

Marc Miller
Ghost Writer

THE KETTLES AND THE KEEPS

Ghosts at War!

Plus
Ghost Mochies
Ghost Stew

By
Marc Miller
Ghost Writer

*The Woman in Red,
And the Man in Blue,
Ninety years dead,
They're coming for YOU!*



The Kettles and the Keeps: Ghosts at War

An Ozark Mountain Ghost Story

By

Marc Miller, Ghost Writer

© 2013,, 2017

The Family Press

///

Chapter One

It had not yet been picked up by the media – the escalating conflict between feuding clans of ghosts in the Ozark back country – and I hoped to find a way to mediate the dispute before it made 60 Minutes or the front page of USA Today. Life there in northwest Arkansas was simple and good – well, good except for the recent ghostly confrontations – and undue attention from the outside world could spoil that.

I had been urged to look into the problem by both Sheriff Chance, of Carlton County, and Sheriff Carter from the county just to the southeast. We had become friends while working together on previous investigations. *

The area is known as Sandy Valley, named for Sandy Creek, which widens there and slows as it meanders its way generally south east toward its eventual confluence with the Arkansas River. The creek flows between Keep Ridge to the north and Kettle Mountain to the South, marking the dividing line between counties.

Reminiscent of the Hatfields and the McCoys, the Kettle's and the Keep's have had their serious differences since before the Civil War. No actual shots have been fired between them since FDR was President but, for some, the long-engrained, hard feelings still smolder close to the surface. Marriage between members of the clans is mutually forbidden and anything resembling friendship best remains unspoken and private. The community of Sandy Valley is divided by the river into North Town – the Keeps – and South Town – the Kettles. Each has its own, tiny, grade school and those youngsters who go on to high school are transported in

separate buses to a consolidated secondary school thirty miles to the West.

The geography is awe inspiring with lofty ridges, often hidden in a thick, early morning mist, which rolls an irregular path down the gently sloping hills into the valley. The area presents a rainbow of wildflowers and shrubs in the spring and is gently textured with a multitude of greens from fescue and leafy sorghum rippling in the gentle breezes of summer. With the coming of fall, the oaks and Maples burst into vivid shades of gold and yellow, red and crimson. In the quiet of the mild winters a smattering of stalwart weeds rise above the valley floor, by then recast in the restful, variegated, tones of clay – white to gray, red to brown – awaiting the renewal of Nature's cycle.

The gist of the situation, as best I've been able to assemble it from here and there, goes like this. Although the mortals of the clans came to a non-aggression agreement of sorts, generations ago, the ghosts of the past seem to want no part of it. Until recently the ghostly antics have been mostly pesky little nuisance-type things – vehicles not starting, jewelry hidden, milk soured, unexplained aches and pains, and the occasional low score on a math test (that may or may not be generally accepted as a legitimate beef against the ghosts of the other clan but one has to give the kids credit for trying!).

During the past month, however, the situation has rapidly escalated into more serious matters. A number of teenagers have become afflicted with unexplainable physical problems – paralysis of the legs, inability to speak, uncontrollable tremors and the like. It appears to have settled into round after round of vengeful events – you harm our kid and we'll harm yours! A Keep becomes affected in some way and within a few days a Kettle comes up ailing. It is no longer just a matter between spirits – the mortals' blood is also boiling as in the days of old. My two friends in law enforcement fear for the safety of hundreds.

It is twelve noon, August 2nd. My name is Marc Miller. I write novels about ghostly happenings. I have just entered Sandy Valley by way of the one gravel road that accesses it from the hills to the west. My reservation at the only local

hotel – a small bed and breakfast, actually – runs through this time next week. My initial concern about lodging in a facility that belonged to one or the other clan – and thereby associating myself with that family - was for naught. The Sandy Valley Bed and Breakfast sits on an oval island in the middle of the creek at its widest point. Single lane, wooden, bridges connect it with each shore.

The brochure touted the Inn as providing, "A God's eye view of the magnificent Ozark Mountains." That sounded hard to beat though my preconception of such a vantage point would have been atop the mountain rather than down there in the valley. It was a two-story, wooden, building with a rustic flair. Each floor was encircled by a wide, covered, balcony complete with chairs, chaise lounges, flower boxes, and hanging baskets. There looked to be space for perhaps eight cars in the empty lot in front.

Quaint is perhaps an overused term, but this Inn, in every immediately identifiable way, qualified as quaint!

I left my belongings in my car and climbed the several, broad, brown stone, steps to the front door. Inside was a pleasantly cool, cozy, lobby-like area, with desk, several comfortable looking chairs, a fireplace – mercifully unlit in the 96-degree heat of the day – and the requisite button below the hand-written sign, "Ring for Service." I rang.

A silver haired, couple soon entered through the door behind the desk.

"Milt and Maggie," the man said, smiling and coming around the desk to offer his hand.

"Mr. Miller," Maggie said, no question in her voice. "It's really good to have you with us this week."

Her tone could not have been mistaken for anything but sincere.

"Happy to be here. A gorgeous area for sure," I said trying to respond in every bit as cordial a manner, then added, "And it's Marc - Marc with a 'c' if you please."

She nodded and turned the big registry book so I could sign in. Milt spoke.

"I'll help you with your bags. You caught us on a slow week. If we get in your hair just tell us to skedaddle. Sometimes we don't take subtle hints very well. Are you a

sunrise person or a sunset person?"

"I guess I've never thought about characterizing myself in those terms."

"Well, like I said it's slow so you can have a room on the west or east or, I suppose, you can even switch in the middle of the week."

"It looks like the town and most of the valley is to the East. I think I'd like to be able to look out over the area."

"East it is, then. Got only one on the East. Second floor right above us here. Nice and big and bright. Got its own AC so you can set it to your pleasure."

"I assume from your speech pattern you're transplants here from someplace in the Midwest."

"St. Paul, Minnesota. Been here nine years last June. Teachers. Took early retirement. It's been a good move. Love it here. Love the people. Love the climate. Love the little Inn."

Five minutes later we were in my room, bags in hand. It was all Milt said it would be. I felt immediately comfortable. The east wall was mostly glass with a sliding door. There was a king-sized bed, a library table with three chairs, and two oversized upholstered chairs on the north and south sides of a large, round, coffee table near the windows. The closet and large bath were backed against the hall wall.

Maggie arrived with clean towels and additional information.

"Breakfast is just anytime you want it before ten o'clock. We're early risers. Can have things ready at five if you require it. There's a cafe in town – not as good eating as here, but it's pretty good."

She giggled.

"If you get in a bind for a snack – or a meal – our fridge is always available to you – seeing as how there's just you this week."

"How kind. Thank you. I have no particular schedule so it's hard to predict such things."

I began unpacking – it seemed clear the conversation would go on.

"Lots of computer stuff, there I see," Milt said. "Got internet access right here."

He went to the north wall beside the table and pointed to the outlet.

"It's not the fastest DSL but it'll get you anyplace on the planet – eventually."

They giggled at his little joke. I giggled at their giggling. They seemed like a nice couple. If I had been writing, that would have been immediately rewritten as, 'They seemed like nice people and made a delightful couple.' People-hood comes first. Couple-hood comes second. I do tend to get bogged down in subtleties that are of no possible interest to anyone but me.

"Haven't had a writer here before, so far as we know," Maggie offered.

"Sorry if I'm spoiling your prefect record."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean it that way."

"Nor did I," I hastened to add. They seemed to understand each other's humor better than that of a third party.

"Milt went to the library and got one of your books. I haven't yet been able to wrestle it away from him yet. What I can tell you is that creaking doors and such now cause him to do a definite double take."

"I'll take that as a compliment. I'm here because I heard there might be some material brewing in these parts for a book, but if there isn't, I can already tell it will have been worth my time to come and enjoy Sandy Valley for a week."

"Oh, there's material alright," Maggie said. "Strange things are happening. We can't explain them. We've never been believers in ghosts and the like – I'll tell you that right up front – but what's been going on recently might make us reconsider."

I walked to the windows and looked down at the river.

"Two bridges – side by side? Is there that much traffic out here?"

"The Keep's bridge is upstream. Kettle's is down," Milt explained.

"Each family has its own bridge?"

"Since Sherman marched on Atlanta."

"Which one does an outsider use?"

"I'd suggest you use one going and the other coming

just to keep it all even," Milt said, all quite seriously. "Wouldn't have mattered one whit two months ago, but like I said, recently things are getting pretty strained between them."

"The town is split with the Kettles to the South – my right as I look out the window – and the Keeps to the North, is that correct?"

"Right. Not just the town – that's small potatoes. No more than a hundred people altogether in town. It's up in the hills where most of the families live. Probably a hundred families each – not sure anybody really knows how many. Wonderful people, except where this family thing is concerned."

"I understand some of the young people have come down with mysterious maladies?"

"That's what they are – mysterious maladies," Maggie said. "A nice youngster who used to work for us here weekends is one of them. His legs just stopped working. He was the first one as far as we know."

"Keep or Kettle?"

"Keep – Willy Keep. High school senior this coming year. His mother runs the cafe – Wilma."

"Willy and Wilma?"

"Gets worse. Father's name is William but he's called Billy."

"Occupation?"

"Billy's the North Town Manager," Milt said. "More like a glorified handyman, in many ways. Keeps the potholes filled, changes the bulbs in the streetlights, paints the city building, keeps the flag waving in good weather – things like that. People lodge complaints with him. It's an elected position with some prestige, however. Chairs the City Council. South Town has the same kind of position – Jack Kettle. His daughter was the second victim of the maladies – she's mute, now. Can't say a word."

"Willy an average sort of boy is he?" I asked fishing.

Milt offered the answer.

"Hard worker. Dependable. Good sense of humor. Honor roll. President of something. What is that, Dear?"

"Senior Class this coming school year."

Milt nodded and Maggie continued.

“Worked for us since he was in eighth grade. Like family, in a way – him to us, not us to him I imagine. Family lines are pretty tightly drawn in these parts. Used to date up a storm but doesn’t talk about that this year. Maybe recovering from a relationship gone sour. You’d like him right off. Nice smile. Probably a bit better than average looking. Average build. Clean mouth. If I were seventeen he’d turn my head, I’ll tell you that.”

Milt put his arm around her waist and pulled her close, saying:

“At seventeen, you’d have turned his.”

He delivered a short peck to her immediately willing lips.

“If it’s any of my business, do you folks have children?”

Maggie beamed.

“A boy and a girl. Both still insist on fighting those frigid, Minnesota, winters. He’s a high school principal and she’s a nurse. Two grandsons – one apiece.”

“I assume the families are larger than that in these parts.”

“Oh, yes,” Milt said nodding. “Five and six kids is more the style around here. Willy’s the exception. He’s an only. Got a passel of aunts and uncles though.”

“His great aunt on his mother’s side is the Keep Family Caller,” Maggie said.

“Caller? That’s like a medium, isn’t it?”

“Maintains contact with the family spirits. Not really sure how it works. Seems to be a gift rather than something that can be learned. It’s a revered position. Agnes is among the most respected people north of the river.”

“Old?”

“As the hills,” Milt said chuckling.

“How can I go about meeting her?”

“I’m sure Willy or his mother would be happy to set it up. Like, I said, he’s a naturally helpful person.”

“I don’t think you really said that, Milton.”

“Like I intended to have implied, then.”

They smiled at each other. Something private between them I assumed.

“How about the Kettle’s. Their Caller?”

"Ruby Mae," Maggie said. "Lives up on top of Kettle Mountain. Unmarried. Callers are always single. She's also ancient. Jack, the South Town manager can undoubtedly arrange a get together."

Milt looked concerned.

"You have to understand that these folks are wonderful people but they aren't very trusting of outsiders. We're just now getting to the place they trust us. I don't know how they'll take to you meddling in their private matters – especially now that things seem to be getting out of hand."

"Is there a doctor in the area?"

"Probably the one drawback to being here. The only really good medical services are some fifty miles in any direction. These folks aren't much for doctors. Mostly home remedies."

"So, the ailing children have not been examined or treated?"

"I sincerely doubt if they have," Maggie said. "Like Milt implied, they like to take care of their own."

"Have you seen Willy since his affliction?"

"He came here once, thinking he might be able to do some things but we used him mainly in place of Milton's back, you know, outside and heavy lifting. Not much for him to do from a wheelchair."

Milt continued.

"We've seen him several times at the cafe. He manages to bus tables there. Strapped bus tubs to each side of the chair. Has a good attitude – better than I'd expect considering it will take him off the football and basketball teams his senior year."

"What are the Callers doing about all this?" I asked.

They looked at each other and shrugged.

"Not being a 'family member' we seldom hear about such things. Word is that they each seem to be behind the escalation – taking revenge for what's been done to their families. Can't swear to that, though."

"If you will, then, point me toward the Callers so I can set up appointments."

They nodded and left. I unpacked, set up my laptop and printer, and made sure my digital camera was ready – for

what, I had no idea. I checked my email and thumbed through the local phone book – a regional book, actually, that must have encompassed five hundred square miles. It was a sparsely populated area, mostly rural, apparently with a very low phone to household ratio.

It was 1:00 when Milt rapped on the frame of my open door. He handed me two slips of paper, explaining:

"Wilma will be happy to hook you up with her Aunt Agnes but she has to meet you first. Assuming you pass muster, she'll work something out. Same goes for Ruby Mae Kettle. Jack, the South Town Manager, will be happy to meet with you, also. Maggie made some tentative appointments. She taught business education classes so you can expect a high level of efficiency from her on such matters. If she seems to get overly dramatic at times, it's because she coached the plays as well."

"And what did you teach, if I may pry?"

"Sociology and shop."

"Interesting combination."

"Lots of the boys who got fed into shop classes in the city were problem kids. My sociology background was unbelievably helpful. Only taught one actual Sociology class a semester – the rest was woods, metals, and electricity."

"Handy skills for a place like this," I said.

"It's like I spent my whole life preparing for this. It has been just wonderful here."

He turned to leave then had an addition:

"If you can make those get together times no need to call them. If not, then a call will be appreciated."

"Got you! Thanks so much. I'll make them."

I had thirty minutes before meeting with Wilma and ninety before Jack. It appeared that I may have lucked into a top-notch appointment manager. I wondered if she also volunteered to transcribe illegible notes.

I decided to walk into North Town and was soon on my way. The bridge connecting the Inn with the main road handled both cars and pedestrians in the same, single, lane. No cars were expected at the lodge so I boldly strode right down the center enjoying the smell of the water and listening to it lap against the old rock wall that had been set in place to

keep the island from succumbing to the creek's relentless pressure.

Nature's Fall was still six weeks away in those parts so the hills presented an interesting contrast of summer greens from the mixture of oaks, maples and pines. Numerous rock outcroppings added variety in both texture and hues to the country side, dotting the area with sprinkles of grays and browns. The breeze, weak though steady, came up the valley from the southeast running counter to the patient current of the lazy, southbound, creek.

Main Street was only a short block long, boasting – in addition to the Sandy Valley Cafe – the Keep State Bank, Keep Supplies (which looked to be a general store in the old west sense of the term), Ben's Feed Store, a vacant chiropractor's office, the city building and garage, and Mike's – a combination gas station/auto repair shop. The street surface, as seemed typical from my experiences in the area, was hard packed chat, white when first laid down but long since darkened to gray through years of use. Behind the tightly set stores, a small residential district spread, somewhat randomly, back across the mostly level valley floor toward and then up Keep Ridge. On the south, a well-maintained park with tables, fireplaces, and a pavilion filled the gentle, grassy slope to the creek. A swimming beech complete with pier and floating wooden platform, occupied the creek-side edge of the park. At the far end stood the church – larger than I would have expected – and the small, four room, native stone-faced, grade school.

Clearly the residents were proud of their village, as the brightly painted buildings were in good repair, the lawns were closely cropped, and there was nary a pot hole to be found. What I saw did not reflect the general level of near poverty I was sure existed there. Folks always seem to find ways of feeding that which is the source of their pride.

I approached the cafe and entered. The booths and chrome legged tables and chairs marked it as 1950's vintage. The lad in the wheelchair looked at the woman behind the counter.

"Hey, Ma! Mr. Miller."

"And you knew me how?" I asked.

"One: you're an outsider. Two: we're expectin' Marc Miller. Three: I've saw your picture on the back covers of Marc Miller's books."

"I suppose that's that, then," I said, approaching him and extending my hand.

"Glad to meet you Wilbur Keep, usually called Willy, son of William/Billy and Wilma Keep, great nephew of Agnes Keep, Caller of the Keep family."

"You're good, too. We'll make a great team."

I thought of myself as a solo act even though it seldom worked out that way. We'd see about the team thing later. Wilma approached me.

"Early's better than late," was her opening remark. "Coffee?"

"Yes. That would be great. Black."

"Come sit at a table so I can join ya with this contraption," Willy suggested.

He scooted a chair to the side and made room for himself. I thought better of offering help and took a seat opposite him interested in how systematically he went about things. Tray in hand, Wilma joined us with three coffees one only half full. I soon understood. Willy added copious portions of cream and sugar then drank it through it a straw. I refrained from commenting, though would have liked to suggest a long squirt of seltzer water.

"So, Mr. Marc Miller, what brings you to Sandy Valley?" Wilma began, offering sugar.

I waved it away with a polite, "No thank you."

Her question seemed a reasonable place to begin.

"The Sheriffs of the two counties that cradle this area both called me sharing a mutual concern about the escalating problems here."

"You sound like a writer, for sure," she said reserving her pleasant smile for a long moment before allowing it its freedom".

It seemed a positive signal so I continued presenting my credentials.

"I've had some success in dealing with ghostly phenomenon in the past. . . ."

She nodded impatiently, interrupting the litany of

triumphs I was prepared to parade on my own behalf.

"I've had blow-by-blow accounts of all your books from Wilbur here."

"Ma-a! Willy, please!"

"He hates his given name. Has a hard time givin' his ol' Ma any latitude in usin' it."

I would not take sides in that one. She continued.

"So, what are Sheriff Chance and Carter concerned about?"

"I believe the terms, civil war, and the Sandy running red with blood were mentioned."

"Goes back forever so far as most of us in these parts is concerned," she said.

"Anybody remember what started it?"

"Probably not. Ain't important. Keeps knows we was right. Kettles knows they was. Ya have to think like that when its family pride at stake, you understand."

"I really want to understand. Have the two separate communities really worked in the past?"

"Pretty well, I suppose. Problems about it starts for the kids when they reaches high school and are forced to mingle. Hard to hate somebody you come to like, ya know."

I had to assume Wilma's insights were not common to the folks there. Willy had been chomping at the bit to toss in his two cents worth.

"Lot's a them Kettles is fine folks. A few ain't. No different than the Keeps but I wouldn't dare say that out loud here in North Town."

"I believe you just did," I suggested with a smile.

"You know what I mean."

"Where do the spirits – the ghosts – fit into all of this?"

Willy deferred to his mother.

"For nearly a hundred years now, we really been gettin' on pretty good together – the Keeps and the Kettles here in this realm."

I assumed she was referring to the living, breathing, mortals' realm but didn't ask for clarification.

"It's been the spirits that can't give up the old grudges, ya see. They keeps pushin' to remind us all about how it was and how they think it still oughtta be. They was shootin' mad

at each other back in olden times, Mr. Miller.”

“Pushing?” I needed clarification of that.

“Pesky little things. Stallin’ people’s cars. Movin’ things from where they was put. Causin’ it to rain on weddin’ days. Prickin’ fingers with sewing needles. Dullin’ knives. Things like that.”

“Aren’t all of those things that just happen by chance to all of us, everyday – without the need to call on ghostly explanations?”

She raised her eyebrows.

"Around here if it's not workin' or out of the ordinary, it's the spirits, plain and simple."

"The way you phrased that makes me think you may not really believe it."

"Around here there are some things a person just don't talk about."

That was that and I would not press her further. From Willy's reactions throughout the conversation, I got the idea he might be more willing to chat about such things. I would wait until he and I were alone.

"There's reason enough to believe, now," she continued as if trying to convince herself. "The Apparitions are back."

"I don't understand."

"The Man in Blue and the Woman in Red. Lots a stories about them appearin' durin' the war between the states. They was credited with peculiar sayin's – some thought they was sayin' one thing and others thought they was sayin' somethin' else. Have evil powers."

Willy explained further.

"They just ask questions – never make outright threats or nothin' like that. But then bad stuff happens."

"Questions?"

"The Woman in Red appeared to me the night my legs stopped workin'. She said: 'If I cut off your legs what would my people believe?'"

"The Woman in Red is a Kettle, then?"

"Oh, yes, Sir. And the Man in Blue is a Keep."

"And how do you know this?"

"It's just always been known. Like Ma said, from Civil War days and before."

"And these two apparitions have just recently surfaced again after all that time?"

They both nodded and Wilma spoke.

"The night Willy was afflicted was the first time either one had been reported in a hundred years. Then, the very next night, the Man in Blue appeared over in South Town and muted a beautiful girl – one in Willy's class at school."

"Muted? You mean caused her to be unable to speak?"

Again, they both nodded.

"Can you describe the Man in Blue?" I asked looking directly at the boy.

"Wears a old fashioned blue suit and high black boots. A white silk scarf around where his neck should be."

"Should be?"

"Neither of them have heads or hands. His black, top hat jist floats above where his head should be. Her red, straw hat does the same."

"And you know about his appearance, how?"

"From the stories of the olden days and from what the Kettle kids are sayin' now."

"You see the Kettle kids, then?"

"Sure. We go to the same school – of course it's out for summer now. We play on the same teams. It's not thought right for us to be actual friends, but we know each other and mostly we get on okay. Two Kettle guys come over to see me after this happened and they told me how Annie described the Man in Blue."

"And the Woman? Exactly how did she look?"

"Tall, taller than average, I'd say. A long, old fashioned, red dress – it went clear down to the ground so I can't say what kind of shoes. No hands. No head or neck, and a string of pearls above the tight collar on her dress. Long sleeves with tight cuffs, buttoned tight."

"Why don't you draw him a picture," Wilma said then turned to me. "He's got an artist's spirit. Can draw anything."

She got up and went behind the counter returning with a large, flat cardboard box which she placed on the table. Willy took out a pad and several colored pencils and began sketching. Five minutes later he had produced an excellent 8

X 10 of the image he had seen. One thing struck me odd about it but I let it go.

"May I keep this for a while?"

"Sure. I think I can do a pretty good one of the Man in Blue if that'll help."

"Yes. Certainly. Go for it."

Again, within five minutes the image had come to life on his pad.

"I'm intrigued about why, with no head or hands, he would wear boots. You'd think either gloves and boots or no hands or feet. It seems a puzzle."

Willy shrugged.

"Those pearls. That's exactly how they appeared to you?"

Wily reexamined the sketch and nodded.

"Yes. Sir. That's just how they looked."

"These will be a great help. Thank you."

Willy nodded and smiled, first at me then at his mother.

"I understand there have been some afflictions since you and the Kettle girl."

"Five more in each family."

"Afflicted how?"

"Tremors, hair fell out, skin blotches, terrible headache, deafened, one kid only speaks gibberish now – terrible things."

"Yes. I assume you have all seen a doctor."

I was fishing.

Wilma answered.

"We is not much for doctorin' here."

It was intended as a full answer to my question and really didn't allow any further suggestions on my part. I moved on.

"About Aunt Agnes. May I see her?"

Wilma looked at Willy and Willy nodded a bit more enthusiastically than seemed appropriate. An adolescent boy's enthusiasm, perhaps.

"Eleven tomorrow mornin'. My husband, Billy, will take you. She lives back in the hills. Be at the city building at 10:30."

"What should I know about her or about Callers in general? I must plead ignorance about them, I'm afraid."

"The birthdate on the front page of her family Bible makes her eighty-eight – no birth certificates was kept in these parts back then. Had the gift since a young girl. Would wake up at night screamin' about ghosts. Could see things, you know."

I wasn't sure I did, but I nodded hoping to hear more and containing my urge to say that I, too, had awakened screaming about ghosts as a young boy but no one had lauded me for having a gift.

"The gift usually skips a generation – every other one produces a new Caller. She keeps us in contact with the spirits of the Keeps that's gone before us. Shifts important things back and forth. Mostly keeps us up to date on the going ons in the spirit world."

"What's her take on all these strange recent happenings?"

"You'll have to ask her. She's troubled by it. Gettin' strong encouragement to back us off from minglin'. May be worse than that, but she won't share anything like that 'til she's sure."

"Worse?"

"Like back to the olden days - fightin', hurtin' – the unthinkable."

"And she has such power that if she gives those kinds of directives the rest of you will carry them out?"

"Some will. Once somethin' like that starts, it takes on legs of its own, you know."

"Yes. Indeed, I do."

Willy looked me directly in my face.

"You can fix this, right?"

His brow furrowed above an altogether serious face.

"I'll give it my best shot. You have to understand, I'm basically a writer. I have no experience mediating disputes between factions of jousting ghosts. I know of no one who has. Probably the most important thing is to do what you can to see that cool, mortal, heads prevail here north of the creek."

