray to ascend to the heavens, there to be received and enlightened by God the Father; enmeshed with the Holy Spirit forever. In this respect, it seems we diminish God while engaged in the feeble attempt to define and envision a Creator. The old adage applies...be careful what you wish for...consider the ramifications of such an unenlightened request. Imagine such a fate; imagine being lost, suspended in the ether for eternity...it seems a fate worse than death. The ancient Chinese proverb "may you live forever" is imparted as a curse rather than a blessing. To some, death is a mercy; reprieve: life itself can be a fate worse than death.

"To be – or not to be. That is the question."
William Shakespeare

Where Souls Dwell

“For most of my life I have wondered where souls dwell. Over and over, I have asked, ‘Where is the other side? Where is the in-between?’ What if some or many disincarnates are stuck between here and there and where is ‘there’? I have come to a conclusion and the answer is simple: just beyond the speed of light. I believe this is where souls dwell. It is past our human senses, of sight or sound, but for those of us with the ability to tune in or to connect, it is as real as it gets. We can then vibrate and resonate with them.

There is no legitimate separation between science and spirit. We cannot separate science from soul. Each originates with a Creator and is therefore eternally, inextricably linked. The souls of spirits who dwell on the other side or the in-between state of being need and want to be acknowledged, to be understood by mortals as much as we need and want to acknowledge them; to comprehend their existence, so to illuminate our own.

I have made a promise, a pact to do whatever possible to keep in touch with two souls who have passed before me. Most contact occurs in dream state. Some happens by synchronicity; synergy during waking hours. When more of us make an effort to remain connected to those who pass on to the other side, perhaps the understanding we gain will cause our fear of them to dissipate; a fear of what we cannot always see or hear, but can feel to the depths of being.”

Margie Mersky



~ where spirits dwell ~

*“Science is not only compatible with spirituality;
it is a profound source of spirituality.”*
Carl Sagan

IV. Spooked

“Absent in body, be present in spirit.”

Corinthians iii. 6

There were many mortals beyond their immediate family who were *visited* when they visited at the farm. Some simply came to expect it, others came in spite of it and some came once, never to return again. There were those who arrived with great anticipation, hoping *something* would happen to them and then, if nothing did, felt disappointed, desperate to come back and try again. Friendships were frequently tested. However, there was one friend who felt no fear at all. In spite of numerous encounters she had during years spent at the farm one frequent overnight guest came and stayed in peace and comfort. Nothing spooked her. Holly was that rare exception to the rule, the one who blended perfectly into the landscape of a farm and the fabric of a family. She belonged with them. The child of Light became tightly woven into a colorful, elaborate tapestry of characters. Her thread remains unraveled to this day.

April met Holly in detention. Destiny, they presume, confirmed by the fact that Holly spent only *one* period there during the course of her school years, whereas April revisited this corporal penance from time to time; relegated to parochial purgatory: in atonement for one perceived sin or another. The girls were devotional from the beginning. No question; Holly’s secure placement within her adoptive family transcended bloodline. She occupies the position of sixth sister, rightfully so. Purity and sweetness drew her naturally to April, as she’d recognized these traits in another soul, one of her own kind. Initially welcomed into the fold as April’s great find of a friend, a treasure to behold, she quickly shared her discovery...then everyone fell in love with Holly; an instantaneous absorption. Her laughter is contagious. Her demeanor meshes flawlessly with everyone in their family; even Roger is crazy about her. He never got close to any of his children’s friends. Again, the exception made. She was more than just another kid hanging around the house. He found her delightful and included her by invitation on many family outings because she belonged: # 6. Holly became so close with them over time, when they finally moved to Georgia, she followed; logically. Within several months they were

all together again, as nearby in miles as in heart; as the fates allowed. She'd deliberately altered the path of her life to remain in close proximity to family she adored and did so willingly; the sacrifice of losing all of them at once too much to bear. Holly felt abandoned. When Carolyn celebrated her sixty-ninth birthday in August of 2008 there she was standing right behind her Cherokee Mother, framed within the borders of the family portrait. Preserving precious moments for posterity, *click* went the shutter of a camera; the familiar sound reminding everyone present of the bond which will never be broken, even in death. This kinship has endured the trials and tribulations of a super/natural family based upon a super/natural love: something sacred.

Decades pass as decades do, yet some memories remain contemporaneous. Though Holly had not been for a visit in awhile, nor had she spoken of these specific incidents in several years, not even with April, this family gathering was a time for celebration and revelation, prompting a spontaneous sharing of reflections and recollections. The subject did come up. Holly was quick to contribute from her personal memory bank. Life at the farm was vibrant with endless adventures. She remembers it quite fondly. Encircling a dining room table, the "girls" began speaking with exuberance about a time in life when everything was new; the element of surprise when seeing something they had never seen before, whether it was a lady slipper on the floor of the pine grove or a pronounced shadow in silhouette leaning against a doorway. Confessing that she *always* felt completely safe and protected at the farm, Holly went on to describe in detail an episode which occurred about one week prior to their family's departure for Georgia. She had come to stay for the weekend, there to help them pack...make a few more memories before they left her behind.

Having grabbed the vacant spot in the middle bedroom upstairs, the young woman fell hard into sleep after a long, hot day of relentless work. As Holly vividly recalls, she was abruptly awakened by the sound of "rummaging" in the chimney closet. The light had been turned on. There was a thin streak of pure white light cast across the darkened room from beneath the closet door. Rolling over in bed, she distinctly recalls the bright reddish background and glowing numbers on a new-fangled contraption called a digital alarm clock, illuminating 3:33 a.m. Drowsy and bleary-eyed, Holly leaned over to check it again, wondering why anybody would be up and about at this hour of night.

Eddy spent the night as well, dutiful helper that he was, primarily due to the very late hour they finished working, followed by a heavy dinner. Everyone crashed and burned in the heat of a house baked in the oven of a sunny June day; broiled from above. Maybe Eddy was already up, getting ready for work but why would he be inside the chimney closet? It had been packed; empty. Click. The latch lifted. As its creaky door began slowly swinging open, Holly saw the silhouette of a man standing in the doorway.

He did not move. “Eddy?” He did not speak. “Is that you?” The figure was as tall and lanky as Eddy but Holly had an immediate sense it was someone else; the same man she had seen before, over all the years of slumber parties. A familiar figure, he was; someone checking in, watching over the children of the house, of which she was one. To her knowledge, Holly had never seen Manny though he had been described to her on numerous occasions. She did not think it was him, even though he too was prone to standing in doorways, usually in the front hallway downstairs. No. This was someone else, someone a good bit older. She wondered if this was dear old Mr. Kenyon, come to say goodbye. Though she never met the man in life, he too had been described to her and spoken of with an abiding affection, often in her presence. Perhaps he had returned home, to the children he loved. Holly propped her body up in bed and stared at the figure; mesmerized...and wholly unafraid.

As Holly remembers it, he stood there for what seemed an eternity, a single light bulb behind him illuminating a deeply dark night. Glancing at the clock again, it still read 3:33, as if it was stuck. Holly wanted to speak with him but could not muster the energy to voice or body, to rise from bed and approach the stoic figure. She insists it wasn’t a sensation of fright prohibiting contact; she was simply unable to move. Truth be told, Holly expressed the desire to go to him, enveloped as she was with a sense of compassion and tenderness, the kind of feeling one might have toward a father figure. She knew him. She knew he loved her. Holly felt a certain kinship with the apparition standing in the doorway of that bedroom. He’d suspended time itself to visit her.

Then, after several moments, in precisely the same way it opened, the closet door began to close again: slowly, deliberately, with forethought; no malice. What Holly found astounding was the fact that this door **could not**

close the same way in which it had opened; what she had witnessed defied the laws of physics. After so many years of coming and going through the rooms of that old farmhouse, she knew each one of those doors had its own personality; its own quirks and foibles. ***That*** door, once unlatched, would slowly sway open, much the same way it had when the apparition arrived. However, because of the slant of a house built long and lean, it required some assistance to close it and latch it again. That door always gravitated toward the pitch of the place. There the figure stood. He did not move or speak as the door closed. Its latch engaged. Lights out...and then he was gone...darkness prevailed once again.

Though Holly knew the answer before asking the provocative question, she felt compelled to check with the only likely mortal suspect before revealing her phenomenal experience to anyone. The next morning over steaming cups of coffee, she rather nonchalantly inquired of Eddy...had he awakened and wandered around during the middle of the night? Nope. He had slept like the dead, so to speak; as she'd suspected. One of many sightings Holly had over the years this was destined to be her last. Within the week their family would be on the road again, caravan-style, out of harm's way, as far as the mother of the clan was concerned. While quietly listening to their odd conversation, Carolyn made no further inquiry...she did not want to know. It was obvious to the outgoing mistress of the house; Holly had encountered a supernatural ***someone*** in the night. From her perspective, she did not want to hear any of the details. Carolyn had endured the most ghostly of encounters and was the one least likely to return, having no desire to revisit this place in the country she once loved but by this time, loathed; a house held in contempt of cosmic court and spark. As her mind was already half way to Georgia, the vision of yet another country place firmly planted as a promising seed in her brain, she turned and walked away from any suggestion of another manifestation, out the kitchen door, off to inspect the loading of a truck. Holly understood her lack of interest and kept the story to herself...for the next thirty years.

2008: There was cause for celebration. With the lighting of candles came a warmth and glow of a song in the voices and the hearts of everyone present: "Happy birthday to you!" A stark reminder of the dark days before; Carolyn had just returned from the hospital. As her daughters signed a birthday card

intended for the cardiologist who saved their mother's life, a man responsible for insuring Carolyn would see another birthday, tears of joy were spilling as heartfelt messages of gratitude were scribed across the paper. Grandchildren signed then passed the pen to friends. Holly's turn came with little space left on a card crammed to its edges yet she found a spot to acknowledge the good doctor with a simple statement: "Thank you for saving my Mom." After cake and ice cream was served, Carolyn went to rest as a crowd began to disperse, mindful of her condition. Essentially, the entire family was recovering from her massive heart attack. Holly remained; **sisters** sat around the table telling tales of their shared childhood...noteworthy stories; the writer in the family taking copious notes.

"Remember the old song, 'Someone to Watch Over Me'?" That is just how it felt; like he knew me and loved me...like he was only there to protect me, from what I guess I'll never know." Recalling every detail of their encounter, Holly continued. "Never once did I feel unsafe in your house. Whenever I'd sleep over, I always stayed with April in her bedroom but not because I was afraid of **anything**. I just liked being with her. You never did tell me what it was going on in the chimney closet, though; this is the first I'm hearing of it. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I never told anyone...no, that's not true. I did tell Cathi about it...after we moved to Georgia. I think I told her when she came down for my high school graduation." April strained to remember precisely when she'd disclosed the great secret of her childhood. "It's not that I didn't trust you...I didn't want anyone to know because it was the only way I could protect him...from the Warrens. You know; they wanted to send them away, and he was my friend." Everyone nodded. Everyone understood. The Perron girls were emotionally attached to their holy spirits; not so spooked after all, it seems. Stories kept on surfacing as the clan revisited their past; page after page, until their scribe required a wrist guard in support of the process. Yes, there was an element of fear at first...though it didn't last. Holly smiled recalling those ethereal years as some of the best of her life. It seems the spooks had touched her heart, too.

"If you don't like something change it; if you can't change it, change the way you think about it."

Mary Engelbreit

going for a ride

“If you surrender to the wind, you can ride it.”

Toni Morrison

As a regular visitor to the farm Holly learned to make herself quite at home. It was a second home to her. She was around so frequently, from the age of ten or so, she soon became familiar with every nook and cranny of the old house. She blended so successfully into the family she was welcomed not as a guest, but simply as one of the girls. Carolyn delighted in her presence. Everyone did. No one served; she got her own. It happened naturally. Many weekends were spent bunking in with April, crammed into a twin bed, giggling until all hours of the night; a perpetual play date lasting for years.

Relieved April had made such a wonderful friend, Holly's presence was a welcome respite from worry, alleviating some of Carolyn's concerns about a reclusive daughter. April was more isolated, less social than her other girls. She spent far too much time alone, something she did by choice. When Holly arrived in April's life she appeared as the fresh face of hope, a promise April would not be so lonely or withdrawn anymore. Born only a few weeks apart; the girls had much in common. Holly was a buoyant, happy child with a huge smile, who laughed from her heart; sparkling bright blue eyes with a devilish spirit the angel inside her kept contained. A truly good girl by any standard, she had staying out of trouble down to an art form. As a positive influence on everyone she knew, Holly was a virtual role model; a pillar of conscience in a crowd of adolescent mischief-makers: Nancy, as the case in point: Holly, saving her sorry butt from mortal mischief more than once! Upon reflection, it was Kate's fault; everyone else went along for the ride with the wild child.

It was winter again; much too frigid to play outside so the children were all making the most of the gigantic house. Hide 'n seek qualified as an extreme sport; so many spooky cubbyholes in which to tuck away. Holly's turn came to hide and she was seeking a place to go. Upon entering Andrea's bedroom above the parlor, Holly looked around, deciding that choice was too obvious. No. The woodshed instead; cold, but way more secluded. No one would find

her out there; nobody would brave the cold to go look! The egg timer would expire and she'd win the game! This decision required sneaking downstairs and out through the summer kitchen. To do so and remain undetected would be a win by any standard; accomplishment in its own right. Gaining access to their woodshed the *other* way meant cutting through the window from inside the burning room. Having the reputation as an evil place to avoid at all cost, Holly thought better of it. Nancy had warned everyone not to go in there.

Standing at the top of the landing, peering into the dark narrow stairwell as it went winding down and around to the far corner of the parlor; Holly had to wonder if anyone was waiting at the bottom. Boo! The staircase posed some hazards by design. Guardrails installed with good reason, as a necessity for navigating the treacherous set of stairs in safety, Holly was about to discover one of the spirits...one with a good sense of humor; an introduction made by way of a rather unusual version of the twelve-step-program. Before she could even reach down and grasp the guardrail, Holly was suddenly flying, literally swept off her feet into midair, lifted up and carried by someone or something which gave her one hell of a ride...all the way to the bottom of the staircase. According to the still-startled soul, it happened so quickly, there was no time to reach for the rail; no time to react at all. In mere seconds she felt her body being *placed* at the bottom of the stairs, the first and only time her bottom touched any of them on the way down. She had not fallen. Of this, Holly was certain. The rest remains a mystery. She was not bumped or bruised, scraped or injured in any way. Boo! Who? Had someone just *stopped* her from going into that woodshed? Had it been some sort of divine intervention? Was it an act of God to keep her from falling (or being pushed) down that staircase? The excursion felt benevolent in Nature. Though, in retrospect, she questions the motivation, she did not do so at the time; mischief or mayhem...it felt as if someone had done her a really big favor. She remains grateful to this day.

What Holly found most bizarre about this event was, as quickly as the child went into flight, as swift the motion which carried her, she did not impact the facing wall of the stairwell. Instead, she rounded a sharp corner with ease, as if gliding down the slide on a playground. Whatever had control of her had *complete* control for those few seconds as Holly went for one soft spill of a ride, bypassing the hard right angle turn with room to spare. If the

girl had accidentally tripped or fallen on the staircase, there would have been no way to avoid striking the far wall in the bottom corner. According to basic laws of physics, some contact would have been necessary to halt the momentum; she would have been thumped and tumbled; guaranteed. Insisting she had been gently placed upon the bottom stair, Holly found herself there sitting upright, facing the adjacent door into the summer kitchen. Carolyn opened the door. She stood there with an armload of wood, studying the child's face, so full of wide-eyed wonder; knowing for certain something odd had just happened to their houseguest. In that house, on that day, it was not just the living at play.

All these many years later Holly fondly reminisces about the old farmhouse she dearly loved: a home place offering high adventure, warmth and comfort (only metaphorically), extended family and a rather wide variety of *friends*. Having witnessed innumerable incidents, she reflects upon these episodes as tertiary moments, not the primary source of her memories. The relationships she established are in the forefront of the recollections she has cherished for her lifetime. Though she rarely speaks of her supernatural encounters, Holly insists she never felt frightened in the farmhouse and always had a sense of being *looked after* and *safe* at all times; not threatened in any way. Truth be told, Nancy scared hell out of her...not the ghosts!

When Holly speaks of this now, some memories are vague and nondescript while others remain sharp and fresh in her mind. Even if she was not actually present for an encounter she knew of it by proxy, almost immediately, as one of the privileged few to hear about any significant experience; one of the few trusted and trustworthy souls; one who was visited whenever she visited the farmhouse. As manifestations began occurring in her presence, nonchalance about it was impressive, especially for one so young: No Big Deal. Even as a child her maturity and composure was evident. Her complete acceptance of the circumstances made them somehow less disturbing to her friends, far less intimidating to those forced to live in this environment full-time. By her own admission, Holly has chosen not to reveal these events from her childhood as an adult. She passed no judgment then nor does she now seek validation from uninformed, unenlightened individuals who wouldn't understand. Holly does not care what others think...she *knows*. Though she and April have remained

very close they hardly ever discuss these extraordinary episodes of their past; what happened in their presence so long ago at a farmhouse in a land far, far away. As Holly says, "It's just a part of our family history."

Cathi had come for a long overdue visit, her pug-nosed pup in tow; a pretty Pekinese named Cinnamon. They pulled in the yard driving a mail truck she bought at an auction. Cathi was always ahead of her time; recycling before it was hip. This unique vehicle with a steering wheel on the wrong side (on the right) was destined for use in the commission of a felony, aiding and abetting in the **rescue** of an old black stove; a crime which would require two intrepid trips. Bathsheba went along for the second ride. The smell was nauseating, even in an open air truck. Maybe she hated being house-bound. God knows she hated being Earth-bound! That witch hitched a ride on something other than the more conventional broomstick. Nobody saw her this day. Felt her? Yes. Smelled her? Oh, certainly so. It was to be a cool adventure in the heat of the summer. There would be junk food involved. Cathi delivered, toting a truckload of goodies; sustenance for a long journey ahead. They all crammed into the funky truck and headed into the woods of Foster, there to explore an old ramshackle estate, abandoned long ago. Carolyn had been there the day before with Fran, picking blueberries. From the moment she laid eyes on **her** stove, the mission was set in stone; cast in iron. She was certain the old place would burn to the ground. (It did, during that summer, roughly a month after their well-timed excursion.) The grand old estate was repeatedly vandalized; a tragic sight: the scene of the crime. Left exposed to the harsh elements, the windows had been shattered; its solid oak doors had been savagely fractured; splintered into kindling. All that survived these vicious attacks on a structure was something thugs and hoodlums could not destroy...it was stronger than the evil. The black stove, a **1909 Home Crawford**, stood alone in the debris, begging to be rescued; salvaged from the site. Carolyn was intent on saving it. All the men traveled together in the van; all the ladies gathered inside the mail truck. It was a bumpy, uncomfortable ride but spirits were high and the laughter, as pure as their purpose, sang along...even if their intention was to **retrieve** a valuable item from private property: Emancipation proclamation!

It was all Fran's fault. She was constantly dragging Carolyn off to *new* old places to explore, providing an exciting journey, to be sure; Fran as a virtual tour guide...one fascinating historical trek after another. The morning before the heist, Fran popped her head in the kitchen door: "Want to go for a ride?" There was a devilish glint in the eyes of an angel.

"Famous last words...so where to *this* time?" Carolyn giggled with delight. "Don't even bother telling me you just happened to be in the neighborhood and want some company; you want a co-conspirator!"

"To pick blueberries? I'm hurt! What could be more innocent?" Fran soon had her convinced. Carolyn abandoned her chores...again. They shared a cup of coffee before hitting the happy trail.

"Where are we going?" The hostess served her friend at the kitchen table.

"Out to the old Stanton Estate in Foster; there are hundreds of blueberry bushes there dripping with ripe fruit."

"Private property?" Based on Fran's history, a legitimate question she had to ask, though a response in the affirmative had never stopped them before.

"Well, technically speaking...don't you know the story? It's a famous one in these parts."

"More folklore? Do tell!" Carolyn claimed a seat. Fran could hardly wait to tell her another tragic tale of yore...days gone by...a personal predisposition.

"The Stanton family built the house in the early 1800's. After both parents died, the brother and sister kept the place and lived there together for the next sixty-five years. He used to do the shopping in the village but she never left their property; reclusive, I guess. Anyway, they were both into their eighties when it came to the attention of some villagers that Mr. Stanton was missing. He hadn't been seen for weeks. So the sheriff went out to their house and the old lady started shooting at him! Wouldn't let him anywhere near the place! Dementia; they had to take the poor woman by force...very sad. They found

her brother's rancid, decomposing body in the bed where he died. She would not part with him and put up one hell of a fight; the state police got involved. It was in all the papers. They placed her in a nursing home where she died a short time later. The house has been deserted ever since, for years...all those berries...going to waste. Come on! I'll show you! Bring some big buckets!" Gulping her coffee, Fran headed for the kitchen door. Carolyn was intrigued and dutifully followed her friend. The girls had plans of their own, though a couple went along for the ride. Arriving home later in the day, Carolyn froze the blueberries then called Cathi, in search of another willing co-conspirator! Fran had been quick to introduce her cohort to the old black stove, endorsing the grand rescue plan though she did not participate in its liberation. Truth be told, she never thought Carolyn would actually do it!

Getting an early start was paramount. At first light the contingent headed to Foster, both get-away vehicles on the road by 6:00 a.m., before the promise of another hot day had a chance to manifest in form. When the group arrived at the site there was no time to waste, no chance to explore...quick: let's go! The work was hard and heavy. Everyone pitched in, stripping a stove of each detachable piece of cast iron, leaving only a vacant shell behind. And then they were off...just that fast...thick as the thieves they were. Stove pipe had been carefully dismantled and removed from a chimney flue; it went with the first load. Within half an hour the deed was half done. Their trip home was a long one but not long enough to recover from all the exertion. An enormous amount of energy expended during the morning, the worst of this chore was still ahead of them. Her mail truck practically dragging bottom, Cathi was vigilant in her attempt to avoid the potholes rural Rhode Island is infamous for, hoping to return to the farm with her prized truck intact. Everyone was a nervous Wreck of the Hesperus; sweaty, dirty, skin smeared, hair streaked with the rusty residual debris of unkempt iron. Escaping unscathed bolstered their confidence even though Cathi kept glancing into the rear view mirror all the way home, watching for the blue light special squad car, **the stove police** laying-in-wait, ready to bring their adventures to an abrupt and unfortunate conclusion: Gotcha! Pulses raced and faces flushed. Riding shotgun, the kids kept eager eyes focused **out**, scanning the luscious landscape for the fuzz! A thrill ride: the rush of an imaginary low-speed chase. How absolutely brazen they'd been: sheer audacity at dawn.

With the first round of blatant pilfering behind them, everyone felt a real sense of satisfaction. Pulling into the yard, having pulled off the devilish heist with a heavenly host, in their light hearts and aching muscles they all knew that to finish the task meant a more painful return for the second, even heavier load. The girls were excited and ready to go. Adults were feeling it by this time; their enthusiasm waning. At least the trip back to the farm had been, though cramped, more comfortable: ballast. It made for a much smoother ride; this classic chase topping out at just about twenty-five miles per hour all the way from the backwoods of Foster to the backwoods of Harrisville. Rather than being nabbed for speeding through a town, fugitives from justice were far **more** likely to be stopped for driving so suspiciously slowly! No need to get busted by the fuzz for rescuing a stove. Best to pick up the pace!

Sustenance being served on the porch: all hands on deck! Chicken and tuna sandwiches prepared the night before, at Cathi's direction, the kids grabbed lunch then went to sit on the lawn. There Carolyn was not likely to notice all the **garbage** bags; assorted chips and cookies hidden among the gangly mix of arms and legs; another felonious act. Cathi had pulled three bags from her secret hiding spot underneath the transom of the truck: her stash. Completely surrounded, hands up, discreetly passing contraband within a tight circle of sisters; their devious criminal minds co-conspired to hide a bright yellow bag of Lay's Potato Chips because it's true what they say; you **can't** eat just one!

All fat and happy, everybody returned to their respective vehicles; time to unload the **other** stash. Once all the pieces of the stove were heaved into the barn, exhaustion began setting in but there was no turning back; the deed was only half done. It had to be finished; time for a second round, a second wind required in lieu of a nap. Cathi had a clandestine cooler hidden in the truck: Coca-Cola...the real thing! She'd held it in reserve, suspecting the beverage would become a necessary evil; a component of the workday. Divulging her secret to Carolyn, a covert cooler stocked with caffeine, the mother grinned. Brilliant! It was hot. They were tired. What better drug to ply the hordes with in regards to increased productivity? Artificial stimulation: Yes! The perfect

solution for lethargy; Carolyn requested her portion be infused intravenously. Nectar of the gods, it was; not the devil's brew their mother often made it out to be, especially for these five children who'd rarely tasted the sweet treat on their lips. Each one of them downed an entire can. Laughter erupted with the bowels of somebody unaccustomed to digesting such waste products, so they presumed. Let the blame games begin! Who was to blame for this fragrant, flagrant offense? As the little *ladies* loaded into the back of a wide-open mail truck a rancid stench became overpowering. Something inside had died, gone to hell...and it had come back to haunt them.

“Okay, which one of you cut the Cheetos?” (A tendency toward bluntness; Cathi retains this propensity.) It was an odor pungent enough to bring tears to the eyes of its victims, which is what happened...from laughing so hard.

“Cheetos?” An inquiring mind, Carolyn had to know; Cathi holding out on her? “Any left for me?” Handing over a brightly-colored bag, Cathi stared as Carolyn shoveled junk in her mouth while stating the obvious: “You’re a bad influence on these brats!” Her sarcasm instantly retrieved an admonishment, one feigned in the first place. They had a unique way of teasing one another.

“Terrible. I know. And you are quite a role model, destroying the evidence! By the way, your face is orange. Remind me who called last night for help to steal a stove.” The cheese that goes crunch all over her chin: bless this mess.

“...to *rescue* a stove...” Carolyn: adamant about semantics, a proper usage in proper context with an unusually nuanced rationalization.

“Oh, yes, that’s right, and who was it suggesting the kids come along to do the heavy lifting?” Be damned the Inquisition! Mom, mounting her defense:

“They’re *really* strong!” A mother’s pride: beaming through playful eyes.

“Yes! They certainly are!” Cathi waved a hand to her nose, indicating that God-awful odor had yet to dissipate. “So tell me, whose idea was this?”

“It was Roger’s idea.” Carolyn chuckled then choked on her Cheetos.

Cathi had to laugh, the ripple effect like dropping a boulder into a pond. “Have you got any Fritos? They’re my favorite!” Carolyn, waiting as expectantly as any child would; Cathi reached into the stash: half the bag of salty-flavored treats remained. Eureka! She’d struck gold-colored corn chips!

Yelling into the rearview mirror, Cathi declared: “**Whoever** it is polluting the air back there, please step away from the vehicle!”

Nobody claimed responsibility, girls pretending protest; yet each insisting **she was not** the culprit. Andrea felt her first; they weren’t alone. As crowded as it was, apparently there **was** room for one more. Sitting in the square metal box beneath a merciless mid-summer Sun, she got cold...chilled to the bone. Glancing over toward Cindy the eldest knew her younger sibling was equally aware of the drastic temperature change and what it meant. Cathi decided the only way to clear the air was to hit the road; to create some wind of her own. As they pulled out of the yard, Andrea leaned forward to whisper something sacred to her mother; the tattler had told the tale, ratting out their stowaway. Turning around in her seat, Carolyn caught a whiff of the foul, familiar odor. She caught the chill identified as Bathsheba. Not wanting to unnerve anyone, Carolyn closed her eyes then mouthed the words: “Get out of here.” Within a few hundred yards of the house her **aroma** was gone, along with the intruder. Cathi, none the wiser; she had already endured one wild ride with the wicked witch of Round Top Road and did **not** need to know that bitch hitched a ride in her truck. Relieved it was over, Carolyn turned to comfort food for solace; hoarding the Fritos, she consumed all the chips left in the bag, washing them down the hatch with another full can of caffeine. Zoom zoom. They were off.

Heave Ho! It required brute strength to hoist the empty shell of a stove into the back of the truck. By the time it was secured there was no room left at the inn so the children rode home with a father and friends in the van while Cathi and Carolyn carefully navigated back roads...as discreetly as possible. Along the way, Cathi had to maneuver cautiously, keeping both hands on the wheel at all times, though her mind was free to wander. After a pause for reflection she uttered a statement so obvious, it was hard to believe it had been earlier overlooked: “You realize we’re **Foster-ing** bad behavior in the children.”

“I do now! Why didn’t **I** think of that? Look! More blueberry bushes!”

“We’re both a corruptive influence, but you’re worse...a rotten mother.”

“Awful.” Carolyn shook her head disdainfully as a sign of self-loathing.

“We’re setting another bad example for impressionable youths.”

“They’re tough enough to take it. They all live with ghosts.” Mom: fooling around in fractions...by half...as the remark was inherently true.

“**I’m** an impressionable youth, too! So I’m actually corrupting myself!”

“How tragically convoluted!” Resist an urge to tease a willing accomplice? Never. All joking aside, Carolyn felt compelled to tell Cathi why she became so enchanted by the stove and **had** to bring it home. It reminded her of home.

“I remember being born, on the floor, in front of a black stove just like it.”

“What?” Unprepared for an abrupt change of course: “Are you serious?”

“I dream about it all the time. It was the first thing I ever saw, as soon as I opened my eyes; a cast iron stove just as big and beautiful.” Smiling serenely at her cohort-in-crime, Carolyn’s gratitude was purely sincere. “Thank you.” She considered the gesture of help a gift given. It was...from a dear friend.

Fugitives from justice, thieves escaped unscathed; they arrived at the farm about an hour later. Cathi had to crawl along the road, the weight of the stove causing the truck to scrape bottom entering the driveway. Off it came, out of the truck with one more strenuous Heave Ho! Carried in the kitchen literally a foot at a time, an old molded piece of iron took up residence. It was home; there to share space...to keep their family and a distant memory warm.

Carolyn’s vision of and ensuing rationalization for pilferage on this grand scale had finally come to fruition: Mission accomplished. She would bask in its glowing heat for many years to come. It had worked! A rather ingenious, well-planned, pre-conceived notion of a heist had been a success, in spite of

being a rather hastily arranged field trip. It was meant to be; astounding that she was able to convince her reluctant husband to participate then gather up his biggest, strongest men friends on such short notice. Efficiently executed: maximizing the time and space allotted for the task. Children: none the worse for wear; dirty perhaps, but otherwise, not a scratch. Contrary to the popular mindset, none of them went on to pursue a life of crime based on exposure; an excursion made into the woods to rescue a stove. Fostering felons was not an accusation which would stick; though they were free to plead entrapment and coercion courtesy of their mother's criminal mind, all of them will freely admit they all went along for the ride. Nobody suspected a thing. Nobody got caught red-handed, yet the telltale signs of their involvement were revealed when they spoke: evidence. The blue-tongued, finger-stained thieves pilfered berries, too. An inspired concept: Blue Girl Group...a great name for a gang. They had gotten away with it! A good thing, too! That summer the old house burned to the ground. Arson: the *real* crime committed at the Stanton Estate. The magnificent specimen rescued; the antique piece of sculpture cast in iron would have been transformed into a mass of molten metal, rendered useless, irretrievable; lost to the world forever. Theirs had been an act of perfect evil executed with good at heart...a scheme which saved a stove, after all.

Looking back on that bright summer day, Carolyn still harbors some regret, expressing it with a wince of shame when she speaks of the grand adventure. However, from the perspective of her accomplices, their rescue mission was necessary, still considered a triumph over evil; not an evil act. Truth be told, it was one of their best family outings ever...stowaway spirits aside.

Share and share alike: it was their motto. The Perron girls were growing up and a common childhood theme was apparently being carried into adulthood. Nancy was in the back of their Chevy van with Fred. It didn't much matter to her that he had been Andrea's first boyfriend only two years before; he had shown some interest in her **next** of kin; all that mattered at the moment. As a firm believer in sharing with her sisters, Nancy decided to entertain Freddy's sly dog suggestion that they take a walk together. Andrea was off in a land

far, far away; she would ***never*** know. Had Fred been given the opportunity, he would have happily taken Nancy for the ride of her life. Having come to the house with his sister Katy, his options were rather limited. Fred's car was broken down. The keys to the van were inaccessible, tucked deeply inside of Roger's pocket while he slept on the sofa. Nancy knew they'd have to travel locally, on foot, but there were plenty of places available on the property to sneak off and hide in the darkness where they wouldn't be discovered, or so she thought. No one noticed when a lusty couple disappeared from the crowd gathered in the kitchen. Katy and company were highly distracted. With one "***come hither***" glance from across the table, Nancy enticed Freddy outside. There were no street lights, nothing to illuminate their whereabouts and yet she was capable of locating his voluptuous set of lips with ease...a miracle! Eyes like that of a cat, Nancy could see in the dark; another natural talent. It occurred to her the vacant van parked in their driveway would be the perfect choice for some privacy, offering a way to stay warm at the onset of winter. With a few suggestions of her own Nancy convinced him to follow her there. They crawled inside the open cargo space in the back. Freddy was just about to make his smoothest move when he turned white enough to light a path all the way back into the house. He followed it, opening the door and exiting the van without saying a word. Nancy was offended, having no idea why she had just been dumped. The young man leapt from a prone position and was out of the vehicle in seconds. She too jumped out, running after him; she ***had*** to run as he was moving fast. It was unlike Freddy to be so abrupt. Nancy found his behavior curious and equally impolite. Obviously ***something*** had happened!

Though it took some time to pry the tough truth from his tender lips Freddy confessed he had been spooked. All he said: "We were not alone in that van." Apparently he'd detected a presence; a ***someone*** undoubtedly there to watch over Nancy (like it or not); so to preserve, protect and defend her honor, no matter how willing she was to relinquish it. Though she did not ***feel*** anything other than his hands at the time, Nancy believed him...the young man had no reason to lie. Whoever it was made his skin crawl; whoever it was made him run away like a scared little child, leaving behind a hot tamale teenager ripe for the picking. Fred never did divulge any details of the encounter. Instead, he took another path, slipping away from a family and friends in the process. He never returned to the farmhouse again. Over the

course of the next year or so, Fred became involved with a group of unsavory characters who'd led him astray. The bright and beautiful boy was transformed by the substance known as Angel Dust; a powerful, often deadly hallucinogen. A sudden influx of the scourge struck like a dagger at the heart of Harrisville during the summer of 1977, changing everything; a sudden turn for the worse. Their sleepy village became a toxic waste dump, virtually overnight. Kids were getting *dusted* all over town, dosing and overdosing themselves; parents in a panic. Intoxicated teenagers were dropping like flies because a pusher was doing his footwork.

There are losses sustained in a lifetime; significant losses from which those who remain behind never fully recover. Freddy's death was one of them. No one could believe he was gone. Nancy called Andrea in Pittsburgh, sobbing hysterically; she could not speak. Carolyn had to take the phone to break the tragic news. His body was found in the village cemetery near his car, parked beside Bathsheba Sherman's gravestone. Andrea grieved for her dear friend. She was not as shocked as some; they'd met in passing the previous summer. During this brief interlude she had seen the startling vacancy in his eyes. His light had turned to darkness. He was already gone...across the Universe.

Freddy had to get high; he had to fly higher and higher until one dark night, while traveling at the speed of light, on devil dust disguised as angel wing, a little birdie whispered in his ear, showing him the way. He wanted to fly high enough to escape his demons on Earth. He did not escape unscathed. Sweet friend, rest in peace. Heaven isn't far. On the wings of angels fly away home.

"The desire to fly is an idea handed down to us by our ancestors who, in their grueling travels across trackless lands in prehistoric times, looked enviously on the birds soaring freely through space, at full speed, above all obstacles, on the infinite highway of the air."

Wilbur Wright

bed knobs

*“We turn to God for help when our foundations are shaking,
only to learn that it is God who is shaking them.”*

Charles C. West

What if everything is **one** thing? What if God is **one** thing and everything? What if the Universe expands with our consciousness? These are some of the questions young children pondered as they tried to fall asleep in a house alive with death; not free to have sweet dreams of David Cassidy or Davey Jones. Their minds were otherwise preoccupied: a blessing and a curse. Each night was a challenge; fear, the obstacle to overcome. Cindy went for a ride almost every night. Her bed would shudder and vibrate, as a matter of course. It did not begin to levitate until she was thirteen. Cindy had reason to want another bedroom but she did not want to abandon Christine. As five sisters, watching and listening throughout the nights spent waiting for what was next to come, doors remained open between bedrooms; theirs was a supernatural existence. Whenever the veils thinned, shredding between the dimensions, moonstruck shadows revealing a translucent presence; space and time became irrelevant. All that mattered in the moment **was** the moment; certain knowing they were not alone; knowing, for as long as they lived there, never would be again.

September ~ 1976: From the minute the car left the driveway for a journey to Pittsburgh, Cynthia began making moving plans of her own, her intention, to stake a claim: Andrea's vacant bedroom. It was the perfect solution to her perpetual dilemma. Christine could have the middle room all to herself but Cindy would be right next door. If they each placed their beds back-to-back against the adjoining wall then, technically, they would be sleeping closer together than ever. Problem solved. Cindy's guilt alleviated, her official plan was hatched. While Roger was away, taking his eldest to college, the fourth of five was single-handedly rearranging the entire room. On a warm, sunny afternoon, while everyone else was busy outside, Cynthia moved her dresser and all of her stuff into unshared space, forgetting that, no matter where you

go, there they are. At the age of thirteen she ***finally*** had a room of her own.

It proved to be a task and a half; a real feat for one so young but Cindy was reluctant to ask for help. She did not have permission and presumed if she did the job alone no one would have a chance to protest. There was a desk, a full-sized bed and a vanity at her disposal, each of which she arranged to her liking. Then came the arduous and incessant back-and-forth motion: toting assorted toys and trinkets, filling an empty closet with clothing. Cindy swept and dusted, polished and primped the bedroom for hours, lending her unique style to the surroundings. She washed windows then hung the set of curtains which matched her quilt. Andrea had been forced to leave a lot behind, as the dormitory room was minuscule by comparison. Consequently, Cindy felt rich in the same way a pauper suddenly endowed feels like a princess. The bed, a four-poster pineapple spinet, was one lovely and familiar space to inhabit. It was like a cushion, a cloud of delightful sensations, luxurious in every way. She had no regrets leaving her old twin-sized bed behind in the middle room. She'd spent many nights cuddled up with Andrea in a bed she had covetously longed for and loved for years...and now it was hers! Placing her quilt across the mattress, Cindy stood back to admire the room, results of an effort made; a wonder to behold. It was beautiful. It looked ***so*** different. It looked like ***her*** bedroom; a vision she'd held in reserve, in the back of her mind for years.

It felt so peaceful to her; calm and quiet. Having always desired a bedroom of her own, more importantly, the child wanted to get away from ***whatever*** it was in the middle bedroom seeming to seek her out...to haunt and taunt her, especially in the night. Children have a tendency to think literally: linearly. It did not occur to her at the time; there was no escaping the sights and sounds surrounding her in the darkness. This change of location a few feet away was highly unlikely to alter the inevitable outcome; merely a change of scenery. The grass is not always greener on the other side of a shared wall; inevitably, it was the same grass planted somewhere else. No matter where you go, there they are; lessons learned over time are, at times, of no service in the moment. Cynthia's desperate craving for a different bedroom was equally misguided and ill-conceived; the rebellious act of a child would soon be duly noted by disgruntled spirits Earth-bound to display some rebellion of their own. She'd be punished accordingly. How dare she reject them! Going somewhere, little

girl? Attempting to leave us behind? No such thing! As if she had left a trail of crumbs through the woods, they followed her...with a vengeance.

This youngster attracted supernatural activity unlike any of her siblings. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she'd come so close to death herself. From the first night the family moved into the farmhouse, the room where she slept became the place where spirits gravitated. Smells and shapes moved through the shadows of spaces so dark it was difficult to see, even with the lights on. There was something about this room...something wicked. Her bed vibrated almost every night. It was moved in the morning. At times it would lurch and scrape across the floor, even though its metal feet never scarred the wood: no telltale signs; no evidence. When approached, she'd frequently hide beneath the covers begging God to make it stop. Cindy saw things in the middle room she will never forget so when the opportunity presented, when she perceived an escape route had cleared, a way out, she literally **took** it.

"Mom, please don't get mad at me." Apprehensively, the child approached her mother in the pantry after dinner.

"Mad about what?" Carolyn was perplexed. She never did anything wrong.

"Come see." Mother dutifully followed her daughter up the staircase.

"So **this** is what you have been doing all day! Why didn't you tell me so? I could have come to help you."

"I was afraid you would tell me I couldn't have the room and I just **had** to get out of...there!" Pointing toward the room next door, Carolyn understood. "I'm sorry I didn't ask first." Confession is good for the soul, so they say, and Cindy was relieved her mother was not upset by the slight deception. On the contrary, Carolyn appeared delighted by the initiative taken; hard at work on such a beautiful day when her sisters were hard at play. Impressed by the results of an obvious effort made and muscle extended, Cindy received only high praise; no harsh judgment against her. Carolyn looked around the room.

“No point in a good room going to waste, I say...and a good thing you’ve snagged it before Nancy did...then it would be a wasteland! Of course, when Annie comes home from school you’ll have to share it...does she *know* you took her bedroom?”

“She knows I wanted it but I didn’t ask her, either. But I know it will be all right with her...she’s like that...she shares everything!”

“I know it will, too. Good job! What does Chrissy think about this move?”

“She’s okay with it I guess...she’s putting her bed up against the same wall as mine. I’ll help her move it so we can still hear each other at night. I don’t want her to feel all alone in there. It was scary enough with the two of us.”

For a few nights Cynthia slept like an angel; utterly undisturbed: Reprieve! It could not have been more blissful. And then it began. Within several days of occupancy she noticed the bed ajar whenever she entered the room. This bedroom had always been quite active as well. Soon other pieces of furniture followed suit...rearranging the suite in her absence. She’d return from school to find the room completely altered; a desk shoved to the center of the floor, her bed, cockeyed, pulled out of place; stuffed toys thrown off the bed into the corner. Cindy had worked hard to set it up the way she preferred it to be; to find it repeatedly tampered with, left disheveled; such disrespect angered this urchin. Frustrated, she cursed whoever it was doing it as she struggled to return everything to its original position, in its right and proper place, all the while chastising the spirits interfering with her life. Cindy threatened them, rather harshly, to get the hell out; leave her new bedroom alone: Big mistake.

Andrea had numerous encounters during her tenure. For the six years it had been exclusively her own, she witnessed a multitude of manifestations but has no recollection of the bed ever moving while she was awake. However, she often awakened in the morning to find herself clear across the room, the bed having been relocated by several feet during the night. This was a rather

common occurrence in the farmhouse, one of those lesser evils; venial sins: space invasion...a violation no one paid much attention. Cindy spent many nights curled up with her big sister in the big bed but it wasn't until she slept in it alone that she fully appreciated its innate power to petrify. Shaken like a kernel of corn in a package of Jiffy Pop, Cynthia was forced to endure the raging of the spirits or a demon intent upon keeping the child sleep-deprived; Cindy had to rock and roll with the punches in order to retain possession of a bedroom she was unwilling to relinquish...to anyone.

Andrea has vivid recollections of her quilt rising and falling, as if someone was sharing space in the bed beside her, visibly breathing beneath the sheets. Whenever this happened, the youngster would sternly demand, "Go Away!" Now **that's** an order! Firm. Decisive. Unambiguous. Obeyed. It always did resolve the problem perceived. Intervention was unnecessary; she never felt compelled to request assistance from God or anyone else, for that matter. She meant what she said when she spoke it; as the voice of authority, it proved adequate to dispel any intruder. Cynthia had a far different approach to this particular problem. She was willing to beg God for help whenever necessary. Once she'd moved into Andrea's bedroom, to her great surprise, it became a far more frequent necessity. No shame attached or pride allowed in the midst of a crisis; not above requesting help from above, Cynthia often called upon the Great Spirit to rescue her from a malicious spirit routinely harassing the innocent girl. Andrea's experiences had been similar though relatively minor in comparison with her little sister's encounters, which lead everyone in the family to believe that she had indeed been followed. Though the eldest had a tendency to observe then react based on the severity of the infraction, Andrea found their antics annoying or at worst, distracting...but otherwise harmless. However, Cindy had close encounters which appeared to be life-threatening in nature as they occurred. Andrea spoke with omnipotence to clear the space and reclaim it as her own. Cindy did as she was told. Repeatedly uttering the words Mrs. Warren had instructed them to use when approached, she found the phrase useless, resorting instead to pleading as a heartfelt form of prayer. It worked. That's what cleared the bedroom for the child intent on claiming it and keeping it as her own: adamant and unyielding, she would **not** be chased away...to go where? Beginning to see the light, Cynthia realized the truth: no matter where you go...there they are. In time, an alternative approach was

successfully adopted and beings would adapt, providing ease from dis/ease, a comfort to all involved. Initially, she was terrified out of her mind.

It had nothing to do with the choice of bedroom per se, but rather pertained to ***the child*** whose attention was solely demanded. As surroundings changed so did the nature of various manifestations she was subjected to; paranormal activity increasing overall. Cynthia had escaped ***nothing***; in fact, her level of exposure was magnified by a lateral move. It only served to aggravate spirits apparently satisfied with habitually visiting her in a very specific location. A unique phenomenon occurred: Cindy had entered another realm of the house, another dimension, just a few feet away from a space she formerly occupied, thereby introducing her to entities with whom she was unfamiliar; those she had yet to encounter apparently relegated to this bedroom. Apparitions she'd never seen before began manifesting with such frequency; it seemed she was still sharing space against her will. Likewise, those she'd attempted to leave behind in their middle bedroom stepped audaciously, belligerently across its threshold into another. The massive relocation project spawned a realization: Cindy discovered the source of the haunting chant she'd endured nightly for six long years. It became louder, more succinct, less muffled, as if coming from inside the wall directly beside her bed. Acquiring Andrea's bedroom came with a series of characters and complications, lending further credence to the phrase, "Be careful what you wish for..." She knew this was one battle she had to win. In a vast theater of operations, a sudden repositioning is risky business. According to Cindy it was like moving from one stage onto another and taking the entire cast, only to discover another complete cast ready and waiting to play their parts as well; the making of an epic...with understudies!

She began hearing voices she had never heard before; strangers. Familiar voices came rippling through the ether with clarity she was unaccustomed to, yet these new sights and sounds were only the beginning. Within two weeks of taking over the bedroom, her peaceful repose became a thing of the past.

One evening Cindy went upstairs to get her homework then decided to stay and enjoy her privacy rather than joining her sisters in the kitchen. Settling in on the center of the bed, she'd worked quietly for several minutes before the onslaught began. It was dark outside but the room was bright. The last thing

she ever expected happened. As if a gigantic hand reached into a dollhouse, retrieving the bed along with its occupant, it suddenly lifted off the floor. As she screamed it began shaking violently: naughty it was not nor mischievous; not like a kid trying to knock a doll from a piece of toy furniture. Instead, it was a vicious and relentless attack. While the bed hovered off the floor it was jerked and lurched so intensely, Cindy was certain she would be thrown from the mattress. Yelling; a shrill, piercing scream ensued at the top of her voice. Bumped and bothered, throttled and thrashed, Cindy hung onto the bedpost, pleading for safe release. “In the name of Jesus Christ, go back to where you came from!” Tears pouring from her eyes; there was so much fluid leaking from her face she could not see what was happening around her but she felt it, making the wild ride all the more terrifying. Jostled and tossed across the surface of the bed, an unprovoked attack continued unabated. The bed came alive. It vibrated furiously, tipping side to side. Then it began banging down onto the floor with such a force, it shook the entire structure; one strike after another. Steam escaped from Cynthia’s mouth with each panicked shriek; the room became unbearably frigid. Books were bouncing off the walls as papers and pens flew imprecise patterns, trapped within a spiraling shaft of stench; a whirlwind as circling projectiles crashed into this child, over and over again; punishment time! She knew her family was downstairs. They **had** to hear it, what was happening to her...someone would surely come running!

“God help me! **Please** make it stop! Somebody please come and help me!” Cynthia begged. “Dear Lord! Jesus! Make it go away! Mom! Come help me! Mom! Please God, send **someone** to help me!” Frantic, she was traumatized; in shock. Her memory of it is still quite vivid; emotionally compelling these many years later. Cynthia recalls this episode as lasting **a long time**, at least a couple of minutes, though she’d be the first to admit the inherent difficulty in establishing an accurate time frame for these episodes, as time itself seemed virtually suspended whenever they occurred. The aftermath of this episode is equally confusing. Just like Dorothy landing in Oz with a jolt, a sudden drop ending with a **bang** finally silenced her screaming and stilled the bed. As the air cleared, the room instantly warmed. It was over. Cynthia was clinging to the headboard, eyes wide open; saturated. The bed was centered in the room and those many objects which had defied gravity were all scattered across the floor. She dared not move a muscle. Barely breathing, once sufficient time to

recover passed and Cindy regained her equilibrium, she leapt from the bed, running so fast, she tripped and fell down the stairs. Racing into the kitchen, she promptly confronted her mother, along with the rest of the clan. No one expected such an explosion of hostility...none were prepared.

"How could you **NOT** hear me screaming?" Hollering, crying hysterically, her voice completely hoarse from the strenuous workout it received upstairs: "Mom! Why didn't you come? You **had** to hear me! *All* of you **had** to hear me! Why didn't anyone come? How could you leave me all alone up there?" Everyone was stunned by the outburst. Nobody understood what happened; siblings sitting speechless in front of homework assignments were confused, unable to respond. Visibly trembling with rage or fear, perhaps both, Cynthia threw a spontaneous temper tantrum; a rant and rave unlike anything anyone had ever seen from her before; the youngster was out of her mind with terror. Carolyn went directly to her daughter. She pulled away from her mother, still furious with her and everyone else in the kitchen, accusing them of willfully, deliberately ignoring her pleas, abandoning her in the midst of a crisis.

"I swear to God, Cin...we didn't hear you." As meek as Cindy was usually, Nancy suddenly assumed this persona. She tried to reassure her little sister, still in one hell of a panic, but Cindy would have none of it.

"You all left me there! You left me alone! I was screaming! No one came!"

Nancy's face appeared pale and drawn. She understood precisely how it felt to be so frightened, left to her own devices. "Cindy, honest to God, we didn't hear anything. What were we supposed to hear? What happened to you?"

"You **had** to hear me!" Cindy persisted, incapable of believing the sound of the attack escaped the attention of anyone in the house, let alone shrill cries in the night. She simply could not accept it; they weren't telling her the truth.

"Sweetheart, tell me what happened." Carolyn sat her daughter at the table while everyone promptly put their work aside. Christine grabbed tissues and bandages from the bathroom as her elbows had been scuffed from her fall on

the stairs. April stared at her sister in silence with wide-eyed wonder.

It was as if she had absorbed the rage with which she was assaulted, as if a transfer of emotion between assailant and victim occurred during the ordeal. Cindy could not calm down. She could barely speak. It took some time for an unnerved sisterhood to recover, everyone distressed by her upset. It took time for Cindy to come to terms and tell them the whole story...about thirty years. Carolyn went upstairs with her to inspect the damage done. It was as she had described it; *stuff* everywhere. They straightened out the bedroom, gathering up her homework; assignments destined to be completed at the kitchen table with her mother by her side. Sullen and withdrawn, Cynthia said very little to anyone. Carolyn was sickened by the sight of the room. It was obvious that a child had been terrorized, brutalized by something evil in their midst. This time there was evidence, and plenty of it. The bedroom was in shambles and the child was in shock. Though Carolyn suggested she take her to a hospital, Cynthia declined, insisting she was all right. A good thing...what would she have said to the charge nurse...they would have admitted both to the psyche unit! Involuntary commitment. Theirs was a secretive existence, by design.

Later in the evening, once they all retired to the parlor, things settled down; the house, a quiet place again. Time for bed. Before Carolyn could extend an invitation for Cindy to bunk in with her, the girl began to climb her bedroom stairs as her mother bolted across the parlor, stopping Cindy in her tracks.

"Honey, wait a minute! You **don't** have to go up there. You can sleep with me or any one of your sisters...or down here on the sofa if you'd like."

"It's all right, mom. I **want** to sleep in my own bed...in my own bedroom." Cynthia's passive / aggressive tendencies were operating at full force in spite of her exhaustion. It seemed as if she thought relinquishing the room for one night would mean relinquishing it forever; a white flag of surrender. No way.

"Are you sure? I wouldn't mind." Carolyn found her own pleading voice.

Cindy returned to her mother, backtracking down the stairwell. "Yes...I'm sure." Leaning her head out to speak directly to a mom and **anyone else** who happened to be listening, Cindy bluntly stated her position. "Nothing and no

one is going to scare me away from *my* room. I waited a long time to have it and I won't give it up for anything...or *to anyone*...not even for *one* night." There's a fine line between brave and stupid. Her defiance was not so passive after all; Cindy had drawn her own line then courageously stepped across it, stupid or not. Steadfast, she refused to be intimidated. Up the stairs she went.

Lying in bed, her thoughts wandering back to that horrific encounter only a few hours earlier, Cynthia became angry all over again, this time at a rather unlikely subject; Mrs. Warren. She had assured the children they could dispel a spirit or even a demon by repeating a single phrase which had proved to be faulty: "***In the name of Jesus Christ, go back to where you came from.***" Her tired mind reeling, she considered the chant and its implications. What if they are already where they came from...what if *we* are the intruders? Heady concepts for one so young but notions begging her consideration in much the same way she had begged to be rescued. She'd begged for mercy.

The same scenario played out again and again over the course of the next four years but Cynthia held her ground then held onto her bed knobs for dear life. Every time the bed levitated it would shake violently. She would cling to the headboard or grab onto its spindles; something sturdy enough to keep her from being flung off the mattress. Every time she'd say her prayers, begging God, believing a guardian angel or *someone* benevolent would be dispatched from above to halt a malfeasant force; someone to protect and defend her in the midst of madness. Cindy insists her prayers were always answered. "Dear God, please make it stop!" It did. It always did finally stop, if abruptly so, whether by divine intervention or because the offending spirit became weary of tormenting the child. Receding back into the mist of the Netherworld, this powerful evil would hover, waiting to strike again. Eventually she came to an inevitable conclusion. It had been a futile effort to move on and take another bedroom. There was no point in attempting to evade or to avoid these spirits. They were everywhere, omnipresent; like God. They knew where and how to find her; no escape from the persistent haunting and taunting she'd endured. Once this child realized there would be no release from her cosmic captivity, Cindy accepted it as fate. As for spirits invading her space; perhaps it was the

other way around. It was ludicrous to think they would ever leave her alone for long. Instead, she prayed for them...then prayed them away.

In time, everyone in the family learned to acknowledge the presence. It was the beginning of a truce, of mutual acceptance: a path to peace. On one point, Cindy would simply not relent; refusing to compromise. It was *her* bedroom, at least most of the time. She would tolerate voices, hollow indentations on the mattress, breathing blankets; she endured what she must, yet still enjoyed having her own space and time to herself; a real luxury in such a big family. Dwelling in a farmhouse riddled with uninvited guests, though she remained wary whenever she entered her room, it was much like it had been with the space she had formerly occupied. “Ya get used to it.” Besides, Cynthia had a plan; a strategy. No surrender. Before she would make peace...it was war.

“Enjoy when you can, and endure when you must.”
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

broomsticks

*"Housework is a treadmill from futility to oblivion
with stop-offs at tedium and counter productivity."*

Erma Bombeck

Witch way did she go? Their broom was not relegated merely to a fictitious mode of transportation for spirits; modus operandi, as the object has so often been portrayed in scary fairy tales. The straw broom in the Perron household served a dual purpose, one of which, as a signal from beyond; an overt form of communication, frequently moving from its safe designated storage space. Andrea **knew** none of her sisters were using it. So, boo who moved it again? In the alcove shared by the bathroom and second kitchen pantry doors, there was a rack discreetly tucked away in the corner, mounted on the wall. It held the mop, dust pan and brush and a straw broom. When not in use **this** was the space where these items were to be properly stored and kept out of the way. Carolyn repeatedly requested that these few objects **not** be floated all over an expansive residence; but instead, used and replaced where they came from so each use did not first require an extensive, exhaustive and unnecessary search of the premises. The kids were generally compliant with the mother's orders, as so few of them were ever issued. They did as they were told; **not** the ones being uncooperative. Whenever the broom was found out of place, becoming a chronic problem, the kids copped the blame. Boo! Who moved the broom?

Cindy walked into the kitchen through the front hallway, the spooky cellar door, something to avoid. Looking straight ahead as she made her brisk little move, she nearly missed what was going on to her left side as she entered the kitchen. The broom was sweeping the floor. It did not appear to be attached to anybody, but someone **had** to be manipulating the object! Right? The first time it occurred in her presence Cynthia was about nine. The girl was aghast; her mouth dropping open as she watched it in silence. With flair and rhythm, the broom swished and sashayed around the room, as if dancing in the arms

of another, then abruptly fell onto the floor. Swept away by the sight, she did not know what or who she had witnessed...a housekeeper in residence?

As example and description of the method by which children adapt to their circumstances, Cynthia had precisely the same encounter again, several years later, though her reaction to it was decidedly different. In the interim, she had experienced so many inexplicable, beyond implausible episodes in the house, by means of overexposure she'd become somewhat jaded, even desensitized to their supernatural environment. She just was not that impressed anymore. Guess they were right; ya get used to it: following vignette as a case in point:

Keep on truckin' baby! Cindy was late: pedal-to-the-metal-put-the-hammer down: late. All of her sisters were waiting in the car as the child was hauling ashes through the house, a wholly polite euphemism the girls used to indicate someone moving their ass! Running through the kitchen, there it was again; that solitary broom, briskly whisking its way across the floor. Glancing over toward it along her trek to the door, Cindy barely gave it a second look, but said: "Good! **You** do it! **I'm** late for school!" Snidely whiplashing the kitchen witch with her flapping tongue, Cynthia opened the door and as she did, the broomstick went flying across the expansive room, clearly flung in disgust, instantly becoming wedged between the black stove and the chimney. Aha! **That's** who keeps putting it there! Whoever **that** is! Epiphany: Running up to the car, Cindy disclosed to her sisters what she'd just seen in the house. They weren't surprised but they were tardy for school, late slips from the principle tardy, all the fault of that damned kitchen witch, no doubt...the blame game.

Carolyn knew about her. She had seen her or seen the absence of her many times. Whether as a fleeting glimpse or long, hardened stare, she was always there and yet not there. Like some stoic romantic figure lost on the moors of history, it was difficult to discern her presence based solely upon appearance because she so frequently disappeared...yet remained. She had to be sensed,

and sensed she was, by those whose paths she crossed like a cat lost in space. Actually, this spirit was cross! Though Carolyn expressed her frustrations at times, especially before realizing who the *real* culprit was, angst was minor in comparison to exasperation displayed by this perturbed, disgruntled ghost; one who obviously required her kitchen be kept a certain way...at *all* times. Unrealistic expectations: thereby setting her up for an existence mired in the muck of perpetual obstructionism...like dwelling in Congress! Hell on Earth!

Once the black stove arrived, she became more visible. When invisible, she became more active, often demonstrating her disapproval by leaving a pile of debris in the center of the kitchen floor with the dustpan beside it. There was nothing subtle about her approach. Wooden floor: each plank lined with deep grooves; crevices craving dirt from the bottom of work boots were magnets for whatever got tracked in. It was a farm! Short of sweeping incessantly, to the exclusion of virtually every other chore, there was no way to keep those floors spotlessly clean. The traffic was too steady; the other chores, too dirty. When particularly annoyed, she would *switch* the broom, twitching it rapidly back and forth; covering about a square foot. Indicating extreme agitation, she'd then toss it onto the floor. Irk and ire; it was easy to arouse her wrath: making a mess will make a temper manifest. Spill some coffee grounds in the pantry or drop a few woodchips at the base of the stove. It drove her crazy! This irascible spirit must have become infuriated during harvest time as their kitchen was always a wreck! Of all the spirits-in-residence, she was the one expressing her sentiment effectively; radiating gamma waves of resentment; her most righteous indignation regarding a perceived neglect of the premises. Essentially, she'd begun impacting *their* environment rather than visiting one formerly her own from another time. The spirit was not sweeping a floor two hundred years prior...she was *present* in the moment and made her presence known; disdain seething from every invisible pore: Obsessive-Compulsive: This level of irritation evidenced by her reaction; the shocking immediacy of her response to Cynthia's terse comment. It was no coincidence. She'd flung the broom across the room with malice, targeting the precise spot, the place it had been found many times before, *misplaced* beside the stove. There was no mistaking her intention. Everyone suffered her shrew-like symptoms, part of her disturbed complicated persona. This aspect of the spirit altered over time.

A contempt borne of familiarity, she appeared to evolve beyond it.

The longer the family remained in the home, the less she acted out, finally exhibiting characteristics more subdued; reactions muted, as if with maturity, as if *she* was growing up...*with* them. This young woman, presumed to be an earlier occupant of the house, rarely revealed herself to mortals. Andrea saw her only once, a brief sighting; just a glimpse. Slender and slight, this entity appeared in the alcove, standing inside the dark corner beyond the threshold of the second pantry. Her auburn hair, washed out by the Sun. Body stooped forward; Andrea could not see her face, focusing instead on the curves of her shoulders, the outline of bones protruding from beneath the fabric of a rather drab full-length dress. In life, she'd gone hungry. There she stood, emaciated, a hollow figure, just inside the storage pantry...where all their food was kept. Slowly the door began to close. Its latch clicked. Andrea walked away, as she was unwilling to reopen it; to take another peek into another dimension. An opportunity for contact missed, it was simply too painful to watch.

Something else clicked during that encounter. Andrea felt sympathy for the fragile creature, this pitiful sighting of her revealing the truly sad realization. The spirit had suffered in life; she'd known abject deprivation and God only knows how she died. It appeared to be from starvation. After describing the sighting to her family, Andrea encouraged everyone to cease and desist with name-calling; from then on the spirit was no longer referred to as the kitchen witch. It was cruel and disrespectful; a mean-spirited approach to a lost soul. With one suggestion, a thoughtless practice instantly fell from favor.

An instant emotional attachment occurred; a connection established with a weakness exposed even if it was destined to be a rather lopsided relationship. The entity never offered any indication she saw the youngster standing there. She'd appeared lost in thought; elsewhere. Her position remained unchanged. A head bowed as if in solemn prayer, long hair obscuring her facial features, Andrea knew the spirit would appear weary, should she look into her eyes. It would be too intense; misery painful to watch...even at a distance.

She *was* someone: a Spirit and Soul dwelling in the Cosmos, someone who had lived and died upon the Earth. No matter who she was, she mattered. She

felt defeated. A broom functioned as a reflection of her moods and emotions; its use spoke of what she'd endured. This once vital, feisty spirit of a woman manipulating a coveted object began to appear depressed; the broom slightly swishing their floor, an entirely lethargic effort. Mundane: another Sisyphean task. Perhaps they'd read her wrong all along. Could it be that the animosity an agitated spirit exhibited was intended for someone else; a wrath misplaced in time and space? Maybe messy mortals should not have taken a criticism so personally. After all, they had not walked in her aged, well-worn shoes.

Lesson learned: "Do unto others as though you were the others."

As girls grew older, everyone made more of an effort to keep their kitchen tidy, to become more sensitive to her feelings and needs, just in case it *was* them distressing her no end. Carolyn let all of them off the hook long before, realizing they were not responsible, not to blame for jamming the dry, brittle broom straw up against a burning stove; all well aware of their mother's fear of fire. Instead, Carolyn assumed it is where the broom had been kept during the time an impoverished woman hovered near a fireplace while cleaning the kitchen of her home. Boo! Who was she and why was she there and how had she died? When Carolyn scoured the records pertaining to former occupants of the town she found the name Harmonie Arnold listed among those who'd lived and died in the farmhouse, though no official cause of death was listed beside her name. Only the innocuous, non-descript word "accidental" was on her death certificate. More undisclosed details: this seemed to happen quite a bit back in the good olden days.

The young spirit remained vexed to be sure...but why? If she did not know Andrea was observing her then why had the pantry door closed on a figment who apparently wanted to be seen? What was the source of her torment? Was she the only spirit who closely monitored a kitchen of the future while busily revisiting the past? Her absence and simultaneous presence was remarkable, easy to discern but difficult to describe. When the broom was misplaced they all knew she was there. The kitchen seemed to be the place she was relegated to, but was this by choice? Clearly she wanted it kept a certain way. It never

met with her approval; never swept to her satisfaction. Was she the one who turned on the dishwasher? **Someone learned** how to do it! Several times the machine began running all by itself, or so it seemed; buttons pushed with no assistance from any mortal on the premises. And boo who was it that kept on opening the refrigerator, deliberately spilling its contents on the floor. Was it punishment time? Was it her “I’ll force you to clean the floor!” bad attitude?

Was she the spirit who preferred old bottles to be arranged by height rather than lined along the sideboard? When she lived in the house she must have stored her broom beside what was then an open, functional fireplace, so to sweep away the ashes from the hearthstone...and this was where she wanted it to stay: Period. Whenever this spirit manifested, it made everyone wonder about her depraved circumstances. Could she see Manny? Could he see her? Were they from the same time, perhaps the same family? Which one was the kitchen instigator, the mischief-maker who antagonized the kids? Who was it repeatedly opening the refrigerator door, flinging it violently back and forth, spilling its contents all over the floor? Cindy’s frantic fears had nothing to do with an unruly spirit causing mayhem. As that door jerked and swayed, she’d beg it to stop, as it almost always occurred just prior to Roger’s return home. Kids would be blamed for a mess they did not make; receiving a punishment they did not deserve. But then, **they** knew that. They knew everything! It was all a part of their plan. Timing is everything in life...and death. Scurrying to quickly clean it up, innocent children had resentments of their own. For some reason, Cindy was the one most frequently subjected to the cruel and unusual behavior, a particular stunt occurring in her presence on a fairly regular basis. It seemed to be a deliberate act, initiated with some forethought and malice. If it was meant to be a joke, it wasn’t funny! Caught up in a situation not her own making, Cindy would curse the culprit, inviting further scrutiny: target!

Funny, the things one remembers from childhood. It was not all doom and gloom. As an aside, this vignette remains appropriate to the “subject” matter, intended to make a point; to make light. House of Darkness House of Light: it was both. In such an otherwise morbid setting there was light and laughter and love in abundance. Nancy had a nickname. Andrea was studying French

and Nancy insisted on knowing what her name was in that foreign language, pressing her eldest sister for an answer. Andrea already knew it was *Nadine* though, during a rather quick-witted moment, dubbed her sibling *Nancois*. Nancy was so gullible she believed it; everyone in their family played along. The name stuck...for life. When Nancy entered a French class the following year, telling the teacher her name...***in French***...Mr. Beausejour was delighted! The man's hearty laughter rang through the hallways. Nancy was mortified; humiliated. She confronted her eldest sibling when she arrived home and the laughter throughout the family was undoubtedly heard all the way back to the school. Nancy has yet to forgive her big sister. Now, for the rest of the story:

Memory is a gift. For better or worse, a blessing and a curse, it is likewise a gift. One might presume, given the circumstances, only tortured or traumatic memories would remain, retained as visions of nightmares; as recollections from a lifetime ago dwelling in a house alive with death. Not so. Nancy now insists the following story be included in this tale of two houses, believing it captures then encapsulates the essence of a spirit: her own. It reflects the true Nature of enduring relationships between five sisters who adore one another, in spite of their differences, regardless of circumstances.

Christine was born just eleven and a half months after Nancy's birth. (It's a Catholic thing.) Anyway, because of their closeness in age and the structure of the curriculum in the middle school, the girls shared an English class. One day they had a test to take. They had studied hard together. Each did well on the exam; neither had a clue about the extra-credit question. They both got it wrong and their mutual failure was a point of contention all the way home; a long bus ride providing ample time to resolve the dilemma. They could not. Their assignment: Name the cliché. Each running the phrase so repetitiously through her mind, both had it memorized for life by the time they got home.

"The woman works tirelessly into the night, sweeping away her woes, wielding her mighty broom as a sword."

So name the damned cliché! How hard could it be? Chrissy's test answer

was admittedly the lamest one. “There is no broom like a new broom.” Whatever! She wanted to be finished with the test and didn’t care about the extra credit. Nancy gave it more thought. She’d relied upon the media to provide her with an extra-credit guess; one equally wrong. “O’Cedar makes your life easier!” It was so wrong. Both girls felt like imbeciles; the answer should be obvious to them and yet there it lingered, right on the tips of their tongues, flapping all the way home. Neither one came up with it. Distracted by other important issues upon arrival, snacks, they both forgot about it and moved on with life.

At thirty-nine, Nancy was engaged in a rather mundane task; sweeping her kitchen floor: Sisyphus lives on! Her mind free to wander, Nancy suddenly dropped the broom, running to the telephone. She called Christine.

“I’ve got it! I know the answer to the cliché question!” Epiphany: tendency to hyperbole. Chrissy remains a supremely patient person. However, Nancy’s impulsive nature *still* drives her to distraction. Preparing for what came next:

“**What** question? **What** answer? What the hell are you babbling on about?” Suspecting her sibling may have lost a tenuous grasp on reality, she indulged a convoluted chat with great good humor. “Nance...deep breath. Tell it.”

“Remember Mrs. Dacey’s English class? Eighth grade; we took it together; that damn test we took and both flubbed the extra-credit question? She never would give us the answer...said she wanted **us** to figure it out for ourselves! Remember?” Christine’s curiosity piqued. She *did* have a vague recollection of this specific event...come to think of it. “That broom thing! Remember?” Nancy recited the quotation; from memory...the results of a mind left free to wander through time. Naming the cliché: ‘**A woman’s work is never done!**’ Chrissy began to giggle like a school girl huddled up with her sister on a bus; a hysterical message received, over the phone, no less! Memories...light the corners of her mind...of the way they were.

“I cannot believe you thought of that! We were...what...twelve? Thirteen? What is **wrong** with you?” Christine had to tease Nancy; it was compulsory, not an option. “What made you think of **that?**”

“I was sweeping and remembered the ghost who used to sweep our kitchen floor; how ***her*** work is ***never*** done!” (Christine remembered...everything.)

“All right. You get the extra credit, even after all this time; at least a gold star for having a ***really*** good memory! A+! Way to go...Nancois!”

The drudgery of it all; this miserable spirit could only hope for some basic improvements in the housekeeping skills. For the most part these mortals had better things to do. The girls would frequently pass her by and keep on going, noticing her presence less and less over time; non-threatening and innocuous; her only bad habit was placing the broom too close to the stove. The threat of fire kept Carolyn mindful; watchful of her. As one of the most active rooms in the house, the kitchen attracted someone, maybe more than one spirit. The telephone was frequently tampered with, as were several appliances. Antique bottles were routinely arranged then rearranged, moved from open shelves to windowsills then back again; ***someone*** had a flair for interior design! A pile of dirt left on the floor, the broom propped beside it, leaning against a chair; a message received then ignored. Household provisions spilled and splashed about the premises, chairs pulled out from beneath children; hair pulling was always a less-than-gentle reminder of their omnipresence. And the flies!

Is there no balm in Gilead? No salve to soothe these savage beasts? Is there nothing to be done on their behalf? Healing wounds in life may be preferable to suffering them after death. The concept of **Eternity** is virtually impossible to wrap a mortal mind around: Imagine that. We cannot envision the realm in which we live in the midst; we simply cannot fathom ***forever***. Human beings, finite creatures by design, exist within an infinite Universe. Spirits defy logic as well as the law of gravity. Rather than being those subject to and governed by Universal Law some suspect they are a part of a grand plan; an immutable law unto themselves, revealing and expressing itself in ways we’re incapable of comprehending. Is there an ephemeral spirit dwelling within all corporeal manifestations, released into the Cosmos upon death? What remains of us as

we transform, when this vessel has perished? Can we have a strictly physical experience in a metaphysical sphere? By what laws are they governed if they defy natural law; supernaturally shattering a one-dimensional, preconceived notion of existence. According to existentialist John Paul Sartre, “Life begins on the other side of despair.” If this is true, then where does death begin?

***“The miserable have no other medicine
But only hope.”***
William Shakespeare

boo! who?

*“When you live in reaction, you give your power away.
Then you get to experience what you gave your power to.”*

N. Smith

Boo! Who the hell was it? Who were these people! Carolyn had to identify the culprits. In spite of Sam's encouraging words, something still told her to be afraid...be very afraid. Fire was elemental to the threat perceived. She had to take necessary steps to create fundamental reforms in their living situation. Truth be told, she was not the only one impacted by fear. Roger knew it well.

He blew his chance. In retrospect, it is one of the regrets he now harbors, an opportunity missed to understand the circumstances in which he dwelled. He too was subject to the desires of a spirit seeking acknowledgement. When it finally presented itself, he blew the chance sky high...into the Cosmos and beyond. He now admits it was Bathsheba who approached him one evening when he was home alone, a rare opportunity for some privacy, as far as she was concerned. Sitting at their kitchen table with the newspaper and a fresh batch of steamers, it was a blissful few moments for a man who worked hard and deserved some down time all to himself, but someone knew he was there and available for a formal introduction. He heard her footsteps on the cellar stairs, dismissing it at first as his imagination. Click. When that door opened in the front hallway, there was no dismissing his fear. Overcome by a sudden sense of dread, he froze stiff. Though he had encountered this spirit before, he had never been confronted by this presence so overtly, her approach, quiet and subdued; frightening nonetheless. The hallway filled with a dark vapor, swirling in the air it consumed. The form in which she manifested seemed to change, assuming a solid form. He was too afraid to gaze at her, too startled to look away. After a few moments, he made a fateful, if fear-based decision. Roger denied Bathsheba her ritualistic *right* of passage. It was her home, too.

Guess who's coming to dinner? The man panicked. He spoke to her in the

harshest terms, in a way generally reserved for loved ones, as a manifestation of his own terror. In so doing, he alienated the spirit wanting to befriend him.

“If you are not going to come in and sit down and talk to me...then get the hell out of here, you witch!” A very fine how do you do. She most certainly took offense. The swirling, translucent mist instantly evaporated. The cellar door slammed with such force, it rocked the dwelling to its foundation. The vibration was stunning; he felt it in his chest. Roger just sat there, trembling in his chair, believing it was time to accept Reality. He felt ashamed.

Bathsheba would not approach him again for many months afterward and the one opportunity he had was lost forever. There was a decided chill in the air and to this day, he admittedly regrets the snap decision made on the spur of the terrifying moment. He had been so rude to an unexpected guest. Roger could have been kind. He could have been welcoming but for fear of the unknown. He could have invited her to join him and could have learned so much in the process. Yet, as the cloud filled the hallway, the abject fear had clouded his judgment. Boo! Who? No question who this was; in his mind, it was the mistress of the house. It had been his one and only chance to verify her true identity; the one and only time she opened the door on a relationship and he slammed it in her face, so she returned his disfavor. Sometimes when opportunity knocks one must have the courage to answer the door and then invite even an unexpected guest to cross a threshold of the heart. Bathsheba wanted to befriend the man whose attention she coveted. Though he had on numerous occasions perceived her as such, in a moment of pure terror he had shamefully dismissed her, banishing a lonely old spirit from her own home. Sticks and stones...but words are weapons, too. Would he never learn?

“Seize the moment of excited curiosity on any subject to solve your doubts; for if you let it pass, the desire may never return and you may remain in ignorance.”

William Wirt

kindred spirits

*“Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times,
if only one remembers to turn on the light.”*

Steven Klove

They all stood together as a clan or a coven; vacant emotionless apparitions staring into nothing, oblivious, unaware they were frightening Carolyn out of her mind. Flames from their torches crept toward the ceiling as the mother of five envisioned her family burning to death. What her eyes could behold told her that they did not have long to live. Crouched up against a headboard, she screamed aloud in mind, begging for mercy, crying out in desperation: God! Kindred spirits, related in life and in death; children resembling the women standing behind them. One resembled a child of her own. Each recognizable as a solitary entity seen wandering their house at one time or another, within one space or another, this cluster of souls appeared to belong together...like a family photograph...they appeared, as portraiture, at the bottom of her bed.

During moments when she least expected it, while otherwise preoccupied, Carolyn's thoughts would often wander into a mine field of memories...there to pause and reflect. Spawning an emotional charge of dread coupled with an instant rage, a sudden surge occurred; a physiological reaction to a vision she struggled to extricate herself from as darkest of nightmares in broad daylight.

For years, she'd habitually expelled this scene from the minute it crept into her consciousness, beginning the arduous process of dismissing the intruders. Nothing less than something wicked; to dispel a memory required more than a modicum of mental discipline. A good brain-washing was called for; spirits are tenacious, even when they are absent from sight. One lovely midsummer day while cutting roses from her garden, Carolyn was inexplicably catapulted back in time to the night when pure fear pulsed through her veins. Lingering with the image, the woman was struck by a realization: a picture in her mind,

so vivid and vibrant, it seemed almost alive; a vision of spirits resembling a family. My God! They all looked alike! Years removed from an exceedingly close encounter, she wondered, why had she not remembered this before?

Kinfolk: Was it her imagination? No. Carolyn determined it was far more likely they were actually related, as so few families ever lived in the house, chief among them, the Arnolds. Most of the recorded deaths which occurred on the farm were in that family: Mrs. John Arnold, Harmonie, Johnny and Prudence...even Bathsheba was an Arnold. It was like viewing their family portrait, studying the symmetry; adults in the back, children in the forefront: all were silent except for the syncopated rhythmic beating of brooms against the surface of wooden boards. Vibrating with each strike, the house trembled all around her. As if hypnotized, under some exotic spell cast, these spirits participated willingly. Those who had never posed any threat before were all involved...a gang mentality...or were they there against their will? Had they been beckoned, coerced into submission then issued instructions? Directed? So it appeared: Vacant; indifferent. No emotions expressed, no contact made. They were there to play their role whereas Bathsheba seemed more invested, speaking with purpose and reason while the others had merely mimicked her. The deafening noise had come from her and she alone; though it reverberated throughout the structure...as Carolyn remained focused on the fire.

Formerly, these spirits had been entirely benign. Manny and the children, the broomeister from their kitchen, the farmer and his son; none of them had ever displayed any type of threatening behavior before, yet there they stood, aiding and abetting a wicked woman; one who knew how to hold a grudge. Their reaction to Bathsheba, or lack thereof, indicated no malfeasance. There was no apparent interest or any attachment in their facial expressions. Blank slates...one and all. They'd functioned as automatons; robotic movements so precise it appeared to be programmed into their beings.

As if in some trance herself, Carolyn stood beside the roses, silent and still. This was revelation: awakening an understanding which did not exist before a discovery of this Nature. Other questions logically followed: do we remain with our families in death? Would she be capable of tolerating Roger's flaws and foibles for eternity? No answers forthcoming, she'd cancelled this image

and focused on flowers instead. Pricking one of her fingers on a particularly sharp thorn, it drew blood, drawing her back to the present while watching in amazement as a crimson bead of blood trickled down the side of her finger. It resembled a teardrop; as water on an icy glass: Needle and the damage done.

One need not be related to relate; feel a real sense of kinship with another soul. Each of the girls developed a *real* emotional attachment to the spirits in the house while bonding between dimensions. Nancy frequently encountered Manny. She believes it's because he watched over her, a constant vigil, often keeping her safe from herself. Divine intervention or just enough *spook* to scare someone away? It was a thankless task. His work was never done.

Christine attracted the one who coveted her. Over time, developing feelings of sympathy and empathy for this spirit, Chrissy wondered why she had been approached, considering whether or not the apparition was there to harm her or protect her from something or someone else. She remains haunted to this day by intense sensations regarding this powerful manifestation even decades after its occurrence. She knows what Cindy saw in the night, as the face of an angel was captured by a demon. Though Chris has no memory of the event, it haunts her still. Or being trapped in a trunk; something she'll never forget. A mortally wounded soul is she, having seen too much in life regarding death.

April had a secret; an emotional attachment to a spirit, protective in nature. A profound friendship formed; a bond which ultimately resulted in the tragic breaking of hearts; regrets all around. It has haunted her for a lifetime. As for her long lost friend...perhaps for an eternity. There are some losses sustained from which beings never recover...mortal and immortal alike.

Andrea was fascinated by the holy spirits in their house and had several of them close by to her at all times. Compassion: elemental to her relationships, especially for the one who kept the kitchen, making her displeasure known to all who had tracked anything through her time and space. The misery of such drudgery, self-evident, Andrea so pitied the one whose hunger showed on her

burdened shoulders; whose Sisyphean task required broom instead of stone: a spirit whose work was never done. A single sighting of her broke the child's heart; an image which lingers and, like the spirits, will not ever go away.

Cynthia: For better or worse, in sickness and in health; they ALL gravitated to the girl with the gift. She always felt a special fondness for and remarkable sadness about the little girl with whom she was, at once, disheartened by and intrigued with; the one who wandered around a house crying for her mother. Cindy cried with her at times, touched as she was by the poignant and pitiful request of a child lost, suspended in the ether. Whether predisposed to acts of goodness or attracting an evil presence as darkness gravitating to the Light in her soul, the child remained haunted by that which she sensed all around her in every room of the house; haunted by voices and imagery she would retain for a lifetime. Cindy often speaks of how closely the little girl resembled her eldest sister as a vision of her as a younger child. Was it possible? Alchemy: Could it be? What drew the family to the farm? Were they *all* from one clan, reuniting in common purpose in an uncommon place and time? Was theirs a reunion between dimensions, at the point of convergence where darkness and light merge as one: at dawn and in twilight? Was the intrepid journey into the woods a family affair: Kismet in the Cosmos? Time itself would tell the tale.

“To confine our attention to terrestrial matters would be to limit the human spirit.”

Stephen Hawking

clarion call

“There is no ghost so difficult to lay as the ghost of an injury.”
Alexander Smith

A distant music: a thundering, dissonant tone; no melody or syncopation, no drums or whistles. There was no accompaniment; only the lone, shrill cry of an archaic horn, its sound muffled by some invisible barrier. Andrea heard the clarion call. It had a rather harsh, militaristic twinge to it; a brassy, high-pitched urgency which seemed strangely familiar. Initially being perceived as the wind playing tricks with the wooden frame of an old farmhouse, rushing through hollow eaves on its way to nowhere, bending beams at will, she soon acknowledged having been mistaken. There was something deliberate about it; an intention behind it. Night after night, she heard a horn in the distance. Always consistently the same: as if the same instrument was being played by the same solitary musician; its ethereal qualities defied any concept of it in reality. As fluctuating winds of winter carried its tune throughout the valley, she listened attentively. After several weeks spent in still unfamiliar territory, Andrea began to wonder who it was for and why it rang out in the night.

“Can you hear that?” Cindy entered her bedroom, requesting a sister sleep-over. This night was colder than most and the eldest welcomed her company. “Listen. Do you hear it?” The siblings sat very quietly, side-by-side, bundled up beneath a cozy cotton quilt. There it was again. They whispered and then wondered about it together. What could it be? Cindy could hear it, too.

“Why don’t I hear it in my room?” Cindy was more curious than fearful.

“Maybe it’s just too far away.” Attempting to conjure up a viable answer to a question posed, she had no explanation for the mysterious music from afar.

Cindy considered it for a moment and developed a good theory of her own.

“It sounds like that music they play in parades when all the men line up

and they walk funny and they all dress the same...with heavy coats and big hats.”

Andrea listened thoughtfully; perhaps it *was* a point of familiarity from her frame of reference. “You mean the bugler...he’s the one who calls soldiers together to come and march; the ones wearing the fancy uniforms.”

“That’s what it sounds like to me.”

They agreed. That was *exactly* what it sounded like...a call to arms. Then the music went silent for the night. It was late. Both girls were tired, so they snuggled in and fell peacefully asleep. Though perplexed, neither was afraid of what she’d heard. There was nothing threatening about it, nothing which posed any hazard or triggered any alarm. In fact, this sound seemed to come from such a distance, some nights it was barely audible. Initially, a serene, oddly comforting lullaby, its tone and tenor would later be altered; urgent.

As time passed and manifestations began occurring with drastic frequency, the sound took on a more ominous tone; a disconcerting note creeping closer. There were nights when she found it disturbing; an incessant and compelling call ringing in her ears and mind as she tried to rest. Then it began recurring in the middle of the night, seeping into consciousness, extricating her from sleep. The horn seemed magnified by silence in the house. It stymied Andrea as it never woke anybody else. Though she found it bizarre, this child fought the fear, reassuring herself, it could do no harm. So many other episodes of significance occupied her increasingly curious mind; she simply dismissed it, until Cindy told her of the voices; what *they* repeat in the night. Her younger sibling heard chanting in her room; several voices speaking together as one, telling her about seven dead soldiers buried in the wall. Sadly, it made sense. The horn was a call to battle, a clarion call to arms in the dark of night. These children had no choice but to conquer their fears, to be victorious over those who haunted their dreams. Imagine the fear of a soldier marching off to war, calling all of those within earshot to join him in the righteous cause. Some of those warriors were children, themselves; had they become separated from their elders? How frightened they must have been! So many perished on the battlefields; so many families fractured forever: Agony....no ecstasy in sight.

Decades later, Andrea attended the reenactment of a Revolutionary War battle on an expansive field in Lincoln, R.I. Just passing by, the window of her car was open enough to hear the call; music from a distance. She had to stop and listen. Instantly transporting her back in time, she heard the distant horn; a lone bugler standing on a nearby hillside calling his soldiers to arms. It was identical, disturbing her peace of mind. The woman remembered this distinct sound from childhood, the same music which rode the wind across a valley at the farm. There was no mistaking what she heard. No question what it was or what it was intended to achieve; the gathering together of soldiers who would be the ones to fight their mighty battles and die to win their wars. She wondered about the spirits she left behind in her childhood home; if their battles waged were still raging on, trapped as they seemed to be, caught up in an eternal conflict, held captive on Earth by a mission left unaccomplished: an imprisonment which must surely qualify as cruel and unusual punishment.

“It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or demons, heaven or hell.”

Buddha

things that go bump in the day

“Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine.”

Sir Arthur Eddington

The three eldest girls took the same bus, as all three were simultaneously attending Burrillville Junior-Senior High School. A marching band practice was scheduled after school which had kept Andrea and Christine on campus, stomping around in the vacant parking lot, dressed in their uniforms like two soldiers on the march. Nancy went home alone. (Of course, no one was really ever home alone.) A bright and beautiful spring afternoon, she ran toward the house, peeling off a sweater on her way to the door. Entering the kitchen, she distinctly heard footsteps from someone overhead, loud noises reverberating throughout her bedroom; sounds coming from the kitchen ceiling. Something heavy: the maple dresser or maybe her bed frame being dragged, oak against pine planks, across the bedroom floor directly above. Presuming it was her mother suffering a bout of spring-cleaning mania; Nancy ditched her books and hollered a greeting up the stairwell. The sounds continued. She must not have heard her daughter: “Mom?” Nancy had quite a set of lungs for a young lady so diminutive in stature. No answer: “MOM!” Scratching and scraping persisted unabated. If she didn’t stop it the floor would be scarred for life!

Suddenly aware it was *her* bedroom being rearranged, the teenager pressed into action. Oh! No! She had things hidden from a mother’s eyes, discovery of which would mean certain upheaval. God forbid! Even worse, it meant her mother was potentially organizing the familiar chaos, bedlam with which she was accustomed and perfectly comfortable *as is*; Nancy leapt the stairs two at a time. Approaching the landing, she recalls hearing the same footsteps again and the chimney closet door closing with a grand slam. Someone was pissed! Fearlessly throwing open the door, (as there were no perceived threats other than the prying eyes of a thoroughly disgusted mother) Nancy fully expected to find her room tidy and uncluttered; her mother engrossed in a diary...some not-so-light reading, yet destined to be illuminating.

Everything was precisely as she'd left it earlier in the day; like the game of fifty-two pick up. Snatching her precious diary from beneath a fat mattress, mad-dash-stashing what qualified as contraband securely in an undisclosed location for safe-keeping, Nancy walked back downstairs and out to the yard, locating her diligent mother alone behind the house, at work in the garden.

"Mom!" An outburst startled the woman. "Were you just up in my room?"

"Hi! No, babe...I've been out here for hours...want to come help?"

"Not really..." Nancy joined her in a row destined to grow string beans.

Carolyn swept the sweat from her brow and the hair from her eyes with an equally sweaty forearm then handed her daughter the spade.

"Work the ground there...this bed next. Go down about three inches deep, four inches apart. I'll plant today if the weather holds. You can help!"

"Great." Nancy was distracted.

"You used to **love** to help me in the garden. Has it lost all of its glamour?" Carolyn was in fine spirits; clearly enjoying playfully teasing her daughter. There was no response forthcoming. She turned to the youngster, an easy kid to read, prompting a quizzical expression on her face. Something happened.

"Mom...have you been reading my diary?"

"No! I didn't even know you **had** a diary. And even if I **did** know, I would **never** take it and read it! Not that I would ever be able to find it in that room of yours: Shame." Plunging her hoe into the soft dirt, Carolyn stood upright.

"You're sure." Nancy had her doubts and no good reason to question mom further; **her** word, as good as gold...and Nancy knew it: Miss Perronoid!

"Why do you ask? Is there something in there I **shouldn't** see? Or should?"

"NO! It's not that. (Yes; actually, it was precisely that,) When I came home from school I heard someone up in my bedroom and my diary wasn't

exactly where I left it last night. So I thought, well, maybe..." Carolyn reassured her; there was nobody in the house. No cause for alarm.

"Mom, *someone's always* in the house...*someone* was just up in my room, moving all the furniture around...and probably reading my diary!"

"What happened?" Carolyn leaned against a stone wall to listen: "When?"

"I'm telling you, *someone* was dragging furniture across the floor and then slammed the chimney door. I went upstairs but nothing was moved, nothing was different in my bedroom."

"Too bad; I sure could use some extra help with the spring cleaning around here. You'd think if they were going through the motions and making such an effort, they'd actually get something done!"

"I thought it was you...but now I'm glad it was just a ghost!"

"I wouldn't worry about it honey...your handwriting is illegible, anyway."

"It's not funny, mom!" Nancy's wrinkled up, crinkly face: as evidence.

"Yes, it is. Paranoia strikes deep...into your heart it will creep! I'll get you, my pretty!" Flashing dirty fingernails: "Now, let's see what's in that diary!" Carolyn let go of her hoe then raced toward the house, Nancy in hot pursuit, both buckling over with laughter; breathless. Carolyn beat her to the kitchen door. Nancy gave up the ghost, gasping for air while shouting after her mom: "Go 'head! You'll never find it!" From a distance she heard her mom holler out an equally smartass reply: "I KNOW! But there's no harm in looking!"

One pleasant afternoon Carolyn greeted her girls at the bus stop. She had a surprise waiting for them inside. Mom had baked! Her chocolate chip cake! Everyone was gathering around the kitchen table enjoying their afterschool snack, still warm from the oven. Their chattering was as raucous as usual, but not quite loud enough to muffle a thundering lump landing overhead. THUD!

Everyone jumped, startled by the jolt. It sounded like a body hitting the floor. As was her habit, Carolyn did a quick head count. All present and accounted for: no one upstairs. It annoyed Nancy no end; it *always* seemed to happen in *her* room. (Perhaps the spirit had tripped and fallen over her junk!) Eyes met as glances were exchanged but no one said a word. Chrissy, the bravest soul among them shook her head, placing her fork beside the plate. “I’ll go see.” As there were no other volunteers willing to go in her place, Chris climbed the staircase, opening the door to a bedroom appearing to be ransacked. She stood on the landing for a moment, surveying the damage done. Then closing the door, she came back downstairs, returning to the kitchen table, prepared to deliver a brief but accurate, if rather unusual report. Timing is everything in life...and death. Chris had her comic timing down to a science. She waited for just the right moment, Carolyn providing just the right questions:

“So, what hit the floor?” Carolyn was curious. Whatever it was, the impact had shaken the house to its foundation, rattling china in the cupboards. It had to have been *something* very large and quite heavy to create such a racket!

“It’s nothing.” Christine shook her head again, this time in feigned disgust. She then resumed eating her mother’s homemade chocolate chip pound cake while standing beside Nancy, glancing disdainfully at her slob of a sister.

“Are you *sure* nothing fell on the floor?” Perplexed by the sound all of her kids seemed to be taking in stride, Carolyn persisted; inadvertently setting up Christine to respond with a nonchalance for which she has become infamous in the family, adding insult to injury...a perfect George and Gracie moment:

“Mom. It’s *Nancy’s* room. Everything is on the floor!” The kitchen erupted with laughter, again at a sloppy sister’s expense. Chrissy’s line delivery was absolutely flawless. Little wonder she was destined for the stage. Nancy was the only one who didn’t chuckle; did not yuck it up with the rest of them: the only one perturbed by the tale; not amused in the least. Buzz kill. Spoil sport.

*“In struggling against anguish one never produces serenity;
the struggle against anguish only produces new forms of anguish.”*

Simone Weil

things that go bump in the night

“All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.”

Galileo Galilei

One steamy evening Nancy invited a few friends over for a game of cards. During the summer of 1979 she socialized quite a bit. Seriously dating Eddy Richardson at the time, Nancy was certain he was *the one*. A casual game: an easy-going round of six; an enjoyable way to spend a date night in one's own home, unless, of course, there are those intent upon *crashing* the party! Boo!

No one remembers where their parents went that night but the girls had the house all to themselves for a few hours. The gathering came with permission and a verifiable head count. At the height of the sweet season, balmy breezes circulating throughout the room provided some comfort after a long, hot day in the garden. A kitchen; littered with colanders brimming with Swiss chard, tomatoes, green beans and cucumbers...destined to be pickled the following morning. However, for the time being all the work was done: Time to play.

While standing just inside the pantry door pouring a tray-load of lemonade-all-around, Nancy heard something scraping overhead. To her knowledge no one had gone upstairs. Instinct told her to listen. It stopped. Hoisting the tray, as she was approaching the table abrasive sounds became more pronounced. Without saying a word about it to anyone Nancy glared up toward the ceiling and *told* them to *stop it*...in mind. No one present noticed but Nancy; a room rocking and rolling with music and laughter, effectively drowning it out. A good thing she didn't say what she was thinking; her language was atrocious! Suffice to say, Nancy told a disruptive someone upstairs to *cease and desist*.

As there had been no mention of the noise from anyone seated at the table, drinks were served and the card game commenced. Katy was flirting with her

dewy fawn eyes again. As if nectar of the gods Jerry drank her stare in faster than the lemonade placed to his luscious lips; soft, round, full lips begging to be kissed, so Katy thought. Kate had it bad, having already arrived at an age to do something about it. She had a plan for later; a detour on the drive home. Too bad it would not work out that way. Bathsheba had plans of her own.

Halfway through their third hand a sudden disturbance abruptly interrupted the game, calling everyone's full attention *upward!* The young folks looked like a nest full of chicks, necks outstretched, mouths propped open, waiting for a meal from mommy. Nancy hung her head, disgraced; certainly agitated by someone too rude to live! An inconvenient truth she had hoped to avoid, having been forewarned, her wishes were ignored by an uninvited guest.

The sounds became more intense with each passing moment, reverberating through the thick floor boards. Something overhead in Nancy's bedroom was being dragged across the floor; heavy: wood scraping against wood, perhaps a chest of drawers or an oak bed frame. The sound was distinct and familiar, a common sound occurring in an all too uncommon way. For Jerry, it was an unusually curious anomaly, based on the fact that all living souls in the house were seated snugly around the table at the time.

Nancy had no desire to identify their intruder and would have preferred to ignore it; the same way previous marching orders issued had been dismissed as irrelevant. Events such as these were all-too-frequent, embarrassing to her. After years of explaining them away, she'd grown weary of the practice. Her friends knew what to expect. Though Jerry, as a new addition to their group, had been to the house several times prior to this incident, it was his first bona fide supernatural experience. The young man had been forewarned as well, but he laughed it off, expressing his disbelief in ghosts and spirits, angels and demons. It was a rude awakening when the chivalrous skeptic volunteered to go up and "check it out" for the damsel in distress. Bounding up the stairwell before anyone could either accept or reject his offer, Nancy was mortified! She did not want him to see her disaster of a bedroom, nor did she want him to run into the stranger-than-fiction resident of the dwelling within its shared space. What she *had* wanted was simple enough, but apparently too much to ask; she'd wanted *them* to behave themselves whenever there was company,

goddamn it to hell! Reassuring her haunted houseguests it was *nothing at all*, Nancy quickly followed Jerry upstairs. Cindy knew better...she knew these episodes often occurred with purpose and reason, a deliberate intention; not as accidental tourists. She remained seated at the table awaiting his reaction. Sipping the sweet tart lemonade, she crinkled her lips to disguise *told you so*, hidden within the wicked grin peeking out from the corners of her mouth.

Determined to prove his hypothesis, Jerry rapidly flung the bedroom door wide open. He was right...nothing there. The almost deafening noise stopped instantly, the moment he touched the iron latch; that awful grinding, gouging sound ceased. Not a single piece of furniture was out of place. There was no one visibly present in the bedroom...not a scratch on the floor...no evidence of any commotion. Jerry's hands began to tremble as blood drained from his face. Astonished, he turned on the landing then stared at Nancy, begging the question without saying a word. She found it to be a rather ironic twist. Jerry appeared to be more ghostly than any apparition she had ever witnessed over all her years in the house. He'd slowly passed her and went back downstairs, returning to his seat at the table...reserving comment.

"So? What was it? What did you see?" His equal as a skeptic, Katy asked him to describe the scene in detail.

"Nothing...like I said." Nancy responded for him as she walked back into the kitchen, leering at her closest friend, the inflection in her voice telling everyone present to hush!

"You're *so* brave!" Kate couldn't leave it alone. Nancy found her fluttering eyelashes nauseating; seemingly unaware she often emulated the practice.

"Kate! Shut up!" Gritting that caustic statement through her clenched jaw, Katy did as she was told you so; Nancy's glare, an expression she could read with relative ease, even if she was oblivious to Jerry's sudden shade of pale. The game resumed but Jerry was too distracted to play. After a few minutes he excused himself, asking Eddy to give Kate a ride home. Suddenly she was the pale face in the crowd, devastated he'd leave her behind. He hit the road; the only bump and grind that night came from floorboards above. Petulantly

pouting, Katy threw her hand of cards in the center of the table. Game over. Eddy had hoped to continue but Katy was hot and bothered; pissed off by the commotion culminating in cancellation of her plans. Her date night had been spoiled...nobody gettin' any nookie ***that*** night. She wanted to go home.

"I hate this damn house!" Regressing by the second, Katy threw a tantrum.

"Well you don't have to come back!" Nancy, noting how self-absorbed and immature her friend could be at times, Katy had her center-stage moments as the drama queen of arrested development. M' lady: ascending to her throne. Nancy, her lady-in-waiting: Birds of a feather always flocking together! The situation was quickly becoming all flocked up!

"Fine! Then I **won't** come back! This is a *creepy* old place anyway! I won't **ever** come back here again!" That was a lie and everyone knew it.

Nancy and Katy were tight; thick as thieves. Secretly wishing what Katy said **was** true, Cindy knew better. Truth be told, she'd be back. Grimacing at the thought of it, Cindy watched the scene unfold with some amusement.

Eddy promptly took Kate home, a mere mile away. He then returned to the farm to spend time with his girlfriend. This young man had long been aware of a presence in the house. He'd likewise understood **his** presence triggered supernatural activity. As a conduit Eddy Richardson was a distant ancestor of the original family, those who had settled this property and built the house in which he'd become a welcome guest. His ancestral connection, a presumed factor in the reception he often sensed whenever he crossed the threshold, the place had always felt like home to him...because it **was** home: Inviting him.

Not long thereafter, Jerry confessed what happened to him, telling Nancy and Eddy why he had become upset by what he heard but did **not** see in the bedroom that night; the stunning absence of life. He was reluctant to express himself further; ashamed to reveal the details of an encounter he'd had **after** he left the house. Eventually sharing, shocking his friends in the process, the macho man whispered as he spoke. As it turned out, Jerry had not gone home alone, after all. While driving the dark, long and winding Round Top Road, he'd detected a presence with him in the car. It began with a sudden chill. On

a hot August night he could see his breath, feel his heart beginning to pound. His car became unbearably frigid in a matter of seconds; whitening knuckles clenching the steering wheel. According to him it was impossible to describe. Jerry seemed shaken by simply retelling the tale; an abbreviated version.

“It was a real ***different*** kind of cold, nothing like **I** ever felt before: Death. The car stunk like hell! A smell so bad it made me almost puke my guts up!” How festive. A man of few words, Jerry always did have a way with them.

Averting his eyes, as if embarrassed by the disclosure, Jerry struggled with his emotions as he spoke; he choked up, blushing because of it, admitting he had been **touched** several times and could feel an icy cold breath on the back of his neck and shoulders; the hair on his body stood rigid, at attention, with contact. There was no dismissing it, no denying the fact: he was not traveling alone. Sensing himself the subject of some scrutiny, Jerry forced himself to glance into the rearview mirror. He saw her through the steam, a mouth full of jagged yellow teeth. Full disclosure: “I almost pissed my pants!”

Jerking the car off the road during his moment of panic, he’d leapt from the vehicle without turning it off. He’d had to gather his wits. It was obvious. No one was in the back seat, certainly nobody he could see. Pacing around in a circle, staring inside it from every conceivable angle, several minutes passed. Jerry conceded feeling ridiculous. He wanted to go home and forget all about it but could not bring himself to re-enter a car possessed. Terrified, the young man finally mustered the courage to drive home, blasting the radio, providing a diversion for a terrifying ride. Though an odor and ungodly chill dissipated, Jerry remained profoundly affected by the incident. Eddy tried to make light of it, knowing his friend had been deeply disturbed and seriously spooked.

“So, was she the ***Ghoul of your Dreams?***”

“Eddy, go have a cup of shut the fuck up!” Jerry was not the least amused, having suffered the ensuing nightmares. Eddy, suffering the bout of nervous laughter, was unable to control his equally serious case of the giggles. Nancy suggested he try to be more understanding of a friend’s obvious distress; kids

can be cruel and insensitive, even into adulthood, and some never outgrow it. That night had become the ultimate date night from hell. Too bad Jerry went home with the wrong girl...the ghoul of his nightmares.

In time, this humbled soul would return to their farm again, requiring some uncommon courage to do so; a valiant effort by Katy's Prince Charming. His belief system had been formally challenged. He'd questioned his own sanity. When Jerry did return, months later, it was as a **believer**. He would never again volunteer to go "check it out" whenever a sudden noise erupted in the house. Instead, he'd take the opportunity to escape; inviting Kate to go for a walk in the woods. Due to the Nature of their walks, her attitude improved as well. Soon Kate was praying for the holy ghosts to appear at will: how ironic.

*"Look in the mirror. The face that pins you with
its double gaze reveals a chastening secret."*

Diane Ackerman

reality

“Everything you can imagine is real.”
Pablo Picasso

It is said that thoughts are things; to be careful what you wish for, as surely you will get it. It is said: what is spoken into the Universe comes back to help or to haunt, depending on the intention of the desires. If thoughts are indeed things, they are intangible, invisible things until they are made manifest in form. When thoughts appear as *something* substantive, such as a manuscript, first written inside the mind then transposed onto paper, the object is defined; assigned its identity. Prior to the existence of the actual book, is the story it tells any less real? No. It was merely invisible, an intangible, out there in the ether of the Universe. Mortals function primarily within the confines of five senses, with all of their inherent flaws and limitations. These senses integrate with and compensate for one another, frequently working in tandem as five complementary co-conspirators. Defining the parameters of what's perceived as reality, humans predominately use the five senses to firmly establish what actually exists, to the exclusion of this vital sixth sense, with which we have been so generously gifted. Essentially, we do believe our eyes. We should. There is no legitimate reason to dismiss these otherwise consistently reliable senses. As trustworthy as the senses prove to be they are woefully inadequate if one's intention is to see with the Third Eye. They do not tell all, and thus, should not be relied upon as the sole litmus test of Reality; the determining factor of whatever is ultimately deemed real or unreal. Disregarding reality in the context of what is seen and unseen discounts the vastness of an intelligent Universe as well as the incomprehensible mysteries it harbors, establishing sensual boundaries where none actually exist. It is ludicrous for mortals to believe we know anything about the ways of the Cosmos; too presumptuous to assume we have any answers when we have yet to ask the right questions.

Reality ~ n. 1. The quality or state of being actual or true.
2. One, such as a person or an event, that is actual.

3. The totality of all things possessing actuality, existence or essence.

4. That which exists objectively and in fact.

(The American Heritage Dictionary)

It requires a certain expansion of consciousness to accept as “real” what is unseen, intangible; to perceive the absence of reality *as* reality requires a leap of faith. The Perron family was forced to leap from this precarious precipice in order to comprehend the essential Nature of Reality. By definition, these spirits are real as their essence manifests in form and function. The night they *all* appeared around her bed Carolyn was abruptly challenged to reassess her perceptions. One element of it was certain: her fear was real. During those moments, all else remained in question. She did *not* believe her eyes. She could smell the putrid air and taste the rancid stench in the hard palate of her mouth; she could see the flames and smell the smoke. The urgency she felt, the need for an explanation of this encounter was real. The terror consuming her being was all too real. It pulsed through her veins, as pure as the blood it swam with during those moments of crisis. Worst of all, it was the perception that she (and her entire family) were about to perish, to burn to death in their own beds, which gripped the woman’s mind and shook her to the core of her consciousness. It was not just a visceral reaction but cerebral transformation which she endured in the darkness of night, at the break of dawn. Under such extreme duress an individual naturally questions the origin and interpretation of sights, smells and sounds which cannot be rationally explained otherwise. Little wonder Carolyn had questioned her own sanity, her own belief system; everything this woman thought she understood about the world underwent a seismic, cosmic shift once she and her family stepped across their threshold, into the house alive with death. There was nothing logical, nothing tangible in their altered frame of reference anymore. The mysteries of life and death, revealed to disbelieving eyes, ruptured Pandora’s Box. There was no point in confronting them; best to give them their space and time to travel.

Her natural curiosity became a supernatural quest for knowledge. Her fear became a catalyst to questions destined to remain unanswered, as if by divine decree. Five senses were formally challenged as her sixth sense came to life; focusing its gaze upon death. In time, Carolyn came to rely upon perceptions

having nothing to do with innate ability to see, touch, taste, smell and hear. In time, the eye of the beholder would see all: behold! She'd wonder why she had been the privileged one; as if chosen to receive these messages imparted. It felt as if she'd been targeted; likewise one entrusted with an awareness few perceive in life. This assaultive spirit certainly got her attention; an encounter she interpreted as a curse, literally and figuratively. Decades pass, as decades do. In time, Carolyn has come to ***realize*** a blessing: Uncommon Knowledge.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

Albert Einstein

Baker boys

*"The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober coloring from an eye,
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality."*

William Wordsworth

They all stood together on the landing of Andrea's bedroom stairs. She had seen them there several times before over their years in the farmhouse: as the father, the son and their holy ghost of a dog. They'd appeared as a Trinity of Souls, gazing through the bedroom wall, overlooking a familiar landscape, a place in the country they had all loved, as if surveying their property in death which claimed them in life. Their eyes remained locked; fixed and focused, a steadfast stare never to be broken by the intrusion of a mere mortal. Andrea looked directly into their eyes but they did not return her gaze. Elsewhere, they were, in a time long ago and far away, in a country place resembling the home she knew, unavailable for question or comment...no contact. Too bad.

During Carolyn's extensive research project regarding the history of the house, an interesting couple of stories surfaced. She learned of the tragic loss of two members from one family; a father and son, both of whom reportedly drowned on this property, some ten years apart. Town records indicated the father died during a weather event, out on the secluded pond, set deeply back on their property. April insists both of them died a horrible, frightening death in the same place; both lives claimed by the raging torrents, lost beneath the surface of the wild Nipmuc River. In either case they've remained together in death, inexorably tied to the home they shared in life, retaining a bond which will never be broken; the faithful family dog by their side.

There was something on her desk Andrea needed desperately. Racing home from school in the '69 Pontiac she inherited from her Uncle Donald

when he bought his new car, the low rider had an uncanny ability to hug the pavement at high rates of speed, the fact she did not divulge to her mother as she sped through the house on her way to some critically important materials she had inadvertently left behind in her bedroom; materials required for the yearbook meeting...a meeting she was missing! Frantic to locate what was forgotten in the morning, aware a roomful of people were gathered, awaiting her return, the editor-in-chief of the yearbook knew she'd screwed up in a big way. Her mind was on one thing only as she flew up the stairwell head down, watching the twelve steps as she went, so not to trip while moving at the speed of light.

Raising her eyes to begin the process of searching her desk before the rest of her body actually arrived on the scene; it was a startling and unexpected sight to see: three partially translucent yet clearly defined entities standing on the landing of her stairs. There they were; a family: a man, a boy and his dog, standing side-by-side, peering through the wall of her bedroom. She'd nearly run right through them! About face! Down the stairs; rapid descent. "Mom!" Carolyn came running. Freaked and frustrated, late for an important date, this was the last thing she needed! By then, she should have known to expect the unexpected, but timing is everything in life and death; they were manifesting, interfering at the worst possible time. Needing what was on the other side of them, it was not a path she wanted to cross. They were literally blocking her way. She would have to pass **through** them to retrieve her belongings. There was no time to waste with spirit matters at the moment.

"Mom! They're on my stairs again! Please make them go away!" Andrea was harried and nearly in tears. Carolyn knew precisely who she meant. Her daughter had seen them there before, sharing details of those encounters with her mother in the past. They appeared to be exactly the same. The father was rather short and stout with a jovial smile on his face. He had a wide-brimmed straw hat, the kind used to keep the Sun off a farmer's back while he worked his land. He wore handmade clothing, the square bib of fabric covering his bulbous chest. His skin appeared to be as weathered as the boots on his feet; ragged leather, worn to a frazzle. The boy stood beside him; a young child to be sure, perhaps ten years of age, according to his height and weight. He too wore a pair of boots in much better condition than those of his elder. The boy

had work pants; a gunny sack cotton shirt like his father, apparently from the same bolt of fabric, as the light gold color matched. Perhaps Mrs. Baker was the seamstress. No mistaking the family resemblance...they were kinfolk.

On this particular afternoon Andrea was in no mood to tolerate a perceived intrusion, though they were a decidedly unobtrusive lot. She often wondered about the three of them; had they all died together, including the dog? Or had they been reunited in death...after death? On the day in question, she was too preoccupied with more pressing matters. They were an obstacle impeding her forward momentum. At times when her mind was free to revisit the past, she considered their circumstances more humanely. However, on this especially stressful day she had no patience for *or* curiosity about them; Andrea simply wanted them to leave so she could retrieve her belongings upstairs and do the same thing; leave! Places to go...people to see...things to do that afternoon.

