

EASTGATE



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Chapter 1 - Something about Graytown

After the first few roadside stands I'd amassed enough fruit to feed a troop of starving monkeys. The peaches were actually ripe and not those peach-colored boulders they sold at Wegmans and everywhere else with air conditioning. The grapes came in every color and fortunately without the chemically-induced long shape of the fruit from California. I munched happily on a firm 'Jonared' apple; or as half the growers called them 'Johnny Reds'. (I suppose in the South they call 'em 'Johnny Rebs'). Its sweet tartness firmed up my mouth with a pleasant punch to the salivary glands. I just hoped those folks could make a living selling apples for less than 20 cents each. I think I'd buy a half bushel on my way out of town. And leave a NitroGreen business card for good measure. Maybe there was a business deduction here somewhere.

I pulled into the rest stop - alias fluid transfer station. All went well until I reached the sinks. The square plastic cube pumped a pearlescent pink gel into my warm wet hand. I pounded the odd faucet handle lever. Nothing. Then again. Nothing. I moved to another sink. I tapped it quickly but a touch more gentle this time. Something came out. My hands still held half of the pink chemical slurry. I imagined millions of germs killed on contact - and a couple of rest stop administrators just as lifeless. I pumped the lever ten more times. My hands were still slippery. In anger I pulled out five folded towels. In a flurry of of bleached fiber and fingers I felt cleanish again. I avoided the doorknob with it's human patina.

Graytown was in danger; to me at least. Like so many little farming- - tourist towns in rural areas there was an industrial creep. A real estate creep. A land price creep. And a big city creep creep. As I cruised down Sawyer Road I saw an old gas station at an intersection being leveled. They were removing its old heavy overhang and mint green cement walls as I spoke. A neatly painted wooden sign full of misty renderings and gold-rimmed insignia proclaimed the impending arrival of a Texaco station; and the forthcoming availability of no auto repair but a wider selection of drinks from billion dollar corn syrup pimps. I guess if you broke a fanbelt in the middle of nowhere you'd have to fashion one from beef jerky.

Graytown sat deep in the wooded hills of upstate New York; sort of Southeast of the Adirondacks where agriculture was more important than the beauty of the mountains. It was close enough to the tourist resorts to earn a steady living each summer but far enough away to be reasonably pristine; a state which in grammatical or sociological correctness cannot in truth exist. The mayor ran the family farm each afternoon when his AM civic duties were completed. They'd hired a

fulltime Fire Chief last year and a third police officer for summers. The ambulance (EMS Transport Unit if you must) had just worn those little rubber hairs off its inside radius. The number one industry was farming with tourist shops a more conspicuous second. Yet around the state Graytown was most widely known for its often eccentric Pumpkin Festival each fall. A few hundred acres of sandy flat land outside town provided some of the best and biggest orange fruit in the state; the signs of course said 'the world'. A few of the best each year went as far as New York City but most went only as far as Syracuse and Albany. A three hundred pounder once made it down Niagara's wrath but the promotion failed as even such a bright bounty of nature is hard to notice. Pumpkins equaled town pride.

'Don't git that one' a voice came out of no where. I had intended to get nothing.

'Why?'

'He marks 'em down by half next week'

'I'm afraid I'll not be around and will need to be gouged'

'Suit yerself' my new friend said with a schrug and moved on.

I'd may have never heard about Graytown except for a curious whim of my boss. I sold fertilizer to farm supply houses and spent at least 5 days a week on the road all over upstate New York. Our new 'NitroGreen' line (with logo showing 'Nitro' in explosion orange and the 'Green' the richest and most precious shade to growers) had proven to be very effective with melon crops in the tests at Cornell. Pumpkin trials were especially good with high yields and good herbicide interactions. Don Rutherford wanted us to get some good promotions and what was more impressive than pictures of huge pumpkins surrounded by happy kids and even happier farmers. I was sentenced...or assigned to donate some 'NitroGreen' to Graytown's top farms and collect favorable pictures and comments at a later date. This week just might be fun.

I glanced at the speedometer and I was 5 mph over. The curves and hills were inspiring. Every glorious shade of brain-healing green rushing me as did rustic barns, old homesteads, and cliches of naturally soiled beasts. I didn't remember my truck as being so smooth. This was fresh black pavement for a rural area. Oh yes. I sure can handle those curves. We experienced drivers love a good test course.

Just over the next hill I saw the black pavement widen out. There were yellow and white marked lanes and six traffic lights. Here it was. A thriving American factory in the middle of nowhere; a sign the economy had diversified. Hard working Americans were making proud metal stuff for other Americans and the eager world. At 65 mph I caught the word 'Dortmund'. That was German. I approved. I'm half German. Hey! It's a

global economy. I later learned they made small pump fittings for use in computer-aided manufacturer and medical systems. While not as fun it paid more than peaches.

Graytown kind of hit you all at once. You saw a sea of Ford Explorers and minivans glinting in the sun about the same time you saw the lovely old storefronts. You'd almost want to stop because everything else had stopped. Parked, cooling rubber is the best sign of all some ad man once wrote. To folks from 'the City' the antique prices were like a sale at an outlet mall. I heard all kinds of Brooklyn, Jersey, and Islip accents whispering the word 'steal' as the Tahoe was padded for the journey. To Graytown merchants the open NYC wallets added a new prosperity. They used the word 'steal' too; after all it was only Grandad's old hoofing table with 20 cents worth of varnish or a cheap pottery jug from North Carolina affixed with the shops gold foil label. Most folks were happy except the kids and bored husbands.

A Madeline grabbed her husband (who had a one syllable name well below his apparent dignity) and pointed to the new Mercedes Jeep or whatever class or number they call it now. 'Ask Vinny if we trade in for one of those...they're just so stylish'. 'I told you before. He sells Fords and Lincolns. And I'm not paying an extra 10 G's for a fancy grill'. Bob or Merv or Ted (I forgot) went on to note the merits of the big, brawny Expedition while Madeline's eyes and ears went elsewhere to a lighted shop window.

Graytown held onto as much of its charm as could afford to keep or buy in the 'old style' benches, lamps, and signs. The attempts at gold lettered script on the store signs ranged from craftsmanship to a study in failed angles of perception, overcrowded letters, and the hazards of real foil. I never thought I'd see the name 'Nintendo' in ornate gold script; or 'Pumpkin' for that matter.

Merv's Restaurant wasn't really a diner though it was often so blessed. It was just a long building with enough metal panels to resemble one; the powder blue aluminium siding kind that is. No chrome. Once inside you saw all of Merv's stuff. And Merv's wife's stuff. And their cousin's stuff. And Chinese factory stuff. There were pumpkin things and a few non-pumpkin things I just can't recall at the moment. Some stuffed and some had only faces. I just recall alot of velour and yarn and felt and black buttons and every strange grin the artful eye of man could imagine.

The dark wooden tables rocked half an inch from side to side. I tried two tables before I found one that only annoyed me a bit. Each window sill by each table had about twelve things from Merv and his wife's handy work or importation. (I wonder why those poor Chinese kids think of our

American eccentricities for odd, colorful junk). A tiny hand-lettered sign proclaimed: 'These items for sale - inquire at cashier'. My omelet was a shade to the good side of okay. I bought the wife a fuzzy pumpkin - friendly face, local-stitched model.

The Graytown Hotel was overflowing with true antiques and beautiful objects of every kind. The sloppy brick and white plastic chair patio out back was the only touristy portion. A large wall full of business cards from around town stood out as a mosaic of white, black, red, blue, and the occasional dayglo green submitted by an entrepreneur with ambition but no taste. One could find everything from a baitshop to pumpkin ceramics to a 'fair price' on a mangled, old Monte Carlo transmission needing 'some work'. There were also the young MLMer's who sank to multiple levels of excess and optimism in certain pursuit of a double-wide, wood paneled trailer; disguised in their heads as an encrusted, country chateau with one new and one vintage Rolls sunning their lacquers. Mindy would sew and repair anything; a useful service I thought in case one's best, shiny blue, road suit was forced to accomodate something as fast growing as the men's warehouse from which it came. (The later example being hypothetical of course). The clerk was friendly and found my reservation in seconds on a big brown computer who thought the Internet was a young whipper-snapper. Slap-ping down the old gold card right away usually improves the service. He mumbled something about 'generous portions' at a Lee's Restaurant down the street. I later heard him give the same carefully-paced, sincere line to another guest.

Today was the busy day for farmers. They mostly ran their roadside stands all Saturday and saved the spraying duties for evening when the city folks were snug in their beds and not apt to smell it. I'd have to wait until Monday morning to do business. But I hoped to hand out a few business cards on Sunday. Business cards from a fellow church goer have a halo of gold around them. I forget now who said that but I think he sold fertilizer too. I decided the good clients who were those with some skill who thrust your card into their right vest pocket while carrying a hundred of their own in the left. I was a little different and used my new accessions to mark the Reverands's obscure cross references from Ezekiel and Malachi. That way one's whole person could become informed. Finally found a small mimeographed map and brochure about Graytown. It listed all the stores, museums, farm stops, parks, and the one big hotel.

The The museum was boring. There were all kinds of old farm implements including the original plow used on the county's first pumpkin farm. I

suppose they would have had the first pumpkin if such things could be preserved; I just imagine how much shavings of it in little vials (to be worn about the neck) would sell for. There were old photographs of farms and festivals and families; like every town. There was an extensive tribute to the universally worshiped, round fruit and instructions on how it had been (and still could) be used for everything; from a kind of soap to a sort of pumpkin butter that surpassed the popular underground nut kind in several vital ways. Apparently houses had been lit by oil from the mashed seeds and the fiber of the vines had been used to make a simple basket; once or twice at least. I was certainly glad life had improved. The poorly lit shrine was empty except for me and a distant sound I could not quite identify. Part of me wanted to read every sign and its two hundred words full of facts and excessively detailed descriptions with fruitful praise. The panels were certainly composed for locals as I had no idea who half the mentioned people and places might be. Perhaps I'd skipped too many signs. Yes. Okay.

The Moravian plow had a better inner angle so the horses had to work less. Makes sense. But where does did this Ephram guy fit in? And why did he let his brother patent it? (No doubt all the rightful money and talent went to California. I think I've heard that from some other states). And what happened to Elijah Pease who master-minded their century? I was lost and I figured real history probably was too. And couldn't they admit where pumpkin pie for all America really comes from? I had hoped to find out how and why pumpkins were a local tradition and found only the bleached bones of fact and enough old shadowly photographs to give it importance. It was very simple perhaps - they just grew well - meaning big - and no one really knew why. Much of human history is based on such observation and its exploitation; in explanation we fall upon the dangers of specificity which when combined with our notorious pride produces unscented compost.

Anyhow I hoped to be a new and higher-tech chapter in the legend. The NitroGreen Era was about to begin. Before long they'd be needing chainsaws to carve them; scrapping them out would be cheaper than ordering a prefab, single, garage kit. Guinness and Ripley technicians will be recognized at the hotel and NASA engineers will proclaim a hundred spin-offs from our weightless wonders. One display had an old cornerstone carved by local craftsmen but arriving in raw form from distant Italy. The cornerstone had no date nor metal plate nor any engraving at all. I guess it was an accomplishment just to form it and move it and polish it to thick perfection. One old photo showed a team of large horses (the Budweiser size) hitched to a wood wagon of equal weight and scale. I wondered if it would cost more to feed a team of brawny horses or fill up a Kenworth moving rig. I wasn't sure what they were hauling but it was not large pumpkins. They had a rather youthful glare and the cargo was well wrapped.

Sunday morning I had some time to kill before service so I took a little walk around. The park in the Graytown was the usual square block of lawn in the center of a town; perhaps I should not say 'usual' as some about here have much less and nothing with bronze plating. A church faced it. So did a barbershop. A funeral parlor. Another shop displaying a white and gold daisy in the window and a sign too small to read. I supposed it was flowers or similarly printed dresses or maybe a tax preparer. Any- thing one might need from first bottle to last. And all the time and along the way you'll have neat hair and hear bells. If it wasn't available here people didn't miss it or they called QVC. It could have been Mayberry except for the neon sign in the music store window and new granite statue commemorating the town's single loss in the Gulf War - a 19-year-old ammo loader whose demise was needless, tragic, and kept vague enough to remain heroic. I expected to see a cannon but they had to settle for an engraving of one on the Civil War monument - an obelisk of tricolored granite mounted atop successively larger blocks of grey marble and bronze plaques facing the four directions. There were no names of this one; it would have required the Washington Monument to record them. A good crop of the local boys went, grew up in a week, and lost it all in several conflicts towards Pennsylvania; a Civil War ignoramus like myself is hard-pressed to recall all the towns and battle names.