Wilma reached her hands out toward Willy who cradled them between his palms. He looked at me.

"You gunna write about this, then, is that what you're sayin'?" Willy asked.

"Would it bother you if I did?"

"Oh, no. That's not what I meant. It would be great once we get things all calmed down."

"Yes. Once it's all calmed down. I agree."

"You'll be meetin' with the Kettle's Caller, too, I guess," Wilma asked more than stated.

"Yes. I'm to meet with Jack Kettle in just a little while to see if that family will be as gracious about it as you folks have been."

"Jack is a good man. It was his daughter, Annie, that was afflicted second in all this," Wilma said emphasizing her endorsement with a series of slow, deliberate nods.

"And Ruby Mae? She is also a good person?" I asked wondering just where the lines of love and hate met.

"Oh, Yes. Stubborn and stays to herself mostly but she's good folks."

I'd push a bit further, then.

"And the girl, Annie. You know her, I assume," I said directing my question toward Willy.

Although his words didn't miss a beat, his ears turned red.

"Yes. She's in my class at school. Good grades. Well liked. Cheerleader."

"Boyfriend?"

"None that anybody seems to know of. Kettle's romantic business is there private business."

"No romance across family lines?"

Wilma answered.

"That's the one line that's never been crossed. The Kettles come here to eat and the Keeps use the leather and saddle shop in South Town. We can each even be seen on the wrong side of the Sandy after sundown, now, but the blood line is sacred."

I took that to be a roundabout way of saying, 'No', to the romantic intermingling of the families.

"If I may be so bold as to make an observation. It appears that you like and even respect members of the other family and yet you don't allow friendship. Doesn't that seem . . . what's the word I'm searching for?"

"Absurd?" Willy offered, as if before thinking.

"I was going for something more like odd or strange or bizarre, but, yes, absurd seems appropriate."

Again, I received a duet of shrugged shoulders but no useful comment. Clearly, some things were not open for discussion with an outsider.

"If, after I meet with both Callers, I think there is something I can do to help, I will want to meet with the youngsters who have been afflicted. I assume that can be arranged."

"Sure. They are all good friends of mine," Willy said. "You just say when and I'll see to it."

"And what about the Kettles?"

"I can handle that, too."

His mother frowned at him.

"I can handle it, Ma. It'll be okay."

It had been an obvious disagreement – something more than the typical parent-teen dissention. I had no legitimate reason to pry. Milt must be in his element, I thought. The sociology of the area was mind boggling!

"Well, I appreciate all your help and guidance folks. I suppose I need to be on my way so I'm not late across the bridge. The city building will be easy to find, I assume."

"South town is like a carbon copy of North Town," Willy explained. "Look for the flagpole."

I nodded and stood offering my hand to Wilma and then Willy.

"I'll walk you out – well, as close to that as I can come these days," Willy said.

Outside, out of earshot of his mother, we each shared our private concern. Willy went first.

"I know that you understand how serious this all really is. It may take the Mother Caller to solve it all."

"Mother Caller?"

"The story is that she was the greatest Caller of all time – born of a Keep and a Kettle back before the War. In times of greatest crisis her spirit can be called upon to return and handle things. Once, even, she appeared without being summoned. Things got that bad between the families. Both Aunt Agnes and Ruby Mae will have to agree to call her. I just thought you needed to know about that before your meetin's."

"Thank you. Yes. I'll keep it in my hip pocket, so to speak. Now, may I ask you something?"

"Sure." He squirmed as if uncomfortable in his chair.

"You seem so unconcerned about your affliction. Most young athletes your age would be in a fit of deep depression over it."

"I got great confidence in you, Mr. Miller."

"Aside from the fact that may be a false impression about me, you didn't know of my presence here until what, an hour or two ago."

"Well, yes, but not really."

"You speak in riddles."

"There's something you don't know – nobody does hereabouts. You see I'm the one who called the two sheriffs and suggested they might want to contact you. I figured nothing' would keep you from comin' to investigate somethin' this weird. That needs to stay just between us, you understand. Callin' in a outsider would be a pretty big black mark on my name."

"Certainly. Our secret. You are definitely a take charge type, aren't you? I can see why your peers elected you class president."

"Maggie been tellin' tales?"

"Oh, yes. They are both very fond of you, you know."

"Me, too."

He beamed.

"I can hardly wait until all this is over and I can be back out there helpin' them again."

The sentence raised a dozen questions in my mind but I would pursue them later. I thanked him again and began making my way toward the double bridges.

* The Specters of Carlton County, Marc Miller, The Family of Man Press

The Malevolent Ghost of Charlie Chance, Marc Miller, The Family of Man Press

CHAPTER TWO

The twin, wooden, bridges were less than one hundred feet from end to end there at the narrows of the creek and sat the length of a football field downstream from my room at the Inn. They were gently arched and built to stay the century, supported from below by a triangular grid of eight by eights. I took the one to my right figuring that if I always took the one to my right – coming or going – I could never be accused of favoritism. I paused at the high point and looked around. The two small communities were, indeed, very similar in layout – short, wide, main streets with ample, grassy, parks facing each other across the crystal-clear water. Kettle Mountain, to the south, was higher and more rugged than the flat-topped Keep Ridge to the north.

I proceeded across the bridge and exited onto a familiar feeling, hard packed, chat covered street. The flag pole identified the City Building and a few minutes later I entered its front door. Jack was working at the only desk in the small, relatively stark, though well windowed, front office. He smiled – well, I assumed it had been a smile – and stood, offering his hand and motioning me to a chair.

"Mr. Miller. Nice to meet you. Stayin' up at the Inn, I suppose."

"That's right. Seems like a very nice place."

"Milt and Maggie are good folks. The only outsiders who ever did fit in around here."

I wondered if that was a subtle hint about my own probable future. I let it slide and waited for him to direct the conversation. He got right to the point apparently needing

less of the usual opening friendship setting chit chat than most folks in the area.

"Want to speak with Ruby Mae, I understand."

"That's right."

"It's about the recent afflictions?"

"Yes, in part. In part to learn what I can about the spiritual beliefs of the folks in these parts."

"Beliefs about ghosts, you mean, I assume."

"Well, yes. Ghosts, apparitions, spirits, souls. Goes by lots of names I've found."

"I haven't read your books but my daughter seems to know 'em all forwards and backward. School assignment or some such thing."

It seemed to imply neither approval nor disapproval of my work. More, I supposed, admitted disinterest on his part.

"Your daughter, Annie?"

"Yes. Heard about her affliction, I suppose."

"Yes. I'm so sorry."

"Figured you'd want to meet her. She's in the back room."

"How thoughtful. Thank you."

"I have to admit if I hadn't invited her she'd a stormed the place on her own to get to meet you. Ain't had no celebrity around here since Governor Clinton's motorcade got lost that first time he run fer office."

He chuckled. It was my first indication that the edges of his mouth could, in fact, curl toward his cheeks and that he might even have a sense of humor.

He turned in his chair toward the door in the back of the room.

"Annie, honey. Mr. Miller's here," he called softly.

It was a different, gentler, tone of voice.

An extremely attractive, jean and sandal clad young lady, with long, black hair appeared and with no hesitation came directly toward me. She was petite in every dimension, though clearly seventeen. She carried a pad and pen and had something prepared. She offered the pad with a smile.

"Good to meet you, Sir. I've read everything you've written – well, almost. I'm so glad you agreed to come."

"It seems my presence here is no secret to anybody," I

said with a smile not voicing my question as to how she knew I had been invited. She took a seat. I handed her the drawing of the Man in Blue. I understand that you have made this gentleman's acquaintance."

She looked at the drawing, then at her father, and finally, back at me. Neither her expression nor general demeanor suggested any particular emotion as she wrote:

"The Man in Blue. He took away my speech."

"Did he say anything to you while you were in his presence?"

She wrote:

"It was a question: 'What if no one in the valley could speak?'"

"And how soon after that did you find yourself mute?"

She wrote:

"I met him on the bridge at about nine o'clock at night. I often stand there and look east down the river watching the moonlight dance along the water. He appeared out of nowhere – that's not exactly how it was. I saw a shadow moving up the bridge from North Town. I figured it was from a cloud passing in front of the moon. It stopped about ten feet from me and then it just appeared – like it twisted into view out of the shadow. It just stood there looking at me – well, not having a head or eyes that sounds strange – but then it spoke, just what I told you. Then it twisted itself back into a shadow and went back the way it came. I ran home and into my parents' room to tell them what had happened. That was when I discovered I could not talk. I was never so scared in all my life."

I looked at Jack who had taken his daughter's hand in his on the desktop.

"It's like she wrote, there. Her mouth moved but no sound come out. She looked so puzzled and touched her throat and she tried again but still nothin'. She made a hand motion like she wanted to write and Norma – my wife, Annie's mother – took a pad and pencil from the drawer in the bedside table. She sat on the bed and begin writin', tellin' us what she just told you."

"Has she been seen by a doctor?"

"No. We tend to take care of our own around here."

Again, it was intended to end that line of thinking.

“I assume Ruby Mae knows about it – and the others.”

“Oh yes,” he said. “First one I told. I took her right up to Ruby Mae’s the very next thing after we seen what happened. Don’t often travel that trail at night. She laid her hands-on Annie’s head and pronounced it the work of spirits.”

“She has ways of knowing such things, then?”

“Oh, Yes, Sir. Ruby Mae knows things the rest of us can’t even dream about.”

“There is a rumor that the Callers may play some part in the escalation of things. Could that be true?”

They paused, looking at each other. Finally, Jack spoke:

“It’ll be the Callers themselves who will have to answer that. I’d be very careful about how and when I asked it. There’s nothin’ worse than a irritated old Caller. Ruby Mae and Agnes never met, but there’s a agitation between ’em, you see. Don’t give ’em reason to think you’re playin’ one against the other.”

Annie wrote a single word on the pad and showed it to me.

“Jealousy!”

Her father craned his neck to look and then nodded, reluctantly.

“That’s true, I suppose,” he said. “They each needs to believe they is a greater Caller than the other.”

“You’ll have to excuse my ignorance about such things but do Callers hold séances or something akin to them?”

“If your askin’ if Ruby Mae will help me talk with my granny or some other departed family member, no. She don’t do that kind a thing. It’s more general. Hard to describe fer a outsider. She passes things back and forth – feelin’s, memories, things of importance. See, it’s really hard to put it into words.”

“Does she communicate with the Callers who have gone to the beyond?”

“Oh yes.”

“Would they ever require her to do certain things?”

“You got all the right questions to really rile her up good an proper, Mr. Miller. I’d say don’t press into things she don’t

open up for you first.”

“I’m told she is a pleasant person. I’ve even heard her called a great lady by someone who is not a Kettle.”

They looked at each other, puzzled.

“Got no response to that, I guess, other than to agree with you. Ruby Mae is a fine person. You’ll like her, if you just don’t rile her!”

It sounded like I may have passed inspection at least marginally.

“So, am I to speak with Ruby Mae?” I asked.

“Tomorrow at two o’clock. Be here at one thirty. She lives a far piece up the mountain. It takes a jeep. No real road into her place. Just a trail off the main road.”

“She lives alone?”

“You really don’t know much about these things, do you? There are some girls with the gift who live there with her. Someday she’ll select one of them to be her successor.”

I suspected the term, girls, was meant to designate gender rather than age. I had one more question for them, although I directed it at Annie.

“About the other Kettle young people who have been afflicted – do they relate events similar to yours? Were they each first visited by the Man in Blue?”

She wrote as Jack waited patiently for her to finish.

“Yes. They were all visited first and every time the question had something to do with the affliction they came down with.”

“Where? When?” I asked.

Annie looked at her father as if to say he could answer that as accurately as she and with less effort.

“Several tell of bein’ on or near the bridge, but that was mostly the first few. After that it’s been no special place so far as I know. You Annie?”

She shook her head indicating agreement with what her father had said.

“Time of day?” I said repeating the second part of the previous question.

Jack looked at Annie. She wrote.

“Just after dark, between 8:30 and 9:30 I’d say.”

“And they are all teenagers?”

Annie nodded as her father answered out loud.

“Yes.”

“Any other trait they may have in common? I don’t even have an example in mind, I suppose?”

They thought. Jack thought aloud, looking at Annie.

“Well, I’d say they come from small families, wouldn’t you?”

Annie nodded and wrote something.

“Two have one sibling and the other ten are only children, like me.”

“Well, now! How would that be explained? As I understand it there aren’t many single child families in these parts.”

“You’re right there,” Jack said. “We love kids. Any couple that can have a passel, has a passel.”

Annie looked up into her father’s face. A wonderful look passed between them.

“Any thought as to why the Apparitions go after the smaller families?”

They shrugged and shook their heads, seeming to be every bit as puzzled as I was. I took out the other drawing and handed it to Annie.

“Does this look like how you’ve heard the Woman in Red appears?”

She took the picture and her eyes went directly to Willy’s signature in the lower right corner. She pointed to it and wrote:

“Great artist. Know who he is from school. Good kid. Tell him I’m sorry about his affliction.”

She looked up at her father as if expecting a reprimand for initiating the message to Willy. None was given. She then went on to examine the drawing eventually looking up and nodding. Again, she wrote:

“It’s how I hear she looks but then she hasn’t appeared to any of us Kettles so my info is strictly second, probably third hand.”

I reached out for the picture and she returned it to me. I stood and offered my hand across the desk. Jack accepted it, also rising.

“I won’t take up any more of your time. Thanks for your

help. I'll be here at one thirty tomorrow. By the way, if, after I meet with the two Callers, it looks like I may be able to help in some way, I will want to meet with each of the victims. Will you be able to help arrange that over here?"

Annie nodded.

"We'll cooperate in any way we feel's proper," Jack said.

"Thanks again."

In any way they feel is proper. It wasn't a blank check by any means but I supposed it was as good as it got with outsiders. The Kettles seemed more protective, more reluctant than the Keeps. It may have just reflected my small sample of families.

I left and stood on the sidewalk, immediately struck by the terrible heat. It was a blue sky devoid of so much as one tiny puff of white. The steady, gentle, easterly, breeze seemed to do little other than drive the hot, dry air, deep into my skin.

I realized I was hungry. There was a question I needed to ask Willy so I would try to kill two birds with one stone (I hate that saying. There must be a better one.). I would also see what the Café had to offer at that time of day.

I took the bridge to my right. So far so good, I thought. I had played no favorites.

Wilma was alone in the café. Her face brightened as I entered.

"Didn't expect to see you back here today."

"Just realized I haven't eaten since breakfast and wondered if you could slap something together at this time of day."

"Sandwiches – ham or egg salad. Can always fix breakfast fare – eggs, cakes, fried ham."

"That ham salad sandwich sounds great. Maybe with chips and a diet cola?"

"Got it. Five minutes. Got some hot, mashed potato salad if you'd like."

"Hot mashed potato salad. Never had that. Sure. Sounds interesting."

"Popular here in the south. You'll like it if you like vinegar."

“Used to sneak it right out of the bottle as a little boy. Only reason I’d eat the spinach my mother forced upon me – had to be floating in vinegar.”

“You’re probably a southern boy just born out of place.”

She smiled indicating it was meant to be humorous – a trait that seemed to be less evident across the creek.

“I was hoping Willy would be here. Thought of another question or two for him.”

“He’s back at the house – twenty yards behind the café. I’ll call him. He can be here by the time I have your lunch ready.”

She placed a call. She had been right. He rolled in the back door as Wilma slid the plate to me across the counter. In deference to the wheelchair, I picked things up and moved to a table.

“You handle that rig pretty well,” I said as he leaned over to pull up his socks and retie his right shoe.”

“Every year we have a wheelchair basketball game at school to raise money for the student council. I’ve played the past three years. Guess I picked up some skill that way.”

He rolled into place across from me.

“So. How did things go over at South Town?”

“Very well, I’d say. I’ll see Ruby Mae tomorrow afternoon. By the way, Jack’s daughter, Annie, sends her condolences on your affliction. She says you have a reputation as a fine artist and an all-round nice guy.”

He nodded, obviously uncomfortable at the compliment, but made no comment.

“I got to wondering while I was speaking with Annie and her father if there were any traits in common among the Keep kids who have been afflicted.”

“Like?” he asked frowning his brow.

“I’m not sure. It’s pretty open ended, I guess. I’m groping for anything.”

I didn’t want to share the revelation from South Town until I heard his independent reaction.

He shrugged almost before having time to consider the question.

“Nothing comes to mind.”

Wilma walked over, bringing Willy a soda.

“Somethin’ struck me and Billy the other night. It’s like all the kids come from really small families – only kids or just one brother or sister. That seems really strange considerin’ the size of most families around here.”

“Anything in the – I’m not sure what to call it. I don’t want to offend you – in the ghost lore that might account for that?”

Again, double shrugs.

“That’s as good a term as any. Me and Ma ain’t ones to be offended so you don’t have to be on your guard that way around us. I never heard about such things. Aunt Agnes will know if anybody does.”

“One more thing, then. Is there any pattern to when or where the Apparition of the Woman in Red appears?”

“The time an place you mean?”

I nodded. They looked at each other. Willy spoke.

“I was on the east side a the bridge droppin’ stones in the water about nine o’clock at night. I like to watch their plops plume in the moonlight. It was the next morning I couldn’t get out of bed. I think one or two of the other confrontations were on or near the bridge, too. You’ll probably find they all occurred about that same time, give or take fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“Any chance that the bridges hold some significance for these two Apparitions?”

Shrugs. I didn’t push for more.

“How did it come into view – The Woman in Red?”

“What do you mean?”

It had seemed a pretty straight forward question to me, and Annie had offered it straight out but I would explain further.

“Did it just walk up to you? Had you seen it enter the bridge? How did you first notice it and how did it leave?”

Willy nodded indicating that he understood.

“It come from South Town end a the bridge.”

“That would have been to your right then as you faced east?”

“Ya. My right. She stood maybe ten feet from me. It was like she twisted out of a shadow, said her piece, and then twisted back into the darkness.”

“I guess you didn’t stick around to search for it.”

“No, Sir! I’m not ashamed to admit I took off and run all the way home. The last time I run, ya know.”

His mother bit at her lower lip sharing his distress. I added a comment.

“Guess I’ll just have to keep my old telephoto lens pointed at the bridge the next few evenings. It seems to be my only lead. Who knows what I may catch.”

“Do ghosts photograph? I mean in your books you’re always takin’ pictures of them, but I don’t recall you ever sayin’ that what you got was really ever ghosts or just the make-believe kind.”

“Often times I haven’t been completely sure if I had pictures of ghosts or their imposters. I guess I don’t have a good answer for your question.”

He nodded, sipping up the last of his soda with that universally understood sound that had nowhere been heard prior to the invention of the straw. My answer had clearly not been satisfactory but he did not press me further.

I finished my lunch – delicious by any standards – other than Maggie’s, I guess – and enjoyed making small talk about the community and Willy’s school. He spoke about fall football practice getting underway the following week and appeared to believe he would be back tossing touchdown after touchdown. It seemed that he had not yet grasped the actual severity of his problem.

I stood to leave and took out my wallet as I searched the table with my eyes for my check.

“Your money’s no good here,” Wilma said. “You just fix things up for Willy and the others and we’ll call it even.”

“I won’t feel comfortable coming in if you don’t let me pay.”

“And you’ll offend me greatly if you don’t keep comin’ in and you wouldn’t want Aunt Agnes’s great niece to be upset with you now, would you?”

Willy smiled back and forth between us, enjoying the battle of wits he was certain his mother would win.

I tossed a dollar bill on the table.

“A tip for the busboy. I’m sure you wouldn’t deny him his due, now would you?”

She nodded thoughtfully agreeing to the terms of the compromise. I returned it in kind.

“See you later, then.”

I turned and walked to the door. Willy called after me.

“Baked ham and sweet ‘taters fer supper. Better be here by six or you’ll have to settle for steak.”

I had never considered steak a settle-for item, but then I would prefer the ham so made a mental note for five-thirty. Again, the blast of heat caught me off guard. I wanted to mingle with the residents and figured that would come naturally at the café. It was the Kettles I needed to meet. I retraced my steps across the bridge and entered the Emporium – the Kettle’s equivalent of the country store. The hand painted sign on the door made me feel immediately comfortable – safe – there in that valley. It read:

Door never locked. Need something after hours help yourself and leave the money on the counter (or drop by and pay latter. -- Bess

Inside, there were a half dozen other people shopping. I began looking around to get a feel for what things were considered the necessities of life in Sandy Valley.

I was immediately approached by a middle-aged woman who I figured was the owner. Her first words confirmed my assumption.

“I’m Bess, Mr. Miller. How can I help you?”

Again, I had been called by name. Outsiders must have truly been a big event. I peeked out into the street, wondering when the marching band and floats would parade by in my honor. I chuckled to myself.

“Actually, I was just intrigued by your store so hoped it would be okay if I looked around.”

“Sure. Lookin’s good. Just let me know if I can help.”

She returned to the register counter and continued her conversation with several gray-haired women.

The place was furnished with wooden counters and shelves out of the early nineteen-hundreds. The floor was bare wood and the ceiling a mosaic of two by two foot, embossed, metal squares. The cash register with its

computer screen seemed uncomfortably out of place. The glass front candy case reminded me of something Normal Rockwell would have painted complete with some wide-eyed, freckle-faced kid with stick-out ears pressing his nose against it.

There was an aisle of clothing and one with bolts of cloth and sewing supplies. I had forgotten that people still made their own clothes. About half the place was given over to groceries. In the back was a hardware section complete with a few things typically reserved for lumber yards back home. I smiled thinking one could buy a ninety-pound sack of cement at the grocery store, but then I could get potted plants, toys and throw rugs at my local IGA so perhaps things were really not so different.

I had a craving for cheese puffs so liberated a half dozen small sacks from the rack and made my way to the register. They had soon found a temporary home in a small corrugated box and I was back outside in the heat. Ten minutes later, I was basking, barefoot and shirtless, in the cool of my room. I went to the window with my camera and looked down toward the bridges.

Although only on the second floor, my room was a good thirty feet above the valley. The Inn had been built on a high, rock, foundation, as protection, I surmised, against the proverbial hundred-year flood mark. I could look down on most of the buildings in both communities and could see downstream all the way to where it bent south around the end of Kettle Mountain.

The water in the stream ran clear and almost ripple free. With the telephoto lens on my camera I could make out the largest of the fish that called it home. In the shadow of the bridges I spotted several boys fishing, one Kettle on the south side and two Keeps on the north. I wondered if they conversed across the water. My bet was they did. I was forming an impression that the youngest generation felt little if any obligation to maintain the age-old tradition of isolation.

Five thirty came and went. I had eaten so late I wasn't hungry so decided to skip the ham and fixin's at Wilma's Café. I worked on notes and took care of my email. At seven Maggie's head emerged from around the corner of my open

door.

“Thought you might be hungry. Didn’t see you leave for supper. Brought you a sample of real cooking.”

As it turned out it was Milt who did the actual bringing and very little real cooking had been involved. He soon entered with a tray. In addition to a large glass of lemonade there was fruit salad, an assortment of cheeses, and half a loaf of almost sliced, generously buttered, French bread.

“How thoughtful, folks. I really wasn’t hungry at supper time and since then the hours have just slipped away. Looks wonderful. Sit while I enjoy it all if you have time.”

“Time is mostly what we do have, now,” Maggie said, an uncharacteristic gloominess seeming to seep into her tone.

“You made your appointments, we assume,” Milt said, pulling up a chair for his wife.

“Yes, I did. Nice folks all the way around. Just like you suggested they would be. Met your Willy. Seems like a fine – and bright – young man. A take charge sort, I’d say.”

“That he is. Last summer I had him climb the peak to caulk some chipping mortar in the main chimney. Before he was finished he had taken it apart brick by brick and re-laid the entire thing with new cement. Said he was afraid the old stuff had weakened and we’d lose the chimney in the next high wind. He was right. I’d made the same observation myself earlier.”

“I also met the girl, Annie, Jack’s daughter. I believe she was the second youngster to be afflicted. Another super nice and bright kid.”

“She comes from a nice family. Well, they both do, but then you’d be hard put to find any other kind around here.”

“And yet they have this problem between the families – the extended families, the clans. I understand it happens but it is certainly hard to comprehend. Nice people who like and even respect each other, at the same time believe the others are in some way evil or unclean or who knows what. They know it to be true even though their daily experiences show them just the opposite.”

I shook my head and was joined by the other two. I figured a change of subject was in order.

“So, what does a pair of retired Minnesota teachers do

around here for excitement?”

It was prompted by Maggie’s earlier statement about time.

“Milt fishes with the boys,” Maggie said.

“Maggie just finished her fifth consecutive Fourth of July Extravaganza.”

I suppose I frowned, indicating what I couldn’t politely ask, as my mouth was full of her delectable homemade bread and tasty cheese. Milt went on.

“When the folks found out about Maggie’s talent for putting on plays, they asked her to write and direct the biggest event of the year around here – the Fourth celebration. Her first effort was so well received it’s become an annual appointment. Spends half the year putting it together.”

“For the Keeps or the Kettles,” I asked.

