

Since coming to Goosehoop the dreams I'd had after Viet Nam had faded. For the last 20 years I had slept like the proverbial baby. If I'd had dreams I had not remembered them. Now suddenly, the dreams were back and they were coming thick and fast. Sometimes even when I was awake I felt like I was dreaming.

Perhaps it was because I was not sleeping well at night and so I was falling asleep at odd moments and dreaming in snatches here and there. I must have fallen asleep again on the sofa while Roy and Alect were feeding the chickens. The last thing I remember was looking down at a church bulletin on the coffee table. I had written down the number of Granny's hospital room on the back of an old church bulletin that I had picked up at Rev. Coopers' church when I was looking for something to write on. It was the bulletin leftover from Easter a few weeks before. On the cover was a stylized drawing of an empty tomb. The drawing lay face up which is perhaps what made me dream of it.

Or perhaps it was because I had read the old familiar Bible story over Easter and it was still fresh in my mind, the story of how Mary Magdalene went to the tomb when it was still dark on that first Easter morning and had found the tomb empty. Of how she had said, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where to find him" but later she had seen the risen Christ in the garden and breathed out just one reverent word, "Rabboni", Teacher. Of how the disciples thought she was talking nonsense, and later, when they saw him too, some thought they had seen a ghost. Of how Thomas had not believed at all.

I fell asleep and in my dream there was a woman stepping out of the black and white drawing of the tomb carrying an Easter lily and with her hair wrapped in a scarf. It looked like Samatha but something had happened to her face. Her eyes and chin seemed to lack definition as if they had been set loose from their moorings and were sagging neatly back and forth in waves of grief. "They have taken away my Lord," she said pointing back to the drawing of the empty tomb. "And I know not where to find him."

"No," I said. "That's just the church bulletin. Besides, the empty tomb doesn't mean anything bad. It means joy."

But she couldn't hear me. I pounded on the glass. Why was there glass between me and her?

"Haven't they done enough?" she said. "Can't I even have a place to come and grieve?" and she began to cry. I pounded on the glass until it broke. As I reached out to touch her with my bloodied hand, to reassure her that the body had not been desecrated but had risen, I heard her say "Rabboni". Teacher.

"It's nonsense." Chipped in

a young male voice in the

background, somewhere around where third base should be. “

”I won't believe it unless I see the nailprints said the second baseman.

‘I saw him in the locker room, but I think it was a ghost’ said the shortstop.”

I could not see the faces of the voices. It was Easter, it must be Easter, but it was still dark.

“Maybe now he'll restore the kingdom to Israel said the pitcher kicking at the dirt. I could see his foot but nothing else, there seemed to be a mist rising..

“It's not about politics. “ I said.

“Now that we've got this crucifixion thing behind us,” came a voice on first base, ‘Maybe he'll come up to bat again for the Messiahship.’”

. “What do you mean come up to bat again?” I shouted into the outfield. “That was a homer, the one that broke all the records..”

Crucifixion, strike one” called the umpire.

“What? “ I yelled “It's not a strike. Didn't you hear what Samantha said?” What had happened to Samantha? “Sam” I called.”Sam, where are you?”

“I'm getting a hot dog and some peanuts for his mother. she said. “His mother is hungry. I'm taking care of her until we figure out what's going on.”

“Peanuts” someone called plaintively. “Hot dogs and soda.”

“Let's hope he slaughters the Caesar team and brings home the pennant. If he does we'll make him King” said a guy in a colored robe coming up to bat. I heard the pitch, I heard the ball whir. It was lighter now but still gray. I could see the oddly dressed batter because I was close to him but I could not follow the ball gliding toward us through the mist.

“Don't you get it” I said grabbing an umpire by the collar. “This is bigger, bigger even than the Roman Empire. He's not going to play against Caesar. Nothing is going back to the way things were before.”

“I wouldn't know about that buddy.” said the umpire shaking me off, spitting and hunching over in order to see the next pitch. “The time-out for the crucifixion is over Sir” he continued. “You'll need to get back to the stands. ”

"The crucifixion is not a time out" I cried into the wind. "It's the ballgame. Listen to me, it's the ballgame." The wind had come out of nowhere and was blowing the mist away but it was also wailing so loudly that no one heard me. "The whole Roman empire, it's just a speck of dust in the face of the immensity of what's happening here." I persisted. "Don't you see the empty tomb over there?" Or had someone erased the drawing? And where the heck was Samantha? I realized that I was sobbing.

"A speck of dust" said the umpire. He was crouching next to me but he sounded as if he were a block away. "There it goes kid" he said. The baseball flew over my head and kept going and going and going until it was just a speck of dust against the dawn.

Telephone rang and I woke up (have something here' mind body stuff, heart math, afraid of giving power back to the churches)

As I hung up (no, have Roy and Alec come in, make it a different kind of scene) I looked down at the drawing on the church bulletin which was still lying on the table. It reminded me of the first prayer research test I had ever done. I'd had a lousy result, there had been very little measurable result from my prayers. It was a much smaller than the result I had expected. Like Mary who at first had seen the empty tomb as bad instead of good I had seen my test result as something bad instead of something joyful.

The disciples back then weren't thinking two thousand years ahead. They weren't picturing this church built on my 21st century coffee table or thinking how the discovery of the empty tomb would some day be an instant shorthand for Easter joy. How could they? They lived in a culture where crucifixion was shameful, where it meant failure. It had taken time and reflection before the empty tomb became a symbol of joy.

For me, on a much smaller scale, it had taken me two decades of reflection to appreciate the lousy results I had gotten the first time I prayed for a research organism. It had taken me twenty years to see those results as joy and not as failure. Over the years I had become more humble. I now realized that any result at all, no matter how small, was something to be grateful for. Also I had come to appreciate those first test results much as one values their baby clothes,

Most of all, because I had not done well originally, this had helped me become a good mentor. It had helped me understand how to help others who got the same poor results, how to help them handle their defenses and emotions, how to help them get from Square one to Square two. Slowly I had learned to teach as well as to heal through prayer. Slowly I had learned the enormity of what

it all meant.

The Defenders were religious believers who knew the bible back and forth but they did not get it. Was I too so strong a believer, but in prayer research, that there was something that I was not getting?

I shook the thought away. Certainly there were things that I was not getting but the important thing was what I did get, and what I could teach to others. When my students first did prayer research tests they didn't think of them in terms far into the future, they didn't think about how spirituality must have already risen into a new era for such tests to even exist now in the world. At first what they thought they saw was ghostlike, fading evanescent patterns, little appearances of measurable effects. Camp Prayer Tracker was unique. There was nothing else like it anywhere in the world. It was here that I had a chance to show students the spiritual intensity behind the research. How could I close the camp?

But how could I keep it open when, in profile against the background of that intensity, was Callie's young face with its small determined jaw? I had not forgotten the man that shot my innocent dog in the jaw. Would religious people like the Defenders, people who believed in the bible, really hurt a kid?

Oh yeah.

Oh yeah.

He's been having bad dreams, Roy said looking worried.

I have a book that translates dreams. Samantha said.

"Relay? What's it mean when a vegetarian dreams he's at McDonalds running after a moving hamburger?" asked Alec. Winced, wishing I hadn't told him about that dumb dream.

It means he has a protein deficiency. Really Keith, you need protein. Couldn't you at least eat more peanut butter.'

Could we be serious? I asked."The only things my dreams mean is that I'm under stress and the sooner we solve this crime the more likely we can all get a good sleep without being worried about someone getting murdered."

“What other creams have you had?” she asked..

“He dreamt that you were a butterfly and Callie was a fly” Alec told her. “In his dream you tried to warn her away but Callie got stuck on some flypper.”

“That’s probably a subconscious echo of Mahlop’s flyppaer business.” She said. “Keith subsoconsiously resents Mahlon.”

“I do not.” I proteted. I don’t’ even consiously resent him. I just domt’ like flypaper.”

“I doubt flyppaer would be listed in the deream book” said Samtnha” but could look up bugs. We could look up what it means to dream about bugs.”

“Do you hae this dream book with you?” Roy asked her.

No, but you can look up dream stuff on the Inernet” Sam said flipping open her laptop.

“Is that really a computer?” “I thought it was your pruse.”

“ My purse? It’s square” said Smantha.

I must have looked puzzled becaue Roy shook his head and sighed. “Woemn don’t’haver square purses.”he explained.

“Really> I half rememb er that my ex wife used ot have a sort of squre black purse.Well, maybe it wasn’t’ exactly square.”

“of course it wasn’t’ square.” said Roy. “ I know your ex-wife. She’s a smarat dresser. Never over accesORIZED.”

“Over what?” I asked

“Bugs. “ said Samantha., reading from the intenet. Ihate totell you this but its prttynegative when you dream about bugs.

Yeah, but thqt’s for the average perosn, for ht eprson wh doesn’t’ like bugs. Its’ probably the opposite for Keith. For Keith dreaming of bugs probably means...

Monday night there had been a thunderstorm. The air had been rich and glossy like wet black paint. After finding George’s body I had found it

hard to sleep. I could hear an occasional ping on the pipe of my wood stove when raindrops found their way down the chimney.

Through the window I saw a sizzling bolt of lightening snaking through the black, a finger of fire stretching from the heavens to the rock.

The lightening had left a large crack down one side melting the rock so that the crack had a shiny lip. The ground beneath the crack was uncovered and in the morning I saw a small bone fragment in the crack. I don't know why I didn't think of that before. Maybe the bone Callie found came from somewhere around Rhinestone Rock. Phoebe loved rocks. All porcupines do.

4116 Moraga 94122

"...As we neared Mahlon's cabin we heard a woman screaming. I saw Roy in the distance running out of the woods toward Mahlon's cabin .He would reach it before we could. The screams got louder. Alec and I too broke into a run.

A plump but pretty woman with obviously dyed blonde hair and pink bows splashed all over her hair and clothes came running out of the front door. She threw herself at my chest with enough force to knock the wind out of me. Roy came out of the cabin immediately after her followed by Mahlon who watched the woman but kept his distance. The woman was still screaming and it hurt my ears. Two of her bows had flown off as she ran landing on the row of bushes leading up to the door. They looked puffy, like obese insects.

“Cruelty!” she cried clinging to my windbreaker and rolling it up in her hands. “I couldn’t have believed anyone was capable of such cruelty.”

“May I help you?” I asked as Roy and Alec looked on in amazement.

“YOU can shoot that man. He’s a monster.” Mahlon Roy and Alec were all standing there so it was not clear who she wanted me to shoot. I tried to pull her away from my jacket.

“Would you like to come sit in my cottage and have a cup of coffee?” I offered

“De-caf” she wept getting my collar wet. “I only drink de-caf.”

“De-caf is very admirable” I assured her, patting her back in an effort to be soothing and finally succeeding in loosening her grip.

“I’m not leaving” she shrieked so loudly that I jumped. “I’m not leaving until that woman leaves also. And I’m taking my painting.” She began to cry again. I moved slightly out of range.

“Stop crying.” said Roy softly and she stopped. Though he is only moderately good looking Roy has always had a way with women. They adore him.

“My name is Keith” I said..

“I’m Dolly.” She replied dabbing at her face with a over used piece of tissue. I offered her my handkerchief.

“Thank you. You’re a gentlemen, unlike some I could mention. My name isn’t really Dolly, it’s Lorraine, but my mother always called me her little Dolly so that’s why everyone calls me that.. “You’re such a cute little Dolly” my mother would say.”

“OH.” I said non-committally while wondering what the hell was going on.

The conversation deteriorated from there but I finally did put together from all the shouting that she was the widow of George Lucor, the murdered man, and that she had been having an affair with Mahlon prior to her husband’s murder. That gave her a motive for killing her husband and presumably it gave Mahlon one too though I doubted, from the way he was shouting back at her, that he cared enough for her to kill unless it was to make her stop crying.

That Mahlon had dumped

her I knew from Roy’s quick

whisper in my ear. "She goudn hiim hi bed with a gerogeowu exotic looking woman."

I sighed. Obviuously it was Samanth.

"I want my painting." the woman sheridked again Shed have done very ewell in a pgi callign contest.

"What painting?" I asked.

Mhalon rubbed his hands over his head and said nervously, "I paitned a pcitutre of her. Its in the front closet. She can have it. I don't; want it." At that Dolly charged at him and begn hitting him with her purse. Roy pulled her away and came away with a bow stuck to his shirt sleeve.

" I didn't; know you could paint." I said surpraised that Mahlon had a creative side. Mahlon had stopped shouting and was now starign at the ground. He showed no signs of movign. Dolly looked as though another scream might be working its way thoroughher system so I said quickly, "I'll go in and get the painting."

"Me too." Said Roy.

"Me too " said Alec, ungalently l;eavign Mahlo alone and undefended.

We found the painting in the front closet and it was a nude. Alec whistled. I looked at the painting astonished. "He's a good artist. " I said. "I didn't; expect that the painting would be good. She actauly looks better with her clothes off."

Well of course she does you idoito" said Alec.

" Women do." Said Roy.

"No, I don't mean that. I menat all those bows and ribbon tings. They're rather off=putting."

"Mahlon certainly put them off and then some." Alec respoonded, missing the point.

" It amazes me thtq Mahlon created this" I contieneud.." I read soewher tht acheivign accuarte skn tones is really ficccult."

"He ahecived it.All over."said Roy.

" Acurate Skin tones?" said Alec. 'Man, you've been spending too much time alonae."

It occurred to me that I was being disrespectful. I turned the painting face down. I was quite serious about his being a good artist however. The painting showed a depth of vulnerability that elevated it past the category of dirty picture.

'If Mahon was sleeping with George's widow that gives him more of a motive.' I pointed out.

"Yeah, Assad Alcec," and it gives her a motive too but why didn't she wait a week to murder her husband until he got his inheritance. Then she would have gotten the money too"

"Wait till she finds out that Samantha has not only gone after Mahlon but is also going to get the inheritance that her husband would have gotten." I said. "I wonder if she knows that her late husband and Samantha are second cousins?"

"I can't believe Samantha is sleeping with Mahlon already." Alec said. ".She just met him last night. That is if it really is Samantha in the bedroom" he glanced nervously toward the bedroom door which was closed. "That's fast work even by my standards." he said lowering his voice.

"Your standards?" said Roy. "You haven't even had a date in six months."

"Yeah, what do you know?"

"What? That female body builder? " I don't call that a date.

"At least she doesn't play the flute." Alec responded.

"You dated a body builder?" I asked him. I knew about Roy's flute player but I must have been in solitude when Alec took up with a fitness type person. "You still dating her? Does she lift weights?" Before he could reply the bedroom door opened. We all turned and gawked, shifting nervously from foot to foot.. Samantha floated fragrantly into the room wearing her unusual perfume and dressed in something long and flowing that had vibrant pink and white triangles outlined in black.

"I need a cup of coffee and I've outworn my welcome here." she said looking at me with her chin up, sheepishly defiant. "Can I go to your cottage and make a cup?"

"Sure. Coffee's in a canister in the cabinet above the coffee maker. " She left. We waited a few minutes until the angry shouts of abuse Dolly flung at Samantha as she floated into the woods in her house dress or nightgown or whatever it was faded. Then we cautiously went outside and joined the group. Roy was looking at the retreating figure of Samantha and seemed oblivious to everything else.

Dolly grabbed the paiting out of Alec's hands and shoved it in Mahlon's face. She had aparently throne her puse at either Samantha or Mahlon for its cotnents were spilled all over the gorund A robin was eying a tube of lipstick with interest. Mhalon ws still, staring at the gorund. I made my excuses and went after Samantha leavign the little grou stanidgn there to sort thing out.

SAm was in my kitchen and had made two mugs of coffee. She was also scabmingl eggs. 'YOU want some?' she asid wthout looking at me.

"I'd lvoe some." I said. We ate in silence and it was only after she had put the plates in the sink and after roy and Alec had poked their head in to say that they wer going to run down to Rhinestone Rock for a mintue as Roy wanted to show Alec some bvone fragments that he had found, that Samantha finally spoke.

" So I suppose your' e mad because of em and Maholon?"

"Good heavens no." I said. "It's nothing to do with me."

"Mabye not but I can imagine what you thnk of me, being celibate and anti sex and everything."

"I'm not anti-sex.

"But you said that you're a celibate and that half the time you're a hermit.."

"Yes. But I'mniether anti-social or anti sex."

"Are you gay?"

"No."

"So what then? You took a vow or soemthing?"

" No. My lfiestyle ha ntohgi to do with rules or vow or dscotrines It just has to tdo wth the demansd of my work. I do spend months in solitude but when I'm not doing my prayer work I still enjoy a good party.""

Is prayiing a dmeanding thing to do? I would have thought it was easy."

"Soemtiems its easy, somtiems its hard. I am responsibel not just for praying but for producing a measuerle effect when I preay and for doing this consistently day after day. Most people don't; have thqt kind of acoutnabilitiy when they pray. I have to focuss. If I were a concert panist or soemthign I woul dhave to

make personal sacrifices in order to practice the number of hours needed. It's something like that."

"Painists aren't celibate."

Though I was not a prude my commitment to celibacy was an awkward thing for me to explain. I came from a more private generation than Samantha's plus today's society was not as tolerant of celibacy as it had been in past centuries. "I'm an intense person" I said quietly, "and don't do things well by halves. For me to be with a woman would be intense. I would form more of a bond than most people. My work is my all-consuming passion and there isn't room in one heart for two all-consuming passions. It's just the way I am."

"You mean you'd rather pray for bugs than have sex?"

"Well, I, uh..."

"I've been rejected by lots of guys for lots of reasons but never because they preferred praying, and for bugs no less."

"Oh come on. It's not like that and you know it. Anyway who rejected you? Why?"

"It's none of your business."

"Your right. It isn't; I'm sorry."

"No," he said, instantly contrite, "I'm sorry. YOUR being celibate is none of my business. It's just that I don't get it I mean at least a painist provides music to the world. I don't mean to be rude but what's the point of sitting all alone praying for seeds and stuff? To me it sounds boring and it's a total mystery to me why it's important to you."

"You don't think it's important to understand the role of consciousness in healing?"

"Is that what you do?"

"Partly. I'm a healer Samantha. Healing is important to me, at all levels. I also try to bridge the gap between science and religion. It couldn't hurt the sciences to gain a few ethics and it certainly wouldn't hurt the healers to be more objective and accountable."

"I suppose." She thought for a while then asked, "Are you a member of that church where you're not allowed to dance?"

No, we're allowed to dance. I

can dance."

“Oh, are you the ones with the herbs?”

“No.

“But you have to be celibate?”

“Actually no, my church doesn't; approve much of celibacy..They discourage it. They're a little church you see and sensitive about their image They think celibacy makes us look strange and we're strange enough already. They want very much for to fit in and be accepted by the mainstream”.

“Most religious people break the rules by having sex. Do you expect me to tell me that your breaking the rules by not having sex? What kind of weird church do you belong to?”

“It's called the Church of Merciful Mind Medicine. Or the C and M and M and M for short” It's a church that emphasizes spirit healing.”

‘I never heard of it.’”

“It doesn't matter. I'm not a member anymore I've just been excommunicated, nothing to do with celibacy or the time I spend in solitude, but because of my research. And of course the murder and the bad publicity. Which reminds me that I wanted to thank you for your poem. It cheered me up after the phone call from the church. Here, I meant to give you this.”

I handed her the verse I had written. She read it with an expression then put it in her purse.” Thank you. It must have upset you. The excommunication thing That's means being kicked out doesn't it?

Yes.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yes. I've had so much pain with my church up till now that the excommunication itself seems minor .”

“What kind of pain?”

“Do you care?” I asked looking at her in surprise.

“Yes. I do.”

I was thrown off guard. With interest could she possibly have in church politics? Maybe she was butering me up for some unknown reason or just trying to divert me from the whole Mahlon thing, but I had not questioned, her, judged her, or even confronted her about that. She had come to the Cottage on her own.

"It's hard to explain." I said. She simply cocked her head on one side in reply. I had not realized that I needed an outlet for my emotions and so I was surprised to hear the words pouring out of my mouth as dark and steaming as my coffee.

"It's not the excommunication," I said, "it's the years that led up to it, the first shock of rejection by my church, the years of being disciplined for doing good, the realization that the church I love is not all that it should be and that it is willing to stoop to dirty tactics, the hurt of knowing that those dirty tactics were carried out by people I love and have worked with, my continued appreciation for all that the church did for me when I was a lonely boy growing up with no parents (despite what the church has done to me now), my passionate belief in the power for good that organized churches have even though they've misused it, and most of all the unbearable conflict between my theology and the church that has become its tomb. The man that satiated my church did praiseworthy experiments yet the Church Fathers tell me that such tests are against the very essence of Christianity."

"I'm afraid Samantha, I'm afraid because the church I love heart and soul is dying. I am afraid for the future. People won't even know what's missing from their world once the healers all die out and the skills are not passed on. The art of spiritual healing is dying and an invisible and unnecessary death, all because churches refuse to think in terms of modern proof standards even though communicating in scientific terms is the most loving thing they could do for the world in this age. And sometimes too I just miss church. I like going to church. I miss the hymns and the flowers and teaching Sunday School, you know? It's been my whole life."

"I'm really sorry." she said. "I don't get it but I am really sorry."

"What don't you get?" I said suddenly tired.

"I don't; understand how you can speak with so much passion about dumb church stuff when you don't; feel passion over normal stuff. Or are you like one of those repressed priests who struggles all the time?"

"No. I don't; struggle with that kind of passion if that's what you mean." I wanted to move the conversation away from my celibacy but she was young and interested and she really didn't understand.

“So when you look at a beautiful woman you don’t feel anything?” she persisted.

“I feel the same thrill when I look at a beautiful woman that I do when I see a deer running or see a cloud cross the full moon. “

“And is this thrill you feel sensual?”

“Partly. But there is no predatory element in it, not when I look at a woman any more than when I see a wild swan flying. Can you understand that?”

“No. Everyone wants something. What the heck makes you tick Keith? What is it about this crazy prayer thing for the bugs and the seeds that makes you so happy? I know what I want. What do you want?”

“Do you know what you want in life?” I asked, diverted. “What?” I thought for a moment she might say “Mahlon” or even “money” but she surprised me once again.

“Safety.” She said. “That’s what I want. What do you want?”

I was touched both by her answer and by the fact that she cared what made me tick. Most people just accepted that I was weird.

Sometimes I want to know what it’s like to be a spider.

“Huh?”

“I’m not sentimentalizing spiders.” I explained. “I know they are ferocious predators. But I want to know for one moment what it’s like to sit in an open walled soft sculpture house of luminous filaments filled with sun and air and have a pattern deep inside me that is so strong that I need to create that pattern every day, so strong that I never forgot how to build my web.”

“Spiders don’t ever forget how? They don’t get Alzheimer’s or anything?”

“Um, no. They don’t; have brains like ours and Alzheimer’s is a brain disease.”

“If they don’t have brains where do they store the pattern?”

“In nerve clusters and in their cells. Or maybe in their soul.”

“Oh come on. You aren’t going to tell me that you’re out there saving the souls of spiders? What makes you think spiders have a soul?”

“They have patterns, and they have dientity, and they respond t prayer.” I said. “ Did you ever wander what it wud be like to spin a web?”

“No, but I wondered why spdiers don’t get stuck in thei rown webs.”

“Only certai sides of the strands are sticky. The sipders know where to walk.”

“How do you know so much about spdiers?”

“My parents died early and my sister na dl were raised by my grnadv awh o lived on Litte Spdier Lake in Rhinelander Wisocnsin. He gave us a magnifying glass that we kept grnady in a fake leatehr pouch and taught us to track spiders.”

“You mean you could atually see their footprints?”

“Well, it wasn’t often that you saw a good set of all 8 prients. Mostly we looked for clumps of dirt that hey had mvoed. Different spdiers leave diffentt patterns, some can crawl over clumps of dirt, some have to go aroundn. Some rest msot of their weight on two of hteir legs so you just see htose two dots, ad with some you can see wheree they left a body mark jumping out at thateir prey.”

“I didn’t; know you had a sister. What does this have to do with what you want out of life?”

“Have you ever wanted to fly like a bird?”

“Geez Keith , pick a species and stick with it. No, I have never watned to wim like a fish, spit like a camel, drool like a cow or fly like a bird. I like tofdly in aripalnes though. lilike the takign off part.”

“That isnt’ qutie what I mean. Have you ever qewanted to cotnin with in youself a quality that other creatures attain so narually? When I pray for other creatures and I meausre their resposnes its like communiating with a life form from another plante.”

“And this is why you do your research?”

“No. I do it mostly to help other people Samantha, to work toward cures of the incurable by udnerstanign the rold of consiousness in healing. But the wodner of it all cant help but rub off on me.”

She looked me strati in the eye for the first time that morning. “Soemtiems you frighten me.” she said.

“Why?”

“Because you make me feel like I should be a better person than I am. I wish you were my dad..”

“I do too.” I said guessing that her childhood had not been happy. “I wish I’d had you at Camp Prayer Tracker when you were a little girl. There’s an old saying that it’s never too late to have a happy childhood. I have to close the camp because of the damn murder. If I could have kept it open I’d have asked you to help me. I would pay you to help me with the children.”

“You’re not worried I would be a bad moral influence?”

“I think you have a lot of love to give.”

“But you disapprove of my sleeping with Mahlon, don’t; you.” she insisted.

“Yes.”

“Why? Because you don’t; like Mahlon or because you’re religious and you don’t approve of people having affairs or both?”

“Because I care about you and it scares me that you feel a need to be self-destructive.”

“Oh damn you.” She said and walked out without finishing her coffee.

Roy and Alec came in shortly after I had finished what was left in her cup. “Samantha’s off the hook. The police don’t suspect her of killing George.”

“That’s fantastic.” I said. “What happened.?”

“It’s the other way around, we expelled Alec. “George was trying to kill Samantha and Mahlon confirms that she has a burn on her shoulder.”

“A what? I don’t; follow you.”

“George knew about Samantha and was afraid she would get half the inheritance. She didn’t know about him, I mean she didn’t; know they were related. George knew she cleaned up at the game reserve after the guns were shut down and disconnected from the computer. He knew that anti-hack protection also went off when the computers went down and he had a virus in his computer that could get through and activate a gun after the computer was off..”

“You can do that?” I asked

“Yeah. “ said Roy who knew more about computers than Alec or I. “You can do that if you’re smart enough. Anyway the Big Shot Game Reserve didn’t have up to the minute virus protection – they were new at this game too. Lets hope that the publicity surrounding the murder will lead to better security measures before someone smart tries it. Apparently George wasn’t smart enough. “

“I’m not so sure.” I said. “George shot at something just before he died and Samantha has a burn on her shoulder, possibly from a bullet that whizzed by but missed. It’s just possible that whoever killed George prevented by a second or two the murder of Samantha.”

“So George was trying to kill Samantha while someone was trying to kill George and all the while that same someone was sending me threatening little notes of Bug Bytes.”

“I don’t think it was the same person.” Said Alec. “I think someone from the Defenders was sending you the threats because they believed you killed George.

That made sense. It narrowed the field down a little too. Who did I know that might be a member of the Defenders, that was possibly allergic to animals, and that had known me or known of me for 20 years?

I felt a chill run down my back. My daughter had been raised as an evangelist because her step dad, Brian Molbec, was a conservative Christian. She had never had animals growing up although she loved them. Was it possible he was allergic? Was it possible he had targeted my wife while I was in Vietnam and married her and taken April to get back at me?

That was paranoid. Rene was a beautiful woman. Anyone would love her in her own right.

When my dog had been shot no one could understand how the Defenders knew where I was and what my schedule was. April and I had just started seeing each other again. Was it her stepdad that had shot my dog? Or was it letting my jealousy and resentment play havoc with my emotions?

“They took apart George’s computer of course. They were just at Malcolm’s cottage and picked up Samantha to question her.” Roy’s voice cut into my reverie.

“We need to listen to the news.” Alec chimed in. “Do you have a radio?”

“Just the car radio. We could drive around the lake. And if we go slow enough we’d hear the whole news that starts in ten minutes..”

You don’t have a radio? I knew you didn’t have a TV but this is ridiculous. When you go into solitude you really do don’t you.

‘I read newspapers’ I said, shifting slightly because my back was still very uncomfortable.

“They have a cop following you.” Said Alec.

“What? Where did they find the extra staff?”

“If we drive slowly enough around the lake to hear the whole news that cop will think we’re up to something.

“Good.’ Said Roy devilishly. We’ll stop in the middle, look all around, and then do something surreptitious. Maybe we should bury something.

‘I’ve got a bag of garbage.’ I said.

I couldn’t sit comfortably so I laid on my side on the back seat. We started off just in time to hear the news and the murder was front and center.

After we got back they told me to rest while they went out to do some investigating
They were going to look up some records on

the Defenders, and some birth certificates, adoption certificates and other paper work that might relate to the murder. Alec was going all the way to Madison; Roy was going to the library in Two Loons.

"Don't leave the cottage" they told me. "Call us on our cellphones if anyone knocks. Don't let anyone in."

I ignored them.

Since coming to Goosehoop the dreams I'd had after Viet Nam had faded. For the last 20 years I had slept like the proverbial baby. If I'd had dreams I had not remembered them. Now suddenly, the dreams were back and they were coming thick and fast. Sometimes even when I was awake I felt like I was dreaming.

Perhaps it was because I was not sleeping well at night and so I was falling asleep at odd moments and dreaming in snatches here and there. I must have fallen asleep again on the sofa after Alec and Roy left. The last thing I remember was looking down at a church bulletin on the coffee table. I had written down the number of Granny's hospital room on the back of an old church bulletin that I had picked up at Rev. Coopers' church when I was looking for something to write on. It was the bulletin leftover from Easter a few weeks before. On the cover was a stylized drawing of an empty tomb. The drawing lay face up which is perhaps what made me dream of it.

Or perhaps it was because I had read the old familiar Bible story over Easter and it was still fresh in my mind, the story of how Mary Magdalene went to the tomb when it was still dark on that first Easter morning and had found the tomb empty. Of how she had said, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where to find him" (John 20:13) but later she had seen the risen Christ in the garden and breathed out just one reverent word, "Rabboni", Teacher. Of how the disciples thought she was talking nonsense, and later, when they saw him too, some thought they had seen a ghost. Of how Thomas had not believed at all.

