

THE GUESTS

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Located on the rocky shore of Lake Tamlin, Willow Falls was our summer rental destination. It was a short 3-hour drive north from our home in Alton, Iowa. I say short, but when you're nine, and it's 1939, it ends up being a half-day affair. We rented #42, the same plain white cottage on the same lake, in the same town, every year. My parents were good people, just not terribly adventurous. During the day, we'd swim and picnic on the tiny beach. At night, we'd sit around the brick fire pit toasting marshmallows while my dad grilled dinner for everyone. Then there were the mosquitoes! The mosquitoes on Lake Tamlin were straight out of a horror film, massive, the size of a large fly. They were thirsty and remarkably tenacious. If we were their last chance at blood, and if they died trying to get it, then so be it. It seemed no matter what we did; sit closer to the smoke, put on a variety of potions, some store-bought, some homemade (my mother was convinced that for some reason baby oil & food dye would do the trick) by the end of the night, we'd end up with a dozen or so red itchy welts, and of course now had greasy, oddly colored skin from the baby oil concoction. Mom said she had heard about the remedy from our neighbor, Mrs. Tibbetts, who lived at the end of our dirt road, next to the big cornfield. My dad semi-affectionately referred to her as our neighborhood witch doctor. Mrs. Tibbetts was a rather short, plump woman with jet black hair pulled up into a messy bun. If you had a health issue in 1939 and couldn't figure it out, you would first go to see Mrs. Tibbetts in her little Robin's Egg Blue cottage. She had no medical training, mind you; nonetheless, she referred to herself as a nurse. I think she just read a lot, or maybe just made stuff up. Anyway, most of her cures never really worked. That said, she was a nice lady who didn't charge anything and always sent you back home with a brownie or a cookie...so there was that!

At night, before we went to bed, if mom could get some ice, she would rub it on the mosquito bites, dry them off, then dab them with pink calamine lotion. This helped for a little while, but by morning, my sister and I would have a bunch of dried bloody bumps on us. I guess we unconsciously scratched them all night in our sleep. Mom washed a lot of sheets those days! Back then, my sister Norma and I would stay up at night, playing Jax, eating buttered popcorn, and telling stories. We would take turns making them up, but we'd always remember to laugh at the funny parts...even if they weren't funny. Norma and I weren't anything alike. Norma was tall, thin, and muscular with sparkling Blue/Green eyes, and long, beautiful blonde hair that she wore in a French braid. I was the polar opposite, on the shorter side, with pale skin, short brown hair, and freckles. I always thought myself inadequate in the looks department, but most people described me as cute. I was a straight-A student, and Norma was more into athletics, but I loved my sister; she was kind, practical, and patient. My name is Elizabeth, by the way, it was my mom's idea...but almost everyone calls me Betty. Norma and I would call it a night when our hands got so buttery that we couldn't grab the Jax anymore, then we'd slowly wind ourselves into bed, buttery hands and all, and start with the stories. Anything past midnight, and we'd get the "wrap it up" knock on the door from Mom. So, we'd shut off the light and would exchange stories rapid fire in the dark. After a while, the stories would get further and further apart until we eventually drifted off to sleep. We grew apart not long after that, but that summer, that magical summer, we were best friends...inseparable, like only sisters can be.

At the end of that summer, our Aunt Violet came to visit. Her name was actually Violetta, Violetta Bonfiglio, but due to the way Italian immigrants were being disparaged, my mom thought it best to stick with calling her Violet. I thought she would be our guest for just the

weekend, but Mother explained that she and Uncle Bud were having some trouble getting along, so she was going to stay with us for a while. Oh, Bud wasn't his real first name either, but that's another story. I guess I should have suspected something was up when Aunt Violet arrived in a huge taxi with four big grey bags that looked like wrinkled Elephant skin, and a large black trunk with one broken handle. The trunk was so heavy that Mom had to enlist Dad to drag it into the house.

Aunt Violet was a quiet woman, short in stature at barely five feet, but kind of a big girl... well, that was the subtle way of saying she was overweight back then. She loved to cook, and it showed. She had greyish hair that she kept up with a beautiful green, purple, and gold butterfly hairpin, but she often wore the same black and white polka dot dress for days. Violet had the most peculiar disposition, though... a combination of being perennially positive but with a constant melancholy smile. She would always say, "Today is going to be a great day", but somehow managed to look sad while saying it. But my mom liked her and appreciated the adult female companionship. They would spend hours playing bridge in the parlor and snacking on Tuna fish finger sandwiches on white bread...crusts removed, of course.

