

A small town in Vermont

River Road was an old road that no longer served any significant purpose. It was just a sliver of a brick between two main streets in the small town of West Lake, Vermont. The fact that it even had River in its name was an anomaly, as there wasn't a river anywhere around it.

Perhaps in the troubled years of the past, forever linking the town to the puritanical hysteria associated with ignorance, there was a river, but there wasn't one now. And like most of New England's small towns, it possessed a link to the earliest of American history, and as such, had its share of savage beginnings, mythology mixed with truth, and the occasional mention of a curse or two. So, the fact that they called a road, River Road, without a visible or historically documented reference to a river, didn't seem unusual or strange. It was just deemed endearing by tourists and stupid by the locals.

Certainly, the relatives of those who were drowned or burned for being witches did not speak kindly of their historical beginnings. But Eli Fletcher, the one person within the entire town who still used River Road, knew all the righteous indignation was just that and nothing else. It helped the town sell books. Books he even read and burned. "That's what you do with trash," he would tell you if you asked him why he burned the books. A few people may have asked the question in the past, but neither they nor anyone else in town did now.

Though his house backed up to River Road, its address was 1110 Fletcher School Road. The road was named for his family and the school his great-great-grandmother had started. It burned down in 1826. All the children escaped the fire, but his great-great-grandmother, Victoria, did not. Considering she started the fire because she got tired of hearing the children reciting the

multiplication tables over and over, there were many people at the time, and even some still today, who were of the opinion she deserved to die.

Eli wasn't one of them. He understood how annoying the same idea or word rummaging around in your head could be to a person and was completely accepting of the notion that something like that would indeed drive someone mad. "If she had survived and stood trial and I was a member of the jury, I would have voted her not guilty," he would have told anyone who asked him, but no one ever did. So, when given the opportunity in a public setting, should the event or even the topic of education in general come up, he would provide them with his opinion and rationale for it. No one who heard his opinion ever offered a contrary one. At least not to his face.

And like most stories originating 150 years ago, the Fletcher School fire became inflated with importance to the overall town development. The school was more like a shed than a school, and there were only five students at the time of the fire. But the state of Vermont knew "historical disasters" with a supernatural link of some sort had relevance for the state's marketing efforts, and its continued association with anything conjuring up the notion of witchcraft in the mind of a tourist was not discouraged. Eli never disputed the fact that something supernatural was associated with his great-great-grandmother. His grandmother told him she liked to eat sow ears, frog legs, and the occasional rattlesnake. She also liked running around in the snow naked. That was proof to him that she had supernatural tendencies.

His house was one of five houses on Fletcher School Road. Two of the occupants who lived in those historical homes were young Vermonters who loved the beautiful antiquity

associated with the town and had taken it upon themselves to restore the homes to their original splendor. One home had sat empty for a long time and had just recently been purchased. The other home belonged to his cousin. Gertrude Fletcher Singleton, or as her friends called her, Gertie. When they were little, Eli called his cousin Gertie all the time. Though the saying was trite and overused by thousands of adults, their relationship was described as “two children who were like two peas in a pod.” But the “I show you mine if you show me yours” incident occurring in 1948 ended the relationship forever.

They were both twelve years old at the time, and the normal changes in one led to the aforementioned event. “She should have never laughed at it,” Eli would say if anyone asked him about it, but very few ever did. Even though one of them went as far as to say it was just a normal child-like reaction to laugh at the cluster of grapes that hadn’t grown or descended from the vine yet, her behavior had embarrassed him and could not be forgiven. Eli did not like being embarrassed, and he held a grudge like a club he could wield at any time and provide the greatest ill-fortune to those who were its recipients.

Historians, psychologists, neighbors, distant relatives (for there were none close anymore), and even shopkeepers, all had an opinion as to how an innocent act of childhood could evolve into a lifelong devotion to harsh words and distance. Historians, of course, referred to the puritanical roots and the societal inclination at the time to keep sexual topics segregated from public discourse. Psychologists would echo similar sentiments, only to add some reference to Freud’s Id or Jung’s personality-type theories.

Neighbors at the time said very little. Neighbors who now knew of the incident because Gertie may have referred to it at a cocktail party would just laugh and acknowledge how silly it was, being careful, though, the assessment of the incident at the party was not conveyed to Eli at another time. Distant relatives were like neighbors. They tended to side with Gertie's representation of the simplification of the incident, only to ensure the dismissal was not shared with Eli. Shopkeepers said very little to Gertie or Eli, but spoke about the incident among themselves, using it as a way to demean Eli, again, provided he wasn't there to deliver a strong and potentially long-lasting financial rebuke.

And if history was completely devoid of manipulation, Gertie would have told her friends her parents told her to apologize to Eli because what she saw was normal. They told her "Girls developed faster than boys and that there was nothing at all wrong with her cousin." But Gertie never did apologize. She didn't like the way Eli shunned her afterward and had thought him a "know-it-all" for quite some time before then. He needs a "good comeuppance," she thought at the time. Unfortunately, the "comeuppance" had now lasted for 72 years. Therefore, there was little direct interaction between the once very close cousins and friends.