There was also a nice bandstand. In the course of 20 minutes I saw three families take a snapshot in it. Being a salesman I wondered why the town's name wasn't painted on the bandstand. Too bad. This town had everything a little town needs to succeed: a solid history, interesting people willing to share interesting things, a reasonably restrained, tasteful town board, and cash flow. I hoped Graytown would always have someone around who knew what it meant to sell your collective soul and why tourists will never be that rich. I stepped back toward main street and found a little shop around a corner (a bad location really). It was run by a young couple who called it the Birmingham Cafe. I never did get the connection and felt too serene to ask. There were bits that might be British or southern or both. They served freshmade donuts (formed with bean curd I later read without guessing) and those trendy syruped coffees with every other flavor from the Plant Kingdom. It was all rather good although I will be asking my state legislator to ban the use of foods named by Frenching up English words. There were nice lithos of master oil paintings in better than average faux gold frames. I noticed a gravy splash on the Matisse; it seemed to improve it. Of course the shelves on the walls were packed with gift baskets and some of the more tasteful things with the town name tampoed on; very few pumpkin things and those they had were more artistic, less overtly orange, and sometimes plaid or lacquered or ornately stiched.

The Seth Antique Store was neat and orderly - unlike most of the country shops down the road. Unlike them it was also proudly open on Sunday morn. Our Lady of the Almighty Dollar beckens us. Everything was clear and perfect and not all of it with prices. As soon as I decided this was a business designed to separate New Yorkers from their underworn plastic, I saw some nice gifts in the \$5-\$15 range. If one loved colored glass objects this was surely a translucent heaven. There were glasses and plates in every shade of blue, green, yellow, orange, and pink; and combinations which are more offenses than colors. I couldn't imagine what kind of food would look better on a blue glass plate and how one could stomach a sandwich that would take on a orange radioactive glow. I got a small dark green glass dish with embossed maple leaves. Some lady was exclaiming to her husband how she'd just found heaven; being a lifelong student of dishes colored red or something. He had one of the those 'just what I need now' looks that his sort of mild, sweater-clad husband gets. I should know.

I pretended to be a Methodist today mainly on account of them having the most lively sermon topic: AMERICA 2000. THE END? It was a clever little opening about how some archeologist or another finds the remains of this once great country. There were jokes about our 'temples' having golden arches or giant statues of talking ducks that sent people into some final, efficient drop and flung bodies down 200 feet before the Mouse god. He took the opportunity to explore that theme to undignified levels before implying that the scene at Pompei proves we are in the end times. If Pompei and Vesuvius were the end times I think we recovered very nicely thank you. There were two offerings: one for the missionaries and one for the general fund; but I found out on later visits they circulate just one plate after tourist season. It was a lovely service overall and the organ was played with both skill and experience. The choir was another matter; probably being the usual matter of no one daring to say Sister so-and-so is past her vocal prime or brother Jones is tonally challenged yet generous. All the hymn tunes were very familiar from childhood but having been raised Baptist we never did get to the 5th and 6th verses much. Inspiration seems to run out after three it seems. And above all it was first time in hours no one was preaching pumpkins or displaying their graven images.

'Saw you at the hotel

Chapter 2 - THE PARKS

There were supposed to be three small parks just outside of town. The large Mertain State Park cost four bucks to get in. There was a small lake

(it's main qualities being it was reasonably flat, wet and nearby). For your greenbacks you got recently renovated picnic tables and all the mosquitos you can swat. I'd pass that one up. I stopped for a few hours at Town Road Park that overlooked one of the larger pumpkin farms. They sprawled in a dusty tan to the horizon about 200 feet below this vantage and resembled some science fiction battle of green snakes. There were century old sugar maples lining the road for miles. People stopped to watch the pumpkin harvests each fall but mostly followed the nature trails into the valley the rest of the year. This was my idea of a park; very few people, lots of birds and wildflowers, and enough markings to get you back to the gravel lot. The third park was four miles up the road. No one was sure if it is worth the trouble. It was said to be old, scruffy, neglected, and that sort of thing.

The hotel clerk had recommended the State Park. 'Ever-one goes there' he said about three times; thinking it would have the usual effect on me. 'Gotta pay though'. Then he mumbled something about taxes and 'ever since Rockefeller'. Didn't think he looked that old. I guess we all have dads and grandpas who remember when Governors loved taxes. He said the third park was only called Route 76 Park. There weren't any marked trails but 'lots of trees and birds and such'; in other words, nothing exciting for him. The 'lots of trees' part got my attention. It was not the sort of place for folks with kids or dressed in Sunday clothes he assured me. 'They needa close that mess up. We're going for a new image these days.' I'd better hurry before all the trees had an admission charge. I quickly discovered why few people ever went there. The lot was a third mud and a third large stone. The remainder was large stone encrusted in mud. And the stones were particularly angular, unfriendly and the mud rather clingy; your basic 'stay away' theme.

The only visible trail went straight up a wooded hill - hardly kind to young feet and those of us with too much girth; that is most of the people in town. The only signs said 'Closes at Dark' and 'No Littering'; both in flaking forest green with a faded white border before the reflective paint days. There might of been one to say 'No Maintaining'. I was the only one there. Being generally bored and decently fed after church I decided it might be nice to do something different. The path was steep. There were foot long stones in the middle of the path. They were large enough to catch your toe but apparently too large for someone to move them. A body could snag one and go rolling down for fifty feet; enjoying a painful introduction to local geology on the way down. But I pressed on with that salesman's sense of invulnerability. I might be chubby but I was in fact very durable; sort of like that inflated Mars lander that bounced about on the surface before coming to rest. Besides the view was improving.

The horizon had a nice mixture of maples, oaks, and a couple of mature picturesque pines. I'd like to see what pine they were; probably resinosa; maybe a nigra if I was lucky. The sound of at least three bird species

blended into my ear. At least nature was happy. Maybe I could relax and enjoy. Perhaps this weekend wasn't so bad after all. I'd have rather been home but this was certainly better than sitting in traffic at the mall or painting my wife's new sewing room. (I was certain that awful shade of pink she'd selected would decrease our property value with each brushstroke. Privately I called it Recycled Cotton Candy). Then suddenly a red-winged black bird and mate flew overhead. I forgot which color was which gender; need to look that up if I'm to feel like the amateur naturalist my friends think I am. I truth I rarely studied much outside the earth-bound kingdom of my profession and backyard passion.

I was weeks overdue for a dose of quiet nature with not a human around. I'd never been afraid to be alone with God, his playthings, and my inner self. I can't really understand that type that never bothers. They have to muck it all up with loud horsepower, paths compacted like cement, and containers full of inflaming sugars. No one loved a day at a park cooking burgers for the family more than I. Yet someone I think we Americans are all getting it wrong again; setting up new traditions and images that ultimately fail both soul and frame.

It should be explained that while I sold fertilizer I usually did so from within the manmade confines of a farm office trailer or a small country lounge. What nature I did get into was mostly shorter than myself and in very unnatural rows; somethings mulched in plastic. I continued up the trail partly because I was unsure how I'd get down with any integrity to the my clothing; I'd imagined that must be an easier way down which of course is not very prudent. The small trail was at least a couple of years since a good trimming. It didn't have much promise except for the sight of some ferns off into the moist fringes. I'd give those a good look. Ferns meant moisture and moisture usually meant some interesting fauna and flora; more fascinating than the pumpkin flats anyhow.

It was getting towards dusk but I could still see my truck in parking lot down the hill. Off to the left the trees in the woods seemed to fit into two tiers. Perhaps it had been a old quarry years ago. My eye caught the outline of an small stone object sitting at the bottom of the lower terrace. I had to see it.

It was a lovely limestone urn carved with ivy leaves encircling its dirt encrusted form. I must have found an old cemetary. Funny the clerk hadn't mentioned that. Then I saw it. Another urn. Then a third. They formed a neat row although the last two were now half sunken into the ground.

Dark was very well named by now. The row of urns led parallel to the second higher terrace and trailed off down into a much darker valley. Suddenly I stumbled. There were rough slabs of stone below my feet. Maybe they'd been stairs or part of a fallen wall. It was getting very hard

to walk with such little light. Still I saw no tombstones. How could I have misjudged the time and forgot the flashlight. My truck was not visible but it would have been another speck anyhow. A cloud of tiny flies surrounded my head at every step. I guess you call them gnats when they get that annoying. I stirred the air to drive them away. I managed to hit my left ear and reorganize the shape of their cloud. Two clogged my left eye and one led a charge up Nose Hair Valley. I spat out a few more. I think I swallowed the scouting party. There were many ways to walk on flatter land now but I knew I should be walking down.

I had heard vaguely about a sport known as 'Night Hunting' using a special kind of flare that wouldn't cause forest fires. There's also a company out of Albany making 'quick on', portable, battery-run strobes which freeze deer like the devil's headlamps. Farmers use them to drive off birds from shrub fruit rows and too haul into the woods at the end of a long day. One sort of sent it the flares up and your buddies would blast away at anything moving under the glow; or alternatively locked by the pulsing lamps. I had a strange feeling this was the kind of untouristed land such sports might be conducted on. And I was about as brown as a fat deer in my suit. I let out a howl just in case. That was a mistake. I shouted some words implying I was not alone. Strange what you'll do when overtired, afraid, and as Jenny tells her friends: 'a little off since birth.'

Curiosity had always gotten me in trouble so why not now that I had enough wits and money to get myself out of most things? So I headed along the wall of urns. There was very little to see in the valley. But someone had built these slabs to lead somewhere for some reason. I was beginning to think this might have been an homestead of some kind. In any event it must have belonged to somebody with more than the oval-shaped green. This much marble had always cost serious money; well perhaps in some little Italian quarry town they do trade urns for cigarettes. Those ivy leaf embellishments has always taken a man or so more than a few day's work. By this time my eyes had gotten used to the 'post-Sunset time frame' (as my military pals might say) and the moon was more generous than during half the month or so. At least I didn't expect to fall too far without notice.

I spotted another urn. This one was larger and had rusted metal points around the rim like a crown for a someone evil. Then I saw it. Another it. A rare Davidia. A dove tree. An exotic Chinese tree that after many decades bears large dove-like flowers among its dense canopy. It had always been a scarce tree - the exclusive honor of scientists and professors in their gardens; And also of people rich enough to have architects well informed as to treasures that climb. The valley proved much larger than I had earlier imagined; almost as if hidden on purpose by design and time. There were hummocks of shrubs and potential paths everywhere. I followed one clearing to the right. The ground felt unusually firm as if

underlaid by stone in a former decade. I took a stick and dug away some grass and weeds. There were stones of some kind. I must be on a right track. To where I did not know.

I reassured myself that 'Flare Hunters' also brought along dogs and as I had not heard any. I walked another 500 feet and saw a bench; actually I sort of stumbled with some directionality. It just sat there with few weeds around it and in a remarkable state of repair. My suit was already destined for the dry cleaners or the bargain shop so why not enough a peaceful night of madness. I would have sat down but a formidable assortment of spiders had woven it leg's into an arachnoid clubhouse that caught the moonlight just so. The stone carving was stunning. Ornate filigree yet so strong. I see the town once had a higher taste for art. It was not the stuff of common city parks or country cemeteries of which my head held many. Someone had loved this ground. It was a receding shrine to some special lives. The very earth and its abundance was devouring it with each cell division and potent rain. I spent almost half an hour under a unique tree. Being a botany major in college I'd learned to identify a few dozen oak species. I was standing under a real puzzler. The buds and few acorns on the ground were of the English oak group; a set of interlocking hybrids and backcrosses and chromosomally incestuous near-species that defy humans skills of classification. Even the most noble oak is likely to be a mongrel. The leaves were oddly lacerated by genetics into narrow, irregular spear points. No two leaves had the same shape. Whatever it was it was rare and more anomalous than country woods should ever be.