Every Friday night, she was at our place, Aunt Violet would come upstairs to visit my sister and me. She'd knock on the door and say, "It's Aunt Violet, it's Friday night, and I've got something for you girls." Every Friday night, the knock followed by the same announcement. We'd let her in, and she would plop her rather large rear end squarely in the middle of the purple blanket my mother made for the end of my sister's bed. She stayed for hours and just talked to us, and of course, she always brought along a sweet homemade snack for us. Aunt Violet was married but had no children of her own. I think she rather liked pretending we were her daughters! We got it, and went along for the ride...she was, after all, family. Twice married, it

turns out that her first husband, Marco, went to a casino one night, at least that's what my mother called it, and there he met a 22-year-old Brazilian dancer named Lola something, and the two of them went to Paris together...never to be seen again. Then, three years ago, she met Bud, plain old pedestrian Bud. I don't think it was a passionate relationship, though. Mom said they were more friends than anything else. A marriage of convenience...or maybe desperation.

Aunt Violet was a nice lady, but to be honest, she kind of smelled. Instead of bathing, she would douse herself with this sickly-sweet perfume that she ordered through one of those mail-order catalogs. That and the combination of mothballs from her luggage, combined with the scent of Canada Mints, the big pink ones....and it was a bit overwhelming. She really had a thing for those Canada Mints and ate them incessantly. She could, and routinely did, rip through a family-size bag in less than a week, and God forbid if she ever ran out...you'd hear her start calling out to my mom. "Where are my mints? Oh, I can't be out already. Where are they?" This went on for about 2 months, then one Sunday morning she got sick...wham, just like that! The night before, she was fine, but by Sunday morning, she said she had never felt that tired before and parked herself on the big brown sofa in the parlor. I say parked, but takeover is a little more accurate. That sofa became Aunt Violet's sofa, and the Parlor...well, that became Aunt Violet's room. She had her little mahogany end table with a blue lace trivet for her medications, and of course, the ever-present bowl of pink Canada Mints was never more than an arm's reach away. There was a cute little folding card table, too, reserved for her bridge games with my mother. The table had hearts, clubs, diamonds, and spades on it...in varied sizes and colors. But over time, she started to lose the desire to play, and by the time October rolled around, she had taken to just sitting or lying most of the day. She pretty much stopped eating, too. She would skip

breakfast and just pick at her lunch and dinner, saying she just wasn't hungry. My dad repeatedly offered to take her to the doctor or hospital, but she'd have none of it.

I didn't understand much about dying back then. I mean, I knew what death was, as I had seen my dead grandfather in a casket. It frightened me...like I suppose death does to most young people. In the casket, Grandpa was as white as a ghost. But in preparing him for the wake, the mortician's assistant overdid it with the rouge, so he had this unnatural, healthy glow about his cheeks. Of course, it wasn't healthy because, well...he was dead!

Anyhow, I always wondered why people would want to display someone when they're dead. I thought it was macabre. I remember what grandpa looked like when he was alive, and that was sufficient; my memories were my personal tribute to him. In the summertime, he would push me around on my little yellow bicycle through the clouds of orangish brown dust that rose from our dirt road. He was always in the same faded overalls with greasy stains and a single pencil and pad of paper in the front pocket. I never knew what they were for, but if Grandpa ever needed to do some emergency, spontaneous writing...he'd certainly be ready. I know the dust bothered him because Mom said he had asthma, or bronchitis, or something like that, but he pretended not to notice because he got a kick out of watching me attempt to ride my bike. Sports were Norma's thing, not mine! He'd give me a good push to get me going, then run alongside as I struggled to keep the bike upright, and when I was about to crash, he'd clap one of his huge, weathered hands on the back of my coveralls, pull me up, and get me going again. I couldn't catch my breath between the pedaling and the constant laughter. It seemed the faster I went, the more I'd start laughing. It was a blast. I could hear my grandfather too...laughing and wheezing behind me. I'd end up running out of gas a hundred yards or so down the road, and we would walk the bike back together. We wouldn't talk, so we could hear the birds chirping, and those summer

bugs...you know, the ones that make that weird constant buzzing sound, like some kind of insect air raid siren. I never really liked that sound...but it did remind me of summer.

Anyway, that fall, Aunt Violet got weaker and weaker, and my dad, who was never a big Aunt Violet fan to start with, decided to do something nice for her. So, he took one of the standing circulating fans with the big wooden blades that we had in the family room and brought it, and our old record player into Aunt Violet's room. At that point, it was no longer referred to as the parlor; it was just Aunt Violet's room...reeking of mothballs, sweet perfume, and pink Canada Mints. God bless her, even after she pretty much gave up on eating, she never lost her craving for those Mints. My dad would put Bach records on the phonograph for her. Aunt Violet loved Bach, and she would perk up a bit when my dad put a record on. The record would play until the end, then we'd hear it skipping. She'd wait a minute, then start calling out to my dad. "It's skipping, it's skipping again", she'd say. She'd wait another minute, and if there was still no response, she'd ratchet up the volume a bit and make it more personal. "Richard, oh Richard, it's skipping, the record is skipping." My dad would come in, turn the record over, and buy himself another 22-minute respite.