This long-lasting feud and their intolerant behavior could be considered insane by some. And that word, along with others like eccentric, idiosyncratic, quirky, and peculiar, had all been used at one time or another to describe the cousins. The whispers or glances told both what people were thinking, and if either of them had been confronted by any of those people with one of those adjectives, neither one of them would have denied it. In that regard, they both stood firm and shared a similar philosophy: "Take me for a fool and it will be you they call foolish one

day.” Tradesmen, neighbors, distant relatives, politicians, and shopkeepers would all testify to the intended or innocent error in judgment as a huge mistake.

Gertie was subtle in the way she taught people how they had made a misjudgment in their assessment of her. This was usually done by asking a lot of questions until, finally, the individual realized if they continued to pursue the overcharged or unnecessary repair and failed to refund her the total due her from any transaction, they would regret the inaction both professionally and financially.

Eli was not as subtle as his cousin. He reveled in becoming the “victim” of such an event. As Gertie would say, “his boastful behavior as a child evolved into the arrogant conduct of an adult.” Thus, any attempt at malfeasance or dishonesty was a moment where Eli would demonstrate his sharp wit, which cut through the feigned ignorance like a scythe and left the person feeling lucky they had corrected the error financially and had a body and skin remaining intact.

The other road of any importance to this community and the cousins was Town Farm Road, which intersected with Fletcher School Road, where, on the corner, Gertie lived. Town Farm Road led to the Town Farm, which had been in business for over 250 years. It made Vermont Maple syrup, and besides its historical beginnings, the few arts and craft stores, the century-old homes, and a few wooden bridges that attracted tourists, it was the only source of industry within a forty-mile area.

Most Vermonters were proud of the fact that Vermont contributed forty percent of the United States market for maple syrup, but Eli was not like most Vermonters. He didn’t care much

for maple syrup. The fructose in the syrup caused his stomach discomfort, so he didn't eat it. If the Town Farm went out of business tomorrow, it wouldn't have caused him any more pain than trying to digest the sweet substance on some biscuits or pancakes. "You'd think this was the only place where maple trees grew," he'd say if anyone asked him as he walked to the town pharmacy, but very few people asked him. At least not more than once.

His scoliosis, which made people wince when they saw his body, rendered his harsh language and rude manner acceptable to anyone who interacted with him. "With a body like that, you would be ill-tempered too," were the words whispered at the grocery store or pharmacy. But they were wrong if you believed his cousin. According to her, his demeanor was not influenced by the curvature of his spine or the crooked nature of his body. No, it was reflective of a hatred of all things human and was more than likely an undiscovered protein manufactured within the marrow of his bones.

At least that's what his cousin said. She was the one person in town who didn't put up with the mean old man stereotype he fostered. And he avoided her as much as possible, which was fairly easy to do, seeing how she seldom left the house, and he only left his for small snippets of time. Gertie would also tell everyone that his face, arms, and legs looked like the color of aspirin. Probably because they very seldom saw the light of day. "Wouldn't be surprised if his body might catch fire if he ever wore anything other than long-sleeved shirts and pants," and then whoever she was talking to would laugh. When he heard she had said those words, he would tell the person who told him, "The old woman has the face of a horse and the breath of a

horse stall, and I doubt if she knew shit from Shinola,” and then walk away. Though ‘Shinola’ was a now-defunct shoe polish, people still understood what Eli meant.

Even if they wouldn’t admit it, those in town would tell you, the two cousins had more similarities to one another than differences. They looked more like sister and brother than third cousins. The genetic randomness of a similar gene pool provided them with a distinct likeness. They both shared a long Roman nose, a hard chin reflecting a resolute jaw and opinion, and the same blue eyes that mirrored heaven, even though they both possessed a religious indifference. They both had thick brown hair as children, and even after all this time, had similar straw-colored hair with a bird nest-like thickness and, at times, appearance. And to be honest, at times, both of them provided those close enough to gain a reference, a distinct odiferous displeasure.

Gertie didn’t have a curved back, but she did have arthritic hips, so sometimes she walked in a stooped manner, and like Eli, always with pain. But perhaps because she was less stubborn, she allowed the pain to dictate her movements, and she seldom left the home. This was a time when Eli’s mean old man appearance truly justified his actions. He was too mad at the pain to allow it to control his ability to go where and when he wanted. That “where and when” were the grocery store and the pharmacy when he needed essential items, often walking down River Road to avoid interacting with other people.

It was April 22nd, a Wednesday, when Eli began walking down River Road to go to the pharmacy. Snow, though almost always a possibility in Vermont at this time of year, was not present. Birds welcomed spring with their distinct chirps and tweets. A breath of color from the spring flowers dotted the countryside against a lush green background, and the weather didn’t

require Eli to put on a jacket. His long-sleeved shirt was sufficient, and the scenery and weather made him smile as he walked, though no one was there to see it.

As he walked into the pharmacy, he was greeted as he was every time he went into the establishment with a, “Good morning, Mr. Fletcher. What brings you to see us today?”

He knew the pharmacist did it to annoy him, but he didn’t see any reason to fight with the man who was responsible for giving him the right medicine. He considered it might even be akin to suicide, considering there wasn’t another pharmacist within the area for fifty miles. And the medicine he acquired there did indeed enable him to continue living.