The wall separating the two terraces was covered with moss and mud and the roots of many old trees. Still I could see it had once been a wall from the rectangular stones that had fallen down. I vaguely remember a small stone carving of an angel but it was only a few feet tall and had long surrendered its body to the moss and lichens.

I was hoping to find a staircase or another easy way up. Nothing. I finally grabbed a large tree root and pulled myself up over a slippery stone slab. This level had more design left. It was clearly leveled by the hand of man. Even the older trees form a kind of symmetry. This had once been as rare and lovely space as ever formed by the hand of man. I managed find my footing on what appeared to be a very solid top stone of the wall; actually former wall. Well it was still a wall - by the most lenient of definitions. Under one of the larger beech trees was something made of stone. This had a cemetery, box-like look to it. A large orb weaver spider (proud to wear yellow and black) stretched out fully in one corner of the stone box. A large weed grow from a crack in the middle. It was too dark to see any markings or carvings. I just had to find this tomorrow when it was light. I stepped into a soft spot. The mud left a cool feeling as it interposed between my right shoe and sock.

In the distance I heard an animal. Probably a bird. Naturally my mind was filled with images of wild dog packs, hunting dogs, or even a bear like the one that greeted me upon entering the town hall. The mind does run wild and even odd bird call gets synthesized by our heads into larger and hungrier throats. There was a distinct grove of trees to the right of this terrace. I imagined a team of nurserymen and young helpers planting this grove for the pleasure of a demanding and powerful family. It might have been designed as a place of rest and contemplation. Or perhaps to shield the estate from unsightly servants quarters. Perhaps the family never saw this ordinary grove as it was one of hundreds on vast rolling acres. These lovely hornbeam had stout and mature muscular trunks - like a dozen grey muscle men extending thick arms into the sky; frozen, posing without reason. Honeysuckle and wild rose surrounded their strength. A lively conical hive sat behind a large rock. It was made of stone and was the highest achievement in naturalistic ornaments.

All my common sense had been abandoned. This ledge was rough under foot and the every few steps a tree root threatened to hurl me into the black valley. Then again, the chance of me falling and never being found again was remote; unless someone stole my truck and the police could not find me. Enough. This was actually the most fun I'd had outdoors in years. It was almost as fun as the big Farm Show in Des Moines. 'Fun is the antitheses of worry' I mused. Not always but it'll sound good at Jenny's next party. We in the agricultural professions need to sound half way intelligent in the company of those who doubt our manure and grass-stained diplomas.

I passed a large tree that had engulfed what must of been a stone bench of some kind. I wish I could identify that tree. It might be special. I grabbed a few leaves from the ground. Just common red maples. Forget it. The ledge started going down hill. The sky was a dark as the black spruce.

Apprehension was increasing. I had a keen sense of when I was getting up to my neck in anything potentially raw. This time it was not a metaphor. There trees on the hills above were over a hundred feet above and the undergrowth was thick and loaded with every defense mechanism that ever came attached to stems. The path under me was uncertain and occasionally loose. This was the kind of place to be at high noon I thought. But maybe I'd never find it again. Sometimes things look better after dark; more mystery; intrigue perhaps. I was in the mood for that. Fun again.

Through a clearing I saw something. An odd silhouette. It was a tower! Actually it was a minaret or bell tower in outline. Wow! It was also about 1500 yards away. I rushed in that direction. A rose bush taller than my tallest friend sent me screaming. I ran around it. Still no way in. Darn! (Not my precise term). What was a bell tower doing in the middle of an

overgrown woods in a second rate small town? This place was as special as I had hoped and more so. The word 'special' usually offends me but tonight it was spot on.

There was simply no way to it. The 12 foot tower of rose, bramble, and dense something required a bulldozer. They conspired by density and spine to keep the teasing tower just a distant form against a paler sky. It was almost Oriental...Japanese really. Here in the middle of the country...an old hick, farming town no less.

I kept looking to get closer to the tower. Then its outline disappeared. So did the clear view to it. More woods. The now helpful moon cast some interesting light on a grove of young trees. Their bright lime green leaves were appealing. I nearly walked past them. Then I saw bright white lines in their young branches. Native striped maples I thought. No. Holy! These were one of the Asian snakebark maples. I'd grown one in my yard but they were normally quite rare in parks. I'd seen them self sow seedlings in one of the Rochester arboreta. But here? Graytown?!? It was quite inconceivable. We had a living museum here and no one cared but me.

The higher trail was narrower and carved its way high into the maple woods. My knees were strained. I had not climbed such steep angles in months. The hill up here was easy in comparison. Just as I had concluded that my effort was wasted I reach the top of the hill. I saw a Pepsi can. No rust. Someone had been here in recent weeks. Walking along the peak I was amazed: a nearly flawless flagstone patio. It extended for at least a hundred feet in one direction until it was engulfed in shrubby overgrowth and sedimented earth. The stone was large and were cemented into a stone base to last for centuries. Under the shrubs I found more broken stonework and what was once a wall on one side. I briefly imagined a 19th century party on this plateau with ladies in ornate satin dresses and men in long coats trying to swirl them about according to prevailing fad. I just noticed the first faint pinprick of celestial bodies we once properly called stars. The trees were thin on this side of the terrace. There was a row of overgrown shrubs that looked like part of a once glorious shrub border; mockorange, very tall burning bushes, some rose honeysuckle, lilac, weigela, bridal wreath. All species old-fashioned, cherished for scent or color or both.

The dark I could take. The hint of terror was now comfortable. But it was getting cold too. I'd have to come back another day. Maybe there was a nice house to go with all these gardens. Maybe it was a cemetery and some wealthy person built stone walls and gardens. They did things like that a hundred years ago. I wonder why they didn't keep it up. I stumbled over another carved piece of stone; shape undeterminable. Strange place by more compelling than people.

Driving back to town I felt a sudden 'thunk' in the car. It might have been

the usual 'hunt for a gear' things in the trans. They always seemed to put those automatic shift points just exactly at the speed limits; 25, 35, 45, etc. I pulled off at a turnaround and checked every fluid, cap, cord, belt, and motor I knew. That was about 40 short of the actual total. All seemed fine. At least nothing was hissing or spitting colored sap or tattered or empty. Probably was just a pot hole I'd not seen. I pulled into Lee's Garden Center. I always liked to check out the local nurseries to see what fruit tree varieties were in favor. Maybe I'd talk a little N-P-K and micronutrients with the kid selling bags of 'Feed, Weed, and Seed' out in the shed out back. In a farming community like Graytown you had to sell good stock. There were none of those scrawny whips of low-yielding peaches more adapted to Georgia than here. No self-respecting farm lady would settle for anything less than thickly rooted, well-branched anything. It was a small sales yard but they had solid and affordable plants. It looked like I paid \$10 too much for two gallon Forsythia at home.

Then I decided to be cruel. I asked the fragile young kid at the supply station about which fertilizer I should use on Capitata yew in acid soil. He pushed the general evergreen line and a bag of lime. He didn't know I had a Master's in Soil Science and had been a fertilizer rep for 12 years. I asked him a long question about application rates with a Model 43 spreader (perhaps there is such a creation), whether it was the soluble-chelated form of the bimolecular complex, and what was the Effective Ion Yield Ratio; assuming standard-corrected surface pH of course. He suggested I speak with Gerald inside. Good answer. Bought a tiny daylily in a pot. The picture of 'Red Flare' seemed darker the ones we had at the house. Perhaps Printers were, after all, responsible for half the horticultural frustration on the planet. I had 40 or more kinds and had paid a good deal more than the \$3.85 that 'Red Flare' asked. No harm done in any case. I really liked the red kinds. They're more subtle than orange or gold and had a regal, velvet-like quality.

I headed for town itself. Main street looked better at night. The old time street lamps had a nice touch. A sort of traditional amber glow did much to add class to the store fronts. The radiance made the ordinary thick, black gloss paint every child and adult had slopped on last summer look distinguished for a few hours each day. The desk clerk at the hotel made a big point of how they got them from Canada; apparently some controversy. He seemed to imply they'd be nicer or burn brighter if they had been good old American. I wasn't so sure but kept quiet.

The new fellow seemed talkative and so I asked him about the park and what I had just seen. He mumbled something about it having the biggest flag in the county. We clearly had not communicated. 'Oh...you went all the way up there' he connected. 'That was the East place...burned down just after the war'. They'd made a ton of money on guns and tanks and that's all they've got to show for it. A rich industrial-fed family had

crashed, left, and folks were happy. Big surprise.

Chapter 3 - BACK TO THE WORLD

I wasn't sure what the sign 'Home Grill' meant but by most accounts it had a certain non-native popularity; a kind of fame that in this town is either borne of pure convenience or true good taste; and occasionally their convergence. I didn't associate home cooking with large greasy grills. Maybe it was the best of both cooking worlds. Or maybe they couldn't find a French dictionary or the cook had a keep-it-simple philosophy. It turned out to be a pleasant experience. I always appreciated a place where the hamburgers had onions as thick and wide as the meat itself and the 'secret sauce' actually emanated from the beef itself. The fries were hot, large, and not topped by one of those spice mixtures that normally justify a higher price and some adjective like 'Texas Style' or 'zesty'. These were real potatoes (skins and all) and you could taste their earthy, starchy, mealy perfection under the hard, crisped coating. Big crystals of salt too. The beige plates (with either a maroon or jade ring) were thick in glaze and foundation and as any former bus boy will tell you 'rush proof'. The home touch extended to the dessert choices. One could lay into a plate of local concord grapes (and not of the California Seedless-Tasteless variety) or dish of diced peaches in whole milk and sugar. One could find any size fraction of fresh apple pie almost yearround and it arrived under Breyer's vanilla without you having to utter foreign words. The only bow to modern trend was a triple decker sandwich of brownie and that natural bespeckled ice cream again - sold as a description only. The Home Grill was outside the town proper but just a ten minute walk down Main Street. There were a smattering of large old residences on its block and what I suspected to be the only funeral home. The yards were neatly mowed with every hedge and foundation shrub in perfect form and color according to a style we might call conservative, old time American horticulture. Everything natural had be lopped and sheared within some invisible bounds in the air or if permitted to ramble or wander it had better bloom enough to compensate for the rebellion. Folks simply took pride in their properties and subdued them with same vigor and ethic they did white dress shirts and porcelain tubs. I suppose all the cleanliness and decorum was as much as product of pride as of fear. One had the impression that a hedge left a week too long or a petunia in wilt would set off a chain of gossip lasting into the next century. They'd manage to forget about it the day you were displayed in your chromed planter down at Brown's. Such is the incentive by which

little towns run and without which big towns seem to flounder.

On my way to town proper I stopped off at a little shop with the strange name of 'The Jungle'. It was one of those places that was half living room and half store. The eager proprietor gave me a five minute history of his family between coughs before I'd even seen the first display. A parrot in the background provided a distraction and seemed to be translating for his owner. Sharing the room were about three dozen cages full of rabbits and rodents; each wearing a ribbon or two from the fair and a price tag. The cages with the most ribbons held the most expensive beasts. I suppose the 'Tar Ear' rabbit for \$45 was a steal for its three ribbons. Amongst the cages were all manner of antiques; some repaired and some not. There were also lots of toys for that overall yard-sale-at-the-zoo look. I distinctly recall one old clock with the missing numbers replaced by those gold and black adhesive squares you can buy in any hardware store. I bought nothing but to this day retain a greater respect for the common white lab rat as a potential pet.

Main Street went on for another six or seven blocks by my count. It ends abruptly at a large grey steel factory called E.M. Riley Inc. The termination was neatly phased in by a large oak-filled lawn and perfectly clipped hedge in front of the factory. I had no idea what E.M. Riley made but from its size and number of parked trucks I figured it employed a good share of the local folk not involved in the agronomy or animal husbandry or whatever the correct term is for trying to grow organic apples that turn out too small and spotted to sell in real stores. Riley Inc. was the only place I'd seen here that didn't invite tourists. A grey outfitted security guard gave me a look from under his oversized hat, swaggering like Norris but looking more like a Fife. I'd once been a guard in college and appreciate how one needs a lot of starch, leather, chrome, and hanging bits to compensate for iron sinew. If it only fools your own ego its probably enough. Heading back to the hotel I detoured over one block square. The street was interesting with large oaks and gaps where towering elms once stood in those innocent days before Dutch Elm Disease and our human equivalents. A particularly nice white-columned mansion called 'The Moreton House' got my attention. The dark green chairs against the white porch was appealing. It would have made a nice B&B but judging from the big numbers on the back of their Benz they didn't need the trouble.