I fell asleep and in my dream there was a woman stepping out of the black and white drawing of the tomb carrying an Easter lily and with her hair wrapped in a scarf. It looked like Samatha but something had happened to her face. Her eyes and chin seemed to lack definition as if they had been set loose from their moorings and were sagging grotesquely back and forth in waves of grief. "They have taken away my Lord," she said pointing back to the drawing of the empty tomb. "And I know not where to find him."

"No!" I said. "That's just the church bulletin. Besides, the empty tomb doesn't mean anything bad. It means joy."

But she couldn't hear me. I

pounded on the glass. Why

was there galss between me and her?

“Haven’t they done enough? she said. “ Cant’ I even have a place to come and grive?” and she began to cry. I poudned on the glass until it broke. As I reached out to touch her with my bloddied hand , to ressure her that the body had not been descrated but had risen, I heard her say “Raboni”. Teacher.

“It’s foolsihenss.” Chipped in a young male voice in the background, soemhere aroudn where third base should be. “

”I wont believe it unless I see the nailpints said the second basemen.

‘I saw him in th elocker room, but I think it was a ghoaset” said the shortstop.”

I could not see the faces of the voices. It was Ester, it must be Easter, but it was still dark.

“Maybe now he’ll restore the kindgom to Isreal said the pitcher kicking at the dirt. I could see his foot but nothing else, there seemed to be a mist rising..

“Its not about politics. “ I said.

“Now that we’ve got this curicfixtion thing behind us,” came a voice on first base, ‘Mabye he’ll t come up to bat again for the the Messiahship.”

. “What do you mean coem up to bat again?” I shouted into the outfield. “That was a homer, the one that broke all the records..”

Cruifiction, strike one” caleld the umprie.

“What? “ I yelled ”Its not a strike. Didn’t you hear what Samantha said?” What had happened to Samantha? “Sam” I called.”Sam, where are you?”

“I’m getting a hot dog and some peanuts for his mother. she said. “His mother is hungry. I’m taking care of her until we figure out what’s going on.”

“Penats” soemone called palintively. “Hot dogs and soda.”

“Let’s hope he slughters the Ceaser team and brings hoem the penant. If he does we’ll make him King” siad a guy in a colored robe comign up to bat. I heard the pitch, I heard the ball whir. It was ligher now but still gray. I could see the oddly dressed batter abecause I was close to him but I could not follow the ball glidng toward us thorgh the mist.

“Don’t you get it” I said grabbing an umpire by the collar. “This is bigger, bigger even than the Roman Empire. He’s not going to play against Caesar. Nothing is going back to the way things were before.”

“I wouldn’t know about that buddy.” said the umpire shaking me off, spitting and hunching over in order to see the next pitch. “The time-out for the crucifixion is over Sir” he continued. “You’ll need to get back to the stands. ”

“The crucifixion is not a time out” I cried into the wind. “It’s the ballgame. Listen to me, it’s the ballgame.” The wind had come out of nowhere and was blowing the mist away but it was also wailing so loudly that no one heard me. “The whole Roman Empire, it’s just a speck of dust in the face of the immensity of what’s happening here.” I persisted. “Don’t you see the empty tomb over there?” Or had someone erased the drawing? And where the heck was Samantha? I realized that I was sobbing.

“A speck of dust” said the umpire. He was crouching next to me but he sounded as if he were a block away. “There it goes kid” he said. The baseball flew over my head and kept going and going and going until it was just a speck of dust against the dawn.

My heart was pounding so hard that I could hear it. Was I awake? I looked down at the drawing on the church bulletin which was still lying on the table. It reminded me of the first prayer research test I had ever done. I’d had a lousy result, there had been very little measurable result from my prayers. It was a much smaller than the result I had expected. Like Mary who at first had seen the empty tomb as bad instead of good I had seen my test result as something bad instead of something joyful.

The disciples back then weren’t thinking two thousand years ahead. They weren’t picturing this church bulletin on my 21st century coffee table or thinking how the drawing of the empty tomb would some day be an instant shorthand for Easter joy. How could they? They lived in a culture where crucifixion was shameful, where it meant failure. It had taken time and reflection before the empty tomb became a symbol of joy. .

For me, on a much smaller scale, it had taken me two decades of reflection to appreciate the lousy results I had gotten the first time I prayed for a research organism. It had taken me twenty years to see those results as joy and not as failure. Over the years I had become more humble. I now realized that any result at all, no matter how small, was something to be grateful for. Also I had come to appreciate those first test results much as one values their baby clothes,

Most of all, because I had

not done well originally, this

had helped me become a good mentor. It had helped me understand how to help others who got the same poor results, how to help them handle their defensiveness and emotions, how to help them get from Square one to Square two. Slowly I had learned to teach as well as to heal through prayer. Slowly I had learned the enormity of what it all meant.

The Defenders were religious believers who knew the bible back and forth but they did not get it. Was I too strong a believer, but in prayer research, that there was something that I was not getting?

I shook the thought away. Certainly there were things that I was not getting but the important thing was what I did get, and what I could teach to others. When my students first did prayer research tests they didn't think of them in terms far into the future, they didn't think about how spirituality must have already risen into a new era for such tests to even exist now in the world. At first what they thought they saw was ghostlike, fading evanescent patterns, little appearances of measurable effects. Camp Prayer Tracker was unique. There was nothing else like it anywhere in the world. It was here that I had a chance to show students the spiritual intensity behind the research. How could I close the camp?

But how could I keep it open when, in the background of that intensity, was Callie's young face with its small determined jaw? I had not forgotten the man that shot my innocent dog in the jaw. Would religious people like the Defenders, people who believed in the bible, really hurt a kid?

Oh yeah.

Oh yeah.

The pounding was louder. Someone was knocking on the door. I was awake.

I opened the door and Sam was standing there. She was dressed properly now in blue jeans and a handknit sweater. She did not mention our earlier encounter or ask if she could come in – she just came in. She looked less defiant, and a little scared.

"I've been talking to the police she said."

Someone knocked at the door again. It was a red-eyed Callie and her dad. Rev. Cooper stared at Sam with muted hostility and Callie looked at her with some reflected curiosity behind her tearful eyes. Sam got up and hugged Callie for no apparent reason. Rev. Cooper stiffened. Callie burst into tears.

After a bit they explained that

Rev. Cooper's mom,

(Callie's grandma,) that is to say my best friend in Gooehoot Granny Brodell, had died that morning.

Samantha stood very still. Granny Brodell was her grandma and they had never met.

The funeral is the day after tomorrow" Rev. Cooper said. At three PM.. At the church. You may come if you like. He looked at Samantha with dislike but added graciously, "You too." Callie ran over and hugged me. Her dad turned as if to go and I snapped to. I had not even asked them to sit down.

"Don't go yet." I said. "Please. Have coffee first. I would appreciate it. Callie, there's soda in there. Come in the kitchen and help me fix it, OK?"

"You talk to the Rev. said Sam. Callie and I will do the honors."

Rev. Cooper looked like he wasn't sure what to do, but he sat down.

"I am so so very sorry." I told him. As Callie and Sam disappeared into the kitchen I heard Callie say, "Are you really my aunt?" and I a little while I heard her crying again. Sam must have comforted her. They were gone a long time.

In the end they stayed longer than they meant to. They didn't seem to know where to go or what to do.

"Are you still having bad dreams?" Callie asked me? I had told her about my nightmares the day after the murder because she had told me that she had had a nightmare and I thought it would help her to know that lots of people do..

Was it really less than a week ago we had had that conversation?

I have a book that translates dreams. Samantha said.

"Really? What's it mean when a vegetarian dreams he's at McDonalds running after a moving hamburger?" she asked. I winced, wishing I hadn't told her about that dumb dream.

It means he has a protein deficiency. Really Keith, you need protein. Couldn't you at least eat more peanut butter.'

Could we be serious? I asked."The only things my dreams mean is that I'm under stress and the sooner we solve this crime the more likely we can all get a good sleep without being worried about someone getting murdered."

“What other creams have you had?” Sam asked..

“I dreamt that you were a butterfly and Callie was a fly. You tried to warn her away but Callie got stuck on some flypaper.”

That’s gruesome said Rev. Cooper.

“That’s probably a subconscious echo of Mahlon’s flypaper business.” Samantha said.” Keith subconsciously resents Mahlon.”

“I do not.” I protested. I don’t even consciously resent him. I just don’t like flypaper.”

I looked surreptitiously at Rev. Cooper who was staring at the carpet lost in thought. I wondered if he had been having nightmares. It would be amazing if he weren’t considering all the stress he was under.

“I doubt flypaper would be listed in the dream book” said Samantha” but could look up bugs. We could look up what it means to dream about bugs.”

“Do you have this dream book with you?” Callie asked her.

No, but you can look up dream stuff on the Internet” Sam said flipping open her laptop.

“Is that really a computer?” “I thought it was your purse.”

“My purse? It’s square” said Samantha.

I must have looked puzzled because Callie said, “Women don’t have square purses.”

“Really? I half remember that my ex wife used to have a sort of square black purse. Well, maybe it wasn’t exactly square.”

“Of course it wasn’t square.” said Rev. Cooper unexpectedly. “Rene’s a smart dresser. Never over accessorized.”

“Over what?” I asked

“Bugs.” said Samantha., reading from the internet. I hate to tell you this but it’s pretty negative when you dream about bugs.

Yeah, but that’s for the average person, for the person who doesn’t like bugs.” Callie explained. It’s probably the opposite for Keith. For me and Keith dreaming of bugs probably means we’re happy.” She paused and

added softly, "Granny liked bugs too."

To distract her I showed Callie m lodestone. They all stood up shortly afterwards and left. They wre all onfoot. The parsonage was an easy walking distance. I wondered where Samantha was going, and whee sh was staying.

After they left Ipicked up my lodestone an dlooked at it.

Monday night there had been a thunderstorm. The air had been rich and glossy like wet black paint. After finding George's body I had found it hard to sleep. I could hear an occasional ping on the pipe of my wood stove when raindrops found their way down the chimney.

Through the window I saw a sizzling bolt of lightening snaking through the black, a finger of fire stretching from the heavens to Rhinestone rock. The rock's outline shown vividly for one second in the light from the lightening.

In the mornng , before goignto the police station and after finding the disturbing rdead flies in the loaf of bread, I had goen townto RhinestoneRock for comfort. The lightening had left a large crack down one side melting the rock so that the crack had a shiny lip. The ground beneath the crack was uncovered and I saw a small bone fragment in the crack. I don't know why I didn't think of that before. Maybe the bone Callie found came from somewhere around Rhinestone Rock. Phoebe loved rocks. All porcupines do. I would have to tell Roy.

Running myhand over the lodestone I gathered courage and reachd for the phone.Aprilanswered on the first ring.

"I was thinking of getting you a dog for a weddingpresent " I told her, but I wanted to check with you. I know you never had oen growing u and I wondered if you or Tod were allergic to any critters."

I felt ashamed even s I said it – partly because I was fishing for information and partly because what dum b dad doesn't even know if his daughter is allergic? I was pretty sure she wasn't. She was always hugging and petting my cats when she visited.

"Oh dad, we were just talking about getting a boxer. After everything settleds down you know. We woud Love it if you got us a dog."

"Yucancoutn on me. I said, "pic out a breeder. I'll get all the accessories and payto have a fence put up if you want.

“Dad I wish you were right here and I could hug you.”

“Your sure no one in your family is allergic?” I asked, hating to put it so baldly?

“Just my dad Uh, my step dad, she corrected awkwardly. “And we’ll wait until after he’s flown home to get the puppy.”

“Is your dad home? I wanted to thank him for having my window fixed.”

“no he went to the hardware store. But he’ll be back in a few minutes. Mom and I are going shopping when he comes home because Todd has the other car. He had to run some errands.”

“Well, I’ll call back another time. We’ll talk more soon about the dog.”

After I hung up my heart almost stopped beating. Bran was allergic to pets. He had known of me 20 years ago. I felt sure he was a Defender. I felt sure he had attacked me the night of my daughter’s wedding. He wouldn’t have wanted me at the wedding. It must have killed him to hear her on the radio defend me, defending my research. Perhaps he was afraid that with her in Goosehoop we might grow close. He probably thought I had killed George.

Todd was gone and April and Rene were going out. Brian would be alone in the house. Quietly, deliberately, I slipped my Smith and Wesson hunting knife in my boot. I left a note for Roy and Alec telling them where I was. I fed the cats, picked up my rock, and locked the door.

Leaving the truck in the driveway I began the three quarter mile walk to Todd’s house. Brian Molbec and I had some unfinished business. It was time to confront him eyeball to eyeball. I could feel the handle of the knife in my boot every time I took a step. This man had not only taken my wife and my daughter and very likely killed my dog, he had also tried to stop my work and now he had tried to kill me.

“Allegedly.” I told myself as the slow burn of anger began to consume me., “allegedly”

I would confront him openly.

I wouldn’t leave until I knew.

To be continued

I am now skipping to the end of the book. Keith has discovered that it is Brian, his daughter's stepdad, who shot him and sent him the threatening notes. Brian did not kill George Lucas though. In fact Brian is a founding member of the Defenders of God and he thinks Keith shot George, his friend and fellow Defender. That is part of why he hates Keith, also because he is jealous of the growing closeness between Keith and his daughter, fearful that this daughter's faith will be corrupted, and because he has wanted to stop Keith's prayer research for years. Brian attacks Keith who hits him back in self defense just as his daughter arrives. She refused to believe that her stepdad started it, and now is not talking to Keith. Keith is arrested for

attackign Btian and relaesed pending a court dqte. He is still trying to figure out wh killed Goerge Lucor. In this chapter, whicih is near trhe end of the book, he is visiting Hearhta.

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Callei and Heartha were playing Scrabble. Heartha made the word "pinch".

"You aren't a real Grandma," Callie blurted out all of a sudden..

Heartha's eyes snapped. "I never had children."

"That's not what I mean."

Heartha reached out and pinched Callie's arm slow and hard. Callie did not pull away. "Pinch." Heartha said again.. Then she stood up and went into her bedroom emerging with a torn green sweater.

"Heartha honey" called Emily from the kitchen where she was unpacking some new jelly jars. "Don't wear that old thing. Don't you want to look pretty dear? Now go and get that nice pink sweater that Mrs. Peardon gave you. You haven't worn it since the day she gave it to you, when you came home from the nursing home."

Heartha obediently returned to her room and changed sweaters. "I have to pee," she said. "Those pills make me pee like a horse." I cringed at her crudity which offended me more than the actual physical act of a physical horse would have.

As she turned and walked to the bathroom I saw that a piece of flypaper was stuck to the back of the pink sweater. The small loop of red string that you use to hang it with lay like a drop of blood against the pink.

"Oh dear" said Emily helping her to remove it and trying not to damage the delicate fiber of the sweater.

Once Heartha was in the bathroom Callie jumped up. "I'm leaving, " she said to Emily "and I'm not coming back. She's a wicked old woman."

"Callie!" Emily exclaimed, genuinely shocked. "That's an awful thing to say." Then she softened. "You're still upset by your grandma's death."

"I don't care what you say or what my dad says or this whole crazy town. Heartha's fooling all of you. She's mean to animals and she's mean to me. I hate htat she;s alive and my Granny is dead. I hate it, hate it, hate it. And don't tell met hat she's old and that I have to be nice to her" she sadi glaring at me, even though I had no intention fo tellign her any such thing, "because igt

doesn't matter how old she is. That doesn't make her nice."

"Is your dad coming for you?" was all the housekeeper said in response.

"No, he's got Parish Council Meeting until late tonight. Anyway its not a school night and I'm going out with my friends." Callie suddnely began to cry. She ran out before I coulds comfrot her.

"She's going out with that boy I bet.." saidt Emily, "and much too young too. Oh well, preacher's kids, they're always the worst."

I heard a nosie and looked aroudn to see that Hheartha had the bathroom door cracked open and had been Isitetning.

"Pinch." she said and closed the door.

End

.....

Matt and his father would not be back until dark, but they had said they would bring a pizza. Callie sat on the steps to their cabin, wondering what to do for an hour. Suddenly she missed her grandma so badly that she doubled over. She tried to picture her grandma's tracks, granny's "sensible shoes" and the round holes made by the walker in the dirt driveway. She imagined the tracks extending far into the woods and tried to follow them in her mind. Her efforts to find her granny were a prayer and even then she knew it.

She decided to wash her face in cold water. The outdoor bathroom and shower room no longer had police tape around it. There would have been too many fingerprints to be useful, thought Callie, with the retreat held here the day before the murder and everyone using this bathroom. It wasn't likely that the murderer would have stopped to go the bathroom anyway. She looked over at the cabin where George Lucor had been shot and shuddered.

Callie had often seen Phoebe in full battle gear with quills erect. As she entered the bathroom she had an odd sensation as though her mind had quills and each one was activated. She saw three strips of flypaper and felt a flame of rage. She wished Matt's uncle didn't own a flypaper company. Since meeting Millie just the thought of flypaper totally creeped her out.

Callie ripped the flypaper off the wall wondering who had hung them. Didn't people know that this was Camp Praeyr Tracker and fleis were safe here?

Suddenly her mind prickles tingled. She stared at the red loop of string at the end of the strips. It was the same kind that she had seen on Millie's sweater, the sweater that Emily said Heartha Millie had not worn since the day of the murder.

Only Millie never used store bought flypaper. She made her own. She didn't use red string for a loop. I distinctly remember Samantha telling me the first night that I met her (quote)

Callie looked at the wall and saw the pushpin. There was even a (require from assignment) Mompers flypaper came four to a pack.

Every one of her mind prickles told her that Millie had been here. Perhaps she should tell her dad but she knew he wouldn't believe her. Could Heartha really have ordered George Lucor just because he was trying to buy her land? Everyone always talked about how Heartha loved her land but Callie suspected she both loved and hated it. The farm had trapped her for years and deprived her of a normal life, yet it was the only place that Heath felt safe. She had climbed over the edrasi at the hospital trying to get home, Callie remembered. If she was limber enough to do that she could easily have walked over here to shoot George. Callie knew she was familiar with guns because she had talked about how they had shot their guns off in the woods to celebrate Independence Day. She could read lips and who knows what she overheard that way about the sale of her land. Her water pill made her frequently need the bathroom. Heartha had never read a mystery, never had TV until recently, never watched Jessica Felthecher or even Perry Mason. She would not think about the fact that using the bathroom might leave fingerprints or forensic evidence behind. The

bathroom had been gone over by the police but there would have been so many fingerprints after the retreat that the police were not likely to find anything useful. Anyway, they didn't suspect Heartha.

The thing was possible but it seemed far fetched. Callie had begun to suspect Matt's uncle which is why it made her nervous that Matt had not shown up yet. It was so unlike him to be late, and she knew that he had been with his uncle earlier in the day.

She certainly couldn't go around accusing an elderly poor person that the whole community was actively helping. Heartha could have had an innocent reason to be at Camp Preyer Tracker. She would need to talk to Heartha, draw her out, and find out more before she could tell anyone her suspicions. She wrote a note to Matt, stuck it in the cabin door and began to walk back toward's Heartha's farm.

A quirky little breeze had been sacking round the lake for half an hour and just then skipped up to shore. Callie felt it tickle the back of her neck, but she did not turn around or see that it had blown her note off of the door and kicked it underneath the two wooden steps leading up to the cabin.

Instinctual strength. Still, Callie felt a sense of reassurance.

"It's a nice activity for her" said Emily. "Isn't it interesting to hear Millie talk about the old days?"

Since then it seemed to Callie that the house always smelled of flypaper.

Millie and Emily had hung the flypaper in the barn as festively as though they were hanging Christmas ribbons. They had invited Callie to join in. The flypaper was much too long and Callie worried that Gaagoon, a handy little climber, would get stuck in it. She did not know how to explain that to Emily or Millie.

She wondered if it was her, if she was the one that was abnormal. Praying for flies and talking to porcupines was abnormal, and she did both. She couldn't handle being abnormal if only she knew what normal meant. Then at least she could fake it.

Birds gave the alarm whenever baseline, or normalcy in the woods, was disturbed. Where was human baseline?

Surely it couldn't be normal for Millie to stand there and watch the flies trying to pull away. Callie knew that flies had more nerve endings than people. That's how they knew to fly away before you swatted them. They could literally feel the movement of air your hand made like the touch of a finger. If they were

that sensitive she could only imagine how the flypaper felt to them.

The flies on the flypaper were beginning to die. Calie turned to leave. She was so angry that she wanted to slap Millie which of course is worse than hurting flies. She knew she must try harder to be kind to Millie.

Only it wasn't just the flies that bothered her. She remembered one day when she had found Millie poking at a hen to make her get off of an egg. "Don't poke her" Calie had said. "Just take the egg."

"She'll bite me if I do" said Millie. "A broody hen is a moody hen."

Callie wondered if poking a hen was a sin. She realized that she was probably overreacting. She remembered the kids she babysat for who were 5 and 7 years old. They lived on a farm and were happy normal kids but when a bumper calf had died last summer their parents had waited a few days before calling the renderer so that the kids could play with it. Battered crates make good trampolines. "Don't forget to wash up at the pump" their mom had called cheerfully out the back window. "I don't want that ooze on my carpet."

No one else had reacted though a farm hand was standing there, and so was the father of the children whose giggles could be heard as they played on their trampoline. Could this really be human baseline?

Millie's flat voice broke into her thoughts. "You want to come and watch?" she said.

"Watch what" asked Callie jumping.

"The flies." Calie realized that Millie was still watching the flies on the flypaper.

"You ought to get a TV or something" she said to Millie and left in anger. She had not been back since and her dad had not asked her to go. Rev. Cooper had other things to think about.

GrannyBrodell had lost consciousness. Cuts it in thick strips like bacon, slightly curled at the edges. "I had a little arsenic" she said Not everyone does, but I think it gives it that needed punch. My mom always made it that way Swore by the pinch of arsenic she did.

Someone follows him home in the gathering darkness, sun shining a red hue between the leaves (check you didn't; use it elsewhere) not Mike at this time of day surely? He knew the woods and darted from tree to tree. Could smell perspiration mixed with the odor of a day's ago skunk and the smell of damp earth. Someone was sweating in the bushes. He could hear the birds fly and the birds give the alarm as the man moved. After all these years they didn't alarm Keith anymore. Concentric circles, changed direction, the whole woods seemed to be telling him that predator was stalking Falls on stomach and crawls through the underbrush. Back hurts. Hair raises, rickles. Look up how to ride this scene. Goes in the house and locks the door. Glass breaks Before I could turn around bee bee guns. I've come to deliver your mail. Not afraid to meet my maker We are already acquainted. Sees the paper, like a Calla lily, writing to the ground as gracefully curled as a white Calla lily. He has cats.

Chapter Seven

in hospital visit from Renee his ex-wife, visit from Sally Peardon, prayer vigil, missed wedding, April comes in wedding gown, Mike the cop visits, Rev. Cooper – prayer vigil symbolic, still a suspect but not the prime suspect, make almost this whole chapter dialog. April visits in wedding dress, she thought he had stood her up.

Gets report from Alec on Defenders, Matt and Callei visit together – hope that first kiss was like granny's.

Put some description of Pehobe in here. Neither ganny or pehobe doing well.

Mahlon visits – we can work together on mammoth if we find it, team going down on the 14th (check dates) cloison on house today. Mr. Ippy brings him a free 20 pound bag of rice, just put it on the over the bed table there. It's so kind of you Yu really should have Oh it was nothing.

He uses scientific method figures out it's Brian, supposed to be in Cleeland, Alec checks he rented a car and returned it, the car had --- miles when he returned it, Keith won't let him go to the police.

Alec has to go home but leaves him a bullet proof vest that Jessie sends up, paparazzi line in this one, spider man, knows that Alec is coming on the 14th, call me every night to let me know that you are ok.

Matt, my uncle is real

interested in the mammoth.

Callei brings a book on mammoths.

Chapter 8 Callei's mom had died when she was six. Minister's wives were looked upon by the parish as unpaid employees, sometimes even coming with their husbands to their job interview. It was a disadvantage to Rev. Cooper that he had no wife. Callei's willingness to help out at the foodbank, listen to Mrs. Peardon's complaints about the church flowers, help sell pies at the fair, and accompany him on pastoral calls when appropriate, had been a genuine help to him. Heartha Gloxin in particular was a parishioner who needed a lot of time right now and Callei's willingness to visit the elderly woman had made things easier for Rev. Cooper. It had been an usually busy spring filled with weddings and funerals.

Heartha Gloxin had left school at ten years old when her dad died during the Depression. She had shouldered heavy responsibility from an early age for running the farm and caring for her increasingly invalid mother who didn't die until Heartha herself was 63. Heartha had never married and had no TV, phone or indoor plumbing. When she needed help she would put an old board up against the barn and the neighbors would stop by. Since the local grocery store delivered, a neighbor picked her up weekly for church, and she held no truck with doctors claiming garlic would cure all, she had never had any desire or reason to leave her farm.

Last Christmas the snows had been so high that Heartha, who was

I pulled on the tree so hard that I felt the skin on my hands rip. I could not lift it alone. Mahlon had not stopped running long enough to help but he hadn't gotten far; he had tripped over a root just a few yards forward. "Help us." I yelled to him over the crackling of the fire. "Help me or she will die."

He turned his head, stood up and took one step toward us but screamed when he heard a large pop from sap in a burning tree. His scream sounded like the death scream of a rabbit caught by a hawk. His eyes were so filled with fear that I pitied him but Samantha was at stake. "Help us" I yelled again."

I was terrified too but my years of mental and physical discipline were like so many sandbags helping to hold the flood of fear in one part of my mind while the other parts still functioned. Mahlon had no such defenses. He came toward us wobbling like a puppet with fear dripping out of every pore. He had taken about 20 steps when he doubled over and vomited but he straightened up again and attempted the long trek of perhaps another 10 to 15 steps to where we were. When he froze once more I ran to him and grabbed him, pulling him toward Samantha like a lifeguard pulling a drowning man to shore. Together we lifted the girl off of her legs.

Carrying Samantha away from the fire was not easy. She was six feet tall, stiff with fear, and I could see that both of her legs were broken. The heat from the fire was passing over us like a red shadow and the smoke was making me gag. There was no time to devise a safe gentle method of moving her. Mahlon tried to help me but I motioned him to run, then I dragged Sam toward the cottage, holding her under her arms.

I knew that the closest fire engine would be 20 minutes away in Two Loons. Pumpers and grass rigs would have to come from even farther. Professional help might take some time to arrive but the explosion had been seen and felt in town and before I was even half way to the cottage there were other human voices in the woods and then a large jeep and then people putting down the back seat and lifting Samantha into the back. "Are you alright?" Mr. Ippy yelled at me over the roar of the fire.

"Yes." I said nodding. "I wasn't; injured but Sam needs to get to the hospital."

The fire seemed to glow all around us from every direction. Mahlon, who was caught up in the confusion of people running, began to turn in circles trying to figure out which direction was the safe one. Trembling he stopped suddenly and began to cry. When I put my arm across his shoulder to steady him he fainted. He was much lighter than Sam so I was able to lift him by myself and lay him in the bed of the sports utility sized jeep next to Sam. The muscles I had developed in college wrestling had not completely faded despite my contemplative life.

Sam was still conscious. "Keith" she said hoarsely, "my legs feel like a bag of nails and when they start this car I'm afraid the bags are going to break and the nails spill out".

I laid my hand on hers and squeezed it. "You need to get to the hospital Samantha. It's only a little longer that you need to hang on. They'll give you something for the pain as soon as you get there. I'm so sorry I had to hurt you and drag you that way."

"Thank you for saving me." she said with tears rolling down her face. "I'm not worth risking your life for."

“Oh sweetheart” I said to her with feeling, “What you odnt; know.”

“Is Mahlon OK” she whsipered thorough gritted teeth while reaching out to him with one hand as he lay next to her.

“Yeah. He’s fine. He came back to help you you know.” Looking back and froth from her to Mahlon I was struck by the contrast in thei rfaces. Though she was afraid and in pain Samantha had coping mehcnisimsns. Hers was a face that was used to pain and behind that face lay a mind that knew how to crawl into its cave and endure.

Mahlon looked older than ususla as he lay unconsiou. His face seemed naked when it was empty of the con-man brand of charm which usually animated it. He had urinted on himself out of fear and vomit still stuck to his chin. I saw him thwt way, old and soiled, onl for a second. Then in an explsoion of joy my mnetal eyes seemed to exapnd as if beoming compound instead of single.

Others besides me have said that when they were in a state of holy inspiration they could lookat a musical isntrument and “see” the music in it. In my momentarily altered state of consciousness I cxould see themusic in Mahlon, the melody of the kind of man he couldd become srising and falling against the roughly played chords of the kind of man he usually was. The moement faded but what I had seen was more than a haallucination of hopeful idealism. This was a man who, despite his fear and hi sinexericnce with goodness, had consciously turned around and faced being burned alive in order to help Samantha.

Mr. Ippy started the jeep. I gave one last reassuring squeeze to Sam’s hands andc losed the back of the jeep as she bracedherself for the ride. “Are y ou sure you can walk back to safety yourself” Mr,Ippy yelled out thewindow as his wife jumpoed in the front seat and turned aroudn to attend to Sam and reasure her as they drove. “I’m fine” I waved back. “I’llmeet you at the hopsital after the firemena arrive.

As they backed up and turend toward the road, away from the fire, I waved to Samantha even though she codl not see me because she was lying down. I could feel her poem roleld up safely in my pocket.

Mahoon couldnt; see me either but as they drove off I lifted my hand to my forehead and saluted him.

Although I loved Rhinelander there wasn’t much opportunity for a young man there. I joined the army right out of high school. I did not see

combat but I did see enough of the world to wonder why a God who noticed the “fall of the sparrow” seemed to overlook human suffering. After I did my stint I went back to school and then I went to seminary to find out.