Carolyn climbed quietly, cautiously up a dark stairwell, secretly hoping to see the Light. Her approach was such not because she was frightened of this trio; she did not want to scare them away. Carolyn wanted to see them, too. Obviously they were harmless; entirely benign. Neither entity had ever even acknowledged the little miss mortal whose space they shared. Whenever they manifested it was in precisely the same place. No one else had seen them yet, unlike some other spirits who'd move freely throughout their house, at will. These three always stood together, stares apparently fixed on a single point in time or space. The father had the palest blue eyes, much like Mr. Kenyon: tired eyes. His son's were a brighter blue; watery, quite similar to this elder gentleman. They resembled each other in a variety of ways; clearly they were kin. Because Carolyn had seen so many spirits in her bedroom on the night she was threatened with blazing torches, she *was* curious. Had these spirits been involved? Had they been a part of the crowd? The only way to know for certain was to observe them; the eye of the beholder, anxious to bear witness, to see if the spirits were familiar to her, perhaps a part of the coven of spirits in her bedroom on that night in question. Alas, they were gone. She did not catch them in time; the vision lost...not even a glimpse. They'd all vanished. The "all clear" was sounded. Relieved, then grateful for her mother's divine intervention, Andrea went back upstairs and gathered her missing materials from the desk in her room with a heartfelt: "Thanks, mom. Be home later." A

kiss on the cheek on her way out the door...her spirited daughter was gone.

“God brings men into deep waters, not to drown them, but to cleanse them.”

John Aughey

go away little girls

“Let tears flow of their own accord: their flowing is not inconsistent with inward peace and harmony.”

Seneca

Time for bed: this obsequious child did as she was told. Cynthia followed directions well. She was the first to head upstairs, putting her flannel pajamas on while the rest of her siblings remained downstairs, stalling for time. Chris was still doing her homework at the kitchen table, which is why Cynthia was in their shared space all alone, or so the child thought. Sitting on the side of her bed, she leaned down, pulling her slippers from beneath it, sliding them onto chilly little feet. Suddenly sensing the presence of another, she assumed it was only her sister, assignments complete, coming to join her for the night. She didn't bother to look up from the task until she heard the mournful sound of an unfamiliar voice; certainly not Christine.

The family had just moved into their new old home, having been there only a few weeks; far too soon for such a rude awakening, especially just before bed. There she was, passing through the bedroom, on her way to somewhere else. She was crying for her mommy. Cindy's breath drew hard in her chest. She could not believe her eyes...or ears. It was pitiful: Heartbreaking. This voice was as petite as the child. Dressed in clothing from another time, the little girl was wearing a neatly pressed gray cotton shift covered with a pretty white apron; pint-sized, just like her. The entity appeared to be about five, or maybe six years of age. She was short but seemed to be a healthy, substantial girl; though she would not always appear so robust. A head full of thick, dark hair cascading down instantly reminded Cindy of her own eldest sister; her round face conjuring an image Cynthia had seen before, in photographs of Andrea at this age. An uncanny resemblance; a disquieting likeness she noted immediately evoked a memory from when she was only a toddler. Time and space seemed affected by this close encounter; confusing to the mortal soul. Watching intently, the spirit moved across the bedroom, crying for **mommy** over and over again before she left, walking through an unopened door into the eaves. Cindy was blown

away. A young mind unprepared, she could not process what she'd just seen: the eye of the beholder, challenged to suspend disbelief again. It was beyond shocking to the youngster; she could not move or speak; locked in one position as if wedged in a vice of incomprehension. Wanting to scream "Go away!" the instant she had laid eyes on the little girl, Cindy's emotions began churning the second she heard the voice; pure and clear...and so very sad. The apparition made a sound which tore at Cynthia's soul; issuing this pathetic plea for her mother in the night. To be lost and so frightened, but lost where? As a shudder passed, rippling through her being, Cindy's eyes began filling with tears. This presence struck a chord; the little girl broke her heart.

It was not the only time Cynthia would cry for and with this child. She did not tell anyone about the encounter or an emotional reaction to it. Recovering her composure, rejoining her family downstairs, it had been too private and painful an experience to assign words to describe, too early to tell the truth. It would be months before other children began to disclose their experiences. Until then, Cindy kept it to herself.

This was only the first of many sightings over the better part of a decade. When Cindy is asked how frequently she saw this spirit, her reply sums it up with one word: **hundreds**. She was omnipresent...like God. At certain times she appeared solid in form, yet there were many manifestations when she'd appeared as a wispy figure, translucent; a shadow. This entity almost always spoke though there was never any interaction between them. She had seemed oblivious to the presence of a mortal in the room. Cindy made no overtures. A vague recollection of hearing her more often than seeing her, Cynthia still retains a vivid image of her in memory. Whenever the wee spirit manifested in form, she always carried something in her tiny hands, though Cindy was never able to determine exactly what it was; once she had passed through the room carrying a book tucked beneath her arm, an object Cindy had not seen before. At times it appeared to be a fine white piece of cloth, perhaps a lady's handkerchief. Occasionally, this child was dressed differently, formally, as if for a holiday or special event. It was a lovely outfit; a deep green velvet dress with a bright white pinafore fitted at the front, synched neatly at her waist. Whenever she appeared as such the girl seemed happy, laughing and playing: her voice was lighter. Then there were other times when darkness seemed to

surround her; a pervasive sadness. When she cried her voice would tremble, the tears would flow like rain. Her domain relegated to the upper level of the house, only once was she seen on the main floor of the residence. Emerging from the eaves in Andrea's room, she would pass right through the door if it was closed, though she was perfectly capable of causing these doors to open and did so on numerous occasions, as if it was announcing her presence. However, she did not interact with anyone and Cindy did not acknowledge her either, whether from a fear or a belief that she could not respond. Heard regularly playing in Andrea's closet, when this door was opened to see who was there, it silenced the child. Did she want to be discovered? Did she want to engage? A friend in need? Indeed. But Cynthia did not want to open *that* metaphorical door, preferring instead to watch her from a distance. In time, she'd learn to accept it. Adapting to this presence was only a small part of the new paranormal, what someone must be willing to endure when dwelling in a house alive with death. Cindy made the quantum leap of faith required. She welcomed this spirit into her world and tried not to intrude on her own. The sentiment was genuine; a kind-hearted soul acknowledging a spirit's plight.

Cynthia assumed she was the one playing with her toys. She began to care about the wee little one, watching over her as she moved through the portals; passages of the past. As Cindy grew older, this child appeared to grow sickly. Nurturing instincts kicked in. When she became a teenager, Cindy's attention to and affection for the entity increased precipitously. Because the apparition occurred with such frequency, becoming so familiar to a mortal soul, Cindy became confused by the presence, finding a discrepancy in her own thought process. Was this the *same* child? Was there a set of twins? Had she misread the situation? When a little cherub appeared to be healthy and happy, she was dressed in her best outfit, skipping carefree through the bedroom. When she appeared to be ill, it was always when she was wearing the drab gray cotton dress. With increased exposure Cindy began to see changes in the youngster: at times her face appeared hollow and sunken, her body emaciated, as if she was wasting away. These were the most miserable of encounters, times when Cindy cried too; it was obvious the child was dying. Cindy could not escape the pain of it and she could not bear to hear this child crying for her mother, suffering alone. It was a disturbing vision; hopeless...riddled with despair.

Was she sick or hurt? Lost and lonely? When Cindy discusses this series of events she cannot help but mention what role it played in her own emotional development. It sensitized her to the suffering of others and made her think about what some have endured in life and death. The visceral reaction Cindy had to the sound of this child's voice haunts her still. She has regrets. Why didn't she reach out to this entity? Was it such a foreign experience Cynthia could not bring herself to take that leap of faith? What would have happened had she done so? Because she heard the little girl many more times than she actually saw her, the voice is what now lingers in her consciousness, more so than the visual imagery; a memory of sound more vivid than sight. She could even be heard outside of the house, especially in their garden; as a haunting melody wafting on the breeze, intermingling with the wind. Carolyn knew all too well how distracting it could be: Downright dangerous.

As Cindy became more familiar with the apparition, she would often leave the bedroom, so to allow the child to play with her toys, something the spirit would never do while Cynthia was present. That's how the mortal discovered who'd been moving objects around her room. Upon her return, an hour or so later, everything had been rearranged. She could hear the child babbling and chattering, happily at play. This kind gesture yielded many valuable insights, reducing an initial resentment of having her things *toyed* with down to zero. Remember? To share and share alike: Do unto others as though you were the others. It only seemed right...because it was the only right thing to do.

With maturity came the ultimate realization. There was nothing to be done for or about it, nothing she could do to help this child...Cindy was and would always be the witness to her misery, unable to affect any positive change in a situation which occurred centuries before Cindy was born. The torture of it; listening and watching and knowing she was helpless. It was all too hopeless. The child died. It's why she was there. Once upon a time Cindy was tempted to tell the little girl to go away and leave her alone, as if the youngster was invading her world. She grew to understand the true Nature of the dilemma. She learned to feel sympathy for the little darling then learned her sympathy was wasted. The poor creature did not know anyone was there or felt sorry for her; a painful ordeal was only hurting Cindy and comforting no one else.

With her understanding came an emotional withdrawal, severance as an act of self-protection. A mere mortal, the child whose heart was too big and too broken to care anymore began to remove herself from the bedroom whenever the girl appeared. Though the two had never interacted, Cynthia considered ***her own*** presence to be the intrusion, having changed her mind about who was invading whom. The spirit from the eaves had been there long before the Perron family moved into the farmhouse. In deference, as well as a need to extricate herself from the despair, Cindy took another bedroom...the instant her eldest sister left for college. Believing the change of venue would lessen her exposure and its impact, she was wrong. Still, when Nancy gave all their toys away to another family of deserving souls, without explicit permission to do so, Cynthia became absolutely furious. Though she had outgrown them those toys ***belonged*** to someone; a sick little girl not of this world. By taking them all away, an injustice was done, inadvertently depriving a spirit of what little the girl had to occupy eternity. Apparently, Cynthia still cared, after all.

“Just because ***I*** don’t play with them anymore doesn’t mean they weren’t being played with! My God! You gave away all ***our*** childhood memories!”

Disheartened; devastated by her elder sister’s misguided act of generosity, Cindy thought Nancy was too insensitive or too obtuse to conceive of this as an error in judgment; oblivious to the needs presenting in their own house. According to Cindy, the spirit children should have been their ***first*** priority: Misplaced loyalty. Adversely affected on behalf of the little girl from another time, Cynthia began a deliberate disengagement from an assortment of souls, living and dead. An evidently diminished capacity for tolerance, a prolonged period of quiet resentment followed. Far less attentive to others in her midst, Cindy went into seclusion; as self-imposed exile. Isolating herself within the confines of a bedroom claimed, ignoring this spirit when she’d pass through, wandering their bedrooms as she always had before, Cindy blocked her out. Whenever she heard this tiny child crying at a distance, as a lone voice from deep within the eaves, she would pause and reflect upon the hopelessness of it all, then turn up the volume on her stereo and resume whatever it was she’d been doing: sad case dismissed. It was certainly not the end of supernatural experiences and in some ways, it was only the beginning. As one of several attempts made, plans concocted to remote-control a paranormal environment,

this approach would ultimately prove to be ineffective. Cynthia's innocence had sadly disappeared with their treasured toys; remnants of a childhood lost with one grand, sweeping, pure-of-heart gesture of generosity.

Stepping across the threshold into adolescence, claiming another's bedroom as her own; it was a bold initial step toward adulthood, one Cynthia would be punished for taking, interpreted as a rejection. Forsaking childish things, the youngster focused her attention inward, spending more time alone in thought. During this introspective period she devised a plan to rid the house of spirits. Too confident at too early an age, Cynthia would discover what a mistake it was to assert herself, to presume any knowledge or control, as the foolhardy endeavor undertaken was bound to cost her dearly: hazardous to one's health.

April was equally disillusioned; hurt by Nancy's generous act of God. She withdrew as well. Cindy's response was prompt and to the point; anger. April reacted differently. She'd wept, though not for herself; she sobbed for a little boy she loved. Their sorrow was palpable; one could taste tears in the water and hear sighs in the air. So many pieces of their history were suddenly gone; a pathway into history instantly vanished. Their shared space was no longer cluttered with all the familiar objects of childhood. Nancy did not understand what she'd done to deserve being shunned. She was mourning the loss of her sisters. Nobody spoke to her for weeks...go away, little girl. Carolyn had no choice but to intervene; the tension was intolerable, the rift, grown too wide. Dissention in the ranks, Carolyn ordered the end of uncivil discourse. Make peace-not war. No replacing what was gone, no way to make amends: reality. Accept it. Move on. Counting the losses...regrets all around.

Recalling this incident and its aftermath with sorrow transcending the years as they pass, it is beneath the weight of aged remorse that Cindy now reflects upon a sick little girl who cries for her mother. Perceived as a lonely

child in life and death, the grown woman now looks back on a childhood riddled with doubts and irreconcilable emotions; questions never answered. Why had she responded so emotionally to the spirit's presence when she had already seen Manny and was not so adversely affected by him? Were there two children? Twins, perhaps? Why did she so eerily resemble Cynthia's eldest sister? Was there a cosmic connection between them, one familial in Nature? Oh, God!

“With all things and in all things, we are relatives.”
American Indian Proverb

told you so

“Every sweet has its sour, every evil its good.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Katy was skeptical, in spite of the fact that she'd witnessed several unusual events occur in their old farmhouse. It never kept her from coming back but it always caused her to question the explanations. She was the pragmatic sort, like Roger in that respect. There were elements of Katy's personality Cynthia found annoying, as she'd all but accused her so-called friends of lying about what they were experiencing; of making it up as they went along. A figment of presumably overactive imaginations: Sticks and stones. Cindy remained as defensive; resentful of her callous attitude and thoughtless words. After a few years of unsolicited, often rude commentary, contrary opinions, the casting of aspersions and vapid doubts; at last...Redemption! Sweet, sweet revenge!

The ladies were preparing for school. Early morning light was filtered by a dense fog; then soft rain began falling. Cindy was seated at the kitchen table, brushing her hair in front of a portable makeup mirror. Katy spent the night, again. She and Nancy were in the bathroom. Nudging one another for space, bowing before the almighty mirror they playfully pilfered through cosmetics from Carolyn's collection, as teenage girls are prone to do from time to time.

From the corner of her eye, Cynthia noticed the telephone receiver...lifting itself off the cradle. Holding her breath, not making a sound, she observed as this manifestation continued; hovering, as something invisible manipulated the object. It was mesmerizing. In spite of the fact Cindy had seen it happen before, (on numerous occasions), it was still, as always, a remarkable sight. Suddenly their house guest emerged from the bathroom. Cindy stopped Katy with a flash of the eyes, having only time enough to whisper: “Look!” Katy's gaze was fixed on the floating phone. There it was. Proof. At last. Hallelujah!

Cindy was delighted! Admittedly taking certain perverse pleasure pointing

it out, Katy stood in the doorway; transfixed and immobile. She watched as it happened; a telephone receiver, in midair, moved slowly away from the wall unit, floating like a feather on a breeze then lingered there, suspended in the thin spring air. An expression of pure panic on Kate's pale face: priceless. It didn't matter how much makeup she applied; she went as visibly white as *Casper*, another ghost she did *not* believe in! During this singular moment of total perfection, because timing is everything in life and in death, Cindy felt compelled to quickly quip, "Told you so!" As the gloating child spoke, an invisible co-conspirator assisted, deliberately drifting the receiver toward the wall unit, lining it up above then letting it drop with a jolt into the cradle with a distinctive sound uniformly produced. No mistaking it for something else. Cindy did not allow her smug satisfaction to surface...yet. Instead, she rolled her eyes disdainfully, returning to her task as if nothing unusual happened. Truth be told, it *was* nothing all that unusual.

Standing inside the alcove, Kate could not speak. She could not even move. After a few moments she bolted back into the bathroom, directly by Nancy's side, barely able to express what she'd just seen in the kitchen.

"Did you see that?" Frantic, Katy pulled Nancy away from her reflection.

"See what?" Distracted, preoccupied by meticulous application of mascara, Nancy showed no particular interest in whatever had spooked her friend.

"The telephone!" Kate explained at light speed while she still had Nancy's diverted attention. Shrugging her shoulders, Nancy ignored the alarm in her best friend's voice, presuming it to be another sign of arrested development. Kate knew she was a guest in the house of the spirits and no major newsflash was necessary just because the phone was floating in midair...again.

"Told you so; things like that happen all the time." Nancy refocused on her long, lovely eyelashes. Staring at her reflection in the mirror, she concluded: "Don't be scared. It's no big deal...don't make it one. They won't hurt you."

"I don't believe what I saw...and I don't believe in ghosts! It's a hoax!"

"Then *don't* believe it!" Nancy stopped what she was doing and turned to

face a friend. “I don’t care if you believe it or not, and neither do the ghosts! Think whatever you want. I really do not care!” Her statement was blunt but sincere; to the point. “I’ve never lied to you, Kate. Stop accusing me of it!”

Stunned, Kate quietly gathered her belongings from the vanity, repacking the bag she brought with her for the night. Quickly piling her books inside it, she left without saying another word. Cynthia reserved a satisfied smirk until the kitchen door closed, though it pained her to do so, wanting to gloat in the worst way. She deserved it; she had it coming and it finally arrived, courtesy of a playful spirit who’d yearned for acceptance from a skeptic: told ya so!

Walking to the bus stop alone gave Katy some time to think about many of the accusations she’d made; to reconsider a staunch, inflexible position she had maintained for several years. By the time the girls arrived, their friend had revised her overall approach, politely receiving them, chatting happily, as if nothing even happened. An attitude adjustment was called for and Katy appeared to comply. In time, she would admit that fear kept her in denial.

Katy really was freaked out and could not wait to get out of that farmhouse, leaving abruptly, with no intention of returning. Months later she came back with a newfound respect and a dangerous fascination. This bizarre incident she witnessed broadened a closed mind and she willingly accepted the word of her friends, shedding her skepticism as a snake sheds its skin. There were no further intimations of dishonesty, no more sarcastic comments...no future need of “told you so” among cohorts as a conciliatory, apologetic truce was struck between them. Kate would later admit she was too afraid to believe in *their* spirits because then she would have to accept what occurred in her *own* old house; forced to believe something it was far more comfortable to deny. Humbled as she was by this experience, she was likewise ashamed of a false accusation levied time and time again, testing the bounds of decency and true friendship, almost trashed. Comments were retracted. Charges were dropped. She took it all back, and rightfully so. There were no doubts left in her mind: this farmhouse had spooks. Oh God! They do exist! No one was lying to her.

Sticks and stones: For future reference, Katy was reminded that words are

weapons, too; name-calling does hurt! Liar! A war of words was over as an obvious pause for reflection had done her some good. Friendships preserved in spite of this trial, Katy became a believer. In time, she would be the one to initiate some dangerous name-calling up of the spirits, without the benefit of a telephone, invoking the name Bathsheba. Anyone home? Leave a message!

*“I have a great deal of company in the house,
especially in the morning when nobody calls.”*

Henry David Thoreau

bloodbath

“Do the thing we fear and death of fear is certain.♦♦♦
Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Come on, girls. That wood won’t cut itself.” Too bad. Those were the few words everybody had come to dread, including the hard-working father who spoke them aloud. The novelty had worn off. Roger’s gruff voice functioned as the clarion call to comrades in arms, weaponry consisting of an axe and an over-worked chainsaw; their mission involved the militaristic massacre of a dozen dead trees out in the woods. A surge ensued. Present arms! Carry logs. Load that truck. Heave Ho! Let’s go! Charge! Their work was never done.

Sunday mornings held the quiet promise of loud and raucous football in the afternoon, along with a well-deserved nap and a sumptuous dinner... when all the chores were done. Cindy had already been out to the barn, tending to the horses. Actually, all the animals had been attended to well before anyone else was up. She was diligent about it, always mindful of their needs, regardless of the weather. Her blood was already pumping, though the same could not be said for anyone else, yet.

In the deep midwinter, those woods were nearly impenetrable. Autumn was the perfect time to forge out into the forest, to identify then retrieve fallen, seasoned logs. Once the underbrush had died back, retreating to the surface of the Earth with a first frostbite, briars were the only hazard. There was no shortage of firewood. Nature provided an abundant supply. Getting to it was not always easy; a veritable obstacle course of fallen limbs and soft, swampy spots creating booby traps for guerilla fighters out braving the elements; any soldier had to watch every step and in so doing, saw wondrous sights. On an important mission, there to capture not an enemy but a friend, there was time enough for mild diversions; watching a raven peck its way through the ice on a puddle to secure a sip of nectar beneath: Nature. It was so lovely, the only splendid aspect of an otherwise grueling task. They all

knew what to expect and they all knew it had to be done. After suffering through the first, none of them were willing to face another brutal winter without the benefit of a fire in the place; Inconceivable! Once open, it provided warmth to a home sorely lacking it. There was a certain comfort associated with returning to the house after chopping wood for hours to find the smoke trickling, seeping from the chimney. It put them in the end zone; must be time for football. No; not yet.

“It’s time to go!” If Roger was ready then everyone else had better be same as the general required his troops. Fall in...to the back of the truck. Carolyn cleared the dishes then headed for the only grocery store in the area open on Sundays. This too was a chore, KP duty...to stock the house with provisions; some bags as heavy as logs, but better than chopping wood. Her husband had arrived home the night before, flush with the profits from an exceptionally successful road trip. Hand it over. The kitchen pantry was virtually depleted of supplies. The woman on a mission of her own; Carolyn prepared to go out on patrol: shopping. Leaning over the table, passing back and forth between the food storage pantry and a pad and pen, she did a quick inventory; simple enough when the cupboard was bare...when there is nothing left to count up. Resentful of her husband in that moment, she hated living this way: feast or famine. Rather than the occasional hardship, it had become a lifestyle, one she did not savor in the least: Deprivation. Carolyn wrote her extensive list, beginning with the basics: *coffee milk bread butter cheese salt cereal oatmeal pasta potatoes onions carrots oranges grapes tomato sauce soups celery eggs bacon mayonnaise meats* Never one to cower from a challenge, she had about two hundred dollars at her disposal and the Scot in her could torture every dime of it, stretching money ‘til it screamed, begging for mercy. No problem. No mercy. Tough times called for tougher measures. One did what one must just to survive, including tromping through the dense thicket of a forest with a chainsaw or buying what was on sale. Winter crops were in; replenishing vitamins with good healthy foods, she felt no remorse filling her cart with every fruit in season to feed her kids: a wise investment.

Coercing every penny to purchase its full worth, Carolyn returned home with few of them left in her pocket. She made it back to the house before the rest of her family emerged from beneath the canopy deep within the woods.

Typically, their mother heard them before she saw them. As she built a fire they pulled the heavy woodshed door open and began off-loading their stash; a seasoned load ready to split and burn. They were a loud, rowdy crowd; blood pumping (thankfully that day none had yet to be spilled) and hearts pounding. Exertion showed on their faces. Ruddy cheeks and runny noses all around, five children were ready to take the well-deserved break they longed for but a general would not dismiss them until the job was done: task master.

As ominous clouds rolled in over the horizon, they had made it just in time. Storm troopers announcing a mission accomplished; it was time for a snack. The crowd came in through the woodshed and went straight into the kitchen. Large paper bags covered the surface of the table; some rummaging ensued. Carolyn then diverted their attention with a red mesh package full of oranges, slightly chilled from the journey; homeward bound. The kids tried tearing it open like ravenous creatures, clawing at fabric which would not give an inch. Enlisting a pair of scissors from the sideboard drawer, it solved the problem. Ripping tender skin away from its fruit, they devoured sweet meat in chunks, juice dripping from frostbitten chins. The oranges were luscious; deliciously ripe. Carolyn bought two bags...along with bananas and berries and grapes. Gratified, a mother watched as her children consumed half a bag before they had even removed their hats and coats.

Everyone disappeared into the parlor except Andrea, who remained behind to help her mother store an inordinately large order of groceries. Folding the paper bags, they too were then stored in the pantry. Carolyn recycled before it was fashionable. Popping a pork roast into the oven meant the chores were finished; mom was free to indulge in an orange of her own, poised in front of the fireplace, her vigilant spot. Andrea grabbed two of them, one for a weary father, along with several napkins, knowing what a juicy batch mom brought home. Carolyn pulled a serrated knife from the sideboard drawer. Arriving at the entrance of the parlor to quite a sight, the eldest counted her lazy sisters. All there; a bunch of frumpalumps, limp as rag dolls, scattered about in piles all over the furniture, spilling onto the floor. Roger was already half asleep, collapsed from exhaustion into his easy chair. Pretending to follow the game, he accepted the orange with thanks. It brought him back to life! Go Patriots! Down 14 points at the half: Ouch! That stinger: leaving a mark on their stats.

“Buncha bums.” Stifling a smile, mom shook her head in feigned disgust. “Football bums.” Carolyn did not bother to ask who was winning...she could not have cared less. Her interest was held in hand...her turn to sip the nectar. “Who wants to help me eat an orange?” A few takers in the crowd; settling in on the hearthstone, Carolyn assumed her *natural* position: (with legs folded beneath her torso *Indian style*, a trait of her Cherokee ancestors) their mother made herself comfy, so to begin the ancient ritual. Since childhood, Carolyn has eaten oranges in a specific way, preparing them with the same technique she learned from her mother. It requires a sharp knife, preferably serrated; a jagged cut is called for to release all of the juice. Christine, Cindy and April gravitated toward a fireplace, seating themselves in a semi-circle around her, each one anxious for a sip or a slice of the tasty morsel; a really sweet treat.

The trick is in the precision. Carolyn didn’t think she needed to watch what she was doing...she had done it countless times before: cut a hole in the top, squeeze out the juice, drink from the fruit then eat its remains; supposedly a Southern tradition: the means of getting fresh-squeezed orange juice from a makeshift cup. The girls waited patiently, having seen this process unfold on many occasions, knowing it was worth the wait for a sip: Nectar of the gods. Plunging a knifepoint into the core of the orange, about a fingernail’s length away from the stem, Carolyn impaled the piece of fruit on an angle, cutting it deeply inside. Sawing in a circular pattern, the width of more than an inch in radius, its juices began trickling then spurting up from the point of incision, gushing as projectile droplets from an open wound, one hell of a juicy orange indeed! Up, down and around she cut, carving out a flawless circle, creating a gaping hole. Practice makes perfect. She could’ve done it with eyes closed. Carolyn barely paid attention to this task-in-hand. Happily chatting with kids, discussing the deeds of their day, she impaled her fingernail beneath the skin, pulling the plug. Withdrawing it from the core, she sucked all the sweetness from the nub; the holy spot where a piece of fruit connects to the Creator, at the point of contact with its Mother Tree of Life. Playfully tossing the spent stem up and over her shoulder into the fire, she kept talking with the children while continuing a process which did not require her attention. She’d focused on her girls instead, gabbing about this or that, listening to them complaining about how cold it was in the woods, but also remarking about how beautiful it was, resplendent with colors of the season.

Squeezing the body of the fruit released its succulent nectar. She lifted it to her lips. The first few sips were marvelous; thoroughly refreshing. The ladies were right; true to initial reports from the field. It was a great batch of fruit! One more pinch should bring more to the surface for sharing. No one had yet to notice the blood.

Having pulled off her wet boots and equally moist socks minutes earlier, Carolyn appeared as a barefoot Indian princess squatting on her hearthstone. Christine cried out, shocked by the sight of it.

“Mom! You cut yourself!” Splotches of thick blood were splattered all over Carolyn’s toes. Chris leapt up from the floor, rousing a father from his chair.

“Bad!” April yelled as well, panicked by the ghastly view; an ugly scene.

“The damn knife must have slipped!” Roger, awestruck by the spectacle.

“Oh, my God! Mom!” Cindy could not believe her eyes. Blood was oozing, literally dripping between her mother’s toes, as if she had punctured a vein. Seeping down her arm to the elbow, it saturated the rolled cuff of her flannel shirt, spilling onto her blue jeans, staining them as well; what part of it was not absorbed into the fabric obeyed the law of gravity and dropped, forming puddles on the hearthstone. Evidence of carnage...everywhere around her!

“Jesus Christ!” Roger hovered over his wife, equally alarmed. “Where is it *all* coming from?” A wonder to behold.

Carolyn felt her heart pounding but could not feel the cut; that sharp sting of citric acid in an open wound. Holding her blood-drenched hand high into the air for further inspection first required juggling the orange into her other hand. In so doing, she identified the source of the blood. It was coming from inside the orange. “Roger. Look!” Carolyn squeezed the fruit. The prodigious amount of crimson liquid was gushed from within its gaping hole; more fluid than could come from a common orange, but this was an uncommon orange. The blood began to coagulate as soon as it hit open air, its hue turning from a

rich, deep red tone to a rusty brown with auburn at the center of each droplet. It bubbled and seethed as she squeezed it, a constant stream trickling like teardrops along the surface of the pale skin on her arms. Thick and pasty to the touch, Carolyn became mesmerized. She sniffed at it, stuck between her fingertips. No doubt about it: blood. Perturbed by what was obviously some kind of supernatural interference, Carolyn grasped the orange, pressing into the skin so hard it left indentations. One final bubble of blood sprung to the surface, spilling onto her thoroughly soiled clothing then onto her feet. In an act of defiance; the woman refused to relinquish her orange. She squeezed it until the juice ran clear again...then sucked it dry. Pulling it apart, she tore it to shreds, eating every fiber of the fruit. Enraged, Carolyn heaved the hollow skin into an equally raging fireplace: It is finished.

The family was gathered all around her, but no one said a word. Every eye of each beholder was gazing in amazement, silently professing disbelief. She did **not** just do that! She did. Polka dot clots speckled all over her body, head to toes webbed with smooth gooey ooze, Carolyn's morbid fascination with the evidence was unsettling; a disturbing element of their mutual experience. She did not seem to be herself; appearing to be lost; elsewhere in mind. Her attention could not be diverted. Focused solely on the event, observing what was happening from within, transfixed by its aftermath, she was studying the Nature of the incident. There was a subtle, simmering fury present in her; the vicious way she'd attacked the orange, ripping it wide open with a vengeance then decimating it, flailing it into the fire. This behavior was out-of-character for a woman who suddenly appeared possessed by a savage mean streak. It was brutal. It was frightening. It was Bloody Hell...Wrath of God.

Once Carolyn had finished it off, so to speak, she stood then went into the bathroom to clean up and change her clothing. Peroxide saved the fabrics but what would save her soul from such an intrusive presence? Spots boiling up as white bubbles on the surface of stains, she'd meticulously removed them, blotting the blood with a cotton washrag; its coloring becoming diluted with each new application, dispersing any proof of her assertion with a treatment. Scrubbing off the streaks and droplets, Carolyn hovered over the bathroom sink for what must have been half an hour or more, cleansing her skin, speck by rusty speck; staring into a white porcelain basin as the residual evidence,

squeezed from the washcloth, swirled away; out of sight but not out of mind. Sitting on the edge of their bathtub, she stared below at those ruddy red toes. According to her recollection, she'd been so struck by how much blood had been spilled, by the sheer volume accumulated on her feet, she studied these dried globules. Disoriented by this incident, the woman decided to leave both feet stained and soiled, covering them with a pair of white socks, for contrast. Later that night she would privately gaze at them again, touching the blood, tampering with evidence, marveling with the wonder of a child peering at the spots and blotches, drips and stains an uncommon orange left behind on her figure. Not until the following morning did she attempt to scrub them away; and scrub them she did, rubbing her tender skin raw with a hair brush; by that time, what was then required to remove remnants of an event she wished she could wash away from memory: a mortal wound which will never fully heal.

No one in the family knew quite how to react to what they had witnessed; how to express the dismay, having played a natural part in such an obviously supernatural event as well as its inexplicable aftermath. Returning to his easy chair, Roger made no further reference to the anomaly, pretending it didn't happen, but his dis/ease was evident to all. For the rest of that day the house remained quiet; its occupants subdued. Once voracious cravings for oranges abruptly subsided, a dramatic loss of appetite occurred, extending through an inordinately quiet dinner. Not one of them lifts an orange to their lips without remembering the Sunday afternoon one bled to death in their mother's hands.

Unlike most of the incidents and experiences they shared during that rather unusual decade, there are conflicting accounts among the family regarding this particular event. Carolyn recalls her reaction to it a certain way; the rest of the clan, quite another. Describing her behavior in far more benign terms than her five children do, each revisits the episode with identical detail and clarity. As far as her family is concerned, their mother's response was more bizarre than the actual incident. Even at her worst moment, this was entirely unlike her. They all recall her acute anger and frustration bubbling up like the blood itself...from within. At once accepting and rejecting the concept of an occurrence which defied any logical explanation, Carolyn's outburst of pure

disdain was shocking for all. Her belligerence; a defiance of and resentment for whatever was causing the orange to bleed, was palpable, entirely contrary to her nature. But then to deliberately ingest the remains of the vile substance was transformative. With purpose; beyond reason: an act of war...taking no prisoners. An impulsive and equally repulsive act instantly impaled the mind and the memories of every witness. The animalistic tearing away at the flesh of the fruit: as symbolism, reflected on Carolyn as an altered entity in those moments; out-of-character...as if out of her mind, as if someone wicked had taken her place. An internal conflict: the struggle to retain control of her own life force. Heaving the carcass onto a funeral pyre bears its own significance. An incidental ordeal functions as multi-faceted metaphor: as a firm refusal to relinquish control to the living *or* the dead. The conquering of a demon: the battle of a lifetime. The drawing of a proverbial line in the sands of time then daring an evil presence to cross over it: there was much to extrapolate from a solitary event. A time to pause and reflect on the physical manifestation these spirits were capable of creating and manipulating, seemingly from thin air. A bloody orange spilling its contents on the intended victim; damage done was minimal, but the ominous message received was quite another spirit matter.

*“The torment of human frustration, whatever its immediate cause,
is the knowledge that the self is in prism, its vital force and
‘mangled mind’ leaking away in lonely, wasteful self-conflict.”*

Elizabeth Drew

shared space

*“A home is not a mere transient shelter:
its essence lies in the personalities of the people who live in it.”*

H. L. Mencken

Children are naturally selfish at birth; imbued with instincts geared toward self-preservation: basic survival techniques instilled prior to seeing the light. They frequently hoard, covet and claim as their own all objects and spaces they perceive to be personal in nature. In this way, children begin asserting themselves; establishing boundaries and developing an intrinsic sense of self. They are not prone to sharing and, in most situations, must be taught by their elders to be kind and conscientious, sensitive to others...as if they were the others. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. There are some children who seem to come by these traits naturally without any prompting necessary.

Cindy was momentarily resentful of the little girl wandering her bedroom, touching and moving her toys. It was a harshness born of feeling threatened and did not persist for long. April did not appreciate having her things toyed with either. She was aggravated by the constant upheaval and rearrangements made in her absence. Andrea was a deeply disgruntled youngster, with good reason as her prized chalkboard was repeatedly tampered with then destroyed and Nancy was certain **someone** was reading her diary! Their precious and in some cases, irreplaceable things were being stolen or broken; misplaced and sometimes disappeared entirely. Theirs was not an environment conducive to an assumption of security for a child. It caused suspicions to brew; tempers to flare amongst the children from the start, within a few days of moving to the farm. There was always a sense of impending intrusion; odd perceptions of space being invaded, personalities being imposed upon; mutually claimed by a presence sensed but impossible to discern. As their disquieting existence became increasingly disruptive, they all made a choice: accept it or reject it. Deny it or acknowledge it. Without formulating any specific strategy (except for Cindy), each child gradually came to terms with her circumstances; each

made an implicit decision based upon who they were as individuals, albeit young ones. Carolyn never had to tell her girls how to *be*; she marveled at who they were and, in time and space, what they would become. She did not have to tell them to “play nice”...they *were* nice...as a matter of character.

Cindy knew the little girl was sad and sickly. She likewise knew this spirit was the one playing with her toys, moving them all about the place when she was away from her bedroom. Having touched another child’s tender heart with her mournful cries for a mother who never did come when called, Cindy soon began relinquishing her space to the little one whenever she appeared. Removing herself gave this spirit free reign. Cindy never left because she felt threatened and sometimes felt as if *she* was the intrusive presence. Leaving was a natural act; not fear-based. On the contrary, it was based in love; as a sympathetic gesture, kindness extended to a pitiful soul. Her exit had purpose and reason: she would want someone to do the same for her.

Their deference became habitual. Whenever Cindy entered her bedroom, if she was presented with evidence of a presence, some extrasensory indication the space was being shared, she’d immediately retreat; relinquishing a room to whomever rearranged an entire farmyard over the span of a few minutes. It was when she stepped back, giving another child a chance to play with toys. Cindy’s natural persuasion was to give the wee little one time, whatever it was that *time* meant to her. These children were unfamiliar with the notion of boredom; there was always something else to do, someplace else to go and someone else to see, whereas the dispirited ghosts seemed trapped; no place to go but a memory. If they were capable of reaching through the cosmos, manipulating objects, Cindy considered her intentional act of kindness as an accommodation, a favor; an act of respect for the dead. It was obvious to her; their existence was an extraordinary occurrence which could and should be acknowledged with reverence. Her uniquely generous spirit was, in itself, a form of contact; like pouring seeds for wild birds then withdrawing into the shadows, at a safe distance, to watch them feast in morning light. There was something special, intrinsically satisfying about the practice of sharing for one too young to yet realize or appreciate the concept of good character she exemplified: an excellent trait. This escaped her; the good she had done as a child...for a child. Practicing the presence was essentially something sacred.

Of course, two adults had to adjust as well, particularly difficult when one of them refused to believe his eyes. Carolyn was frequently confronted with images constantly reassuring her that she was not alone...never alone. Many times she experienced identical sensations as those reported and complained about by her children; it was that distinct impression of being watched. Even when the spirits did not manifest in the corporeal realm of visual reality, they remained nonetheless real. A scent. A chill. Footsteps from where no mortal dared to tread. At times it felt downright crowded. Their constant barrage of sensations began as a confrontation, evolved into a distraction and eventually became a way of life: the new paranormal. In fact, it was only a matter of time before each of them discovered the space they supposedly owned was being shared with apparitions and entities which seemed to belong there as well; they did. Selfishness served no purpose and in the case of a child who cried too often, kindness extended seemed her only respite, her only glimpse of a childhood lost in the ether when left at play, even if the time was spent in solitary confinement while wandering the cosmos alone. The thought of it was too much to bear for a mortal soul who knew she had plenty to spare and time to share her belongings; perfectly willing to forfeit all of it on behalf of one far less fortunate than she. Little wonder then, when these treasured toys disappeared due to the generous act of a sibling, Cindy felt deeply conflicted and resentful of the offending sister. Yes, there were living children who had nothing, but she didn't ***know*** them! Cynthia had struggled with a loss on two fronts. The trinkets of childhood measured her time. An ethereal connection had been abruptly severed as the little girl stopped coming to play. From then on she only cried; the heartbreak ramifications of one well-intended act. If she could have only stopped Nancy; counting the losses...regrets all around.

Bonds form in close quarters. Familiarity does not always breed contempt. Attachments between mortals and spirits are difficult to comprehend and will undoubtedly prompt much debate. In defense of relationship initially born of necessity, truth be told, ***strangers*** can be stranger than fiction and so can the truth. If a proper introduction is made and a positive attitude is maintained, the more crowded a neighborhood becomes, the more peaceful it will remain; one big happy family. If souls involved will simply try to get along, disputes

can be amicably settled; working together in unity could result in a mutually beneficial conflict resolution. Down in the trenches, the gray space between black and white, the darkness and light of life and death, there is a light at the end of the tunnel: a pathway to heaven from hell. Reaching common ground requires uncommon valor. A truce declared in the midst of war brings respite for all involved. Space claimed can be space shared: Peace be with you, my friend. In death as in life, it only takes one bad apple: Bathsheba. As with the torches incident, she spoiled the bunch. A house divided will not stand for such nonsense. It does not matter who arrived first or lingered longest. What matters is the intention. Do no harm. Do only good. Do unto others as though they were the others...because it's the right thing to do. One needs no other reason to fulfill a purpose. Then say a prayer and give peace a chance. Amen.

*“Change the changeable, accept the unchangeable,
and remove yourself from the unacceptable.”*

Denis Waitley



~ something sacred ~

Metamorphosis

*“How many of our daydreams would darken into nightmares,
were there a danger of their coming true!”*

Logan Pearsall Smith

Natural conversion: the transforming of this into that in the space and time required, according to all established laws of Nature. How long does it take a leaf to decompose in autumn; what variables exist which could conceivably impact or alter this process? How to factor the elements into these equations? Simple: “To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven.” As beings in perpetual motion, ever-changing, consciously or not, in death we change yet again, morphing into something else: as pure energy, soul and spirit dispersed into the Cosmos. Metamorphosis is not an event but is instead an ongoing co-creative process which we remain actively involved in during each moment of existence. We are; always have been, always will be, in some form or another. Best we come to terms with Infinity and our own immortality. Accept it and move on across the Universe...at light speed.

No one could have predicted the outcome thus far; the consequences for mortal and immortal alike...bound together and bound to get worse before it got better. Something had drawn them to the home of their dreams, there to experience the nightmare of Reality. It was true. Whether being thrust across the threshold, pushed from behind or dragged in from the cold to the colder, Carolyn had been compelled to dwell within its walls; a sacred place in the country. As if the house itself functioned as a stern old schoolmarm ringing the bell, calling its students into class, it beckoned their assembly. Dutifully bringing everyone else along, soon the classroom was full to overflowing, all of them **present** and accounted for, there to learn their lessons well: “Here!” (**Geography Lesson #1:** On the existential map of life...we are here!) Even if one belligerent, non-complaint student refused to acknowledge the fact he was **in school**, frequently bunking the classes he had insisted did not exist, ultimately he absorbed by osmosis. Initially, no one was open to instruction,

unwilling to accept a formal education they had specifically come to receive; disenchanted with the format in which it was presented. Eventually each one of them would learn to listen up! No syllabus had been provided for their complicated curriculum. Difficult to assess multiple messages coming all at once: as impossible to determine precisely who these multiple *personalities* were, appearing like so many guest lecturers on a busy convoluted campus. Carolyn was, by far, the most studious; the one who did all of the research: **home/work**. She had paid attention in class; took notes, followed directions, remained observant and kept a journal throughout this course as part of her reference materials for use later in life. At times it was utterly overwhelming, everyone teaching them something new simultaneously; challenging them to discern who had something of importance to impart and who was present merely to disrupt the class. In retrospect, it was *all* important: relevant and intense. At other times, the school/house appeared entirely vacant; students would sit there alone to worry, wondering which teacher was next destined to waltz in the classroom unannounced at any given moment in time and space. Such quiet time was welcome; a pause for reflection, like study hall. Best to be prepared for class; the test always came before the lesson. Some absorbed information with five senses; some relied on the sixth, while others depended on repetition; all learned their lessons well. One way or another, all teaching methodology required an element of memorization skills which qualified for credit toward completion of a course with no end. The student who had come to class most eager to learn was the one summarily dismissed; culminating in a rather odd combination of detention and attempted expulsion: punishment time. No apple for the teacher? Graduating to levels of higher learning; it was an unorthodox approach to education, one destined to terrorize and inspire in equal measure, quite like Catholic school!

Enlightenment is painful to observe; it stings the eyes of its beholders with images too bright to perceive, too difficult to focus on for long, until mortal eyes adjust to the Light. There was a period of maladjustment for this family who got more than they paid for in the bargain: what Carolyn once described as the real estate deal of the century. True enough; it was literally an estate with centuries of a history and what dwelled within the walls of that ancient

edifice was far too real for her to abide. Had she known at the time what was yet to come Carolyn would have surely abandoned the dream. Soon enough others would arrive, hoping to help. When Ed and Lorraine Warren got wind of their predicament they came to the farm expressing a sincere desire to be of assistance and once the couple became involved it became quite apparent; Pandora had nothing on them. The energy Lorraine released; the compassion Ed harbored for the children, coupled to create a whirlwind of activity no one could have predicted. They knew...from the moment they stepped beyond the threshold. Both were perfectly capable of seeing in the dark...their eyes adjusting instantly to the Light in the midst of darkness: A wonder to behold.

Fear not the house, for it is not to blame. It remains as it has always been, a finely constructed piece of architecture with a personality or ten all its own; hard to keep count. If one must fear anything at all, best to fear the unknown, as life and death are apparently full of surprises. Fear the haunted woman who lurks in the night under cover of darkness then vanishes with the light of dawn. Fear fate or destiny which calls its pilgrims home to petrify them. Fear the knowledge that mortals know nothing. Fear the living...not the dead.

Bound they were, mortal to immortal alike. Yeats proved to be correct. He described spirits as being “Insipid as the dough before it is baked” and knew “they change their bodies at a word.” The poet knew “Images can break the solitude of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes.” Practically magical; he knew enough to tell the truth of them. It was not the end. It was only the beginning.

*“The world is round and the place which may seem
like the end may also be only the beginning.”*

Ivy Baker Priest

"Mortals bask in the wonders of this world, sharing a desire to learn evermore of our place in the Universe, seeking meaning for our existence, all the while intrinsically knowing we know nothing at all. Yet, the intellect perseveres in pursuit of knowledge, yearning to discover that which defines limitations, serving to reveal our ignorance as an integral part of the learning process."





"Based upon numerous observations made in an old farmhouse, presumptions may be made of the Univers: We are not alone and what we are a part of is essentially invisible. It is Spiritual in Nature. It is something beyond ourselves, resembling ourselves when manifesting in form and substance; a profound discovery. A message received. We need only close our eyes to feel our spirits."

House of Darkness



House of Light

The True Story

Volume Two

Andrea Perron

House of Darkness House of Light

The True Story

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Bless Me Father

For my Father

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the ability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but someday the piercing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”

H. P. Lovecraft
“The Call of Cthulhu”

House of Darkness ~ House of Light

The Trilogy

Prologue in Prayer A Proper Introduction

I. A Place in the Country

*let there be light *frozen stiff *sounds of silence
 *a matter of time *contact *a chill in the air
*creature discomforts *the devil's pets *safety in numbers
 *sword of Damocles *a very fine how do you do
*familiarity breeds contempt *cold as stone *dusk 'til dawn

II. Fire in the Hole

*bless this mess *close that door *smoke and mirrors
*spirit matters *scorched offerings *apple blossom time
 *kiss of death *omens *from frying pan into the fire
 *blue light special *an old torch carries a flame
 *fire and brimstone *trial by fire *lady bug
 *burnin' down the house *feet to the fire *bats!

III. Wicked Woman... Evil Ways

*demon doors *knock knock knock *blown away
 *Bathsheba *a stitch in time *from insult to injury
*is this the party to whom I am speaking? *a pain in the neck
 *message received *twisted sister *solitary confinement
 *as the crow flies *off the hook *no rest for the wicked
 *sink or swim *a rude awakening *a fate worse than death

IV. Spooked

*going for a ride *bed knobs *broomsticks *boo! who?
*kindred spirits *clarion call *things that go bump in the day
 *things that go bump in the night *reality *Baker boys

*go away little girls *told you so *bloodbath *shared space

Metamorphosis

V. Ghostly Cries and Whispers

*secrets and lies *make yourself at home *comes and goes
*timely manners *for crying out loud *rearing its ugly head
*history *all fun and games until someone gets hurt *insight
*listen up in smoke *staking a claim *making matters worse
*in the closet *poetry and prose *chants and incantations

VI. Down the Hatch

*ye olde cellar hole *beneath the bell stone *the big dig *eureka!
*a sense of direction *fountain of youth *release the hounds!
*knocked back *buyer's remorse *black hole *dead in the water
*all's well that ends well *holy hell *leave well enough alone
*teardrops *a woman's touch will get a man's attention *tug of war

VII. Warren Peace

*inquest *divine intervention *promises... promises
*tempting fate *twilight *hippies, freaks and misfits
*blessings and curses *darkest before the dawn *death becomes her
*inner sanctum *fear the living... not the dead *continuum
*eye of the beholder *a little knowledge *all things considered
*more harm than good *wrack and ruin *this too shall pass

VIII. Bless Me Father

*a turn for the worse *a wing and a prayer *all in good time
*comfort zone *common sense *act of god *hallelujah
*something sacred *guess who's coming to dinner? *joy
*leap of faith *doubt *abandon all hope ye who enter here
*clearing the air *epiphany *the foreseeable future *amen

Transformation

IX. Rock On with your Bad Self

*elemental reflections *windsong *broken record
*pine forest portal *cracking up *season of the witch
*feel free *if these rocks could talk *good vibrations
*along came a spider *journey *wonders never cease
*to soothe the savage beast *perfect harmony *starlight
*a fish tale *harvest home *solitude *welcome home
*stairway to heaven *highway to hell *wisdom

X. A Fly on the Wall

*the new paranormal *right of way *go in peace
*rites of passage *terms of endearment *keep the faith
*manifest destiny *fond farewell *carpe diem *no turning back
*homecoming *what a relief *grand slam *smoke signals
*soul searching *master of his domain *escaping unscathed
*ancients and horribles *photographs and memories
*revisiting the past *touched by an angel *mistress of her domain
*darkness and light *to lift the spirits *truth be told
*long ago and far away *collective memoirs *revelation

Confluence

Epilogue in Epitaph
In Gratitude

The Little Ghost

I knew her for a little ghost
That in my garden walked;
The wall is high—higher than most—
And the green gate was locked.

And yet I did not think of that
Till after she was gone—
I knew her by the broad white hat,
All ruffled, she had on.

By the dear ruffles round her feet,
By her small hands that hung
In their lace mitts, austere and sweet,
Her gown's white folds among.

I watched to see if she would stay,
What she would do, and oh!
She looked as if she liked the way
I let my garden grow!



~ staking a claim to the garden spot ~
~ a chill in the air ~



She bent above my favourite mint
With conscious garden grace,
She smiled and smiled—there was no hint
Of sadness in her face.

She held her gown on either side
To let her slippers show,
And up the walk she went with pride,
The way great ladies go.

And where the wall is built in new
And is of ivy bare
She paused—then opened and passed through
A gate that once was there.

Edna St. Vincent Millay
Renascence

FROM THE AUTHOR

With deepest gratitude, I welcome you to the next leg of our journey. Volume Two of “House of Darkness House of Light” is the continuation of a compelling saga which will take you elsewhere, backward and then forward in time to dark, dangerous places you would never suspect, into black holes where you may even see the Light. It will reveal elements of this haunting which strike at the heart and challenge any mortal mind. For those who have waited patiently, thank you. I hope it satisfies your curiosity and exceeds all expectations. Those unfamiliar with this story are well-advised to begin at the beginning with Volume One. Otherwise, it may seem fragmented and confounding to the reader, making frequent references to prior events of which you will be unaware.

Volume Two proceeds as the first book of the trilogy ended, with the segue Metamorphosis, as a reminder of lessons learned in an old school of hard knocks at the door. It is also a foreshadowing of events yet to be, where this memoir naturally came to rest along the path of this spiritual excursion. To those who have been here before, a warm welcome home. To those who remain strangers to this memoir, one stranger than fiction, I extend an invitation. May our often poignant and sometimes disturbing saga serve you well. Come, my brave and faithful traveling companions. Cross the bridge. Take my hand. There is nothing to fear but fear itself.

Ring the bell that still can ring... celestial school is now in session.

Yours in spirit ~ Andrea

METAMORPHOSIS

“How many of our daydreams would darken into nightmares,
were there a danger of their coming true!”
Logan Pearsall Smith

Natural conversion: a transforming of this into that in the space and time required, according to all established laws of Nature. How long does it take a leaf to decompose in autumn? What variables exist which could conceivably impact or alter this process? How to factor the elements into these equations? To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven. Beings in perpetual motion, ever-changing, (consciously or not), in death we change yet again, morphing into something else: perhaps as pure energy, soul and spirit dispersed into the Cosmos. Metamorphosis is not an event but is instead, an ongoing co-creative process which we remain actively involved in during every moment of our existence. We are; always have been, always will be, in some form or another. We evolve. Like it or not, we all learn. Best we come to terms with Infinity—and our own immortality: the biggest chill. Accept it and move on. Out across the Universe, transformed, evolving into ether, as spirit, traveling just beyond the speed of light.

No one could have predicted the outcome thus far; the consequences for mortal and immortal alike... bound together and bound to get worse before it got better. Something had drawn them to the home of their dreams, there to experience the nightmare of Reality. It was true. Whether being thrust across the threshold, pushed from behind, or dragged in from the cold to the colder, Carolyn felt compelled to dwell within its walls, her own sacred place in the country. As if the house itself functioned as a stern old schoolmarm ringing a brass bell, calling her students to class, it beckoned their assembly. Dutifully bringing everyone along, soon their classroom was full to overflowing, all of them present and accounted for, all there to learn their lessons well. “Here!” (Geography Lesson #1: On the existential map of life... we are here!) Even if one belligerent, non-compliant student had refused to acknowledge the fact that he, too, was in school, (frequently bunking classes he insisted did not exist), ultimately he would absorb the lessons by osmosis. Initially no one was open to instruction, unwilling to accept the formal education they had specifically come to receive, disenchanted with the format in which it was presented. In time, each one of them would learn to listen up! No syllabus

provided for the complicated curriculum, it was confusing to interpret these messages, received all at once; impossible to determine exactly who these multiple personalities were, appearing as guest lecturers on the convoluted campus. Carolyn was, by far, the most studious among the mortals; the one who did the research: home/work. She paid attention in class, took notes, followed directions well, remained observant and kept a journal throughout the course as part of her reference materials, for use later in life. At times, it was utterly overwhelming, everybody teaching simultaneously, challenging seven students to discern who had something of importance to impart and who was present merely to disrupt their study! At times, the school/house appeared entirely vacant, eerily quiet. Pensive students worried, wondering which teacher may scare up next, floating into their classroom unannounced, at any given moment in time and space. Boo! Who? Peace and quiet was a welcome respite, reserved as a pause for reflection: a form of study hall. It is best to be prepared for class, as their tests always preceded their lessons. In retrospect, it was all important: relevant and intense... something sacred.

Some absorbed information with all five senses but relied upon the sixth. Others depended upon repetition to instill an intrinsic message they received. All teaching methodology requires an element of memorization skills, which qualifies as credit toward completion of the course with no final exam. The most eager student among them was also the one dismissed, culminating in a bizarre combination of detention and attempted expulsion: Punishment time. What? No apple for teacher? Something sweet picked from the Tree of Life? Graduating on to multitude levels of higher learning, their adversarial, rather unorthodox approach to education proved one certain to terrorize and inspire in equal measure, quite like Catholic school!

Enlightenment can be a very painful process. Observing it occur stings the eyes of reluctant beholders with imagery too harsh to perceive, far too disturbing to focus on until mortal eyes adjust to the sudden change of Light. There was a period of maladjustment for a family who got more than they bargained for when they paid in full for the farm Carolyn once described as the real estate deal of a lifetime. True enough. It was a real estate, her place in the country; centuries of history attached... and more. What dwelled within the walls of an ancient edifice was too real for her to abide and was, in fact, entirely surreal. At the time, had she known what was to come, Carolyn would have certainly abandoned the dream. There would be no turning away.

The house would not allow her to leave. It had captured her spirit along with her heart. Perhaps it wanted her soul.

Soon enough others would arrive, offering to help. When Ed and Lorraine Warren caught an ill wind of the Perron family predicament, they visited the farm, expressing their sincere desire to be of assistance. Once they were involved it became apparent, Pandora had nothing on them. The psychic energy released by Lorraine, coupled with compassion Ed harbored for the children, created a whirlwind of supernatural activity no one could've imagined or predicted. They knew from the moment they crossed the threshold. Capable of seeing in the dark, well-trained eyes adjusted to the ethereal Light. They'd instantly recognized the true nature of those who lurked in the shadows, the ones who were a wonder to behold... the source of all enlightenment.

Fear not the farmhouse, for it is not to blame. It remains as it has always been, a finely constructed piece of architecture with a personality (or ten) all its own; hard to keep count. If one must fear anything, fear the unknown, as life and death are full of surprises. Fear the haunted woman who manifests in darkness of night then vanishes with the light of dawn. Fear a fate or destiny which calls its pilgrims home, only to petrify them. Fear the knowledge that mortals know nothing at all. Fear the living... not the dead.

Bound they were, mortal to immortal alike. Yeats proved to be correct. He described spirits as beings "Insipid as the dough before it is baked" and knew "they change their bodies at a word." The poet knew "Images can break the solitude of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes." He knew enough to tell us the truth of existence. It was not the end. It was only the beginning.

"The world is round and the place which may seem
like the end may also be only the beginning."

Ivy Baker Priest

~ House of Darkness ~ House of Light ~



“Everything is energy and that’s all there is to it.

Match the frequency
of the reality you want and you cannot help
but get that reality.

It can be no other way. This is not philosophy. This is physics.”

Darryl Anka



~ a mysterious barn dances with the wind ~

“In that moment of trust, he and his experience are transformed. Looking around, he can see glimpses of that trust trying to rouse itself in the religions and sciences alike, but he understands that for all their merits institutions can speak only generally to any given individual, and that each man’s life involves him in a direct confrontation with the universe in which he must ultimately trust both his own nature and the unknown source which it springs. That greater source makes itself known through the living person in his living and his dying and speaks directly through his own nature. Only that trust can illuminate and make sense of the facts of the known world. It is ultimately impossible to trust God and distrust the self, and vice versa.”

Jane Roberts
The Afterdeath Journal of An American Philosopher;
The View of William James



~ a sacred source of pure enlightenment ~

V. HOSTLY CRIES AND WHISPERS

“Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil,
as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour.”
Peter v. 8

Sensory perception is a wondrous gift of Nature. Those who listen to the whispers of spirit will be tenderly guided along, while those who deliberately provoke the dead know not what they may receive in response. It requires an inordinate amount of courage, coupled with morbid curiosity. There is such a thing as begging for trouble. It seems to obey any request, as if by command. The children had been forewarned. They'd been unwilling to listen to reason, to voices of authority; far more susceptible to absurd notions and suggestions made by friends. There would be consequences... for every action, a reaction: science as equation. Disobedient heathens get what they deserve. You asked for it, girls! There is an indistinguishable line between bravery and stupidity.

Be watchful. Be prudent. Be wise. Be gone!

Their odyssey began as a pronouncement; the sad, diminutive clarion call. In hushed and somber tones, this communication, disguised as wind and rain, cloaked by the creaking of old clapboard, infiltrated the senses of those who had entered unfamiliar territory. In the quiet darkness of night they'd listen to the farmhouse, its whistling coos or high-pitched whining, whenever an ill wind passed through the eaves, or so they had all presumed. The busy and rambunctious household was a distraction during their days but at night the house spoke of its story to newly arrived inhabitants. During their first few months in residence, there was so much buzz and extraneous activity, the dismissal of uncommon noises was the norm. An adjustment period was necessary and no one in the family trusted their own perceptions of this house. A new place—new noises mindset explained away virtually every strange and foreign sound. The house was so big in comparison to where they

had come from that the tightly compact Cape Cod in Cumberland now seemed, (as a distant memory), something no bigger than a beach bungalow. Sound was magnified and distorted within the massive structure. It was an echo chamber. It had a heartbeat. The house had an energy and a voice all its own; several, in fact. The interplay of shadow and light intermingling with its natural/supernatural sound became mesmerizing; a source of wonderment. They had willingly crossed the threshold, entering into the shared space, one filled with secrets and souls. Into a mysterious portal they ventured, finding it hypnotic by nature, casting its enchanting spells on those dwelling within its clapboard walls. There was no escaping the effect it had on a family who could not help but listen up in smoke: Attention class! Mere mortals could not ignore the gauzy haze gathering in rooms, masquerading as moonlight. Cloud cover hovering in shadow dance, an elegant disguise, Nature provided a cloak for an esoteric element of itself... very clever camouflage.

Yet, there is no mistaking the cry of a child. Cindy would soon identify the face of the littlest ghost wailing for her mother. The moans seeping from deep within the eaves were, after some research, presumed to be the sick and pitiful sound made by Johnny Arnold, a man in the self-inflicted throes of a poisonous death. He suffered, departing life in excruciating pain; a haunting, desperate sound, as if he attempted to muffle his agony so to avoid detection. Was he unwilling to risk discovery before the deed was done?

Soon enough chanted incantations would begin. Whispered words, barely perceptible, over time became audibly intelligible. The distinctly articulated statements made no sense at all to the child suddenly struggling just to be a child, striving to grasp and interpret the cryptic pleas, to determine a source. Cynthia heard the call of seven dead soldiers buried in the wall. Come to me, little girl. Telepathic messages, conveyed within the sealed mind field of sound surrounding each recipient, altering their state-of-being. During these encounters, what Cynthia often describes as being in the bubble, all external activity was deflected as a spirit shielded itself, protected from any intrusion. It soon became apparent to five children listening with new ears, observing with new eyes... they were not alone. They were never alone and would not ever be again. Such disturbing interludes were enlightening in this respect.

Carolyn saw the little girl, dressed up in her green velvet finery, what she would later describe as the child's burial outfit. A tiny cherub chanting with

cohorts was seemingly oblivious to the terrified woman being targeted: Will drive ye out with fiery broom . . . will drive ye mad with death and gloom: their unholy chapter and verse... perhaps not so benign, after all. Footsteps in stairwells or whispers from walls, mournful cries of a child, the incantation of a crowd of souls resembling a coven of witches or the soft, soulful whine of a distant bugle—these were but a few of the distinctly disquieting sounds which they heard incessantly. Sensory perception is a gift, though as much a curse as a blessing... as a balancing act of God.

Supernatural/psychic sound was not relegated to the farmhouse. Giggling spirits at play in the pine forest became an equally common occurrence, as if they assumed it was safe to reveal themselves in the presence of others their own age. Had they always been there? Was it something about these children which allowed their mortal eyes the ability to see all there was to behold? A heightened sensitivity developed, undoubtedly due to over-exposure. They lived among dead people. It was something none of them could ever afford to forget, not for an instant, to be on the safe side but there was no safe side. Anyone could see anything at anytime. Family pets often responded to things their humans could not see or hear, frequently alerting them to any pending manifestation. Accused of being alarmist by nature in the beginning, the dogs proved consistently reliable; keen senses quite telling. The self-doubt of mere mortals would dissipate with time. After awhile they did believe their eyes. The animals knew it all along, from the moment they arrived, precisely why they refused to cross the threshold. The sounds of silence came always with a message. “Hello darkness, my old friend. I’ve come to talk with you again, because a vision softly creeping left its seed while I was sleeping, and the vision that was planted in my brain still remains... the sounds of silence”. Everyone was beginning to understand. It was not the wind. It was not the rain. It was something else entirely, perhaps something wicked. Either they would have to find their way or forge a new path on this intrepid journey through another dimension while dwelling with the dead in a portal cleverly disguised as a farmhouse.

Opposing forces were about to engage in a ferocious battle as adversaries waging war within the dark confines of the burning room, against the evil in an old house. Disobedient heathens would be severely tested, admonished for the deliberate splicing of dimensions. Foolishly doing so would mean taking a terrible risk as antagonists exploring treacherous boundaries of an

inherently inconceivable realm. Overtly provocative behavior functioned as the clarion call, the command to be obeyed, essentially calling on all enemy combatants: for every action... a reaction. The children had no concept of the consequences, no idea of the power they were about to unleash as warnings went unheeded. It was destined to become a test of wills. Inviting disasters into their home, stupid girls got what they deserved. The ultimate wake-up call to arms, Cindy would be forced to fight for her own life in the darkness. Indistinguishable is the fine line between brave and stupid, and they brazenly crossed it. Hubris found in one so young, Cynthia was certain she'd identify then banish what had haunted them, day and night, for years. So confident and prideful in her assertion, the child arranged a get-together from the ages, for the ages. Her anger manifested as arrogance, pride as over-confidence. A mere waif decided to take on a demon in their midst. Everyone else thought that was somehow a good idea! Be watchful, girls. Be sober and be vigilant. Lessons learned the hard way. Mother always said: "all fun and games until someone gets hurt". Best they brought the white flag along for their wild ride across the cosmos. This was not philosophy. It was physics.

"The conflict of forces and the struggle of opposing wills
are of the essence of our Universe and alone hold it together."

Havelock Ellis



~ a room with a view of the universe ~

secrets and lies

“If you reveal your secrets to the wind you should not
blame the wind for revealing them to the trees.”

Kahlil Gibran

Keeping secrets from each other, lies as sins of omission, was contrary to any previous behavior displayed by these siblings. Things had changed. Prior to moving to the farmhouse, these children always shared everything with each other, from triumph to tragedy. Nothing was off-limits in a discussion, even if the conversation was kept as temporary secrets between sisters. All of them knew how trustworthy their mother was and they would confide in her with ease; no fear of retribution. Eventually, Carolyn would be made privy to any and all significant events in their lives. Then she'd consider it, deciding if it was something serious enough to warrant their father's attention or his intervention, often strictly handled on a need-to-know basis. If it was an issue she could resolve without him, Carolyn did so, simply to keep things peaceful and quiet. Never one of those you just wait until your father gets home mothers; she preferred to settle disputes on her own. Roger's tendency to overreaction was something to avoid, so, if a minor incident happened there was no need to involve him. That is, unless he asked, in which case she was always honest with her husband; a hard fact that would become a major point of contention between this troubled couple. Carolyn took profound exception to his overt disregard for her opinions and blatant skepticism he'd express in reaction to her descriptions of the supernatural activity, experiences occurring all around them. It was insulting and offensive. She'd never given Roger any reason to doubt her voracity.

All family dynamics evolve over time. This is a given. Children grow up. Even adults mature with age. As deep and abiding bonds alter, relationships change: love deepens or chasms widen. The family functioned relatively well until the move to a place in the country. Thus began an inevitable breakdown in communication. As the girls were exposed to the supernatural phenomena, they withheld information as a matter of course and did not share sightings with one another for quite some time. Truth be told, they did not trust their own perceptions; no need to disclose what each could not believe she'd seen. It created a covert atmosphere, a deceptive mindset among five siblings in an environment where everyone present was keeping the same secret.

When the floodgates of hell burst open and the deluge began, the sense of relief was palpable amongst the group of girls who really had something to talk about! When the eldest divulged her concerns to the mother in a crisis of her own, it actually eased much of the low-level angst present in the house, effectively clearing the air of an oppressive and omnipresent fear. The secret was out. A comparative analysis of episodes proved beneficial for all those questioning their senses and, to some extent, sanity. As a rule, honesty is the best policy. Yet, when the father and husband, the one relied upon to protect and defend his family against all enemies, foreign and domestic, does not believe a threat exists, it makes for a rather convoluted report up the chain of command. Sometimes it requires bypassing the general entirely. Good God. Seeking assistance, they were forced to go right to the top.

For all practical purposes, their secrets, lies as sins of omission, served to provide sufficient time to process events as they happened, to emotionally and intellectually absorb what had just transpired. By necessity, a brief but imperative pause for reflection accompanied every event. Keeping it private seemed the only thing to do. No one knew how to initiate such an absurd conversation, where to begin. Cindy uttered as holy words: "There are seven dead soldiers". As encounters continued to accumulate, there came a gradual recognition, awareness that they were dwelling within a cosmic laboratory, in a living museum, an unusual place among a decidedly eclectic, often eccentric group of spirits who, for some reason or another, never left. As months became years, the unusual became rather commonplace, to such an extent, many ethereal encounters were barely even mentioned in passing, if discussed at all. There was no need. Everyone knew the drill. Natural: no longer so Super / natural. Manifestations became an ordinary part of life; the new paranormal. Seven mortals touched and were touched by immortality, traversing the spectrum from keeping the secrets to telling the tales, in some cases, thirty years hence. One important lesson was learned: all is revealed in its right and proper time. The Universe cannot keep a secret.

"In the long run, there are no secrets in science.
The universe will not cooperate in a cover-up."
Arthur C. Clarke

make yourself at home

“Where we love is home—home that our feet may leave,
but not our hearts.”
Oliver Wendell Holmes

It is often said that hospitality is making your guests feel at home, even if you wish they were at home. The Arnold Estate was packed to the rafters and eaves and nobody seemed able to determine who was the guest or the tenant. Animosity was bound to brew as both camps outstayed their welcome. Even if they were a family, enough was enough. Carolyn wanted the house cleared out, cleansed of the presence that meant her harm. The trouble was two-fold: everyone present was home! These spirits had no place to go, or they would have gone long ago. Obviously, it was their home first. Retaining ownership as former (and current) inhabitants, claiming the space as their own, certainly complicated matters. As the presumed mortal mistress of the house, Carolyn wanted to stake her claim and was prohibited from doing so as a struggle of wills ensued. Eventually she would succumb in battle, losing the war.

Mr. Kenyon used the common phrase, ushering the Perron family through the doorway, inviting them across his threshold, having already chosen this clan as his successor to this estate. Difficult to interpret who really belonged there, in actuality, the house was pre-occupied long before they arrived. To those crossing into strangely familiar yet uncharted territory, it felt more like “welcome home” than “make yourself at home” to those who sensed a vague permanence about this home place, right from the inception. There was no explaining how the children knew their way around when Mr. Kenyon gifted them with his unfettered access to the property. The grounds were enticing enough but it was as if the barn had called to them, as did the grand old apple tree, stone walls and a woodshed. Andrea had been put in charge of counting heads, a task she’d abruptly abandoned. No point in trying to keep up with everybody, as no one was going far and each knew where she was going. It was obvious. Theirs was an inexplicable mission of rediscovery. Though no one mentioned it that day, it has since been a topic of conversation within the family... for decades. Why did it feel so strange yet so familiar? Why did the sights and sounds and smells of the place seem lodged so far back in their collective consciousness? It was an ancient memory, a sensation shared by all and it remains a mystery yet to be solved.

There was no arguing or bartering for rooms. Every one of the girls knew where they would eventually settle and on the day they moved in, there was no need to assign a space. Each child took her belongings to the room where she was destined to dwell for the next ten years of her life. No discussion. No complaints. The space occupied was where each belonged, where every child had lessons to learn from the messages received. It was no coincidence Cynthia gravitated to the middle bedroom upstairs, the most active spot on the second floor. It was located directly above the room Carolyn chose to share with her husband. He agreed it was the perfect place for them without saying a word. The house itself assigned the lodging, or so it seemed. Beds were assembled well before the truck was emptied and furnishings appeared sparse in comparison to where they had come from, but all made the most of the move. Roger did as Mr. Kenyon had suggested... he left the lights on at night. A solitary lamp in the dining room illuminated the path through the center of the house, yet the light was all but swallowed by the surrounding darkness, requiring more light from the kitchen to navigate the structure safely. The shadows cast were not spooky but beautiful, the wallpaper often bathing by moonlight, being the natural images of a supernatural portal, so cleverly disguised as a farmhouse, as magical as mysterious.

During the following decade many friends and family members would be warmly welcomed into the home, there to see the Light. It was odd how the spirits would pick and choose who to contact whenever they'd come to call. Fran and Eddy always created a ruckus with their presence, while Tim and Ray saw nothing unusual, in spite of so much time spent on the premises. There was no explaining it. When the house came alive with death, a blatant display of what was there all the time, some visitors were terrified and never returned while others were especially anxious to revisit the farmhouse with a personality or ten all its own. Apparently beckoning the souls with a history, some connection to it, others were profoundly and permanently turned away, rejected, never invited to return. Holly felt embraced by it while Lori ran for her life! Freddy felt threatened. Fran was impaled by blue light. Katy, queen of denial, made matters worse. Lenora's time was too brief but she loved it there and longed to return. Perhaps she has...

In time, Carolyn would come to know a sense of homelessness within her own walls. She eventually lost her will to fight on, unwilling to struggle for a place that rejected her on every front. It was a test of wills, conflict from the

start. It had taken all the strength she possessed to battle her way back to her family. For all she'd lost, Carolyn found a new understanding of peace in the midst of war. Up went the white flag. Surrender, Carolyn. It became a battle to the death of her belief system. She was forced to call upon a higher power. Lo! And behold came her answer, the merciful savior who always intervened on their behalf. God help me crossed her lips spontaneously in times of crisis but the answer was far more significant than the question implicit to the plea. Is someone there? Yes. Listening, watching and coming. She was not alone.

In spite of assistance received, this ongoing skirmish drained the woman of energy and enthusiasm, effectively killing Carolyn's spirit of adventure on a farm she once found enchanting. It became a noose around her neck which strangled any love she felt for a place at first adored. What she still perceives as a nightmare and a burden lingers as love lost in the minds of her children. It will always be "home" for those who continue mourning its loss. None of them were born there, at least not this time around, yet a connection remains strong more than thirty years after their departure. They often return there in a dreamscape which captures their imaginations after dark. Roger never fails to note his regrets when the subject comes up. All but Carolyn and Christine have gone back to walk the land and see the farmhouse now restored to its Colonial splendor, as a true original. Neither of them can bear to revisit the past yet their past will never leave any of the family behind for as long as they live, and so it is. 'Tis true, there's no place like home... no need to click their heels. They need only close their eyes. No matter where they go, there they are, in a memory, a scent or a song; in a moment of recognition. Here they are, omnipresent... like God.

"May the roof above us never fall in and may
we good companions beneath it never fall out."

Irish Blessing

comes and goes

“The woman’s like the night, she comes and goes /
She breaks my heart each day and never knows /
And the time I spend in sorrow
will match the time I live /
And the time that’s left is all I have to give.”
Dan Fogelberg

Andrea came home with another new love in tow, nothing too unusual. Dan Fogelberg, not the man but his music, tucked securely beneath her arm, in a loving embrace. The album had been opened and placed on the turntable moments after she entered the parlor. Of course, as was her nature, she had happily shared Dan with her family. Let there be volume! Surely these picky spirits would not object or tamper with the stereo. This music was beautiful, even spiritual. Carolyn was moved by what she had heard, what had enticed her through the house, that is, until one song struck a chord of discontent. As she listened to lyrics which described her situation, it pained her, evoking many not-so-distant memories of nights spent in abject terror while a solitary entity provoked then threatened her. Seemingly coming and going in mere moments, yet there for eternity, all of their spirits seemed to travel like the wind but nobody had been fooled. There was an omnipresence about them which could not be denied and could only be described as a feeling but there was nothing out-of-sight-out-of-mind about them. Did they come and go as they pleased? Or was their circumstance quite the opposite, perhaps a fate worse than death? Impaired sense of direction? Were they already home?

“The woman’s like an ivy on a pole / She wraps her twisted love
around my soul / There will come a sudden
winter when she’ll seek
the warmth of day / And there’ll come a time when
she will come to stay.”

That is precisely what Carolyn was afraid of, that she would come to stay, essentially moving in on a mother of five, there to reclaim her position as the mistress of the house. By this time, Carolyn had been hobbled and humbled by pain of all sorts and the weakness she could not fight off was draining her of mortal energy. Standing silently in the corner of the parlor, lowering her head, sudden darkness overcame a lighthearted mood all present had shared.

There it was again; an oppressive spirit had entered the room. What escaped Carolyn at the time was the fact that she had never relinquished the position in the first place and her nemesis was becoming a dark spirit. Had the ghost known as Bathsheba literally moved into their mother? The children watched as her bright smile curled into a grimace, once sparkling green eyes appeared hollow and vacant. An intertwining had occurred, much like tendrils of ivy climbing a pole. No mistaking this twisted love, its momentum appeared to be reversed, from the eyes down. As transformation, it was an eerie sight to see. They knew not who was with them as music frolicked through the air.

Had an unholy spirit come to stay? Could it be true, she'd never left? Was Carolyn becoming consumed by a spirit, one with an eternal longing to feel the warmth of human flesh again? Did she crave the sensation of wrapping children in her arms or long to rest beside a man she loved? Lyrics as lovely as any ever written lashed at a mother's mind as she listened intently. When it came to an end she raised her head and uttered only one word: "Haunting."

"The woman's like the tide, she comes and goes /
She knows the things that I can just suppose /
And the time I spend in sorrow
will match the time that she laughs /
And the songs I sing cannot explain but half."
Dan Fogelberg "Comes and Goes"

timely manners

"Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."
Romans xii. 21

Christine and Cynthia couldn't help but notice how their belongings were being tampered with, as toys became a point of fascination. April and Nancy knew things in their bedroom were frequently displaced, later found in other places, moving by their own volition. How could something that was there in one moment, disappear in the next? Invisible spirit activity was rampant and included manipulating objects around them. It was commonplace, the natural in supernatural. There was a hotbed of kinetic energy in their farmhouse and an ever present sense of a potential energy; a prevalent something is about to happen sensation; particularly intense forewarning prior to manifestation. Stepping through time and space as tearing through dimensions is disruptive on either side of the perceived veil. If such quantum leaps exist, it must be a natural phenomenon, not some illogical supernatural event, as is frequently described; something beyond the corporeal realm, yet accessible, given the appropriate environment. More likely, it is an integrated function of energy being dispersed in different ways because it has accumulated. Ultimately, everything will be explained by physics or metaphysics. No mortal should presume to neither understand Mother Nature nor comprehend the complexities of the Universe. Discovery aside, anyone in the know will admit that we know nothing. Our existence remains a mystery.

In spite of all the displacement faced from the inception, once they settled into their farmhouse, what had been packed then unpacked then thoughtfully rearranged was now being shared. What the children considered as intrusions by each other soon proved otherwise. When the phenomenon began to occur, their first inclination was to blame each other, an initial defensiveness among them contrary to their personalities. Quite strange, considering the amount of space shared had, at the very least, quadrupled. Essentially, there was plenty of room for everyone. Accusations and suspicions were running rampant and Carolyn could not understand why she suddenly had to be a referee, running interference between daughters who somehow always managed to get along in the past! It was disconcerting for the lot of them and as far as their mother was concerned, unnecessary. Intolerant of the discourse, she would not abide

it for long. Unaccustomed to breaking up such arguments, Carolyn reminded her children how fortunate they were to live in an awe-inspiring farmhouse; a beautiful place in the country. They'd hang their heads in shame... and hush! Gratitude is the foundation of acknowledging a gift. Her girls knew the sacrifice made to provide them with a very special home place.

These children knew about life beyond their borders. Underlying all else was a broad worldview, including knowledge of homeless, starving children and political oppression: war and pleas for peace. They'd received messages from their mother, assimilated by osmosis; a philosophy which would carry them farther than any formal education received. The woman knew precisely what it meant to be destitute, to have no possessions to misplace. She'd worked diligently to be certain her girls did not suffer that same cruel fate. Her divine intention had been to instill this abiding sense of gratitude as a fundamental element of her own innate spirituality. Carolyn appealed to their higher Nature, gently persuading them to reconsider their rather base, caustic approach, adopting one far more gentle, insisting that they think outside the boxing match. Play nicely, girls! An untenable blame game had to come to an end; a tug of war that suddenly erupted between five siblings was entirely unacceptable. The cease and desist order issued had challenged them to find alternatives to settle all disputes. The ladies opted for peace long before they knew where to rightfully place the blame. Then the trouble ended as abruptly as it began. Returning to a more copacetic existence they effectively defeated an invasively negative influence: evil as a presence whose source had yet to be identified. The house had already begun yielding its lessons as fruit, ripe for the picking of a fight.

Children must be taught. Guided. Directed. Within weeks, a significant if brief period of time, arguments subsided and dispositions brightened as these girls began to understand... their anger was as misplaced as their possessions. With each sighting the picture became clearer, more well-defined. A mystery unfolding before their eyes, witnessing a phenomenon of supernatural origin, events which could not otherwise be explained, also, could not be denied. The conundrum: by example, they were taught when to withhold and when to be forthcoming but they did not know which path to take. When Cynthia disclosed information to Andrea it released a pressure valve, nearly filling the frosty air with steam. It had been building within her for several months, threatening to explode. The child was so frightened and confused. Her relief

was as real as her troubling report. Cindy successfully offloaded what was a heavy burden to bear, once placing the decision of whether or not to tell at her eldest sister's discretion.

Gently reminding her girls of what they already knew by heart, in heart, Carolyn's subtle influence was repetitious and poetic, including a proverb of Cherokee origin. "Sharing and giving are the ways of God." It was a phrase, yet it had encapsulated the source of her heritage, what she passed along to her young ancestors. Carolyn took great pride in her polite, well-mannered, naturally sweet-tempered children. She had seen to it; an ordinary selfishness found in most youngsters did not develop in her own. Instead, she bred into them a willingness to help others, an altruism rarely found in ones so young. Little wonder then, that Cynthia began leaving her bedroom and belongings behind for the benefit of a bereft child who, stepping through an inexplicable portal was coming over, crossing over to play. As Miss Manners personified, Cynthia's supernatural inclination was to sharing. Once the manifestations became familiar and obviously posed no threat, fear subsided, replaced with a mortal compassion for an immortal soul. Had her mother known about this kindness extended, she would have been prouder still. However, Carolyn had taught all of her girls that it was sometimes necessary to withhold pertinent information, having done so by example, role-modeling as she did with her husband. Therefore the children received mixed messages. Until they knew precisely what was happening around them and could believe their eyes, none of them dared to divulge anything about their ethereal experiences with anyone, uncertain of how it might be perceived. Eventually they would share sordid details, though in some cases, it required thirty years to tell all. In this life, whatever is revealed is done so in a timely manner. No coincidences and no mistakes made because God does not make mistakes. It was self-evident; everything happens with purpose and reason.

Not all of their household entities were quite as generous of spirit, not so anxious to return the favor. As considerate as these children had been of their presence, some of the spirits were want to reciprocate in a proper manner, by simply making themselves scarce when company arrived. Instead, this would be the time when all proper social manners lapsed into oblivion and at least one restless spirit would exhibit blatant disregard for basic rules of decorum. Though these children could be heathens when unleashed, they all knew how to behave. They could plow into food like starving tomboys straight from the

trees, or work like lumberjacks alongside any man, though each one retained her young lady-like quality, when it mattered most. Mr. Kenyon found them endearing, as did anyone else who visited the farm, admiring their refined manners, good sense and sensibilities: Little women.

Timing is everything in life, and apparently in death as well. It is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain any sense of normalcy when a spirit decides to make its presence known. Their “everything is fine here” approach unraveled like chenille throws as minds scrambled to explain away inexplicable events. It happened so many times, over and over again. The house would be quiet for weeks then suddenly come to life with an unexpected visit from a friend. Fran, Holly, Katy, Eddy, Sam, Cathi, Margie... the list goes on. Each one of them and more had profound, consciousness-altering experiences at the farm. It was as if the spirits waited for their gathering, poised upon the precipice, ready to pounce. Yes. It did appear deliberate and intentional. There were too many of them to assign any specific entities the blame but their family had suspicions. The more they got to know them over time, the easier it became to attribute the mischief-making to one or the other, not that it made much difference. The very existence of these spirits appeared to be punishment enough and no chastisement from a mortal soul could compare to an eternity spent in a place they seemingly could not escape. There was no stopping it, no controlling it. Behaviors (and misbehaviors) varied, crossing the spectrum between playful and benign to ugly and exceedingly mean-spirited. A vast array of incidents occurred over the course of a decade spent in a house alive with death. The spirits were not quite as conscientious as the human beings attempting to accommodate them; mortal souls who'd tried to share space, offering an allowance for the presence of those who had come before them. There were ghosts who did not care if they were disturbing others with their antics and those who would specifically target certain house guests, always with purpose and reason... adding Freddy to the list.

Children must be taught though some do come by a kind and gentle spirit quite naturally. The understanding innate to these children was enhanced by complications posed by the house in which they lived. They had to choose

how to react; to reconsider how they treated each other as well as a variety of entities manifesting around them day and night. Mind your manners, missy! Be thoughtful. Be generous. Be courteous. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you... as if you were the others. Cynthia's heart broke when she'd heard the little girl crying for her mother, wandering and searching vacant space for a mom long gone, to infinity and beyond. Staring into a disheveled bedroom, the floor covered in toys was being navigated with ease by a little ghost lost. Cynthia closed the door then turned and walked away. She made a decision. Meanwhile, in the adjacent chimney closet, April made a friend.

"As you think in your heart, so are you."
Proverbs 23:7

for crying out loud

“Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster,
and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”
Friedrich Nietzsche

Margie Bailey was fearless. She was strong and smart and beautiful with a round face full of freckles and flaming auburn hair, reminiscent of a bright autumn day in full splendor. Andrea's friend, she'd come to the house quite frequently. They would light incense and play guitar, chanting the songs of Cat Stevens, learning the lyrics together. Music was a language they shared and spoke in, a mutual point of reference, the single most abiding attachment of many they shared. Even though Margie was older by several years, neither of them ever noticed what was essentially irrelevant. Cindy was fascinated by her. In rapt attention, she hung on every word the striking young woman ever uttered in her presence. One evening, this impressionable child was listening in a bit too closely and overheard a suggestion, one strictly made in jest. Cindy foolishly followed it as informed advice, resulting in injury, the most serious error in judgment she would make regarding an evil presence far more powerful than she could imagine. Do not listen up in smoke, little girl... incense numbs the mind. As is true in life (and afterlife), where there's smoke, there's usually fire... resulting in collateral damage done.

Lori George was Cindy's best friend. Though her family lived just up the road, she did not come over to their house very often so, by open invitation, Cynthia went to hers instead; a welcome escape from their frantically busy farmhouse. The George family was even larger than their own and as bonds were forged, the Perron girls made friends with them at the bus stop on their first day of school. Robin, an animal lover, had so much in common with Andrea. Lori took to Cindy instantly. The girls were close but Lori had heard rumors about the farmhouse and just the thought of spirits spooked her out! Occasionally she would come over to play in the yard but rarely entered the dwelling. Whenever she did so, Lori's stay was brief. Raw nerves would overcome the child and she'd head for the nearest door. Cindy understood. She wanted to do something about it so her friend would feel unafraid, more comfortable in their house. The girls talked about it privately and the devious

duo developed their plan of attack. As far as an impatient kid was concerned, Cynthia would handle this herself, a formidable foe. It was war. The strategy was simple enough: call the spirits forth then send them on their way. Margie mentioned a book she read on the occult and told Andrea about something called a séance... Cindy listened up. Their family had lived in the house for about two and a half years when this incident occurred. Ten years old at that time, Cindy was just young enough to do something stupid and old enough to learn her lesson well.

Deciding on the borning room, a secluded space in which to exorcise their demon, Cindy brought along a white tapered candle wedged inside a shallow pewter base, a hook for a handle, snagged from the sideboard. Matches came from there as well, discreetly pilfered the previous day. Plan in place, Lori arrived, literally shaking in her boots. Two ladies on a mission went upstairs. Reviewing the covert scheme, it was best to know what one was doing prior to blindly embarking on such a treacherous spiritual journey. Courageously, Cindy asserted her intention, declaring victory before they'd even begun.

"They'll all be gone in no time!" Her demeanor exuding pure confidence, certain to complete the task at hand, it did not occur to her that she might not be successful, thereby endangering a friend and herself in the process. Boldly going where no Perron had gone before, to infinity and beyond, Cindy would soon learn that matches are not toys. This play she was staging was not some science fiction film real. It was real. Off they went into the belly of the beast.

The spot chosen couldn't have been spookier, a part of the farmhouse she deemed perfect for engaging the spirit world. Bright afternoon light filtered through the windows at the far end of the borning room, requiring cover. As Cindy proceeded to darken the space even further by hanging a thick tartan blanket from her bed, she declared them ready. Her slender fingers trembling as she lit the candle and closed the door, they crouched down into the golden glow of a candle's flame, clasping hands, encircling its light. With breathless anticipation, Cynthia began summoning the spirits. Conjuring a demon takes guts. Suddenly hers twisted in place. She pulled away, inclined to break that connection with Lori. This visceral reaction was the reflexive response to an intense coldness overtaking her by the moment. Frightened, she reconsidered their stunt. Suddenly stoic, Lori convinced her to continue; reminding Cindy of the reason why they began, to free them, ALL of them; to rid the house of

whatever was present. They did not distinguish between the benign, harmless spirits and the one who brought evil into the farmhouse. Perhaps they should have been more conscientious. Cindy should have listened to her intuition instead of a friend's folly. Of course, neither of them knew if anything would actually happen. Lori persuaded her, recounting several incidents shared with her in the past, reminding her of the holy-hellish existence for all concerned, including the holy spirits. Many lives had been disrupted by death. Instilling the sense of righteous indignation brought them back to the point where they were at in the perilous process. Lori's message fretfully reinforced a need for spiritual cleansing. Cynthia was urged to recall some of the worst moments, ones she'd prefer to forget. A reluctant child settled on the floor, listening in darkness to the ill wind advice from a friend. Their delicate features awash in candlelight, they were the absolute picture of innocence. Grappling with an evil spirit, both girls were wondering what to do... or not to do. That was the question. Cindy's intuition told her to abandon the mission straightforwardly and her sense of urgency was based on ancient instincts: fight or flight. Retreat!

The burning room was long and narrow with a severely pitched A-framed appearance, rusty nails protruding from the unfinished wood between large, exposed beams. Crouching down, Cindy knew precisely what to say, how to proceed—with caution. As curious as frightened by the daunting prospect of encountering another ghost, wanting to dispel all spirits from the premises, her participation was essential to their banishment. The morbid pep talk Lori had given Cindy was charged with negative energy, accusations sparking the air. It served to re-ignite passion in the scared and somber child, inspiring the youngster to dismiss an initial reticence in pursuit of an invisible enemy, one much closer than either suspected. “Is there anybody here?” Intention clearly resolute, together in the trench Cindy firmly grasped Lori’s quivering hands.

“Close your eyes...” Lori did as instructed. “Spirits of this house, whoever you are, come to us now.” A terse, rather belligerent inflection infiltrated the youngster’s voice. Cindy was confrontational; the words issued more as a command than as a polite request. “Ghosts of this house I am calling to you. Come.” In spite of ongoing silence, this terse, demanding message delivered was not well-received. “If you are here, give us a sign.” Nothing. “We want you to stop coming and scaring us. It is our house now!” Sincere as she was candid: “I mean it! I want you all to leave us alone! You do not belong here anymore. Go away. Go be with God.” SWOOSH! Lights out. A mad rush of

supernatural wind suddenly swept through the room, encircling the children, snuffing out a flame. Gusting ferociously, girls began screaming hysterically. Though not pitch black, strobe light from the window illuminated occupied space... Hell on Earth. What was beckoned from beyond had come to call.

"Ouch!" Lori was first to feel the hand of the law of cause and effect.

"OW! My hair! Something's got a hold of my hair!" Yanked flat to the floorboards, Cindy squirmed, gasping for air, grasping at her painful scalp. "Oh, my God! It's got me! Lori! Something's got me!"

"Me too! I can't move!" Though still sitting upright, her head pulled back, Lori had no more mobility than Cynthia did, pinned and wriggling, fighting for freedom... not a fair fight. "Help me! I can't move!" Out came the white flag of unconditional surrender... like they had a choice.

Snagged from behind, pinned into position, Lori and Cindy were frantic; long hair pulled so tightly, both were yelping in pain. Flailing then kicking, struggling with this invisible assailant, their unknown captor had the upper hand. No visible means of escape, hair twisted into knots, surrounded by a twister of wind, it was as if they'd been trapped in the core of a tornado. That tartan throw secured over the window was flipping up with the brisk breeze, allowing just enough light for these children to see what they'd conjured up in the darkness, enough light to witness an untenable predicament, one born of arrogance, by provocative design.

The borning room was primarily used for storage, loaded with a variety of items scattered about the space. In those moments, inanimate objects came to life. Everything was flying around the room at light speed. A wicker bodice hovered overhead, spinning in place as a swirl of air suspended it. Pieces of a mannequin bounced off the slanted walls. Its legs were dancing around them, hopping around as a pair, in tandem. Neither of the youngsters was amused. Nothing funny about it. Petrified as the twin mattresses began flip-flopping, side-to-side, the kids were being taunted by a supernatural being of unknown origin, punished for their impudence, shown what this power was capable of unleashing as it overpowered them, body and mind. Humbled, begging for respite, both were repeatedly struck; body blows by an unidentified assailant, flying objects coming from virtually every direction, as debris caught up in a storm, an ill whirlwind. Light cast from exposed windowpanes revealed the dilemma. Panic prevailed. Terrified children pleaded for mercy... for release. A force to be reckoned with, the reckoning had arrived with a vengeance.

“Oh God! We’re sorry! Please let us go! We didn’t mean it! We’ll never do it again! Please! God!”

Lori was released. She instantly leapt onto her feet. Cindy’s face was still pressed into the wooden floorboards. Overcome by paralyzing cold, she was barely able to speak. The vile stench in the room was enough to gag them.

“Get the door! Go! Get help!” Cindy’s voice moved her cohort to action.

Sprinting to the door, Lori grabbed the latch and began pulling on it with all of her strength. It would not budge. She banged on it then shook the latch, doing anything in her power to dislodge it from position. The door would not open, as if it were frozen shut. Lori began to hyperventilate. Cynthia sobbed. They were being held captive. They’d been targeted... under a direct assault.

“Bang on it! Harder! Lori!” The little girl did as she was told, to no avail. Suddenly, Cindy was released from the iron clad grasp of her tormentor and bounced from the floor up to the door in a single step. No use. It would not open. Her hands trembling uncontrollably, she ran back to the doused candle, fumbling for the book of matches in her pocket. After several failed strikes, one match finally ignited. The candle glowed again. Cindy hovered over it, closed her tear-drenched eyes and bowed her aching head in prayer.

“Dear God, please help us. Please come to help us. My sweet Lord, please come to me now.” Though her words were whispered, they had been heard. It stopped. Ghastly gusty wind abruptly ceased. Objects suspended in midair instantly fell onto the floor with a crash. No time to rejoice. Cindy bolted for the door. Click. It opened with ease. Nancy had arrived from the other side, wearing a panic-stricken expression which rivaled that of children being held in captivity. Cindy’s fear instantly exploded into rage, an outburst of Biblical proportion: casting aspersions instead of a spell... blaming her sister.

“Why would you do that to us? Why didn’t you open the door?” Clinging onto Nancy’s arms, jerking her ever closer, Cynthia shrieked like a banshee, screeching furiously into her sister’s flushed face. As frantic as her sibling, Nancy didn’t know how to respond to the anger or hateful conclusion drawn, an accusation leveled with disdain. “How could you do this? How could you hold the door when we needed to get out of there?”

“I did what? I just got here! I was in my room! I heard someone yelling so I came running... I was trying to open the door, not hold it closed!”

“Swear it!” Violently shaking Nancy’s shoulders, it was scaring her more than the wild-eyed look on Cindy’s face, a frightfully intense interlude from

every vantage point. Lori stood there, too shocked to breathe, or to run.

"I swear it! Why would I do that? What happened to you guys in there?" Nancy embraced Cindy then held her while Lori, equally traumatized, darted around her friend and ran out of the house, never to return. Cindy let her go. This was no time to discuss lessons learned. It was time to get the hell out of there! Quickly retrieving the candle, Cindy blew out the flame then slammed the door shut. The burning room was officially off-limits, as it was clearly an unholy portal to the outer-limits. Scampering off into Nancy's bedroom at the other end of the house, a comfort zone, Nancy provided her freaked out sister with a box of tissues and a shoulder to cry on... and on. Truth be told, Nancy had come when called. Something intervened, allowing her to hear a little sister's desperate pleas for help. She was the conduit... the closest thing to an angel on Earth at the moment... a foot soldier doing God's good work.

It took time for the children to come to the conclusion that they were all at a beckon call, there to help each other when summoned. What Cindy and Lori conjured up was something evil. They had deliberately entered a portal, leaving them vulnerable to attack. Because Nancy had her close encounters in the burning room, she knew it was unsafe to go inside there. As Cynthia chastised the spirits for their perceived intrusion, so Nancy admonished her little sister for doing something equally intrusive, so foolish—ill-advised, at the very least. Pressing her for an explanation, Nancy agreed to keep a secret divulged. She did... for thirty years. Their emotionally charged conversation progressed. Nancy heard about a Margie Bailey influence which eventually guided them to the bitterroot of the matter: a purely good intention behind an ill-conceived action. Cindy wanted to spare a friend her fright and to help her family be freed of the supernatural influences on their lives. Her heart was in the right place, as always.

Cindy realized Nancy had done no harm and had come to help, perhaps as the answer to her heartfelt prayer. She had not caused objects to fly about the burning room and she did not hold the door closed as they tried to escape the harrowing ordeal and any suggestion otherwise would be cruel. Apologizing to her sister-savior for the harsh accusation, Cindy decided it best to keep all of it close to the vest. Mom would surely disapprove of their efforts made, no matter how altruistic in nature. Lori was another issue. She might well tell her mother, who would then phone their own. This could prove problematic. Carolyn would not appreciate hearing about any episode occurring inside her

home from someone outside her home. Adding insult to injury, the quandary was growing complex. It only took one bad idea to manifest upheaval. Cindy had no choice but to go to Lori's house, to assess the collateral damage done.

No doubt about it. The child was traumatized. Lori was still quivering when Cindy found her, huddling in the corner of her bedroom. Curling up on the floor beside her, the girls discussed what had happened to them. Both agreed it was not something they should share with anyone. Cindy assured Lori that Nancy would keep mum. Given every indication to believe Lori's emotional state was fragile, Cindy swabbed the constant flow of tears from her cheeks. For Lori, the ordeal was not yet over. Well aware she had been an instigator in a hair-raising episode, it was in her best interest to guard her involvement, to shield herself from the inevitable results of any confessions: punishment. Considering her mother had expressly forewarned her to avoid that house, Lori knew better, but she did it anyway. Cindy was so relieved; returning home to inform Nancy their secret was safe. Pact: a code of silence between the three of them. To Cindy's knowledge, Lori never told anybody about their horrific childhood experience, about lighting a candle and playing with fire! Cynthia asked that the identity of her friend be protected, which is why hers was one of few names changed in telling this tale. She deserved her anonymity. Once lost, it can never be retrieved. According to Cindy, she had suffered enough and wanted her privacy preserved. Though she and Cindy have not seen each other in decades, it mattered not; her secret was still safe, after all these years, as words of honor were exchanged between friends.

The George family has been in close contact with the Perron family since, with release of the first volume of this story. They remember what transpired in their presence at the farm, things they heard about at the bus stop on frosty mornings. They remember it well. Robin has been a wholehearted supporter. The family has graciously granted permission for use of their rightful names. Bless them, one and all. It is, after all, a part of their life story, too.

Nancy and Cindy told this chapter of their lives some thirty years hence, with the assistance of a cell phone and the benefit of a speaker feature; an object which did not exist when this manifestation occurred. While reminiscing about their experiences at the farm, they suddenly became very serious, admitting it was what happened on the fateful day which could have proved disastrous. An exposed flame: open fire so near to the floor of a tinderbox house was beyond dangerous. It was stupid. It qualified as tempting

fate. That candle could have been easily dislodged by the explosive flurry of activity, kicked asunder at a critical moment during the turbulent entanglement. It could have meant the death of them. Nancy recalled painful memories, the desperation she had heard in Cindy's voice: a wildly distorted, indistinguishable cry she could not identify as she'd raced to the rescue. Boo! Who cries there? Tears were shed once again as Nancy began describing that terrible scene, what she discovered on the other side of a door. Revelations were forthcoming.

According to Cynthia, the onslaught lasted for at least a couple of minutes (though she says it felt like eternity) and she believes something intervened, allowing Nancy to hear the distress call from afar. Maintaining her position, Cynthia insists and Nancy concurs: a ferocious battle between good and evil ensued within the burning room that bright, sunny summer afternoon. Cindy described the vapor lock as inescapable, the sound barrier as breached by a force for good. "Something holy kept that candle upright. It made me a firm believer in the awesome powers of God. Mannequin pieces flying all around us, dancing toward us like puppets... we were being abused and taunted! We were being punished. Lori was absolutely hysterical and I was screaming my lungs raw! It took a few minutes but something allowed Nancy to hear us, to come to that door... she fought to open it as much as we did. Whatever held it in place was not of this world. Nance was so brave... she didn't even know who was on the other side of it! When that latch released and it finally let us go, I screamed at her for holding it closed and accused her of blocking us in when she was there to rescue us instead. I have made that up to her about a thousand times... so far. All I know for certain is some great power helped us escape, a force more powerful than what had us trapped inside the burning room. Good told Evil to go back to hell. It might sound simple but it's true and it took too damn long! Maybe that was our lesson to learn, for calling it up in the first place."

Of course, Nancy insists they brought it on themselves. Be careful what you wish for as surely you will get it! Cynthia's séance was a disaster in the making right from the inception. These children were basing their actions on flawed and faulty information from one well-meaning but unreliable source. Super/naturally, it went wrong! Nancy knows of what she speaks. She had made the exact same error in judgment, having listened far too closely to another encouraging friend. Katy: Bad advice from all over town. Though

they both vividly recall this event, remains of the day from different perspectives, alternate vantage points offer a slight variation on the theme. From opposite sides of a door with a mind of its own, they each agree, this was an entirely avoidable altercation. There is such a thing as begging for trouble. Having been forbidden to play on the dark side of the moon, one provocative gesture antagonized the spirits, picking a fight, essentially calling them on.

The outcome instilled a deeper, more abiding sense of faith in Cindy. As young as she was, she understood. Message received... help was on the way. Nancy will never forget that awful day, a shocking outcry, the sound of pure, unadulterated fear, the desperation she heard coming from within the burning room walls as captive souls fought to escape something wicked. Her memory will never be absolved of the image, the panic in Cindy's eyes when the door flew open, revealing the gruesome scene... the coldness and the smell. Nancy forgave the transgression long ago, the unfair accusation issued by a sister in crisis. Convinced that the brats got off easy, with a warning, Nancy knew the calling forth of spirits was risky business. Closing the book on this particular chapter, Cindy referenced the phrase: Pray the devil back to hell. According to her, it is precisely what she did that fateful, frightful day. Pray. Just pray.

“Never take the advice of someone who has not
had your kind of trouble.”

Sidney J. Harris



~ the burning room door with a mind of its own ~

rearing its ugly head

“The Past lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body.”
Nathaniel Hawthorne The House of Seven Gables

Kids are stupid. No matter how bright or God-gifted, they unfortunately remain as dumb as dirt; please pardon the insult to dirt. As those naturally precocious frequently prove, curiosity is both a blessing and a curse. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Yet, children bring things on themselves all the time. It is how they learn about life and death. A single foolish decision, made in haste during an opportune moment, defying gravity while defying authority, the children proceeded to do as they damn well pleased. Beyond theory, it is an infinite axiom, an immeasurable and immutable law of the Universe. Kids are stupid. Referencing the Law of Attraction, as well as the Law of Cause and Effect, there is also Murphy’s Law: what can go wrong, will go wrong. Then there is Schwartz’s Law, which is as follows: Murphy was an optimist. Disobedient heathens get what they deserve. It’s the law.

Katy wore a hint of trouble like perfume. An enticing aroma, attractive to her gullible girlfriends, just a whiff, a dab of desperado smudged behind the ears, the scent was detectable to those with a nose for adventure. As a unique fragrance it was captivating, intoxicating, persuasive, mysterious, evoking a rather nostalgic air of time gone by... of the age of innocence. Kate also wore the essence of purity well, a barely perceptible trace, inspiring confidence in unsuspecting adults. Lulling them into a false sense of security, Katy made more mischief than most girls ever make in secret, right beneath the noses of those mesmerized by the sweetest scent of trouble in the air.

Something about Kate attracted all the boys as well, though it was likely a more subliminal scent and is, in fact, another story. When she’d appear at the farmhouse, she was generally unannounced, though planned well in advance; an inordinate amount of strategizing occurred on the bus every morning and afternoon. Nancy and Katy were as thick as thieves, a tag team in the den of iniquity. Two perfect little pixies. Baby dolls. Cute as buttons, they were and they got away with everything but murder and would have beaten that wrap.

However, once Katy accepted the existence of the spirits at the farm, she wanted to dispose of their celestial bodies. Hell bent and determined to expel

them, Katy had a plan. Nancy had an objection to the plan; her weak-willed exception to this proposal was no match for a friend's tenacity. Not that Katy cops all the blame, though she was often the mastermind. As a smart, savvy, manipulative adolescent girl, (by any standard, a dangerous combination of attributes), Katy inevitably got her way. Nancy bought into all the nonsense. Every scheme... every time. On a number of occasions the girls validated the aforementioned axiom... for every action, a reaction. Perhaps it is why they'd bonded so closely, as birds of a feather do tend to flock together.

It was a clever disguise—the sweet disposition, those big brown eyes and chubby cherub cheeks: adorable. Carolyn opened the kitchen door, ushering Katy over the threshold, in from the cold clearly capable of numbing a mind as well as one's fingers and toes. There's one possible excuse—brain freeze! Braving the elements on that bitter, blustery afternoon, Kate hiked across the power lines... a short cut, as the crow flies... about a mile. It was back in the days when kids went out to play in the cold and their parents let them go, so it was no surprise whenever Katy made that challenging trek, this time with purpose and reason. Had Carolyn not been so charmed by the youngster, she might have noticed the sparkle in her eyes. Though difficult to discern by an untrained eye of the beholder, truth be told, Kate had a bit of the devil in her. Carolyn unwittingly invited the precious little demon seed into their house, kindly welcoming her onto the premises with a hot cup of cocoa in hand, that extra ingredient, adding insult to injury. Katy was a known quantity, yet full of surprises, as she was the day she so brazenly slipped forbidden contraband past the presumed mistress of the house. Carolyn, suspecting nothing had not a clue about the nefarious object concealed beneath Katy's woolen overcoat. Neither did Nancy. It was meant to be a surprise, one worthy of trudging for a mile or so through snow. At the sound of her full voice, Nancy went flying, moth to a flame. Gulping down their cocoa, Katy suggested they go upstairs. Nancy took the lead. When they got into her bedroom, Kate closed the door. Pulling open her coat, revealing what was so discreetly hidden inside its torn lining, Nancy shrieked with delight.

“Nice! Satin.” Nancy had an eye for fashion, a penchant for high quality.

“Not the lining! Look what’s underneath it!” The pot and kettle engaged in conversation. Katy pointed to the outline of a long box, exposing the stash in a flash. Curious as a cat, Nancy reached into the secret compartment of the coat, retrieving a mysterious box, tattered with age; no ordinary board game.

“What is it?” Inquiring minds... Nancy was instantly fascinated.

“A Ouija board. We can have a séance! We’ll call the ghosts then make them go away... with this!”

“No way!” Nancy knew better... on both counts. She had seen what came of Cindy’s fiasco, a similar escapade with Lori. Likewise, she’d been sternly forewarned against the use of Ouija boards, as Lorraine Warren had already come to call, expressly forbidding the presence of the dangerous game in the house. Nancy took it seriously. Perturbed by the intrusion, Nancy was certain she had told Kate of the unwritten rule about an unwelcome object. It would have to go. A disappointment pending, it was time for Kate to plead her case.

Reassuring Nancy that this game was perfectly harmless, her arguments centered on the cowards who feared it as being ridiculous and melodramatic. Superb hyperbole, the hellion knew how to work a room but actions speak louder than words... loud enough for Cindy to hear. The door to the chimney closet was open and she was on the other side of it. For the sake of curiosity, as mystical weirdness, an unyielding teen promised her trusting friend no ill would come of it. Nancy explained that her mother had taken sage advice as a legitimate warning. No Tarot cards. No Ouija boards. Period. Mrs. Warren told them all neither was a game, much more an invitation to disaster. Katy considered the warning hocus pocus and was not impressed by this litany of excuses. Instead, she suggested it was time to seek a second opinion. Katy tucked the board under her arm and marched into Cindy’s room, right past a sister hiding there. Emerging from behind the chimney, Cindy followed, then Nancy, as they gathered for a conference in the heart of the farmhouse.

Even though Cynthia had little tolerance for Katy, she was intrigued by what this mischief maker was proposing, in spite of a former encounter gone horribly wrong. Time had passed. Cindy was older, though apparently none the wiser. More prepared to re-explore their treacherous terrain, to play with a new toy. Relieved once the onus was officially off her, Nancy acquiesced. They all settled in together on the floor of the secluded room and opened the box. It may as well have had Pandora’s Box scrawled across the cardboard surface. The disobedient heathens were old enough to know when they were breaking a steadfast rule; ignoring instructions, the troops were disregarding a direct order. After all, they had played with it in the past, no harm done. Blatant defiance of authority resulted in consequences they couldn’t imagine. Headstrong, Katy’s influence was powerful. Caught in her spell, another one

of those webs she'd weave just to practice to deceive, the girls were about to bestow a whole new meaning on the word daredevil. Opening up the board, Kate placed it in the center of their circle, demonstrating how it worked for Cindy; fingers laid gently on the centerpiece, allowing it to move around the board at will, in response to questions asked. Ah, if it were only that easy...

Deciding which question to pose first, it proved to be the last they would ask of the Ouija board on that fateful day, or any other.

"Who is inside the house?" Proceeding with caution, courageous Katy did the honors. Too late to be careful; a low, guttural moan began to erupt within the room. Within seconds, it exploded into an ominous roar. Clutching their ears, a reflexive act to block the horrendous outburst of decibels, three brave teenagers were instantly transformed into quivering, sniveling girls, utterly immobilized by abject terror. It had only begun. Suddenly, a dark, menacing figure, the living image of a wild, ferocious animal appeared as an enormous shadow moving slowly, deliberately across stark white walls. Appearing in silhouette as if the creature casting the shadow was actually in the room with them, each felt consumed by an intensely evil presence. Shocked, they stared into it, as none could believe her eyes. The bedroom became permeated with its repulsive odor. Noxious fumes triggered Katy's gag reflex, causing her to retch from the rancid stench in the air. An inexplicable cold flash froze them in place. The floor began vibrating. Gazing at the walls in total amazement, cringing again with each awful roar, a revolting creature reared its ugly head, throwing it back, exposing its vile teeth. Unidentifiable, nothing they even remotely recognized, the apparition was a beast but one not of this world. A cross between a lion and a wolf, it did not resemble any animal they knew, as its gruesome features were indistinct, distorted by the angles of dormers, save one stunning glimpse they caught of a gigantic set of sharp, protruding fangs dripping with a fluid they presumed to be blood. Though they watched that figure for only a few seconds, they well remember sensing its implied threat. It was as if their house had come alive. Glass rattled in the windows. The booming sounds magnified, shattering a barrier between them and itself. They could feel it viscerally, shaking their sternums as floorboards vibrating beneath them. Hands clasped tightly against ears, they'd attempted to muffle the deafening sounds of some mutation manifestation, as well as their own mortal screams. All were sobbing hysterically, yelling for help, begging for mercy while frantically searching one another's pleading eyes with a 'what

'have we done' desperation yet it did not require words to express the heartfelt sentiment. Humbled kids knew they were in terrible trouble. Not one of them was able to budge from their positions. Steam pouring into frigid air around them while gasping for breath, they were forced to inhale then expel a putrid smell too repugnant to describe. The house heaved, rumbling with a violent turbulence. Evil forces had converged. There would be no challenging it. Surrender reserved for overpowering encounters, this qualified as such; a disturbing spectral odyssey revealed. With a sweeping gesture, the demon, in profile, turned to face the terrified trio. They'd dared the devil. It morphed into something a group of mortified girls could not comprehend. Throwing its ugly head back, exposing its full throat, the figure unleashed a reverberating, tremulous growl then it roared out its warning, casting out the mischievous mayhem makers who conjured it, releasing them from its grasp. A spell was broken. Go away little girls! Hit hard, now run for your lives!