Town was quiet tonight. Most of the tourists had fled to other places. For fifteen dollars more than the Budgetel down the highway the hotel in town was more than worth it. The nice grandfather clock in my room alone was worth that. Besides I wasn't paying - the pumpkins were.

The pillows were lumpy but I got four of them to compensate; four very large ones which are somewhere between King and a baby bed. (Not unexpected in a town where the motto was 'bigger is better unless small

is all we've got). I forgave them. Still I couldn't sleep. I'd seen too much to let my mind wind down. Like a hundred sleepless nights before I made a dozen plans to stay up all night and get an earlier start. By three I felt drained and proclaimed all dozen plans stupid and unworkable.

(Before I forget to mention it should set down for the record that the revered melon is in these parts to be pronounced as PUM-kin. If you say PUNK-in you'll get a look like you were are southern hick; a class they don't know well but suspect are decent Mayberry-type folks but not a good sort of tourist in any event. And should you accentuate the 'p' as in PUMP-kin (and worst of all say it very slowly) you'll be branded a very stupid though highly welcome visitor.)

The hotel didn't have cable but there was a Satelite feed from the nearby thriving metropolis of Holden. One got the 3 networks plus WHLD and the usual HBO-Cinemax-Showtime combo. Only WHLD dared to show latenight movies of the B variety and local community interviews from a studio with blue walls, grey vinyl wing chairs, and a mostly orange carpet. There was the required stiff plastic Ficus and a 'walnut' coffee table of the \$9.99 a month style. The community show titles invariably suffered from what an old communications prof of mine called 'experimentalism' - things like shadowing, rainbow shifts, and fades outs existed simultaneously to excesses that demeaned the effort of the well-meaning guests. There must be some federal law stating that community access shall be fined upon showing any taste or forethought in decoration and graphics.

Representative Meyers faced an eager young lad named Chad and recited lines about 'helping our farmers' do this and that with minimal interference from big, bad, and evil Washington. Loans were not of course interference. Money was good; strings were not. Rep. Meyers took a call from Mary T. outside Holden and set forth a firm stand against potholes everywhere in the county. I believe he took the position that they should be filled.

Holden's access channel was thriving; mainly I supposed because the only local talkshow station was now confined to all things on sports. Someone had apparently not dared to tell Luella Morris that she could not sing. Her large frame was draped in a pink, orange, and black floral pattern that gave no hint when a breath was taken. Her voice was high and in key every third bar or so; as if the composer had advised it for some passages and not others. We were treated to an assortment of traditional church hymns and a few popular show tunes suited to a soprano-like performance. Doing life 'My Way' and 'Jesus way' didn't seem to conflict for her. Actually I admired her nerve to appear in a thousand or more unknown living rooms and compete voice to voice with Madonna and whatever that jumping octave style is called. On second thought perhaps she did have talent.

Maybe I was too critical. Luella knew the words and had clearly practiced. Her accompanist (a Leonard something) seemed worthy a better thing than that battled, black upright in the studio. He added some things of his own that I believe are called 'grace notes'; I still call them trills. I imagined a dozen old shut-in folks enjoying every note at home and perhaps singing along. Luella was probably a very enjoyable MTV for them; now that the Lawrence Welk reruns were off again. Any good work is good I suppose.

It was 1:30 am but WHLD was still better entertainment than another view of Batman XXVI or Toxic Avenger IX. Actually I'd seen them both twice; maybe it was the sequel before. Maybe I'm thinking of that green, leafy swamp guy? Anyhow, This half hour was a round-table discussion of Holden County environmental concerns. As are many such sessions it was a mixture of 49 different issues combined with easy solutions to all them (assuming that \$12 billion federal grant would arrive) and disagreements on which of the 49 should be addressed first. Big corporations were Satan's local reps. I wasn't sure how a big paper company had responsibility for protecting the dolphins. Perhaps the chain saws disturbed them? A local Ph.D. (who was not identified with any real job) talked from a puffy beard about a new deadly molecule starting with 'Iso' something. (We in soil science kept our own strange molecules and know few others).

Molly Greer was more concerned about runoff from the local exploitive agriculturists - farmers I guessed. I guess if you don't like some farmers it makes sense to call them 'large agribusiness interests'. Molly and the Doctor were united but still on different wavelengths. The good young Ph.D. talked about some new books with the solution. The titles and authors passed into the air beyond the rate of human comprehension. I wish they had a mailing address cause one of them sounded useful to one in my job. I was in their minds, I imagined, the worst sort of chemical-pushing accomplice. Molly went onto to issue #2 and #3 and #4. She had some homemade charts showing local damage to the land and a nearly vertical graph line showing liver cancer increases. I wasn't sure which issue caused the cancer. I may have been the lack of compost bins around town. Martin (something) did a 5 minute demonstration on the recycling center; sort of a joint venture in which tax payers paid, did all the sorting, and some company from outside Chicago sold the products 'round the nation. Since Holden Co. didn't have home pickup I wondered how a long drive in the gas-slurping family wagon or 5.2 liter truck was really saving anything. Perhaps you were to do the good deed on your way from patronizing the vile agriculturists.

I got bored again and walked down the hall to get some ice from a drab green machine that should at a branded hotel have gone on to its third metallurgic reincarnation by now. The night air was actually warming and I paused to step out on the balcony at the end of the hall. The thing was

old so I stepped slowly as if a slow fall to my death was better than a quick one. They'd managed to get flagstone on this thing. The forged iron railing in darkest black covered over decades of rust. I pushed on it. It was...maybe...semi-firm. I hoped the bolts were not just painted over. I survived by manage to spill a small cube onto the geraniums below. A nice young couple sitting in a romantic angle on the bench nearby looked up at me. I made one of those puzzled-not me-confused-I'm sorry kinds of grimaces that happen in such awkward moments; and don't get better with age. The visual entertainment tonight was a family trying to load their five bodies into the Cherokee with all agreeing as to safe placement of souvenirs and easy access snacks for the road ahead. The youngest son snatched a few cookies and stuffed them into his stained jacket. The Mrs. carefully packed a new lamp among the blankets. The girl was simply bored and probably angry about missing the party of the decade. Mr. Frustration checked the tires between loud instructions he half ignored.

Town tonight was ravishing and wonderfully lit by the old wrought iron lamps that danced off plump rich wives in prized beaded tops; often colored and striated for thinness one would assume and reflectful enough to allow one a wide clearance. Don or Ben or Al usually had a Birthday sweater or a light jacket and was a fashion nothing except for loafers shined like an fresh eel.

I loved those old lights with their sense of having been there before Ben Franklin was sharp and a girth greater than the Ginkgos and Zelkova in dark pens. The cupped, wrought baskets overflowed and ebbed with the life and glow of some imaginery, red, bountiful flower that was at once Geranium and Petunia as injected continents west. They were cheerful and bright enough for those throbbing down the brick sidewalk with wallets flapping and raucous descendents in tow. In one sphere of thought I could praise them for the low cost, maintenance-free, tax-saving effort. But as an agriculturist I was sharply offended; even for those who did not notice. A small message board held about twenty announcements for local and tourist alike.

The Methodist Church was having a bake sale to raise funds for a rejuvenated organ (and I will spare you the local graffiti) and a child care center. The museum was having a display of plows and plowing devices (an 'historical retrospective' to be exact) next month including the latest manly, soil-compacting, house-wide creation you could mortgage your life to lease. (In defense of my employer I should state that it will infuse the good earth with acres of baby beans and our pellets in record time without missing [your soap acronym]). A list of new divisions for the annual pumpkin pie contest was announced. I wondered how many 'under 10' competitors there were and just how much parental help was allowed. Being conspiratorial as I am I figured ma or her ma might hedge their recipe with little Debbie or Tiffany placing an extra aged plate on the

rack. Being a dad I figure it was a nice way to get the wee ones involved with the amber goo. Being close to the marketing side of things I thought that a cute freckled face or blonde ringlets would be just the way to proclaim how easy our fertilizer made it to grow a kid-sized pumpkin. I'd speak to Greg about that. Our company should win this kiddy division. It would look so good with our logo.

Boys were encouraged to join in the pumpkin cooking contests and and rightly so if you ask me. If we fellows can make pizza and beer with dignity and desire (to say nothing of family fortunes) I do believe that pies should be elevated to some honor. How about Little Bobby Carver, founder of the four billion dollar PIE-2-U delivery empire with 'Punkin' Pies (and 10 other kinds) fresh to you in 30 minutes or less from 'Grandad's kitchen'. Try our new Cinnamon-Honey-Graham Cracker crust. And for a limited time only order a large pie and get a second for just \$5.99 more. Then there's our new Punkin' Sticks - five for just 99 cents more.

I learned enough manners to know that a fertilizer salesman (even one bearing free samples) had better not intrude much before mid afternoon. A good 8-10 hours of serious, sweaty something was always required on even the most relaxed, family farm. And one was also more likely to be asked to be asked to stay for dinner if arriving around three or so. You would not think a traveling salesman would get such offers in this day and age of trusting no one. Yet even I as a stranger was to be trusted when displaying a business card with our good NitroGreen name. Besides I know how some farmers operate. With the thin wife and table loaded with young mouths they figure its just the right atmosphere to talk you down on a pallet price. It's certainly harder to say no in front of all those running noses and a steaming plate of his food.

Being an early riser this schedule tradition left me time to explore the town. Marketing required some research and research I would do. Besides my expense budget was based on a statewide average and in this town it meant I had a little extra pocket change.

The Benton Emporium in town was across the street from Merv's Restaurant which many of tourists called 'Marv's'; I suppose there are more Marvins in the big city. I told a young couple 'its Merv's like in Griffin'. That got a blank look from her and a 'who?' from him. Then I spelled it. They got it.

I expected the Emporium another hybrid of local handicraft and antique assemblage. It was. But better. The Benton family had some museum curator in their blood. They posted a nice selection of magazine articles in binders in each carefully organized section of the all wood shop. There were some nicely chosen books to help one learn more about lamps, old

metal toys, dolls, and such. This was as complete a learning experience as you could expect in such a small town. I went out of my way to tell them so; omitting the bit about the small town and actually sounding enthusiastic. Upon deciding I would express my appreciation I had to find something to buy. A cheap customer would go unheard. I selected a small but higher priced Corgi fire truck; the kind with an authentic gold seal on the door, ladders that moved at even dangerous angles, and all sorts of real chrome fittings to look official. I had a whole shelf full of nice, diecast, working man's trucks until my wife bannished them to a box in the basement shop. I think she was afraid they'd collectively decide to form a convoy, roll silently, and crush our sleeping skulls in the night. Like a man I proposed a firm block to end cap the shelf and solve the entire problem. But after all that was not really her point. I still wonder who in history decided dolls and sinus clogging potpourri belonged in bedrooms and not metal dump trunks.

For your first ten minutes or so Grover's looks like any little town art and handicraft shop. There are miniature stained glass pieces of the local covered bridge, handcarved bookends showing last year's pumpkins, and all styles of dolls in country dresses. Betsy Grover belts out her 35th 'ken I help you folks?' of the day. At that very moment your eyes find the the most ugly collection of dolls you've seen. 'They're the Grandma Jo dolls' she says proudly in a misread response to even the women. They reminded me of those wicked witch face masks kids wear on halloween except that each had one orange tooth. 'Grandma Jo made the best punken' pie ever in this county...so we gave her an orange tooth'. The logic escaped me. Maybe it was cute. It sure was wierd and one of those traditions even tourists can't eradicate.

The silly doll was ugly but it made a curious story. Maybe I'd give it to mom. Maybe I put in the back room and wait for friends to ask about the oddly colored tooth. I truly hoped my wife had more taste than this but there was some chance it would remain in our bedroom the next twenty years. In any event I couldn't stand to have this doll and the bright pink walls together. We'll see. They look flammable enough. As I set the doll in the back seat a tiny slip of paper fell out of the doll's package. It was for Lloyd's Old-Fashioned Country Kitchen 'just a short piece' down Route 14. Why were these upstate New Yorkers trying to sound so Southern? I supposed it was what city folks expected all country people to be. You had better have a little Mayberry and a dash of Hee Haw in you to strike the right chords. Besides I think a new strain of country music was coming back into New York chic; at least as an excuse to change lady's clothes styles this spring.