“Need a refill, Joe. Getting down to the last several days, and you know I don’t like to get to a point where I may need it and you may be closed.”

“Yes, that’s one thing I can say about you, Eli, you don’t procrastinate about anything at all. I’ll get it together for you. Beautiful weather, isn’t it?”

Idle conversation was not Eli’s strong point. He considered it a waste of breath, and he wasn’t sure how many more breaths he had. But when it came to discussing the weather and nature, he considered the conversation worthy of his endeavors.

“Yes, indeed it is, Joe. Heard the black-capped chickadees and blackbirds this morning. Saw a couple of turkey vultures and tree swallows, too. Good to see those tree swallows. They keep the insect population tolerable. Even saw a woodcock in the open fields on my property. Interesting watching them dance. I also saw a lot of trilliums out in the woods along with some yellow trout lilies. Mighty pretty when those two flowers are growing side by side. Saw several

Jack-in-the-pulpit, too. Funny how the flower got its name. Would have never thought of it by looking at it, but that pouch shape of the flower was considered to resemble a pulpit, and the club inside of it a preacher. Never looked like it to me, but I didn't name it.

"The hawthorn, ash, birches, and maples, all are beginning to green out. Beautiful trees, every one of them. Even saw a couple of cottontails earlier this morning as I was drinking my morning tea. Just as the sun is coming up, they will come out and look for a little food before they go back into the underbrush. So, I agree with you, Tom, it is indeed a beautiful morning."

"It's amazing to me how you know so much about everything in the woods up here, Eli."

"Shouldn't. Been here my entire life. If I didn't know much about them, it would be a sin. Can't take days like this for granted. You never know how many more you'll get to see."

"Truer words could not be spoken. Here's your medicine, Eli. Not sure how you have been able to take this anti-fungal medicine for so long."

And just like that, an error in judgment by a shopkeeper. Regardless of the medicine he controlled, he had tried to insinuate Eli wasn't aware of his disease, its effect on his body, or the properties and side effects of his medicines, and that could not be tolerated.

"For your information, Joe, the aspergillus in my lungs and the candida I sometimes get in my throat should be of no concern to you. I think you are a pharmacist, not a physician, unless you have another online degree of which I am not aware. And considering you just talked about my medical issues out loud in a public area, I believe that is a HIPAA violation, and I am inclined to report it to the federal authorities."

“Eli, there isn’t anyone in here but you and me, and I have been dispensing this same medicine to you for close to fifteen years. I think that may be a record. The fact you haven’t had liver or heart failure is remarkable.”

“Do you plan on publishing a white paper on the unique patient you just violated their right to privacy?”

Joe knew better than to persist in this discussion. Though Eli had been the one to bring up the exact illness, he knew he had essentially violated HIPAA by stating he was taking an antifungal medicine, even though it could be argued there was no one else around. But why bother? Eli would win the argument eventually. He always did.

“Sorry, Eli. Hope you have a good day, and don’t worry about the payment. The entire cost is covered by your insurance.”

“Yes, I know, Joe. I am very aware of what my insurance pays for and what they don’t cover. Have a good day.”

“Eli,” Joe said in a cautious manner.

“Yes?”

“I know you don’t read the paper, so I wanted to tell you they found another body off Town Farm Road. I hear from some of the folks in town, the police think it looks suspicious. I hope this isn’t 1980 all over again.”

And just like that, the shopkeeper did it again. Another mistake – an insinuation Eli wasn't aware of what was going on due to his old age and his lack of reading a bi-weekly newspaper.

“First of all, Joe, the paper you refer to likes to label everything as suspicious, whether the police think so or not. It helps them sell newspapers. The fact that the police found two people dead off Town Farm Road doesn't mean anything. People go up and down the road all the time. Drunk people drive up and down the road all the time. Second, the police tend to see two deaths, which occur within a short period, as suspicious. Now that short period of time could be days, or even months, or even a year. Hell, the aforementioned police have thought I was suspicious on more than one occasion. Third, you weren't even here in 1980, so why would you even refer to these deaths, of which I am certain you know nothing about, seeing how you got the information from the “town folk,” as related to something occurring back then?”

“Eli, I wasn't trying to pick a fight with you. I was just trying to...uh...you know...keep you safe.”

“Then do what you know something about. Give me the right medicine in the right dose and keep my information confidential. I will ensure I remain safe.” And upon saying that, Eli stormed out of the store. Storming out of the store meant that as he went out toward the door, he knocked a couple of Ace bandages onto the floor.

The young woman entering the store saw the elderly gentleman knock the Ace bandages onto the floor and ran to him.

“Here, let me get those for you.”

“Young lady, you are not getting those for me. I had no intention of picking up something I had knocked onto the floor in the first place. But if you are so inclined to pick them up for a pharmacist who has a significant amount of idle time, then do so. But you will be doing it for him, not me. Now, if you don’t mind, would you please move aside so I can get by?”

The woman looked stunned by the response and slowly backed off to the side as Eli walked by her and out the door. When she looked up at the pharmacist, she saw him laughing.

“Don’t mind him, Miss. He’s like that with strangers. Heck, he’s like that with friends and relatives too.”

“But he’s not a stranger. Or at least I didn’t think he was. I have been waving to him from across the street ever since we moved in over a month ago. I thought he was waving back to me.”