“You won’t believe this but it’s one of the few things the families do together,” Maggie explained. There’s a floating stage on the creek between the two parks and it becomes a combined community picnic time.”

“How long has it been a joint celebration?”

They looked at each other.

“We don’t really understand the particulars, I guess,” Milt began, “But it goes back close to the end of the Civil War. It may have even been celebrated here before elsewhere in the country. I’m not sure. Anyway, it has something to with an edict laid down by the Mother Caller. Have you run across her?”

I nodded. He continued.

“Seems that in her sage judgment it was important to mend fences as a nation and so she required the joint celebration on the fourth. I’ve probably told you more than I know.”

I smiled at his reaction to his own comments.

“Sounds like the Mother Caller is pretty powerful,” I said.

“Seems that way,” Milt said agreeing without further comment.

We sat and talked for quite a while. I learned more about their children and grandchildren – Maggie had brought pictures just in case. They learned about my upbringing in

rural Indiana, similar in many ways to the conservative traditions of the Ozarks. They discerned that I had wandered significantly from some of those early teachings. I pointed out that my evolution was merely a simplifying of the teachings of my parents. I could live with unanswerable questions. They, like most folks, could not. I felt no need to rely on 'realms', which were themselves unexplainable, to provide answers for the unexplainable events and unanswerable questions I faced in my life. It set in place an extra layer that only complicated things and actually raised more questions (for me) than it answered. My way worked best for me. I had no intention of ever suggesting anybody else should follow my beliefs. I was happy with myself. Every day I worked hard to improve the lot of mankind in some small way and I conducted myself with others in what I considered were both moral and ethical manners. My life-long quest of ghostly topics might suggest the importance some of my unanswerables continued to play deep down somewhere in my psyche.

I finished everything but the bread, though claimed it as mine for later on. They were on their way by eight.

By eight thirty I had made myself comfortable on the deck outside my room. I had my camera on a tripod at eyelevel next to me as I reclined on a chaise lounge. The bridges and surrounding areas were in full view between the top and center boards of the guard rail. The sun had mostly slipped below the horizon to the west of the Inn and my portion of the sky had grown dim. I'd been told the moon was in the third quarter – I could never remember if that meant it was three quarters there or three quarters gone. Either way I should be able to see anything that transpired below. The weather report suggested a front was moving across the area. It would mean little more than a few clouds. The chance of rain was minimal at that time of year.

With the setting of the sun, the breeze cooled and the overbearing heat of the day was suddenly gone. Darkness enveloped the valley and hundreds of dots of lights began sprinkling themselves across the hills as house after house was lit for the evening. The moon appeared, confirming that a sea of long stringy bands of thin clouds had moved in.

At nine I sat up turning my head this way and that. I

thought I heard faint voices on the breeze coming from somewhere downstream. Just as soon, they were gone. It was probably my imagination – I wanted something to happen. My mind was used to helping me create what I wanted when I had pen in hand. It had undoubtedly just engaged itself inappropriately.

By nine fifteen nothing noteworthy had yet happened, unless the repeated, rasping, wail of an amorous Tomcat qualified. I supposed it probably did to the waiting young Miss Kitty. I had to wonder if they, too, had to respect the ban on romantic activity between the clans.

Then it began to unfold. There was activity at both ends of the near bridge. Forms – indistinct, shadowy, forms – moving slowly, erratically, up the gently arching bridge toward its center. Gradually it became clear to me what was happening. I clicked away with my camera. Each form was – well, it had been the word both Willy and Annie had used – twisting in and out of sight as if quivering between the two realms. The Man in Blue came from the south and the Lady in Red from the north. They continued to flicker – or twist? – as they stopped, facing each other some fifteen feet apart near the center. Thunder roared as if from nowhere. Lightning flashed from above and struck somewhere between them. Then it was two and three bolts at once hitting the same area. The bolts lingered and flickered. Lightning from the other realm? It seemed unlikely. But then what about it all did not? I continued taking pictures.

As quickly as it had begun it was over. The lightning and thunder were gone. The two figures turned their backs on each other, twisting into the darkness. It was as eerie an appearance by Apparitions as I had ever witnessed. I continued to observe the area for some time, clicking the camera just in case it might detect something I could not. By nine twenty-five it was over. I went back inside and donned shoes and shirt.

As I've said in every book – I'm always leery when the object of my visit shows up right on cue that way. However, if this one had been faked, it was done with the flare of Broadway's best special effects artist.

I picked up a jacket, a flashlight, and my camera, and

left on foot for the bridge. I approached slowly and cautiously along the north bank from the west. Periodically, I stopped to listen. There was nothing to hear other than the occasional hoot of an owl or the scurrying of some small nocturnal critter through the grass. In situations like that I could never decide who to root for – the Owl who deserved an ample dinner or the tiny mouse rushing off for the safety of cover. But I distract myself from the story.

The moon, reflecting off the water, dimly illuminated the underside of the bridge. The area was deserted. The clay was rife with footprints of every size. That would be expected, I imagined, in a fishing spot such as that.

There was one fifteen-foot-long two by six that seemed out of place nailed across the east end of the support beams close to the top. Perhaps it was there to assist with painting or repairs or some such thing, I thought.

I stuck my little finger into a set of holes some two feet apart on a cross beam. Upon examination in the beam of my flashlight, they appeared fresh. It told me nothing. The fishing boys could have made them for some fishing related purpose. With my flashlight, I searched across the creek to the underside of the south end. It was every bit as unoccupied as where I was. Still, I would cross the bridge and look it over.

A few minutes later I was there. I found the same ho hum mosaic of footprints and – suddenly very interesting – a similar set of dual screw holes, two feet apart, and freshly cut, into a cross beam some six feet above the ground. I didn't try to make sense of it. Much more information would be needed if, indeed, I would ever discover their significance.

My attention returned to the ground. There, below the cross beam which sported the two holes was a straight, narrow line cut into the clay. It measured three feet end to end and only an eighth of an inch wide. It made me wonder. I returned to the other side and sure enough, a similar line was pressed into the clay below that beam. Again, I made a note without attempting an explanation. I was sure it was a conundrum that would keep my mind happily occupied long after the rest of me fell asleep that night.

I would, however, recreate in my mind the scene I had witnessed earlier. I returned to the center of that west bridge,

suddenly having to wonder why both Apparitions would appear on the Keep's bridge.

A thicker layer of more threatening looking clouds moved across the sky above, blocking the moon and leaving me standing there in inky blackness. I heard steps beginning to approach me on the bridge from the North. Almost at the same moment a like sound came at me from the south. I could make out only the faintest of forms – each tall and without distinctly cut outlines. I wondered if apparitions could swim. Perhaps my best plan would be to jump over the railing and into the creek.

The clouds parted and I stood there as if in a spotlight cast from heaven itself. At that moment, each slowly approaching form called my name, drawing it out into a question.

“M a r c ?”

“M a r c ?”

Scared spitless would most accurately define the moment!

CHAPTER THREE

They picked up their pace and again called out.

“Marc?”

“Marc?”

I figured a response couldn't hurt.

“Yes. Marc Miller here. And you two are?”

“Jack, Jack Kettle.”

“Billy Keep.”

They stopped within a few feet of me and I recognized Jack immediately. I studied Billy's face and figured he had to be Willy's father.

“What's going on out here?” Jack asked. “Got a half dozen phone calls about thunder and lightning at the bridges.”

“Same for me,” Billy added. “You know anything about it?”

“Yes and no and I realize that does nothing to clarify things. I noticed the lightning and heard the thunder from my room up at the Inn – second floor this end. I came down to investigate.”

It had not been a full rendering but I'd stop at that and see how it played.

“That's pretty much what the folks in town reported,” Billy said.

Jack nodded and added.

“Hard to explain thunder and lightning on a night like this. Filmy, little, layer clouds like this don't produce such things – takes billowing dark clouds.”

I wondered if that was based on folk knowledge passed down from generation to generation or something picked up

from regularly listening to the weather guy on channel 5 out of Fayetteville. I wouldn't ask. Well, I might ask later on.

"Well, okay then," Billy said. "Not sure what I thought I was going to find up here but I'll tell you I'm glad it was you and not something even worse."

What I would have given if he just left the word 'even' out of that last sentence. Here I thought I had been getting along so well.

"And may I just add that it's a pleasure to have had it be you two and not the Apparitions I was afraid were about to make a sandwich of me."

"Blue Man and Red Woman?" Jack said as if needing to clarify.

"The same," I answered wondering if that implied there were others.

"Well, I'll leave then," I began, "Though I must admit I'm in a quandary about whether to move south or north, either of which will get me back to the Inn."

"Let's all go south, then," Billy suggested. "Wilma just informed me she's out of eggs for breakfast so I need to stop by the Emporium in South Town."

That handled that. Ten minutes later I was back in my room. I closed and locked the door for the first time since arriving and made ready for a shower. The encounter on the bridge had raised an interesting question. Why, during the drama that I witnessed from my deck, did the Keep Apparition – The Man in Blue – begin from the Kettle's side of the bridge and the Kettle's Woman in Red, come from the Keep's side?

And that was secondary to the larger questions – What had happened and why? Whether it had been an actual confrontation of ghosts or some dramatization staged by who knew who, it had to hold some significance. It might be as simple as making appearances to prove their existence or as complex as establishing some major schism between the families from that moment forth. Truthfully, I hadn't a clue.

Apparently, I had been the only witness to the entire event. If others had seen it, I assumed they would have also shared that with Jack and Billy. Either the Apparitions could have cared less whether or not their meeting was witnessed by me, or it had been carefully orchestrated to be a, for my

eyes only, performance.

My shower – intentionally on the cool side – was refreshing but inspired no helpful insights. Afterwards, I made a few notes, checked the lock on the door like a four-year-old in a strange house, and went to bed.

* * *

It was the early morning sun invading my room and warming my eyelids that awakened me. I always enjoyed those few moments between sleep and full consciousness. The vividness of the dreams faded as the realization of where I was and what I was about came into focus. At each awakening I could have let myself wrestle with the question about which was real – where my mind had been during the night or where it would be until sleep again overtook it. I would not dawdle over such an unanswerable that morning.

I stood and stretched, scratched in places best scratched in private, and made my bed. I slid open the glass door to the deck and enjoyed the cool, gentled inside on the easy, easterly breeze. Probably about seventy, I estimated, suddenly smelling that most wonderful of all early morning aromas – coffee.

It presented a quandary – get dressed and go in search of it or follow my usual morning routine and begin by making my list for the day. I turned back into the room and noticed a slip of paper that had been slid under the door.

"Coffee in a thermos in the hall. An endless pot downstairs."

I opened the door. There, on a fold away stand, sat a tray holding an assortment of pastries and the promised thermos. I took the tray and closed the door.

How thoughtful. I moved with the tray and my pad and pencil to the chaise on the deck, figuring my state of undress would not be visible to anyone out there. Coffee, Danish, and a pad and pencil! Life was good!

My day would revolve around two major events: the appointments with Agnes at eleven and Ruby Mae at two. I figured the towns would be buzzing with opinions and interpretations of the meteorological events of the previous night. I decided my two best sources for that information would be the cafe in North Town and the Emporium in South.

I added the cafe to my list for mid-morning and the Emporium for right after lunch.

There was another idea formulating in the back of my head but I would wait until after my meetings with Agnes and Ruby Mae to decide if it seemed prudent to proceed. I was sure I would want to meet the other victims regardless of the outcome of my sessions with the Callers so I would have Willy and Annie follow through on that front. I would interview them individually, at least initially. I wanted their accounts to be as pure and free of influence from others as possible.

After the experience of the previous night, I was hooked into the story and would follow wherever it led.

I tore off the yellow sheet, folded it to shirt pocket size, and went inside to dress. I was soon headed downstairs to see if the news had reached the Inn. A dining table was set up beside the windows on the east side of the lobby. Maggie was knitting and Milt was reading the paper. He rose as I entered the area.

"Thanks for the early morning jump start," I said returning the tray.

"Lots more where that came from," Maggie said, putting her handwork aside. "What'll it be, eggs, bacon, flapjacks?"

"Flapjacks. I haven't heard them called that since I visited the Paul Bunion area of Wisconsin some years back. That sounds great. With a side of crisp bacon. That should take good care of me for the morning."

"Fifteen minutes," she said, leaving through the door behind the desk.

"Well," I began, taking a seat near Milt and pointing to the paper, "What's the latest gossip in Sandy Valley."

"You won't find it in here, that's for sure. Tulsa World. Seldom anything considered news worthy happens in these parts. Takes something like murder, embezzlement, political corruption, or robbery to make the paper. Nothing like that ever happens around here. Just being good people seems easy for the world to ignore."

"If this ghost-thing doesn't calm down in hurry, I'm afraid it'll become fodder for a media frenzy," I said.

Milt nodded.

"You hear that thunder last night?" he asked.

I couldn't tell if the comment had grown out of our conversation or was just a disconnected topic.

"Yes, I did. Seemed strange for the weather conditions but then I'm not an expert on your local happenings."

"It was strange. Sam – he's the milkman – said there were also reports of lightning. We didn't see that. Supposed to have hit the creek close to the bridges. Our bedroom's on the west, so we wouldn't have been able to see it, I suppose. Usually see the sky light up though."

My initial impression was that it had not been blown out of proportion by the local gossip mill. That was probably good. Unless Sam was a real slouch where it came to carrying gossip, I also figured that no one but I had seen the ghostly drama play out on the bridge.

By the time I finished breakfast and took my turn with the paper, it was going on nine. I had an hour and a half before I needed to meet Billy at the North Town Building. I returned to my room, packed my briefcase with recorder, camera, yellow pads and pens and was soon off to the café on foot.

I noticed my pace had slowed from the day before. Perhaps the more unhurried life style there in the Valley had begun gentling my more typical gung-ho style. Perhaps my encounter on the bridge the previous night had left me sapped of vigor. For whatever reason, I enjoyed the leisurely walk. I passed several young children – running, riding bikes, climbing trees – and they all waved and called a cheery, "Hi, Mr. Miller!"

People were clearly important here. I returned each wave, sorry that I had no name to attach to my, "Hi. How ya doin'?"

That changed as I entered the cafe.

"Morning Wilma, Billy, Willy," I could say. It made me feel down right local.

"Hey! Mr. Miller," Willy called, rolling toward me from the back of the room. "What's up?"

"Really need a cup of your mother's good coffee, for starters," I said.

He looked at his mother and snapped his fingers playfully. A cup was soon poured behind the counter, handed

to Billy who had been sitting on a stool there and carried the ten feet to where I had taken a seat.

"That's a true family operation, I'd say."

"Sometimes they let me think I'm useful around here," Billy said.

I sensed a nice family feeling.

"Willy. You said I could count on you to help me meet the other kids – those with afflictions."

"Yes, Sir. Already put the word out. You just say when."

"I'd like to meet them individually. Probably need fifteen minutes with each one. How about beginning at 4:00 this afternoon? Not sure where to suggest."

"You can use our living room, right Ma," he said looking her way.

She nodded. He turned back to me.

"They'll all feel comfortable in there. Should I invite parents or not?"

"Leave that up to the individual families. I certainly have nothing to keep from the parents. How many are there, exactly?"

"Not counting me, it's three girls and two boys."

"An hour and a quarter. Okay then. See what you can do."

"I'll call from the house so I don't tie up this line. Anything special you want me to tell them?"

"Just put them at ease about it and explain I just want to hear their story. It's strictly a no pressure event. None of them have done anything wrong."

"Okay, then. I can do that."

He turned his chair and rolled out through the back door.

"Great kid," I said.

"He is that," Billy agreed. "We're so worried about his condition. You have any ideas about that?"

"I do but I'm just not ready to say anything. Never like to spread false hopes."

"So, you see some hope, then?"

"Like I said . . ."

Billy nodded.

"We considered taking him to a doctor but Willy wanted to wait and see what happened this week. He's an optimist through and through. Always sees the silver lining. Never thinks any challenge is going to be too big for him to handle."

"In this case I sure hope that works out for him," I said.

Billy nodded and I changed the topic.

"Any more information on that thunder and such last night?"

"A few more people seem to have heard the thunder. No more reports of lightning. I'm wondering if it was just some overactive imaginations."

I wasn't going to commit myself on that one so, once again, I took a different tack.

"There is a very personal question I want to ask and because it is so personal there will be no problem if you don't want to answer."

"You've got my attention," Billy said.

He looked at Wilma who shrugged and nodded – apparently not the mixed message to him that it was to me.

"Okay. Can't see how we can lose on this one," he said.

"Do most Keeps hate the Kettles?"

"Hate? No. We don't hate them."

Again, he looked at Wilma who nodded her agreement.

"So, if Willy came home and announced he had a new best guy friend who was a Kettle, would that cause trouble for you parents?"

"I suppose not. We know they mingle at school. He talks fondly of most of them – the Kettle kids that is. It wouldn't be the usual thing, but Wilma and I could live with it. Don't know how it might affect his other friendships, though."

"May I take it step further?"

"Sure."

"What if Willy came home and announced he had a new girlfriend who was a Kettle, would that cause trouble for you parents?"

"Wow! That's one I never expect to have to cross. The families just don't do that. All the children know it's not to be considered."

"And that practice seems fully reasonable to you and

Wilma?"

Wilma came around the counter and stood beside Billy with her arm around his waist.

"Traditions are often not even slightly reasonable let alone fully reasonable. Me and Billy are among the most lenient about minglin' between families. But like Billy said, romance isn't somethin' that could ever be considered."

"I appreciate your willingness to help me understand all of that."

"You ain't gonna argue the lack a logic in our position?" Billy asked.

"It's not my place to tell folks how to live their lives or set their values. I just like to understand. The logical point is an interesting one, however, and if I were given to debate, it might be where I'd start. Thanks for the coffee. I have some errands I need to run. See you at ten thirty."

I stood and left a dollar on the table. Wilma eyed it and commented.

"You're gonna spoil the boy rotten, at this rate."

"I don't have one of my own to spoil, so humor me, okay?"

I didn't receive the all clear but her smile let me feel comfortable about it.

"Oh, one more thing," I asked at the door. "Has to do with protocol – procedure – with the Callers. Will they expect payment of any kind? I want to do things right."

"No payment. The Family supports her. She has what she needs."

"Okay, then. Until later."

The air outside was already well past warm. I looked at the big thermometer on the door frame. Eighty-nine and no prospect of shade between there and the Emporium. I sucked it in and strode off toward the bridge chuckling to think that such a thing as the temperature could even be a concern – considering the far more important matters at stake there in Sandy Valley. It was akin to allowing oneself to fret over a broken fingernail or thinning hair when there were children in one's community who went to bed hungry every night.

I survived the walk and learned several things about fishing for the big ones from a couple of lads under the bridge.

They had no information for me about either the screw holes or the long thin line in the clay below them. In fact, they seemed surprised they were there. The long board that had been attached to the east end of the bridge had been removed. It made me believe it had some connection with the activity there the night before.

I entered the Emporium.

"Mr. Miller. Good mornin'. Thought you had an appointment with the Caller today."

"This afternoon, actually."

"Need more cheese puffs?"

"A couple of packs of gum should do it today. It'll hardly pay your light bill but hope it will help."

"Every little bit, as they say," she said smiling, pointing me to the candy counter.

"I understand there was some unseasonable thunder and lightning last night," I said wondering what response I might get.

"I heard it myself. I live upstairs here. Went right to the front windows. May have seen some lightnin' by the bridge but that really makes no sense, you know. Never have lightnin' low to the ground like that and cut off way below the clouds. Probably moonlight on the fog or some such thing."

"Spearmint – no, on second thought make that Juicy Fruit. Just had a bad experience with the other flavor." [The Malevolent Ghost of Charlie Chance].

"I sure hope you can get all these goin' on's straightened out. My heart hurts so fer the kids. Helpless, ya know?"

A tear needed tending on her cheek. She smiled as she dabbed at it; her lower lip trembled.

"I'll do what I can. Never been into the likes of this, however."

I was far too proud of how I thought that last sentence sounded like a native. I loved the Ozark version of English – so soft and efficient. Why add an unpleasant soundin', twangy 'g' at the end of a word when the gentle, comfortin', easy, in' worked every bit as well? An why add that harsh, flow stoppin' 'd' to the connectin' conjunction, when by usage it will never be confused with the article (an) spelled the same way? Hooray

for harmonious efficiency! (Do I sense an army of English teachers and literary giants turning over in their graves?)

I paid and left to go find a shady spot in the park and see what might transpire. I still had some time before I met Billy. Several dozen youngsters all under the age of eleven or so were enjoying the large grassy area. There were the usual swings and teeter totters, a slide and huge sandbox, and numerous benches so the older folks could sit and watch, perhaps relive times past. Several approached me but conversations were short lived. Play called and it was hard for me to remain more attractive than pirates and cowboys for more than a few moments.

I walked in the door at the North Town building at ten thirty on the dot.

"Truck's out back," Billy said. "Agnes seems eager to meet you. She called a few minutes ago to make sure you was still comin'."

"Wouldn't miss it," I said following him through the door and back outside.

The winding road had been graveled at some point in the past, though probably never graded. Many of the roads in those parts followed well established cow paths used by the animals as they came and went from their twice daily milking. I didn't ask about that one.

It divided and re-divided several times. We veered to the right on each occasion taking us a good way up the mountain. Eventually we pulled to a stop. There was no house. Billy explained.

"Up that trail about half a mile. Hope you have your walkin' shoes on."

We got out and I followed him up a winding, narrow, hard dirt, path through a wooded area. It was bounded on both sides by low bramble and berry bushes.

Billy easily managed long, slow, steady strides. I struggled a bit keeping up. We rounded a corner into a clearing which was home to a rambling, one story, white house. It was a patchwork of additions, which had been put in place with no apparent esthetic goal in mind. Billy put his little fingers to the edges of his mouth and whistled. A woman in her mid-fifties came out onto the front porch. She was too

young to be Agnes.

"Mornin' Miss Jane," he said as we took the final few steps across the lawn.

"Mornin' Billy. Mornin' Mr. Miller."

"Mornin'," I replied in my best Indiana version of Ozarkian.

"Miss Agnes will be out in a minute. Make yourselves to home out here."

She returned inside. Taking my lead from Billy I continued to stand at the bottom of the steps.

"That's the youngest of the Caller apprentices. There are two others who live here, also. Just one piece of advice if I may?"

I nodded eager to hear anything that might move things along in a positive direction.

"Let Agnes take the lead in the topics. If she asks what's on your mind, then she's givin' you a openin' to say or ask whatever you like."

"Thank you."

"I'll introduce you and then wait back at the truck. She'll want things to be private between you."

Agnes came through the door. She was a large woman and wore a flowing, pleated, plain white dress, white sandals and a wide-brimmed white straw hat.

"Caller Agnes. I'd like you meet my friend Marc Miller, the writer we talked about. Marc, this is Caller Agnes. I'll leave you two alone."

She comforted her considerable bulk into place in the middle of a wicker loveseat and indicated a matching chair for me.

"Yankee?" she asked not unpleasantly.

"Indiana. Southern Indiana."

"Married?"

"No ma'am. I hope to be."

"A believer?"

"Always a student?"

Her last question had caught me off guard. I must have responded well. Her ample cheeks broke into a wonderful smile.

"I like a honest man. I hear you're interested in the

Apparitions and the afflictions."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She shook her head. I hoped that was not a signal the topic was to be forbidden. It had, instead, been an indication of her concern.

"Serious. Very serious. When things reaches eye for an eyein', they is plum full of serious."

I assumed her reference was to the Kettle and Keep youngsters being afflicted in an alternating fashion, back and forth, one after the other.

"The war flared up all sudden like."

It was the first time I had seriously considered it to be a war.

"Only got vague feelin's about its cause. The Kettles instigated it all of course – afflictin' young Wilbur first. They's always been a hot-tempered lot. Lots a red hair and rosy cheeks among 'em. Probably can't help it."

She paused and I remained silent according to Billy's directive. It may have been a test. A minute passed. It seemed like ten. There were so many questions whirling in my head. She nodded and smiled again. If it had been a test, I figured I passed.

"You want to know how to stop it all. I been doin' what I can. Pity is, we have to keep things even or they'll see us bein' weak. We come off weak and they'll start afflictin' ten instead a one at a time. Have to keep it even. That keeps it from gettin' outta hand. One deserves one but two deserves three, and three deserves five, you understand?"

I didn't and yet I did. Some law of ghostly escalation, I supposed. So long as one affliction was met with only one in retaliation, it continued to just fester. When it rose beyond that, things would apparently become grave in a hurry.

"You can ask a question, Mr. Miller."

Did she mean I could ask just one? Which one? I'd go with the most basic.

"What sorts of things might have caused all this to start at this time?"

"Some prank got misread."

I shrugged suggesting that I had no idea what that meant. It may have been the wrong reaction. Maybe not.

She began speaking.