I wasn't very hungry but the phrase 'biscuits made fresh every hour' had a hook to it. Lloyd's Country Kitchen down the highway was far less traditional than the shops downtown. They started taking FAX orders last year and actually carried imported beer. Horrors. Tourist dollars corrupt.

Lots of them will corrupt absolutely. After all what better way to wash down apple cobbler than with a Sapporo Lager. Still the food was good. And nicely priced. Lloyd could actually take his pick of the prettiest girls in town for waitresses; now that they've discovered tourists liked to tip over \$2.00. The menu had a wide range of everything except quiche and squid. I'd kind of expected fried green pumpkins. I settled for a good cheeseburger plate; pickles and parsley included. You could almost timber frame a barn with the fries.

Chapter 4 - THE SELL

I'd bought the two best-looking maps of the county in town. I emphasize: best-looking. Neither had half the roads I found. There was Route 117 but where was 119. There were two unmarked roads here. They were paved. They should have a number! Or a name! And my little mystery park was not even color-coded as such. There was a tiny patch of tan with speckles in it - a swamp maybe? I never saw one. In fact if I read is correctly it was just ordinary woods with a stream a mile or so into it. That much was right. I guess I shouldn't have expected buried treasure chest. My boss had gotten an old college buddy from Cornell to recommend the top farms for my visit. If anyone knew the best farms it was the Cooperative Extension boys; around the office we called 'em CotEx. They were good old lads with graduate degrees and pickup trucks made during the current decade. You'd find the occasional Ph.D. with dried pig slop under his nails. They knew what every farmer did wrong and right though they're own backside had probably only been on a tractor once or twice since childhood. Or more likely 'in' a tractor; those air-conditioned, color TV kind of models in the John Deere brochures that everyone wants but nobody can afford; excepting the college farm that is.

They were nice fellows almost to a fault and could recite exactly many pounds of corrective phosphorus or calcium each field needed to make it test well again; grow well might be something different. We always disagreed of course since we recommended the maximum dose that wouldn't burn anything; sort of like a pharmacist sending you out with an armload of bottles instead of a single multi-vitamin. Fortunately the farmers listened to both of us much of the time. Lots of them still did it granddaddy's ole way but the younger ones knew knowledge meant money in the long run.

I stopped off Route 117 to visit a family named Lodi. I assumed it was pronounced like the town and the apple variety. They had nearly a hundred acres of the orange Halloween melon. With four sons and sons-

in-law and some serious tractor hardware they were among the best in the pumpkin business. What they did they did grandly and with style. They had three college degrees among them too. Even their cows had those big white eartags with large numbers and computer barcodes. It wasn't long before pumpkins would have their own microchips and weigh themselves each morning! I could always persuade that kind of operation to 'list heavy' as my boss called the big sale.

Not knowing what to say (as I was not selling really) I made mention of the missing road signs. They laughed. Briefly. 'There are signs for a week or two each year. Then some moron gets a new shotgun...usually one of the Corley boys...but nobody's caught 'em yet.' I laughed. Briefly. Today was dry enough to lay down some top-dressing in the fields so Mr. Lodi and sons gave me a quick goodbye. I left a fertilizer sample and a business card. When dealing with a 'triple farm' (acres in 3 digits) samples meant a few minutes hauling work; enough to feed all the house plants in Manhattan until Jesus returns. He said he'd try our stuff on an acre or two. Young Chris just out of Rutgers promised to bookmark the NitroGreen web page (just added to our new box of cards) sometime. Still not sure if that's my kind of farmer or not. I was soon placed in the charge of Myra. She could have been a Walton daughter on TV - minus the neon green sneakers. Her braided hair and overalls were perfectly neat. So was her smile and manners. As tour director we spent an hour in the barns and fields.

Young brother John insisted on showing me his mastery of the manure cleaning passages. All of me was impressed except my nose. Myra liked the baby lambs best. She insisted that 196 was Daisy and red tag 72 was Leno; the later named for a largish jaw. I guess I should have appreciated the kindergarten tour since I was too frightened to touch anything except the smallest cows and sheep. Myra and John next argued about the full name for the new blue silo. It cost a small fortune and had the most elaborate metal vents I'd ever seen; controlled by a thermostat and a solar-fed brain in the dome. If those kids were headed for college that silo would sure have to earn its keep. I had to earn mine and gave them both a little green and yellow ERTL tractor (advertising specialty) with our logo. This was one of Greg's brainstorms - even if dad tosses your stuff he'll still see us plowing nylon acres across the living room floor. This was clearly a Cadillac of a farm. My boss later told me that it was 20% owned by one of Graytown's 'elite' families; a painful but necessary compromise during some rough years in the 80's. Their cash kept the Lodi going. I guess the era of the 80% family farm was here.

Heading back to town there was a traffic snarl getting back into Graytown. Apparently a large blue S-Class Mercedes stuffed with antiques had collided with a local in a tacky woodgrain station wagon full of groceries and kids. Nobody was hurt but the two policemen (two thirds of the total force) were trying to keep tempers down. Mr. Station Wagon

seemed to want cash compensation on the spot and was trying to keep the last length of tan woodgrain molding from hitting the asphalt. Mr. Benz seemed troubled about the pile of bright orange taillight slivers all over the curb and the ceramic core of a willow lamp in equal lack of form. I guess the locals needed the Mercedes crowd but on occasion the economic disparity came to a violent boil. I couldn't wait to read about the event in tomorrow's paper. The editor had just the wrong way of offending both sides in such matters.

The hotel had the morning paper bright and early at 6am. The Graytown Beacon was only about 20 pages but had enough AP stories to be interesting. The age of colored ink (even on the front cover) had not yet arrived here but I have no doubt as to which glowing color they'll try first. Getting the NYT would have to wait until 10am they told me - when the daily plane arrives at the county airport with stacks of less accomplished things. There it was. ACCIDENT HALTS TOWN TRAFFIC. It was a simple non-biased statement of the facts this time around. There was a simple ending: 'neither party was charged with traffic violations'. Don't bite the Benz that feeds you I guess. I also enjoyed a short story about Mary Beth Lee and her campaign to stop the county school board from adopting multi-cultural course materials and some evil everyone (but me) knew as OBE. It was apparently the only thing to unite the Baptists and Methodists in years; must be as evil as Saddam then.

Clipped a few articles on the Festival Committee's plans for the Pumpkin Festival. There were new layers of bureaucracy including mandated 'safe knives' for the children's division of pumpkin carving. (Almost every year one kid or another 'mistook' a sibling for a pumpkin head and things got ugly. The year before it had been two brothers reenacting a pirate scene from the day's cartoon with mom's best steak knives. Leap from a kitchen chair the pirate separated young Ned from a portion of his small scalp. Somehow Ned didn't know how to fall painlessly like the celluloid sailors - and they did it without that red stuff that made Ma scream.).

There would also be no use of paint in the regular pumpkin decoration division. I guess the orange had to be real. The judges could no longer be associated with the farms that sold pumpkins; 'of exhibition size and class' read the political compromise. Apparently conflicts of interest and corruption had recently invaded the melon world. The Beacon was asking for volunteers to help with daily duties. They had enough self-confidence to admit the need for 2-3 more proofreaders. They also needed a painter to finish the 'main work room' and a part-time classified ads manager; about 30 minutes a day I figured. All volunteers would receive two free subscriptions and lunch.

I felt in the mood for antique shops again though I had never been drawn to them in any previous years. Perhaps I secretly thought it was the most clever way to simultaneously honor and insult an in-law without swallowing the sums at electronics and jewelry stores. After all if something was authentically 'turn of the century', 'pre-Civil war', or 'early American' one was obliged to show appreciation regardless of physical merits, appearance, or condition. It was almost uncouth, un-cultured, and un-American to do anything else but smile and praise such a gift. And if the thing was not a common object and required some long historical explanation you really had them cornered for Christmas. I think my mother-in-law could use a copper broom cleaning fork. I'll glue the handle back on later.

A whole lot of antique shops had sprung up on the highway. Many of the shops were run by farmer's wives who wished to capture tourist dollars that once headed out of town at 45 miles per hour. Not a few were antique and fresh produce combos. I guess the cherry trees gave all to make these places run. With many of the county's best antiques long gone to Long Island bedrooms, some of the shops were actually handicraft and art galleries of the country sort. There were rumors of 'faux antiques' and it was said one of the families had hired a fellow from New York way to teach tricks of the trade. (I could already imagine a small white Chevy pickup bearing the county seal and shield saying 'Pottery Police' Inspection Unit #4.) It is a shame to see country highways grow up bad.

A few places carried pottery from neighboring Lee County where clay was as abundant as pumpkins were in Graytown. So many mouths get fed from fat orange lumps I thought. I didn't buy much that day. Found an old sterling butter knife with the kind of filigreed pattern my wife finds appealing. I couldn't tell if the ornate letter was a B, an E, or P. Who cares. Jenny will appreciate the thought.

Redman's Restaurant diagonal across Main Street from the hotel was one of most professional eating establishments in town. They had a full cafeteria layout and on a busy Saturday lunch would serve 150 or so. The walls were some ornate pattern of wrought iron, vines, and pillars but in the wrong shades of green, grey, yellow, and white. I was quite sure ivy and iron smiths could not and would not accomplish such things. It said the place had tried (by spending money) but that the interior decorator probably did drywall or spooned lima beans for a living.

To my delight they stayed open to 11pm to provide a late feast to truck drivers and tourists; twenty years ago they had been the same group. Now wives of investment bankers on antique hauls sat next to a table full of farm fellows discussing every known complication of getting calves out of their mothers. I opted for a small dinner of Salisbury Steak with an

extra dollar's flow of gravied mushrooms; they had come from the inside of a can but were warm and savory enough. It was edible but nothing exciting. The corn was downright hard and probably had sat in that hot yellow-grey water all day long. The small slice of apple pie seemed to lack any kind of spice but actually had two pieces of the real fruit - at least twice that of a McDonald's pie. I enjoyed a tall glass of whole milk - a treat - Jenny had banned whole milk. And red meat too. I was quite a rebel tonight.

Back in the hotel lobby I ran into another agricultural salesman. Max Lorde represented a New Jersey firm and sold herbicides to farmers in nearly the same territory as myself. (In a way I helped him. My fertilizer made both crops and weeds grow. He helped the farmers pick the winner). Max and I exchanged business cards and commented on the recent Ag Chemicals Show outside of Rochester. Judging from the navy blue, chrome-laden DeVille rental car in the driveway he did very well. (The molecules I sold were not as rare nor expensive as his). I just thanked God (to myself) my boss didn't make me wear a blazer with a huge yellow and green shield logo. Max was hitting on local farmers to use a new class of less harmful herbicides. Celfonid sounded like a miracle. 'Oh. Thank you'. He handed me a very fat yellow and green pen declaring 'Celfonid - Your Best Protection Yet'; Plus the same ugly shield-like logo.

My room in the hotel was on the first floor so I almost missed the charming upstairs. I guess they figured if the good paintings and antiques were off the ground floor they might be safe. (While 99 out of 100 New Yorkers eagerly bought artwork the 1 in 100 preferred not to pay). One back room could easily have been a Presidential Suite; perhaps once every 75 years. It turned out to be the owner's private collection of old photo-graphs, vases, and such. Some were quite nice but I couldn't tell junk from real goodies. The photos had solid oak frames cut by hand but lovingly trimmed in gold leaf. Most showed the church in town, former mayors, school classes, and one parade with two glittering pink floats. Didn't see any cheap pumpkin souvenirs. It might have been the only room in the town without at least one pumpkin paperweight. I stopped to reflect how half the folks in this town had their own little private museums. It was probably the number one hobby by now.

My bathroom was a nice but had a curious combination of the new and the old. The tub was original (reglazed) and had those animal-like metal feet. The handles were at most ten years old (quite flat and ordinary in design) and most importantly a very generous flow of instantly steamy water. The sink was an old and very small basin but the mirror was large and trimmed in a gold that did not match the brass hardware of everything else. The window was frosty and suitably modest. There was a

new pink textured acrylic mat on the floor - one in front of the sink and a clone by the tub. I hadn't used separate hot and cold taps since my college days and had to shave twice for best effect. Let's see. I guess you get a handfull of cold and blend in some hot until your're ready to scream. Ouch.