Message received. Breathlessly, they leapt to their feet and raced from the bedroom, slamming through the door, rushing the darkened stairwell leading into the parlor. A grotesque figure still howling from behind, as if in pursuit, they stumbled and tumbled all over each other, like a game of Twister gone painfully awry; it was a bad trip no one felt until much later, as the anesthetic benefits of adrenaline subsided. Bouncing off the walls, banged and surely bruised by that rough ride down those stairs, their mad dash resulted in an equally stunning vision once arriving at their destination. Piling through the door at the bottom of the stairwell, what they witnessed silenced all of them.

There was Roger, sprawled out and motionless on the sofa, sound asleep. Impossible! No conceivable way. The kids kept running, straight through the house and into the kitchen where they found Carolyn preparing a meal in the pantry. She heard them coming and stepped over the threshold to greet them. The girls plowed straight into her body, practically knocking her to the floor. Obviously, something had happened! What it was remained a mystery. The shouting and crying and hysteria they brought along with them precluded her from assessing the situation. All three were angry, extremely upset, each one seeking solace as well as an explanation for why they'd been abandoned, left to their own devices upstairs. Sitting them down around the table, inviting an open discussion, Carolyn grabbed a box of tissues and instructed the children to breathe then blow. It required several minutes to calm them down enough to determine the situation. During this time Carolyn maintained her naturally

compassionate demeanor, unaware she too had something to be angry about.

Cindy protested, demanding to know why no one came to help, insisting they were all screaming loud enough to be heard throughout the entire house, not to mention the awful rearing, roaring head on the bedroom wall shaking it from stem to stern... rafters to foundation. Nancy, as furious as perplexed, argued her point: it was impossible for their father to sleep through that kind of disturbance without waking up. Carolyn assured the girls, she had heard nothing at all. Suggesting their father may not have been able to hear them, it would not be first time (or the last) he'd been adversely affected in the midst of an ongoing manifestation. Rising from her seat, she went through the front hallway, into the dining room. She could hear Roger snoring. He was fine. Returning to the girls, mother's intuition told Carolyn to listen up. There was more of a story here... something more to tell. Reclaiming a seat at the table, she stared at the sober crew. Katy wiped her nose but kept her eyes averted, ashamed of what she'd done. Cindy's chest heaved as she gasped for more air with each whimper. Nancy confessed, divulging what they had done and why. All compassion suddenly went up in smoke! Made aware that a Ouija board was involved in this incident, Carolyn became visibly upset. Livid. Instead of imposing sentence she decided to reserve judgment, for the time being, to hear them out. Electricity was in the air as their body hair stood on end. Whatever the hair-raising encounter occurring upstairs seemed consequence enough, for the moment.

In spite of their humble admissions, Nancy remained petulant; profoundly disturbed that no one had come to rescue them. Likewise, Cynthia concurred, finding it implausible that nobody heard them. A mother and father did not know about a crisis occurring beneath their own roof? Distressed, it was as if they were picking another fight! Carolyn, stunned by negativity oozing from the wild-eyed children, supposed they needed someone to blame. Insulted by the implication, the mother reassured all of them. If she'd had any indication, any suspicion something wicked was happening in the farmhouse, she would have most certainly intervened on their behalf. Instantly! No room for further accusations, argument or debate on a razor sharp point of contention. Nancy retracted her claws. BOO! Who brought that thing into this house? A logical question posed. Carolyn noticed how quiet Katy had been. Posture alone identified her as the culprit. Sunken down into her seat, she appeared to be hiding from herself, probably a good idea, as Kate could not ever seem to get

out of her own way. Mothers always seem to recognize the guilty party. Katy caved. She knew the jig was up... her friends had taken the bait. No wriggling off the hook this time... not for any of them. Katy accepted responsibility for the infraction as Nancy defended her friend. Insisting she thought it was only a stupid game, she described it as just a way to kill time. How stupid are kids? Profuse with apologies for the transgression, remorseful and in tears, Katy pleaded with one mother not to tell the other. Lesson learned as a bridge burned, losing more than she knew that day, Katy would never be trusted again. She became a perpetual suspect, guilty until proven innocent.

“Where is it? In the middle room?” Nancy nodded. Carolyn went upstairs to retrieve the Ouija board. In passing, she briefly checked on Roger. He was breathing. Marching upstairs, burning off some of her own negative energy, she jerked the board from the floor and loaded the box, leering at blank walls. The absence of its image did not cause her to doubt the children. It was over. The apparition was for them to see. Its lurid figure erased from white plaster, she knew it had come in answer to a question posed... it had come when called. Game in hand, she went back downstairs through Nancy’s bedroom.

“Your bedroom is a mess. You will spend this afternoon cleaning it up.” Carolyn’s tone was as sharp as the slap of the box at the center of the table. Nancy didn’t dare blink let alone object to the first of several admonishments to come. “Was I unclear? Wasn’t Mrs. Warren quite clear about it?” Haven’t you girls been repeatedly warned NOT to bring one of these things into this house?” The blunt, facetious statement directed toward her two disobedient heathens, she was absolutely right and they all knew it. Nancy should have stopped this before it started, should have stopped her at the door, rather than allowing a little demon to unleash a much larger one. Carolyn had invited trouble across her threshold then gave her a cup of cocoa! “And you, young lady! I shouldn’t have to frisk you at the door! You are a guest in this house. I expect a lot from my girls and that goes for you too, Katy, which includes respecting my wishes, rules and regulations, no matter how strange it may seem. You don’t get to make decisions for me. You did it to yourselves; you were all asking for it and got what you deserved.”

Attempting to create a diversion Nancy grasped her shoulder, indicating some measure of discomfort; a low, pitiful moan. Groping and hoping for an immediate change of perspective from her normally nurturing mother, it was

not to be. Carolyn was still furious. Sympathy was in short supply, in fact out-of-stock. Tears trickling down Nancy's cheeks, her mother was not moved. She'd seen right through the scare tactic, refusing to oblige a naughty daughter, the only time she was ever callous when a kid got a boo-boo, as anyone can recall.

"It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt." Carolyn couldn't believe she was actually saying those words, though they were certainly appropriate in the midst of the episode. She was not finished. "I am disappointed in all of you. I'm hurt! I will never tolerate disrespect. Katy, I have fed you, sheltered you and loved you for years and this is how you return a kindness? Bringing bedlam into my home? Today you darkened my door. Don't ever do it again or you won't be welcome here anymore. Take this thing with you as you go, now, and never bring it back here again." Katy took her cue... and her game.

Go away, little girl! Teardrops froze on her ruddy cheeks as she trudged through the snow at twilight. Claiming to have destroyed the board when she got home, Carolyn never divulged the bad behavior, not even to their father. He woke none the wiser. Grateful girls appreciated their mother's discretion. After all, hers was a sufficient punishment; an impactful and memorable loss of freedom. The natural consequence of their supernatural activities, Carolyn grounded both of her heathens for a solid month. Apparently, a consequence they already endured was deemed insufficient, as far as mom was concerned. They need never forget what they'd done; no more games, no more wreaking havoc in the house. There was trouble enough within those walls. No need to usher it over a threshold, deliberately inviting disaster! Some thing wicked had come their way... and it came to stay. It may never leave again. If it had not been there all along, it certainly made itself at home, by invitation. No happily ever after-life in the offing, Carolyn knew a door had been opened that could not be closed, all in the name of fun and games.

There is evil in the world. It is a force to be reckoned with while rearing its ugly head, especially when foot soldiers abound, ready and willing to do its bidding. What transpired in the bedroom on that cold afternoon occurred, to best recollection, in a matter of two or three minutes, yet no one escaped it unscathed; a cosmic adventure with the wonderful Ouija board took them on

one hell of a ride, in answer to one simple question, “Who is in this house?” As an exercise intended only to make contact, the connection designed to pose a few inquiries (if they got lucky), it was never meant to call forth an unholy host of who knows what! Unaware there was a demonic presence to exorcise, let it be noted that crashing the Gates of Hell is never a good idea! Instead, the girls thought they might persuade what they’d perceived as a bad influence to go forth on its merry way through the Universe and leave them be; they meant to expel only the most troublesome spirit and did not care if the rest remained behind. Katy proved to be the bad influence, admonished and expelled. Their intention was pure, as a possible solution to a problem, but they made matters worse, unleashing something beyond comprehension or control. This was not one of the spirits with whom they had grown so familiar. It was something else: a malignant, ominous, evil presence capable of malfeasance, warping time and space on its journey across an astral plane, unless it was omnipresent in the old house. Boo! Who? A pertinent question: what was this thing lurking on the periphery, awaiting an invitation? Which threshold had this crossed over to come in? Why did it release its captives? They knew it let ‘em off the hook. Go away, little girls! The devil you know, but they did not know this devil when it came to call. As participants in a dangerous game, they had gotten off with a warning. Evil does exist. Its most revealing aspect: in the midst of abject horror, mercy was bestowed. Perhaps in its purest form, at its point of origin, evil exists with purpose and reason. Perhaps it too is divine by nature, as the eternal balancing act of God.

“As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.”
Henry David Thoreau



~ Boo! Who goes there? ~

history

“History is the unrolled scroll of prophecy.”

James Garfield

The farm was old but they knew nothing of its history save what little Mr. Kenyon passed on to Carolyn before he passed away. There was much more to discover about an eclectic, eccentric mix of town folk hidden within dusty archives and record rooms. Curious to a fault, Carolyn had immersed herself in an exploration process, traveling wherever she needed to go to retrieve the information so ardently sought, to the exclusion of all else at times. From the quaint and quiet Chepachet, Rhode Island to the bustling city of Worcester, Massachusetts, earliest records remain scattered; anything accumulated prior to the formal incorporation of the town of Burrillville was stored elsewhere. Because Carolyn longed to understand more, to capture the essence of a new place, to attain a sense of how it had evolved over the course of centuries, it became her imperative to unravel the mysteries of the house. By the time she began delving into its personalities, those who'd once inhabited the dwelling she called “home” Carolyn was certain; spirits they encountered belonged to her place in the country... quite certain it was their home, too.

Over time invested in the project, a prolific paper trail revealed interesting fragments of history: the Arnold Estate was originally the Dexter Richardson Homestead. This expansive property was deeded in 1680 and another house was built further back in the woods close to the old wagon road. Though that house no longer exists, remnants of the past remain; ancient ruins. Exploring the old cellar hole was always illuminating. Everyone had a fascination with it and most of them recall a corresponding supernatural experience there.

What began as the Dexter Richardson Homestead later became known as the Arnold Estate. This is the house with an infamous past. Harmonie Arnold died within its walls, though there was no recorded cause of death. Prudence Arnold: so young, few details of her life left to punctuate that tragic passing. It was later discovered she had been raped and murdered by a local farmhand who then took his own life. The woman who first inhabited it as mistress of the house was an Indian woman named Mary. Could she be one of the spirits who resides there, still? Johnny Arnold's suicide had been recorded, as had Mrs. John Arnold's suicide, in their barn. Generations of information passed before her tired eyes late into the nights, organizing her notebook, growing

thicker by the week. It seemed like reams of paper, meticulous research done then thoughtfully compiled, written over an expanse of time in space shared, marking the centuries, denoting the course of lives spent within its walls.

The farmhouse is a living museum, testament to those who constructed it, completing the task at hand in 1736. Requiring years to build and then build onto, in its present form the house is at its best, having been painstakingly, so lovingly restored with impeccable detail by its current caretakers. Yet, this house has an ethereal history as well. As the metaphysical marvel, a portal to the past, this place in the country offers the inhabitants insights as it teaches lessons and reveals its secrets to those who listen up in class. A rarity among homes, Carolyn often wondered when this haunting began. At what point did manifestations of previous occupants begin to occur? How many mortals had seen apparitions before them? It could not have started with the unsuspecting family fresh from the suburbs, could it? Was it something unleashed by their presence on the farm? Was there a specific reason why it had called to them? Was it “love at first sight” or did they have a family history there?

Though brimming with spirits, it is likewise a spiritual place, surrounded by the endless bounty of Mother Nature in all her glory, ripe for the picking, prime time and space for exploration across an infinite expanse reaching into the netherworld, perhaps an integral part of it. Cindy insists the farmhouse is as powerful as the spirits who reside within it, if not more so. Her sense of its significance is shared. The family knows they are only the messengers.

Carolyn’s diligently prepared research, once placed into Lorraine’s presumably trustworthy hands, those of a friend, was lost to her, never to be seen again. Intending to expand the knowledge and deepen the understanding of the two specific people investigating supernatural activity in their house, Carolyn’s personal materials and mementos were generously extended—as a loan, not as a gift. Too bad. It was an awful loss; deep disappointment. Though she would love to retrieve these items, as keepsakes for her children, as pieces of their history, she has kept other souvenirs from the farm and has no shortage of memories. As the decades pass she is sustained and enriched by reflection. Looking back with a temperate eye she sees, now as the beholder from afar, what she learned from the farmhouse. Perspectives change over time. In her mind’s eye Carolyn sees the farm and her experience in a far different light. Darkness was its disguise. It is clear to her now, in hindsight, that the mere existence of spirits is the source of enlightenment.

Their lightness of being is perceived when dark shadows cast begin to distinguish one from the other. Attempting to make finite that which is infinite, mortals limit the bounds of understanding. Acceptance is the key. Nature reveals its own. They are an integral part of incredible history lessons learned. Perceptions altered, minds changed while dwelling in a house alive with death. Revisiting the past has its own rewards to offset the pain of awakening to Reality.

Perhaps it would behoove humanity to observe its history from a broader perspective, a more expansive mindset. Abandoning the concept of time as a linear series of events is a first step, a quantum leap toward comprehension. As the mind grapples with it, liberation begins to occur. When one frees their mind to reconsider time, it opens the doors of space for dimensional thought, along the continuum... to infinity and beyond. The Perrons had no choice, essentially forced to absorb heady concepts. Even the youngest among them, learning quickly, felt compelled to process information at a rapid-fire rate. It came at them from every direction, at every turn. Click. BOO! Who the hell was that? It forced them to think outside the sphere, to ponder their plight in universal terms, in reference to a portal cleverly disguised as a farmhouse. It proved to be where time and space were dismissed as irrelevant to ongoing lessons being learned at a place in the country they called home.

What if human history has existed through millennia as recycled souls, as lifetimes all tied together like a strand of pearls? Does this thing called life officially end? There is an ancient Chinese curse: "May you live forever." It sounds like a fate worse than death. Immortality may not be as desirable a state-of-being as most mortals portend. Based upon the alternative, ashes and dust, it might appear to be an attractive option, short term... another time or two around is fine but forever? Objective analysis indicates its inherent flaw. No rest at all, for the wicked and for good alike. As a philosophical premise, immortality is somewhat less appealing to those who've found this go 'round a trial by fire. The one reason anyone gravitates to the fundamentally hopeful idea is due to this predisposition most living creatures cannot seem to shake: a fear of death... the unknown.

It is often said, we cannot live fully until we love deeply and fear nothing. In the interim, the human race progresses. Increasingly self-aware, our mortal fear evolves with us. We once feared everything. A solar eclipse was cause for worldwide panic. Ideally, the more we learn the less we will fear and yet,

mortals remain fixated, absolutely mortified by our own mortality, terrified of that unknown quantity beyond this world, or worse yet, the fear there is nothing at all beyond this world. Fear is precisely what keeps human beings up at night, locked in a paralyzing state of apprehension. So few people ever realize their fullest potential in life, as a visceral desire to fulfill their dreams is consumed by worry and doubt. This is not so much a matter of economics or intentions. Where there's a will, there is usually a way. It is because they are way too busy concocting then inviting trouble, conjuring an incongruous series of nightmare scenarios which correspond with the potential adventures they dreamed up. Fear of dying can certainly keep one from living. It is often said that thoughts are things... that you are what you think. Our imaginations are a blessing, though they'll also function as a curse, hobbling those whose thoughts are preoccupied with what comes next... after life or after dinner.

Then there are the daredevils among us, those who tempt fate, as a matter of course. Some become obsessed with keeping a fountain of youthful glow, determined to cheat death, in perpetual denial of what lurks in the shadows. An invisible threat: an ever-present hold on their throats. Eventually it comes to call for all. Some actually hasten its arrival. Human beings frequently kill themselves, for a variety of reasons. Too many do it accidentally, just trying to have some fun, to feel thoroughly alive. Risking life and limb to do so, too often the moment of life they find most thrilling tragically intersects with the moment of death. So thin, the line between the two... how tenuous the grasp.

Most people seem to want to preserve their lives as long as possible and it is almost always because they have a family they cherish. The family Bible is an archive, recording the births and deaths, marriages and other significant events as a family history. As a treasured keepsake for those who espouse its tenets, it plays a role which is two-fold, religious and secular. Human beings construct belief systems which help ease our fear and banish our doubt, most including a promise of everlasting life after death. Faith in a higher power, a benevolent source of creation in the Universe purges us of the fear associated with an age old question: Is there something beyond our mortal existence? What if that question had been suddenly answered? For the Perron family, it has been. According to Marianne Williamson, "You must learn a new way to think before you can master a new way to be." They'd had no choice in the spirit matter, no choice but to think differently to be where they were... and where they were caused them to think differently. Seeing is believing: a

wonder to behold.

What to make of this fascination with history? Why not live existentially, day by day, no regard paid to who came before us or who will come later? It is human nature to form attachments, to bond with our young and to honor our elders, those who've paved the way; something intrinsic to the human condition. Because all of us eventually perish, we long to leave something of ourselves behind, for the sake of posterity. We share a symbiotic relationship with our ancestors, because something reaches through the veil to touch us to the core. Whether it manifests in spirit or remains an intense longing to know where we've come from, to find our place, as a single strand, a cosmic thread woven into the tapestry of life, or to determine what genetic flaws we carried into yet another generation (or incarnation), the fascination cannot be denied. On a base level, we want to know who we are, and why we are here. Living inside our minds, we manifest our own reality, hoping what we leave behind matters to someone. We propagate the species as an act of our immortality. We travel to graveyards with flowers, an act of respect for the dead. Those who have encountered spirit know of what they speak, privileged to carry the torch and light the way. The Perron family has come to terms with their own role in this historical drama: a passion play. They are the foot soldiers, the couriers and the scribes. As ancillary characters, they all know the farmhouse has the lead. Likewise, they're aware that having faith IS a higher power.

Death may be merely a conversion of pure energy, a life force dissipating into ether, there to reconfigure into another expression of itself. Theosophists believe there is an astral body which coexists with our finite, mortal forms; a being within a being that survives death of the physical body then ascends to become again; a compelling theory. Carolyn developed a theory of her own. She listened closely to her children. Cindy described the little girl wandering her room as someone eerily familiar, someone closely resembling her eldest sibling at that age. Andrea saw herself in the eyes of another soul. Were they all meant to see their family resemblance, then make an ethereal connection? Had they all lived there before, perhaps in another lifetime? Were they meant to return home? How long a family history shared? The Law of Attraction is mysterious. The time would come for Carolyn to beg her ancient ancestors to help; a plea for mercy... release. Bless their souls, they answered the call.

“History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time;
it illuminates reality,
vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life
and brings us tidings of antiquity.”
Cicero [106 BC—43 BC] *Pro Publio Sestio*

all fun and games until someone gets hurt

“This is an evil in all that happens under the sun,
that the same fate comes to everyone.

Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil;
madness is in their hearts while they live,
and after that they go to the dead.

But whoever is joined with all the living has hope,
for a living dog is better than a dead lion.”

Ecclesiastes 9:3

An innocent child at play is something lovely to watch and watched she was, by those she could not see. Cynthia was playing all alone in the middle bedroom. Shadows having nothing to do with a sunset began moving on the floor, across the toys at her feet. Crouched down in a position hovering over the barnyard she had built, as the shadows passed overhead, they resembled crows in flight. Shifting direction, landing on bare white walls, the patterns changed. The dark, foreboding images began to emerge in silhouette, stirring slowly, deliberately around the bedroom with purpose and reason: Intention. The walls came to life as figures, swirling within the haze of grayish smoke. Look up! As the child sat motionless she could do nothing but stare, muted by their hypnotic movement. A shallow gasp of air inhaled, but then she held her breath, mesmerized by the vision. A little girl free to flee the scene chose to remain, inclined to observe this gathering rather than escaping the crowd. This time she decided to decipher the cryptic message received. In a moment, transformation occurred. The birds became darker figures in shadow dance.

It began as a low ominous growl, gradually rising in intensity, threatening in tone. Figures passing figures, as if choreographed, like crossing paths on a city street, they filled the room with wonder. Some heads were bowed, some facing straight forward. Cindy’s bedroom was suddenly crowded with souls. Queasy feeling struck her while she observed the swirling smoke, something akin to the onset of vertigo. Its constant waves swept the child seasick. There was no particular chill in the air or any detectable odor with which she was familiar; precursors she had learned to expect when manifestations occurred. Instead, light and shadow danced, waltzing across the once vacant wallscape of the room at twilight... then they were gone. Rather than running to her mom, Cindy decided to stay put and rearrange the barnyard. She could tell her about it at dinner. No big deal. She had already begun to think differently.

But then...

“As I looked up, she was heading toward me.” Cindy remembered it well. “She was floating. I didn’t see the feet. She was tall and had broad shoulders. Her head was cocked off to the side, her neck was broken. It made me sick to my stomach to look at her. The features were gross and distorted. Her head was awful. I couldn’t move. I could only stare at her.” Cindy’s face flushed. She went on, reluctantly, struggling to tell this tale. “She was wearing a gray house dress, cotton I believe, with orange and yellow flowers on it, all faded out, like it had been washed and hung a thousand times. It was a rag. It had a short, delicate ruffle around the neck and sleeves. There was a pinafore, too, as dingy and worn as the dress she had on. Her arms were extended toward me but no hands... just a handkerchief tucked up inside the cuff of the sleeve. That is what I focused on... her arms. I thought she was going to grab at me. I couldn’t move, not at all. The room was icy cold. It smelled like death. I could only watch then I panicked when I saw those sleeves reaching out for me... long sleeves, not leg of mutton... straight from the shoulders to wrists. I swear to God, I could hear her... telepathically! She was speaking to me! She kept telling me over and over again that she needed me and wanted me; she wanted to hold me. The entity appeared to be about thirty, which seemed old to me at the time. When I heard the door open I didn’t even look up at first. I thought it was one of my sisters or mom coming to get me for dinner. Once I did look I never took my eyes off of her. She started to speak out loud. Her voice was the kind of pretend sweet adults use when they want to get kids to do something for them. She kept on saying ‘Come to me, little girl.’ I was in the bubble. When she began leaning over me I just prayed... I begged God to get me out of there! It’s so strange though, because I could feel her presence very powerfully and it felt like she really loved me! When I look back on it now I have to think she did not want to harm me. She just wanted a little girl of her own. I can’t explain it. She coveted me. So did the other woman who came, to tuck me in at night, the one who smelled like flowers and fruit. It’s so sad... I guess she was the mother of the little girl who died in my room. I wonder if she thought I was her little girl! With so many spirits passing on through that room it was hard to know who was who. But the one

who came that day... she was new. I had never seen her before. She was so disgusting to look at she'd be impossible to forget. She didn't want me to go away but as soon as I broke free I started to run. Something helped me escape... I should have been more careful on that staircase. God! I fell so hard. I ran through Andrea's room then fell down the stairs. It's where I tripped. I don't think I have ever been so scared in my entire life. Not ever before... or since. When I think back on it now, I feel pity for her. She was so ugly; especially that head, but I can't help it. I feel sorry for her. What a way to spend eternity!" Cindy wrung her hands and asked for a cup of coffee, then continued. "I was just a little girl at the time and I didn't deserve to be terrorized. I will admit, that experience left some scars but the truth is, I'm fine, she's not. I'm sure she's still there, at the farm, along with all the rest of them. Maybe she is pure evil. Maybe she tried to disguise it with her kind voice. I don't know. Squatting down on the floor, minding my own business... and that happens!"

When her coffee arrived Cynthia took a sip then studied the surface of the strong brew for a moment, composing herself along with her next thought. "We never really had a chance to be kids in that house. It seems like there was always something happening to yank us back into reality. OUR reality. We lived with ghosts. Sometimes we lived like ghosts! When dad got mad, we vanished! We lived in a haunted house and even though we got used to it we never stopped being shocked by it. They adored us but that never kept us from being frightened of them but it did make us stop and think about their plight... their existence. They have feelings and desires just like us and they only wanted acknowledgment. When that entity came to me I think she just wanted a hug. I have always wondered if I hurt her feelings by running away from her. She never came to me again." Cindy got hurt as well, flying down the stairwell like a rag doll, bouncing off walls, scraped and scuffed, bruised and bleeding by the time she'd landed in the relative safety of her mother's arms. She remembers sitting on the side of the bathtub sobbing, insisting that she belonged to Carolyn and did not want to go with the spirit who had come to call her home to the netherworld. Story over. Cynthia drank her lukewarm coffee. The eye of the beholder sees both ways. As spirits watched over them equally observant mortals practiced their presence, acknowledging them in a reversal of scrutiny, especially at twilight, the time when they seemed able to see one another. All agreed... it was best not to get too attached.

“Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness.”
William Shakespeare

The hiding and seeking of sisters was wrought with perils. Even though the children had some rather unpleasant experiences, it didn’t stop them from engaging in a favorite game... kids just being kids. Certain cubbyholes in the house were deemed off-limits. They avoided places like the burning room, for instance. During one spirited round of the game, Cynthia decided that the woodshed was attached to the house, so it qualified as a place to go and hide. The cellar door out there gave her the creeps but it was not reason enough to shun the space... not yet. They’d all played out there so many times before, without incident. Discreetly scooting through the summer kitchen, she pulled open the heaviest door in the house. As quietly as possible, a kid slid into the darkness undetected, or so she thought. She forgot they were never alone.

Months earlier, Carolyn discovered an old wooden box hidden beneath a tarp on the lower level of the woodshed. She’d enlisted the help of her eldest and hoisted it onto the upper level, placing it near to the front entrance, the sliding door. That spot would provide sufficient light to work on it over time. Covered up in cobwebs and dust, it needed a good cleansing and a paint job before it could move into the parlor. There it sat untouched, but for a cursory brushing off. It seemed a likely place to get lost in space reserved for logs. A simple box: the frame, set on four peg legs, about five feet across, two feet wide and equally deep. The lid was hinged on the back, folding over like the cover of a book, a real find in the dark and dusty archives of antiquities. No latches. No locks. No problem. It was safe enough, for the moment.

Running short on time, Cindy climbed into the wood box, reached up and lowered the lid. Nobody would ever find her there, not in the time and space allotted for the game. Out of sight and out of her mind with panic when the lid would not reopen. The child was trapped. Its lightweight lid would not budge. Having had second thoughts the moment she crawled inside, Cindy wanted out. No way out! She banged and screamed as steam heat building up around her became oppressive. It was August, a very humid day. The air was stagnant, no breeze to circulate what a frightened kid required: air to breathe! She could not catch a breath inside a box with no exit.

Running short of safe places to seek the well-hidden sibling, Christine and Nancy reported to the kitchen then decided to search the woodshed next. Lost and FOUND her! Nancy lifted the lid with ease, only to find a huddled mass of matted hair; beneath it, the face of terror. Soaking wet with sweat, wild-eyed, Cindy could barely move. Seek and ye shall find a sister in crisis! There she was, desperately gasping for a breath of fresh air. Game over and out of the box, Nancy and Christine grabbed Cindy by the arms, lifting her up and out of solitary confinement. Free at last. Thank God Almighty.

“Oh God! Cin! Are you okay?” The words shrieked from Nancy’s mouth, scared stiff by the sight of her little sister. “Come on, honey!” The panic in her voice could not be disguised... Cindy was dead weight in her arms.

“No! I... was stuck... in here!” Barely audible, voice shrill from screaming for what she suspects was at least twenty minutes, she fought to contain her rage for being abandoned, while expressing undying gratitude for the rescue. Bursting into tears, sobbing hysterically, an emotion had her by the throat.

“Why didn’t you just climb out of it?” Chrissy was perplexed and equally disturbed by the sight, a wonder to behold. One had to wonder.

“I... couldn’t... climb... out!” Cindy’s body lurched as she wept, creating a staccato effect, erupting as words she was struggling to speak aloud.

“What the hell happened?” An alarm in Nancy’s voice spoke volumes about the sight before her eyes.

“Why didn’t someone... come for me... I was... screaming for... help!”

“I didn’t hear you until I came out here.” Nancy was telling the truth.

“I... I was kicking the lid... as hard as I... could! It wouldn’t... open!”

“Of course it opens, sweetie. There’s no latch on it.” Showing Cindy how easily the lid lifted up, no locks, no impediment to escape, Nancy closed the wooden box, returning to her sister’s side.

Completely drained of energy, Cynthia staggered as her sisters guided her back into their house, toward the kitchen. She was unable to walk without an assistant and still crying. Carolyn was in the kitchen. Mommy would know what to do. Overcome by an inexplicable lethargy which was, in hindsight, something more than the result of a traumatic situation, more than oxygen deprivation, Cindy was profoundly, physically affected by the metaphysical encounter. She’d been touched by something wicked.

Only eight years old at the time, Cindy appeared to have aged. Extricated from the coffin-like box, she seemed as frightened as when she was trapped

within its wooden walls. Carolyn knew instantly what to do. Snagging a dish towel from the pantry, she soaked it with cool spring water and swabbed her daughter's face and hair. Andrea brought her a cold glass of water to drink.

"What were you girls thinking?"

"We were just playing, mom. We were hiding and seeking like we always do! But Cindy got stuck in the wood box."

"Out in the woodshed? How is that possible?"

"It's not... but it happened." Cynthia's pitiful face emerged from beneath the towel drenched with sweat, tears still streaking down cheeks flushed with frustration. Nobody understood it, as usual... easy to misunderstand unusual things occurring there. A rigorous curriculum... complicated subject matter.

"It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt." Carolyn was cross.

Something beyond exhausted, Cynthia went to bed and there she stayed. Hour after hour, she slept like the dead in her mother's bed. Her numinous encounter from another realm left the kid weak and weary, to such an extent, it was as if the life force had been sucked from her soul.

Meanwhile, Carolyn took Andrea out to the woodshed. They retrieved the suspicious wood box, carrying it into the house. Nailing two props in place, securing the lid in an upright position, they filled it with firewood. From that day on until the family moved away, it remained in the parlor as a permanent fixture, placed in a position of prominence directly across from the fireplace. There a watchful mother could keep an eye on it. What's that old adage say? "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." Front and center, present and accounted for, a wood box stood vigil, like a hatchet on the hearthstone.

"There was no air left in that box. I was suffocating!" All these years later there is still alarm in her voice as she recounts the story, revisiting the past. It qualifies as a traumatic childhood event. Cindy remains grateful to Nancy for bailing her out of that hell hole, for hearing her when she was so exhausted, down to a whimper. To this day, Cynthia believes if she had not been found when she was she might have died. Perish the thought! According to her, she was super/naturally saved, rescued "just in the nick of time". That phrase applies. Adamant her life was threatened, first and foremost, she is sure this episode involved some suspension of time, at the very least, a distortion of it. Her memory is of being angry that nobody came, as if time itself had been notched out of the public record and she was left alone to fend for herself, all alone in the netherworld. Chris claims she had been missing for about twenty

minutes or so when it occurred to them to check the woodshed. Cindy insists she was banging and screaming for help for that long or longer but then time itself seemed to stop so she couldn't tell how much of it had lapsed anymore. It was remarkable that Nancy heard her at all. Safe and sound, four decades hence, Cindy still shudders at the thought of it. Nancy interjected a memory, prompted by her little sister's comment:

"I still can't believe no one could hear me!" Cindy's frustration returned.

"We looked everywhere for you, even in the summer kitchen. You were nowhere to be found. We didn't hear a sound coming from the woodshed."

"But I was making so much noise, at first anyway. I don't know how long I banged and kicked and screamed... someone had to hear it!" Someone did. Whoever or whatever held a hinged lid closed on an otherwise safe haven for hiders must have heard the child, felt her panic as she tried to escape a living tomb. Cruel and unusual punishment... an evil act perpetrated against her.

It occurred to Cindy while revisiting this episode that she could not recall feeling the way she later would, during other manifestations. Reflecting upon this event, sharing revelations, Cindy continued to pick it apart in her mind. Then aloud, surrounded by her sisters, she made a startling declaration.

"I don't remember feeling like I was stuck in the bubble, you know, that vapor lock we always felt when the spirits came around us in a circle then no one could hear or see anything going on inside of it from outside of it. Even though I'd been trapped in the wood box, I really don't think I was caught in the bubble... not that time anyway. It didn't feel the same."

"You were in a very dangerous situation." Carolyn's demeanor was grim. As the talk tended to bring her back to a dark place she didn't want to revisit, a past life she'd sooner leave behind, a heartsick mother recalled her version of events, remains of the day. "Thank God Nancy heard you crying."

"That's another thing I can't explain! By the time Nancy and Chris got to the woodshed I wasn't really making any noise... not anymore. By that time I was exhausted, forced to focus on trying to breathe instead of trying to yell. I don't know how she heard me or even knew to look inside the wood box."

"But I did hear you! I could hear you crying!" Nancy—chiming in again.

"I don't know how... I was barely breathing when you opened it."

"No one put it together. I don't remember anyone saying it was some sort of supernatural thing. We'd only been there for, what, eight months?"

"I knew." Carolyn glanced over at Andrea.

"I did, too." Laying pen and paper aside, the eldest had something to say. "I remember you signaling me to follow you out to the woodshed. You were defiant. We never said a word. I knew what you intended to do before we got there. You checked the lid, closed it then brushed it off. We carried it into the summer kitchen. You got the hammer and nails and two pieces of wood. We cleaned it out then you nailed the lid open. We put it in the parlor against the wall next to my stairs then I went to get wood to fill it up, about four or five armloads, as I recall." She smiled and flexed her muscles; anything to lighten the dark mood of the moment. Too late. Carolyn was lost in space and time, lost in a memory... sucked into a black hole in the cosmos.

"You're lucky you survived."

"Luck had nothing to do with it, mom. My prayers got answered."

"You were in danger... all of you... all the time."

"Oh mom, it wasn't that bad." Nancy attempted to yank her mother back from afar. She was too far gone, lost in thought. Even on the speaker phone, calling from Florida, she could sense the despair in Carolyn's voice.

"Yes, it was that bad!" Cindy could not concur with Nancy's opinion. She had been through too much in that farmhouse to ever agree with her sister on the point being made and downplayed. One thing everyone agreed on, Cindy had been in terrible trouble that day. She'd prayed for help and help arrived. By all accounts, this was an anomaly; not the standard fare served up by the spirits they would all come to know better and in some cases, even love. Or, in Carolyn's opinion, it became a classic love/hate relationship.

In retrospect, Cynthia thinks this was a supernatural episode, with a twist; not like having her hair knotted, being dragged to the floor in the burning room, but incapacitating nonetheless. She believes it was a warning, perhaps a power play, a cruel joke or a forceful assertion of strength. Though she had not sensed the actual physical pressures of being trapped inside the bubble, state-of-being was no reliable criteria for an accurate determination of cause. Their family had been at the farm for eight months when this event occurred. It was still too easy to explain away the inexplicable. There was so much left to learn. One lesson learned long ago: leave 'em laughing! Cindy had to go, but wouldn't leave on such a sour note. It was both: Darkness and Light.

"Remember the time Joyce came over and we were doing our homework upstairs? We came down Annie's staircase and just as we got to the bottom, the hatchet you always kept in the chopping block popped up! It came flying

at me and went spinning across the room then landed in the wood box in front of me. Joyce freaked! Remember, mom? You were standing on the hearthstone when it happened.”

“I remember.” Carolyn shook her head in disgust.

“What did you do, Cin?” Nancy was still on the line.

“I looked at her and said, ‘It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. Let’s go.’ She went, all right, straight home and never came back again!”

“That’s not funny... the poor thing. It must have scared her half to death!” Mother was not so amused but everyone else smiled. Mission accomplished, almost a good ghost story. When Cindy left, Carolyn continued to lament the dark days and darker nights they spent in Harrisville; by the time two months had passed she knew they were in trouble. Her original idealism about their family having a place in the country had already begun to be displaced by an equally powerful deep-seeded cynicism she retains to this day. “All I wanted was a safe place to raise my girls. What we got was the opposite. I learned to hate it as much as all of you loved it. You couldn’t even play a simple game without having your lives threatened and your minds cluttered with things no child should ever have to endure. I knew the place was dangerous. I felt it in my gut when you carried Cindy in from the woodshed. What was I thinking? I should have listened to my own instincts and gotten you out of there much sooner.” Tears crept into Carolyn’s voice as she finished a poignant thought. Andrea took over the conversation, punctuating it with a point no one had yet made.

“We all survived it and we’re much wiser for it. Personally, I consider our time at the farm to be the best decade of my life. It was a celestial classroom. I learned everything I needed to know about life and death and because of it I haven’t wasted a minute of my life worrying about death. It was a blessing.”

“Not everyone survived it.” Carolyn was correct; likewise a curse, or so it seemed. She could not forget or discount those who’d come to call, so many friends who met an untimely end, if there is such a thing. For the remorseful mother, there was no good cheer that day. No laughter, no light to dispel the darkness in her heart. No fun and games. Revisiting the past, she found once painful memories had returned with a vengeance and they still hurt like hell. Front and center, present and accounted for... so much for burying your dead. Exhuming them proved painful; she’d been right to fear the process of telling this tale, suspecting that all of it was still very much alive in her mind.

Some things one never forgets. Imagery impaled as permanent impressions leave a mark, indentations that do not heal with time. Here they were again, the scars on her heart, all of them dead and buried remarkably close to the surface.

“Idealism is what precedes experience;
cynicism is what follows.”

David T. Wolf

insight

“Instinct is something which transcends knowledge.
We have, undoubtedly, certain finer fibers that enable us
to perceive truths when logical deduction,
or any other willful effort of the brain is futile.”

Nikola Tesla

Always trust your gut! Cindy's gift was more than meets the eyes. It came from her mother or perhaps the close encounter she had with death's door at two months of age. Wise beyond her tender years, the child learned quickly to listen to the little voice inside of her head which told her when to be wary. Forewarned is forearmed. All of Carolyn's kids were either born with or later developed a keen eye, sensory perceptions which guided them along on their treacherous path through childhood. Of course, there were times when they'd choose to deliberately ignore it, for the sake of curiosity, but it was not that they hadn't heard it. Cindy, always looking inward to reveal then interpret messages manifesting beyond the confines of her mortal mind, in this respect mimicked her mom. Carolyn set an example for her girls. They emulated her, observing when to withhold critical information from their father, keeping secrets to keep the peace, as a matter of necessity. They learned to solve their own problems most of the time, a prime skill put to good use later in life.

Instinct and intuition comes from the gut as well as the mind, that visceral sensation which warns of danger; impending doom. Both are functions of internal constructs mortals cannot entirely comprehend, yet the human race manages to put these important tools to good use, especially its women. All mothers supposedly have eyes in the back of their heads, an interesting, if somewhat gruesome image to conjure up. Even though these two words are often used interchangeably, they each possess a distinct definition. However, they work in tandem in a variety of ways. Instinct is as ancient as intuition, a facet of human development; that which kept safe those with the good sense to listen up. Ancestral in nature... holy smoke signals from beyond the grave, each is a part of that grand strand every soul weaves into the tapestry of life. Some think of it as an unidentifiable, actually invisible element of a strand of DNA. Others assign it a more ephemeral quality, meaning based on the stars. Third eye blind, Roger did not understand, develop or use inborn intuition for some time after moving to the farm, but the girls, including the mistress of

the house, relied upon the accuracy of perceptions revealed from within.

There is one aspect of these gifts, also invisible to the naked eye, which is required to activate their functions. Belief is the key. One must have faith, a certain trust in the process for it to work efficiently. Intuition literally means learning from within and the only way to learn a lesson well is to listen up in class. Voltaire espoused a philosophical tenet, captured in the words: "Faith consists in believing when it is beyond the power of reason to believe." Faith is, by definition, the lone foundation of all religious thought and doctrine, all magical thinking in its highest form. Based upon previous experience their family had no reason to believe in spirits, to believe their own eyes no matter how keen the senses. At first, it was easier to dismiss the notion. When they were out of sight they were likewise out of mind. Otherwise, mortals would go out of their minds, stressing about so many strange occurrences. Later, as it became clear, the only logical explanation resulted in a natural conclusion drawn of a supernatural dilemma. Roger preferred to reduce everything to its lowest common denominator, the bottom line... if he couldn't know it with five senses then it didn't exist in a sixth.

Was it intuition suggesting Nancy look out in the woodshed for a missing sister? Or was it common sense at work? Based on Nancy's extensive track record it was most likely the former. She seemed the one least endowed with good old fashioned common sense or refined intuition. Yet she was always the one who sensed a problem and ran to the rescue. On the day Cindy got trapped in the wood box, Nancy and Chris searched for her by a process of elimination, as every safe place to hide in the house had been explored while looking for their little sister. Once reunited in the kitchen, Nancy and Chris were stymied by her absence. What voice told Nancy where to seek next? Had she sensed her sibling from afar, from the other side of that massive structure? It cannot be denied. They retain the special bond, nurtured in childhood. Truth be told, Nancy is far more astute than given credit for, often saying "I have a feeling" instead of "I had a thought". No doubt about it. She was certainly in tune, in time for Cindy. They still spend hours together, every day, hundreds of miles apart. Thick as thieves, they are... birds of a feather. They find each other by a process of illumination. They had both learned a valuable lesson in youth: physical distance is irrelevant to metaphysical relationships.

As for absence noted a more pertinent question asked: why didn't mom

sense it when her children were in supernatural distress? She was the one with finely honed skills, sense and sensibility, yet there were many instances when they came running to her, screaming that they'd been left alone, abandoned in the midst of a crisis. There is only one logical explanation. They were not heard. It is clear to them now. Her senses were obstructed, deliberately blocked in the same way her husband was absent when she needed him most. Instincts disabled, an intense intuition erased from existence, a mother was as much in the bubble as her kids crying upstairs. When a farmhouse is shuddering and children are screaming and falling down stairs, no matter how big the house, they'd get heard. That is, unless they cannot be. It was not a matter of being distracted or too distant. When the episodes occurred, it gave new definition to far, far away as a measurement of physical distance. It does not attempt to explain the astral plane. Being a being in two places at once is illuminating as mortal experience goes. Being someone else, someplace else, occupying the same space in a different time reflected the multi-dimensional nature of Carolyn's place in the country. Something sacred and scary, all at once.

To dismiss one's own instinct is irresponsible. Roger did precisely that. It was not a matter of him being oblivious. He was fearful. He did not want to be drawn into the house and defied it to affect him. When it did he got angry. His instinct was sound. He chose to ignore it. In fact, the only time he really ever used it was the first time he saw the old Arnold Estate. Believing eyes spoke to his heart. Roger fell in love at first sight... on the spot. He trusted an intuitive longing and followed it all the way to Harrisville, Rhode Island.

Once there, he abandoned his intuition the same way he did his children. Absence does not make the heart grow fonder. Gone but not forgotten, even when he was home, he was distant. The house affected a father, too. He was stern, if not cross, much of the time. No point in listening for what he would not hear. According to Roger, five senses were good enough for him, a sixth dismissed as so much hocus pocus. No matter what occurred around him or to him, Roger refused to listen to his gut. Adding insult to injury, he'd often blame it on his wife. He found it easier to find fault with others, rather than looking inward to a family dynamic he was creating and then perpetuating, alienating everyone in the process. How many times did Carolyn forewarn him about a pending partnership she did not trust? Inevitably, she would have the privilege of saying "I told you so" when he ignored her sage advice and

went ahead, against her will. It was his marked unwillingness to listen to his family, especially to his wife, which created so much consternation between them. Pick the worst partner on the planet. Go ahead! Do as you please! And so he did. When Carolyn's intuition was fully functioning, he had no faith in hers and refused to acknowledge his own. He'd never trusted his wife's word for things he could not comprehend, so his actions always spoke louder than her words. So began the disintegration of a marriage made in hell, as marital bliss turned to blisters, a decade before its actual dissolution.

He had to make her be wrong! Roger hated it when Carolyn was right and she had no qualms about throwing it right in his face. Conflicts between them became commonplace. It put the norm in paranormal. As if he resented gifts bestowed upon her, he did not develop his own until much later in life. When it came time to admit that he was frightened by his lack of control at the farm, Roger had his epiphany. He realized the truth about his lack of self-control, his predisposition to become adversarial without fair warning, not as much as a moment's notice. A deep-seeded fear had a hold on his soul and it shook him to the core of his being. He'd attempted to control what he could, including his wife. The master of the house felt utterly emasculated, so he fought back. He is a tiger and the stripes he so proudly wears came with him for the ride. No tugging on that tail!

To pause then reflect on one's life is no easy feat. It requires an enormous reservoir of self-awareness and mental discipline; nothing hocus pocus about it. Roger finds it difficult to gaze back into the image. In retrospect, the most highly refined intellect can be tested by an entity from parts unknown and it is no match for the manifestation. During his more contemplative moments it occurs to him that he's made mistakes; he is only human, after all. However, in spite of this, he remains as defensive as ever, and will still try to absolve himself of responsibility by blaming his behavior on the spirits! No excuse!

It was cosmically challenging to live on the farm: a holy spiritual journey. Time and space, both suspect. Very little made sense and common sense was little help when it came to a scenario unfolding which deliberately interfered with a loving mother's intuition, her innate ability to sense what was coming on before it even happened, let alone rescue her own while it was happening. Carolyn's gifts were inborn but frequently overshadowed by something more powerful than her capacity to sense a presence with a purpose, its intention to

disrupt, to be known by her young. She couldn't stop what was happening to them because she didn't sense it; never saw it coming... none of them did.

The most fascinating aspect of the journey revealed itself years later as an intriguing story of darkness and light. Introspective moments spent dredging up the past have proved noteworthy. Instinct and intuition come into play as a vital part of the equation, riddled with mystery. This process has caused all of them to look back but their faith has compelled them to seek answers from within. As Lillian Smith so succinctly expressed, "No journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us, it goes an equal distance into the world within." For the past thirty years this family closed their eyes to an intense, frequently disturbing vision they'd once been forced to behold with unprepared eyes. They rarely spoke about the ordeal, even with one another. What they endured left scars on their hearts and minds. It isn't easy to revisit the past, to re-examine old wounds, to see if they've healed. Exposing them to open air is what they have needed all along. It has caused a great healing, one long overdue. A growing awareness of "what one seeks lies within" has compelled all of them to dig deeply into their own dusty archives, to clear all the cobwebs from the darkest recesses of memory. Much remains a mystery; many questions, few answers. It has been a fruitful endeavor for all involved, shedding new light on a dark matter... blackest hole in the firmament.

Roger has struggled the most with it, Carolyn the least. She has faith that it will help others to tell this tale in its entirety, no matter how difficult. Even though Roger developed his innate skill set rather late in life, he remains reticent to discuss his insights with anyone. It pains the father of five in ways he cannot give voice to, as it breaks with the natural outpouring of emotions he would rather not express. Carolyn's insights flow with relative ease, as naturally as they always did. In words uttered and in deeds done, she remains generous in spirit. Together, they are a study in darkness and light, forever juxtaposed as opposing forces to be reckoned with but never reconciled.

Forthcoming in a manner no one expected, Roger shared generously, too. Some things occurred in the house that no one will ever know about and it is their prerogative to withhold certain details from this public record of events. Suffice to say, enough of the saga has seen the light of day. Never again will it be relegated to dwell in dark shadows. It is time to tell the truth. The world is ready. Insights abound. Acceptance of the existence of spirits is no longer

an issue. In unison, the family has opened the door and crossed the threshold, again. Faith is pivotal to the process. Thirty years have passed. Knowledge is gleaned from hindsight as well as insight. “If there are any answers to be had they will come from within.” A wise sage said it best. Carolyn pried open the door to her soul, cleaning house, sharing secrets with the world; no easy feat.

With maturity comes a willingness to confront the demons haunting mere mortals, coming to terms with the history and mystery of life’s experiences. It is impossible to reflect upon this time and dismiss the significance of an incredibly spiritual journey. Through a process of elimination Carolyn was determined to discover the identity of the souls with whom she shared space. Doing so became a process of illumination. Though most of her memories are dark, Carolyn admits it was a meant-to-be moment when she found the farm... her destiny. She readily acknowledges it. The Universe doesn’t make mistakes. Her philosophy of life is simple: what will be, will be. Let it be.

“The path of love and the path of insight lead
into the same garden.”

Stephen Mitchell

listen up in smoke

“It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is
the privilege of wisdom to listen.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Her bedroom would be silent, lights dimmed, whenever the smoke came. From those early days during their first winter in the house, a pale, thin mist began to seep into Andrea’s room, infiltrating beneath the door to the middle bedroom. Sometimes this presence was noted as a hazy, lazy film of swirling fog gathering at a window shared by both rooms. Sometimes she would look up from her work and find herself surrounded by the light translucent smoke. Because glass in the ancient panes was so raw and rippled, the phenomenon first appeared as an optical illusion, as a reflection or a shadow on the glass. Within moments it began to dissipate, receding from window to floorboards, as if it was peering through the panes to see if anyone was home. Certain she was there to spook, as if it had eyes, the bluish-gray vapor crept through the cracks of the door (there is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in) and her initial reaction was panic: FIRE! Where there is smoke... but no. She checked. It was just a spirit in rebellion. A strange sensation: to be relieved when what one witnesses is only a supernatural manifestation and not something much worse. Carolyn knows this feeling well. So does her eldest daughter, having come close to witnessing the farmhouse going up in flames on more than one occasion during the decade. The threat emerged as a theme.

Though it always arrived with little fanfare, this apparition was so beautiful; enticing to mortal eyes. It was fascinating, a serene presence, mesmerizing as a hypnotic trance dance; its form, casting the spell. As if wrapped in Salome’s veils, delicate tendrils of wispy smoke swirled around her on the bed. Andrea believes she was chosen to be the observer, as a vague, almost imperceptible voice would always instruct her to look up and away from her homework, to watch what was happening instead. Heads up, kid. This play had a show off! Her bedroom was perpetually active, though this type of manifestation was, by far, the most frequent visit she experienced there. Whether working at her desk or reading on the bed, in rapt attention, a total focus could and would be interrupted by a certain something, a gentle tug on her intuition, a change in the light. It caught her notice, spoke to her. It told her to look up... a startling reminder that none of them were ever alone

in the farmhouse. What Andrea best recalls of this recurring incident is the sameness of it. Her senses were not assaulted and were rather soothed by a presence. With an exception made of the one time she thought the smoke signaled fire, Andrea never felt fearful of the apparition. Once she became familiar with a seemingly harmless entity she welcomed it, received as a gift. There was something loving in its nature. Nothing wicked; no need to beware... no harm done.

Though this happened numerous times the visit always began with a faint whisper in the air, the sound so diminished it was barely audible. Listen up. Like a mysterious tap on the shoulder, it was a calling card of sorts. A gentle nudge... the perfect pitch to capture her attention. Over time, Andrea came to expect it when she was alone in her room, though as she learned, never really alone. She wondered. Boo! Who would come as a vapor to dance around her bedroom? Was it a familiar spirit in another form or was it something else? It remains a mystery. Of one thing she is certain. It was a benevolent presence. Passive/aggressive perhaps, but no threat issued or implied. Holy smoke!

Cindy forgot her sweater. It was upstairs in her bedroom. Though spring had officially arrived, nights still got quite chilly at the farm and they were quickly running short of firewood... again. Roger had ordered his troops to assemble; time to trek into the woods. Running back into an empty house to retrieve her warmer outerwear, a strange thing happened as Cindy ascended the staircase. As the light upstairs abruptly shifted, it appeared to be different than it should have been for that time of day, especially because the light was at its brightest during morning hours. There was a haze in the air; that smoky blue/gray, flimsy wispiness to the atmosphere; one she could not identify. It shared her space, surrounding her as she entered the bedroom. Then Cynthia heard the most remarkable sounds. She distinctly heard a family assembling in the dining room downstairs, gathering together for the meal. They were all laughing and chatting incessantly. Cindy could hear every word they uttered, as if the smoke signal carried and magnified the conversation, as if they were in the same room with her. Though she knew they were actually downstairs, in reality, the farmhouse manipulated sound, a stellar feat she knew well. It enhanced certain sounds while muting others, but these voices were with her,

moving through the child's forehead, from inside. There is no explaining the phenomenon. She knew the voices but it wasn't her family... or was it?

The youngster grabbed what she had come to retrieve then ran through the farmhouse, anxious to escape an eerily familiar sensation enveloping the solitary child. In spite of that laborious chore still ahead of her, she felt compelled to rejoin her father in haste before being chastised for an extended absence. The general was waiting and ready to go. As Cindy rapidly made her way through the parlor, heading for the door, she glanced into the dining room. There they were, just as she knew they would be, enjoying an opulent meal. Five or six of them, maybe more; she allowed herself only one quick glimpse then flew through the door, returning to her mother's side. Tugging at the sleeve of her coat, Carolyn leaned over, listening as an awestruck kid whispered in her ear: "Mom, there's a whole bunch of people eating in our dining room." Pausing to reflect on the perceived intrusion, Carolyn thought Cindy's vision must have been remarkable. Then it was time to decide what remark to make, in reply. Though she had not yet observed these particular apparitions, Carolyn knew Cindy was telling the truth. A family of spirits, dining out in their dining room, seemed perfectly logical. Cindy searched her mother's perplexed expression while her mother searched for words. As the troops began loading up into the truck, Carolyn leaned over again, cupping her hands around Cindy's ear.

"Why don't we just keep this between us so your sisters will leave them alone... so they can eat in peace." Nodding in agreement, Cindy knew they'd rush the joint to catch a glimpse, disrupting both the mission and the meal, crashing a party for the sake of curiosity. Dad would freak out... not worth it.

"They'll keep an eye on the place while we're gone." Carolyn winked at a wide-eyed wonderful kid. Cindy tried to return the gesture but blinked both eyes, soliciting a kiss on the forehead. Then they all hopped in the truck and went over the river and through the woods.... on a family matter.

Sam came to spend the weekend with his family. Even though their house was big, four extra souls made for cramped quarters upstairs. Some shuffling had to occur, so to accommodate everybody. His two daughters slept upstairs with five more who were anxious to receive them: a slumber party! Sleeping

bags were pulled out from the eaves and popcorn hot from the stove, melted butter drizzled over it, made for smiles all around. The Olevson family had come to spend time in a timeless portal... what could possibly go wrong?

Once everyone had settled down for the night, dispersed throughout three bedrooms, Cindy grabbed her sleeping bag, dragging it into Andrea's room, the thick braided rug providing extra cushion on the chilly hardwood floors. Even though she'd been invited to bunk in with her big sister before going to bed, Cindy preferred to stay where she was at the time, insisting it felt more like a real slumber party that way. She was excited! Hunkering down with all the other girls in the middle room, she changed her mind. It got crowded and uncomfortable. But what a Saturday night! Popcorn and fruit punch with sherbet, a movie with friends—awesome! Some wicked good fun had by all! Little did she know, the most significant event of the night had yet to occur, resulting in an extremely close encounter of the bizarre kind; Andrea's room got crowded, too.

Something woke the youngster just about 3:00 a.m. A sensation signaling some intrusion disturbed her sleep. Rising up, raising her head, Cynthia was about to experience the rudest awakening of her life. The nightlight revealed the dark presence of an opaque figure hovering directly over her sister, only inches above. Cindy gasped, drawing her breath inward, where she held it, shocked by the sight, waiting to see what would happen next. Andrea was motionless, lying on her side, a quilt up over her head. The black vaporous apparition was free-floating, lifting up then skimming down again, almost touching the child through the surface of the quilt. Contact. It resembled a storm cloud, the elusive form rising then falling. As the child beneath the blanket remained perfectly still, it breathed deeply in and out, hanging over her as if it was breathing for her, in unison with her. Cindy found the natural syncopation mesmerizing; an incredibly striking element of the vision before the eyes of this beholder: virtual simpatico between mortal and immortal. Cindy described the entity as a dense black liquid mist that covered her sister like a shroud. She insists that it appeared to be doing something to Andrea, perhaps drawing energy from her or something far more nefarious... literally fusing with her. To the little girl, by then wide awake, they appeared to be as one. Cindy could only stare, awestruck.

Startled, alarmed by a sense of dread creeping into her consciousness, she propped herself up on her elbows to better observe what was going on in dim

light. As she did so, the slight, almost imperceptible movement was instantly noted. Still wrapped snuggly inside the treasured sleeping bag she'd received the previous Christmas, straining her eyes to see better, Cindy was astounded when the obscure form suddenly made a seismic shift in her direction, as if it recognized her as the intruder. Cynthia would be severely punished for the perceived infraction. Hang on for dear life, little girl! You're going for a ride.

From its position over the body in bed, the entity swept down, leaping off of Andrea with one grand SWOOSH! It raced toward Cindy from across the room. Passing just above her head, she screamed as it wrapped itself around her ankles and dragged her off the palate where she lay; jerking her body so hard her head struck the floor. It pulled her as she wailed for help, begging it to stop. It didn't matter who might be awakened by the commotion; the more the better. This was a crisis. Cindy needed all the help she could get. Sounds of abject horror; shrill screams poured from her soul. Andrea never moved. Cynthia went into panic mode. Once she realized she could not be heard by anyone (otherwise the entire household would have been up and by her side) the child freaked out as it began dragging her backwards down the staircase. A hysterical girl held captive, pleading for her life, sweet little Cindy latched onto the banister at the top of the stairs, just as her torso was being hauled past it. With all the might she could muster, hooking the hardwood post with the crook of her elbow, she clung on and screamed at the top of her lungs. It felt as if a monster was ripping her legs off her body, dismembering her.

Cindy implored God to intervene. It stopped. Release. Gasping for breath, the wounded kid hoisted her trembling body back up the stairs. Perched on the landing like a frightened baby bird, the totally traumatized entirely mind-blown teenager attempted to recover from an overt assault. It was then Cindy realized and felt so ashamed. During this horrendous encounter the poor kid became so scared, she wet herself. Her pajamas saturated down to the socks, sobbing uncontrollably, Cindy does not recall how long she sat there crying, but remembers how hard she'd cried. Cynthia could barely move. Her body was stiffening, becoming more rigid by the minute, so sore it hurt to breathe. Composing herself, she had a decision to make. Though her wild shrieking had not roused one single soul, she was afraid that sneaking into the middle bedroom to retrieve some fresh clothing might stir the dead once the incident was over. A modest child, this mishap was the last thing a fourteen year old wanted her house guests to know about. Instead, she would quietly descend

the stairs, heading straight for the laundry pantry to get something clean and dry to put on. Stunned into submission, as she rose, Cindy gazed at her sister. No movement. No sound. No signs of life at all. As a mind-altering moment, it was something she then blocked from memory for the next twenty years.

The pantry they used as a laundry room posed hazards of its own. In the dark, it was an even spookier space, frightening to step into unaccompanied. Cindy flung open the door and snatched anything that looked like it would fit then traveled the length of the house to the bathroom. The child was frantic. Attempting to navigate the house in shadows, she glanced around and behind her, rushing to clean up fast then change her clothes, not knowing if she was truly alone. Was the horror show all over? Or was the morbid apparition still there, lurking somewhere else... waiting to terrorize her all over again?

They were invisible stalkers. No one was ever alone. As Cynthia returned to the parlor undetected, she piled her soiled laundry and sleeping bag into a basket just inside the pantry door, then curled up on the sofa and fell asleep.

Carolyn was up at dawn, preparing a menu bouncing around in her brain, a breakfast feast for their guests. "What are you doing down here, honey?"

"Too crowded upstairs and I got kinda cold." Secrets and lies in disguise. While her mother made coffee Cindy nonchalantly did her laundry. She must have been discreet about it. No one seemed to notice. It was a lovely Sunday spent among friends but Cynthia couldn't shake the shock of her experience. Andrea was exhausted. In spite of a solid night of sleep, she woke wrung out and spent the day recovering from what she assumed was the residual fatigue from an exceptionally active day before or an oncoming cold. Cindy knew it. She knew precisely why her sister was drained. Though apparently unaware of it, she too had been through quite an ordeal... one she survived. Overjoyed that Annie was all right, Cindy never said a word to her about what she saw, what happened to both of them that night. Her throat was raw, still quite sore from screaming her bloody head off. Nobody noticed the bruises on her chin or elbows; it was simple enough to hide evidence of the supernatural assault. There was no need to explain something no one realized happened at all. It was a sin of omission but that evil presence was something beyond sin.

It required courage, an act of selflessness for Cindy to expose a secret and tell the tale, one she closely guarded and did not divulge for more than three decades. Only her husband knew and he did not hear it until they had been married for twenty years. Cindy found disclosing such details quite difficult

and does not discuss things she would prefer to forget, but some things are impossible to forget. Yet, some events were all but forgotten, blocked by her subconscious mind, as an act of mercy. This was the case with the encounter Cynthia could not process and therefore suppressed. It took twenty years for her to remember this experience in full. During that time she had apparently relegated the horrifying, heinous episode primarily to a secluded realm of the subconscious mind as something wicked to feed the nightmares when they'd come to dine on her memories. Though Cindy thought about it infrequently, as she moved on with her life and raised a family of her own, it remained a painful and humiliating memory, one which would occasionally rear its ugly head when she least expected it. Whenever the terrible image intruded on the present, she'd shove it back into the past where it belonged. Ancient history. Dead and gone. Then one day, out of the blue, from the vast beyond it struck her; bolt of lightning. She remembered this incident in its entirety, including a belief that her sister had died. It was what she had blocked out for decades. Cynthia suddenly recalled an overwhelming fear, belief that Andrea perished during the episode, her life force drained until she became an empty vessel.

Calling a memory up again with such vivid detail proved it never left her. Cindy's thoughtful interpretation of the experience is fascinating. Hindsight has convinced her that she interrupted the devious plot and she believes what happened that terrible night was something akin to catching a thief in the act: criminal intent. She had disturbed something evil doing the devil's footwork, surprising it in the midst of an insidious process involving her big sister. The innocent child was severely reprimanded, physically punished for witnessing its work, becoming both observer and victim during a dark night of the soul.

Wondering aloud, she recently posed a provocative, if rhetorical question: "How many times did THIS happen to us?" There is no way of knowing how often they had been touched by spirit over the course of a decade. How many times did this kind of thing happen, only to go undetected because everyone slept through it, or was forced to sleep, while someone else was kicking and screaming her way out of the bubble. Cynthia's eyes were pleading with her sister for answers as Andrea recorded every word for posterity, concerned by the haunting question. "Why didn't I sleep through it just like everyone else? Why did I wake up? Was I supposed to wake up? Was I supposed to see IT? Was I destined to be the one to stop it and take the beating for it? I've never seen anything like this in my life and when I noticed it, it noticed me! Then it

swept across the bedroom, like a wind gust in a hurricane! It was stunning! It was absolutely huge! It took up space but had no real form and appeared to be at least five times more dense than smoke from the chimney, almost solid. That thing literally blew my mind. It felt like I went out of my mind! God! I was so upset and embarrassed by what happened to me. Then I had to go into that damn laundry room, all by myself and we never went in there alone. The door could slam from behind and trap us at any minute and it often did. After what I had been through, well, I propped it wide open with a basket in front of that door so it could not close. I could still hear my heart pounding inside my ears and I was pouring with sweat but the house was freezing cold. Then I had to go into our bathroom alone and I didn't know where that thing had gone or even if it really was gone! Whatever it was, it was pure evil. It was the most terrible night of my life. I begged God for help, to make it let me go and make it go away. When it finally released me, my legs felt so light! It yanked on them so hard that my whole body hurt like hell. I don't know why I've hesitated so long to tell anybody about this. I guess because it's private and painful to talk about. I was so scared I peed my pants." Cynthia hung her head. She spoke with some urgency, anxious to be done with these gruesome details of her story... done. An incident from thirty-five years ago still brings tears to the tired eyes of one beholder who has seen too much. She will never fully recover. Childhood trauma: the gift that keeps on giving.

Once Cynthia found her way past the sense of shame she associated with the manifestation her reluctance subsided, considering it important enough to set aside her personal concerns. This particular episode is included in the tale only because Cindy decided not to keep her secret any longer. Regarding the family from which it was withheld for so long, among them it is considered a minor infraction: a sin of omission. All is forgiven. It is not always easy to be honest or much fun to be forthright. Secrets and lies have their place. All is revealed in its right and proper time. Proof of the assertion: fear conquers all until it is conquered. Only love conquers fear. Afraid of being perceived as a coward among her siblings, the child who'd seen too much and endured too much grew up, evolving into one strong, resilient and deeply spiritual woman. They are proud of her. Truth be told, Cindy is the bravest one of all.

"In a real dark night of the soul, it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day."
F. Scott Fitzgerald



~ tripped up and down a treacherous stairwell ~

staking a claim

“Angels descending, bring from above, /
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.”

Fanny J. Crosby

Nothing delighted Carolyn more than working in her garden spot; countless hours spent tending to fragile sprigs, watching them shoot up, popping through the surface of rich, fertile earth. The woman knew her garden would produce prolifically. She'd plunge her bare hands deeply into black, pungent soil then hold it to her nose, breathing it deeply into her soul. This had been her dream and she knew this was where she belonged, staking tomatoes, staking a claim to the land. Her land. It had been laying fallow for so many years, basking in the glow and afterglow of Sun and Moon, the Light of its life. There it was, pleading to fulfill its destiny, to propagate life again. Carolyn reveled in this process, from planting to harvest time. A promise made then kept, she finally had her garden spot, a place in the country in which to revel and reveal the cosmic secrecy of seed. The mistress of the house found her heart's desire.

During the first year on the farm a garden spot went completely to waste, much to Carolyn's dismay. There was too much happening in the house to be bothered with much else beyond it. The supernatural upheaval precluded turning over one single square foot of Earth. Not nearly as much interaction with the natural world as she would've preferred. The garden stared back at her through windows thrown open to welcome the spring. She mourned the loss. There it lay, untouched as if unloved, producing only pea green grass and the assorted ground cover, occasionally a few odd weeds thrown into the mix. Dandelions were sprouting in abundance, festive in color but otherwise useless. Carolyn was terribly disappointed. An opportunity squandered. She had come to the farm with high hopes, planning to restore it, to make it a working farm again, at least to some extent. She intended to till the land 'til death do they part, a real commitment on her part, one she took seriously.

A second spring arrived to find the woman changed, sobered by events. She was determined to make her garden grow into an abundant food source, a cornucopia for family and friends. It likewise served a valuable purpose as an

escape from the bizarre happenings inside the house, or so she thought. It never occurred to Carolyn that manifestations could happen beyond its walls, out in Mother Nature. Though the barn posed hazards of its own, she did not consider the garden a hotbed of supernatural activity.

Roger roto-tilled the soil, an insurmountable undertaking at first. Hard-packed, unforgiving dirt did not yield easily. Indulging his desire to get that job done and over with, its unrelenting surface fought him, tooth and nail. Once the land was finally turned over, the aroma it released was intoxicating, filling the air with promise. God willing, the weather would cooperate. Frost is a mortal enemy of all New England farmers. Transforming the farmhouse into the harvest home barely three months later, everyone was astounded by what it was producing and equally overwhelmed by the amount of work involved to put it up for the winter. Simple seed lived up to its potential, transforming itself into a resplendent array of fruit and veggies of every hue. Swiss chard, tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, summer squash, butter and sugar corn, sweet peas: variety is the spice of life! A mind-boggling assortment of fresh, delicious food: an incredible accomplishment for a mom. No matter what, their family would eat. It put a mind at ease as she canned and steamed and froze the remains of a day spent picking her fingers stiff and sore. Hard lessons learned: the bountiful harvest required much tending and attention. Snap beans needed to be snapped. Canning is its own daunting task. The girls worked alongside their mother, generously imparting her knowledge.

Because the kids were all in school, including April by the second spring, Carolyn did much of the planting alone. Hour after hour of back-breaking, knee-popping, bending and stooping was spent in solitude, rediscovering the pleasant and not as pleasant sensation of being so close to the essence of life, intermingling with planet Earth. While preparing supple ground to receive plants and seeds alike her slender fingers lingered, passing through cool dirt, breaking up clumps, removing the stumps of acorns staking a claim of their own. Deeply buried by diligent squirrels, the little suckers were taking root. Their destiny was in her hands. Those well-developed enough to find another home were given a second chance at life, to thrive, to become a mighty tree. A gentlewoman thoughtfully put them aside to later transplant into the forest bed. So like the mother, each one of her foundlings given an opportunity to reach full potential. She treated her plants as tenderly as she did her children.

A journey through the darkness beneath her feet would yield more than a

fruitful, opulent garden. She made a thrilling discovery, one warm afternoon, while turning a long row to hoe by hand. Striking something solid, laying her tool aside, reaching beneath the surface, Carolyn presumed she would fetch yet another rock to keep company with hundreds that came before it. Eureka! Instead, the land gave her a gemstone of sorts. There in her hand she held an exquisite artifact, a priceless relic in the form of a hand-struck pewter buckle which once belonged to a leather shoe. Spellbound, Carolyn studied her rare and precious gift from the land. An intriguing object from the past captured her imagination in the present, as a present, instantly lifting her spirits. In that moment she was transported in space, back through time, bewitched by an enchanting garden as it had been, two centuries before. Suddenly, in her mind's eye, she was the woman hovering over the earth, nurturing plants as a leather strap snaps on her shoe and its buckle slips through without notice, buried. Lost and found again. Transfixed by the vision, for a time Carolyn didn't know when, where or who she was in the garden's ancient history. In that moment, she could have been retrieving something she'd lost long ago.

Early June: time to stake the hot spots tomatoes had claimed in late May. They were literally growing like weeds. It was an unusually warm and windy morning. Hatchet in hand, she plunged another wooden stake deeply into the ground, about two feet apart. She expected a lot of her babies and gave them plenty of room to spread out. Soft dirt did not resist her efforts. Pounding the metal to wood, she worked like a man, staking her claim of the land, every precise and powerful strike punctuating her presence. This was HER garden! In time, it would nourish an entire community but it was her baby. Each line measured to exacting standards, each row meticulously planted. Her garden, admired by many, transformed from a vacant plot of land to a piece of living artwork. A wonder to behold. No one had to wonder what made her garden grow. It was obvious to all who witnessed the transformation. Love. It was true love.

Working with her back to the back of the house, Carolyn faced the long, sloping route down to the river. No time set aside for taking in the scenery, she pressed on, head down, nose to the grindstone. Hearing the sound from behind her, carried by the brisk breeze, it was drifting from inside the house.

Stooped over, she slowly twisted her torso around, to listen. It must have been the wind passing through the eaves. Roger was away. The girls were all in school. Not a living soul was in the house. There it was again, carried by the wind, delivering a message. A startled mother stood abruptly at attention the instant she heard the child's cry; a virtual command made for a mother.

"Mama" . . . steeped in desperation, pain and solitude. Sadness. Grief. Loss. Amazing how a single word could communicate pure, raw emotion. "Mama" Carolyn heard the call. She heard the word distinctly, uttered from the voice of a child... a little girl. No question. Her heart leapt. In mere seconds, a rush of adrenaline surged throughout her entire body with a jolt! Every motherly instinct she possessed kicked into high gear. Sensory perceptions were on alert. Remaining completely still and silent, she listened to the pitiful moaning, the sound of a little girl in terrible pain. Awestruck, Carolyn felt sickened by the pleas, her mournful cry for help. There was no mistaking the haunting sound. It had been reported before, heard by her daughters, coming from inside their rooms. Glancing upward, gazing at the portal into the middle bedroom, it was coming from within a wide-open window in the center of the dormer, overlooking the garden. She heard the wailing of a hopeless child in distress, bereft and weeping, left all alone in the house, beckoning a mother long gone but not forgotten. A shroud of darkness swept over Carolyn. Fade to black. A fainting spell cast from beyond the grave, she collapsed to the ground, losing consciousness... dead to the world.

Carolyn does not know how long she lay prone upon the cool, moist earth that morning. When she finally regained her senses, it was only to discover a serious injury sustained in the fall, or so she presumed. Stretched on her side, a tomato stake protruding from her right hip, her blue jeans were rusty red, saturated with blood to her boots. Overcome by the panic and pain, Carolyn describes her reaction as being in shock. Disoriented, she did not know what to do or where to find help. The sharp point of the stake had impaled her so deeply, it wouldn't budge. The more she tugged, the more it bled. It had apparently struck her with such force; the point went through the thick outer seam on the side of her blue jeans, straight into her hip. With one solid yank accompanied by a mortal scream, Carolyn removed most of it, but the stakes were old, ones she had found discarded in the barn. The wood was rotten. It snapped off; a large shard of it remained lodged in her upper thigh, bleeding profusely. She knew she was in trouble.

There was a cluster of houses nearby, about two hundred yards up Round Top Road. Surely someone in the neighborhood would help her. Hobbling at an urgent pace, as quickly as she could, Carolyn went to the front door of the first house she came to and knocked. Lori's mother, Mrs. George, answered. She saw the wound and went all to pieces. She would not allow Carolyn to cross her threshold, frightened as much by the victim as she would have been by a perpetrator at her door. It was as if she had seen a ghost! No one could fault the frantic woman. It was a shock to her system, a horrible thing to see. Carolyn pleaded with her for some help removing what remained of a bloody shard protruding from her hip. Refusing assistance, anything other than her willingness to call for an ambulance, their traumatized neighbor was unable to overcome her own fears of the farm and its "occupants" in order to help extricate the intrusive wood from Carolyn's flesh. It was out of the question. She began sobbing at the sight of it and then she closed the door.

Returning home, anxious to tend to the gruesome wound before the girls arrived from school, Carolyn drew herself a bath, carefully peeling the denim away from a gaping hole in her hip. It was a repulsive sight. Climbing slowly into the steaming water, as hot as she could tolerate, Carolyn gently lowered her torso as tears poured down her face, unbridled cries of pain escaping her quivering lips. She appeared to be swimming in a pool of blood; the residual coating on her body blended with what kept seeping through an open wound. The puncture was deep, perhaps an inch and a half or more, with another half an inch of wood protruding above the surface of the skin. A severe injury, it required medical attention. A doctor with sterile instruments needed to probe it to remove jagged fragments of the offending object, as quickly as possible, before infection had a chance to set in. It was not to be. Roger had planned to be away for at least a week and left his wife with twenty-five dollars in cash, for emergencies . . . the meager amount, inadequate even by 1972 standards. It certainly would not cover the costs associated with a trip to the hospital. No. Carolyn was left to her own devices and she knew it, having earlier declined the offer of a call for help. Though not in the budget, it qualified as an emergency.

Pervasive despair, a painfully real sense of lack and deprivation staked its claim beside a dreadfully injured, emotionally battered woman who thought she was alone, steeping in the bloody brew... a bitter cauldron of discontent. Unfortunately, hot water caused the opposite effect intended; her tender flesh

reacted by swelling. Carolyn had hoped the heat would draw the object out. Instead, her skin appeared to pucker up, sucking the fragment further inside the hole rather than expelling the tip of the spear. After five days of constant care and attention, while sitting in an intensely hot bath, her body finally rejected the piece of wood. It suddenly shot out of her hip, as a projectile, from beneath a flap of overlapping skin torn open during impact. The worst of her ordeal was over, even though it took weeks for the exposed puncture to completely close. Not a mortal wound but a wounded mortal, to be sure, Carolyn gingerly nursed the point of impact. Roger arrived a day or so after the extraction to find his wife limping and healing and wholly pissed off, with a sordid story to tell.

Believe it or else! An origin of a wound inflicted while gardening remains a mystery. Unless a physicist would explain how such a thing could happen, she'll continue to believe as she does: it was no accident... not a coincidence. There was a malfeasance afoot, a deliberate intention to injure. She feels it in her gut as she once felt it in her hip, to the bone. Carolyn well remembers how awful it was, the incessant, throbbing pain endured, how much it bled. Whatever caused the incident, its effects on the woman were as profound as permanent. She believes the only natural explanation is utterly implausible; she'd collapsed onto a tomato stake that had already been pounded into the ground, buried at least a foot, maybe as much as eighteen inches deep. It would have had to flip up out of the ground then fly up into the air, spin into a vertical position then plunge back to Earth with significant velocity; the force necessary to impale her body, nearly two inches deep, through a thick side seam of heavy denim blue jeans. Nothing could explain the perfectly square hole in the ground left behind where the stake had been impaled; dirt undisturbed, as if pulled straight out then plunged into her. Taking a moment to pause and reflect, she cannot help but wonder if someone was trying to make a point or stake a claim of their own. Based on what was yet to come, Carolyn wonders if she was the claim staked, stalked by a woman not of this world.

Convinced of the nefarious nature of this bizarre event, evil incarnate responsible for the brutal attack, she is too pragmatic a person to discount or dismiss the remote possibility she is dead wrong. If this actually occurred as a freak accident, she could have been killed. Had the tomato stake pierced a

lung or punctured her temple, the vision of a potential disaster is disturbing. Carolyn considers herself a fortunate woman while counting her blessings.

If memory serves, and in some cases it does so too well, Carolyn has no recollection of feeling a presence around her during the rude awakening she suffered... whatever had come was gone... needle and the damage done. If it was a threatening message, it was straight to the point. The memory of the incident spooks her still. Carolyn struggled to comprehend the true nature of the dangerous encounter. She finds it far more plausible that this occurrence was supernatural phenomenon; perhaps as punishment for the presumptuous mistress of the house, staking a claim where she didn't belong. Intimidation tactics as an overt threat issued. A promise made as a cryptic voice heard or a contemptuous message received by its intended victim? The startled mother still remembers the call of a little girl coming from the eaves of a not-so-vacant farmhouse.

Carolyn's garden was resplendent, a wonder to behold. She still feeds a neighborhood. Having bid a not-so-fond farewell to New England long ago, forsaking its thick, rich black dirt, she now works diligently to replicate it in Georgia, augmented by mixing bags of manure and topsoil into red clay and sand by hand, preparing the ground to receive seed. At harvest her daughters hear the same words they were weaned on, a super-sensory revisiting of the past, listening as she makes light of time gone by. Her children still gather to learn more about the cosmic secrecy of seed. Leaning over the tomato stakes, cradling the swollen fruit, ripe for the picking, they will linger in the comfort zone to hear the soft voice they've known lifelong, repeating the sage words of advice she has passed to her ancestors: To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven. Carolyn still sings to her girls.

“Affliction comes to us all, not to make us sad, but sober;
not to make us sorry,
but to make us wise; not to make us despondent,
but by its darkness to refresh us
as the night refreshes the day; not to impoverish,
but to enrich us.”
Henry Ward Beecher



~ hallowed ground laying fallow for winter ~

making matters worse

“Every man has his secret sorrows which the world knows not;
and often times we call a man cold when he is only sad.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Always a bit of a rabble-rouser, one way or another, Roger found lights out, nobody home, no one to raise but the dead. He could certainly stir them up! He'd returned to the farm in good spirits, only to find it empty of living souls, save his wife, who he found injured, not quite as cheerful, working out in their garden. Her mood was foul, her mouth more so when she realized he was there. He'd had a lucrative trip, sharing the spoils in the form of a big smile, at least for the moment. Concerned that she was limping, he asked her what was wrong. What was right? Cursing him beneath her breath, the blame game had begun. Using the hoe as a crutch, she hobbled up to the farmhouse without saying a word. Once in the kitchen, Carolyn slowly lowered a flimsy fleece, the softest fabric she found to cover a wound while working in dirt. Better safe than sorry. Removing a bandage, Roger had a few choice words:

“Holy Jesus Christ!” His emphatic prayer issued on her behalf, no doubt. The ultimate flesh wound reared its ugly head, and it was a week (or more) healed when he first saw it. Shocked, stunned into submission for a moment, he did not know what more to say. The eye of the beholder was offended by the sight. He'd cringed, wincing with her as she replaced the gauze bandage, securing it in place with yet another strip of Scotch tape from the sideboard, all she had on hand, serving the purpose well enough. A first aid kit emptied days earlier lay sprawled open on the bathroom shelf, awaiting replacements. It was one of those rare occasions when Roger had been rendered speechless.

Carolyn told the story well. She picked up where he left off, propped up against the old black stove, telling him things he didn't want to know about. After all, if she was right, it meant the spirits could maim and wound mortal souls. He'd refused to go there, and even though he heard her out, in graphic detail, Roger never accepted the notion that this accident was anything other than an awful, eerie, freak accident. His demeanor belied his opinion on the matter. Twisting his lips into a sardonic curl, a gesture with which she was all too familiar, Carolyn accused Roger of being insensitive to her plight, which was not true. He cared. He just didn't believe it happened the way she described it, complicating matters. More than just semantics, there was an

ongoing dispute, a difference of opinion to consider, the basic tenets of cause and effect. Because of her husband's predisposition to argue every point she made since their time together began, Carolyn expected it. Skepticism was his calling card. She tried to explain this encounter as yet another hit and run moment, when the spirits come then go, very quickly, leaving their mark. A wound of this nature was certainly going to leave one hell of a scar behind, inside and out... for life. Finally, punctuating her end of their debate with an exclamation point, as a long piece of wood, Carolyn handed her husband the sliver of the stake that languished in her body for a week. It had dried out by then and was as sharp as a needle at the tip. His wife had been stabbed with a weapon and he knew it in his gut, something he'd failed to admit for thirty years. He had done the math. Calculating the trajectory, velocity it would've needed to attain in order to penetrate the seam of her blue jeans. No way. It would have had to be traveling from too great a distance to do such damage. She had exposed a hole left behind in her hip and the one in her denim jeans, too. It was inexplicable. There was only one logical explanation.

"You fainted. You must have collapsed on top of it."

"Roger, that stake was buried a good eighteen inches into the ground. Go look. I left the hole untouched because I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"No need... . I believe you."

"No, you don't. The hole is clean. It looks like the stake was pulled up, straight out of the ground. If I had collapsed on top of it, the point would not have landed in my hip. It would still be buried. If I fell on it that might have caused it to flip upward out of the dirt. There would have been some sign left behind. It would have disturbed the dirt around the stake. Don't you see?"

"Why didn't you go to a doctor?" Quick change the subject. A flimflam thank you ma'am tactic he'd put to use in the past: a sense of redirection.

"Are you kidding me?" Carolyn's lips were curling in disgust. "You left me with twenty-five dollars; gone for more than a week. I ran out of tape the first day and this piece of gauze was the last one I plastered on, yesterday! I can't even walk, let alone drive a car to go get what I need... even if I could, how would I pay for it? Any other questions?" Mt. Vesuvius had nothing on Carolyn when she had a point to make. On point, she was not done with him yet. "Roger, you didn't even know I was in trouble. How could you know? You never called home, not once." She blew her stack. With fire in her eyes, flame-throwing daggers in his direction, the time had come to cut and run.

She would have preferred to plunge the suspicious stake into his cold, hard heart, though she was willing to settle for running him off. Acting out, in pure frustration, Roger emptied his pockets of cash, throwing it on the table. Then he hit the door. Carolyn glared at him as he stomped off, contemptuous of her mortal adversary, the man she'd married. All of his clothes were still packed in the car. Hit the road! It was his fault, all of it. Point... counterpoint.

But it could not have been all of it, Carolyn thought. Roger would never leave himself destitute the way he had so often left her. Never known to be a penniless man, she knew it meant there was more money than just what he'd scattered across the kitchen table. It had to be elsewhere; out of sight... she thought she'd go out of her mind with rage, wondering where he had stashed the cash. As squeaky brakes on a school bus broke the speculative spell and kept her from conjuring anymore worst case scenarios, from the sound of it, there was room for improvement everywhere in her world, even beneath the seats her children occupied on Bus #10. Fired up, ready to roll, Carolyn was on the phone with the transportation company before her kids hit the door, brakes fixed by the following day. Piling into the kitchen, ravenous as usual, the girls began foraging for food while their mother intimidated some poor man on the other end of the line. Satisfied she had made her point, repairs promised, she hung up the telephone, properly greeting her daughters as they passed a box of cereal around. Deciding not to tell them that their father had already come and gone from the premises, she joined them at the table. No need to inform or disappoint them. His absence was nothing unusual. Ya get used to it. That is why Carolyn was so surprised to hear his booming voice behind her while she worked in the pantry, hardly music to her ears. She'd thought she was free of him, at least for awhile. What was he doing? Carolyn listened up. She'd heard it and there was music in the air; the sounds of her children greeting their daddy. It softened her stance a bit. His arms were full of paper bags, each one with a name written on it. Handing them over to his girls, they were shocked to find what each contained: girl stuff! He had never done it before. Nail polish and hand cream, make-up remover, hair barrettes, and a sample perfume for each of his little ladies (the ones who preferred to hang from trees) as Carolyn watched on in stunned silence. How incredibly thoughtful of him. It had to take some time to make the selections he did, matching hair bows to an eye-color, choosing the sweetest scent for April, something musky for Nancy. Daddy had been to the Chepachet Pharmacy!

Eureka! Like striking gold itself... in the form of gold-foil chocolate coins!

As shocked as the girls had been, Carolyn figured he was gone, if not for good, at least for the time being. Cautiously approaching his wife, taking her temperature from a safe distance, the core had cooled. Handing her a bundle of flowers, then one overstuffed bag crammed with anything and everything she could possibly need to fill up a heart or a first aid kit, she smiled. She did not want his sympathy but needed the medicine, accepting it graciously.

"Look, mommy! Daddy brought all of us our own Whitman's Samplers!" Nancy was beside herself with glee. Chris was as delighted by the pretty box as she was by what came inside; a little something to keep her trinkets in.

Tempted to remind them that candy would rot their teeth right out of their pretty little heads, it hardly seemed the time to state the obvious.

"I knew you were holding back on me." Carolyn could not help herself. It just came naturally.

"I should have called home." Roger hung his head. This was the closest his wife would ever come to a full-blown admission of guilt, or an apology. He didn't mean to be an ass. Couldn't help himself... it just came naturally.

By the end of that evening, all was forgotten... but never really forgiven. The lone victim had suffered far too much to ever forget her predicament and its aftermath. For better or for worse, for richer or poorer; nothing had really changed between them. Typical... so like her husband to make matters worse then try to make it all better by making amends with one kind gesture. She mustered some gratitude but the fact remained, no matter what Carolyn said, he had to counter it with his differing opinion. Point... counterpoint. It was almost like a game. Jeopardy. Their whole family was in jeopardy. Nobody could provoke him with greater ease than his wife. It seemed as though both of them were always right on the verge of picking a fight. As usual their children chose to ignore a residual tension which lingered in the air. Instead, they nibbled on candy and filled their home with a variety of fragrances that thankfully did not clash as they laughed and played dress up in the bathroom. Carolyn watched on while soaking in the tub, attempting to heal one of the wounds inflicted. She closed her eyes, revisiting an event that brought her to the knees, begging God for help she could not find anywhere else. Studying the hole in her hip, Carolyn was quite certain it had been no accident. Certain she'd been deliberately targeted by a force of evil with malicious intentions

she knew the worst of it was over. Eventually it would heal; the pain would gradually subside. As for her emotional scars, they proved to be permanent. Feeling especially soft-hearted toward the five tomboys trying to be ladylike, Carolyn kindly suggested they were free to use her cosmetics. At least they would have a great day, one to remember for the rest of their lives. For these children, a day filled with light and the love of their parents. It mattered.

“Life is short and we have never too much time
for gladdening the hearts of those who
are traveling the dark journey with us.

Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind.”

Henri Frederick Amiel

in the closet

“When you close your doors, and make darkness within,
remember never to say that you are alone, for you are not alone; nay,
God is within, and your genius is within.
And what need have they of light to see what you are doing?”
Epictetus

April had a series of experiences at the farm, some she never shared with anyone. It was a private matter so she kept it that way for almost forty years. Only recently has she divulged the relationship which so profoundly affected her life. It was difficult for her to do so because what happened to April was decidedly different than anything else happening with any other members of the family. She defended her privacy, and that of the boy she had befriended, with silence, the only way she knew to protect both of them from scrutiny.

When the Perrons moved to the farm in January of 1971, April was still just a little bit of a thing, only five years old. Nobody knew at the time what the place held in store for the family. Of course, none of them knew about the spirits or anticipated supernatural activity of any kind. The thought had not even occurred to anyone, having had no experiences of this nature prior to their arrival. It was the stuff of scary movies and grim fairy tales. As far as Roger and Carolyn were concerned, the two pragmatic, reality-based parents were preoccupied, worried about those mundane yet important things in life, like registering the girls for school and unpacking multitudes of boxes. They thought of little else than getting settled. Nobody realized what was going on in the upstairs closet, from the inception, as a slightly neurotic attachment in the making, a bond forged for life and afterlife.

As the youngest child, April was the most malleable, highly susceptible to omnipresent forces in their farmhouse. Her innocence, that certain sweetness she possessed was quite enticing to mortal and immortal alike. Little wonder it was an invitation to interactions of the supernatural persuasion. Reclusive by nature, she loved to play alone, as long as it included access to all the toys while her sisters were away at school. April hoarded them, not selfishly, not by any means; her exceedingly generous spirit persists, to her own detriment. She is still one of those “give you the shirt off her back” folks. She’d always

enjoyed gathering the Little People together, a complete assortment of trolls and a regimen of ghostly-glow-in-the-dark finger puppets. She built an entire community, along with many amenities, using Legos to construct the shelter, Lincoln Logs for the barn and a place to park the school bus, a barnyard for the animals and an airstrip for plane landings. She established a hierarchy of toys. The dolls played with the trolls and Little People were in charge of any theatrical productions, putting on plays with the talented finger puppet cast. They directed the show. April's playtime was extremely creative but Carolyn worried when her baby girl spent too much time alone, by choice.

While her mother was preoccupied unpacking and arranging a new house April claimed a space in it for herself. It was a warm and private place in which to explore her great gift of an imagination with no boundaries. This is precisely why she'd withheld vital information from her family. She always presumed they'd think she made it up. A secret she kept for decades was based on fear. Her spiritual encounters were so unusual, so frequent April thought nobody would believe her. Even after everybody else began telling their own tales of supernatural origin, encounters with spiritual beings, April protected her own knowledge from scrutiny, even by those eager to hear about it and willing to accept whatever she had to say. Lorraine Warren knew the child had a secret. April trusted no one. Strangers would certainly never pry this from her lips if she steadfastly refused to tell her mother about what happened in the closet. Confiding in no one, especially those who claimed to help, in her mind, they posed a threat. They offered to make the spirits go away! Her concerns were legitimate. It was precisely their intention. April was unwilling to part with a precious, enduring friendship she had, by that time, nurtured for years.

Within days of moving in, the child had her first encounter with the spirit, an entity she would claim, then covet, one with whom she would develop a profound emotional bond; one so meaningful its mere existence permanently altered her perceptions of life and death. It was a fateful union, haunting her still, within her dreams and memories of a significant friendship. She cannot speak of it without crying, remorseful about how it ended. April considers it to be a childhood tragedy... for two children.

The original center chimney was removed from the farmhouse before the furnace was installed, decades before their arrival. A much smaller chimney replaced it at the time, creating space: the "warm room" off the bathroom on

the first floor, an equally cozy alcove directly above it. Their chimney closet was such an inviting place for this solitary child, though it proved a favorite spot for all the girls at play. They would often cram in together for hours, but when the four eldest were in school, April had it all to herself. She relished those times in total solitude. Tucking up into that gap behind the chimney, she would spread the toys out all around her, building a miniature village, reconfiguring the scene piece by piece. One chilly morning her playtime was interrupted by a timid presence she had already sensed for days. He bravely manifested, pushing an open door a bit wider, the one leading into the eaves. April heard a creaking sound and looked up, instantly noticing a wider crack in the narrow door. She watched with a curiosity reserved for the youngest at heart, as her newfound friend emerged from the ether. He too was a child, no bigger than she, tentatively raising his head from within the dark confines of a cubbyhole in the eaves. He appeared to be frightened, peering in panic into the place with which he seemed familiar, checking it, for safe passage, so it seemed. He didn't appear to see April at first. His facial expression indicated trepidation. He'd been hiding out. Entering cautiously, nervously glancing over his shoulder, the lad looked scared to death. She was not a bit afraid of him. He posed no threat. Quite the contrary, he was the one who appeared to be threatened, evading something or someone from whom he'd escaped. She studied him in silence as he entered the space she willingly shared.

The boy wore a pair of handmade trousers, about three inches too short. A pair of loosely bound brown socks sagged at his ankles inside a ragged pair of shoes. One of the shoes had a distinct hole worn into the side, too small to contain his tiny foot. The shirt was grey flannel with a strip of cloth running down the center of the front, pockets on both sides. His clothing was shabby but he appeared to be clean. He had a full head of very blond hair, so blond it seemed almost white. His eyes were the most haunting aspect of this tortured soul. Pale green, watery, filled with pain: an inexplicable sadness, enough to break a stranger's heart. When he looked up at the child, she acknowledged his presence, his existence, with a smile. The boy crawled out into the closet then he sat down on the floor a few feet away from her, a safe distance from which to observe one another. As April recalls, he was fragile and delicate, perhaps six or seven years old, though extremely frail, obviously a child who had known hunger and deprivation in life. It was difficult for her to describe him, even though her recollections remain quite vivid. As she struggled to

adequately capture his physical essence in words, April used “translucent” to express what proved to be a fascinating visual anomaly to a five year old kid. Unable to see through him, she says he was solid but light, as if he was about to disappear, on the verge of vaporizing into thin air at any moment, but he never did. Instead, he stayed, becoming her companion: playmate. Whenever he came it was for the duration, for as long as a living soul remained at play. Not as vibrant in tone and texture as a mortal being, his coloring was muted but clear. In time he would come to trust her, moving ever closer to her spot behind the chimney. Their interaction was limited in the beginning, based primarily on mutual observation. A willingness to communicate existed between them, even though neither knew how to begin conversation between dimensions. April longed to ask the boy why he was so sad and worried, why he would always look around the way he did before entering their closet. It was a trial. His despair weighed heavily on her. April felt very protective of him, defensive about the lad. It required some time for them to learn how to properly converse together. When their connection was firmly established, it was telepathic in nature, because Nature always finds a way.

It was a heart wrenching process for April to describe her encounters with a little lost soul. Because it was so difficult to talk about she decided instead to write about her recollections. After so many decades had passed, anyone would assume that time would taint or diminish her memory but April insists her vision of him remains vivid and pure, an image she could not ever forget. She spent so much time in his presence, studying his expressions, the details of him, marveling at his wide-eyed wonder he has become a permanent part of her consciousness, etched in stone, not simply a vague childhood memory.

As for the pain, it comes not in recalling the past but in reliving it, if only briefly. The emotion it still evokes is the natural consequence of revisiting a place in the country, re-exploring this sad and tragic loss of life involving the demise of an innocent child. It never mattered to her that his death occurred well before her life began. Simpatico: they shared acute awareness, a mutual vulnerability. Both sensed a threat, a suspicion that they were in danger. He was frightened and alone. Without her, he was on his own in the cosmos. This was all that mattered to April. Still raw, she cannot escape the image of him. Time does not heal everything. She will never close the book on this chapter.

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.”

John 4:18

The following is an excerpt from a letter April drafted on January 12, 2008:

"His name is Oliver Richardson. He never spoke to me, but in some way he was able to communicate without speaking. He conveyed his name to me silently, or I named him. I cannot explain it but I know it was his name. He was always upstairs in the chimney closet. To my knowledge this is where he dwells and he never ventures beyond that room. He hides behind the little crawl space door. Whenever I would go upstairs to play, he would cautiously peek out as if to see if it was safe. He emerged tentatively, looking around again, before he would settle beside me on the floor. He felt comforted by my presence. I know he did. In some ways we'd comforted each other. He never participated in my play. However, he did pick up the Little People and stared at them, fascinated. He would turn them around and around in his hands and he'd look at them from every angle. Whenever he left me, he would always go back inside the crawlspace into the eaves, as cautiously as he had emerged, first peering inside and then carefully looking back behind him, as if to avoid being followed. I know he was always hiding in there, so afraid of something. I'm not sure of what or more likely, whom. He never did disclose that to me. What he did share was the fearfulness that still embodied his existence. He has resided there a long time and I am sure he is still at the farm. He is all alone. He has been abandoned, forsaken long ago. I know in my heart that his short life was tragic. As a child myself, I could feel his fright, the pain he was in, and all I could do was keep him company. Because he had chosen me, I felt compelled to protect him. I told no one except Cathi and that was many years later. As I lost my own innocence, as my identity became altered with age, I too abandoned him. Over the years it has caused me sadness and regret. Nancy had, (without anyone's permission), given all the closet toys to a needy family in the community. Her heart was in the right place but it broke my heart to come home one day and have all the objects from my childhood completely gone, as if they had never existed at all. I mourned that loss and never returned to the chimney closet. Nancy did not realize what she had done. While generously helping the living, she had inadvertently robbed her own sister of what remained of a childhood, and had in the process, deprived two lonely souls of the toys they both loved and shared. They were all Oliver had. I was all Oliver had and then I went away. I was lost to him and he was lost to me. When I was older and moved into the middle bedroom, he would often crack the closet door then peek in, just to let me know he was still there, and I would ignore him. As I grew even older, he would, at times, gaze into Nancy's room from the same adjoining closet. We were rowdy teenagers then, doing things teenagers do. I would notice him occasionally watching me through a crack in the door. It was during these unwelcome visits his woeful countenance would transform into an expression of uncertainty, disapproval and disdain when I would fail to acknowledge him. None of my sisters could see him so I ignored him. I am not sure why. I think it was because he represented a time of my life that was lost. The age of innocence and time we shared together was one in which he was trapped, destined to remain forever, a time I'd wanted to keep but could never again recapture. I feel certain the lifetime of the boy I knew as Oliver Richardson was cut short by some kind of violence, abuse or neglect. The awful truth of his brief life was bad enough but the real tragedy is his eternal captivity. He remains a prisoner in a house which offers him nothing but fear, loneliness and isolation. I know the feeling and I know in my heart, he remains a victim of his own untimely death. I

still mourn his loss and always will.”

April rarely speaks of Oliver now and has said all she intends to relate on the subject of a little boy lost. What troubles her most deeply is a belief that she abandoned him when she was all he had in this world or the next, adding insult to mortal injury resulting in immortality. One thing she readily admits; April loved Oliver Richardson. She still does, to such an extent she cannot heal a wound or relinquish the burden she has carried lifelong. His presence will haunt her forever, a profound pain which stays with a soul for eternity.

“If we have the opportunity to be generous with our hearts,
ourselves, we have no idea of the depth and
breadth of love’s reach.”

Margaret Cho

poetry and prose

“Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance.”
Carl Sandburg

Prose may read as poetry and poetry may at times appear as prose, though they are related only through marriage to the word. A poem is finite in form, deliberately so, utilizing specific language, thoughtfully chosen, composed to inspire a mood or to evoke a certain response from the reader. Whereas, a good book will transport the reader to another place, telling a story in its own time, poetry is timeless thus maintaining an infinite, ethereal quality, bearing its own singular gift of interpretation for every being whose eyes intermingle with its intrinsic meaning. Should the meaning remain elusive, all the more reason to revisit its words with purpose, seeking to discover what they reveal over time as we grow into them. The enticing pages of a book are the virtual destination: Elsewhere. The cherished poem provides a place to stay. While absorbing into the mind, its meaning flows naturally inward, as reflexive as reflective, there to expand inner space, over time. Evolving, as the desire for knowledge couples with a desire to share it, poetry integrates with mind. An intimate bond is established. Chapter and verse, a good book may stay with a reader forever but it does not become a part of the person in the same way a perfectly constructed poem can build a bridge in a human psyche. Unlike a fickle lover, a poem well-loved is destined to remain in heart. It will never leave you. What seems a mutual understanding develops with a natural flow, as each word mingles in tandem with the next, finding its own unique path, en route to the proper place in an ever-expanding consciousness, as the mind wraps itself around a galaxy within a universe. Such is the Nature of poetry.

Carolyn considered the reading of fine literature integral to the education process, the planting of seeds into fertile ground. She'd instilled a love of the written word in each of her children, expressing a visceral desire, a need for them to understand, in its highest form, literature as a mortal manifestation of the creative life force. Reading was an imperative, as a spiritual endeavor.

It took time to mentally and emotionally process what was happening in the farmhouse, to accept things as they were or try to comprehend why. The children were evolving, growing up, in the midst of the madness, wondering how they fit into the scheme of things. Unbeknownst to their mother, each of the girls was keeping a journal or composing music, writing down deep, dark

words to describe their existence, expressing themselves in a wide variety of ways which would prove to be insightful and likewise therapeutic. If Carolyn didn't realize what gifts her daughter's possessed, she was presented with the evidence. Cindy approached her mother in the parlor, handing her a crinkled sheet of lined paper torn from a notebook. The presentation wasn't flawless, but the words... perfect.

In the purest
sign of dusted madness
in common wisdom we sit
in sadness
with careless grief
we compel in badness
We can't feel the anger
that walks beside us
we hide from pain which
often stalks us
we perform
wisely
as we tip our glasses
with our elegant style
life slips and passes.

Cindy Perron Age 12

Poetry is perfectly capable, by means neither staid nor static, but fluid, of transporting souls to the inner sanctum, the recesses of a subconscious mind, where the garden grows. Reading is consummate to mind-melding with the author, thereby traveling conjoined on a holy, enlightening journey. Carolyn practically worshipped the written word, instilling a love of fine literature in her offspring by way of repetition. She would weave her favorite quotations in conversation where applicable or recite poetry or read aloud to the ladies on a regular basis. She would scrounge up the money to buy them whatever they wanted to read. Their house was filled with treasured books; volumes waiting to be discovered as her children matured: all of the classics. Trips to the library or a second-hand bookstore provided an endless array of thoughts or concepts to explore. The love of knowledge is the greatest gift any parent can bestow upon a child. It is a way of giving them the whole world. It is the means of growing the mind. Carolyn read aloud words her daughter wrote, haunting words which touched her heart, recognizing the underlying premise

revealed. This garden was beginning to bear the fruits of her labor of love.

“The only thing that can save the world is the reclaiming
of the awareness of the world. That’s what poetry does.”

Allen Ginsberg

chants and incantations

“My soul is full of whispered song; / My blindness is my sight;
/ The shadows that I feared so long /
Are all alive with light.”
Alice Cary Dying Hymn

Words are powerful weapons and glorious gifts. Language is a marvelous invention, a wonder to behold. There's intrinsic beauty in rhythmic repetition of a lyrical verse, to which human beings respond, as the infant will gravitate to her own mother's heartbeat. Enchanting spells are cast when one is lost in mantra; whispering of words or shouting them to Heaven, it matters not. The sensation is identical, sometimes bordering on intense, an emotional (if not delirious) state-of-being. Described as transformative spiritual experience, an old-fashioned Southern revival routinely produces altered states of mind, one good example of the phenomenon. As cobras can be hypnotized, so too can a mere mortal succumb, becoming mesmerized by what one sees and hears, as a function of the senses. An old song from childhood transports us back to that precise time and place in which we heard it first. Peaceful prayers will calm a collection of spirits in rebellion and any good bombastic sermon will bring the faithful to their feet, drop them to the knees... stir them to the soul. As human beings tend to express our power in numbers, gathering in groups, we utter words in unison, that God Almighty force to be reckoned with, for good or evil intent. From dancing in trances to swooning in choirs or praying from pulpits, words cast en masse, cast a spell... like magic. A form of magic to be sure, as an illusionist draws an audience into the fold, compelling them to BELIEVE! Yet, there are times when it is not real at all, when their eyes deceive them. Just a trick of the trade: an illusionist, playing with fire and brimstone.

“Beseech thee, leave! Afore ye go, beware the flame, the fiery glow.

Was mistress once afore ye came and mistress here will be again.

Will drive ye out with fiery broom.

Will drive ye mad with death and gloom.

Was mistress once afore ye came and mistress here will be again.

Will drive ye mad with death and gloom.

Will drive ye into Satan's tomb.

Thus has been spoken, thus has been read.
Take leave of this place or ye too will be dead."

Woe be unto them. Though a few of the words have been lost to time and memory, an elaborate incantation chanted by spirits remains as haunting as it was on the fateful morning she first heard it, at dawn. Carolyn is unwilling to undergo further hypnosis to recapture it in full and who could blame her? An unnecessary sacrifice as far as her family is concerned; the ample impression left behind is sufficient, the essence of the message received. Interpretation is the key to comprehension. When Carolyn repeated these words to Roger, his initial response expressed as rage: "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" She had found the statement to be rather self-evident: Get the hell out! The message began to take root in her consciousness. Granted, the words spoken were compelling, delivered in unison as an explicit threat indelibly imprinted on her mind. She heard menacing words describing her demise, the ominous intonations as sinister intimations: a promise of impending doom. This explicit warning was drummed in syncopation; incessant pounding of broomsticks on a hardwood floor left an impression. It played over again and again in her mind, tumbling about like two loose dice in a dangerous game of chance. It was not a game. No chance. A threat issued. A promise made.

The children were petrified. They would huddle together at night (usually in Andrea's bed) to say their prayers, as one. It was comforting, especially to Cindy. This went on for several months. Andrea kept it simple, repeating the words she'd learned in catechism; a steadfast hope between sisters that they would be safe for the night and would wake to see the light of day, at dawn.

Now I lay me down to sleep ~ I pray the Lord my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake ~ I pray the Lord my soul to take

Pretty morbid imagery by any standard; a lot for a child to absorb, though it brought each of them a sense of peace in the midst of turmoil and an anguish they'd been forced to endure. From the beginning an uncanny sense of their situation consumed Cindy. She was the one who sought assistance from the

highest authority. Not for a moment of her life has she doubted the existence of God; a certain knowing, from experience. She would help her sisters seek refuge from evil spirits within the divine realm of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bend and stretch . . . reach for the stars
there goes Jupiter . . . here comes Mars

Kids are naturally indoctrinated from birth to audibly recognize and verbally identify repetitious phrases. They absorb everything they are exposed to then respond in kind. It is how babies learn. Patterns they pick up become deeply rooted in their little brains then grow with them; an amazing feat for ones so young. Mary Mary quite contrary how does your garden grow? They'll feel the rhythm of nursery rhymes from infancy, comforted by words which seem to go together, sung by their mothers late into the night. It all gets processed. Romper Room. Sesame Street. Everything has its impact teaching children in a series of repetitious phrases and then they go to church! Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. There they learn to pray, in larger gatherings, to speak the word of God aloud, in one voice as worship of the deity, practicing the presence. Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Dear Lord: a communiqué, one made not in solitude, as a private conversation, but by chanting sacred words as a cluster of souls lining pews like rosary beads.

Cindy was all too familiar with this ancient technique, having repeatedly heard many speak as one to announce the presence of seven dead soldiers in her bedroom wall. It was during these times she would've preferred to return to their inadequate house in the suburbs, back to the swing set they had been forced to leave behind. She'd prefer to be swinging on a star . . . at least there was nothing spooky or sad about that place. The child resented her childhood being interrupted. There she had been carefree. All of the girls have precious memories of swinging and singing together. When they were small the lyrics were as innocent a collection of words as the law allowed. It was long before the time when filth was a "normal" part of the language. On top of spaghetti, all covered with cheese I lost my poor meatball when somebody sneezed. It was a time of innocence, when children could be children, when along came a spider who sat down beside her was not the theme for a horror movie, but was instead, the simple rhyme to teach kids the facility with which language

cooperates to please the senses. As they grew, twinkle twinkle little star how I wonder where you are evolved. Over time, from the influence of others in the neighborhood, the sweet song went street and became twinkle twinkle little bat how I wonda where you at? Up above the atmosphere drinking Narragansett beer? Of course, they had no idea what they were singing, until their mother intervened! The beer thing made them giggle. As for the rest of it, they were unaware of the social implications and racial undertone or its intended target; variations on the theme, nothing more. So, how did they learn those words? By repetition on a playground. Hocuspocusdominocus a favorite magical word from a childhood hijacked by destiny or fate. But they have their undisturbed memories, as well.

In derby town in derby town the streets are made out of glass, and if you do not watch your step you'll fall right on your hocus pocus dominocus so ask me no more questions . . . I'll tell you no more lies . . . perhaps a moral message contained within the lyrics, though no one can recall. The song was long and elaborate; rather sophisticated for a simplistic genre. But then Mary Poppins came along. There was something about Mary... that name keeps poppin' up! Enthralled by her character, the girls learned every word of the musical film, especially her splendid use of the super word; the calafragalistic one... a far cry from the time when there were ten in the bed and the little one said roll over . . . roll over . . . so they all rolled over and one fell out. From the rhymes designed to teach kids to count their toes... one piggy wiggy two piggy wiggy and the little one went wewewe all the way home, to a valid question posed: how does your garden grow? There are few answers in life but Mary knew how to grow her garden, with silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row . . . it became far more a matter of where. In Cumberland, Carolyn became quite contrary, seeking out an answer to one of life's most pressing questions, where to raise her children. She was the one who wanted a place in the country, a sacred spot of earth on which to grow her garden. Once she found it she almost lost her family, questioning a possible loss of her mind.

They did not want to be robbed of their childhood. As questions mounted, becoming more dark and ominous by the day and night, resentment began to brew in the cauldron of discontent. At some point, it was bound to boil over. This is precisely what was happening to Cynthia and four siblings who were learning things they did not want to know. How? Exposure and repetition.

Countering darker questions, they kept asking their own in songs of light: Would you like to swing on a star? Carry moonbeams home in a jar? Yes.

They all gather together now as a congregation of five, to reminisce about the holy land. What began as a natural childhood and later transformed into a supernatural upbringing they experienced as one was the result of a move to a place in the country. They sing happily, as they once did, swinging as high in the sky as the Law of Gravity allows: Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars. Let me see what life is like on Jupiter and Mars. They learned words are something sacred. Even the most trivial have meaning. For good or evil, the word is powerful, though not powerful enough to keep the demons away from the other side of death's door, darkening by the day and night. Mrs. Warren taught the girls words for protection that she appeared to have the utmost faith and confidence in but they didn't work; words meant to establish an instant spiritual connection in a crisis, to beckon assistance from beyond. Cindy heeded the call as a warning to all, and used specific language assigned with purpose and reason. Yet, when that crisis came upon her, these holy words proved wholly unsuccessful when summoned up on her behalf.

In the name of Jesus Christ, go back to where you came from.