Seminary was a disappointment. There were more classes on fund raising than on ancient Hebrew. My theology teachers were so academic as to have lost their passion. I learned pastoral counseling from secular psychologists. When I graduated I felt more like a psychologist with a faith twist than a minister of Christ.

I wanted to thank her for the cookies but Roy said that she was dead.

I tried to explain it to my wife once about why I studied prayer in a laboratory setting. I told her it was like the birds but that was dumb because she never did like birds. “They flutter too much.” she said. “It scares me.” When I healed sick people just by praying that scared her too. It seemed all fluttery and mystical to her while to me spiritual healing was as normal as changing the oil in my car.

I never claimed to measure divine Love directly any more than I could track where a bird flies. When a bird touches down for a moment you see her tracks. By studying those tracks you learn more of the path she takes in the air. From the physical effects of prayer I learned how the Holy Ghost moved with grace and power like a bird.

When I went to seminary I quoted a poem about the white wings of the Holy Ghost. “Don’t say ‘Ghost’” objected the professor wrinkling his nose. “It’s obsolete. The proper liturgical usage is ‘Holy Spirit’”.

The actual word once translated “Ghost” and now translated “Spirit”, is pneuma, which means wind or breath. How can you track the wind? How can you track the breath of God? By watching what happens when it moves.

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My first congregation was in Skokie Illinois a suburb of Chicago. I used to love to go tracking in Skokie and even in downtown Chicago. Chicago is a city where you can always hear jackhammers like mammoth birdsong.

It was in Skokie that I first realized that sidewalks were the track left by the village itself, a flowing fossilized river of its history. It was the first time I had thought of a group of individuals, as opposed to just one animal or person, as something that you could track.

From sidewalks I learned how the size of the lot lines had changed over the years. From their zigzagging I learned how the village had grown. I could picture the changing shape and size of the village as it emerged and grew.

I learned a lot of history from reading the words and dates written by the sidewalk companies in the pavement. For example I learned when the town became big enough to support its own cement company. I still love sidewalks and I study them wherever I go.

Groups of people leave paths just like individual people. Groups have identities. I have a feeling that understanding this is going to be important in solving George's murder.

During my second interview with the police they told me that George was a member of an ultra conservative group called the Defenders of God. The Defenders oppose prayer research and hate my work. I've had previous clashes with them which makes me a suspect.

I'm convinced that understanding this group is essential to solving the crime and clearing my name. I have to find and follow the flowing paper trail of their history. I have to be able picture the changing mission and size of the group as it has emerged and grown. I need to find out when they first became big enough to support acts of violence.

One of the things that I learned from tracking sidewalks in Skokie was where the pavement is most likely to crack. It has a lot to do with the earth hidden underneath the pavement. I will need to look beneath the surface facts about the Defenders and find out where their weak spots are.

Back in Skokie my District Superintendent had not looked kindly on a Reverend who crawled around on the sidewalk. He also did not look kindly on my experiments with prayer.

Start

The Prayer Tracker
By Deborah Klingbeil

Dedicated to my dad who never instilled fear in me and who always nurtured my capacity to love.

Chapter One. The Hunter

Monday May 2, 2005 8 PM

George looked so gross as he sat in the cabin at Camp Prayer Tracker with beer stains on his T-shirt and a trace of liver sausage sandwich stuck to the stubble on his chin. He hit the enter key on his laptop which was already logged on to a live Internet Hunting website. As the screen saver faded a Texas wildlife reserve came into view. He told me he had paid by credit card earlier in the day to have his computer hooked up to the Remington .30-06 rifle with the video camera embedded in its gunscope.

The menu contained wild

boar, Big-horned sheep and

antelope. "I'm not much interested in watching some slow-arse sheep walk around a pile of rocks," he had said grunting. He had clicked on antelope. He laughed in his over-loud voice when the screen asked him if he wanted the meat butchered and sent to him if he made a kill. "Oh yeah, he said, "this is the way to hunt. No fuss, no mess."

I had come by to bring him some firewood, as the nights were still chilly even though it was the first week of May. I knew from the newspaper that Congress was debating Internet Hunting but I had never seen it live before. Repelled and fascinated I watched as George maneuvered around the site. It was actually possible to kill a real animal in Texas by clicking on a computer mouse in Wisconsin.

George's handmade leather hunting jacket lay on the bed. He told me that his Grandpa Apple had made it from animals that he had skinned himself and that his grandpa used to hunt out at Rhinestone Rock. He enjoyed describing the process of skinning to me knowing that I was a vegetarian. I don't know why I stayed. The guy was a creep.

He was also a talker. I listened as he told me that his mom was the illegitimate daughter of a Depression Era peddler named Harry Apple. "If old Grandpa got into a few pairs of britches more power to him. Bet you don't get much of that around here in your line of work hey?" He laughed in an ugly guttural way. For 20 years I have been a celibate and a contemplative who spends eight months of the year in a life of near solitude and prayer. The other four months of the year – May through August – I am out in the world giving retreats and running a praery camp. Camp Praeyr Tracker didn't open until next week and I had let George rent a cabin for a few days. I was beginning to regret it.

He struck me as greedy and pompous, a man who obviously enjoyed boasting about an inheritance he was going to get. He just rattled on about how his Grandpa Apple had left behind a legitimate daughter who had died a year ago. The run down old farm she lived on sat in the path of a big development project and had suddenly become valuable. Apparently George was the only heir Harry Apple had left. "His old lady's kids are dead and wouldn't she just love to see all that money going to her husband's bastard." He laughed again.

A fly landed on the monitor, slightly groggy from the growing evening chill. George squashed him with his bare finger then wiped the fly's green blood on his T-shirt. I got up and left, slamming the door. My cottage is an easy walking distance from George's cabin.

I had fallen asleep in my chair when I heard the shot an hour later. It woke me but I figured that it was just another dream about Viet Nam.

Looking out the window I

thought I saw a shadow in

the trees but there are always shadows in the trees. The clock showed that it was around eight PM. I could also see Callie Cooper, the fourteen-year-old daughter of the local Methodist Minister, in the distance. Putting on my shirt, and wincing from the pain in my back from sitting too long, I went out to say hello.

Callie is, figuratively speaking, the poster child for the non-denominational prayer camp that I run in the summer. For four months over the summer I run a camp for kids and a retreat center for adults. I teach nature awareness skills along with prayer skills. In the winter I work for a prayer research lab, exploring the relationship of prayer to healing through the laboratory test. We do experiments and then measure the effects of prayer on research organisms, mostly seeds and microscopic life although we do a little work with lab rats and insects. The data our lab produces helps build the body of knowledge used in medical and mind-body studies. It advances, at least I hope it does, an understanding of the role of consciousness in healing.

The lab and the camp are next door to each other but I do most of my praying alone in my cottage rather than at the lab. The cottage is rigged for remote controlled viewing of the laboratory organisms and I'm more comfortable at home. Callie is the only kid that sometimes helps at the lab in the winter as well as attending camp in the summer. She loves Camp Prayer Tracker. You simply can't keep her away.

As I got closer I could see that Callie was leaning over Phoebe the camp porcupine who sat on a low branch. Walking up to them I was awed by the beauty of the yellow tips on Phoebe's dark brown quills which were shining like a full body halo. The porcupine I realized was getting old.

Callie said that Phoebe had slept through the noise that sounded like a shot. "She jerked but she didn't wake up." she explained in a worried way.

"A shot?" That got my attention.

"Oh, it probably wasn't really a shot Keith. It just sounded like that, you know like on TV." I asked her if it happened a few minutes ago.

"Yeah. I listened and it was more than two minutes before the birds sounded an all-clear and then I waited another five minutes or so and then you came."

I could imagine her standing there listening to the noise of nature resuming in jumps and starts just as I had taught her to do. She had listened until the background of animal sounds indicated that baseline – a safe environment - had once again been reached in the woods.

“ I’m going to look around” I said, “because I think I heard something too.” She wasn't paying attention; she was looking down at Phoebe. “ Don’t worry kid, your porcupine is going to be all right. She’s just slowing down a bit.”

As I turned I tripped over something. Callie’s young hands reached down and found it before I could even stretch my painful back into a leaning over position. “Hey are you OK?” she said handing me a large animal bone. “Wow, that’s bigger than anything we have on the bone cart.” she added looking at the size of it and referring to the cart where we kept all the old bones that we found in the woods. “Phoebe must have dragged it back from somewhere ‘cause look, her teeth marks are on it.”

I looked and saw Phoebe's distinctive teeth marks but there were also other scratchings on the bone that I could not identify. The bone was old and glowed with an amber sheen. It had been broken off of an even larger bone but so long ago that the edges were as smooth as beach glass. I’m usually pretty good at identifying bones but I had no idea what animal this came from. I knew I would need to send this one to Roy for identification. Roy was my army buddy and he was also a paleontologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

The sun was setting. Callie leaned over and whined like a puppy, which is the language porcupines speak. Phoebe woke with a whimper, yawned, then waddled slowly into her tree hollow.

After Callie left I walked around the camp checking things out. Most of the cottages were empty. There was a light on in the Cottage where Mahlon Mompers, the flypaper millionaire, was staying with his nephew Matt. He and George had both rented cabins at Camp Prayer Tracker for a few weeks because they were both trying to buy the farm next store. Camp Prayer Tracker is straddled by the laboratory on one side and by Heartha Gloxin's farm on the other. Mahlon had lost out to George’s quicker bid. The closing was supposed to be in the morning. As I walked by his cabin I wondered if George was still hunting or if he had gone to bed early to be ready for the nine AM closing.

In the growing dusk I almost missed the hole in the screen of George’s cabin window. I think it was the faint smell of gunpowder that alerted me, almost unconsciously, to look a little closer.

The screen saver was on when I found George’s body. Four flies sat on the computer monitor that had been splashed with gore as though the man and his computer had been surgically merged. The fish on the screen saver seemed to be swimming in and out of George’s hair, or what was left of it.

Backing away I bumped the

table edge slightly and the

screensaver faded. The fish disappeared and the flies flew away. George must have clicked and fired the remote control gun at something just before he died for the monitor said, "You have made a successful kill. Click here for options." George was in no shape to click but the options came up anyway. Peeking through the blood came the words "Would you care to have your meat pre-marinated?"

As I reached for my cell phone to call the police the four flies returned. In a tidy fashion, often stopping to groom themselves like miniscule cats, they began cleaning up the bloodstain on the desk. They worked with forensic precision, each lowering their straw-like proboscis and pumping out small amounts of a digestive juice that would soften and break down the protein in the bloodstain before the flies ingested it. Then, like cars lined up at the pump, they lowered their proboscis to the desk again filling up on the resulting high-energy liquid.

Goosehoot is too small of a town to have a police force. The police would have to come from Two Loons, almost 20 miles away. It didn't seem respectful to leave George's remains unattended so I held watch. I wondered as I looked out the window who was going to inherit Harry Apple's money now. Meanwhile the flies filled themselves to capacity then landed on the pull string of the overhead light to wait patiently for the sun.

Chapter Two: The Suspect

Tuesday May 3, 2005 10 AM

"Date of birth?"

"September 13, 1939."

I was sitting in the interrogation room of the Two Loons Police Station the morning after the murder. There were two police officers questioning me. Mike I knew slightly; his son had attended Camp Prery Tracker one year. I knew too that Mike coached Little League in Two Loons and I had sometimes seen him at the feed store. Officer Kram, who was asking the questions while Mike took notes, was a

ahndsoem well dressed man who I guessed had come to Two Loons frm a larger city. I had never seenhim before.

I am a contemplative for 8 months of the year and I had just finsihed spenmding all thosemonths in solitude and prayer. For tehe etire winter I had not seen or talked to anyone except the occaisional technciian and s oemtiems Callie. My life as a contemplative was a life of silence. I had been out in the world for only three days so far this spring, to preparte for opening my camp. My social skills and my voice were both rusty. I jumped every time fthe phone rang . The unaccustomed human voices around me soudned odd and jangly.

Mike had brought me a cup of tea. Gray paint was wpeeling from the walls of the police station.. I wondered when there had last been a murder investiagiton here. Certianly not in the 20 years I'd lived in the neighboring town of Goosehoot.

Officer Kram turned to me. "Place of birth?" he asked. The bare light bulb from the broken light fixture above him shoen on his brown hair like susnhine on chestnut horse.

"The north woods. I was born in the north woods."

"What do you mean in the woods?"

"I was born in the north woods of Wisconsin sir, before the wolves all died."

He looked up at me annoyed. "The name of the town?"

"We didn't live in town but the nearest town was Rhineland."

"I used to fish in Rhineland," said Mike. His boyish face made him look younger than he was. I was about to answer him when he looked away unwilling to meet my eyes. I realized with horified astonishment that they considered me a suspect.

"Let's start by reconstructing your day yesterday," said Officer Kram. The clock on the wall looked like it had been taken from an old high school. Its big plain face suddenly gave a loud "chock" instead of a discreet "tock" and the hand jumped forward three minutes. "What time did you get up?" Kram continued.

"Around five. I fed the cats and then walked to Rhinestone Rock. That's a big boulder near my cabin."

"And you went there for?"

“ To pray. I like to sit on the rock and say my mornign pryalers. ”

“ To, uh, pray. On a rock. I see.” Kram tapped his pencil. “And after that?”

“Huh?” I felt Kram’s voice more than heard it, like a hand parting the curtain of my thoughts.

“We were reconstructing the day of the murder.”

“Oh right. Well then I walked home, did my chores and went to the lab.”

“What time did you arrive at the lab?”

“About 8:30.”

“The lab is next door to the camp?”

“Yes. I walked.” As I answered my voice cracked a little from lack of use. My first week back out in the world each spring was always the hardest. After being alone all winter it was overwhelming to be having a conversation with other people. For me it was the emotional equivalent of a trip to the Super Bowl except my team was losing.

I sipped the tepid tea Mike had supplied. It tasted as though they had taken the water out of somebody’s fish tank.. We were only five minutes into the interview and I felt drained. I began to resent being questioned and automatically checked that response but it was hard to pray – hard to pin down the resentment and reject it, hard to make an effort to love the people in front of me - in the middle of an interview. I was simply out of practice.

“What do you do at the lab sir?”

“I’m a prayer provider. For the research organisms.”

“I don’t follow you. Exactly what do you do there?”

“I pray.”

“For what?”

“Well, right now we are doing some projects with houseflies.”

“You pray for flies?”

“In some of the experiments yes. The lab is using laser microscopes to parse the inner workings of living tissue from the flies. They are testing to see if changes in the tissue are effected by mental input of a vbenveolent nature.”

“ Huh? What do you mean, what for?”

“Flies carry disease. We, um, would like to work on lessening the spread of disease without compromising the usefulness of flies in other areas.” Mike choked back a laugh. Two Loons is not the kind of a town where people conceive of flies as useful in any capacity.

“You pray for bugs? Is this some kind of new religion?” Kram was looking right at me, rather like I was a bug he would like to squash..

“No sir,” I said looking right back. “ Its not a new religion, its an extension of all religions. Spiritually speaking praying for bugs is a way of dissolving primal fears. In the case of these tests though it just has to do with how mental input affects their response to pheromones.”

Kram stared. He appeared to be at a loss for words. His mouth was open “It’s called bio-mimetics,” I said, trying again. I pushed the tea away, closed my eyes to refocus, and suddenly I could smell the thick clear sap of the pine trees and hear the water lapping on the shores of Little Spider Lake in Rhineland.

It was there that my grandpa had taught me not to be afraid of bugs. He had taught me how to track the delicate daddy long-legs that the lake was named for and had bought me a magnifying glass that I kept grandly in a fake red leather pouch.

My grandpa taught me the beautiful side of many life forms. He never instilled fear in me. I was certainly never taught to fear God. When I’d say my bedtime prayers grandpa would sometimes swing me up in the air and say, “Keith, you talk too much. Remember how I taught you to get the wild birds to eat out of your hand? When you pray you need to listen sometimes and be still as if you were tracking. Then God's thoughts, like the sparrows, will come right up to you.”

“Are we boring you Mr. Redland?” The sarcastic voice cut into my reverie.

“No sir, it’s just that I didn’t sleep well last night after finding the body. I’m feeling drowsy.”

“The tea has caffeine in it. You better make use of it. You are going to be here a while.” He pushed the cup closer to me.

My voice had cracked again. They probably thought I was nervous. Quietly I pushed the tea further away from me so that it almost teetered on the edge of the desk.

“What did you do first after arriving at the lab?”

“I brushed Benny’s teeth.”

“You what?”

“Benny. He’s a lab rat. Respiratory disease. He coughs up blood and it makes his teeth gummy.”

Mike looked down to hide a smile.

“And then?” Unlike Mike Kram was not smiling. His voice was controlled and quiet.

“I gave Benny a cornflake. As a treat, you know.”

“You do realize that this is a serious inquiry Mr. Redland?”

“Yes sir, it’s just that you said to be detailed.”

“Uh huh. Well, lets move on. After you, um, brushed its teeth what did you do?”

I looked at Kram, not without sympathy even though he annoyed me, and wondered if I ought to tell him the truth. In the end I couldn’t resist. “Well then”, I said quite honestly, “I gave the cockroach a warm bath.” Rambo, one of the lab’s Madagascar hissing roaches, had wandered too far from the heat lamp and it had made him nervous. I had given him a dip in some warm water to calm him down.

“All right Mr. Redland. Are we finished now with the rats and bugs etc.? You do realize that you are a suspect?”

“Yes sir.”

“What did you do next?”

It went on like that for four hours. Finally we finished “reconstructing the day”. Then Kram asked,

“Would you describe yourself as a liberal or as a conservative Christian?”

Depite my age I was a Viet

Nam vet, having gone

back into the service a second time as a chaplain. Though I belonged to a small liberal church denomination – the Church of Merciful Mind Medicines or C and M and M and M - I did not identify with liberal Christians; their memory of how cruel they had been to the Viet Nam vets was too strong. I did not identify with conservative Christians either. They were too rigid, and some conservatives had been brutal to prayer researchers such as myself even though they appeared to have a deep respect for prayer that I admired. “Neither one.” I answered.

“Have you ever heard of a group called the Defenders of God?”

“The Defenders?” I looked up in surprise. “What does this have to do...”

“If you don’t mind I’ll ask the questions. Have you heard of them?”

“Yeah sure. They’re an ultra conservative group and they oppose prayer research. They used to burn crosses on my lawn. They weren’t the only ones though. There were other groups, churches, prayer groups. Mostly it was the Defenders.”

“Did you fill out a police report when these incidents occurred?”

“A couple of times. I was living in Schaumburg Illinois at the time. After a while I just bought a fire extinguisher. Sometimes my neighbor would call the fire department. I suppose they have a record.”

When people had first started burning crosses on my lawn I would put all the burnt material in a bag after it cooled and sorted through it. I wanted to figure out why some crosses burned brighter or longer than others did.

I found that some were made of more expensive materials indicating which opposing groups had the most funding. I decided that certain theological biases translated into people who preferred a fast showy cross burning and others lent themselves to the psychology of the long slow burn. The sophisticated crosses were a type of fireworks but the simple ones felt more menacing to me in terms of the minds behind their making. The Defenders of God left crosses made of thin pine strips wrapped in newspaper with twigs or bundles of dried grass tied on.

“Did you have any other conflicts with the Defenders?” asked Kram. His brown hair was blow dried in a casual way to look as though it weren’t and his blue eyes were a vivid turquoise rather than a watery gray blue like so many blue-eyed people. He continually tapped his notepad with a pencil. It drove me nuts.

“A couple of times the Defenders organized into groups to pray against specific tests that I was doing. I compared the measurable effects of

those tests to the same tests where no one was praying against them. The hostile prayer affected the data patterns. Fascinating stuff. I'm afraid that once I made a provocative statement to entice the Defenders into praying against the test one more time because I needed more data. When I learned that some members were violent I backed off."

"What kind of violence?"

"They killed my dog. Why are we talking about the Defenders?"

"Tell me about your dog." he said softly.

"A man in a ski mask entered the room where I was praying for an experiment and shot my dog in the chin splitting her jaw. 'God and Jesus Christ, that's the only equation and don't you forget it.' That's what the shooter said. He identified himself as a Defender and left before I could gather my senses." I shivered at the memory. The man had sneezed softly as he left. The monster was human.

I had sat for an hour rocking my old dead dog and bawling like a baby but I wasn't about to tell Kram that.. Cookie had been the dog that got me through when I came back from Viet Nam. My daughter loves dogs. The only good thing to come out of the incident – for the police had never discovered who did it – is that it brought me and April closer together.

"Is that why you went to see George the night he was killed? To confront him about being a Defender?"

"George was a Defender? No. I didn't know that. I went to bring him some firewood."

"We have information that you were there almost half an hour. We have information that you slammed the door when you left." They must have gotten that from Mahlon. His cabin was right across from George's.

"Yeah, well we were talking and frankly he annoyed me. But I had no idea the guy was a member of the Defenders."

"Didn't you? Are you telling me that you were just chatting for a full half hour about all the things you had in common?" Kram was tapping his pencil again. "And I suppose that you had no idea that George was buying the farm next door specifically so that the Defenders could harass your work?"

"What?"

Kram was looking at me as if I was a fly that he meant to pull the wings off of. I wondered if he had done that as a child. Mike looked down at his feet as if he was a child, like a boy that wanted to go outside and play instead of sitting inside with the grown-ups. After a full minute of silence Kram said suddenly, "You can go now."

I was tempted to leave immediately but instead I said, "There was an incident this morning that I think you should know about." Kram looked up, alert and wary. "Not an incident really, a prank. At breakfast this morning I was about to eat a piece of raisin bread when I noticed that the raisins weren't raisins. They were dead flies stuck in where the raisins ought to be. There was a note too, folded small, in the bread bag.

"Where was the bread bag?"

"On my kitchen table. I don't like cold bread. I leave the loaf out."

"And how did this supposed intruder enter your cottage?"

"I never lock the cottage."

"Did you bring the note with you?"

"No, I threw it in the wood stove."

"Wouldn't it have made more sense to bring it with you? You knew you were coming down to the station."

"I should have. I mean I didn't actually think it was related to the case because it happened after the murder and, well, thinking about it as a police matter simply didn't enter my realm of consciousness."

"Your what?"

"My..."

"Never mind. What did the note say? Do you remember exactly?"

"Yes. It read:

Bug Byte

Did you enjoy your toast?
And the raisins on inspection?
The flies are dead. Why

don't you pray

and cause a resurrection?”

Its true that I had not thought of it at first as a police matter. I am used to being alone and handling anything that comes up on my own. Besides I was too busy trying to figure out who would do such an ugly thing. The only other people staying at the camp were Mahlon Mompers, the multimillionaire, and his nephew Matt Huck. Mahlon owned the Mompers Flypaper Company. Was this his way of ridiculing me because I prayed for flies in my experiments?

It didn't seem likely. Mahlon apparently admired flies even though his business was killing them. He always called them his "little customers" and carried on about their extraordinary abilities. Their skill in flight is extraordinary. They are named "fly" for a reason. Besides, Mahlon didn't know about the fly experiments.

"You are claiming that someone besides you wrote the note and yet you know the note by heart?" Kram asked skeptically.

"The note was short, I have a good memory and I'm not claiming anything. I just thought you should know."

"Is it your theory that this intruder entered your cottage while you were off praying on a rock?"

"No because I came in the house after that, although I didn't open the bread bag. Nothing looked like it had been tampered with though. I don't know. They probably came in later while I was out back feeding the chickens."

Chores had taken longer than usual that morning because my two roosters, after living in the same coop all winter, had suddenly decided to kill each other. Their annual spring rush of hormones had apparently poured into their systems and hit like crack cocaine. Banjo shook to remove the blood from his eyes and splattered it all over my garden statue of St. Francis. I had received a gash on my arm when I speatrted the birds. Calming them down and then cleaning the blood stains off of the saint's face had taken a while.. Whoever entered the cottage would have had plenty of time

Kram turned unexpectedly to Mike. "Do you have any questions?" he asked.

Mike shuffled his papers and said, "Yeah, well, uh what did you do with the piece of bread that had been tampered with? Was there more than one slice?"

"No, only the one slice was messed with. I washed the butter off the knife because a dead fly had stuck to it, and then I broke up the bread and put it out on the bird feeder for the squirrels."

“Wouldn’t it have been more natural to throw the bread in the wastebasket?” cut in Kram. “It seems to me that you destroyed all the evidence so that the police can’t check your story. Why would you be handling the bread? Weren’t you repulsed by the dead flies?”

“No Sir. I was repulsed by the mind of the person who put them there.”

“Tell me Mr. Redland, is committing a murder within your um, realm of consciousness?”

“I don’t believe in murder sir.”

“I’ll be sure to make a note of that. You are free to go. I wouldn’t recommend leaving town any time soon”

In the parking lot I found a sheet of paper on the front seat of my truck. Obviously I needed to start locking my truck as well as my cottage. The note said:

Bug Byte

My plans have been made.
Your grave has been dug.
Close your heretic camp
or get squashed like a bug.

I felt my intestines curl up and cramp as I realized that my life had just been threatened. Slowly, paper in hand, I got out and walked back into the police station.

I gripped the steering wheel tightly and scanned the parking lot. There was a pain in my stomach and thought for a moment I thought that I was coming down with something. Then I remembered what the pain was. I was scared. You need a lot of mental discipline in my vocation and sometimes I kept my thoughts so tightly disciplined that I lost touch. My army buddy Alec always told me that I lived too much in my head. Was I really so out of touch that I needed a physical tightening of the stomach to understand that I was scared?

Alec would be a good person to call for help I solving the crime.. He was a retired Chicago police officer who had taken early retirement after being shot. He could have stayed on the force and done paperwork for he wasn't permanently injured but he just couldn't stand to sit behind a desk.

When the War in Viet Nam started I had gone back for a second stint in the army as a chaplain. Most of my army buddies were younger than I

was and might have the energy and know-how to help me solve this case. It was one of the blessings of my life that being able to rely on them for anything was a given.

I leaned back on the cracked vinyl seat of the truck and disciplined myself to focus. A piece of litter blew in front of the truck startling me. I needed to catch a religious killer who thought I was a heretic because I prayed for things he didn't like. They don't teach you about this sort of thing in Sunday School

The notes were probably being written by a Defender. It made no sense that a Defner would have killed Geroge if he was one of their own, but the polcie had asked me about the Defenders before I had told them about the note. It made no sense.

The first note had made it obvious that someone knew about my fly experiments but except for Callie, who sometimes helped in the lab, few people knew anything about them. Callie knew how to keep a confidence but she was still a kid and might have told someone she really trusted. Could she have told her dad or granny? She was too young to have a boyfriend. Or was she?

Her dad was a liberal pastor and let Callie attend Camp Prayer Tracker but he wasn't comfortable with prayer research. Callie's granny had been the one that had pushed him to let Callie be active at the camp and the lab. Granny was my only real friend in Moosejaw and wouldn't tell anyone anything even if she knew. She was too smart. Besides Callie had told me yesterday that her granny was in the hospital.

There was a lab director and four technicians but they had worked for the lab for 20 years and I did not suspect them. I couldn't imagine them breaking confidentiality about an experiment. They all knew the rules.

There was also one other full time prayer provider but he lived in Taiiwan and worked via remote controlled viewing . Like me he was a contemplative part of the year. The rest of the year he was a tea educator. I called him the oolong man. He was not a Christian which is part of what made our laboratory controversial. I wasn't even sure he had started on the fly experiments yet. They were brand new.

The laboratory sometimes used volunteer prayer providers of various religious backgrounds but they had not used any yet this year.

George, Matt or Mahlon could have wandered into the lab I guess, and George could have seen and then told someone what was going on there before he died but that seemed far-fetched. The lab door was locked except during the lunch hour when technicians sometimes liked to hike or eat outdoors. Since there was seldom anyone around they were a little lax during the lunch hour.

It didn't seem likely that anyone from town would walk into the lab. A ten-acre plot surrounded it. The cabins at Camp Prayer Tracker were the closest; the nearest houses after that were pretty far away. The only way to approach was on foot coming through the woods, as there was an alarmed iron gate at the front where the road was.

Mahlon had stayed on at Camp Prayer Tracker after losing his bid to buy the farm he wanted on the other side of the camp. I had asked Mahlon why he was stayed after losing out to George and he gave me a bunch of bull about how his instincts told him to.

He also told me about the "almost religious experience" that he had when he first encountered a strip of flypaper hanging in men's room in Detroit. "I knew immediately that flypaper would be my fortune" he claimed, "and my instincts never let me down." The guy talked like a shyster but I didn't see how that gave him a motive to vandalize my breakfast, threaten my life or follow me to the police station. It would be worth checking to see if he had been seen at the camp this morning while I was being interviewed.

I took the new note inside. The police said that it could have been done on any Hewlett Packard printer and asked me if I owned one. When I said "Yes" it sounded like a terrible admission.

"This note is only going to make us look at you more closely. I hope you know that."

They apparently thought I had written the note myself and brought it along to the interview in case I needed to divert suspicion. That was stupid. If I was going to do that I'd have brought the first note too. "Is Mahlon Mompers a member of the Defenders?" I asked bluntly.

"You'll have to ask him yourself" said Kram. "I am not privy to their membership records. Why do you ask?"

"Why aren't you looking into the possibility that some one related but unknown to George was trying to get his inheritance?" I asked switching the subject.

"We are looking into it and we will also examine this, er...bug byte. Whoever wrote it seems to be interested in bugs. You are interested in bugs aren't you sir?"

I walked out. Three points of the case stood out clearly. My life had been threatened. The police were not taking the threat seriously. I had to.

Since coming back from Viet Nam I had gradually adopted an attitude of nonviolence. It had helped me control both my rage at the way people

treated vets when we got back and my hatred for Brian Molbec, the man my wife had fallen in love with while I was overseas getting shot at. Now I had to face the possibility not only of being arrested but also of being killed and I could feel my hard won pacifism slowly evaporating.

Buying a gun didn't appeal to me; I had thought of myself as a pacifist for too long. There were some heavy rock fragments that the lightning had broken off of Rhinestone Rock that would do as a low-tech weapon. In Viet Nam when I'd been caught off guard, I had killed a man with a rock.