Some days I wished I could live the country farm life like my grandpa. Everytime I dreamed my brain quickly reminded me of those 4am mornings, bank loans in six digits, lack of nearby malls, and something more unpredictable than women - rain.

Still one could have a two acre front yard, as many cats as you could name, and neighbors that wouldn't talk if your Ford pickup was half rust. Then there was fresh milk, eggs, meat and a family always willing to whip them into something sinfully good each day. I guess there was also vet bills, turbohydramatic tractor transmissions with costly Japanese circuit boards, twelve variables that affected the value of the milk each day, a computer full of NASA-like charts of bovine fertility, and a child or two needing a degree in Poultry Science. Farming was simple. Two hundred years ago. Once you got by all that with half a smile and 14 hours you had a big house with another dozen things needing repair and three pairs of new shoes. But you had ten people who needed you and loved you and let you know it was more than worthwhile.

Chapter 5 - BACK AGAIN

My boss had set me up with some new clients in Fenton County; the more agricultural one to the left of Graytown's Holden County. That way he said I could keep track of the pumpkin farmers a few more weeks and still made my customary commission very near the top in our office.

The Fordis Farm was a sort of place where they did the best they could with corn and beans but had been meaning to diversify for years now. They never seemed to dare to risk the odd ten acres on something unfamiliar though I assured them we had a packet for each crop; no matter how experimental in these parts. 'The best of practical farm sense and university research' I'd assured them. Then we'd end up with a discussion of how farmers had to be smart nowadays; as if brains atop tractors ever influenced the price of any commodity. I did of course think of myself as a 'brain on the road' since the extension guys never did get around this county very much. I had a two year degree back when people didn't laugh at them. Any farming soul who'd managed to get cleaned up and darken the door of an agricultural classroom had to be trusted. And if

he wore the familiar bright green windbreaker of our company he was trusted a few notches more; at least well enough to invite him to dinner.

Farm dinners are generally reliable in that most things worth eating are always available. And you were more likely to get real butter not some chemical oil compound that comes from tall metal tanks. The downside was that the fine thick meat (endless supply) was usually accompanied by a story of how it 'had to be took down' or met some ugly fate in contact with machinery. At the present moment I was almost hearing the noise of this fine ham having broke out and got a foot caught in the cattle waste conveyor.

That was Saturday's story minus three stops at farms so ordinary as to be Norman Rockwell stuff but on the poorer, dirtier side. The familiar old Redroof Inn was now Ramada but the only difference seemed to the shape of the breakfast croissants and some smart burgundy vests for the front desk girls. I fell asleep very quickly; getting an estimated half way through a rerun of Dick Van Dyke; the episode where they have to think up an entire skit in an hour.

I didn't have to be back to the office up north until Tuesday so I decided to return to Graytown on Sunday for a look at the park. With some careful time juggling I could spend the Monday morning as well and get back over to Fenton in time for my afternoon pitches.

This Sunday I went with a more settled congregation. Graytown Baptist Church was the only really very tall building in the whole town. Naturally it was white and had a steeple so high it might be visible to space shuttle crews. Rev. Porter was preaching on 'Eternal Glory'. That really covers a wide set of topics. Perhaps he was busy this week and would let 'Eternal Glory' kind of just happen. My wife's younger brother is a minister. He says that every priest and minister always keeps a few outlines 'in the bank' in case the town has an epidemic or lots of teens go astray that week. But I was probably being unfair with Rev. Porter. He probably had a desk piled with concordances and Greek texts all week and didn't come home until Mrs. Porter called after dark. To my delight the front door was open long before Sunday School at nine. I had always admired pipe organs. Graytown Baptist had a very nice one which surprised me. As a rule Baptist houses of worship do not always favor large, fancy material objects in the way some other groups do. I just loved to read all those black knobs with white Latin or Italian or some kind of foreign words. I never could hear how they made things sound different but I'm sure the organist and a few choir members could tell. It certainly sounded better than those synthetic keyboards or whatever you call them.

I walked around the town until time for service where I was greeted warmly by the kind of deacon always picked for such duty. His hands were big, pre-warmed and he looked you right in the eye to size up your

soul, your wallet, and get your name. The bulletin had a generic fall scene on the top half of the cover and the church's particular address (no website yet) on the lower half in black letters on sky blue. A small offering envelope numbered and lettered in the upper right corner (for statistical purposes no doubt) fell onto my lap as the second opening theme (Handel I suppose) began. 'Eternal Glory' turned out to be on I Samuel and I never did make the connection. Then again I suppose the best sermons simply form as the Spirit leads each week and a title announced a week before is only a rough estimate.

For Sunday dinner I picked out one of the few mainstay eateries I'd not tried or been driven away from by the crowd. Ray's House up on the road was an old farm house. The old windows were replaced by larger plate glass and neon signs for 'O'douls' and 'Budweiser'. The front porch was nicely restored and was filled with good old boys in oversized rocking chairs. The bar atmosphere didn't thrill me but it was one of very few places not cramed full of screaming kids wanting ice cream before peas. The very bar look about it and the men smoking on the porch turned off the average tourist I figured but farmers rarely ate where the food was not as good as home; but don't quote 'em on that last point. I was pleased to see an ordinary restaurant fit snugly into the left side of house; it was only half bar and smoke. I was seated promptly and soon served a overflowing platter of pot roast, real mash potatoes, and a gravy that would pass for grandma's best. It was called DELUXE BEEF DINNER (#3 on the Sunday menu) and I only picked it because I heard some hardy-looking fellows almost unanimously call out that number. It was flavorful as anything of its kind but I felt dumb picking such a heavy, filling meal just before a rigorous trek in the park.

The walls out at Ray's were drab olive green and were regularly punctuated by brass lamps filled with orange glass. The golden glow on green was unique to say the least. At least it wasn't too bright or noisy.

The waitresses at Rays were dressed in light pink with black lacy trim; apparently the feminist police hadn't arrived to tell them pastel colors and fancy hems were demeaning. I thought they looked good. They acted as if they looked good. No one complained. Under the golden glow of the lamps their movement became a sunset-hue blur. They were efficient enough to earn optimal gratuities but distant enough to keep the men at bay; especially those who'd enjoyed a warm-up on the other side of the building. The women had mastered the safe friendly smile - friendly but not flirting; enough tooth for good will but fast enough to keep Miller Time fantasies and grasping palms well away. Serious working ladies always seem to master the look of pretty, efficient, and just out of touch. That's my kind of femin-ism. Actually it's ordinary professionalism for half of us. Their shoes were black and thick enough to be practical, comfortable, affordable, flexible. (I might owe ASCAP-Super Tramp something here). The younger ones had the highest hemlines but Ray

would not tolerate any real short stuff - that was for Kilgo's up the road. Never did get there now that I think of it. Note to self...

Each waitress knew the 'speech of the day' which covered soup, Mrs. Ray's latest pie, and usually a distinctive burger du jour. I thought the idea of fried bologna and swiss above a big slab of hamburger paddy was inventive. Mrs. Ray had several apple, blueberry, and peach pie variants; some involving citrus fruit additives, ice creams, and the always popular brandy. The obvious pumpkin never seemed to turn up. One day a few of the fellows begged loudly for a festival tribute and she proudly obliged, displaying the raw preparation with a defiant act of opening CANS and holding her nose. Somehow they became my kind of people. I always like food with humor. But hungering for a Bologna-Swiss Burger one night I was sad to determine it was an irregular offering; I'd have to go with the Cajun Burger this eve. I should have known better. If you ever want to dream the Devil himself is poking your abdomen with lances and leading you into a bull ring (all night) I recommend that plate.

Ray's House was clearly on an old farm site. That 150-year-old Norway spruce with olive, drab limbs hanging low and cones serving as after school hand grenades was my clue. There was a piece of a red barn (trimmed white by a dozen fearless lads) among the meadow flowers out back. Probably everybody went to get laid or sober back there. That was some kind of entertainment at least; I'd always liked heaving breasts after a meal even if I had to hide or watch. All I got was two flannel fellows standing in the weeds looking nervously at me over their shoulders; until they were satisfied I wasn't one of those New York City 'preeverts'. They concluded the universal urge. I walked the other way towards a fragment of a dirt road that had a career goal of becoming a meadow. Looked like a dump at the end of it. I walked ahead. I didn't know much about tractors but the rusted wreck in the weeds had the look of a well-built masterpiece from the past. One had the idea it took a room full of men with hammers an entire day to form the long rounded engine cover that way. They didn't make 'em that way nowadays and maybe they never should have. (Maybe their kids could have eaten and the TV invented a generation sooner). I could actually move one of the lever arms. Then I realized my last tetanus shot was about 13 pants sizes ago so I let it's remains fall into the Burdock. A neat plate (once glorious brass) was affixed to the fender. It read simply: VINEYARD. 'We have a cultural gap' here I heard a friend say once. It was probably just the wild side of the farmhouse talking.

I checked into the hotel in town and for some unknown reason I was given a room with two skinny single beds. I imagined some large family was enduring all sorts of tossing upon the King room I thought I'd reserved. I decided I was too tired for the park this afternoon and vowed to climb harder and longer the next morning. Besides that pot roast was laying a bit heavy still. A good meal needed a good nap; especially on a

day that's in theory devoted to rest. I'd always used the big Sunday Excuse to do less. I still let me get away with it too.

A peppy little tune on the bells made me feel like giving the Presbyterian Church a try for evening service. (I later learned the three major churches had a bell-ringing schedule agreed among them so the more powerful Baptist bells didn't offend). The Methodist Church was one of those solid stone structures that had so much workmanship and stained glass it seemed to exceed the collective wealth of the town. I guess the prices of stonework and good glass art were much cheaper than today. The cornerstone said 1854. Tonight the Rev. Thomas Murphy was preaching on 'Soldiers Stand Fast'. It was an emotional and uplifting sermon but I never did find half of the scriptures before he moved on. I wonder if he ever tailored the message to his perception of how many among us were tourists. It was hard to tell though the sermon was more comforting of the flock than disturbing to the heathen. (And there is a general supposition up there that New Yorkers are heathen and attend their cathedrals only as a fashion show and to keep the kiddies from joining the mob.) The congregation was a friendly group and I received more hearty handshakes than at the Farm Fair last month. I wanted to climb that bell tower some time; by APPOINTMENT ONLY the sign said. From the outside it seemed like some of the finer glass pieces had to be seen from that passage.

I managed to get up early. I left a dollar on the counter (down and under to be exact) and procured three postcards to send the relatives. No matter what I wrote or said each card would end up in the many files of Uncle Jay who had collected any rectangular photo on which a stamp and dark ink could be affixed. A think you had to be a voyeur to have that hobby. Folks always seemed to be drenched in some local product before sending off such shiny mailings. No right-minded, afternoon correspondant would be so brave. I think half of them half hoped a postal clerk with no life would get off reading it all. Of course some decorum was observed. Each nasty word or deed had a it's postal card synonym over the years. Rendezvous is the best known. Even in this town the opportunities would be great. There were farm girls holding gourds and smiling, gripping them enough to make grandma blush. Some prudent Methodist or Baptist had better inventory the gourd table before dark. The Pumpkin Queen always wore a low cut frock of green and orange. There were always some rumors there. Shall we say no scrawny lass ever earned the crown.

I got lost the next morning. Those country intersections all look the same. There was no one at the park again. Anyone with a car or kids wouldn't like all the pot holes in the lot and the overgrown vines along the entrance. It was kind of place that set off alarm bells in every mother's

head and made dad worry about the mileage he was getting on the tread. Something told you that people should not be here and if anyone was you wouldn't want your son or aunt or beagle to meet them. Besides there was some kind of festival in town this morning. I'd check it out later. Or maybe not.

I'd acquired a pair of brown boots from a popular family clothing store called Save 'n Store (popular Slave 'n Snore - a reference to

farming in summer and winter in these parts). I figured such a place had dare not sell cheap, overpriced boots like malls often did. The pair seemed sturdy enough but I felt a bit clumsy having to balance a larger frame than the last time I'd walked on chunks of rubber.