“Oh, so you bought the Doyle home, did you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, uh...well, welcome to West Gate. My name is Joe Robinette. Hence the name, Robinette Pharmacy.”

The young woman smiled and put the ace bandages back on the shelf, walked over, and held out her hand.

“Hello, Joe Robinette. My name is Kathryn. Kathryn Powell.”

“Nice to meet you, Kathryn. And the pleasant old man you just met is Eli Fletcher. Oh, but you know that seeing how you moved in across the street from him. But if you don’t mind, I

look forward to adding you to my collection of Eli stories. I could write a book by now, but you can never have enough material.”

“He’s probably in a lot of pain. His scoliosis is quite pronounced.”

“If he’s in pain, you’d never know it, because he never mentions it. But I agree with you. And though it might have something to do with his irritable nature, I know his cousin would disagree with the notion. Well, probably a lot of people who met Eli would disagree. Sometimes an angry old man is just an angry old man.”

“I hate to think so. I’ll just give Mr. Fletcher the benefit of the doubt and make a special effort to say hello to him when I get back to the house.”

“Next time you come in, will you please tell me how the interaction went?”

“Need more chapters for your book?”

“Always, Kathryn. Now, how can I help you?”

Kathryn handed Joe the prescription she needed and told him she would be back in about thirty minutes, as she needed to do a little shopping and get a paper. Joe told her he would have it ready and watched as she walked out of the store.

“I wonder why such a young woman would need such strong medicine. She didn’t seem like she needed this at all.” And then Joe looked around to make sure no one else was in the store. “Damn it, Eli,” he said under his breath as he went about filling her prescription.

As he walked down the brick road, which was more blush than red now, Eli heard the woodpeckers off in the distance.

“That Mr. Fletcher is a Yellow-bellied sapsucker and a Northern flicker if you know anything about birds. Funny how the repetitive sound of those birds never bothers me, considering the irritable state of my ancestors. Different sound. Nature. There is nothing wrong in nature, is there, Mr. Fletcher?” As soon as he asked the question, Eli looked around to make sure no one was around, and as was the norm for that small slice of the past, there wasn’t.

“Careful, Mr. Fletcher,” Eli whispered to himself. “People who hear you talking to yourself like this will only think you are ready to pick up an ax and begin repeating the events of 1980. Suspicious lot, these Vermonters.”

After he returned home, Eli went out walking in the woods of his twenty-seven-acre lot and smiled as he reflected on all of Nature’s responses to spring. He could smell the skunk cabbage, and like its name, smelled it before he saw it. He saw the pink flush of several Spring beauties and, not too far away from them, a cluster of Dutchmen’s breeches. As he admired what was on the ground, he looked up as he walked among the trees. More than any other part of his landscape, he loved the trees. Some of them had been there for hundreds of years, and he knew every one of them as if they were a member of his family.

Green, Black, and White Ash, Pignut, and Shagbark Hickory, the Eastern, White, Jack, and Scots Pine, the American, and Slippery Elm, American and Horse Chestnut, White, Burr, Pin, Chinkapin, and Scarlet Oaks, the Paper and Sweet Birch, the Eastern Red Cedar, Eastern Cottonwood, Hawthorne, American Hornbeam, American Beech, Box Elder, Hackberry, American Sycamore, the American and Slippery Elm, and the Striped, Sugar, Norway, and Red Maples.

“This is the forest primeval.

The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,

Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,

Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,

Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.”

“Now, if you put something like that in the paper, I would read it. ‘Evangeline’ by Longfellow.

Written in 1847 and just as beautiful then as it is now,” Eli said as he walked over to a very large sugar maple and patted the bark. “Untapped potential, you have, old fellow.” He laughed when he said the pun and patted it a couple of more times before he started walking back toward his home.

He thought about picking some of the skunk cabbage for his cousin, but thought she probably had enough flies and carrion beetles already. The thought made him laugh. He hadn’t been in the house for five minutes when he heard a knock. As he opened the door, he saw the young woman whom he had encountered in the pharmacy.

“Hello, Mr. Fletcher. I wanted to formally introduce myself to you. I’ve been waving to you, well, you and my daughter, who was in your yard, and I thought.... well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. My name is Kathryn Powell. I bought the Doyle house across the street. Fell in love with it as soon as I saw it. I love restoring old homes. And that one has such good bones.”

“Yes, it does. Probably find a lot of those bones, as you say, underneath the basement concrete.”

“Pardon me?”

“Realtors are required to tell you about violent deaths occurring in a home. But technically speaking, I suppose the realtor didn’t have to disclose anything to you, seeing how the murders occurred elsewhere and there was only one body they found sitting there in the front parlor as if it was ready for tea and cookies.”

“Umm...”

“Look it up. 1980. The Maple Syrup killer. Buford Doyle. Worked at the tree farm. Just went crazy one day. I suspect a genetic predilection toward it. Started killing his coworkers. Put a maple tree tap inside their head. I would imagine that would be quite painful to have inserted in your head while you were still alive. He said the one they found in his house talked to him. I never doubted it did - talk to him, that is. He had crazy-looking eyes. I never trusted him. Told my cousin on the first day he moved in.”