"The spirit world of our ancestors still holds the old hates and grudges agin each other. That world is boiling over all the time, you see. It ain't no restful place to be for the Kettles and the Keeps. But, Spirits can't hurt spirits, you see, so they has to take their animosities out on the livin' – Kettle spirits agin mortal Keeps. Keeps agin mortal Kettles. The Mother Caller discourages deliverin' hurtful tactics across the veil, so what's left? Prankin'. Hiding things. Breaking little things.

"But sometimes one spirit feels the other has went too far, you see, something uncalled for or too close to causing real hurt. It's those times the Callers have to smooth things over. Times comes – not often, but they comes – when the angered spirit won't be soothed and then the war is rekindled. The war's never over. It was a shootin' war back in the beginnin'. Finally, one Caller – mixed Kettle and Keep – become so powerful in the eyes of both Worlds that she caused the killin' to stop, but that don't mean the war was over. No Sir! Just took a different turn.

"Can you imagine how frustratin' it must be for them poor ol' spirits, who was used to just up and killin' the one's they hated, to suddenly be required to do less than that? To break lead pencils instead of putting lead balls between their eyes. I can understand that. Seethin' is all that's left on the other side. It's like every once in a while, some old spirit tempts the power of the Mother Caller. This must be one a them times, Mr. Miller."

She paused and her face took on an expectant look. I decided it was permission for another question. I would try one more.

"How have such incidents as these been reversed in the past?"

"You are a wise man, Mr. Miller – lookin' to history for solutions. You have to understand the spirit world is made up of good spirits and bad spirits – God's Spirits and the Devil's Spirits. What's bad in our world, Mr. Miller, is a reflection of what is wrong in the spirit's world. Things got to be fixed there, first. I work to rally God's Spirits to take up the cause over there. Sometimes the good spirits become too busy with

other things and they don't take proper notice of what the bad ones is up to. There's a lot more a God's spirits, of course, so once they sense the problem they gets to work on it.

"I must admit, I've had little success makin' the point with them on this one. I'd say Ruby Mae probably finds herself in the same spot. She's as good a person as a Kettle can be, you see. I know she don't want no more a these afflictions, but like I said, one for one is the best me and her can arrange right now."

"Am I allowed one more question?"

She nodded, graciously.

"I have the most difficult time imagining that you could bring yourself to cause the terrible suffering and mental anguish that has happened among the Kettle children – even just one at a time as you suggested. The question I want to ask is undoubtedly out of line. . . ."

She interrupted me by raising both palms in my direction. I figured that had just brought my session to a grinding halt. Interestingly, it hadn't.

"I sense your question. 'Has Caller Agnes really caused the afflictions?'"

I nodded suddenly encouraged.

"I am the Caller. I have my responsibilities that I dare not shirk if the two Worlds are to be kept in balance. Some of my powers are called up by my thinkin' about what I want to do. Others is just there and react without no need to think. The afflictions is from the second level. I'd never wish hurt on a child but the part of me that controls my mission, does what has to be done."

Ah, ha! I said to myself. In other words, she played no deliberate role in the afflictions. If I could just get the same admission from Ruby Mae I would be pretty sure what I was dealing with. The end goal was clear to me but the method for achieving it confused me.

"Since you asked my last question for me, does that mean I might have one more left?"

Again, her wonderful smile. We liked each other. About that there was no doubt.

"I'll hear one more."

It was not a promise to answer, but I'd take whatever I

was given.

"The two Apparitions that seem to be appearing. Do they have some specific significance in things such as this?"

"As mortals, they was lovers but she was a Kettle and he was a Keep. When their parents forbade the marriage, they laid themselves down on the railroad track and, hand in hand, waited for the locomotive to run them over and cut off their heads."

I shivered. For me it took romance and devotion to an all-time low. Perhaps it was not motivated by devotion to each other but by disdain for the parents. I could think of few better ways to instill a case of life-long guilt. She continued.

"They roam eternity together now – like they got the last laugh, you see. When you dies together, your souls is joined as one. When their animosity about what their parents done to them boils over, they appears an lays out some major punishment to other parents. It's how they find relief. When they's seen together they make it seem they hates each other so as to not let the mortals allow they ever did get back together."

"Couldn't it be then, that this whole thing is their doing and that it has nothing to do with the old spirits' hatred across family lines?"

"It jist don't feel that way, you see."

She became clearly thoughtful.

"Could be both. The spirit world ain't bound by time or reason. And then, there's that back an forth thing. Just don't feel that way."

"Why would the Apparitions be a part of it then? Why is it they who appear to deliver the afflictions?"

"Spirits visiting in our world can be used by those in the other for their own purposes. A spirit can do a hundred times a hundred things at once. No time or distance boundaries, you see. There is no at once or no apart. There is just is."

Agnes stood and I followed suit. It signaled the end of the meeting. She patted my hand and spoke one more time, quietly and confidentially – person to person.

"You understand what I've said. We is both students, you see. You has my blessin' to do what you has to do. Our words stay here."

I nodded agreeing to the confidential cloak she had established. The grand old dame had just come as close as she dared to privately admitting she could not offer an explanation that satisfied her, and essentially denied a conscious role in any part of the laying on of the Afflictions – the escalations. Her skills seemed to be floundering in a sea of failure. Self-doubt – that could not be admitted to her family – had begun to creep into her being. It was fascinating to think the Caller was depending on me – a student at best; a doubter at worst.

I admired her for her honesty with me and understood the positive, self-confident facade she had to maintain within her family. Most of all, I appreciated the trust she put in me. It signaled her willingness to risk her power and position if necessary to put an end to the Afflictions. It had been a selfless act. It had been as if she had given me the assignment she was finding too difficult.

A plan began to come together in the outer reaches of my mind. I chuckled, wondering, for the shortest moment, if it had just been deposited there by Caller Agnes.

I started back down the path toward the car. Perhaps five minutes into the walk – much easier going down than it had been coming up – I heard rustling off to my right. I stopped to look beyond the thicket of bramble bushes into the deep shadows of the pine woods beyond. How I wished for my camera.

There, some twenty yards away, holding a long embrace, stood the faceless Man in Blue and the Woman in Red. It was dark and what spots of light there were, danced about as the branches moved gently in the breeze interrupting the few rays of sun that had penetrated there. I had no clear view but I knew what I was seeing.

They separated and turned, facing in my direction. Slowly the two of them began walking toward me. They came closer and closer and closer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ten feet from me, in the shadows just across the thicket of bramble and berry bushes, their forms began to twist and they were suddenly gone.

I kept my encounter to myself as Billy and I rode back to town. I was struck by two things. First, as on the bridge, the man was on my right and the woman on the left. Second, as Willy had pointed out, they were extremely tall, the woman nearly six feet and the man towering above her at perhaps six-six or even six-eight.

I wondered if there was a tall gene in each clan. Billy, however, stood only five eight or nine, Willy at about the same and, Jack a hair short of six. A small sample but it was all I had. Wilma and Bess – from the Emporium – wouldn't have topped five-five in heels and Annie was some shorter than that.

When I arrived, the cafe was crowded. I hesitated, thinking I might be more comfortable coming back later after things had thinned out. A table opened up in the rear corner and Willy motioned me back. I decided to stay. He had it cleared and reset in less time than it would have taken most experienced, able bodied, bus boys I had watched.

"I got the kids all set up startin' at four like you asked. What you gonna want from them?"

It struck me as an odd question but then he may have just felt the need to be protective of his friends.

"Just their story. When, where, how, what? Just the basics like I said before."

He nodded, bouncing his head as if to give his tentative

approval – something I hadn't realized I needed.

"I can take your order. Things got crazy in here this noon. I'd suggest the Swiss steak if you're hungry or the ham on rye combo if you're just eatin' out of habit."

I chuckled out loud at his characterization of motivations for having lunch.

"What?" he said smiling?

"I've just never thought about my reasons for eating being divisible in those ways before."

He seemed satisfied and didn't pursue it.

"I'll go with the habit entry – the ham on rye."

"In a flash," he said, twirling on a dime and heading off toward the kitchen door at the rear end of the counter.

Although there was some degree of anxiety associated with the audiences, I suddenly felt eager to meet Ruby Mae.

Wilma arrived with my food and a tall lemonade.

"Willy forgot to get your drink order. I figured this would work."

"Looks great," I said even though every boy from southern Indiana knows you always have milk with sandwiches.

I was pleasantly surprised at how well the fruit flavor complimented the ham and cheese. Ruts were strange things. Although they made me feel secure about right and wrong they also dictated that I would miss out on wonderful, alternative, experiences.

Willy was the picture of efficiency as he tooled around the room keeping on top of everything within his realm of responsibility. The customers clearly liked the lad and I had the idea his tips may have increased significantly since his affliction – though no one mentioned it, plainly avoiding the usual opening questions about health and happiness.

I lingered over the meal and accepted three refills before determining it was time for me to head toward South Town. I debated whether or not to look at the thermometer. I did. Ninety-four and rising. The humidity that had accompanied the passage of the front added to the unpleasantness.

By the time I entered the South Town building, my shirt was more than a little damp. I hoped my Mitchum worked as

well as it was touted to work.

"Marc. Prompt. I like that. Makes everybody's life easier."

"I've always thought that," I said not immediately finding a snappy comeback.

"Truck's out back. Have to walk the last half mile up a trail. Your shoes look up to it."

Deja vu?

I followed him to the truck. Jack was less into small talk than Billy had been. I wondered if that was a clan-wide trait or just specific to him. Thinking back on Bess and the others in her store I concluded it was just about Jack.

It was a two story, white, house that sat in the clearing that time. A porch circled the three sides exposed to my view. Three of the four women sitting there stood and went inside as we approached. I figured the one remaining must be Ruby Mae. I was correct.

"Caller Ruby Mae, this is the writer, Marc Miller. I'll wait back at the truck."

It had been a one-way introduction but I had no problem with that. She was larger than Agnes, but wore a similar white dress and hat. Perhaps there was a dress code, I thought to myself, working to maintain a sober face. Not having been given any guidelines by Jack, I would just keep to the one offered earlier by Billy.

"Please, have a seat Mr. Miller."

Her tone and style were gracious and immediately friendly. Her smile was more reserved than Agnes's but every bit as genuine. She set me at ease.

"It's about the children, is it?"

"Yes, and the recent happenings."

"The recent happenings. Yes. So sad. So strange. Do you have questions?"

Again, I would begin with the basics.

"How do you believe it all came to get started, here, at this time?"

She paused a long time before speaking. Since I was certain she would have anticipated my concern, I had to assume the pause was for some other purpose. Again, perhaps, a test. I sat quietly watching her face.

"Could be the vengeful Apparitions. Could be the spirit world done boiled over through the veil. It happens."

My blank look and shoulder shrug had been successful with Agnes when I hadn't understood. I tried it again.

She smiled.

"I know it's hard for a outsider to understand what we all have knowed so well from the time we was just little tykes. The Apparitions – The Man in Blue and the Woman in Red – went to their deaths filled with hate so that's how they remain in the beyond, of course. Hate filled hearts can't abide in other's happiness. They can never feel good, mind you, but they can feel better when they makes the rest of us feel bad or hateful or gets us riled up mad about somethin'. Could be, you see, they's out to put the families up against each other like it was in the olden times. All so's they can feel better. I been a callin' to God's Ghosts on the other side to pay attention but they seems to be busy with something else. They can't sense urgency – like how something needs to be done right away. They ain't got no right now. It's a hard thing for outsiders to comprehend."

I nodded. She paused. I assumed it was my turn.

"And the boiling over from the spirit world?"

She sighed. I couldn't determine if it was her impatience with my ignorance or something else.

"The spirit world of the Kettle's and the Keeps is a restless, hate driven world. It ain't jus strictly the wonderful place lots a preachers make it out to be. Gotta find your comfortable niche even there. It's gittin' better as more of us love filled folks enters it but a hateful soul can't never change you see. Hatin' is Hell and lovin' is Heaven. It's all mixed together on the other side. Ain't separate an neat like some would have you think."

"Much like it is here, then, you're saying?"

I probably shouldn't have spoken but I'd been born with an impulsive bent.

She smiled and nodded slowly.

"The Devil's souls have to press their hate against the living, but the Mother Caller has forbid maiming across the veil. Sometimes a disobedient spirit will boil up so hard inside that it just can't contain things and it presses some evil deed

through, you see. Then it's gotta be one fer one to keep the balance."

I assumed I now understood about the one for one from my session with Agnes. Again, she paused.

"So, how can the escalation be reversed?" I asked hoping it was my turn to ask.

"I been Callin' with all my might. I'm sure Caller Agnes is doin' the same. Like I said, sometimes the other side is not responsive. That can't be explained. It is just one a them things that is."

She was sounding more and more like me. I would NOT point that out, however.

"I'm going to assume you usually do not encounter such non-responsiveness."

"That's right. Can't remember another void so severe as this."

I would skip having her define, void.

"Could that possibly mean that all of this has to do with something that is strictly from this World and not the other?"

"Such things are not of my concern. I am a Caller. I move things between the worlds. Unless it belongs to both worlds I am required to let it be. You, however, Mr. Miller, is not."

She stood. It was over. I stood. She extended her hands and I met them with mine. Her large hands dwarfed mine as she held them, closing her eyes and tilting back her head moving it from side to side. It reminded me of a radar dish. Perhaps it was – of a kind.

She opened her eyes and patted my hands before releasing them.

"You's as good a man as a doubter can be, Mr. Miller. If the problems is of this world only, you have the power to fix it."

She indicated the steps with her arm and I left, not looking back. It had been another fascinating glimpse into these people and the beliefs that supported them.

It seemed I had received the blessings of both Callers to do what I could – they would not interfere though they could not assist me. I had one question neither Caller allowed me time to ask. It had to do with the Mother Caller and the

degree, if any, to which she interceded in things of this world. Who else might be knowledgeable on that topic? A clergyman. There were two churches. Surely that signified two preachers.

Back in the truck I inquired about it.

"I see two churches. I assume there are ministers."

"Parson Keep and Parson Kettle."

I should have guessed.

"Do you suppose they would be willing to speak with me?"

"I'm sure they will. Nice gentlemen. About as good friends as a Keep and a Kettle dare be."

What an interesting turn, I thought.

"How would be best to contact them?"

"Give 'em a call. Numbers in the book."

Nothing like overlooking the obvious. I would do that as soon as I had spent time with the Keep youngsters. Billy spoke.

"Annie has the Kettle youngsters who've been afflicted ready to talk with you. Six this evening at the South Town building be okay?"

"It will be just fine. Thank you. Thank Annie. Let me guess. In addition to Annie there are two girls and three boys."

"Yes, sir. That's just what there is. We was talkin at the cafe this mornin' that no more afflictions has been visited since you showed up here. If that holds, you can pretty well write your ticket in these parts. Some is talkin' like you has a power."

I wasn't sure what ticket he was talking about but assumed it included general support for my efforts. I needed to squelch that power talk immediately.

"No power. Just coincidence, I'd guess."

I felt grimy after my two dust filled rides and walks up and down the steep trails. I asked to be dropped off at the Inn and was soon in and out of the shower.

I hadn't yet looked at the pictures I had snapped during the drama on the bridge so slid the card into my laptop and began going through them as I dried my hair. It revealed little other than what I remembered seeing. Several of the pictures showed a bright spot of light on each side of the creek, back

under the bridge. It wasn't on all of them. It might have been a reflection of the moon off the water. It might have been something else.

There was one other phenomenon I couldn't figure out. Above the bridge, it was as if there were some kind of dark after image remaining after each flash of lightning – and the flashes showed clearly as wide, short, irregularly formed bursts. There seemed to be something else but I couldn't draw it out. I'd have to think more about that.

I found the ministers names and numbers, and made arrangements for later that evening. The first suggested that the three of us meet together at his home. It was agreed.

I had time for one short glass of lemonade at the cafe before my appointments began with the Keep kids.

"Fifteen minutes early," Willy said, smiling as I walked through the door.

"Not at all," I said, catching him completely off guard.

He frowned and looked at his watch.

"Figure in a fourteen-minute glass of lemonade and I'm exactly on schedule.

It garnered a grin. I took a seat at a table. Wilma appeared from the kitchen as Willy wheeled himself behind the counter to fix my drink.

"How'd the time with Ruby Mae go, if that's not too personal," she asked.

"Just like Agnes said, I found her to be a fine and cooperative lady."

It had been a partial answer – probably not very helpful in addressing the parent's desperation. I felt compelled to say more.

"I've learned so much in such a short time, I just haven't had a chance to get it all sorted out, yet. I'm feeling very positive, at this point, however."

She nodded and smiled, briefly. The lemonade arrived, still mostly in the glass.

"Gonna see the South Town kids, too?" Willy asked.

"After supper at the Town building."

"Tell that girl, Annie, thanks for thinking about me and tell her I hope she gets her speech back soon."

"I'll do that. You know each other from school, she

says."

"Had classes together. Probably know her a little better than I let on around here. Even the most casual cross-family, boy-girl friendships are cause to bring out the militia in Sandy Valley."

I nodded and dropped it. Willy took a folded piece of paper from his jeans pocket.

"Here's the schedule from four to five fifteen. I added what affliction they each got so you could be prepared for whatever come through the door."

"Very helpful. Thank you."

He smiled – no beamed – and nodded, shifting in his chair.

"I imagine that chair gets pretty tiring doesn't it?"

"You got that right. Had a constant butt ache since the minute I first sat in it."

"You have feeling in your legs then?"

He frowned and hesitated.

"Guess I never considered my butt part a my legs."

He seemed to have missed my point. I tried again.

"Feeling. Can you feel touch in your legs and feet?"

He poked his upper right leg.

"Some, I guess, I'd have to say. That good?"

"Not a doctor but that would seem to be very good, I'd think."

His smile was not all I would have expected. Perhaps he feared it was just false hope. He sat up and took notice of something out front.

"It's Abby. She's first on the list. Her right arm won't work. We can all three go back to the house together."

Abby entered and Willy made the introductions. A few minutes later we were seated in the living room. It was small but pleasant. My apartment had never been so clean and neat.

"If you would rather Willy stayed, I have no objection. I know you don't know me from Adam."

"No. That's okay. Caller Agnes says you're a good person."

Willy smiled and left.

"So tell me about how this right hand thing came

about?"

"I'm the last one to be afflicted, I guess. I was walking home from the park about nine at night. A bunch of us had been hangin' out there singin' songs and stuff. I cut across to go in our back door. She was there beside the garage. I was really scared because I'd heard what she'd been up to."

"She, meaning the Woman in Red?"

"That's right. She pointed her arm at me and said, 'How can a woman care for her children when her arms won't work?' Then, she just disappeared into the dark."

"Can you describe how she disappeared – I mean was it just poof and she was gone?"

"No. Strange. It was like she become skinnier an skinnier an then there was nothin' at all."

"I'd say strange! Anything else?"

"Can't think of anything. Tall. Really tall. No face. One thing, maybe. It was like her hat – red straw hat – bobbed like it was slipping up and down on her forehead. I don't know."

"The forehead that wasn't there?"

"Ya. Sounds dumb I know."

"Which hand did she use to point?"

She took a moment to think.

"Her right. Yes. She pointed with her right arm and now mine won't work."

"Thank you for coming and talking with me Abby. I guess that will be all."

Next came Bruce with horribly discolored skin blotches all over his body. He felt no modesty in showing them all to me. They were like nothing I had ever seen before.

"Do they itch or are they in anyway sore?"

"No, Sir. Jist there."

For Connie, it was a migraine-like headache that had sapped her strength and kept her cheeks wet with tears.

Donny's hair had fallen out. The lad was as bald as a melon. He had brought a zip lock bag full to show me. I asked for a small sample and he offered it willingly.

Emily had not been able to keep food down since her encounter with the Woman in Red.

"May I touch your cheek?" I asked.

"Sure. Caller said to cooperate."

"Her skin seemed well hydrated and bounced right back into place."

"You can drink, I assume?"

"Yes sir."

"And that stays down. No problems with liquids?"

"No problems."

She was the last of the youngsters. All had seen only the right side of the woman. None recognized the voice but agreed it was definitely female. The last two girls described the dress as being slit from the knee down, which was how Annie said she had heard it described. I assumed that girls would, understandably, be more observant of such things.

What I had learned fit my assumptions about the nature of the Apparitions. None of that, however, seemed related to the ultimate, driving, motive I had in mind.

I still had the Kettle youngsters to interview. Perhaps there would be something new from them.

Aside from the fact they all agreed the Man in Blue consistently revealed his left side to them, it was all essentially the same story as the Keeps had told. It was always dark – after nine, usually. They had each been alone when the appearance took place. It was always a question asked. They were questions relating to the most basic human skills – What if no one in the valley could walk, write, speak, or see? What if terrible changes in physical appearance occurred, and so on? The affliction – if not immediate – occurred within hours of each of the confrontations.

It had become a 'Count Your Blessings Marathon' of a sort. That I understood.

I just had time for a quick bite of supper and to obtain directions before starting out for Reverend Keep's home. Once into the residential area there were no sidewalks so I made myself at home on the street. A friendly puppy romped around my feet for a block or so before hightailing it back toward more familiar territory. The house sat behind the Church and just north of the Cemetery. Handy for all concerned, I imagined, with a private smile.

It would be lawn chairs on the front yard for our get together. Reverend Kettle had arrived ahead of me. I had to

wonder, if only briefly, if that had been by design so they could hold a preparatory strategy session.

They both rose to greet me. It was cordial and genuine. The ice tea was welcome. The always promised cool of evening seemed to have lost its way. It was Jeb Keep and Harley Kettle. I in my blue flowered shirt seemed somewhat out of place among a set of dark suited clergymen. That was relieved somewhat when they moved to shed their coats, loosen their ties, and unbutton their collars.

"Now, that's more like it," Jeb said, lifting his tea as if in a toast. What can we do for you?"

"If my faith in the Sandy Valley word of mouth system is not misplaced, I have to assume you probably already know as much about why I'm here as I do."

Jeb turned to Harvey.

"Seems like a pretty sharp cookie for a Yankee."

Harvey nodded.

"I'm putting you on, of course. We're happy to have you here and yes, I suppose you could say we've been kept up to speed on your comings and goings."

"I'm particularly interested in the Mother Caller and what actual leadership role she is felt to play in these parts."

Harvey fielded the topic.

"First, you have to understand that the organized version of religion that Jeb and I dispense has to be carefully fit into the fabric of lore that has been established here for more generations than we can count. We do our thing, and people come to us for that. The lore and the Callers remain all quite separate. Neither competes with the other. It has always been an amicable relationship.

"What I'm getting to is that since we don't really participate in the other, Jeb and I may not be your best resources on the topic of the Mother Caller."

"I appreciate that but even the most rudimentary explanations will be helpful. My time with the Callers was cut short and I wasn't able to pose the question."

Jeb picked up the conversation.

"I assume you know the basic story. She is said to have been the child of a Keep and a Kettle and because of her remarkable power as a Caller, eventually came to possess

great influence over the folks in these hills and valleys. She became even more powerful in death. When the Callers believe she has spoken, her will, will be done!"

"Does she appear to the . . . what shall I call it, the general public?"

"Rarely, as I understand it. It takes something extraordinary."

"Like the twelve afflictions?"

"Maybe."

"Do you have information as to how she appears – looks, I mean?"

It was Harvey who carried on.

"Tall, long blond hair – an oddity in these parts – dressed in the white flowing robe of a Caller, and the requisite wide brimmed, white, straw hat. She wears a red, braided, sash around her waist which distinguishes her from all other Callers. Her speech is said to be low – alto, I mean, not quiet – and commanding, with a slow and deliberate delivery. Like all Callers she is . . . how can I put this, buxom, large boned, heavy."

"Why is that?"

"It is believed that it takes sheer mass of body to intercept energy from the spirit world."

"The hat is regulation as well, I assume."

"It is a symbol of respect. In public a caller only removes it when in the presence of a superior or someone for whom they have the greatest respect."

"Superior?"

"I suppose only the Mother Caller."

I nodded and shifted the conversation.

"You two grew up here?"

They nodded.

"Yet you talk as if you were somehow distanced from it."

"Seven years away at theology schools tends to have that effect. For many families here, the lore is handled a lot like their religion – they profess belief but really don't get into its regular and sincere practice. I guess we both came from homes like that. Marginal participation in the lore department might describe it best."

"Would even the marginal believers – of the lore – heed the edicts of the Mother Caller?"

"Mr. Miller, if she'd appear here in this yard right now, Jeb and I would be swept away with her wishes. Some teachings get so deeply buried during the vulnerability of youth that we never shed them, you know."

I nodded. My questions had been answered. I thanked them and walked back to the Inn. I needed still one more perspective on the situation – that of my two chatty imports to the region – Milt and Maggie.

They were sitting on the deck outside the lobby as I approached from the north.

"Hey, Marc," Milt said, waving.

"Got time to sit a spell?" Maggie added.

"Nothing but time, this evening," I said taking a page from Maggie.

They demonstrated a good grasp of the related lore but had little to add to what I had already learned about the Mother Caller. Maggie had been to the Emporium and picked up on the gossip of the day. It seemed the overriding topic revolved around the underlying truth which had begun to emerge from the questions asked by the Apparitions. I had lightheartedly referred to it as a count your blessings marathon. It had apparently become much more – a soul searching exploration of what things truly were and were not important in life, specifically, life in Sandy Valley.