My morning coffee and enthusiasum got me up that hill with the vigor of much younger man. Every footstep seemed to fall in a steady place but I still didn't dare to look back down. Not this time anyway.

The first terrace was more rough that I remembered. I could see the row of urns. It looked like most of the unsunken ones had been taken. I recognized a couple of European shrubs that didn't belong in any American woods. The terrace wall was lovely. Dark hearts of English ivy were hiding more of its length than I'd imagined; and I suppose helped kept it from completely falling apart. There was a small stone arm on the ground with no matching shoulder in sight. It was a chubby arm not clearly of masculine or feminine form.

The first terrace had at least a hundred large trees. I checked out at half of them in hopes of finding something special. One evergreen of about 18 feet tall drew my attention. It was a large cascading yew that formed a graceful mound of narrow inch long needles - each a perfect dark green knife and each arranged opposite another. This neglected specimen was like some old ones you see on the old estates of Long Island. Again. What was an unusual English yew doing in the middle a rural woods? It wasn't the kind of thing you'd see in cemeteries. I secretly wished it had an ancient label in its dense heart. No luck. I casually pulled off a tiny shoot tip. I hadn't seen one of these in years. They aren't too hardy this far north. They'd have no chance of flourishing against a house in town.

The upper terrace was muddy. I'm glad I brought my hiking boots today. The stone structure had a smaller spider than I remember. He was kind enough to let me examine the carvings at the edge of his web. Someone had spent hours getting those scrolls all the same size and with perfect edges. I walked around it. Another surprise.

There was an opening about one foot high and four feet wide. Part of it was under the ground and an assortment of weeds. As I pushed aside the weeds. There was the frame of a leaded window with a few surviving fragments of old window glass. What the heck was it?

I spent 5 furious minutes pulling out the easy herbaceous weeds. The young saplings would have to remain. I could see more and more hand-cut stones framing a series of small windows. It was the kind of stonework and leading that I'd admired so much on the old mansions of Long Island in my youth. I could not imagine why such a wonderful place was not cleaned up. The windows were too small to push in or out and let me enter. There was enough silt around their frames to allow two of them to push inward by a foot or so. I felt guilty as a piece of lead fell to the ground. I didn't want to damage such fine work. But then who would know. Or care.

There was clearly something meaningful inside these windows. There was too much silt, fallen stone, and far too little sun in the sky to see more. Walking along the terrace wall I looked and looked for more windows. Maybe I'd get lucky and find a real door. Perhaps an old wooden door with easy access. But no. Nothing. My brain finally got in gear. I had matches. I lit one for a second. Then another. This time I'd hold it right and away from the wind. Holding it to the window I peeked into the darkness between the thick mud-stained pieces of glass. There were things in there. I could see something that looked like a lamp on a wall. It was just too dirty and too dark. This was beyond my belief.

I headed for the tall mystery of that first night. The valley was so overgrown it was hard to distinguish a manmade trail from an ordinary gap in the vines. I have no idea how I had managed to move about so well. Perhaps the darkness made the way more clear; blending so much of the obstruction into simplified dark bands. Sunlight complicates a view. Or perhaps I'd never been this way at all. One could not be sure. I stopped to take a few Polaroids. Heading to the left of the valley I found a series of passages that at least made me feel comfortable. Avoiding those less than 5 feet wide or with the most nasty of brambles and nettle seemed prudent. A single old sprig of a once mighty rose managed a single stunted, coral bloom. It was a last gasp of glory. I'd go back sometime and restore the sun and maybe bring a handful of our best 10-30-10. My foot struck a large grey rock protruding about 5 inches out of the grass. A second later I noticed it had a few letters carved into it. I jumped back in fear I had dishonored a headstone. I took out my pocket knife and unearthed another 5 inches of it. The words had something like 'By this measure' and much more text far too severely damaged to read. I later picked out the word 'time'. If I'd only brought some water to wash it off. Another Polaroid.

This section did not have much to interest in the way of vegetation. The native grapes had apparently gotten the best of any plantings many years ago. A product of the vine has that effect of people too I mused. I was really full of such thoughts today. There was a noble, ancient oak that spread as wide as tall. Its young seedlings had no chance in this mess of foliage. Noble trees were giving way to more ambitious, aggressive

species. Beauty succumbs to invasion. I walked again. Once again I was only half sure I could find my way out in short order if trouble arose. One never knew when a thief or snakebite or a hungry dog might cause one to exit with haste. I heard last week that the occasional bear wanders into the State Park up the road. Why not here? I saw something formal ahead. It appeared to be a row of dead evergreens. They were half covered by honeysuckle but in their woody spire-like form they appeared as if still alive. The skeletons of twenty dead sentinals remained.

Still no hint of the tower or the special maples. I was thoroughly worn out and besides I promised a sales call on a farmer a good ten mile drive the other side of town. I could not forget the sights I'd seen.

The trip to the farm went well enough. Perhaps it was just the wind but this place was the most foul smelling of any diary operation I can recall. Dirk Conners also had a 'fifty' of pumpkins but seemed more than happy with turning the smell into small, ornamental type units. 'The money has always been in the small decoratives' he said proudly. 'The big stuff is all show. Ya can't sell 'em or eat 'em. Most of those monster growers can't put a decent unit on sale. I go for shape, color, no blemishes...it's all market driven these days'. I nodded in quick approval but thought: when hasn't any farm thing not been market driven in the last hundred years? I left him the sample bags just the same and he suddenly took up the idea of using our product for his new field. 'Over Lloyd and Holden way there lots of little vineyards. They get a steady flow of city folks buying the wines to take back. Few of the smart ones set up some fancy restaurants. Heard tell they could use some city sort of vegetables...you know that gourmet sort of thing. Had the old lady read up on it some. Might be a little business raising fancy sorts of herbs...what's that thing called...folks is always chumping on...anyhow. Can't use man-err on kitchen crops. We're puttin' in some stuff for the fall...might show 'em around the specialty market in Holden.'

I managed to get away from him before the whole of agriculture was discussed and promised to send a few smaller packets of our Intensive Vegetable Formula made for such high value, small acre stem and leaf crops. I'd have Doris send him a little mailer full next week along with my card and our new logo sugar spoons to give to the lady folk.

I'd promised a family from the Baptist church I'd call them next time in town. They always liked to have 'outta-towners' over for dinner but I made it plain was already in the Kingdom and no encouragement on that line was needed; though perhaps Jenny will tell you otherwise. Anyhow Mr. Wainwright had sold agricultural chemicals prior to his back problems (he now sold heavy duty insurance) and we hit it off real well. Everyone hit it off with his wife. I'd already arranged dinner tonight and would

enjoy some true home cooking. Except for the absence of wine or other strong drink it was a perfect meal of lamb, buttered sweet potatoes (the other orange crop), herbed fava beans, cranberry jelly, and a rhubarb pie; the later made quite correctly with lots of orange and lemon peel in it.

Eventually the estate-park came up in conversation and I figured it couldn't hurt to inquire. But I was a little wary of being known for snooping around up there. Not everyone in town might appreciate it. It was certainly an odd hobby and my self-checking program told me it was getting to be a hindering obsession. Still good things are often done that way so I often vacilated on how much correction my tongue needed.

'East made bundles during the war, married, settled out of sight for years. He ended up with a few kids but none of them went to schools around here. I heard it was a regular palace they had up there.' the man of the house said with no surprise at my discovery.

'I heard there may have been a rather fine art collection and believe some vineyards' I added.

'The old man probably drank it all himself...he ended up that way by some accounts. The family went elsewhere I think. Sometime after it all burned down. The circumstances were a bit of a mystery. Even the sheriff let'em keep to themselves. It's often best that way even in Christian town. I think the family hauled some things away after the death. There's nothing left to see anymore.'

'Its one of the sad tales about how riches fail the soul' Irma piped up.

'I heard the paintings alone were priceless. The subject interests me...'

'If it cost money they had piles of it. Lots of the old families in town had relatives work up there. He gave some good jobs for awhile...doesn't take much to pay more than farming...even in good years.'

'That's the truth' I continued not knowing exactly how much to say. 'I was up there the other day. The trees are quite spectacular if you know what you're looking for. Many rare kinds. '

'Oh you were up there?' the Mrs. asked, seeming perplexed. 'I heard it was all grown over decades ago. Not a stone standing.'

'There's quite a tall tower...as fine as anything in Europe. I sat on a wonderful stone bench with such ornate carvings. On the contrary there is very much to see.'

'That sounds cool...you mean like old ruins and stuff' the older Wainwright boy joined in.

'Most definately. I found dozens of fine stone artifacts and such wonderful plantings. One of the trees species occurs probably in only ten

or twelve places in the whole state. Some of them are exceedingly rare' I went on sounding more like an old archeologist than a fertilizer salesman.

'You don't say. I'm sure the Historical Society might like to know. Don't you think so Irma?'

'Oh yes. Betty is keen for anything on our heritage.'

'Over at City Hall they had nothing on the place. Folks don't seem to know much about the grounds. I imagine it was a grand estate at one time. You know more than anyone so far...'

'That was before my day really. For ten years or more it was a sort of industry up there...just building the place. They cut the stone in New York or somewhere, unload it off trains, and draw it by horse up there. I can't imagine how it was done. It kept a few families together through some rough years. But after all the fuss they closed up the place and no one in town got in again. Not 'til after the fire. My dad said he was curious and walked up one time...years ago now...but it was all a burned out ruin. They'd already hauled off the big columns...'

'Columns?' I exclaimed.

'Tall as any down Washington way' he shot back. 'Folks considered it another town really. We weren't welcome up there and consequently it was figured they weren't down here.'

'That was mighty unchristian of folks. Our town is getting more that way all the time'. Irma sighed.

Chapter 6 - PREPARED FOR ONCE

I really and truly was prepared this time. I had bought everything under the general category of camping and climbing that could be had locally. I even had a whole box full of brightly colored ropes that were a strange braid of dayglo purple, pink, white, and black or just chartreuse, neon orange, white, and black. I had no idea on earth how one would use or attach such ropes to the bits of hardware the wiry kid had recommended for my 'friend'. (I could not expect even the most daft 'retail associate' to expect someone of my size and age to repel down or ascend anything larger than a Lazyboy.)

Today I decided to the left side of the parking lot; which if all these swirling things are right must be WNW. And it was 2.3% more humid than

yesterday. Wow!

There seemed to be nothing of interest over here but I could not imagine anything this close to a former service area could have remained undeveloped. After all the estate had the first heated horse barns in the entire county if not for several counties out. Almost enjoying the abuse from shoulder high weeds, offending blackberries, and occasional buzz of insects too large for comfort, I prodded on. I had intended to go up the hill again but breakfast or my will had not settled enough to encourage it just yet.

There were suddenly some very old boards underfoot but no hint of a foundation that ever assisted them. The weeds cleared somewhat revealing a single lovely arbor atop a hill easily two miles in the distance. I half slide on another board and something glinted for me to showed it was a disgarded piece of granate. Now we're talking. I more formal dump of sorts appeared to the north but it was clear it had not been used in ages. Even its cans were now perforated bits of rounded rust lightly clinging to- gether in some geometry. As I approached the dump it a short row of build- ings appeared along the back. The dump had been formed behind their col- lective stone walls - apparently out of sight for anyone important at that time. I had merely approached from the wrong side. They buildings had red clay tiling (mostly in pieces or covered by a thick combination of moss and branch debris). I grabbed a thick grape trunk from the pile. There may have been a hundred or more there and one could still identify their shapes. I waded up to my chest in weeds to get one out. A sudden slip into a foot deep hole turned me around. I was briefly in pain and my fears of being injured alone returned. Fortunately my ankle wanted to work perfectly the fifth or sixth step thereafter but I had better watch it. I was a delayed reaction sort of person a doctor once told me. Things usually ache, bruise, or swell much slower on me. And that can be inconvenient.

Upstate New York has always has about half as many vineyards as early California so the tractor I saw next was no big surprise. I just wondered why such a large complex of buildings and such good soil was abandoned. Surely some farmer would have wanted to keep up this spot. Unless. There could be a dozen unlessees here.

As a I walked back to the lot my mind imagined all sorts of old wineries on the site. I pray to God they don't see it now.