Kathryn’s face was as white as one of Eli’s birch trees, and she felt her knees beginning to weaken. Eli noticed it and grabbed her just before she fainted. She woke up on his sofa with a cup of warm tea on the table in front of her.

“I suppose by your reaction, you were unaware of the notoriety associated with the house you just bought. Take a sip of the tea. Has honey and a little whiskey in it. It will help you get some blood circulating back in your body.”

Kathryn did as instructed and sipped on the tea, which tasted very good. Much better than she anticipated. She looked at the old man and his stooped posture and wondered how he was

able to get her onto the sofa. He must be much stronger than he looks, she thought. Or maybe there was someone else in the house she hadn't seen.

"Thank you for the tea. It tastes wonderful."

"Does, doesn't it? Good for coughs and colds too. Good for cold evenings up here in this part of the country also, and if you have a notion, cold days when you just want to sit back and look outside at the snow and think about things. Or walk among the trees, though their silence can be deafening at times. Anyway, I enjoy walking among them. Thinking about the past, the present, and even the future. At my age, there are a lot of things to think about, and each time period has a specific relevance to you. I enjoy the silence of the day or night and even the weather allowing it to occur."

"That's very poetic."

"You think? Maybe. I was walking among the trees just a moment ago and was reciting a little Longfellow. Perhaps that got me to 'waxing poetic,' as you would suggest. Did you say you had a daughter?"

"Yes. Alice. She's twelve and a bit precocious."

"Precocious? So, she's inclined to tell you she knows more than you, huh? A tad sassy, too? God help you if she meets my cousin."

"Your cousin?"

"Yes. Gertrude Fletcher Singleton. Large yellow home at the end of the road. On the corner of Fletcher School Road and Town Farm Road. She has twenty-six acres of property. One

less than mine. She doesn't get out much these days. Arthritis in her hips. Takes home remedies in lieu of new medicines. Can't fault her too much there, though. Some of those home remedies are better. You happen to be sipping on one."

"So, you have twenty-seven acres?"

"See there, your blood is flowing again to your brain. Yes. I have a slightly bigger lot than my cousin. Property has been in the family for decades and decades."

"Probably more than decades, I would think, as I look at your house and just getting a glimpse of your property."

"Yes, you're probably right. Maybe one day, if you are so inclined, I can take you on a tour of the property. Got lots of beautiful trees, but need to let it warm up a bit more before everything will be in full bloom."

"Yes, that would be nice. Well, didn't want to take up much of your time. Just wanted to come by and formally introduce myself, and if you happen to see my daughter where she shouldn't be, then just send her home."

"Kathryn, don't take this the wrong way, but if your daughter is on my property, then she is where she shouldn't be. I don't take kindly to people, including children, coming onto my property when not invited. I understand that you coming by here was a politeness and a desire to be neighborly, and we've introduced ourselves and now know a bit more about each other. Like I said, when things get a bit warmer, and if your child hasn't made herself a nuisance, then we can

certainly explore the woods, and I would be happy to teach your child and even you a thing or two about nature. I've learned a lot over the years. You'd be well served to understand that."

Kathryn wasn't sure whether to get mad or to accept the words Eli had just used to dismiss her and her family from future interactions unless it was on his terms. Her first instinct was to tell him he could take those woods of his and stick them up his ass, but then she realized what Joe had said. He was considered a mean old man by everyone who knew him, and he was indeed offering more reasons for someone to say so, but she sensed something else about him. A softer side. He did bring her inside and provide her tea and, in his own peculiar manner, offer up something she was certain he didn't do for many people. No, she would just have to accept Eli for what he was. An old man who liked his privacy. She understood. She just hoped Alice and Mary could.

"Thank you, Eli. I'll see you later."

"Yes. Take care, Kathryn, and when you go by and see my cousin, and I know you will, tell her I have some cabbage for her. She loves cabbage."

"Yes, I'll do that. Goodbye, Eli."

As Kathryn walked across the street, she saw Mary standing in the window looking at her. She had a scowl on her face, which wasn't uncommon. Heck, she should understand Eli very well, Kathryn thought. I think they have a similar distrust of people, and she certainly likes her privacy too. I think I'll avoid the scowl for the moment, though. Maybe go see Miss Gertrude. Yes, I think that would be a good idea.

Kathryn waved at Mary, turned, and walked down the road until she came to the big yellow house. It was a beautiful Victorian-style home with a large porch that wrapped around the front. Everything about the exterior of the home said “welcome.” There were large hanging pots of vibrant annuals mirroring the length of the porch, with several wind chimes intermingled among them. Colorful sun-catchers were in almost every window, and the chairs and tables on the porch were set up in a manner inviting one to sit back and relax.

Though there was a wrought iron fence around the front of the yard, there was no gate. Just an arbor, covered in green for the moment, but as the temperature warmed, it would be awash in color. The brick pavers defining a path from the arbor to the porch were interesting and inviting, too. They were a beautiful red, as if they had just been put in, and every couple of yards, there was a circular brick piece that, when combined with the other bricks, created an image of the sun, and within the sun were different animal designs. Beautiful, she thought as she walked up the path. Mary would like this because she loves animals so much. Kathryn stepped onto the porch and knocked on the door.