I began to see the light – well, only a glimmer, but I had a way to proceed. The conversation turned to small talk and by 8:30 I was back upstairs in my room.

* * *

I was up, dressed, and down stairs early the next morning. I yawned my way through a stack of flapjacks and savored a delicious slab of Ozark country ham. Sam – the milkman – had earlier delivered more area news. If he were as talkative at every stop as he seemed to be at the Inn, I had to wonder how he completed his rounds.

It seemed the Mother Caller, herself, had made an appearance in the South Park around ten the night before. She was seen by several people. She spoke and although each witness reported the same phrase, no one understood

what she meant. "Blood is blood."

Milt had an interpretation.

"It could mean that no matter who you hurt it is wrong."

Maggie had her own idea.

"Or, it could be saying we're all basically of the same blood, like we all belong to the single family of man."

"How interesting. Both interpretations seem plausible," I remarked contemplating what they had just said.

"The way I understand the spirits methods and constraints, it certainly could mean many things all at the same time. Time and space seem meaningless in the spirit realm as I've recently learned."

They nodded, clearly disturbed by the report.

"How can I get their names?" I asked. "The people who saw her?"

"I'll jot them down for you. How will that be?" Maggie said, smiling for the first time that morning.

"Great."

"These are the ones Sam knew about. Jimmy and Sandra Kettle, third or fourth cousins, going to be married in August. Both eighteen. Dan and Maude Kettle, both long past sixty-five. Live in the first house east of the park. Doubt if they have phones. Sandra lives at the end of Main Street – only two story house on the block. Jimmy lives somewhere up on Kettle Mountain."

I hurried through breakfast, wanting to get to the cafe in time to hear the local reaction. It had happened in South Town. I wondered what significance might be assigned to that.

At seven thirty-five the cafe was perhaps half full. Willy was busy clearing tables and Wilma delivering food. I waved and arranged myself into a table in the center of the room, hoping to be able to listen in on conversations from there. I took a yellow pad from my briefcase and began doodling trying to look occupied.

Wilma brought a cup of coffee.

"Be a couple of minutes, Mr. Miller. We got slammed about ten minutes ago. Everybody commin' to check out the sightin' story. You heard?"

"Yes. I heard. Take your time. Actually, I ate up at the

Inn."

She nodded and went on her way. A few minutes later Willy arrived.

"You hear about the Mother Caller making appearances last night? It blew me away when I heard."

It was the most emotion I had sensed from him during the time I'd known him.

"Was that plural? Appearances?" I asked.

"Ya. Jimmy and his girlfriend saw her in their Park and Jasper Little saw her in ours."

"Do you know the times?"

"About ten in South Town and ten thirty or so up here."

"It's my understanding she may have said something."

"Ya. Nobody'll forgit that. Jimmy heard her say, 'Blood is blood,' and Jasper heard a question. 'Is separation hate made white?' What do you think it means. I mean I never in a million years thought a ghost would appear right here in town."

"But the Lady in Red?" I asked, his comment confusing me.

"Oh, ya, that. I guess I mean like the main ghost of all time, right here, the Mother Caller."

"But that first day. You described her to me and indicated it might take something with her powers to handle this problem."

"I know. But I guess I never really thought it would come to that."

I nodded.

"So, what does it mean?" he asked again pressing his question.

"Can't be sure. You folks know lots more about such things than I do. What's the word going around about it?"

"Well, the first one sounds to me like she meant something like all blood is the same. By blood she probably meant blood-line or family I'd guess."

"And the second?"

"Well, you could think of hate as being black. She could a meant that if you hate somebody but stay away from 'em, you is like trickin' yourself into forgettin' the hate or playin' it down or some such thing."

"Very interesting. Does that mean anything here in this

real world you live in?"

"Don't know. It all just come up so sudden like. Ma says the hate thing is really about keepin' yourself from feeling guilty about treatin' somebody bad by staying away from him or keepin' him away from you."

"Why do folks think the Mother Caller chose this time to appear? I understand that hardly ever happens."

"Got me."

"Something to do with the Apparitions, you think?"

"You mean like she was really speaking to them?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but I suppose that's as good a possibility as any."

He shivered and moved his shoulders. He shook his head and frowned below his already furrowed brow. The boy seemed terrified. It became a study in contrasts – his cavalier reaction to the legitimately frightening Apparitions and his terror at the appearance of the symbol of love and good in the lore with which he had been raised. I didn't press further.

Wilma came over wiping her brow with her apron and pulled out a chair.

"I suppose Willy's filled you in on the sightin's last night," she said sitting.

I nodded.

"Biggest events around here since the 1870s I suppose, when she come demandin' a stop to the killin' between the clans."

"Clans. I hadn't heard that term used here before."

"Since that visit we're supposed to think family instead. Clan had a more private side to it – more like forced separation, you could say. Family continues the pride in who you are but don't refuse outside influences."

"I see. Very well put, Wilma. You'd make a good teacher, I think."

"It's the sayin's that has the towns abuzz," she added unwilling to react to my compliment. "It's like riddles. Might be she and the Apparitions is in cahoots some way – both comin' at us from different directions. She'd have to keep the afflictions even, but then the two Apparitions seem to be doin' that all by themselves. All I can say is that whatever it is, it's the biggest thing in a century. Caller Agnes will have

something to say later on today. She should know what it's about by then."

These people lived, in two worlds, simultaneously – the logical, day to day life and its challenges here in Sandy Valley and the world of the spirits – a world that seemed to be relegated to the background until events changed the focus. Perhaps the Mother Caller felt her flock was finding it too easy to evade the teachings of the spirits and decided it was time to return things to how it once had been. It was easy for me, as an outsider, to spin hypotheses but it would be only the local interpretations that would prove meaningful.

She had carefully avoided giving directives. Instead she had laid out nebulous phrases – as if providing ink blots for interpretation. If we do read into the blots those things that our subconscious minds feel are of ultimate importance to us, then perhaps the same thing can happen from interpreting her phrases. What do these folks already know – deep down inside – that finally needs to be brought out into the open and acted upon?

I sound like a writer, spinning scenario after scenario. Willy and his mother returned to their duties. I continued trying to catch snatches of conversations. If it were the forcing of deep philosophical searching that the Mother Caller wanted, she had succeeded. If it were frightening the beejeebies out of these people, she had also succeeded. Sometimes it takes the strongest of emotions to unseat and reveal long dormant feelings that no longer serve positive purposes.

Interesting to me, as I looked around the room, it was Kettles and Keeps who were talking together. I had noticed early on that the Kettles had the lobeless ear – a common, genetically determined, physical attribute. The Keeps, on the other hand, had well defined, hang down lobes. I could now determine last names knowing nothing more than that.

Three cups of coffee later, I had heard enough. I waved again across the room at Willy and took my leave. I wanted to examine the bridge one more time. It was an itching in my curiosity box – a part of me to which my mother had often made reference, usually just after it had got me into some new form of trouble.

I crossed the street and began walking across the

grassy park toward the creek. There came a voice from behind. It startled me. I had an unreal quality, husky, cracking, wanting in force, yet clearly was to be taken seriously. Perhaps it was being disguised.

"Keep walking and don't look around, Mr. Miller or it could be very bad for both of us."

It sent shivers up my spine and caused my heart to begin racing.

CHAPTER FIVE

The voice from behind me continued to speak. I walked on neither slowing nor speeding up. I listened attentively.

"There's gonna be a meetin' a the afflicted kids at Sandy Point, tonight at ten. Kettles and Keeps. Thought you'd want to know. Don't look around, now."

I didn't. I continued on to the bridge. One of the ten-year-old fishermen from before was there. I had to wonder how he kept his cut offs up. He had not the slightest hint of hips. A ten-year old's normal physique, I suspected.

He looked up and smiled.

"Mornin', Mr. Miller. Got three Blue Gill. Two more and it'll make it mess for lunch."

About then the other lad showed up, repeating the greeting.

"And hello yourself," I said trying to be somewhat playful.

He got right to work baiting a hook and plopping it expertly right where his young friend had indicated should be a good spot. The end of the pole was fitted into one of many cane-sized holes in the clay. Apparently holding the pole was not a requirement for fishing in Sandy Valley.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out an already opened package of beef jerky.

"Hot and spicy, Mr. Miller. Like a strip?"

"No thank you but I appreciate the offer."

I recognized the distinctive odor. It had wafted over my shoulder during my encounter with the informant a few

minutes before. So now I knew who. I had to wonder why.

"What's the best bait for Blue Gills?" I asked, suddenly far more interested in the lads than before.

"Little crawlers. Git 'em too big they scare these pitiful little critters away."

"This must be a pretty good fishing spot. I see you guys here so often."

"It's okay. Jist out a the sun, mostly, though. Thick old planks on the bridge bed keeps the heat away pretty good 'til three or so. Can catch Sun Perch other side a the Inn up stream. They's the best eatin' but no shade up there."

"How's the fishing out at Sandy Point?"

The Jerky Kid looked up at me. It wasn't terror in his eyes but it came close. I went on as if I hadn't noticed.

"I've just heard about it. How do you get to it from here?"

The other boy answered.

"Two ways. Ya can jump in here and float to it. It's about two mile downstream. Or, you can take the gravel east. You'll see it. Juts out into the creek. Big sandy beach. Always full up with families on Sunday afternoon. High school kids use it as a place to go kissing after dark."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll take a ride out there after the sun goes down. Sounds like a nice spot."

It had not been the trip to the bridge I had anticipated and I really didn't understand what was going on, but I would check it out. I pretended to kick up a five-dollar bill I had furtively deposited in the sand near the water.

"Hey, guys! Look there. Either of you lose some money."

"No, Sir, the first boy said looking back and forth between his friend and the bill. Jerky Kid again looked me directly in the face. His eyes were still wide but the fear was gone. I winked at him. He nodded an infinitesimal nod and came close to smiling.

"Well, I'd say you better rescue it before it gets carried on downstream."

The first boy made quick work of the rescue. I thanked them again for the information, wished them luck with the Blue Gills, and walked back to the Inn. It was going on nine. I went

to the window to see if the kids were still at the creek. They were. I just imagined Jerky Kid had been fully convinced that I actually did possess the 'powers' some had rumored about me.

So, the teens were holding a meeting. Late at night, not in the light of day. That signaled private. It was a dilemma. Should I respect their right to privacy or find some way to become a mouse in the corner. J K (Jerky Kid) had reason to think I needed to be there. Clearly, he knew something that he felt he could not or should not handle so he had passed it off to me. I would go. It meant I needed to reconnoiter the lay of the land ahead of time.

From the description of the area as a large sandy beach big enough to hold many family's I was afraid secreting myself would present a problem. Fifteen minutes later I was there walking the point.

It was much as it had been described by the boys. The beech, however, jutted out from a wooded area that encircled it in an arc on the west, north and east. At one point, sloping down from the woods, was a natural mini-amphitheater. It looked to be a natural setting for a group meeting. It was my bet that would be where I'd find them.

On my way back through town I had the sudden urge for coffee and a pastry at Wilma's cafe. She was pleased to oblige me – pamper me would probably better describe the treatment I received there. It was ten o'clock and the place was empty other than for me. Wilma made herself at home at my table.

"Willy's blamin' you for the Mother Caller comin'," she said. Her expression was pleasant but suggested that she really couldn't blame him. It had been a mixed message.

"Blaming?"

"I suppose you're the easy target – outsider, known to meddle in ghostly things, speakin' with Caller Agnes and Ruby Mae. He says you tend to rile things up where ever you go."

"I've certainly heard that before. It's interesting to me that when I was here to investigate the Apparitions, Willy was okay with it – even may have had a hand in getting me here, I understand. But with this Mother Caller thing he turns on me."

"Well, it won't stop him from talking with you or anything

like that. He's just made the coincidence into a cause and effect thing in his head."

I nodded that I understood. Wilma was both bright and wise.

"He's elsewhere, I see."

"He takes off after the breakfast crowd leaves 'til about eleven. Then he comes in and sets tables, makes salads, all those things. He's good help."

"He doesn't seem to be in pain – his legs, I mean."

"He don't complain none. His best friend comes over at night and he and Billy help him get in and out a the bath tub. Nothin's ever said about hurtin'."

"He can manage getting in and out of bed by himself?"

"His daddy helps him scoot in and out a his chair. It's so sad sometimes I don't know how we're gonna manage. If it wasn't for Willy's good attitude, I really don't know how we'd do it. His optimism rubs off on the rest of us, I guess."

"This is probably none of my business but then I've seldom let that stop me."

Wilma smiled and raised one eyebrow. I had been noncommittal but in no way intended to shut down the conversation.

"Maggie and Milt said Willy used to talk a lot about dating but hasn't done that for a while. I don't even know where to go with the question, I guess."

"Up until his junior year he was really into girls. In love constantly – a different girl every month, but madly in love each and every time. That seemed to change his junior year – last year. He became very serious about his studies. Sports started taking up more of his time, too. He always had a date for the dances and things like that."

"Good. I guess I was afraid he had been jilted and irreparably damaged where girls were concerned."

"Heavens no. Around here the kids marry young – seventeen if they're not planning on finishing high school and nineteen or so if they do. He'll finish, of course, and there'll be a girl for him. Always is here in this valley. Talks like he wants to go up to the Junior College but we just don't have that kind of money."

"What do young people do around here to make a

living?"

"Farmin' is the biggest thing. The valleys on the far sides of both a these mountains is pretty good for growin' hay and sorghum, some corn. Willy don't care much about farmin'. Probably take this place over some day. He'd make a good Town Manager like his daddy. Always has been a leader. Good at figuring things out. Don't know how his affliction may change all that, of course."

She had her hands folded on the table. I put mine around them.

"I'm 99 percent sure I can guarantee his affliction will not be a concern in his future. Don't ask more."

She nodded; tears began streaming down her face. She removed her hands and patted mine. There were no words.

"I better be on my way. Several things to follow up on. These days just seem to be flying by."

I stood and left.

I spent the majority of the day outlining the first several chapters of the book – a book that had given me trouble hatching but was now growing strong and straight. Getting into the outline that way often gave me direction. It let me find unanswered questions and missing pieces of information.

At nine I left for Sandy Point and pulled my car well off the road into the woods. It was the only red Chrysler in the area as far as I had seen. Satisfied at last with its resting place I made my way through the woods with my brief case in one hand and a sack and can of insect repellent in the other. I had confronted chiggers on other occasions in those Ozark Mountains and I was not prepared to live through that again.

It was a pine forest and the soft layer of needles on the ground felt comfortable and cool and allowed me to move along silently. The near darkness was accentuated there among the tall, old, trees and I often found myself feeling my way from trunk to trunk. At last I saw the faint glimmer of light that signaled I was nearing the far edge of the grove.

The beech was nearly empty of people and those who remained seemed to be making ready to pack it in for the night. I found a comfortable spot with a view of the slope and waited. I could see out. No one could see in. I was more

proud of my accomplishment than the next half hour would bear out.

The young people began to gather at a few minutes before ten. Unfortunately, they gathered out along the water's edge – too far away for me to hear. I counted twelve, which suggested it was, indeed, made up of kids from both families. I dared not show myself or someone in their group might be suspected of having tipped me off. They sat on the sand in a tight circle and appeared to just be talking quietly together. Perhaps it was nothing more than an informal support group. I watched for a while but there seemed to be no purpose in my staying so eventually I left, disappointed but not discouraged.

* * *

It seemed I had left too early – at least that was the five-a.m. report from Sam. Several of the Keep kids said they had gone to the point to talk the night before – only three, the way Sam recounted the story. The Mother Caller had appeared to them. Again, her message had been question-like. "What's a name but a name?"

It had been picked up by the adults and was the only topic of discussion at the cafe by the time I arrived at seven. The place was packed. One stool remained open and I slid onto it. The men on both sides of me immediately engaged me in conversation about the appearance.

"You know about such things. What ya think is goin' on?"

"Have ya ever seen such a thing before, Mr. Miller?"

They were searching for answers and they wanted them today, not tomorrow or next week. I really had no good response but I tried.

"Seems like her words are directing you people to reconsider some things. I don't know – hate, blood, now names. I'm sure you will be able to make sense out of it all long before I will."

I hoped they'd go with that and form some insightful answer. They tried but it was difficult for them to move from the concrete phrases into the abstract possibilities.

Gradually they went their ways to get on with their real-life jobs and to cope with their real life problems and enjoy their real life successes. I moved to a vacant table that had

been only partially bussed. I wondered how Willy was going to interact with me – in light of what his mother had said the day before.

"Hey." he said; there was no particular pep or energy associated with it.

"Hey!" I repeated. "Not feeling well?"

"No. I feel okay. Just the new sighting has us all flustered, you know."

"I can only imagine. Yes. Some kids, I understand."

"Ya. Three. All afflicted. Out at Sandy Point. Scared out a their gourds."

"Keeps or Kettles?"

"Keeps - Bruce, Donnie and Connie."

"That typical for three kids to be out there that late?"

"Ya. In summer."

"Can you tell me just what they told you?"

"She come out a the woods and walked back and forth until they saw her. Then she took a few steps toward them and said her say."

"And what was that again?"

"What's in a name but a name?"

"Mean anything to you?"

"Maybe like the saying, 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.'"

"Junior English?" I asked, smiling, hoping to break the tension.

He nodded and looked into my face for the first time, though he didn't produce a fully qualified smile. I didn't comment on his response.

"What we gonna do, Mr. Miller?"

"Well, first take some solace in the fact no new afflictions have happened and that the Apparitions seem to have skedaddled back to wherever."

"But that's not enough."

"I'm sure it's not. I can tell you that I have the greatest confidence that things will soon be worked out, but I realize that can't really fill you with any great measure of relief."

"You talk like you write."

"I've been accused of that before."

It produced the first hint of a genuine, spontaneous,

smile.

"I know. I've read your books, remember."

Just as things appeared to be getting back to normal between us, Billy and Jack entered the front door together. Their expressions were one step beyond serious. Billy motioned Wilma to follow as the two men came directly to my table. They took seats. Billy spoke.

"I don't know if this good news or bad news, Mr. Miller. Tell him what you know, Jack."

"I got a call from Ruby Mae this mornin' sayin' she had been visited last night by the Mother Caller. She appeared out on the front lawn about eleven, all decked out in white and glimmering there in the moonlight with her crimson sash. Ruby Mae went out onto the porch thinking to approach her but she put out her hands meanin' to keep her distance. That ain't like the Mother Caller. Then she said, 'It takes four eyes, four ears, four breasts.' That's all she said."

He looked back at Billy who took up the conversation.

"I got a call from Agnes about a hour ago and she had the same experience – said it was close to midnight. She was already sleepin' when Miss Jane came and woke her up tellin' her of the appearance in the lawn. The rest is just like Jack told it."

"My, the Mother Caller is suddenly very busy. What do the Callers make of it?"

"It must be somethin' really big," Jack said. "The two of them has agreed to meet and speak about things."

"Where? When?" I asked.

"Noon today at the Keep's Church. The Reverends done set it up for them."

"This does sound big," I said. "As I recall the two of them have never met."

"That's right. I thought it wasn't allowed," Jack offered. "Ruby Mae said it just wasn't the custom."

Willy slumped back in his chair and sighed that deep sigh that only accompanies a feeling of defeat. He started to speak and I put my index finger to my lips. His brow wrinkled suggesting he wasn't sure what I meant. I repeated my gesture. He nodded and remained quiet though it was based on trust rather than understanding.

"This needs to be the business of the adults," I said.
"Your say will have its day."

"Now you're talkin' in riddles," Willy said.

"Think on it then."

I smiled and reached out and patted his arm. He accepted it without reaction. Wilma spoke:

"Well, two heads are better than one, they say. Maybe gettin' them together will help. Maybe together they can git to the bottom a all this."

She was standing behind Willy and reached down and massaged his shoulders. He looked up into her face and nodded.

"That's probably what the Mother Caller meant," he said. "Four eyes, four ears – sounds like two heads to me. Aunt Agnes and Ruby Mae must a figured it just like you did."

Wilma and the men moved to the counter leaving Willy and me at the table.

"I suspect you know something very important about the Man in Blue and the Woman in Red," he said to me, quietly.

"Yes. I do. But trust me on this one, Willy. It is not yet quite time.

"Okay. I guess I will trust you on it. Let me know, though. I need to be a part of it. I was the first to be afflicted."

"You can count on that," I said.

* * *

I imagined that such revered ladies would rate limo service. It was, I suppose, as defined in Sandy Valley. At a few minutes before twelve Jack's pickup crossed the bridge from South Town. As it turned east on Main Street, headed toward the church, I saw Ruby Mae, sitting tall and proud on her loveseat in the back of the truck. A similar event was taking place coming down off Keep Ridge and heading toward the church from the East – Caller Agnes, in the back of Billy's pickup. They were both huge women who long ago had outgrown typical means of transportation.

I assumed they had heavy duty steps available. I would not invade the privacy of the event. Interestingly, no one else would either.

Sandy Valley was a quiet town by anybody's standards

but for the next sixty-three minutes – and everyone in the valley could tell you it was sixty-three minutes – the town was hushed. There was no traffic. There was no one on the streets or in the parks or fishing under the bridge. Except for the chorus of birds – which seemed louder and more melodically orchestrated than usual – the sounds in the town had been suspended.

The pickups made the return trips with their precious cargos and life gradually returned to the valley. The buzz began.

"What did they say?"

"How did they get along?"

"Did one surface as more influential than the other?"

"Did either or both remove the hat in the presence of the other?"

"Would they be combining their powers in some way?"

"Would there be more meetings?"

"Would they have a statement? When? By whom?"

It had been just Wilma, Willy and me in the cafe. Neither of them had spoken a word while the meeting was in progress. Wilma cleaned and re-cleaned the counter. Willy sat quietly at the table with me – drawing, and sighing, and staring off into space, deep in thought. I made no attempt to intrude into what was obviously the biggest event of their lives.

Once the pickup was over the bridge, Willy spoke first. He addressed his comments to me.

"I suppose change can come too fast sometimes, can't it?"

"What kind of change?"

"Between people – families – things you believe in."

"Your phrase, too fast, imply something bad or hurtful."

He nodded and looked at me.

"I've always thought this family separation thing was dumb. You'd think that after a century without any real conflict, nobody'd care anymore about staying apart. With what's happened this past month it seems even a hundred years is too fast."

I thought I knew where his thoughts were going but he still didn't have them sorted out well enough. I'd let him work on it.

"The families shouldn't be takin' the one fer one revenge but everybody still just accepts that it's the okay thing to do. I really thought we were smarter than that. I guess I was wrong. Seein' it happen, ain't changed a thing. Maybe we need to wait one more generation. Most a the kids think like I do. Parents don't. It's hard to be that patient when you're seventeen. I want everything good to happen fer us right now. Were you that way at seventeen?"

"Oh, yes, and I suppose if I were honest I'd have to admit I'm still that way. Patience is fine when it's required but don't mistake pig headedness or refusal to grow for patience."

"Like the saying, 'out of mind, out of sight?'" he asked.

"Yes, just like that. When folks choose not to consider the possibilities they never have to choose among them – they never have to commit themselves to doing what might be better. Some would say doing what's right."

Again, he nodded.

"So, are you saying that applying a little pressure to make folks think about those kinds a things is okay?"

"My answer would be yes. It would not be the answer many other people would give you. The right and wrong of the topic will have to be found within yourself."

He looked relieved and managed a prolonged, medium sized smile.

"I found it sometime ago," he said. "Just having second thoughts, I guess."

"Second thoughts are always good, I think – provided they are honest. They require us to periodically reassess things."

"It's funny, when I begin thinking about it, though."

"What's funny," I asked more and more intrigued by the twists and turns the conversation had been taking.

"That even though you really want something to change from how it's always been, it's downright scary once you're sure it's about to happen."

I nodded. He wasn't finished.

"It's like that final hurdle in the race when you're so tired you really have to wonder if it's worth trying to get over one more. Then when you do, after ya made the effort, it's all of a sudden the greatest thing."

It hadn't been the perfect analogy, but he was on the way toward clarifying his beliefs – a process I believe has to be a lifelong undertaking.

He handed me the sketch pad on which he had been working. It was a self-portrait – a profile with faces looking both right and left. The one on the right was encircled by a halo. The one on the left bore ugly horns and a pointed ear.

“Sometimes it’s really hard to know your heart, isn’t it?” I said.

I handed it back across the table toward him. He indicated by his gesture that it was for me.

“You keep it until I git it all figured out.”

I nodded.

Customers gradually began entering the café, one by one. Lunch had been delayed but it would come to pass. I rolled the picture into a cylinder and left for the Inn.

My door was unlocked, probably because I failed to lock it when I left that morning. Or, maybe not! There, scrawled on the glass door to the deck, was a message.

MARK MILLER GO HOME NOW!!!