There was a key ingredient missing in this recipe for disaster as sacred words memorized then repeated as the mantra they were intended to become had no particular sentiment attached. Essentially her heart wasn't in it. She had been too busy trying to remember the precise series of words and, in the process, forgot to feel them. However, when Cindy began to beg, to plead and cry for mercy and relief, she meant every word. Oh, God! The child learned how to ask the right questions. Nothing she ever learned in church or anywhere else taught her to say it with feeling; something Cynthia had to grasp on her own. Word has it, the family that prays together, stays together. All five sisters huddled and cuddled in bed, sharing space and the heartfelt belief they would be protected from whatever might come for them in the dark of night, from dusk 'til dawn. Legitimate concerns. Pray. Deliver us from evil. Please.

Is there really power in numbers? Would it apply to something beyond an army marching in unison to a cadence being drummed into their heads or is a solitary figure connecting with her maker equally as potent? Witches conjure

powerful spells, gathering together in covens, thus increasing the potency of their chants and incantations. Is it what happened to Carolyn? She'd become a virtual centerpiece in a circle of immortal souls who'd come to threaten her as evil incarnate, banging their broomsticks in cacophonous, unholy cadence. Was God aware of their antics? Thy kingdom come Thy will be done Had they been sent as messengers? If so, that was one HELL of an introduction to Heaven. She was not happy to make their acquaintance but remains grateful to this day that help arrived, the direct pleas made of her maker, issued with heartfelt sentiment. If these manifestations of spirit were something wicked, when help arrived in the form of release, it was something sacred. Charmed. A spell cast as a chant, an incantation from beyond the grave was vanquished by a benevolent spirit arriving just in time from somewhere beyond the stars. Best to count those lucky stars as kin! The family that prays together, stays.

“I take as metaphysical poetry that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible
only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling,
or that in which what is
ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought
without ceasing to be feeling.”
T. S. Eliot

~ In memory of Sam Olevson ~

“Death is nothing at all,
I have only slipped away into the next room,
I am I and you are you;
Whatever we were to each other, That we still are.
Call me by my old familiar name,
Speak to me in the easy way which you always used,
Put no difference in your tone,
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.
Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we shared together.
Let my name ever be the household word that it always was.
Let it be spoken without effect, without the trace of a shadow on it.
Life means all that it ever meant,
It is the same as it ever was, there is unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?
I am waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near,
just around the corner.

All is well.” Henry Scott Holland

Canon of St. Paul’s Cathedral London, England



~ I'll be with you in apple blossom time ~

“People only see what they are prepared to see.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

VI. DOWN THE HATCH

“Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you.”

John xii. 35

Dangerous to descend the cellar stairs, to describe them as rickety is only as a kindness extended to the structure as a whole, as a sign of respect. Truth be told, they were certifiable health hazards, reason enough to condemn the place from ground level down. All three entrances were disquieting: the front hallway, the parlor and the scariest of them, the entrance from the woodshed. Even though it was the safest staircase, as well as the widest, it was also the darkest in many ways. That space was charged with negative energy and was naturally avoided by everyone who sensed a supernatural disturbance in the force. It wasn't just the physical dangers associated with old creaky stairs but an implicit threat perceived, with its metaphysical implications. Descending into the pit of hell, perhaps purgatory, going down those stairs meant taking one's destiny into their own hands; at the very least, tempting fate. What was sensed could not be seen. Fear was the most disturbing aspect of any journey below. Behold! The inanimate hazard, a clear and present danger of descent was overshadowed by what only the third eye could perceive. Witnessed by mortal souls through terrified eyes searching in shadows only a body creates, they'd cautiously creep along. Each member of the family would, at one time or another, step into shadows cast by a lone light bulb glaring down a narrow path. Knowing it could buckle and cave in at any moment, they prayerfully pressed on. From grown men to ghosts to little girls, those stairwells bore the weight of the world... and the netherworld... not so rickety, after all.

From the day their family arrived at the farm, the cellar was considered an off-limits area of their farmhouse. It was something beyond dark and creepy! Descending any of the treacherous stairways was a life-threatening excursion and unnerving proposition. Three different doors had one thing in common. Each offered that extreme sport feel of tight rope walking, with no net. Every staircase presented its own hazards and, from the start, kids were encouraged

to avoid them altogether. On those rare occasions when the journey had to be made by necessity, it was navigated with some trepidation, and justifiably so. Having eyes in the back of one's head might have proved beneficial, except for the fact that they never saw it coming, from any given direction. Had the manifestations been consistently solid in form it may have eased the tension as most encounters happened from behind, but they could not fight what they could not see... an unfair advantage in mortal combat with immortal beings. Everyone in the family was touched at one time or another while standing in the cellar. Roger was the favorite son. The rarity was when he'd go down the hatch and was not approached below ground. He insists it was Mrs. Arnold, not Bathsheba, describing her touch as gentle and even seductive. It was no secret to anyone. Whoever she was, she liked the man. Nor did she attempt to hide this time-warped attachment, not even in front of his wife, in their own bed. Roger was the only one who wasn't reluctant to go down into the cellar. He knew she would not hurt him. She posed no threat to him. It was Carolyn who was taking the brunt of her abuse. Once the man of the family began to acknowledge an underground presence in the house, after he'd been touched several times and could deny it no longer, he made friends with her. In much the same way April befriended Oliver, Roger found a companion in her, someone who stood by him literally and figuratively. An odd attachment formed between them, one difficult to describe. It was multi-dimensional.

To deliberately go below was always an intrepid endeavor. The door was cautiously opened, releasing its distinct aroma. Once it permeates the nostrils it heads straight for a memory bank where it is destined to reside lifelong as an unforgettable fragrance. The foundation of their farmhouse was perfectly constructed: a masterwork. Earth, hollowed out then lined with the gigantic stacked slabs of solid granite, dry as a bone, as sprigs of the brittle horsehair protruding from cracked plaster create that spooky three-dimensional effect. Anyone exposed to this cellar never forgets the sensory thrill ride; a greeting extended, its messages received by any time traveler courageous enough to descend an ancient and decrepit staircase too authentically old to replicate.

Every step of every staircase had its own distinctive creak, much like the click of the doors. While shifting stairs beneath the weight of any mortal was unnerving enough, it was nothing compared to the sounds of one aggressive spirit ascending that same staircase. Over time, every member of their family

became familiar with an eerie intrusion and learned what to listen for, how to identify the very specific sounds these spirits made within those stairwells, especially the thoroughly obnoxious sounds emanating from within the belly and bowels of their house. Roger was the one most exposed to the presence in the cellar, as he was their Mister Fix It. When he had no alternative but to repair that furnace or a hot water heater, both fixtures rather conspicuously located down there, he'd bravely descend the rickety set of wooden stairs, his tool box in hand, to begin the arduous task of, once again, saving them a small fortune by salvaging an old piece of equipment which needed to be replaced a full ten years before they'd arrived at the farm. His children recall their father as fearless, though he'll now admit how much it spooked him going down the hatch. If, God forbid, he required an assistant, this too was problematic. "No way! I'm not going down there!" Though the girls were usually anxious to be daddy's little helper, not when it meant going into the cellar. Cindy was always the one to volunteer, fascinated with the place and its many mysteries contained within. According to Cynthia, based on recent reflections, it meant the chance to go exploring... when she felt most safe... a father by her side. She considered it an opportunity instead of a chore.

"Let's take a walk." Down they went, beginning the journey with a click of the door and a tug on the thin cloth cord attached to the lone exposed bulb dangling from the top of the landing. At least three times her weight, Roger's creaking sounded like the footsteps of a giant compared with his daughter's diminutive steps. They remained silent while descended the stairs, listening. Cindy held onto the rail and watched her own shadow keeping pace with her father's image, while wobbly knees and quivering legs threatened to buckle like the wood beneath her feet. Dragging a few fingers across the surface of the stone, the curious child could feel her palm being tickled by the horsehair plaster set in between them, an unusual tactile sensation with which she had become accustomed. Ya get used to it.

Rounding the corner at the bottom of the staircase, Roger grabbed another solitary string swinging from the second bulb hanging over the main beam. There. Let there be light bulb! He began his task while Cindy peered over his shoulder, down through a long dreary corridor, riddled with ancient secrets.

Once her services were no longer required, she began the trek to the other end of a dark cellar, peaking into one room after another, beginning with the

farthest; a built-in root cellar where fruits or vegetables were stored. Though an equally barren bulb hung suspended at the far end of the space, she could not reach it and did not even try. Cynthia was unafraid. Her father's presence sufficiently bolstering her confidence, yet there was something intimidating about the enormous door located at the far end. It was constructed of solid wood, nearly twice the width and height of any standard door: Special order. The monstrosity was practically impossible to open or close. Her dad was the only person with brute strength enough to handle that job, and he too struggled with it, as an adversary. Apparently it had been used as an entrance for livestock. It weighed a ton, perhaps literally so. That woodshed door had captured her attention long before. Cindy was as fascinated as terrified by it, in equal measure. A sense of wonderment drew her to the site and a sense of revulsion repelled her once she had felt a power the child could not discern. Instead, she relied upon her visceral reaction... the sense of a threat... fight or flight mechanisms triggering in her brain, setting her petite feet in motion; an urgent need to flee, to get fast away from whatever it was she perceived as a threat. Emboldened by her father's presence, she'd lingered, to be brazen, if not brave, studying the built-in fruit chute beside the door, probably used for offloading and storage of perishables. While working her way slowly, very methodically back toward her father, Cynthia made one brief "pit" stop after another. The candle room was peaceful, serene when compared to the space beside it, meat cleavers hanging from the rafters; ancient tools, hundreds of years old, each as sharp as a razor. Amazing. Roaming along, she entered a room with the well centered in the floor, safely covered with a huge circular slab of granite. Tempting fate, as usual, the inquisitive child stepped onto the well. Instantly, the ground began to tremble. A rock beneath her feet felt as if it was shifting. Her equilibrium disrupted, it was as if she was falling, falling in! As was her way, Cindy's immediate reaction was to draw in a breath then hold it in until the queasy sensation stopped, but it didn't stop. She described this overwhelming feeling as a vibration pulsing throughout her entire body, causing her to quake. All sensory perceptions become immediately skewed, producing a feeling of being drawn in then down by an intense and powerful force, an elemental tug or some gravitational pull. She well remembers the pure panic she associated with the moment when the little girl realized she could not move! Whether due to fearfulness or perhaps a wicked spell cast upon her, again, the child could not move and could not speak... to call for

help. It was as if she was stuck in a time warp, magnet to steel. Her father was merely a few feet away but she could not let him know that she was in trouble. Cindy was in the bubble. She knew from experience, even if she cried out, he would not be able to hear her, yet she was not alone.

By the time this manifestation occurred, the child was well-versed in the routine. Curiosity can be a blessing and a curse. In this case, it had taken her where she did not belong yet it taught her things she needed to know. There was something about that well. It was somehow connected with spirits; a concept Cindy did not give much credence or consideration at the time. No one in the family had pursued this concept due to the implausible nature of it. After all, how could the spirits have had anything to do with well water? It made no sense at all and yet, there she stood, sensing the shattering presence shuddering throughout her entire body. She remained rigidly in place, scared out of her mind. During those few terrifying moments the child, in a bit over her head, began having visions of being surrounded by blood-streaked walls. Overcome by the nausea often associated with vertigo, Cindy felt woozy and weak, as if about to topple over. Her body began to tremble uncontrollably. Her teeth began to chatter. Describing this as becoming sealed within a solid block of ice, she readily recalls the helplessness then hopelessness of feeling locked in the force field: no exit. She prayed to God. All vibrations abruptly ceased, subsiding as a sudden jolt of stillness. The bubble had burst. Release! Cindy leapt from the well stone then ran straight to her father. In the severity of the circumstance, during a tumultuous ordeal, a little girl no older than ten at the time had retained the presence of mind to practice the presence of God. Flying from the well room like a captive bird escaping from its cage, Cindy gratefully acknowledged her liberator on the way out. Every time she found herself caught in a precarious position she relied upon her faith, the steadfast belief that good would prevail and God would provide a way out! Not once was she left unattended in a crisis. Traveling at the speed of light warp factor six, the girl was overcome with what some would presume was an irrational fear that the stone would suddenly shift and she would take the plunge, an ill spill, down the hatch. She knew better. Anything was possible at the farm.

Perhaps she startled him. Maybe he had already been spooked prior to her arrival by his side. In either case, Roger jerked his head around, the terrified expression on that face, in his eyes, indicative of far more than her presence, as if he did not even recognize his own... as if she was the ghost in the hole!

Though he made no disclosure of his own, Cindy knew something happened, and not just to her. Whatever it was had successfully drained all of the blood from Roger's hairline to his neck. His wild, deeply set eyes appeared crazed and glazed over, in fear. One glance at her father sent Cynthia racing up the stairs in search of the creature comfort to be found in her mother's arms. Her father frightened her more than the cold encounter in the well room. In spite of its obvious enticements to wonderment, Cindy declined invitations to visit the cellar for months afterward. Dad had to find a new daddy's helper as the troops were thinning rapidly. Andrea refused the excursion, though she was always polite about it. Insubordinate? Maybe. Her diplomatic skills were put to good use. April was too young to ask. Chris would disappear as discreetly as a spirit, so Nancy would be the one left holding the bag of tools. In time, the identical force which had expelled Cynthia from the cellar drew her back down the hatch again. Its call was irresistible. Its grasp was undeniable. God would not forsake her along the path on an incredible journey of discovery.

There was hardly any decent reason to go into the cellar other than for the breakdown of equipment, which for some mysterious reason, only seemed to happen when Roger was home. Nobody ever knew when a treacherous set of stairs might collapse beneath their feet, though they never actually did fail. Then there was the necessity of having to round the coal black blind corner at the bottom of the stairs. It required a leap of faith. This, in order to turn on an inadequate second light which was supposed to illuminate the vacuum of darkness outstretched like a tunnel burrowed into the ground. It should have been deterrent enough for any mortal of sound mind, any living soul with a healthy respect for the dead. In retrospect, the family concedes a point made long ago. No matter how the girls tried to avoid cellar doors, no matter how often the man of the house was called upon to repair the hot water heater or the furnace, events would conspire to drag them down there, for one reason or another. Sam was the first to suggest then later insist that these objects, the mechanical devices were metaphysically tampered with as a shock to the heating system. Devices were destroyed, mechanisms were manipulated. He believed proper functioning was somehow being deliberately interrupted by a spirit, so to entice the living down among the dead. In fact, he attributed all

subterranean activities to an entity known as Bathsheba and may well have been correct in his assessment of the situation. As infrequently as these trips occurred, no one ever emerged from a cellar door feeling unchanged by the experience. Even if nothing happened at all, nobody escaped unscathed. It was a queer sensation, as if someone pulled a plug and drained all the energy from whoever braved the trip. Roger would go down alone although the girls generally traveled in pairs, if not a pack. Comparing this quizzical sensation these many years hence, it is agreed upon. No matter what energy reserves a human being possessed when entering the cellar, little was retained upon their return from that dark pit; a hole in the ground. It was usually time for a nap, an urgent need to restore a vexed mind and recharge the body's battery, as it was inevitable sucked dry by something!

At the time they shared an unspoken assumption. Fatigue caused by stress was simply explained, an ensuing exhaustion, a symptom of a sense of relief. The fear-based excursion always created a heightened sense of awareness, an increased level of anxiety among everyone present in the house, even if they were not going along on a wild ride to the underworld. Once anxiety released its grip, an equivalent reduction in the stress made them feel utterly depleted. A cause and effect unquestioned, recovery was usually as quick as a cat nap. It never became a point of contention. It followed logically. Common sense.

They were wrong. In hindsight, peering yet again into the deepest, darkest recesses of mortal memory they've since seen the light. They got sucked dry. After all, the cellar felt totally creepy long before anyone realized their house was haunted. Children who were normally willing to do whatever was asked of them balked at any request to enter the inner sanctum unaccompanied, just another example of the new paranormal. Request denied. On those occasions when Andrea was asked to escort one of her sisters into the cellar, the simple question posed would prompt internal conflict. Mom's suggestion was never rejected outright, but an element of dread went along for the trip. If it came from her mother she would reluctantly agree to go; if it came from her father, he was on his own. Her angst: that cerebral argument conducted in silence in a moment of pre-panic, her brain would exclaim: "NO! Don't go!" Her heart, heaving a heavy sigh: "Please don't ask me. GO! So mom won't have to go. Do it." Protective instincts liberally dispersed amongst females in the family, responsibilities were shared and burdens were lifted. Carolyn was a magnet, a target of supernatural activity. Everyone knew it; her exposure to the cellar

was limited, as a stand-in, at the ready in the wings. Without anyone having to say a word about it, kids did their best to keep their mother out of harm's way whenever possible. If that meant going down to get the damn potatoes (and why exactly did Roger have to buy them in fifty pound bags anyway?) then it meant going down to get the damn potatoes. A root cellar, uniformly maintained at fifty-three degrees Fahrenheit, it was perfect for the storage of perishables. Unfortunately it was also located at the farthest end of the cellar. Navigating the space as quickly and efficiently as possible was their ultimate goal: to get the potatoes then get the hell out of there! It was a pure shot of adrenaline, like running with scissors, the hazards posed by scissors not half as dangerous as running with potatoes! At least the scissors could be used as a weapon as self-defense. There was no real defense against what was surreal in the cellar, lurking behind corners, hidden in shadows, inside the crevices and cubbyholes of the underworld. It is impossible to inflict a mortal wound on an immortal soul. Not a fair fight. "You can't really kill what's already dead." Mrs. Warren said so. Their real enemy was a fear of the unknown.

With entrances located in the parlor, the woodshed and the front hallway, it was often difficult to ignore an omnipresent sense of dread about what lay beneath the structure, especially when the doors could open at will, releasing the rising aroma, along with whatever else chose to travel on that draft, as it swept up a stairwell with a vengeance. At times, the scent was intoxicating, like detecting a hint of sweetness in the air, becoming more pungent as they descended the staircase. The slightest whiff of it was enough to startle then stop dead in their tracks, any unsuspecting soul: the pause that refreshes an urgency to run from an out-of-this-world aroma, so to avoid a death-defying trip down the hatch. Enticing, it was, beckoning visitors from above. "No!" Not going into a hole in the ground. "Stop!" What is it that calls as a clarion, summoning the ranks? That's an order, soldier. "Do not obey!" It was not as a suggestion or a request. Christine felt the tug of war and often fought with herself to resist the charge. She recalls, describing the scent of the cellar as a fragrance rather than an odor, as her mother recalls it. A chosen terminology, fluid-based, she remembers it as a feeling of being submerged, immersed in the essence of perfume. This Aquarian child was quite adept at sensing water

in the air. She used the cellar as a testing ground for her gift. It is where she developed supernatural skills acquired only through the use of a sixth sense. Attracted to the distinctly musty aroma permeating the air down there, this insubordinate soul knew better, resisting the urge, exhibiting self-discipline. “Don’t do it.” Click. As she’d open the door, its whining hinges would sing to a curious kid peeking through that crack, no more than an inch or so wide. That’s how the light gets in. Peering into the bleak black hole, tempting fate, there was nothing to see. Ah, but then, to breathe it in, siphoning the scent of a woman from the cellar. It was a unique fragrance, an essence of spirit permeating moisture-laden air, traveling on a draft, up and into her mind. Contact.

Always sensationally struck by the languid pool of cool air rising up into her nostrils, she would drink it in, filling her lungs, on its way to her soul. The memory is one of her most vivid, of feeling that astonishing blast from below; a blast from the past. It took only a few moments before her common sense kicked in. “Close that door!” Click. Clarion call dismissed, the battle was over before it began. Christine’s internal struggles about descending that set of stairs often ended in a draw. FEAR claimed the victory. Her quivering legs could not quite muster the courage to step further down into the alcove, tempted as she was to cautiously proceed onto the landing. One had to know when to say when, how to listen up when the wiser inner voice says: “Stop!” A fight or flight mechanism built into her system, intact, this child knew the magnetic draw of the cellar all too well. Too big a leap of faith required... no guarantee of a soft landing. Close that door and keep on truckin’ . . . the only wise course of action to take when tempting fate in a house alive with death.

At times it was dry, acrid odor seeping into the residence, an accumulated assortment of aromas the cellar absorbed and retained over the centuries. The ancient earth holds secrets... the blood, sweat and tears of countless souls; a simmering cauldron of toil and trouble. Mortal fluids had been spilled below the surface, solicitous of attention from above. It had an essence, the enticing aroma, though markedly different; like the scent of a woman, each unique to that individual. Supposing a noted change in scent was primarily attributable to an omnipresent dampness whenever the water table was up, it nevertheless

remained dry in the cellar all year round: a marvel of construction. However, the dense black earth was prone to becoming noticeably drier during summer months, dusty; a natural phenomenon occurring within a supernatural abode. This was when their farmhouse would flood with the aromas of aged earth, attracting those who would naturally gravitate to the woods or a garden spot, arousing their desire to go elemental. When the ground was driest, one could easily discern the emergence of the well-worn footpath etched into that cellar floor, over time, appearing distinctly like a shallow rut, revealing the traffic pattern as a slight indentation only when the ground was drained of moisture. Once the rain returned, that image vanished, becoming invisible to the naked eye as the earth plumped up to the point of saturation. Of course, by then, the family knew about the mysteries associated with the history of the cellar. If it was, as rumored, a pit stop along a route of the Underground Railroad, then a partially obscured pathway assumes more significance because it has borne the weight of all humanity. Such a burden carried would surely leave a mark, an irreversible scar upon the planet, each footprint telling a story of its own. Likewise, they had all become keenly aware of the fact that something does not have to be visible to exist. "Just because you can't see it does not mean it isn't there!" This, according to Nancy: High Priestess of the double negative. It took years for their family to recognize the whole truth of it... the reality of their situation. Experience is the solution to every riddle, the key to opening every door. They were being psychically drawn down the hatch. It was hard to resist. A crack in the door is an open invitation to disaster. There is a crack in everything... . how the Light gets in. Theirs was an enlightening journey through time and space shared. It required some time to distinguish between the emotions solicited within a convoluted, complicated place in the country. However, once a clear realization collectively occurred, it proved to be their only real defense against a powerful force unleashed, rearing its ugly head. Knowledge is power, too. Employing a series of evasive, tactical maneuvers developed to avoid altercations proved beneficial to the cause, mitigating the effects, to a certain extent. Keep the peace and keep from provoking a war. It was a passive / aggressive approach to any spirits who dwelled in that cellar. Intrigued as they were, those wise enough to be wary maintained a constant awareness of what transpired around (and beneath) them and therefore fared best in the midst of a madhouse. Being perpetually on guard had its rewards, finer minds focused on the mission at hand... essential to remain at attention.

Memories of the cellar are as fresh as its air remains pungent; so stagnant. That dark and mysterious hole in the ground made a powerful impression on everyone in the family. The current reflections and recollections are still very specific, vivid and precise. Roger spent the most time down below, by far, and learned to expect being approached, seduced by the touch of a woman who got his attention. Every time he was contacted it was an identical stroke, across the back and shoulder, across the nape of the neck. No way to mount a defense. She always approached from behind. At first, he would feel that icy sense of her at his back then smell the stench of death searing in his nostrils and then came the stroke. Initially, when it became clear to him that this was not his imagination, Roger was fearful. Though he now admits to it, earlier years of his life were spent cloaked beneath a false bravado. He rarely spoke of the farm and when he did his remarks had nothing to do with the spirits. It made him uncomfortable, not a topic for discussion, as it occasionally was with the rest of his family. They assumed he had an aversion to anything he could not comprehend. In this respect, all seven mortals involved shared the same fate. It is one thing to know what is and is not and quite another thing to spend a lifetime wondering who—what—when—where—why and how it could happen. Boo! It is disquieting, unsettling to dwell upon and yet, Roger has finally attained a comfort level regarding spirit matters and he has been forthcoming about his personal experiences. One particularly stunning story revealed the essence of a spirit in a lopsided relationship, the close encounter going horribly wrong, leaving the man regretful and dispirited for life about an opportunity squandered, never to re-emerge again.

Though the air was always pungent its unmistakably earthy aroma was an ever-present reminder of what lay beneath, dispersing throughout a dwelling. Traveling airborne whenever anyone opened a cellar door and did, of course, whenever any one of the cellar doors opened themselves, a far more common occurrence, it would vaporize into the ether. Only when the malevolent spirit decided to manifest as form and substance did the smell become nauseating. She certainly knows how to make an entrance, her presence and appearance known to all. Her overt convergence with Roger was rather covert in nature. Though she had twice accosted him in the bedroom, advances were far more

tenuous in the cellar. No sense of impending doom attached, she was quite attached to Roger. If a tentative, sensuous stroking of his broad shoulders did not provide evidence enough of this attraction, the fact that she'd repeatedly followed him up the staircase was indication of her intentions. Truth be told, he was nice to her, too afraid to be anything otherwise, and his acceptance of her presence (as if he had any choice in the matter) had altered her previous approach to him. Whenever, wherever they coincided he was on her turf. She might have felt at ease expressing sentiments from within the catacombs. It was interesting how she and Carolyn perceived each other as a threat while sharing space, as well as a man. Their relationship was adversarial by nature, right from the inception of her stay at the farm, even before Carolyn knew it. Something in the air... a decided chill. The cold shoulder. In the midst of the supernatural deep freeze, the mortal mistress was the one taking the heat.

As the sole maleficent spirit present, the one known by most as Bathsheba made it known that a home cannot have more than one mistress at a time, but in which time was Bathsheba the mistress and why did she covet the man of the house? Though trouble was brewing between the two women, Roger was far less threatened by the entity than his wife, likely because she never reared her ugly head in his presence. Apparently she saved manifesting in substance and form for others. For quite some time he kept their encounters to himself, to avoid upsetting Carolyn more. In this respect theirs was a bizarre, if prime example of an often clandestine relationship conducted between dimensions. Bathsheba's access was unfettered in the cellar and this was when she would be tender with him, what Roger describes as friendly. Her sociable overtures were quite the surprise when they began, within just a few months of moving into the house. As time passed, he became less fearful of a presence he could not explain yet could not deny. Perhaps she'd considered him attainable in private, though she also used him for her own nefarious purposes, to taunt and terrify Carolyn in their own bed. Well! Blow me down the hatch!

According to Roger, at first her touches were slight, almost imperceptible. That smell then corresponding chill announced her arrival. A dead giveaway. He recalls the hair on his body standing at attention, as if electrically charged by her presence. She would frequently follow him up the stairs then stop at the door. He would sense her in the darkness once he turned off the light, closing the passage she could penetrate at will. Rarely emerging from the abyss during daylight hours, when she did, it was not an appearance made in

form and substance. Manifestations occurred primarily between twilight and dawn. Those who saw this entity knew she had various methods of making manifest; anything from a spot of light to a grim figure hovering overhead. Sometimes she was kind, if a bit coercive, summoning the children to join her. Sometimes she was overtly threatening. At other times, merely intrusive. When with Roger, she was as solicitous of his affections as any suitor ever was with her in life. Enticement implies the coupling of hope with desire. Bathsheba's delicate touch was light, as if embarrassed by her own behavior. One shy stroke of the shoulders instantly captured this man's attention. An implicit message received... an indecent proposal.

All empirical evidence aside, there is no doubt about it. The cellar of that farmhouse is the dwelling place for a spirit who communicates with mortals, at will. She has a volatile temperament, passionate desires for good and evil, in darkness and in light. Bathsheba hated Carolyn. She coveted her children and lusted after her husband. She made no attempt to disguise her intentions. The frequency of her appearances was based upon her acquisition of energy required to manifest in form, whatever she could pilfer from the house or its unsuspecting inhabitants. Perhaps she was living vicariously, as a being who did not even know she was dead. Their realization proved to be the only real defense against her, in knowledge borne of experience. Eventually, they all understood the dynamics of their dilemma. Ultimately, it came down to an utterly simplistic solution to the convoluted collection of propositions posed. Surrender, Carolyn. No matter how huge the home place, there was not space enough to share. Truth be told, there could only be one mistress of the house.

The cellar of the farmhouse, a place in the country formerly known as the Arnold Estate, harbors many secrets and contains many mysteries. It remains the same as always, an enticement to mortal imaginations, as a confrontation to all of the senses. One trip down the hatch provokes intense memories and familiar thoughts. Feelings come as a rush, flooding deep space like a tidal wave, drowning out any sense of calm. It becomes so difficult to distinguish between them yet easy to recognize as a visceral reaction. Excursion into the depths of its darkness is a mind-altering, unforgettable journey down a set of stairs on an intrepid, nether-worldly, four-dimensional dip in the deep end of

infinity... and beyond. What made this family unusual was their capacity for understanding that the only way one keeps their head above water is to take the plunge then develop the ability to breathe in an under-water underworld saturated with the scent of a woman long gone, yet omnipresent. Pungent aromas still fill the air down there. Breathing in her essence, the nature of a lost soul, is an enlightening endeavor... a spiritual voyage worth the trip.

It is a wonder to behold. One visit prompts the natural questions: How'd they do this? How did they construct such a masterpiece? Who chiseled this enormous hole in the ground then cut gigantic slabs of solid granite without modern machinery? How did they line the outer walls, perfectly positioning the stones in place without the benefit of heavy equipment? It appears to be impossible, much like ancient stone walls amaze the eye of the beholder, as a marvel, a challenge to their imagination, something which must be seen to be believed. Regarding a spirit dwelling within a tomb-like chasm built of sand and stone, whether she be Mrs. Arnold or Bathsheba Sherman or someone else entirely, one need not see to believe or believe to see a ghost. That's not how it happens. It is not a matter of faith or belief, but is instead subject to reason and reality. Their existence isn't contingent on the opinions of mortal souls. The spirit world exists whether or not we believe in it. Just ask Roger about his pain in the neck hair-raising adventures.

They all knew the truth, though this failed to set their family free of fear. Spooked as he was down below, trembling like a scared little girl, Roger said silent prayers in that stairwell while ascending those creaky, cranky steps to the landing... lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil . . . mounting his retreat as a death-defying leap of faith up and out of the darkness into the light. The dear man did not yet understand that the dark essence of her being would prove to be the holiest source of his enlightenment. Bless his soul.

“Truth is what stands the test of experience.”
Albert Einstein



~ down the hatch ~

“No journey carries one far unless, as it extends into the world around us, it goes an equal distance into the world within.”

Lillian Smith

ye olde cellar hole

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread,
places to play in and pray in,
where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.”
John Muir

Planet Earth has its own elemental vibrations, energy intrinsic to a living, breathing entity. It is a life force to be reckoned with, to be respected or even worshipped by those who dwell upon the surface or deep within the crevices created by mortal souls who seek to merge with its essential nature: “Home”.

The old cellar hole remains a dark and mysterious place, shrouded by the dense canopy of overgrown trees surrounding it. As time passed, everyone in the family made their way into the woods. Each felt a compelling attraction, a compelling urge to escape into the heart of the ancient inverted edifice, into the land of enchantment. There was something magical, supremely powerful about this simple, small square hole in the ground, a shallow indentation dug into the planet, lined with slabs of stone. Something sacred. Though it took time for everybody to learn their way around the massive piece of property; once boundaries were established in mind, a sense of direction developed as if by intuition. It became second nature to go solo, deeply into the woods: to embark upon a transformative spiritual journey. It was an inescapable result of traversing the forest alone. Private excursions began in earnest. Flora and fauna were enticements enough. The wildflowers and wild animals beckoned to be seen and heard. There was music in the woods, never silent except after a snowfall. Only then could one discern the truly mystical quality of music as silence itself, nothing but the sound of the wind. Frozen in time, the forest is marvelous, a wonder to behold. It speaks freely without needing someone to listen or agree. The Arnold Estate was a bewitching place for girls eager to find their own way in the world, at times, by way of the netherworld.

Nancy found it first. She'd gone off on her own again, much like the old song describes it: “Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we'll go.” This particular excursion would prove to be one of the most profound of her life, the day Nancy knew it was not just their farmhouse that was haunted. What she discovered was beyond imagination. It was reality. It

was the old cellar hole Mr. Kenyon told them about, but no one had yet seen.

Always gravitating to the pond, its pristine, babbling waterfall, music to her ears, Nancy took off with her fishing pole, as if called to the concert. Her day began early and she'd be gone for hours. It was a bright spring morning, a rather unusual warm spell cast by Mother Nature. She intended to take full advantage of the gift bestowed. Grabbing her gear from the woodshed, well in advance of anyone asking her to do chores instead, she walked down the old wagon road and was out of sight... out of mind. By the time her mom realized she was missing, the kid was long gone... to infinity and beyond.

In relative peace and quiet, Nancy fished for hours, lost in thought if not in the woods. She knew her way around, almost by osmosis. Following that ancient, well-worn path, she'd found the stone state line marker protruding from the ground on top of a hill overlooking the placid pond. On a previous trip she had explored the land around the pond, returning home with pussy willows galore. An endless array of treasures to be discovered, it was the day she was destined to find a thread to weave into the tapestry of her life.

After hours spent in solitude, Nancy would soon be joined by "others" in the forest. Packing up her gear, the slanted angle of sunshine indicating that it was time to go, Nancy had nothing more on her mind than what her mother might be preparing for dinner. As she began a long trek home, a journey she had made many times, the child became disoriented. No point in yelling for help. No one would hear her from such a distance. At a branch on the trail she did not recognize, confused and apparently lost, something or someone sent up a signal in response to her internal distress call... calling her to come in another direction, calling her home. The conflict she felt was practically magic, an overwhelming desire to follow the leader; a sense of being drawn elsewhere, away from the home place she was seeking. A palpable reaction to its urgency consumed her where she stood; the girl had a keen sense of her surroundings. Nancy knew it was not the way home but something powerful compelled her to take the road less traveled, to follow the foreign path rather than her own gut instincts. In that moment of pure panic, seized by a sudden surge of adrenaline, it struck her like an arrow through the heart, pulling her closer in mind. Heeding the call of the wild side, Nancy was lured in. As she took a detour to her destiny, it took a wicked hard turn to the past, perhaps a return to a past life. Heading toward that which beckoned from the forest, the child began to hear voices... familiar voices.

The way she describes this encounter now, as Nancy vividly recalls, those voices began in the center of her forehead. It was the same way Cindy heard the spirits, through what is considered by many to be the third eye, the sixth sense. She was too young to realize it at the time, but her sensory perceptions kicked in high gear as she made her way to who knows where in the woods. After several hundred yards passed below her feet, afraid she was becoming more lost by the moment, Nancy was overtaken by an inexplicable calmness, replacing the anxiety propelling her ahead. In an instant, she understood. She was following the voices in her head instead of the path beneath her feet. The panic-stricken pixie felt the sudden sense of an inner peace passing over her, reassuring her that she was indeed on the right path. Slowing her pace a bit, she listened. The voices were becoming louder, more distinct with each step. They seemed so familiar, the accent and all. As she peered through the thick underbrush into a clearing, Nancy knew she had reached her destination.

There they were, all of them. An entire family: a mother, father and three children, living in the woods. The wagon road ran right beside the small but sturdy house, well kept and lovely, surrounded by lilies and lilacs and roses. A sight for sore eyes weary of searching the netherworld for an answer to the call, there they were. Fascinated, Nancy keenly recalls feeling like one of the family. She felt drawn to them, as if she truly belonged there with them. And then they were gone. She was alone in the forest... or was she? Approaching the spot where they'd just been, where a house stood only moments before, Nancy gazed down into the old cellar hole, marveling at a hole in the ground. But they were just there! Instead, she found well-tended roses had gone wild with the lilac bushes, suddenly super-sized compared to what she'd just seen. Substantial trees were growing from where they rooted in the center of it. No signs of life, Nancy stood at the edge, on the precipice of history, only to feel the earth moving beneath her feet. The bizarre vibration was emanating from the land itself, drawing her downward into the hole. As seismically shifting land continued to tremble, she no longer felt steady on her feet. About to fall, the child let her legs buckle and down she went, exploring this unique place in time and space. Unafraid of what she might find, Nancy plunged in.

Once her curiosity had been sufficiently satisfied, she crawled up and out, somehow knowing her way from where she'd been lost in the forest. There it was; the deeply rutted wagon road. Walking past an anomaly, Nancy paused to reflect on a large granite stone in the shape of a bell. Even as the vibration

continued like tremors beneath her feet, traveling up her legs, Nancy gazed at the odd bell stone, wondering what was under it, reluctant to get too close. About to lose what daylight remained, she turned and scampered home along the old trail provided. Certain that nobody would understand or believe what happened to her, without divulging a word about it to anyone, she quietly ate her dinner then went to bed, exhausted from a remarkable journey taken over the river and through the woods on an inexplicable voyage back in time.

The old cellar hole was more than unique; something beyond fascination. It was a destination. Located precisely where a sweet song describes, it was over the river and through the woods, not far off the beaten path, a historical wagon road. Remnants of its rough cut ruts appearing as an optical illusion, vanishing beneath an accumulating blanket of organic debris growing thicker with each passing season. Hundreds of years prior to that time it had been a toll road, one segment of the main route between enclaves, the lone colonial passage from Worcester, Ma. to Providence, R.I. It was the way home. It still is, except now it is merely as a memory, familiar paths taken in dreams when revisiting a childhood home. Perhaps, in some former life, in some ancient time, at some alternate point in a multi-dimensional Universe, it was the way to grandmother's house, after all. Dorothy said there's no place like home.

When arriving at the cellar hole, its visitors would often stand along the precipice, marveling at if from above, atop the narrow ledge. Its depth comes from its history more so than any other measurement of the actual structure. The place has a vibration, inspiring a sense of wonder and awe, as if trying to speak for itself, of itself... so many stories to tell. An oak tree had sprouted decades before, from the center of the dirt floor. This hole in the ground is surrounded with tiger lilies and mountain laurel, lady slippers and wild roses; once pampered old stock plantings gone to seed well before any of them had even been born; an enlightening perspective on a former home. Visitors went into the woods to inhale the fragrance, to sip the nectar, to escape and reflect, to hide and seek its mysteries. With each intrepid journey came many great discoveries; a newfound knowledge. Each excursion provided a lesson in life and death, the study of darkness and light. Intoxicating aromas traveled from delicate blossoms releasing their perfume to air, wafting on the wind: Smell.

Brilliant displays of vibrant colors dancing, dotting and decorating the forest bed, resplendent with bouquets: Sight. Birds in flight; a fluttering of wings, carried by the breeze, transporting birdsong from hidden limbs: Sound. Pure water cupped within palms tickling, trickling through fingers pressed tightly together to savor every drop: Taste. Ferns teasing bare legs, thorns pricking fingertips, icy water numbing toes, the bark of a maple: Touch. The forest was much more than a craving. It had an addictive quality, appealing to sensory perceptions in every conceivable way, including the sixth sense. Intuition according to some. Maybe this is what drew them in, one and all, into the woods. They shared an intense curiosity, the sense of having more to explore as silent witnesses to the cycle of life and death. The cellar hole was like having a womb of one's own tucked discreetly away in the woods. Only shards and slivers of light could penetrate the heavy overgrowth; so amazing anything can grow in the dark! Searching a landscape, they would inevitably gravitate, as if drawn by a magnet, to the old cellar hole. They'd settle down and in to the place which seemed familiar. This was a comfort zone for most, though Nancy and Cindy had exceedingly uncomfortable experiences there, as mutually exclusive events, yet virtually identical details in every respect.

While telling their individual stories, an interesting duplication occurred. Nancy and Cindy both told the same saga, though neither had ever discussed it with the other. This had to be brought to their attention. It stands to reason: woods happen. However, in this circumstantial case, the literal and figurative whirlwind of fresh information solicited from childhood memories, imparted as adults, proved a hypothesis: supernatural activity did not occur only in the house. The presence was felt elsewhere on the property as well, as a specific manifestation shared by two siblings who both chose to remain silent on the subject for decades. Notification prompted a pause for reflection throughout the entire family. Well, blow me down! They were both blown away.

On two separate occasions, in entirely disparate circumstances, Cindy and Nancy had visited the old cellar hole. Each was there by herself, peacefully sipping the nectar, like a fawn on the banks of the creek. Taking it all in, enjoying the beautiful landscape, the privacy afforded by seclusion, each was swept up in a sudden twist of wind that seemingly came from nowhere... and everywhere, at once. A phenomenon was not caused by the natural elements. Each had traveled on a placid day. Excursions were often made when it was bright, sunny and warm, nary a breeze, the perfect day for exploration. What

happened in the woods down at the old cellar hole was not natural... it was, without a doubt, supernatural in origin. Nancy vividly recalls standing at the edge of it, staring down when she was suddenly surrounded by the fierce, circular wind sucking her off her feet, blowing her forward, down the hatch. She could barely see through it, so much debris from the floor of the forest was swirling in front of her eyes. An instant sensation of vertigo compelled her to grab the bush beside her and hold on! For dear life. It would have been quite a fall, had she lost her balance, tumbling into a dark abyss chiseled into the ground. Describing it as being stuck in the vortex of a stationary tornado, Nancy remembers the panic, a sensation of being swept away by a wind that was not lifting her up but dragging her into the hole. Violently twisting her torso around, when it stopped as abruptly as it had begun, Nancy ran all the way home feeling chased by a presence she sensed was still with her, behind her on the path. As the girl was so fond of saying at the time, she was totally freaked out, quite literally blown away by that bizarre experience. Mortified, she entered the farmhouse and never spoke a word of it for over thirty years.

Cynthia's account was virtually identical. Once this was brought to their attention, they discussed it, including the sense of awe and wonder it inspired after the initial fright and shock had subsided. Neither knows why she never shared it before. Perhaps it was because they had been warned (and scolded) for going to the old cellar hole alone. Carolyn preferred her children to travel in a pack, for safety's sake. According to their mother, it was too dangerous. She was, of course, considering the natural hazards posed by Mother Nature. It did not occur to her, or anyone else in the family, that the woods were just as haunted as their house, possessed by spirits and demons alike. All agreed, they did certainly presume to own and control their environment. Possession, they say, is nine-tenths of the law. Does this rule apply to Natural Law, too? Law of Gravity? Is there a Supernatural Law which supersedes all others?

Neither of the girls ever went back to the cellar hole alone but they did go back. Something about a place in time and space drew them in, magnetically toward it, in much the same way the farm had called to their mother. She too enjoyed an occasional romp, a solitary escape into the woods, as fascinated by a holy hole in the ground. It remains there as a sacred shrine, historically significant, its mere existence inextricably bound to the past. However, there is a timeless quality, a mystical, magical power associated with it, as well. Most would observe it as an innocuous spot, had they not experienced these

wondrous force it exhibits. Neither Cindy nor Nancy could fully comprehend or explain what the heaven or hell happened with them. Interpretations vary. Cynthia said it best: "No matter where you went there they were." What they do know, all they know is this: something absolutely incredible happened to both of them, at separate times in the same place... something wicked which changed their minds for good... even if the power itself was evil. Ultimately, it did not hurt them and it taught them a lesson. They were never alone in the woods. What existed in the house was not confined to parameters encased in clapboard walls but was as free to roam as they were. Land was shared space and spirits have property rights. Truth be told, it was their land too. Whether wicked or fanciful, mischievous or malignant, threat or a practically magical joke, the presence was finally accepted. In time, everyone realized they were perfectly super/natural, like children running wild through the woods, off the beaten path. It was best to let them be... free to explore. Free to be dazzling.

"I believe there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which,
if we consciously yield to it, will direct us aright."

Henry David Thoreau



"There, don't you hear it too?
Something is calling, although
The day is blank and gray.
The eye fastened on nothing,

The ear undistracted
And we with nothing to say.
But still that sense of calling,
Of something seeking attention
Beyond our consciousness.”

John Fuller



beneath the bell stone

“In my end is my beginning.”

T. S. Eliot

A recurring theme had begun to emerge. Mortals being drawn down into Earth; there was no escaping and no denying the allure of a cellar underneath the aged farmhouse or the old cellar hole set back on the property. There was another spot as well... a well. About twenty feet adjacent to their old exposed cellar hole lays a deep well, hand dug and expertly lined with stone. Its cover is a solid slab of granite in the shape of a bell. As a wonder to behold it was a fascinating discovery. Roger required assistance removing that cumbersome cover. Once its weight was shifted, it was lifted off, revealing the cylindrical shaft. Everyone peered down into the planet from above. Sweet water. Nectar of the gods: essence of life, pure and unspoiled. There was much speculation about the age of the well, certainly hundreds of years old. Roger warned kids away from the edge, explaining the inherent danger posed: any uncovered well is a death trap. Blunt and to the point. You will die. You will drown before anyone could ever rescue you. A message received. Heave ho! The granite bell stone went back into place over the mouth of an ancient well which could and would swallow any one of them whole. Spooky.

Standing beside it made Andrea queasy and uneasy. She stepped away, suffering the symptoms of vertigo. Then she noticed Cynthia, appearing to be struggling with her equilibrium, shaky on her feet and a bit green around the gills. Both of them felt the magnetic pull, a gravitational tug of war as the youngsters fought the effects. Nobody else seemed to be suffering from the same malaise. Andrea sought out her sister for some validation. She got it.

“Can you feel it?” Cynthia’s voice was pleading for some recognition of a sensation she was experiencing at that moment, a trembling, earth-shattering vibration from beneath her feet, traveling up into her torso. It was powerful.

“I do! Like an earthquake, but deep underground.” Andrea knew precisely how it felt. “The ground is shaking. I can feel it inside me!”

The family had moved on. Reaching for her sister’s hand, Andrea pulled Cindy up from a low spot of grass near the well. They stood there, shocked by electrical energy vibrating throughout their bodies. Neither of them could rationally process the intensity of tremors emanating from below the surface, causing both girls to quake to the core.

"It isn't as strong here." Cynthia had something to compare this sensation with, yet another well which blew her away in the cellar of their farmhouse.

Let's try catching up to them." One good tug pulled her little sister along, up the hill... then over the river and through the woods... another festive, if intrepid trek through time and space... at light speed. Lost for only a second, they found their family along a well-beaten path to the pond.

Neither of the girls mentioned this event to anyone else and nobody else seemed to notice the phenomenon occur, except them. Once they reached the rest of their family, an oddly disquieting incident was all but forgotten. There was so much more left to explore and so much merry to make in the woods. Distractions were as bountiful as the land. Future sublime excursions would yield other interesting encounters but on this particular journey, two cautious siblings took an alternate path around the well, thus avoiding it on their way home. No point in tempting fate any further. Heads up, not down the hatch.

A cryptic message was not well received. In fact, it made no sense at all; impossible to decipher this cosmic code. What was that odd woman saying? What could she have meant by it? "Your answer lies beneath the bell stone." Carolyn wasn't in a state-of-mind to consider or comprehend inner meaning, the underlying message obscured by an ongoing conflict. In no mood to play head games, not ever, Carolyn did not ask for clarification. She didn't ask for anything because she could not speak at all. Instead, she ignored the mystical remark. Recovering from the ordeal she had just endured required all of her resources. Three of the children heard those words but did not know how to interpret them. Roger was preoccupied dismissing all present ghost hunters from his farmhouse, the space he considered had been invaded. Expulsion, including the medium who had uttered the statement in question, created the chaotic scene. In moments such as this, pearls of wisdom can fall as if manna from Heaven, into the saturated minds of unsuspecting souls. Andrea heard what this psychic had said to her mother. The solitary comment has intrigued her for decades since. On a fundamental level it makes sense, if intuitively. There remains no empirical evidence, no proof of the assertion made or the conclusion drawn. There is only a feeling that haunts her still... a sense of it. The woman was telling the truth. She did not have to pause above Carolyn,

stopping to utter these few obscure words, in haste. The expression on her face revealed her sincerity, a genuine desire to help. The mysterious message was delivered more like a secret, as if the recipient was supposed to grasp its intrinsic meaning. Everything was happening so quickly, people coming and going at Light speed. Mary stopped dead in her tracks. She had something to say. If hyperbole or an authentic clue to solving the dilemma, no one knew. "Your answer lies beneath the bell stone." Something dead in the water?

The concept of a well having something to do with a haunted house half a mile away is fodder for any decently engaged imagination. What could water have to do with it? Elemental reflections. Perplexed, the thought of it tugs at her mind like the current of a mighty river flowing along memory banks of a curiosity-driven-stream-of-consciousness; a tidal surge of inquiry comes crashing onto the shoreline whenever Andrea entertains this nebulous notion, prompting a series of pertinent questions: Why does Cindy still insist that the spirits in the farmhouse travel through the wells? What, if any, is the relative connection between the well in the house and the well at the old cellar hole? Are both tapping into the same subterranean source, an underground aquifer? Why do they vibrate? Why did ground surrounding them tremble whenever a mortal soul would step onto a stone? Was the sensation of suction caused by gravitational force? Is this phenomenon magnetic in nature? Are these wells a direct route to and from the netherworld as an underground superhighway to heaven or to hell and back again? What had she meant by the bizarre comment?

If Mr. McKeachern was correct and the folklore accurate, the local parish would not allow Bathsheba to be buried in consecrated ground. If not there, then where? How did a family dispose of her body in the end? Where is she, if not beneath her own gravestone? Is it even possible her stone cold corpse went down the hatch, entombed for eternity in a watery crypt beneath a bell stone within an ancient, abandoned well instead of a proper internment in the cemetery in the center of Harrisville? It was not long past the time when any woman presumed to be a witch got burned at the stake and drowned for good measure to be certain she was dead. Salem was just up the road, after all. It is incredulous by modern standards, yet women of ill repute were persecuted in her time and a reputation preceded her. If Bathsheba is somehow attached to the wells on the property, no matter how strange it might appear in theory, maybe a plausible, elemental explanation exists. According to one thoughtful

soul who'd bothered to pause on her way out the door, risking further wrath, their answer lies beneath the bell stone. It is important for mortal souls to ask pertinent questions regarding life and death, the how, where, when and why of immortality, answered or not. There are significant historical implications. There are those throughout history who buried their dead in watery graves.

“What is important is to keep learning, to enjoy challenge,
and to tolerate ambiguity. In the end there are
no certain answers.”

Martina Horner

the big dig

“Courage and perseverance have a magical talisman,
before which difficulties disappear and
obstacles vanish into air.”

John Quincy Adams

“Mother of God!” Click. Carolyn slammed the telephone receiver into its cradle, having received an unwelcome message from her wayward husband. Roger was in a lousy mood and on his way home. She would’ve preferred he keep his irascible disposition with him on the road. Though this mother was rarely tempted to raise her melodious voice, no residents present and accounted for missed this clarion call to arms on a snowbound afternoon. It reverberated, echoing throughout the farmhouse. Present arms! Troops at the ready.

“He’s coming home!” Carolyn knew what this meant. “Girls, get dressed. Get the shovels. Your father is already on the Mass Pike.” Their mother was frantic. Charge! The Light Brigade was marshaled into service. Even if he was, as she suspected, just crawling along through more than two feet of fresh-fallen snow, she likewise knew he would know enough to drive behind a plow and travel its wake. This would get him home in about two hours, if he was lucky. One glance out their windows proved they were on a tight schedule. Losing the light meant losing their battle with the elements. Space had to be made before dark. Daddy had to pull into the barn. It wasn’t a fair fight. Let’s go! It took all of them to shove the woodshed door. Work was required to shake off her mood; that’s just what Carolyn did. Heave Ho! The woodshed door gave way under pressure as the five foot high snowdrift collapsed, spilling inside and all over them. Shake it off! Best to begin any task with a good attitude and a hearty laugh, but time was of the essence.

Using shovels as weapons against Mother Nature was futile when she was busy having her way with the world. They all knew it. What they were about to do would not even scratch the surface but it had to be done. Winter storms were hard fought and winter lessons hard learned at the farm. The girls knew snow shovels were offensive as well as defensive weaponry, effective shields against the harsh, wind-driven squalls, attacking at will from every direction. Well! Blow me down again! Over and out of the fight, April took the plunge into a snowdrift that towered above her head and the snow kept on coming as

the battle raged on. The women warriors began their assault from inside out, digging a path to the barn, a sled dog came to the rescue. Pooh Bear plowed right in, leading the charge, tunneling through the massive mounds of snow. It caved in from above. A path was cleared so they marched behind, trudging along, playing follow the leader of the pack all the way out to the barn. There was Pooh Bear, their champion, emerging from beneath another drift. There they were, attempting an insurmountable task. So began the cardio-workout session, the building of muscle mass... an exercise in futility.

Curses! Carolyn kept them under her breath as it flowed from her lungs, transforming into steam as it hit frosty air. She was resentful of the perceived intrusion. Beyond physical labor, being compelled by obligation to perform a duty with so little advance warning was what perturbed her most. She could not understand why he would foolishly risk his life to come home in a storm rather than taking a room for one more night until the roads could be cleared. Very few of Roger's decisions made any sense to his wife. Carolyn would have much preferred to have an undisturbed snowstorm, spending quiet time with her kids, making hot chocolate, playing Parcheesi. It was never her intention to go slogging off into the snow to dig a hole for her husband, yet there were times when she wanted to dig one, about six feet down underground, just for him, and this was one of those times. Too bad the land was frozen as solid as a slab of granite, one as thick as her husband's skull!

A sudden ghastly gust of wind blew all the girls back. In case complaint was forthcoming, Nancy interceded, reminding the troops they would have had to come on out to the barn anyway, to take care of their horses. The boys required fresh water and grain, as well as thermal blankets for the bitter night ahead. They needed to be comforted, groomed and stroked as Cynthia had done earlier in the day, calming them down at the height of the storm; purely a labor of love. These needs were only disguised as chores. Having them was a privilege. Cindy and Nancy were the bravest of the bunch, first to take the plunge that morning, stepping off the precipice of the porch into a thigh-high winter wonderland. They told their tale with good cheer as laughter erupted. Carolyn may have been a bit disgruntled but her kids were already having a winter blast. They didn't mind it at all... any excuse to go play in the snow! Girls just wanna have fun! Everything is a grand adventure when kids create a grand adventure out of everything. This was wet, fluffy stuff, perfect for snowballs but heavy as hell. Digging in, Christine recalled a favorite line:

“It wath a blithard all the way but we had
to get that therum through!”

Nobody can remember precisely where that phrase comes from. Perhaps it was Snagglepuss or maybe it was Daffy Duck who said it, or one of those many fanciful and familiar cartoon characters from The Bugs Bunny / Road Runner Hour . . . a Saturday morning staple. Her fine line drawn in the snow certainly applied to the task at hand in glove. Chris giggled, admiring her own inimitable wit and yes, it was a blizzard! As soon as they'd clear a square foot, wind howling like a banshee lashed out, laughing at lowly mortals, blowing back what was shifted and shoveled off to the side, recovering the barren surface. It was useless, yet they persevered. Just fooling around, not a grimace to be found among the crowd, even their mother had to laugh at the utter futility of it all. The weather outside was frightful but the kids were so delightful and since they'd no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow! Heave ho!

Sometime back in the 60's the phrase “Dig it!” came into common usage as a rather uplifting, positive expression of sheer delight. “I dig rock 'n roll music” assimilated into the popular culture and even made it to the top of the charts. For the Perrons, the word “dig” was a working verb, an action word. Nothing passive about it. Whether they were shoveling the next snowfall or digging bottles from dumpsites they discovered on the prime property, someone was always up to the elbows in something. Digging rows in the garden for the planting of seeds or solemnly digging a grave for a lost cherished pet, it seemed as if there was no end to the drudgery and divinity of rooting down in the sacred ground. The biggest dig of all was yet to come.

Eventually it was determined to be sadly true. The spring was no longer a viable option, a reliable water source for the farm. It ran beneath Round Top Road from a hillside across the street. That line was crushed by heavy snow removal equipment the previous winter. Time to dig a well. It was obvious to Carolyn what move to make first. Most women would let their fingers do the

walking, busy calling up one company or ten, posing questions and noting rates. Carolyn was even more sensible. The pragmatic approach to her quest for knowledge kept her closer to home. Calling upon old Mr. McKeachern instead, he invited her over to his farmhouse and when she came to call, they walked out on his land. The wise man paused at the door of a shed where he retrieved a blade from a toolbox. As they continued, the gentleman explained precisely what Carolyn should do to locate water on her property. It was a simple matter and an even simpler method: carve a divining rod. The way he could whittle a natural tool of the trade was practically magical.

“I’ve known of a few that knew how to find the water.” He winked at her. His heavy Yankee accent made words all the more appealing; a charming companion. Together they wandered through the woods until coming upon a huge bush trying its best to become a tree, as a member of the birch family. “Here’s what you do...” He examined the bush for a moment then reached in with both hands, deftly grasping then slicing off the chosen one. “Ya cut ya an alder branch about two feet long, shaped like a Y . . . like this.” Handing the branch out to Carolyn, Mr. McKeachern extricated himself from the massive bush seeming to consume him, but he got the one he wanted. Placing it back in his calloused hands, he quickly and precisely trimmed the bark clean with his blade. “Well, there ya go.” Exchanging the wood once again, she studied what was in her hands then handed it back. “Ya hold it like this, upside down and strong. Hold onto it with both hands straight out in front and walk... slow and careful... and make sure ya don’t miss no places where ya might want a well. Listen to the land.” Mr. McKeachern began walking as he’d described, demonstrating the technique of a dowser, his long, slender fingers wrapped securely around both stems. Quick and nibble as he’d been while cutting and stripping an alder branch, he did an about face, deliberately lethargic in his movements. A thoughtful, almost prayerful approach to the Earth beneath his feet appeared to be a holy, divine endeavor. “If there’s water underground an alder will pull straight down to it.” And it did. Carolyn watched it happen. She felt it happening as he found a spot then placed the rod in her hands. It began to tremble. She could sense the gravitational tug from deep inside the planet, pulling it down, down... maybe not just an old wives tale, after all.

Once she received the message intended, another lesson learned, Carolyn thanked him for his time and many talents. Perhaps without thinking about it,

Mr. McEachern tossed the branch away, discarding it like a worthless twig. It didn't even matter that he'd neglected to offer it to her. The woman had an inkling she was supposed to make her own divining rod, from her own land. She did so without delay, choosing an alder branch from a bush in their back pasture once she returned to the farm. While driving home, wondering what she'd just seen happen, intuition had told her to call on her neighbor, the man who knew everything. Carolyn wasn't certain she had faith in the principle of divining rods or a confirmed belief in dowsers before going over to visit the gentleman sage. After an hour-long excursion, over the river and through the woods, she understood more about the land and the human connection to it, as information was absorbed by osmosis, by simply being in his presence. Once she'd carved out a place for herself in the holy process by carving her own tool, she likewise discovered a rapidly developing respect for its pure power. She gained faith in her role as the technique evolved. Carolyn could do this... a natural, perhaps as an intrinsic gift from her Cherokee ancestors.

Though astounded by his dexterity, the eager woman performed her chore with equal finesse, trimming tufts as if she'd done it a thousand times before. Mr. McEachern would be proud of her initiative. If only her husband would ever take her as seriously. While reminiscing about the spiritual experience it occurred to her how vivid this remains in her mind. Carolyn declares that she can still hear the crack of the wood and the snap of the blade against the bark as she collected that singular piece of nature itself with which to locate the elemental source of life from beneath the crust of the planet. The effort made was mortal. Finding water was purely an act of God... divining intervention! Carolyn found the act inspiring. An enticing adventure was about to begin.

Surveying the lay of the land, Carolyn decided she wanted the well drilled close to the house; less dirt to dig, less line to bury. With grid-like precision, bound and determined to cover every inch of every acre, the woman began to walk. It was a slow, tedious process, to be sure. For the longest time nothing happened at all. She was beginning to doubt if she had done it correctly but suddenly paused, allowing her intuition to take the lead. As if by some subtle magnetism, she was being drawn in toward the mystical place, carrying her magical talisman. Meandering around the front corner of the expansive yard, nearing the site of the old blacksmith shop, the deep-earth explorer made a startling discovery. The divining rod lurched and twisted in her steady hands; she felt the birch rolling between her fingertips! The alder branch began to

behave precisely the way Mr. McKeachern predicted it would. Remarkable! Carolyn could feel it happening, leading her along with elemental vibrations. She could sense the existence of an invisible river, rushing silently beneath her, deep below the ground. Mesmerized by the sensation, Carolyn observed the alder branch, tugging impatiently downward toward its Mother source, jumping about, practically yelling at her; pointing her in the right direction. "It's here! The water is right here!" There was no question about it. No doubt in her mind anymore. "Eureka!"

Satisfied a proper spot had been chosen, Carolyn needed only to convince Roger of its efficacy as a tool, if not her accurate aim as a novice dowser. He knew it was dependable, accepting her conclusion without question or doubt. The scout knew the divining rod as a primitive but wholly effective tool, not some hocus-pocus. Fortunately, he'd had some experience with them and he had faith in the tool and, as a refreshing change, his beloved wife. Believing she picked the right and perfect place, he was equally fascinated, especially after she showed him the reaction a lowly twig had to an inconspicuous plot of land. It was obviously gravitational in nature. No doubt about it. Time to dig a hole in the ground. Call in the heavy equipment and drill, baby... drill!

It was a blizzard, all the way from New York to Rhode Island. As harsh wind-driven snow swept the landscape linen white, obscuring an otherwise luminescent vision of twilight, it masked a sunset trying to make its presence known but fading fast. Like kids, eager to please. No time to admire the sky. Dig in! Losing the battle along with the light, they fought on, clearing a path to the general's quarters that he and his car could occupy. Dig! They had to get the job done and they did! Just in the nick of time a space was cleared. HALT! Who goes there? Going the distance required, pushed from behind by an ill wind, Roger made it home. Emerging from white gauzy haze, a vision: Here he comes! There he goes! He could not see the gaping hole in the snow prepared for him by a family frantically waving as he passed them, bye... bye. As visibility diminished to the point of invisibility, it became clear. He'd missed his turn entirely, careening past them in a blur of wind as swirling snow obscured his vision, too.

Any port in a storm? Spotting them as he passed by, inches away, faces and

fingers pressed against the foggy glass startled him out of a snow stupor. In that shocking moment of recognition, the vacancy in his transfixed gaze disappeared. Eyes unlocked as the brakes locked up. He jammed them to the floor board. Daddy simply could not stop it in the time and space allotted, sliding right past the entrance to their barn. A car literally skating on thin ice, he was all over the road, an out-of-control Bonneville with an equally out-of-control father behind the wheel. Jerking it hard to the left, missing the stone wall by mere inches, Roger plowed down the sharp embankment into their circular driveway, untouched by human hands, four feet deep. Buried alive! Swallowed whole by a snowdrift, there he remained as foot soldiers ran to the rescue through the ruts left behind. DIG! Adrenaline surging with the troops, they all had an underlying expectation of disapproval from the general, anticipating a foul scowl or evil grimace from the one ultimately in charge of this fiasco. They had followed his orders, completing the cold and nasty task at hand, in gloves, with shovels, accomplishing a madcap mission... all that was asked of them. This was not their fault. It really wasn't anybody's fault. Blame Mother Nature! Or, God forbid, himself! In their haste to dig him out of a hole he dug himself into, brushing away the snow from the ice-encrusted windshield, a sense of relief swept over them like a great gust of winter wind, striking at their in common senses and the heart of the matter. Stranded, literally under the weather; otherwise, dad was fine. Observing their ongoing excavation became a mutual process of discovery. No woe be unto them expression in his tired eyes, a nice surprise, instead they had found the general, a stern soul, still laughing at himself! Exhuming his shaken and stirred, chilled-to-the-bone body, the smile frozen in place on his face, Roger was instantly warmed by the good cheer of his infantry.

Welcome Home, Sir! Looking a bit haggard, more road-weary than usual after a trip, this had been no ordinary road trip. Escaping the intrepid journey unscathed, the grateful eyes of this beholder emerged from within a vehicle still submerged in snow, adrift, but at least in port for the storm. Arriving safely, the biggest dig of the day was done.

"I see you've curbed your enthusiasm." Carolyn's slightly snide remark could have been a message received with disdain but Roger took her gentle ribbing with good grace under fire. He screwed up and he knew it.

Dutiful snow bound foot soldiers all had frozen feet! Boots on the ground, marching single-file back to the barracks, they had lost the battle but won the

war. The only supernatural aspect of this story was the super storm and the fact that the entire family was in high spirits! Even Carolyn had to laugh as she followed Pooh Bear all the way home, over white and drifting snow.

“Help one another, is part of the religion of sisterhood.”
Louisa May Alcott



~ one of the biggest digs ~

“Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity; so that
not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand.”
Henry David Thoreau

eureka!

"If I have ever made any valuable discoveries, it has been owing more to patient attention, than to any other talent."

Isaac Newton

That incessant pounding was a mind-numbing ordeal, day after day, week after week, driving an entire family to the brink of madness. How could they, how could anyone do this for a living? That poor man had to stand out there, right beside his rig, feeling it rupturing the Earth as his body took the brunt, strike after strike, traveling up his sternum, in the heart and heat of summer. Digging a hole in the ground was no easy feat. At least the kids were free to flee. Go away little girls, as far away as possible from the offensive, nearly deafening sound effects created by a massive contraption attacking the planet in perfect syncopation. BAM! BAM! BAM! A house and everything inside it vibrated with the commotion of a ruckus raised outside, pushing the drill bit down into the ground one solid strike at a time. Panes of glass rattled in their windows, shattering what peace of mind Carolyn could muster in the midst of it. Dishes trembled on the shelves. Her husband was equally on edge. This force to be reckoned with was forcing them from their home. Though no one spoke of it, everyone was thinking the same thing: maybe a divining rod was not such a good idea after all. Two weeks and counting. Roger rearranged his schedule to stay home for the duration of the drilling but this well was eating up too much time and money. He had to get back out on the road again.

On the morning he decided to head out, the gentleman drilling their well was still shaking his head. He had never seen anything like it; four-hundred feet and counting... and not a drop. Disgusted, Roger packed his bags then loaded the trunk of the car with sample cases. Time to go. Pouring himself another cup of coffee for the road, he'd stepped out of the kitchen, through the screen door. From that vantage point he could watch the rigging directly in front of him, just about fifty yards away. Roger dropped his mug on the stone steps. Everyone present on the property heard it occur but Roger saw it happen; the gut-wrenching sound of twisting metal, groaning like an injured animal. A pressurized explosion knocked the old man back from his rigging equipment. Run! He bolted. Fearful it would topple onto him, as he began running away, Roger was running toward the scene, his eyes to the skies, overjoyed by the outcome. It was a veritable geyser! Old Faithful would be

impressed by the copious amount of water shooting straight up, one hundred feet into the air. Based on Roger's reaction, anybody watching would have thought they had struck oil. Hallelujah! The sudden outburst of pressure shattered the meter; nothing left of the gauge to accurately measure output as countless gallons of pure water flowed from deep earth into the sky. The pond quickly formed. A cause for celebration: EUREKA! Followed by a moment of stunned silence. Thank you, God. Humbled by the sight, a pause for reflection was called for in that holy moment. Finally! Nectar of the gods. On the verge of giving up, with a drill bit buried hundreds of feet in the ground, they struck liquid gold. The Rhode Island Health Department received its samples and performed the standard analysis, declaring it to be the purest water in New England, sharing identical components of the Lost River of New Hampshire, buried during the last ice age... some of the cleanest water on or in the planet. Awe-inspiring! A blast from Earth's ancient past. Hope springs eternal.

Artesian wells are standard fare in Rhode Island but this one? It broke the mold and the meter and the equipment and the gauges and the rig. It broke the record. They had a hell of a time capping it. The pressure was so extreme it forced water out from around the seal year round, creating a pool too cold to touch. The state inspector listed the well as "immeasurable" but since he had to, by law, record an estimated figure on a form, he noted the outflow at approximately "110 gallons per minute" and then beside it he noted the well as "an unlimited supply" which makes it, all the more, one exceptional find. Nectar of the gods flowed as a fountain of youth from deep within ancient Earth. It was as if it was alive, as if it had a heartbeat, a pulse pushing it up to the surface once the vein was opened. It did not escape the couple that they'd tapped into something eternal. Rushing upward, anxious to escape that cold, dark place where it had been entombed for millennia, at long last, the long Lost River of New Hampshire could see the light of day again. Sparkling with rainbows dancing in the mist of a wild geyser, it was something sacred.

Vindication! Carolyn was excited and delighted that her divining rod had spoken and it had told the truth! A sturdy alder branch coupled with a steady set of hands and this patient, deliberate dowser located one of the wonders of the world. She'd discovered treasure buried deeply beneath Mother Earth, an elemental source of something mere mortals cannot live without... pure water.

“The most exciting phrase to hear in science,
the one that heralds new discoveries,
is not ‘Eureka!’ (I found it!) but ‘That’s funny . . .’”
Isaac Asimov

a sense of direction

“Be tolerant of those who are lost on their path.

Ignorance, conceit, anger, jealousy

and greed stem from a lost soul.

Pray that they will find guidance.”

Cherokee Proverb

Following her instincts, a highly refined internal compass, her uncommon sense of direction, Carolyn knew when it was time to move on. As a fixed destination in mind, elsewhere, she set a course for parts unknown then went to look at a farm in Harrisville, Rhode Island. The moment she saw it, she knew she was home. With a shared sense and a common purpose, they leapt from the precipice and learned how to fly, to navigate the old Arnold Estate with relative ease. Carolyn was not alone in desire for a place in the country. From the instant the family stepped onto the property they all knew precisely where they were coming and going to and from, over time. Drawn to a scent in the air, stone walls, the hayloft, the burning room loft over the woodshed, to the river then over the river then through the woods, they’d been pulled in by an inexplicable gravitational force, sucking them deeply into the vortex, a portal to the past and future alike: homeward bound. Becoming quite lost in its beauty, they found the place they all wanted to be, a place they belonged. Bewitched and transfixed by the sensations of a house unlike anything they had ever seen before, it was unique. Alive. Sipping the nectar, sweetest water touched their lips. Having succumbed to its essential Nature, nobody had to tell these girls to count their lucky stars, though, while inspecting the night sky, they’d found there were clearly too many to count. No one forewarned them of the pernicious presence who did not want Carolyn there, though she was more than willing to accept the rest. A battle for property rights began.

But what of the spirits? What was it which skewed their sense of direction after death? These poor souls were lost where the Perrons had found them, suspended in the ether. Unwilling or unable to move on after life ended, they hung around, as if they had no place to go. Shrouded in darkness, each of the spirits had failed to go to the light. It is often presumed that each should have followed a common sense of direction, traveling toward their cosmic home.

So what stalled their progress? Perhaps they’d committed a cosmic crime. Several of them ended their lives by their own hands. Suicide was the choice

made by Mrs. Arnold and Johnny Arnold, a path taken in life to hasten death. There were others who did not seem to know they were dead. Do they have a penance to pay? Are they held there as captives, prisoners in a holy war? The fairest of them all, dear Prudence Arnold was an innocent victim of evil. Her rape and murder, throat cut with a straight razor, surely qualifies her for entrance to Heaven. Evil had a name. Bill. He cut his own throat with the same razor used to end her life. Had he been instructed to rid the planet of himself once the devil's footwork was done? The mystery remains.

There's a not-so-fixed point in time and space at the farm. A destination is likewise a destiny for those who dwell within its sacred walls, for those who'd walk the path leading to the great unknown, in spite of the fear of it. A portal cleverly disguised as a farmhouse, it successfully enticed the family to its door. What leads the way? Does intuition exist as an internal compass, pointing all of us in the proper direction, showing us the way to come home? Perhaps the spirits were meant to remain sequestered, awaiting some notice, hoping to be heard by those who learned how to listen up in smoke while mirroring former lives of their own; as holy spirits needing to be known to those with an ability to see in the dark, see the light in their eyes, feel the fire still burning in their souls. Is it all part of some grand master plan?

Mrs. Warren considered it a tragedy that they had been left behind, bound to this Earth for eternity. Cindy believes they are here with purpose and good reason. It was more than a glitch in the system. God does not make mistakes. Word up! Straight to Heaven. Is the GPS recalibrating to accommodate these long lost souls or, in the grand scheme of things, are they where they belong? With a shared sense of destiny and an uncommon purpose, the Perron family launched and landed at that farmhouse for a reason. There is no such thing as a coincidence. They had converged on a place in the country which claimed them all in body, mind, soul and spirit, from the beginning, but was it their beginning? As each became captivated by its magical qualities, they became inextricably linked with spirits who still haunt within those walls and roam the hallowed halls, sharing space with mortals in a multi-dimensional portal to the past, a glimpse into the future. But what of the family who cannot shed their images that visit and revisit them in a dreamscape that will never die?

Essentially, they are all going in the same direction, guiding each other on

sacred steps along a righteous path. It may be they were meant to make their presence known, there to get a message out, through those perceptive enough to hear the call, receptive to its significance and implications. Whether or not it was well-received is of little relevance. At a fixed point in time and space a convergence occurred and mortal messengers forced by memorable exposure to immortal souls took up the torch for their cause. Like it or not they'd been assigned a task in the cosmic classroom, there to learn their lessons well so to impart their knowledge to others... a different kind of religious instruction. It took thirty years for the message to sink into their collective consciousness as it was a hard lesson to learn, but they've been going in the right direction.

On a bright summer morning in June of 1970 Carolyn hopped into her car then embarked on a journey, a netherworldly excursion she never anticipated to a place unlike any other she'd ever known. Inevitably dragging her family along for a wild ride across the Universe, at Light speed, a course correction occurred, mid-flight. Was her GPS recalibrating? Does the G stand for God? If an internal compass guides by intuition it pointed her in the right direction.

“Ideas are like stars: you will not succeed in touching
them with your hands, but like the seafaring man
on the ocean desert of waters, you choose them
as your guides, and following them,
you reach your destiny.”

Carl Schurz

fountain of youth

"In the dark night of the soul, bright flows the river of God."
Saint John of the Cross

A concept this powerful casts its own shadow across the ages. Cultures all around the world have long maintained a belief in the existence of a fountain of youth. Eternal beauty, sought by those who wish to live forever, proved an elusive goal ages ago. After all, Ponce de Leon is immortalized in stone, not flesh and blood. However, there are many special places on this planet which appear to possess magical, even medicinal qualities within water bubbling to the surface from its depths, coming straight from the heart of Mother Earth.

Though nobody in the family intentionally imbued this well with mystical qualities it didn't require acknowledgement as an exceptional discovery to be one. Instantly recognized for what it is, no doubt about it, an ancient, primal, elemental source of pure water at its very best, the well is incredible. It was a marvelous wonder to behold. A point of fascination drew curious onlookers, especially the local kids who would routinely visit this languid pool, there to sip frigid fluid. Refreshing to mortal senses, chilling to the core of any soul, dipping bare fingers into that pool was actually painful, even in midsummer. The water never warmed, yet, in the steam heat of July, it proved restorative, a welcome relief and well worth the trip to a far corner of the yard.

With the explosion of the big rig came myriad stones of a different color. Producing an astounding assortment while retracting the drill bit, there must have been some residual rock which surfaced, gathering at a stem protruding from the ground. Stones had splattered all over the area. Tapped then capped off, the vein, once opened, could not be closed. The pressure was so extreme it forced an incessant and substantial trickle up through the sides of the stem where it attached to a reinforced cap. There would be no containing the flow, quite literally no way to turn off the tap. Thousands of pebbles lay beneath it and many more were scattered for yards around the pool of water perpetually re-filling itself. They had burst from the earth with the geyser. The pool was about three feet in diameter, a perfect circle, as if in homage, resembling the shape of the Earth and the Sun and the Moon: Universal form and substance.

As the rig erupted in a cacophony of unsettling sounds, its metal twisting against metal, water forcing its way to the surface through solid bedrock, the resulting commotion caused the neighbors within earshot to come-a-calling.

Excitement in the air intermingled with a surging river shooting straight up through the ground, enticing those who'd felt the rumble and also heard the explosion from a distance then came to behold what they wondered about. It created a sudden magnetic tug, a gravitational pull, calling everybody within range to come see a geyser before they capped it off and they had to hurry. It was flooding the yard! Water was rapidly rushing downhill racing toward the Nipmuc River. It was a sight. Neighbors called others nearby. Folks gathered on the front lawn to watch it as cars stopped then parked on the road because they had seen a geyser from above the tree line while passing the old Arnold Estate on Round Top Road. The farm remained crowded for several hours. A rather bucolic drive through the country had been abruptly transformed into the place to be in Burrillville one hot summer afternoon as a natural resource went on supernatural display for the day. Had they discovered a fountain of youth? Did the purest water possess any special properties which set it above and beyond? Roger certainly looked relieved. Drenched when he'd run out to the rig, the water seemed to work its magic on him immediately, washing all of the stress from his face then it did the same for Carolyn. If it is a fountain unlike any other, a special find on an equally special place, it would be best for everyone to remember that ancient Chinese curse: May you live forever. Perhaps immortality is not such a blessing, after all. Consider the source.

It is impossible to tell the full story of that decade, of the family dwelling within this house, without fully expressing the significant role played by the Nipmuc River in their lives. Though not intending to dwell on the riverbank too long, it must be noted. Its message was well-received and so, should be passed along as a profound part of their entire tale. Some remarkable things happened there. Each one of them recalls experiencing something uniquely spiritual at the river and everyone has gained insights due to the time they invested there. It was a flowing lesson of life and death. It offered so much, if only one would sit and quietly listen. At times it flowed rough and robust, tearing through the countryside, as if on a mission to ravage the land on its path to the sea. At other times, it became a placid and peaceful creek, almost still. With one glance it became a reflecting pool, a window into the soul.

The kids were thrilled when their father built a small dam from its endless

supply of river rocks. He worked diligently for hours, slogging through sand and mud with one stone after another, constructing the shallow pool in which his kids could swim to their heart's content, or so he'd said. They all secretly suspected daddy built it as much for himself, considering how many hours he spent submerged in the crystalline pool, swimming with his fishes. It was when he felt closest to his girls, when dad was at his happiest, surrounded by nature, soaking in it while soaking it all in. When Roger recalls his time at the farm, these are sentimental moments he remembers, like slowly, deliberately dipping his overheated body into that cool, clear water. In those moments, he felt rejuvenated, certain bathing in its beauty replenished him, spirit and soul. Standing in its sacred sand, in those moments he felt like a young boy again, like a man-child who had discovered the fountain of youth on a farm in rural Rhode Island. When he talks about it now, it is always with regret: a sense of loss. Roger has never overcome what he still perceives as a promise broken to himself: to hang onto this place in the country... forever. Now, it is with sincerest remorse that he revisits the past, disdainful about feeling forced to leave it behind rather than being grateful for having found it at all. Because of a sad, chronic condition he imposes upon himself, this poor man cannot enjoy his own marvelous memories of the most magical decade of his life.

April's memories of the river involve repeated sightings of spirit children at play, in and around the water's edge. Many times, she returned home from an excursion mentioning what she had seen, how they spoke with each other. She would watch and listen intently, curious about their language, tickled by their lighthearted laughter and peek-a-boo! game. Fascinated by their lavish outfits, the children wore ornate handmade smocks. April described in vivid detail their faces and places she had seen them emerging from in the forest, darting out from behind trees, examining stones from a riverbed. Whenever she spoke of them it was always with a smile. She took pleasure in observing their antics; the happiness, joy they shared just being together. There were no toys. Nature itself was enticement enough to relish what their world had to offer, even if they were revisiting a final memory for an instant in a fractured sliver of time and space; as a quantum leap, in-between dimensions.

It was April's way to sit quietly down by the river, blending into scenery,

observing the cycle of life unfolding. She was still very young when she first witnessed apparitions there, remaining silent as she watched the bevy of little ones, those she would later watch playing in the pine grove. Describing their clothing as simple but fancy, at the time, words a child would use, April now recalls these images from an adult perspective, able to state that they were all dressed in tan-colored smocks, obviously handmade, colors painted on what appeared to be a thin hide. Wearing open moccasins resembling sandals, they scampered through the woods to the riverbank, moving quickly and nimbly, navigating that rugged terrain with ease, familiar with their surroundings in a place they knew as home. Indian children, the Nipmuc Tribe occupied this valley well before the time when hosts of colonists appeared on the horizon, those who came to claim it as their own. According to the historical records, their settlement was an expansive, sprawling village nestled in the heart of the pristine valley and the river running through it was a vital source of life.

There were there... and then they were gone. As if April was just another little ghost, she would curl up beside a mighty maple tree and watch them for the few instants they appeared and then they'd disappear, dispersing into the ether, riding the wind to who knows where. When April was a child, her own reaction to the sightings seemed nonchalant, as if the Nipmuc children were naturally where they belonged... not supernatural in Nature. Decades later, as her story has come to light, she cannot help but speculate about what she saw and what it meant. Questions arise from mist collecting as vapor above the water when the air is moist; a secondary pool mimicking what lay beneath it. She finds one aspect of these visions most compelling. How could they leap into an alternate time and space then leap out again with relative ease? Why did they seem so familiar to her? How could it be they'd played around trees, among branches that did not even exist during the time they lived? And how could they come so close to her and yet not see her huddled at a river's edge? It makes no sense. Of one thing April is certain. Her senses as a child did not betray her. They were keen and clear and she saw what she saw. Her sense of them remains strong and she often feels a subtle longing to return to the river to reclaim the childhood she still perceives as lost in the fray. The land is just as haunted as the house and the barn but April does not consider it as such. It remains a placid place to escape their house of horrors. Drawn back in mind to that peaceful place where once she discovered her love of Nature's beauty, it is with a heavy heart that she revisits the past. April still wants to go home,

back to a fountain of youth where she once felt ageless and eternal.

Over the course of a decade spent discovering the essential nature of life and death, girls learned powerful lessons regarding the pure power of water. As a mighty force to be reckoned with, it has claimed innumerable lives over time, throughout the ages, man and beast, as all living things are susceptible to the curse that comes with the blessing. One cup full of what human beings require to live can and will kill, without malice or forethought. Like fire, water does not discriminate nor does it possess a conscience. It has profound influence on life, as an elemental source of it; the stuff of a primordial soup can also be a recipe for disaster. It is the beginning or it can spell the end for anyone who fails to be wary of the woes it can bring. Perish the thought.

During several of her countless visits to their river, April witnessed others as well, souls who appeared to belong where they were but where were they? She saw a man and a boy there. Her description of them was identical to the pair who frequently appeared in the house, manifesting on the landing at the top of the stairs to Andrea's bedroom. She even saw their dog a time or two. April did believe her eyes. She was too young to doubt her own senses, as all children behold the world with wide-eyed wonder. Her descriptions of them were too exact to be any other souls. It was their land. It was their river, too.

When she describes what she saw, what April says defies public record. It is written that the elder Mr. Baker drowned in the pond and his son perished ten years later. April insists the father died on the river and so did his son, as well as the boy's dog. April does not talk about what she saw or how she knows. No one doubts her version of events and nobody is willing to reopen the wound to ask. Some things are better left unspoken... too difficult to say.

On the subject of dogs... the river could be treacherous, quite frightening. Case in point: Pooh Bear fell through the ice. Andrea panicked, jumping in after him. Roger plucked both of them out of the frigid water before it was too late. It was a concerted effort on his part and obviously shook the man to the core. The speed of water rushing beneath the icy crust could have swept them away in seconds. He trembled that day, and not from the cold, though he and his daughter were drenched. Helping her back up to their house, he should have ranted and raved, having every right to admonish her for doing something so foolish but instead, he cried and tried to hide it. The father had

come close to losing a child that day and he knew it. Perish the thought. The fountain nearly claimed another youth, along with her beloved dog.

There was an intriguing combination of natural and supernatural episodes which occurred at the river. As seasons passed, everybody realized the truth: the forest was not an escape from events happening in the house. The woods were simply another venue where different scenes played themselves out for the benefit of the audience, or not. They never noticed who was watching, so the presence of mortal souls had no adverse impact on the spirits. They were where they were, in another space and time, and they would have been there regardless of whether or not there was someone to watch them being spirits. Perhaps they did not realize they were dead. The real question was how these immortal souls could make such an implausibly quantum leap then touch the same trees the Perron girls played among. Phenomenal! Cindy saw several of these native children playing in the pine grove. Impossible! The pine grove was not there when these spirits were alive. Not another living soul present to bear witness, Cynthia doesn't care who believes or disbelieves her stories. It matters not. She believed her own eyes... and still does. No doubt about it.

If it is even remotely possible for spirits from another time and space to visit and partake of the same pleasures in this realm, within the same woods where mortal children frolicked, the concept is cause enough to investigate, to explore the existence of multiple dimensions at the intersection of past and present tense. Such a vision presupposes the existence of an alternate reality, beyond the three-dimensional world human senses are hardwired to perceive. There were some mind-boggling moments for five little girls who could not comprehend what they'd witnessed in the woods. Yet, fearlessly or foolishly, they would return over and over again, as if being drawn in, to connect with its source: a mystical, magical place in the country where spirits could touch the same bark on a tree they'd touched, at the same time in the same space. It was all too remarkable to ignore, too much of a cosmic collision not to stare in shock and wonder about; an awe-inspiring, four-dimensional revelation.

Behold! The river is what first enticed Roger, well before he ever stepped foot inside the house. His eyes admired the land but a river grabbed him by

the heart. When he pulled off shoes and socks to go wading into the shallows of the clear, cool pool, Carolyn knew her husband was as hooked as any fish swimming trustingly around his ankles could have been on that day or any other. He did not fish. He did not hunt. The land was left alone, preserved by a family who tended to it lovingly, protecting it from harm, not simply for themselves but for all of those who'd loved the land, mortal and immortal alike. It was destined to be adored, even worshipped by the pagan children in the family. Inspirational to all of them, some in very specific ways, a walk in the woods was healing. It was a transcendental, holistic experience, whether or not there were supernatural sightings. Being there is supernatural. Being there is essentially spiritual in Nature.

Cynthia still wonders why she could see solid apparitions, observing them without being seen. How would they have reacted if they'd ever noticed her? Is it possible her presence would have frightened them? Would she be the one perceived as the spirit? Would they be as fascinated by her as she was by them? These little ghosts would show themselves, but did they ever realize they could be seen? Was she the one visiting them... or was it the other way around? When they disappeared, where did they go? Were they still there, in the woods, merely invisible? April ponders the same questions, ones without answers. Is it conceivable that these spirits were watching over the family as they were being watched over, in the woods and elsewhere? Indian children never appeared in their house because the house did not exist when they did, but then, neither did the pine grove. The Baker boys, a father, his son and a dog, had all appeared in the house. April recognized them. Nancy had been drawn to the old cellar hole, as if beckoned by her family to come home. So, what was the cause or better yet, an explanation? These were heady concepts for ones so young at the time; decades have not provided clarity. Thirty years hence, it all remains equally mystifying. There will be those who suspect the ghosts were little demons come back to haunt and taunt these living souls. Truth be told, they were innocent children... sweet little angels at play.

The enormous storm blew up the coast with a vengeance, its unsurpassed fury taking aim on millions of unsuspecting souls. People died as a result. As it arrived, another one blew in from Canada. A direct hit, it did not run away.

Instead, it hit a solid wall of water. Conflict ensued. A collision caused both storms to stop dead in their tracks. The warring factions converged over New England. Adversaries fought it out on turf borrowed for use as the battlefield. Day after day, copious amounts of rain fell, scarring a late summer landscape as the relentless torrent continued, a deluge that cut the Earth to shreds. It ran like blood in the trenches, gutting everything in its path. Then it ran off like a coward, deserting its post, rushing downhill toward the river. As if trying to escape itself, rain fled from the sky then ran for the hills and valleys, making its way home to its own elemental source, merging as super/natural resource. Attraction: It's the Law. Two storms coincided, battling it out for three days. Then, in mutual surrender, embracing as one, they drifted out to sea in peace. Over and out of sight. The collateral damage was done. It was devastating. It was beyond belief. Disturbing. More than mortal eyes could bear to behold. A miserable set of storms teamed up and seemed to do permanent damage to a ravaged landscape. Having witnessed its savage power in its aftermath, the distressing sight prompted Andrea to write about the supernatural destruction done to land she loved and thought she lost. Children process the traumatic events of their lives in different ways. As sunshine re-emerged from behind black, ominous clouds, she could see the light of day. Stepping outside of the house, surveying the property, garden in shambles, she walked to the river. Roaring like a lion, rearing its ugly head, gutting the valley, she could see it had suffered irreparable harm. Nothing would ever be the same. It never is.

After the Flood

Be quiet listen to the voice of Earth—she cries in squalls
wailing like a baby torn from her mother’s arms
tears from places dark and deeper still
than water rushing over banks
traveling as tributaries crooked sprawling jagged ruts
splayed like fingers reaching out to grab and hold
to save what is forsaken to the storm
gouging paths through woods of oak and birch and maple
seeping into open wounds veins split and seething
sliced across a humbled landscape
countryside crippled drowning begging for mercy

each drop a mournful plea
weeping for her mother, rushing to the river
there to reunite on a journey to the sea.

It was a tragedy at the time, a loss sustained or so it seemed. Earth healed. Requiring only one full season to restore itself, no trace of the ravaging flood remained. No open wounds or visible scars left upon the land, no longer torn and serrated. Instead, it appeared as it had been before a super storm took its toll. In many respects, it was even better. Cleansed, scoured by that violent, destructive force with no remorse for the damage done, this land was reborn, as the phoenix rising. If only human beings knew how to heal as efficiently. Nature has an answer for every question. One need only know where, how to look. Andrea was right. Nothing was the same. Nothing is ever the same. In the same way she'd seen the stress washed away from her father's face as he submerged himself in a shallow pool at the river, she witnessed the aftermath of the storm. The damage done was naturally restored in no time at all, not a trace of what she had once perceived, believed to be irrevocable harm done. Perceptions changed once she began to evolve with the place. She began to see the world differently. As Marcel Proust stated, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

As the water from that geyser rushed as a raging torrent down the hillside toward the Nipmuc River, the stone walls created a natural barrier, halting its momentum, at least slowing it enough to form a big puddle at the base of the hill, detained by the porous dam. Everyone saw this happening. The girls ran down to toe dabble, then slosh around in the freezing cold water at the height of summer: a social experiment in extremes. They'd screamed like girly-girls do, laughing and splashing each other until they were soaked through to their tender young skin. Shivering in the sunshine, they all ran home to change. By the time they returned to the spot the pond had changed, too. The water had dispersed, trickling down a well-worn path then over the bank into the river, gravitating back to its elemental source, so to merge and converge with its essential self. A natural confluence occurred. This was the year when the grass was greener on the same side of the fence, at the foot of the hill, the

beneficiary of a massive flood erupting from deep within the planet.

John O'Donohue wrote: "I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding." His insight was shared by young ladies as they learned powerful lessons about the stream-of-consciousness. A clear understanding came to each member of the family as each, in their own time, grew with this place where they had settled. They evolved like the land and came to comprehend the essential nature of things, including the realities of the river. There were natural and supernatural consequences for those who'd visited their secluded place in the country. The property was an open door to an extraordinary spiritual experience, different every day. It had personality, a way about it, unlike any other place. Perhaps it was because of its ancient, tragic past. The spirits have their own stories to tell. Indian children were all frolicking in a once open field, one which would, centuries later, become the meticulously planted pine grove. It was truly inexplicable. These same little souls played together at their creek, emerging from the woods to explore the water's edge. Something killed them. Was it another flood... in another time? Had they been swept away doing what children so foolishly do, standing too close to the chasm? The sad but real truth is that children die because of their own curiosity, mesmerized by this incredible world which offers so much to explore. Adults criticize children in many ways, particularly because of these irrational risks they take; usually the same risks those adults took when they were kids. It is amazing that anyone survives childhood. Accused of thinking of themselves as immortal souls, it may well be all souls enter the world with an insatiable curiosity for where they are and memory of where they've been. Are human beings born knowing where they come from, born carrying an imprint of the past? If ancient memory exists, does it wash away with time as rushing water smoothes a stone or does it become deeply buried, embedded with age, like an artifact in the Earth? Does an influx of new information suppress their previous inborn knowledge or is it intrinsic to the mind, accessed only if that door is opened by contemplative means? It's possible. Anything is possible.

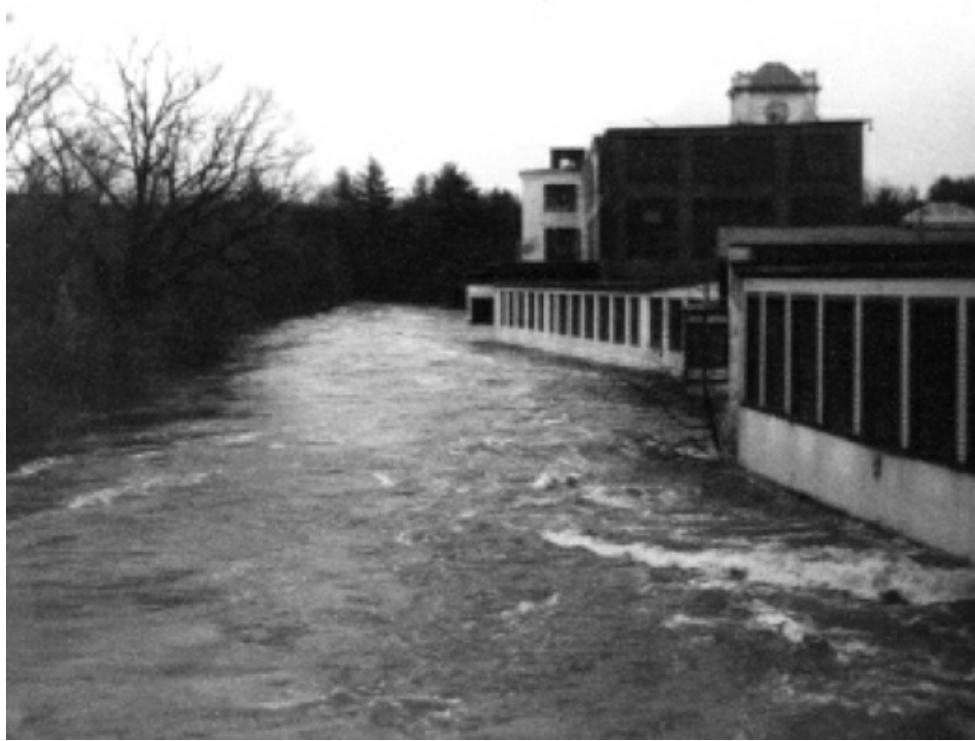
The Perron family was drawn to a river's edge. Curious children observed their parents playing like kids. Longing to join them, to play there together, it

was not long before it would become a second home. Adults watched as their reflections mirrored a newfound youth in the fountain, as stress washed away with the obviously restorative qualities of the placid pool. It was magical. Long after the farm had been sold and the Perrons had relocated to a far safer place, their children would return to their river. They would explore those well-worn paths and the promise of eternal youth in its darkest depths. As adults, they've dangled their legs from the bridge then dabbled their toes in the water again. Some have returned time and time again, there to revisit the past, to gather up stones and sip the sacred nectar from languid pools filled with memories and the pebbles of Middle-Earth, a place where they are free to pause and reflect on a childhood riddled with the supernatural wonders of Mother Nature at her best and worst, blessing and curse. One thing is certain. They staked a cosmic claim to land long ago, maybe longer than they know.

“Only in quiet waters do things
mirror themselves undistorted.
Only in a quiet mind is
adequate perception of the world.”

Hans Margolius

~ Stillwater Mill ~ Harrisville, R.I. ~



“The leaf has a song in it.

Stone is the face of patience.
Inside the river there is an unfinished story
and you are somewhere in it
and it will never end until all ends.”
Mary Oliver



~ Round Top Road submerged ~

release the hounds!

“The irrationality of a thing is no argument against its existence, rather a condition of it.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

It was a peaceful evening. Everyone had settled in for the night. Gathered together in the parlor to watch an old movie, the classic film Carolyn insisted they needed to see, turned out she was right, as usual. *Gone With the Wind* was a beautiful but heart-wrenching film. Their mom talked them through it, explaining the history of that era, telling her children about all the wonders of Georgia with all its Southern charms. Even Roger, a history buff himself, listened attentively to a lesson. It was one of those times they remember, not because of the natural inclination to enjoy popcorn and a movie but because of the supernatural activity about to be unleashed. When such episodes occur there's a tendency for images of an event to solidify, setting up like concrete in the mind, poured through the eyes of beholders, even if they see nothing at all. As a pause for reflection, the intermission wasn't quite long enough.

Timing is everything in life... and death. As William Tecumseh Sherman began marching his troops into the city of Atlanta, burning everything along their bloody route, the shattering sound exploded from the cellar. It was loud beyond description, like the horns hunters blow as they release the hounds and begin their hunt of a fox on an all-consuming run for its life. A familiar image from previous movie night excursions through time, they could all visualize the men in their fancy red coats and funky hats riding their horses, jumping the fences of a proper British pasture, in pursuit of the prize. The house shuddered. Floorboards vibrated. China rattled in the hutch. The cats hissed and hunched and bared their fangs. Two dogs were instantly up on their feet howling and growling. Roger was half way down cellar stairs. For every action, there's a reaction! Barking. Yelling. Crying. Shouting. A horn blared again, louder, as if it was actually in the parlor, magnified a hundred fold. Terrified children clung to their mother. Both dogs were frantically barking, growling menacingly at the cellar door. They suddenly cowered to the floor, whimpering instead. Jennifer and Pooh Bear were fiercely protective of their family, as devoted as dogs come. They were fearless creatures and yet, there they were, crawling like wounded puppies toward the children, seeking their protection as a creature comfort in the midst of

madness. Someone powerful had silenced them. Both of the dogs were trembling uncontrollably.

Pervasively negative energy filled their farmhouse. It was oppressive. The horn sounded a third time. The ladies-in-waiting could hear their champion below, bellowing atrocious language at pique volume, ordering this intruder to leave the premises immediately; unaware his threatening, rather indelicate hyperbole was feeding the negativity as a symptom of his own fearfulness. He was the one who went bravely to the source, into the belly of the beast: the cellar. Intending to expel the culprit, he was inadvertently providing it with energy. The air was heavy, darkening with a presence no one could see but everyone felt as the clash of opposing forces occurred. Carolyn began to pray aloud. The children listened as their mother implored God for some act of divine intervention. The words she uttered were juxtaposed against stark imagery of destruction and death: flames and chaos exposed on a television screen. As the scene of devastation exploded across the glass, five children found themselves staring at it in awe, while still in the midst of some turmoil of their own. War: their battle being waged against an invisible enemy, little wonder they all remember what film they were watching that night when the farmhouse erupted in vile sounds from below... part of the new paranormal, a surrealistic impaling of memory. None of them ever hear a reference to the epic film without thinking of that equally epic night; an automatic response, reflexive in nature, like dad leaping from a chair or dogs leaping to their feet.

SILENCE! Roger had suddenly stopped cursing. It became deathly quiet, dead silence from below. Carolyn turned off the television as they listened and waited. What just happened? Was it over? Where is daddy? April tugged at her mother's sleeve, her pleading eyes asking these questions. There was no answer. Mom had no idea how to explain something that she could not comprehend. Whispering only a few comforting words she could conjure up to ease April's distress, "It will be all right honey" was all their mother could muster in the moment. Of course, she didn't know if it was true or not; she had to say something to pry them from its evil grip at that prickly spur of the moment, what a good mother does when her children become scared. Then, expressing her wishes to Mary, as one mother to another, on behalf of these children, she knew what transpired was inexplicable and had no confidence it was over. It was something wicked, of that she had no doubt. A force to be reckoned with, what she dreaded most of all. Waiting was as surreal as those

sounds. Everyone feared for the master of the house, the man of the family.

Roger practically ripped that cellar door from its ancient hinges. He went flying down the hatch into the dark, dank hole, in rapid and rabid pursuit of an intruder in his house. The ensuing confrontation was audible, if one-sided, like listening to someone fighting over the telephone. When the harsh noises quite suddenly subsided, then began the most hair-raising time lapse of all. Nobody knew who to expect or what would happen next. Huddled beside each other in the middle of a parlor, frantic females shivered and shuddered with anxious anticipation, awaiting a father's return. The room turned colder as stench filled the air, mingling with the distinct smells of the cellar. He had left the door wide open on this intrepid journey, as an inadvertent invitation. The farmhouse remained eerily quiet, even though everyone could hear the pounding of their own hearts, the pulse of life beating within the bodies of mortal souls surrounded by death, immersed in the essence of immortality.

A few minutes later, footsteps were heard creaking up the cellar staircase, slowly ascending, as if every step taken was laborious, weighted down with wonder. Roger emerged from the cellar door, as white as the sheet of paper on which these words are printed, a ghastly, ghostly shade of pale. He nearly glowed with the dark cast of enlightenment. So what the hell had he seen? Appearing stunned, he stepped off the landing into the front hallway then turned to look at his family. Without saying a word he closed the cellar door, leaving the alcove light on. A wounded warrior, what had the brave beholder witnessed in the cellar? Carolyn went to her husband. They sat together in the dining room. Obviously traumatized, so vulnerable, Roger appeared to be elsewhere, lost in thought, asking questions of himself... no answers in sight. Carolyn recognized these all-too-familiar symptoms as the aftermath of any supernatural encounter. The man was wearing his fear as a facial expression, especially in the eyes, fixed intently on the edge of the table.

“The woodshed door... is open.” Roger bowed his head and whispered his words. “It’s off the hinges.” He looked into Carolyn’s eyes for confirmation, revealing too much of himself in the process. She heard him. “It was lifted then thrown against the wall, about twenty feet away.” Of course she knew what it meant: an act of war. It was a blatant show of force, an intimidation tactic of an unholy presence in the house. No human had lifted that door. No human could. It was all he would say aloud. His eyes said the rest. He had been courageous... but not fearless... not anymore.

During the few seconds they conversed, at the point of mutual realization, that foul odor receded, evaporating from the air as their dwelling warmed up. Almost instantaneously, balmy summer breezes swirled and swept through the home, cleansing the premises; the prevailing winds of warning. An evil force literally flexing its muscles had finally fled. Joining their parents at the table, the ladies who had waited so patiently were hoping for some insights of their own, a proper explanation of what happened. None was forthcoming. Destined to remain as perplexed as their parents seemed to be on the matter, an all-too-common sense of paranormalcy was pervasive, as a chill invading their airspace. They had seen his face as their father's deeply disturbed eyes gazed downward, at a fixed point, targeting a table. He was in shock.

The mystery remained. Daddy divulged nothing. Instead, after awhile, he got up and returned to the parlor. The rest of the family followed and they all resumed watching the movie. A "fake it 'til you make it" strategy employed, a sense of normalcy was restored. As their dogs finally settled down and fear began to subside, no one could concentrate, distracted by the thought that it might happen again... whatever it was that happened. The girls were still too apprehensive to go off to bed. Everyone remained on edge during an evening which had been so rudely interrupted. Without order or consent weary troops hunkered down with dogs for the night on a sofa and loveseat... lights on.

All's well that ends well, or so they supposed. Five children were not yet aware of the fact that something exceedingly powerful removed the massive solid oak door in the cellar. They were not yet privy to vital information their mother and father possessed, quietly fighting to absorb. They had no inkling of the significance of this event or its impact on the two adults charged with their protection. Quilts and pillows gathered, dogs at their feet, the girls were watching Atlanta burn to the ground as they fell off to sleep.

The cellar door to the woodshed did not open from the woodshed. It was accessible only through the cellar where it had remained locked, bolted from within. Secured as such, there was no other access to the cellar from outside their house. Whatever opened that door had done so from inside the house. Carolyn knew it. Too heavy for one man to move, it commanded the strength of several just to budge it. As a practical matter it was practically impossible. Roger could not fathom how much superhuman strength would be required to literally lift it off its hinges and send it sailing through the air. What brute

force would be necessary to pick it up then prop it so many feet away from where he'd found it laying lopsided, up against the granite wall? No damage done to the door, as if it had been gingerly handled, it appeared to be merely tossed aside as an afterthought. Roger had a few afterthoughts of his own. It was a struggle, difficult to discuss decades after the fact; another hair-raising adventure remains much a mystery. Inquiring minds gave up asking long ago until recently, when the episode required inclusion in a memoir. Delving into the depths of his consciousness as he'd done that fateful night, racing down a cellar hatch to vanquish an intruder, he told what he could of this story with his usual stoic style then he suddenly stopped. The sounds of silence. As he began to clear his throat, choking back tears, he turned away from his eldest, attempting to regain his composure. Rattled to the core, he could not speak.

"Dad, what did you see down there?" Andrea was gentle with her words. Surely she could coax the answer to an age old question in the family.

"Nothing." It was his final word on that subject. As her mother predicted, it was all too much for him, even now. She had asked him about this episode many times over the years. He never revealed what he sensed or witnessed in their cellar that night, not even to his own wife. No one in the family knows what he saw, if anything. He has never found the words to describe what he seems to be withholding. Perhaps there is nothing more to tell; no more than the door, but everyone in his family has their doubt about it. They know him. Andrea's suspicions were confirmed as she questioned him then watched her father dissolving into tears he tried to hide. As a sullen, contemplative figure, stark white to ashen gray, he was struggling with internal conflicts he could not contain. Her father's formerly vibrant face transforming before her eyes, it suddenly appeared drawn taut with fatigue. Utterly exhausted, irrevocably altered... enlightened. Message received, loud and clear, blasting like a horn, warning him off the subject, and her as well. Don't ask... he'll never tell.

"It is only when we silent the blaring sounds
of our daily existence
that we can finally hear the whispers of truth
that life reveals to us,
as it stands knocking on the doorsteps of our hearts."

K. T. Jong

knocked back

“The last function of reason is to recognize that there are an infinity of things which surpass it.”

Blaise Pascal

Let there be light from below when darkness descends from above.
Let us abandon our fearfulness to discover the pure power of love.
Let us be kind when it's difficult and let us be brave when need be.
Let it be clear you're standing quite near to someone who isn't me!

Roger was mortified, struggling to understand how it could've happened, how that door was lifted from its hinges then tossed asunder: Impossible! So many things were impossible. As episodes occurring in the farmhouse defied all logic, reason and natural law, he was being forced to factor supernatural law into an equation that didn't follow logically, anathema to this pragmatic man. Being challenged on every front, it made him cranky. He had become, as Nancy described, freaked out. He'd embraced his doubt like a lover, holding it close to heart as a natural shield against the supernatural onslaught. Doubt proved to be a phantom in his arms, providing no protection from the truth. It dissipated as an innocuous vapor into the stale and languid air of the cellar at the instant a beam of light revealed the truth... then there was no doubt left. None. He'd witnessed and was, in a sense emasculated by a force which had flagrantly declared its own being much stronger than him. Was it Bathsheba? Or, was it the devil that bribed her in life then claimed her in death? Was this a demon door, manipulated by a force he was ill-equipped to contend with or was it a spirit making her presence known? Leaping backward into memory, as a young boy in the church, Roger first heard holy words which suddenly made more sense: “Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” What does this phrase really mean? Was it as simple as asking God for an explanation of these events and, if so, what does God have to do with it, anyway? Roger severed his ties with the church and what faith he possessed was private and went unacknowledged. During this episode, he found the need to reconnect, a visceral urge to find a plausible believable source of information on which to base his conclusions. What did he see, what had he sensed in a cellar which

was so compelling, it sent him seeking the answer from God the Omniscient? Though he has never divulged any details of what happened at the time in a space below his home, he emerged as a believer, whether or not he was yet prepared to admit it to himself, or any other mortal soul. That night was the turning point for Roger Perron. Until this time he'd refused to accept a word of it: the existence of the spirits. Even when he was not arguing a point, acquiescing to or indulging in another quip about the "ghosts" in their house, he did not believe they were actually there. He'd always assumed there had to be another explanation still eluding him. A door opened for him, literally and figuratively, changing his mind and releasing his demons. The encounter finally forced him to confront his fears. The family agrees he emerged from the cellar door a different man, humbled by whatever he had seen. It took him down a few steps, toward an awkward admission: the world's leading authority on everything realized he was not omniscient, that he might need to seek his answers elsewhere, from a higher power to reconfirm his faith. Revelation: Sometimes it is impossible to bury the dead. They tend to live on in mind... a haunting notion.

Nancy frequently went exploring on the land alone. She loved the peace and quiet, a privacy she found only in the woods, escaping an over-crowded farmhouse; the way to replenish what the sharing of space seemed to deplete. From the earliest days, during the first spring, she had gone off on her own, with her mother's blessing. Carolyn had done the same thing as a child, as her mother before her. It was an ancestral tradition; a Cherokee trait. In many respects, Nancy was the one most like her mother: fiercely independent and inquisitive by nature, about Nature. It was a different time, an era when kids had more freedom and were trusted because they earned it from an early age. Expectations and obligations increased as they matured, demands were made as instructions given. All of the girls knew the rules and knew to follow them to the letter of the natural law. No climbing on rocks, no swimming alone, stay away from the well and the river and the old cellar hole.

During one of her many excursions, the kid tempted fate, going off to the cellar hole alone. She had been told, forewarned to stay away from it and the well beneath the bell stone; an off-limits area deemed unsafe. It was an order

repeatedly issued by the platoon sergeant, drummed into their thick skulls. And yet, left to her devices, Nancy went where she felt compelled to explore. It was a perfect day. Everything was itching to bloom, buds begging to burst, but it was still a little too early. Sweetness in the air issued its full-throated promise of spring. The underbrush, subdued by the harsh winter, had not yet sprung to life, so it was relatively easy for her to navigate the obscured path. Relying on her senses and the memory of having been there with her family, Nancy found the old cellar hole rather quickly. She stood there, mesmerized by the place, peering down into the depths of its history. An attachment she could not comprehend consumed her thoughts, allowing her imagination the same freedom to roam as that granted by a trusting mother to a naughty girl who'd chosen to deliberately disobey a direct order. Nancy tried to visualize those who'd lived in that house hundreds of years before and how they lived, drawing their own water, no electricity, only a fireplace for heat. She tried to catapult herself back into their time for a moment or two; to draw the images of another time in mind. As she reveled in the natural wonders of this place, something bizarre occurred. It was a profound pull, one gravitational in Nature.

In one moment she was standing perfectly upright, as still as the wind. In the next, she was being drawn in then sucked down into the vortex of a mini-twister. The spontaneous wind was swirling around her, threatening to knock her off kilter, backward and forward into a deep pit. The youngster panicked. Terrified, her equilibrium compromised, she grabbed the limb of a bush to regain some stability. The ground shook as if something was forcing its way up to the surface, ready to burst through the crust of the Earth. A fierce wind surrounding the scared and unsuspecting child struck her like a shock wave. A force field encased her, spinning and twirling her body while boggling her young mind. Of course she wanted to run! Nancy could not budge her legs. Trembling uncontrollably, she vividly recalls feeling entirely out-of-control, describing a sensation of feeling like Jell-O, inside and out. Waves of nausea then dizziness nearly caused her to swoon: those nasty symptoms of vertigo. Nancy felt sick, twisted into a knot. As tears flowed down her face, a far cry for help escaped her lips. She screamed, not that any mortal soul would have heard her pleas from such a great distance. She was on her own. Having been called home, over the river, through the woods... she was all alone.