Yesterday one of the fragments from Rhinestone Rock had stuck to my watch when I lifted it. The lightning must have magnetized it making it a naturally occurring lodestone. I decided to go get it.

I felt hypocrisy wash over me like a hot flash. It didn't matter if I killed someone with a gun or clobbered them on the head with a rock. Violence is violence. I felt the burn of hypocrisy but I did not reconsider. It wasn't even anything that I had to analyze. If anyone threatened me I intended to kill them first.

Chapter Three The Bug Bytes

Tuesday afternoon and evening, May 3, 2005

"Yes, she heard it on the radio." Todd said. I'll tell her you called."

"I need to talk to her. Is she home?"

There was silence for a moment then he called "April!"

"Oh dad," she said. "I've been so worried about you." I let my breath out. Before I could catch it again she told me that the Internet hunting aspect of the case had already made the murder a media extravaganza.

"Good Lord April, will this affect the wedding tomorrow?" She and Todd were set to be married at 5 PM the next day followed by a dinner and dance. It had been planned for a year. My ex-wife and her husband Brain and a whole host of others had flown in for the event.

"Of course not. We're going through with it as planned. I want people to know that we are all sticking together as a family. Don't worry dad. Everything is OK." But of course it wasn't. This was April's second marriage and I wanted everything to be perfect and happy for her this time around.

“Listen, dad. You hardly know Todd and I want you two to get to know each other. We’re slipping away from all the other relatives and going out to Hansen's for a beer in a little while. Want to come?” I didn’t but I also didn’t want to disappoint her so I promised to meet them.

When I called Alec he had already heard the news. “I’ve been trying to reach you.” he said. “ What can I do to help?”

“ I need a lot of information. I mean you might know how to find out things.”

“You bet I do. What exactly do you need to know? Wait, let me get a pencil.” In a minute he was back and I gave him my whole list. I told him I needed information on Harry Apple, a Depression Era peddler and ladies man that had worked the area around Moosejaw. I needed to know if he had left behind any illegitimate children besides George’s mom. I figured if there was another heir out there they might have shot George to get his inheritance. I also told him I needed to know everything I could find out about the Defenders of God, when they started, how many states they operated in, who they targeted and why. I offered to pay him. He laughed.

“I’ll see what I can find and then I’ll drive down to see you in a few days. You hear anything from Roy or any of the others?”

“Yeah, I just talked to Roy. I’m sending him a bone that I found in the woods that I want him to identify.”

“You mean you don’t know what it’s from? I thought you knew all the little creatures of the forest.” Alec was never exactly an animal person.

“This is from a big creature of the forest, like maybe even a dinosaur.” Alec wasn’t impressed. He didn’t think dinosaurs would be of much help in the case.

“My daughter’s getting married tomorrow” I continued “but after that I’ll be free.”

“ Keith, that’s terrific. When I come down we’ll have a few beers and celebrate. What do you say?”

“Sure, great. Listen, I appreciate this. I mean...”

“Damn Keith, don’t get all mushy on me, we’ll get you out of this mess. Cripes, how could they even suspect you? You wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

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Hansen's is a country tavern, the real McCoy. As usual the Hansen's hound dog lay sleeping in the corner probably in violation of the health code though no one minded. Mrs. Hansen, who tended bar, had her hair in curlers. "So good to see you Keith. It's been a while. My hair is still too damp to take them out yet." she explained patting her head. I told her she looked very pretty even in curlers and she blushed.

Todd and April were seated at a table and had ordered me a beer. When I sat down people moved away. Perhaps they thought I was a killer. Perhaps Todd thought so too. Under the circumstances conversation between us went more smoothly than I expected. Todd was protective of my daughter and he was obviously crazy about her. Whatever he thought of me I was grateful for that.

Mahlon Mompers was at a table in the corner telling everyone about his flypaper company. He leaned forward and said dramatically, "Most people believe that the pulling power of flies is all the same. That's not true, not true."

The people of Moosejaw nodded their heads. They were not going to be like most people. They were ready to believe that it was not true.

Mahlon continued, "How strong a fly is depends on environmental factors such as drought. Political factors can affect the pulling power of a fly's legs, oh yes, wars, that sort of thing. The weaker my little customers are the less sticky I have to use to catch them and the more money I make. I always market my flypaper where the flies are currently the weakest. "

I wondered what he was up to. Two bowls of chili arrived. "Don't you want any?" Todd asked. "He's a vegetarian" explained April. "Good God." muttered Todd involuntarily. I kept watching Mahlon. He was at the top of my list of suspects.

The crowd was gathering around Mahlon's table. They were thrilled to hear that the flies down in Latin America were so strong that they could practically pull a plow. In Eastern Europe, however, flies were so weak that they could be trapped with flypaper coated with only the 22 pound sticky formula. "Probably something to do with the communists." Charlie commented refusing to acknowledge the end of the Cold War.

I don't know what made me do it. I knew I was making trouble but I couldn't resist. "Hey Mahlon," I called across to him. "How strong are the flies in Wisconsin?"

"Wisconsin's little customers," Mahlon replied "are running about 24 pound. I expect them to increase in strength by midsummer if they find enough food."

"We have a lot of picnics here. Watermelon, soda pop, that sort of thing." Sally chipped in.

April turned to Todd. "My dad has a sense of humor," she said. Todd looked at me sympathetically, as though it were a disability.

"Its odd" Mahlon continued "because just across the border Canada's little customers are already running at 26 pound and I haven't figured out what's giving them that little bit of extra pulling power. I'm not much up on Canadian politics you see."

End

There had been a stunned silence while the patriotic beer drinkers absorbed the fact that Canadian flies were stronger than American flies. Charlie opened his free sample of Mompers flypaper and hung a strip from the bar. Eventually a single fly flew in and stuck itself obligingly to the glue.

Mahlon studied it. Supposedly he could determine the pulling power of a fly in one minute, an edge no competitor had. "It's no wonder," Sally said to him awestruck, "that you've made millions."

You don't make millions without being shrewd. Mahlon was a businessman who had wanted Heartha's farm but didn't get it because George stood in the way. Now George was dead.

When Mahlon reported that the fly in the bar had less pulling power than Canadian flies he was not forgiven. He finished his drink and left just before I did.

"I hate to leave you two," I said rising, "but I'm sure you won't mind having some time together. Where's your mom and Brian?"

'Over at the church setting up." explained April. "Don't you want another beer dad?"

"No thanks."

"See you tomorrow then. We've fixed you a vegetarian plate for the reception."

Tomorrow I would have to watch Brain, April's "other dad", walk her down the aisle. It would be good practice in controlling my emotions. Prayer providers need to keep their minds in good order just like singers have to protect their voices. I didn't want to spoil the wedding for my daughter although now that I was a murder suspect I didn't see how I could avoid throwing a damper on the party. I wouldn't stay long.

Out in the parking lot, stuck under the wiper blade of my locked truck, was a note that read.

Bug Byte

Do you think all the flies
at your funeral will rally?
Close your heretic camp
or else risk the girl Callie.

Yes, the flies will all mourn you.
Such respect they will pay!
And their babies will visit
your grave every day.

This murderer was in a hurry. He wasn't sending the notes gradually over several days. Weary of controlling my emotions I had an urgent primitive urge to hit him with my rock which was the size of a grapefruit and which sat next to me on the passenger seat. Instead I took a notebook out of the glove compartment and wrote a list of the suspects.

Mahlon Mompers. He had left the bar shortly before I did, and he'd left alone.

Matt Huck, Mahlon's nephew. I hated suspecting a kid but I'd heard that Matt had fought with George and in these days of school

shootings I couldn't rule him out.

Unknown possible heir to George's inheritance?

Callie? I scratched her name out and tore the page without meaning to. Not Callie, not even in an age of school shootings.

Rev. Cooper? Threatening his daughter could be a bluff . I could not rule him out because Callie might have told him about my fly experiments. The notes implied that the sender knew about those experiments.

I decided to stop at the church to show Rev. Cooper the note. When I got there my ex-wife Renee and her husband were coming out of the church with their arms full of ribbons and of serving dishes that needed polishing. "Oh Keith," said Renee with that enthusiastic huskiness in her voice that I had once fallen in love with, "It's been way too long."

"Can I help you carry something?" I offered starting to get out of the car.

"No, no we're just on our way back to Todd's house. Listen we were so sorry to hear about your troubles."

"Thanks. I hope I won't spoil the party."

"How come you have a rock on your front seat?" Renee wanted to know.

"Oh. I've been, um, rock collecting." She looked at me with the same concerned look she had given me years ago after I began modeling the reproductive systems of snails out of clay in order to better understand the effect of pollution on marine life.

"This is Brian, my husband," she said nudging him. Brian was a tall solidly built man while I am short and have been described as "impish". There was nothing mystic or mischievous about Renee's current husband.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you." he said. His tone was conversational but his eyes looked annoyed. Two years ago I had overcome my hatred of him long enough to write a letter acknowledging, "My daughter tells me you have been a good father to her." He had never responded. To him I was a religious fanatic and a deadbeat dad. It didn't matter. I felt better after getting rid of my anger even temporarily, rather like a cat that throws up a hairball and then feels frisky.

"Todd's pastor seems so nice." Renée said, breaking the awkward silence. "He and our preacher from home are doing the service together

you know.” I grinned. It was all over town that Rev. Cooper and the Bible Belt preacher that had flown in were not getting along in what you would call a Christian manner.

Brian began to herd his wife toward their car. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” she said, waving a ribbon and a sheaf of lists on yellow paper in my direction. “After the wedding lets get together, OK Keith? I want so much to sit down and have a real chat.”

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Rev Cooper turned gray when he saw the note.

“I can’t get Callie away just yet because her Granny is ill but I’d like to take her away on vacation. She’s been offered a summer job at Heartha’s though, helping out.’

“Yes. I was planning on visiting Heartha but now that I’m a suspect I don’t know. I don’t want to scare her.”

‘Oh Heartha won’t care. It would liven up her day. She’s a tough old farm lady you know. Last time I was there she shot a squirrel out the window while she was having her cereal.” I must have looked horrified for he added, “Well it was a red one.” as if that explained everything. Farmers dislike red squirrels. “ Callie’s granny is the one who really wants to see you.” he continued. “She’s in room 243 at the Two Loons hospital. By the way, congratulations on your daughter’s wedding.”

“Yes, thank you, and thank you for pitching in and officiating. Do I owe you anything for the service?”

“No, that’s OK, Brian took care of it. Would you like a cup of coffee while you’re here?”

I turned him down. Besides having a murderer loose he also had the wedding to do and Callie and his mother-in-law to worry about. Sunday was Mother’s Day and he had a special worship service to prepare. Since losing his wife I figured Mother’s Day couldn’t be the easiest day of the year for him.

‘Is Callie around?’ I asked. “ I need to tell her that the police want everyone to stay away from Camp Prayer Tracker for a few weeks while they finish their investigation.” The police hadn’t really said that but it would ease her dad’s mind if Callie stayed away. It was the only diplomatic way I could think of to let Rev. Cooper know that I would only see his daughter in public places with other people around until the murder was solved.

She’s at the hospital with

Granny.” said Cooper

relaxing a little. "I'm going to pick her up as soon as I tie up a few loose ends here."

It was quarter to 8. Visiting hours didn't end until 9. "Maybe I'll just pop over there myself," I said. "I'll probably see you there."

"Yes". He said. "I'll be leaving in a few minutes so I will certainly see you there."

It was obvious that Rev. Cooper suspected me. As I drove to the hospital I found myself returning the favor. The logical part of my mind noted that he might have killed George even if he wasn't writing the notes. If Cooper had received one of these threats against Callie before that might have given him a motive to kill George because I was still convinced that the notes came from the Defenders of God and George was the only person locally that I knew had been a member

When I walked into the hospital room Callie had put the bedrail down and was sitting on the hospital bed talking to Granny about a boy she had met. She was wearing a lime green tank top and a hot pink sweater with her red hair drawn up in the back by some kind of a loopy thing. She waved "hi" without stopping her rapid chatter. Granny winked at me. The boy in question was Matt Huck, Mahlon's nephew. Mahlon was second in line after me as a suspect and Callie's dad wasn't going to be happy about that. At the first break in conversation I told Callie about the murder, "Yes I know" she said her eyes spitting fire. "The dumb police accused Matt of doing it."

"Well they also accused me and under the circumstances the police don't want anyone to come to the camp for now.

"But that's so unfair." she started. Granny broke in and talked her into seeing the bigger picture. Even while weak and in pain Elizabeth Brodell was every inch the grandma. By the time her dad came the issue was settled although I had to promise about ten times to take good care of Phoebe, the camp porcupine, until Callie was allowed back on the grounds.

"You can look for Gaagoon's den. I think she has a nest on Heartha's farm." I told Callie to mollify her. Gaagoon was Phoebe's cub from last year. Callie greeted her dad then went downstairs to the cafeteria to get some ice cream for everyone.

"Did you bring me my lavender cologne?" Granny asked her son-in-law.

"No, I forgot. I'll bring it tomorrow night, after the wedding.

"Is that why Callie was wearing lipstick?" I asked Granny "Is she getting all jazzed up to go to the wedding?"

“Lipstick?” huffed Reverend Cooper? “Where did she get lipstick?”

“In my purse, dear,” said Granny, “It’s a pretty pink appropriate for a girl of her age.”

“Her age? She’s not even 15!”

Granny chuckled. “ She will be in June Albert. And I think you should know that she has a crush on Mahlon's nephew. I advise you not to say a word against it because he’s probably a nice boy and anyway if you do she will start seeing him behind your back and you don’t want that.”

“What do you mean seeing him? When? Where?”

Granny closed her eyes and took a long slow breath. “At fifteen I was already engaged.” she said reminiscing.

“I thought you didn’t meet Mike until you were in your twenties.” Cooper said moving the over-the-bed table so he could sit closer to her. I sat on the windowsill.

“I don’t mean Mike. That was later. It was a boy back in Ireland many years ago. Don’t interfere with Callie’s first puppy love Albert. I just hope that when Callie is as old as I am she’ll have something good to remember.”

“Ho, ho, we’re learning all of your secrets Granny” I said “So why didn’t you marry the poor guy?” Granny coughed up some blood and shook with a spasm. The nurse was called, tubes were adjusted, and medication was given. When all was calm again I asked, “Granny, did you ever hear of a peddler called Harry Apple?” Her eyes flew wide open and she trembled. “How did you know Keith? And why would you of all people torment me with that now? Can’t I have even one happy little Irish memory without that coming back?” To my horror she began to cry.

I quickly reassured her that I didn’t know anything. I explained to her about George saying, “If Harry Apple had another illegitimate child or grandchild they may have murdered George for the inheritance. That’s why I asked.”

She stopped crying but sobbed noiselessly. I felt terrible for having somehow hurt her. The light blanket covering her was rising and falling rapidly. I wondered if I should call a nurse. “Granny we can talk later. You need to rest. None of this is really important.” I looked around for the buzzer.

“Its important Keith. Sit down. I want to tell you both something before Callie comes back. It was so long ago, when I was 16, one month after I came to America. My fiancé’s family was supposed to follow.” She was talking

rapidly as if to say it all as quickly as possible. “The farm ladies all liked Mr. Apple. My mom liked him. Heartha’s mom liked him. Charlie Hansen's aunt, who lived where your camp is now, she really liked Harry Apple. Everyone did until the day he went too far.”

“What do you mean?” said Cooper.

“It was behind the barn. I tried to fight him off.” she said coughing .She was clutching the sheet in one hand and moving her fingers, as though crushing a flower.

“What?” Rev. Cooper exploded. “You don’t mean...”

“Sit, Albert,” she said. “I need my strength to tell you. There was a child.” She covered her face with her other hand. “ I had a son just before my 17th birthday. I only saw him once and then they took him away from me. My dad would never tell me who they gave him too. Adoptions in those days were more informal you know.” Her shoulders quivered under the blanket.

Her voice kept breaking but she stubbornly pushed each word out over her lips anyway. Speaking of this was obviously painful; I half expected her lips to bleed. “After I married Mike we tried so hard to find little Patrick. We wanted to raise him together. My father had died without telling me who he gave my little boy to. There just wasn’t anything to go on.”

It was as if something frozen inside of her had melted into an uncontrollable flow of words. She dropped the sheet and made a fist against the mattress. “ When your wife Kathleen was born it seemed like such a gift from God. And then when I lost her and my husband in that awful car accident I wondered what I had done that God hated me so. He took my husband and both my children away from me.” The rawness of Granny’s anger shook me much more than news of the baby.

Normally Rev. Cooper would have oozed some kind of reassuring religious remarks. Instead he stood with his mouth open. Granny gathered herself with an effort. “Keith, God bless my soul” she wept “ its possible that I could have a child or grandchild that would murder for money. If I do will you get a good lawyer? Not that I hold with murder but its all I can do now for my child. Promise me Keith?”

“Of course I promise.” Why hadn’t she asked me before? I’d have moved heaven and earth to find her son for her. Perhaps she was too ashamed; in her day such things carried more stigma than they did today. I was still holding her hand when she had another spasm and the nurse came in. Rev. Cooper looked offended that she had asked me for help. It was his family.

We stepped out into the hall.

“I’ll have to tell the police

tomorrow,” Cooper said in a tight voice

I was becoming as worried about Rev. Cooper as about Granny. They were both breaking apart little by little.

So was I. When I got in my truck I began to sob as convulsively as Granny, grateful there was no one there to see. The pressure of the day had been building until, like a plane breaking the sound barrier, a boom of grief had rocked me. A letter from my church saying that they were going to excommunicate me if I did not give up prayer research had been sitting in my dresser drawer for six months and the final date by which I had to “repent” was today. From the time I was a Sunday School kid to being a pastor, to being an army chaplain I had always loved and needed my church and I still did. I picked up my rock and squeezed it. It felt comforting and solid. When I put it down my hand was bleeding.

Today was also the anniversary of my twin sister’s death. It seemed like only a few days ago, instead of many years ago, that we had both tried our first prayer research test, which involved praying for soybeans. “How am I supposed to pray for something I don’t feel love for? I can’t even tell if the beans are alive or dead.” I had complained to Jessie tossing a soybean around. “Geez, these things bounce. They look like popcorn.”

She smiled. “Find something about them that interests you. If you can appreciate them in some way the prayer will come. Unless you don’t think you can...!”

“Of course I can.” I had tried. The soybeans I prayed for all absorbed and retained more water than the control beans. There was a computer generated graph showing how my prayer affected the beans. I felt as excited as the first time I saw the track of a whale in the water. If anyone had told me that you could see the track of a whale in the ocean I would have said they were crazy. That was before I encountered whales. A whale that surfaces and dives leaves a distinct glossy smoothness between the seas, a smooth patch or track that floats visibly for several moments. If anyone had told me that prayer left measurable tracks I would have said they were nuts. That was before I saw the graph. I felt surprised, pleased, and mildly powerful. Then I saw the graph of Jessie’s results which looked different than mine. There was just enough sibling rivalry between us for me to wonder why.

My prayer had affected the soybeans as a group causing them to retain moisture even if they didn’t need it. By contrast Jessie’s prayer had affected each one of more than 5,000 beans individually. Those that had too much moisture, lost moisture, those that had too little, gained moisture.

What caused the difference and what kind of a power could reach into the heart of a soybean and regulate tiny amounts of moisture? Could this power make minute adjustments to human cells? Why would such a powerful

force bother with a bunch of beans? How had my twin sister accessed this power? She had not been trying to increase or decrease moisture content; she had just felt appreciation for the beans.

I wanted to learn to pray like Jessie, but if her prayer was holy then why had it led her to lie down in the woods ten years later and put a shotgun in her mouth? It wasn't the prayer that made her do it of course but her prayers hadn't saved her from the ugly sexual accusations that were part of the public smear campaign to discredit her research. The fact that our older brother had made these false accusations both for spite and for pay in selling her supposed "story" to the media made it harder. Jessie was shy about such matters and inexperienced by modern standards.

Her library card had been in her pocket and was soaked in her blood. I wanted to keep it but by then I had acquired the discipline not to. Instead I vowed to learn to pray like she did.

I never learned to pray like Jessie but I did learn to pray in my own way both joyfully and effectively. When I pulled up to the cottage I put my head down on the steering wheel. For a moment as I prayed a type of joy that is not tied to circumstances danced in the mental sky above my loneliness.

There was another note stuck under the front door of my locked cottage. The night air was chilly but I felt one drop of sweat roll slowly down the back of my neck. The Defenders had shown their hand. Whatever was going on had started long before the murder of George Lucor. The note said:

The Final Warning

The first shots are to make you hurt
The way you hurt your daughter.
For all the sin you've brought on her,
The sinful things you've taught her.

I'll shoot you like I did your dog.
I'll swat you like a fly.
The second time will be for real.
The second time you'll die.

End

Chapter Four Te Final warniang fulfilled

Wednesady May 4, 2005

Rev. Cooper called me around 9 AM to tell me that Granny Brodell had fallen into a coma during the night. Alec called me a few minutes later to tell me he was going to Cleveland because he had a tip that the Defenders operated from there. I told him about Granny's son by Harry Apple and how we now had a missing person to find. He promised to call early the next day with any news. I decided it was time to do a little sleuthing of my own so I got in the truck and headed into town.

Ippy's Feed Store was the undisputed social center of Goosehoot. Between the bags of powdered calf formula and pelleted duck grower gossip flowed like beer at a Friday night fish fry.

Not everyone that came in owned livestock or needed feed. To give people an excuse for stopping by Mr. Ippy always stocked plenty of apple-flavored horse treats. A person could graciously buy a Nickey bar as a treat for his neighbor's horse if he didn't have a horse of his own. This provided the entire town with a low cost excuse to go to the feed store and gossip. The only drawback was that at election time and during times of marital infidelity all the local horses put on weight.

During the winter Ippy's delivered feed directly to the lab. This was my first trip to Ippy's this spring plus I was entering as a murder suspect so I was the center of attention the moment I walked in. People drew back from me as I entered as if I were a dangerous zoo animal that they were intereted in watching, but from a safe distance.

Going up to the counter to order rat chow and hen scratch from the warehouse, and to buy a poodle sized rawhide bone for Phoebe, I noticed that the bin of Nickey bars on the counter had already been depleted by about a third. Since it had been learned that George Lucor had been murdered "in cold blood" as Sally Peardon noted "...over there at that that cult camp, right while he was hunting on the Internet." the Nickey bars had become a hot sales item.

No one had called Camp

Prayer Tracker a cult camp

since the first summer it opened 20 years ago but a murder on the premises had given people a reason for reintroducing the term. I told myself not to react.

A group had gathered back by the smaller scale where they weighed rabbit chow and chick grit. They were going over play by play the argument that the murder victim had with sixteen year old Matt Huck in this very store, at about this very time, on the very subject of live Internet hunting, and could that really be only twenty-four hours ago?

"It's a judgement on George Lucor," Mr. Ippy said. He was a sportsman himself but one who thought that live Internet hunting made all hunters look bad.

"It's that hot-headed kid that shot him," said Charlie who thought Internet hunting was a wonderful service. Charlie petted the mangy looking moose head hanging next to the live bait fridge. "That little Boca Burger crybaby had no call to talk to George that way."

"The kid's a vegetarian." noted Sally, "Vegetarians don't shoot people."

Charlie looked over at me with eyes as glassy as the ones in the old moose head. "I don't know about that." he snorted

Most of the Ippy's crowd believed that Mahlon had murdered George. Originally Mahlon had been popular in Goosehoot. He had charmed everyone when he had handed out free four-packs of Mompers flypaper, which in a farming town is a free sample worth having. Besides he was rich. People had at first overlooked his eccentricities such as his odd habit of running both of his hands over his thinning hair. "Just like a fly rubbing its head." Mr. Ippy said

Since last night however, when Mahlon's patriotism had been questioned at Hansen's Bar, it was natural that the "big customers" at Ippy's should turn on him as the most likely suspect for murder. "Mahlon Mompers. What kind of a freaky name is that?" asked Molly Henderson.

Was it possible that Mahlon was a member of the Defenders of God? The group appeared to be well funded and Mahlon had the funds to contribute. If so why had he been in competition with George to buy Heartha's place and what would be his motive for killing George? Was there infighting among the upper echelon of the Defenders?

Sally explained that Mahlon's nephew Matt had not heard the shot as he was listening to music with earphones. "That's what he told the police and I believe him," she offered, pausing to ask Mr. Ippy the price of asparagus root. "The music my daughter listens to" she continued, "would drown out a cannon much less a gun."

"Has anybody ever heard of

Harry Apple?" I asked. They

all turned and looked at me. I explained how George had told me an hour before he died that he was eligible for an inheritance that originated with a peddler named Harry Apple.

Sally was immediately enthusiastic. " We can ask around. Charlie, isn't your aunt still alive at that nursing home in Florida?" It was obvious that Granny's secret had been well kept for Sally apparently had no idea that there was any connection between Granny and Harry Apple. I looked around at everyone's face. No one was looking at the floor, fidgeting or looking uncomfortable, as though they were hiding any knowledge of the tragic rape of Granny by Harry Apple..

If Harry Apple had two illegitimate children he could easily have more. I meant to find out. Sally was all ready writing down the phone number for Charlie's aunt in Florida. The grapevine had been put in motion. I had accomplished one of the things I had come for.

"I'm closing Camp Prayer Tracker, you know." I said in a stage whisper to Sally so that everyone could hear.

"No! My land, you don't say!" She would spread it all over town. The murderer would hear of it. That was one more thing on my list that was done.

"We should ask Heartha if she ever heard of Harry Apple," said Charlie. Mrs. Ippy reminded him that Heartha might be a little too young.

" She was old enough to have been a kid during the Depression and kids pick up more than people realize." Charlie responded. Granny had told me that Heartha'a mom knew Apple. I wondered if Heartha remembered anything about him and decided to ask her myself rather than wait for feedback from the town grapevine..

"Did Mahlon have an alibi?" Mr. Ippy asked Sally. Sally knew all the ins-and-outs of the police report, as her cousin's wife was a dispatcher.

" No. He said he'd been taking a walk around Rhinestone Rock when George was shot".

A feed store poll showed that people considered this to be a fishy story. The phone rang. Mr. Ippy's friend who owned a gas station reported that a CNN truck was headed for Goosehoot. "Good heavens." said Sally, "I must get home and set my hair."

"Why is Mahlon still hanging around Moosejaw? That's what I want to know." said Mr. Ippy.

"He's up to no good." Charlie said.

"Up to no good." Sally agreed. The feed store contingent went out like good soldiers to spread the news that Mahlon Mompers was up to no good and that CNN was coming to Goosehoot. The Nickey bars flew out of the bin until there were only three left. Mr. Ippy was on the phone ordering more and enthusiastically describing the murder to the salesman when I left. "Yes and one of the chief suspects was actually here, right in the store just now" I heard him say before I was totally out the door.

I approached my truck cautiously but there was no note on the windshield. Weariness began to set in. I had been up most of the night praying after getting the note last night titled "The Final Warning." My prayer had not been the comforting kind where you feel the gentle presence of divine Love. It had been a wrenching kind of prayer that leaves you doubled over on the cold bathroom floor vomiting all your anger in your aching to be a better person, to be free of rage.

After taking my clothes out for the wedding that morning I had thought about running into Two Loons to buy a new tie for the occasion but I didn't want to run into reporters or to be on CNN. Deciding against the new tie I went home instead and took a nap. When I got up and looked at my old suit still in a plastic bag from the dry cleaners I regretted my decision. Brian would probably be wearing an expensive tie I thought, but then I dismissed the comparison as petty. I had to be at the church in two hours.

Suddenly the hairs on my neck stood up for no obvious reason. Choppers and Nora, my two cats, slid under the bed. I picked up my rock and walked slowly around the cottage looking everywhere. I looked out the window scanning every shadow. I knelt by the bed. "Here kitty kitty" I called but the cats would not come.

As I stood up again I heard the bedroom window break and then there was a sound like insects whirring. Soemthign hit me in the back. The pain crawled up and down like bugs with cast iron jaws, stinging and biting. It all happened so fast that even as I was hit I could hear the pieces of glass still falling onto the wooden floor. The pain heightened my perception and made everythign seem to be in slow motion; I swear I could hear every piece of glass distinctly as it hit the floor and could almost picture the size and shape of each splinter.

I'd been hit by something but I didn't know what; the pain was not just in one spot. Whatever it was it had come in through the window behind me. Or was it above me? Gradually I realized that I had fallen on the floor. As I struggled to remain conscious an unseen hand stood a gun up in the corner. I could only see part of the gun but it was enough to make me suspect that I had been shot with birdshot. A whispery voice above me said, "I hope that you're prepared to meet your Maker."

"We're already acquainted," I

said coughing.

"I've come to deliver your mail" the voice whispered. I had left the Bug Bytes next to my bed and I heard him pick up the pile and drop them over me. They floated slowly to the ground curling as gracefully as Calla lilies. I was lying on my rock and it was digging into my belly.

The voice sneezed. It was him. My terror began blowing up like a balloon. I was sure that the man that had shot my dog twenty years ago had come back. As cold sweat ran down into my eyes I tensed, waiting for the balloon to pop.

He sneezed again. He couldn't still have a head cold after all this time. It had to be that he was allergic to my pets. Momentarily distracted I felt satisfaction in having solved one piece of the puzzle. Only why had he come now? There were little green dots jumping around in back of my eyes sparking fuses of fear that ran down into my gut like cheap liquor but as scared as I was I hated the idea of dying without figuring out who did it.

Ahead of me on the wall I saw the shadow of his hand as he raised it to strike. There was a moment's delayed reaction between the dull sound of his fist when it hit and the sharp pain ignited. My eyes began sucking in the light. Internally I could hear my breath screeching to a halt. For a moment my pain stood out like a separate part of my body. "No" I screamed and the pain danced back a little but not enough.

My last prayer was for April and Callie. I could picture both of their faces. The image of them sharpened like a briefly lit match in a darkening room as my ability to think began to slurp down the drain of my mind. Then their faces disappeared, the match went out, and the room turned very very cold.