I smiled. People were always telling me to go home. They just didn't understand how cuddly and loveable I really was underneath my meddling facade. I figured the spelling of Mark with a K reduced my number of suspects by at least four: Milt, Maggie, Willy and Annie. That left hundreds, of course. Other than that, I had no lead.

I stood there, hands on my hips, wondering about my next step. A glint of light caught my eyes. It came a second time and a third. I located its source as being under the west bridge. It wasn't in Morse Code – it was just frequent flashes as if from a hand-held mirror.

I opened the door and stepped out onto the deck. I waved, figuring if it were a signal I should acknowledge receipt. The flashes stopped. I supposed I had just been summoned. I suspected it was J K. The nameless lad interested me. I left to see what it was all about.

I noticed that clouds were beginning to gather to the west suggesting a shower or even a thunderstorm might be in the works for later in the day. Moisture to calm the dust would be welcome, as would the cool that accompanied a summer

rain.

I went on foot by way of the southern bank, thinking I might get a better look under the North Town side of the bridge from there and perhaps gain some advantage over my summoner. No one was to be seen. I proceeded on across the bridge and circled back down to the boy's fishing spot.

There was a stake in the ground and a sheet of paper, slit in two places so it could be slid over the stick. I removed it. "Back door of Mikes guradg."

The creative spelling of, garage, further supported my suspicion I was dealing with young J K. Mike's place was at the far west edge of North Town, less than two hundred yards away. I wiped my forehead and continued on my quest. It reminded me of the treasure hunts we had at parties when I was a kid. A sign on the front door – the multi-stained cardboard clock with the moveable hands – read Back at 4. My instructions had been to use the back door. I walked around to the rear of the building. The door was ajar about eight inches. I pushed it open just enough more to let myself in. There was another sheet of paper – this one sporting a single red arrow pointing to the sheet metal rack.

I approached and began examining the several sheets of steel stored there. I noticed it immediately. The front edge of the top piece was covered on both sides with red clay. I pulled it out. Two holes had been bored near the upper edge. They would be a match to the holes in the beams under the bridge. A second identical sheet lay underneath it. I did understand the significance. I didn't understand what J K was doing or why. Either he was a good deal smarter than his spelling skill would suggest or he had a direct tap into the community secrets. Most likely, both.

Regardless of any of that, it seemed I needed to meet Mike of Mikes Guradg. He would be back at four. It was One. Perhaps another stop at the bridge was in order. I removed the arrow so as to leave no evidence behind and went back to the bridge.

The same two, hipless, boys were sitting in the same two places with the same two poles secured into the same two holes.

"Hey, Mr. Miller," the one who was not J K said,

apparently happy to see me and continuing as the spokesman for the pair. "Hear about the big meetin' up at the church?"

"Yes, I did. A big event for sure."

"Biggest ever around here. All anybody can talk about. They say things is gonna be different around here now. Can't get nobody to tell me how, though."

"Sometimes we just have to wait and see, I guess."

"I guess. Hope they done away with school."

J K looked at me over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. I winked. He nodded. The two of us did communicate – just not yet face to face through spoken words.

"I just realized that I don't know your names," I said.

"I'm Harry Keep and this is Jake Keep. We're some kind of relatives."

Well, I'll be. J K was, in fact, J K!

"Ever find out about those marks in the clay and holes in the timbers?" Harry asked.

"Yes, in fact, I just did. Probably some kind of metal sign involved."

The boy nodded, clearly not really interested in pursuing it. J K also nodded. The back of his head revealed little else to me.

"What can you tell me about Mike at the garage?"

They both giggled. Harry answered.

"Mike lives behind the church now."

It seemed hilarious to J K who bent forward in convulsive laughter.

"What am I misusing?" I asked, smiling.

"Mike's dead. Hank runs it now. Hank is Mike's son."

"I see. Let me start over. What can you tell me about Hank?"

"He's a old man. Had a passel a girls. Lots a grand kids. Been fixin' trucks all his life. Good at it. Not real friendly. Likes to hunt. Like that?"

"Yes. Like that. Thanks."

It really hadn't told me anything that seemed immediately useful.

"Guess I better get on to other things. Thanks for your help."

As I turned to leave a different, husky, voice spoke up.

"I'm readin' one a your books – about the soldier boys up at Carlton."

It was J K though he still had not turned around.

"I see. Kind of tough reading for a guy your age."

"You're tellin' me. Willy's helpin' me. He helps me with my school work sometimes."

A Willy connection. Interesting.

"So, that must mean you and Willy are pretty good friends, I suppose."

"Yup. Feel real bad about his affliction, but he will get better you know."

Again, he looked at me over his shoulder.

"You sound pretty sure of that."

He nodded, and turned back to watch his line. He offered no explanation. Was it his child's blind faith about such things or was it something else?

"Jake knows stuff," Harry explained. "He sees things sometimes."

His comment muddied the water, but that never bothered me. It just signaled there still were things I needed to learn.

"Well, tell Willy hi from me next time you see him."

J K nodded. I walked across the park to the cafe.

"Don't you ever get out of here?" I asked.

Wilma smiled.

"Mary's on vacation this week. Usually she does the supper hour. Just doublin' up right now. Coffee or tea?"

"Tea, please, iced. I hope Mary found some cooler spot in which to vacation."

"In these parts, vacation mostly means just not working at your job. She's at home up on Kettle Mountain probably workin' twice as hard as when she's here."

"A Kettle? I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Forgive that."

"No problem. Lots a work place mingling goes on now. Don't really know a Kettle that I don't like."

"What can you tell me about Harry and Jake, the fisher boys who seem to live down under the bridge?"

"Interesting kids. Been best friends forever. Hard to figure. Different as night and day. Sometimes they'll bring

their catch in here and trade me part of it for fixin' the rest for them to eat. This summer it's fishin'. Last summer they tied towels around their necks for capes and were super heroes for three months. Good kids. Jake's the student and the dreamer. Harry's the talker and the doer."

"I've discovered that. Jake says Willy's helping him read one of my books."

"Willy helps a lot of the kids with school work and readin'. I think he'd make a good teacher."

"That reminds me."

I took out my billfold and rummaged until I found a business card.

"You once mentioned Jr. College. This is the card of the Headmaster at the Ozark Hills Academy. He's a good friend of mine. Use my name and tell him your situation. There's no tuition and if there's an opening I'm sure Willy would like it there."

"Heard about it. Didn't think they took students from this valley."

"Flexibility is their motto. I can't believe that being from here could possibly matter. I'll call ahead if you like."

"That would be very kind. I'll talk with Billy first before we mention it to Willy, you understand."

"I understand. New topic. What about Hank at Mike's? Anything special about him?"

"Too old to still be workin'. Didn't have no boy so there's nobody to take over from him. Mike was his daddy. Sold brand new Model T's I'm told back in the old days. Not sure what you're gettin' at."

"Would he be the kind who'd be against an outsider coming in and trying to help?"

"Might be. He givin' you trouble?"

"Oh. No. Nothing like that. Just forget it."

No more was said.

"Any word on the big meeting?" I asked keeping it general.

"None from the Callers. Plenty of talk from folks who really don't know nothin' but fancy themselves to be experts."

"Caller Wanabes?"

"Some. Yes, you could describe 'em that way."

"Is there jealousy about who gets selected and who doesn't – to study with the Caller?"

"It can't be said out loud, you know, but sure. It's like any contest. Winners and losers. Happy and sad. Hank's oldest has the gift but there'll be no Caller from her generation. Just how it is."

"Nobody sets up shop for herself?"

"As a Caller, you mean? No, Sir. That would be kin to claimin' you was God himself."

"How are the kids doing – the afflicted ones?"

"Nobody's gittin' worse. Nobody's gittin' better. Some a the parents is wonderin' if it happened because they done somethin' wrong – some sin or somethin'. Sounds extreme when you hear it but then the more you think and look into your own heart the more you has to wonder if it might be true."

"I sincerely doubt that, but I suppose a good soul searching never hurt anybody."

I smiled. So did she. Not as broad and not as long, but she smiled.

"Some are wonderin' if it might be some little kid with the gift. One with poor judgment, ya know, who just makes wishes against kids or families that he thinks done him wrong."

"You say 'him'. I thought the gift was a female thing."

"I didn't really mean either boy or girl," she explained. "We only look for the gift in girls. Maybe we overlook it in the boys."

Maybe, indeed! J K! The newest player to enter the game had just been promoted to first string on my roster of interesting prospects.

///

CHAPTER SIX

At three o'clock Billy was summoned to the residence of Caller Agnes and Jack received a similar request from Ruby Mae. At four the joint communiqué – a copy in each of the Caller's handwriting – was posted on the bulletin board in front of each Town Building.

"We have no answer. We share the same question. We will continue to work hard and will speak by phone tomorrow at noon."

To say that was a letdown would understate the reaction. To say it was cause for near panic would better describe the reaction.

I was in my room wondering whether to leave my new window decoration in place or attempt to clean it off when Milt and Maggie arrived with the news. For transplants, they were worked up beyond what I would have expected. It was the first time they had seen the message – directive – threat - whatever. It doubled their concern. Quadruple all of that when two law enforcement officers walked in the door right after them.

"Don't you two have anything better to do than come and meddle in my meddling?" I said extending my hand, happy to see them both again.

"Introductions are in order, I suppose. Sheriffs Carter and Chance these fine folks are Milt and Maggie – they own this place and have all but adopted me the past few days. What? Why? And both of you?"

Sheriff Chance, the older of the two, spoke for them.

"Got another call. This one said you'd been threatened. I called Sheriff Carter and we decided it was about time we

had coffee together at the Sandy Valley Café.”

“You missed the Café by a block and a half,” I said, hoping it would sound humorous.

“Hit it first, actually. Willy pointed us in your direction. We’d like to get filled in on things.”

Milt and Maggie excused themselves and the men moved to examine the message on the window.

“Mark with a K,” Sheriff Chance said. “Ignorance or intentional misdirection?”

“I must admit I hadn’t considered the latter.”

“Any obvious suspects?” he asked.

“Not really. The red lipstick hardly goes with the masculine scrawl and it is only a suggestion, not the usual threat to life and limb that I’m used to getting.”

It was Sheriff Carter’s turn.

“The good news is there hasn’t been a homicide, domestic disturbance, or disorderly case in this area for as long as I can remember. They just aren’t violent people. The bad news is that nice guys are unpracticed fighters and never know their own strength once they go berserk?”

Sheriff Chance stated what both men were thinking.

“I’ll just assume that since you’ve been here more than twenty-four hours you now know what it’s all about but you still have a few loose-ends to tie up.”

I didn’t want to disclose my hand to anybody. A leak of the critical information at the wrong time could cause serious trouble. I compromised.

“I have my suspicions. It’s one of those situations in which the plots and subplots have to stay exactly in line because if one falls they all fall. I know that doesn’t answer your question but the point will come when I’ll know it’s time to tip that first domino. It may be tomorrow. It may be several days away but soon.”

“You want protection?”

“Goodness, no. Like you said I’m here in the middle of Eden and haven’t seen an apple tree since I left Carlton Corner.”

Chance turned to Carter. “Do you suppose he could survive for even one hour without metaphors and analogies?”

“Perhaps an hour and a half if he had free access to

allusions, allegories and alliterations.”

I clapped. They nodded their appreciation. I got serious and directed them to chairs.

“You’ve been kept up to speed on the events, I assume.”

They nodded. I tried to summarize relevant bits and pieces as I understood them to provide a background of sorts.

“The valley and surrounding mountains have been in the midst of social upheaval for two decades. Part of the problem is that very few of the residents even know it. Most of the changes have taken place gradually, orderly, without any particular attention being paid to them. Many Kettles now work in North Town and Keeps in South. The teenagers attend school together with other youngsters from outside the valley.

“Right now, there seems to be one set of forces – the Apparitions as they are called – working to maintain the old ways. They have, seemingly, reinstated the old one for one form of retaliation – although no one seems to have any real idea what may have lit the fuse. There seems to be a degree of exaggeration to it – reacting out of proportion.

“Then there is the Mother Caller whose message seems to be that it is finally time now to put all differences and old grudges behind, and fully unite as one people. It is being sold as a war between spirit forces – ghosts if you will.”

“And you, not buying the ghost thing, have an entirely different interpretation,” Sheriff Chance said trying to cut to the quick.

“If you’ll let me redefine ghosts to include all those, no longer useful beliefs, most of us have stored deep down in our psyches, then I can deal with it at the ghost level.”

“You think there may be some non-ghost types trying to assist those forces.”

“That could be.”

My noncommittal approach had clearly not been satisfactory but nothing was said about it.

“You see no trends toward more violence?”

“More?”

“The Afflictions,” the Sheriff said clarifying.

“Oh. Well, certainly nothing that will be headed off by a

duo of sturdy, stalwart, six-gun slinging sheriffs.”

“One of Marc’s alliterations blows us both out of the water, Sheriff,” Chance said.

“Not that we don’t have faith in you, Marc, but the two of us have decided to keep a deputy within easy 911 shot just in case. We’ll both feel better if you slip this number into the speed dial of your cell phone. Humor two old lawmen, okay?”

“Anything for the silver-haired set. I appreciate your concern. It’s mostly a matter of just letting these folks come to grips with the forces – ghostly or mortal – and make some sane, sociological, decisions.”

They stood. I had one more unrelated question for Sheriff Carter.

“How well do you now Willy?”

“Known who he was all his life, I guess. Can’t say I know him or his family well.”

“I’d like Headmaster James to consider him for the Academy. I’ll call him later on but just thought a word from you might help pave the way.”

“Certainly. That hilltop campus isn’t set up for wheelchair students, you know.”

“Let’s assume that will not be an issue.”

The Sheriff turned to his companion.

“Do you get the idea that we came all this way, had our conversation with Marc, and are still as much in the dark as before we left home?”

“But the coffee was good!”

They smiled and I walked them down to their cars. They paused in the parking lot long enough to make sure I added the deputy’s number to my cell phone. At Main Street one of the cars turned left and the other right. It was good to have them as my friends.

“Friends or enemies?” came a husky voiced question from behind.

I looked around and J K stepped out from behind the shrubs.

“You tell me,” I said testing a hunch.

He smiled.

“Friends!”

“How long?”

“Not sure but the older guy longer than the younger one.”

“And how is it that you knew that?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Sometimes I just know stuff.”

“Are you here for some reason other than to spy on who comes and goes?”

Another smile as he hitched up his cutoffs just in the nick of time.

“You ever lose those shorts of yours?” I joked.

“Sometimes swimmin’.”

He grinned.

“I’d think a length of rope for a belt would make life easier.”

“Had one. Needed it fer a stringer fer all the fish we caught one day. Stinks like fish now.”

I didn’t pursue the logical step to just go find another length of rope.

“Lemonade?” I asked.

“You wantin’ or offerin’?”

“Offering.”

“Sellin’ or fer free?”

“For free.”

“Sure.”

“That be okay with your parents – coming inside with a stranger?”

“You’re no stranger. You’re Marc Miller.”

I supposed that fully answered the question. Maggie always had lemonade in press and serve insulated bottles on the desk in the lobby. I turned up two tall glasses and filled them. I pointed to the deck and followed him outside. He took the chaise and I happily settled for a chair.

“Things is gettin’ edgy in these parts,” he said apparently getting down to business.

“Edgy? How do you mean?”

“Them ghosts from the other side is on a rampage – losin’ our stuff fer us, makin’ folks forget things, burnin’ pies – things like that.”

“Let me try to understand. I assume you are saying that the Keep ghosts are suddenly more of a nuisance for the

Kettles and the Kettle ghosts for the Keeps.”

“Yup. The Reverend Keeps wife, Alice, done fell down stairs this mornin’.”

“And that was caused by the Kettle ghosts?”

“Yup.”

“How can you be sure it wasn’t just an accident?”

He looked at me fully puzzled.

“Accidents? There ain’t no accidents, Mr. Miller. That’s a outsider’s word. Usin’ it jist means you don’t understand how things really is.”

“And how is – are things, really?”

He took a long drink as if to fortify himself before beginning his explanation.

“The ghosts is at war – well not all of ‘em but a sizeable bunch of ‘em. It’s the Keeps against the Kettles. Since they can’t hurt each other – ghosts can’t hurt other ghosts, you know – they takes it out on us here in Sandy Valley.”

“I see. And in the past few hours that, taking it out on, process seems to have become worse, has it?”

“Yup. Everybody’s saying it’s true. Willy’s Ma just burnt the pies fer supper. Even she’s sayin’ it and she never says stuff about the ghosts.”

“What’s Willy saying?”

“He closed up about it all. It’s like his head is in some other place today. I was readin’ and he wasn’t catchin’ my mistakes – I made some on purpose to test him out. Guess the Kettle ghosts done got to him, too.”

“Just as a point of interest, did you make more real mistakes reading today than usual?”

“Me? No. I don’t suppose so. Why?”

“Why not, would be my question? If those Kettle ghosts are affecting the things everybody else is doing, why not you?”

He threw his hand up.

“I’m just a kid. I don’t know everything yet.”

I wouldn’t push. The look he gave me told me I didn’t have to. J K realized the inconsistency. He’d work on it. He changed the subject.

“That red lipstick?”

He paused to make sure I understood his reference.

“On my windows, upstairs?”

He nodded.

“Somebody from town.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Womenfolk don’t wear it up in the hills.”

I wouldn’t ask how he knew about the sign.

“Something was wrong on that sign, you know,” I said.

He nodded.

“The K.”

“You’ve seen the sign, then.”

“Somebody’s gotta look out fer you, Mr. Marc with a ‘c’ Miller.”

So, I had a self-appointed guardian. I didn’t understand why. Probably not a bad idea, however. He had finished his drink. I’d been so interested in the conversation I hadn’t touched mine.

“More lemonade? I haven’t touched mine.”

“No thanks. I better be goin’. Gonna spring a leak if I don’t take one.”

He giggled.

“I’ll show you to my bathroom, then.”

“Naw. Boys was meant to use bushes – that’s what Pa says.”

I figured that philosophy probably saved on the family water bill and minimized early morning overcrowding of the bathroom.

“Thanks for the drink, Mr. Miller.”

“Thanks for dropping by. I feel we know each other a lot better now.”

“Like friends?”

“Most certainly like friends!”

He grinned and took off on a trot – in search of the nearest bush, I assumed.

I was both fascinated and troubled by J K’s report. It could be, of course, just as he reported: the ghosts had suddenly and for some unknown reason, upped the ante. More likely, I figured, nervous people were just reacting the way nervous people usually do – having more little ‘accidents’ and more forgetful episodes.

None of that mattered. It was what the people believed that would set the tone in Sandy Valley during the next day or

so. I was suddenly grateful for that new number in my speed dial. I was also suddenly hungry. It was nearly six o'clock.

I took care of a few things up in my room first, and walked through the café door at exactly six thirty. It was no more than a quarter full, still, the decibel level was up from what I was used to there. I took a table by the front window and faced myself into the room. It was filled with lobes – Keeps, that is.”

Willy and Wilma approached me together.

“Good evening,” I said smiling giving no hint I was aware of the increasing tension.

“Things ain’t goin’ good,” Willy said.

“Oh?”

“Stuff is happenin’. The war’s getting worse hour by hour.”

“What he means is tensions seem to be increasing,” Wilma said trying to be the voice of reason and phrase it in a way she thought might be more acceptable to me.

“I notice only Keeps in here this evening,” I said.

“How did you know that?” Willy said, surprised.

“I know things,” I said, smiling and pulling on my ear – which does sport a lobe of sorts.

“Oh. You noticed. Had me going there.”

“And a proud moment it was, too,” I said hoping to ease the strain that had crept into the relationship.

“Do you two serve food here this evening or just concerns?” I asked trying to bring things back into focus.

“Salisbury steak. Mom’s is the greatest ever made.”

“That sound wonderful. I’ve worked up quite an appetite and have no idea how.”

Wilma turned and left to attend to the food. I spoke to Willy.

“So, how did J K do with his reading today?”

“J K? Don’t know a J K.”

“I’m sorry. I guess you know him as Jake Keep.”

I got a look but no actual question.

“Little Jake. I guess he did okay. You use big words sometimes that even I have to think about.”

“The boy sure looks up to you,” I said.

“A good kid. A whole lot smarter than you’d think first

off. How do you know him?"

"He and I share the same shade under the west bridge sometimes."

It seemed to satisfy him.

"So, tell me more about the developing problem."

"Just lots of stuff happening all of a sudden."

"Like stuff that doesn't usually happen?"

"Right. Well, no. It's pretty confusing actually."

"Talk to me about it."

"Everybody's on edge. Little things are driving us all nuts. It's like things that we usually don't think twice about are suddenly big deals – big bad deals."

"And blame seems necessary?"

"Oh yes! We don't think in terms of accidents around here. It's all the insidious intention of the bad ghosts."

"Insidious?"

"Probably picked it up from one of your books – you know, sinister, dangerous."

I was amused he felt the need to provide a definition when he assumed the word had come from one of my books.

"You have me confused. Are you saying there are really more of these things happening or that people are just paying more attention to what they've been willing to overlook in the past?"

Willy paused, thoughtfully, before answering.

"I'm probably resorting to the first to describe the second. You knew I'd see that, didn't you? Sneaky but thanks. It doesn't change things. People are scared and more than just irritated."

"Angry?"

"Well, maybe not that yet, but it's heading in that direction for sure."

Wilma returned with my meal. She had overheard part of the conversation.

"It's more mistrust, again, than anger, I'd say. Look around. Half my regulars aren't here and that half is all Kettles."

"I am really confused. If it is a war between ghosts and not mortals – not the living, breathing, Keeps and Kettles – then what is there to mistrust here among you people?"

Willy took a stab at an explanation.

“Them ghosts was once Keeps and Kettles. You’re always kin with the departed. Dyin’ don’t change that.”

“But can you influence your departed relatives to do bad things to the living Kettles?”

“No. Maybe the Caller can.”

He looked up at his mother. It had been a question for her. She responded.

“But that isn’t what a Caller does. She tries to keep things in balance – between here and there.”

I had heard the words before. More and more they seemed just that – words, completely separated from any concrete concepts, from any reference to anything real. Those who now used them, in the same ways they had heard them used for generations, could not recognize that. I would not pursue it right then. We needed a more concrete plan.

“So, what do we do?” Willy asked impatiently.

“Explain to the other kids the revelation you just had about overreacting to what’s always been happening and inappropriately blaming it on increased ghostly activity. Have them try to make the point with their family members and neighbors.”

“But that will only handle the Keeps,” Wilma said.

“I think Willy probably has enough ties to the Kettle kids through his school contacts to get something going over there, too. Right, Willy?”

He looked directly into my eyes, clearly not pleased that I would suggest such a thing in the presence of his mother.

“I’ll see what I can do. Yes, probably.”

He turned in his chair and went to tend to the recently emptied tables.

“I suppose Billy and I should try to do the same thing with the grownups. People ain’t thinkin’ very clear about it all right now. It won’t be easy.”

“It won’t be at all, if somebody doesn’t take the lead.”

She nodded.

“They all respect Billy. He can get them to listen if anybody can. He’ll talk with Jack in South Town. The Callers won’t interfere in worldly relationships like this. It’s not their responsibility.”

Billy entered. He came directly to my table but spoke to his wife.

"There's been a bad accident on Kettle Mountain. Old Bert didn't make a turn comin' down the hill and his pickup fell plumb into the valley. Somehow, he survived but he's pretty banged up. Not good for such a old man. They're already blaming it on Keep spirits. Seems like the war may finally be getting out a control."

"Now what?" Wilma asked him.

"Hank's got the only wrecker in the area. I'm going to go get him so we can haul up the pickup."

"Will they let you help," I asked, "Considering the accusation against the Keep spirits?"

"Hadn't entered my mind they wouldn't. You do raise an interesting point. I'll see what Jack has to say. A person shouldn't have to second think his helpful bent, you know."

His tone reflected both sadness and disgust. He went to use the phone at the far end of the counter. Willy wheeled up.

"What's up?"

His mother answered, stroking the back of her son's head.

"Bert Kettle – the old one – just run off road and got hurt. Your daddy's tryin' to offer Hank's wrecker to help."

"Tryin'?"

"The Kettles figure it was our spirits what caused it," Wilma explained.

"Was it?"

She didn't respond but looked at me and then left to be with Billy.

"I know you don't think it was the spirits, do you?" Willy said to me, deciding to face the notion that some people don't believe the way he and the folks in the valley believe. It was clearly an uncomfortable pursuit. Allowing for possibilities beyond what one believes is always difficult; some find it impossible.

"I don't know everything, Willy, but no, my inclination would be to first look for some other explanation in the here and now."

"Like a 89 year old man, crippled up with arthritis, drivin'

down a narrow, winding, mountain road with the sun in his nearly blind eyes?"

"Yes. That would probably rate high on my scale of possibilities."

"I'm going to say this," Willy said. "I think a lot of our blaming the ghosts – maybe even most of it – for the little things that happen to us, is probably wrong. But, I can't go all the way and say those spirits may not do such things sometimes."

"We all have to believe what makes the best sense to us. I'm always impressed when I see somebody examining their beliefs that way – allowing for other possibilities. These kinds of things force me to do that, too, you know."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," he said. "Being open minded doesn't give a guy a lot of security, does it?"