Yet not alone... something was physically manipulating the frantic child,

constricting her movement, controlling her body and mind. Scared out of her quick wits, the tumultuous whirlwind kept dashing its debris in her direction, from every possible direction as a cluster of cones and leaves, twigs and pine straw, splattering her face, sticking against moist cheeks, tangling in her hair. With one final blow, an ill wind knocked her back from the rim of the cellar hole as a supernatural grand body slam. It was over. The brisk, blustery wind and everything trapped within it, including Nancy, was instantly freed to fall onto the ground, which is precisely what she did, thankfully backwards. Any forward tumble would've sent the youngster plummeting into a stone cellar hole ten feet deep. Scratches and scrapes heal; that would've been a disaster, a mortal wound inflicted. Beyond hazardous, maybe deadly. As a mother had forewarned, don't break your neck, kid!

There was nothing natural about it! Nancy did not pause to reflect on the too-close-for-comfort encounter. No need. Instead, she ran all the way home, at light speed she did not know she could attain, or maintain, for half a mile. A curious kid reached adulthood without divulging her off-limits excursion into the outer off-limits of the property. Nobody knew of her wicked ordeal in the woods, unwilling as she was to confess a transgression. Nancy kept it a secret for more than thirty years. It was a traumatic event in her young life, only eleven at the time. As far as Nancy is concerned, she was old enough to know better. She knows for a fact what she endured that day was not normal, it was paranormal. Not a natural phenomenon, it was instead supernatural in Nature. She knew enough to realize, tornadoes do not spontaneously erupt, nor does a forest floor. Distraught, she had no choice but to hide her raw and fragile emotions; the girl was freaked out! She perceived the whirlwind as an attacker and felt victimized by its presence. It was something wicked, more serious than merely being warned away. She considers it assaultive behavior, assuming she'd been dealt a harsh blow, severely disciplined for disobeying a direct order: a supernatural consequence. It remains her strongest sense of the episode. Carolyn certainly would have been disturbed by the details of an incident that never should have happened, had a mischievous daughter been able of adhere to a few simple, specific instructions. Had her mother known, she may have told her father, reason enough to keep mum. Forget about it, as if she ever could. She never did.

On the clear, calm, bright and beautiful spring afternoon, a mortified child ran from the woods she loved, as if being chased, escaping from something

invisible; sensing it encroaching, one step behind her, all the way back to the house. Discreetly slipping in through the woodshed, Nancy went up the back stairwell, straight into her bedroom. She was a mess: sobbing, shaking, dirty and hurt, having fallen several times during the intrepid journey. Who knows what made her feel safe in her bedroom. It was only an illusion. There was no safe place and there would be no escape from the omnipresent influence within and beyond those walls. The spirits were like the air, usually invisible but always there.

It was not until her story was being told that the family realized it was a duplicate, virtually identical to a story Cindy told, likewise retaining a vivid memory of the event. Lessons learned the hard way? One would think so. As it turns out, both of them went back to that old cellar hole alone, on separate occasions, enduring a similar punishment, as if they hadn't suffered enough during their first not-so-merry-go-rounds. Kids are stupid. While listening to the replication of an eerily similar circumstance, Carolyn cocked an eyebrow at her two grown daughters, wondering how they survived such a hazardous childhood, much of their own making. She had one pertinent point to inject:

"Disobedient heathens get what they deserve." Her understated and rather unsympathetic tone was well-deserved by two of her own. Carolyn had quite enough exploits and episodes to hold against her naughty daughter Nancy, so why bother providing extra ammunition? Cindy's news came as a surprise. Confession is not always good for the soul. Nancy felt ashamed. To this day she cannot believe, as scared as she was at the old cellar hole that day, she was foolish enough to return, but it was true. She went back for more and did so all on her own, without the benefit of reinforcements. They had both been sufficiently reprimanded long ago, a mighty smite coming in the form of an ill wind. According to mother, a cross wind. No further admonishments were warranted. Carolyn knew why they'd both gone back, risking further attacks. Her children were drawn to the old cellar hole. Nancy had a sense she'd been caught doing something wicked, and suffered the consequence. Cindy sensed the same but also interpreted that frightful gust as communication rather than an overt persecution. Both believe something called them over the river and through the woods. Both believe it provided an inexplicable sense of home, enticing them to return. It was a powerful invitation, one they simply could not ignore, so they did what children do. They'd succumbed to curiosity and followed their instincts as a path. There was no escaping it. One by one, each

member of the family was compelled to acknowledge the truth and come to terms with the circumstances. They were completely surrounded, the twister as a metaphor. Nancy would feel that queasy, disorienting sensation again, at another place and time. Cindy encountered a similar whirlwind in a burning room with Lori. Holly would go for a ride on the wind down a treacherous set of stairs and Roger felt the swirling draft from an open cellar door lifted off its hinges. Life and death went on along a linear path, as part of a more complicated continuum no one could explain.

It was usually difficult to distinguish between the normal and paranormal; not always black and white but shades of gray as well. However, when major manifestations occurred, there would be no mistaking it for something else. During those moments, contemplation and interpretation are unnecessary. As Nancy declares, "It is what it is and it is up in your face!" She knows of what she speaks, from experience. Cindy agreed. "No matter where you go, there they are!" They laugh about it now but it was no laughing matter at the time. The girls learned to navigate treacherous metaphysical terrain, to walk a fine line between alternate dimensions as an extreme sport... tight rope walking, no net. While they reminisced together several more incidents were revealed. Emerging as a study in shades of gray, until it all became black and white, darkness and light, Nancy remembered another story. It had begun as a chat between sisters, resulting in a revelation for those seated at the kitchen table.

The horses belonged to everybody, though Nancy and Cindy did think of them as their own and cared for them as such, as precious pets. They took the job quite seriously. It was not unusual for them to spend hours a day with the stately creatures, either inside the barn or out on the property, grooming then riding the boys. As the epitome of pampered pets, the horses were spoiled rotten, both indulged and adored by their children. Each of these girls had a special affinity with animals but Cynthia and Nancy were totally committed to the horses, devoting countless hours to their care. Therefore, exposure was greater, as the dutiful duo shoveled stalls, baled hay and filled feed buckets. What happens in that barn is more than meets the eye of the beholder.

There were numerous instances of supernatural activity in the barn but it was such a hectic place, it was difficult to distinguish or attribute the cause or

to point a finger at the culprits. It was more of a frustration, a nuisance, really; currycombs and other tools of the trade had a tendency to temporarily disappear, relocating at will. The bridle, always hung on the same peg on the nearest wall to the stall, would suddenly vanish, only to be found later on the opposite side of the barn, hanging upside down in some dark, obscure corner never used for anything, by any living soul. Too busy for juvenile practical jokes, the girls soon realized that it was not some playful prank but rather the pronouncement of a presence. Still, proving this assertion to be true would be virtually impossible. Circumstantial evidence may not hold up in the court of public opinion... just not convincing enough for skeptics who presumed the existence of a logical explanation. Yet, it is logical, if one believes in the existence of mischievous spirits who chomp at the bit to wreak havoc!

Their supernatural shenanigans seemed to be intended as annoyances, to distract, maybe even to keep the kids in the barn a little longer, due to delays deliberately caused: searching for lost, misplaced, pilfered items they needed to do their jobs. No, the girls were not amused by these antics. Actually, they became chronic complainers on that matter, growing weary of their perpetual scavenger hunts. The game got old and, according to the mother, the whining got older. Eventually the girls gave up the ghost, accepting their lot in life, at least while in the barn. Empty accusations fell upon deaf ears... no point in pointing fingers. There was nobody there... or is there? Boo! Who to blame?

There was a time when the rafters they stood beneath held the weight of a woman's body, swinging from the end of a rope. They could never afford to forget this while working out in the barn, yet they didn't even know about it for several years after moving to the farm. No one ever bothered to mention Mrs. Arnold. Carolyn's research revealed the truth of her life... and her death. No wonder its rafters rattled. The wasting of one's precious time on Earth would emerge as a theme in the history of the old Arnold Estate.

Nancy went out to check on their horses, no time to waste, as a cold night ahead had been predicted. The forecast was a bleak one. It was twilight, time for a couple of boys to go to sleep. Entering the barn to find them munching on their last hay of the day, the grain buckets were empty. They'd had a good meal to keep them warm. Pineridge and Royalton were ready to settle in for a

long winter's nap. Pulling an enormous roll of blankets from the outside wall of the stall, intending to cover them, before doing so, Nancy refreshed their water, breaking through the thin sheet of ice forming on the surface. No doubt about it... gonna be a cold one. It was by no means warm in their barn but it was certainly tolerable for critters. Nancy was moving fast, working up a sweat. She had placed a thermal throw on Royal without incident. Standing in front of Pineridge, preparing to open his stall, she was whispering sweet nothings to him when it happened. Nancy remembers being overcome in an instant by a sensation she describes as unnatural cold; supernatural in Nature.

The backside of her body, all of it, from head to toe, suddenly turned so frigid it was as if she was stretched out on a solid slab of ice. The heaviness she felt was staggering, like the weight of the world was pulling her back, to force her down to the ground. Pineridge went nuts! He reared up, screaming in terror. A moment before he had been docile, eating a carrot from her hand. Throwing his huge head back then to the side, his wild-eyed expression, one of abject horror, frightened her more than whatever was right behind her, whatever it was Pineridge was staring at, scared out of his mind. Nancy felt overcome, stricken by a weakness in the knees that threatened her collapse. It was proper time to panic. Pineridge was known to be skittish but this was dangerous, as he could easily injure himself. Leaping in protest, kicking up on his hind legs then slamming into the walls of his stall caused Nancy to begin sobbing. She was helpless and so afraid for him. The horse screeched and whinnied, kicked and bucked in his stall, all the time staring over her shoulder. If he'd had the opportunity to bolt, he would have been gone, but the poor thing was trapped in a cage, nowhere to run. He had seen something behind the child, just beyond where she stood, frozen stiff. Whatever had a hold of her pulled Nancy off her feet, jerking her down onto the floorboards. She hit the floor hard, knocking the wind from her lungs. Pinned, wriggling to escape in her mind, Nancy could not move her body. But she could pray, and she did, begging for help. Release seemed to take eternity but once she could breathe again the terrified teenager leapt to her feet then ran screaming and crying all the way back to the house, confronting the issue head on.

"I told you so! I told you there was something in the barn!" The youngster was hysterical. "Pineridge is probably hurt! And so am I! Something grabbed me from behind and dragged me to the floor!" Nancy rubbed the back of her head to indicate injury. Carolyn embraced her daughter then took her into the

bathroom. It was not be the first aid rendered or received that evening. Good Lord! Roger grabbed his coat and was out the door, running to check on the other victim. Pineridge was startled when he entered the barn, still afraid and sweating profusely. Steam poured from his nostrils and his body, laden with glistening drops of moisture, was freezing solid in the bitter cold. He reared up then backward in his stall, away from Roger, but slowly came around a few minutes later as the man spoke softly, kindly to him. This horse trusted a human being he knew well, the man who had originally rescued him; the one who had come to help in a crisis. After some gentle coaxing then cautious but comforting strokes, Roger was able to soothe the savage beast and enter the stall to wipe Pineridge down. Though his hide was scuffed in a few spots, otherwise he appeared unharmed, none the worse for wear, though Roger did not blanket him right away. His body had to cool first.

Once the horse settled down, Roger returned to the house to check on his daughter. He said little more than goodnight but knew she'd been through an ordeal of some kind. Feeling sad and helpless, unable to control the situation, he went back to the barn, out in the darkness, following an illuminated path across packed snow, having left the lights on earlier. It gleamed through the window, providing him safe passage, revealing the hazardous ice beneath his feet. Pineridge finally received his warm blanket and oats for good measure. Royal was asleep. Roger turned the lights out and found his way home with the brilliant glow of moon shine from above thickening clouds, peeking from behind, much as a spirit spooked a horse from behind an unsuspecting child.

But Nancy had suspected, all along. Even though she was ill-prepared for what happened to her, (not what one would expect to occur while performing a mundane task), she had known all along about a presence in the barn. It had haunted her from the beginning. Nancy barely slept that night. Her head hurt. Instead, she laid in bed thinking about the wild look in the eyes of her horse. What was it that frightened him out of his mind? What evil presence took her to the floorboards of the barn? Why didn't Royal react the same way? Had he not seen what Pineridge did? Rolling around in her bed, the child realized the barn had just become an off-limits area without an escort. Safety in numbers? Not necessarily.

All's well that ends well, or so they say, but Roger was deeply troubled, and so was his daughter. Life on the farm was becoming more complicated, as a series of unfortunate incidents began to unfold, quite like what occurred

in Cumberland. It is one thing for straps or bridles and curry combs to vanish or get misplaced. The truth is, things get misplaced from time to time but the complaints were chronic and none of the girls were blaming each other. They all knew that nefarious forces were at play in their barn and elsewhere on the property, too. Their head games were harmless enough, as head games go, nothing but a nuisance. These missing objects often found their way home, reappearing in the spot from which they were taken, usually a few minutes after the spot had been re-checked. That spirit, a mischievous soul, was a benign presence. This could not have been the same spirit. Nancy had been petrified, frozen in place with purpose and reason, deliberately disabled. She hit the floor like a slab of stone. It was meant to hurt; a cruel and vicious act. The same intuition she used to locate lost items, a voice that told her to go back and look again, also told her what attacked her and had spooked the horse was not the same familiar playful presence to which she and her sisters had grown accustomed. The encounter she had that evening was something else entirely... something wicked. Mean-spirited. Nancy believes it intended to do her harm and if the horse was harmed in the process, so be it. Devil may care... or could care less. Whatever it was, it was pernicious, cold and heartless. She felt its malicious intention and so did her dad, but did they sit down together to discuss this incident? Hell no! That would have required Roger to admit he felt something and his most vulnerable emotions were located in an off-limits area. That night, Nancy wrestled with images of fear, panic she saw in the eyes of an innocent animal that had seen too much. And the image that was planted in her brain, still remains.

Prior to this unsettling experience, Nancy had considered the episodes out in the barn to be a more subtle form of communication, non-threatening and non-violent. This not-so-subtle encounter was a rude awakening. What had been a special, sacred place, a welcoming retreat, suddenly transformed into a hostile environment from which she'd been inexplicably forced to retreat, under threat. Nancy was angry, bitterly resentful of the intrusion, spoiling the barn as a spot for the child who always found it a safe and comforting place, in spite of all the supernatural activity surrounding her there. For no apparent reason, the student had been expelled from her favorite class.

Perhaps it was the presence of mere mortals the spirits found disturbing. Seven of them inadvertently knocked on their door to the netherworld and it knocked back in response, as a pull on the hair, the tug of an ill wind or as a door knocked off its hinges and Nancy knocked on her ass! What diabolical message was meant to be sent or received with three heavy blows against the house or three blows of the mysterious horn from the bowels of the Earth: a sinister mocking of the Holy Trinity? Or was it something worse? And what of Roger's rude awakening? Dogs knew enough to cower and the horse tried to bolt, but there was no escaping unscathed. Mortals were not as wise as the creatures they cared for; they did not see with the same eyes. Their animals told them the truth. Danger! Providing all with a wake-up call at the dawn of a new age, the message received was ageless and yet, right on time for a new millennium. It was illuminating, to say the least. Always darkest before the dawn, enlightenment is a sometimes painful, difficult process for those who know not where they are in the grand scheme of things. The eyes have it.

“Every animal knows more than you do.”
American Indian Proverb



~ Pineridge ~

buyer's remorse

"When anger rises, think of the consequences."
Confucius

One balmy August evening Roger and Carolyn took the kids for a ride off shoe shopping with a special trip to McDonald's, a big deal and a good deal back in 1974. Even though the town of Webster, Massachusetts was hardly bigger than a quaint village, it had the lake with the longest name on record, dubbed by the Wampanoag Tribe, quite literally unpronounceable. The girls had a good time trying to say the name aloud as the car passed the oversized sign paying homage to it, as a dare ya! The beautiful ride along narrow roads thickly lined with birch and maple, especially brilliant in autumn, everyone knew the show was about to begin, within a month or so. Their final outing prior to the start of another school year, it was a fun-filled occasion for all.

Returning home sometime after darkness fell, pulling into the driveway, it was obvious; no one thought to leave the light on. Carolyn entered, fumbling for the lamp beside the sofa. Roger walked in behind their children, instantly noticing what they already knew. As warm as it was outside, the house had a biting chill... to the bone; that cutting cold in air as thick as paste, leaving its taste at the back of the throat. A gut-wrenching stench had returned as well, a repugnant odor so foul as to be repulsive. Instantly invading their nostrils, its pervasive presence throughout the house was impossible to escape. Roger's jovial mood turned abruptly sour, almost evil. It was stunning how fast it had happened, even for those accustomed to his occasional fits of temper. As the spontaneous outburst erupted, issued from the center of their parlor, it caused everyone to jump. Brief and to the point, came his familiar prayerful words.

"Jesus Christ!" Roger glared disdainfully at his wife, a weird concoction of game, blame and shame. A snarling grimace had stolen a broad smile he'd worn throughout an eventful evening. The moment was a loss for everybody involved. His tirade continued. "This house smells like death!" Shocked by that harsh tone, the intensity of delivery, it startled all the children, silencing them as they stared at their father's face, twisted and contorted with hatred. The girls stood totally still, frozen in time, waiting for whatever was coming next, mortal or immortal. Negativity oozed throughout the room as an almost tangible presence, as dense as the venom milked from a poisonous snake. A fierce energy charged with the ugliness of contempt seething from his pores,

popping from his veins, it began to puddle on his skin as minuscule beads of perspiration; an anomaly in such frigid air. The ladies huddled together and shivered, as much from the volume and dark content of his remarks as from a bleak, intense cold. Vile, offensive words sent shock waves through them, a trembling shudder through the stillness. Was his emphatic prayer another cry for help? Good God Almighty! It was true. He was right. It was Death. A presence of death was in the farmhouse. No doubt about it. All of them were overcome with a visceral sensation with which they'd become familiar, a gut-wrenching anticipation: what's next?

Roger leered into the dining room then marched in, pausing, as if to sense his surroundings; chasing a culprit, tracking a scent. This is when he noticed the deliberate taunt. The cellar door in their front hallway was swinging back and forth, wide open. Roger had been the last one out of the house that night. He knew that door was closed when they left. He'd been the one to secure it then habitually rechecked it before he exited the premises. Swinging open, as if fanning flames or spreading the stench, Roger confronted his attacker. The severity in his voice increased during a moment of realization; an accusatory comment so misdirected became redirected toward yet another target of his anger and frustration. Bathsheba. Carolyn was off the hook, for the moment.

"Get the hell out of my house, you witch!" He kicked the door shut then defiantly stood there, waited in place; a daredevil, daring her to return.

Click. The latch lifted then it settled back into the slot. He could hear her, footsteps descended the staircase into a malodorous black hole of oblivion. Roger yanked the cellar door open again, staring down into the darkness. Let there be light bulb. He pulled the string in fearless pursuit of this hellacious spirit. Nobody home... only the sound of her footsteps causing the stairs to creak beneath the invisible weight of infinity... imagine the universal mass.

When you see a chance, take it! Daddy was distracted. His children fled. Up the stairs they flew, birds on the wing, escaping the surly bonds of Earth while their father was engaged in subterranean battle. Packages in hand, they quietly gathered in Andrea's bedroom, from where they could clearly hear as mom and dad began arguing again. It is something a child remembers. Roger took aim at the only available target, blaming Carolyn for... well, everything.

"You just had to have this goddamned house!" Using words as weaponry, his sarcastic bite matching his bark, it was nothing compared to that wild, arm-flailing creature bearing fangs. "It had to be this house!" Ranting on...

"It must be fifty degrees colder here than it is outside! I can see my breath!" It was true. Steam heat poured from his loud mouth, like a lone wolf poised in the cool evening mist, baying brutishly at the Moon. "For Christ's sake!" Praying again, as a frantic call for help, no doubt.

"Then stop huffing and puffing like some ridiculous cartoon character. If you're not careful you'll blow the house down!"

"I'll be goddamned if I'll run the heat in summer!"

"No one asked you to! Besides, it wouldn't help anyway."

"Oh, really."

"You can blast it all you want and it won't make a difference. The cold in this house won't leave until she does."

"Is that so... and how do you know that?"

"Because this happens all the time! You're just not here to feel it when it does. I've told you over and over again. You don't listen to me, Roger."

"I am so sorry you ever found this place..." shaking his head in disgust.

"It found me." Carolyn, suddenly subdued, was oppressed by burdens she carried alone. Truth be told, there was more than one dilemma in her life.

"Maybe all of this happens because of you! Maybe Mrs. Curtis was right. Maybe you're the witch!"

"And maybe you're a stupid sonofabitch." And... she's back!

"Now I'm stupid." Roger's face resembled a balloon ready to explode, too much hot air bulging, accumulating from within. It had to go somewhere.

"Well, it took you long enough to admit and yet, you still blame me."

"I am sick to DEATH of this godforsaken place!" The rafters rumbled.

"Empty vessels tend to make the loudest noise."

"Don't you dare talk to me..." So much hot air... in spite of the chill.

"Perfect. That works for me." Carolyn had effectively silenced the wolf, for the moment. She simply stopped responding... stopped defending herself. While he was mid-sentence, she pivoted in place and walked away, out to the woodshed. Pacing like a caged animal, he prepared his next lines in advance, to effectively advance a cause; ready his half of the argument in her absence. Sharpening his points like a set of claws on the ragged bark of a tree, Roger planned on plunging them into his adversary upon her return. Like a weapon of mass destruction and proud of it, poised in position, Roger remained quiet as his wife dropped the heavy armload of wood in the box, never extending a hand to help or even applaud her efforts. Punishment. No doubt about it.

She ignored him entirely, built a raging fire then claimed her familiar spot on the hearthstone. The man of the house watched a woman do all the work without lifting a finger, though he had no qualms about lifting a finger to her face, pointing it directly at her like the barrel of a gun, taking aim and... fire!

A foul and frigid parlor warmed instantly. The life force of fire had driven death away. Roger hesitated to pounce, withdrawing his weapon as fast as he drew it. Carolyn was holding the fire poker. Best not provoke her, should she choose to strike while the iron is red hot! Perish the thought! He had made a wise choice for an often unwise man. Carolyn was in no mood to tolerate any further disruption, remaining cold to the core. She wondered how a heart made of solid ice could possibly keep beating. The air began to sweeten, an obnoxious odor dissipating with the chill. In spite of this remarkably sudden change, a certain stench lingered... that of a marriage rotting on the vine.

Mission accomplished. Whoever she was... Bathsheba Sherman, perhaps Mrs. Arnold (as Roger later suspected) or some other lost soul that they were never able to identify... whoever she was, she was happy. The spirit from the depths had done her stinky, dirty work. Why wasn't it obvious to everyone? It was her intention to split the couple up, to force Carolyn out of the house. Ulterior motive: not merely an objective to haunt and taunt but instead, expel. She was an incendiary by nature, a supernatural fire-starter. How many times and how many rifts caused by her insinuating herself into the mix, to stir the pot as a cauldron of discontent... and she was the fire beneath it.

Her purpose in death, perhaps as well in life, was warfare; an avid attempt made to disturb the peace. Regardless of her point of origin, she had gotten what she wanted. Breaking up is hard to do. At times, it takes three souls to accomplish the task. The spirit in a cellar seemed hell bent and determined, doing everything in her formidable power to incite a riot, to break this couple apart. All quiet on the Eastern front but the damage was done. A witch? Had he suggested she was a witch? The other woman made her presence known. Had she put words into his mouth? Apparently, it was one of the dark arts.

For some inexplicable reason, Roger's disposition immediately improved. Malice he'd exuded moments earlier seemed to vanish with the odor, going up the chimney as one solitary huffing puff of smoke. He calmed down then settled into a Red Sox game, as if nothing had happened at all. At least it was reason enough to ignore his wife for the rest of the night and that was fine by her. Peace and quiet restored, the girls began a tentative re-entry into the war

zone. No more hot shots, a cease fire declared, no white flag was necessary. It seemed safe enough. Dad had fallen asleep on the sofa. The girls gathered around their mom as protectorate, circling the wagons, squarely in her camp. Still apprehensive, it took awhile for them to warm to their surroundings, sensing a decided chill in the air, in spite of the hot as hell fire in the hole. The children began interacting in hushed tones, asking questions in whispers.

“Mommy? Why does daddy blame you for the ghosts?” April had tugged at Carolyn’s sleeve, feeling insecure, in desperate need of attention.

“I don’t know, baby. I think because it scares him, too.” Her eyes moist, dripping with sadness, Carolyn’s somber mood persisted, though she’d made a valiant effort to disguise it. There were no secrets to be kept; her kids knew everything. Above all else, they knew they lived in a war zone.

“They were all here before we came.” Cindy’s statement was defensive.

“And they’ll still be here when we leave.” Chris completed the thought.

“We’re never leaving!” Nancy was adamant, as a declaration of intention. Staunchly opposed to such an absurd notion as surrender, she wanted no part of a ludicrous discussion. Failure was not an option. To abandon ship wasn’t only proof of catastrophic failure; it was simply out of the question, not if the vessel was still afloat. Abandoning her family along with the uncomfortable topic, Nancy’s bedroom was her fallout shelter, the place where she’d escape the worst of the aftermath which inevitably resulted in conversations about selling the farm. Too predictable for words. She had none to spare.

“Mom, I can’t even imagine living anywhere else.” Andrea’s melancholy tone was as reflective as her comment was reflexive.

Roger began to snore. Even so, the girls knew not to change that channel on the television, knowing from experience, it would wake the man instantly. He tended to follow ball games subconsciously, in an altered state of mind. Father would know the final score when he woke up, causing his family to wonder if he might hear them, too. Lingering by the fire with their mother, they happily chatted about the marvels of fast food and new shoes. Carolyn was preoccupied, lost in thought, pondering the fact that she had to build a fire in August to chase the chill of death from her home.

Suggesting the girls get ready for bed, Carolyn stood up from her spot on the hearthstone. A virtual explosion of sound reverberated through the house, originating in the cellar. The dogs: four on the floor and barking hysterically. Roger was blown upright off the sofa. Kids covered their ears instinctively,

as a reflex. No! Not again! That noise was deafening and deeply disturbing, like a foghorn. So loud, it literally shook the floorboards beneath their feet.

Nancy flew from her bedroom, screaming in terror. Glass trembled in the windows. China rattling in the hutch, strings in their piano vibrating audibly, Jennifer crouched down and began growling at the cellar door in the parlor, the room they were in. No question about it, the vociferous sound resonated throughout the house but it emanated from a cellar, a resounding commotion so intense, the children huddled with their mother for comfort as Roger ran toward the only entrance to the cellar that had not been blocked off, the only conceivable point of entry. He had no weaponry with which to confront an intruder, save his volatile temper, a formidable force in its own right. The door he had earlier kicked to close was now nearly ripped from its hinges as he opened it again. His family could hear the anger in his furious footsteps, causing the wood to beg for mercy beneath his weight while descending into the darkness. Three times the horn blew: three distinct tones came back-to-back as the uproar continued. This commotion had a sickening feeling to it, literally nauseating. Roger's sudden absence was just as horrifying for the girls, more frightening than a sound ringing in their wounded ears. They all believed he was the one in danger and would have preferred he not behave as a knight unarmed with no shining armor to carry into battle for protection, but had instead decided to remain behind with them. It stopped. The blaring noise abruptly ceased. Everybody listened intently to the sounds of a silence made all the more stunning by what had preceded it. Detecting whatever she could from the void, Carolyn heard nothing. It was completely quiet. Several minutes passed, the most frightening time of all, moments during which one had to wonder what was coming next, because the war was never really over.

When Roger emerged through their cellar door, he looked shell-shocked; ashen. It was obvious the man had an encounter of some kind. He resembled the plaster on the walls he'd just rushed past on his intrepid journey into the unknown. No longer contemptuous, instead, he appeared bereft, despondent, something the girls recognized, familiar because of what they'd already seen happening to their mother. Reclaiming his spot on the sofa, Roger hung his head, attempting to hide the facial expression he must have presumed was far too telling. Carolyn did not utter a word about it to her husband. This was not something either of them was willing to discuss in front of their kids. Andrea went to him. Placing her hand on his shoulder, she offered him what support

she could. Conflicted, she felt anger and pity for him but admired his courage. This had happened before; dogs cowing behind kids, loud noises erupting from within the farmhouse... all part of the new paranormal.

“Girls, say goodnight to your father. It’s time for bed.” April crawled into her daddy’s lap then hugged his neck. Cindy began a sincere chorus, a round of “thanks for the shoes” and “we had fun tonight” which, considering their current circumstances seemed oddly out of place. He must have appreciated it during such a trying time. Trials and tribulation. Even though they were all quite frightened, no one asked to remain behind with their parents. Instead, they called both dogs upstairs. Embracing their mother on the way, all of the children clustered in Andrea’s bedroom again, anxious to eavesdrop on the inevitable conversation about to begin. Emotions flooded the air up there, with heartfelt sympathy for both of their parents. They prayed together.

Carolyn felt she had no choice but to discuss this event with her husband. As alienated as she was from him that night, she was likewise grateful he’d been home when it occurred. Too often copping the blame and coping with the aftermath, she handled far too much alone on her own over the years. He needed to be there, for her.

“What happened down there?” Stoking and poking the fire, she turned to study his face, the bleak, blighted expression, a precursor to his comment.

“That bitch...”

“Did you see her?”

“No, but she touched me.” Roger’s voice lowered. So difficult to admit it. “Across my back... my shoulders and neck... more than once.”

“Where were you when she touched you?”

“At the far door then again at the bottom of the stairs, before I came up.”

“Roger. Don’t you understand? She called you downstairs.”

“You don’t know that.” The familiar growl had crept back into his voice. “There was nothing down there. Nothing. I looked everywhere.”

“So nothing touched you?” His wife stared him down.

“I don’t know what touched me!” Grinding out words he resented having to say, Roger was quickly slipping back into a rage against a cosmic machine he did not know how to fix, like everything else he had to repair in the cellar. This was beyond his grasp. He was ill-equipped to handle the challenge.

“I’m not the one who did it. Stop treating me like I am the guilty party.” Her words struck him like an arrow from an unholy crossbow, into the heart.

Roger realized his tone was as severe as his aggression was misplaced.

“What the hell was that . . . some kind of horn?” The man was stymied.

“Does it really matter?” It didn’t, really. Carolyn felt no need to identify a specific sound. It served no purpose and certainly didn’t explain its presence. “It happens... that’s what matters... and you know it has happened before.”

“This was different than the last time. It was... closer.”

“Roger, haven’t you noticed? This only happens when you are home. It’s how she calls you.” To the point of epiphany, she felt the need to share it.

“Bullshit.” Making another profane point all his own.

“I am telling you, whatever it is in that cellar knows when you’re here and knows you will come when called, if for no other reason, than to protect your family. She knows it.”

“That’s insane.” A man of few words when he wanted to be, Roger kept it short and sarcastic.

“No. On the contrary, it is entirely plausible. I wish I could get you to hop that fast when I call you! Follow her directions... and she will find you.”

Hard to believe, but Roger did not want to argue anymore. He was weary, overwrought. Exhausted. He had not retained enough energy in the aftermath of this incident to invest another ounce of it anywhere else. Reclining into his overstuffed chair, he closed his eyes and promptly fell asleep. Carolyn curled up with a book on the sofa. The children went to their own beds. Show over. Done for the night, or so they thought.

Roger awoke an hour or so later, refreshed. He’d turned on the late show, never considering it might be a noisy distraction while his wife was reading. Without saying a word, she closed the book and placed it on the coffee table, there to wait its turn, again, after he’d gone to bed. The weather forecast was foreboding. A cold front arriving; kiss all the seasonable warmth goodbye. A first taste of fall. As predicted, the night air had become frigid, a shock to the system. Carolyn felt it coming the last time she’d gone into the woodshed as the temperature was dropping like botflies. Rising from his seat, intending to stoke the fire, an incredible explosion stopped the man dead in his tracks. The eruption did not come from the cellar. It came from their front yard.

Andrea leapt from her bed. By the time she arrived downstairs her parents were already outside. As she ran over to the door, left open in the parlor, her mom emerged from the front porch, stopping her with a list of instructions. Triage had already begun. Time to use a lifeline... phone a friend for help!

“Call the police. Tell them there’s been a car accident; three victims with serious injuries. Tell them to send an ambulance NOW! Send more than one! Go, Annie... go call for help!” Her mother’s expression informed everything. It was a matter of life and death. “Tell your sisters to stay upstairs. Bring me every blanket you can find.” Following her directions, the teenager ran to the phone, hands trembling while placing that frantic call, relaying her message received to the proper authorities in town. She then ran throughout the house, hastily stripping every blanket from every bed, breathlessly explaining what had happened to her sisters, based on what little she knew. With an armload of quilts, Andrea bolted through the front door into a morbid scene she could never have imagined in her wildest dreams. It was as she feared, a virtual nightmare come to life and death, in Technicolor. Even beneath the shroud of darkness she saw it was a blood bath, broken bodies scattered everywhere.

Neither parent wanted the child exposed to what she was seeing, but they needed her to stay and help. Roger yelled to the girls inside to turn on all the lights. Defying a direct order four faces were plastered against windowpanes, staring into the darkness, unaware of the gruesome scene unfolding in front of them, sprawled out on their lawn. Two of the three young men had been thrown from the vehicle on impact. The driver was still pinned beneath the wreckage, moaning in agony, crying, begging for his mother.

Those first few minutes were as critical as the injuries they had sustained. Thankfully, all of them were drunk. Rounding that sharp corner approaching the house, they’d struck the stump of a tree the state had cut down but never bothered to come back and grind down. An impact at God knows what speed had caused the vehicle to literally blow apart. Gasoline and other fluids were leaking out of the engine, saturating the boy who’d been trapped beneath it. Roger could not budge the car or help him out from underneath the frame. His belt served the purpose and his skillful use of a tourniquet saved a life. Meanwhile, Carolyn was doing the same for the victim she was tending to, several yards away from Andrea, telling her eldest what to do for the one she was with, the boy closest to the farmhouse, the one who had been catapulted through the windshield. His leg was almost completely severed at the thigh. Roger did the triage, discovering a gruesome wound. The kid was bleeding out. He told her what to do and how to do it then left her to her own devices, returning to a boy trapped beneath a car. Put pressure directly on the wound. Cover him up. Get as close to him as possible, for the benefits of body heat,

and talk to him! It was most important to keep him talking. Roger knew all three were in shock. If Andrea's charge went to sleep, he would never wake up again. She did as she was told and what she was not told to do... pray. As their gut-wrenching battle cries rang through the valley, the fierce fight for their lives continued unabated.

Shattered glass was scattered all over the road. After several minutes, the few cars traveling such a remote stretch so late at night had no choice but to stop. A crowd began to gather on the periphery as neighbors who'd heard the virtual sonic boom began emerging from their homes, walking down the road to investigate it. Screaming sirens detected from a distance were small comfort; a welcome sound to be sure, but still too far away to count as help. As the air was moist and chilly, it carried the promise of hope, though it seemed to take forever for help to arrive; two fire trucks followed by the captain's car. Ambulances appeared simultaneously, discovering devastation. Rugged souls, burly men leapt from their vehicles, literally lifting the car off one victim. As three young men were loaded onto stretchers, three Perrons were able to step away and let the professionals take over. The chief would later tell Roger that he and his family did all the right things. Because the accident victims received immediate and appropriate care it saved their lives: message well-received by all. Do unto others as though you were the others. God forbid. God bless them, every one.

The following spring, two of the three passengers of that ill-fated flight up Round Top Road came back to the scene of their near-death experience. The young men were so grateful, truly humbled by the gentle care taken with their lives. Each of them spent months in the hospital recovering and both were tracked with scars as permanent reminders of formerly gaping wounds and the inherent danger of traveling at light speed. They sustained numerous critical injuries during an ordeal they barely remembered. Tender mercies as blessings bestowed. One of them gave Mrs. Perron a package, returning the quilt that went for a ride in an ambulance. Naturally, she inquired about their friend, the third occupant of the vehicle. He couldn't come with them. Spinal injury, he had been paralyzed from the waist down, confined to a wheelchair for life. It was all over at age nineteen. Their hearts broke for the young men who were quick to remind them as mourners that they were not dead. Lives were spared and they'd survived because of what the Perrons did for them on a dark, chilly night eight months earlier. It was a highly emotional exchange.

Even though they were unknown to the family prior to this horrendous event, it left an indelible imprint on everybody involved. One brief but profound conversation established a connection, a bond which can never be broken, forged in memories during a dialogue none of them will ever forget.

True. This is a gory story to be sure, but one with a happy ending. At least none of the three boys involved succumbed to their critical, life-threatening injuries. However, it is made even more significant because of an impression it left behind. That terrible accident touched many lives and left many marks: scars. It was nothing less than a crisis; the intervention was divine by nature. Obviously, no direct correlation can be drawn between the incident occurring within their home and what then occurred beyond its doors. Neither can it be entirely ruled out. It remains anecdotal, inferential with purpose and reason, as an important part of the collective memory of a family. Due primarily to a shocking, yet redemptive quality it possessed as a singular event, it was also a matter of timing, a startling occurrence in context with the dark, disturbing events transpiring within the farmhouse. That night, above all others, it felt to those who dwelled within those walls as if their farmhouse was cursed. The horn was an ominous call to arms as a harbinger of things to come. Timing is everything in life... and death... and the coincidental timing of these events was bizarre, leading to substantial speculation on the part of the participants. There had been a lot of living and dying on their farm over the centuries, providing its residents with a decidedly different perspective; cause enough to examine shades of gray wedged uncomfortably between black and white. There is an almost imperceptible veil which exists between life and death, so thin it becomes transparent, seen through like a shady used car salesman.

Was it a truly cosmic convergence? Was there an evil presence involved, drawing disaster to their door or was it a coincidence, as a matter of unhappy happenstance? There are those who believe the concept of coincidence was invented by mortals as a matter of convenience, arbitrarily imposed upon reality, to quickly explain away the otherwise inexplicable. There are those who believe that virtually anything is possible, and those who are convinced that a spiritual connection exists, as fine lines drawn between these incidents. Only time will tell, or not. Some questions have no answers in this realm.

“There is no such thing as chance; and
what seem to us merest

accident springs from the deepest source of destiny.”
Friedrich Schiller

Roger had been beckoned, first into their cellar to confront the presence of death from within; then, later that evening, forced to confront it again on his own front lawn. Once those three first responders had scrubbed the blood from their skin, dousing saturated clothes and quilts with peroxide to salvage what they could, they gathered together in the parlor. Before sending Andrea off to bed, her parents decided to discuss the accident and its aftermath, so to give her an opportunity to express any distress. It was unnecessary. Their eldest child, calm and collected in the wake of the disaster, knew they had done what was asked of them. She followed every direction her mother and father issued throughout the ordeal and they did everything in their power to rescue three boys from themselves. Childhood trauma it was not. Hers was a sense of gratification, a satisfaction that comes from a job well done. Roger and Carolyn were proud of Andrea, expecting nothing less of their daughter than a level-headed approach to an insane situation. Goodnight. Sleep tight.

While Carolyn returned to her book, too wired to sleep, Roger stoked the fire which had, in their absence, burned down to ashes and embers. He stood in silence on a hearthstone stirring cinders, gazing at his wife while she read, wondering how she could appear so unaffected. Truth be told, she had faced many a crisis in his absence and was getting rather used to it. Roger spoke honestly, if quietly, expressing his own heartfelt grief on numerous fronts.

“I am sorry we ever bought this place.” A sincerely emotional sentiment shared, he awaited her response. As none was forthcoming, he turned his back on her and went to bed.

The horn would sound once more during that tumultuous decade in which they inhabited the farmhouse, totaling three separate incidents of its kind. In each episode Roger was home, at her beckon call, there to receive a message. Was it as Mrs. Warren said, mocking the Trinity or was it a mocking of mere mortals? Maybe there is something to it, about everything happening in sets of threes. Yet, with what purpose and reason? Three victims, three saviors, three knocks at a door, three blows of a horn. What could it all possibly mean, if anything? Considering coincidence, what if there really is no such

thing?

“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;
the most massive characters are seared with scars.”

Kahlil Gibran

black hole

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are
powerful beyond measure. It is our light not
our darkness that most frightens us.”

Marianne Williamson

A Technicolor Life: Earth is ablaze with vivid texture and hue, as brilliant displays of creativity, forever in flux, re-creating itself in perpetuity. Tapping into elemental sources reveals a staggering array of possibilities. Discoveries at every twist and turn of the labyrinth, a journey through life on this planet is quite enough to occupy the most facile minds. Why bother looking up and out when Earth itself is so intriguing? Why such a fascination with the black backdrop, why an affinity with the infinite? Humanity is drawn to the Light. Gazing up and out, captivated by those mysterious arrangements of specks in the sky, mortals know instinctively to appreciate the darkness, providing the necessary contrast to define so many points of Light. Staring into deep space, we chart the stars, examining the cosmos, scrutinizing it more closely all the time, constantly reinventing new techniques for looking deeper still, into the blackest of holes. If not obsession, this craving to understand the Universe, (the place where some perceive God to be), will ultimately result in a greater understanding of ourselves. This coupling of Darkness and Light functions in tandem reflecting our own image back as we gaze upward into the infinite, where we communicate freely, like writing a love letter home with our eyes.

It felt like a black hole in the cosmos. A once vital marriage was disintegrating, being sucked through a pin hole, blown away, out into oblivion, to infinity and beyond. The vacancy in Carolyn, the void-of-course created, was akin to a vacuum, draining her of enthusiasm, diffusing then depleting the natural resource: hopefulness. There came a rancid realization, a time when the heartsick woman could no longer abide her husband and could no longer envision a future with him, and yet, she persevered. There were still five children to be considered, factored into every equation. The eldest would soon be heading off for college, not exactly an opportune moment to declare her intentions. Was there ever a good time? Divorce meant upheaval.

She swallowed back her discontentment, choking it down the hatch with another cup of coffee... a bitter pill.

Revolving around the house like the Moon in permanent eclipse, Carolyn was perceived as a phantom, there but not really there: elsewhere. Remaining in perpetual motion, her cold and wounded heart was mostly dead. She had no proof to confirm her suspicions, no empirical evidence to back an internal assertion made... just a feeling, a sensation she had felt in the past. But it had always passed. This time it lingered, gnawing at the woman from inside out. This distress showed on her face. What had he done? Perhaps nothing at all. Intuition is both a blessing and a curse, unless trusted. Had she been willing to listen to her instincts? Trust was becoming an issue overall. Do the eyes of the beholder suffer optical illusions? She would rather remain silent and risk appearing foolish than make a harsh accusation and be wrong about it. Not his alone, her personal integrity was on the line, as well. Would the third eye lie? Does disillusionment qualify as second sight? Simmering, smoldering in a cauldron of discontentment, the man she once loved and married seemed to be wandering away, but that is what she wanted, wasn't it? To be left alone.

Carolyn began writing again: a taproot manuscript of her fears, grief and contemplation. Whether the thoughts were scrawled in the pages of her tablet or securely tucked away within the recesses of memory, recorded later when time permitted, she began to express herself with words again, though few of them were uttered in the direction of her children. She appeared sad, troubled by something serious. Increasingly distracted, a remote mother seemed rather disinterested in her own life, likely because she was preoccupied by the lives (and deaths) of others. During this period she did not ignore them but was never really present with her girls, either. She'd begun slipping away in a variety of ways, disappearing into the forest for hours. Vacant in spirit, even when she was present in body, as the girls observed this transition, their assessment was accurate. Mom was missing in action in heart and mind, soul and spirit. Carolyn knew it too, capturing self-reflections on notebook paper.

At the kitchen window
I work the sudsy water
watch a finch searching for grubs
along a cherry branch
thinking of my small, insignificant life.

All the while
the Universe explodes
out and out to limitless spaces
blowing God farther and farther away
each second of the day.

How will the Great Spirit ever hear my pleas
and whispers from such a distance?

Knowing she could leave wasn't enough. Carolyn could do as she pleased but nothing pleased her at a point in her life when prospects appeared bleak, a grim reminder of the future she once pictured. It was but a distant dream of a past life, a fairy tale, one filled with the light of promise rather than darkest regret. The embattled woman was fiercely fighting in a war on two fronts: a relationship with a mortal soul in question, there was no question at all about the presence of an immortal mistress of the house. Each was adversarial by nature, the mutual contempt between human beings expressed with words as weapons, taking careful aim and fire! The double-barrel attack, on target: powerful ammunition. The onslaught caused her to feel inadequately armed, but Carolyn knew she was powerful. Problem was, she had kept that a secret from herself and was forced to stare into the black hole in her soul, there to rediscover the essential elements of self, the source of her inherent strength and resiliency. Hardly an easy path of passive resistance, the contemplative effort made was revealing. Her emotions spilled onto white lined paper as poignant words, scribbled and scrawled across the vast Universe within. Her salvation was pointing the way home. Her survival was at stake. Battle on!

Human beings have built an amazing machine that flies through the skies and photographs the cosmos. Scientists focused it on dark space between the stars with fervor and fascination. All Hail Hubble! This telescope stares with wide-eyed wonder at gaping holes, drawn evermore deeply into the darkness. On behalf of its inventor, it discerns from such an inconceivable distance, it is difficult to fully wrap one's mind around, then it beams these remarkable images back to planet Earth in a sequence of snapshots which reveal infinity at a glance. Someone as bright as the Universe itself thought enough to focus

an elaborate camera on a fixed point in space, gathering thousands of images which were then layered and interpreted by those who know how to look at these pictures, those who know precisely what they are looking for. Lo and behold, at first glance, it appeared to be nothing at all... entirely vacant space. As these repeated exposures were scrutinized more closely, as the eye of this beholder penetrated the depths of space, out of the darkness came the light. Billions of points of Light. A mighty mechanism, an intrepid explorer gazing mindlessly into the Universe, what it un-Earthed has come as a shock to the system for some; others believe it has over-exposed the essence of humanity: stardust. Stunning to some, a given for others, assumptions were made from alternate perspectives, positions assumed based upon a belief that what could not be seen did not exist. A faulty supposition. Hubble has captured light in the depths of the darkness of Infinity. Attitude is everything. Let it shine.

We look up and out. Searching outside ourselves, we seek a holy Creator. While human beings focus out we should likewise focus inward, deliberately peering into the black hole we sense inside ourselves in times of crisis, there to reflect on light disguised as darkness. Since we capitalize God as a sign of respect and reverence, should we not do the same for the astral bodies from which our corporeal bodies have evolved? And what of these orbs revolving around an infinite cosmos, containing all the elements of which we are made in its likeness? Shouldn't we honor, revere the Earth and the Moon, the Sun and the Stars, including the Black Holes of the Universe? Worshipping God requires looking up and out, yet we neglect to regard existence from within. Considering consciousness as manifestation of God, thinking becomes a holy spiritual endeavor, an elemental reflection of self. We are stardust. Golden. Carolyn knew precisely how to rescue herself. She got herself back to the garden.

“I believe a leaf of grass is no less than
the journey—work of the stars.”
Walt Whitman

dead in the water

“The question is not ‘Can they reason?’ nor,
‘Can they talk?’ but rather ‘Can they suffer?’”

Jeremy Bentham

It was a nice time for a walk in the woods, a bright and brisk autumn day. Roger asked the ladies who wanted to come along. All of them accompanied him on the excursion. Nobody knew where they were going, or if he had a fixed destination in mind. This was another chance to go play in the forest, to frolic as wood nymphs among the stoic pines. They could already see the old cellar hole and hear the pond calling. Carolyn was enticed to come along.

Over the river then through the woods they went, the ice-encrusted crunch of dead leaves became almost deafening beneath so many feet... a cacophony to beat the band. First stop: the river. The shadows were high, aloof, dancing overhead among bare limbs adorning the surface of the water, reflecting their images in spite of the furious pace of its flow. So much more to see, the brief time spent lingering on the bridge only served to draw them further in, to call them more deeply into the forest. No stone left unturned, they were prepared to explore, to see what the woods had to offer on such an exceptional day.

The old cellar hole was more fun with dad around. He'd allow the girls to scale its walls and climb those trees growing inside it, as long as they were careful and he was there to rescue them from mishaps. An open-minded man to the fact that he had five tomboys for daughters, they all knew the sense of freedom the forest provided, indulging in its pleasures, the splendor of it all. While they climbed and laughed and screamed with delight, Roger foraged the forest floor. A bell stone beckoned. He'd heard the call of the wild side.

Sliding the enormous granite bell off the well, he wanted to reexamine the walls more closely then determine how deeply it had been dug. Fascinated by it from the start, from the first time Mr. Kenyon pointed it out during one of their private excursions, Carolyn accompanied him, equally curious about its antiquity. It required all their strength to shove it aside, only to discover a gruesome and heartbreaking sight. There floating on the surface of its watery grave was a rabbit, eyes wide open, terror frozen on its face. They gasped at the sight, causing girls to come running, wanting to know what they found. Carolyn told them to back away, keep their distance, though several of them peeked before Roger could reposition the stone. Tears welled up in the eyes

of those who had seen too much. Disregarding the direct order, insubordinate heathens got what they deserved, and more. A wonder to behold. One had to wonder how such a thing could've happened, a consequence in its own right. Telling sisters what they had seen, a shroud of sadness fell upon the family. A moment of silence, a pause for reflection observed as they considered the cause of this unnatural disaster. In hushed tones, the girls quietly asked their parents difficult questions to answer. How could this death have occurred? If the rabbit was wild, could it have burrowed through an earthen wall of a well in search of water and why would it do so with an abundance of resources at its disposal? Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink? There was no way of extricating the pitiful creature from the well. It went too deeply down the hatch, too far gone to be reached with any tool; afforded a proper burial.

The pathetic animal was gone, but not forgotten. More childhood trauma to add to their collection of imagery they'd all sooner forget. It was not to be. Troubled, deeply disturbed by the find, this put a damper on high spirits and the kids told their parents they wanted to go home. It hardly seemed suitable to frolic so festively when poor Peter Cottontail had met such a bitter end. The girls were disheartened. Carolyn considered the gruesome sighting as an omen, a harbinger of things to come: doom and gloom. Was it an evil omen? Was this an evil act, perpetrated against an innocent creature? It appeared so. Emerson wrote: "People only see what they are prepared to see." None of the family was prepared for this. It took their collective breath away, impaled in mortal memories already over-burdened, infiltrated with vivid imagery.

"Mom?" Andrea hesitated to ask, but finally mustered the courage to say the painful words. "Did someone throw the rabbit down the well?" She made sure no one else was within earshot as she asked that provocative question.

"I don't know." Carolyn's mind was on the same matter. She could not dismiss what she'd seen and her brain immediately started trying to solve a perplexing puzzle. It was a dilemma for both, presenting itself in the most obscene sense. Carolyn relied upon her senses but also her finer sensibilities. Something told her this was no accident, no unhappy happenstance. Her true sense of it was darker and deeper still than a rabbit floating in a watery tomb. How to reconcile such a bizarre discovery? "I honestly don't know."

"Daddy? Do you think he suffered?" Nancy had some difficult questions of her own. As compassionate as any mortal soul, the sweet softhearted child was struggling with a frightful sight which refused to vacate her mind.

"I don't know." Roger's mind was equally preoccupied. Suspecting the animal was sacrificed, his attention turned to an angrier notion: someone had been on his land. Though he didn't share his speculation at the time, the very pragmatic man knew the creature had not burrowed through the well wall. It met its death another way, under nefarious circumstances. Some sonofabitch surreptitiously sacrificed the little lamb disguised as a rabbit. Despicable.

Demonic in Nature: it was no accident. Roger was certain and so was his wife. They tried to protect their curious kids but they all had minds of their own, running in overdrive. Each was trying to sort it out, make sense of a senseless death. Walking together in pairs, Cindy joined her mother who was actively attempting to concoct a plausible explanation, something reasonable to pass on to her young, to ease their pain. She knew it in her gut, from the instant she observed the floating carcass; something wicked this way comes. It was a huge, well-fed, domesticated rabbit and it did not find the hole in the ground on its own. Had a sick someone stood there, gazing down from above watching the show of force? The overwhelming, elemental power of water at work? It was all too much to absorb, resulting in some inexplicable lethargy. Someone had been doing the devil's footwork... again. Imagine that.

The pace slowed with the prospects considered, meandering up the hill to the house. Like a funeral procession, what appeared to be a ritualistic killing labored on their minds and legs alike. Solemnly, they proceeded, as if lining the valley with sorrow in every step taken. It was a tragedy. It was a murder. A specter of death upon them, a dirge continued until they reached their final destination. Everyone needed a nap. The life force had been sucked from an entire family, into the vortex of a black hole, catapulting the energy outward, dispersing it across the Universe. No stone left unturned. Woe be unto them.

The bell stone was almost impossible to move. It could be shoved with a concerted effort, though it would require a small army to pick it up and move it. Roger hid behind his newspaper, contemplating other ramifications of the discovery made that morning. He considered the water source and its proximity to the house then could not help but wonder who else knew it was there. If some scoundrels from the expansive neighborhood were haunting property not their own, he wanted to know about it. Likewise, if they were capable of such a heinous act, how safe were his girls? Mother of God! Wasn't this why they had moved to the country in the first place, to escape s criminal element in their own back yard? The irony did not escape the man.

His rage began to fester like a boil on his brain. There was no conceivable way to adequately monitor the land. Anybody could come and go without ever being detected. Easy access: from a multitude of angles for entry. He'd felt as violated as that rabbit, trapped, panicked by the potential hazards posed by a grotesque find; a revelation. Taking longer than anticipated, he wrestled with the lurid image for hours fixated on a single page of the newspaper... he hadn't read a word.

An obsession with death at every turn, the entire family was suffering the effects of over-exposure, making life itself a living hell. Roger resented the intrusion of such stark reality. It conflicted with his intentions, to provide his children a healthy, wholesome environment in which to grow and prosper, as ardent about this as his wife. They were equally disturbed by the foundling, haunted by the sight. Perish the thoughts! But they couldn't... none could. Yes, sweet Nancy. The poor thing had suffered. He knew it had struggled to the point of exhaustion, drowning with its last gasp of air. Had the sadistic someone watched it happen? Did it provide a thrill from the precipice? Did it answer any age old questions or was it murder for the sake of murder, an evil act perpetrated against an innocent victim for the fun of it? What fun? What mortal could so lack any semblance of conscience? Brewing in a cauldron of discontent, Carolyn was in the pantry stirring up the same stew in silence. As parents, they were both alarmed by these implications. Was there no escape from the evils of this world? No place to run... nowhere to hide from heinous acts of violence? Dispirited, they gazed at each other with knowing eyes. No.

The light of day was fading fast as the family gathered for dinner. It was a somber assembly of souls, all aching from within, barely able to eat let alone speak. What they witnessed knocked the wind out of them. Barely breathing, seven tormented mortals passed the salt and pepper, bread and butter, doing so set on automatic. Their minds were otherwise disposed. Highly unlikely that any of them was thinking about anything else, despair in the air was as pervasive as the air itself... omnipresent, like God. Abruptly interrupting the meal, Cindy suggested they say a prayer for the lost little soul in the woods. Bowing their heads they recited the Lord's Prayer in unison. Deliver us from evil. Please. Amen. No one suspected Bathsheba... even she wasn't so cruel.

What had begun as a festive excursion in the forest ended with mournful thoughts of a tragic loss. Heartsick, they were likewise sick in the stomach. The girls hardly ate a thing. Even though Roger and Carolyn had intended to

spare their children it was too late. The damage was done. They all possessed imaginations capable of conjuring the creature's final moments of life. They could visualize a morbid end of days for a helpless rabbit taking the plunge against its will, diving in a black hole from above, clawing for something to grasp in the dark depths, fighting for its life. In a death-defying leap of faith they grieved, fighting back remorseful tears for an evil deed witnessed in its aftermath. They'd prayed for its soul and redemption for the perpetrator of a cosmic crime. As it could not escape the darkness of its watery grave, these sad souls couldn't escape its image. Twilight became night, no light in sight.

“When you reach the end of what you should know,
you will be at the beginning of what you should sense.”

Kahlil Gibran

all's well that ends well

"Birds sing after a storm; why shouldn't people
feel as free to delight in whatever remains to them."

Rose F. Kennedy



CURSES! Would nothing go right for their family? Of course, the dismal economy was a factor, but Roger had a bunch of kids to feed and sometimes the pickings were slim on the road. Forced to adapt to the new paranormal, they were likewise compelled to adjust to a feast or famine reality. Bouncing back and forth from affluence to indigence provides for a wild ride through childhood, leaving children queasy, feeling insecure, the dis/ease associated with a chronic condition. Their livelihood was contingent upon the next road trip, the next holiday, a quality of life based upon the inconsistent whims of the retailers stocking their shelves; as such, their purse strings were involved, as well. The deep, lingering recession tightened those strings daily and was strangling this family. Roger's business took a significant hit. He sold luxury items at a time when bare necessities came first and foremost for many in the country. He'd decided to embark on another path, one much closer to home. Truth be told, Roger had grown weary of life on the road. His marriage was in crisis and he didn't know his kids. While traveling a long, lonely stretch of highway through Vermont, it suddenly occurred to the equally lonely man. It was time to go home, and stay there for a while. He spent the rest of the trip devising a plan of action, sketching out a vision, daring to daydream again.

Possessing many talents, one of them was Roger's power of persuasion. It bordered on coercive. He convinced his wife it was time to make a change. Roger required Carolyn's keen eye and discerning taste, her flair for design. Perhaps this would be an opportunity to get reacquainted, to like one another again. His idea was actually fresh and exciting, the strategy, well-conceived. They did their homework together. Diligent research yielded results. The old Stillwater Mill in Harrisville appeared to be a perfect location to start a new business. Close to home. They opened a manufacturing company. The dream manifested magically. Grass Roots, Ltd. was successful from the start and Kandi Kisses, their line of junior sportswear, did exceptionally well. It was a highly lucrative venture and a grossly underinsured disaster. Over two years they'd worked to build the brand, traveling to New York City for the trade shows, hiring a top fashion designer. When the pipes froze then ruptured at

the plant, destroying the entire investment, an incredibly promising business vanished within minutes. Damage done was extensive; the loss sustained, immeasurable. Gone too soon: equipment, inventory, trips to trade shows, hopes and dreams gone... washed away. The landscape was altered after the flood; desolate. Their prospects bleak, counting the losses, regrets all around. Roger was despondent. Defeated. No signs of renewal on the horizon save the white flag of surrender. For awhile it seemed he'd given up the ghost.

Once again, their dream had become a nightmare. It took years to recover financially. Meanwhile, Roger did whatever he could to generate income for an insecure unprotected family just trying to get by. They were a prideful lot, struggling along in silence, pretending their plight did not even exist, on a variety of levels. Carolyn opened an antique shop in the barn, on weekends. Digging deep, she began selling off family heirlooms, including her precious bottles, dug with her own bare hands. Treasured possessions, gone too soon. An income was derived but personal losses accrued as each piece planned as a legacy for her children walked out the door. Over time, she purchased other items to include in a collection that ultimately drew many from nearby towns to her country shoppe, an endeavor which literally saved the farm. Forced to sell off half of the acreage just to survive, property original to the estate, they did what they had to do, regretting the decision all the way to the bank.

Roger tried to acquire a permit to operate campgrounds on what remained of the place. Stopped dead in his tracks by the town council, deprived of the opportunity because of short-sighted politicians, he was literally at wit's end. But there was nothing funny about their situation, nothing pleasant to look forward to anymore. Roger was stressed out, anxiety-ridden and sometimes, exceedingly unpleasant. In truth, so many things went wrong so frequently, in retrospect, it was destined to become the family joke: Bathsheba's Curse. The Curse of Bathsheba! (A hangnail is reason enough to invoke her name.) It is always best to blame another and better still to blame someone not of this world, thereby avoiding any claim of personal responsibility for one's mortal mistakes, like the failure to acquire adequate insurance to cover the catastrophic loss of a huge business investment. No hedge against disaster, for potential loss incurred including acts of God. Roger tempted fate instead. Regarding culpability? A blame game got nasty. Consider Cause and Effect. It's the law of the land. Leave Mother Nature out of it... not her fault.

The biggest dig of all was the only real success story from a decade of life and death on the farm. After the first few hundred feet, everybody assumed it was another costly endeavor gone awry, including the man digging the well. A faulty divining rod no doubt. On pins and needles, week after tedious week, the family trembled with the Earth. Impaling that drill deeper still, not a drop drawn, they feared the worst. Lo and behold! The geyser felt redemptive, as if it washed away the sins of the world with the woes of a family, as clean as the slate on which the future could be written. Nature had mercy on them. A discovery obtained by necessity meant liberation. Where there is water, there is life, even in the presence of death. Gazing into the self-reflecting pool, it remains his greatest regret, sold with the farm for a song, according to Roger, who will never recover from the loss. He'll never escape the haunting image of what could have been... what might have been happily ever after.

Wipe the slate clean. Start again. Lessons learned. Never give up. Never. Carolyn was the Mother of Invention and Roger, the Father of Re-invention. Compelled by these challenges and circumstances, often of his own making, he had been forced to perpetually re-create himself during the course of that decade. When one well dried up, he would dip hopefully into another. Roger possesses an innate ability to conceptualize. It has caused him to undergo one radical metamorphosis after another, as if he's been attempting to cram multiple incarnations into one hit and run at this thing called life. He has manifested many a dream and he has known tremendous success and equally spectacular failure along this remarkable journey, traversing numerous paths in pursuit of the prize as he perceives it; total financial freedom: security. He perseveres. This man never quits, a valuable lesson imparted to his children so long ago, absorbed by osmosis or simple observation. It isn't important how much money a man accrues or what level of success he attains, but how he copes with inevitable disappointment. For what seemed like eternity but was only a decade, Roger kept dipping expectantly into dry, dusty wells then seemed surprised when he repeatedly came up empty. Nothing ever worked out, nothing went right for him. Even if it went right for awhile, in the final analysis, it went wrong. He was angry and frustrated, thwarted at every turn.

This brewing cauldron of discontent occasionally boiled over, scalding anybody in the path of its flow. Roger alienated those who loved him most. A tragedy. In spite of his inborn ability to reinvent himself, he'd failed to define

his relationships in context of a multi-interpretational word: success. Had he ushered his own into adulthood feeling as if they were the priority, the apple of daddy's eye, now that would have been a fine accomplishment, a legacy. If he had been able to express a complicated set of ardent emotions more appropriately, perhaps the marriage he claimed to cherish could have been salvaged, but he was far too wounded. It was long ago and far away, in another space and time. Light years. Let it go. Move on, across the Universe.

Why do mortal souls often squander opportunities as if there is an infinite supply? Self-awareness exists primarily for the purpose of self-preservation. As we evolve and mature, we learn to shift the focus from ourselves to those we cherish. There were times when Roger's children perceived themselves to be the insignificant others in his life, five mouths to feed, a burden instead of a joy. Only when we dare to redefine the concepts of success and failure do we accurately determine what matters in life. Introspection can be a painful ordeal. Revisiting one's past is a process, not one to be undertaken lightly. It was a hard life at times, feast or famine, affluence to indigence... a wild ride. All's well that ends well? No. All was lost and nothing was well in the end.

“He has spent all his life in letting down
empty buckets into empty wells;
and he is frittering away his age in trying
to draw them up again.”
Sydney Smith

holy hell

“So I dropped into the luxury of the Lords /
Fighting dragons and crossing swords

With the people against the hordes who came to conquer . . . so amazed I’m here today
Seeing things so clear this way . . .

Stumbled through the door and into the chamber /
There’s a lady setting flowers on a table covered lace
And a cleaner in the distance finds
a cobweb on a face. And a feeling deep inside of me
tells me this can’t be the place.”

Graham Nash “Cathedral”

There are those who live their entire lives in terror of temptation, in dread of God’s wrath or condemnation; a shame to waste precious time on guilt or sin or fear: the unholy trinity. Recovering Catholics who were, on some level still drawn to the old familiar dogma, an aroma of incense, the stained glass, those glorious rituals of church, the Perron clan occasionally attended Mass, usually only at Christmas and as innocuously as possible. It already occurred to several of them that hell was an invention of the church, as a balancing act for Heaven, fostering mass hysteria, by design. Being Roman Catholic meant straddling a fine line between darkness and light, tight rope walking... no net.

Some would describe what the Perron family endured as “Hell on Earth”, which is far from accurate, when juxtaposed against the numerous heavenly aspects of life on the farm. It was not all doom and gloom. Truth be told, this was a wild ride, a grand adventure; a journey which encompassed the natural wonders of a colonial estate in New England, coupled with an incredible trek through time and space. When the two aspects merged as one, intermingling as it were, it was magic. Not black magic, not just spells, chants and demons.

Instead, it was spellbinding: an enchanting, pastoral wonderland. Seven mortals were enormously enriched by their place in the country. Not one of them, including Carolyn, has ever regretted being drawn into that experience, presuming it was with purpose and reason and not some random throw of the cosmic dice. It remains her best philosophical argument for the existence of God and fate. None of their family ever felt like accidental tourists. Quite the contrary, it felt as if they belonged there from the inception, before they even owned their estate, perceiving it to be Heaven on Earth so to claim otherwise

would be a distortion of the truth. Many joyful memories were made at the farm. Its gifts to those who dwelled within its walls were immeasurable as an ever-emerging Light source from the depths of its Darkness... each requiring the other for either to be seen. As human beings tend to list and then label, to classify and categorize everything, that includes conclusions drawn based on those final outcomes. Presuming the existence of good and evil, not as polar opposites, rather, two pieces of fabric woven together into the same tapestry, perspectives are altered. Expansive concepts which were once thought to be mutually exclusive, like heaven and hell, develop and evolve. Perhaps good and evil function as partners; they require each other to exist and one cannot exist without the other, as each is identified only by the absence of the other. Perhaps they exist because we say they do as the concepts of time and space. What if everything is one thing and this one thing is God. Imagine that.

As for value judgments made, assumptions drawn are inappropriate to the essential nature of things which embraces all variations on a theme. Does the concept give all males permission to take what they want, as tacit approval to brutalize women and children and animals because it is their nature to do so? Of course not. Absurdity. Mortals strive ever toward what we deem to be the ideal of "civilized" behavior. Is it morally and ethically justifiable to kill half a million people to potentially preserve the lives of millions more? A bombs away judgment call made to end another world war waged. Humanity still grapples with difficult, complex questions, literally day by day, as moral dilemmas. Knowing the right thing to do preoccupies our minds because we are thinking, feeling beings. It is why we celebrate life at weddings or mourn the dead at funerals, rituals we have invented by necessity as outlets for deep emotional expression. We establish laws, rules of engagement and marriage, (otherwise known as mortal combat). Humanity has decided how humanity should behave, writing laws meant to keep us safe and sound, golden rules to protect us from ourselves and institute healthy boundaries for others. With awareness comes an implicit understanding. First do no harm. It's imperative we remain cognizant of our holy role model; set a good example. Blessed be the peacemakers. It is said the meek shall inherit the Earth but what will be left to inherit if those who fail to discern their proper role manage to poison it or, God forbid, blow it to hell? Perish the thought. Prohibit the act by law.

The holy church, the presumed moral authority has developed an equally extensive list of rules and regulations, (one list even comes numbered!) all of

which pertain to whatever it or they consider acceptable and unacceptable to society at large. These tenets are usually set forth then expounded upon by a group of people claiming to know God's word and will, proudly proclaiming divine knowledge endowed by the One: Creator. However, if even one of us possesses such knowledge, would it not follow logically that we all possess that same God-consciousness? Couldn't we all naturally attain this identical omniscient status? Don't we possess an innate ability to answer any question posed, as a matter of birthright? If we are children of God, don't we share the same DNA? Aren't we all part of the same whole, sharing cosmic connection as a Godly concoction? Science says we crawled out of the same primordial soup, but are we the chef, the recipe or the ingredients? Isn't science another manifestation of Infinite Mind? Perhaps we are all born metaphysicians and the one who made us in its own image says: "Metaphysician, heal thyself!"

Upon reflection, it appears that knowledge comes incrementally, as much as we can handle at one time, and not as one divine thunderbolt strike; more like the soft rain, gradually absorbed. Assimilating too much information too fast is overwhelming to the human mind. Ask any of the seven mortals who suffered an incessant onslaught of sounds and images so stunning, it stopped all of them dead in their tracks, chilling them to the bones. Carolyn's various experiences transported her to hell and back on several occasions, as a vision of death was seared into her psyche, for life. It leaves a mark. Each time she was confronted by another entity, malignant or benign, the woman was taken to another place in time: unfamiliar territory. That sensation never subsided, even after years of supernatural encounters. They remained shocking, always prompting visceral reactions. Danger! This does not compute! As images are instantly absorbed, messages are received. Data processing comes later.

During these episodes Carolyn prayed in moments of quiet desperation, an automatic reflex to implore the Savior, requesting divine intervention on behalf of herself and her family from their Creator. In moments of crisis, we tend to go straight to the source, bypassing religious connotations. Her words of prayer were pure, her connection with spirit was strong and it had nothing to do with any lessons she had ever learned through religious instruction. We look up and speak to the sky, sending messages into the cosmos, like smoke signals... with the hope they'll be noticed. We seek communion with someone we believe to be powerful, something greater than ourselves, the perpetration of a fallacy of Biblical proportion. God is so much closer than

we think.

Carolyn found all religions archaic, resenting this intrusion as an artificial authority being imposed upon her, misrepresenting itself as something other than man-made. She considered Catholicism to be unhealthy for the children, spreading the fallacious messages based solely on their gender. According to Carolyn, Roman Catholic doctrine has invented and aggressively promotes a fear-based mentality among its parishioners, especially children, fostering an unholy belief system that includes divine retribution, that which awaits those who fail to follow all of the rules and regulations. Be afraid... be very afraid, because God'll get you for that! What about Original Sin? Born to be bad to the bone? Good Lord! Carolyn figured her children were frightened enough, no need to add fuel to the fire, insult to injury. There was quite enough going on in their own home to make their lives a living hell. God's house shouldn't be scary, too. No advocate of the practice, going to church was nothing more than a means for her to gather ammunition against her perceived adversary; preaching hatred and intolerance instead of love is an expression of evil. Not good. At the heart of the matter, Carolyn was convinced that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church intentionally scared the hell out of its flock to keep them in line, inflicting premeditated brain pain as a dictate, in unapologetic terms. The manifestation of madmen, ignoring yet another tenet: first, do no harm.

Why do human beings feel justified in the taking of another human life? It's as if, while claiming to trust in the Creator, they're likewise compelled to take matters into their own hands, on this field of battle, rather than relying upon the next. Humanity routinely doles out punishment that seems to fit the crimes against humanity that occur just as routinely. We lock up the culprits, throw away the key... then pray there is a holy hell for them to burn in and a God to condemn them. Eternal damnation. What a concept. So what if there's no inherent meaning to crime or punishment, excepting the significance we assign by hypocritically superimposing it on ourselves as a society? The vast majority of humanity believes in a Creator. If God is beckoning all of us to Heaven, wouldn't that qualify as the ultimate Day of Judgment Call? So why do human beings cringe and wince when they hear of another atrocity? Why do they find it abhorrent? Why does it offend their sensibilities? Because we are all hard-wired for self-preservation and God-wired to pass judgments and draw conclusions. Because mortals validate our existence by acknowledging the existence of others; intuitively sensing, knowing their plight could be our

own... the birthplace of sympathy and empathy in any soul. We are enigmas, riddled with thoughts and emotions. We ask pertinent questions: Does God exist? Does He cringe when We wince? Are we One in the same? Are we an expression of God-consciousness, a manifestation of a good idea at the time? Are we the living, breathing embodiment of the infinite mind of the maker? Is it why we have faith in ourselves and others? Does it matter to do the right thing? We seek justice then pray for peace, yet war remains our fundamental response if threatened, as a function of self-protective instincts. Whenever an evil act is perpetrated against innocents we seek a satisfying outcome, some sense of vindication. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.

If good and evil were deemed indistinguishable from each other, it would spell the end of civilization as we know it. Instead, human beings delineate, a fine line, one from the other; assigning essential attributes, intrinsic meaning, according to value systems. Though we claim to trust in God to handle it in the end, we routinely intervene on His behalf well beforehand, just in case: a preemptive strike, specifically targeting prime suspects where opportunities arise. If we believe God exists and He will smite all sinners then why take on that kind of responsibility? Why bother to apprehend the offenders unless we really are manifestations of God-consciousness, doing God's good works on behalf of all humanity. It's a theory, one among many. Nobody really knows. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord . . . so, we have every right? If the devil has foot soldiers, why not welcome crusaders, on behalf of all that is holy, sacred and good? Fair is fair. All is fair in love and war. On guard! Charge! The Light Brigade. And if they don't believe what you believe, off with their heads!

Carolyn wasn't willing to listen to what rang down from the bully pulpit. She found numerous images of "the church" disturbing; objectionable on a variety of levels. She considered the concepts of heaven and hell to be a pure fabrication of religious zealots developing crafty tools to entice, ensnare and manipulate millions who were hungry for some meaning in their pitiful lives. It was harder back then; survival itself was far less certain than modern times afford and mortals needed to know there was some reward for all that misery and suffering. Yet, the same holds true today. People want to know if they're going somewhere after death, if life goes on, elsewhere. Eager to believe, the doubt persists because they are not sure of anything. The founding fathers of the "great" religions effectively utilized the omnipresent fear factor to cajole,

persuade and convince the lowly souls among them that high in the sky they would find eternal salvation; the sacred source of redemption and everlasting life. If they would merely follow a few simple rules, then contribute all their worldly possessions to the church, propagate the species and keep the church populated. And then, in the end, they would receive their just reward, with only the faith of a mustard seed. Now that's spooky. Superstitious! Actually, it really is a rather ingenious calculation, a brilliant deduction: utilizing the pre-existing powers of fear to insidiously interject guilt, sin and shame for good measure. Keep them groveling, guessing and coming back for more!

Almighty Fear: that which is intrinsic to our nature, effectively hijacked; an exceedingly clever tactical maneuver designed to relieve anxious masses, committed as the best method of controlling millions and millions of minds: something wicked. Carolyn considered myriad devilish images displayed as a picturesque series of grotesque icons that established religions deliberately impose upon and impale in impressionable minds of countless unsuspecting souls. Specifically intended to terrify youths into submission; indoctrination works. Apparently they forgot about DO NO HARM. As a mother she didn't want her children exposed to graphic renderings depicting evil as art, images hard to forget, knowing it would, no doubt distort their natural perceptions of the world. She never encouraged going to church, the presumption made that her girls would not be raised that way. She grew unwilling to watch curious, liberated minds become molded closed by blatant, subtle, or invisible forms of indoctrination. Lesson learned: do not always come when called!

Her fundamental belief system remains intact. Some forty years hence the issues remain, a judgment regarding the church, from parish to pope. In part, and as a whole, institution to individual, Carolyn believes organized religion is another form of mind control and Catholic doctrine, in particular, is a form of psychological torture as emotional terrorism. It serves no one but itself as a morbid, historically shameful blight on humanity. A plague on mankind: self-possessed, self-perpetuating, self-indulgent and self-absorbed.

Of course, there was the original self-fulfilling prophesy to be considered: Jesus Christ at Gethsemane. Through no fault of His own, in advance of His gruesome death, Jesus knew his role. In its wake, there emerged a religion, a holy church dedicated to His name, in His honor, proclaiming the teachings of the Magic Man from Galilee. The Prince of Peace. Yet, over the centuries, his followers brutally slaughtered anyone who did not believe in his magic.

Way to spread the word of God... written in blood on the sands of time.

A thoughtful woman found ideological tenets of Catholicism particularly harmful, downright dangerous, especially for females. She'd encouraged her five daughters to use their bright, facile minds to chart their own course and discouraged them from buying into the doctrine and dogma of an institution that essentially suppresses even those women who serve it from within. Just more of the same; women serving the men in the name of God: Nauseating. Holy men serving themselves in the name of God. Priests who murmur tacit threats while raping altar boys: Criminal. In God we trust? In her lifetime she has witnessed enough to know her assessment of the church is accurate. That atrocious behavior, obvious intention and attempts to keep it quiet, affording protection to criminals sheltered from the darkest gathering storm as blatant efforts to cover it all up continue. Exposure of an ugly little secret has rocked the foundation of the Roman Catholic Church all the way to the Vatican, not because this was happening all along, but because they got caught. Carolyn did pass judgment on a belief system that failed its own, cheered as the lot of them went to prison, men who'd wounded so many innocent children over so many decades, committing vile, despicable acts while the venerable Cardinal Law ends up not where he deserves to be in some cold jail cell but is instead, by invitation, settled in the lap of luxury at the Vatican. Welcome home, son. As flagrant, obscene transgressions there will be no forgiveness forthcoming; only loathing and contempt. So many lives were ruined, made a living hell, shattered in subjugation. Holy Hell. Misogyny is pure ignorance. Pedophilia is pure evil. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. Could anybody imagine letting them off the hook in the name of God or a belief in divine retribution? Will they get theirs in the end? It was time to take matters into mortal hands. There is some justice in the world, only because human beings insist upon it.

“The happiest man is he who learns from nature
the lesson of worship.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

After their final trip to church together, to Midnight Mass on a sparkling Christmas Eve, the family returned home. Roger built a roaring fire. Placing a Yule log in the center of a wrought iron grate, everyone gathered around it, enjoying a cup of hot chocolate before going off to bed. During the ride back

to the farm, Carolyn informed Roger that it had been her last time in the pew of any church. He did not respond. The kids were all at the point of frenzy in the back seat, discussing plans for the holiday. April overheard her mother. Standing beside her in front of the fire, the youngster tugged at her sleeve.

“Mom? Why don’t you want to go back to church anymore?” Cherubim, the little angel spoke. Carolyn listened up as smoke billowed in the chimney. She believed in the message of Jesus Christ but thought it had not been well-received by humanity. She considered Jesus misunderstood, misinterpreted by those in the flock who’ve used His words of peace as the weapons of war. How to express such an intimidating, complex concept to a seven year old?

“I think the church makes God too small. I think God is bigger than any of us can even imagine. When I want to pray I would rather take a long walk in the woods. I feel closer to God there.” A mother spoke her truth to power.

“Aren’t we even closer to God in the “House of the Lord” . . . with Him?” Nancy was paying attention. She’d felt scrutinized, parishioners staring their way. She wanted to inquire why her mother was feeling uncomfortable, too.

“I don’t know. I feel God in this house. God is everywhere all the time.”

“That’s impossible.” Christine was doing infinite calculations in her head, theorizing with a big bang, until she thought her head would explode.

“That’s what makes it a miracle.” Carolyn smiled at her pragmatic middle child, struggling to make sense of that much God in action.

“Like the baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary!” Cindy perked up, chiming in. “I feel God here all the time... this is a holy house.”

Carolyn understood precisely what Cindy was saying, and why. Deciding to end it right there before their chatter plunged into the deep end, she said:

“Good! It’s late. Time for bed. Santa Claus is coming and he will not stop unless you’re all asleep. Say goodnight to your father then head on upstairs. I will be up in a few minutes to tuck you in. Don’t forget to say your prayers.”

(And Carolyn had the audacity to accuse the church of promoting a fallacy!) Dutiful children did as they were told, especially on the one night of the year when compliant behavior was of the utmost importance. Carolyn was jovial: “He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. So you’d better be good for goodness sake!” Off they went thinking magical thoughts.

Once the girls were asleep, Santa Claus emptied the trunk of his car then retrieved a few more well-hidden items from the woodshed. In the meantime,

Mrs. Claus gathered up the wrapping paper, tags, bows, scissors and tape for their long winter's night ahead. Feast or famine. Roger always did well for Christmas but it always came at the last minute, like the shopping spree his full pockets afforded. He'd outdone himself that year. Seriously Santa.

If the couple had anything to discuss, it was who should receive what the next morning. Carolyn thought about what she had seen and heard in church; chants and incantations, a spell cast upon the masses from on high above the altar during Mass. Realizing her explanation was insufficient, Carolyn knew it would be a topic to revisit, in the future. Church and prayer were mutually exclusive concepts. She never hesitated to pray. Conversation came naturally to her as a spiritual being. While wrapping gifts, it occurred to Carolyn, their home was the house of the Lord. It had all the components: Heaven and Hell, angels and demons and God by her side in battle: concepts originating with and ordained by the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

And that immortality thing? Disappointing news. She did not want to be reborn and was so looking forward to a deep, restful sleep at the end of it all. While she pondered the intermingling of good and evil, darkness and light, Carolyn considered humanity's singular role in the epic passion play and the fascinating concept struck her: mortals create Heaven and Hell on Earth, as a self-fulfilling prophesy. We've handled our fellow human beings with tender delicacy and savage brutality, intentionally imparting pleasure and inflicting pain upon one another. An answer to a question asked for millennia was yes. Is a God here, there and everywhere? Does the Great Spirit hear us crying in the night? As it all became clearer still... epiphany! God hears our little voice within because God is our little voice within. If everything is one thing then Hell is as holy as Heaven, as holy as the farmhouse where she and her family dwelled. It followed logically: the holy spirits of the house were where they belonged. On that Oh! holy night, Carolyn decided she would only worship at an altar of an almighty oak well before it was ever transformed into a pew. Recalling what one great leader told his people when they were frightened in the midst of an evil, wicked attack Winston Churchill inspired the British with his stiff upper lip: "When you're going through hell, keep going." Sage advice. In the midst of a war of her own she need not look any further than into the eyes of her children for inspiration. No need to seek beyond her own back yard. From high upon the altar she heard fear being preached in church. Angels on high to demons below, she preferred to plant herself firmly on

Mother Earth.

“All religion has to have its day / Expressions on the face of the Savior / Made me say I can’t stay / Open up the gates of the church and let me out of here / Too many people have lied in the name of Christ / For anyone to heed the call / Too many people have died in the name of Christ that I can’t believe it all. / Now I’m standing on the grave of a soldier that died in 1799 / And the day he died it was a birthday and I noticed it was mine. / And my head didn’t know just who I was and I went spinning back in time and I am high upon the altar . . . The air inside just hangs in delusion,
but given time, I’ll be fine.”

Graham Nash “Cathedral”

leave well enough alone

“To do nothing is sometimes a good remedy.”
Hippocrates

The path of least resistance has obstacles all its own, with a series of hazards, a labyrinth lurking with dangers at every turn of phrase. Carolyn never knew what next to expect along this trail of tears... too often a shock to the system. Welcome home.

Roger appeared to be just fine when he came home, no apparent problem. His mood was jovial. He'd spent some time outside with several of the girls before entering the kitchen. If Carolyn thought his kindness would extend to her as well, she was sadly mistaken. Stepping across the threshold, his nose wrinkled, struck by an aroma he perceived as a stench in the air. Based upon his hyperbolic reaction, one would have thought Carolyn was attempting to serve rancid mutton to her family. Instead, she had thoughtfully prepared the luscious pot of meatballs, still simmering in sauce on the stove. Water ready to receive spaghetti, Carolyn pried open a package of pasta while Andrea remained busy nearby, assembling a salad at the table. Dad was home and dinner was cooking, soon to be served, or so she thought. Entering the pantry, his abrupt change of mood became evident to all within earshot.

“What's this?” A gruff, sarcastic tone did not sit well with either mistress of the house. Placing both hands on his hips, leering into the pressure cooker, it was obvious he disapproved of a meal made especially for him. A favorite.

“You can see what this is, Roger. It's dinner. Spaghetti and meatballs.” Carolyn snapped to attention. High-alert-defensive-mode. On guard!

“I had that last night... I don't want it again.”

“Well, that's too bad. I had no idea what you ate last night or on any other night when you're on the road because you didn't call home and even if you had, you never say much... so how was I supposed to know?”

Andrea trembled inside and out. She lowered her head and stared into the salad bowl hoping none of her sisters walked in on the escalating altercation. It was bound to get ugly. She wanted to spare them the fallout but remained steadfastly at the table, her mere presence offered as some form of protection against an outburst. They didn't seem to notice her there. Too busy fighting.

“I’ll just go out and get myself something to eat.” Petulant while pushing buttons, pouty boy turned to leave, transparent passive / aggressive behavior, all an act designed to provoke a response. Carolyn fed right into it, virtually begging him to explode, and that he did, so to oblige the fair lady-in-waiting.

“You just walked in the door! You have been gone for more than a week and now you want to go out to dinner... alone... because you refuse to eat the same food two days in a row? Bullshit!” Oh, God. Andrea shifted position at the table, preparing to intervene. Something extraordinary occurred. Roger’s violent outburst was about to meet its match... Bathsheba intervened instead! The child could only watch. Deliberately intimidating at times, the man used his powerful presence effectively to cause others to cower. Standing with his hand on the door knob, he charged back into the pantry. His wife took a few steps back out of harm’s way, providing plenty of room for his temper.

“Fine! Then I’ll have a bowl of cereal but I am not eating this!” Seething with anger, he touched a handle on the pot of meatballs. It flew off the stove and hit the floor in front of his feet, splattering sauce all over the man. It was hot but he was hotter under the collar, kicking the pot past his daughter. It bounced off the wall. For a moment nobody breathed; no one dared to move. Then Carolyn calmly placed that box of pasta on the counter, turned off their stove and walked past her husband... straight out the door. Retreat! Shocked, Andrea just stood there studying her father’s blood red face, wondering what to say or do next. She picked up a dishrag beside her on the table then began to approach the overturned pot. Leaning over what needed to be cleansed, his booming voice from above ordered her to cease and desist immediately.

“Leave it alone! No one touches it! Just leave it there. Go tell your sisters there is no dinner tonight.” Marching orders. He went into the bathroom and slammed the door. Apparently everybody deserved punishment. The children went upstairs and stayed there. Roger took a shower then went to bed where he slept throughout the night. Meanwhile, Carolyn went deep into the woods, seeking solace in the darkness... in search of her own inner Lightness.

She walked and walked but could not get the damn song out of her head; it kept playing over and over again, like a broken record, but made her smile.

“On top of spaghetti, all covered with cheese, I lost my poor meatball when somebody sneezed. It rolled off the table and onto

the floor then my poor meatball rolled out the door.”

Carolyn could still hear it, her children singing it, when they were younger, swinging on the set in their backyard in Cumberland. It seemed long ago and so very far away, light years before they moved to the farm. Though she was tempted to laugh her way through the tears, at least long enough to enjoy the sweetest memories of her girls in a simpler time... before, Carolyn could not bring herself back. She was simply too wrapped up in hating her husband at the moment, blaming him for something he really hadn't done.

Andrea was an objective observer and a reluctant witness for the defense. She saw that pot of meatballs go flying off the surface of the stove without the assistance of her furious father. Carolyn insisted otherwise, inflexible and unwilling to consider another explanation. Truth be told, in that house it was entirely plausible for a spirit to manipulate any object at will. Who knows? Maybe the kitchen witch thought he was being a jerk. Perhaps Bathsheba did not approve of his leaving so soon after arrival. She may have been the only one in the family anxious to keep him there, the one who really missed him!

Wandering the woods until darkness set in, filtered moonlight became her guide home. When Carolyn entered the kitchen, everything appeared to be in suspended animation, every drop of sauce precisely as it was left, splattered all over the floor, the walls and appliances, except for all the meatballs which had vanished. It was nothing mysterious. The dogs had helped themselves to a feast and famine for the rest. Carolyn was pissed off. For the next hour or so she scrubbed red paw prints from the wooden floor, cleaning up the mess from pantry, kitchen and hallway alike, where pups had tracked it through the house. Exhausted, the woman gave up the ghost and threw in the towels with the dishrags, into a bucket of sudsy water, calling it quits for the night from hell. Grudge match over. She'd lost that round with her temper.

She went upstairs to check on her girls, beginning with Nancy and April, over the kitchen. Working her way to the far end of the house, Andrea was the only one still awake and happy to see her mother arrive, safe and sound.

“Mom, are you all right?” The child sat up in bed, inviting her to settle in. Carolyn joined Andrea in the comfort zone. No tea, but plenty of sympathy to spare. More like empathy. She lived with him, too, but this time she had to defend him. Do unto others...

“I’m fine, honey, just tired. I cleaned up the mess your father made.”

“Dad didn’t spill the pot on purpose... he didn’t do it at all... I saw how it happened. From where I was standing I saw him touch the handle of the pot. He pulled his hand away and that’s when it flew off the stove. Honest, mom. Dad didn’t do it. I think he got burned. I thought he was going to clean it up. I tried to but he told me to stop. I thought he was going to do it, instead. You should have come to get me when you got home. I would have helped you.”

“No problem. It’s all done except for a few stray paw prints; the dogs got all the meatballs. Did you girls get something to eat? I’m sorry I left without telling you where I was going. I had to get away from him.”

“I know. I told them you went for a walk. I snuck downstairs and made oatmeal and toast for everyone. We ate upstairs and left him alone. I know how mad you are at him. You made such a nice dinner. I saved the salad. It’s in the fridge.”

“Where’s your father?” The contempt in her voice was unmistakable.

“Under the weather. Dead to the world.” Andrea was disgusted with him, too. After all, he started it and should have at least cleaned up the mess made instead of leaving it for her mother to deal with... so typical.

“From your lips to God’s ears.” Carolyn wished him dead. She’d had it.

Perhaps he was responsible. His incredible negative energy could’ve been the culprit at the source, or a culprit could’ve been the source of his negative energy. It was hard to tell. After some time spent in the farmhouse, it became obvious to all the females in their family... that house did something to men. Roger threw temper tantrums but the frequency and intensity of them grew exponentially while living at the farm. It could have been the stress of it but something seemed amiss. Everyone had noticed he was always much happier when he was not inside of the house, almost like a different person. Spooky. Scrunching down beneath the covers, Carolyn cuddled up with her daughter and promptly fell asleep. It was where she slept for the duration of his visit home, keeping her distance, biding her time, until Roger hit the road... again.

This argument remains a point of contention within their extended family. Carolyn blames Roger for spilling good food and spoiling appetites. Andrea blames Bathsheba for stirring up trouble. Roger blames Carolyn for, well, just about everything else. Lessons learned eventually proved valuable, if for

no other reason than exposing the truth and the fallacies of life on the farm.

1. Problems ignored rarely solve themselves.
2. Haste makes waste.
3. Given the opportunity, a house will not keep itself.

Keeping a mental list, therein lies only a few of the lessons imparted from an entirely disturbing and often dysfunctional classroom; one episode of many at the farm. No one recalls what the fights were about. Does it matter? It was over. Once things calmed down, it was best to leave well enough alone.

“If I had a formula for bypassing trouble,
I would not pass it round.
Trouble creates a capacity to handle it.
I don’t embrace trouble;
that’s as bad as treating it as an enemy.
But I do say meet it as a friend,
for you’ll see a lot of it and had better be
on speaking terms with it.”
Oliver Wendell Holmes

teardrops

“I go to nature to be soothed and healed,
and to have my senses put in order.”

John Burroughs

Her teardrops spilled as meatballs had just a few weeks earlier. Unwilling to give him the satisfaction of seeing how upset she had become Carolyn left abruptly and went into the woods, down through the valley, across the river, deeply into the forest. Andrea did the same, following her distraught mother. When she finally arrived at the old cellar hole, expecting to find her mom there, it seemed somehow transformed, different than what she last remembered of it. Carolyn was nowhere in sight. Startled, Andrea approached the ancient ruins and saw how overgrown it had become, how Earth had suddenly reclaimed it. The change was stunning, as were the wild roses, in full bloom, apparently without benefit of sunshine. Tucked in between lilacs, the fragrance was enough to lure any unsuspecting soul to the site. They were free, constrained by nothing but lilac blossoms on either side, not the solid clapboard that held in check those roses wedged into a corner of the farmhouse, beneath her bedroom window. As alluring aromas drew her closer still, as if she was an accidental tourist in a cosmic fairy tale, something told her it was no accident. No such thing. Wandering around as a child lost in the woods, following a sweet scent, she felt very much at home.

She had no sense of time and space, no way to discern the gradual descent of the Sun; the residual hue, her only clue. Light transforming into darkness Andrea approached the hole in the ground, peering down from the precipice, amazed by the conversion; what occurred between her last visit and this one? So much growth seemed impossible. No. It was impossible! Andrea became disoriented, perception distorted. It felt like she was becoming intoxicated by the fragrance she inhaled while standing on the precarious ledge of a black hole. An oak tree growing from its center quadrupled in size over what she'd quickly calculated to be no longer than a month or so before. She had begun questioning her own memory and mental acuity. It was all too strange. Time to investigate. Her equilibrium began faltering. Latching onto a large, sturdy branch she cautiously climbed down into the cellar hole, staking her claim of land beneath a mighty oak. A tree which appeared as a sapling only weeks prior had, in the next month of the same summer, become her launching pad.

Remembering why she was there in the first place, Andrea closed her eyes. The dizziness subsided; so did her unwillingness to accept what she had seen all around her. Then she slowly opened her eyes to that muted light, dappled rays of sunshine filtering through leaves overhead. The curious kid looked down at the dirt and debris and there, her quieting mind began to gradually open to the possibilities. Gazing at the many insects scrambling over roots and stones, Andrea understood. She had been given an extraordinary gift. In that moment, the child realized what was happening to her. She'd arrived at the cellar hole of the future. She had been transported to another space and time, certainly not her own. It then occurred to Andrea, if her family were to come looking for her there, they would not see her. She would be invisible to them. This knowledge transported her to a place she'd longed to visit, where peace and quiet reigned, cloaked in another dimension. Solitude she'd been seeking was found, at last. Safe. Secure. Untouchable... in the comfort zone.

It began to rain, just lightly at first, as a barely perceptible shower, hardly able to penetrate the draping canopy overhead. A few drop made their way to the ground stirring up activity. Staring at the insects scurrying all around her, Andrea realized that their ancient ancestors had not yet been born. Epiphany. Then it was time to go. Dreading a return to the farmhouse, she did not want to witness another fight. Instead, she longed to remain where it was lush and safe and timeless. Behold! Awakened by this wonder, she had seen the future of the cellar hole. She had come to know true serenity within the ruins, stone walls she knew would endure. Wishing to remain with the roses and lilacs, to remain at peace in a different dimension, the youngster reluctantly scaled the wall, climbing to the ledge. As she did so, looking around, she was graced by raindrops on roses. So beautiful! Walking only the slightest distance from the cellar hole, heading toward the farmhouse, she noticed the rain had suddenly stopped. Turning back to glance at a sacred spot she left behind, she watched the rain still falling directly above it yet nowhere else. Ground cover beneath her feet was dry; the path, clear. Without realizing it Andrea made a quantum leap, there to rediscover the solace of the simplest truth from a different time, an altered perspective. Life goes on. A message received. Her strong sense of direction intact, common sense prevailed... it's time to be homeward bound. Only a matter of time.

“The roses under my window make no reference to former roses or better ones;

they are what they are; they exist with God today.

There is no time for them.

There is simply the rose; it is perfect in
every moment of its existence."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

a woman's touch will get a man's attention

"And out of the darkness came the hands that reach thro' nature, moulding men."

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Something was always going wrong down in the damn cellar! Whether as normal or paranormal, Roger had his work cut out for him under their house. Down the hatch he goes again, down a rickety set of stairs, down in the dark, dank shared space below a family dwelling. He'd been the only one unafraid to tread where others dared not go. He had come to accept her presence, even welcome it as company among the cobwebs and that dreary lack of light. She posed no threat to him. In fact, oddly enough, her existence was comforting to the man. Strange, how a budding relationship only confirmed how wrong he had been and Roger was not one to accept the idea of being wrong about anything. Well aware this spirit loathed his wife and meant her only ill will, perhaps this realization was at the root of the companionship they'd shared. Though Roger still presumably loved his wife, he also felt contempt for her, especially whenever they argued... and he lost. It was a sentiment returned in kind: double-barrel shotgun style. His frequent trips to the low country often occurred after an intense altercation above ground, accusations boiling over, spilling from a cauldron of discontent where they simmered. Prime time for the other mistress of the house to step up as a stand in and that she did. When he went where she was hiding, she was there, seeking the man of her dreams.

Truth be told, Roger was often found in the cellar working on yet another broken device to escape a blowout about there being another broken device in the cellar! A cold hot water heater or a furnace on the fritz, again. Carolyn was certain this spirit had something to do with it. Nothing ever broke down unless he was home. That witch had him at her beckon call with a honey-do list of her own making. Anger and frustration accompanied him down those stairs, the residual fallout from harsh words and even harsher tones. There he found a friend with whom to commiserate, someone clearly on his side of an argument. It was always about taking sides. No new furnace in the budget, it was as ancient as the hot water heater, obsolete when they bought the place. Carolyn impatiently awaited replacements, considered it her husband's fault when they were not forthcoming. He'd become defensive, so down the stairs he went to work some more magic on another mechanical device which had worn out its welcome long before the family arrived at the farm.

His cursing, slamming the cellar door became a loud, disturbing ritual, his come-a-callin' card; a bombastic pronouncement of an entrance being made, issued from the hallway or the landing of the staircase. As their adversarial relationship, long-established between the couple, would erupt in accusations whenever anything went wrong, she was there, waiting, at the ready to throw a willing arm around his broad shoulders or stroke his back in a supernatural show of support. Want tea with that sympathy, dear? Her transparent ploy was obvious to all, except for Roger, who did not realize he was being toyed with, manipulated by a maleficent mistress of Mephistopheles.

When contact with him first occurred, Roger became just as frightened as Carolyn had been. Once it became apparent he was not her target, at least not in the same way his wife was, the man began to loosen up a little when these encounters happened by making light of it, as if the episode was no big deal. His adoption of a nonchalant attitude, closely akin to Sam's approach to this matter, was merely a mask. The truth? Her presence unnerved him no end. In reality it was his false bravado. The subterranean subterfuge was always startling, a seductress-in-waiting at the bottom of a shabby staircase. She left quite an impression; made her marks. He couldn't afford to forget a potential payback if he was not nice or not conscious; the damage she had done to his skin, as if needles scraped his back bloody. He remembered waking up in holy hell. She was powerful, capable of harming mortals where they slept or capable of making mortals comatose! For this reason, he thought it was best to forewarn his brother-in-law prior to an excursion into the cellar, a trip down the hatch which may well include a visitation from the other mistress of the house.

Frankie and Guy came for their first and only visit to New England in the summer of 1976, soon after Andrea's graduation from high school. Two of their three sons had come along for the ride of their lives. Taking the scenic route, the long way provided them a picturesque view of the coastline, from Brunswick, Georgia to Providence, Rhode Island. Then, of course, they had to find their way out to the farm, a rather secluded place in the country. After driving nearly fifteen hundred miles, they'd gotten lost in Chepachet! Roger went to fetch them, guide them in, while Carolyn readied the farmhouse for guests. She'd truly missed her elder sister, Frankie. And Guy? She loved him like a brother. It had been too long, too many years since an official visit and

it had always been the Perron clan who made that trek to Georgia. The ladies adored their sweet cousins, Billy and Johnny, both awesome boys. They had been looking forward to spending some time together again. Another grand tour planned once they arrived, a historical journey through New England. It meant adventure for the girls, as well. Boston, Lexington and Concord... the shot heard 'round the world! What a rush it was for them to see the places they had only read about. Frankie was a teacher and this field trip would be shared with her students when their fall semester began. Carolyn left Georgia practically a child herself, only eighteen. The time had finally come to share her discoveries with her elder sister. It was a joyful and a meaningful reunion for everyone involved.

However, there was one thing the hosts felt obliged to divulge. Neither of them wanted to broach the subject. Carolyn had not yet told them about their house alive with death, the place where anything could happen at any time. It was privileged information, disclosed strictly on a need-to-know basis. This had been easy to put off, for years, as Carolyn was not certain how her sister would react to the fear factor. It wasn't a topic they'd ever discussed before.

After a lovely dinner, Carolyn showed everyone to their rooms. Two boys got the middle bedroom downstairs, long abandoned by Roger and Carolyn once they'd refurbished the summer kitchen. Chrissy later claimed it, happily relinquishing her sacred space to their cousins for a week. The Perron clan planned to bunk upstairs. Andrea gave the full-sized bed to her parents who gave their room to Frankie and Guy. The girls crammed into the two remaining bedrooms. Voila! Room enough for house guests with no room to spare in the midst of space shared by seven mortals who didn't know how to explain just how crowded their farmhouse really was, in spite of its size.

Reconsidering her position on the matter, and because the house had been so quiet for a long time, Carolyn did not discuss the dilemma with her sister that evening. Instead, she decided to risk it, to hope against hope the spirits would be cooperative for once, not resentful or too curious about the sudden influx of people on the scene. Everyone went to bed late. There was merry to make! The celebration ensued from their moment of arrival. It was well past midnight before all four of the adults were ready to retire for the night. By that time it was too late... nothing left to do but listen to their scary stories in the morning. Nothing left to do but to apologize for failing to give them fair warning in a timely manner. Frankie and Guy were about to be introduced to

the other mistress of the house.

So many souls to consider... so many fences to mend. Rising at dawn, Carolyn made the coffee. Frankie was not far behind her as they greeted each other at first light. Carolyn could see that something else was brewing. Frankie confronted her sister.

“Carolyn, why didn’t you tell me this house was haunted?” The stern tone of her voice sounded like something she would use in her classroom: lessons learned. She demanded an answer with her tired eyes... not a wink of sleep to their credit.

“Oh my God... what happened?” Carolyn was stunned by the slap of her sister’s words against her blushing cheeks.

“Something was standing right beside the bed, staring at both of us then it reached down and peeled the blanket back all the way to the foot of the bed. It hovered there. Guy was ready to start the car! The room became ice cold and we couldn’t move at all.”

“Oh, my God. I am so sorry.” Carolyn’s remorse was genuine.

“So am I!” Frankie was equally sincere. Though it sounded like the end, it was only beginning. An ethereal classroom had a schoolmarm in the house.

“I’m not finished. The room filled with a smell so disgusting that I nearly retched. I couldn’t move. We both heard the sound of a heavy object, like a cannon ball rolling across the floor, loud enough to wake the dead! Guy was petrified and so was I. So? What the hell happened in there?” Frankie had become emotional. Their bond was being stretched by the truth, or a lack thereof, and Frankie was offended that her own sister did not trust her enough to share their horror story. “You’ve lived here for more than five years now. Don’t tell me you didn’t know about this!”

“I didn’t want to scare you... any of you.”

“Well, something did it for you.”

“In case nothing happened while you were here, I did not want to frighten you, especially the boys. When I found out you were coming I wanted to tell you then but I was afraid you wouldn’t come, so I waited. And the house has been quiet for months, no problems at all. I thought about telling you when you got here but I didn’t know how...”

“You didn’t know how to talk to me about it?” Frankie seemed shocked.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t believe me.” Carolyn became emotional, too. She felt ashamed. It was obvious her Southern belle sister was disturbed.

“Not believe my own sister?”

Carolyn continued pleading her case. “I needed to see you! I thought if nothing happened I would never have to mention it at all.”

“You would have kept something this important from me? Never tell me about it? I thought you trusted me.”

“Frankie. I didn’t want you to think...” Carolyn fought on, losing a battle to keep her composure as an internal conflict was exposed. Words seeped from her lips as tears pooled in her eyes. Frankie softened her stance a bit when Carolyn confessed. “I was afraid.”

Whereabouts unbeknownst to their mates, Roger and Guy walked through the kitchen door, having been off for a stroll on the land, engaged in a rather intense conversation of their own. They had met in the parlor and decided to head out early. Carolyn knew the instant she looked at Guy’s face Roger had told him the truth. There were a few tenuous moments. No one was certain how to react or what would be said next but then calm eased into the scene which could have played out very differently, requiring a hotel room or a trip back to Georgia. As Carolyn and Frankie poured coffee for their husbands then began preparing breakfast for unruly hordes, both men sat at the table, discussing the faulty electrical system too old to be considered antiquated. It was downright dangerous. As the master electrician in their family, Guy had volunteered to rewire a farmhouse during their visit. Guessing it was settled, Frankie and Guy had overcome a fear of the unknown.

“Looks like we’ll be staying.” Grasping her sister’s hand... it was settled.

Grateful beyond measure for their understanding, Carolyn was relieved. It was so difficult to discuss, but soon she was pouring her heart out to a sister who grasped the concept and found herself fascinated, in spite of a gripping fear she had felt the night before, confronted by a presence she didn’t expect. Speaking of mending fences, she told Frankie all about the day Cindy had to rebuild a fallen fence during a storm, about the kind help she received. It was not all doom and gloom. There was light with the darkness, explaining how a situation perceived as a curse had transformed into a blessing, repairing a rift between sisters in the process: Nancy and Cindy. It was complicated and she wanted Frankie to understand that they had reason to stay. In spite of all the extracurricular activity in the farmhouse, there were lessons to be learned.

One minor complication with the proposed electrical work: it meant a trip into the cellar. Roger had no choice. He had to do the right thing. An attempt

at full disclosure on the subject he would rather not discuss, Guy deserved to know what was down there, waiting. Besides the furnace and a mostly dead boiler system, there was an equally dysfunctional relationship to consider. He had to admit it. Neither of them would make the same mistake again: a sin of omission. Once all the best and worst of these stories were out in the open, clearing the air, it was easier for everyone to breathe a sigh of relief. Two sisters were free to revisit the past aplenty, chatting happily about their magical childhood shared on a farm in Georgia. As their husbands prepared (tool boxes in hand), to bravely descend into darkness on a stairway to Heaven or hell, depending upon perspectives, Roger did his best to assuage any fears Uncle Guy had before fear had the chance to manifest in form and substance. Heading down the hatch required a leap of faith... say a little prayer.

“She likely won’t bother you. For some ungodly reason, she wants me!” Roger, once again, underestimated the power of the Law of Attraction. Uncle Guy was a handsome devil, a fit figure of a man: tall and lean, that charming Southern drawl, icing on the beefcake. The spirit laid her invisible hands on him immediately. A woman’s touch will and did get the man’s attention. He spun around, pivoting in place like a soldier. Attention! Roger saw the blood drain from his face and knew precisely what happened. “She touched you...” Roger posed the question as a statement.

“Yes. I think so.” Guy was rattled, anxious to be done with a job that only just began. His tools were still in the box, wire still on its spool.

“On the shoulder?”

“And my neck. Down my back.”

“I guess I’m not her only boyfriend.” Roger tried to make light of it in the depths of the darkness he could not comprehend, let alone explain. “You know what they say, a woman scorned... hell hath no fury like her! Be nice.”

It was the first of several encounters Guy would have with this mystery woman over the course of the next few days. He’d adjusted well, though not completely. Neither did Frankie. She was not amused. On edge, nervous like a cat in unfamiliar territory, this little game of “peek-a-boo!” going on in the guest bedroom was disconcerting enough in its own right, but that invisible entity kept the ball rolling, what Frankie described as the sounds of a cannon ball on a roll across the floor. Then there was the antique bucket moving all around the bedroom while they lay there, listening, unable to sleep with the

commotion and scrutiny. Nor did she approve of the “hide-n-seek” going on in the cellar with her husband and his newfound friend. Neither of them had appreciated being awakened in the middle of the night by noises too peculiar to describe and both were grateful the boys had been spared this same ordeal. Guy and Frankie left that old farmhouse with many memories and an entirely new perspective. Their surreal journey to the great State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations was third eye-opening enlightenment. They’d learned lessons about life and death, developing a new awareness of and appreciation for the supernatural world. Likewise, a sister and brother came to understand what their family was enduring. It’d been six years since Roger and Carolyn bought the farm, six long years keeping secrets from a sister she could trust. Fear is a powerful weapon. That trigger gets pulled every time a mortal soul allows death to get in the way of a life, by adversely impacting relationships. Mending an imaginary fence fear built between them, Carolyn pledged to tell Frankie everything from then on. No more code of silence. It’s not honorable among thieves or sisters, and they were thick as sisters. Carolyn rediscovered her confidante from long ago and far away, sharing their multitude of stories. Frankie expressed her concerns but there was nothing to be done. The family was firmly entrenched on their farm. She understood why; so did Uncle Guy. During a week spent sipping the nectar, drinking it into their collective soul, they too had fallen in love with its graceful beauty, its history and mysteries. Frankie was transfixed and inspired by a tale told in the wee hours of darkest night or in bright morning light. Two sisters walked in woods, resplendent as always in June, sipped water from a frigid fountain at the well. Love potion. They had languished in the river and lingered at the pond. Carolyn called her when it sold. Frankie mourned the loss of a place in the country she adored and would never revisit again. Any regrets? Still busy counting the losses.

Not long after their journey to New England, the Clark family suffered an unimaginable loss. An unusually foggy Georgia morning, heat rising with the sun was burning off moisture absorbed overnight. Billy was sixteen. Music blaring in his car on the way to school, the typical teenager, he never heard the horn. He did not slow down at the railroad crossing at all as the train had a regular schedule and always made its morning pass through the countryside

promptly at 6:00 a.m. His expectation of immortality must have kept him from applying the brakes. That fateful day it was running one hour behind. At precisely the moment he crossed the tracks, the cosmic convergence occurred. Billy was gone but never forgotten. That singular event continues to ripple through the hearts and minds of those who loved and lost the brightest star in the firmament. He never knew what hit him; a mercy bestowed. Timing is everything in life and death and his time came too soon for anyone to abide. Only his twisted eyeglasses were found near the wreckage, hundreds of yards down the track. When the call came, no one in the family could believe it. How could it be if the essence of his purity still lingered in their home? How could he be lost and gone forever? Carolyn collapsed. There are losses from which mere mortals never recover... haunted for life by the death of a child.

“Nothing befalls a man except
what it is in his nature to endure.”
Marcus Aurelius

tug of war

“The universe will reward you for taking risks on its behalf.”
Shakti Gawain

The antique icebox entered its newfound home through the kitchen door. Fran claimed it for Carolyn from the cellar of a friend who was moving on. It was “no charge”! Grateful to get rid of the solid oak monstrosity, unaware or unappreciative of its intrinsic value, he gave it away. A surreal score! Once it was cleansed of cobwebs and polished to a shine it looked beautiful. Carolyn placed it proudly up against the wall between two kitchen pantries, admiring it, a lovely pitcher and bowl set on top. A splendid addition to the kitchen, it remained a decorative piece for about a week before someone put something on it that didn’t belong there. Then it became just another cluttered surface.

It reminded Roger of one from his own childhood. He’d reconditioned it and wanted to try it out so he drove into town, returning with a chunk of dry ice. Storing it in the cellar until he was ready to load it into the icebox, the man got sidetracked by some other errand requiring his immediate attention. Meanwhile, Carolyn reminded her girls not to touch that hazardous object, not to go in the cellar at all. When asked why this was so dangerous to touch, their mother explained that it was not really ice, but was instead, a chemical, a solid block of carbon dioxide. Insisting they keep their hands off it because contact could damage delicate fingertips (leaving patches of skin behind on the surface of it) mom said: “Don’t touch!” It was all she had to say.

Nancy was usually the corruptive influence on her younger sisters but this time she had nothing to do with it. Cindy felt compelled to sneak down those stairs. She flew down the hatch when no one was watching, so she thought. Curiosity was not just for cats. That strange looking substance was, for some reason, fascinating to the youngster. She merely wanted to know more about it and did not believe for a moment that her skin would shrivel up and fall off if she touched the stuff. Daredevil, down she went into the depth of darkness, into that off-limits area. Roger had placed the block in the anteroom, tucking it out of the way. Out of sight.... out of mind? Hardly! Cindy found it sitting on top of the well, a mysterious substance begging for fingerprints. Looking back to be sure she was alone, a naughty girl went where she did not belong.