She waited for several minutes before she knocked again. She was about to leave when she saw a shadow appear behind the stained-glass irises, which were the centerpiece of the large glass oval in the door. The door opened slowly, and a woman similar in age to Eli smiled as she stood there, leaning against a cane.

“Hello, Miss Gertrude. You don’t know me, but I’m your neighbor. I just came by to meet you. My name is Kathryn Powell. I just moved into the Doyle home.”

“Hello, Kathryn. So nice of you to drop by. Come in, won’t you? I saw some activity over there and wondered if someone was moving in. Come in, come in. Would you like some tea or coffee?”

Kathryn followed Gertrude into the living room, which resembled a very expensive New England antique store. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the large grandfather clock that chimed just as they sat down. Gertrude smiled as she saw Kathryn looking at the clock.

“That’s a Chippendale carved walnut tall-case clock. Made in 1775, I believe, if my memory serves me right. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s stunning. Can I get a closer look?”

“Of course. You never did answer me about whether you would like some tea or coffee.”

“Uh, no, no thank you, sorry. I just had some tea with your cousin.”

“Oh, so that’s how you knew my name. Did he send you down here on an errand of some sort?”

“This clock. It must have cost a fortune.”

“Yes, at the time, it was indeed expensive. Would cost a lot more now, though. But enough talk about the clock. Let’s get back to Eli. How did the two of you meet?”

“I went over to his house and introduced myself.”

Gertrude started laughing out loud. “Goodness dear, before you sit down, would you open the walnut cabinet next to the clock? That’s my liquor cabinet. I’d like to have a drink with

this conversation. The bottle of Prichard's Tennessee Rye Whiskey; get that bottle and a glass. Get another glass if you'd like to join me. Those Tennesseans know a thing or two about whiskey."

Kathryn opened the top of the cabinet, retrieved the bottle and two glasses, and sat down next to Gertrude on the floral print sofa.

"The liquor cabinet is beautiful, too. Looks expensive."

"1800s, but not that expensive. Though the clock would buy your house, but enough talk about furniture. Let's have a drink."

Gertrude poured them both some whiskey and tipped her glass to Kathryn as she emptied it.

"Can you smell the vanilla, just before you taste the cinnamon and nutmeg, and then a little chocolate toffee to top it off? Nothing finer than Tennessee whiskey in my opinion. Now tell me about my cousin. Did he welcome you into his home?"

Kathryn took a drink and coughed, but then smiled. "It is very good. Uh, yes, as a matter of fact, he did welcome me in. Well, after I fainted."

Gertrude laughed again and poured herself another two fingers of whiskey and drank it.

"Fainted? My cousin can be a bit offensive at times, but why did you faint?"

"He was telling me about the house I just purchased and the reference it had to what he called the Maple Tree killer."

“Maple Syrup killer. Yes, sounds like my cousin. Direct and to the point. Probably didn’t like you knocking on his door. But didn’t you know about the house before you purchased it?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“That’s odd. I would have thought they would have been required to tell you, considering everything. Well, I’m glad he didn’t just let you lie there on his porch. I’ve known him to do worse. So, he brought you into the house and...”

“Fixed me a cup of tea with some whiskey in it. I’m afraid this is the most liquor I’ve had this early in the day since I went to college.”

Gertrude laughed. “He must be a bit smitten with you, Kathryn. Eli wouldn’t do that for anyone. Maybe he’s softening up a bit.”

“Not exactly. Once he saw I was well, he informed me that if he saw me or my daughter on his property without an invitation, he would be displeased.”

“That’s my cousin,” Gertrude said as she smiled. “Haven’t seen your daughter. What’s her name?”

“Alice. She’s twelve. I don’t know why you haven’t seen her. She’s been running around the neighborhood. We homeschool her.”

“So, what’s his name, her father?”

“It’s Mary, Mary Powell, and she’s not her father. Her father is not in the picture anymore. Mary is well, ummmmm..., let’s say a very, very, close friend. Helped me a lot during the divorce, and Alice loves her. Mary is maybe more like a mother to her than I am at times.”

“I understand, dear. Well, glad you got to meet Eli, and glad you and your family are going to live in the Doyle home. Needs a good family living there again. Used to be a good one before Buford Doyle bought it. Never did like the way his eyes looked.”

“I’m afraid, Gertrude, all this whiskey is making me a bit lightheaded. I need to get home while I can, so if you would excuse me.”

“Certainly, dear. Certainly. Come back anytime you want. Bring Alice and Mary with you. Love to have you over for dinner. Just come by. Don’t need to call. Always have something ready we can eat. I love to entertain.”

Gertrude put her hands on her cane and pushed on it as she stood up and then walked Kathryn to the door. Kathryn said goodbye as she told Gertrude she had a lovely house, and just as she started to leave, she remembered something Eli had said.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Eli said he had some cabbage for you.”

“Ha! The damn old coot. He’s talking about skunk cabbage. Stuff is appropriately named. Comes up before all the other plants and, with the smell it emits, gets the flies and beetles to come over and pollinate them. But thank you, dear, for relaying the message. I’ll try and send him a nice thank you for thinking of me.”

Kathryn smiled and told Gertrude, “Thanks again for the drink,” and then left. As she was walking home, Alice came running up to her. “They’re strange, aren’t they?”