New chapter

I woke up on a stretcher in my front yard surrounded by fireflies that flashed around my face like mini camera-toting paparazzi. The ambulance took me to Two Loons hospital where they confirmed that I had been shot in the back by birdshot and that I was lucky to be alive. "Any of these pellets could have penetrated an internal organ," the doctor said cheerfully as though glad to have some negative news to announce. I had missed my daughter's wedding for the second time.

"I would never have gone ahead with the wedding if I'd known," April said the next morning when she visited me." I thought you stood me up. I'm so sorry. I'm just so sorry."

"It's not your fault." I said.

What I meant was that it was my fault for being the kind of a father that she thought would stand her up, the kind of father that she always worried would not come through for her. "There's nothing for you to feel sorry about."

"Oh, but I'm so sorry you've been hurt. Of course I am. Who would do such an awful thing?" She was sitting next to the hospital bed, close enough to adjust the sheet over me, which she did. "I would have come earlier this morning but mom said you'd had surgery and that you would still be out. Are you OK? Does it hurt?"

"Yes to both questions. Alec is coming tomorrow and he's going to take me home."

"Dad, they're calling you a cult figure on TV. It's not good. I mean I know you're not like that, but don't you think this prayer research, well, I mean is it really worth all this?"

I looked at her for several seconds before answering gently, "To me, yes. Besides I'm not going to let someone tell me how and when I can pray. Even a condemned man is allowed to pray."

"But what if this is God trying to tell you to stop the research? I mean if it's wrong I don't want you to be punished. I'm scared for you dad."

"April, God didn't shoot me, a person did."

"Why is it so important to you to prove that prayer works? Can't you just take that on faith?"

"My work isn't any more about proving that prayer works than astronomy is about proving that the earth is round. No one had to go into outer space and take a photo of the earth to convince me that it's round April. I accept its roundness through my educated faith, but seeing the photos of the earth hanging round in a black sky, well, it affected me when I saw the actual photos, you know? Having the photo is different than knowing the theory."

"Dad, what are you talking about? Do you mean those old NASA photos? What do they have to do with anything? Did they just give you some meds or something?"

She grew up accepting those photos as the norm so of course she didn't see. Or maybe I wasn't being clear. She was right. They had given me some meds and I was aware that I was rambling.

"I don't need to see a lab test in order to believe that prayer heals." I plodded on relentlessly even though I knew it was better to drop the subject. "But seeing it brings a different dimension to my prayers. It's like seeing

those photos of the earth from space. It helps me to understand that creation is all in this together."

"Dad," she said. "It's weird."

"You're not the only one who thinks so." I said wincing from the needle-like pain in my back.

"I just don't get it daddy. I mean how come its so easy for you to love all those enzymes and bugs and strange things you pray for when you found it so hard to love me?"

I tried to answer but no noise came out; it felt like a mouse was gnawing on my vocal cords. Her comment hurt more than the birdshot for the birdshot I did not deserve. "I've always loved you April." I told her in a voice that sounded like the voice of an old man. I swallowed, focused, and continued, " I held you in my arms when you were five minutes old. The thought of you and your mom kept me alive all through the war. You still keep me going, more often than you know."

"But mom says you volunteered. You left us when I was just a little baby. And you were old enough that you didn't have to go."

How could I explain? I had not realized that the War would last so long. I had felt stifled and out of place in the suburban parish I had been assigned to. I had longed unbearably to do something with more purpsoe than to settle disputes on the pastor parish committee.

There had been no email then, no cell phones. We only had 3 to 5 minutes to talk to our family each month if that much. The War stretched on and on. I came home with a piece of shrapnel in my back and found out that my wife had fallen in love with Brian Molbec. April was sitting on his lap and was afraid to come to me. The divorce was unbearable. I put all the money I had in savings in my daughter's name, turned down my weekly visitation rights, and walked away.

"Why didn't you come see me on the weekends when I was growing up?" she asked. "Mom wanted to let you." It was the question I had been dreading, the unspoken question that had hung between us for two decades, ever since I had tentatively made contact with her on her 21rst birthday.

"I was still raw from combat," I explained, fearing even as I said it that this would sound like an excuse instead of an explanation. "Losing you was so painful that I could not lose you like that once a week and live. I know it was wrong and I will regret it till the day I die."

"I guess I can sort of understand that although I don't think I could ever walk away from a child." She took a deep breath. "I'm a Christian and I can forgive the past. What I worry about now is your religious doubt. I'm afraid you'll die without finding the Lord. You can't find the Lord by setting out a test, like a trap, to catch Him in."

"I'm not setting out a trap to catch God in. I am opening a window to watch God work." I wanted to end the discussion but did not know how. "Doubt seems to me to be a natural part of faith." I told her. "What's so bad about doubt? It isn't God that I doubt but my own understanding of Him. I don't doubt that God is Love but I sure as hell doubt that I know everything about Love. You've shown me that much."

She looked at me without comprehension. For a moment I wanted, selfishly, to be close to her, to have my daughter understand what I was really like. "Reason can be just as holy as faith April. It is possible to think as intelligently about religion as Einstein thought about physics and when the church discourages such thinking that is more painful to me than unrequited love."

She felt my head to see if I had a fever. "When did you ever have unrequited love?" she asked lightly.

"I adored your mother for years even after she remarried."

"But you never came to see her, you never came to see us, and it seems to me that you substituted some kind of surface intellectual hang up for the love of your family. You can't find the Lord through intellect. You have to find Him through love, and that includes the love of your family."

"I've always loved you April. Love and Truth are not exclusive. God is Truth as well as Love and the search for Truth takes many forms. "

"The truth is in the Bible," she said quietly. "I don't see why you need anything more than that."

My heart screamed out for recognition and I tried to suffocate the scream. I was the parent. It was I who should be trying to understand her, not the other way around. I groped for a way to end the discussion and said lamely, "The scientific method is as important to me as prayer. Science isn't just about tests and experiments. It's a way of thinking, a way of organizing information in a way that helps people. It's a joyful, inquiry-based, hands-on approach to life that I can't live without any more than I could live without prayer

"Prayer I understand daddy," she said. "I will always pray for you."

I looked at her with my heart

full of emotions that were vivid but unlabeled by my intellect. I did not know exactly what I was feeling. I only knew the feeling was intense. April would soon be living in Goosehoot with Todd. They were both over 40. There would be no grandchildren but perhaps I could finally get to know her.

"Do you think I did it?" I asked her involuntarily and we both knew I was referring to murdering George.

"No of course not." she said giving me a quick painful hug. "I know you'll figure out who did it too." she continued encouragingly. "You're not only smart but you're a rare beast yourself dad and you know how to find elusive things. You'll get him." She smiled at me.

"The camp is closed for now. Things will calm down, you'll see. Why don't you and Todd go on a honeymoon? I'll pay for it. I want you to get away from here, in case there's any danger. At the very least get away from all this publicity."

"I'm not leaving you. Todd wants to go I know but the media needs to see that our family is standing by you and anyway of course I wouldn't go when you've been hurt."

Her loyalty always amazed me. It was one of the things I really admired about her. "You should go." I said.

"I believe in honoring my father and my mother as the Commandments say."

I sighed. We so often seemed to be talking past each other.

Just as she got up to leave my ex-wife Renee came in. She was the one who had found me on the floor because after the wedding reception was finished and everything cleaned up she had stormed over to give me a piece of her mind for not showing up.

“Keith,” she said, “Oh Keith I am sorry.” She pulled up a chair, took my hand, and began to cry. When she was done she asked me the same question that April had asked, “Keith is this strange research really worth all that

you are going through and putting everyone else though? Do you realize that you could die?”

I looked at her beautiful face and remembered how, decades earlier when we were dating, I had tried to explain to her why I do prayer research. I told her it was like the birds but that was dumb because she never did like birds. “They flutter too much.” she said. “It scares me.” When I healed sick people just by praying that scared her too. It seemed all fluttery and mystical to her while to me spiritual healing was as normal as changing the oil in my car.

I never claimed to measure divine Love directly any more than I could track where a bird flies. When a bird touches down for a moment you see her tracks. By studying those tracks you learn more of the path she takes in the air. From the physical effects of prayer I learned how the Holy Ghost moved with grace and power like a bird.

When I went to seminary I quoted a poem about the white wings of the Holy Ghost. “Don’t say ‘Ghost’” objected the professor wrinkling his nose. “It’s obsolete. The proper liturgical usage is ‘Holy Spirit’”.

The actual word once translated “Ghost” and now translated “Spirit”, is pneuma, which means wind or breath. How can you track the wind? How can you track the breath of God? By watching what happens when it moves. That’s what I wanted to say to Renee now as she sat there with one wisp of hair curling at the side of her face, Kleenex scrunched up in her hands and that worried, confused look in her eyes. “Praying is like flying.” I wanted to tell her. “Its like when a bird is let out of a cage and flies and knows this is what birds do. This is what I do. The research is my ocean and I fly above it diving and grabbing whatever jumps out of it that day. How can I voluntarily live in a cage when I can hear the ocean roaring?” But all I said was, “It’s what I do for a living and I’m not going to let violence define me or format my life.”

Her husband Brian came in before she could answer and she stood up. “I’ve made you some vegetarian soup and homemade bread.” Renee said blowing her nose. “Brian has called a company to repair the broken window at your cottage. The police are done in there. We’d like to fix that for you.”

I looked at Brian in surprise. “The guy can come this afternoon and have it done before you come home tomorrow.” said Brian, “if that’s OK with you.”

“Of course” I said. “Thank you. That’s a nice coming home gift.”

“Dad” began April but her mom intervened. “Honey your dad is tired, let’s let him get some rest. We’ll see you soon Keith. I don’t think you’re safe in that cottage. Maybe you should consider moving in with us for a little while.

Todd's mom said it would be OK even if we'd be a little crowded." She kissed me and turned to leave. I looked at Brian but he was talking to a nurse and I could not see his reaction to his wife's awkward invitation.

"I'll bring you some wedding pictures dad. And we have cake leftover." When they left I felt relief. Although I loved April and Renee intensely I was glad to be alone.

My quiet time did not last long. Rev. Cooper and Callie visited ten minutes later. They had just visited Callie's grandma and Callie was visibly upset. Seeing me pale and weak in a hospital bed didn't cheer her up any.

"You had surgery didn't you?" asked Rev. Cooper.

"Yeah, but minor, just to dig the pellets out. How's granny?"

"Not very good" said Callie, looking like she might cry. "We're having a prayer vigil at the church tonight to pray for her and for you and to pray that this murder be solved."

"Well how nice." I said, looking over at Rev. Cooper genuinely surprised.

Yes," he said absentmindedly. "I thought that it would be a nice symbolic gesture with the town so stirred up about the murder and everything."

Callie looked at her dad. They were miles apart spiritually and she just now seemed to be realizing it. It wasn't the best time for her to be having such insights. "Are you allowed to eat? You want me to go downstairs and get you some ice cream?" she asked. The hospital cafeteria had a soft serve ice cream machine.

"Only if you're going to rub it on my back" I said. "It feels like I'm on fire."

Rev. Cooper looked nervous. I wondered if he still thought I might be a suspect even though I'd been shot. The police could accuse me of writing the notes myself but I could hardly shoot myself in the back. It had been almost 3 hours before the wedding when the intruder entered. I wondered how early Rev. Cooper had arrived at the church and if he had an alibi for the time of the shooting. Did he think I was the one who threatened Callie? Did he think that I had killed George and that I might now hurt his daughter? It made no sense, but Rev. Cooper was under a lot of strain and if he thought his daughter was hanging out with a murderer it was possible he could crack and do something violent. I would have to find out from Callie if her dad was allergic to animals. Callie adored animals and yet they had no pets. It was certainly a possibility.

After they left I turned on cable TV. They were talking about the murder of George Lucor. It seemed so odd to see perfect strangers talking

about my quiet life on television to millions of people. “The religious cult figure who found the body was shot yesterday and police are investigating whether this latest shooting has any bearing on the murder.” came the professionally interested voice. “No word yet on his condition. Meanwhile a taxidermist in Goosehoot Wisconsin has revealed a startling link in the puzzle.” And there he was. Old Charlie Miller was talking on TV all dressed up in his Sunday best and sure enough there was Sally Peardon prancing behind him, with her hair curled, trying her best to get in the picture.

“It was them huns,” he was saying into the microphone in a voice loud enough that he hardly needed one. What on earth was he talking about? “Them little gray Hungarian partridges don’t you know, the ones Frederick Pabst the beer man brought over and let loose for huntin’ only now you don’t hardly see them no more ‘cause they nest on the ground and there ain’t no more hayfields and now people cultivate the heck out of everything, there’s no more meadowlarks either, have you noticed?” The reporter cut his unintelligible rambling off.

“You were saying earlier sir that one month ago a woman came into your shop claiming to be the granddaughter of Harry Apple and that the very next day the murder victim came into your shop claiming to be the grandson of Harry Apple?”

“That’s right. They both wanted to hunt huns like their grandpa Apple did. Wanted to know if I knew anything about where they could spot some huns. They fly like little sidewinder missiles don’t you know, darn hard to catch, great sporting bird, did I mention that Frederick Pabst...”

“Did the two second cousins, that is the woman and the murder victim, know each other?”

“No. That George fellow he was surprised when I told him about the girl. Big tall girl she was She said her grandpa Harry Apple used to hunt huns around here and was tickled pink when I told her we still had a few around. They’re out by Rhinestone Rock you know only they don’t let you hunt over there at that religious commune. They think it’s a sin or something. What’s so sinful about putting some food on your table?”

Commune? We’d been called a lot of things but never a commune. Apparently it was open season on Camp Prayer Tracker.

“And the murder victim said the same thing, that his grandpa was Harry Apple?” asked the reporter.

“Yup. He was buying some property right around there where them huns are. There’re a great sporting bird...” The picture of Charlie abruptly disappeared.

“Our reporters have learned,” the man on TV continued, “that George Lucor was in line for a large inheritance because he was the only known heir to Harry Apple. The appearance of another possible heir has complicated the murder investigation. Apple was a peddler from the Depression Era who disappeared around 1935. Police are calling the woman who visited Goosehoot “a person of interest.” Her name is not known. The only thing known about her is that she has claimed to be Harry Apple’s granddaughter. Police are hoping she will come forward voluntarily or that someone will recognize her from this artist’s sketch.”

They held up a picture of a woman I had never seen. Charlie must have helped them make the sketch. I didn’t even know that Two Loons had a sketch artist but maybe they had borrowed one from somewhere else. “In other news...” the reporter droned on but I clicked the TV off and dialed Alec’s cell phone.

“This is for your ears alone,” he told me, “but I just heard from my friends at the station that they found her, or else she turned herself in. Her first name is Samantha. I couldn’t find out the last name. She’s on her way to Two Loons now to be questioned, in fact she started out a few days ago, as soon as she heard about the murder. She’s from Texas and she’s expected to arrive in Two Loons late this afternoon or this evening. She is definitely the daughter of Mrs. Brodell’s son.”

It seemed odd to hear Granny called Mrs. Brodell. “Is the son alive?” I asked.

“I’m afraid not. Is Mrs. Brodell still in a coma?”

“Yeah. Callie, her other granddaughter, was just here and was pretty upset by her Granny’s condition. I wonder how she will take it when she finds out about her Granny’s past and realizes that she has a second cousin, especially one that’s a murder suspect.”

“Listen, you need to come home with me to Chicago. It’s safer. You know I live in a secure building and you didn’t have such a bad time last time you were there. I can’t be investigating if I’m worried about you getting killed every time I go somewhere.”

“I don’t think the police will let me go,” I said “and my cats...”

“You can bring the damn cats” he said, “and I’ll fix it up with the police. They can’t hold you there if you haven’t been charged. They’ll know where to reach you.”

“I want to go home to the cottage tomorrow night but after that I’ll think about it.” I said and I meant it.

The dinner tray came and

went. I hardly noticed

because I was busy thinking, trying to organize facts in my head. For me gathering data was like gathering firewood. While others preferred the central heating of popular religious beliefs I had always loved the open flame of scientific inquiry. In solving the murder too I needed to go the route of the open flame. The conventional approaches of the police, right or wrong, made no sense to me. Perhaps I had spent too much time alone to understand the police approach. I wasn't communicating very well with the police, or my daughter, or my ex-wife, and I certainly had not communicated very well over the last six months with the church officials. I wondered what would happen next with my excommunication. Was it automatic? Would I get some kind of letter or certificate of excommunication?

My first congregation had been in Skokie Illinois a suburb of Chicago. The memory of it was vivid perhaps because that is where Arpil was born and where I had last been married to Renee. Seeing them always stirred my memories. When we had first moved into the parsonage in Skokie I had missed the woods of Rhinelander but then I learned to see and to track on a larger scale. Chicago is a city where you can always hear jackhammers like mammoth birdsong and Skokie ended up teaching me as much about tracking as Rhinelander.

It was in Skokie that I first realized that sidewalks were the track left by the village itself, a flowing fossilized river of its history. It was the first time I had thought of a group of individuals, as opposed to just one animal or person, as something that you could track. From sidewalks I learned how the size of the lot lines had changed over the years. From their zigzagging I learned how the village had grown. I could picture the changing shape and size of Skokie as it emerged and grew.

I learned a lot of history from reading the words and dates written by the sidewalk companies in the pavement. For example I learned when the town became big enough to support its own cement company. I still love sidewalks and I study them wherever I go. Groups of people leave paths just like individual people. Groups have identities. I had a feeling that understanding this was going to be important in solving George's murder.

I was convinced that understanding the Defenders was essential to solving the crime and clearing my name. I had to find and follow the flowing paper trail of their history. I had to be able to picture the changing mission and size of the group as it emerged and grew. I needed to find out when they first became big enough to support acts of violence.

One of the things that I learned from tracking sidewalks in Skokie was where the pavement was most likely to crack. It has a lot to do with the earth hidden underneath the pavement. Alec and I would need to look beneath the surface facts about the

Defenders and find out where their weak spots were.

Back in Skokie my District Superintendent had not looked kindly on a Reverend who crawled around on the sidewalk. He also did not look kindly on my experiments with prayer. Now the police did not look kindly on me either, my ex-wife and daughter thought I should retire from the only thing I really loved doing, and the nurse had scowled at me when she picked up my tray because I had not eaten my dinner. I felt out of sorts with everyone. It was jolting to realize that this would be true even if there had been no murder; I simply wasn't; in sync with the world around me any more and I did not feel confident that I could find my way back.

I did feel confident however that I could solve the murder; that seemed a simple thing in comparison to fitting into the world. From science I had learned that tiny details, like kindling, can ignite a case if placed correctly in relation to the whole. By the time it was lights out in the hospital I had gone over every detail I knew about the Defenders of God a thousand times in my mind.

Alec had mentioned that the police were monitoring the Defenders and that they were considered to be a minor domestic terrorist group. The police had told him that the Defenders had a good-sized membership but they had no real information that could be pinned down. They guessed the group had anywhere from five to eight thousand members nationally. They were known to be violent but the incidents had been spread out and there had been no convictions. It was probably only the inner core of the Defenders that were violent; publicly they raked in donations from people who perhaps did not realize the full extent of their activities. The police suspected them of being behind the bombing of abortion clinics in Cleveland, Chicago and elsewhere. They had spoken openly against prayer research.

In my work I had figured out early that spiritual healing could be understood in part as prayer bringing order to a system. I knew now that it was going to take more than prayer to bring order back to my life. It was going to take the scientific method, a systematic careful detailed hands-on inquiry into the truth, a forming of hypotheses to be rejected or accepted according to whether the data supported them. This meant I had to be objective. I had to be willing to suspect people that I didn't want to suspect at least until the data cleared them. To start with I wasn't going to go to Chicago with Alec until I had determined who had been seen the hour before April's wedding, who had an alibi for the time of my shooting and who didn't.

I told Alec that the next day as he was wheeling me in a wheelchair even though I could walk. He took me to see Granny Brodell. They had tubes the size of hoses going into her small body. I was afraid when I saw her, afraid that she might be scared, afraid that granny's missing mind might be locked in somewhere screaming and crying to get out. "I'm here," I said over and over to the figure on the

bed. "I'm right here with you." I also told her she had a granddaughter and that I would watch over her granddaughter for her. I doubt she heard me. Granny had shrunk. Her lips had cracked, her skin felt dry, and her breathing was loud.

I had heard that the prayer vigil the night before was well attended. Many of the people at church would have been praying for granny sincerely and would have prayed only reluctantly, if at all, for me, but I was the one that would recover and I could see that granny would not.

Callie had told me that without her granny she felt like someone living in a two-story house with no staircase. She felt like she kept falling down to the first story and was always having to pull herself up through a hole in the ceiling to the upper floors of her mind where she could be happy. But then she fell back down. Granny was her stairway, the person that made it possible for her to move through her highs and lows without bruising. If granny died Callie would temporarily have no stairway and she would fall and break her heart. It was one lousy time for a murder to be complicating things that were already complicated and painful.

"Its time to go." Alec said gently.

End 3262

Later that evening we finished the soup and most of Renee's bread in one sitting. Alec admitted that my ex-wife's soup was delicious even if it was vegetarian.

"She was always a great cook." I told him trying to eat the last gulp while laying half on my stomach and half on my side. He brought a pillow and wedged it in so I wouldn't bump my back. Then he walked over to the door. He was constantly looking out the door and windows. The phone rang. It was Roy. We passed the phone back and forth for half an hour reminiscing about Viet Nam before Roy got to the point. "That bone you found. It's from a woolly mammoth."

"You mean those big elephant creatures like dinosaurs?"

"Yeah. And it's got tool marks on it. At least we think they're tool marks. I'm having them checked out by another expert. If they are it could be an important find. I mean it could mean that there were Native Americans in Wisconsin long before the date we now believe. I want to bring a team out and see if we can find more bones. Can I come?"

"Well sure, but I was thinking of going home with Alec tomorrow. You know we have a murderer on the loose?"

"Yes but I want to get out there before someone else finds the woolly. We had another inquiry here at the University from the town of Goosehoot you know. Wait, let me look up the guy's name."

"You mean someone else from Goosehoot sent you a woolly mammoth bone and asked you to identify it?"

"Uh huh, but that bone came a month before yours did and it wasn't addressed particularly to me so one of the grad students handled the ID. I just found out about it. It took them longer than it would have taken me. Here's the name." I knew before he said it what the name would be. "Mahlon Mompers. Do you know him?"

"Yes. I know him. Are the bones worth money?"

"If the tool marks check out, oh yeah. But it would take a lot of money to excavate the woolly if we found one. If it's even there. Can I come out? I could be there by noon tomorrow."

"Sure come ahead. "Bring a gun."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes" said Alec cutting in. "You need a gun. Keith isn't carrying none though he's carrying around some damn rock like he thinks he's Fred Flintstone."

"What" asked Roay.

"Never mind," I said grabbing the phone back. It will be like old times to have you here. Alec and I will stay till next week."

Alec protested, reminding me that I was a direct target, but I overruled him. The truth was I didn't want to leave granny plus I wanted to find

out what Mahlon was up to and I hadn't spent much time with Roy in several years. The woolly interested me too. How long had Mahlon known about the woolly? Was this why he had wanted to buy Heartha's farm? Her social worker wasn't going to kick Heartha off the farm which meant that she wouldn't sell Mahlon the farm without a life estate. If he had killed George to get at the woolly he wouldn't let Heartha stand in his way. I'd have to pin down Roy more exactly on how much those old wooley boens wre worth when I saw him.

Had Mahlon found his mammoth bone at Heartha's or at Camp Prayer Tracker? The guy had a lot of nerve stealing bones from other people's property . I knew I would have to tell the police about the mammoth bones even if it meant making it part of the public record and risking a horde of curiosity hunters at Camp Prayer Tracker and at Heartha's. I hated to do that to Roy because I knew he wanted private time to look around, but Heartha could easily be in danger if Mahlon wanted her farm all to himself. I decided to visit Heartha tomorrow if I felt well enough. I hadn't seen her in a long time and wasn't sure what her state of mind was. I also wasn't sure the polcie woud believe me if I started talking abot wooley mammoht's. Maybe I should have Roy talk to the police directly when he came down.

Start

The action in this book happens fast so I am using some of my word count for a time line. George was killed on Monday. On Tuesday Keith had his interview with the police, got four threatening verses, went to Hansens' bar for dinner with his daughter and her fiancée, and then went to visit Granny in the hospital. On Wednesday he went to Ippy's feed store in the morning and then was shot with birdshot while dressing for his daughter's wedding. On Thursday he was in the hospital all day but had a lot of visitors whose conversation moved the story forward. That is where we ended.

Granny is Keith's best friend din Moosejaw. Callie, Keith's 14 year old protégé, is her granddaughter. Granny's daughter (Callie's mom) died in a car crash. Granny has confessed to having been raped by the peddler Harry Apple when she was 16 and to then having a son that her dad gave away for adoption.

I am skipping two chapters. Since the last assignment it has been discovered that Granny's son is dead but that he left behind a daughter named Samantha. We don't know anything else about her except that she is a "person of interest" to the police because she is set to inherit the money that would have gone to George if he hadn't been murdered. This is money from Harry Apple's heirs, and she is eligible, as George was, because of her (illegitimate) relationship to Harry Apple.

I am starting in the middle of

a chapter where Keith is at

home recovering from his birdshot wounds. Because of the threat to his life Keith is going to go to Chicago with Alec the next day to stay with him in his secure-lobby building. The reference to the taxidermist refers to something in a chapter I skipped – too long to explain with this word count, but not important. Also I apologize that I end abruptly in the middle of a conversation but will pick up next time where I left off.

.....

“I could never live out in the country.” Alec said bringing me back to the present and brushing away some moths that had landed on the screen door. “How can you stand to pray for bugs? Yuk. I don’t even like to be around them. Give me city life any day.”

“Do I need to remind you of how many bugs live in the city?” Alec lives on the top floor of a forty-five story building that is so large it constitutes an entire Chicago precinct. At night the bugs flock to this brightly-lit building like moths to a high rise flame. Spiders also arrive on Alec's balcony to feast on the bugs. It's their version of dining at the top of the Ritz. In the country these spiders live on rock cliffs high above the water while in Chicago they reach the tops of tall buildings through a process called ballooning. “I seem to remember that the only time I visited you there were 14 spiders on your balcony. You won’t find 14 spiders on my screen door.”

“Well the spiders, those, sure. You can’t avoid them,” Alec said as though they were tourists. “They invade Chicago every summer.”

The wind is strong on Alec’s balcony. At times there are small waves in his bathtub due to the wind that causes the building to sway. He can’t have a grandfather clock because the floor rocks imperceptibly; he has had to make do with a chiming clock that hangs on the wall. The spiders have webs that can withstand the wind. “Did you know that the strands of web those spiders weave are stronger than the ballistic thread used in your bulletproof vest?” I said.

Alec is very protective of his vest. He never leaves his vest hanging over a chair like he does his shirts. He knows that the morning sun shining in off Lake Michigan must not be allowed to rest for any length of time on the vest because ultraviolet rays cut its effectiveness. The spiders are more advanced in their technology and have no such concerns. They go to sleep in the morning curled into balls like pills of lint on the fabric of the skyscraper. Their webs are much easier to care for than Alec’s vest.

“And your point would be?” he asked.

“My point would be,” I answered, “that scientists are studying spider webs to learn how to make more effective bullet proof vests. Some day

whether you live or die may depend on how well scientists understand spiders. So don't tell me that you can't learn a lot from bugs or that studying them is stupid because you don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh man," he said, "I didn't say studying bugs was stupid, it's the way you seem to actually like them that I can't figure." He laughed suddenly. "How can you even stand them? Don't you remember the leeches in Viet Nam?"

I threw the pillow at him. "Leeches aren't bugs."

"Well maggots are. They're flies, like you got in the lab. " He shuddered. I knew why. I had not forgotten about the maggots. "And that centipede," he continued, " you were more scared of that thing than you were of the enemy. Now that you're all converted to this bug love stuff you'd probably pray for centipedes, even gross ones like that monster."

I had been afraid of the centipede. It was so long that it was bigger than my foot and when I stepped on it it curled up over my boot. Viet Nam had been full of bugs and ticks that we couldn't get rid of because we'd mixed most of our insect repellent with peanut butter to make fuel to heat our food.

"That was forty years ago; I've changed my view of bugs."

"Have you changed your view of the maggots?"

"Maggots don't cause wars." I said. "Maggots just come in and clean up the messes people make. But if it makes you happy I admit that I don't think I could pray for that centipede, not even now."

Our bug argument was interrupted by the sound of a car driving up followed by a knock on the door. Immediately I tensed, feeling hunted in my own home. Alec came over and replaced the pillow I had thrown at him, adjusting it gently behind my back, then went to the door and opened it a crack. I could see an old Chevy out the window. In a moment Alec opened the door wider. Standing against the night sky was a woman fully six feet tall with glossy black hair, turquoise jewelry, and golden eyes like a coyote. She wore a black shawl embroidered with red roses and she smelled like ginger and grapefruit even from a distance, along with something more flowery mixed in that I didn't recognize. She looked as out of place as a peacock in a chicken coop.

"Hi" she said. "I'm Samantha Apple. I've just found out that I'm a murder suspect so I'm putting together a little cocktail party for all the other murder suspects. I thought maybe we could find out which one of us did it. I heard you were on the list so I came by." She

smiled and for a moment her face was gorgeous. I had no idea what to say.

“Won’t you come in?” said Alec, and she swept into the room like a sexy female version of Edgar Allen Poe’s raven. If this was supposed to be the woman the sketch artist had drawn then Charlie Miller must need glasses.

“Got anything to eat?” she asked looking around disapprovingly at my sparse quarters.

“Tofu and broccoli casserole, rice pudding. Homemade bread. There might be Coke.”

She visibly shuddered at the word tofu. “Beer?” she asked hopefully.

“Sure.” I said, “ and pretzels.” Why had Alec let her in? She looked capable of murder although she also looked capable of great art, brilliant inventions, or any other thing she put her mind to.

Alec brought a can of beer and pretzels. “May I have a glass to put it in?” she purred. He went and got it. I was on the sofa and I only have one chair so Alec had to sit on the ground when he came back. He crossed his legs and looked at her. “Do you own a gun?” he asked abruptly.