In September, we went back to school. I was in Fourth grade, and Norma was in Sixth grade. We would come through the door after school, grab a snack, and then head into Aunt Violet's room for a nasal extravaganza. Thankfully, she had stopped with the sweet perfume at that point. I don't know if she ran out or just gave up on freshening up, but regardless, it was a nice break. But the body odor, mothball, and mint combo gave her room a new identity all its own. The fan helped a little...we got used to it!

Then, in November of that year, my cousin Mary reached out to my mother and asked if I could be their guest for Thanksgiving break. Having never been away from home alone, and very

excited at the prospect, I pleaded with my parents, but my mother said, "Thanksgiving is not a time to be away from your family". I said, "Well, technically my cousin is part of my family...albeit my extended family". My father, who already referred to me as a bit of a smarty pants on account of my straight-A average, didn't appreciate my tone. But he deferred to my mother, who shrugged, and with that, I began packing.

I arrived at my cousin's house the Sunday before Thanksgiving. They lived on the opposite side of town in a lovely old yellow colonial with big black shutters and six bedrooms. I thought of it as a big trip to go there when I was little, but it's only ten miles away. They lived in the nicer part of town, and we lived in the blue-collar section. I didn't know what that meant back then, but I do now. In their sprawling upstairs bathroom (we had just one and they had three) was the most wonderful clawfoot bathtub you can imagine. Shimmering white, with gold claws...it was like having your own warm, soapy swimming pool. The tub had bright silver knobs for the water, and they were shaped like little Swans. The cold-water Swan had blue wings, and the hot-water Swan had red wings. I must have been pretty grimy, because my aunt encouraged...well, politely demanded, that I start the visit off with a bath. My aunt was a stickler for cleanliness! The bathroom had a large semi-circular bow window with a view of the tranquil pond at the edge of their backyard. There was a long wooden walkway that my uncle and his friends built that led from the back of their lawn, around the edge of the pond, to a ladder, and into the water. The Wizard of Oz had just been released, so Mary and I nicknamed it The Yellow Brick Road, our Yellow Brick Road...only it wasn't yellow or brick for that matter. Mary and I would join arms and skip along the walkway, pretending we were in the movie and singing the words to "Follow the Yellow Brick Road." Once we got to the end, there was an old rowboat tied with a rope to the bottom of the stairs that led right into the pond. It was worn out, with rusty oarlocks that

squeaked every time you rowed. The harder you rowed, the louder it squeaked, so we didn't do a whole lot of rowing. It was dark blue on the outside and faded light blue on the inside. The boat leaked, and every year it seemed to get a little worse... This makes sense, of course, because leaks don't just fix themselves. Anyway, we'd row out to the middle of the pond and stop. If you stayed out for half an hour, you were good. An hour or so, and you had to use a small red bucket that was chained to the splintery wooden seat to collect the water and bail it out. Two hours or more without bailing, and you ran the risk of full submersion. This sounds sort of exciting and a bit dramatic, but at the deepest part of the pond, the water was only up to your shoulders...and even though we were fully clothed with jackets, we both knew how to swim well in case we needed to, so not a big deal.

By Thanksgiving, though, it was getting too cold for boating and certainly not cold enough for skating yet, so we were stuck inside...sort of in weather limbo. We ended up spending most of the days playing checkers and taking turns trying on all my aunt's dresses...much to her chagrin. Mary would insist on wearing her mom's best purple floral dress and using only the red checkers. Sometimes she would point to something fictitious behind me, and when I looked, she'd move a piece to another place. I went along with the charade and knew she was technically cheating, but I let it go...she was resplendent in her mother's dress, even though it was way too big, and I was thrilled just to be there.

On Thanksgiving Day, we had the most enormous feast imaginable, far better than anything my mother ever put on. There was Turkey, of course, mashed potatoes, my uncle's sausage stuffing, which I could eat daily and never tire of, pitchers of thick brown gravy, green beans drenched in butter, and cranberry sauce with little mandarin orange slices. You get the point...in short, everything one could want for a Thanksgiving dinner. It was magnificent and went on for

hours. Before we started eating, though, we were each required to recite what we were most thankful for. Everyone had a pretty lengthy list of things they were thankful for. I think this was an annual tradition because they all seemed well prepared for it, but when they got to me, I didn't really have a great answer, so I just said I was thankful for all the delicious food. My uncle nodded politely, but I suspect he was looking for a little more than that.