“Alice, how can you say that? You haven’t even met them.”

“I can tell. I can always tell.”

“They’re old. Old and opinionated, perhaps eccentric, and in Eli’s case, likes to be left alone.”

“That’s what Mary said. Mary said she could tell he was like that. Reminded her of some old people from long ago she didn’t like.”

Kathryn wanted to change the subject. “So, what did you study today?”

“American History.”

“Good. What did you learn?”

“That this place killed women for thinking they were witches. The last ones killed were in 1692. Did you know we have witch windows on our house?”

Damn it, Mary. “Yes, that was a very long time ago, Alice. And what do you mean, witch windows?”

“The windows at the top of the gables. They are slanted horizontally at a 45-degree angle. They made them that way so a witch couldn’t fly in through the window on their broom. But Mary says that’s so foolish.”

“Yes, it is foolish.”

“Mary also mentioned something about some deaths that occurred in the past month. And some Maple tree killer.”

“Maple Syrup...I mean, no, Alice. Let’s go talk to Mary and get all this straightened out. I don’t want you having nightmares tonight.”

“I won’t have nightmares. Mary has gone through the house burning sage. She says it wards off evil spirits and such.”

“Yes, I have heard her say such before. Good. Let’s go home then. See what we can do next to help Mary restore the house.”

Kathryn then felt her head spinning. Must be the alcohol and the medicine, she thought. I shouldn’t have drunk so much.

“You think we’ll be living here a while?”

“I do, sweetie. I do. I like this place, but before we can help Mary, I need to lie down for a while.”

“You having headaches again?”

“Yes, and feeling a bit dizzy.”

“Here, hold my hand, I’ll help you home.”

When Kathryn awoke, she was lying on the ground in the dark. There was a sweet smell all around her, and she could hear the wind moving through the leaves on the trees. The moon was peeking at her from behind some clouds as if it was scared to show its face. Then she heard a noise in the dark, not far from her. It sounded like Alice playing in the mud, and she called out her name, but Alice didn’t answer.

“Be quiet, Kathryn,” Mary said. “I’m not finished.”

Kathryn felt herself getting sick and rolled over and threw up. As she rolled over, she felt something hard next to her. It was a flashlight, and she flipped the switch on and pointed it toward the squishing sound. She wanted to scream, but the only sound that came from her mouth was the gasping of air, as if she were someone who had been drowning and had just gotten their head above water.

She took in as many breaths as she could as she watched Mary's nude body carving up the dead one on which she sat. The decapitated head was looking at her in a very strange manner. As if its eyes were not real. She watched Mary carve away the man's skin and then place a maple syrup tap into his liver.

"I am the willer and I put the blind on thee. I spit upon thee and take the bile that has filed thine body with evil. Killer of the innocent, kill no more. With this act, do I seek vengeance. Fair is foul and foul is fair, and with a lock of thine hair, I send it and thee to hell." Upon saying the chant, Kathryn watched Mary set the hair on fire.

"We can go now, Kathryn. I wanted you to see this. You needed to see this."

"Why?"

"Because you know. You know how they killed my ancestors. These people killed innocent women and must be avenged."

"This was your plan all along, Mary. You researched the murders occurring in 1980, and you knew it would provide you with cover to commit these horrible, wicked acts. You killed those other two, didn't you?"

“The other three. There is one behind you.”

Kathryn turned around and saw the other body. Lying next to her with vomit on it. A tap in its liver and its head resting on its stomach. This time, Kathryn screamed until she felt Mary’s hand slap her across the face.

“Shut up or you will never see Alice again.”

“What do you mean, Mary? What have you done?”

“I have given her a potion which will make her sleep. Sleep forever if you don’t do what I say. We will need to kill one more before the night is through. The old man. The one who watches us from his home. Eli. He is related to the old ones. The ones who killed my ancestors. They cry out for justice. And I will have justice tonight.”

Kathryn didn’t say anything as she watched Mary wash her body with the hydrogen peroxide she had purchased from the pharmacy. When her body was clean, she put on her clothes and pulled Kathryn up by her hair.

“Come on. You will drive us home and park the car on the street. Open the hood and disconnect the spark plug. Then you will try and start the car. The old man will hear it. He hears everything. He will come out. And then I will do the rest. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mary. But please don’t harm Alice.”

“Alice will be fine provided you do what I say. Now go.”

Kathryn drove the car home and did as Mary instructed. And just as Mary thought, Eli came out of his house soon after he heard her trying to start the car. He was dragging a metal canister of oxygen behind him.

“Are you having car problems?”

“Yes, I don’t know what it is. But I need to get to the pharmacy. My daughter is sick. But are you okay? The oxygen?”

“Oh, I just sometimes get a little short of breath. Nothing stops me from doing what I need to do. But the pharmacy isn’t open at this time of night.”

“I called Joe. He is getting some medicine ready for me.”

“Well, that will be something he and I will discuss one day. He’s never been inclined to do that for me. Let me look at what’s going on with your car. Don’t drive much these days, but I still know a thing or two about them.”