“Oh darling” she said, “I own three. How boring of you to get right to the point. I didn’t kill my second cousin George in fact I never even met him. But apparently we share the same Grandpa and the same taxidermist.”

“What do you take to the taxidermist?” I asked, diverted.

“Mostly fish. The big ones. So hard to get the eyes right. I love to fish. But I like to hunt too. I gather, since you eat tofu, that you aren’t an avid hunter?”

“Ah, no.”

“Did you kill him?” She looked at me directly.

“No.”

“Me either.” For the next half an hour Alec picked her brain which she seemed to find amusing. She shot answers back at him like an enthusiastic player on a game show.

“Where do you live?”

“Texas.”

How did you get the last name Apple?

“My dad was adopted by his uncle, Harry Apple’s brother.”

“Where was Harry Apple?”

“I don’t know, He died I guess. “

“Your dad was the illegitimate son of Granny Brodell and Harry Apple?”

“I don’t know this person you call Granny Brodell, but yeah, the name Brodell is on my birth certificate.”

“Where do you work?”

“At the Big Shot game reserve.”

“The one where they do Internet hunting? The one George was hunting on?”

“Uh huh.”

No one had leaked that to the television stations yet. “What do you do there?”

“I help out. I clean the guns.”

But...” Alec stopped in mid-sentence. This elegant creature did not look like someone who cleaned guns at a game reserve although I could believe that she knew one end of a gun from the other.

“Do you have an alibi?”

“Oh certainly. I was working the game reserve right at the time that poor George was shot and I can prove it. But the police think I might have hired someone to do the job.” she said. “ You know, in order to get the inheritance. They think I hired someone to kill George since we are both grandchildren of Harry Apple and with George dead I could have the whole inheritance to myself.”

“Did you hire someone?”

“No. I’m too broke to hire a hit man. Besides, if I wanted to kill someone I would do it myself.”

I believed her.

“Why did you come to Goosehoot a month ago if not to meet your cousin George? Were you coming to tell him you wanted part of the Apple inheritance?”

“I told you I didn’t know that I had a cousin George and I certainly knew nothing about any inheritance. I doubt Harry’s brother, who lived in Texas, ever told Harry’s wife, who lived in Wisconsin, that he was raising her husband’s bastard boy. Despite the blood relation between the two brothers there was no contact between the families after Harry Apple disappeared, at least none that I know of. I wasn’t born yet so you understand so your guess is as good as mine.”

“Then why did you come to Goosehoot if not to meet George? Why did you come to Goosehoot if you didn’t know about the inheritance?”

“I was driving back from Minnesota where I was promoting the Internet hunting site. I wanted to stop and see where my Grandpa had gone hunting. I had heard family stories about him and the game animals that live around Rhinestone Rock.”

“Do you really approve of Internet hunting?” I asked her.

“Approve? Sweetie, the animals don’t know the difference. Being shot is being shot. It’s a hot new thing. I’m good at promotion and I needed the money. Now that I have an inheritance coming I think I may start to disapprove of Internet hunting. I can’t be a vegetarian though. I love to hunt the real way. Besides I tried tofu once. It’s mushy.”

“Do you know that you have a Grandmother who is in a coma in the hospital?”

She frowned. “I didn’t know that she was in a coma. Do you think that I should cancel my suspects party?”

“Surely,” Alec said cutting in, “you didn’t really expect anyone to come?”

“Oh but that darling little flypaper man has agreed to come and I was thinking of inviting Reverend Cooper.”

“He’s not a suspect.”

“No?” she asked, letting the word hang in the air like the tone of a bell that dissipates slowly. I was surprised that she had cottoned on to the possibility of Rev. Cooper. She had been in town only a short time.

“You’ve met Mahlon Mompers?”

“Yes, and I was totally charmed. He was all involved talking to some old lady about a house he’s buying from her so I didn’t have time to get to know him as much as I’d like to.”

She looked expensive and Mahlon was rich even if he was twice her age. I wondered if that was why she had found him charming. On the other hand with George dead she was now in line to receive a substantial inheritance and didn't need Mahlon's money. The pay for cleaning guns in Texas couldn't be sky high and money is always an excellent motive for murder. Despite the possibility of her being a murderer I couldn't help enjoying her company. Perhaps Mahlon had been drawn in by her like a fly caught in a spider's web. “Did you say that Mahlon was buying a house?” I asked.

“Yes, the house next door, from a perfectly awful old lady who was making homemade flypaper when we came in. Mahlon was interested of course. I thought it was perverse.” She examined her manicure.

“Some of the elderly ladies around here make their own flypaper.” I explained. “They say the commercial stuff doesn't hold up in the barn. They like to make longer thicker strips.”

“Well these strips were as thick as bacon and they smelled disgusting.”

“Yeah, the glue they cook up smells kind of like pig wormer and peppermint.” I agreed.

“I don’t know what the rest of the ladies in Moosejaw whip up in their kitchens but this woman is disturbed. Be careful,” she said looking at me, “that you don’t get caught on one of her strips of flypaper.”

“Some of the ladies put arsenic in their flypaper.” Alec chipped in looking at me pointedly. I could tell that he thought that Samantha was just one tall strip of feminine flypaper flapping in a perfumed breeze and that I was in danger of getting stuck. Sometimes your best friend can know you but not know you. There was no danger in the direction he was thinking.

My instincts told me that this woman was a small time con artist but she was my friend’s granddaughter. Besides, involuntarily I liked her.

“Heartha’s not so bad.” I offered. “She’s a bit crude, that’s all, and definitely the product of another era.”

“I don’t care what she’s the product of. She’s a disturbed person.” insisted Samantha. “She wanted me to cut strips of twine to hang the flypaper with. Ugh.”

I wondered what had gotten her goat about Heartha. Had Mahlon been paying too much attention to the old lady instead of to her? “Does Heartha know that Mahlon is buying her farm?” I asked her.

“Of course. Mahlon explained it all to her, you know, that she could still stay there. He’s a very kind man. I don’t think Heartha’s social worker had explained it to her at all.”

Mahlon was amusing but he had never struck me as kind. He was probably plotting to murder Heartha even as he talked to her. “Heartha is hard of hearing.” I explained to Samantha. “Maybe she just didn’t get it.”

“She seemed perfectly with it to me. She was watching the flies trying to pull away from the paper and I swear she enjoyed it.”

“Mahlon does that too.” I said.

“No, he times the flies to see how long it takes them to pull away. It’s a calculation made strictly for business. He doesn’t enjoy it.”

“Mahlon manufactures tons of flypaper. Heartha only makes a little. Why are you upset with one and not the other?” She did not answer me directly.

“Maybe I’ll re-educate him. I’m sure he could run any kind of a business he liked. Anyway like I said, its business.”

“Business? You mean the way you promote Internet hunting? For business?”

“Yes.”

“So you feel sorry for a fly caught on flypaper but not for an animal shot by a mouse click?” She did not appear to be upset by my criticism. Con artist or not I had to admit that she was unusual and that she interested me.

“Look. If the animal isn’t killed on the first shot I kill it. That’s part of my job. I never let the animal suffer. But these flies were in pain. They practically pulled themselves inside out trying to get away. Or maybe they were waving good bye, or sending waves of air to warn the other flies away. Do you think that’s fanciful?”

“Only the part about waving good-bye. They do use waves of air to communicate and you’re quite right about the pain. Flies have a much keener sense of touch that we do. If I lifted my hand like this “ (I lifted it as well as I could positioned as I was on my side,) “and if you were a fly, you could feel the displacement of air all the way over where you are sitting. That’s why it’s hard to swat them. They can

feel the air when you lift your hand. They have an intense sense of touch so I imagine that flypaper is excruciating."

" Oh for God sakes." said Alec. "They're flies."

"I remember now." she said turning to look at me more closely. " You're the psychic guy that talks to flies and porcupines. They were talking about that on television. They showed a photo of your porcupine. Or maybe it was a procupine from the zoo. Anyway they said that you're a nature nut who has psychic conversations with the animals. It was a pretty good program. The procupine was cute."

"I'm not a psychic." I said wincing at the word as well as at the mention of publicity. "I do not talk to animals. I pray for them."

"That's supposed to be better?"

" You do too talk to animals." said Alec. "I heard you talking to your cat."

"Do you really have one of those wire hats?" asked Samantha.

"What?"

"On TV. They said you had a hat with wires in it to communicate psychically with dolphins. Or was it porcupines? Can I see it?"

"I do not have a wire hat." I said.

"Don't growl," said Samantha. "I didn't make it up. I heard about the hat on TV."

"The only hat he's got is a ridiculous looking hood that makes him look like the Red Baron." chipped in Alec.

"That hood keep my ears warm. I need it when I do my chores in the winter. And it has nothing to do with my praying for animals. Why does everyone think it so weird to pray for animals? Whose making up this list of what you can and can't pray for?"

" I'd like to see your hat." said Samantha. " Or even your hood. What do you pray for when you pray for the porcupine? Is she part of your experiments?"

"I don't use porcupines in my experiments." I explained. "The porcupine simply lives here. This is a woods you know."

But you pray for flies and

bugs?"

“I pray for everything. I don’t make lists of what I’m allowed to love and what I’m not.”

“What do you ask for in prayer for a bug?”

“Nothing. Prayer doesn’t always have to be asking for something you know. Sometimes it can just be a gathering in of the essence of the animal, an appreciation of the rhythms of its life and its qualities,” She was listening with her head tilted on one side so I continued, realizing as I did that I enjoyed talking to her. “The Bible says that God is Love. Prayer is just love except that when you pray you become more aware of how you love and you learn to concentrate on it, sustain it, increase it, project it, embody it, deepen it, share it and also receive it. Prayer sharpens all those skills. Why does everyone think that being a loving person is so damn strange?”

“He prays for flies.” said Alec.

“I might possibly grant you that porcupines can be cute, “ said Samantha who had begun taking me seriously, “ but what do you find to love about flies? They're filthy. Don't you think its gross when they eat manure and then sit on your soda can?”

“Yes. But I can’t help but respect them. The way they fly, the way they can hover and fly backwards, the way they can keep a sense of direction, the way they dare to fly around creatures much larger than themselves and how often they manage to avoid being swatted by people who are a thousand times bigger and stronger. They’re so beautiful in the sun with their green and red metallic tints. Plus as a scientist I’m blown away by their sensitivity to minute changes in the light.”

“You are poetic” she replied. “And quite talkative for a hermit.”

“I am not a total hermit.”

“And tidy” said Samantha ignoring my reply and looking around the room. “ I do not think your sign is correct at all.”

“Huh?” It took me a moment but then I smiled. The sign in front of the cottage had originally said “Sunswept Cottage” but Phoebe had chewed the corner off and it now said “Unswept cottage. “Phoebe, the porcupine in question, likes munching on wildlife trail signs.” I told Samantha. “I had to replace the wooden restroom sign with metal. One summer she chewed away the entire bottom half of the oar on the old red rowboat. She had indigestion for three days. I’m afraid she’s growing old now though and her oar eating days are behind her. We bring her little rawhide bones instead.”

.I had not checked on

Phoebe the day before

because I had been in the hospital and I felt uneasy about her. She lived in the hollow branch of a 600-year-old oak tree that Callie called Grandmother Tree because of a place where the branches intertwined like a lap for Phoebe to sit on. Sometimes, with the sun shining a red hole between the leaves, Phoebe would almost glow.

Phoebe didn't always stay in trees. Porkys are great rock lovers. Thousands of years ago the glaciers had come through the 60 acres now known as Camp Prayer Tracker leaving behind boulders as large as Volkswagens. Phoebe had always liked Rhinestone Rock, a huge black rock flecked with mica. It was large enough for half a dozen people to sit on comfortably and had a flat top indented in the middle. Local people claimed it was where the earliest Native Americans in Wisconsin had ground grain.

"There's pictures of your procupine all over TV," continued Samantha." You'd better be careful you don't get a lot of tourists here chasing her through the woods and wanting to see her."

I shuddered. These days Phoebe often fell asleep in the sun right out in the open on top of Rhinestone Rock. She was at a vulnerable age. My militant little porky had softened in shape and had aged into her own style of prickly mellowness. I knew that she would be gone by the first snowfall. Watching her was a lesson in graceful dying. I wanted to be sure that her passing remained on her own terms and that it wasn't interfered with by predators or by any publicity that resulted in strangers gawking. It burned me up that she had been mentioned on TV. How on earth had the reporters gotten hold of that story? Someone from Ippy's I supposed, who knew I bought rawhide bones for her.

"Why are they plowing the fields at this time of night? Samantha wanted to know. "I saw them in the field across the street when I drove in."

Opposite the Camp lay cabbage fields which were thought of by the locals as "sauerkraut on the hoof". There was also one wheat field owned by a contract farmer who ran his operations around the clock. "They farm at all hours these days." I said still thinking about Phoebe. "Last week I watched the farm machinery all lit up and moving around the field like a space ship at 2 in the morning."

Alec cut in. He always got restless when I started with the farm talk and the little animal stories. "Mahlon has moved very quickly to renew his offer to buy Heartha's farm." he remarked. "I wonder why."

Samantha looked at him with dislike. She seemed to have her sites set on Mahlon all right. Perhaps they were two of a kind. "I have a second cousin don't I?" asked Samantha turning toward me with her back toward Alec.

"The preacher's little daughter? Do you know her?"

For a moment I felt worried that Samantha might scoop Callie up like a hawk catching a rabbit. I reminded myself that Samantha had been in Texas when the Bug Bytes were sent, at least assuming that her alibi held up. It wasn't Samantha but someone else that wanted to hurt Callie. "How old are you?" I asked. She told me that she was twenty-eight, which was thirteen years older than Callie. I wondered, looking at her, if she was happy. "Callie is just a kid." I said.

"I like kids." she insisted aiming her smile at me until I broke down and believed her. "Tell me about her and about my granny, the one that's in th hosptial with a coma.. I have no family. When did you first meet them?"

"I met them right after Granny's husband and daughter were both killed in a traffic accident. We all call your grandma Granny, everyone in town I mean." I said explaining.

"Did it take the little girl a long time to recover from the loss of her mom?"

"Of course and her dad too. I don't think he's ever healed. I remember the first day I got Callie to smile again after it happened." I fell silent. Callie had been six years old when her mom died. Looking at the pain on her tiny face I had wondered, "Was that how my daughter felt when I left her?" Alec looked at his watch. I could tell that he wanted Samantha to leave.

"Tell me about it." she said seductively. She was a good listener and I was in a mood to reminisce.

"It was the butterflies that got Callie to smile for the first time after her mom died." I said.

"Butterflies?"

"Yes, we raise them at the lab. I'll show you sometime." Alec rolled his eyes.

"Your granny had brought Callie here to the camp after church on Sunday to see the ducks." I continued. "Callie was wearing a pink Sunday dress. I took them to see the butterfly habitat at the lab. Because of her pink dress and red hair the butterflies flocked around her. Granny had opened her purse and allowed Callie to dab a little bit of lavender cologne behind each ear to attract the butterflies. She loved that but she didn't smile."

"So when did she smile?"

asked Samantha.

"Ah, well that's a long story. You said you liked kids. Do you also like stories?"

"I love stories."

"You do? Well let me see, the story of making Callie smile began when I asked her if she wanted to play butterfly."

"Is that a game?"

"It's make believe. I told her butterflies start out as an egg. She looked for a good place to sit and be an egg. She decided that Granny's lap was the best place to sit and wait for something good inside of her to hatch. She closed her eyes and I waited until she said she was hatched."

"How did she know?"

"Kids know. Then we were caterpillars crawling around eating everything we saw."

"What did you eat?"

"Nothing really. Oh, except a coconut candy bar that I had in my pocket. Real caterpillars eat constantly but we were prayer caterpillars. Thinking is like crawling because your thoughts move over everything and instead of eating everything we saw we were feeling love for everything we saw. The butterflies followed Callie around like cloud of colored dots even when she crawled into the wastebasket."

"How do you feel love for a garbage can?" Samantha asked.

"If it weren't for wastebaskets there would be garbage all over the floor. We are glad to have garbage cans. We love them."

"We do?"

"Yes. We do."

Samantha was perfectly still and her eyes were wide. It was like telling a story to a child. Was it my imagination or was there a little of Granny behind her eyes and maybe even a little of Callie around the firm jaw? She reminded me of Phoebe, prickly and soft at the same time.

"And then?" she asked.

"Then I showed Callie a real

caterpillar. It tickled her arm but she still did not smile."

Samantha rose suddenly, all six feet of her. "You're in pain." she said. You can tell me the rest of the story later. I can wait for the smile. Yours and hers. You should get to bed."

"How did you know?" I asked. I had felt a surge of pain as I had been speaking but I didn't think that it showed.

"Displacement." she said. " Like the flies. That's how you do it, praying or whatever, isn't it? You lift your thought instead of your hand and I feel it over here?"

"Close enough." I said amazed at her insight.

"Goodnight Keith. Your name is Keith isn't it?"

" Yes. Goodnight Samantha." Already I cared for her in her own right, not just because she was related to two people I loved. That didn't mean I trusted her. Alec had told me that she had a record. Nothing big. She and her friends had taken a car and gone joy riding when she was eighteen. She had not done time. I liked her but I knew that I had to be objective if I was going to solve the case.

" Oh please. Call me Sam." She slipped gracefully out the door but her presence lingered. It wasn't her perfume; it was just that she was too arresting to fade easily.

"I bet that woman is after Mahlon's money." Alec said. "You better watch out for her. She was pumping you for information. Why did you tell her so much?"

" I just felt like talking. Anyway if she gets the inheritance that was supposed to go to George she won't need Mahlon's money. Not that I would be surprised if she didn't kidnap him and carry him off with her just for the fun of it."

"That's what I forgot to tell you." said Alec looking up with his eyes alert. "Kidnapping, that's what I forgot. The Defenders of God, there is some suspicion that they've been involved in kidnapping. Some of my friends that I took some anti-terrorism training with found out for me. The kidnapping thing has never been proved."

"Who do they kidnap?"

"Kids. Like if a mom gets custody and they think she is too lenient they kidnap the kid for the father. Or sometimes kids have been kidnapped from liberal parents and then deprogrammed. No convictions and the role of the Defenders is murky, though there was one case involving a Defender that almost came

to trial.. The eprogrammer got off when he claimed he was an "exit counselor". It's an iffy area of the law. The Defenders always seem to be lurking in the background with stuff like that. They've been suspected in both areas, the abduction itself and the deprogramming.. Not that it has any bearing on this case but I meant to tell you."

That night I had one of the dreams. Someone had hung a piece of flypaper as wide as an oak tree right in the middle of the lab. The glue on it looked like Vaseline and was spread as thick as a bedroom pillow. Some leafy plants that we had used in an experiment were giving off coded gas exhalations like Morse code. "Stay away," the plants screamed in their slow motion cellular language . "Danger."

Samantha stood by the door. She had large rainbow colored wings. She was beating them and displacing waves of air that rippled the message, "Turn back. Unsafe. Be careful."

One baby fly flew in. She was too young to understand. She flew straight for the thick smelly flypaper that was oozing with gooey vaseline. Only it didn't smell like vaseline, it smelled like pig wormer and peppermint and the stench was making me gag. I knew that the little fly was Callie and I got up to save her but I couldn't move because my bare feet were glued to the floor.

"Wake up Keith." Alec was touching my arm. "Here". He handed me a towel. Sweat was running down my face. "You were screaming." he said. "I thought you were rid of those dreams."

During my divorce I had slept on Alec's couch until my numbness felt normal enough that I could work again. I remember going to real estate school each day and sleeping and screaming on Alec's couch each night. "The dreams only come when things in my life are stirred up." I told him.

"Yeah, me too. I had a lot of nightmares when I had surgery. So, you want to tell me about this dream?"

"It's Callie." I said. " The note I got showed that Callie is known to the Defenders. It threatened her as well as me. Her dad is a liberal minister and she is closely connected to my prayer research which the Defenders hate, - she is closely connected to the camp and the lab. The Defenders might be into kidnapping kids and deprogramming them."

Alec was now fully awake. "You're right," he said slowly. "I didn't think at first that the kidnapping information had any bearing on the case but it damn well does.

"I can't go to Chicago." I said.

"No." Alec agreed, " I'll stay.

And Roy is coming. It will be like old times."

"Tomorrow," I said, "we need to go on the offensive."

A low "hmmm" was all I got from Alec in response but I knew him well enough to know that the "hmmm" meant that he was already planning strategy.

"I'm not going to have this thing hanging over everybody's head." I explained as we sat there in the dark, the scent from the lilac bushes drifting in through the window.

"What have you got in mind?"

. "I'm going to flush this murderer out. I'm going to use myself as bait."

"Hmmm. That will be like old times alright."

"yeah."

"Go to sleep. We'll talk tomorrow. When Roy gets here we'll have a conference."

Having made a decision I rolled over and slept soundly.

.

(I am now skipping part of the next chapter where Roy, Keith's second army buddy shows up and they plan strategy. We pick up as Alec and Roy are outside doing chores while Keith is in the Cottage.)

The phone rang and as I stood up to answer it I saw that someone had slipped an envelope under my door. They must have done it in the last ten minutes or Roy and Alec would have seen it. I picked up the note and the telephone at the same time.

The Bishop's office was calling. A perky woman asked me for my membership number. "We have your excommunication certificate ready," she said "but our computers are down and I wanted to double-check the number before making this a permanent part of the record."

I took the cordless phone into my bedroom, took out my Bible, and found my membership certificate tucked next to a picture of Moses that Callie had drawn for me years ago. She had given Moses red hair and glasses. I read my membership number to the lady on the telephone and told her that I had been a member for more than half a century for I had joined the church when I was 12 years old.

“ Yes Sir. Thank you. Let me double-check that number with our paper file. If you could wait just a moment please.” And she put me on hold.

I sat down on the bed weary of both the church and the murder, wishing I could just go back to the lab and work. While I waited I opened the blank envelope that had been under the door. The handwriting was large and generous, written dark with a gel pen. I saw immediately that it was titled Bug Byte and signed “Sam “ There was a flourish underneath the signature.

Was it possible that Samantha had sent me the bug bytes? My stomach felt like it was laid inside out on an ironing board being pressed with a hot iron. She couldn't have sent them from Texas. Had she been lying about her alibi? News of the Bug Bytes had been all over the media. Was she sending a copycat note? All the other notes had been typed. I forced myself to look down at the words while some offensively mediocre music played relentlessly over the telephone and I continued to stay on hold.

Bug Byte

It's OK to catch a butterfly
but look, then let her go
To pollinate and beautify
The flowers as they grow.
Don't take a pin and stick her in
A bar of soap or jar
She'll make a dried up specimen
She'll die and not go far.
The way that I was taught to pray
I'd take the pin of fear
And beat my wings, or thoughts, real hard
While stuck in neutral gear
But Keith can pray without the pin
He lets his prayer fly free
To pollinate and beautify
And help people like me.

As I read I felt myself turning

hopeful again, as if I were a

chameleon taking on the color of the verse.

This was a side of Samantha that I had not seen last night – or had I? Childlike, not as secure as she seemed, but still unusual, astute, and sensitive to nuance. That Samantha had survival skills I did not doubt. There was a look of knowing about her eyes that comes only from having seen too much of the lesser side of human nature. That she would lie if needed I also didn't doubt. She reminded me of a flower kept in a dark room that becomes twisted but only because it has to bend and grow out of kilter to reach a distant window with some light. I wished I'd had her at Camp when she was a kid.

I have written poems for the kids at camp so often that verses come easily to my mind. I took a piece of paper and wrote

“ Dear Samantha, Thanks. Your note came at a good time and made me feel better.”
Underneath I wrote:

Most people don't like bugs.
What causes all the fuss?
Psychologists say its because
there's more of them than us.

If being around bugs
makes you extremely nervous
then you should know that bugs, like you,
have much below the surface.

Praying for a bug
means primal fear dissolving.
You'll see bugs differently
and you will find your mind evolving.

Keith

“I was able to confirm your membership number Mr. Redland. You should receive the excommunication certificate in 4 to 5 business days.”

“OK.”

“Godo-bye then.”

“Good bye.”

She hung up. Decades of

service to my church ended

with a click. My lifeline had been cut and I was floating free of the mother ship, alone in space, without any idea of how to survive outside of the only spiritual home I knew. I put Sam's poem in my Bible and petted Nora, one of my cats. I wondered what the certificate would look like and if it would be signed by more than one person or by anyone that I knew personally. Would it come alone or with a long letter spelling out once again all my offenses? I decided not to put myself through the pain of finding out. When it came I would put the envelope in the wood stove without opening it.

Surges of self pity and sentimentality passed over me like nausea with enough force to leave me feeling weak. Both were feelings I despised. I wondered if the excommunication would affect my employment at the lab or hurt business at Camp Prayer Tracker. With a feeling of revulsion I realized that it would be reported on the cable news networks.

Once again I thought of all the compromises with the church that I had considered and discarded. Had I missed a way to compromise with integrity? Was prayer research harmful and materialistic as they claimed? The questions were rhetorical; I had been over them so many times that they no longer fully engaged my emotions.

In the blackness of my pain I saw the pulsing red lights of my anger. I was angry at my church and recognized the danger of self-justification. To break the spell I forced myself to think of something else for a few minutes. Looking down at my verse I realized that I did not know where Samantha was staying so I could not mail it to her. I would give it to her next time I saw her. She was obviously determined to make a play for Mahlon so perhaps she was visiting him and had slipped the note under my door on her way to his cabin. For her sake I hoped that Mahlon was not a murderer. For my sake I hoped that she was not the murderer. It was essential that this murderer be exposed quickly and I had an idea for how to bait the trap.

Samantha's poem reminded me of a time when I had been in the butterfly habitat and had been surrounded by emerging butterflies drying their wings. I had looked at one and seen a spot of color that looked like blood but it was only a drop of pigment that is naturally released when the butterfly emerges from the cocoon. The church had been my cocoon and it had fallen away. I felt like I was bleeding but perhaps it wasn't what it felt like. The pulsing red lights in my mind were fading. At least I was not being burned at the stake or being forced to recant under threat of torture as I might have been in the past. My Christianity could not be affected by anyone's signature on an excommunication certificate and my love for my church was stronger than my anger. I had grown big enough over the years that with a little effort I could let this go without resentment.

Nora purred against my chest. After we visited Heartha, I would spend a few hours working on some equations related to my research that I

had stopped working on when George was murdered. I would no longer let the murderer or the police or Church Councils format my life, define my faith, or attach their history to me. I would keep working.

I want to post the last three chapters of my book as the last three assignments so I am now skipping over most of the book to the end. During the interim Keith has discovered that it is Brian, his daughter's step dad, who shot him and sent him the threatening notes. Brian turns out to be a founding member of the Defenders of God. He has hated Keith for years, going back to when he shot Keith's dog. Brian did not kill George, his friend and fellow Defender. He thinks Keith killed George and is after him partly for revenge. He also wants to stop Keith's work, which he believes is of the devil, and he is jealous of the growing relationship between Keith and his daughter April. He resents April's loyalty to Keith. He does not want April being contaminated by Keith's religious views or living in the same town with him after her marriage, and he definitely did not want Keith at April's wedding, which explains the timing of his shooting Keith on the day of April's wedding.

Brian attacks Keith during their confrontation and Keith hits him with a rock in self-defense. Keith hits Brian hard enough to land him in the hospital with a concussion for several days. April walks in unexpectedly just in time to see Keith hit her step dad. She does not believe Keith's story and is no longer talking to him. Keith is arrested for attacking Brian. He is released on bail and is waiting for his court date. Brian tells everyone that Keith is jealous of him for marrying his ex wife and raising his daughter, and that is why Keith attacked him. Brian's story is generally believed.

While out on bail Keith finds a clue that indicates that Heartha was at Camp Prayer Tracker the night George was murdered. This makes no sense. She hates leaving home. She had just come home from the nursing

home the same day and would have been tired. Why would she walk next door to Camp Prayer Tracker after the housekeeper left?

Did she see the murderer? Or was she the murderer? We know from previous clues that she is limber enough to climb over the bed rail of her hospital bed at the hospital, which means she is physically capable of walking next store and shooting George. George was buying her farm. That could be her motive. Maybe she was afraid of losing the farm, afraid that she would not be allowed to live on the land where she had been born. We know from previous clues that Heartha can use a gun. Most farmwomen can. Heartha has never read a mystery or had a TV or seen a cop show. She probably doesn't even know about fingerprints. Perhaps to her simple mind murder was a simple solution.

But if so why was she acting so scared prior to George's murder? Why did she think, when the Rescue Squad came to take her to the hospital, a whole week before George was murdered, that they were taking her to jail? (unposted chapter.)

Callie has just had an emotional outburst and stormed out of Heartha's house after calling Heartha a wicked woman and saying that she wasn't fooled by Heartha like the rest of the town who "thinks Heartha is nice just because she's old." Callie explains to Keith that she was upset because Heartha is mean to animals and mean to her. Heartha always yells at her when she hangs around in the barn and for some reason hates it when Callie goes in the horse stall. That is where Gaagoon's nest is, Gaagoon being a young porcupine, Phoebe's daughter.

Callie goes back to Heartha's farm to apologize to her at Keith's urging. Keith finds the clue placing Heartha at Camp Prayer Tracker just after he convinces Callie to go back and apologize. He feels uneasy and decides to check on Callie, send her home, and then confront Heartha.

To understand this chapter you need to review the situation about Harry Apple. Harry was a peddler who disagreed just after the depression. Heartha would have been 10 years old when he was last seen. She says she does not remember him, but Keith knows that Heartha's mom did buy things from Harry.

Harry had gotten a girl from a neighboring town pregnant. The girl had an illegitimate daughter. George, the murder victim, was Harry's grandson by that illegitimate daughter. Harry had also raped Callie's grandma who had a baby boy as a result. Samantha is Harry's granddaughter by that son.

When Keith goes to find Callie he first finds Heartha standing outside the barn. He asks if Callie is in the barn and when Heartha says yes he walks in. Heartha closes and locks the door behind him, pulling the bolt. He gets

entangled in the flypaper and is disoriented until he hears Callie calling him. She explains that Heartha is going to kill them by burning down the barn with them in it. The flypaper is highly flammable because of the glue and the barn is full of old hay. She does not understand why Heartha is going to kill them. She says that Heartha has gone to the house to get some matches.