As fearless as foolish, Cindy cautiously reached down. Laying a finger on the cold, hard surface, she abruptly pulled away. It burned, like touching fire

made of ice. Incredible! She had to touch it again! Examining her fingertips in dim light muted by dirty cellar windows above her head, the musty glow illuminated her hand as she compared index fingers. No damage done. None at all. Skin still perfectly intact she leaned forward again in flagrant disregard of her mother's direct orders. There would be an immediate consequence for her actions, though nothing expected. Again, the youngster had been caught playing with fire, tempting fate with ice.

"Ouch!" As she, more confidently, leaned toward the object, pushing the boundaries, testing the water disguised as dry ice, a disobedient heathen got what she deserved. Shocked by a sudden pain, her long, flowing locks of hair had been grabbed from behind. With a vicious yank, hard enough to pull her head back then knock her to the floor, Cindy knew instantly she was being admonished. She was not alone and had been watched all along her journey.

Tears welled in her eyes. Jerked severely, her scalp was throbbing, aching from a tug so sharp it should qualify as a weapon of war. She reached behind to grasp her head and save her hair, sure she would encounter the hand of the spirit who caught her in the act but it was a different kind of close encounter, cold as ice itself. Cindy gasped; a startled breath of putrid air went deeply into her lungs along with the striking odor of death. What had her by the hair was not mortal, (no one in her family would be that brutal) nor was it pleased by her behavior. She did not dare make a sound, though doubted she could in a moment of panic: terror. Had anybody heard her in the cellar, she would be punished twice. Instead, she pulled free from a grip held so tightly, strands of her hair remained behind on the granite floor beneath her. Frantically leaping onto her feet, Cindy ran for her life. The most frightening time of this ordeal came at the top of a splintering stairwell. She stood there trembling, listening and waiting for a strategic exit from the escape hatch, rescue from a situation of her own making. She could not bolt through the cellar door and risk being discovered; she had to wait, dead silence on the other side her only salvation. It was her own fault and she knew it; knew it was an encounter she could not disclose for fear of mortal retribution. She would not look down the staircase for fear she'd been followed. It was best not to know if it was the end. After a few unbearable minutes which seemed to last forever, Cindy took a chance and fled into the hallway then straight up Nancy's bedroom stairs, through a closet then into her own room. Nobody to seek comfort from, her pounding heart was her only companion. She sat on the edge of her bed and rubbed her

aching head, tears flowing down flushed cheeks. Not about to rat herself out, she kept this incident a secret... for more than thirty years.

A reward for the risk taken came much later in life, arriving in the form of revelation. Once Cynthia realized what had actually happened, it occurred to her that the spirit not only had her best interest at heart (though the method of discipline was a bit harsh), but obviously knew their mother forewarned them against touching something hazardous to their health. Having defied a direct order, she considered the retribution divine by nature. That particularly bizarre incident had a valuable lesson which was not apparent to the child at the time, busy soothing the pain she could not divulge, thus suffered alone. However, as a child, she'd presumed it was a tug of war rather than a way to keep the peace. The test was over but questions remained. Was she protected from her own bad decision or was the spirit showing respect for her mother's directive, as Carolyn was unavailable to intervene on her daughter's behalf? It was nice to be naughty once in awhile but was practically impossible to do in a house with invisible eyes. The walls had ears. Eventually, Cindy came to her senses and a conclusion based on an encounter; the spirits did watch over them. They listened and frequently responded to various interactions which occurred between their mortal counterparts, like free babysitting, though they all paid a price in the end. It took a toll at every turn.

Upon reflection, Cindy is now convinced the spirits often defended them from themselves, as if these sometimes stupid, silly children were their own, by birthright. She likewise believes they retained intellect and emotions after death. They reason and persuade, cajole and protect those they care for and watch over within an expansive Universe. They are all capable of expressing love and in some cases, hatred. There is simply no other rational explanation for it. The spirits are omnipresent, like God. Perhaps they are merely another manifestation of God, in an alternate dimension, devotional by nature, much like their mortal counterparts. Most amazingly of all, they still feel fear. Ask little Oliver Richardson what terrifies him as he crawls through the eaves or perhaps a little girl who knows the depths of loneliness and despair. Tragic.

Going into the cellar is still some risky business. Cindy once vowed never to descend the stairway again, a self-imposed rule she later broke. Exploring the cavernous underbelly of their home meant taking a risk. It made Cindy a wiser soul. Just another classroom on campus, there to learn her lessons well.

Poor judgment aside, she once cursed the darkness but she has seen the Light. “No matter where we went, there they were... hard to get away with anything! We were never alone.” Disobedient heathens get what they deserve as punishment and enlightenment, in equal measure. An important part of child-rearing is discipline imposed. The source matters not as long as the authority figure is an elder. In some cases, the girls found themselves confronted by an elder who was hundreds of years older than their own parents.

“It is the false shame of fools to try to conceal wounds that have not healed.”

Horace

War

When my young brother was killed
By a mute and dusty shell in the thorny brush
Crowning the boulders of the Villa Verde Trail
On the island of Luzon,

I laid my whole dry body down,
Dropping my face like a stone in a green park
On the east banks of the Rhine;

On an airstrip skirting the Seine
His sergeant brother sat like a stick in his barracks
While cracks of fading sunlight
Caged the dusty air;

In the rocky rolling hills west of the Mississippi
His father and mother sat in a simple Norwegian parlor
With a photograph smiling between them on the table
And their hands fallen into their laps
Like sticks and dust;

And still other brothers and sisters,

Linking their arms together,
Walked down the dusty road where once he ran
And into the deep green valley
To sit on the stony banks of the stream he loved
And let the murmuring waters
Wash over their blood-hot feet with a springing crown of tears.

Joseph Langland



~ a bridge too far gone ~

“We make war that we may live in peace.”
Aristotle

VII. WARREN PEACE

“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

James iv. 7

Ed and Lorraine Warren were the perfect example of an intermingling of darkness and light. Both are fondly remembered by the Perron family as kind and compassionate human beings who did everything in their power to help, a beacon of light in a storm. They knew the darker side of existence, too. It is not their fault nor was it their intention to create upheaval in a farmhouse. In October of 1973 the couple first made their presence known, and a powerful presence it was: two supernatural beings disguised as mere mortals. They had appeared at twilight on the threshold of their door on a wild and windy night just prior to Halloween. It really was a dark and stormy night! Having been recently informed that the Rhode Island family was in serious trouble, they made the trip from Connecticut with nothing but a surname and address to go on. Widely considered as the foremost experts in the paranormal, then and now, the Warrens had no idea what threshold they were crossing at the time, but would soon understand the significance of their exceptional find in space and time: a portal to the past and future alike... a dimensional doorway.

Finding their way to the farmhouse in Harrisville was no small feat. They were lost in the woods. Finally, after several passes, the Warrens glimpsed a few lights from the old home place, set back hundreds of feet from the road, discreetly hidden behind three enormous evergreens. A massive barn was the clue that a house was close by on the property. It was sometime around 5:00 p.m. when they pulled in the driveway. Carolyn anxiously paced the parlor.

A friend had called to tell her that help was on the way. Upon arrival, the Warrens were cordially invited inside then introduced to most of the family. Roger was noticeably and quite deliberately absent, gone out of town, those plans hastily arranged, once he heard they were coming. He wanted nothing to do with the world-famous “ghost hunters”, considering them to be in an illegitimate line of work. Theirs was the ultimate odd job, as far as he was concerned. Over time, his extremely narrow mind would expand universally. However, at the moment, Carolyn was left on her own... again.

A surprisingly jovial pair, Ed and Lorraine were charming and disarming. Carolyn was unaware of just how famous they were, or she would have been far more self-conscious. She was already on edge. They seemed “normal” for people who’d delved so deeply into the paranormal. The middle-aged couple appeared to be ordinary folks, like people who would make good neighbors, someone from whom one could borrow a cup of sugar, maybe share a cup of coffee, which is exactly what they did. Once the children delivered a “good night” to all and went upstairs to attend to homework, Carolyn explained that her husband would be unable to join them. There was no way to mislead this highly intuitive woman. Lorraine Warren was far too perceptive to fool. She knew precisely why Roger was missing in action. She’d sensed his reticence from afar, from the very beginning, through the trembling voice of his wife, someone in obvious turmoil, left alone... in solitary confinement.

Settling into the parlor, the Warrens enjoyed the warmth of the fireplace and that of their hostess. Ed was a gentle, soft-spoken man. He resembled a teddy bear, possessing those same endearing qualities. Lorraine was far more the school teacher, quite adept at taking notes and directing the conversation. For Carolyn the encounter was quite an education. Though she had much to learn, she had much to teach the Warrens, as well. By the time they left, far later on in the evening, the two were both excited and equally distressed by what had been freely discussed in their presence. Carolyn believed she could trust them. She held nothing back. It was quite an earful for the eldest child, too. Andrea’s room, directly above the parlor, had an iron grate in the floor, designed to disperse heat upstairs. It was also the source of some startling information. It was the night she discovered to what extent her mother had endured abuse at the invisible hands of a malicious manifestation, a hateful spirit with purely evil intentions toward her mom; an influence this couple suspected might be attempting to “oppress” or “possess” the dispirited soul, a woman being challenged from within as the rightful mistress of the house.

“Was mistress once afore ye came and mistress here will be again.
Will drive ye out with fiery broom.
Will drive ye mad with death and gloom.”

Carolyn peered into the small, dark closet where she had kept a notebook containing descriptions from her initial encounters with an entity in question.

Lorraine, stunned by the images and explanations revealed within its pages, exchanged a silent but extended glance with her husband, as if conversing in sign language entirely their own. The lapse in time had done little to mitigate the memory. Several years had passed since Carolyn had looked inside those pages, at the sketches and the notes she had scribed with her trembling hand. They quietly studied her face, transfixed by her reactions while revisiting the nightmares, all too real. Carolyn became fearful, withdrawing into herself for several minutes, obviously in pain. Lorraine reached over, coaxing her back.

"I think that's enough for tonight." Closing the notebook, suggesting they should go, she said, "It's getting late and we have a long drive ahead of us."

As the initial meeting had been both pleasant and productive, the Warrens asked if they might return again in the near future. Carolyn agreed. Lorraine asked if she would try to convince her reluctant husband to join them. They wanted his perspective as well. She'd promised to try. Before they departed, Lorraine respectfully requested a brief walk throughout the lower level of the house, so as not to disturb the children upstairs. The grateful woman escorted her guests. When Lorraine entered the couple's bedroom, stopping abruptly, just beyond the threshold, she closed her eyes and shuddered, visible tremors passing through her body.

"No one should sleep in this bedroom." Carolyn concurred, explaining it. Plans were already underway to convert the old summer kitchen into another bedroom. Roger had been consistently and diligently working on this project. She took them in to see it. Mrs. Warren approved. A far better choice. She suggested they close off the other bedroom, abandon it entirely. Apparently it was not a space any mortal beings should want to share. Carolyn opened the pantry door into the laundry room. Lorraine stepped inside but then she immediately backed out, startled by what she described as waves of negative energy. Carolyn had not yet mentioned the issue with the doors opening and closing at will, especially this one. It seemed negligible in comparison to the other incidents which had occurred by the time the Warrens became involved in this truly remarkable haunting. So much to tell... so little time.

"Terrible. Something awful happened in there. Violent. The poor thing. So young. A girl. Blood. Definitely a female." She closed the door, certain something tragic took place within the narrow pantry.

Lorraine's expression appeared deeply disturbed, though she reserved any further comment or judgment at the time, sensory perceptions on high alert.

"That's what April said, too. This door opens all the time, by itself. It has been a problem since we restored the fireplace. It's as if someone is trying to send us a message or get our attention, or maybe just get out of the pantry."

"No... not by itself. It only appears that way. Carolyn, please listen to me. Children are highly susceptible to supernatural energy. They're an easy mark as targets go, easy to haunt because they are so innocent. They can see things adults don't perceive and they are often adversely affected in insidious ways adults do not understand. They haven't established any boundaries and have no preconceived ideas of what they are experiencing; they simply experience it. Children remain open to the energy around them. They absorb the good as well as the evil and the sensory impact can be traumatic. Destructive. Intense fear can trigger other problems. I really do understand. Protect your own. We should interview them, with your permission, of course." The mother of five felt her blood pressure rising with the moon.

"I don't know. I'll have to discuss it with my husband first." Carolyn was as frightened by her words as by the images she'd revisited that evening.

"Please do so, as soon as possible. Carolyn, your children are in danger. I don't mean to alarm you. Well, maybe I do. Whatever this is in your home is attracted to them, I promise you. Please call me whenever you're ready for us to come. You have our phone number. Ed will conduct the interviews. He is wonderful with children. He will put them at ease and when he is finished listening we will all know far more about the impact this haunting is having on them." The investigation was fast becoming a "case". Shaken and stirred, a loving mother noticed she was trembling again, from inside her soul.

Carolyn agreed to do her best to persuade Roger to participate, confessing she was fearful of the effort. She seriously doubted he would agree and she already knew he would never allow their children to become involved in the discussion. Escorting her guests to the door, Carolyn bid them farewell and told them she'd be in touch. Afterward, she settled on the sofa then thought about a close encounter with two people who felt like friends. She was able to speak openly with them, to share her ordeal and that of her family without feeling self-conscious, without being judged or criticized in any way. It was a relief. Something about them inspired confidence, the belief they might help. "Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark." (George Iles) Shaking their hands, she'd said goodnight in gratitude. An intense meeting, they had put her at ease, until they mentioned a necessity to include her husband.

When Roger returned home, Carolyn rearranged some time and space for them to speak privately. As she expected, he wasn't the least bit amenable to having their conversation. Belligerent, Roger considered this concept absurd: ghost hunters! Staunch and rigid, he preferred to simply ignore the problem, as if it didn't exist... like the ghosts! Seeking assistance was an admission, with some real potential of exposing his family to further scrutiny. He feared involving the Warrens. It could destroy a low profile deliberately established long before, in the first year when they decided not to share the predicament with anyone outside a very small circle of trusted souls... real friends.

"Roger, these people can help us... they're parapsychologists."

"I think you're dreaming again! No such thing as a parapsychologist. It's a fake made-up career invented by somebody looking to make a buck off the misery of others! Don't you realize when you're being played? I thought you were smarter than that." A big dig. Roger could not communicate with his wife without insulting her in the process. It came naturally to him; that bad attitude was like breathing. What was supposed to be a civilized discussion quickly deteriorated into a grudge match... a fight to the finish.

"They didn't ask me for anything except an honest conversation. I've told them the story, that's all; a truthful account of what's been happening in this house since the day we moved in. And let me remind you, it was not so long ago that you didn't believe in ghosts either." The insults always flew in both directions, like spears in a jungle, amongst warring factions: rival tribes.

"I have no interest in talking with these people and neither should you. I don't want to discuss this with anyone and I certainly don't understand why you would. They can't help us. No one can. We're on our own."

"You don't know that." Carolyn's cauldron was sputtering, boiling over.

"This story makes you sound like you're unstable!"

"Is that what you're so worried about? Being thought of as..."

"I am a respected businessman with a reputation to uphold! I don't need it undermined by a pair of two-bit charlatans spreading my name around town or anywhere else, for that matter! Don't you get it? They'll only use you for notoriety, for their own purposes." Roger's tendency was to bluntness.

"So what you're saying is... this is really all about you."

"Of course it's not! Don't you think it's our job to protect the kids?"

"That is precisely what I am attempting to do! The Warrens are educated, articulate, sensitive people who seem knowledgeable about the supernatural.

They know what they're talking about.”

“That always does impress you.” Roger could not control his sarcasm. He didn’t even try. “And how do you know they know what they’re doing? It’s their job to convince you that they’re the experts.”

“Lorraine says our children are in harm’s way. She told me they’re highly susceptible to the supernatural activity in this house. She claims they’re all in danger! If that is true then it’s our job to learn more and to listen to what the experts have to say. It is the only responsible, parental thing to do.”

“Self-proclaimed experts?” No slack in the rope, trying to hang her up.

“Didn’t you hear me? The Warrens said our kids are in danger here!”

Carolyn’s statement silenced her husband. His demeanor quickly altered, a harsh tone softened. After a pause for reflection came a pertinent question.

“What kind of danger?” For once, he looked her straight in the eyes.

“I don’t know what she meant. They want to interview the girls next.”

“Absolutely not. They’ll scare the hell out of them. No way.” Period.

“Nearly four years now... we’ve literally lived with the dead. After all these kids have seen and heard in this house, do you think talking about it with a couple of people who actually understand will traumatize them more? I think it will be a relief instead of another burden... I think it is important for them to talk things out... clear the air. It might help all of us to cope better.”

“You would be taking a hell of a risk. We don’t even know these people.” Roger had a point, at the tip of a weapon of war, poised and ready to strike.

“Actually, I do know them. You’re the one who ran like a bat out of hell the minute you heard they were coming... so it seems to me you should trust my judgment since I’m the only one who has a real, legitimate opinion about who they are and what their intentions might be. You left me alone to deal with this so let me deal with it the way I choose. Trust me.” That’s an order.

“Like I trusted you about buying this house?” Roger had so little room for argument but that fact had never stopped him before. It was true. He deserted her but she was the one who invited them to the house by proxy, through a friend and she did so without his knowledge or consent. Therefore Roger felt justified in pursuing the point further. Adding fuel to their fire, he suggested, “Spending a few hours with someone does not mean you know them.” Open fire. Carolyn had pre-positioned assets, far more than torches and pitchforks and broomsticks at her disposal.

“Unlike yourself, Roger, I am a good judge of character and you know it. I

size people up quickly and accurately. The Warrens have come to help us. I sensed no ulterior motive. They met the kids and are genuinely concerned for their welfare. Don't you think their parents should be at least as concerned?" A warning shot... went right over his head. Carolyn won that round.

"What did they say?" No point in prolonging the inevitable, Roger was at last willing to listen, albeit grudgingly; this subject matter made him queasy, uncomfortable in his own skin. He was incapable of hiding it.

"Quite a lot, actually." Carolyn settled back in her chair then soothed her parched throat with a sip of coffee before beginning to speak. "For one thing, I was right. Remember those flies? Remember how they came in droves then all died at once? Remember when it happened? As soon as we acknowledged the existence of the spirits, they were gone. Those were botflies... the devil's pets."

"What are you saying?" Roger was still skeptical, his cocked eyebrow, a sure sign of the times. He resented the woman ahead of her time.

"It was not just an infestation. It was a manifestation. Those flies were all sent here on a mission, to observe the new occupants... to size us up."

"That is ridiculous!" A few choice words. "They told you that?"

"How many times did we treat this house? How many different ways did we try to kill them? We couldn't do it! Did we ever find them breeding?"

"It doesn't mean they weren't... we just didn't find out where."

"Nobody has thousands of house flies in the dead of winter. No one. Certainly not in Rhode Island! Don't you remember how they'd attack us and buzz our heads? They'd stare at us! They did not even look like normal flies. Those fat, black little bastards! Don't you remember how they'd drop dead in the windows then vanish... nothing at all but ashes and dust left behind. Lorraine says she has seen this happen before. They came here for a purpose. There was a reason for their presence in this house."

"Paranormal flies. You've already convinced me she's a fraud."

"They were harbingers of things to come."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"She says this anomaly commonly occurs in the homes of the haunted; the flies come first. It's impossible to get rid of them. They leave when they are ready to go, once they've served their purpose and not a moment sooner. Mrs. Warren said: 'You can't really kill what's already dead.'"

"And what, pray tell, is this grand purpose they serve?" Sarcasm again?

“Botflies are only found around the dead. Corpses. They taunt to signify the existence of spirits in a house, almost like forewarning the residents.”

“And you believe this bullshit.” A profane approach tends to stir the pot.

“God damn it, Roger! Are you going to fight me on this all the way? And that’s another thing! I was honest with them about these conflicts between us and they said by engaging in arguments, fighting with each other is just like feeding raw meat to a lion... it makes them stronger. Lorraine says we have been fanning the flames by having talks like this one. Pure negative energy.” Adding more fuel to a fire about to rage out-of-control. “I am not gullible! I’m as educated and just as pragmatic as you are and I want an explanation!”

“Great. So now these people think I’m a jerk.”

“They don’t know that yet. You’ll have to prove it to them yourself.”

Roger bolted from his seat, angry as hell, perhaps because he had missed his calling to the stage. Just as he did so, a bottle on the sideboard took flight and crashed to the floor, just enough to stop a temper tantrum in the making. He retrieved the undamaged bottle, studied then replaced it on the shelf. He then sat back down in his chair like a naughty little boy who’d been scolded. Revisiting his coffee in silence, an excuse to avoid speaking for a moment, without a glance at his wife, Roger suggested it was time to continue their conversation, doing so in a far more demure manner. Time to tone it down. For her part, Carolyn was also ready to bury the hatchet... in the center of her husband’s skull.

“So... what else did they say.”

“Well, for one thing they’ve explained the wildly fluctuating electric bills. Do you remember how it got higher and higher, month after month and then, after an incident, it would fall off to a fraction of what it had been before? It always spikes just before something major... it isn’t us, Roger... it’s them.”

“How could I forget? I almost went broke paying off those first bills.”

“Don’t you find it curious? That drastic drop after something happens?”

“That is strange.” Roger’s initial admission of a genuine anomaly.

“Lorraine says there is a malignant spirit draining energy from this house, enough electricity to be able to appear in solid form. She thinks it’s a force to be reckoned with and says it’s demonic.... her words, not mine.”

“I’m just glad it stopped draining the bank account.” The bottom line had always mattered to the man, at times, at the expense of all else.

“Aren’t you even interested? Don’t you want to know why it happened?”

“Well I don’t buy that explanation. I don’t believe in demons.”

“What do you believe in, Roger? I will never forget the look on that man’s face when he came to change the meter.” Carolyn shook her head, stirred by the memory of it. “He thought it was broken. Then I thought he’d faint when he saw the gauge spinning inside the glass. He ran back to his truck and split. Remember? Something spooked him.”

“Well, it wasn’t a demon! For Christ’s sake! If these people are going to plant ideas like that in your head, you’re better off without them.”

“How do you know, Roger? You might be sadly mistaken about that. You were raised Catholic. Aren’t you supposed to believe in evil... in the devil?”

“What else?” Roger was beginning to appear interested in her comments, except for the one prior, which he completely ignored like it didn’t exist.

“She walked through the house, well, this level, anyway. When Lorraine went into our bedroom she literally shook in her boots. She prayed out loud. Both of them said we should close it off immediately. Seal it shut.”

“That’s not going to happen. We have to sleep somewhere. I’m not giving up rooms in this house on their say so or anyone else’s, for that matter. No.”

“Ed said a vengeful ghost can do quite a bit of damage. You don’t know. You weren’t really there. Dead to the world. No help at all, as I recall.”

“I was there. My back got torn to shreds. Twice. Did you tell them about that? Did you say I’m converting the summer kitchen into our bedroom?”

“Yes. I took her in there. She said it was all right. But she said the laundry room pantry was the site of something violent and tragic. I told her afterward about that door. She says it is the spirit of the victim attempting to escape her fate because she died so fast she doesn’t know she’s dead.”

“How could she possibly know that?” Cynicism crept back into his voice.

“She’s psychic. She knew why you weren’t here.”

“I don’t believe that. You told her.”

“I didn’t. In fact, I tried to cover for you. She didn’t buy it for a second.”

“I had business to do...”

“You had escaping to do... the same thing you’ve been doing for years!”

“That’s not fair... I have a family to support!”

“Roger, your support means a hell of a lot more than an income. Will you stay home long enough to meet with these people and see for yourself? They are harmless. I think you’ll find them kind and considerate of our situation, anxious to help in any way they can. That is my impression of them and you

would feel the same sense I have about all of this. They're the very best hope we have... our only hope. They have been investigating haunted houses for decades, all over the world! Sam said they're considered to be the leading experts in the field of study related to the supernatural. If you don't believe me and you don't trust them, then you should at least trust Sam. He's the one who knows about them and said they're the real thing... not frauds."

"He told you that?"

"He heard about a seminar they were doing at RIC and made an effort to meet them. Why can't you do the same? For God's sake, they came to us!"

Invoking the name of Roger's closest friend was all it took to pry his steel trap of a mind open just a crack; how the light gets in. If there was anyone whose judgment he trusted, it was Sam.

"I suppose you invited them back..."

"Damn right I did."

"When." The man sounded defeated, on the verge of declaring surrender.

"When I call them. I told Lorraine I needed to talk it through with you before we went any further. They need to interview you, too."

"I don't want to deal with this." Roger was sincere. He really didn't want those people in his house and he didn't want any family secrets divulged. He too was frightened by what he'd seen and heard in their home and he wasn't looking for "explanations" as his wife was, just peace. He hated the conflicts, loathed the intrusions of spirits and feared further disruptions caused by this mysterious couple a little too anxious to expose and/or expel them from the place. Curiosity aside, his thirst for knowledge began to wane as the subject matter became more convoluted, increasingly uncomfortable. Carolyn had to know what was happening, and why. They'd finished off their coffee. Time to tend to the fire: escape. Leaving the kitchen for the parlor, Roger paused. By the sideboard he picked up the bottle which had become a projectile during an ungodly release of the rage welling within him, Roger stared at it, wondering if there could be any legitimacy to their theory; his outbursts and argumentative nature were prompting and actually encouraging metaphysical activity in the house. Inconceivable! He just shook his head, replacing it on the top shelf of the sideboard then left Carolyn sitting alone in the kitchen, again. Where's a nice hot fire poker when you need one? She was armed and dangerous. Words became weapons of war. In that regard, she's well-armed. She'd acquiesced in the past. This time she wouldn't take no for an answer.

“No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars or sailed an uncharted land, nor opened a new doorway for the human spirit.”
Helen Keller

Prudence S.
Daughter of
Eaber & Charlotte Arnold
Age 11 years & 10 months

Oh, Death! How sudden was thy visit paid.
No time allowed to bid a last adieu:
This hour in health... the next a corpse was laid
Torn from the world, from all her friends by you.
Pure as her heart, may flowers eternal bloom
May pensive genius strew them round her tomb.

An entry from the
Black Book of Burrillville:
(Compiled by John Smith ~ Additional entries by J.C. Mathewson)

Prudence Arnold January 31, 1849
Throat cut with razor by Bill Norton
at Dexter-Richardson House

PRUDENCE
GRISWOLD
EADIE'S CHARLOTTE
ARNOLD
Died Jan. 31, 1849.
aged 11 years
& 10 mos.

~ dear sweet Prudence ~

inquest

“Knowledge is power.”
Sir Francis Bacon

Carolyn made the fateful call. Message received. Reassuring Lorraine she discussed everything with her husband, securing his cooperation, she invited the Warrens to return to the farm. Roger agreed to meet with them. Likewise, he'd reluctantly granted approval for the children to be interviewed. Carolyn tried to prepare them, explaining that it was safe to be open and honest about their experiences. April remained taciturn. Defensive... on high alert.

“Mommy, you told us not to talk to anybody about it. Remember?”

“I know, sweetheart, but this is different. They're fine. That's why they're coming... to help us. Daddy said it was all right with him. He'll be here, too.”

“Help us how?” April had good reason to ask. Though they had all grown accustomed to the necessary discretion, nobody in their family knew the then nine-year-old had kept a closely-guarded secret for years, even from them.

“We hope they can send the spirits away and we'll be done with it.”

“Forever? I doubt it!” Skeptical, Nancy said, “They'd come right back!”

“Forever.” Carolyn's optimism should've been as infectious as a common cold. From the reactions of her girls, she had some more convincing to do. “They'll know what to do to cleanse the house and clear the stinky air!”

“Clean us out? All of them?” There was real alarm in April's voice.

“They'll think we're nuts.” Christine shook her head in disbelief.

“They will never believe us. I think Chris is right.” Nancy was still resistant. “I don't want to tell them any of it. How do we know we can trust them? I've trusted friends who spread it all over town so I lost them then couldn't make new ones for a long time. Only Katy really understands. She's the only one I trust and she won't even sleep over anymore since the thing with the phone.”

Carolyn never expected to encounter such opposition persuading her own girls to be forthcoming. Their reluctance was well-founded; they had all been victimized by it, one way or another, and didn't want to make matters worse.

“Mom.” Andrea was the observer in the family. She watched and listened carefully to everything and everyone. Carolyn paid equally close attention to her eldest, hoping she would shed new light on a dark subject.

“I think it could be good to talk about it but the house has been very quiet.

Maybe we shouldn't stir things up. They're listening to us right now. It's like talking behind their backs right in front of their faces. It's rude."

"They might not like us telling on them!" Nancy was right.

"I know they won't like it." Cindy's grim response was said as a whisper.

"I've considered this and I'll ask Mrs. Warren about it. I promise. If she's concerned, we'll skip the interview. Agreed?"

Finally, the children were willing to follow their mother's lead, save one. April reserved judgment, withholding further comment. Roger came home around 4:00 p.m. and the family had a normal dinner prior to the paranormal evening planned ahead. They did not discuss their pending visit or anything else regarding the Warrens. Instead, they gabbed about Johnny B's good cap getting tossed out the window, something not-so-funny which happened that morning on Bus #10. It was as if they were preserving their collective energy for what lies ahead? The Warrens arrived promptly at 7:00 p.m. Roger was cordial enough, if a bit remote. Carolyn introduced him and quickly escorted Lorraine into the kitchen, the secluded spot to privately discuss these serious, even pivotal questions posed by her kids, leaving Ed behind with Roger.

"This house has been quiet for months now and the girls like it that way. They're afraid if they start talking about experiences, it will cause a reaction, create some new disturbances. Is that possible? Andrea thinks the spirits are listening to us all the time. It's the reason why they're afraid to offend them. Everything in our lives seems based on the fear of something."

"Andrea is right. How astute. It is possible our presence in your house is enough to cause activity, to what extent I'm not certain. It depends on them. Active spirits can become highly reactive if provoked. Exposure to a psychic energy often results in a response. They resent the intrusion but draw energy from the conflicts they create by being here. Has anything happened lately?"

"No. Nothing I can think of... oh, yes. Roger and I, well, we were having an argument about this interview with the girls, about involving you and Ed. It wasn't loud but it was contentious, I guess. I'd said something unnecessary and when he got angry, a bottle went flying off this shelf... this one. It hit the floor so hard I can't believe it didn't shatter... look. Not a crack or chip in it."

"I warned you about this, Carolyn... just like feeding raw meat to a lion. Do you remember? It makes them stronger. Healthier. Anger equals strength. It releases powerful energy... a negative charge and they thrive on electricity. Please trust me about this. It is something you want to avoid. Do your best to

keep things peaceful here and don't feed the beast."

"I know, Lorraine. I don't know why I said what I did. It was mean. This has been hard on him, too. I don't want to go through with this interview if it will only invite disaster. I like the peace and quiet, too. We all do."

"We've come here hoping to provide you the peace you seek. It might not be easy to achieve. It requires understanding the events as they occurred and it will require talking with the children as well as your husband."

"So what you're telling me is... it's worth the risk."

"Yes, Carolyn. That's exactly what I'm telling you. Are you ready?"

"I don't know if I could ever prepare myself for this."

"Take a deep breath. Calm yourself. If you are nervous, the girls will pick up on the energy. Think of it this way. Your house has a disease. The malady is currently in remission. You've had a long period of dormancy yet this has happened before. No symptoms, but the disease remains. It has not vanished. It is invisible. For the time being, it's in hiding."

"Yes. We've had long stretches of time when nothing happens at all."

"The farmhouse has a low grade fever, a sure sign of infection. In keeping with the analogy, let's presume we'll attack the systemic presence of disease from two separate, distinct directions. We have found in the past, interviews provide a great service to the patient by providing an outlet, like applying a topical ointment as a soothing salve on a painful wound. As for the aftermath of the interview, especially for the children, it's like receiving a painless injection, a remedy for what ails them. They begin feeling unburdened. They begin to undergo a complex healing process infusing a psyche with invisible medicine. They won't feel it working but it is. We don't intend to expose the wounds. The intention of an interview is to gather more information but also to bandage the wounds, allowing the healing to occur from within."

"I'm afraid for my kids, Lorraine. This will bring up emotions and images I'd rather let them forget. This could backfire in my face."

"That's the thing. They will never forget; the feelings and visions they've had here have already become part of them, permanent fixtures in the minds of impressionable children. Their experiences will undoubtedly be carried on into adulthood and it will haunt them for the rest of their lives. They will never forget but I firmly believe we can help them to understand the reality of what's going on here and that knowledge will help them heal."

Carolyn's eyes were suddenly brimming with tears she couldn't suppress, a

spontaneous reaction to a sentiment Lorraine had so succinctly expressed. A mother riddled with guilt, she'd chosen a home for her children which had scarred them for life.

Lorraine embraced Carolyn; an act of compassion... a kindness extended.

"I'm sorry." Carolyn fought for every word. "I was hoping..." Her guest helped seat her at the table. "I was hoping the answer would be 'no' when I asked you if this could do any damage. It could do more harm than good."

"Carolyn, I understand how conflicted you feel. We don't have to do this tonight. It's entirely up to you. In fact, I'd suggest we postpone it, at least for now. If you think they're not ready..."

"I am not ready!" Stretching an arm across the table, using it as a cushion to rest her weary head, Carolyn was physically and emotionally exhausted.

Lorraine quietly quelled what was a visceral response; one Carolyn could not avoid, control or escape. "The root of this fear is buried deep. We'll go."

"No." The muffled sound coming from the soft inner lining of her elbow, Carolyn slowly turned her head. Lorraine patted her hand, waiting patiently.

"Your home is much more than a house. It is a portal to the past, a bridge to the other side. I know it. I feel it all around me. If you think you are ready to talk about this as a family then we are ready to listen."

"Please help us." Wiping tears onto the sleeve of her shirt, Carolyn chose to rise up and face her demons, searching for answers from someone she trusted. Believing Lorraine was capable of crossing a bridge between dimensions as their pathway to understanding, fear had crippled her long enough. She was ready.

"Much good will come of it." Lorraine sounded confident, though not in a boastful way. She was too humble for that. Her sweet disposition wasn't a disguise. Her calm, serious demeanor was all business, yet she appeared to be a soul possessing empathy and a sense of inner peace, satisfaction attained professionally. As an unmistakable quality of one who has known a measure of success, Lorraine wore it well on her somber face, inside a set of knowing eyes which had witnessed things few ever behold... or believe if they do.

"Much good needs to come of this... there has been enough ill will here, enough evil to last a thousand lifetimes. Believe me."

"Carolyn, I cannot make your memories disappear but if we can keep you from making any new ones, if we can cleanse this house of a disease that has plagued your family for years, then we should, for the sake of the sad souls

who dwell here, dead and living alike. I've never felt such sorrow anywhere I've ever been before."

Lorraine's painfully honest words struck Carolyn in the heart. It was true. There was certain sadness in her home, a palpable sense of loss, a shroud of grief draped over all of them all the time.

"Please tell me what to do."

"Let's rejoin your family. I'll speak with Ed about your concerns. He will know what to do and how to speak with your girls. I promise."

The women began to move toward the parlor. Lorraine suddenly stopped in the front hallway, directly before the cellar door. Placing her hand against the wood, she lingered for a moment, grimacing as if pained by the presence. It passed then they moved on, though Carolyn could already sense a chill in the air. They were not alone. They were never alone. It had already begun. If the Warrens could keep them safe, what would happen when they left?

Roger and Ed were conversing with ease. Once introduced, they'd spoken freely as though they'd been longtime friends. Ed asked the right questions. The men focused on innocuous subjects like cars or cutting wood. Engaging with the girls kept them busy in the parlor while the women went off to talk. Listening a little more closely, the kids learned a few things like the fact that they would be off in the forest with their lumberjack father that next Sunday, replenishing the wood supply, again. They groaned. That backbreaking chore no longer considered an adventure, its rustic charm wore off years before. It was just work. Roger smiled gratefully at his girls like he meant it.

"You've met my little helpers?"

"I've already had the pleasure. A group of fine young ladies."

"I'm outnumbered... six to one... with one bathroom."

"There's an outhouse in the woodshed, dad!" Nancy strikes again.

"I know!" Roger shook his head as everyone laughed.

Emerging from the dining room, Carolyn and Lorraine rejoined the others in the much warmer parlor. Gravitating to the fireplace, Lorraine approached her husband. As she tugged him aside for a private chat, Roger and Carolyn exchanged a tentative glance. Carolyn nodded her head. It was a go, after all. Opening her generous valise, Lorraine came prepared. Removing a recording device tucked discreetly inside the pouch, along with an empty notebook, a pen in her pocket; apparently they quickly decided to make it a casual affair, nothing formal. Ed planted his burly frame at the center of the sofa. Lorraine

placed a valise on the coffee table. As the conversation began she reached into the pouch and pressed a button. Click. Time to talk.

The ladies were not anxious at all but their mother was nervous wreckage. She worked hard to hide her distress, turning to face the fire during moments when the tension was about to get the best of her. Roger seemed oblivious to the process though he listened, continually stoking a raging fire as welcome distraction for the hands and mind alike. So began their first official inquest:

ED: "Does everyone know why we're here tonight?"

NANCY: "To talk about our ghosts."

ED: "Why do you call them your ghosts?"

NANCY: "Because they belong to us if they live in our house."

CHRIS: "They aren't alive anymore."

NANCY: "You know what I mean... they sure do seem alive!"

CINDY: "They don't know it's our house."

ED: "What do you mean?"

CINDY: "It used to be their house and they think it still is."

ED: "How do you know that?"

CINDY: "They tell me."

ED: "When do they speak to you?"

CINDY: "All the time."

ED: "How do they speak to you?"

CINDY: "Inside my head... through my forehead or inside my ears. I hear them when they all come together at night, when the voices tell me about the seven dead soldiers in the wall."

ED: "Could you tell me more about that?"

CINDY: "I always knew there was a secret place inside my bedroom since we moved in. I just knew it! Somebody put a wall up there a long time ago but I know they're behind that wall!"

ED: "How do you know?"

CINDY: "They say so... and I feel them. When those spirits come at night they talk at the same time with the same words. It is a little scary. At first it was hard to tell what they were all saying. It sounded jumbled up like puzzle pieces. They'd all talk together but it sounded far away. Then their words got easier to hear when they started coming closer to me. I got really scared then but I can hear them better now. Now it's

more like one voice, saying the same thing at the same time. I hate it when they come into the bedroom really late at night and get close to me. It makes the air freezing cold, even in summer... and they make my room stink!"

ED: "How often does this happen, Cindy?"

CINDY: "I don't know... all the time. It's really bad when they're in the room but then it goes away when they do... that smell. When they talk it sounds so loud. There are so many..."

NANCY: "We do that, too! We all talk at once!"

ED: "What exactly do they say to you?"

CINDY: "There are seven dead soldiers buried in the wall."

ED: "Anything else?"

CINDY: "That's all. It's never different than that. They wake me up on purpose and say it over and over again. After awhile it starts to sound like a song. They don't care if I have a test in the morning. They wake me up anyway... on purpose!"

ED: "Do they only come at night?"

CINDY: "Those spirits only come at night."

ED: "How long has this been happening?"

CINDY: "Since we moved in, I guess... or right after. Always."

ED: "How often do they come to you?"

CINDY: "Almost every night."

MOM: "Why didn't you tell me this, honey?"

CINDY: "I did tell you, a long time ago... the first time. Besides, it doesn't really scare me anymore the way it used to, mom. I just cover my head then go to sleep. Chris is in the room with me so it helps that I'm not all alone. She doesn't even hear them, even if she is still awake. I'm the only one they come to but she knows when they do because I'll cover my head with a pillow, so I can't hear them anymore. Chrissy gets mad at them because then she can't talk to me, either."

NANCY: "Don't you want to ask me some questions? I have stuff to tell you, too!"

ED: "Yes, of course. Just one more minute, Nancy."

MOM: "No pouting. You're way too old for that, young lady."

ED: "How old are you, Nancy?"

NANCY: "I'll be fifteen next February."

CHRIS: "There. He asked you a question. Now hush."

ED: "Cindy, one more thing. You said those spirits come to you only at night. What do you mean? Are there others?"

CINDY: "The others come when the light gets strange in my room. The pretty light after sunset. What do you call it, mom?"

MOM: "Twilight... the in-between light."

CINDY: "That's it. That's when the spirit came who loves me and it is when I see the little girl who cries for her mommy."

ED: "What little girl?"

CINDY: "We used to think it was two girls because she wears two different dresses, one when she's sick and one when she's fine. She's so lonely. It's very sad. It makes me cry, too."

Ed and Lorraine remained exclusively focused on their respective roles. In spite of it, they maintained almost constant eye contact throughout the conversation. Only their eyes reacted. They would look across the room and lock eyes together for a minute then break away again, like dancing partners. However, once Cindy made mention of a spirit who loved her, the couple's gaze became transfixed. It was love. In an alternate dimension... at twilight.

ED: "Cindy, who is the spirit that loves you?"

CINDY: "I don't know. She came when the light went strange in my bedroom. She came out of the closet... then floated over to me while she was talking to me inside my head. Here... in my forehead. I was in the bubble. It got cold and loud and the floor shook. The room smelled so bad when she was in there. Then she held out her arms but she had no hands or feet. I froze stiff! I couldn't move... at all! She leaned over to kiss me or hug me. She wanted to touch me! She said to come to her! Then I broke loose from her then ran straight to mom. I fell down the back stairs I was running so fast. I was scared to death. She didn't hurt me but she is so ugly. She has no face and I think her neck got broken. The spirit really loves me but I don't want to go with her, not ever."

MOM: "Enough! That's enough for tonight."

ED: "Please, just a minute more? Cindy. What did you mean? You broke loose... from what?"

CINDY: "From her. She put me in the bubble. I think it's because of the

light. It's a time when our worlds are the same one.”

MOM: “I can’t take anymore of this. Roger?”

NANCY: “Cindy hogged all the time. I didn’t get to tell my stories! I saw Manny first! I’ve been in the bubble, too!”

CHRIS: “It’s not a competition.”

NANCY: “But the ghosts love all of us... not just Cindy!”

MOM: “Let’s take a break. Annie? A fresh pot of coffee?”

ANDREA: “Sure mom. I’ll put the cake out on the table, too.”

MOM: “Girls... please go with your sister.”

APRIL: “I knew I smelled cake!” (Sensing a gravitational pull.)

All the children left the parlor for the kitchen. Roger and Carolyn felt the stares of their house guests; no judgments attached... only sheer amazement. Lorraine leaned in toward the coffee table, reaching into the valise to turn off the recorder then she thought better of it, discreetly withdrawing her hand.

Four adults sat together quietly for a few moments. This would have to be done incrementally. Rubbing the pain out of her throbbing wrist (due to that frantic attempt to keep up with her notes) Lorraine began interpreting what she already heard. “Cindy speaks matter-of-factly about her experience, with such ease and acceptance it leads me to think she has natural psychic abilities attracting the spirits to her; insights and understanding far beyond her years. I’m very alarmed. She’s especially vulnerable to their influences.”

“I agree with Lorraine.” Ed was almost passive compared to his wife but as he spoke it was evident the man had something to say. He was a Catholic, a church-affiliated demonologist, one of the few worldwide who was not an ordained priest. “Cindy is the target, being routinely approached. Something wants her to cross over. This is extremely distressing. Make no mistake. This love she speaks of is only an enticement. It is evil in disguise. Your children have been exposed to this presence and they are quite forthcoming about it, which indicates a comfort level I can only assume is based on a familiarity. They’re being approached so frequently it has become a common occurrence in their lives. I must tell you, these children are all in danger of becoming the victims of demonic oppression or possession, and so are both of you. No one living in this house is exempt from the threats posed by the essence of death surrounding all of you.”

“We should have sold this place.” Roger hung his head as he spoke.

“Whenever we even mention selling this house the girls scream in protest. They beg us to stay. I thought things had calmed down. Cindy never told me how often she’s been hearing voices at night. I don’t know why. Maybe she thinks we can’t do anything about it, so why bother. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“We can do something about this.” Lorraine was as confident as adamant. “Do you know anything about these seven dead soldiers she is talking about? Carolyn, have you identified any of the voices speaking to her?”

“A neighbor told me this house was part of the Underground Railroad. If that’s the case, I suppose anything is possible. The house has been here since the state was a colony. It was completed forty years before the Revolutionary War began. The boundaries of this property from the original deed, issued in 1680, were in dispute. Sixty acres of our land is in Massachusetts. I believe it happened during an early border skirmish. I’ve begun researching its history. Quite awhile ago. Trust me. Many people have lived and died in this house. It’s been here forever. I cannot imagine what it must have been like living out here hundreds of years ago, the hardships those folks must have endured. The Revolutionary War. Civil War. Who knows how many soldiers came through here and for what reason? Some may have stayed against their will.” Carolyn’s voice belied a profound sadness. It was war and she felt defeated.

“Please listen to me.” Ed’s normally cheerful demeanor had become quite somber, even grim. “These emotional attachments forming between the girls and spirits is disturbing, a precursor to something worse. It opens a door.”

Lorraine took over. Her face had become pale and drawn. She’d suddenly appeared to be much older, as if the weight of the world had just been laid on her shoulders. Summoning all of her strength to remain sitting upright her voice dropped; an attempt to avoid being overheard by the children. She did not want to frighten them further.

“There’s an attachment forming with at least one demon in this house and it thrives on an energy being generated from within, whether it’s the negative energy of hostility in an argument, or the natural, positive energy of children. Either way, it will not leave on its own. It’s obviously being well fed.”

Roger cocked his eyebrow but didn’t say a word. Knowing the expression on his face, Carolyn intervened before he could make an ass of himself.

“Lorraine, the more you speak of it, the more I cringe.” Carolyn’s distress was beginning to surface. Her voice was rising, her hands visibly trembling.

"This was not a good idea. I think we should call it a night. I need to tuck the girls in bed. They've been through enough."

Their mother was trying to wind things down for the evening. Truth be told, she was the one truly struggling with all of it.

"Coffee and cake, anyone?" Roger tried to lighten the mood, providing an offer of sustenance for their haunted house guests. It did not escape anyone. His lighthearted words were foreign, out of context with dark subject matter, causing the self-conscious man even more discomfort. It was awkward for all of them. Lorraine graciously declined, insisting she would be up all night going through her notes without the benefits of caffeine. Apparently she had already taken in far more than she could digest in one sitting. Ed on the other hand, could justify the coffee to help him with the long drive home. Andrea placed the tray on their dining room table then slipped back into the kitchen. She was still running interference between Nancy and Cindy: sibling rivalry. Carolyn stepped into the kitchen for a moment to quell all of the commotion. Lorraine took an opportunity to speak directly to Roger regarding his family.

"You don't know me well enough to trust what I'm telling you, but I hope you will listen in spite of it. Roger, the risks posed are serious. We consider it imperative to cleanse the premises, to identify and expel spirits from your house. All of you have been adversely affected by this presence but I believe they are deliberately ingratiating themselves with your girls, integrating with your family. It has got to stop. Malignant or benign, they must go, especially for the sake of your defenseless children and your vulnerable wife, as well."

Roger could not respond. Carolyn returned, forcing a piece of cake on Ed. He gratefully accepted. "That smells good!" Ignoring a disapproving glance from his wife, she was the only one watching his weight. Carolyn spoke up next.

"I hope you realize we've barely begun this process. They have a lot more to say but I need you to understand we've gone as far as I can allow it to go tonight. The girls are all exhausted and need to go to bed. I know the drive is a long one. I beg your pardon. We'll have to continue this at another time."

Lorraine was aware it was the parents, not the children, requiring respite. There had been overwhelming admissions, an ordeal for both of them. Each suffering the ravages of guilt, they began to realize the severity of exposure in what had already occurred. Roger and Carolyn were more exhausted than the children. Their yoke was even heavier to bear: a burden. The Warrens did

understand. They'd seen the effects of this kind of acknowledgement before, causing one to lay the body down, the only recourse to rest a weary head or a boggled mind. Gathering her belongings, Lorraine was packed... ready to go.

"Then we'll bid you all a goodnight." A fine lady of impeccable manners. Ed gulped the coffee, inhaling the last piece of his cake before they departed.

"I suppose it's the most we can hope for... a good night. Peace and quiet." Carolyn was worried. Had they unleashed anything evil? Perish the thought!

It was all quite cordial. As the Warrens left they received her assurances they were welcome to return and would do so on several more occasions. It was obvious to both of them, yet they knew practically nothing compared with what was still left to tell. Talk about scratching the surface! As Carolyn had been spiritually drawn to a place in the country they too had become enticed, intrigued by the remarkable find, a significant discovery in the backwoods of a quaint New England village. One could only speculate about their private discussion, only imagine the level of discourse they shared while driving in the darkness. There was no doubt about it. The Warrens had seen the Light.

"You see, Roger? They came in a car, not on a broomstick. Maybe they're not so fly-by-night after all!" Always well-armed with sarcasm, Carolyn was a formidable force to be reckoned with; as a mistress of the house, a wonder to behold. Guess she told him... and so did Mrs. Warren. Dangerous, indeed.

"It is better to know some of the questions than
all of the answers."

James Thurber

divine intervention

“My definition of an expert in any field is a person who knows enough about what’s really going on to be scared.”

P. J. Plauger

Perhaps it happened during their second or third visit to the farm. Carolyn cannot recall precisely when this exchange took place yet remembers vividly those sobering words, an anxious tone Lorraine used to express her concerns. Upon entering their parlor, it came to the psychic’s immediate attention as an undesirable object. Danger she perceived could not be ignored or dismissed.

“It would be advisable to remove that from the house.” Her tone of voice was almost stern, with a slight twinge of remorse, and a hint of presumption, as if allowing her mind to declare: “Poor dears, they know not what they do.” In certain respects Carolyn was as innocent as her children, a bit naive.

Lorraine Warren was a relentless advocate for the family she barely knew but cared about nonetheless. Carolyn considered the couple a gift from God. They stayed in close contact over the holidays, though Carolyn suggested she be allowed to get through their busiest time of year before attempting to progress any further with an inquiry and investigation of the house. Lorraine respected her wishes and the Warrens stayed away. When they did return the following January it was just in time to observe the group of gangly girls sledding down an enormous, sloping hill in their own back yard. The best gift dad ever brought home in the trunk of a car: High-flying saucers! Shiny, silver disks escorted each of the children along the icy surface of fresh-fallen snow, icy enough to pose a hazard to their health. Most children believe if an adventure they’re on is not life-threatening, it isn’t much fun! Carolyn was preoccupied preparing the cauldron of hot chocolate, trying so hard to avoid glancing out the pantry window to oversee the antics of those who fancied themselves immortal. She’d noticed, while she was not looking, their father had stacked bales of hay at the base of the hill before he’d left, all along that solid granite wall, to cushion the blows for anybody whose brakes may fail. Doing his utmost to keep them alive as mortal souls, their father knew his supernaturally stupid kids didn’t bother with the brakes. So much more fun to bounce off the walls! Risky behaviors ran in the family. Tempting fate had

become a tradition. Even on impact, apples don't fall far from the tree.

That Saturday afternoon, unexpected guests appeared at their kitchen door with broad smiles, a cake in hand and an apology, for arriving unannounced. A claim of just being "in the area" would be perceived as disingenuous. No one was ever in the area without purpose or a good reason, as isolated as it was, after all. Lorraine laughed at herself, confessing the urge to say such a thing! Their intention was to scrutinize the family in its super/natural habitat, seeking out information. They had only scratched the surface of a far deeper story in much the same way five girls dragged the heels of their boots along the frozen tundra. It wasn't long before one of them came running into the house to use the bathroom and realized company had arrived... with a cake! Telephone. Telegraph. Tell a Perron. AT&T still has nothing on them.

Within a matter of minutes an entire entourage piled through the door, following the pointed finger at the end of their mother's arm; a silent signal sending all frozen females directly into the bathroom, to hang ice-encrusted outerwear destined to thaw out then dry out in the warm room. They had all overcome whatever fear they once harbored of a space that was their first jolt of reality in their new home, several years before. Emerging unscathed, they gathered around the guests, greeting them politely. Ready and willing to tell more scary stories, it was an outcome Carolyn anticipated. She did nothing to interfere. It had done her girls some good to talk openly with the Warrens. She welcomed the chance for them to continue that mutually enlightening conversation. Lorraine was willing to try, try again having been unsuccessful at recording their statements the first time around in this neck of the woods. Reaching into her valise to activate the recorder, she tested it, having found the machine inexplicably failed to record any of what had been shared that night. Click. The anomaly would become a recurring problem, a mystery yet to be solved or fully explored. Removing a notebook, pen in hand, Lorraine was prepared to give her wrist an old school workout... her back up plan as an insurance policy. She didn't want to miss a winsome word of their tale.

"Roger's away?" She could sense Carolyn's relief.

"You'll get more done without him." She wasn't being mean, just honest.

Nancy felt slighted during their initial encounter and made her presence known almost immediately; she wouldn't let a second chance pass her by. It was important to her. While Carolyn dipped the hot chocolate, Andrea cut the cake, laying a piece beside each steaming mug. The one who believed her

stories to be the most compelling of all ignored the tempting treats while everyone else indulged.

There was a method to her madness. She could speak uninterrupted! Thus began the interview. Ready or not... here she comes!

"Right after we moved in it was really cold. That winter was way worse."

"Poor sentence structure. Nance... try that again." Carolyn's voice loomed large from within a kitchen pantry with good acoustics.

"Oh, mom!" After a heavy sigh of frustration, Nancy continued. "When we moved here it was winter. It was very cold outside. How's that, mom?"

"Better." Carolyn joined them at the table. "Don't be fresh, young lady."

"Four years ago this week!" Christine did the math: an accountant with all the facts, figures, times and dates. Annoyed by yet another interruption, Nancy realized the calculation was accurate. It had been four full years.

"That's right! Now let me talk!" A harsh glance toward her sister silenced Christine for the moment. "Snowstorms came one after another so we spent a lot of time playing inside."

"Hide-n-seek." Cindy spoke up, knowing what tale was about to be told.

"I don't need any help!" Nancy bristled. Cindy returned to her cake.

"We were playing that game because there are lots of places to hide..."

"And seek!" April was just being helpful, if slightly antagonistic.

"Mom, tell 'em it's my turn!" Nancy's face curdled like a bowl of spoiled milk. Her sisters giggled. Mission accomplished. "Please make them stop!"

"Spirits play their own game of hide-n-seek with us. Now you see them, now you don't!" Cindy smiled... just trying to set up the story for her sister.

"Girls, please let Nancy speak and stop interrupting her." Carolyn tried to hide her amusement but Cindy's sweet smile lingered in her mother's eyes.

"Anyway, that was how we all got to know our house. I found a spot that nobody else knew about behind the chimney in the borning room. I tucked myself in behind there then I waited for a few minutes. All of a sudden the room got so cold I froze in place. I couldn't move! I tried to yell for Cindy. I tried to call for help but I couldn't make any sound at all. I was hollering in my head but the words would not come out of my mouth! And the horrible smell came up into my nose. I almost gagged! It was so gross! Then I felt the bubble come around me and everything went hazy so I couldn't see anything anymore! It felt like something was pushing on me, from every side! Like I was getting pushed right into the chimney! I was so scared and it was so cold

that my whole body couldn't move at all and it hurt so bad! It hurt like I was shrinking into myself. I could hear Cindy at the door. She sounded really far away from me but she was right there, on the other side of the door and I knew she knew I was in trouble but she couldn't help me at all because she couldn't open up the door! Cindy pulled hard on the latch and banged on the door and I could hear her yelling for me then yelling for mom to come help, but mom couldn't hear us even though she was downstairs in the parlor, she still couldn't hear Cindy. I was screaming in my head! Just when I thought I was going to be crushed alive in the bubble I started to cry and then I prayed. Just then the door flew open! It opened so hard Cindy got hit in the forehead but she came rushing into the room and she knew just where I was hiding! She grabbed me really hard and pulled me out from behind the chimney and almost broke her head on one of the beams but she got me loose and saved me. My sister Cindy saved me. And God. I think God told her where I was."

What had been a festive mood only moments before had turned suddenly somber as a tear trickled down her face. Cindy reached over, tenderly taking Nancy by the hand. They embraced as Cindy whispered a message received.

"Maybe you shouldn't have told that story. It always makes you cry."

An audible gulp from Andrea's throat, she swallowed back tears with her cocoa. Carolyn sat silently, questioning her decision to allow this discussion to proceed; one taking a turn for the worse. Christine broke a dark spell cast; sadness conjured by the ultimate run-on sentence. Their brightest ray of hope in the firmament, Christine targeted onset of despair with precision: pinpoint accuracy. She used her Laser Light.

"That was a long time ago. We're all used to it now. They won't hurt us."

"Why do you say that, Christine?" Lorraine was perplexed by a statement which made her wonder... why? What would make them think such a thing?

"Because they know us, they share the house with us now. They love us."

"They all watch out for us." April's little voice pierced morning air thick with emotion. Its purity was like an angel from the ether, her point of origin.

It was the second time Ed and Lorraine had heard such a thing, equally as stunning as the first. They looked at each other then Ed decided to pursue the notion with all of the girls. Neither of them had ever come across this kind of intense emotional attachment during all the years of investigations in a career spanning decades. Ed posed the next question in his gentlest voice.

"What makes you say that? Why do you think the spirits love you?"

Andrea spoke for her sisters, expressing the collective opinion of five. “We know it. I don’t think they want to hurt us. They only want us to know they’re here. They want us to acknowledge them then pay attention to them. The ones who misbehave do it on purpose. When we scold them they stop it. If they don’t go away, at least they usually quit acting up. When I’m working at my desk one comes by to pull my hair or knock my pens over or yank my homework away from me, or it sends one of books flying across the room.”

“Naughty but harmless?” Lorraine smiled knowingly. “Poltergeists.”

“It’s rude! They broke the binding on my math book. I really couldn’t tell my teacher the truth about what happened... that the ghosts did it! So, I got a demerit and mom had to pay for the book. I’ve never had a demerit!”

“So, not completely harmless.” Lorraine humored the teenager.

“Well, you could have said: ‘The devil made me do it!’” Nancy, oblivious that she was the one interrupting, found her comment clever. Andrea was not amused. She had more of her own story to tell.

“When the gray smoke comes my bed moves.” Andrea lowered her voice.

“Me too.” Cindy nodded.

“Me three.” Nancy concurred; a smile ran away from her face as she said:

“Chrissy got locked inside the trunk and she thought it was mom who did it because she sounded like mom but ma was out on the porch with us when it happened. We were all singing when we noticed Chrissy was missing. Cathi was here. Thank God. She’s the one who found her.” Nancy had overstepped a well-established boundary. Her audacity knew no bounds. Chris got upset.

“I don’t want to talk about that.” Leaving the kitchen abruptly, Carolyn followed her daughter. Chrissy was private, more reserved than her siblings. She didn’t want to revisit the trauma and did not want anyone to see her cry. In an instant she went AWOL. Missing in action... again.

“I didn’t mean to tell the story for her.” Nancy’s remorse was genuine.

“But that’s not the point, Nance. She doesn’t want that story told at all.” Andrea knew there was no malice implied or intended, so did not chastise a younger sister. She simply told her the truth, as kindly as possible.

Ed and Lorraine stared blankly at one another as the copious notes ceased and the couple took a break. So many questions clogging their minds, neither of them knew what to ask next. No one had to say so. It welled in their eyes. Carolyn returned with Christine. Subdued, it was obvious the young lady had closed that chapter of the book; she sat down to eat what was left of her cake.

Nancy leaned in toward her wounded sibling, issuing a heartfelt apology. Its acceptance was noted with a nod and a hard gulp of cocoa to wash down the knot which had formed in her throat... the subject, off-limits for discussion.

"My friend Katy has a weejee board!" Nancy needed to deflect attention away from Christine... back to herself. "She brings it here for us to play with and things happen when she does. The spirits talk to us through it. We ask it questions and it answers us in letters and sometimes the board even moves!"

"What? When did this happen?" Carolyn was alarmed.

"Ouija board?" Lorraine's soft disposition became stern, even severe. Her mannerisms became more animated, the pitch of her voice, rising suddenly. "Under no circumstances should a Ouija board be allowed in this house. No Tarot cards. No Ouija board. Nothing connected with the Dark Arts."

Everyone was startled by the sudden outburst coming from such a demure woman. Mrs. Warren was as shocked as they were, fearful for them.

"But it's just a game." Nancy was pleading her case, to no avail.

Lorraine was unwilling to argue the sharp point with a child, focusing the remarks on her mother instead.

"Carolyn. That is a very dangerous game. Actually, it is not a game at all. Please forbid all of your children from romping in the devil's playground. It is literally inviting disaster into your home, literally begging for trouble."

"I was unaware of this... you all heard Mrs. Warren." Nods all around; the rather vague, mysterious warning was being heeded. The girls all agreed to comply with her directives, as if they had a choice. None of them understood exactly why such an order had been issued. Mrs. Warren had not explicitly detailed the evils or hazards involved, but she certainly did sound like an authority on the subject and their own mother backed her up, even though Carolyn was confused. She did not know about the Ouija board discreetly hidden from her but she always presumed they were benign. No more playing with fire!

"Girls. Pay attention to me. This is very important. If something comes to frighten you, even if it comes and you do not see it but you feel something with you, I want you to say: 'In the name of Jesus Christ, go back to where you came from. Leave us in peace.' Do you understand? These words will protect you and keep you safe. It will make the spirits leave you alone. Say it again with me. I want all of you to memorize it."

The group spoke together as one voice, repeated it twice again, until Mrs.

Warren was satisfied it sunk in. Cindy interjected a viewpoint no one had yet to consider, spoken softly, as one would murmur a prayer.

"That sounds like the voices sound, the ones who tell me about the dead soldiers in the wall. But, what if the spirits are already where they come from?" It was a profound realization from someone so young, haunting in its delivery. Cindy was familiar with a cacophony of sounds as chanted incantations in her head. She recognized a cadence, the syncopation: a lyrical song hidden beneath its fluid words. She believed the spirits were with them all the time, believing that it was where they belonged... or they wouldn't be there at all because God doesn't make mistakes.

"It sounds like praying in church." April remembered. "When we all talk together and do the cross and say 'amen' afterwards." The littlest one never did quite master the sign of the cross but displayed it for the group anyway, backward. Lorraine laughed, the first time any of them had heard her bright chuckle. She was a serious sort most of the time.

"It is a prayer, sweetie. It's something we all call for: Divine Intervention. It's a way of connecting with God to ask Him for help when we're scared. If you say those words over and over until what scares you goes away, it will go away, I promise you. These are sacred and powerful words. Carolyn, does your family attend church?" The uncomfortable question was finally posed.

"No, Lorraine. Not anymore. We'll talk. I'll tell you about it later."

"They don't want us to go there anymore. Especially the blue-haired lady. She thinks we're witches or something." Nancy curled her lip in disgust.

"Nance, I'd rather not discuss this right now."

"Okay, mom. Sorry." After the mishap with Christine's story, Nancy was treading more lightly... as if skating on the thinnest of ice!

"Ladies." Ed was polite. Such a gentleman. "Would you mind if we went upstairs to look around?"

At the mere suggestion, panic ensued. Not a single bed was made. It was never a priority but especially not on a sunny Saturday morning with a bed of fresh-fallen snow beckoning instead.

"Are your rooms presentable?" Carolyn knew the answer. They scattered. It would be a frantic effort but about fifteen minutes later, the call of the wild child came from above. Nancy pressed her face into the open grate between their kitchen ceiling and her bedroom floor, announcing that they were ready to receive guests upstairs. Lesson learned: clean before the company arrives!

Ed and Lorraine were accompanied by Carolyn, heading up the steep and narrow stairwell beyond the cellar door in the front hallway. The children at the other end of the house were grateful. The choice made had bought them a little more time to tidy up their end of things.

“I beg your pardon in advance.” Carolyn was only half kidding them.

“This is our bedroom.” Nancy welcomed them, kicking something behind the door as the Warrens entered. “I share it with April. Sorry. She’s a slob.”

“Don’t blame me! You’re the slob!” April, offended by the comment, did not deserve the bulk of the blame. There was nothing hidden under her bed, just a few toys that liked to be there... it was their home!

“Your room looks lovely, ladies. That is not why we’re up here, anyway.” Putting an end to any potential disputes Lorraine wandered around the room. Then she shut her eyes for a moment. (Perhaps it was too painful to look!) Ed reassured Carolyn that she was merely sensing the vibration of the room. He stood by the door, waiting patiently for his wife to do whatever it was she was doing. Approaching him quietly Nancy whispered her words so as not to disturb Lorraine’s ongoing investigation spent in consultation with spirits.

“These are the stairs where the footsteps come up and then they stop right here. Sometimes the door opens by itself but nobody is ever standing there.”

“Somebody’s there. You just can’t see him.” This was the most April had said since their arrival. Compelled to follow up with the youngest one of the family, Ed began asking questions he hoped she would answer.

“April, do you see him?”

“Sometimes.”

“You know for certain that it’s a man?”

“Yes. He smells sweaty, like he’s been working hard for a long time.”

“Is he the only one you see?”

Averting her eyes, April did not respond to Ed’s question. Nancy snagged the opportune moment to interject another comment, giving April the chance to escape further inquiry, rejoining mom before Ed could delve more deeply. He sensed she had something to hide and he was seeking same... no game.

“His name is Manny. That’s what I named him. He watches over us and he doesn’t cause any trouble. He’s the ghost I told you about, before. He was here the day we moved in standing behind the hallway door downstairs while Mr. Kenyon and his son were packing up the rest of his stuff. He just stood there and watched everyone. It felt like he was saying goodbye to them but

they did not even notice him. I don't think so, anyway. Nobody said a thing about him being there but I saw him, plain as day. And Cindy did, too and so did Annie, but we saw him disappear and she thought he was real."

"What's in here?" Lorraine approached the chimney closet door.

"That's our playroom. It's really warm, just like the room in the bathroom downstairs. We keep most of our toys in here." Nancy stood beside the door, presenting the sacred space like a model on a game show would. Before she could do the honors, the door opened. Click. The wrought iron latch lifted as they watched. There was no one on the other side... no one visible, anyway. The door swung open as April raced past her startled sister, rushing toward what would scare most away. As Lorraine entered the closet, April placed herself down on the floor in front of the smallest door to the eaves then sat, pressing up against it, pretending to be engrossed with all the toys scattered around her. It was a confining space, not much room to move, so the group passed through one at a time. No one lingered long. It was April's impulsive behavior which captured Lorraine's attention. It did not escape her notice; the girl was hiding something. Carolyn assumed it was their messy pile of toys on the floor but Lorraine knew better. She did not ask for an explanation of her decision to bolt into the closet. Instead, Lorraine moved on into the middle bedroom. It was a long, dark space with a single portal window in the shape of a rectangle tucked in above the eaves, overlooking the back yard.

Lace curtains filtered waning daylight. Evening came quickly in winter.

"Carolyn, what's behind the small doors in there?" Lorraine was referring to the chimney closet, curious about what April guarded so protectively.

"They lead into the eaves. We use that space for storage... too many toys... too much in this house to keep up with, including the spirits."

Carolyn, glancing down at her daughter, tucked discreetly into the corner behind the chimney, wondered why she was acting so oddly, all of a sudden. Following the Warrens into the middle bedroom, while this was discussed, April shuffled a bit uncomfortably in place then shoved herself even closer to the miniature door, partially hidden behind her. Everyone else had passed on, gingerly stepping over the little one as they went. Lorraine looked back, to re-examine this scene, asking April if she'd like to continue on with them, but the reticent child declined. She had better things to do... a secret to keep.

"Would you like to come along with us?" Lorraine was being solicitous.

"No, thanks. I'll play in here." Smiling sweetly toward the wary woman,

Lorraine had a feeling that April felt relieved. Her secret went undiscovered. She was hiding something or protecting someone. Lorraine had a sense of it but did not pursue the line of questioning floating through her mind. Instead, she focused on the next mystery along the path of a journey through the past.

"This is the wall." Cindy pointed at what appeared to be an enclosed area of the bedroom offering much in the way of mystery. The far wall had a full window and door, leading into Andrea's room at the other end of the house, positioned above the parlor. It was an odd keepsake, unaltered over time as a farmhouse grew. Perhaps a former owner had retained it for the extra light it shed in an otherwise tomb-like room. Mrs. Warren closed her eyes again as she sensed her surroundings then spoke directly to the most sensitive one.

"Cindy, do you think there's something hidden behind this wall?" As she pressed further, Ed was investigating, too. Inquiring minds. He was equally fascinated, looking everywhere at once, getting his sea legs beneath him as he peered out the masterfully constructed window fit for a captain's quarters on a mighty ship adrift at sea. The light shifted. They both felt it happen.

"I know there is... I've always known it, even before they told me so." Lorraine was more than intrigued. She'd joined her husband and touched the wall, closing her eyes. Withdrawing her hand abruptly, she stared intently at Ed but said nothing to him, not aloud. Her process was mysterious to those who witnessed it. She stood silently in the center of the room, motionless, lost in thoughtful reflection for several minutes. "In the name of Jesus Christ go back to where you came from. Leave us in peace." The words muttering past her lips as a prayer were then repeated several times. It spooked them. Children looked around apprehensively, wondering what or who was in their midst. Everyone, including Ed, went on high alert. Carolyn, equally alarmed, began asking the obvious questions of her houseguest.

"Lorraine, what is it?" No response. "Do you feel something? Please, tell me. Is someone in here now?" There was desperation in Carolyn's words.

"Someone is always here." The gentlewoman's voice was heartbreakingly sad. "So many of them... so many." Lorraine bowed her head in prayer.

As she did so, the mother of "so many" wondered precisely who Lorraine was praying for within their unholy farmhouse. Carolyn perceived her words as the sympathetic treatment of a supernatural someone harboring malice, an evil intention toward her and the entire family. She remained in staunch opposition to the presence she could not detect but detested, totally adverse to

their existence, utterly unsympathetic to their plight. Carolyn could feel only disdain for the intruders and was resentful of Lorraine's psychic energy being spent on them rather than on behalf of those she had supposedly come to help. As if reading Carolyn's mind, Lorraine addressed the troubling issue with her immediately in an attempt to resolve it as quickly as it had surfaced.

"Trapped. Earth-bound souls with no escape. I grieve for them."

"I reserve my grief for us." A comment as quick as it was terse.

"Carolyn, please do not misunderstand me. Your family is our priority but we can't help you without helping them, as well. I cannot help but pity these miserable lost souls. We're here to intervene on their behalf, too. No one will be free until everyone is free." It was a good point and a good time to amend that old Yankee motto: Live free or die trying!

"I understand." It was untrue. She did not comprehend such compassion. It made no sense. They were there to help her family... those who were alive.

"We're standing in the core of it. The energy is here and it's coming from the room below us... from your bedroom, Carolyn."

"My bedroom." The notion instantly struck her. Their home was a portal.

"Best we move along." Mrs. Warren stopped at the next doorway, waiting and watching as Andrea organized the surface of her desk. While doing so, a container of pens went for a ride across the room, scattering on the floor. She hadn't touched it. Retrieving them, Andrea glanced up toward Mrs. Warren, knowing she'd seen what happened. The youngster's pleading eyes told her story in full... they were not alone. Never alone.

"It's all right, dear. My presence does have a tendency to shake them up!" She smiled at the flustered child then entered her bedroom. Steep dormers in all the rooms upstairs, the ceilings were quite low. However, Andrea's room had a different feel about it. Lorraine paused in the center and took it all in, peering at the farthest door, deeply inset, tucked into the corner between the chimney and the largest of the closet doors leading into the eaves.

"What's in there, Andrea?"

"That's the borning room. Mr. Kenyon called it that. It's dark and scary. I don't go in there anymore. No one does."

"That's where I got stuck in the bubble behind the chimney when Cindy could not get it to open!" Nancy walked right past Lorraine, lifting the latch. "See? It works just fine. Click. But not that day! Something was holding it closed, from the other side. I just know it! When it let go the door hit Cindy

in the head. It almost knocked her out! Do you remember me telling you?"

"Yes, Nancy. I certainly do. Good. You shouldn't play in there anymore." Lorraine began to enter the room, stepping back out after only a few seconds. She closed the door. "No one should go into this room. Do you understand?" The children agreed. Lorraine became visibly rigid. She stood perfectly still, closing her eyes again. It was as if she had gone off... elsewhere. Then, when she reopened her eyes she remained quite still, appearing to be different than she was just a moment before. Carolyn asked if she was feeling all right and Mrs. Warren responded, anticipating that question. She was fine, so she said, but it was striking how quickly she'd changed. There was an ethereal quality about her, amazing to all the witnesses. Ed seemed unaffected by this sudden shift in his wife's demeanor, having seen the phenomenon occur before, they suspected, but it was very strange for everybody else present in the bedroom. When she answered Carolyn's inquiry, it was as if she was doing so from an enormous distance. Then it was over. She was back as fast as she'd departed. Ed approached his wife, taking her hand in his own, a sweet gesture; a warm and comforting touch. He loved her deeply; there is no mistaking true love.

As she smiled then squeezed his forearm, Lorraine glowed. During their tender exchange, she'd ignited a fire in his eyes. For him, she was The Light.

"We are all done in here." As Lorraine began heading down the stairwell, she did so slowly, deliberately stopping several times along that narrow path. Impatient, kids turned around and went on through in the opposite direction, emerging from the kitchen stairwell instead. There they waited for their mom to return with the Warrens while finishing off the cake and cocoa in the pot.

Lorraine entered the parlor with Carolyn then, stopping abruptly, stared at the hatchet lodged in a stump on the hearthstone. As the newest fixture in the room, Carolyn had recently moved it into the house so she would not have to splinter kindling out in the cold woodshed, but Lorraine's reaction to the tool was sudden and severe. Her interpretation of its presence was far more sinister.

"Dear." Her tone as sharp as its blade. "It would be advisable to remove this from the premises." The expression on Mrs. Warren's face, startling to a nervous mother, revealed apprehension in her heart and worry on her mind.

"But I use it all the time. It's where I split my kindling for the fireplace."

"Carolyn, get that thing out of your house." It was not a suggestion. For the first time, Carolyn gazed at a simple hatchet with new eyes, as a potential

weapon instead of a tool. She agreed to comply promptly with a direct order. Tucking it away in the summer kitchen, she'd deal with the hatchet later.

When all the adults arrived back in the kitchen Nancy told them there was still much more to tell. It seemed she was the one who wanted to share, to be interviewed. April remained upstairs in the closet. Lorraine asked someone to go fetch her. Once all five of the girls were together again, Lorraine asked them to repeat a phrase she taught them to protect against spirits who might wish them harm when manifestations occurred. They did so to perfection. As if in one voice, with good reason, united in purpose, they said: "In the name of Jesus Christ, go back to where you came from. Leave us in peace." Done.

"Very good, girls. Now, with your mother's permission I'd like to suggest that you all go outside while there is still enough light left for some sledding. I need to speak with her privately."

"That's fine. Your clothes should've dried out by now. Go on." Relieved their interview process was apparently finished, at least for that day, Carolyn sent them off to play as twilight encroached. Nancy, beyond disappointed by a unilateral strategic decision made without her consultation, began to pout.

"But we have more to tell you!" A familiar steel-saw whine had returned to her melodious voice, vibrating with barely restrained emotion. Nancy's feelings were hurt. She felt dismissed, as an insignificant other child ignored.

"We'll have plenty of time to talk but I need to speak with your mother right now." Lorraine Warren's words were kind but firm; that school teacher thing again, hitting a granite wall at light speed. No tolerance for arguments. No dissent in the ranks. Coats. Hats. Gloves. Class dismissed.

Once all the children went back outside, Ed and Lorraine got right down to business. Carolyn began to brew another pot of coffee for her house guests. Always persistent, Lorraine began to ask some rather probing questions of an anxious mistress of the house. She had her pen and paper at the ready.

"By the way, where's Roger today?" Ed's inquiring mind, always curious.

"He went into Providence to do some buying for the business. Not much. It slows down a lot after Christmas. He should be home in time for dinner."

"Good. We'd like to talk with him again before we go, if possible."

"He doesn't know that you're here. I hope he'll be willing to cooperate." She had her doubts. He would likely be tired, perhaps a bit irritable, as usual.

"Carolyn, please listen to me. You have a serious problem. Somebody has invited a demon into your house. Either it has been here for a very long time

or someone has allowed it in, possibly by playing with that Ouija board. You must forbid the children from using such a dangerous thing. It is not a toy.”

“I didn’t know they were doing it. A big secret, I guess. And I thought the sleds were dangerous! I’ll be sure to...”

“You must be more than sure. There can be no exception. The house must be free of that object. It is imperative. The dark, morbid energy I felt upstairs was overwhelming. It was ominous and threatening. They’re exposed to it on a daily and a nightly basis. We must cleanse your home immediately.”

“What happened to you upstairs? What did you sense in their bedrooms?” As alarmed as she was curious, it was Carolyn asking the questions, afraid of the answers. She listened intently.

“I intuit. I pick up on psychic vibrations around me and I have never felt so much energy in a house before. There are so many of them. Most of them are Earth-bound spirits who failed to make their proper transition but there is evil here as well and all of you are vulnerable to it. Nancy says they have just begun to tell us their stories. That is a horrifying bit of information. They are highly susceptible to the hazards here. April is the one hiding something... or someone. She will not tell us about it but the child almost ran into that closet when anybody else would have run in the opposite direction when that latch lifted. This is important. I need you to find out why she is so drawn there. If April has a secret I want to know what it is and why she’s keeping it. As the youngest, she’s the one most easily manipulated... most at risk.”

“I will... but what happened to you? Where did you go? You seemed very far away from all of us for a few minutes while we were upstairs.”

“I suppose so. It’s really a form of self-hypnosis. I’m sensitive to spirit. I open my mind to the Universe so I may fully sense spiritual energy around me. I open my mind to God and request His divine presence as intervention.”

“I heard you saying a prayer.” She paused. “Was it for us... or for them?”

“All of you. I know that makes you angry, Carolyn. I felt the tension rise upstairs and I feel it now. Though you claim to understand it, I know you are confused by my compassion for the spirits. Please remember, the anger feeds them. I cannot be more serious about this. It empowers them in ways you do not want, giving them the strength they require, energy to manifest in form.”

“I resent the living hell out of them!” As her face became contorted with fury, in that moment of rage Carolyn no longer resembled the woman they’d come to know. “We need to send them back to hell... where they came from.

Is Cindy right? What if they are where they came from? They'll never go."

"They'll go. In the meantime, there are rooms that should be sealed off." A sobering assessment was also entirely unrealistic. They bought that house to live in, after all. Carolyn had no desire to be confined like a prisoner in her own home. The specter of death seemed to be closing in all around her, to be closing one door after another in her face. Everything seemed to be based on the fear of something. It was too much for her mind to absorb so the excess angst flew from her quivering lips, sentiments escaping like bats out of hell.

"Close this room! Close that room! How much house will we have left to live in? I cannot just seal the place shut like some kind of supernatural vault! You cannot trap what is loose in here. You said so yourself. They're already trapped. So you want them, or us, to be sequestered like a jury of our peers? This place is gloomy enough... a tomb out of the Dark Ages. You're asking me to shut out all the light. What judgment calls do we get to make about it? Don't I get to decide how my family lives in our own home? Don't you think we've sacrificed enough?" Beyond the average rant, Carolyn was on a tirade.

"Calm down. Don't give them your power. Don't provide them with the strength to manifest." Lorraine whispered these words as if sharing a secret.

Carolyn's frustration was brewing faster than the pot of coffee percolating in the pantry. Ed studied her features intently; her reaction. Then he spoke:

"This outburst... what just happened to you is a transformational episode, indicative of oppression. I know these remarks are out of character. Carolyn, there are three stages to a process which could cause you grave harm. I think you're in the second phase." Blunt and to the point. "We will need to spend more time with you, very soon. We need to expel the demonic presence from this house before it can do anymore damage to anyone."

"I'm very tired." Carolyn was overwhelmed. She had begun to shut down. Waves of exhaustion crashed over her. Leaning back in her chair, resting her head on the wooden knob, staring up at the ceiling, she suddenly appeared to be in a trance-like stupor, lost in thought. As if elsewhere, she spoke quietly. "I have to start dinner. The kids are getting hungry. Roger's coming home."

"Carolyn?" Lorraine coaxed her back with a nudge, reaching across their table, tenderly touching her hand. The woman slowly returned to her guests. She resumed her eye contact with them, smiling again, regaining the pleasant demeanor with which they'd become accustomed. It was shocking how rapid the transition had been, how quickly she changed. In that instant she seemed

unburdened, free of what had previously troubled her thoughts.

“Would you care to join us for dinner? Roger should be home soon.”

“No, thank you dear. Ed and I have a great deal of work to do. We should head on home. If you don’t mind, we’d like to visit again soon. We’ll need to speak with Roger, too. It’s important that he participate as we move forward with our investigation. He will be an integral part of the process.”

“Stop by again when you are in the area. We’d all be happy to see you.” Carolyn’s good humor had returned, in the form of her original personality. She seemed so lighthearted, almost carefree. Eager to please her houseguests, she extended an open invitation the Warrens intended to take her up on with some frequency. “It isn’t necessary to call ahead. Somebody is always home. God knows, the girls will keep you company if I’ve had to run an errand. But beware! They’ll talk your ears bloody, especially Nancy. They trust you now and I do, too. You are welcome in our home anytime. It is your job to deliver us from evil... as our divine intervention... right?”

“That’s right.” The Warrens were spellbound by a stark, transformational change they’d just witnessed, occurring over so few minutes. Lingering only to be sure Carolyn was all right, then to be certain it was her extending that invitation, they waved goodbye to the kids from the top of the hill, departing at sunset. The glorious winter sky streaked by haze and hue escorted a muted sunlight to the horizon. What a brilliant day it had been; so much excitement and so much more to come. The Warrens intended to intervene on behalf of all of them, all lost souls, dead and living alike... on a mission they wanted to accomplish successfully. Both knew it could be a difficult task.

“It would be advisable to remove this from the premises.”

“But I use it all the time. It’s where I split my kindling for the fireplace.”

“Carolyn. Get that thing out of your house.”

Needing to splinter some wood for kindling, so to rekindle their evening fire, Carolyn went out to the summer kitchen to retrieve a hatchet she had hidden from Mrs. Warren. When she’d finished with the task, she plunged the blade into the log, something she did naturally... force of habit, reflexive in nature.

Standing at attention on the hearthstone, directly beside the object of earlier interest protruding from a log, the anxious mother glanced down at a hatchet, buried in the center of a solid slab of oak, holding this tool securely in place, where it remained when not in use. The humble implement served a purpose. There must've been a reason why she was adamantly opposed to its presence in the farmhouse, insisting upon its prompt and permanent removal from the premises. Her cryptic statement was neither suggestion nor request. Carolyn complied with a direct order. Hatchet in hand, out to the woodshed she went. Better safe than sorry? Suppose so. They wanted to cleanse the farmhouse, to open up a line of communication with the spirits then send them on their way across the Universe at light speed. In retrospect, divine intervention occurred that fateful day, manifesting in form and substance as Mrs. Lorraine Warren.

“Sometimes your only available transportation is
a leap of faith.”
Margaret Shepard

promises... promises

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.”

Robert Frost

Some were explicit, others implicit but assurances were made as promises uttered by two people who undoubtedly believed their own words. Likewise, Ed and Lorraine Warren were truly confident in their abilities to successfully perform a cleansing of a farmhouse riddled with spirits and demons dwelling among the living, usurping the family in their own home. Carolyn was not so certain. Roger, far less enthusiastic about the prospect of attempting the feat. The mistress of the house had grown cautious, wary and withdrawn. She was certainly not skeptical to the extent her husband remained. Her dismay was a different kind of apprehension; a deep-seeded fear of what the effort would entail or, God forbid, provoke. She was too weak and weary to indulge even the thought of it. A séance? The woman felt nothing but dread in her heart.

While digging for bottles with Fran out beside the barn one unseasonably warm afternoon toward the end of a particularly punishing winter, a hint and a promise of spring in the air had been matched by the spring in their steps to the dump site. It had lightened and brightened their spirits. Deciding to brave the permafrost, they took out their trusty, rusty tools then plunged them into an undulating bulge of earth slowly shedding its icy skin. The mound, sure to yield as much history as treasure, was the most enticing find consuming their attention. Each woman, working in from the opposite end of the pile so not to encroach on the other’s space, there was a logical method to the madness. Ah! The incredible lightness of being them, friends out on a dig together!

It was a welcome distraction for both. Mrs. Warren had called again, just moments prior to Fran’s arrival, encouraging Carolyn to allow them to come and perform a spiritual intervention. It was all quite disconcerting, disruptive to her consciousness. While settling into their biggest dig yet in silence, their focused work became an escape from such troubling notions, if only briefly. It wasn’t long before like-minded souls shared the same thoughts.

“Have you heard from the Warrens lately?” Uncanny how Franny could read her mind, she always seemed to know what Carolyn was thinking.

“Today. But then you probably knew that, too.”

“So?” Fran grinned coyly. “What’s going on?”

“The same... Lorraine wants to have a divine intervention, to cleanse the house of the spirits. She wants to include a priest and a medium.”

“What kind of intervention?” Fran spoke quietly, almost breathlessly.

Carolyn detected a trembling note of trepidation in her voice. It was fear.

“Well, she wants to bring a few experts in... bring them along.”

“I thought they were the experts.” Shooting her a skeptical look.

“They are, but she also wants to include a medium and a priest along with a technical crew... she wants to perform a séance. If Lorraine expects Roger to agree to this, she will have to convince him herself. I already know what his answer will be... HELL NO!”

“You can’t blame him.” Fran completely understood Roger’s reticence.

“I don’t. And I don’t blame Ed and Lorraine for wanting to try, either. They only want to help us. Lorraine suggested this as a potential solution to the problem, a remedy for what ails me... for all of us, really. No guarantee it would work but she says, at this point it’s certainly worth attempting to expel what keeps me up at night.” Their excavation continued unabated.

Fran struck gold. She’d slipped her delicate fingers into the thick leather gloves then sunk her arm to the elbow into frigid dirt, retrieving the treasure. Slowly extracting the object from sweet, aromatic ground, delight danced in her eyes, as if revisiting the wonder of childhood. Eureka! What a strike!

“Well, what do you know?” Sitting back on her legs, Fran began to scrape off the crusty dirt from the fat brown bottle, carefully unearthing a gift from God, enjoying the precious moments. Carolyn watched on, equally excited. Fran looked like a child, wide-eyed anticipation growing with every brush of her thumb across the surface of glass. COD LIVER OIL Embossed, raised lettering on the face, the original cork, still intact. A pontil bottom. Labeled. Two hundred years old or more, harbinger of things to come up from a hole in the ground, Mother Earth shall provide! It was a truly magnificent trophy, inspiring them to dig a little deeper. Indeed, it was a big dig!

“This’ll cure what ails ya!” Fran found the timing of a discovery amusing, giggling as she handed the bottle over to Carolyn.

“Never touch the stuff myself!” Laughter erupted in remembrance of that day in a country store where they met over a six-dollar COCAINE bottle.

“Can you believe they used to sell that stuff at the local apothecary?”

"Guess that's why they call it a drug store now, as cheap as the dirt it was buried in. I wonder who dug that one up." Carolyn's memory of the meeting between them had been well-preserved for posterity. She loved Fran.

"Here's a scary thought. We're not the only people who do this, for fun!"

"You dig?" Carolyn felt the joy of the moment. "I dig deep!" Handing the most recent find over to Fran again, she said: "You found it. You keep it."

"No. It's a prize... you keep it. This comes from your land and most likely from your house... you should hang onto it. This one's a real treasure."

"And so are you, Fran. Consider it a gift." Smiling, Carolyn continued to delve even deeper. "It obviously didn't help whoever drank it. They're dead! Almost everyone around here seems to be dead... at least mostly dead." It is always best to make light of the darkness.

Inspecting the glass jar closely, Fran found it flawless; its cork intact, not a single scratch or chip on it. It was in perfect condition. "Amazing how fragile yet so sturdy. Thank you, Carolyn. A keepsake of our day spent together."

Both women worked diligently for two hours, silently considering shared information. Friends often give advice to each other but uncommon advice is required when a subject so unusual surfaces, exhumed like the bottle in hand. Scraping off moist dirt, revealing the face of yet another artifact, hundreds of years old, Carolyn rejoiced. It was her lucky day. As a satisfaction settled in, the ladies let their bodies relax, sliding down along the steep mound of earth, unconcerned about becoming just a little bit filthier than they were after such toil: a self-imposed sentence to hard labor. Thick black dirt wedged beneath what remained of fingernails, chipped and split, their hands were often the casualties of a tedious painstaking process they both loved. A very good day. No major wounds and four bottles found as a successful outing in the woods, it was how they measured the madness of their task at hand. Delighted and a bit tired, after an extended absence of conversation, Fran finally gave a voice to her formerly private thoughts, as a gift of her own to a friend. Both of the women were thinking about the same thing and both of them knew it.

"Be careful, Carolyn. Forewarned is forearmed. You know what they say. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The Warrens may be making promises they can't keep."

"That thought has occurred to me, too."

"Do you know what happens during a séance?" Fran's tone was suddenly so mysterious, understated in her own inimitable way. Hers was a legitimate,

if rhetorical question, one she simply had to ask.

“Only what I’ve read about them or seen in the movies… fiction.”

“Unless you’ve experienced it you can’t even imagine...”

“Have you?” Carolyn was becoming more curious by the moment.

“Yes.” Fran whispered the word beneath her breath, as if afraid to say it.

“Tell me. No keeping secrets.” Both stopped what they were doing.

“I have participated in only one séance and I will never do it again.”

“Was it at your house?” Eyes widening with wonder, Carolyn could feel it as her heart rate began to rise abruptly.

“No. My neighbor. The group wanted to do one at my house, too. Zealots. Those people had no idea what they were doing; the unholy power they were foolishly tampering with… that scared me. What they unleashed...”

“What the hell happened?” A startling unexpected suspense overcame her desire to dig. Carolyn dropped her spade in the dirt.

“Hell happened… hell on Earth happened.”

“Jesus, Fran.” Carolyn’s curiosity piqued on a subject she’d long avoided. Suddenly she found herself wanting… needing to know more.

“Jesus had nothing to do with it. He wasn’t even there and if He had been there, He would have been just as frightened as I was… never again, Carolyn. I told those fools I’d rather live among the dead.”

“Tell me it wasn’t the Warrens.”

“No. College kids masquerading as authorities on the subject.”

“Tell me what happened.” It was not a request.

“You don’t want to know.” Fran wasn’t being coy. She was serious.

“I do… I need to know.” Carolyn was listening to every word.

“All I can say is, contact has to be made to convince the spirits to leave, and contact was made… not only with spirits. A door was opened that night, one they couldn’t close afterward because they didn’t know how.”

“Like inviting the devil across your threshold?”

“Exactly like it.” Fran paused in reflection, gazing into a painful memory.

“Sounds dangerous… but I really don’t believe in the devil, per se.”

“Carolyn, whatever you label it, there is evil in the world.”

“I know… I just can’t buy into the whole horns and pitchfork promotional thing the church designed to scare the hell out of us.”

“A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” Fran hung her head, effectively ending this portion of their conversation. “I should clean up and hit the road.

I need to take the kids home and fed... getting later by the minute.” Twilight.

Carolyn agreed. They gathered up their treasures and began the short walk back to the farmhouse. Normally they would chat about their finds but pallor had fallen upon them as a shroud. Both were lost in thought.

Before Fran left, she'd told a cautionary tale, issuing her forewarning.

“I won’t tell you not to do this. It is your decision. What I will tell you is this; what I saw was not of this world. It was pure evil. It came by invitation and it never left that home. The owners left it instead. There are things we do not understand and never will, not while we are here in this life. Ignorance is so dangerous. The people who think they know what they’re doing are the most dangerous of all. Believing in one’s own prophesies can be hazardous to the health of others. Before you do anything about your trouble, please be sure you know what you’re doing and what they’re planning to do. Don’t invite more trouble in and make matters worse. Promise me that.”

“I promise. I’ve already told them I really don’t want to do this.”

“Good! Gotta go!” With that, Fran loaded up her kids, placing the most prized jar wedged between her legs for safe-keeping. Her thoughtful words lingered in Carolyn’s mind long after her departure.

During that evening, alone with her memories of the day, she considered the specific messages received from a trusted friend, deciding not to pursue anything further with the investigation of the house. Considering how many “mere mortals” had intruded on the premises, infringing on her privacy in the name of enhancing their own knowledge at the expense of her family, the decision seemed sound; well-founded. Too many spirits... too many visitors. It had grown tedious and tiresome. Many months had passed and yet nothing substantive occurred. There had been no resolution. Carolyn felt confidence waning with the moon. She went for a walk to clear her mind of a madness consuming her from within. Everything became much clearer in the forest. It all made sense there. Nature had its way of speaking to her senses, a method of reassuring her, restoring her faith in humanity, even though she’d be the only human in sight. Carolyn didn’t go far. The darkness was too difficult to navigate. Wandering the relative safety of her own back yard, she settled into the garden spot and touched the Earth patiently awaiting its next chance to be a sacred messenger spreading the word: to reveal the cosmic secrecy of seed.

However, Carolyn was presented with yet another haunting dilemma, as if

she didn't have enough to occupy her mind. During a previous visit, she'd been generous, trusting to a fault, handing over all her historical records, all the documentation she had in her possession, research compiled on the farm and its former inhabitants throughout the ages. Notes she scribed in the dead of night, meticulous notes including detailed descriptions and sketches she'd drawn of imposing figures, entities, some drawn at dawn by trembling hands. Lorraine asked for access, gratefully accepting Carolyn's precious materials, her home/work, with an apparently ardent promise to keep it safe then return it all to her in relative short order... but it hadn't happened yet. Realizing she would need to meet with the Warrens once more, if for no other reason than to explain their decision to cease and desist with the investigation, she had another good reason. It was imperative that she retrieve these valuable items, countless hours of hard labor; not punishment but a true labor of love. It was highly classified materials, "eyes only" information regarding numerous up close and personal encounters. Carolyn had to tread lightly. It was important to her to reclaim her possessions, as a legacy for her children.

There is such a thing as expecting too much from another. Carolyn feared she may have invested too much faith in a couple who might be ill-equipped to handle the kind of trouble her family faced. Even well-intended efforts could wreak havoc, creating more chaos in her house. It was confounding to think about. Who better than Ed and Lorraine Warren to tackle a demon? Ed was certified in demonology. They had an extensive history, decades of self-proclaimed success on their side and a plethora of followers to back them up. As founders of the movement toward enlightenment, the original paranormal pair set the standard and wrote the rules of supernatural study. Investigations of this sort were synonymous with their names. Tenacious, diligent research they conducted spawned a whole new school of thought on the subject. They were headmaster and mistress of the dark side of existence, class perpetually in session. There was always another lesson to be learned, on a case-by-case basis. Mr. and Mrs. Warren were attempting to solve the riddle and dissolve a haunting, not by the standard process of elimination but instead by process of illumination. They already identified a main suspect: Bathsheba Sherman.

In spite of it, doubt had crept into Carolyn's mind then took up residence. She resented the intrusion and would have rather spent her time thinking of a way to exhume the bodies of fragile glass from beneath an unforgiving earth. Sympathetic to the holy cause, which was hers, Carolyn truly believed it was

their intention to help. To her knowledge they had thus far functioned fully in good faith, doing all within their power to banish these spirits from the house, to no avail. Carolyn remained concerned, disturbed by the amount of people peripherally involved. Where were these folks coming from and why? She could not avoid noticing numerous cars driving slowly, deliberately past her property and did not want her children exposed to such thrill-seekers and charlatans, those who'd gravitated to the Warrens due to their notoriety. The girls had been harassed in school and stopped on the streets of the village by curious strangers. Carolyn didn't want her children encountering anything or anyone beyond her control, beyond the sphere of her scrutiny. In spite of her wishes, it happened repeatedly. They had all been through enough and didn't deserve to be singled out for something they did not do and couldn't control.

It occurred to her that an implicit understanding she originally established with the Warrens had been breached. Any dam with just a few pin holes will eventually crumble under pressure, releasing a virtually uncontrollable flood. "Damn it!" Even though she'd signed a confidentiality agreement, their story had leaked out, not been kept privileged: not kept in confidence, after all. As she searched her memory, trying to determine whether or not they had ever discussed this issue directly, she found her mind too cluttered to recall it, but Carolyn believed she had been clear about a desire to keep this investigation private. She felt certain that she'd effectively conveyed the message to them. It was an imperative for her family as well as for her own peace of mind. The assurances uttered had been taken seriously, accepted in good faith. It was a matter of trust. Though their depth of uncommon knowledge was impressive, their experience extensive, the ability to act on such understanding was still a matter of theory; no empirical evidence available. To convert their presumed knowledge into some meaningful change was in doubt, certainly the question lingering in her consciousness. Was it even worth the risk? Would it unleash more horrors in their house or were they true warriors, prepared to vanquish the space invaders with the mighty power of faith? The concept itself was an internal altercation she could not escape. Taming a mortal mind, one running rampant with suspicion took effort on Carolyn's part. Embarking on such a hazardous excursion, one should know their strategy in advance, a route they intended to take and where they were going. Lorraine's clarion call was their virtual call to arms in every conceivable sense. She'd promised Carolyn foot soldiers who would engage in a war of words on their behalf. According to

her they were armed and dangerous, well-equipped with an arsenal of heavy artillery, prepared to do battle in the dark. Carolyn knew the devil would be in the details, in a drastic plan of action, one yet to be divulged. Were they to be holy warriors or mercenaries, infantry or seasoned veterans? In the end, it would require a leap of faith to survive the attack as a force to be reckoned with during the conflicts which ensued. If the pen is mightier than the sword, what weaponry did they have at their disposal and who would be calling the shots? Would there be any collateral damage? Perish the thought!

Her fear had found a voice in her head and would simply not be silenced. The fight of her life had already begun. Carolyn sat on pins and needles in an internalized torture chamber. The wounds she suffered were all self-inflicted. Dreadful anticipation was taking its toll on the road to hell, paved with good intentions. Destined to become a fight to the finish with a spirit in rebellion, it is never a fair fight when the enemy is invisible. Condemned to live like a prisoner of war, under house arrest, it occurred to her, she was captured long ago, upon arrival, the moment she entered the theater of operations. Destined to become a duel to the death, for rightful position as mistress of the house, Carolyn remained mindful of the truth. One cannot kill what is already dead, but she'd staked her claim and had no choice but to defend it or die trying to be free again, at last. Fated to the fight with a force in her house, the woman was well aware she'd been the primary target since the inception. She looked around the room, doing a quick inventory. The woman was truly defenseless. Spirits in rebellion carried torches. A demon in their midst may likely have a pitchfork at the ready and there she was, without as much as a hatchet left on a hearthstone. Not anymore. The commander-in-chief ordered it be removed. It felt like trial by firing squad. Boo! Who would open fire on her next?

Mrs. Warren identified the adversarial presence as Bathsheba Sherman, establishing the parameters necessary to stage a prize fight and the prize was a woman, her family and a farmhouse. She'd been quick to make promises then declare war while Carolyn was still struggling just to get her bearings. About to be thrown into the ring with the lions or fed to the wolves, the one in jeopardy sensed little concern for her welfare in warfare. Shocked by what

she perceived to be the premature assault, actions speak louder than words. Carolyn was no coward, but an abject fear and trepidation which had become firmly entrenched in her mind was countered by an audacity or self-righteous overconfidence of a couple who felt secure enough in the process described to assemble the troops and declare victory before their battle had even begun.

“Those that are the most slow in making a promise
are the most faithful in the performance of it.”

Jean Jacques Rousseau

tempting fate

“The future is the past returning through another gate.”

Arnold Glasgow

Would Carolyn be taking an unnecessary risk by allowing a séance to be performed within their home? The more she considered the concept the more averse she became to the suggestion. It felt like tempting fate. Likewise, it felt foreign and frightening to a woman who was entirely unfamiliar with the process or real purpose of the ancient spiritual exercise. No one proposed an exorcism. No mention of the word. Instead, Lorraine insisted it would be an opportunity to identify then expel the offending spirits, ushering them onward to an unknown destination. Effectively ridding the home of their presence, affording them their chance to go to the Light; according to the kids the spirits were the Light, already at their intended destination. The children had adjusted to crowded quarters in shared space. Acceptance is the key to successfully living with the dead.

Ed repeatedly mentioned an ongoing affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church regarding matters of demonic possession. They asked that a priest become involved, a holy endorsement of sorts, although Carolyn found it ironic that the church from which her family had been all but expelled was their original source for most information on the subject; supposedly the saving grace. A belief in demons is deeply rooted in Catholicism. Satan as the personification of evil incarnate is reportedly a fallen angel. In historical terms it was rather convoluted; someone who journeyed to heaven then later founded hell. Thus was established an infamous power struggle between good and evil: a core conflict between juxtaposed forces as the foundation of a religion built squarely upon the implicit threat of eternal damnation, one used primarily for purposes of crowd control. Banishment from the embrace of the loving God; plunged upon the spikes of a pitchfork in holy hell. It was all too simplistic, far too insulting for any intelligent human being to abide. It was not the route Carolyn wanted to take to achieve the resolution she sought, yet it appeared to be her only option. It was certainly not a question of wanting to be rid of the ghastly ghosts. She had longed to be free of this intrusion, the torment of threat. As for them, she didn't give a damn where they went as long as it was far away from her family. Bathsheba could burn in hell, for all she cared.

Her mind was in overdrive through hyperspace, traveling at light speed. If God is, as the church dictates, omnipotent as well as omnipresent and omniscient, then how could a devil possibly have any power or control? It was an entirely incongruous concept to the woman. If God possesses the unlimited powers of creation, retaining infinite authority, present everywhere simultaneously as the creator of all things, wouldn't it mean God had created His own opposing force? Shouldn't acknowledgement of an equivalent force be considered sacrilegious? Awareness and understanding was ephemeral. A brilliant woman struggled with these notions. This condemnation she and her family encountered was an intolerant message received, loud and clear. Yet, there she was, wondering what these other Catholics would do for her now. An acrimonious relationship with the church had resulted in her bad attitude: not so certain she wanted their help after all. Perhaps it would be best to look on the bright side of life rather than peering into the darkest depths of death.

Peace and quiet. It was all she desired. Carolyn could not help but wonder if it was her fate. Tranquility was elusive. Serenity seemed quite impossible to achieve. As if a whirling dervish were dancing in her consciousness it was inexhaustible, no matter how tired she remained. Was a reunion with Ed and Lorraine an act of God, meant-to-be, a divine intention manifesting in form? Weren't they the conduit as divine intervention? Had they been a blessing or a curse? Perhaps it was God who had sent them to her, as that loving deity, attempting to exert some control over this situation in which she felt trapped and powerless to create a positive outcome. Perhaps this was, after all, an act of Divine Providence. Or was an intervention essentially corporeal in nature? Confusion drew her to the public library, a gravitational pull toward needed understanding. There she began to reacquaint herself, pursuing philosophy, epistemology and cosmology, where she had endeavored to comprehend the structure of the Universe regarding space and time and causality. A greater sense of freedom began to re-emerge. Carolyn investigated the origins and limits of mortality as she delved deeply into human nature and methods of mankind, seeking the tangible results from an ethereal process: sacred study broadening her already labile mind. Intense fear began to subside. Pouring through the bevy of books on these subjects, she'd begun to reinterpret their presence as a form of Grace under fire. Essentially, they were her only hope. Their intention was something sacred. She could only pray they knew what they were doing. God, help them. On the verge of engaging in mortal combat

with an immortal entity, Carolyn began preparing herself for a holy war with an unholy adversary. It was for the love of her children that she would forge ahead and battle on... but it wasn't a fair fight. Hope springs eternal.

“Peace demands the most heroic labor and
the most difficult sacrifice.
It demands greater heroism than war.
It demands greater fidelity to
the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience.”
Thomas Merton

twilight

“In the right light, at the right time, everything is extraordinary.”
Aaron Rose

The daily transformation was astounding. As ethereal light it was airy and tenuous, delicate and refined. Sunset was spectacular, even when an ominous cloud cover hovered over the despondent landscape. Yet, this was something more than sunset. It was something sacred. During a transition when ethereal and corporeal merged and intermingled, when celestial bodies came closest to Earth, all was one. Winter twilight were the most outstanding; a feast for the eyes and a blanket for the heart. The children learned about gratitude and spirituality from their mother but also through a constant exposure to Nature, of which they availed themselves. No matter the weather they battled a wide variety of elemental offerings to become a part of the property as little pieces of the place. Stimulating the senses, they were most drawn to and defined by the light as it attracted the eyes of each beholder. Hues at sunrise and sunset fascinated the children. They were mesmerized, struck by tone and texture of a sky above casting its holiest light on the valley below.

There was something about this event: the morning and evening transition to and from darkness. It was the time when the house became most active. At least it was that time when the children could see the other side most clearly. Perhaps it was the essence of this light which allowed their eyes to focus on the entities, not that they weren't always there. This was the time when they became most visible to the eyes of mortals. Cynthia insists this was the time when their worlds would collide as one in a cross-dimensional convergence, what she describes as “both sides now”. In those few precious moments, in a state of semi-light, reaching out was possible. Touching each other became a tangible reality. Sharing space in time seemed entirely plausible, as natural as their supernatural essence. They were revealed to those with eyes capable of seeing their light. Emerson wrote: “The sky is the daily bread of the eyes.” It was a virtual feast, a cornucopia at the farm, equally spooky and beautiful.

Enlightenment is a process which, in most, occurs incrementally. It is not a peaceful evolution, but rather, is painful and disruptive to any mortal mind. Courage must be equivalent to curiosity or fear will get the upper hand in the struggle to focus on what is real and what is illusion. However, at twilight it was different. Everything shifted. Everything changed. This was when Cindy

often saw the poor little girl passing through her room. It was when creatures would stand at attention then cower for no apparent reason. It was the time of day and night when it was both, when everything attained an enhanced level of clarity amidst vague and nondescript transition known to open a passage; a portal to the past and the future, so to reach across dimensions with relative ease. To acknowledge and to touch them with eyes that could hardly believe what they saw, as spirits were much more than meets the eye of the beholder, there was always a sense of needing to know more, of there being something else to learn. Even moments of horror provided an equivalent fascination for children who still viewed the world with wide-eyed wonder. They were lost, finding their way in the dark, navigating between dimensions or traveling at light speed across the Universe, just like the spirits, finding their way home.

“When you get to the end of all the light you know and it’s time to step into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing that one of two things shall happen: either you will be given something solid to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.”

Edward Teller



~ let there be twilight ~

“For one moment, our lives met, our souls touched.”
Oscar Wilde

hippies, freaks and misfits

“Praised be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy and for objects and knowledge curious;
And for love, sweet love—But praise! O praise and praise,
For the sure-enwinding arms of cold-enfolding Death.”

Walt Whitman

Word was out and about. At the time, nobody knew how it had happened, though Carolyn would soon discover the truth. Suddenly it seemed as if there were sightseers everywhere, omnipresent, like God. As mere mortals would simply show up at their door hoping to catch a glimpse of the other side of existence, Carolyn was tolerant and kind. Most just wanted to see the place; those who happened to be in the area confessing the heartfelt desire to meet those who were known to dwell among the dead. A theme began to emerge. Suspicions became a way of life as those appearing at their threshold, (under the guise of inquiring further), made their presence known. As this became an uncommonly frequent occurrence, the Perron family felt imposed upon, scrutinized, haunted from every direction. With her patience wearing thinner by the day, a protective mother couldn't help but be concerned as the curious onlookers encroached on what peace remained at her place in the country. So she began asking some questions of her own. It turned out that many of those driven to find their farmhouse learned about it while attending one of a series of seminars conducted at institutions of higher learning around the state. The lectures regarding paranormal activity investigation featured two preeminent speakers: Ed and Lorraine Warren. Devastated by the newsflash, Carolyn felt utterly betrayed. A confidence shattered as a promise made and broken.

In August of 1973, about six weeks prior to their arrival, a small group of students preceded the Warrens, having been informed of the supernatural shenanigans by a friend of the family, deeply concerned about their welfare. Carolyn's reaction was always nothing less than gracious, having received so many visitors at the farm over the years. Roger, not so much. When their van pulled into the yard she first assumed they were friends of her daughters. She was wrong. As Roger loaded his suitcase into the car to depart on yet another extended trip, his wife gazed at him pleadingly, a “Could you do something

about this?" expression on her face. "If you don't want them here tell them to get the hell out!" With that, he slammed the door then promptly drove away. Abandoned again. Standing alone on the porch, awaiting their approach, she was stilled by a striking vision as they emerged from the vehicle. An optical illusion? A study in darkness and light. Among the group she glimpsed two young men, identical twins as opposing forces. One appeared to be the living embodiment of Jesus Christ Himself, the other, an ominous figure, as the devil incarnate. Polite, as always, she wondered what this was about. They introduced themselves as Keith and Carl Johnson. Her heart sank with the claim they were affiliated with a paranormal group from Rhode Island College: P.I.R.O. Para-psychological Investigations & Research Organization. Donna was identified as the founder. Michael, Billy and Jay rounded out a cluster of ghost hunters, inquiring minds, all quite eager to know more and ready to help in any way they could. Keith Johnson came with only one tool-of-the-trade in hand: his Holy Bible.

Keeping her wits, Carolyn decided to investigate the investigators. Keith ingratiated himself immediately with an erudite intellect and seeming awareness of the supernatural which belied his youth and inexperience. His twin brother, Carl was another matter entirely. She ignored him, based on a negative first impression, causing the blood to chill in her veins. There was something about him... something wicked she sensed and did not allow him into her home. Keith was welcome. Her sense of him was purity, an incredible lightness of being. Carolyn had much to gain by speaking with Keith. His brother was relegated to the yard as Keith gained entrance to the porch. Explaining he was a deeply devout man who felt nothing but compassion for those who dwelled within the farmhouse, his demeanor was disarming. He gained Carolyn's confidence as they spoke. She invited him into the kitchen. His other half? No way.

The girls were transfixed by the same vision which had quickly put their mother at ease. There was an ethereal glow about Keith, an aura so pure, she was certain he would do no harm. Carolyn was taken by his soft presence. It appeared godly. Nancy could not take her eyes off him. Truth be told, he was beautiful. In fact, drop dead gorgeous. She began to flit around him like the schoolgirl she was, hormones raging like wildfire. Cindy stared into his eyes, searching his soul. Christine listened intently to every word he said. Andrea kept watch on the rest of their group from the parlor windows, alerting her

mother when Carl asserted himself presumptuously. He defied her orders by stepping up on the porch. His girlfriend came with him. She was beautiful but equally dark. Her bruised body was covered with bite marks, sending a shudder through an observant eldest daughter, a sensation she could not shake. He was evil. She knew it. Carolyn expelled them again while Cindy slipped onto the porch to get a closer look. She too sensed a maleficent air about him and saw the scars on the girl in his lap. It was offensive and distasteful. The way they were sitting together, touching each other was prurient, overtly lascivious and quite frankly, totally inappropriate. Staring at what appeared to be one fresh wound on the neck of the young woman in his company, Cynthia gasped. No question in her mind. He was the culprit, the voracious one who had attempted to eat her alive and she had obviously allowed it. There was something villainous about him. He left the porch, as directed, but kept on skulking around the house... investigating, no doubt.