As Eli bent over and directed his penlight onto the engine, he felt the knife blade hit his scapula. Before she could pull it out and bury it elsewhere in his body, Mary heard a loud smack, and her eyes rolled back in her head before she fell on the street unconscious. Eli pushed Mary’s head over so he was looking at her face, and then brought his oxygen tank down onto her mouth as hard as he could.

“Come on, let’s get her into the house, and then you can pull the knife out and put it in her hand. Then you can put on one of those poultices you love to make and wrap a bandage around the new hole in my back. I’ll be fine in a couple of days. She put the tip of the blade in

my bone. The worst place she could have placed it. Another little prick in my bone is not going to bother me any more than the twisted nature of my body. By the way, your cane, is it white ash?"

"Yes, as hard as a bat. Surprised it didn't kill Kathryn or, as I suspect, Mary. I think Mary was the dominant personality. How did you know, Eli?"

"She said she was waving to her daughter in my yard. You and I both know I would have seen her and said something to her about it long before she showed up at my doorstep. At that very point, I knew she was lying, and then when I looked in her eyes, I could see more than one person was staring back at me."

"You've always had a good way about you, being able to tell who folks are by their eyes. And thanks for the warning. When she told me about the skunk cabbage, I knew we had our killer. And the name, Mary Parker. And Alice. Alice Parker, more than likely. Two women hung back in 1692 as witches. For some reason, they reached out to her."

"They didn't reach out to her. More than likely, those damn puritanical idiots did. Governmental leadership was just as inept at truly understanding the problem or lack of one, and the true solution, or required response, as they are today. Hell, they were the evil ones, Gertie. You know that."

"Yes, Eli, you're right."

"I never get tired of hearing you say those words."

Gertie smiled. "I bet she desecrated those dead bodies something awful," Gertie said in a mournful manner.

"Better dead ones than live ones, and just as damning with regard to her crazy nature. What did you put in her drink?"

"Some salvia and some St. John's Wort. Considering the other medicine she was taking for her dissociative identity disorder, it would have made her even less able to know those were dead bodies she was carving up. I'm going to have to make the King and Kistner families a nice basket for their loved ones. Maybe you could give them a couple of plants and some young saplings?"

"Yes, I'll be glad to do so."

After they had placed the body in the house and were walking outside, Eli thanked Gertie for her help. It had been a long time since Gertie had heard Eli thank anyone, and she paused for a moment to let it sink in before she replied that he was welcome.

"You know, Gertie, in about a month, the trees and woods will be in full bloom. I'll have the pathway really clean by then, and I bought an electric wheelchair you...I mean, I might need one day. You could use it if you want and we could walk through the woods."

"How are the trees doing by the way?"

"Good. The antifungal medicine I get helps the older ones. I mix it in with distilled water, and it does the trick. Had to put Joe in his place the other day as he questioned me about the

long-term use of the drug and how it would destroy my body. Damn fool should know it would have killed me by now, but I don't think he will ask the question again."

"No, I'm sure he won't. So, you say that in about a month will be peak time?"

"Yes."

"Can I bring the whiskey?"

"Hell, why do you think I invited you?"

Gertie smiled and turned and walked down the road back to her home, pausing for a moment to look back at Eli as he walked into his yard.

The police were not sure what it was that killed her, except to say it was large and round and done with a lot of force, considering it knocked out most of her teeth and made her mouth look like a large boa constrictor with an unhinged jaw. The coroner's report would say she died of a broken trachea. The biweekly paper would say the Doyle house was cursed, considering the second Maple Syrup killer had been found in the home, dead with the weapon in her hand. Neither the police nor the newspaper would ever determine who killed her, though the police questioned Eli extensively and held him under suspicion for several weeks. Six weeks later, Eli took his oxygen cylinder back to the pharmacy with the bottom full of rust.

"Left it outside again, didn't you, Eli?"

"Yes, I did."

Eli didn't reprimand him for implying he didn't know what he was doing because he knew the rust hid the specks of blood, which may have still been on there, provided anyone ever thought to look. But no one ever thought to look at the rusted-out bottom of an oxygen cylinder of an old man.

"What do you think about the Doyle house, Eli? They ought to burn the place down, don't you think?"

"Doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

Joe laughed, exchanged the cylinder of oxygen, and watched Eli as he walked out the door. Once he knew, he couldn't hear him, he said, "No, I don't think it does," and shook his head.

"Some people say me and my cousin Eli are as old as dirt. Well, that is a saying that is well-grounded in fact." Most everyone at Gertie's latest party smiled and rolled their eyes when they heard the pun, but regardless of how many years she had told the joke, Gertie laughed. Her cousin thought the joke was old and stale, and she dismissed his cantankerous manner as a product of time and old age, even though she knew time and old age were irrelevant anymore.

As she often said over the years, she "hardly even gave him the time of day anymore." She always thought the joke was funny each time she said it, and, begrudgingly, Eli did too because he also realized time was of no importance to either one of them.

The Native Americans called the female earth spirit Pacha. They called the male spirit who protected the maple tree forest Ma- Na-Ki- Ki. Their spiritual connection was difficult to interpret but deemed familial and close and distant at the same time. Cousins was the best term the historians could find to describe the relationship, but that opinion was subject to change, as were most aspects of historical fact, which were often misinterpreted and relegated to fictional embellishments.