Keith tries to find something that he can hit Heartha with. Callie offers an old coffee can with a lid, which is being used as a scooper for feed. Keith says it's too light so she then offers him a bone from Gagoons' nest. Porcupines often bring bones home to chew on. I will talk about the bone in the next chapter. Keith accepts that as a weapon. While he is trying to think of how to get Heartha to open the barn door Callie sweeps a single fly about to get caught on the flypaper. She catches it and puts it safely in her coffee can. Just then they both jump. Heartha has returned and is standing outside of the barn.

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Suddenly we heard Heartha's voice disembodied in the air around us. We both jumped. She had returned and was standing right outside the barn wall where we were huddled.

"During the Depression" Heartha said as though thinking out loud, "we had to sell the icebox so we couldn't keep fresh meat. I used to club the raccoons. I don't kill things because I want to, just if I have to. I never did enjoy killing chickens though I liked to see them run with their heads cut off. That was the only part I liked."

There was a large knothole in the wall and her voice sounded so close that I looked up at it wondering if Heartha was talking through the hole. I saw nothing but the spot of light that came in from the knothole and played on the blue gray wood of the weathered barn. The wood was beautiful. It was also dried out and flammable. Certainly the barn was so old that the wood had never been treated with a fire retardant. There was no sprinkler system and the barn was filled with old hay.

"Susie she was a mean dog" Heartha continued apparently talking to herself "but I never had no trouble with her. She didn't like my Uncle Herbert. I don't know why; he liked dogs pretty good. If a burglar had come Susie would have taken the seat of his pants off and a little more besides. Yes, I guess they would have left with less, not more, than they came in with. Hah!"

"Why is she talking?" Callie whispered to me huddling closer. I hunched my shoulders to show that I did not know and listened for some clue to what was in Heartha's mind, listened for some spot where I could enter the conversation and talk with her, reason with her, get her to open the door.

“When father died” she plodded on, “ we sold the sulky plow and horses. It was the Depression don’t you know; we couldn’t feed them. They ate them for horsemeat. They lied to me. They promised to use them to plow. We had a hired man for a few months but he went to the Catholic Church and his mom was always on his hinder about working for a Protestant family. So we lost him. I worked awful hard as a girl.”

“I’m sure you did Heartha.” I cut in using the most sympathetic voice I could manage under the circumstances. “ But there must have been good things too about growing up on the farm.” I was trying to draw her out, trying to buy time, trying to understand what was motivating her. “What do you miss about growing up?”

She was silent for a long minute and then peered in at us like at cat at a mouse hole. Her eye, framed by the knothole, looked enormous. The shadows in the barn seemed to walk toward us until finally her eye disappeared and the spot of light expanded once more.

“I miss the peddlers.” she finally said with her disembodied voice hovering in the air. “ There was a peddler that sold sewing things and one that sold rags, and pots and pans. Then there was Harry Apple selling Murphy’s Mineral. He always gave me candy and told me I was prettier than the other girls were. He liked to touch my hair. Nobody else ever said that I was pretty.” She paused and the eye reappeared at the knothole swinging from one side to the other. “ His leather jacket smelled real oily when I laid my head against it. But he didn’t have the jacket on the day he died.”

“You told me that you didn’t know Harry Apple.” I protested. “Don’t you remember? I asked you and you told me that you didn’t know anything about him.” Good Lord, Heartha had only been ten and the perverted old peddler had been touching her hair. Callie was 14 and quite modern but like all young girls she was vulnerable. I shuddered. “You were there the day he died?” It had taken me a moment to register what she has said.

“ It was an accident.” she said in a matter of fact voice. “ I didn’t want to kill him. I wish he hadn’t made me have to. He always touched my hair real soft like.”

“You killed Harry Apple?” It was a dumb thing to say but I was stunned. The possibility had never occurred to me. George had been wearing Harry’s hunting jacket when he showed up to buy Heath’s farm. It must have been a shock to Heartha to see the jacket and then have George ask in his loud dominating voice to buy the farm. Had Hearth assumed that George knew something about the old murder? Maybe she thought that he would expose her for killing Harry if she didn't give him the farm. How many years had she been scared for? How many years had she been worried that someone would find out and tell?

I felt Callie leaning in as close to me as she could. She trembled against my side and I was reminded of a shivering little piece of hay moving slightly under the warm breath of a horse leaning down to eat it. She certainly felt as light as a broken piece of straw. I put my arm around her. She was covered in flypaper and stuck literally to my side. Heartha began to talk again.

“Daddy took care of it. But then daddy collapsed in the doorway a month later and died, and that’s when it all started. It weren’t never the same after that. Nothin’ did go right after that.”

“Why did you kill George?”

“I killed George because I had to. Nobody knew about Harry Apple until George came. George was his grandson. George knew about Harry. Harry is right there by you, buried under the horse still. I watched daddy pour the cement over him. Callie knows. Callie is always in the barn. She talks to Harry. I’m not going to kill you and Callie because I want to, just because I have to. It don’t hurt to watch though.”

Callie made a frightened noise. Obviously Heartha had misinterpreted the time Callie spent in the horse stall. Callie often talked to Gaagoon and if Heartha, standing at the door of the barn, did not know about the porcupine nest it must have seemed to her that Callie was talking to herself – or, in her imagination – to the dead Harry. Wouldn’t; you know that despite having acres and acres to choose from the little porcupine would make her nest in the horse stall where Harry Apple was buried. It must have made Heartha very nervous to have Callie always poking around out there. During her outburst Callie had called Heartha a wicked woman and had said that Heartha didn’t fool her. No wonder Heartha thought Callie had discovered something.

Heartha's eye played peek-a-boo at the hole and we both froze. Then the large eye floated away again. I could hear a click, and I knew without a doubt that she had opened her purse. Its surprising that such a simple sound can be so distinctive.

“No, oh no,” Callie breathed out involuntarily then squeaked in my ear explaining “She’s got a box of matches in her purse.”

“I won’t touch you or Callie till you don’t live no more.” said Heartha. “But it don’t hurt nothing to watch.”

I listened so hard that my ears ached. Either the match didn’t catch or the wind had blown it out but I was sure that I had heard the faint raspy sound of the match on the box, as faint as the sound of a snake's stomach slithering across the cement of the barn floor.

“ I like to watch.” continued Heartha as though she were talking about fireworks or a ballgame. “ It gives me something to do. I watched the pastor once when high winds broke the handle of the pump and the windmill kept running and you couldn’t turn the pump off. It just kept running all over the yard and froze in one big sheet of ice. The pastor came to bring us a sausage. It was a long time ago. He slipped and broke his leg and jerked a long while. His coat was blowing. He looked like a crow. It was an awful good sausage. I remember that it was an awful good sausage.”

While she was talking I had finally moved into action; my shock had been broken by the sound of the match. I motioned Callie to go as far back in the barn as she could after untangling where our flypaper had stuck together as she leaned against my side. I could feel some of the flies still moving under my hand. “Stay in the back of the barn, and hunch down.” I whispered to Callie nudging her into action. She went.

“Yes, I miss the peddlers.” Heartha continued. The lust of anticipated murder was making her talkative. She was speaking in a flat voice but when the large eye reappeared at the knothole I could see that it was wet with excitement.

“ McKinnon, he sold lineaments and spices” she continued speaking faster. “ I locked him in the barn a little while and watched him from the horse stall. When I let him out I said, “Oh, the wind must have blown the latch.” That was funny. But now not so many people come that I can keep here long. There’s not much to watch. Farming is lonelier today than it was when I was a girl. “

The raspy sound came again and I saw a flame dart like a snake's tongue through the knothole.

“You left your new pink sweater in here” I said.

“Someone gave it to me. I don’t know who. I got it for free.” The match burned out with a tiny hiss.

“A sweater like that is worth about 30 dollars Heartha. They sell them for 30 dollars in Two Loons.

Heartha had been raised in the Depression. She got upset even when Emily poured the water from boiling potatoes down the drain. Water was precious. Water was life and you could still use it after you boiled the potatoes, to make soup, and with any left to add to the bread dough and with any left to wash yourself, and then to wash the floor, and then to clean the chicken coop, and then to throw on the garden. Heartha thought that people shouldn’t throw water away. It made her mad.

“It’s a shame to burn 30 whole dollars.” I continued. The sweater was a desperate last resort; an idea that had flickered into my head as the match had flickered at the knothole.

“I ‘m not going to burn it.” she said. “Its mine. I have a gun so don’t try to keep the sweater ”. I heard her heavy walk plodding methodically toward the door. Quickly I checked that Callie was still as far back as she could go, uttered a silent prayer of thanks that an idea had come to me of how to get Heartha to open the barn door, and made my way the short distance to the door hiding just behind it. My back still ached from the birdshot and I was weak from fighting with Brain. Heartha was an old lady and ought to be an easy hit but she was a good 70 pounds heavier than I was and she was emotionally pumped up while I felt weak and shaky.

I had been weak that way once before, weak because I’d been hit with shrapnel. My back had hurt then like it hurt now. Yes I knew what to do. The enemy kept coming; I could hear his boots, the plodding of her steps. I willed all the strength of my body into my trigger finger until that finger became my entire fist wrapped around Gaagoon’s snack bone. My body seemed to float in the air, it had no substance for all my being was in that trigger finger that had turned into that fist. As I heard the door open it did not occur to me that my victim was a little old lady in a frumpy blouse and sensible shoes, a woman so simple that she did not know that that she was walking into a trap. I saw only the enemy. My soul was in my fist and it was primed to kill.

The barn door creaked open. Light flooded the barn like liquid corn syrup flowing out of a bottle. It coated the fuzzy pink sweater and ran down the bale of hay the sweater sat on glowing like a piece of fuzzy pink bait. I saw Heartha’s purse swinging forward and then the arm it was on and then her body. I hit her hard from behind. She fell down in a blob, wobbling to rest on her side. She looked up at me with one large eye. She might not be smart but she was cunning and deadly. For a moment the eye spit hatred, like venom, and then suddenly it closed. I realized that I was not in Viet Nam.

“Yes,” she continued with her eye closed as though nothing had happened. “Farming is lonelier today then it was when I was a girl.” Then her head lolled to one side. Her huge eye, like a bloated tick, crept under her eyelid and she lost consciousness.

Callie ran forward and threw herself at me, crying. Roy appeared out of nowhere and for a moment, hearing his voice I was confused and thought maybe we were in Viet Nam. Feeling dizzy I gently disengaged Callie and leaned back against a bale of hay.

Roy looked at us both standing there with flypaper stuck to our hair and said “What the.” and then he came toward us, tripping over the bone. He picked it up to get it out of the way just as I started to keel over. “ Good Lord it’s the bone of a baby! “ I heard him say just before he saw me falling. He lurched to

catch me. I saw his hands reaching out and then I didn't see anything. From far away I heard Callie squeaking and Roy's voice fading in and out calling, "Keith, are you all right? Are you all right? All right?"

Where was he? Who had a baby? Why were the snipers carrying purses? Did Callie float away? Did someone kill the eye? And why was there a palm tree in the corner of the barn?

I guess it was right about then that I passed out.

To understand the ending you must be keyed in to some story lines that have not been posted. Way back in the first chapter Keith finds a bone:

"I looked and saw Phoebe's distinctive teeth marks but there were also other scratchings on the bone that I could not identify. The bone was old and glowed with an amber sheen. It had been broken off of an even larger bone but so long ago that the edges were as smooth as beach glass. I'm usually pretty good at identifying bones but I had no idea what animal this came from. I knew I would need to send this one to Roy for identification. Roy was my army buddy and he was also a paleontologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. "

In the sections not posted Roy finds out that it is the bone of a woolly mammoth and that the scratchings on it are probably tool marks. The bone is at a lab for verification but if the marks are tool marks the bones will be worth big cash and it would be a big prestigious find because it will prove that Native Americans were in Wisconsin long before paleontologists believed there was human habitation. This part is based on something true

Roy also tells Keith that another person in his area – Mahlon Mompers - sent in a bone (that he found at Heartha's place) with similar markings.

Porcupines drag bones all over the place so no one knows just where the woolly is buried. Mahlon, Roy, a team of paleontologists and Keith have all been chasing each other around the woods looking for it throughout the book, generally with Mike, the police officer, tailing them.

The other story line is that after Keith fought with Brian, and Brian went into the hospital, a tourist from Cleveland arrived in town. This is suspicious because Alec has discovered that the Defenders are headquartered in Cleveland. Roy Alec and Keith all suspect the tourist is connected to Brian and the Defenders but there is no proof.

Finally, as you read this don't forget that while they were locked in the barn Callie caught a fly that was about to get stuck on flypaper and she put the fly in an old coffee can with a cover. This will be important to remember later because Keith will have a dream about it.

The story picks up about 4 PM on a Friday after Keith has hit Heartha and knocked her out..

Start

For the second time in a week I woke up on a stretcher. I tried to focus but the world was a whirling blur of images. Callie holding a coffee can up to the sun and taking the lid off. A fly buzzing around my head. Ambulances and police cars arriving regularly like buses at a bus stop. Fireman standing around with nothing to do.

Rev. Cooper arriving and hugging his daughter. His voice, broken and deep saying over and over "Callie, Oh Callie." Officer Kram putting something white and bloody into a bag with gloved fingers. "Its an important find." came Roy's voice. "Its' evidence Sir" came the response.

"I want to stay with Keith." Callie said, pulling away from someone's arm on her shoulder.

"You are both going to the hospital in Two Loons," said a soft spoken stranger." Now come along. Everything will be OK"

At the hospital I heard Callie before I saw her. "You don't need to cut my hair. Don't you know anything?" came the imperious little voice which still sounded frightened to me beneath the fuss.

"My dear we will never get this flypaper off."

"Vegetable oil!" came Callie's voice." She had remembered what I told her. If a bird gets caught in flypaper you must never pull the paper off because there will still be a glue residue and if they groom their beaks will glue shut. Vegetable oil will remove flypaper. Afterward the oil must be washed off delicately with a light detergent, the bird rinsed very gently and then the bird must put in the sun to dry but remain closely monitored until the shock wears off.

"Gently" protested Calie's voice. "You're pulling my hair."

"Its going to be all right" I heard the nurse tell her. "Everything is going to be OK."

“We’re going to give you some new pain medication for your back Mr. Redland.” said a nurse whose face suddenly appeared in the airspace over my bed. “You’ve pulled a muscle in your shoulder but you’ll probably be able to go home tonight.”

“I don’t feel like I can sit up.” I told her.

“It’s going to be all right Mr. Redland. Everything is going to be OK.” she said.

Rev. Cooper appeared inside my curtained cubicle in the emergency room after brushing past the protests of some nurses. He closed the curtain and tried to thank me “for saving my daughter’s life.” He was also trying to apologize for something but I did not know what. I felt so tired. He sat down, put his head in his hands and began to sob without making any noise.” Its all right” I told him, Everything is going to be OK.”

When I came home from the war I had knelt by my bed as I hadn’t done since childhood. I had tried to pray but ended up lowering my head to the worn old bedspread and sobbing without any noise coming out. After a lifetime of religion I really had no idea who or what I was praying to.

“It gets better.” I blurted out. “Eventually the praying, all the words, they become real.” Rev. Cooper lifted his head and nodded. “I’m taking Callie away for a two week vacation to Yellowstone” he said. We’re leaving after church on Sunday.” If you are feeling well enough, do you want to come?”

I was astonished at the gift of his offer. “ No.” I said, “ but I am a very happy that you thought to ask me.”

“Well, I’ll see you later then.” he said, “I told Callie I’d be back in a minute. Tell me if there’s anything you need.”

“You could send me a post card.” I said. “One with bears on it.”

“Ouch” screamed Callie in the distance.

“Is Heartha all right? “ I asked the new nurse that had drifted in.

“Who?”

“The old lady knocked out in the barn. With the large black handbag.”

“I’m sure she is. No one at the scene was seriously hurt. Now don’t you worry about it Mr. Redland. Everything is going to be fine. You’re going to be OK.”

I leaned back and felt gratitude tingle like pain. We had all survived. Brian was in the hospital, which put him out of commission, and Heartha was no longer at large. Callie was OK.

“Dad” said a voice that I had ached to hear, and there was April half in and out of the white curtain. Then she came all the way in, sensibly pulled up a chair, and said, “What happened?” She had been at the hospital visiting Brain, her step-dad, when she bumped into Roy and heard that I had been brought in. “I want you to know that my dad,” she paused awkwardly, “that is, my other dad, is dropping all charges against you. He didn’t realize that you were really in danger and had a reason to be defensive. You were wrong to suspect him, but we understand now why you were so jumpy.”

This did not seem to be the time to explain to her that her step-dad was bent on murder. It was enough for now that she was talking to me again.

“I’ll see you before I go.” she said, hugged me hard, and left. I closed my eyes against the chaos of the emergency room. Noises and fans and the sound of metal wheels made by the equipment being rolled around made me feel slightly giddy and nauseous. All of a sudden I smelled ginger and grapefruit, with something flowery mixed in.

“Well what the heck are you doing in here?” came Samantha’s voice.

“What’s in your perfume?” I asked her.

“What? Are you nuts? What does my perfume have to do with it? Are you OK?”

“Ginger, “ I said, “and grapefruit.”

“And rose geranium.” she said. “I make it myself with essential oils. You’ve got a good nose. I’m going to go talk to the nurse, find out what’s wrong with you and then get you out of here. I’ll be back.”

The nurse was right. Everything was going to be OK.

New Chapter

4 hours later, at about 8 PM, Roy, Samantha, Alec, Rev. Cooper and I were all sitting in the waiting room at the hospital watching TV and waiting for Callie. She had acquired some bruises and the doctors were running some tests to be sure she had not received any internal injuries as Heartha had apparently knocked her against the barn wall before I had arrived.

Mike had stopped by to

question me. He told us that

Heartha had confessed to killing two men, George and someone called Harry. He wanted to know if I knew who Harry was. I told him the whole story. "Harry is buried in horse stall." I added helpfully.

Roy asked Mike when he could see the bone I had hit Heartha with. "I'll see what I can do, Sir." said Mike politely, "but it won't be soon. The bone is evidence."

"What's with the bone?" I asked Roy seeing that gleam in his eye that he got only when he looked at a pretty girl or at old animal bones. He was looking at Samantha and I had noticed that he had begun falling for her, so maybe it was that. Or maybe it was the bone.

"It's the bone of a baby woolly mammoth." he explained. "So help me if there's a baby woolly buried out there with its mother it will be the find of the century."

April and her husband Todd got off the elevator and came over to see us. They were on their way to the cafeteria. "We're going to go home in a few minutes," said April, "and I was going to get some of that soft serve ice cream for my dad before I go. Anybody want some?"

We all did but we didn't want to go down to the cafeteria in case we missed Callie. Roy and Samantha went with Todd and April while the rest of us stayed in the waiting room and watched TV. At the bottom of the screen a trailer said, "Breaking news. New details in the Moosejaw Murder Case. Details at 10." Alec changed it to the weather channel. "Look," he said. "There's going to be a frost tomorrow night. Its kind of late in the year for that, isn't it?" It certainly was. It was almost the end of May. An untimely frost, even a light one, would damage the tree buds.

The group with the ice cream arrived. "Sunrise is at 6:23 AM" continued Alec still watching the weather. "I'm just glad you're her to see another sunrise." he said turning to me. "Mike told me that crazy old lady really meant business. The police found a big box of matches in her purse, and one burnt match on the ground." Since Alec was a former police officer Mike sometimes told him more than he told us.

"Did you say the sunrise tomorrow was at 6:23?" I double-checked with Alec. He nodded. "I think I'll go to Rhinestone Rock and watch the sun come up. I usually do every day but with all this happening I haven't had a chance to. "

"Isn't that kind of early?" Rev. Cooper asked me.

" I like the early part of the day." I explained.

After Callie was released

Roy, Alec and I went out for

pizza in Two Loons as none of us had eaten any supper. It was after ten-o'clock when we headed back to my cottage and I was exhausted. In the car Alec yelled at me for speaking so freely in front of my daughter.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You told her your movements. You even told her the exact time you would be at Rhinestone Rock.”

“My daughter wouldn't hurt me.” I said quietly.

“No but she'd blab all that to Brain. She has no discretion at all.” I was silent and he continued, “I'm sorry Keith, but it's your safety that we have to worry about.”

“Heartha is no longer at large and Brian is in the hospital.” I pointed out, feeling that it ought to be over, that we shouldn't have to be thinking about these safety precautions anymore.

“And the tourist from Cleveland has a cell phone. I've seen him talking on it. If he were calling into the hospital no one would know. The hospital does not keep a record of incoming calls, just outgoing calls. Whatever April tells Brian, Brian could be telling the tourist from Cleveland.” His fears gained credibility when we saw the tourist from Cleveland walking along the outer edge of Camp Prayer Tracker as we pulled up. “May I help you?” asked Alec, pulling over.

“Oh no, I was just looking for a good fishing spot.” he said. In the light from the headlights I could see that the casual sports clothes he wore looked new.

“In the dark?” asked Alec.

“Yes, I wanted to get started early tomorrow so I was looking for a good spot tonight.”

“Well this is private property.” Alec continued, “so you will need to find another spot.”

“Really? I'm so sorry. I must have missed the sign.” The tourist smiled and walked away.

“I don't think you should go looking at sunrises tomorrow.” Alec said.

“I'll probably be too tired anyway. I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

“We need to keep an eye on Callie for two more days until she leaves on vacation.”

Roy reminded us. “Don’t forget that she was threatened too.”

“I’m setting the alarm for 5 AM.” Alec said. “You follow Callie. I’ll stake out this guy from Cleveland. We’ll tail both of them for the next few days and give Keith some time to recover.”

That night I had one of my dreams. In my dream I could see Gaagoon and I knew her thoughts. I knew that she disliked the police even before they began digging in the barn where she had her nest. The police were digging up Harry Apple’s bones and when Gaagoon returned to the barn her nest was gone. The whole horse stall was gone. I felt her nervousness, her confusion. It was time to sleep but she had no den.

I watched her as she wandered back into the woods and climbed a tree. Like her I could tell that something didn’t feel right. She climbed down and walked toward Rhinestone Rock but that felt very scary – something was wrong at Rhinestone Rock. She wandered and in my dreams I followed her, until she arrived at the base of Grandmother tree whose scent was so familiar. Climbing up the trunk she came to the den of a full-grown porcupine. It was empty but had obviously been occupied recently. She hesitated partly because she was not old enough or large enough to defend a den but also because she was a proper little porcupine who felt deep in her prickles that it was wrong to steal a sleep.

Yet the scent of the adult that had recently occupied the nest was not at all threatening (quite the opposite). It was a scent that she knew but could not place. She entered the den and knew at once that this was home, that she had found again the place of her birth. But where was Phoebe? Gaagoon no longer remembered her mother, but I knew even in my dream that Phoebe should be there and I tried to tell the little porky this. She paid no attention for she was busy domestically arranging a few brown leaves and sticks. She realized, without knowing how she knew, that the occupant of this nest would not be returning. She put her quills down, wiggled into a comfortable position, and slept, breathing deeply. Little snoring sounds emanated from the den but were interrupted by an enormous blast that rocked the tree. She woke but did not fall out of the nest. Feeling that she was deep den safe she went back to sleep. What was the blast that had shaken her? In my dream I tried to place it but could not.

Suddenly I was floating in the air and saw Phoebe through a mist of gray ash. Was the forest burning? Her body was cradled on a tree branch above the den, at a place where two branches intersect. I knew, as one can only know in dreams, that she had taken a notion to see the sun come up and with a burst of energy that she had not felt in weeks she had climbed to her favorite resting spot. Porcupines have poor eyesight. She would have felt the light more than seeing it as it began to fill the sky half an hour before the sun rose. She did not live to see the sun come up but she was content. She had, I knew intuitively, simply put her head down and

fallen asleep without waking.

Phoebe disappeared and I was back at Heartha's farm watching the coffee-can fly, knowing her every thought. Since her escape from Heartha's barn she had used her gift of freedom to the fullest. She had hovered and flown, doing wheelies in the air without the need for wheels. She had communicated with other flies from distant places (one had been as far as the church parsonage) had mated in mid air, and had lain her eggs my compost pile.

Since flies have taste buds on their feet she had also walked through a world of flavors often comparing them with her friends. Having the police come to Heartha's barn had been especially fun. She had gotten a kick out of walking on Officer Kram's hat. It tasted sweaty and smoky and had an interesting texture. It was too dry to actually eat but you could taste it without inhaling.

Sensing that hat walking could become all the rage among the younger flies, she alerted her many friends. Soon a whole group had learned the hat walk and gathered on the rim comparing notes.

Officer Kram had been very kind. First he had opened a soda can for her and she had enjoyed her experience of having her feet carbonated. Then, even though she could see that he was quite busy, he had played hand tag with her for a long time. He wasn't very good at it. He hadn't tagged her even once but he was a wonderful sport and kept playing.

Finally he had dug up a pile of old human being bones for the flies and had allowed the flies to sniff at them like puppies. Not that the bones tasted very good but it was such a kind gesture to offer them that it had restored her faith. The other flies had communicated to her that human animals were not to be trusted. Officer Kram was obviously some kind of a holy man, different than other humans, compassionate to the small ones, offering them gifts, and he was an inspiration to the coffee-can fly.

The next morning though – or was it this morning? - she felt restless like Gaagoon. Something told her that a change was coming and she did not understand what change meant. She knew nothing of the light frost that would occur during the night killing off the summer's remaining insects. She just knew that change was in the air.

I felt her restlessness as I flew along beside her. She was flying at random, never settling for long until she came across a sweet and unfamiliar scent. She followed the scent path up to the top of a tree and landed lightly on the ear of a porcupine. The porcupine did not twitch her ear, swipe at her, or attempt to knock her over. Encouraged the fly hopped down and proceeded cautiously.

She realized then that this was one of those cases. The porcupine was too large for the little fly to care for. The case would have to be referred to others in the woods, but she could pay her last respects. Pausing to snuggle next to the Phoebe's ear for a moment the coffee-can fly felt all her tension unwind. She was no longer nervous about the coming change. For the second time she had been given a gift, first of life and now freedom from fear.

The fly sat reverentially next to the Phoebe's ear and rubbed her head with the porcupine's essence. She then bowed respectfully and paused to touch the soft furry head lightly with one front leg.

Suddenly there was an enormous displacement of air as if the earth was sucking all creatures to its center. The sun disappeared and the body of the porcupine fell down in the sudden darkness landing at the base of the tree. The coffee-can fly took off, unsure of her direction. Unusual drafts, hot and cold were hitting her like tidal waves but her flight skills were extraordinary and she held her course. She flew up and up rapidly through chunks of ash until she glimpsed the sun still shining above the cloud of smoke. Still carrying the essence of the old porcupine she circled once, took her bearings, and flew directly into the sun.

I woke up. It was 5:30 AM. It had been a strange dream. Roy and Alec were gone but they had left me a note to call Alec's cell phone when I woke up. Alec told me that Roy was staking out the parsonage and would keep an eye on Callie. He himself was at the Two Loons hotel where the tourist from Cleveland was eating a big breakfast. The restaurant opened early to cater to fishermen. Maybe our tourist really was going fishing.

Feeling safe with everyone accounted for I grabbed a light jacket and went directly to Grandmother Tree. Phoebe's body lay on the intersection between two branches that Callie called the "lap" of Grandmother Tree. I pulled myself up and sat on a lower branch so that I could look inside her nest. Gaagoon was inside sound asleep.

In my dream there had been some kind of fire or explosion. I struggled to remember all the details of the dream; I definitely remembered Phoebe's body falling down to the base of the tree but in reality it lay on the branch above me. I was about to retrieve her body when I heard Mahlon's voice in the woods. Annoyed, and wondering if he was busy stealing more wooly mammoth bones, I left Phoebe to find him. I wanted to be alone and peaceful before laying her to rest.

Mahlon and Samantha were headed for Rhinestone Rock. "I knew you were coming to see the sunrise," said Samantha "and I thought I'd join you." I sighed. Watching the sun come up is, for me anyway, generally a solitary activity.

“Mahlon, what are you doing?” I asked bluntly.

“I’m looking for bones.” he answered candidly, adding, “Don’t worry I won’t touch them, I’ll leave them right where they are. My interest is purely scientific.” Since he was staying at Camp Prayer Tracker I could hardly tell him not to walk around. I decided that pretty soon I would kick him out. I wondered if Heartha’s arrest would impact the sale of her farm to him.

“You’re misjudging Mahlon,” said Samantha as he scurried away in the woods ahead of us. The two of us settled on Rhinestone Rock but he ran around like a puppy. “He really loves the idea of the old woolly.” Samantha continued. “He’s like a child with a toy. He’s bought a million books about wooley mammoths.”

I wasn’t paying attention. The woods was too quiet. I had been so concerned about Phoebe that I had not noticed it but now the quiet was unmistakable I did not see a bird or a squirrel or anything at all moving and there was no sound.

Birds will sound a call of alarm when there is danger. Quiet only occurs when the danger is more than a fox or coyotes. It takes deep danger to silence the woods.

“There’s going to be a frost tonight.” Samantha said, “and it already feels cold to me. I miss Texas.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. Of course. There was probably a storm coming with the frost. The weather channel hadn’t said so last night but it was a logical assumption and it would account for the absence of noise and birds. The wildlife had either moved or hunkered down. Glancing at the sky however it did not seem that a storm was imminent and certainly there ought to be some sign of the animals. I shifted uncomfortably on the hard rock.

“You OK?” asked Samantha?

“Oh sure.” I said. “Just thinking.”

“Finish telling me the story” she said.

“What story?”

“The story of how you got my little cousin Callie to smile after her mom died.”

“Oh yeah. I had forgotten about that.” I smiled. “Where did we leave off?”

“You told me that you took her and her granny – who

was my granny too – to see the butterflies. You told me that she sat on her granny’s lap and pretended to be a butterfly egg until she hatched and that then you and she crawled around pretending that you were caterpillars.”