Carolyn confronted Keith about his brother, making it clear that he was not welcome in her home. Divulging that Carl was a practicing devil worshipper, his virtual polar opposite, like the negative plate of a photograph, he told her all she needed to hear. Instructing her eldest as a scout, Andrea's keen eyes remained focused on Carl for the duration of the visit as Carl's rapacious eyes remained fixated on his girlfriend. Red flags waving all over the place in the country, Carolyn suggested the impromptu visit come to an end. Keith was persuasive; reassuring her he would do no harm and only wanted a tour. Nancy instantly obliged his request, volunteering to lead a walk-through. Consenting, Carolyn assumed sentry duty. Andrea left her post as lookout! She then escorted their haunted house guest down the hatch.

For some reason she could not explain, Andrea felt safe and secure in his presence so she offered to show Keith the dreaded cellar, a spooky area of the farmhouse she normally avoided like The Black Plague. Warning him in advance about the ramshackle staircase, it occurred to her that his presence was enough to keep one evil spirit at bay. She guided him all through the cavernous depths, showing him anterooms while describing the purpose for each: a root cellar, candle room, etc. As the two of them were about to ascend the stairs, Keith took her hand and said a prayer which stuck with the youngster for life. His blessing was beautiful. They shared a moment which forged a lifelong bond.

Maybe it was his long flowing hair or a white tunic which charmed her or

maybe it was a true sincerity in his voice. Either way, Nancy was smitten. She dragged Katy along (visiting on that day as well) and the other girls went for what proved to be a wild ride. Carolyn had instructed them to leave the doors open and she'd catch up with them. They went into Nancy's bedroom. Keith could not help but notice how hot and stuffy it was then asked why the windows were closed. It was a warm summer day. Nancy told him both were swollen shut. She wasn't strong enough to open them. He offered to do it for her then forced them open, wedging a stick lying in each sill into an upright position, to prop them. Ah, that old farmhouse. A good job done, just as he'd turned around to face them Keith glanced around the room again. Nancy was practically in a state of delirium, sucking up all of his attention. Keith asked her, with all the problems they'd encountered in the house, why there was no crucifix hanging on the wall... for protection. The second those words left his lips, the pallor came upon them as an abrupt change of light occurred. Nancy shrugged her shoulders. He asked if she had a piece of chalk or a bar of soap. Scrounging around, she found the sidewalk chalk. Everybody conducting the tour gathered to sit in a circle on the floor. Keith went back to the windows, etching the sign of the cross onto each rusty screen. Somebody present took exception to the gesture. That was the moment all hell broke loose.

Instantly, as soon as he turned his back, both sticks went flying out across the bedroom. Both windows slammed closed so hard, it was an impossibility they did not shatter. A split second later both doors to the bedroom slammed with a mighty force so furious it shook all of them to the core. At this precise moment something hit Nancy in the head from behind, knocking her hard to the floor. Carolyn flew up the stairs, anxious to discover what just caused the entire house to shudder and shake. Keith was as white as his pristine tunic. Cindy made the only comment as she whispered in Nancy's aching ear:

"Oh, great! Now he's really pissed them off!" Cindy was suddenly afraid. They were all scared, including Keith, who'd already seen more than his fair share of supernatural activity in his young life. Everyone present remembers well but Cindy specifically recalls being instantly worried, quite concerned about retribution they would certainly receive as punishment for the flagrant transgression. Nancy already got her due but what was to come for the rest to suffer? Nobody waited around long enough to find out, as the mass exodus occurred. Keith was mortified. His wide eyes spoke of the terror in his heart. He felt the force he'd reckoned with, sensed a maleficent presence in a room

vacated quickly. Quarters becoming more crowded by the moment, the hasty retreat was in order. Nearly tripping over each other as they all hustled down the stairs, it was obvious Keith and his escorts had bitten off more than they could chew and it came back to bite them. Be careful what you wish for... as surely you will get it. Their group left shortly thereafter but the Johnson brothers would return again, the next time in the company of Ed and Lorraine Warren. Carolyn considered them a study in Darkness and Light.

Oh, my God! The Warrens had told their story. They named the town and described their farmhouse. Anyone curious enough needed only to drive into Harrisville and ask around. If they wanted explicit directions, they could just drop their family name. Ed and Lorraine had, according to several visitors. It was revealed during a lecture divulging details about their own investigation, thus exposing all seven members of the family to a kind of scrutiny they had never known before. Carolyn was too stunned by their infraction to be angry. They claimed to be bona fide friends of the family who would do everything in their power to help... to protect them and preserve their privacy.

Why, she wondered, was it necessary to disclose sordid details, imparting confidential information that would ultimately expose them all to inspections from a variety of hippies, freaks and misfits? The result of their indiscretions would be an influx of stranger-than-strange souls seeking out their family on a rural farm. Apparently these seminars drew many from an extensive area, including the professors, staff and students from URI, Brown University, Providence College and Rhode Island College, in particular. For a tiny little state, its institutions of higher learning remain numerous and interconnected. This was a lecture series and the Warrens were famous, much more so than Carolyn previously understood. They each had much to share regarding their investigations; a supernatural odyssey upon which they'd built a joint career. In their exuberance, while discussing a great discovery in the backwoods of Rhode Island, they had given away too much information. She had just made a remarkable discovery of her own. Carolyn was disenchanted, to be sure.

Though she did not believe it to be an intentional gaff at the time, the ramifications of it were identical to publishing their name and home address in The Providence Journal. Cars slowed to a crawl on Round Top Road as

thrill-seekers tried to identify a specific house in the lush landscape. Curious onlookers came for weeks after the seminars. Individuals would simply show up at the door, sometimes in small groups, wanting to meet the family, to ask questions and see the house. Carolyn did not find such notoriety appealing in any way. In fact, she resented the living hell out of it. Though always polite but brief with visitors, explaining that she valued privacy for her family, she could not tolerate anymore intrusion. Most accepted her point of view as valid and respected her wishes, leaving disappointed but appreciative that it was an opportunity to meet the mistress of the house. Carolyn was becoming quite the celebrity herself, famous for being the oppressed one, according to the Warrens. It was a label she shunned, scrutiny she loathed. In the midst of all she had to deal with, this was the last thing she needed. After a few weeks of incessant interruptions Carolyn confronted Lorraine. Openly admitting the Perron Investigation had become a topic for discussion, Lorraine seemed surprised anyone had taken the initiative to investigate it further; to actually seek out their family, especially in such a remote location. She claimed to be unaware she'd mentioned the town or names involved. Carolyn finally grew perturbed as anxiety bubbled up to the surface in her cauldron of discontent. Lorraine expressed regret, challenged for breaking the presumed confidence. Carolyn asked that she not continue the practice. Confessing she had spoken about the farmhouse and its numerous inhabitants during a recent trip, she'd assured Carolyn nobody from a distant seminar would ever travel the length of the continent to find a house in New England for the sake of idle curiosity. Promises... promises. All they would need is a map! Describing these people, her followers as utterly harmless, Lorraine dismissed the legitimate concerns of her client. Carolyn took exception to her rather nonchalant approach to the problem but said nothing more. No reason to argue about it. She'd made her point, emphatically. The genie was out of the bottle, though it was beginning to feel more like Pandora's Box. The Warrens were famous and making the Perron family infamous. The seminars were well-attended by people from all over the country or beyond. Known worldwide, the preeminent pair of supernatural sleuths had quite a reputation as paranormal researchers before there was such a thing. By founding a movement they became the founding Godfather and mother of ghost hunting, far ahead of their time, or any other time, for that matter. They'd found the Perron saga compelling enough to make its presence known as the centerpiece of their presentations... no more

secrets to be kept. It was too late... out of the bottle and up in smoke. Listen only to the advice of those who've walked the same path to bloody, holy hell and back.

Mortals evolve. They change and grow, learning the errors of their ways. Carl Johnson was once drawn to the darkest side of existence, fascinated by devil worship. He is no longer that reckless bad boy of his youth. Thirty-five years hence, he has matured into a thoughtful, erudite individual with much to contribute to a never-ending conversation regarding the netherworld. His vast accumulation of knowledge is generously shared, used only to the good. It was long ago and far away. Amends have been made with contact which is welcome. His true personality has emerged and he can now be described as a "twin" in every conceivable sense of the word, exhibiting qualities which he reflects as a mirror-image of his brother. Carl Johnson has seen the Light. He found his inner glow. It required courage to abandon the enticing powers of a dark spirit, to his great credit. His good work continues, spreading the word and keeping the faith. It radiates from within, illuminating his chosen path to enlightenment. Those who know him now would never believe who he was then, a young man struggling to establish an identity of his own, separate and distinct; opposite of his brother. This alone should inspire anyone on a journey.

Keith Johnson had made quite an impression on the bevy of young ladies. When he hugged Andrea goodbye Nancy got jealous but that's a whole other story, perhaps another book. First impressions tend to last. Jesus freak. Bible in hand, looking every bit the part he seemed to be playing, at first glance, it was not an act. Keith proved to be pure of heart, eager to help all humankind. Do not judge, lest ye be judged; a valuable lesson learned. Reunited, a bond of friendship re-established some thirty-four years later, as destiny dictated, Andrea and Keith are as thick as thieves. Truth be told, they were all hippies, freaks and misfits in a narrow-minded world, including a family that was lost and found by those who understood. Birds of a feather do tend to flock together.

"I have an existential map. It has
'You are here' written all over it."

Steven Wright



~ Nancy knows more than she shows off ~

blessings and curses

“Never to suffer would never to have been blessed.”
Edgar Allan Poe

There were too many blessings to count. Blessings abound when someone knows where to look, and if one is looking everywhere all the time, they will be seen like spirit itself... omnipresent. In spite of their trials and tribulations, there was perpetual lightheartedness, an ethereal spectral wonder about being in the place they truly loved. The children were particularly tolerant of what their mother perceived as a curse. It was the price they paid to have the home they adored and it was not such a heavy toll, most of the time. When escapes became necessary there was always a fair forest calling, lovely, dark and deep. Promises to keep to one another, they protected their mindset by traveling all together to a peaceful pond or a babbling brook. The girls learned early how to count their blessings. As time passed, as events transpired, it became more imperative to notice what was good and pure and true. However, one cannot escape the fact, there were horrors to behold. It was during these times when they found comfort and solace with each other, embraced by the loving arms of those who endured the same and understood this fear... their saving grace. Strange as it may seem, suffering as one, feeling that pain with and for one another was a blessing in disguise. They were never alone in the dark. They had each other. No stronger bond exists than one formed by sheer necessity.

There is something to be said for being surrounded by those who instantly believe, by those who never question if what was seen was real. It preserved and enhanced the bonds which have lasted a lifetime. In spite of what may be perceived as a childhood cursed, they would all beg to differ. They shared a common secret, prayed a common prayer and worked in common purpose at a farmhouse blessed from within by an uncommon grace and an eternal love. The decade spent steeped in discovery was the ultimate childhood adventure, for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as they all shall live, perhaps even longer. When someone is young and has no sense of how fragile life is, being surrounded by and reminded about death can be a saving grace in its own respect. There is nothing wrong with having a healthy respect for death. It helps mindful souls become more aware of the intrinsic value of life. Developing an appreciation for both matures a mind,

unlocking the gate. It is one of the keys to Enlightenment. Once that path is sufficiently illuminated one is less likely to stumble over an obstacle or take a wrong turn in the dark. Seeing is believing as the eyes of the beholder is gifted with a sight too bright to believe at first, found in the shadows of one's peripheral vision. To see the other side of existence is a blessing, not a curse.

Bestowed with uncommon knowledge coveted in silence, kept a perpetual secret for three decades after the fact, part of this process is awakening to the notion that this is not the kind of news one should take to the grave. Having major implications for all mankind, it would be selfish to withhold evidence; sin of omission. That it happened with purpose and reason is reason enough to assume a significant discovery; compelling information meant to disperse. The world waited patiently, for thirty years, not knowing what it had missed. There is merit in telling the truth when it benefits others, no matter the risk to one's reputation. The Perron family had to get past the fear of rejection and a scrutiny that would surely accompany any pronouncement of this nature. As a fate was accepted, so was the responsibility which accompanied it. To bear witness to such events then to divulge the details in earnest requires courage.

There are elements of this memoir which are quite literally unbelievable, requiring a leap of faith. Therein lies the risk... not being believed. There was a time when such rejection seemed a fate worse than death. No more. They overcame their fear of mortals in much the same way they overcame the fear of immortal souls. With the awareness came a willingness to cast doubt aside and share with those who do believe, so they too may find some peace.

To live unencumbered, free of the fear of death, to embrace the present moment is a holy endeavor. To be in touch with the planet, observing its transitions to and from darkness and light or sense the Earth spinning, to feel its vibrations beneath bare feet is a gift. As a variation on the theme, they have put that old Yankee adage to good use: Live free or die trying! Ask any of the children what they think about those formative years as adults: "It was the best time, the best decade of my life. What a blessing." Valuable lessons were learned. To honor the past by living well in the present, unconcerned about the future, is liberating to the mortal soul. A lifetime spent knowing there is a hereafter, that there is, without a doubt, something beyond our mortal existence is truly a blessing. God. Who could consider such uncommon knowledge a curse?

“Better to lose count while naming your blessings
than to lose your blessings to counting your troubles.”

Maltbie D. Babcock

darkest before the dawn

“The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.”
Joseph Campbell

When all has turned from gray to black, when looking forward requires an all-too-painful journey through pure self-doubt, and looking backward is not allowed, looking inward is darker than the blackness filling space with itself. When there is no point of light, it is time to seek assistance. When one can no longer discern the century or identify the year of the Lord it is time to humbly ask for help. Ed and Lorraine Warren seemed the most likely source of comfort and support, yet Carolyn feared what would become an ordeal. Their uncommon knowledge, once imparted, evolved into a burden in mind. She couldn't imagine what this couple might conjure up to clear the house of spirits, to banish the demon forever. God. She had no idea what to expect.

A decision had to be made. It was a matter of natural selection regarding the supernatural dilemma. Carolyn chose the path of least resistance. Famous for being an easy way out of difficulties, this path exists only when needed, when the confrontation can be avoided. It provides an escape route: a flight over fight option. Carolyn finally decided to leave well enough alone. She was not well enough to determine the consequences, to see or to know where the path might lead. Hers was a lonely intrepid excursion through desolation, despair disguised as that singular solitude she sought within the woods. Her mind became capable of a self-deception, convincing her everything would be all right in the end, when she knew better, all along. It was time. A decision had to be made, involving matters no less significant than life and death. Carolyn had to navigate blind or develop an ability to see in the dark.

“Lose not yourself in a far off time,
seize the moment that is thine.”
Friedrich Schiller

Vacant and disillusioned, she decided to dig bottles with her friend, Fran. She deliberately went to a place in mind where she felt comfort and security, a place where she became free to fully express herself. Clinging for dear life to what little optimism remained in her spirit, appearing infrequently, in few

fleeting moments, a weakened woman kept her hands busy buried up to the elbows in dirt on her scavenger hunt through history. Research continued as well, another way of getting lost, if not in the woods, among ancient particles of parchment on dust laden library shelves. She would watch it rise from the pages, a vision captured by daylight streaming through rippled panes of glass to illuminate the new world order from her unique vantage point.

Or, off to old graveyards, they'd go to walk among lilies and lavender, so to pay their respects for the dead, long gone but not forgotten. Breathing in a fragrant wind is therapeutic, soothing to a soul. Seeking solace where others go only to grieve, Fran and Carolyn were equally fascinated by an ornate and often heart-wrenching collection of tombstones in the old Arnold Cemetery. Buried deeply in the woods, it was abandoned long ago, little or no upkeep to show for its care or concern over the centuries. There, sprinkled among its forlorn ruins were splendid remnants of tributes past, its old stock plantings pointing toward Heaven, bowing in reverence at graveyard gates. There, they would wander along peaceful paths, ambling between weather worn stones, a somber and reflective journey through the infinite darkness of time gone by, prayerfully meandering toward the Light.

Together, they'd haunt antique shops to find vintage clothing which they would then wear into local villages where they would shop some more. An interesting couple of women began to turn heads or prompt whispers behind their backs, and they didn't give a fig. They'd use archaic language in public, just for fun; making fun of those who made fun of them. Thick as thieves.

Paranoia strikes deep. Into her heart it would creep. Melancholy seemed to be the only mood she had retained. Not depression. Introspection. Though fully functional, she wandered through her days. The rest she so desperately needed eluded her during the night. Sleep-deprived, she would curl up in the corner of the sofa like a cat. She could not, would not close her eyes. Instead, she read or wrote of reasons why she could not escape. It was a time to pause and reflect, her time to brace against what may come. To dream wide awake.

Who sleeps here unturned
by dream in stillness
stark as death?
This is not rest
this is retreat

and my one comfort now
is wakefulness.

They had come to her before dawn, in darkness lingering just prior to daybreak. It seemed they were quite adept at barely evading the Light. The first glimmer of it, creeping upon the horizon, had banished them from sight. An old clock had marked their arrival. This vivid imagery remained with her. Omnipresence; an unholy host gathered like a coven in her consciousness. When would they return? Immersed in a volume of Edna St. Vincent Millay, her tired eyes fell upon several lines which rang clear through to her soul, by prompting a resurgence of visions Carolyn sought to dismiss, to forget about, but there was no forgetting what she had seen and what she knew of them.

“A Fear that in the deep night starts awake
Perpetually, to find its senses strained
Against the taut strings of the quivering air,
Awaiting the return of some dread chord?”

When would they revisit? When would they again dare to drag her out of bed, tearing her from sleep, prying her eyes open, compelling her to look up, to peer through the smoke, to gaze into the mirror, searching for a reflection not her own? When would they re-emerge through timelessness, pushing her around, provoking the woman to bear witness to the essence of her mortality and their immortality from another dimension where dark hearts do not beat?

Closing the volume she'd propped between trembling knees, unwilling to venture any further into the poem which told her own tale, Carolyn observed the quivering cigarette between her fingers, weary eyes following the trail of smoke as it traveled through the room, making its way up the chimney shaft, riding the draft as its only escape route. It was true; she'd lived in pure dread, with a perpetual cloud of suspicion hanging over her head like the Sword of Damocles, dwelling within an insipid hell hole of a house which offered her no comfort or protection, nothing but hopelessness... a door prize for coming to call, daring to cross over this threshold. Thrusting her cold body forward, forcing it to rise from the ashes which had casually dropped from a neglected cigarette onto her feet, Carolyn sought release from within the shell she had

hollowed out on the sofa. Wandering the parlor, peering through its windows at the break of dawn, she wondered when they'd come again and what they wanted from her. There she stood, gazing inward, into the nothingness of her being during moments when she was not sure she was still there, present and accounted for, sentry at her post. And then, there, on the darkest of horizons sat the burnished glow of sunrise; full-throated promise of another day dawning: hot coffee and sweet kisses from five children. Peace at last, as that sense of freedom found in the arms of those who did not know she had been there all night long, wide awake, keeping vigil, watching over them in the darkness as a beacon of Light to show them the way home. As footsteps overhead broke a bleak spell cast, it was time to forsake the specter of death and rejoin her clan in the land of the living, escaping the land of the lost and gone. A pause for reflection: a welcome pause refreshed a soul hungry for company. Good mourning, girls. How did you sleep?

“If you want peace, stop fighting.
If you want peace of mind, stop fighting with your thoughts.”
Peter McWilliams

death becomes her

“We know what we are, but not what we may be.”
William Shakespeare

The Warrens were becoming veritable fixtures in the Perron family, expressing enormous interest in the most mundane episodes. Lorraine would call at least once, sometimes twice a week, speaking with whoever answered the telephone, adult or child, intuiting a sense of what might be happening with that individual and the family overall. They all trusted Ed and Lorraine and were quite forthcoming, at times battling for the telephone so they could describe their latest incidents without fear of reprisal or judgment, providing them a certain comfort and freedom to disclose. Living in perpetual secrecy, their relationships with the Warrens created a safe haven, an outlet for inner conflict, giving Ed and Lorraine further clues and insights pertaining to the level of supernatural activity in the home. The clear open air communication enhanced the fundamental background required for thorough investigation.

Sometimes everything was peaceful and quiet, just the way they liked it. Sometimes that was not the case, at all. One afternoon, Lorraine called then shared a conversation with Andrea, a chat which became the catalyst for the most significant event involving the Warrens. The eldest was home alone, free to speak her mind. Andrea told Lorraine about her heartfelt concerns; a worry for her mother who seemed to be slipping away from their family. She described the withdrawal symptoms, the rapid weight loss, a frail, frequently fainting woman she adored and was frightened for; it was a real burden for a youngster who felt helpless to affect any positive change. Carolyn had taken a turn for the worse. Her energy was dissipating, an interest in life apparently waning. Andrea expressed deep feelings of abandonment. Though not prone to complaint, she let it be known, much of the responsibility for their house and her siblings was falling on her. The children were quite often alone when arriving home from school, as Carolyn was off somewhere else, deep in the woods, digging ancient dumps for bottles. Latch-key kids, except there were no keys or locks and all of the latches had minds of their own. Click. It had become an obsession. Chris was usually able to find her but the absence was stunning. The girls had always been able to rely on her presence and it felt as if she had lost interest in them, too. It was a painful time. Carolyn would get so wrapped up in her dump-digging, she would lose track of time altogether.

Christine would often seek her out, sensing where she was on their property. She too soon became obsessed with unearthing glass artifacts. They would be out of the house, gone for hours, forced to abandon the effort at twilight. Then they would return home filthy and exhausted, carefully toting its spoils, remains of the day, antiquities to add to the burgeoning collection. It was all fun and games until someone got hurt, and that someone was Andrea... cut to the bone, left all alone with memories of a mom long gone... but not forgotten.

Lorraine became equally alarmed, though she didn't disclose her thoughts to Andrea. It was her job to listen and that she did. Christine wanted to spend time with her mother. It was what drew her into the woods. Yet, she too had become enthralled with all the painstaking toil involved, becoming as lost in a project which seemed to be another unending, Sisyphean task. Carolyn had her newfound friend, someone she met at an antique shop in Chepachet, and she too had left her children behind to exhume ancient bottles from the earth. As the days evolved into weeks, Annie began resenting her mother's absence though she loved Fran very much and was glad that her mother had someone who'd shared the same interests. Fran Sederback was a fascinating soul. She seemed much older and wiser than her age would allow. Andrea confessed to Lorraine just the slightest hint of jealousy. From the moment the two women met, they'd become virtually inseparable. Fran helped Carolyn with research on their house. They rummaged through antique shops together, acquiring an unusual variety of vintage clothing from the ages, for the ages; an assortment to be envied by any serious collector. Fran also lived in a haunted house. The women shared countless hours of stories. She was the first real friend that the lonely, isolated woman found in the woods and that is precisely where they spent a good deal of their time together. Fran frequently brought her children to the farm. It meant more kids for Andrea to mind: a head count up by three. She felt ignored and unappreciated as a surrogate mother to children not her own.

By the time Andrea finished telling her sad story, which included a recent manifestation in her bedroom Lorraine came to the conclusion that it was time to approach this persistent problem more aggressively than she'd done thus far. No more investigations. It was time to act. Later that evening she called the farmhouse again, speaking directly with Carolyn at length. She also asked to speak with Roger but he was out of town. How convenient for him.

Lorraine had concocted an elaborate scheme to finally rid their house of what was having such a radical impact on the entire family. Carolyn listened carefully. Ultimately declining an offer, considering the proposed remedy far more radical than the existing problem, Lorraine asked Carolyn's permission to conduct a séance in the house. It all seemed a rather extreme solution to a dilemma the family had learned to live with over time. Don't stir the pot. Do not fan the flames. It could boil over. At the time it was merely a simmering cauldron of discontent. Leave well enough alone like her desperate daughter.

"Carolyn. Andrea told me she saw the man and boy in her room again."

"She told me. It startled her. When she went back upstairs later they were gone. Give them space. They meant no harm. No harm done. No problem."

"They're never gone, Carolyn. That's the problem. They need to be freed from this place and your family needs to be free of them."

"They seem to come and go as they please. I do not want to stir things up around here again. Maybe they have accepted us. It has been quiet for awhile now... only a few minor incidents lately."

"It sounds like you have given up." Lorraine was frustrated by her client's complacency on the subject. "Why wouldn't you want to try to reclaim the house as your own... the home of your dreams?"

"It is our own. We've lived here for more than four years. It does belong to us." There was a twinge of defensiveness in Carolyn's voice.

"No, it doesn't... you share that space. My dear, your home is exceedingly crowded." Counterpoint made, for balance, Lorraine stood her ground.

"It's a big house. There's room enough for everyone. I don't see the point in making matters worse. It would only invite more trouble to my door."

"Carolyn, listen to me. Someone invited a demon into your home. I'm not sure if it was Bathsheba who made a deal with the devil, as I suspect, or if it was a group of children playing dangerous games with a Ouija board, or if it arrived through some insidious supernatural pathway we do not yet perceive but it is there and it is quite active, regardless of what you see or hear. It must be expelled and there is only one way I know of to permanently abolish the evil from your home. Please give this all the consideration it rightfully deserves, if not for your own sake, then for your children. Don't you think they've lived with this long enough?" Lorraine was adamant, quite persistent in her approach. As far as the psychic was concerned Carolyn's apathy was a symptom. The Warrens had long suspected that the woman was in the throes

of oppression, just a baby step away from possession. No wonder she did not want to disturb the spirits. She was in the process of becoming one of them! Acquiescing to the power, merging with the force she was no longer willing to battle, a report she received earlier confirmed her suspicions. She believed they had no time left to waste; a critical time came to circumvent a surrender of a soul. Carolyn knew engaging in an unfair fight meant knowing how and when to surrender to it as an act of self-preservation.

Though Carolyn finally did agree to reconsider an outlandish concept, she never did discuss their offer with her husband once he'd returned home. Her deep ambivalence was a mere shadow of his and would render no purposeful consultations. Wondering how she would even begin to convince him of the necessity for such a gathering, her doubts became much more pronounced, a reticence made more distinct because she did not believe it to be necessary, either. Over time, Lorraine had issued what Carolyn interpreted as a series of empty promises. She introduced her to people who all supposedly possessed skill sets and insights required to attain resolution of their dilemma. So many had come and gone with no discernible impact on their situation; no positive outcomes for them, only further intrusions. Beyond being reluctant, Carolyn had become unwilling to share their story with anybody else. Going on about the business of digging up her most recently discovered mounds of treasures, she all but forgot about the conversation for days, putting it out of her mind.

The following Friday afternoon Lorraine called again. Apparently she had been in touch with several people who she intended to include in the séance that she intended to perform... come hell or high water! Not quite coercive, she was persuasive. Again, she asked Carolyn about it. Divulging the subject had not come up yet with her husband, she became evasive. Lorraine would have none of it, asking if she and Ed could come to the house that evening. Carolyn agreed, knowing they would be willing to discuss the proposal with Roger, one she had attempted to avoid. It was as if she could already hear his resounding, "No way!" echoing throughout their hallowed halls. She decided to inform him at dinner. Roger's dour expression informed all else.

"Ed and Lorraine are coming by to talk with us tonight."

"Couldn't we spend one night without something happening? I've been on the road a week. I'm tired. I'll be watching the Red Sox game tonight so you can talk to them. Leave me out of it. No, better yet, call them and cancel. I don't want any company tonight. How about some peace and quiet for a

change!"

Roger's words and even harsher demeanor complicated matters further. Carolyn feared a reprisal from her own timid words, issuing them in whisper.

"It's too late. They're already on their way."

"Jesus Christ!" His napkin went flying toward the center of the table. The girls began shrinking into themselves, attempting to become invisible, like the spirits. Roger leapt out of his chair, exploding through the dining room door, leaving his meal behind. He stood alone on the porch in a self-imposed exile: in solitary confinement. An imposing figure at a distance, this dark and brooding figure in twilight was not far away, yet distant, close enough to see a cigarette dangling carelessly from his quivering lips, an indication of some self-restraint. The cauldron was about to boil over. White smoke surrounded the pensive soul as fog would on a beach, wafting through old rusty screens. Carolyn glanced around the table at the faces of her children, with sorrow in her eyes and contempt in her heart for the man she believed was incapable of controlling his emotions, regardless of who it affected. She did not want her kids exposed to his unpredictable fits of temper. Carolyn, angry with herself, knew she should have informed him privately, prior to a family dinner. Good food suddenly became indigestible for youngsters meekly finishing a meal.

Their mother quickly suggested they each phone a friend to inquire about spending the night... elsewhere. Raw trembling nerves tingling in her fingers, Carolyn knew the Warrens were due to arrive within the hour, well-prepared to broach the difficult subject of a séance with her belligerent husband. That had to happen privately. The girls were more than happy to oblige. In fact, their mother's suggestion made perfect sense: permission granted for escape. Evacuate the premises! It wasn't that easy. Nancy snagged the telephone first then went over to Katy's house. Andrea, Chris, Cindy and April were not as fortunate, unable to locate an available bed for the night on such short notice, a life-altering twist of fate for all. Several of them were about to witness an arcane, mind-numbing event no child should ever see or hear... ever after as a memory they would never escape.

Three vehicles pulled into the yard at dusk. It was a caravan: two cars and a truck. Roger glared out the window then back at his wife with disdain.

"You said the Warrens were coming... you never said they were bringing an army along!" Holy warriors? Mercenaries? Boo! Who goes there?

"I didn't know!" She was just as surprised as her husband. The accusatory tone in his voice revealed his suspicious nature, the fact that he simply didn't believe her... another big surprise.

Carolyn requested their remaining children go upstairs for the evening as Ed and Lorraine came to the door. The entourage waited patiently outside as the couple entered the farmhouse. Carolyn was confused. Roger, aggravated, this obvious hostility apparent the moment they laid eyes on his face, as that unmistakable "What the hell is going on here?" expression glared through his intense gaze. He was still busy leering contemptuously at his wife when Lorraine interceded on her behalf.

"Roger. If you are going to be angry with anyone, be angry with me, not Carolyn. She had no idea this many people were coming. If I had asked in advance she would not have allowed it, but we're here for a good reason so please sit down and we will explain."

Lorraine calmly settled into the love seat. Roger remained defiantly on his feet, standing his ground, defending his position. Without saying a word, he fixed his gaze on them.

"Fine. As you already know, Ed and I have grown increasingly concerned about your family and I have enlisted the assistance of a few close associates who understand the critical nature of this problem. They have come to help us in the process of ridding this house of an evil force dwelling within it. We are here to perform a cleansing of your home... a séance."

"Absolutely not!" Roger's face appeared sun-scorched, his deep dark eyes effectively functioning as the flame-throwers. "Send them away. Under no circumstances is anything like that happening in this house." Turning toward his wife, as if preparing to pounce, he pointed his powerful weaponry in her direction. "Did you ever give them your permission to do this?" Carolyn shuddered as that toxic venom spewed. Lorraine became defensive. Roger's voice echoed throughout the house, startling and intimidating everyone within earshot all except for Lorraine. She was neither impressed nor offended by the eruption, countering his comments while rising to her feet.

"I told you she had nothing to do with this! Roger. Please look at me. We are only trying to help. You can't let this go on indefinitely. It's detrimental to your family. We brought people with us who are scholars and scientists, people who know what to do and how to do it. You need to trust us. We'd never do anything to place either of you or your children in jeopardy. Quite

the contrary, we intend to banish a dangerous presence you've lived with for years. We've brought a medium along, a shaman... a holy woman. A priest came with us. I want you to meet them... talk with them. I promise, you will understand the real necessity for this gathering here tonight. Afterward if you decide against this, then we will honor your wishes and accept your position. We will all leave your home. I promise. Please, just hear us out first."

Lorraine had a way about her; a practiced and practically magical method of disarming her foes, adversarial clients who were either nervous or scared or both. She had done so with a few calming words of reassurance. It was the out he needed to be even remotely willing to literally and figuratively open that door. Carolyn's head hung limply, eyes averted. She remained virtually silent for the duration of a turbulent, contentious exchange. Roger's outburst had inadvertently issued an invitation all its own. Evil descended upon them. An unholy transformation had already begun.

Carolyn freely admits she has no memory of the following episode. She vaguely recalls their arrival that night. All else has been lost to her. For this, she is grateful as are all of those who witnessed the harrowing ordeal unfold... a blessing which resulted from a curse.

Roger's skepticism was outrageous, almost palpable. Lorraine pressed on. She went outside, retrieving those left behind in the dark. Within moments, footsteps began crossing the threshold, too numerous to count. Two children watched, listening through a crack in the door. Andrea tucked April in when they'd arrived then returned to her own bedroom where Cynthia was waiting. Chrissy had put herself to bed, exhibiting little interest in what was occurring downstairs. They crept down that darkened stairwell together. There were no formal introductions. It was all business. Several men entered at first, heavy equipment in tow; massive cameras dangling from broad shoulders. Asking for directions, Lorraine quickly pointed out the cellar door, leading the way. They began their hazardous descent, navigating the rickety set of stairs with caution. A tall man entered the parlor, dressed in black except for the narrow white collar indicating his position as a member of the clergy. He placed his hand on Carolyn's head then went directly over to Roger, extending his hand again, in friendship. Though he greeted the priest cordially, he'd said nothing but his full name in response, austere among strangers. Silently observing the

influx of characters as it continued unabated, Roger remained fixed and rigid in front of the fireplace, cold to the bone. Another woman came in then sat quietly at the end of the sofa. She was young; a serious expression belied her youthful glow. With a case in hand, she opened it carefully then began unloading audio equipment. Removing the Nikon camera hanging around her slender neck, it was hiding an equally large sterling silver cross.

Finally, the last one to enter was a short, stout middle-aged soul, a woman with flaming red hair. Her ruddy cheeks were freckled and pouty mouth was rounded, framed by lips lined with restraint, as if having suffocated many a smile over the years. Wearing make-up as heavy as her mood, she and this plethora of personalities wandered through the rooms, making themselves at home, photographing the house in infrared. All of their equipment appeared to be state-of-the-art for its time, if bulky and cumbersome. Its purpose was clear: to capture something on film or audio, to record the pending event for posterity. Everybody had a job to do, each one actively engaged in a process. Equipment monitors were checked and re-checked as cameras were mounted on elaborate tripods. A reel-to-reel tape recorder was centered on the dining room table. They'd all been informed of what technical difficulties to expect, issues the house presented, all supernatural in origin. Essentially, they didn't like their pictures taken. The kids watched in awe, going unnoticed by adults nearby. There is a crack in everything... that's how the Light gets in.

Roger appeared overwhelmed by the deluge. His withering grimace spoke of disapproval. Carolyn lingered in her chair, silent and virtually motionless. Lorraine brought the medium over to her and both women crouched down and spoke quietly to the mother of many, assuring her that they would do all in their power to rid the home of the evil lurking within it. Carolyn remained unresponsive. She stared at them with vacant, hollow eyes, as if she couldn't comprehend their language or could not hear a word they said. Lorraine was explaining who this woman was beside her; a true friend, describing her as a spiritual conduit capable of contacting then communicating with the dead. Carolyn's blank expression informed both. She was already in deep trouble. Lorraine took her hands, as cold as stone in winter, like touching a corpse.

"Carolyn." Lifting her head from beneath the chin, Lorraine gently guided the weight of it upward. Gazing into eyes once full of light, they'd gone dark and distant. "Dear, listen to what I am saying. Someone invited a demon into your house. It might have happened many years ago, before you arrived here.

Or it might have come in because of mischievous children, playing with fire, disguised as a game, or it could have been Bathsheba Sherman, bartering her soul, but make no mistake, someone invited this demon just as surely as you invited us in so many months ago. You welcomed us then asked for our help and that is why we are all here tonight. It will never leave on its own. Dear, I hope you understand me. We have to do this and we need to do it tonight." It was as if she was trying to inform and convince everyone present regarding a dangerous situation. With her back toward Roger, she felt him listening, too.

Still verbally unresponsive, Carolyn began to cry without making a sound. Tears pooled in her eyes then trickled down her face. Lorraine reached into a pocket, producing a wad of tissues. No one left an impression that the séance would be easy. Carolyn's face suddenly altered. It belied a fearfulness which spoke to hearts in minds of everyone in the room, including her intransigent husband. It was as if she had just been informed about an impending surgery to be conducted without the benefit of any anesthesia; the abject fear of pain. There was pure terror in Carolyn's eyes as the desperate gaze of a tragic soul wounded on a battlefield, waiting... praying to be noticed among the dead.

"She can't do it. She's too weak." Roger remained firmly entrenched.

"She must do this or she will never regain her strength." Lorraine rose up abruptly, turning on Roger like a panther would its prey. "Look at her! Don't you see what's happening here, what's happening to your wife? Look at her, Roger! I can barely reach her. Are you really willing to deny her the help she obviously needs? Do you really love this woman?"

"How dare you!" Furious beyond measure, Roger began visibly trembling with rage. Ed stepped in to quell a firestorm Lorraine doused with accelerant.

"Roger. Breathe." Leaning into his ear, Ed whispered, "She'll jump on me like that sometimes, too. This is only because she cares so much. Believe me. It is because she knows this is a crisis. Please. Let it go. Let's move on."

Lorraine was a force to be reckoned with as their power struggle ensued. She was acutely aware of intense negative energy swirling around the room, recharging a battery, power-surfing through the atmosphere like a lightning strike. Expediting the process, prying the portal wide open, Roger wanted to bolt. This was a calculated risk on her part. One of the men present among a stunned, silenced crowd was a prominent doctor from Duke University who specialized in the study of extrasensory perception and parapsychology. This learned professor also pursued telepathic / telekinetic experimentation. Well-

versed in the occult, he'd approached attempting to explain the process involved with the ancient craft and primitive ritual... the origin of séance.

"Mr. Perron, this technique is well-established. It dates back thousands of years. It is not black magic or hocus-pocus or witchcraft. This is a legitimate method for making contact and receiving messages from the other side."

"Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot. I know what it is."

"Of course not. I'm merely trying to explain, provide a bit of its history."

"I don't give a damn about history. I want to know what is going on right here, right now."

"There's no way of telling what will happen in advance, maybe nothing at all. It depends on the medium and the others involved, especially your wife. It depends if she is receptive or not."

Roger appeared distant and disinterested, barely making eye contact with the professor. Meanwhile Carolyn was being briefed by a medium seemingly elsewhere herself, or not totally present. No one can remember her name, so, for namesake she'll be referred to as "Mary" for the duration. Carolyn was in a dazed stupor, an increasingly darkening space. It was nothing less than a paralyzing lethargy. She was not even capable of wiping her own tears away.

In spite of their academic approach, Roger remained staunchly opposed. Ed took a chance Roger would listen to logic; become more practical. He requested the unyielding man accompany him into a vacant room. It was obvious to Ed that Roger was terrified, as fearful as his wife was, for entirely different reasons. He had seen it before; bravado used to disguise fear. Roger was thoroughly unimpressed with the arguments used to convince him of the need for what he considered to be a foreign, wholly superstitious pagan ritual. He found the gathering absurd, disturbing on so many levels: a very bad idea. Reluctantly, Roger agreed to speak with Ed alone. Addressing the matter privately behind the door of the couple's new bedroom, (formerly the summer kitchen) the men emerged from within the confines of that space after a few long minutes, apparently having reached some resolution. Roger finally appeared more at ease; a gut-wrenching anxiety Ed previously sensed began to visibly subside as his deeply furrowed brows relaxed and that taut, pinched skin around his nose measurably softened... for the moment.

A mind-boggling notion for the husband and wife to absorb, their struggle with the concept of allowing the séance to occur within their house persisted. Time passed, and it had been nearly an hour. Carolyn had withdrawn further,

becoming untouchable. Presumably she was listening as Mary prepared her, though she never did respond. Not one word. With each passing minute she became more frigid and rigid, fighting to maintain her composure. When her teeth began to chatter, her shivering, and shriveling body began quaking from the cold. An embattled woman, summoning defenses necessary to engage in the fight of her life... for her life, there was no question about it. Carolyn was under siege. This was war. A confrontation was occurring. It was with them in the room. The assault had already begun.

Lorraine kept anxiously watching over her charge. Approaching Carolyn from beneath a collapsing face, she asked if they could help her to the table. She could not move a muscle, not even her jaw to answer the question posed. Ed went over to Lorraine, sensing her concern. They each took an elbow and lifted a poor soul in tandem as they would an elderly woman in an infirmary. Extricating the fragile creature from her chair, guiding her with utmost care, leading her to the table, Mary readied her own place at the head of it. No one spoke or uttered a sound as this transition occurred, allowing them to hear the cellar stairs creaking in protest beneath the weight of the photographers. Lifting the latch, he announced they were ready. All of their equipment was set and ready. It was an opportune time for the children to quietly scamper across the upper floor of the house, emerging in the opposite stairwell in a matter of moments. Their journey went undetected, providing them with an exceptional vantage point from which to witness the gathering in their dining room through a crack in the door. By the end, they'd both wish they had not seen anything. Disobedient heathens get what they deserve, but God! Let the punishment fit the crime! It was exposure which would prove to be cruel and unusual... unforgettable. Ah, childhood trauma: the gift that keeps on giving.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:

Mortal strength should not define an immortal battle.

No true warrior should ever be felled by invisible forces.

It was not a fair fight from the start.

There is a weapon for every conflict.

On Guard!

Mary aimlessly wandered the room, as if lost. She'd appeared perpetually distracted, engrossed in thought, as if taming her mind, preparing the ground

for planting, for receiving the cosmic secrecy of seed. Removing several objects, trinkets and some type of talisman from a small, black velvet pouch cinched at her waist, she placed them on the table in front of the spot she had chosen. The younger woman dispersed candles in a circle at the center of the table as Mary opened an unusual box in the pouch including matches which were handmade. One matchstick was used for each candle illuminated. The haunting, spectral glow filled the room with holy Light. The charred remains stacked in a pile, like sticks of kindling bundled in a fireplace at the center of a circle; an acrid smell of sulfur permeated the air as she rounded the room her gaze transfixed on the light. Fire in the hole. Solemnly, Mary claimed her place. This was no parlor game. A time lapse occurred, fracturing thin air. A séance had begun.

Encouraging him to take his assigned seat beside his wife, Roger balked. Resurfacing as anger, his personal conflict reared its ugly head again. He had agreed to allow the ritualistic ceremony but had no intention of participating, preferring instead to watch from a safer, more comfortable distance, perhaps in the upper deck at Fenway Park in Boston. He refused, stepping away from the table, lurching back, as if touching fire, spooked by the recalcitrant force; an invisible presence. The man freaked. As the professor approached him, a tension in the room became unbearable. Roger left, returning to the fireplace. Ed followed, realizing this chronic problem must be resolved immediately in order for them to continue. As the priest advanced, Roger became obdurate, feeling cornered and trapped; a captive in his house. The doctor spoke first, assuring him that his personal involvement was both necessary and required. It was evident to all that Roger might have been a more amenable advocate, had his comfort level not been severely infringed upon. It was not a matter of respecting his space, though he clearly interpreted it as such, lashing out at the men surrounding him, cautiously approaching from every direction.

“This is bullshit!” Roger began questioning the credentials of the priest, a stall tactic. Then he questioned the professor with a doctorate. Ed intervened immediately.

“Roger. I thought we agreed this was best for your wife.” Ed spoke softly.

“We agreed on one thing. She needs help. I don’t need to be involved.”

“But you do. We need your energy, your connection with the spirits. It is critically important, Roger... imperative you be included.”

“I need to get her into bed.” Glancing toward his wife, he could see she’d

become utterly despondent, as if a pallor of death had washed over her face.

"It's too late for that, Roger." Lorraine's shrill tone silenced the muttering onlookers. "We are wasting time she doesn't have to spare." Contempt in her voice, she growled the beastly words at him while hovering protectively over Carolyn. "It is time to begin." Lorraine, leering at Roger, willing him back to the table, he'd reluctantly complied. Once the technicians took their places in the background the electronic shutters began clicking incessantly. Ed crossed through the dining room, closing the door which led into the front hallway. A nervous man was moving fast. He couldn't see two girls tucked discreetly in the stairwell and failed to secure the wrought iron latch, allowing the door to remain slightly open, just enough for them to witness a horrible incident.

"Everyone join hands." Mary had spoken.

"No way!" Roger retreated again, standing abruptly and stepping back from the table. He wasn't willing to touch anyone there, especially unwilling to "hold hands" with another man.

"Sit down, Roger. Do as you're told." Lorraine forced him back in place.

Andrea's heart began to pound. She knew that expression on her father's face. He was about to explode, like her heart. Nobody told him what to do!

"We are gathered here tonight to reach across, so to call forth the spirits." Somebody turned out the lights. Only the soft glow of candlelight remained, casting shadows across its darkened walls, shadows dancing all around them.

April opened her bedroom door at the top of the stairwell. Andrea was so nervous she turned, snarling at her baby sister, telling her to close that door! And stay upstairs! It was only a whisper. She did not want to risk detection. April got the message, loud and clear. Andrea regretted her tone as that door quietly closed. She would have to make amends. Shocked, her feelings hurt by the practically silent outburst, April's eyes began filling with tears.

There was an urgency to begin, set a spiritual process in motion, though everything seemed to be happening in slow motion; in suspended animation. With thoughtful, deliberate movement, as if time had been interrupted for the duration of the ritual, Mary began with her prayer, asking everyone to close their eyes. Roger watched as the crowd complied. His anger and resentment was almost palpable. It swirled around the man like vapor, thickening the air.

"We call upon God to create a peaceful path for us to connect with spirit." Mary had not said more than a few words when the table began to tremble then shift in place. Cynthia grabbed hold of her sister. As the girls observed,

wind filled the dining room and Roger's eyes grew wide. Both girls stood up and watched something Cynthia was familiar with, an encounter so similar to her experience in the burning room. Crawling into relative safety, inside a sister's arms, Cindy pulled them tightly around her, hanging on for dear life. Together, they peered through the crack in the door, only to witness what each perceived and believed to be the death of their defenseless mother.

Carolyn's body recoiled. Her head lifted and she began mumbling a series of incoherent words, garbled chatter. Mary asked who was there with them. Foreign sounds began emanating from the woman. Everyone realized it was not Carolyn's voice they were hearing, a brief, collective gasp heard beneath the strange language she was speaking. Her hands pulled free from the grasp of those on either side. Her fingers curled, nails impaling the palms of her hands. Excruciating pain appeared on Carolyn's face and she began to moan like a wounded soldier. Her eyes sprung wide open. They were not her eyes. Suddenly, both of her legs drew up to her chin, as if her body was forming a fireball. A low-pitched, guttural utterance emerged from deep within her being as her quaking body trembled in place. It sounded like a wild animal warning off an intruder, preparing to attack. Andrea felt sick to her stomach and thought she might faint dead away with Cindy in her arms. Just as they were about to run, something wicked burst forth from their mother: a stark, dark transformation of energy, as black as any moonless night. It was not of this world. Everyone present observed it in awe. Only Mary's eyes remained closed. She never saw it coming.

Words unheard by mortal souls in this lifetime or any other began spilling from Carolyn's shriveled lips. Even these terrified children knew it was not any language present on the planet. It was ancient. Primitive. Otherworldly. The sound sent shivers through their bodies and nausea through their bellies. This thing was not their mother, but it was certainly in their mother! Cindy's legs buckled. Andrea held her tightly upright, not certain how long she could keep her sibling from tumbling out of her arms and through the door. Panic gripped them, choking both by the throat. They wanted to scream but could not break a stranglehold. They wanted to flee but couldn't move. The girls had seen plenty at the farm but nothing ever like this! Roger's face told the story. They had never seen their father's expression before, because neither had seen him scared out of his mind. Mary continued muttering words of her own, head down, eyes closed as everyone else focused their attention on the

woman formerly known as Carolyn. Whatever this was, an imperial presence had possession, complete control of her. She had ceased to exist for the time it was speaking. An unholy demon had entered a holy host... a child of God.

The shrill screams came so suddenly no one was prepared. It rang through the rafters, sounds impossible for the human body to produce. Her tiny voice had transformed into that of a creature, something angry and evil; something wicked. Again it came, howling in the night, baying at the moon, an ungodly shriek any coyote would cower from instantly, though it seemed a call they would make in a pack while hunting prey. Again, her head thrown back as if pulled from behind, it jerked with such force it should have broken the neck of its host. Mary kept praying and mumbling unintelligible words as the lights flickered in the constant rush of wind. It should have blown out the candles as it blew back the hair of those closest to her caught in a whirlwind, in the vortex of where she was centered. Sur-reality: time was suspended.

Each outburst was louder than the next but the third was too much to take. Roger broke the wicked spell cast in shadows, jerking his hands free, bolting upright from his chair.

“Stop it!” His voice seemed magnified a hundred fold. “Stop this now!” Ed stood up grabbing at Roger’s flailing arms to keep him from interfering. A howling, growling horrific pain exploded out of Carolyn. Ugly. Grotesque. Pure, unadulterated evil, louder than anyone could imagine, filled the air and shook the house. Everybody was trembling to the core. Carolyn’s chair lifted from the floor and flew straight back, traveling at light speed into the parlor. She hit the floor with such force everyone present could hear the air rushing from her lungs. Someone screamed. Roger leapt toward his wife as Lorraine stood. Mary collapsed, head striking the table. Ed tried pulling Roger back. He whipped around and punched Ed directly in the face, dropping him to the floor. All Hell broke loose. Shutters began snapping and clicking like latches on angry doors. People were yelling and crying, racing toward the wounded woman who lay seemingly lifeless in a crumpled mass on the floor, dangling over the back of the armchair still beneath her. As someone reached the light switch, Lorraine raced to her husband’s side. Roger picked Carolyn up as if she was weightless, carrying her to the sofa. Andrea felt her knees buckling, hugging Cindy so hard it cut off her air. No one was breathing... hold it!

A sudden, horrendous noise rocked the house, emanating from the cellar. Crashing and creaking; the sound of wood, splintering and glass shattering...

as if the structure was being destroyed from within. Roger ignored it, leaning over his wife. He gently shook her by the shoulders. He yelled in her face to come back... come back... goddammit come back to me now! He slapped his wife gently on the cheeks, seeking a response; anything. Ed's nose was bleeding. Lorraine wiped his face. Mary lifted her head from the table. She looked as if she had aged one thousand years over the course of twenty minutes. Once Ed was up on his feet again he stood behind Roger as Lorraine went to Carolyn. Roger turned and glared at her with rage in his eyes. Carolyn began to groan. He growled an ominous tone, as if he was the one possessed by the demon. Daredevils had tempted fate. The war raged on with collateral damage, life and death resulting. The parlor stilled when Roger rose to his feet, facing his adversaries. It was war... but he was declaring his intention for peace.

"Get the hell out of my house!" Roger was livid. The place fell instantly silent. It was over. Ed backed away, perceiving a threat implied by a glance taking a punch of its own. He crossed through the dining room then opened the door to the hallway, shocked to find two children standing there, rigid, motionless, terrified out of their minds. Ed gasped when he saw their faces. He knew what they had seen. Everything. They'd seen the face of hell.

"Oh, my God! Girls, go back upstairs." He embraced both of them as one, reassuring them it would be all right. He then insisted they leave the hallway. Stepping back into the dining room, this time he'd latched the door securely behind him. They scurried up the staircase, darting through the upper level of the house as quickly and quietly as possible, though, with all that commotion downstairs, no one would have heard them anyway. Still it was not worth the risk. Their father was furious... officially out of his mind.

As they passed through April's room, Andrea ran to her sister and gave her a hug. A little body shaking uncontrollably, April clung on to Andrea with all her strength, afraid to let go.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm very sorry I was so mean to you." Tears trickling down Andrea's cheeks, April wiped them away with fingers, asking her big sister what was happening downstairs. Andrea could not respond. Cynthia snagged her by the hand, frantically jerking her arm. "Come on!" They were off. Andrea turned, kindly telling April to stay put but this time the child did not obey, rejoining them momentarily at the bottom of the stairwell to the parlor. Passing through the middle room, no one could believe that Christine

had slept right through all of it, the noise and upheaval enough to wake the dead! As they tiptoed past her, there was no need. Christine was dead to the world. Peering through another crack in the door, Andrea still felt sick to her stomach but she was relieved to see their mother sitting safely on the sofa.

Roger cleared the air and the house of mortals, telling everyone to leave immediately. Keeping his distance, Ed told techs to stop taking photographs, instructing them to retrieve their equipment from the cellar. Apprehensively descending a staircase, they returned literally a minute later, both distraught. Their expensive equipment, every device had been destroyed. All gone, but not forgotten; in bits and pieces, scattered all over the earthen floor. Tears flowed from two grown men. They went back down to gather whatever they could salvage, loading the van through the kitchen door. When these brave souls finished, they waited outside for the rest of the group to follow, too terrified to return to the parlor. They'd seen enough. Who knows what they had seen down the hatch! Lessons learned the hard way. There was no getting out of harm's way in that farmhouse... no escaping unscathed. Any visitor who made a memory there took it with them. They may leave the place but the place never leaves anyone. As if by osmosis, it seeps in, creeping through a mind, setting up permanent residence.

Mary collected her belongings from the table, her trinkets and a talisman, replacing all of these objects precisely where they had come from, within a velvet pouch. As she snuffed out the candles, Mary said a prayer, blessing their house. The parlor filled with lost souls, mortified mortals so anxious to accommodate the master of the house, they were ready to run for their lives. Andrea and Cindy went back through to the opposite stairwell, where they could observe it from a safer distance. April remained behind. As the parlor became more crowded, she quietly opened the door then walked among the adults, getting lost in the confusing frenzy of activity. Laying down on the love seat, April disappeared, blending into the woodwork. Nobody noticed her. Later when asked whatever possessed her to risk such a harsh reprisal, she recalled only wanting to feel closer to her mother. Bless her little heart.

The room emptied quickly as if someone pulled the plug. They all drained out the door. Mary was the last to go. She walked past Carolyn then paused, leaned over, touching a wounded warrior gently on the head. Extending her best wishes, Mary spoke briefly, uttering a cryptic message from beyond, perhaps from within the grave.

“Your answer lies beneath the bell stone.” It did not sound speculative.

Carolyn’s head hung limply, appearing almost lifeless. Her hollow stare never wavered. Once everyone was gone, Roger slammed the front door and instantly turned to glare at his wife, in disgust. What sympathy he felt for her only moments before vanished. He blamed her for all of it. April heard it all. She’d heard her father rant and rave, assailing and regaling the victim of that horrific attack, his kick-the-old-lady-while-she’s-down approach, a veritable syndrome from which he’d apparently suffered. There was no doubt about it. Roger was hurting, too. He was more frightened than he had ever been in his lifetime. Unwilling to suffer alone in defeat, he took his fear and frustrations out on his wife, again. For her, the verbal assault was a rude awakening from a stupor, the place from which she had barely returned. Dazed, still confused, she slowly rose up from the sofa, practically staggering over to the fireplace. Arms flailing, the madman followed her across the parlor, out of his mind. Neither of them glanced in the direction of the love seat. Had they done so, it would have revealed April’s presence. They would have discovered a foot soldier downstairs. Instead, she remained unaccounted for... left alone, wounded on an active battlefield, taking more shrapnel by the moment as words flew like weapons through the air, scattering throughout the house: cluster bombs hurled from her father’s bully pulpit.

On pins and needles she laid, bundled beneath a quilt, watching, awaiting her turn. There would be no escaping unscathed; her time for retreat long passed, she had to play dead. The damage done was irreversible; collateral damage manifesting as childhood trauma.

As far as Roger was concerned, this whole thing had been a sneak attack. He bitterly resented the intrusion, the theatrical farce of a pseudo-intellectual endeavor: ritualistic nonsense. Fake. Roger went on and on in mind and with his mouth, pre-and-post-judging a grudge match. No stranger to ritual, he had been an altar boy for years. He knew the aroma of incense, the weight of a scepter in his hands. It wasn’t the spiritual endeavor as described. Roger continued to resist what he perceived as a mockery, fraudulent and deceptive distortions of religious practice... oh, but she had forced the issue by inviting more than one demon across his doorstep, without his permission. For Roger it was a personal affront; an overt challenge to his authority. He felt usurped, manipulated, foolish and ashamed. She was supposed to understand that he was upset; that it was not about her... not at her... so he tried to convince her

that, in spite of her ordeal, this was really all about him; about something she could not even recall happening. She was supposed to get it, not be upset by his fear and agitation. Roger considered their little side show a charade, an essentially inauthentic practice perpetrated upon two unsuspecting souls; an artificial make-it-up-as-you-go-affair possessing all the earmarks of satanic worship, far more dangerous than any Ouija board, providing more than one wet-your-britches moment for everyone involved. She allowed it to happen, inviting disaster. She was selfish. She was self-absorbed. She was delusional. She was a witch. He could not help himself. The subject of his tirade stood motionless, muted. She had not heard a word of it. Lifting her face to meet his, Carolyn gazed into his twisted features, eyes on fire, to ask him a simple question: "What happened?" Dispirited, Carolyn's voice seemed a whisper in comparison to her husband. Roger appeared to be terrified of her, staring at the woman as if he didn't know her at all.

Subjecting her to his wrath, treating her as if she were his mortal enemy, he could see Carolyn was defenseless against further attach. She had to lift her head to feel the heat of his gaze... less heat, more light called for in the moment, it seemed he had regressed to childhood, behaving like a scared boy, a little kid throwing a temper tantrum. He was absolutely blown away, knocked back from the woman of his dreams... and his eventual nightmares. He stared at her, realizing what had just transpired. The vacant stare in return was a message received. The enraged man took a sudden turn for the worse. Spinning around, away from his wife, Roger saw their baby daughter curled up on the love seat. His heart nearly stopped.

"How long have you been down here?" His booming voice shook the rafters. April did not answer him. "Get your ass upstairs to bed... and close the door!" The child ran all the way to her bedroom and never looked back. Caught in the act on both fronts, poor, sweet little April had taken shots that frightful night, double-barrel. She was wounded. Laying in bed, alone in the dark, she was too scared to go to her big sister for fear of being heard. Instead, she cried herself to sleep.

Unyielding in his position, the man stood firmly, rigidly in place at his post as his wife retreated to the sofa and promptly fell asleep. Eventually he covered her with a quilt then sat with her for hours, watching the Red Sox, a welcome and necessary distraction. Staring at the screen, volume off, he'd been deafened by the noises in his head which would not subside. He too had

been exposed to the darkest side of existence. He could still hear the clicks of the camera shutters, the incessant voices chattering around him and a distant scream echoing through his deeply troubled mind. Roger closed his eyes. It was over. All he craved was a normal life, the peaceful sound of silence.

Mortal strength was no match for what they encountered that night. One cannot vanquish what one cannot identify. Part of any fight is in knowing when to surrender, for the sake of self-preservation. Embrace the inevitable. Let go and let God take over. Roger had looked into Carolyn's eyes. He didn't even recognize his own wife. It was as if something had died inside her then come alive again. She was different, altered by an experience she could not recall. It was, and still is, a stunning recollection for the man. He now admits that the spirits controlled and manipulated the visible world around them by invisible means and he too was altered in the process. Physical strength should not determine or define a battle where immortals are concerned but it required all the strength Carolyn could muster to make it through this ordeal. It was not a fair fight. No warrior should be felled by invisible forces. There is a proper weapon for every conflict. Mary was Lorraine Warren's weapon of choice the night an incipient presence claimed the form and substance of a mere mortal it had occupied. Following the ugly vision back in time, Roger regretfully recalls what comes back to haunt him in the night. Its existence is not in question. As it appeared, communing with the mistress of the house, an unholy ghost had its way in the Netherworld; it got what it came to claim, if only briefly, making its presence known through another. For many years, Roger put it out of his mind, woefully aware that he'd been out of his mind at the time. Enlightenment is a very painful process, no easy feat. Coming to terms with his own immortality required a quantum leap of faith for the man.

The spirits enlighten us with their darkness, no matter how difficult it is to behold. With wide-eyed wonder, images impaled in memory which cannot be shunned take up residence in any mortal mind exposed to the presence. It is impossible for Roger to reconcile what he'd witnessed that dreadful night. In time, he may make his peace with it but there is no denying the fact that it was a test of wills, a struggle, a battle... a war. For awhile, Carolyn lost her

will to fight on. Yet somehow, in the midst of its madness, she reclaimed her own certain sanity. Somehow, in the midst of war she lost and found the will to go on, having discovered what it means to be immortal. Not a fair fight. She would succumb to a presence which meant her harm but she had to fight her way back for the sake of five children she had inadvertently left behind.

Some would call Roger's outlandish behavior reprehensible and utterly self-indulgent. Some would accuse him of off-loading on his wife when she was most vulnerable. Others might suggest he is a man who lives in a rage. There are those who will hope that he suffered, too and a likely few who will hope that he still does, but there is more to the story. A psychologist may assert that his outbursts were caused by merely compensating for a sharply heightened level of fearfulness, an inordinate amount of stress with which he was unfamiliar and equally unprepared to handle... a volatility brought on by circumstances clearly beyond his control. Roger did not always attempt to control his temper but that night was different. There were witnesses: three of them. Each asserts that this explosion was fueled by toxic venom. This was not their father. This was not the same man who placed a quilt across his wife's cold body, tucking it in at the shoulders. No. It was something else... something wicked had a grasp of him that night and only the stunning sight of his baby was enough to break the evil spell; a shock to the system. His words had been malicious, hurtful in the extreme to anyone listening, especially for children who had grieved on behalf of their mother, berated in ways she did not deserve, even though the subject for which his wrath was intended has virtually no memory of the event or its aftermath. It would be easy enough to say "no harm done" if it had not been for the sad fact that his children were listening intently to every word, shuddering with every wild gesticulation. As for Roger, he was adversely affected; an incident reflecting so badly on the man he could not look into the mirror for days, unable to forgive himself. According to his children, upon thirty years reflection, there is nothing to forgive. The duress he was under existed, no doubt, but each is convinced there was another explanation, nefarious forces at play, forcing them to wonder if the presence, its influence was yet gone or a force to be reckoned with further. Evil has a face. Stick to your guns.

Weeks later, when Carolyn began to come round right, she discovered that

a paper bag of treasures, the simple gifts the farmhouse had bestowed upon her were missing... gone but not forgotten. The items were stored inside a brown bag, wedged in a corner of the china cabinet in the dining room. What a farm surrendered to its caretakers had been taken but no one can steal a memory.

“I existed from all eternity and, behold, I am here;
and I shall exist till the end of time, for my being has no end.”
Kahlil Gibran



“Life begins on the other side of despair.”
Jean Paul Sartre

inner sanctum

“Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Carolyn's self-reflective journey was not at an end. In many ways, it had only begun. She had been to the precipice and some would say she had taken the plunge. Others would claim she was pushed. Regardless of who or what was responsible for that treacherous excursion, Carolyn survived it. In fact, she had no memory of it at all: A blessing born of a curse. Her body was stiff and sore for days after the séance but it was her mind which struggled most. Assimilating the messages received by her husband, a horrific description of the events as they occurred, the woman was grateful she had no recollection of the episode; no memories preserved for posterity. It was obvious by his upset it had been surreal and deeply disturbing for her husband. His reaction, targeting the victim, was standard operating procedure for the man who often disguised his raw emotions by projecting other emotions over them... bigger, louder emotions... loud enough to muffle the cries of the scared little boy. Roger was as frightened as he had ever been in his life; not so fearless, after all. The bravado was a façade. Compounding the distance between them was a quiet and uncomfortable scrutiny. Carolyn saw it in her husband's eyes, making her squeamish, forcing her to look away. He talked of it incessantly as if talking to himself, awkwardly expressing his distress about the Warrens and the séance; a fiasco, according to him. Whenever Roger addressed her directly, which was rare, Carolyn couldn't help but notice him looking at her in a different way than she'd ever seen before. Roger was afraid of his wife. Carolyn withdrew. During this time she underwent a holistic transition. She reconnected by hiding in a protective shell where she could not be reached for comment. Their house became deathly quiet, a morgue-like existence for all hands on deck. It was safe to heal in the dark and somber environment, a good place to begin. A mother embarked on a journey home to her children.

When we cease resisting the inevitable we are freed from its influence.
This does not necessarily mean that we accept it.
It means only that we no longer fear it.

“We acquire the strength we have overcome.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

fear the living... not the dead

"The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary;
men alone are quite capable of every wickedness.♦♦?♦?
Joseph Conrad

There is good and evil. There is darkness and light. Each manifests in acts, motivated by an intangible force which can only be distinguished then labeled based upon the nature of the act. Helpful is good. Hurtful is bad. First, do no harm. Do unto others. Simplistic forms of comprehension, to be sure, but the existence of both is fundamental to the human condition. Everybody living is subject to ethereal forces beyond the visible world, our corporeal existence. Random acts of kindness are common. Expressions of pure evil are far less prevalent and always shocking. Few in a lifetime escape unscathed. Whether victim or victor, life presents us with a series of challenges and obstacles to overcome.

An integral component of the ongoing war between good and evil is the endless battle of wits waged by those who seek justice. Retribution requires a strategy. Some would viably argue, because the longing for vengeance exists as an essential element engrained in human nature, we do not seem to trust in God or the concept of divine retribution. We can't tolerate the thought of someone "getting let off the hook" in the physical realm, hoping our prayers for their demise will be answered from beyond. All will be made right in the end? We can only hope. Mortal tendency is to take matters into our own hands. We pursue the culprits, sentence and imprison them. The "witches" suffered a trial by fire. Those who commit crimes against humanity, real or imagined, when discovered, are destined to be punished by the society striving to consequence unkind souls for their abhorrent behavior. In principle, it would be heartening to think those who embody evil receive their just rewards right here on Earth. Truly, that is not necessarily the case. Many throughout history who've committed horrible, unspeakable atrocities have done so with impunity and without remittance. They got away with it... or did they?

Such knowledge offends common sensibilities. Justice-minded souls can't abide the notion. Human beings as intelligent, complicated creatures capable of immense cruelty are instead predisposed to acts of astonishing kindness. It is our predominant characteristic. Whatever compels us to decide how to

behave as we create our own reality is a matter for those who study the human mind to ultimately determine. What motivates us, as good souls, to wish ill on another who has committed a heinous offense, is best left to the psychologists; this duplicitous dichotomy for them to discern.

We classify crimes according to their impact. Precisely who, or what, was lost in the assault? Those capable of deliberately hurting another are considered the lowest of the life forms among us, those to whom claiming an innocent life matters not. Amorality is a crime to some. Bathsheba was accused of an ungodly crime, of consorting with the devil, selling her soul for eternal youth and beauty, a sacrifice of an innocent child as the toll taken in payment. Neither officially exonerated nor vindicated, she was simply let off the hook: Insufficient Evidence. She never lived it down. The label stuck for life and afterlife, 'til death did she part, and beyond.

What happens if a crime is committed and there is no evidence, no way to establish the identity of the criminal? How to determine exact culpability? We tend to throw our hands up in the air, to disavow our role and say it is in God's hands. Wasn't it there all along? As if a supernatural onslaught was an inadequate punishment for the family residing in hell on Earth, there came a natural disaster to their door, perpetrated upon them by a ruthless mortal soul with a dark heart who'd surreptitiously entered their midst. A manmade disaster devised for his nefarious purposes, a plan conjured up to permanently expel a family from their farmhouse. With forethought and malice, this vile act was intentional, a flagrant display committed by one of the devil's foot soldiers; an unspeakable act of brutality, mind-bending cruelty inflicted upon two innocent, defenseless, unsuspecting victims. The collateral damage: ramifications of this event were widespread, peripherally injuring seven mortal souls who did not know who to blame... but they knew who not to blame. It broke their collective heart. They couldn't comprehend how this could happen or why. Boo! Who would do such a thing? Only one thing was certain; this was not of supernatural origin. The spirits were not the irresponsible party.

The morning air was fresh and pure, a chilly spring day, unusually so for the first week of June. Christine was up, in the kitchen early, chatting with her mother. There was only one chore on her mind, the same chore she gladly did as part of her morning routine. First, feed the bunnies. Trumpet and Flute

were fat and happy, beautiful rabbits, both. They were kept close by, in a large cage and enclosure right behind the house, a step outside the kitchen door, beneath the pantry window. Roger spent an entire weekend of his life building that elaborate structure, a testament to his caring for the child whose pets they'd become. Christine adored them, caring for the duo daily. The enclosure was safe, built up off the ground so nothing wild could ever get to them, save one sick and twisted human being. As soon as Christine stepped out the kitchen door and off the porch landing, the screaming began. It was a blood bath. They had been massacred, split open from throat to groin. Both had been disemboweled, locked inside the cage, left alone in the dark of night to bleed to death.

Everyone came running at once. Closest to the scene of the crime, Carolyn arrived first, bolting through the kitchen door. She found Chris frozen stiff, staring at a scene no child should ever have to witness, offensive to the eye of any beholder. Grabbing her daughter, spinning her around in her arms, she tucked a baby face close to heart, instantly pulling her away from the grotesque sight. As distraught as her daughter, a mother escorted her dear child into the front yard. Roger could hear the hysterical sobbing all the way from the barn, running as fast as his legs would allow. He arrived at the far side of the house in an instant as the other girls came running to the rescue, of what, they did not know. He could see the desperation in Carolyn's eyes. Motioning for him to go around to the back of the house, she ran interference, stopping the others dead in their tracks.

"Jesus Christ! God damn it!" Roger's voice echoed throughout the expansive valley, carried on the weeping wind. Everyone was crying, even daddy, his emphatic prayer breaking with the sudden rise in his voluminous voice. Keeping the children at a safe distance, they all comforted Christine as Carolyn went to her husband. It was a vile, horrific, bloody mess. Unimaginable, and yet, there it was, sprawled out before their disbelieving eyes. Roger went into his comfort zone, exchanging anger for pain he could not abide. He began cursing profusely, unleashing a tirade of vulgarities until Carolyn persuaded him to stop, lest he upset their children even more. There was no doubt about it. Someone wicked had been on their property, committing an evil deed which could never be undone. Roger could be heard in heaven as he ordered the culprit to hell.

Hurriedly rushing all of the girls into the farmhouse, Carolyn kept them

there while Roger remained outside, staring at the remains of the night; two treasured family pets. As distasteful as it was, his chore was also obvious; what a father does for a wounded daughter. He buried the bunnies then cleansed their home, a disgusting, disheartening task if ever there was one. There it would sit, empty, for months, a constant reminder of the vacancy deliberately created, a mortal wound inflicted by a contemptuous soul. They dared not try to ease the pain by replacing these precious pets... there was no replacing them. They were special. They were Chrissy's little angels, sweet and gentle creatures of God, neither of which had ever known anything of human contact except the kind and tender touch of a child until the bitter end. Until this savage act. Though the other girls had been spared the sight of it due to the rapid response of their mother, Christine wept for days, unable to shake the shocking vision. She cried to the point of exhaustion. Though her sisters commiserated with her, they could only imagine an image she'd seen with her own eyes. Carolyn mourned the loss as well but her primary concern was the impact it had on her children, especially Chris. She was as furious as her husband, with good reason. Both of them knew this malfeasance had been perpetrated by the living, breathing embodiment of evil incarnate, wandering the Earth at will, no matter the original source of the sickness. There were bloody fingerprints left on the latch. No spirit, no matter how clever, could manage such an illusion. Both recalled hearing what sounded like knocking on the woodshed door that fateful night, in the hour just before dawn. It had briefly stirred the couple but silence resumed and these things had happened before. No harm done, or so they thought. Dismissing it as wind in the rafters, they each went back to sleep, thinking nothing more of it at the time. Roger felt remorse for failing to rise up from his bed to investigate and vanquish an intruder he might have actually been able to see in the waning dark converging with morning light... had he only known what was lurking beyond the clapboard walls.

Closure was not yet a word in common usage regarding the aftermath of loss, yet Carolyn realized it was what they all required to move on in life with the shadow and specter of death lingering quite literally at their doorstep. One sunny afternoon not long after this incident Carolyn gathered her girls and they went to the river. There they chose a perfect flat rock from the shallows, destined to become a shared gravestone to honor the dead. Together they painted the names and dates on it. Christine well-remembered the day Flute

and Trumpet were born and the night they so tragically perished from this Earth. Roger had buried the bunnies out beyond the barn, near the old apple tree, so blossoms would mark the spot each spring. He had a heart and it was broken, too. Their burial site was lovely, so serene, compared with their frantic end. The poor dears must have been so scared, terrified in their final moments of life as one watched the other die before him. There the family stood in a circle as Carolyn recited the Twenty-third Psalm. Heads bowed in reverence as she spoke: "The Lord is my shepherd..." Message received. The moving prayer, the ritual of a proper funeral brought some measure of comfort to otherwise inconsolable children dealing each in her way with overwhelming grief. Make no mistake... each one of them wished the murderer as dead as their bunnies. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. They could only hope so. It appeared to be their only option for resolution... retribution.

One day later that summer Roger removed the cage he'd worked so hard to build, giving it away to a friend. Its presence and the conspicuous absence therein had kept the tragedy fresh, preserving it in too many minds as thoughts about who was missing from the farm. It was his attempt to abolish the imagery from the mind's eyes of those who had witnessed the carnage, including his own, to no avail. The sad truth is, there was no possibility of erasing a vision impaled through the eyes, into the memory of a child, for life. There would be no escaping it. Memory is both a blessing and a curse and this one qualifies as childhood trauma. Christine cannot discuss this incident with anyone, not even her own family, not without shedding more tears; as if it had happened mere moments ago, as if she'd just made the grisly discovery all over again. The subject doesn't come up, with purpose and reason... to spare the little girl still inside of her a macabre memory. Forty years later, the raw emotion surrounding it is equally palpable as it was on an otherwise perfect spring morning. Counting the losses, regrets all around.

For more than thirty years, the identity of the culprit remained a mystery and then, quite inexplicably, out of the blue, the ultimate cold case was suddenly solved, or so it seemed. The message was well-received and there was nothing cryptic about it. A name was divulged, though it will not be revealed within these pages. As it turned out, the cold, dark-hearted bastard

who committed such a despicable act in his youth had apparently confessed to the crime against humanity. They say confession is good for the soul and he'd been out seeking redemption, so she was told. Andrea was living in Providence when the news found her, though it hadn't come straight from the source. Still, it had to be true. It made perfect sense. Perhaps he sought absolution so he supposedly went to the woman who knew what had happened at the farm to admit he had been the one. If he did indeed apologize, his regret was misplaced, his remorse meaningless. Mrs. Warren was not the victim. He would rightfully need to seek out those who were hurt most deeply, those personally and profoundly affected: the parents forced to watch their children suffer a tremendous loss and the girls whose innocence was sacrificed along with their pets.

Awash with emotion, a newsflash stirred a surreal memory, vivid images of that morning so long ago, when she'd held her little sister while she wept. A sudden, welcome rage welled within her. All the anger and fear, frustration and sorrow surged to the surface, propelling itself with one seismic jolt. An explosion straight from the bowels of the Earth, from the depths of hell where it dwelled lifelong, having been harbored there, buried for decades... given up for dead. Eureka! What a release. The controversy brought back to life, resurrected at long last. Mystery solved! In that moment, Andrea discovered something about herself. She was a fraud and a hypocrite. Self-confession is just as good for any mortal soul. Eventually, gradually, she would evolve because of it. This was only the beginning of an entirely new odyssey, a journey she never expected to travel, especially alone as a sojourn. She was frail and flawed, supremely human; perhaps not so enlightened, after all. Where was all that forgiveness in her heart, the attribute she'd practiced, nurturing for many years, the quality she considered to be one of her finest? Allowing her psyche to revel in the relief, to finally know who to hate, who to find, confront and punish, who to hang on the wrack and ruin, it was oddly satisfying. It did her heart good. She could almost taste sweet vengeance on her lips, like sipping nectar of the gods. As self-righteous as she'd ever felt in her life, the woman was exhilarated, preparing for battle, ready to set forth on a crusade; a one woman holy war. Joan would be jealous!

Then Andrea told her family and the real eruption occurred. They all felt an identical disdain, repulsed by a ruthless revelation, the exposure of a devilish figure. According to her severely disturbed father, his crime was punishable

by death... justifiable homicide... probably not the wisest person to bring along for their inevitable confrontation. It took awhile to track him down but when she did, the altercation occurred as she promised and predicted: a self-fulfilling prophesy. Andrea had longed for the gratification of seeing him sweat. Instead, the man cried, filling the air between them with heartfelt sentiments, condolences for their loss. He was mortified. Repeated denials poured from his soul. Swearing to God it wasn't him, that he was incapable of harming an innocent animal, it took equally long for Andrea to believe him. What a dirty, rotten joke... what conspiratorial malfeasance exists in the Universe? What is it capable of conjuring? Why are the lessons so hard to learn? Was this the Cosmic Comedy Hour... a tragedy disguised as a comedy of errors and false accusations? Not funny! How could something resolved once again be called into question? She had no choice but to question her own motivations. It was time to reassess. There was no one left to suspect, no one to target, aim and fire at. Her arsenal was wasted, her energy depleted, sucked dry by the pervasive negativity around the matter rekindled... fire in the hole. The woman found herself armed with some dangerous misinformation, not knowing where to stash the cache... what corner of her mind to tuck it into next. Once again relegating it to the depths of despair, she gave up. Threw her hands in the air... let go and let God. In the end, she chose the path of least resistance, ultimately the road less traveled by humanity as a whole. It takes too long to reach the desired destination.

The same cannot be said for the rest of her family. According to all of them, whoever did this is a coward, a murderer, a thief. His actions claimed more than the lives of two rabbits. It was like he'd killed an entire village of shell-shocked souls. As for the demon incarnate, the one capable of such an evil deed, he need not approach any other member of the Perron family. There won't be any absolution granted or forthcoming regarding what they perceive to be an unforgivable sin... not ever. May he burn in hell; may there be a God to send him there. May a father's soulful prayer be answered as an order followed. That's how they feel about it and always will. No forgiveness. Seeking absolution after all these years? Seek it from a higher power. Go into the astral plane and then go straight to hell you sick, twisted son of a bitch. God! Damn him! That's an order!

Who would do such a thing? Why? Was it some deranged maniac? Conflicting reports from the front lines resulted in confusion and some

serious soul-searching. A presumed gift given was just as abruptly taken away, replaced with another to fill a void created; a vacancy of spirit. More than one revelation occurred. If everything happens with purpose and reason then why such cruel and unusual punishment? Was the joke on her? Could it be that the victims would get it in the end? In time, Andrea came to her conclusion. She did get it... and had to let it go. It had haunted her too long. It had been too heavy a burden to bear. For one member of a family, it had reached the end of a journey taken through darkness. She craved only light. Have Faith. Believe. All will be made right in the end. The Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to behold. Forgiveness is mine, sayeth the eldest daughter. Throwing her hands in the air, hallelujah! She was free at last.

There are some sins which remain unforgivable. This crime felt like one of them for a very long time. Unwilling to carry the burden of it any farther on her journey through this life, it was time to set the baggage down, to lighten the load. A change in perspective came as God's grace. It could not be reconciled any other way.

As for whomever it was who actually did this, he has had to live inside his own skin and look into his own eyes every single day since. Isn't that punishment enough? Roger wishes him dead. Andrea's curse upon him: "May you live forever." In lieu of sending him to hell as his final destination, perhaps he already dwells there during his miserable life. Epiphany! She has forgiven but will never forget. Time to move on as time is of the essence. So there it was: closure.

Therein lies the lesson... the toughest test to pass. Class dismissed.

"From beasts we scorn as soulless,
In forest, field and den,
The cry goes up to witness
The soullessness of men."
M. Frida Hartley

continuum

“Only love can be divided endlessly and still not diminish.”

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Without realizing what they had become engaged in, the Perron family embarked on an intrepid journey of time travel and deep space exploration. “May you live forever” is an ancient Chinese curse issued with a purpose. To be immortal could be a fate worse than death, certainly not the blessing we all hope it to be. For those who remained trapped, suspended in the ether, it is quite contrary to the end we envision, standing before the pearly gates of the home we call Heaven. Who was there to greet these spirits, left wandering this world, and who was the beneficent one who decided to turn them away?

Oh joy! Oh rapture! She’s back! Cathi pulled into the yard driving a silver space-aged, square box-looking contraption she had affectionately dubbed “The Aluminum Womb.” It was a cradle and crib; a home on the road. Her little dog Cinnamon soared through the hatch, followed by the Mother Earthling, glowing as if she had been recently irradiated with a massive dose of joy. The sojourn was too brief and then she was on her way... along the continuum between New England and Nova Scotia. A wild woman living free as a bird traversing the open sky had decided to light, to perch with the Perrons for a welcome respite.

While she was there Carolyn filled her in on a few sordid details then abandoned the effort, preferring to share their time together in other, more fruitful ways. Though no one knew it at the time, this was destined to be their final visit before selling the farm; one last chance for Cathi to sip the nectar. While she was present much mischief was made, as usual; it’s what they all looked most forward to and she did not disappoint. Even the critters acted up for the amusement of others, as if her jovial mood was a transmissible attribute. No one will ever forget the first morning she was there after a late night of frantic, fantastic rollicking. Everyone was tired but happy, congregating in the kitchen for coffee. Carolyn brewed a fresh pot and Roger was helping himself as Cathi peered out the pantry window. Fawn had escaped from the barn; a six-month old calf with personality plus. She would never consider running away from the farm. Instead, she broke out to come

find her playmates... the girls... yes, the cow was another pet. Suddenly Cathi burst into uproarious laughter as she glanced past Roger. Fawn was eating his silk shirt off the clothesline. One sleeve was half way down her throat and she began chewing it like a wad of cud. As Roger began screaming at the poor dear creature, demanding that she release his precious clothing, he became the main attraction of a sideshow occurring on the side of the house. He flipped out on the cow, grabbing the shirt and pulling with all his might as he cussed her repeatedly for ingesting his personal property. It was hysterical. He was hysterical! The man ran like a banshee through the yard, chasing a calf he could not seem to catch. The kitchen windows were lined with onlookers. Carolyn caught her breath and went outside, interceding on his behalf. The calf came to her immediately and she gently withdrew the sleeve from her throat, patted her on the head. She then instructed one of the girls to put her back in her stall. She tried but Carolyn was unable to remove the stain; counting the shirt among the losses, what they had gained was a memory which still makes them laugh, especially the greatest spirit named Cathi!

When she left to continue the journey she drove off into the sunset then had to turn around, returning to retrieve her dog. Cinnamon got left behind in all the commotion: the last laugh of the visit. However, it must be duly noted: Cathi never left them at all. She was and remains an ethereal creature, and is in many ways a lot like the spirits... coming and going yet omnipresent. It would be virtually impossible to love someone as powerfully as they all love Cathi without having her remain ever present in heart. Perhaps she is "spirit" in the finest sense of the word: holy. Visible or invisible, she was always there, always with the family... in spirit. Cathi remains an integral part of the Perron family. No matter where they go... there she is... in a sweet memory or a cute turn of phrase: J-E-L-L-O Nothing! has been instilled into the vernacular of the family language as she was long ago woven into the tapestry of their lives. Now they meet in cyberspace, on Skype. Her pure presence is felt with each reference made to a woman who makes an impression and leaves a mark on every heart, like a residual kiss left on the forehead of an adoring child.

Is human existence one great, exceedingly long continuum? Are we recycled souls, visiting and revisiting this realm until we get it right? If

Heaven is the ultimate home, perhaps a paradise place in the country, who condemned the spirits to remain Earth-bound souls? Is it possible the farm is their idea of Heaven, where they reside as a reward rather than a punishment? Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done... deliver us from evil.

“The only thing wrong with immortality is
that it tends to go on forever.”
Herb Caen

eye of the beholder

“Into my heart’s night / Along a narrow way /
I groped; and lo! the light, / An infinite land of day.”
Rubaiyat of Rumi

We mortals do believe our eyes. We should. There is no legitimate reason to dismiss otherwise consistently reliable senses. It is entirely understandable that there are those who doubt the existence of spirit. If they have not seen it they don’t believe it... they don’t know... simple as that. However, it is equally legitimate to claim, as a witness, the existence of something beyond this realm. Only one belief is certain. Mortals who have, with their own eyes, witnessed the manifestation of spirit claim to have no doubt at all. Trust all the senses, each as the gift of God. “Faith dares the soul to go beyond what the eyes can see.”

Cindy possesses what metaphysicians are fond of calling “The Third Eye” and she uses it in myriad ways. As a child the first indications of the gift were rather subtle though one particular event stuck in memory; the first sign... a harbinger of gifts to come. Raymond was at the farm one afternoon working with Andrea on a joint project for history class. Their research materials were sprawled across the depth and breadth of the dining room table. Cindy came downstairs through the parlor and paused to reflect upon a mess large enough to preclude dinner being eaten in there... they would have to chow down in the kitchen for one more night.

If she was feeling particularly receptive in the moment, Cindy said nothing. She sat quietly in a chair beside her big sister for the sake of idle curiosity. After a few minutes, Cindy leaned back in her chair and looked directly through the front hallway into the kitchen, as if she’d heard something. Raymond wondered what she was looking at as she stood abruptly and walked into the kitchen without saying a word. Andrea was busy and didn’t notice. Raymond became curious and rose from his chair, following behind. As he stepped over to the doorway he saw Cindy standing beside the telephone in the kitchen... just standing there. Then it rang. She answered it. Startled, Ray returned to his seat. A minute later Cindy returned to the dining room to give her big sister the message received. Ray appeared to be astonished. An inquiring mind, he spoke up.

“Cindy, why did you go into the kitchen?”

“Because the phone was going to ring.”

“How did you know that?”

“I don’t know... I just know.”

“Are you listening to this?” Ray tried to get Andrea’s notice and comment.

“What?” She was, but was vague on the details, her rapt attention diverted while reading.

“Cindy says she knew the phone was going to ring.”

“Yes, I know... she does it all the time. Do you think we should use this article in the presentation?”

Realizing his study partner had moved on to another topic, Ray did the same without pressing further for a more complete explanation though, as Cindy recalls, the young man seemed rather stunned by the incident, more so by the nonchalance with which it was addressed. In all the years he spent as a frequent visitor at the farm, Raymond never witnessed anything out of the ordinary. This minor event was all he could recall as anything worth including but it is noteworthy. It speaks to the selective nature of the spirits and a certain ability the children possessed to intuit; for all intents and purposes, to see in the dark. It was enlightening for Raymond to see the third eye in action, yet so taken for granted... nothing out of the ordinary.

No one escaped unscathed. Everyone living in the house of the dead dwelled there as a witness to the images... manifestations that have and will remain with them permanently. Two children saw their mother fly, observing death become her as she screamed and spoke in an alien voice with a language not of this world. The vivid detail of their memories is a testament to the impact made, impressions left by numerous encounters with the spirits. It leaves a mark. Upon reflection they each agree, as difficult as these images are to bear once conjured then revisited, they remain as real as when they occurred, inspiring reverence; awe and respect for God’s eye as the ultimate beholder of every creation, including the spirits. If we are made in the image and likeness, if we are indeed a manifestation of God-consciousness, do we not also peer clear through the Eye of God? It is said that faith dares the soul to go beyond what the eyes can see. By taking a quantum leap of faith, by daring to believe our own eyes, in so doing, we develop the ability to perceive the world with different eyes... an infinite sight which follows the Light of acceptance, emerging from the dark age of fear. Lo! and Behold!

“If you begin to live life looking for the God that
is all around you, every moment becomes a prayer.”

Frank Bianco

a little knowledge

“The only good is knowledge and the only evil is ignorance.”
Socrates

Carolyn always told her girls the truth. “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” Beware of those who proclaim themselves to be the experts of this world. We know nothing. We possess no viable explanation for anything we sense here, so to claim otherwise is disingenuous at best, fraudulent at worst. Under false pretenses, that presumption of uncommon knowledge will make matters worse. This was Carolyn’s philosophical viewpoint. It had evolved over time, with experience. No longer such a trusting soul, she had much to consider. Her new attitude was implicit whenever she’d mutter the profound, yet simple statement beneath her breath, referencing the séance she could not recall. She’d been told what transpired that hellacious evening. Lessons learned by proxy. It pained their mother to know what her children had witnessed. She could only imagine what it must have felt like for them, trembling with fear, wondering if their mom had survived the attack. Waiting... and waiting for some signs of life in a home darkened by death itself. Einstein said it best: “Whoever undertakes to set himself up as judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the Gods.” Perhaps a siren song thrown in for good measure?

The nescient among us would suggest that an incomplete thought is better than no thought at all. Simply not true. Emerson defines awareness as such: “Knowledge is knowing that we cannot know.” Relinquishing the desire is, in itself, transformative. It is not a cosmic throwing of one’s hands in the air. Far from it. To accept that we do not understand is a liberating admission; it cracks open the door and pries the eyes wide as we become observers in this world. Only then can we attain true spiritual freedom. Carolyn grasped this concept in full, speaking words of wisdom: let it be. Comforting comments came at the most opportune time. After the séance the farmhouse became inordinately active for several months. During this period Cynthia began to speak with the spirits as they manifested, instructing them to do her bidding. If she wanted to be left all alone, she told them so and they complied. If she wanted to observe something, they would linger, accommodating her wishes. Suddenly they became cooperative. These acknowledgments made by a child

altered the dynamics in the house to the good. Everyone followed her lead. It was an entirely new level of mutual acceptance and respect. Apparently, that door between dimensions cracked open, wider than anyone ever anticipated, and it stayed that way. It was as if what happened to Carolyn had affected all of them, including the ghosts. They had all witnessed the ravages of a war and wanted only peace. The knowledge spirits possess far exceed any kind of understanding mere mortals could attain. Even though the interaction they engaged in became more frequent and overt, they all knew enough to keep it peaceful while making their presence known. The air became lighter, easier to breathe. The spirits responded with a universal “welcome home”. At last, some measure of peace and quiet.

“Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless,
and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.”
Samuel Johnson

all things considered

“Pure logic is the ruin of the spirit.”
Antoine de Saint-Exupery

It was time to reassess... for everyone. Exposure and experience combined, conspiring to write another new chapter in the Perron family saga. Since the worst of the worst had already happened, it seemed to cast a much lighter shadow across the minds of those who'd observed something not of this world, forced to believe their own eyes. Even the one who had been taken down, succumbing to this force to be reckoned with, knew of its power. For so long, there seemed no rhyme or reason for the visits, no purpose served other than to scare the hell out of little kids. Time to reassess: If it exists and it is capable of manifesting among mortals then the only logical conclusion is as follows: it IS of this world. Evil exists and its foot soldiers walk among us. Inevitably, good triumphs over evil. The bastards are outnumbered. They won't go down without a fight but they always lose in the end and get what they deserve. It was time to begin the long trek out of the darkness into the light.

Roger had much to consider. The man realized he was afraid of his own wife, afraid of his own home, powerless to control the situation, at the mercy of a presence he could not comprehend; precarious at its best. He had to be humbled before he could attain his true humanity. As the tones and overtones of their household had been altered by a stunning encounter, even the lowly spirits seemed to be silenced by the turn of events; subdued and muted for a spell, as humbled and intimidated by that episode as the rest of the family had been. It was as if they'd seen what happened, too. Perhaps they did. It was the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end; a pivotal point... the turning point for all involved. Carolyn came to her senses and claimed her own power. She refused to be manipulated anymore. Roger faced the pragmatic facts of the case. He was forced to admit he was wrong... to admit that demonic forces do exist; pressured into acceptance by an undeniable reality. A kind of “hush” fell all over the world. Acceptance is the key to enlightenment, the master which unlocks every door. It was a trying time for him and two of the children. There was no denying what they'd witnessed. Each of them had to learn how to live with it. Knowledge is power yet they felt powerless to create space in their minds, to both acknowledge the

presence and assimilate this knowledge of it into life in some meaningful way.

The changes were subliminal at first, just below the surface. Gradually, Roger became less reticent and his disposition improved. He lightened and brightened, no longer so predisposed to fits of temper from out of the blue. No more casting aspersions with shadows so long they would touch hearts and minds, altering the mood of any mortal soul within reach. Evolution almost qualifying as a revolution: everything changed as attitudes adjusted to the sudden shift in light. Smiles came more easily, fences were mended as quickly. It had come to all of them supernaturally, as a gift; the blessing after the curse. It was transformational for the family.

Carolyn began her ascension. She would not languish longer in the depths of despair. Instead, she rose up. It was time to fight back and she would not be taken alive, never again. Declaring her intention to break free of whatever it was trying to claim her from within: No more. Go back to hell where you belong; where you came from. What overcame Carolyn that night was not Bathsheba Sherman and it was not Mrs. Arnold. It was not anyone dwelling in the farmhouse but it had access because it was invited in. It had come from beyond, from another realm... elsewhere. But then, evil is everywhere, omnipresent, like God. One must make a decision to be in good spirits! Carolyn fought her way out of the darkness by simply becoming consistently lighthearted. It was her weapon of choice, countering evil with good. It wasn't a fair fight... for the demon! Rising from the ashes, she snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

Christine slept right through the séance. It was supernatural sleep. She was dead to the world, considered a blessing bestowed: a mercy. The poor child had been through enough, seen enough. Even though April was privy to the aftermath, she had not seen her mother fly across the room, not like a witch (without the benefit of a broomstick) but backwards and not of her own volition. Lifted then thrown with a force that sent her feet in the air, it was entirely in control. What grabbed Carolyn that fateful frightful night flung her across the Universe, emerging straight from hell... pure evil. It spoke through her in an ancient and alien language no one present could discern... not of this world? It was there, among them. Hell on Earth.

The notion never escaped them: if it happened once it could happen again. For awhile afterward, there was tiptoe-style watchfulness, an ever-present

need to peer over one's shoulder or keep an observant eye open at the back of one's head. In time, this tendency subsided and what came to claim Carolyn never reared its ugly head again. What occurred was legitimately classified as evil but in the end, it was to the good; transformed as a blessing from a curse. What remains to be seen will all be revealed in its right and proper time, of course. All things considered, less heat and more light was called for in the situation, so their family followed the Light. Being happy is its own best reward. To know the incredible lightness of being from within is a holy gift.

“More wisdom is latent in things as they are than
in all the words men use.”
Antoine de Saint-Exupery

more harm than good

“Turn your wounds into wisdom.”

Oprah Winfrey

They meant no harm. The Warrens had come to make peace not war, but it backfired in their faces. Some of those tethered to them had ulterior motives but Ed and Lorraine had come only to help. To this day, the Perron family believes as a whole in the pure motivation of a couple who knew enough to identify the situation yet not enough to dispel the culprits wreaking havoc in a portal cleverly disguised as a farmhouse, one which remains alive with death. They did their best and who could ask for more? Roger may have been unappreciative of their efforts at the time but even he'll admit they were right about what was happening. Like him, they just didn't know how to control it. As Franny had forewarned Carolyn, there was real potential for opening a door which they would find impossible to close. Whatever attacked Carolyn left when it was ready under its own power; it was not ushered from the premises nor was it dismissed from class as the Warrens had been. Rather, it did what it came to accomplish, on a mission to make its presence known... thirty years hence, to the world.

Anyone observing objectively would call their encounter an unnatural disaster but it is more complicated. If truth be told in full Ed and Lorraine Warren were a catalyst to much-needed change. Their presence prompted a seismic shift in thinking, especially for Roger. As much as he resisted, he was listening. He was watching. He was there. A crash course if ever there was one. They were all drifting in uncharted territory, navigating within treacherous waters with the common sense of direction to guide them. In spite of all the tools at their disposal, they were blown off course by a rogue wind of supernatural origin. They did what they could and no one can fault them for that.

Sure, there were other issues. Keepsakes were forever lost and gone but not forgotten. A serious breach of confidentiality had resulted in curious folks dropping by unannounced for a visit to the Netherworld. There were problems intrinsic to an association. The investigation they conducted did no harm to their careers. They were both transfixed by what they'd witnessed at the farm so this story became the centerpiece of many a seminar for years to come, by all accounts. Still, it was clear... they were not there for the

notoriety or future fame and fortune. They had come to help. In some strange way, they did. They listened to the children and comforted Carolyn. Yes, she was physically injured in the process but then again, so was Ed... by her husband.

First, do no harm. As the mantra of those who care for the sick and infirmed, the phrase likewise applies to those who seek out others under supernatural siege. Try not to stir things up. Identify the culprits. Never, ever provoke. Acknowledge and engage, if you dare. Crack the door open... that's how the Light gets in. But first, do no harm. The notions are incompatible... doing so is inevitable. Harm is almost a foregone conclusion when inviting an unwelcome guest... feelings are bound to get hurt; elbows bruised, noses bloodied. All but begging for trouble, it came to their door and let itself in but only because the door had been left wide open.

In the grand scheme of things, from the distance of time and space, it all seems to have happened precisely the way it should have... everything in its right and proper time. It took thirty years to tell the truth because the truth is unbelievable, requiring a quantum leap of faith. In the midst of harm, some good was done, as well. If human beings are in one another's lives with purpose and reason then the Warrens were supposed to establish this tenuous bond with the Perron family. They were supposed to see what they had witnessed and they were destined to be the ones to spread the news far and wide, across the Universe. Perhaps the news will do the world some good, after all. Perhaps there are no accidents, no such thing as coincidence, in this realm or any other. All of them have been inextricably linked because of this case: a connection established, resulting in a convergence of events. A confluence occurred, as if ordained by God. What did they learn in class? They know nothing at all.

Sequestered in a suburb of Providence, R.I., Carolyn discovered the real estate listing and thought, "It couldn't hurt to look." Yes, it could. She wanted to go take a peek at the Arnold Estate. What harm could it do? Prophetic words, indeed. Perhaps Carolyn was prescient, after all.

"Don't allow your wounds to transform you
into someone you are not."

Paulo Coelho

wrack and ruin

“Eternity is not something that begins after you are dead.

It is going on all the time. We are in it now.”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Peering in the mirror, Carolyn observed her features with new eyes. The woman had seen and been through so much, it left her weak and weary, though her resolve finally returned. She was in mortal combat with an immortal entity, actively fighting her way back. Imperative she return to her children, they were her best and only reason not to give up the ghost and succumb to the misery. At times it was mind over matter coping with the pain. She felt it in her bones from the inception; the oppressive weight of the Universe crushing and compressing her joints, boggling her mind over matters of spirit she could not control. Still a young woman, her body belied its actual age. It had deteriorated rapidly over the years spent living (and almost dying) at the farm. There were times when she felt like she was dying, and death did not become her. She longed for the vibrancy of her youth to return, the dream of everyone seeking the fountain to sip the nectar. It had been too long since she availed herself of what the farm had to offer... it possessed restorative qualities. As she'd grown disenchanted with the experience inside the house, she forgot to seek out Mother Nature for some good, sound advice. There had to be a path out there which would lead her home.

For some inexplicable reason, a glance into the mirror triggered the visceral response. Carolyn was suddenly panic stricken, feeling trapped in a place which offered no real comfort, held captive in a physical form which was failing her. She was too young to feel so old. Paralyzed with fear, as if her body was turning to stone, she made a decision. This would not do. None of it. How to make light of the darkness... how to feel free again?

As sore and stiff as if having been stuck in the stocks as some sadistic form of punishment for a crime she didn't commit, the woman was still under assault. The battle had only begun.

“Wrack 'em up!” Then into the stocks these poor unfortunate souls went, trapped and tortured, accused of being witches, one and all, then drowned for good measure to see if they would float. Atrocities committed in the name of God by the body politic, holy men who knew not what they did. Ridding the

world of evil by perpetrating another act of evil, the devil's foot soldiers marched on in pursuit of the wicked, in a holy war. On their crusade to banish the devil they became him.

"Wrack 'em up!" But this wasn't a game of billiards where colorful spheres bounce around in the green felt universe, colliding in space then falling gracefully through black holes tucked into remote corners of the cosmos. This was no game. It was real and she was in for the fight of her life, for her life. Carolyn felt as if she was falling apart; gone too soon... gone to wrack and ruin.

Resenting the label "oppressed" attached to her persona by the Warrens, it was the anger about it which also prompted a realization. She had changed in inexplicable ways... she was not herself, not the woman she'd been before moving to the farm. For the first time in a long time she stared in a mirror, into her own aging eyes and older soul, as a deliberate act of self-reflection. Her husband and children assured her "something" had come into her body, if only briefly. Something hateful and mean-spirited tossed her across a room and into another, done with such force and precision it could not be mistaken for any other force on the planet. It was not an attempt to kill her. It could have easily snapped her neck if it wanted to, but it meant to use her to inform everyone else of its presence, everyone watching it happen in terror. Loathing the word "possessed" she had to admit to at least the possibility it had happened. A sense of urgency available to accompany her sense of direction, Carolyn abandoned the mirror which lied to her face and went for a walk in the woods. Opening the kitchen door, she noticed it was twilight, a perfect time to see everything there was to see along her sacred journey, one which would inevitably lead her home to her kids in the end.

"As nightfall does not come at once, neither does oppression.

In both instances there is a twilight
where everything remains seemingly unchanged.

And it is in such twilight that we all must be
aware of change in the air—however slight—lest we become
unwitting victims of the darkness."

William Orville Douglas

this too shall pass

“All truth passes through three stages.

First, it is ridiculed. Second,
it is violently oppressed.

Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”

Arthur Schopenhauer

The only thing constant in the Universe is change: it is, for all intents and purposes, all fluxed up! It is with this understanding that one begins to assimilate the adventures; the trials and tribulations called life. If and when we learn to acknowledge, observe and appreciate our own ignorance, embrace it as an opportunity to learn or experience life without reservation, we cease being such fear-based-carbon-units and evolve exponentially as a blossom opens, revealing its face to the sunshine which, in response, instantly brightens its hue. What a truly splendid turn of events. To everything... turn turn turn... there is a season. Carolyn returned to her family.

The solitude had come to an end. She made peace with her tormentors and they, in turn never came to her again. Even if they had, she would have perceived them differently; the abject fear factor was gone. It meant liberation for all as a tenuous reconciliation was established... a tacit agreement to live and let die. As months passed many manifestations occurred, all benign in nature. The threatening abruptly ceased. If they appeared in form it was only briefly and then, no harm was implied, no fear incurred. It was the new day they had dared to hope for and it had arrived. Acceptance is a gift. It works both ways; exchange is a healthy thing. It began to show. Carolyn gained some weight. The color came back to her cheeks as her eyes brightened with the sunshine on her face. Interaction with her children became commonplace again even though the distance between herself and her husband persisted. He noticed the change as well, attempting to approach her, compliment her, acknowledging the progress. Still, she could not let him into her heart; the only sadness in an otherwise happy time. The attention and affection withheld from her spouse was instead showered upon her children. Her rejection of him had fringe benefits. He tried harder. He wanted to heal as well. It was too late. Alienation was complete; the contempt, too engrained to reverse.

This too shall pass, he surely must have thought at the time. Her disdain for

him was the only constant in the Universe, or so it seemed and Roger began drifting away from her. He too began becoming more involved with his children if, for no other reason, to afford him some semblance of companionship whenever he was at home. Ironic: the disintegration of their marriage would ultimately yield what had been sadly missing for the wanting children. It was a time of rapid eye movement... everything appeared to be happening at light speed. Manifestations came frequently brief, fleeting glimpses into the past. The girls were busy. Extracurricular activities had become the norm and schedules were posted and kept by necessity. Carolyn generally had a house full of company. The children found friends who accepted their lot in life and passed no judgment. They all had a healthy appetite for life and Carolyn's cooking. The farm became a social gathering spot, especially as Nancy came of age and discovered how to circumvent the dictates of her mother: Disobedient heathen.

During this time Fran began to mention some unusual pain, hoping it would pass. Andrea left home for college, reassured by a loving mother that this painful longing to return to her family would also pass. It never did... and neither did Fran's pain. It would only subside with her death. Over the next four years a family would undergo a fundamental transition, culminating with the ultimate decision to forsake their farm for greener pastures. In the interim, Cindy evolved into a being no less spiritual than the ghosts, developing her third eye... growing pains incurred in the process as something sacred, divine at the source, descended upon her. She integrated in a way which appeared perfectly natural. There was much more to learn; more to see and more to come. Christine had yet to know the panic and pain of entrapment in a trunk... it was coming. April would endure unspeakable pain, ultimately resulting in the complete abandonment of a little boy she loved and Roger would seek his relief in the arms of another woman, though he feels the need to deny the obvious. Don't ask... he'll never tell. Tumultuous times lay ahead, my dears. Breathe deeply. The only thing constant in the Universe is change. In Time, this too shall pass.

“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.
Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.”
Madame Marie Curie

The Soul's Prayer

In childhood's pride I said to Thee:
“O Thou, who mad’st me of Thy breath,
Speak, Master, and reveal to me
Thine inmost laws of life and death.

“Give me to drink each joy and pain
Which Thine eternal hand can mete,
For my insatiate soul can drain
Earth’s utmost bitter, utmost sweet.

“Spare me no bliss, no pang of strife,
Withhold no gift or grief I crave,
The intricate lore of love and life
And mystic knowledge of the grave.”

Lord, Thou didst answer stern and low:
“Child, I will harken to thy prayer,
And thy unconquered soul shall know
All passionate rapture and despair.

“Thou shalt drink deep of joy and fame,
And love shall burn thee like a fire,
And pain shall cleanse thee like a flame,
To purge the dross from thy desire.

“So shall thy chastened spirit yearn
To seek from its blind prayer release,
And spent and pardoned, sue to learn
The simple secret of my Peace.

I, bending from my sevenfold height,
Will teach thee of My quickening grace,
Life is a prism of My light,
And death the shadow of My face.”

Sarojini Naidu



“Be faithful to that which exists within yourself.”

Andre Gide

VIII. BLESS ME FATHER

“Get thee behind me Satan.”
Matthew xvi. 23

The Warrens brought many people to the Perron home place, including a priest. No one among the family can remember his name, though there was a vague recollection about him having recently written a book about life after death. However, what matters is the collective memory of a family in turmoil recalling his loving, calming presence. He was a kind and gentle man who'd come to help. His soft eyes and warm words soothed and comforted the wounded souls dwelling within a house alive with death. He seemed to understand their circumstances from personal experience and was convinced he could assist in ridding their home of the spirits once and for all. It was not overconfidence. He was humble, a holy man of peace.

Soon after the rumors began in town, there had been some suggestion uttered that the family worship elsewhere; not an outright dismissal from the church but rather, a firm nudge in another direction... any other direction. It seemed ironic to Carolyn that a religion credited with the acknowledgement of spirits and demons, development of the process to address their existence (through overt expulsion in the form of exorcism) would fail to support a family in need of assistance in this realm. Demonology has its roots and very foundation in Roman Catholicism and those who know the most regarding the evil ways of such tormentors come directly from the Vatican: a handful of priests who do nothing else but travel, investigating claims or suspicions of demonic possession. These mortal men do their utmost to rid the tortured souls of a presumed intruder, waging battle with immortal souls in the dark: Holy Warriors on a crusade to rid the world of evil.

The priest who accompanied the Warrens to the farm was fluent on the topic. Experience had been his teacher and he knew what the Perrons faced was daunting, indeed. He went through the house and looked at the pitiful children with compassion in his watery eyes. A kind and gentle man, he and

Ed Warren attempted to convince Roger of the necessity to act on the night of the séance. During that fateful night, he seemed as stunned by a demonic force, by the presence of evil, as anybody else in the room. Priests can be frightened, too. They too are mortal and when facing something as powerful and grotesque as what he witnessed, an intimidating force from an unfamiliar realm, they react as other mortals do. He was not exempt from the shock and horror of it. Bless him, dear Father, as he blesses those in his presence during moments of fear and incomprehension, trepidation and doubt. Ultimately, the kind man was dismissed from the house along with the Warrens and all of those who had come to participate; to witness an event of their own making. Calling forth an evil spirit through a conjuring that should not have occurred in the home, they had essentially asked for it. Be careful what you wish for. Roger was correct in his assessment as Franny had been right. It is hazardous to open a door one cannot close again. They were all playing with fire and brimstone, but this wasn't a game. Too little knowledge is a very dangerous thing. Dear God, forgive them. They know not what they do.

Confronting the spirits in an attempt to identify and reason with them is similar to an absurdly mortal predisposition; an assumption that humanity is formed in the image and likeness of God. Perhaps there is some elemental truth to the notion in terms of sharing Divine Mind. However, it is the best possible argument for God being flawed and imperfect, embodying a marked proclivity encompassing good and evil. Human beings are so; even the finest mortal who has lived in good faith, kept the laws of conscience, practiced the golden rule is capable of behaving in ways to the contrary on all counts when plunged into a set of bizarre circumstances which test their resolve. Andrea spoke quietly with him on the front porch as the others entered the house. A daughter's concern for her mother prompted their conversation initially but once he had offered his assurance regarding her mother's care and safety, the eldest moved on into territory he hardly anticipated, asking questions about the Universe, the Nature of God Consciousness and the Holy Spirit. Her fascination with all things mystical and metaphysical captured his attention. It prompted questions from him in response to her inquiries. The gentleman thought this was a reaction to the episodes occurring in the house when in fact, it was little more than intellectual curiosity. The child had no idea what might occur that evening... she simply wanted to pick his brain for his own particular perspective and she gravitated naturally toward him, feeling safe in

his presence, certain he had something of value to offer. He did... but so did she; the few moments they spent together were enlightening for both.

She was just fifteen at the time though Andrea had already come to the conclusion that she need not seek God in other houses of worship, as she dwelled in the House of the Lord... a house of darkness and light. Good and evil. Spirits and demons. Her farmhouse was both a blessing and a curse. Andrea gave the man an immense amount to think about over a brief period of time. He could barely respond to one notion before another was introduced. Staring at the kid in amazement, she continued with the profession of a well-developed belief system, the basis for which had come from her powers of observation within her own home as well as from Nature. She reassured him that God did indeed exist. As such IT embodies the Universe and every conceivable element within... including human beings, for good and evil.

We are all divine manifestation of God-consciousness and though we take solid form as mortals, we are essentially spirit; divine energy in action, in concert with the cosmos. Truth be told, we can fly. With realization came resolution for the child. She'd no longer perceived their living arrangements as being in conflict with the spirits. This was no longer an us versus them proposition. According to Andrea, she was convinced we were all made up of the same stuff... energy... and as a result, we are all essentially the same. She drew no significant distinctions between the living and the dead other than the fact that the spirits energy has already transmuted, thus assuming another form. She wanted to tell him this before he entered the house of the holy so he would understand. His presence was important to the process. She wanted him to level the battle field. Ah, the power of knowledge.