"Security?"

"Ya. You can't be open-minded if you can't admit that what you believe may not be entirely right. And it's hard to feel secure if you have any doubts about your beliefs."

"Some say that seeking security is a deceptive goal. They say that being part of the never-ending search for truth needs to be the goal."

"Being secure is really a form of being insecure, then."

"I don't follow you, Willy, but I want to. Say more."

"Well if you tell yourself you already know what's right, for example, you've given up ever finding out whether you really are right or not, and just realizing that has to make you insecure in some way."

Again, the young man had some work to do on it, but he was well into his own quest. I hoped his would be as exciting and worthwhile as my own had been – was being. Nothing that abstract was going to solve the immediate problems of Sandy Valley, however. Sometimes, recognizing one's own over-reaction was the surest way to gain a more reasonable perspective.

We left the conversation there. It probably wasn't finished. I topped off my supper with a slice of peach pie – apparently her second attempt came through unscorched by ghostly antics.

As I began the walk back to the Inn I saw Hank's wrecker, driven by an older man I assumed was Hank,

following Billy's pickup across the bridge to the south. Apparently, things had been worked out.

* * *

Mine was a restless sleep that night. I awoke, so I must have been asleep, though as I recalled I spent most of the night fretting about not being able to. I had showered and dressed – well, mostly dressed – when I noticed J K sitting out on my deck. I took my shoes and socks with me and joined him.

"Where's your cape?" I asked.

"My what?"

"I understand that last summer you were a flying superhero so I just assume you flew up here this morning."

He grinned.

"No cape. No flyin'. I'm a good climber. Pa calls me his Billy goat."

His grin quickly faded.

"More serious stuff happenin', Marc."

I was amused and pleased that our friendship had progressed to a first name basis. I'd have to remember to use his.

"Serious stuff?"

"Yup. Another affliction by the Woman in Red."

"Really. A Keep kid, I assume."

"Yup. Peter Joe."

"How old?"

"High schooler."

"Details!"

"In his back yard about midnight. He was sleepin' in his hammock – so hot ya know. She come up and started talking to him. He can't see nothin' now."

"Blind?"

"As a bat!"

"Did she say anything?"

"Yup. She said, 'It has ta git worse, unless it gits better'."

"What do folks think that means?"

"It's a puzzle, I'd say. Most folks know it's because of the thing with Old Bert."

"A getting even kind of thing, you mean?"

"Yup. Tempers gonna flare, I'd say."

"Whose?"

"Everybody's but yours and mine."

"And why not yours?"

"I live by Goldie's rule."

"I guess I'm not familiar with Goldie or her rule."

"Sure, you are. 'Do good stuff so others will do it back.'"

"Oh, yes. I guess where I come from it's called the golden rule and it's worded just a bit differently. Same idea, though. And you think nobody else around here will follow that, now."

"Nobody's thinkin' straight."

"And how is it that you are?"

"Like I told ya. Them ghosts is gonna do what them ghosts is gonna do and nobody ain't gonna change that. Ya jist lives with it."

"You're wise beyond your years, Jake."

"That like a compliment?"

"About the highest compliment, I can think of."

He beamed although he didn't ask me to explain it. He wasn't finished with his sunrise report.

"There's more to tell. The Mother Caller done showed up again last night – over near Old Bert's place."

"What message did she have?"

"They ain't sayin'."

"They?"

"The Kettles. They's a pretty closed mouth lot right from the git go, so it ain't surprisin'."

"Has that seemed to make any difference as far as you can tell?"

"That?"

"What she said."

"Too soon to tell, I reckon. Word's just now gettin' around, I'd say."

"How do you know so much this early? Don't you ever sleep?"

He grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess I jist git more sleep to the hour than most folks. Five hours and I'm good to go again."

"Had breakfast?" I asked.

"Biscuit and bacon drippin's. 'Bout as good as it gits."

"Think you could put away a flapjack?"

"Don't know flapjack?"

"Pancake, griddle cake?"

"Oh. Probably could. You a cook, too?"

"Not a very good one but Maggie sure is. Let's go down and see what she can rustle up for us."

"Did you notice how clean I am this mornin'?"

"Yes, actually, I did. Bath last night?"

"Swim this mornin'? Figured I should wash up seein' as how I was comin' to see you."

"Why would you think that?"

"Never seen ya with dirty elbows or a shiny forehead."

I wondered if I had become a role model or merely a curiosity. Either way, I was amused and probably honored.

Jake put away three flapjacks and a cheese Danish. He washed it all down with two cups of black coffee. Through it all, he never once stopped talking.

Not surprisingly, he and Sam the milkman turned out to be buddies. I suddenly understood where Sam got the news so early in the day.

"Missed you at the dairy this mornin', Jake," he said.

"Had business to take care of."

"Business?"

"Ya. I'm like a advisor to Mr. Marc Miller, here. Had stuff to do. You know."

The frown on Sam's face seemed to indicate something more than not understanding the lad's meaning. His glance – perhaps more of a glare – in my direction interested me. I needed to find out more about him.

Breakfast over, Jake and his coffee headed for the nearest bush and me and my briefcase for the Cafe to see what the latest adult take was on the events of the previous evening.

"You'll never believe this," Willy said as I entered, again to a smaller than usual crowd.

"You mean about Peter Joe and things over at Old Bert's."

"How do you know stuff, so soon?"

"There don't seem to be many secrets around here –

not for long, anyway. So, what's your take on it?"

"Well, I think the Lady in Red done already took her retaliation for Old Bert's wreck so things are back in balance. No need for nothin' more to happen you see."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. I was never sure if the two Apparitions were really a part of the spirit world's war or not. I mean the way I hear it they are a pair of wanderers, not really a part of the warring ghost factions."

"Ghosts is ghosts, I suppose," Willy said. "They can talk with each other you know. Probably can help each other out."

It sounded like he was grasping at straws – wanting me to buy his take on it all.

"Any word on what the Mother Caller actually said over there last night?"

"We got two versions. One is, 'You still think you're sixteen, Bert?' The other is, 'You still think you're sixty, Bert?'"

"Any word on what they think it means?"

"Seems plain to me. She was tellin' him to act his age and give up on his drivin'. Sixteen is driver's license gittin' age in this state and even sixty's a darn site younger than Bert is."

"That certainly seems like a reasonable interpretation to me. I suppose it means more than that, too, though."

"More? Like what?"

"Like, that she was insinuating it had been his, fully mortal, fault and not that of the warring ghosts."

"Oh. Ya. Jeeze. I hadn't thought about that. If that's so, then when the Woman in Red made things even, she really didn't."

"It would seem so. Of course, the Kettles have to buy the idea that it was really just Bert's doing before that would become an issue."

"It means somethin' a lot bigger than that," he said, his mood slipping.

"What?"

"That accidents do happen. That will be a mind blower fer sure on both these hills."

"As I recall, in our last conversation you had already come to that same conclusion – just beat the others to it."

"It's really hard to have what you always knowed was true, suddenly not be true no more."

"Remember about the Quest."

"I was thinkin' about that with Ma and Dad last night. It's like you can grow tall or you can grow broad."

"You'll have to help me with that one," I said.

"You can grow as a person by learnin' all about the one set of beliefs you was raised with, or you can grow out by learnin' about other ideas as well."

"Profound!" I said.

"Really?"

"Absolutely. And, the second doesn't mean you can't also do the first, you know."

"Oh, Ya. Hadn't thought that far. You mean you can learn all about your first beliefs and learn about others, too."

"There's a trick to it, though."

"Trick?"

"Some folks only look at other belief systems with an eye toward proving them wrong and their own right. To really grow as a person, I think you have to examine other ways as if they really might be true. It's the only way I know of to find out for sure."

"Being on a quest is a whole lot harder than settling for the security of just thinkin' you're right and they're wrong."

"No doubt about that, but isn't getting closer to the truth worth a little extra effort."

"I'm sure you think so. I may be leaning in that direction, now, but lots of folks wouldn't agree with that."

"No doubt about that, either."

Wilma approached the table.

"What you two bein' so serious about over here in the corner?" she asked.

"About how having my whole world suddenly turned upside down can really be a good thing."

He looked at me and smiled then carried it up into his mother's face.

"We had quite the discussion at our place last night, Mr. Miller," she said. "One of those that probably won't soon be over."

"And am I still welcome here?" I asked, more than a little seriously.

She smiled.

"Of course. New isn't always good. But then it isn't always bad either. Beliefs have to stand up to scrutiny. If they can't they have to grow wider, as Willy puts it."

"Had breakfast?" Willy asked, clearly ready to move the conversation in another direction.

"Yes, but coffee and a donut works for me most any time of day."

I took a yellow pad from my briefcase and made notes while I munched and sipped. The others went about their business. Willy had made an error – a misjudgment – that was only known to him and me. I wondered how he would go about correcting it.

Wilma arrived with a pot of coffee.

"Got time to sit?" I asked.

"For a few. Sure. Anything special or do you just find my conversation irresistible?"

Wilma was a remarkable combination of high intelligence, social savvy and the Ozark language pattern. It reminded me of the sage truth contained in the old, judging a book by its cover, saying.

"Both, actually," I said responding to her humorous question.

She took a seat.

"Sam the milkman?"

"Sam Kettle. Runs the dairy. Has a herd of Guernsey's. Richest milk in three counties. Lost a son a few years back in a car accident up on the interstate. Side swiped by a drunk, the way the story goes. If you ask me he never grieved proper like. Makes you think he's the same old Sam and you know he can't be."

"Hit by another local driver?"

"No. Out of state and he got out of it without a scratch."

"Other children?"

"Two daughters about ten and fourteen I'd say. The little one and Jake are good friends. Stay at home mother. Helps out in the milk barn and runs the cheese plant. Nice family."

"Does he blame the Keep Ghosts for his son's death?"

"Probably. That's how it goes, here."

"He drops into chat up at the Inn every morning and he

just interested me. Thanks for the information."

She topped off my coffee and left. Willy stopped by my table on his way out of the cafe.

"See you later. Got stuff to do."

"Time for one short question?"

"Sure. Always."

His response made me think our relationship was back to normal. He adjusted his chair so he was facing me.

"Sam the milkman?"

"Son got killed by some drunk Yankee a few years back. Family never got over it. I can understand that. Nice people. Two girls. This'll kill you. A month or so ago Jake got in big trouble for skinny dippin' with Sam's youngest girl. I thought it got blew up way to big – I mean what do a couple of nine year olds know. Still makes me laugh when I think about it."

"Sam seemed to treat the boy pretty well this morning up at the Inn."

"Sam's a guy. He understands about stuff like that. I think it was more Jake's Ma who caused the stink. Her oldest boy had to get married. That ain't so unusual around here, but it really ticked her off for some reason. She's got seven boys to raise and didn't have no brothers herself. Probably quite a strain fer her."

"I can only imagine. Raising seven of anything seems like it would be a strain to me."

"Mostly big families in these parts. We all like babies. Seem to be pretty good at makin' em."

He laughed.

"What about Pete's family – big, small, medium?"

"He's a only like me."

"And the Apparition took his sight away, is that correct?"

"That's what I hear. I'm on my way over to his place now. He's a good friend. Hundred and eighty pound all conference right tackle. Tough as nails, I can tell you that."

"I won't keep you then. Give him my best. Maybe it will just be a short-term thing for him, considering it seems to have been an overreaction by the Woman in Red."

"I don't think ghosts take things back. Oh. Well."

Maybe. Things is changin' it seems. Maybe they's changin' on the other side as well, now that the Mother Caller's all worked up over it."

He left. I hadn't understood it was the local perception that she was all worked up. I suppose that was a legitimate assumption, though, considering she had shown up more during the past week than she had in all the years since her death.

Agnes and Ruby Mae were to talk by phone at noon. I wondered where that would lead. They had apparently, each laid it on the line in an honest way while they were together – neither claiming to have done better than the other. The nudge from the Mother Caller seemed to have been taken seriously.

I headed for the Emporium in South Town. I was afraid that my perspective on the gossip might be Keep-sided.

Bess seemed happy to see me. There were no other customers.

"Cheese puffs or Dentine?" she asked.

"Half dozen of each. How things been going."

"Upsetting, Mr. Miller. Tempers is gettin' awful short. Two kids – a Kettle and a Keep – had a fist fight out on the street a while ago. That don't happen here. It's all finally gettin' to us."

"What's the report on Old Bert's condition?"

"In lots a pain they say. Whiskey's helping some. May have to try aspirin, I hear."

It struck my funny bone – whisky as the first line of defense with aspirin, the wonder drug, being held in reserve.

"Nothing broken, I hear."

"That's right but we all know he shouldn't be drivin' at his age and in his condition. I guess the Keep ghosts just took advantage a that."

Her logic had not taken her to where I thought she was headed. But, half a revelation is probably better than none at all.

"Any plan of action brewing that an outsider could hear about?"

"I don't know of any – fer outsiders or otherwise. Never had to plan about such things before. Always just knowed that

if one a them pranked one a us, a Kettle spirit would take care of it all, you know. Things is changin'. It's hard to see how things is gonna turn out."

I took my little box of goodies and went in search of some shade under the bridge. My two buddies were there and willing to help me work on a couple bags of puffs. How Jake had any room left was beyond me. His explanation was pretty straight forward.

"Cheese puffs is squishy!"

How dumb could I have been?

Jake was business-like in everything he did. He was thoughtful before speaking or acting. I imagine he only shared things once he was convinced the time was right. His pal, on the other hand, began sentences well before he had any idea how they might end. It's said that opposites attract. I tend to think it should be opposites distract. When we hook up with our opposite it helps us take our mind off ourselves and allows us to observe and consider another – perhaps refreshing – approach to living. Maybe it's a style we admire in some way but can't bring ourselves to try. Being with opposites is always, well usually, a renewing experience for me. It keeps me from taking myself and my ways too seriously.

Within the next thirty minutes, three bass and a wayward Sun Perch were caught on hooks baited with cheese puffs. Who knew?

///

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I hit my finger with a hammer I tend to get upset with myself. When I lose my keys, I tend to get upset with myself. On days when a host of such things happens I begin considering the possibility of early senility – a seriously scary thought.

For generations, the folks in the area around Sandy Valley were free from such frustrations and fears. When they experienced those sorts of things, they knew it wasn't a reflection on them – just on the ghosts of the other family. It was a belief that – when held in check – diminished the need for self-doubt or frustration and made getting irritated with others fully irrelevant; it was not about me or him but the ghosts. And there was no useful reason to become perturbed with the ghosts since most mortals had no way of altering their behavior. And anyway, they had the Callers to take care of that for them. No wonder it was such a peaceful place where folks got along so well.

On the other side of the coin, when one accomplished something that was laudable or even just self-satisfying, it was all to that person's credit. An interesting system. When I do well I get all the credit and good feelings. When I do poorly, it's those pesky ghosts fault so I don't need to feel bad about myself.

It had worked so well for so long, I began having second thoughts about interfering with it. Perhaps I should just leave and let whatever forces there were, work things out. I couldn't do that, however, since I was certain there had been fully intentional meddling from outside the ghostly realm.

Water can't find its natural level when somebody keeps stirring it.

Those were the thoughts I was having while I watched the boys fish and I doodled on the pad where I should have been outlining chapter seven.

By ten forty-five there were ten fish on the stringer – formerly Jake's belt.

"Still early enough that Wilma will fix 'em fer us," Jake said. "They'll be good eatin'. You up to some?"

"Sounds great. How does this work?"

"First we gut em and skin em here. Then she takes half fer cookin' 'em. Usually she jist fries 'em all up and we all sit down and put 'em away together."

By eleven the three of us entered the cafe – by the rear door, "'Cause that's how ya does it when barterin'." By eleven twenty the two boys, Willy, Wilma and I were lined up on stools at the counter enjoying the catch.

"Gotta' squeeze lemon juice on 'em. Brings out the Sandy Creek flavor," Jake said, taking the initiative and fixing my plate for me.

Wilma threw in some fried potatoes and slaw and we had a feast. I had to admit the Sandy Creek flavor did seem special that noon. Personally, I felt quite the successful fisherman (Well, I had furnished the cheese puffs!).

The good news came from Willy.

"Peter Joe's gettin' his vision back. I spoke to him on the phone a little while ago and he can make out faces and everything. Still blurred he says but seems to be getting' better fast."

"That certainly is good news," I said. "Hard to figure, I'd say."

"Pete says he got hit on the head the day before his vision failed. He thinks he may have dreamed the Woman in Red part and just suffered some temporary thing from the head thing."

"Plausible," I said returning to the food.

No one spoke of it but the cafe grew silent at noon – the time everyone knew the Callers were speaking by phone. I supposed there would be another written statement. The last one had taken an hour to post after the meeting was

concluded. I figured that by two we should hear something.

Wilma went about her business taking orders and fixing lunch. Willy kept the tables clean and set. The boys patted their stomachs and went in search of adventure. I walked to Hank's Garage.

He was deep into tightening – or untightening – something under the hood of one of the few cars I had seen in Sandy Valley. Pickups were clearly the vehicle of choice. Unlike those I had seen up at Yates Corner on a previous assignment, none of these carried rifles across the back windows. This Valley clearly had a gentler approach to living.

"Hank, I assume," I said attempting to get his attention.

"Busy," came his reply. "Be an hour 'til I can get to yours."

"Actually, I don't have anything for you to work on. I'm Marc Miller. A writer. Just came by to say Hi."

"Hi," he managed as he continued working. I didn't know if that had been a cordial greeting or an expeditious rejection. I tried again.

"Nice valley. I like the people. Beautiful area."

There was no response but then none had been required. I would change my tactics.

"You been here long?"

"Yup."

Okay, so yes and no questions would be of no value either.

"How bad was Old Bert's truck damaged?"

"I'll have it runnin' agin. It's out back. Lots a dents. Tore off the front right fender. Don't do body work no more but it'll be runnin'. Shouldn't be. He hain't got no business to be drivin'."

"Won't his children step in and see that he doesn't?"

"Not the way it's done around here. He's their pappy. Don't never go agin your pappy."

"I understand you've raised a nice big family, yourself."

He pulled his head out and looked me over for the first time.

"A house full a girls. You lookin'. Have one about your age who's available. Good cook. A big mouth, sometimes. Wide hips so she should still be good fer a few babies."

I felt like he was trying to sell me a horse.

"I have somebody back home."

It wasn't strictly the truth but expedited my retreat.

"Got a take on what's been going on?"

He wiped his hands on a rag and closed the hood.

"Most say it's the spirits. Don't seem like 'em, somehow. Can't say."

"Those Kettle spirits often bother you, here at the garage?"

"Always thought a them as being more playful than bothersome."

He giggled.

"Once they tipped over a open oil can – five gallons plumb full – and it soaked me from head to toe. Darndest thing you ever seen. Like I said, playful. Like somethin' I'd a done when I was a kid."

He giggled again, obviously not in the least angered by their antics.

I liked Hank. I had one more area to explore with him.

"I see on the sign there you do sheet metal repair. Not even sure what that means. I'm a city boy."

"Don't do it no more. Used to mend metal buildings, roofs, truck trailers. Not so good on ladders any more. I knowed when to give it up. Wish old Bert was that smart."

I nodded as he opened the car door and took a seat – side saddle – legs left outside. The engine roared to life on the first twist of the key.

"Purrin' like a kitty cat. I'm still good with these older models. Lucky if I can even find the dip stick on the new ones."

He patted the steering wheel with obvious affection and turned off the motor.

"You still sell metal sheets if somebody needs to do their own fixing up?"

"Would. Don't. Still got a few sheets maybe in the back. Probably ain't looked for fifteen years."

I believed him. Somebody else also knew that he didn't make it a habit of looking in the back. It interested me that although they put holes in two sheets and borrowed them, they did return them, even knowing he'd never know they had

been gone. I imagined if they had asked him outright he'd have not only made the loan but helped them make the holes. Perhaps he had.

"So, nobody much interested in sheet metal anymore, you say?"

"Nope. Everything's aluminum and plastic these days."

I'd given him an opening but either it hadn't prompted him to remember the loan or he hadn't made it. None of that had ruled out his just being secretive about things, of course. Would that be to protect himself or someone else?

I left with more questions than I'd come with. It hadn't been for naught, however. He had all but offered me one of his daughters for the taking. He was probably not the one who decorated my windows.

The Inn was only half a block away so I stopped at my room. I knew I wouldn't get the latest from the Callers there, but it was only a little after one. I lay down, thinking I might sort things out.

For a doubter, I had certainly been acting as if I believed in all the ghostly phenomena supposedly going on around me. It fell into four fairly specific categories: The two Apparitions and the afflictions. The escalating behavior of the ghostly pranksters from the two families. The appearance of the Mother Caller and her cryptic messages. The attempts of the Callers to reestablish some sort of balance between what was happening in the spirit world and the mortal world of the Kettles and the Keeps.

Ghosts at war was a new concept for me. It was a unique war. Since ghosts could not harm each other (and I had not received a satisfactory explanation as to why not) they fought each other using the living members of the families as their targets – a war by proxy, if you will. It was my impression that the escalation of that war began almost immediately after the first appearances of the Apparitions – Man in Blue and the Woman in Red. That had certainly raised the anxiety level among the mortals. Could it have done the same for the ghosts?

The most recent affliction just didn't fit the previous pattern. It had been a series of back and forth, one for one, afflictions all quite separate it seemed to me from the battling

ghosts in the spirit world. But the latest one appeared to be retaliation for a suspected ghostly deed – not one from the opposing Apparition. The lines of battle and the alliances had suddenly become fuzzy.

Willy had tried an explanation, but it hadn't worked. He knew it and I knew it.

At two o'clock I stood up and re-buttoned my shirt – wrong, so had to start over. Oh, how I wished my family ghosts had been battling those of some other family so I could have justly blamed their deceased relatives for my error.

As I fixed my collar in the mirror I observed a familiar face behind me – flattened nose pressed against my outside door. I turned and motioned him inside.

"Made ya a copy a what Caller Agnes wrote up on the Town Building."

He handed me three scraps of paper. They were numbered 1, 2, and 3. It was both frugal and legible, I'd give him that.

"We feel less tension on the other side of the veil than we do here. The war has slowed over there. We have done what we can do."

I supposed the folks on this side were fussing at each other sufficiently so the ghosts decided they could take a short tour of R and R.

"So, you probably needin' a big glass of lemonade about now, huh?" Jake asked.

I smiled.

"How did you know?"

"Like I told ya. I know stuff, sometimes."

We headed downstairs and indulged ourselves in liquid refreshment out on the deck.

"What are folks saying about the Caller's message?" I asked.

"Lots a long faces. Not much talk the way I saw it."

We sat in silence for a while.

"Where does your buddy go when you come to see me?"

"Digs crawlers and pesters the girls at the park."

Seemed normal enough to me.

"You like to pester the girls, too, I suppose."

"Not like Harry. I think he's developing faster than me where makin' interest is concerned."

"That happens at different rates, for sure," I managed, carefully maintaining a more or less straight face.

"How did you get to be such a good observer of people?" I asked.

"I'm the littlest of seven brothers. Too small to contend for stuff with any of 'em. Could get trampled jist bein' under foot. Nobody listens to the squirt. So, I sits back and learns what I can from watchin'."

"Lots of things to learn from that many older brothers, I suppose."

"You got no idea, Marc."

He rolled his eyes again. I moved on.

"I think I'll go on down to the cafe. Want to walk along?" I asked.

"Sure. Need to tackle chapter six with Willy today. Chills still runnin' up and down my backside from the last time."

"You like chills?"

"Oh, ya. Good stuff. Keeps your risibles cleaned out."

I decided not to ask

The reaction to the Callers' communiqués was pretty much as Jake had described things. What seemed depressing to the grownups, however, Jake took as a good sign.

He was methodically devouring a piece of apple pie at the table where Willy and I were also enjoying Wilma's mid-afternoon treat. It may have been ten-year-old naiveté. It may have been wisdom beyond his years. Or, it may have been that as he said, he just knew things sometimes.

"I don't see the big deal about it. The Callers done said it wasn't the ghosts so all that leaves is the people. We's a smart lot here in the valley. We jist need to put our brains to work on it."

That should have been posted alongside the Callers' messages. It may, in fact, have been the exact intent of the Callers' words.

Willy nodded and called to his mother. He had Jake repeat it to her. She nodded and went to the phone to call

Billy. They spoke for some time. She returned.

"Willy, your Daddy and I agree with what Jake said. He's making some calls. He suggested you do the same to some of your friends – on both sides of the creek."

It's always good to have a plan even if it may not be tight in every respect. Wilma and Willy obviously felt better. Having purpose does that to a person.

Jake's purpose was clear.

"Since Willy left his pie, you s'pose it's okay if I finish it up?"

I nodded, smiling.

"Where do you put all that food, young man?"

"Ma says I must be storing it up for my growth spurt. My brother Andy grew eight inches the year he was twelve. I may be comin' in a bit sooner."