“That’s right. Well let me see. After that we got tired of crawling and Callie was ready to be a chrysalis. I showed her what one looked like ‘They look so dry and they don’t move.’ said her granny, ‘But they aren’t really dead honey. Do you understand?’ She didn’t. ‘A chrysalis needs a good place to hang on to.’ I told her. ‘Someplace where it won’t blow off in the wind, like on a tree branch.’ I offered her my arm to use as a tree branch and said, ‘Hold on with both hands real tight. Our prayers need a strong place to hold on to so when a sad thought comes and the wind blows we don’t let go. Can you say blow wind blow, I won’t let go’?

“Did she say it?” asked Samantha.

“Sure, and so did granny and I rocked my arm back and forth harder and harder but Callie hung on like a pitbull. Finally they were ready to become butterflies, Callie and granny too, and I told them they were both as beautiful as any of the butterflies flying around the habitat because it was true. ‘Congratulations’ I said bowing to the ladies, ‘You have made it to a butterfly. Now you don’t just feel love, or think love, or pray love, now you get to do loving things.’ And I told her how to flap her arms and to sing ‘I have wings, I have wings, I can do loving things.’ That’s all it took. Callie immediately began to chirp ‘wings, wings’ along with me. She flapped her thin arms up and down then rising on her tiptoes she twirled around and around in her pink dress while the butterflies hovered around her. Inevitably she toppled over. She giggled. I knew even before she got up and I could see her face that she was smiling.”

I was surprised to hear my voice crack. I am not sentimental. The spirituality I had nurtured in the children, mixed with the joyful inquiry-based approach to life that was the scientific method, had somehow broken society’s invisible taboos. The camp had been discussed continually in the media. These were children. They needed a wading pool of prayer to play in. The emotions being generated and reported on felt the deep end to me.

“The camp sounds like a wonderful place.” said Samantha. “When are you going to reopen it?”

“I’m not.”

“Why?”

“Partly because of the danger its put Callie in, and partly because of the inaccurate way society still views prayer research. The things in the

media have been pretty bad, and the media merely reflects cultural values.”

“Cripes Keith, do you always have to talk like an encyclopedia? What are you talking about cultural values? Why not just say that with all the crappy stuff that happens to kids in this world people should support a camp that teaches kids to pray? Not that I’m a fan of prayer myself. I don’t believe in God. But I like your style and your sincerity.”

“Camp Prayer Tracker is the only place in the world where children are taught prayer research.” I burst out. “The kind of prayer research I teach is unique. The gene pool of people that can teach it is shrinking. I’m 66 myself. Lord, it took me 11 years to save the money to buy this place and it takes me all summer to earn the money to pay the property taxes. I don’t know Samantha. Ever since the murder I’ve turned down interviews, unwilling to let people probe my personal life, though come to think of it I don’t actually have a personal life, but its the principal of the thing. I know that reporters have to do their job but I’m not throwing the subject of spiritual healing out there as an information product.”

I paused for breath aware once more of the eerie quiet of the woods and feeling edgy because of it.

“Perhaps not giving interviews was a mistake. I can hardly pick up a paper or turn the radio on without hearing an accusation that my camp is testing God, teaching children to doubt, and substituting the cold sterile materialism of the sciences for a living faith.”

“So what’s the other part?” she asked.

“Huh? What other part?”

“You said that all the crap in the media was part of why you were closing the camp. What’s the other part?”

“The other part is me. In one week I have almost killed two people. I have a lot to learn about love and violence, healing and forgiveness, before I ‘m ready to teach children.”

“Well for heavens’ sakes Keith, if you have to be perfect to do prayer research no wonder people aren’t interested.”

“You don’t understand. At the moment that it happened I would have enjoyed killing. I wanted to kill Heartha and Brian, at least for a few seconds.”

“What are you making such a big deal out of an adrenaline rush ? It happens when you’re under attack. It’s a normal reaction. If you get any farther along the spiritual path no one will be able to even see you much less learn from you so if you want to teach kids you better keep one foot in this world whatever you

do in your praying and stuff. Here, I wrote this for you as a present.”

Her sudden change of subject made me look up. She handed me a piece of paper. On it was a verse titled The Prayer Tracker which read:

The blessed antenna
Scanning and feeling
Exploring the qualities
Leading to healing.

Love wide and composite
Universally seeng
The beautiful patterns
Of spiritual being.

The sure climber flyer
To truth sticky footed
Each day flying higher.
In many worlds rooted.

The strong jeweled armor,
Yet heart strings that tug.
Sometimes my friend Keith
Resembles a bug.

It was so like her and yet so totally unlike her. Rolling it up I put it in my pocket and I waited a moment so my voice wouldn't break with emotion when thanking her. It was then that I heard it, a slight ticking noise, like an insect walking on wood. I knew at once, without needing to articulate it in my mind with words, that it was a bomb and that the tourist from Cleveland had been here planting it last night.

In less than a second I realized that if he had been told I would come to the rock to watch the sun rise he would have set the timer for sunrise, which occurred at 6:23. In one efficient motion I looked at my watch and saw that it was 6:22, looked at the horizon and saw the outer edge of the sun breaking the horizon, and glanced down into the crack where lightening had struck Rhinestone Rock and saw the wire. Twigs hid it and it was in shadow but I could see one little naked inch of it where it slithered under the crevice. I almost pushed Samantha off the rock. “Run” I screamed. “It’s a bomb.”

She ran. Mahlon was too far from us to hear me but he heard the explosion when it came and he ran like a rabbit. I felt the explosion

more than hearing it. It felt like something inside of me was caving in on itself. My ears popped. I knew my eyebrows were singed. Samantha fell backward from the force of the explosion. A small tree that had been picked up by the blast flew through the gray powder that was everywhere and landed across her legs. I heard the cackle of fire and knew that the woods was on fire.

Hurrying to Samantha I pulled on the tree so hard that I felt the skin on my hands rip. I could not lift it alone. Mahlon had not stopped running long enough to help but he hadn't gotten far; he had tripped over a root just a few yards forward. "Help us." I yelled to him over the crackling of the fire. "Help me or she will die."

He turned his head, stood up and took one step toward us but screamed when he heard a large pop from sap in a burning tree. His scream sounded like the death scream of a rabbit caught by a hawk. His eyes were so filled with fear that I pitied him but Samantha was at stake. "Help us" I yelled again."

I was terrified too but my years of mental and physical discipline were like so many sandbags helping to hold the flood of fear in one part of my mind while the other parts still functioned. Mahlon had no such defenses. He came toward us wobbling like a puppet with fear dripping out of his eyes. He had taken about 20 steps when he doubled over and vomited but he straitened up again and attempted the long trek of perhaps another 10 to 15 steps toward the fire to where we were. When he froze once more I ran to him and grabbed him, pulling him toward Samantha like a lifeguard pulling a drowning man to shore. Together we lifted the tree off of her legs.

Carrying Samantha away from the fire was not easy. She was six feet tall, stiff with fear, and I could see that both of her legs were broken. The heat from the fire was passing over us like a red shadow and the smoke was making me gag. There was no time to devise a safe gentle method of moving her. Mahlon tried to help me but I motioned him to run, then I dragged Sam toward the cottage, holding her under her arms.

I knew that the closest fire engine would be 20 minutes away in Two Loons. Pumpers and grass rigs would have to come from even farther. Professional help might take some time to arrive but the explosion had been seen and felt in town and before I was even half way to the cottage there were other human voices in the woods and then a large jeep and then people putting down the back seat and lifting Samantha into the back. "Are you al; right?" Mr. Ippy yelled at me over the roar of the fire.

"Yes." I said nodding. "I wasn't injured but Samantha needs to get to the hospital."

The fire seemed to glow all around us from every direction. Mahlon, who was caught up in the confusion of people running, began to turn in

circles trying to figure out which direction was the safe one. Trembling he stopped suddenly and began to cry. When I put my arm across his shoulder to steady him he fainted. He was lighter and shorter than Samantha was so I was able to lift him by myself and lay him in the bed of the sports utility sized jeep next to Sam. The muscles I had developed in college wrestling had not completely faded despite my contemplative life.

Sam was still conscious. "Keith," she said hoarsely, "my legs feel like a bag of nails and when they start this car I'm afraid the bags are going to break and the nails spill out".

I laid my hand on hers and squeezed it. "You need to get to the hospital Samantha. Its only a little longer that you need to hang on They'll give you something for the pain as soon as you get there. I'm so sorry I had to hurt you and drag you that way."

"Thank you for saving me." she said with tears rolling down her face." I'm not worth risking your life for."

"Oh sweetheart" I said to her with feeling, "What you don't know."

"Is Mahlon OK" she whispered through gritted teeth while reaching out to him with one hand as he lay next to her.

"Yeah. He's fine. He came back to help you you know." Looking back and forth from her to Mahlon I was struck by the contrast in their faces. Though she was afraid and in pain Samantha had coping mechanisms. Hers was a face that was used to pain and behind that face lay a mind that knew how to crawl into its cave and endure.

Mahlon looked older than usual, as he lay unconscious. His face seemed naked when it was empty of the con-man brand of charm that usually animated it. He had urinated on himself out of fear and vomit still stuck to his chin. I saw him that way, old and soiled, only for a second. Then in an explosion of joy my mental eyes seemed to expand as if becoming compound instead of single.

Others besides me have said that when they were in a state of holy inspiration they could look at a musical instrument and "see" the music in it. In my momentarily altered state of consciousness I could see the music in Mahlon, the melody of the kind of man he could become rising and falling against the roughly played chords of the kind of man he usually was. The moment faded but what I had seen was more than a hallucination of hopeful idealism. This was a man who, despite his fear and his inexperience with goodness, had consciously turned around and faced being burned alive in order to help Samantha.

Mr. Ippy started the jeep. I gave one last reassuring squeeze to Sam's hands and closed the back of the jeep as she braced herself for the ride. "Are you sure you can walk back to safety yourself?" Mr. Ippy yelled out the window as his wife jumped in the front seat and turned around to attend to Sam and reassure her as they drove. "I'm fine" I waved back. "I'll meet you at the hospital after the firemen arrive.

As they backed up and turned toward the road, away from the fire, I waved to Samantha even though she couldn't see me because she was lying down. I could feel her poem rolled up safely in my pocket.

Mahlon couldn't see me either but as they drove off I lifted my hand to my forehead and saluted him.

.....End

There is one more chapter after this. Samantha has two broken legs and bruises but will fully recover. The tourist from Cleveland is arrested. Keith visits Brian and tells him they have unfinished business. A tusk is found sticking up out of the crater left by the explosion that pulverized Rhinestone Rock. The mother and baby woolly mammoths have been buried deep beneath Rhinestone Rock for centuries. Phoebe has a funeral .The end.

Pheobe's body lay at the trunk of the tree just as I had dreamed it. Working carefully so as not to get her quills embedded in my skin I lifted her into the box. She was surprisingly heavy, easily over 20 pounds. She was covered in the fine gray powder that covered everything. It was all that was left of Rhinestone Rock where she had loved to sit.

As I walked back to the house carrying the box Roy saw me out the window. He knew me well enough that he would not be surprised to see me carrying a dead porcupine. "There you are," he shouted out of my kitchen window. "If you want any pizza you better hurry because Alec is eating most of it."

I waved and he shut the window. Stopping by the edge of the blackened lilac bush where a few flowers and green leaves had survived I plucked a fragrant flower whose light lavender was frosted, like everything else, with the soft gray powder. Laying it in Pheobe's box I said, whether mentally or out loud I do not remember, "Rest in the nest of God, Pheobe, rest in the nest of God."

Then, knowing that Roy was right about Alec, I hurried.

New chapter

One week later her dad talked her into going back to Millie's. "I know you miss granny" her dad said, "but just think Ellie, poor Millie doesn't have any grandchildren. She doesn't have anyone at all." Callie had felt guilty then, and she had wanted to see Gaagoo anyway, so she agreed to go.

They were playing Scrabble. Millie made the word "pinch." Startled at the word something clicked in Callie's mind and she looked at Millie with no more guilt, no more confusion, just with total clarity and dislike. She sensed in Millie a mushy hidden rottenness like crackers gone soft. She thought for a moment of the crisp smell of the lavender cologne that Grandma Brodell had always worn.

"You aren't a real Grandma," she said.

Millie's eyes snapped. "I never had children."

"That's not what I mean."

Millie reached out and

pinched Callie's arm slowly

and hard. Callie did not pull away. “Pinch.” said Millie. Then she stood up and went into her bedroom emerging with a torn green sweater.

“Millie honey” called Emily from the kitchen where she was unpacking some new jelly jars. “Don’t wear that old thing. Don’t you want to look pretty dear? Now go and get that nice pink sweater that Mrs. Peardon gave you. You haven’t worn it since the day she gave it to you, when you came home from the nursing home.”

Millie obediently returned to her room and changed sweaters. “I have to pee,” she said. “Those pills make me pee like a horse.” Callie cringed at her crudity which offended her much more than the actual physical act of a physical horse would have.

“Have you seen the new shower?” Millie asked Callie.

“Yes.”

“It’s got a spigot where the water comes out and Emily puts in on my hair.” As she turned and walked to the bathroom Callie saw that a piece of flypaper was stuck to the back of the pink sweater. The small loop of red string that you use to hang it with lay like a drop of blood against the pink.

“Oh dear” said Emily and set to work to help Millie change the sweater.

Once Millie was in the bathroom Emily said, “Isn’t that cute how proud she is of that new shower?”

Callie jumped up. “I’m leaving, “ she said to Emily “ and I’m not coming back. She’s a wicked old woman.”

“Callie!” Emily exclaimed, genuinely shocked. “That’s an awful thing to say.” Then she softened. “You’re still upset by your grandma’s death.”

“I don’t care what you say or what my dad says or this whole crazy town. She’s fooling all of you, she’s not a nice woman and it doesn’t matter how old she is it doesn’t make her nice. Don’t you get it?”

“Is your dad coming for you?” was all the housekeeper said in response.

“No, he’s got Parish Council Meeting until late tonight. Anyway its not a school night and I’m going out with my friends.” Callie flounced out.

“She’s going out with that boy” thought Emily, and much too young too. “Oh well, preacher’s kids, they’re always the worst.”

Millie closed the bathroom door where she had been listening through the crack. Callie had said she wicked. She knew.

With all the cunning she had developed from decades of using survival skills Millie realized that Callie would think about it and then come back tonight. The housekeeper would soon leave and she would have time to prepare.

“Pinch.” she said.

Matt and his father would not be back until dark, but they had said they would bring a pizza. Callie sat on the steps to their cabin, wondering what to do for an hour. Suddenly she missed her grandma so badly that she doubled over. She tried to picture her grandma's tracks, granny's "sensible shoes" and the round holes made by the walker in the dirt driveway. She imagined the tracks extending far into the woods and tried to follow them in her mind. Her efforts to find her granny were a prayer and even then she knew it.

She decided to wash her face in cold water. The outdoor bathroom and shower room no longer had police tape around it. There would have been too many fingerprints to be useful, thought Callie, with the retreat held here the day before the murder and everyone using this bathroom. It wasn't likely that the murderer would have stopped to go the bathroom anyway. She looked over at the cabin where George Lucor had been shot and shuddered.

Callie had often seen Phoebe in full battle gear with quills erect. As she entered the bathroom she had an odd sensation as though her mind had quills and each one was activated. She saw three strips of flypaper and felt a flame of rage. She wished Matt's uncle didn't own a flypaper company. Since meeting Millie just the thought of flypaper totally creeped her out.

Callie ripped the flypaper off the wall wondering who had hung them. Didn't people know that this was Camp Praeyr Tracker and fleis were safe here?

Suddenly her mind prickles tingled. She stared at the red loop of string at the end of the strips. It was the same kind that she had seen on Millie's sweater, the sweater that Emily said hertha Millie had not worn since the day of the murder.

Only Millie never used store bought flypaper. She made her own. She didn't use red string for a loop. I distinctly remember Samantha telling me the first night that I met her (quote)

Callie looked at the wall and saw the fourth pushpin. There was even a (require from assignment) Mompers flypaper came four to a pack.

Every one of her mind prickles told her that Millie had been here. Perhaps she should tell her dad but she knew he wouldn't believe her. Could Heartha really have ordered Geroge Lcor just because he was trying to buy her land? Everyone always talked about how Heartha loved her land but Callie suspected she both loved and hated it. The farm had trapped her for years and deprived her of a normal life, yet it was the only place that Heath felt safe. She had climbed over the edraisl at the hospital trying to get home, Calie remembered. If she was limber enough to do that she could easily have walked over here to shoot Geroge. Callie knew she was familiar with guns because she had talked about how they had shot their guns off in the woods to celebrate Independence Day. Dearht could read lips and who knows what she overheard that way about the sale of her land. Her water pill made her frequently need the bathroom. Heartha had never read a mystery, never had TV until recently, never watched Jessica Felthecher or even Perry Mason. She would not think about the fact that using the bathroom might leave fingerprints or forensic evidence behind. The bathroom had been gone over by the police but there would have been so many fingerprints after the retreat that the police were not likely to find anything useful. Anyway, they didn't suspect Heartha.

The thing was possible but it seemed far fetched. Callie had begun to suspect Matt's uncle which is why it made her nervous that Matt had not shown up yet. It was so unlike him to be late, and she knew that he had been with his uncle earlier that day.

She certainly couldn't go around accusing an elderly poor person that the whole community was actively helping. Heartha could have had an innocent reason to be at Camp Preyer Tracker. She would need to talk to Heartha, draw her out, and find out more before she could tell anyone her suspicions. She wrote a note to Matt, stuck it in the cabin door and began to walk back toward's Heartha's farm.

A quirky little breeze had been saking round the lake for half an hour and just then skipped up to shore. Callie felt it tickle the back of her neck, but she did not turn around or see that it had blown her note off of the door and kicked it underneath the two wooden steps leading up to the cabin.

Instinctual strength. Still, Callie felt a sense of reassurance.

"It's a nice activity for her" said Emily. "Isn't it interesting to hear Millie talk about the old days?"

Since then it seemed to Callie that the house always smelled of flypaper.

Millie and Emily had hung the flypaper in the barn as festively as though they were hanging Christmas ribbons. They had invited Callei to join in. The flypaper was much too long and Callei worried that Gaagoon, a handy little climber, would get stuck in it. She did not know how to explain that to Emily or Millie.

She wondered if it was her, if she was the one that was abnormal. Praying for flies and talking to porcupines was abnormal, and she did both. She could not handle being abnormal if only she knew what normal meant. Then at least she could fake it.

Birds gave the alarm whenever baseline, or normalcy in the woods, was disturbed. Where was human baseline?

Surely it could not be normal for Millie to stand there and watch the flies trying to pull away. Callei knew that flies had more nerve endings than people. That's how they knew to fly away before you swatted them. They could literally feel the movement of air your hand made like the touch of a finger. If they were that sensitive she could only imagine how the flypaper felt to them.

The flies on the flypaper were beginning to die. Callei turned to leave. She was so angry that she wanted to slap Millie which of course was worse than hurting flies. She knew she must try harder to be kind to Millie.

Only it wasn't just the flies that bothered her. She remembered one day when she had found Millie poking at a hen to make her get off of an egg. "Don't poke her" Callei had said." Just take the egg. "

"She'll bite me if I do" said Milly. "A broody hen is a moody hen."

Callie wondered if poking a hen was a sin. She realized that she was probably over reacting. She remembered the kids she babysat for who were 5 and 7 years old. They lived on a farm and were happy normal kids but when a bumper calf had died last summer their parents had waited a few days before calling the renderer so that the kids could play with it. Bloated claves make good

trampolines. "Don't forget to wash up at the pump" her mom had called cheerfully out the back window. "I don't want that ooze on my carpet."

No one else had reacted though a farm hand was standing there, and so was the father of the children whose giggles could be heard as they played on the trampoline. Could this really be human baseline?

Millie's flat voice broke into her thoughts. "You want to come and watch?" she said.

"Watch what?" asked Ellie jumping.

"The flies." Ellie realized that Millie was still watching the flies on the flypaper.

"You ought to get a TV or something," she said to Millie and left in anger. She had not been back since and her dad had not asked her to go. Rev. Cooper had other things to think about.

Granny Brodell had lost consciousness. Cuts it in thick strips like bacon, slightly curled at the edges. "I had a little arsenic" she said. Not everyone does, but I think it gives it that needed punch. My mom always made it that way. Swore by the pinch of arsenic she did.

Someone follows him home in the gathering darkness, sun shining a red hue between the leaves (check you didn't; use it elsewhere) not Mike at this time of day surely? He knew the woods and darted from tree to tree. Could smell perspiration mixed with the odor of a day's ago skunk and the smell of damp earth. Someone was sweating in the bushes. He could hear the birds fly and the birds give the alarm as the man moved. After all these years they didn't alarm Keith anymore. Concentric circles, changed direction, the whole woods seemed to be telling him that predator was stalking Falls. On stomach and crawls through the underbrush. Back hurts. Hair raises, rickels. Look up how to ride this scene. Goes in the house and locks the door. Glass breaks. Before I could turn around bee bee guns. I've come to deliver your mail. Not afraid to meet my maker. We are already acquainted. Sees the paper, like a Calla lily, writing to the ground as gracefully curled as a white Calla lily. He has cats.

Chapter Seven

in hospital visit from Renee his ex-wife, visit from Sally Peardon, prayer vigil, missed wedding, April comes in wedding gown, Mike the cop visits, Rev. Cooper – prayer vigil symbolic, still a suspect but not the prime suspect, make almost this whole chapter dialog. April visits in wedding dress, she thought he had stood her up.

Gets report from Alec on Defenders, Matt and Ellie visit together – hope that first kiss was like granny's.

Put some description of Pehobe in here. Neither ganny of pehoebe doing well.

Mahlon visits – we can work together on mammoth if we find it, team going down on the 14th (check dates) also sign on house today. Mr. Ippy brings him a free 20 pound bag of rat chow, just put it on the over the bed table there. It's so kind of you Yu really shouldnt have Oh it was nothing.

He uses scientific method figures out its Brian, supposed to be in Cleeland, Alec checks he rented a car and returned it, the car had --- miles when he returned it, Keith won't let him go to the police.

Alec has to go home but leaves him a bullet proof vest that Jessie sends up, paparazzi line in this one, spider man, knows that Alec is coming on the 14th, call me every night to let me know that you are ok.

Matt, my uncle is real interested in the mammoth. Callei brings a book on mammoths.

Chapter 8 Callei's mom had died when she was six. Minister's wives were looked upon by the parish as unpaid employees, sometimes even coming with their husbands to their job interview. It was a disadvantage to Rev. Cooper that he had no wife. Callie's willingness to help out at the foodbank, listen to Mrs. Peardon's complaints about the church flowers, help sell pies at the fair, and accompany him on pastoral calls when appropriate, had been a genuine help to him. Heartha Gloxin in particular was a parishioner who needed a lot of time right now and Callie's willingness to visit the elderly woman had made things easier for Rev. Cooper. It had been an usually busy spring filled with weddings and funerals.

Heartha Gloxin had left school at ten years old when her dad died during the Depression. She had shouldered heavy responsibility from an early age for running the farm and caring for her increasingly invalid mother who didn't die until Heartha herself was 63. Heartha had never married and had no TV, phone or indoor plumbing. When she needed help she would put an old board up against the barn and the neighbors would stop by. Since the local grocery store delivered, a neighbor picked her up weekly for church, and she held no truck with doctors claiming garlic would cure all, she had never had any desire or reason to leave her farm.

Last Christmas the snows had been so high that Heartha, who was now 82, could not reach the outhouse. She had also become becoming dehydrated, and her blood pressure, when checked by a neighbor, was way too high. She had foghorn going to the hospital so an ambulance was called. The town inspector ruled that she could not go back home because her home was not up to code. A guardian ad litem was appointed

and a temporary protective custody order was put in place.

There are many layers of incompetence. Eventually Heartha was found, after her assessment, to be competent in most things but not competent to handle her own finances. A guardian of estate, but not of person, was appointed. In order to help her move back home a local company had agreed to build a bathroom, delaying payment until Heartha's farm could be sold with Heartha retaining a life estate. Only now the man who was to buy the farm was dead and the guardian would need to sell it to someone else quickly in order to pay the new housekeeper, and to pay for the bathroom, hospital and nursing home bills.

Callie thought that meeting Heartha was like reading a book about old-fashioned times. Just before Christmas she had accompanied her dad, Heartha's pastor, on a hospital visit. They were doing an EKG. The patches that the nurse places on your chest during the procedure confused the elderly woman. "I must have gotten into a burdock bush," she said to Callie. "Can you help me get these burrs off?"

Over the holidays Rev. Cooper had tried to draw Heartha out, asking her how her family had celebrated holidays in the past.

"Well we didn't do much," she said, but we would sometimes (use diary here) "except my mom and I would go out in the woods and shoot our guns off. It sounded like firecrackers don't you know. That was all people did back then unless they had money to go to a dance."

Naturally Callie wasn't in the courtroom when Millie had her protective custody hearing but she saw the picture in the newspaper and thought Millie looked small and bullied. "My family never had no dealings with the courts before" Millie told her. She was scared that she was being arrested. Callie assured her that she would be able to go home soon, for indeed the whole community had chipped in to make this happen.

Because Millie was so shy they had broken the rules and let her young friend Callie stay with her during the ordeal of being questioned by a nurse as part of seeing if she was competent.

"It was so unfair dad" Callie complained. "They asked stuff like what were the capitals of countries. And she hardly went to school and has no TV. They should have asked her stuff she knows, like when do the barn swallows come back. When she talks to me she's totally with it."

"I'm so glad she talks to you," her dad said approvingly. "She doesn't understand me."

"You have to stand right in front of her daddy, so she

can see your lips. She doesn't hear so well. But she's not a nut case."

"I know honey," her dad said, "but she does need help and the only way to get it is to appoint a guardian which you can't do unless she's incompetent. Everyone is being very kind. It will work out, you'll see."

Callie didn't see. She didn't think it was kind to call someone incompetent.

Rev. Cooper had approached the subject of a daytime caregiver diplomatically. "Would you be willing to let a lady from church come and be your housekeeper?" he had asked Millie. Millie's only question had been, "Can she drive a tractor?"

After Millie climbed over the bedrails several times trying to go home the nurses gave her medication. Waking up groggy she had startled Callie by suddenly asking her, "Does the housekeeper know about the body in the barn?"

"Don't worry, Callie," her dad reassured her, "that's just her meds kicking in. I've been to Millie's dozens of times and there's nothing in the barn but a few chickens."

But Callie still thought that the elderly woman was more with it than people knew. First chance she got she was going to check out the barn and see.

Though Callie had liked Millie when she first met her she began to be uncomfortable around her and even to resent her as time went on. She thought perhaps it was because she was upset about her grandma, upset that Millie could go home and granny was still in the hospital. She knew that Millie was lonely and needed help and she had been one of the volunteers that had worked cleaning up the old farmhouse, but even working all day as a volunteer didn't help get rid of the guilt she felt at not really liking Millie much anymore. She just couldn't help comparing Millie, who was crude and somewhat withdrawn and detached, to her own grandma Brodell who was a hugger and the kind of grandma that baked cookies. Callie knew the comparison was not a fair one and decided to try harder to get to know Millie.

One good thing about visiting Millie is that she would also be able to visit Gagoon. She had been over to Millie's yesterday and had checked out the barn very carefully but had found nothing out of the ordinary except for the den of

Gagoosn, the young porcupine. Gagoon was not yet as tame as her mother Peobe but probably would become so.

When she had first entered the barn though she had found Heartha poking at a hen to make her get off of an egg. "Don't poke her" Callei had said. "Just take the egg."

"She'll bite me if I do" was the reply. "A broody hen is a moody hen."

Callie wondered if poking a hen was a sin. She knew she was probably over reacting. Her dad had said the other day that she needed to get over being so sensitive about things. With granny in the hospital every little thing seemed to bother her and make her nervous.

After school she headed to granny Brodell's house to pick up the little blue blanket. Granny was fretting for and to bring her more handkerchiefs (Granny did not like to use Kleenex) plus a bottle of her favorite lavender cologne.

Calley loved Granny's house. There was a piece of tinfoil under granny's boots in the hall to keep the carpet clean, a doll with a porcelain head on granny's bed, and a plastic placemat tacked up behind the sink to protect the wall from splatters.

After granny's husband and Calley's mom had been killed in a car crash Rev. Cooper had wanted either to move in with his mother-in-law or have her move in with them. Granny was independent though, and content to have her family right next store instead. The parsonage was located next to Granny's house. Walk down Wissihickon lane you passed the church first, then the parsonage, Granny's house, then the entrance to Camp Pryea Tracker, and finally you came to the driveway of Heartha Gloxins farm.

Just as she was leaving Callie remembered that Granny had said she could borrow her cell phone until she came home from the hospital. Granny often let her grandaughter borrow her cell phone since her dad said she could not have her own cell phone until she was 16. As she locked the door she paused and looked once more at the living room with its old blue davenport and the doilies on the back of the chairs.

She was at that age where she tended to stream her daydreams, thoughts, and prayers all into one stream, leaving them all to God to sort out and confident that She would. Somewhere in that mix of emotions a part of her was maturing and dropping illusions like overripe apples. That part of her knew that granny was very ill and might not ever come back to this house. As much as she had always longed for a cell phone at that moment she wanted to throw it against the wall. Instead she quietly locked the door and took the shortcut through Camp Praeyr Tracker.

As she came to the cabins she was amazed to find yellow polcie tape aorudn one of them and also aroud the buidlkgn that hosued the showers. A muscualr boy who had dark hair that fell over his forehead and the bluest eyss Callie had eve seen sat as still as ahreon on the frotn step of anotehr cabin. . I had mimed to Callei that I needed soemthign to throw. Se offered antoehr empty coffee can and I shook my head . It was too light. She sacmepred away, stil clutching the covered coffee can with her fly, and reched into Gaaggon's den .She skittered back handing me a new piece of a bone that Gaggon had evidcently dragged home. It looked like a bone tha tRoy woud be interested in but this was no time to think of that. I noded my head yes and