My mother, Gloria, was a good person and a good mom, but she simply couldn't cook...and it frustrated her. One year, she even tried buying one of the Better Homes and Gardens cookbooks and following some recipes, but the meals never turned out like the pictures, and it didn't make our home or garden any better! She would bring the culinary disaster of the day to the table, saying, " Well, I tried, but this is the best I could do." ...same response, every time. My dad would assure her with "I'm sure it will be just fine," but it never was...we ate it anyway. I wouldn't describe my father as particularly affectionate, but he was a considerate man and well-liked in town. His name was Richard, but many people in town called him Dick... Mom said this really bothered him, but he didn't say anything.

On Sundays, my father would read the big Sunday paper or listen to the NBC radio news broadcast, then spend the next hour pacing around the house talking about Hitler this and Mussolini that. Dad didn't drink on weekdays, so on Sundays, he'd have a few glasses of plum wine that his customer and friend Malcolm brought him. Malcolm was a corn farmer who lived half a mile down the road. He would stop by because he owed my father money for provisions, which he had taken on credit from our little store. You see, Malcolm had a bit of a drinking problem, and according to my mom, he never really paid Dad back in full...so, he would bring over a couple of bottles of homemade plum wine on Sundays to placate my father, and he and Dad would work through them together. Once he'd had a few glasses and Malcolm left, Dad

would go back and read the editorials in the paper, and remind us all again that he thought the Germans had unfinished business, and that there would be another war before long, only this one would likely be much worse. I didn't like war, or even hearing about it. War scared me, like seeing Grandpa dead in a coffin, smartly dressed in his very best suit...with too much rouge on.

When I arrived home after Thanksgiving break, I could tell immediately that something was different. The overwhelming scent of mothballs and Canada mints was barely perceptible. My mom approached, said nothing, and just hugged me. Mother wasn't a big hugger, so I knew something was up. She just held me for an uncomfortable thirty seconds or so and kept saying "At least we still have you kids"... over and over again. Finally, my father felt the need to intervene. He walked my sister and me back to the parlor and sat us down on what used to be Aunt Violet's sofa. I could see that Aunt Violet and her things weren't there, and the Canada mints? Well, they were gone too. My dad started with something like "You know, kids, we can't all live forever", and "It's important to live life to the fullest", but there was something dark and sad about his tone. There was an awkward moment of silence, then my mother entered the parlor...she was crying, with lines of eyeliner dripping down her cheeks. I felt sorry for her. I finally just asked, "Where's Aunt Violet?" " She's gone, Aunt Violet is gone," my mother said. "Gone where?" I said naively. "Just gone dear, gone for good...gone forever".

While my mother was struggling with the loss of Aunt Violet, my father was stoic, being all too familiar with death. He was an Army man during the Great War, that's what they called World War One back then...Although I don't think there was anything particularly great about it. He was a very young Captain in an Artillery brigade, responsible for taking orders from the Generals and Colonels and executing them on the battlefield. His job was to provide the target coordinates to the Artillery teams. Those same teams would then send devastating explosive

shells whistling toward our enemies...smashing bodies, destroying buildings, and disrupting communications. At least that's what they thought at the time.

In November of 1918, shortly after the war ended, in what was left of the village of Bezonvaux, he found out from some drunk French soldiers at a café that many of the shells didn't land where they were supposed to. This troubled my father greatly after the war. Mother said that after he returned in December of 1918, he started having horrible nightmares. He would be shouting in his dreams, cursing...and sometimes crying. Mother would have to wake him. He would be bathed in sweat, his heart racing. "I don't know what I've done," he'd say. "I have no way of knowing". Did I just kill the enemy? Did I blow up a town? Maybe a family's house? Did I kill their children?" The uncertainty gnawed away at him and was too much for him to bear. Mother said she would console him for an hour or so, holding him in her arms and speaking softly to him like he was a child. Then she would give him a drink, a pill, or some tea until he fell back asleep...only to relive the nightmares in another dream on another night. This went on for a year or so, and then, thankfully, started to diminish. My dad, whom I came to find out later, had found what today we would call a support group. Other local American soldiers...men who had killed, who had guilt, who wanted answers. They met, drank, took solace in one another, and justified their actions as doing their job, as simply following orders. It was always about just following orders; they were, after all...soldiers. Anyway, thankfully, my father got better, or maybe less worse is more accurate.

So that was the summer and fall of 1939 in Alton, Iowa. The year Aunt Violet became our guest for the last time and the year that I became a guest for the first time. A year the world would remember with tears, sorrow, fear, some laughter, a little hope....and for me, of course, the Canada mints. The End.