“In fact, it seems that present-day science,
with one sweeping step back
across millions of centuries, has succeeded in
bearing witness to that primordial

‘Fiat lux’ [let there be light] uttered at the moment when, along with matter,
there burst forth from nothing a sea of light and radiation, while the particles of
the chemical elements split and formed into
millions of galaxies . . .

Hence, creation took place in time, therefore there is
a Creator, God exists!”

Pope Pius XII

Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences 1951

a turn for the worse

“Among the attributes of God, although they are all equal,
mercy shines with even more brilliancy than justice.”

Miguel de Cervantes

Their faith was evolving. In the process, it was also going blind. They could not see the benevolent force so often called upon for rescue, nor could they discern the invisible: the omnipresent source of grace and mercy from which they had required help; respite under siege. The children learned about the miraculous power of prayer due to the supernatural events occurring in their lives, but this faith was truly tested when their mother suddenly became gravely ill, a natural phenomenon. They saw tangible results as their heartfelt prayers were uttered then answered. A spiritual awakening occurred as a call for help went forth into the cosmos: pleas for assistance from beyond. This time was different. Carolyn was dying. A constant vigil began; five days and nights spent pleading for their mother’s life. Have mercy. Though the shared experience was not supernatural in origin, it was no less a crisis. It was the pure fear of losing their mother. As faith went blind the girls utilized others senses to practice the presence of God. Begging was allowed in any crisis.

When the girls arrived home from school they found Carolyn bedridden; delirious with fever. She had been sick for several days and Roger was away on an extended trip in the dead of winter. A sudden turn for the worse duly noted, Andrea obeyed her sense of direction, detecting the impending doom. Racing from her mother’s room to the phone, she called for the ambulance. All of the children hovered around her, terrified out of their minds. It was obvious how serious the situation was by sight alone; the woman could not breathe, she could not respond to them, she could not even ask for help. Her deterioration was too rapid to ignore. In spite of contrary assurances made during the onset of illness. She told them she would be all right. She wasn’t. She was dying.

Cindy lay weeping beside her mom, gently stroking her hair, drenched with sweat. It was twenty minutes before the ambulance arrived. A frantic family did whatever they could to comfort the poor soul while they waited. A glass of water offered... she could not drink, even when Andrea lifted her head up. Carolyn was too weak. Instead, a cool washcloth was placed on her forehead

while the baby of the family held her mother's hand, tenderly trying to convince her it was time to go... a siren song audible in the distance.

There was no mistaking the critical nature of an illness taken hold; it was obvious Carolyn was suffocating. As the ambulance approached Cindy was overcome with a sense of panic and dread; terrified that, once they took her away, they would never see their mother alive again. Overwhelming sense of urgency caused Cindy to lean into her mom's ear then ask a very difficult but necessary question: "Mom, if you die, if you leave us will you please come back? I know you can. We all know you can. Promise! Will you please come back to us? Mom?"

As paramedics entered the bedroom carrying a stretcher, Carolyn spoke the last words, the only words she would whisper that afternoon: "I promise, I will." It was the answer Cindy needed to hear. A man lifted Carolyn onto the gurney in what seemed like a split second. They immediately recognized the gravity of the situation. Death becomes her, rapidly. Neither of them asked Andrea where their father was or if they would be all right left alone. They swept her out the door as if she'd turned to dust... ashes lighter than air. She was gone, in what seemed a second, their mother was gone. The girls listened to the siren until it fell silent in the distance, too far gone.

Andrea was just fifteen at the time but appeared older, old enough to take over, shoes she had to fill for the next five days as a surrogate parent. Those same shoes she had worn comfortably in the past. Roger called the house four days later and was informed of the situation. He was furious with his eldest daughter for not having called some adult to come and stay with them. Of course, he was actually furious with himself for having waited so long to call home. Andrea understood. She knew her father well, accepting of the fallout she did not deserve. He drove all night long and arrived the following morning as the girls were preparing to leave for school. He was exhausted, bleary-eyed, but cognizant enough to embrace Andrea as warmly as any father would the child he had wounded; as close as she would come to an apology for their earlier telephone conversation.

Handing him the telephone number to the hospital, the children ran to the bus stop. When they arrived home later their house was empty again. Roger was gone. Andrea built a fire then began to prepare their dinner as the other children did their homework. The mood was dark and subdued. No note. No message. Naturally the girls wondered what was happening but no one spoke

of the dreadful sense of things aloud. Rather, they held their collective breath and waited for word. When the car pulled into the yard a sigh of relief rung out among them: Oh, thank God. There she was, their mother seated right beside their father. She had finally been discharged from the hospital.

Her own children were terrified to touch or embrace her. She appeared to be so weak and fragile, as the skeletal remains of an emaciated body ravaged by disease. It was as close to death as she had come at the time and everyone in the family knew it without being told. Cindy gently kissed her mother on the cheek then whispered, "I knew it. I knew you would come back to us, one way or the other! I prayed and prayed. I begged God. We all did." Roger assisted his wife into their bedroom and there she lingered for another full week. He took over the household while she recovered. The day she emerged was cause for celebration.

Memory fails Carolyn in this particular instance. She has virtually no recollection of becoming ill or of being hospitalized with pneumonia. That time has been lost; swept from her mind, as if it never occurred. Carolyn had been through so much. Her defenses were down with her weight. She was compromised, as was her immune system, placing her at great risk; highly susceptible to whatever disease might try to claim her. The spirits cannot be held accountable. They were never officially blamed yet they were culpable to a certain extent, as what Carolyn was enduring was related to their antics. She was run down, sleep-deprived due to the challenges faced within those walls. Even though the spirits didn't make her sick their presence and all the stress factored into the illness and her markedly diminished capacity to fight off this aggressive infection. Simply too weakened to fight it on her own, it nearly claimed her life. Though her memory of this incident is impaired, the woman knew what it was like to stand on the threshold of death's door. She thanked her rescuer for having made the call for help on her behalf. Andrea claims none of the credit. A merciful God gets all the glory for this one. The woman should have died. She was that far gone when they found her. Perish the thought. Counting losses including the loss of what would have otherwise been a horrific memory, she'd been victorious in battle, in a fight for her life.

It is often said, some good comes from every evil. It was both a wake-up call and a rude awakening. Carolyn began taking much better care of herself, in body and mind; no longer allowing it to wander aimlessly where it could get into trouble, in the darkest recesses of existence. She began to feed and

heal herself, because of an awfully close encounter... a brush with death. Her girls remain grateful she even survived the ordeal. Perhaps there truly is power in numbers, the collective prayer from the heart sent forth mercifully answered. Carolyn had finally returned to her family. She kept her promise... one way or the other... she came back to her children on blind faith alone. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord.

“Gratitude is born in hearts that take time to count up
past mercies.”

Charles E. Jefferson

a wing and a prayer

“Thou dost understand my thought from afar.”
Psalms 139:2

During their years in the farmhouse a conversion of faith occurred. Based on numerous supernatural episodes, every member of the family conversed with a power that protected those who requested help. It instilled in each one a sense of hope and an implicit understanding of something existing beyond this world. These conversions of faith were different for each individual; an amalgamation of concepts and sensory perceptions based on previous ideas and current observations. No one escaped unscathed or unenlightened in the process. There was no doubt about it; no question what or where or who God might be in any given moment: Everywhere omnipresent made perfect sense, given the circumstances. The journey as sojourn was incredible at times. A highly personalized evolution of spirit took root in the consciousness of seven mere mortals, members of a family incessantly subjected to the whims and fancies of the spirit world. As the Universe itself exists, their gradual realization remained perpetually susceptible to change, as change is the only constant. Bombarded by myriad images, an onslaught of shadows and light, each adjusted in their own unique way. Prayer was practiced in moments of panic but also in those rare, quiet moments of solitude when no one was there to hear the words, except God; moments when it was easy to touch the face of God. The girls would often practice the presence as a group. They prayed for each other, their parents and pets. Everyone requested assistance at one time or another. As adults, Roger and Carolyn had the fundamentals down based on how they were raised, what they had learned of religion and faith in childhood. Whatever stuck is what carried them at first, something to fall back on in a pinch, a tug, a scratch or a punch. In time they learned how to engage differently... directly. Crisis creates desire for connection. It stirs the passions and heightens awareness. It brings one closer to what is already there. According to William Wordsworth, “Faith is a passionate intuition.” It is the common sense of knowing we are not alone; a voice inside the head telling us the truth of our existence. It sometimes comes from somewhere outside ourselves but speaks from within or it comes from within as source. Either way, it carries messages received by those who listen: It ain’t really over when it’s over. This realization is, for some, no comfort at all. Instead, it

is perceived as a curse; something to fear. As those who fear death know, the prospect of nothingness is terrifying. Everlasting life is a more daunting proposition. Welcome to forever. Learn your lessons well, my dears. You'll need them later on to get you through the next round! Blessed be.

Truth be told, their family got by on a wing and a prayer: feast or famine; joy or misery with frequent pit stops in between, depending on conditions and circumstances. Prayer became a passionate endeavor, not an escape from but an attachment to a force present within the house. However, it was not a pre-scheduled event. Whenever the children gathered they did so spontaneously, especially if one sensed a threat. Danger! They relied upon intuition about such things, all from a very young age. Each learned to listen closely to her own inner voice: from the point of connection. Looking inward reaching out, expressing that which is deeply embedded in a mortal soul, the big dig down deep is holy therapeutic practice. Mankind can achieve healing. A realization of oneness develops over time as we come to know ourselves as an integral part of the whole and the holy, achieved through pure direct communication, solidified by belief... a conversion of faith. This is the secret. This is a gift.

The conversation was silent and became ongoing. From an early age they began practicing prayer ritual as it had been learned during their few years of exposure to the church; clasping little hands, bowing their heads, crossing themselves with a word: "Amen". As they matured, so did the understanding evolve and prayer was incorporated as a natural aspect of consciousness. The messages conveyed were rather unconventional by standards of the church; not what one learns in classes or in a pew from the pulpit. Hail Mary, full of grace... Our Father, who art in Heaven. Rather, it became almost perpetual conversation, often passive, sometimes pensive and no penance involved or required. They spoke with God in much the same way they spoke with the spirits, as if they were one in the same. Well, as it turns out, if we can hear ourselves thinking, God is listening... from within... not so far after all.

It is not a bit frightening to go through life on a wing and a prayer. Both are reliable forms of transportation (and better than a broomstick) when traveling in mind across the Universe. There is much to absorb and consider; much to teach and so much more to learn. Best to float along, as spirit does.

"Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;

The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

all in good time

"For death is no more than a turning of us
from time to eternity."

William Penn

History teaches the collective us about ourselves throughout the course of recorded time. In the past we collectively agreed to measure time, using techniques developed for the purpose of discerning our place in the Universe. They studied the stars; astral bodies that light the night sky. How fitting. Do we fit in the Universe? Of course! But how? From light years to milliseconds, we measure time obsessively. Galileo is thus related to Hubble is related to Einstein is related to Aristotle as God. Each contributed to an associative understanding, an accumulated knowledge which defines then clarifies the we for those moments spent here on Earth. The precision with which we measure time is all to the good. It works for us and that's what counts. Infinity doesn't care how we keep a schedule or count our days, as long as we arrive on time... as time is of the essence.

Carolyn was moving right along with intention. Something pressing had her complete attention as she rounded a hard corner passing from the kitchen into the front hallway and there he was, the one the girls named Manny. She suspected it was Johnny Arnold but no matter. He was obviously engaged in some form of transaction; communication with another soul, invisible to her mortal eyes. The man was groomed and well dressed. He was leaning into the front door on a bit of an angle, jacket drawn back, his right hand tucked into the pocket of trousers. It was his typically nonchalant pose, something with which they were all familiar. Carolyn stopped abruptly to stare at the figure before her. He then turned toward the astonished woman, his genteel manner evident in each perceived movement he made and he focused on his unexpected guest. He gazed directly into her eyes: Engagement. It was time enough; she noticed his face now appeared more haggard and weatherworn with age, but soft and serene; he looked about forty, as she recalls. There was no question about it. This was the same young man, the one she'd seen on numerous occasions leaning into the doorways, leg cocked to the jam; quirky little giggly grin on his lips. Recognition was instant... for both of them. He

greeted the woman with knowing eyes then calmly turned again, through time, back into eternity. She remembers thinking that he had aged well and recalls feeling perceived as a spirit with whom he was equally familiar. And then he was gone.

It was a moment of realization, cosmic incident creating a seismic shift in her perceptions of the spirit world from core to crust. It was a revelation; a blessed event. On some visceral level Carolyn understood her omnipotent role in the reality of their encounter; she had witnessed this same entity, a character with whom she was familiar, at a different stage during his life. He became something more than a solid apparition; his existence in the hallway, his interaction with yet another invisible spirit, his peaceful, knowing glance her way, all factored in as she thoughtfully considered what she observed. It posed more questions and answered nothing, which was the same outcome of every manifestation ever witnessed in the house. There are no answers in this realm; there are clues for a curious mind to ponder. Was he a reflection of a dream or perhaps his own memory in another dimension? Was he truly as real as he appeared? This mistress of the house had much on her mind. In those few moments following her passage through the portal, Carolyn came to another realization. Her obsession with research abruptly ended. It did not matter who they were... they are . . . it is all that matters. They still are... and were... and will be... and with these thoughts all time blended into a perfect patchwork manuscript of history no longer requiring the naming of names. Inquiry became irrelevant as a point of reference; still interesting, somehow far less significant as she straddled time and space tight rope walking, no net. A war had raged for years; not an overt conflict with the spirits as much as it was an internal struggle. In an instant Carolyn made her own quantum leap of consciousness, abandoning the corporeal confines of logical thought for an ethereal embracing of an intuitive process, liberating her immediately. She felt him look at her, and then he was gone, but not really gone: Never really gone. Omnipresent... like God. In the moment they shared on a bridge between dimensions, Carolyn learned far more than she ever had from any history book. His kind eyes contained the volumes of eternity... in the blink of an eye he spoke to her, revealing the integrated nature of the Universe. He was past, she was future but for an instant they were present together in time.

“Life is hardly more than a fraction of a second.
Such a little time to prepare oneself for eternity!”

Paul Gauguin

comfort zone

“There are nights when the wolves are silent and
only the moon howls.”

George Carlin

That fight was awful: the worst one. Children fled to the far reaches of their house but there would be no escaping unscathed. Simply knowing it was still happening in their absence was difficult enough. They didn't need to know the details to know it was bad. A blatant accusation of infidelity flew like daggers from her lips; swords shooting from Carolyn's eyes, impaling Roger from across the kitchen, leaving him pinned and wriggling to the wall. He argued and then denied it with an uncharacteristic weakness in his voice then left the house abruptly, his car tearing from the yard as if it were a bandage maliciously removed from the surface of the fresh wound; raw and bloody. A pernicious exchange left her drained; despondent. His response, his demeanor confirmed all of her suspicions. Trust was gone, never to return. Carolyn did not believe a word her husband uttered in his own defense... not a single word of it... and he knew it. That's why he left. Void of hope for a tattered, unraveling marriage, she remembered how their savage words had rung through the valley, trembling along currents of cool spring air, dispersing into the cosmos; the dissonant bells of a funeral procession. He would not confess. The man neither requested nor required absolution. Ever staunch and resolute, he stormed from the house, stomping through the muck and mire of soft, porous earth. The foot soldier had his marching orders and was determined to carry out the charge: dismissed. Carolyn considered him a deserter... in every conceivable way. Split the scene... stage left. Hit the road. The pain in her heart was supernatural. She could barely breathe.

What the woman was certain she knew had been gnawing at the lining of her empty stomach for several days, devouring her from inside out. Though she tried to keep it away from her children, it was obvious to all. Something had gone terribly wrong; something of this world. As their dutiful mother, she had no choice but to persevere. Simply because she'd perceived her life was in shambles was no reason to abandon her young. Assuming her responsibilities did not end with a marriage. Carolyn had taken Christine to Chepachet for a dentist appointment earlier that afternoon, waiting behind in

the car while her daughter went into the office alone. She could not drag herself from the vehicle... too wounded to move.

Carolyn had wept throughout the day while her children were in school, affording her grief some privacy. But there were places to go and people to see. She remained behind in the car because she was self-conscious and well knew she was incapable of sitting in an office waiting room and pretending nothing was wrong when, in fact, everything was wrong. After the dentist finished the procedure Chris went to the desk and realized her mother had not given her a check to pay the fee. She excused herself and ran out to the car only to find the woman bereft, crumpled on the seat, wiping her face with some dirty rag from the floorboard. She heard Christine's gentle knock at the window and tried to stifle her tears, to keep this horrible breach from her children, but they all knew something awful had happened. They knew their mother's heart was broken. Chrissy returned to the car once she paid the bill then the two traveled home in silence. The child reached out and held her mother's hand. She knew without asking, this was a crisis unlike any other they had faced as a family.

Though it had been a gut-wrenching day, possibly the worst of her life, it was far from over. April, about to turn ten had a celebration to attend, a party being thrown in her honor. Her friend Felicia had planned it and April still needed a ride to Pascoag, then home again a few hours later. Carolyn had to suppress the anger and an all-consuming grief to make it through dinner then get her youngest daughter to the festivities on time. It needed to be all about April this night; a mother swallowed back the tears before they ever reached her swollen, bloodshot eyes.

The house remained quiet that evening. Roger never returned home; the girls did their chores and homework without as much as a nudge from their mother. Wandering the farmhouse, awaiting the notice of a telephone call to come retrieve her daughter, Carolyn busied herself with a series of mindless, mundane little chores, avoiding only the washing of mirrors so she would not have to behold the face of despair. Keeping a distance from her children did not shield them from her vacancy, an essence void of hope. This time she failed to keep a secret. The palpable poisonous vapor spread throughout the dwelling like an airborne virus, attacking the system of all it encountered. No soul was immune from an insidious disease running rampant throughout the household. Each in their own way, children mourned with her, though they

didn't yet know why. They knew it was bad. They all sensed the marriage was coming unglued.

Their father would return in time and would privately make amends for whatever infraction occurred. However, on this cold night in March, no one could imagine that time would come. It felt like a tearing and shredding of the fabric of the universal shroud. It felt final. Carolyn took the call and left the house in silence. Everyone knew where she was going. Everyone knew not to ask to go along. It was understood; she needed time to be alone and as big as their house was, it did not afford the privacy to scream from the core of her being. No estate afforded space enough to muffle such an outcry.

Squelching the disgust, Carolyn plastered on the brightest smile she could possibly muster for her daughter. April was thrilled to see her and she had a wonderful time with her friends. They'd laughed and chatted along the way while a mother, turning on the dashboard light, glanced over at April's haul as the child proudly displayed her numerous gifts. Carolyn made a real effort to engage her in conversation with her then almost-ten-year-old and did well with it most of the way home, assuming a far more quiet demeanor as they approached the house. The interior glow had to go: Extinguished. It was not just a distraction while driving. Feeling suddenly self-conscious with her own child, Carolyn was afraid the harsh light would reveal the equally severe pain, afraid as she was to expose the truth on her face. She didn't want April to see by the light an absence of it in her mother's moist eyes. It had been a special night, a celebration, and it had to stay that way.

Relieved Roger had not returned, Carolyn pulled the car into their yard. She was prepared to keep going, as if she had missed the turn but thankfully the driveway was empty. April ran inside with packages dangling from both arms, anxious to show her sisters how kind her friends had been. She knew such folly would take a few minutes, so Carolyn lingered outside, taking cool air into hot lungs through her raw throat, still burning with the strain of choking back angry tears. She looked up... for a variety of reasons. God! The New Moon was well-hidden, lurking behind shadows, somewhere in the sky. Evading detection, there was no empirical evidence indicating its existence and yet she knew it was there like the spirits; same principle. The night was dark as chocolate; stars shone brightly against an infinite velvety backdrop: Heavenly. A shroud of mist lay draped across the valley floor and there she stood, wondering if she'd remain this way forever, wondering what would

come next. Succumbing to sheer exhaustion, Carolyn decided to enter the house and go straight to bed.

Gathered together in the parlor, a mother did not want to explain herself to the children so she made an abrupt right turn in the front hallway and went up to Nancy's room instead of going into her own. Without speaking it aloud, the girls provided their mother with a wide girth: some space and time to heal. It was over. A day to forget was done though no one would forget it. Carolyn had crawled beneath the rumpled quilt of an invitingly unmade bed, allowing her heavy head to plunge and then sink into the pillow. Instantly, a series of severe images and savage words flooded into her mind. She wept; a necessary release. As a means of ridding her wounded soul of the ravages of conflict, she wept her rage away, vowing to expel him from her system one teardrop at a time, if necessary. Darkness trapped behind her eyelids was a black hole in the cosmos. All was lost. She'd found something out.

The day had been chocked full of responsibilities she simply could not avoid so she struggled through in spite of the chronic urge to lay her body down to die. Carolyn drove her daughter to the dentist and sent her in alone; out of character for a mother attentive to details. As the inquest with Roger went badly, to say the least, the suspect fled; he split the scene. The birthday party in Pascoag; to and fro, Carolyn was surprised she had any energy left with which to think. Her muffled cries attracted someone's attention.

Though noise in her head was overpowering, Carolyn heard the quick click of the latch from the chimney closet. The sound was distinct, different than any other door in the house. Her face was buried but her ears were exposed. She heard the door open and close... gently, as if someone was peeking in on her to see if she was all right; a caring gesture. Then the floorboards began to creak beneath the weight of a curious soul. A moment later, this weight was lowered into the seat of a wicker rocking chair in the corner of the room. Whomever it was settling in then began to slowly rock forward and backward in a lilting rhythm, causing her to begin drifting off to sleep. Murmuring "thank you" beneath her breath, there was no response. She turned to see which one of her own had made the trek upstairs to stay beside her mother. Carolyn turned to view the empty chair, still rocking to and fro, peacefully providing her with a comforting backdrop; a familiar sound meant to soothe the restless soul. She was not in the least bit startled by the sight. Instead, she smiled faintly and rested her head on the pillow again, listening to the

creaking floor and cracking wicker while it rocked her empathetically off to sleep.

When Carolyn awoke from her nap the spirit was not gone. She was still in the chair but silent, having allowed Carolyn some undisturbed sleep. She gratefully accepted the presence beside the bed and did not question why she was there. She knew why. An understanding; the bond of trust was forged that evening. It was a transformational moment for the woman. She did not resist the assistance from one spirit she had, for years, perceived to be her tormentor. They shared a mutual comprehension of pain as a few moments spent together in the comfort zone proved. Perhaps they had something in common. Perhaps the spirit had known her grief or had a similar sense of loss in life and could relate to such desperate turmoil. Whatever drew this particular spirit to the pitiful mortal was based on compassion. Of this, there was no doubt. Carolyn is still certain of it. They remained in silence for several minutes before the entity left the room the same way she'd arrived then gently closed the latch as she went back into the closet. It was profound communication, an act of trust and an abiding sense of friendship present in the room where company was kept at night. Still cold and feeling vulnerable, Carolyn sensed the warmth of their encounter seeping into her psyche, lighting the way. Of this she was certain. The visitor had been a woman.

“True silence is the rest of the mind, and is to the spirit
what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.”

William Penn

common sense

“Our ancestors worshipped the Sun, and
they were not that foolish.
It makes sense to revere the Sun and the stars,
for we are their children.”
Carl Sagan

If reason and enlightenment are due to arrive on the threshold together, best be prepared for guests. Jean Paul Sartre regarded the age of reason as an awakening of human consciousness; the self-awareness which evolves naturally during the aging process. Andrea was not exempt from this process and was actively involved in seeking out something meaningful to satisfy an urgency to know evermore. As a mortal mind develops it assimilates complex concepts; synthesizing the significance of each as they pertain to life, discerning what the common and uncommon senses divulge. Humans generally keep what works and shed the rest in accordance with their own personal comfort level. Some decisions appear to be self-evident. Others require sustained thought and contemplation. Not all issues are resolved; not all relationships are reconciled. Much of what she was hearing offended her rather uncommon sensibilities. Most of it didn't make any sense at all. Perceiving herself as a child of God, Andrea could not quite grasp why she had even bothered with a struggle to fit the construct, the Roman Catholic ideology. Questioning everything became a pathway to disaster; rejection. Likewise, it provided another pathway leading to understanding. It was true. She was a philosophical misfit. The more she learned about it, the less she concurred with the creed, doctrine and dogma of a religion she had been born into, through no fault of her own. The only good reason to stay and learn more she didn't believe was an abiding friendship. In the final analysis it wasn't a good enough reason. No one abandoned her simply because she had abandoned the church that gave her up for dead to them. In the final analysis she found it was an institution which preached tolerance yet practiced the worst kind of intolerance, hypocritically expelling a child of God from its midst. Shame on them.... just when she needed them most, or so she thought at the time.

As in any relationship, it isn't until hindsight kicks in that people discover what was so wrong with the union in the first place, why it was a blessing

bestowed to be over and what to avoid in the future. At some point, in retrospect, folks look back on their lives in amazement, wondering how all of the pieces fit so tightly together, after all. When it all begins to make sense, they realize how everything had to happen precisely the way it did, involving the specific cast of characters. It is not unusual to reflect on how the events and apparent “coincidences” and happenstance of life had to happen then coalesce into a cohesive story which brought them to the place where they arrive... at the point of epiphany. It is a journey worthy of examination. Employing her God-given attribute as a possession of good, sound common sense, the child of God began to peer inward rather than seeking solace outside herself. It was then the real journey began. All else had been a prelude, part of the learning process which would eventually light her path all on its own. Soon she realized that her mortal existence was significant merely because she existed. To live in good faith is good enough. It is difficult to awaken to the truth, to be the light rather than to seek it. Spiritual enlightenment is no easy feat and will prove quite painful at times. It is the bravest of the brave who confront their demons.

As Andrea reflects upon the journey thus far, she must humbly admit to being dazzled, mesmerized, and beholden to the sights seen. In retrospect, with the benefit of hindsight (an essential resource for the purpose of contemplation) a decade spent at the farm was a source of pure enlightenment. She has no choice but to look back on it with wide-eyed wonder at a time which made all the difference. Yet, at the time, it made no sense at all. In the aftermath of an experience which literally altered her life expectancy, changing an overall perspective of life, it was actually an extraordinary gift; a message well-received. It takes time to process what all three eyes behold; time to make sense of what appears nonsensical. When logic and reason are blatantly defied, immutable laws of the universe challenged, it then becomes incumbent upon any thinking human being to assess their surroundings by way of a different path, perhaps a long walk in the woods. The sixth sense is an equally common sense at our disposal. When utilized to perceive a complicated environment it yields simple conclusions; common senses lead to uncommon knowledge. It seems a circuitous route to wisdom. With all due respect extended to the spirits who still reside within those walls, Emerson was correct. “Knowledge is the antidote to fear.”

“Any one who has common sense will remember that
the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds,
and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light
or from going into the light, which is true of the mind’s eye,
quite as much as of the bodily eye; and he who
remembers this when he sees any one whose vision is
perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh;
he will first ask whether that soul of man has come out
of the brighter light, and is unable to see because
unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned from darkness
to the day is dazzled by excess of light.”

Plato The Republic

act of god

“The soul of man is immortal and imperishable.”
Plato

They were kindred spirits, Carolyn and Fran: Soul sisters. No two friends ever closer, they did not waste much time commiserating about husbands or problems they had in common. Instead, they were each other's escape for years, having been devoted and trusted confidantes. Their adventures were legendary (and infamous) and their spirits were highest when they shared space and time together. It was a pure and perfect love... something sacred.

That's why it seemed so odd to Carolyn when she did not hear from Fran for several weeks. It was summer, prime time for digging dumps and going exploring on the back roads of New England. They'd been thick as thieves, and her pilfering partner was missing in action. Carolyn made a call to arms. She'd sensed her friend needed a hug. Fran answered the phone but said nothing about her own conspicuous absence, leading Carolyn to believe all was well. Nothing could have been further from the truth. What Fran had to say was not the kind of information imparted over the telephone. Shortly after an awkward conversation ended, Fran got in her car and drove up to the farm.

Surprised and equally delighted to see her pulling into the yard, a fresh pot of coffee was brewing before she had a chance to cross the threshold of the kitchen door. The instant Carolyn laid eyes on Fran she knew something was terribly wrong. Embracing spontaneously, welcoming a long lost and found companion, they sat down together at the table. Staring at the coffee cup in front of her, Fran started to speak. Her hands began trembling, as if all the raw energy in her body was trying to escape through her fingertips.

“Tell me what happened. Fran, what can I do to help?”

“Nothing. No one can do anything. What's done is done.”

Alarmed by the tone of her voice, Carolyn waited patiently for Fran to divulge what she had come there to say. Reserved and dignified, not prone to display much emotion, Fran composed herself along with the words she needed to speak, as painful a process as anyone could endure. Choking back what should have rightfully exploded out of her, having simmered for so long, the dear woman refused to cry anymore but the grief was palpable, a presence in the room. It was difficult to watch her struggling but Carolyn waited for her dear friend to find her own way in her own time.

Fran had gone over to T.W. Rounds on her own to look around, to see if there was anything old but new to him, something worthy of dragging Carolyn the distance to see. Fran was the lookout, the one who found hidden treasures, whether buried in the ground or shuffled to the back of a dusty shelf. It had been a brief excursion, one not far from her house. On her way home, while taking in the scenery along the Smith & Sayles Reservoir, she approached another sharp corner. A car pulled out in front of her and sped away. Chestnut Hill Road in Chepachet is a narrow, winding death trap. Everyone knows to take it slow... almost everyone. Approaching the narrowest of its bridges just ahead of her, behind another driver traveling a bit too fast, Fran saw the child dart out from behind her mother. She saw the mother turn, trying to grab hold of her little girl. Look out! It was too late. Both ran directly into the road, into the path of the oncoming car; both struck. Leaping out of her own vehicle, she ran to the wounded, scooping the little girl into her arms where she died a few minutes later. Franny cradled the babe who'd been feeding the ducks only seconds before. She knew what had happened. The ducks swam underneath the bridge and a curious kid simply wanted to see them emerge from the other side. An innocent mistake made cost the child her life. How tenuous the grasp... how thin the line between life and death. Her mother was also severely injured though she remained conscious long enough to watch her daughter die in the loving arms of another mother. Fran was a surrogate, thrust into the role of guardian as the angel of death came upon them. It shook her to the soul. At the intersection of life and death, Fran swaddled a child and comforted the mother whose arms were both broken, unable to hold her baby or say goodbye. It was beyond tragic. Fran would never shake the shock of it, not in her lifetime, another one destined to be all too brief. There were no words of condolence adequate to soothe the pain of inconsolable grief. Time does not heal everything. Sometimes it merely prolongs the memory.

When Fran began feeling ill she withdrew though the ladies always stayed in touch, especially in mind. Then came the awful diagnosis. It took its time ravaging her body, devouring her from within. As the end grew too near to bear Carolyn flew to her side to see her, be present with a friend one last time, the day before she died. Ever since their sad parting, as Fran escaped the surly bonds of Earth and touched the face of God, Carolyn has often

wondered why it had been the last time, why Fran has never come back to visit her, not once, not even in her dreams.

Fran's death was a mercy: an act of God. She was a pure and perfect spirit in life and as Carolyn ponders her ultimate fate, she's decided Fran must have transcended the darkness and gone to the light; becoming Light. To reunify and coalesce with the Universe seems appropriate for the once ethereal creature. Franny was not of this world. She was an angel wandering through, touching the hearts of mere mortals along her journey home, having taken the road less traveled. As Carolyn thinks of her now the words of Emily Dickinson swirl in the vapor, a deep sigh inhaling them into her soul. Revisiting the past, the memory of an old friend she misses; her bottle-digging, stove-stealing buddy stuck with her for life. Dear God, how she'd suffered in the end. Amen.

“Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.”

Fran's death was haunting. It was grossly unfair. She was still such a young woman. Struggling to make sense of it has provided no closure, only more questions. She has never come to call, not once, though she left this world knowing how to fly like the birds she so tenderly fed from her own hands. Why has she never returned, if for no other reason than one last meeting of the minds? Why has this celestial spirit not bothered to impart a message she knows Carolyn is capable of receiving? Has she passed the point of no return? Had she achieved the ultimate spiritual evolution, ascending to then crossing through Heaven's Gate, the gateway into a garden, the paradise from which she can never re-enter this realm? Did Fran make the transition as her transformation? Enlightened, had her beautiful spirit, pure white light, dispersed as energy into the ether, out into the cosmos to create some other life form with which we are unfamiliar? Carolyn has always been curious about it, though she suspects, in her end was her beginning. Fran was highly evolved, a spiritual entity: a being with no bounds. Carolyn always assumed they would communicate again from beyond the grave. Silence: no sign of the times they'd shared or what time she's in now. No messages. Not a clue to her whereabouts.

What remains most deeply troubling to Carolyn is the notion that, somehow, nefarious forces were involved in her demise as she and Sam both died of cancer and each had been impaled, penetrated by the blue laser light which came down the chimney, targeting them at the farm. This is a distressing concept yet it lingers in her consciousness and has done so for decades, haunting her still.

Carolyn walks into her garden, then come the birds from every conceivable corner of the Universe. Fran would be so satisfied, so proud to see her friend in communion with the creatures she adored. Essentially, she was a bird at heart: an esoteric being with invisible wings. Perhaps Carolyn had been mistaken. Disheartened that Fran has not come to call on her, perhaps she is the black-capped chickadee perched upon her bedroom windowsill, the one who greets her every morning, the one who comes with the light. Maybe she has crossed beyond mortality to discover the ultimate freedom of flight. Fran always knew she could fly. She needed only an adequate supply of wind. She may reside and glide on the solar winds, soaring into infinity on a wing and a prayer, attaining a proper altitude for one so elevated. Hers was a radical departure, one prompting her closest friend to wonder why Fran had forsaken her when there was so much more to explore. There she went, off into oblivion, traveling a timeless path. Go in peace... the kindest words one can utter to another mortal soul as they make their transition to spirit. Carolyn prays for her still hoping tranquility has become a close companion in the convoluted cosmos. It was the least she deserved; serenity she sought in life and found too infrequently, though usually while digging bottles with a cohort. It should be her just reward for a life well-lived. If she has indeed passed through an irreversible gateway to infinity and beyond then Carolyn hopes someday to meet her on the other side. As Cynthia is so fond of saying, "No need to mourn them... they're not really gone." But it feels as if Fran is really gone... for good. She remains as elusive in death as she was accessible in life. If she has indeed crossed beyond the reach of mere mortals they can only pity their own loss. She is free to fly.

Carolyn went to see Fran one last time, the most haunting and humbling of all their many encounters. They shared fond memories of gallivanting together through the labyrinth of life and then Fran closed her darkened eyes to rest. By the next morning she was gone, but not forgotten. Her friend hopes she has someone close by to fill the void if it exists for her now.

Carolyn remains lonely without her, longing for her company again. Or perhaps she is a luminescent figure, a guiding light, closer to God than she was on Earth, in which case, Fran may well be closer than they think... omnipresent. Perhaps she's the tickle of tiny birds lighting upon Carolyn's shoulder in the light of dawn.

Before she died Fran found true love: Eternal love. What more can someone ask for in life? The little bird on a wing and a prayer, angel in disguise, Carolyn will count on her in death as she once did in life. As the navigator with a good sense of direction, there, waiting to show her the way home, they'll be together again, onward to the next exciting escapade.

"I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment,
while I was hoeing in a village garden and I felt
that I was more distinguished by that circumstance
than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn."

Henry David Thoreau



~ George and Fran forever together in heart ~

hallelujah

“Maybe there’s a God above
But all I’ve ever learned from love
Was how to shoot at someone who outdrew you
It’s not a cry you can hear at night
It’s not somebody who has seen the light
It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah”
Leonard Cohen

Found then lost: true love. Eternal love. What brought them together had torn them apart. Their differences were too many, the chasm too wide. A bridge too far to travel. I wasn’t worth the energy she’d have to expend, even if she had it in her to try. He would never meet her halfway. She just didn’t care anymore. Roger and Carolyn Perron were married in 1957 and expected to remain so forever. Differences they once found enticing proved to be their undoing. What each once considered intriguing and unusual about the other had become overbearing and intolerable for both. Their marriage had become a trial by fire and she was burned out. Ashes and cinders. No point in rekindling a funeral pyre. She wanted to rise like the phoenix and fly far, far away.

The same held true for the farm. Love found then lost, Carolyn was disenchanted with virtually every aspect of her life. She took no pleasure in the place anymore. It was a burden, a chore, one endless Sisyphean task after another. Crowded out of close quarters, she became as cold and austere as the house itself. It had turned on her, becoming an enemy, much like her husband, rejecting her on every front. Even though their family left the farm in the warmth of June in 1980, it was a cold and broken “hallelujah” Carolyn uttered as they pulled out of the driveway one last time. She will never return to the place in the country she once loved, a place that called her home. It robbed her of her youth and enthusiasm, and almost claimed her life on more than one occasion. It supplanted images she will never escape in this lifetime and stirred raw emotions she never wants to feel again. It was time to move on... if not yet in body, most certainly in mind.

It would be seven more years before their family moved to Georgia, yet it seemed Carolyn had been faced with some difficult decisions living at the farm and she was about to make another. She wanted a divorce. Not just from her husband, from her life as she knew it. By any standard, this was a clear

cut case of irreconcilable differences and she firmly believed there was no fixing what was wrong. The only joy she found was in the company of her girls, the golden moments she cherished with them: trips to the river and walks in the woods, a spirited softball game with the Marshall family, riding the horses across the rocky, rambunctious terrain at the power lines. These are the times she would recall later, much later in life, as times well-remembered.

As for the children, they all sensed a breach, a permanent rift between their parents; a wholly disconcerting and insecure sensation for any child. They call it “The What Next Syndrome” now, something closely akin to Boo! Who? Though not privy to the sordid details they all figured it had something to do with the fact that he didn’t believe her about the ghosts for a very long time. By the time he became a believer, she had lost her faith in him. Roger had questioned her sanity, her integrity, her character. It was more than she could abide but according to Carolyn, she had many reasons, more than they will ever know. But the way she was treated on the night of the séance had been the bridge too far to cross and Roger had crossed the line. Ironically, their marriage was destined for failure, not because of their differences but because they were too much alike. The day Carolyn announced she had filed for divorce a cheer rang out in the Salacoa Valley which echoes through the foothills to this day. If one listens closely, the word “hallelujah” can still be heard in the wind; the sound of five voices speaking in unison, much like seven soldiers buried in a wall. The war was finally over though an official truce was never called between factions, hostilities simmering ever since in the cauldron of discontent.

Roger and Carolyn married in 1957, expecting to remain so forever. Though she did not leave his side, the mother of his children divorced him in spirit almost ten years before she did it in front of a judge, receiving the official documentation releasing her from hell on Earth. After twenty-four years, their children shouted to the heavens “Hallelujah!” It was over. As the former couple has yet to resolve their differences, perhaps they’ll have another chance next time ’round the cosmos. Only time will tell as neither learned their lesson well. And all either of them ever really wanted was peace. Perhaps along the continuum, they will pass the test of wills.

“The golden moments in the stream of life rush past us and we see nothing but sand;

the angels come to visit us, and we only know them
when they are gone.”

George Elliot

something sacred

“Laertes: Lay her i’ the earth: / And from her fair
and unpolluted flesh /
May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest, /
A ministering angel shall my sister be, /
When thou liest howling.”
William Shakespeare Hamlet 1603

There were guardians in the darkness; ancient, vigilant souls watching over an anxious family. Guardian Angels? Perhaps. Cindy believes and so does Nancy. They witnessed an incredible sight, energy protecting a sister in dire need of assistance. Nancy saw the Light. Cindy felt it surrounding her in the dark of night. Blessed be.

The house was crowded with kids that night, a motley crew of teenagers playing music and card games, all learning how to flirt. Nancy made all the arrangements. Cindy was fourteen at the time and Nancy was old enough to know better. As soon as the parents hit the door, she was on the phone. Andrea was in Pittsburgh, unable to put a stop to a party for which no permission had been granted.

Before long the yard was littered with cars and kids, more than expected. Chrissy became nervous, questioning her older sister about the onslaught. Cindy was so shy and reserved, reluctant to intermingle, afraid of making a friend in a crowd. She got small, receding into herself. Lingering behind on the porch, almost out of sight, an innocent child would soon be exposed to a vice of adulthood. Apparently a popular elder sister was determined to stay that way. As cars began to gather along a gravel driveway, speakers blasting, Nancy swooped down from her perch on the porch, as a hawk honing in on its prey. Landing softly, she flittered about the group, cheerily greeting her guests. Before she arrived at the site she made her choice. Nancy really liked Eddy. Soon he would be the one to capture her heart and undivided attention, to the exclusion of everyone else. Inviting the school buddies to stay, friends of her buddies were apparently welcome as well. A disruptive influence by nature, Nancy insisted that her sisters be cordial and participate in the festivities. Ultimately, when the truth was revealed, Nancy would not be the only one to cop the blame, as usual. She always had a few unwitting co-

conspirators. It was inevitable. Carolyn made a point of knowing all of their friends. As a mother, it was her business to be informed. Eventually one of them would get careless in her presence and make some nostalgic quip about an “awesome party” that she had known nothing about. With a cluster of loose-lipped gossips hanging out, it was only a matter of time. Katy.

Christine was polite to all the guests. She chatted with those she knew well. April had gone with her parents for the evening. Cindy sat silently on the porch, studying new faces from a safe distance, so she thought. A young man approached, climbing up the granite stairs. He sat inside the wide window ledge, where the screens would be inset once the weather became warmer. She recognized him as someone she had avoided, one of the older boys on the bus. She knew nothing about him otherwise.

“Who are you?”

“Cindy. Nancy’s sister.”

“Oh, I’ve seen you before. You always sit up front.”

“Usually.”

“I’m Jake. Eddy’s friend.”

“Hi.” Cindy blushed in spite of a chill in the air.

“Are you cold?” The young man seemed genuinely concerned.

“No.” The girl looked away before her expression revealed too much.

“Then why are you shivering?”

“I don’t know.” The body betrayed her. It was visible.

It was fright. He was gorgeous. He was sitting down beside her. Cindy trembled.

“Here! This’ll warm you up.”

“Thanks.” Her gratitude was sincere. The senior was a scoundrel.

No liquor of any kind had ever touched her lips. When he offered a bottle of what appeared to be fruit punch, the trusting soul did not hesitate to accept. She was very nervous. Her mouth was dry. She sipped the sweet and sour nectar without realizing the fluid was toxic, not the mixture of berry juice and lemonade it tasted like, not at all. Instead, she was ingesting grain alcohol, a concoction that would shortly sicken an unsuspecting child abandoned by her sibling.

At twilight the air became damp, chillier with the setting sun, so typical for early spring. Nancy suggested that everyone move indoors. She pulled a deck of playing cards from a sideboard drawer. The boys struck up a game of gin

rummy as giddy girls gathered to watch. Cindy staggered slightly while entering the kitchen, bottle still in hand. No one paid attention. Returning it to the culprit, he then joined the game, claiming a spot at the table. Cindy floated through the crowded room, as would an apparition, an ethereal creature. Once warm inside, her face grew hot, her stomach turned. No one seemed to notice as she spied the bathroom door, awaiting vacancy. Her body in rebellion, she needed privacy. After several minutes passed she bolted for the woodshed.

Passing through her parents' room, the child prayed for help. Desperate to escape the scrutiny of others, scrambling for solitude, Cindy was in jeopardy. She knew it. Dizzy and spinning, unable to keep her balance, she struggled along a familiar route as if stumbling through a maze. Dragging stubborn legs along, the pace of a frantic journey stalled. Needing to flee, she could gain no momentum; regain equilibrium, bouncing from dresser to bedpost. It took all her will, what strength she had left to open the thick wooden door at the far end of the room. Cooler air in the woodshed provided small comfort but proved inadequate. Cindy urgently required the colder evening air to banish an increasingly queasy sensation rumbling, curdling within a sour stomach. She could taste a vile serum at the back of her throat. It was too late. She could not reach the woodshed door soon enough to forestall something putrid catapulting from her body, as inevitable as a mother discovering a child's secret.

Collapsing on the landing, at the top of the cellar stairs, her body became rigid as her stomach rejected the poison. Violent vomiting ensued. She had no control over herself during those dangerous moments in isolation, fighting for composure in the one place nobody would think to look. Gasping for air between spasmodic retches, the compromised child feared for her life. Cindy was miserable. That painful jolt of heaving would not subside. There was nothing left to expel. Through flowing tears she could vaguely see her location, staring down into a stairwell that frightened her beyond belief, far more than the precarious position she found herself in, unable to move. Defenseless, she closed her eyes and begged for help with silent prayer. God please, dear God, please don't let anything open that door. Please Lord. Don't let it hurt me. There was something sinister with her in the darkness. God would send the light of love to protect her. Good God.

Nancy was oblivious to virtually everything except her hormones. Eddy

was one good-looking boy. She doted and fawned on him. While fluttering and flirting all around the young man, Nancy failed to notice that her sister was missing, her rapt attention clearly focused elsewhere. Meanwhile, Cindy was alone in a cold, dark place suffering an interminable ordeal.

It was an omnipresent fear; a living fear. Cindy could feel it crawling through her skin, swimming in her veins. Everyone knew to stay away from that door. It was an unholy altar where her head had come to rest. It was that huge, heavy door, the one that had flown off its hinges the night of the horn. The crushing weight of fear kept her body immobile but her mind remained alert. Matted hair draped awkwardly across a face drenched with sweat and a residue of all the night had offered thus far. An innocent child to be sure, Cindy didn't know what happened to her, what brought her to the place where she lay, panting as a rabbit run down by a dog. Barely breathing, she gazed into the vacant space beneath her, below the splintered piece of wood puncturing her skin. It scraped her face as she went down, hard onto the jagged surface. She could taste the blood in her hair. Cindy closed her eyes. Wriggling inside as spasms of terror passed through her fragile frame she sensed the omniscient presence. It knew what she was thinking. She knew that it was there. Curling up into the fetal position she became smaller, less noticeable. Percussive, rhythmic pounding in her chest precluded hearing threat of demon or angel of mercy. The throbbing, magnified sound of panic reverberating from within her listening ears became a cacophonous noise, effectively muffling all but the primal beat of a pulse.

In the midst of the festive atmosphere void of concern, something intuitive seized a clueless sister. Chattering incessantly as she was prone to do, Nancy's behavior was entirely true to form. Suddenly she stopped, standing abruptly from the subservient position she'd assumed beside her prospective boyfriend. It was a stunning moment of clarity. She was listening. Within seconds Nancy identified the message, if not the messenger: Crisis. She ran directly to the woodshed.

An oppressive weight of fear began lifting from the trembling child. Remaining as still as possible, an attempt to become invisible in the darkness, she felt her figure impacted by a protective force encasing her in white light. Too horrified to open her eyes, she quaked as an inexplicable softness surrounded her in the shadows. Cindy dared to breathe again, to sense the

relief of an unmistakably benevolent presence. With eyes closed, she could see the Light.

The creaking door shuddered as it opened. Nancy stood on the landing just inside the woodshed, halted by the sight of her sister bathed in an ethereal glow, the light so pure, it brought tears to her eyes. "Cindy?" She reverently whispered the name. It traveled on the echo of the air. No response. Approaching the evanescent, radiant glimmer, it began to dissipate, intermingling with shadows cast by the open door. It evaporated as Nancy reached down, touching her sister. Realizing the situation was serious, she stared through matted hair into the face of a child touched by the evil of this world, not another. Still squeamish, Cindy gagged on the remnants of what remained within her sour throat. Nancy hoisted Cindy to her feet and guided her sister out of the woodshed. She got her into bed then quickly returned to the kitchen.

Impromptu party over! Nancy pulled Christine aside and told her what just happened. The house was cleared in minutes, the yard emptied of cars, the landscape silenced once more. Christine tended to Cindy while Nancy fearlessly cleaned the woodshed floor, scouring away every detectable trace of the incident. She felt responsible and in fact, was partially to blame. Tossing the soiled water from a bucket down an outhouse hole, she scampered into the house in time to greet her incoming parents. They were home much earlier than expected. Nancy was nervous. She wondered if they could see the sweat on her brow or the guilt in her eyes. The teenager had a gut-wrenching feeling that she would not escape unscathed. It would be only a matter of moments...

"Where's Cindy?" Carolyn instantly noticed her daughter's absence.

"She went to bed." Technically not a lie, Nancy attempted a tactical diversion. It was important to distract her mother. Otherwise, she would go upstairs and see the outcome of an evening when a mother's trust had been betrayed.

"Why are you home now? We thought you'd be gone..."

"I know you did. We passed a parade of familiar cars driven by boys with familiar faces right on Round Top Road. Do you want to tell me what that was about?"

"Does he know? Dad. Does he know what happened?"

"I don't know what happened but something told me to come home. What

“was it that told me to cut our shopping short for your sister’s birthday?” Sober and stern, Carolyn demanded, “What happened in this house?” She then insisted on an immediate reply. No time available to think about it.

“Cindy’s sick.” Nancy hung her head. She was rightfully ashamed of herself. Confession they say is good for the soul. She spilled her guts much like her younger sister had before they arrived. Carolyn ran up the stairs. Nancy followed. Roger was building a fire and did not notice what was occurring.

Shocked by the sight of her precious little girl, Carolyn cradled Cindy in her arms and rocked her like a baby. She could smell the rancid odor of alcohol in the air and leered at Nancy while stroking her daughter’s matted hair. Pulling it away from her face, Carolyn saw streaks of blood, scrapes across her cheek. She gasped.

“How could you let this happen?

“Mom.” Cindy’s voice was weak. “It wasn’t her fault. I drank something... it was a bottle of fruit juice but it made me sick.”

“It was not fruit juice and it never would have happened if your sister hadn’t been completely irresponsible!” Doing her best to restrain an unbridled anger, Carolyn kept her voice low but emotions were running high throughout the darkened room.

“Please don’t tell... please.” Begging forgiveness, Nancy promised it would never happen again. Furious, Carolyn looked at her children without saying a word. It was a mother’s intuition that brought her home, a protective instinct which knew no distance. Quite alarmed by the sight of her daughter, she considered the distinct possibility all the girls had suffered enough. She too was fearful that any further punishment might be more consequence than necessary for girls who had apparently learned a lesson.

“You’re grounded.” Nancy bristled. That’s precisely what she had hoped to avoid.

“For how long?” With three desperate words, Carolyn could detect the nagging whine.

“I haven’t decided yet.” Gritting out the answer through her clenched jaw, the terse tone put an end to the protest. Nancy knew if her father weighed in on the decision, she would not date or even socialize again until sometime after forty. Nancy closed her mouth. Carolyn kept a secret.

“Mom.” Cindy’s voice quivered. “Something happened in the woodshed.”

“I know, baby. We’ll get you a shower and bandage your face.”

“No. I mean... something happened to me after I fell at the top of the stairs. I was so scared. I hate the woodshed and that door. I was so afraid it would open and the ghosts would come after me. I prayed really hard and something covered me up... something protected me.”

“I saw it!” Nancy confirmed the story, acknowledging her vision.

“I didn’t see it exactly... my eyes were closed. But I felt it all around me.”

“Maybe it was your Guardian Angel, sweetheart.”

“Maybe.” The child’s weak voice trailed off as she laid her head down again.

“Do we all have one?” Curiosity broke Christine’s conspicuous silence.

“I think so... I hope so.” Smiling sadly, Carolyn watched Cindy bundle beneath a thin blanket. She reached for the quilt at the bottom of the bed and covered the child as she fell off to sleep.

“I hope so, too.” Christine had tears in her eyes, ashamed of what transpired at the house that evening. She felt equally responsible and overcome with guilt, incapable of reconciling the fact she had gone along with one of Nancy’s wild, impetuous flights of fancy. This time there were serious consequences, an outcome far beyond anything either parent could impose on the disobedient children. Cindy looked pale and drawn. All color had washed from her face except for blood red streaks; painful reminders of unnecessary wounds. She appeared entirely listless and exhausted. An unconscionable young man on the verge of adulthood with no business at the house had poisoned an innocent girl. The infraction occurred within range of the watchful eye of an elder sister who allowed it to happen. Mother had every right to be furious and Nancy knew it. She stood at the bottom of Cindy’s bed, remorse in her heart, as Carolyn soothed her child and tucked her in beneath the quilt. Chrissy went quietly to her bed and wept in despair, a pillow absorbing her tears, while Nancy remained behind awaiting further instructions. None were forthcoming. Gathering up a soiled pile of clothing from the floor, Carolyn exited the room without a word or glance at the perceived culprit. The breach bordered on unforgivable and Nancy knew it was going to take some time to regain her mother’s trust, if she ever could again.

The contaminated clothing was discreetly hidden until it could be

laundered with no risk of Roger picking up the scent. The mother, whose protective instincts were still in full force for all involved, in spite of the temptation to tell her husband, went back upstairs to retrieve Cindy a few hours later after Roger fell asleep. Helping her disoriented daughter bathe, washing her hair was a labor of love. Tucking her in for the night, Carolyn whispered an old Irish blessing: "A sunbeam to warm you, a moonbeam to charm you, a sheltering angel so nothing can harm you." Kissing her good night, a heartsick mother left the room with regret, wishing none of it ever happened. Her anger was tempered only by grief. Cindy was so vulnerable, too trusting of others. She wanted to wring Nancy's neck like a washcloth she'd used to cleanse Cindy's face.

Deciding to keep such a secret was second nature, as Carolyn preferred to handle the situation in a less disruptive manner. Roger would have certainly lost his temper. Her silence was far less disturbing and far more effective than the hollering which would likely ensue. April's birthday was coming the following day. Carolyn believed she should be spared the gruesome details of her elder sister's behavior. Otherwise, the negativity would spill retribution upon the innocent one who deserved to enjoy her birthday in spite of the antics of her rebellious elder sibling. A mother's instincts held true to her principles, if false in marriage. She could not bear thinking April's party could get cancelled through no fault of her own. Honesty is not always the best policy, after all. Best to commit a sin of omission, as penance would be too widely dispersed. Secrets and lies... they seemed to proliferate in the farmhouse.

Cindy slipped and fell down. It was the story her father was told when he inquired. It was obvious something had happened to the delicate skin on her face. Covering for her girls, Carolyn made light of it in his company. Clumsy. Armload of wood. The woodshed staircase needs repair. The kid keeps Band-Aid in business... time to buy stocks in the corporation.

Something told Carolyn to come home that fateful night, the same thing which told a completely distracted sister to go out to the woodshed immediately and rescue her sibling. Perhaps there are powers which human beings are not meant to understand. It could be they exist with or without comprehension, offering only points of light to reflect upon in the darkness.

Cindy remains convinced she was in serious jeopardy. It was not only the risk posed by alcohol. Thirty years later Cindy swears she felt an evil,

threatening presence in a space shared. She knows. She asked for help and it arrived. An oblivious sister and a benevolent spirit arrived. Her mother was on the way home... heartfelt prayers answered from every conceivable direction.

Nancy knows what she saw: a shimmering glow hovering above her sister. Prior to her arrival in the woodshed she knew precisely where to go. Of this they are both quite certain. Nancy insists something spoke directly to her. It was something so powerful the force literally stopped her from speaking or thinking of anything else but Cindy during those critical moments. It told her where to go to find her sister.

Telepathy and intuition are as real as they are invisible, much like good and evil. Witnessing the manifestation, the outcome, is as close as humanity gets to the concept in action. They exist to function and function to exist. A presence threatened the child, even if that presence was fear itself. She had reason to be fearful, based on prior experience, yet even if nothing except fear was present in the woodshed it was reason enough to pray. It was reason enough for Spirit to answer the call. Begging for help, it arrived promptly. Nancy witnessed the distinct manifestation of what can only be described as divine light. Both still believe something sacred intervened on Cindy's behalf then battled forces with something wicked in the woodshed. The purity of one child's faith triumphed over fear. A blessing in disguise.

“Sweet souls around us watch us still,
Press nearer to our side;
Into our thoughts, into our prayers,
With gentle helpings glide.”
Harriet Beecher Stowe

guess who's coming to dinner?

"Look not mournfully into the past. It comes not back again. Wisely improve the present.

It is thine.

Go forth to meet the shadowy future, without fear."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Lorraine Warren had virtually promised supernatural activity would increase in the house due to their presence. Reiterating this notion on the night of the séance, primarily due to the inclusion of a medium necessary to the process, even Lorraine, in touch as she was with her own intuition, could not have predicted the extent to which all space and time, heaven and hell would break loose; a seismic shift, an act of transformation: Metamorphosis. Perceptions of this meeting of the mind were permanently altered. Pushed from behind, Carolyn arrived at the dark intersection of life and death: Simpatico.

On the night the infamous séance occurred, what energy Carolyn possessed was drained from her being as an experience she cannot recall depleted her of whatever strength remained. As her resources diminished, fast-approaching a point of extinction, Andrea assumed virtually all of the household responsibilities. It was essentially becoming a surrogate; mother to her four siblings. This was a position she'd already accepted on some level years before, so, at the age of sixteen, she was prepared to take over until her mother was well again. No one had any notion when this time might arrive. Andrea knew her mother needed help. It was all she needed to know.

Roger made himself scarce, embarking on one business trip after another. Once it was clear all the turmoil had subsided, it became a very quiet time in the house; no bedlam. The children were subdued. Though Andrea and Cindy had been the only actual witnesses of the séance, the others knew it had not gone well. Andrea discreetly shared just enough detail with her sisters to let them know it would be a good time to be still, lay low and stay the hell out of trouble Nancy. April was nine years old and still preoccupied with the chimney closet and all of the mysteries it contained. The other girls kept close by the house, often playing school in the middle bedroom upstairs, taking turns being teacher, sharing whatever they'd recently learned. No one wandered far from home. Reading and any leftover homework took

precedence during the evening hours and there was to be no yelling, no bickering; no upheaval of any kind... in deference to their mother. Andrea kept a close eye on Carolyn; powerless as she was to affect any positive change, yet willing to do whatever she could to ease her mother's burdens. A driver's license afforded an ability to take care of grocery shopping and assorted errands, though she found it to be a time of heightened anxiety whenever she left the house... even when going to school. It was a dark time, a frightening time for the entire family. None of the children were in any way comfortable with leaving their mother alone in the house. The protective instincts a mother felt so intensely for her children were being returned in kind, shared by those she loved. As each of them began to watch over her with fear and trepidation regarding her well being, children took on the role of caretaker to the parent.

A séance had indeed stirred up the spirits. The event had somehow torn a hole in space and time itself, opening the presumed portal to the past unlike anything the family had experienced to date. Shadows abounded. The cat they all loved moved out and went to live with a neighbor down the street. No matter how many times they fetched her back, she refused to stay in this house. They had no choice but to relinquish her to the new home she chose. Jennifer, the dog, was constantly on alert. She would leap off the floor and growl at thin air, then settle back down but rarely close her eyes. She was devoted to the family, especially April. It was her job to protect them, though they could not detect the intruder. Still, she refused to pass in front of the cellar door and would literally walk the length of the house outside in order to avoid the necessary pathway to the food bowl in the kitchen. A passive dog became highly aggressive near the cellar door: agitated and ferocious. There was definitely something down there Jenny did not like and her mortals could not see, smell or sense at these times, but she knew better.

Carolyn never did tell Lorraine what was happening in the house after that disturbing night. Though the Warrens called frequently, undoubtedly to check in on what they clearly perceived to be their charge, Carolyn became quite distant and aloof with an unwitting pair who desired to complete their mission. It had been her fervent hope, as those two years passed, that the Warrens would be the saving grace, the ones whose knowledge would resolve the haunting, but Carolyn had grown weary of the people and the effort. She simply gave up, uninterested in pursuing any further interaction

with them. The attempt had been an utter failure as far as she was concerned. Likewise, Carolyn believed the couple had been derelict in their duty by exposing her family to so many others while in pursuit of the truth. She resented the intrusion of living beings more than she despised the presence of spirits. Carolyn assumed the position with notable reserve.

There is such a thing as expecting too much from another. So it was with the two friends who promised to help. Gradually losing her once steadfast faith in the Warrens, the well-established trust she invested in the relationship had significantly eroded, eventually disintegrating entirely. Carolyn had expected both to keep their story in confidence. The night of the séance felt more like a sideshow to her, as veritable strangers crowding into her own home gawked, observing the tragic figure of a woman at her very worst; at her most vulnerable. What was supposed to be a private gathering of only a few knowledgeable souls, an intimate matter between confidants had instead become a spectacle for all those present to witness; the most nightmarish episode of her life. Carolyn was hurt, bothered beyond measure, in spite of the fact that she retained no actual memory of the séance or the horrific events as they had transpired. Everyone else there certainly did, though many fled from the home during the terrible ordeal, too frightened to be in the house. They got a taste of “what next?” and fled the scene. It was over. Carolyn intended to insulate, isolate and keep it that way. Over. There would be no more interviews, no sharing of information; no further disclosures of any kind from anyone else in the family. On this point there would be no future debate. Promises made had been empty ones, indeed.

Succumbing to exhaustion, Carolyn realized she was far too weak to resist or even tolerate any further intrusion. Sequestering herself became a source of peace, the comfort zone established; welcome respite from the hoards of curious onlookers. The Warrens made a final attempt about a month or so afterward, showing up at the farm unannounced, something they were prone to do for their own investigative purposes. The couple’s discovery must have been disconcerting to them. The mother of five appeared more as a pale phantom. Her eyes were dark and hollow. She was emaciated. Her reserved demeanor was somber and stoic. Carolyn did not invite them into the house, across her threshold. Instead, she stepped outside where they chatted only briefly on the kitchen porch. No questions answered. Nothing of substance was discussed between them. As children who normally ran to greet them

remained inside, waiting for their mother to return, it was apparent to all; this was the end of the association. Her natural warmth was replaced with a decidedly cool reception. Carolyn made her disposition known by simply becoming remote; withdrawing... withholding information. She did not confront them about the disastrous séance or its aftermath. Sealed as tightly as any vault, the conversation soon became uncomfortable for all involved, riddled with frequent pauses and empty stares. A roast languished in the oven, the scent of which could easily be detected, yet Carolyn did not extend an invitation to stay and share the dinner with her family, as she had so often done before. They knew the show was over. It was the culmination of an investigation which had yielded too many results.

The Warrens witnessed an iniquitous entity take Carolyn into the night as they wrestled her back from the darkness, from the grasp of something so obscene, so purely evil; they all feared losing her in the process. Their eyes revealed the same fear as they scrutinized Carolyn that afternoon, shrunken and removed, quiet and calm, ardent in her resolve to be finished with any exploration of the supernatural activity in her house. The couple had shared countless hours in her company and that of her family. From their first encounter to their last, it was obvious they cared about the outcome for all involved. Carolyn knew in her heart; these people had a genuine fondness for her and a real commitment to the cause of salvation for so many wounded souls. No one in the family believes the Warrens intended any harm to come of their actions. Quite the contrary, their motivation was based in goodness and light, a faith in God and the human spirit. The couple moved on to other investigations, incapable of vanquishing the demon they sought and unleashed one fateful night in Harrisville but never forgot the family or what they observed. It haunted them as the spirits continued haunting those they had come to help. Best intentions proved no match for an evil presence they could conjure but could not counter... a force to be reckoned with had won the war... and peace remained elusive.

Soon Carolyn would have another close encounter with more unexpected dinner guests. Their presence was about to change her life and change her mind about death in fundamental ways. In fact, their presence would, ultimately, bring her back to life in a way her children did not expect or dared to dream could happen. As the cool of spring made its glorious transition to

another warm summer, Carolyn finally found her way home and back to her children. It was a true cause for celebration. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord and pass the popcorn! Movie night was back and so was their beloved mother. A sense of normalcy returned to a place no less paranormal. The shift was invisible like the spirits. Carolyn changed her mind. Attitude is everything, they say.

“There is an alchemy in sorrow.
It can be transmuted into wisdom, which,
if it does not bring joy, can yet bring happiness.”
Pearl Buck

joy

“Cease, every joy, to glimmer on my mind,
But leave—oh! leave the light of Hope behind.”
Thomas Campbell

In spite of, perhaps because of the many trials and tribulations the children endured in their beloved house, they savored the precious moments with an enthusiasm reserved for childhood. They would all grasp the gravity of their circumstances in time and space but it was their escape from reality they found most pleasurable. They screamed when they saw something treacherous or threatening in the house but outside they screamed like banshees in the snow, running and playing and sliding down tall hills far too fast. Kids have a tendency to seek and find excitement wherever it may hide and they did not have to look too far... out the door they went... up the hill... over the river and through the woods. There was joy in their home as well: there was laughter and music, light and love surrounding them all the time. No matter what happened they always did manage to come round right in the end. It was their eternal optimism which kept hope floating like the ethereal creatures hovering about. Even spirits participated in the festivities. One of them was particularly fond of the choices made in music and would sit in the rocking chair and keep the beat with a creak in the floor as the antique rocker came forward then went back on the up and down beats respectively. If the girls turned off the music the rocking would stop as well, like a game of musical chairs. They'd grin at each other then continue, marveling at the Universe, its ability to provide them with an appreciative audience out of thin air! Life was good. Most of the time it was great, spirits were high; all right with the world and space beyond its borders, especially why they stayed within its borders most of the time. Not a lot of gallivanting. No need. They had just about everything they could want right where they were.

It is the simplest pleasures they remember most: horseback riding on a sunny day, planting the garden, digging a dump beside mom. When the family looks back, revisiting the past in mind, it is with some measure of regret, some element of sadness and loss but there is also a vast reservoir of memories which were happy; lighthearted and satisfied, in spite of and sometimes because of the dark circumstances. When one lives in the midst of an ongoing conflict, the peaceful, pleasurable moments stand out in the

crowd of experiences and become magnified, taking on even greater significance. When everything is surreal, moments of plain and simple three-dimensional reality seem a comfort, a touch of normalcy in an otherwise paranormal existence. For this, they are grateful. The girls grew up to be women who all have positive memories of their childhood, too. Not all doom and gloom.

When it came time to endow this manuscript with a title, Carolyn came up with it out of thin air, quite like naming a puppy Bathsheba some forty years ago. When asked if she'd write down a few ideas and give it some thought, no need. As if on the tip of her tongue, she said: "House of Darkness House of Light." She smiled: "It was both." Let there be light in the darkness.

"I cannot believe that the inscrutable universe turns
on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty
of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy!"

Louise Bogan

leap of faith

“The soul would have no rainbow had the eyes no tears.”

American Indian Proverb

Roger had a very special man in his life. His uncle Eugene was a Brother of the Sacred Heart, a member of a select, well-respected group of clergymen at the Vatican. For years he was lost to the family, doing his good works elsewhere, touching the lives of everyone he met. His kindness was immeasurable. The man’s spirit soared; he could make an eagle blush. He was loved, adored by the children he’d come back to visit every few years, hopping the pond, one giant leap, landing first in Canada, to make the rounds. Then onto Maine to see more family, with a final stop in Rhode Island. Roger’s uncle Gene was known far and wide by many who appreciated the time and trouble he took to stay connected with his extended family, in spite of his numerous duties and obligations at the Vatican. Every three years he would skip over the pond like a stone skipping the surface, so to come home to play with the kids. It was a precious, endearing relationship he had with each of them. He was a luminescent figure; a human being who possessed an unmistakably Godly glow. The man spoke five languages and earned three doctorates but would get down in the grass and roll around like a youngster; still young at heart. Yet it was this enormous heart that claimed him in the end. He had given so much of it away to so many souls there was not enough left for him. So he flew home to be with the angels.

During his initial visit to the farm, not long past its purchase, he too learned to sip the nectar. Roger took him for a long walk in the woods and showed him the property. Uncle Gene was delighted. He was well aware of the impact unbridled Nature can have on children; it is about as close as any of us ever get to God: Heaven on Earth. During his second and last visit to the farm Roger did not tell divulge what was happening there, but Carolyn did. He listened thoughtfully, sympathetically, though he offered no advice or suggestion for a remedy. Instead, he gave all of his attention to the woman sharing a story, one obviously difficult to tell, even to a close family member. He held her hand as she fought to find the words to describe the ordeal.

Several months later a mysterious priest arrived at the house unannounced. He walked through it and delivered the unhappy message she received: the

house could not be cleansed. She wept but in her heart she knew, some way, somehow, Uncle Gene had tried to help. He had spoken on their behalf to someone who knew about dilemmas such as these and she still suspects this priest was dispatched directly from the Vatican, courtesy of a wise and beneficent man.

One warm morning the following summer Andrea was early to rise and made a pot of coffee. Roger came into the kitchen and greeted his daughter. They sat quietly at the table nursing their respective cups of something so strong it qualified as Witch's Brew. When the telephone rang Andrea looked into her father's eyes as her own suddenly moistened.

"Oh, my God. It's Aunt Irene. Uncle Gene died."

Roger's facial features hardened with the issuance of soft words. How dare she predict such a terrible outcome? She has no idea who is on the phone... how could she suggest such a thing? Andrea could almost hear the words as if they had been spoken aloud by the troubled man. He lifted the receiver and placed it to his ear. His eyes told the rest of the story. Roger stared at her with a grimace; partially the pain of a loss sustained as well as suspicion bordering on distrust, with a hint of fear. Roger never looked at his daughter quite the same way again. It was not only Cindy; she too had the third eye. If he'd been a wiser man he would have viewed his children with reverence and respect rather than suspicion and distrust regarding an innate ability to see. Many years later he came to understand the truth. His eldest child felt the loss before any empirical evidence existed. Her connection with the favorite uncle was strong, indeed. He still holds out his hand to her in times of need. There have been many moments in her life when she felt him beside her, guiding her along this treacherous journey and there have been moments when she has sensed his presence as if he was standing beside her, as she believes he does. Those who listen, who sense spirit around them come to understand; it is a blessing, not a curse. When one soul chooses another to protect and defend, to lovingly guide along the path, it is the truest, most adoring act of God manifesting in a form we do not always recognize. Practicing the presence is a purely passive endeavor when one considers the only necessary action: Listen up. Look up. The Stars are whispering their secrets... tales traveling on the wind. "Faith dares the soul to go beyond what the eyes can see."

Over time, Roger realized who the rightful owner was and he relinquished two of his most prized possessions to her as a testament to her caring for the man she lost so long ago. Andrea hopes to see him again, God willing. Roger knew she had no affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church and yet the keepsakes would be meaningful, separate and distinct from point of origin; as reliques. He gave his eldest daughter the set of rosary beads he'd inherited from his Uncle Eugene, the set of beads the Pope presented to him many decades before; she keeps them with her at all times. They do not represent a point of reconciliation but rather, function as a touchstone; an object of deep significance... something once held in his hands. It is a talisman, something tangible to see and touch and feel between her fingers as she reaches through the darkness hoping to glimpse the Light of his Soul in the Cosmos. Whenever she takes a moment to pause and reflect on his life, Andrea gazes into the eyes of a beautiful portrait; in memory of a man they both cherished.

“Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark.”
George Iles

doubt

“I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.”
Robert Browning

It is often said that doubt is where wisdom begins. Doubting one's own eyes then eventually one's own sanity is a truly precarious place to be in life. What we rely upon to guide the way through this journey, our primary tools which function as a compass for navigation come into question. This fosters a skeptical mindset; an ominous expectation of impending doom. As suspicion then paranoia set in like tenacious weeds in a garden it suffocating new growth, compromising the soil; draining it of nutrients for no benefit. That which should go to the food supply to sustain it and ensure a healthy crop is instead circumvented: wasted. Carolyn was determined not to let this happen to her. She used her doubt initially to further her own investigation regarding the occurrences in her home but as time passed and the manifestations became more threatening in tone and manner, she shed the doubt like a snake sheds its skin, releasing her mind to consider the ramifications of their existence. The spirits were not subject to speculation past a certain point. Instead, they became a foregone conclusion. At first, Carolyn really did not begrudge her husband his skepticism but after a while it seemed ludicrous to his wife. The existence of metaphysical beings was so blatant, so obvious; denials began to seem deliberately belligerent, even antagonistic on the spirit matters at hand: Devil's advocate in the extreme, with no evidence to support his position. Meanwhile, the evidence was mounting to the contrary. Once he encountered a few ghosts of his own he had no choice but to relinquish his vice grip grasp of a fantasy and realize the truth: they were living among the dead.

As Roger's caginess became more an irritant than viable argument in opposition, Carolyn began to dismiss him as irrelevant, nothing to add to the discourse. If he could not admit what was happening in their house after witnessing what he had, there was no hope for the man. As he scrambled to come up with one lame and utterly implausible explanation after another, he sounded ridiculous. When he realized the same it was too late; she no longer took him seriously. Circumspect about the trial, Carolyn now defends his former position, aware it was fear dictating his every action and reaction. He was as subject to the Law of Cause and Effect as any other mortal soul.

The brilliant philosopher Rene Descartes made an erudite assertion regarding the matter. He declared: "If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things." Doubt is an integral and truly critical element of faith and ultimately, belief, causing mortals to examine what is seen and unseen, forcing us to grow as the catalyst to an evolving thought process encompassing what is visible to the naked eye of the beholder and what must be seen by more esoteric means: Intuition. a healthy process unless taken to extremes. When doubt is used in combat as a weapon of war, when there is no fight to pick, it ceases being a rational pursuit and sinks to the depths of depravity; a taunt, a reason to disagree for the sake of being disagreeable. At some salient point of reference when someone is confronted by too much evidence to deny, doubt becomes a human crutch and as such, is an obstacle to further enlightenment. When finally acknowledged, accepting what's invisible around us, something as significant as the air we breathe to live, we can and will, at last, see the Light.

"The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the
rational mind is a faithful servant.
We have created a society that honors the
servant and has forgotten the gift."

Albert Einstein

abandon all hope ye who enter here

“When you say a situation or a person is hopeless,
you’re slamming the door in the face of God.”

Charles L. Allen

The priest who came and told Carolyn the house could not be cleansed was only a precursor to an event of a far more sinister nature; lowlight of the summer. One pleasantly cool morning the girls got up before their mother and were all having breakfast together around the kitchen table. Jennifer and Pooh Bear began barking; both were outside the kitchen door sharing a breakfast of their own when each suddenly sounded their alarm, something neither was prone to do without provocation and a good reason. Andrea peeked out the window and could see a beat up Chevy sedan parked on the side of Round Top Road, directly across from their house. It was difficult to spy the intruder at first, obscured as he was by those enormous evergreens in their front yard. What she could see was some kind of sign... two pieces of cardboard, it appeared, secured to one long pole, protruding out from behind the hemlock. The eldest immediately went out onto the front porch for a better look, telling her younger siblings to remain behind. What she heard and soon witnessed was a young man walking back and forth in front of their house, spewing one Bible verse after another, one fanatical phrase after another about a house and its inhabitants being possessed by the Devil himself. A sign of the times. Sticks and stones. Demonstrating as a one-man side-of-the-road-show. Before Andrea could alert her mother she heard a click behind her right shoulder and turned around just in time for the Boom! There stood Carolyn with her shotgun raised and pointed, aiming the weapon directly at a holy roller. Of course, the bullet flew over his head and into the dense forest beyond but the man did not linger long enough to find out if she had missed her target or was simply forewarning him of what was to come if he did not exit the premises immediately... which he promptly did... dropping his home made sign on the ground. The car squealed away like a baby pig running frantically back to its mommy. It was over. Carolyn dropped the shotgun to her hip then turned and walked back into the parlor. Andrea ran to the road to make sure he was gone and while she was there, retrieved the protest sign. Its flimsy paper had disintegrated; it looked as if it had been used before; painted over. Hateful words, scrawled across one side;

on the other, “abandon all hope ye who enter here.” A sign of the times.

The telephone rang; one of the neighbors checking in to make sure everything was all right. A shotgun is a formidable opponent; a noisy one as well. Its discharge did not escape the attention of anyone within half a mile of the house: a sonic boom of sorts. Carolyn has always been a proponent of the Big Bang Theory.

“Carolyn? Are you all right?” Mrs. Pettigrew was as curious as she was conscientious.

“We’re fine; just someone on the property who didn’t belong here. He’s gone now.”

“Do you want me to send my husband down?”

“No need... but thank you for the offer. I’m here with the girls.”

“Well call me if you need us; I’ll send the boys.” Bless her heart... still too frightened to come.

The mother of invention was also the recycling queen. Carolyn took the ugly, illiterate object from her daughter and used this particular sign of the times as kindling. Up in smoke and flames it went; the ignition source for a blazing inferno in the fireplace... there was a chill in the air that morning, after all. Carolyn’s reflexive reaction was oddly comforting to her children. Mom was a bad ass eagle eye with a shotgun. It made them all feel safe from the outside world, no matter how active their inside world became. The insulation and isolation had been breached against her will again and Carolyn was angry, mumbling to herself in utter disgust as she stoked the pyre... up in flames it goes... coming here to scare my kids... burn in hell you sick son of a bitch.

“I’m sick to death of being told there is no hope here... there’s always hope... this guy is just a blithering idiot. Maybe there is no hope for him... but a priest coming here... telling me this house cannot be cleansed of spirits... it is sacrilegious! Imagine a priest telling someone there is no hope!” Carolyn was livid; her darkest fear was in knowing a priest and the freak were both right.

“Hope is that thing with feathers that perches in the soul
and sings the tune without the words and never stops . . . at all.”

Emily Dickinson

clearing the air

“The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude.”

Aldous Huxley

Time came for a long walk in the woods so to practice the presence of God. It was time for her to take a quantum leap in consciousness, the mistress of the house having grown weary of disappointment, loss and regret. Having lived too long this way, she was anxious to find another way, a different path, so she took the road less traveled. Expecting the best upon arrival at the farm, she had begun to assume the worst. Clearing the cobwebs, coming to terms with her mortality was easy compared to grappling with immortality. It was time to clear the air, though not with her irascible husband. She didn't really care what he thought about anything. No. Instead, Carolyn had a needed conversation with God.

Recalling what happened when she and Roger first discussed spirits in their house it was on that day all the bothersome flies dropped dead, again. Airing their differences never proved very beneficial. Usually it became a battle of wits, an altercation with no real winner or loser, just animosity and contempt. There was no point in reliving the past. It was dead and gone but not forgotten... never forgotten. There would be no peace between the couple again, only fleeting moments of silence, an occasional pause for reflection. No form and substance left to the pair, they floated around each other like spirits, avoiding contact, keeping a necessary distance to keep what peace and quiet existed in their home.

There was no point in attempting to clear the air in a home which would instantly fill with the stench of death as an entity made its presence known without fair warning at any given moment. No way to remove a sudden chill. Open every door and window. No was to dispel an immortal being which claimed the place. No way to keep her kids out of harm's way. No way to usher them along. The priest told her so. “I'm so sorry, Mrs. Perron. This house cannot be cleansed.” Cleared of spirits? Never happen. If they refused to move on, why did she feel so entrenched, dug in to a place that offered no hope, only hell on Earth?

Carolyn went into the forest to meet her Maker. Face to face. Up close and personal. She asked the pertinent question: why? Why had this happened to

her and her family? Was there no escape? Were they supposed to be there, supposed to see and hear the sights and sounds of immortality? Was there such a thing as destiny? Was it fate or some cruel joke? The home of her dreams was a nightmare. Conflict erupted as she heard the words she wanted to ignore. Let it be.

There is a cycle in Nature, a pure and perfect union of elements that conspire to create and recreate in every moment. Nature is patient. It is cruel and heartless. It is stunningly beautiful. It is harsh, controlling and utterly unforgiving, possessing no conscience, no will. It runs hot and cold, wet and dry, dark and light. It is neither good nor evil. It is.

Oppressive air began to lift, replaced with something lighter, much easier to breathe. Carolyn began to breathe again. Over time she began to accept her plight not as a lot in life but as a lot of life crammed into a house alive with death. Regarding the true nature of a decade-long experience, it was an expression of Nature. Darkness and Light. It was both. It was everything. Earth had spoken words of wisdom: Let it be.

“The voice of Nature loudly cries
And many a message from the skies,
That something in us never dies.”

Robert Burns

epiphany

“There is no death, only a change of worlds.”
American Indian Proverb

Within a few weeks of the final visit and Warren departure from the farm, another incident occurred, metaphysical in nature; no ordinary manifestation. Carolyn was tempted to call and confess it to the couple, though she resisted the urge, fearing further unwelcome intervention. She still considers it to be of utmost importance, one incident which explained all the rest. The deepest, most profound spiritual encounter of her life, it was a revelation. A miracle. A moment of epiphany... the answer to pensive prayers. Resolution. God.

Wandering their house like a nomad on a cold desert night, the vacancy in her eyes spoke of the hopelessness inhabiting an empty soul. To escape such a pitiful interpretation of her own plight, Carolyn spent a great deal of time in her bed. Exhaustion and pain were consuming the woman like a voracious animal, stripping flesh from her bones... eating her alive. The children would have suffered benign neglect, if not for the intervention of their eldest sister. The girls went to Andrea for... everything. Appearing to be a sack of skeletal remains, the emaciated remnants of their mother kept up a pretense of being, of animated existence as a shadow of her former self while her girls became increasingly frightened of losing her to the black hole, darkness surrounding them in a house alive with death. Carolyn had become a living apparition, a frail and fragile creature, a ghost of a woman. The seekers and soothsayers, the ones who had come to the séance with their morbid curiosity in tow just weeks before, would have been stunned by the change; the metamorphosis. Wasting away, Carolyn's weight plunged below one hundred pounds. This was a rapid transition. Sustained by coffee and cigarettes, she would literally faint into bed. Andrea's self-appointed task became keeping her sisters well fed and the home fires burning. It was the least she could do for the mother she loved as much as life itself. When alone, she prayed for the wonderful woman who'd given her life.

Late one exceptionally chilly night Carolyn emerged from her bedroom, taking up residence on the hearthstone in front of the fireplace. Andrea had stoked the fire and was sprawled out on the sofa, surrounded by her books.

Having gotten her sisters settled into bed, it was finally her turn to address the study postponed earlier. Delighted to see her mother awake and alert, she shuffled out from beneath a blanket of literature, the history of the Western world, anxious to embrace a woman who somehow seemed to be more of a stranger, unfamiliar in body and mind. Having slept right through dinner, her dutiful daughter offered to suspend her homework and warm up the leftovers of food she had prepared earlier. Carolyn declined a hot meal, reassuring her concerned daughter, she wasn't really hungry. Unacceptable. "I insist. You have to eat something." Andrea turned toward the kitchen.

"Would you bring me a cup of coffee, too? To wash it down?"

"At this hour?" Though skeptical of the request, Andrea knew her mother was impervious to the effects of caffeine. She was only teasing, just trying to coax a smile from the forlorn figure in front of her eyes.

"It won't keep me up. Haven't you noticed? Lately I can always sleep."

"I've noticed." Not an indictment, Andrea meant to achieve a playful tone by the retort but certain sadness infiltrated her brief response instead.

Holding firm to her position in front of the fire, the mother felt only regret for her daughter while she watched Andrea disappear through a dark dining room door. Turning to face the fire, Carolyn lifted the iron poker and tended the flaming logs. A cacophony of sound erupted behind her the moment she leaned down into the fireplace. It was a multitude of voices in conversation. Raucous laughter rang through the room. Startled, Carolyn turned around to locate the source of the sound. Rising slowly, the mystifying sight before her eyes claimed, and in fact demanded her undivided attention. Laying aside the tool in hand, she focused on the adjoining room which had been, just a few seconds before, as dark and vacant as her eyes had been in recent weeks.

There they were: men, women and children gathered together around a table not her own. In a brightly lighted room, sharing a festive meal, several children were at play, running around the room as a tall, lean woman cooked something over the open flame of a fireplace which had been sealed many decades before Carolyn bought the house. The men were drinking from large steins and helping themselves to opulent bowls of food already being served from the center of the long, hand-hewn table. Benches ran along the rugged piece of wood and two men sat, side by side, sharing a grin as they toasted the cook and the very fine meal being placed before them. The mother gently scolded her naughty children, insisting they settle down, take a seat and eat.

The men laughed heartily, hoisting their steins once again. Souls in glorious celebration, it was a gathering in tribute to the value of family and friends. It was a striking image, a manifestation unlike any she'd ever witnessed in the home, though Cindy had described it before, as an expression of pure love.

One big happy family! Carolyn stared at them in disbelief. She vividly recalls feeling humbled by it, unafraid, entirely peaceful in their presence. It was fascinating to her; their clothing, their speech... words no longer in use. She felt a sense of familiarity. No anxiety at all. Could they be real? She wondered if she might be hallucinating... but the details, the language... these people were from another time, another century; not an illusion or some figment of her imagination. They were real. After a few moments of being utterly transfixed by disbelief, Carolyn decided... she did believe her eyes.

One of the men looked up from his plate. He turned his head and stared directly at Carolyn, in sheer amazement. She met his fixed gaze, smiling in response. He could see her as well as she could see him, and they shared an intense moment of mutual recognition. Without diverting his eyes, he gently and discreetly used his elbow to nudge the man seated beside him, indicating where he too should look, on the hearthstone of the fireplace. "Ya see that?" It was the last thing Carolyn heard then they were gone. All gone. A terrible burden had been inexplicably lifted. Carolyn realized the truth... epiphany! During that point of cosmic convergence, in shared space, she was the ghost.

Andrea emerged through the doorway, entering the dining room, empty and dark. She could see her mother in the distance, still standing where she left her, on the hearthstone. Instantly, the youngster saw there was something different about her mother, something so starkly altered, it was impossible to escape notice. A furrowed brow had softened. Light had returned to her eyes, infusing her entire being, bathed in a pale, translucent glow. The woman was shining for no apparent reason, appearing angelic, ethereal; not of this world. Approaching, balancing a tray of food and drink, Andrea was received with the brightest smile she'd seen on a face for longer than she could remember. It was a welcome relief, and amazing change, occurring during the brief time required to warm a bowl of beef stew and brew a pot of coffee. As the light slowly dissipated a smile remained, leaving a mother renewed and ravenous. Without discussing this miraculous experience, Carolyn gratefully accepted the delicious midnight meal. She was as hungry for the food as Andrea was hungry for her mother to return to their family. The youngster went to bed

feeling happy and hopeful, though perplexed by the sudden improvement.

On a cosmic level, in another dimension, a healing happened that night. It was a moment of truth; pure enlightenment. A revelation for Carolyn. Though it took some time to fully process the episode, she did so privately. Her spirits lifted as time passed and several years later, she finally described what she'd still perceived as a miraculous event to the daughter who had been present to witness this remarkable transformation. Andrea was off at college and had come home for vacation. During their conversation about philosophy, her chosen course of study, the two of them began exploring metaphysics and religion. At that time, Carolyn finally disclosed this phenomenal event, revealing her interpretation of it. Those unexpected dinner guests had truly touched her heart and likewise opened her mind. A singular event solidified her faith, the existence of something beyond us, beyond this life. The mystical encounter caused her to become a more deeply spiritual being and she felt privileged to witness such a remarkable manifestation, as it informed everything else. She knew, beyond a doubt, she had shared the same place, at the same time, with a group of people who once dwelled within those walls. At the intersection of dimensions, a crossroad of life and death, she was the one perceived as the spirit. An acknowledgement and acceptance of such had essentially liberated Carolyn from the vise grip of fear that kept her tethered during all the years spent in a farmhouse that, until this incident, she could not comprehend. The woman finally understood they all shared the same space and time; a concept of a portal suddenly made perfect sense. A shroud of despair lifted. Light penetrated the darkness of a black hole in which she dwelled. Her strength, weight and outlook showed signs of a gradual but steady improvement. After an extended absence, at long last, Carolyn began her sure ascent on a journey back from Hell on Earth. She returned to her family, restored, into the loving arms of her children again, as if she had never left them... but she had. She was finally home. Silent prayers of gratitude were heaven sent. Hallelujah!

“I simply believe that some part of the human
Self or Soul is not subject to the laws of space and time.”
Carl Jung

the foreseeable future

“Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.”

Henry David Thoreau

Her sense of direction skewed and screwed with by one irascible immortal soul, it was not so easy to predict what the future might hold. No psychic, no matter how prescient, could say what would happen to a mere mortal searching for a way out of a labyrinth, the maze her life had become. Carolyn could not see her way clear to the freedom she craved because she did not yet know where to look, in what direction to run. She did not yet comprehend that she was already free as a bird. Glimpses into the future were dark and bleak, revealing nothing, like staring into a black hole from which she extricated herself in an act of divine intervention and self-preservation.

Those possessing foresight are quick to admit they almost never predict what is going to happen in their own lives, because they can't, because they aren't supposed to see the light within. They are instead supposed to be the light which guides others along their path on a remarkable spiritual journey called life. Ah, the gypsies and fortune tellers of the world are an interesting lot. Carolyn wasn't one of them. She'd have flashes and moments of insight which often panned out, yielding little flecks of gold to marvel at, but she was not prescient in the truest sense of the word, defined as possessing knowledge of actions or events before they occur. Few possess such ability and some who claim the gift as their own are frauds. For those who are legitimate, who are the seers among us, no oracle or sage could have helped her. It was too volatile an environment, too unpredictable. There was no crystal ball... no deck of cards... no Ouija board with any answers for a woman who dwelled in a numinous realm. It was truly beyond understanding.

Carolyn was beginning to allow a new vision into her mind. There was another path. She would not be there forever. She wanted to go home. In much the same way she put it out in mind years before, the deep, heartfelt desire to find the right and proper place in the country, she refocused and redoubled her efforts to visualize a way out, a way forward. Carolyn wanted to go home. She had Georgia on her mind. Placing an order with the cosmos, she let it go and moved on with life as she knew it, knowing the time would come when she would. If she had learned anything in her ethereal classroom it was to let go and let God.

“For a long time it had seemed to me that life was
about to begin—real life.

But there was always some obstacle in the way.

Something to be got through first,
some unfinished business, time still to be served,
a debt to be paid.

Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that
these obstacles were my life.”

Friar Alfred D’Souza

amen

“Those who seek consolation in existing churches often pay for their own peace of mind with a tacit agreement to ignore a great deal of what is known about the way the world works.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

A moment of silence. A pause for reflection. Prayer as powerful medium; the point of spiritual convergence: in unity. When a child closes her eyes and connects from within to the belief that someone is there to hear her call out in the night, it alone provides a moment of stunned silence for any thinking mortal soul. The practice of prayer was familiar to the children, whether in private or as a group, they sought comfort and solace in phrases that always ended in amen; prayer punctuated with a single word to announce an end to their communiqué. Traditions upheld dictate the necessary completion to a memorized text when praying together in church. A predetermined construct; its boundaries set in stone, it left no wiggle room for children confronted by the Netherworld. Often, when these children prayed, it qualified as begging; pleading to be spared from some ungodly sight or sound... to be spared from death, or a fate even worse. Cindy had begged for her life on more than one occasion, not the conventional Lord’s Prayer . . . a different version of the practice altogether. Directly to the source, requesting immediate assistance, divine intervention in that moment of crisis. Her unique method of informal communication was a marked departure from hushed tones used, the somber words murmured in church, heads bowed and hands clasped, kneeling in oak pews beneath stained glass. Cindy would, if necessary, scream for help, and often did. No worry of disturbing the family. None of them could hear her.

The five children of the family were far more devout than either of their parents but it was the house, a spooky old farmhouse which forged an innate understanding in each of the significance of this pure connection. No words chanted from memory could quite convey the need or gratitude transmitted in the heartfelt pleas they uttered when overtaken by a moment of panic. It did not escape them; their prayers were always answered... always. Not once did evil beget good. Not once was the clarion call blatantly ignored. Some benevolent force always intervened on behalf of the panic-stricken child, instantly banishing any malevolence from the scene... exit, stage left.

For the first year or so the children clustered like nuts in a squirrel’s nest

atop Andrea's comfortable bed, as soon as they all realized they really had something to pray about. Andrea would lead the charge and often relied on the old standards. Over time, she began addressing specific issues with the Almighty Lord, requesting protection for herself and her siblings each night before they went to sleep. Bound each to each, these girls learned to speak directly with God regarding whatever was on their minds. God's existence was a given. It was a valuable resource, a gift they gave one another as they each expressed their own desires and dreams and wishes for the health and happiness of their family. Gathering in a circle on the bed, holding hands, the children grew spiritually, simply by sharing their thoughts and fears, free of any scrutiny or judgment. It was safe when they were all together. It felt as if nothing could harm them. There was safety in numbers and power in prayer.

This evolution occurred naturally but did not really begin in earnest until they moved into a house alive with death; such is the blessing that comes with the curse. With only a modicum of instruction in an outdated dogma, the children entered the farmhouse with fresh eyes and pure hearts, relatively unspoiled by any preconceived notions. None of them expected what they soon discovered but all of them knew where to turn for help. Each of them learned how to seek the Holy Spirit as a valiant companion with whom to do battle; to virtually wage war against the formidable (if sometimes invisible) adversary... an unholy ghost. Though the children got caught in the bubble, their nightly prayers felt like the establishment of a mighty fortress, as a protective barrier... a force field of their own to shield them against attacks. It was how the girls coped, how they processed what was happening in their home. This was how they resolved the dilemmas and snapped the grasp of constant fear. A natural conversion began to occur after several years in the house. They found God omnipresent in Nature and likewise found God in every holy moment during every holy day. They were never alone and never abandoned to the dark and nefarious forces. They felt safe in the midst of those momentary lapses in dimension when hell chose to rear its ugly head. But why, they wondered, was "amen" even necessary when there is no end to practicing the presence? Of course private conversations occurred while under some peculiar duress. However, when things were calm in the house there was no less reason to maintain private connections. Spirits in rebellion in their natural habitat manifesting at will; this was reason enough to keep a conversation current. When things became active it was time to pick up the

pace and make a call... much like phoning a friend in a crisis. A call for help.

There was a truly redemptive quality about their encounters with spirits. Time after glorious time, simple prayer would spontaneously rush to the lips of everyone who lived in the dwelling. Roger's prayers came in the form of what some might perceive as curses, in emotional outbursts: "Jesus Christ!" All is forgiven... he hopes.

These children gravitated naturally to acceptance of a greater power. The existence of God did not seem to be such a far-fetched notion to any of them. Had they become indoctrinated? No. It was a fundamental inclination based on the Nature around them; miracles they saw every day. Seeing the spirits was a miracle: proof enough. How many times had their desperate pleas been answered? How many times did an angel come to call? They had no reason to doubt. Over the course of time everyone learned their prayers were heard and taken seriously. They were usually answered in a timely manner, unless there was some obvious lesson involved. In the midst of a crisis each request was attended to with immediacy. Nancy trapped behind a chimney inside the burning room. Carolyn surrounded by fire. Cynthia, sick in a dark woodshed. It was she who first insisted the farmhouse was a protective force; a fortress against evil. Yet, her suggestion was not taken seriously at the time. Upon reflection, the family now sees her point with clarity... the truth of it.

April prayed on principle alone. She never did distinguish between the phenomenon she called Oliver and what she prayed to before she went to bed at night. To her they were one in the same: it was all miraculous. There was no perceived threat. She felt only a deep sense of compassion for a little boy lost, trapped between this world and the next. She said "amen" as an excuse to practice making the sign of the cross, though she always got it backwards. In the end, there is no end. Amen is, for the ladies, simply a way of saying "ta-ta-for-now-talk-to-you-later!" Though amen has a much nicer ring to it.

"There are many things that are essential to arriving
at true peace of mind,
and one of the most important is faith, which cannot be acquired without prayer."
John Wooden



~ an old wagon road leading nowhere and everywhere ~

Transformation

“Once you make a decision, the universe conspires
to make it happen.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

In retrospect it appears to be a conspiracy, a deliberate convergence of events. Carolyn made a decision. She wanted a place in the country. Having focused all her mental energy on a singular desire, essentially placing an order with the Universe, she'd then moved on in mind, attending to her family while silently nurturing the dreamscape along as a vision, no further words on the matter necessary. During fleeting moments, when her mind was free to wander, she would allow herself passing reflections, imagining a future free of worry and torment from mortal souls surrounding them in a suburb she reluctantly called home. She knew better. She knew there was a place for her family elsewhere though she had no idea how far away elsewhere might prove to be. Carolyn allowed herself the luxury of looking ahead, peering into the future at that point in her life, still young and energetic, full of life and clinging to the hope that they would find their way. Trusting her sense of direction, she followed it all the way to Harrisville, Rhode Island, to the home of her dreams. Too good to be true? Apparently so. Yet, it was also too true not to be good. As far as Carolyn was concerned it had robbed her of youth and beauty, depleting her of natural resources in every conceivable way. Supernatural subterfuge, it all seemed cruel and unusual punishment for a mother who wanted nothing but the best for her children, especially a fine education. Few children ever receive the education her girls did. However, omnipresent underlying currents of hostility charged the place with negative energy and there proved to be nothing restorative about an oppressive weight Carolyn carried as a burden for a decade. There was nothing enchanting, nothing uplifting, not anymore. The spell cast had been a dark one indeed.

Fear consumed like flames, ravaging the minds of those who'd come to the light but had to learn to find their way in the dark. Fear of fire was a mother's greatest torment, what a spirit used as weaponry. Carolyn had lowered her standards and expectations over time. Instead of daring to long for a future as free of worry as she'd once hoped the farm would provide, free of anguish from mortals they encountered in Cumberland, her priorities had drastically

changed. Now she hoped for a place free of immortal souls and the riff raff they attracted. She once felt trapped, stuck in Cumberland and those emotions reemerged when she felt captured by a haunted house in Harrisville. No way out.

Far more than a tale about the two who remained locked in a most ferocious battle, in a mortal conflict waged against an immortal soul; it was all about staking a rightful claim to the position of mistress of the house. But the body count kept rising. Collateral damage was done. Children lost their innocence but gained a new perspective and their father was confronted by the truth. In time, they would all learn their lessons well and none were permitted to leave the ethereal classroom until they'd passed the test. Each member of the family was forced to learn about life and death the hard way, compelled to stare into a light emerging from their dark existence. As such, each of them gradually transformed, touched by a mutual encounter within shared space. They experienced the wonder of it all as participants as well as witnesses to a decade-long duel to the death on two distinct fronts. Carolyn began to become what she'd loathed. Her physical transformation took a toll. Complications ensued. A séance gone wrong revealed the presence of imminent danger. There was nothing left to salvage from the spoils of a war waged in the Netherworld. It was not a fair fight. Wounded and withdrawing into a cocoon-like existence, Carolyn would have to heal where she felt safely cosseted though she knew better than most there was no safe place. They were always in harm's way and some tempted fate as a matter of course. In a Universe riddled with collisions and near misses, she'd taken a direct hit then crawled off the battlefield for a time to heal the wounds, to restore and reclaim her soul. When she'd grown out of it the cocoon ruptured. She emerged profoundly changed, almost unrecognizable. It was the most fearful time of all. The irony of it was inescapable and no one escaped unscathed... a life sentence.

Life and subsequent deaths on a farm seemed to be a series of trials and tribulation; crimes committed and punishment dispensed. Penance or purgatory, it hardly mattered when it came to spirit matters, as they called all the shots. Best to stick to one's guns. Would their family get let off the hook with only time served? From the moment they stepped onto the property, over a threshold, through a portal cleverly disguised as a farmhouse, it was

simply too late to turn back. Recalling words of warning by Paulo Coelho, “Don’t allow your wounds to transform you into someone you are not.” There were times when it seemed they had no choice in the matter. Transmutation seemed to be the natural course of things in their supernatural environment; Carolyn’s conversion, a case in point. The entire family became involved in the process of spiritual evolution as revolution, one they could not avoid.

Epiphany is painful. Enlightenment is a difficult process. When all one has ever known is three-dimensional black and white, introduction of the fourth dimension displayed in dazzling Technicolor is terribly hard on the eyes, all three of them. What was once bright and beautiful at a glance became more of a shock to the system when stared at for an extended period... too much to take in. H.P. Lovecraft wrote about this kind of conversion. “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the ability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.” How does a family stunned by the sight absorb the many messages received? What mercy bestowed? “We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.” Their journey became truly treacherous. It was a call to arms but why? Coming to terms with one’s immortality requires a quantum leap in consciousness, no easy feat, culminating in the biggest chill of all.

It was surreal estate with a cosmic twist; a black hole to infinity and beyond. No one expected to have to travel quite so far to get elsewhere and it seemed a high price to pay to arrive at an intended destination; a placid place in the country. Lovecraft forewarned of it: “but someday the piercing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.” Forewarned is forearmed and yet, they were actually outnumbered in their own home. Plunged into a new dark age, they marched forward into each new moment of it as advancing their position seemed the only option.

Time is of the essence. In retrospect, the timing was impeccable as everything happens with purpose and reason in its right and proper time. They arrived all but blind to the possibilities which lay before them and departed a decade later as seers who’d been over-exposed to a negative energy which eventually yielded a positive outcome. It took time to absorb

and process these events. Thirty years to tell a sordid and equally enlightening tale of discovery. To do so required courage and faith, the acquisition of a belief system that fit the construct, as a guidepost. Awakening within a new dark age, they'd ventured past the point of no return. Truth be told, there is no turning back in life. As we look back on it mortal souls may observe only with the mind's eye in memory. Some introspection is essential but most of us learn as we go. Otherwise, the journey yields nothing but time spent and sometimes wasted. This is a time-consuming, painstaking process which cannot be avoided but must be endured by those who've seen too much and just enough to know there is something beyond mortal existence.

Human beings begin evolving at a cellular level due to a collision as the cosmic secrecy of seed is revealed. From point of conception we continue evolving through life to death and beyond. A proper sense of direction is helpful but not intrinsic to an excursion on Earth. If we all knew where we were going from the inception, life would be a bore. Instead, it is a constantly changing, ever-transforming intrepid journey through time and space allotted, which offers much more in the way of adventure. Carolyn discovered how remarkable it is to remain alive in the wake of spiritual death then regenerate, rising from the ashes. Fran was not the only one who knew how to fly away... birds of a feather. Both are to be commended for two valiant efforts made in battle; for a fight of their lives for their lives. Fran's transition notwithstanding, it was a war won in the end, freedom the reward. Each made her trek her own way, crossing their bridge, over the river then through the woods. Mother Nature embraced her young in loving arms disguised as limbs and Carolyn healed her wounds, the sticky pine pitch on her fingers a balm for the soul. Battle scars remain, yet Carolyn feels blessed that she survived the onslaught, that she outlived her attacker's presence in her life and any attempt made to take her down the hatch; a black hole. Is it not miraculous to remain alive in spite of and in light of spiritual death? Perhaps her girls had been right all along. They are the Light.

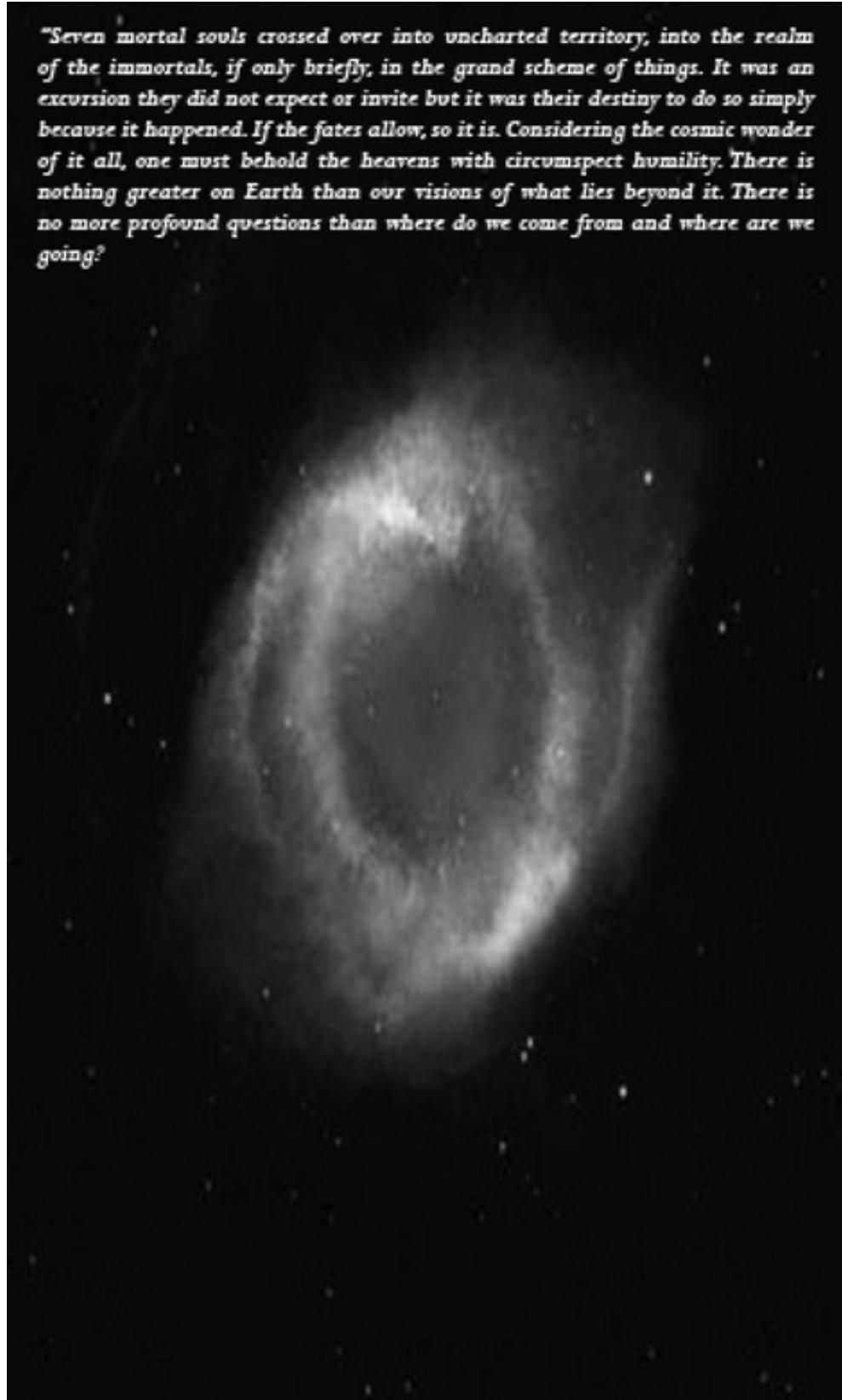
Together, as one, the Perron family intermingled with immortality and each was transformed by the experience. They would emerge from this engagement profoundly changed and spiritually stirred, shaken and awakened by personal encounters they will never forget. Together, as one, they entered

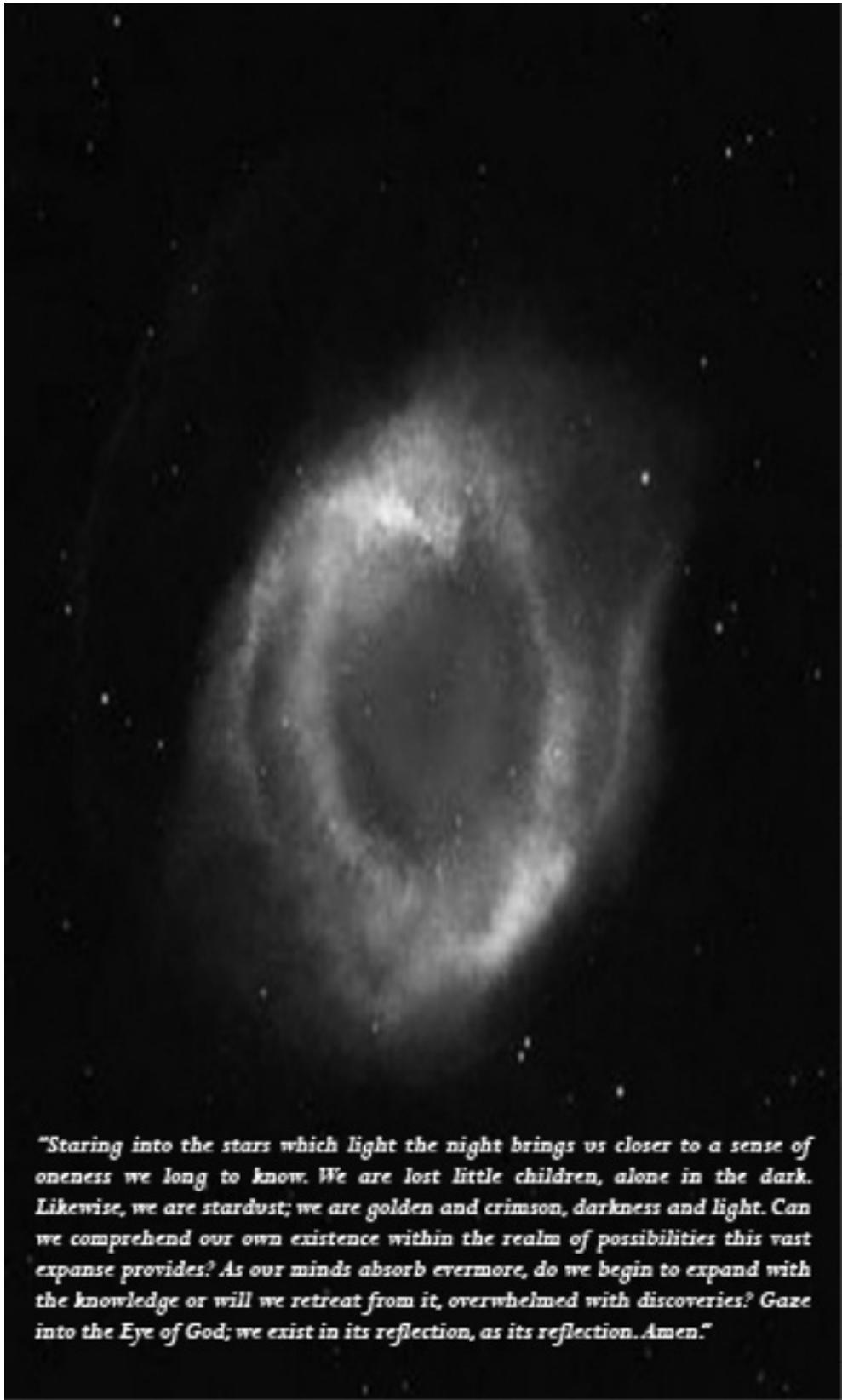
a new dark age. To see its light was the challenge and the lesson. The test always came first. When they emerged it was with a realization. There is no death. There is only transformation.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called
the children of God.”

Matthew 5:9

"Seven mortal souls crossed over into uncharted territory, into the realm of the immortals, if only briefly, in the grand scheme of things. It was an excursion they did not expect or invite but it was their destiny to do so simply because it happened. If the fates allow, so it is. Considering the cosmic wonder of it all, one must behold the heavens with circumspect humility. There is nothing greater on Earth than our visions of what lies beyond it. There is no more profound questions than where do we come from and where are we going?"





"Staring into the stars which light the night brings us closer to a sense of oneness we long to know. We are lost little children, alone in the dark. Likewise, we are stardust; we are golden and crimson, darkness and light. Can we comprehend our own existence within the realm of possibilities this vast expanse provides? As our minds absorb evermore, do we begin to expand with the knowledge or will we retreat from it, overwhelmed with discoveries? Gaze into the Eye of God; we exist in its reflection, as its reflection. Amen."