Jake was the picture of self-confidence. He had the necessary answers for all aspects of his life. He knew what he was to do, when it was to be done, and how he was supposed to go about it. He understood what was expected of him and had a good grasp of how those expectations were going to change as he matured – after all, he'd seen it happening in six older brothers. Life was a grand and safe adventure for Jake. There was nothing scary about it (other than an occasional Marc Miller ghost story – but, then, since that cleaned out his risibles, it was probably a reasonable trade off!). When new data arrived he thoughtfully assimilated it, grew with it, and went on from there with as much faith in life and confidence in himself as ever before.

Early on I had been struck by the fact there were no local police there in the valley. I was coming to understand why. These folks didn't need laws. They lived by a set of generally accepted expectations about how people treated each other. It was clearly based on love, compassion and unselfish helpfulness. From infancy, they learned that nothing was more important than people and their wellbeing. That is why the Afflictions had made such an impact in the communities. It was why the continued separation of the families seemed so out of sync, so irrationally disassociated from the basic philosophy. It was one of those left-over expectations that went unchallenged – unexplored. It had just

slipped through the mental cracks.

It reinforced my belief that the need for laws (and therefore officers to enforce them) was inversely proportional to the scope of love, compassion, and selfless helpfulness within a society. The less universally those qualities were present in the makeup of the citizens, the more laws and police were necessary. So sadly, the social deterioration of my own country was living proof of that theorem.

I looked at Jake and Willy and understood it all began at home. The early learning of positive, cooperative, people-based, values produced socially beneficial citizens. The early learning of self-centered, hurtfully competitive values produced the kind of people that necessitated the majority of our laws.

Apple pie always made me wax philosophical, understandably so, given the apple's important place in the history of human beliefs – the one in Eden and the one that conked Professor Newton on his head. Enough of that.

"Like crust?" Jake asked pushing back from the table.

"Yes, I do."

He slid Willy's plate toward me.

"Done got plum filled up. Must a drank too much water."

He and his plum filled up tummy went in search of his pal. Wilma sent along a slice of pie for him.

By four o'clock the two towns were abuzz. Everybody wanted to pitch in and help, but few had any idea about what really needed to be done. The plan was soon adrift. People were talking and that was positive. But no one seemed sure exactly what needed fixing. The afflicted kids needed fixing but no one knew how to go about that.

Bess, at the Emporium, reported about the same from South Town.

"We'd all do just anything to help those poor children you know, Mr. Miller. We're at our wits end over it."

One of the others in the store – a woman – added: "Things has jist always run along so smooth around here we come to take a awful lot fer granted, ya know? What could be more important than the health of our kids?"

Another agreed:

"It makes all the other things seem pretty petty, I suppose."

"What other things would that be," I asked.

"I don't know. Stuff between the families fer one I guess."

"Is there anything in the Mother Caller's messages that might give you some ideas – some direction?" I asked intending to just let it drop.

I picked up my box of junk food from the counter and left, leaving a buzz in my wake. Having had a fresh fish feast at eleven and pie at four, I was 'plumb full' myself so went straight back to the Inn.

I wondered if the Mother Caller's job was finished or if she would need to make one more appearance to pull things together. Since the two local Callers had bowed out of the matter, perhaps the Mother Caller would follow their lead.

Milt and Maggie were sitting out on the lower deck. I stashed my box on a chair in the lobby and went out to say hello.

"Hey, Marc. Haven't seen much of you the past day or so," Milt said indicating I should take a seat.

"Busy time," I said being fully non-committal as I sunk into a colorful, flat-pillowed, chair. "What's up around here?" I went on hoping to change the focus.

"We washed off your window," Maggie reported. "Got to thinking afterwards maybe we shouldn't have. Evidence or some such thing."

"No. Thank you. I was going to do it myself this evening."

"What's all this going to come to, do you think?" Milt asked.

"Good things eventually. The next twenty-four hours should wrap it up. Have to make sure those Apparitions go back to and stay where they belong for one thing.

"Also, need to find some way to get them to reverse their evil deeds before they go. It's my belief that if the two families took steps to break down the final barriers between them, the ghostly antics – the war – would have to cease, or nearly so. It would seem to me the lore has to be logical enough to say that if both families are like one, the spirits

would no longer have clear targets. If the husband were a Keep and the wife a Kettle, surely neither side in the ghostly war would attack that family. But then, lore often opts for rationalization and the continuation of the non-logical. So, I suppose there's the chance that such a union could be condemned by both sets of ghosts and receive the double whammy."

"You're saying some mixed-family couple needs to get married in order to try it out," Maggie said getting down to the nitty gritty.

"Or at least become engaged with the blessings of both families."

"It's all coming to a head, you think?" Milt asked.

"Oh, yes! I suspect this will be an interesting night in Sandy Valley."

That prompted Maggie to offer some information.

"It's the weekly band concert night. Takes place in the parks. The Band plays out on the floating platform between them. April through October. They call it the Moonlight Serenade. Been going on since the 1940s. Mostly the same music since then, too, I imagine. Everybody comes. You'll be surprised how many folks there are here along Sandy Creek when the mountains empty tonight."

"Begins when?"

"Most families picnic about 7:00. Band starts playing at sundown. The concert goes on for several hours."

"Band? Singular?"

"Yes. Interestingly, the bands from both towns integrated years ago. One big sound was better than two little sounds, I suppose," Milt explained. "The families still stay to their own sides of the creek. About as integrated as you can be, though, and still not be."

"It's been years since I've attended a concert in the park. What fun!" I said.

"Maggie will pack enough picnic for you too, if you'd like to join us."

"That will be great. Yes. Thank you."

"We always take fold up chairs and sit on the rise close to Main Street centered on the Keep-side Park. If you can't find us just ask anybody. They'll point you in our direction."

"You're saying there's a sameness to where families sit, I guess."

"Like family pews in a church. You can count on it."

"Until seven or so, then," I said, standing.

"Cold fried chicken be okay?" Maggie asked.

"If Minnesota fried chicken is as good as Minnesota flapjacks, it's got my full approval."

I went on up to my room. There was a multitude of things I just needed to get down in black and white – well, blue and yellow as it turned out. I took a seat in a comfortable chair by the windows and didn't look up for an hour.

When I did, I saw a familiar, skinny little body standing there, peering in at me. I motioned him inside. He opened the door.

"How long you been out there?"

"Jist a few minutes. Didn't want to disturb a famous writer while he was a workin'."

"Very considerate, although I always have time for you. What's up?"

He beamed and took a seat opposite me. The big chair swallowed him. Jake was a master at conserving energy. He never moved faster than he needed to and always sat when neither standing nor moving was required.

"Comin' to the band concert tonight?"

"Yes. Sounds like a good time."

He nodded.

"I think some stuff will happen tonight."

"Stuff? Can you be more specific?"

"Huh?"

"Like what stuff?"

"Not sure. Feels big."

"I guess I sort of feel that, too. Big good or big bad do you think."

"One a them things ya can't tell about til after it's been workin' a while."

"I see. Well, I hope it works out for the best."

He sighed before responding.

"Most things do – after they been workin' a while."

He spied the box of chips on my bed.

"Got any a them chips ya need ta git rid of?"

"I had you in mind when I got them. Help yourself."

He retrieved a sack and returned to his chair.

"I figure you must be rich but you don't act like it."

"I guess that depends on how you define rich."

"Money. How else can you be rich?"

"Not long ago I was thinking about you and how rich you are."

"I ain't got a dime."

"But you have so many other things that make you richer than a dime or even a million dimes."

"What's that?"

"A family that obviously loves you. Good friends. A smart head on your shoulders. A wonderful smile and way with people that will someday help you find a wonderful girl. Things like that."

"I'm rich in those ways, fer sure. Hadn't considered it like that before. Dimes is good, too, though."

"Yes, dimes are good, too."

"You got a family to picnic with tonight?"

"Yes. Milt and Maggie invited me to be with them."

"Okay then. Wanted to make sure you was handled. Ma's makin' hushpuppies and batter fried fish. Hard to beat. Stop by if ya want to."

"Thank you. I'd like to meet your family."

"Once the eatin's over it'll mostly jist be me and Ma and Pa. My brothers'll all be off in the shadows kissin' on girls."

He headed for the deck door.

"I better be goin'. Got stuff to do."

"You can use the stairs, you know."

"Stairs ain't no real fun, Marc – not when you're ten and a quarter anyways."

I nodded seriously, knowing he was right – again!"

Seeing the door close behind him made me think about the message that had been scrawled there. Nothing like it had happened since. It was almost disappointing. I chuckled. Usually, I was threatened from all directions when I was researching a new story. What was I doing wrong?

I made a few more notes before the growing darkness signaled it was picnic time. I went out onto the deck and stood at the railing, stretching and looking down onto the parks and

the creek between them. Whoever had said it had been right; I was amazed by the number of the people milling around. Vehicles were parked along both sides of both Main Streets from the west city limit signs to the ones on the east. Kids were swimming and playing chase. There were a few small boats on the water. The large raft – platform, whatever – had been set up with chairs and music stands. It was centered about thirty feet from each bank so I assumed the musicians took boats to reach it.

I debated about taking a light jacket but decided it would just be unnecessary baggage. I walked the south bridge from the Inn into Kettle territory and made my way to mingle for a few minutes among the folks gathered there.

I stopped to chat for a moment with Bess and met her husband, and eventually stumbled onto Jack and his family down near the creek.

"Marc. Good evening. You know Annie. This is my wife, Norma."

"Good to meet you, Norma, and see you again, Annie. What a sea of people! Most of them live, hidden, up on the mountains, I assume."

"Yup. Lots a good folks here. This is like our main social event of the week and a mini-town meeting all rolled into one. Anybody with concerns can always find me – or Billy, across the river, there. The music's not too shabby either. Mostly older folks playin' the brass band type instruments. Youngsters on the banjos and guitars."

"I better be getting on across the bridge," I said. "Milt and Maggie promised fried chicken and Jake indicated if I was still hungry he'd save me a hushpuppy or two."

We shook hands and I left. I stopped to chat briefly with Billy and Wilma. Willy had already eaten and left to find his friends. I hoped one of them was a wonderfully compatible young lady who enjoyed the shadows. He hadn't really gone into details on such things but I had to assume at his age there would be somebody.

An extra lawn chair was set up and awaited me at Milt and Maggie's spot. The plates, on wooden lap trays, were piled high with chicken, corn on the cob, and sliced fruit. What a wonderful way to spend an evening. Birds sang their go-to-

sleep songs. Children laughed. Teen couples held hands and giggled. Mothers hummed as they filled plates. Fathers sat, backs to trees, and whittled. The sun was soon gone replaced by a moon so bright it cast shadows. Some families had lanterns on tall stakes. Most, however, seemed content to accommodate to the darkness and enjoy the evening sky.

Jake arrived with three hushpuppies carefully secured inside the empty chip sack from earlier.

"Ma insisted. Y'all will love 'em. Pa says to drop by."

The delivery made, he turned and strolled off into the mass of bodies, receiving his fair share of pats to the back and ruffled hair as he went. In return, everybody received a sizeable dose of his endearing grin. It seemed an even trade.

Something was different there in that park from the ones I was used to. I couldn't put my finger on it. I mentioned my quandary to my new friends.

"No yellin' at the kids," Milt said, nodding. "Maggie and I had to get accustomed to that, too."

"What a nice thing to have to get accustomed to," I said.

The meal finished and appreciated, I excused myself to go in search of Jake and his family. It was only necessary to ask an occasional, "Jake?", and I was pointed in his direction.

Eventually I came upon him, sitting cross-legged on an empty picnic table savoring the final hushpuppy in sight.

"Hey! Marc," he said smiling. "You just missed my Ma and Pa. They done took the basket and cooler back to the truck. Be back, but it'll take a while. They's quite the talkers, ya understand."

"Unlike you, I guess."

My comment went over his head but he didn't ask.

"So this is your family's spot for the concerts is it?"

"Yup. Been that way since I was just a glimmer in my Pappy's eye, I guess you could say."

"You know, never having actually seen your brothers or parents, I could think that you're just an orphan boy with a big imagination."

It garnered his broad grin.

"Guess you're welcome to think what ya thinks."

We continued to chat about matters of importance – the

gradually improving quality of the summer's supply of Sun Perch; how summer would be too soon over and he'd again be imprisoned inside a classroom and shoes for no apparent, positive, purpose; his theories about why girls talked so much and went on and on about the same things hour after hour never seeming to actually want to come to a resolution of the topic.

They were all important things to a ten and quarter year old guy. I appreciated the opportunity to remember how it had been, and was struck by the fact that such concerns never really cease; they just get passed on. Every generation has to wonder the same wonders, make the same discoveries, and come to the same conclusions about life and what it's really all about. Having known Jake had become a bright spot in my visit.

"Bout time for the band to start," he announced at last.

"Then I guess I better head back and find my chair with Milt and Maggie. Those hushpuppies were the best I've ever had, by the way. Thanks again."

He stuffed the remaining morsel into his mouth and waved me on my way. By the time I found Milt and Maggie the musicians had gathered on the platform and the lights, strung between the poles on the four corners of the raft, had been lit, making it a bright oasis extended by its shimmering reflection in the water.

By contrast the surroundings suddenly seemed darker. The dimmed image of the bridges stood silently to the west. The hill sides were missing the tiny sparkles of light I had come to expect. Empty houses needed no light.

The quiet that had settled over the crowd in anticipation of the first song was unceremoniously broken by the sudden, booming, onset of The Stars and Stripes Forever. People clapped in time. Little children marched – the boys with sticks resting against their shoulders. One family waved a flag. It was like being transported through time back into the 1940s – or at least the movie versions of it I had seen. I imagined the ghost of Norman Rockwell was probably sitting close by ready to capture the moment.

As the song ended and the appreciative applause died down, the low, rolling sounds of thunder drew the crowd's

attention to the bridge. Lightning flashed there, and yet it was a clear evening, brightly lit by an almost full moon floating in the eastern sky. Puzzled frowns washed across faces. Twisting into view in the center of the bridge, at the top of its gentle arch, appeared two imposing figures, immediately known though only ever seen before by a handful of those present. It was the Man in Blue and the Woman in Red.

The lightning ceased. The thunder quieted. Everyone remained seated – awe struck. No one moved toward the bridge. The Man in Blue put his arm around the waist of the Woman in Red. He spoke in a clear, determined, somehow familiar, steady voice.

"Here in the presence of our most precious people, we once again pledge our love and ask our families to give us a sign that at last we have your blessing."

The silence quickly became a murmur; it lasted for several minutes as quiet discussion passed among those gathered. Billy stood up and began to clap, slowly, deliberately. He was quickly joined by Jack across the creek, and then by Wilma and Jack's wife. Within minutes both parks were alive with the sounds of a thousand hands. Everyone was on their feet. The boys whistled. The children ran wildly, caught up in the importance of the moment even if not understanding it.

The Man in Blue faced his Woman in Red. They embraced and appeared to kiss, a long and meaningful kiss. He then turned back toward the crowd and raised his hands for silence. It was promptly granted; all eyes remained on the couple at the center of the bridge. The men nodded. The women cried through their smiles.

History would record that during those next few moments life in Sandy Valley changed forever. Most would say it changed for the better.

A transformation began taking place in the two stately figures. They turned away. Their outer clothing moved up and out of the way as if struggling to remove a heavy, bulky, sweatshirt. The suit and dress fell to the deck. The two figures, now each a good foot shorter and clad in white, turned toward each other and kissed, again it was long and meaningful.

That time it was not a kiss between fearsome, bewildering, strangers from another realm, but a kiss between two of their own young people in love – A Keep named Willy and a Kettle named Annie. They held hands as they turned back toward their families. They raised their outside arms high into the night sky, waiting patiently – hopefully.

Again, the hush. Again, the murmur. Again, the duo of slow, deliberate, clapping fathers, then mothers, then aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens. The final barrier had been broken. The families of Sandy Valley would become one. The War of the Ghosts was over.

EPILOGUE

The next morning as I opened my door to slip downstairs for a quick breakfast before leaving, I spotted a small parcel, wrapped in brown paper and sitting on the floor beside my door. On it, scrawled in a familiar shade of red lipstick was a single word – SORRY. I took it back into my room to look inside. It contained a variety pack of cheeses all distinctively labeled, Sam's Dairy Farm, Sandy Valley, Arkansas.

I'd keep that note and it would eventually find a place on the wall of my den. It takes a mighty big man to recognize and retreat from his own misplaced anger. It was a precious piece of Sandy Valley that I could take away with me.

As I entered the cafe to tie up loose ends and say goodbye, I was welcomed by a chorus of greetings. It appeared to be a meeting of the soon to be extended family. Three tables had been pushed together. Sitting there were Billy and Wilma, Jack and Norma, Willy and Annie.

"I don't want to intrude."

"Nonsense," Billy said. "If you hadn't intruded in the first place, we wouldn't be having this happy get together."

I took a seat beside Willy.

"Please let it be noted that I was invited to intrude – if in a roundabout fashion – by young Willy, here."

The boy grinned and nodded admitting his role in it all.

"You'll be leaving, then," Wilma asked.

"After while. I never like to leave things dangling, though. Thought I should show up for one last chat about it all and not make you wait for the book."

It was Willy who spoke first.

"You seemed to know about what the kids and I were

doing almost from the time you got here. How and why didn't you tell anybody? You didn't even discuss it openly with me. What gave it away?"

"Lots of questions there. For starters, the pearls, your socks, and your description of Annie."

I was met by a table of furrowed brows.

"I must admit that from the beginning I didn't buy the idea that the two Apparitions actually existed. When you drew the Woman in Red you drew the pearls as a complete string – it didn't stop at the side of the invisible neck as it would have if someone wearing a black head mask had been playing the part. You drew it as if there was nothing at all in that space – which there wasn't since I assume that space began at the top of her head. A wire went up from the back of the collars to hold up the hats. They swayed and wiggled, I was told.

"That allowed me to consider shorter actors playing the parts. I imagine the two costumes were both actually only half costumes – one side in color and the other in black. When the black side was toward a viewer at night nothing could be seen. As you turned to expose the colored side it appeared the Apparition was twisting into this realm from somewhere else. Then to disappear you just reversed the process.

"It was why the Woman in Red – a Kettle – approached the center of the bridge, that first night, from the Keep side of town. So, the red side of her costume could be seen from my window. All reports said she kept her right side toward those she met. The same – well the reverse – was true for the Man in Blue."

"So, then you didn't buy the Afflictions, either?" Willy continued.

"No, and for several reasons. To begin with they were a medical hodgepodge. Donnie gave me a sample of his hair. Supposedly it had fallen out but there were no follicles on the ends as that condition would have required. It had been cut and his head then shaved. But more than that, Willy, it was your socks."

"My socks! I don't get it."

"You were forever pulling up the back of your socks. When do socks slip down into the back of a person's shoes? When they've been walking. You see, once I realized you

were still walking and Donnie's molting was a sham, I had to suspect all the other afflictions as well. When your parents suggested going to a doctor you put them off like you might have done if you were sure there was nothing for a doctor to find. Then I had to ask if you had not actually been afflicted, why would you play the part? You'd do that if you had some plan that depended on the afflictions for its success.

"At first I was puzzled about why the afflictions were restricted to only children. The answer came to me while I was talking with Jake. In large families, there are no secrets and this production required absolute secrecy. The clear choice would be only children.

"I had to ask what the underlying motivation might be. Once I came to understand how precious people – especially children – are in Sandy Valley, it came into focus. With so many youngsters afflicted with terrible problems the parents would have to begin thinking about what was and wasn't really important in life. The questions asked by the Apparitions directed that thinking. Your hope was that other things would pale by comparison.

"Your target, of course, was the ban on inter-family romance and marriage. It was a well-conceived plan based on a lifetime of good data about the people here.

"Using the star-crossed lovers – The Man in Blue and Woman in Red – was a stroke of genius. Have them do the damage to the children, have them obtain the right to marry – the idea being that the parents would grant that, thinking if they did, the afflictions would be reversed out of appreciation – then expose the entire undertaking as a fraud helping folks further understand what was truly important and unimportant.

"You spoke with direct and open fondness and admiration for the Kettle youngsters in your life – except for one, Annie, who you described in a most anemic, merely polite, manner. I had to ask myself why. Most likely because you were hiding something – unwilling to admit something. What could that be between a teenage boy and girl here in this situation? You see the obvious conclusion. The fact that Annie knew I had been asked to come, led to me only one conclusion – you had told her – therefore the two of you had to have a close relationship. You trusted her not to expose your

role.

"The first day, after I began having my suspicions, I bated you into producing the display on the bridge that night. Well done, by the way, with lightning bolts probably made of cardboard painted yellow on one side and black on the other so they could be twirled and made to appear to be flashing. The realistic thunder was made from wobbling the bottom of two large pieces of sheet metal attached, out of sight, under the bridge – well, almost out of sight. As they were moved back and forth they shimmered in moonlight reflected off the still, creek, surface. I caught that in my camera. Then I found the holes in the beams where they were attached and the lines in the clay where they sat before being lifted into place. Eventually I even located the sheets, themselves, at Hank's.

"Most basic to it all, of course, were the phone calls you made to my friends, the Sheriffs. You set up the Afflictions knowing I would not be able to resist. You lured me here as your assistant – accomplice, even, tossing out ideas and searching my responses for useful suggestions. Knowing my penchant to wax philosophical, you expanded your data base of possibilities – ghosts, spirits, apparitions, and how they might and might not interact or be organized.

"When the Mother Caller became involved you knew you had gotten in over your head and wanted to back off. You hadn't considered your actions could stir up the attention of such a force. I admonished you not to spill the beans right then and you →→blindly bowed to my advice. I take that as a compliment.

"You overacted to old Bert's accident, thinking that you needed to fake a retaliation against the Keeps so the Kettle spirits wouldn't initiate a real one thereby ruining your entire plan. Why you thought they wouldn't know yours was not of their doing, I'm not clear. Perhaps clouded judgment under pressure. When I suggested to you that since it had been inappropriate, and therefore Peter's affliction might be short lived, you acted on it immediately.

"The use of the band concert as the forum to force your bottom line issue was brilliant. The bands had been combined as one 'family' for generations. The people came together as families with one, shared, focus – the concert. It

was the closest point to actual joining that the families knew. If taking the big step would have been possible anywhere, it would have been there in that atmosphere of friendship. And having these people grant the right of marriage to the Apparitions – the surrogates you established for your generation – it would have been the height of fully unexplainable hypocrisy for the adults not to grant the same to their own flesh and blood.

"All in all, it was a well-designed strategy of subterfuge. Next time, however, I would suggest . . ."

"Hold your horses, writer man. There won't be no next time and you can count on that!"

It was met by a chorus of chuckles.

"What about the threatening sign on your windows up at the Inn?" Billy asked.

"Turned out to be totally unrelated to my research. It represented more the public grieving of a father who missed his son and needed someone to share the blame."

"We owe you a great deal, Mr. Miller," Jack said. "Had we knowed ahead a time what would come of it, we probably would a run ya off, you know. But as it turned out, we couldn't be happier."

"It's really exciting to think we may be the first grandparents of a Kettle-Keep baby," Billy said.

"Not likely, Dad. Peter and Mary are all but down the aisle. Me and Annie have a chance to go over to the Academy to finish our senior year and stay there right up through Jr. College. It's all free."

Willy looked into Annie's face.

"Our marriage will happen, okay, but not 'til after we finish our education. The Headmaster says it's a done deal, thanks to Mr. Miller and Sheriff Carter. We sure can't thank you enough fer that, Sir."

"Strictly, my pleasure. Now, I guess, I'd better be on my way. Daylight's burning as they say."

I stood and returned Willy's self-portrait to him.

"You asked for this back once you had things worked out."

I motioned Wilma over to the counter. I removed two rolls of dimes from my pocket.

"See that Jake gets these if you will? Sort of a private thing between us."

* * *

By nine o'clock my car was packed. One thing remained to be done.

I took a large, brown paper grocery bag from the closet shelf and carried it down to the front desk. Maggie was there alone.

"You did well, Marc Miller," she said patting my hands. "I'll thank you for all of us."

"I had good help, Maggie. Thanks for the loaners, here."

I placed the bag on the desk and returned its contents to my new good friend and confidant – a white flowing dress, a red rope belt, a wide-brimmed, white, straw-hat, and a long, blond wig.

"I learned something valuable, you know," I said.

"What's that?"

"I do look stunning in white!"

"It'll always be our secret, Marc."

I kissed her on her cheek and left.

* * *

It had been a fascinating time. It had been a wonder-filled time. I would never forget the people in Sandy Valley. As I put my car in reverse to back out, I looked up to view my balcony one last time. What met me there was a mixture of the real and unreal – at least I think part of it was real.

Young Jake stood waving from behind the railing. Behind him with her arm on the lad's shoulder, standing tall and stately, her flowing, red belted white dress rippling in the breeze, appeared to be the Mother Caller. I blinked. She remained. She removed her hat and placed it over her heart, nodding down at me. I returned a simple, single nod, and was on my way. My risibles had never been so clean!!!!

THE END