I had almost given up on this thoroughly ruined site when I saw another exotic tree that didn't fit into your basic native woods. It was a copper English beech; something that had to be grafted or imported from hundreds of miles away or perhaps even from a fine reputable English nursery. The leaves were just bronzed enough to catch my eye. Someone had planted it and though its companions tried to crowd it out it

managed to wave from the green mass like an army soldier in the wrong uniform. By now I was at least an hour down the trail - a trail that was getting more weedy and overgrown by the yard.

I'm not sure why but I headed across the path from the beech. There was an old slate roof on a building that lost one of its well-crafted stone walls. The building was surrounded by slate flagstone and only a few shrubs and weeds had managed to dig their seedling roots into the building; those which thrived and benefited from the heat it stored and radiated even in the sunny winters. And when the summer parched the soils around a store of moisture remained unevaporated from the earth under it. In its death it was giving life. And as is the pattern of nature everywhere there are always a dozen species ready to reclaim man's failures and use them to get ahead. Weeds cover but they also tell.

I walked around to the other side and with joy saw a small stairway descending down to what looked like a basement. I reached down and rolled down those red-banded, gray mountaineering socks that look so silly on a man of my age. The ankle had not swollen. I walked down carefully; once again imagining a dramatic demise where the police pointed down these stairs for my wife - where something a size larger than me was outlined in chalk. I looked up, prayed a second, and trusted in God and Old World craftsmanship. The roof looked solid but had two stories worth of cut stone walls available for disaster. There was a thick wooden door from which a plaque or sign had been removed years before. It was half rotten and it gave way with ease. The firm iron handle fit my hand with comfort. It would last another two hundred years. I had a large flashlight but the holes in the floor above also lighted my way. The oak racks still stood - It was a wine cellar. There were only a few dozen bottles left.

From the rows of wooden racks this had been a very large wine cellar. In a minute of quick math it looked like there was room for 3000 bottles and perhaps more. I picked up one of the bottles. No label. For a second I thought about smashing off the neck and giving it a taste.

The missing wood pieces in the ceiling were starting to worry me. When they had crashed they had taken down things stronger than skulls. The dust on the floor seemed to follow a wide river of stain towards the low part of the surface. It must have been very good glass because many bottles remained in just two or three pieces and in each pile one could find a bottle or two that managed to remain corked and full.

I decided to look for some labels and get out of here. I saw a couple. They were all in French and Italian but unlike modern labels a date was not immediately apparent - nor was their gold foil or pictures of chateaus. The name had to do it all back then. They mostly stuck with words and family crests. I almost took a bottle just for display. Today I wish I had. Sadly,

there was a very heavy snowfall that winter and the whole cellar is now a mountain of well-cut stone, wood, and tile. Not a single bottle could survive that or any mechanical uncovering. I became that day the last person to see the main Eastgate wine cellar; once among the finest in our vast state. As the Enological Society told me later it had once served Vanderbilts, Astors, and the like on several now famous expeditions to fill their own cellars.

It pains me now to look at guides to old wine. I almost always think I recognize a label of something or part of a name. Some of those bottles were likely worth thousands at auction and but then I lacked that knowledge.

Continuing my tale I explored the room some more. My lamp caught a table on the opposite side where the walls formed small cubicles as we would call them today. The table turned out to be a firm oak desk with at least 30 compartments where the table met the wall. Somebody had left most of the tiny drawers open and empty. I suppose they were searching for fountain pens or keys or money and such treasures. I opened all the big drawers and got a snoot full of foul, moldy dust and sore forearms in the process. One by one. One fell apart in my hands and hit my knee cap rather hard. That was another part to check later. It almost felt like a sin. I scanned by light under the desk. There was lots of debris. Judging from the bottle pieces under and around the desk some folks had partied here in years past; perhaps shortly after the first abandonment. In the debris I found a book. The cover was black leather, now thin and brittle with age and the clasp was ornate metal; still beautiful though rust had sharpened its edges. It was some kind of a log with numbers and names. It wasn't an inventory. Perhaps it was a production log or gift register. I took it with me despite a divided conscious and today many are glad I did.

The trail was running out quickly. Fortunately the woods was mostly pine here and I could walk on the nearly clear floor of needles. Something told me to be careful or I'd get lost. I'd just stay without sight of the beech and path. I was feeling guilty again and walked with the book hidden under my coat - just in case someone happened by.

About 500 yards off to the right I spotted a large Greek style statue. It was leaning against an old stone building and was half engulfed by a wisteria whose offspring now ruled that part of the woods. Clearly there was much more to this estate. Then I saw another roof line in the woods. But it was getting dark again. And I had the book.

I thought to myself as the engine finally started: if this town could put this park together...restore it...no one would live off pumpkins again. I had a quick lunch of crackers and tin of cheese from Switzerland that severely tested my plastic knife.

Being fond of majestic beech trees with their green, copper, and purple

leaves and elephantine bark, I had hoped the copper was one of many. I never did see any other beeches that day. Instead I found a piece of a statue. Actually half a face and part of a tiny torso. I was easily mesmerized that perfect little pixie face; a face that seventy years and a quarter inch of lichen could not hide. Perhaps it was the family's daughter or a granddaughter.

Behind the copper beech was a clearing. The soil seemed dry and infertile and had very few weeds and overgrowth on it. At the edge of the clearing were numerous shrubs and trees of many kinds. I recognized a few to be roses and by their leaf shape to be of diverse species. Maybe this was an old rose garden of some kind. One arching rambler didn't seem to know that people no longer walked by and put out a profusion of tidy, two inch, pink blossoms that filled the air with heaven. I did not say 'perfume' quite intentionally for this was a whole higher, superior class of scent right that nothing in bottles can imitate. I think women who've never worn flowers in their hair are missing something.

With the trees overtopping the clearing the roses had little light and thus little chance of blooming well except for this one pink spot of glory that was too vast to be covered.

The shrub ring around the clearing was occasionally broken by narrow passages. I felt that I was close enough to the parking to think that one might lead there. It did.

It proved to be a painful and fruitless route as the mosquitoes inflicted as much damage to my legs as did the rose prickles. Instead of my ankle developed one massive swelling it suffered from about six little agonizing ones. The path was rough with stones and mud. A few of the ruts suggested that a truck or machine of some kind had done its damage in the past. My car seat felt like the most comfortable bed on earth and I took a ten minute 'open eye nap' to recover my breath and clear my mind.

I grabbed the book which soiled my carseat with aged dust and little squares of cracked yellow paper. It seemed to weigh more and more the closer I got it to the parking lot. It fit neatly under a pillow in the backseat - the one my wife used to give the kids when they got tired. It's mildewed odor filled the car. I put the A/C on extra high and super cold.

The road to town was dark black and so smooth. You seldom saw such nice fresh asphalt this far into the country. I guess the tourist money was good and New York was once again bathed in tax money; like it had ever been below a Rockefeller fortune! This was surely tax money well spent. Graytown was New York at its best. The biggest crime was hiding half rotten apples in the bottom of a bushel of shiny, plump ones. That was my opinion. I hear some folks think its a crime not to have Bloomingdales or any malls at all. I for one think that's the virtue. One should not look to

have all the pleasure everywhere.

I stopped off at Louby's Ice Cream. I didn't need the sugar and fat with the meals today but I hadn't had ice cream in weeks. Anyhow I felt I deserved it. (Why am I arguing my case here? I am only married to one of you. And she probably won't read this far in. Let me retract that. One of her friends will get this far. Beauty parlors are good for long-winded authors. Is that you Gloria?) There was no pumpkin ice cream but a few flavors caught my attention; that fun, sensory-deprived chunk of the brain that has great powers of rationalization. I went for an indulgent flavor called Louby's Delight. It was orange sherbet nicely colored with pieces of dark and white chocolate. It looked better than it tasted. And that thought I was the trouble with modern frozen confections. Serves me right says someone.

With tired feet and eyelids I pulled into the hotel parking lot. I locked the book and pillow in the trunk and hid both under a plastic trashbag full of fertilizer samples.

The hotel lobby was alive. A group of tourists with heavy Brooklyn accents were fighting about what to do the next day. 'Morris, we have to do the guest room! Your sisters are coming in November you know'. Morris nodded and consented to another round of antique shops. I knew exactly how he felt. I had told Jenny the other day that perhaps she was under a widespread misconception about the financial world. Those nearly rubbed off numbers on the face of the Master Card were not our account balance. She gave me one of those 'if I didn't love you you'd be dead' looks.

Good night sleep. Up early. Don't feel any pains for breakfast. The town was finishing up the festival. It was like any small town event except that orange cotton candy was sold at many of the stands. From the looks of the T-shirts and city hats most of the people were tourists. Some others were decked out in Ralph Lauren from head to toe. That said 'tourist' as much a cheap blue and orange 'Graytown' sunviser. I spent a few minutes in the hotel lobby going over brochures. Most of 4-color jobs were for amusement parks, old forts, and Adirondack lodges a hundred or so miles away. I had never seen camel rides and authentic Onondaga headresses in one pamphlet before. I was beginning to think every tourist trap in the world has the same idea that roller coasters, camels, dayglo dinosaur theatre, and laser shows could somehow be called historical. It was not a silly, cheap experience of the TV-numb middle class - no - it was educating your child. I had some and they knew better. There was plainly little to see around Graytown or perhaps they couldn't afford brochures - or didn't need them. I grabbed one on Sunnyville Glass Factory for my wife. Sounded like a good day trip. I liked traps as long as they made useful or

aesthetic things of worth. I wasn't a big fan of dirt roads but one had to endure the dirt to see rural New York. I passed a couple of fine farms with tall modern silos and recently painted barns. One of the farms had a blue Volare in the driveway but they sure had the best of farm stuff. I suppose I'd drive an old Volare just to keep my professional pride and give the old girls the the best housing.

My seventh trip to the park was made early in the day and the dew had not fled before the sun. I had several major sales contacts after lunch and could not afford to get too involved. I parked in the lot as usual and decided to explore a different route than before.

There was this other trail to the right of the lot. It was much less obvious and one had to look behind a grove of trees to even notice it. I'd noticed it last time but it was not very clear. It was more suggested by the general arrangement of the trees that by this decade suggested a tunnel of green to somewhere of interest. I thought of lovely ladies wearing yards of white frilly fabric and scented like a hundred roses stepping gingerly off a thin carriage for a Sunday walk.

Imagination can be a painful thing. I endured all sorts of insults to my skin and deportment to struggle down this thorny, uneven trail of mud under majestic trees. Finally it opened somewhat (opened onto to less offensive weeds to be exact) and I found a streamlet. It wasn't much of a stream by rural, architectural dream standards. It was barely gurgling three feet wide but it did have direction and curvature; character without force. Many of the older oaks had forced their roots into its shallow bank for nourishment. It seemed to go on for hundreds of yards until the undergrowth became dense and full of honeysuckle, mulberry saplings, and brambles. I followed its course for half a hour, stopping to admire branching of those old oaks and an occasional dove that paused to sit. Part of a broken wine bottle was visible - the party must have moved outside. I wondered how long ago the cellars were first raided. Three years? Ten? Thirty? Longer maybe.

The stream was getting thin and shallow. More and more of its bank wanderings were getting obscured by overgrowth. I seemed to disappear a few thousand yards ahead in a dense deep woods.

I stepped into the deep dense maple and oak woods. There were ferns and moss at every step. One had to step carefully to avoid spoiling God's own fine arrangements that to some are only a random landing of spores and seed. The stream certainly did them some good. They were plump, lush, and the most intense shade of green they were intended to throw off. The brights were luminous, the darks regal, and the olives a richness that you eyes loved to drink.

While I was luxuriating in the natural splendor some ominous jab of the peripheral alerted me to a surprise. Not far ahead I saw a statue. I felt

wierd. A stone statue in the middle of a woods that had been dense and black for a hundred years. They had intended her to be sylvan, shining white, and startling from the beginning. She was a young nymph-like creature with overly curly long hair and flowing garments that hid everything twice but not her left breast. Her feet were in sandals and her up-raised arm was gone from the elbow up. I tried to imagine her pointing to the sky. Or perhaps holding a bird? A flower to heaven? Or a love letter? Or a cup? She was beautiful in her woodland. By her face and pose it was still hers. You were still hers if you'd stood there. I was inspired.

Still it was fascinating. Its muddy length was strewn with red clay roofing tiles. It looked like someone had hauled out some roofing material late one night. From the texture of it I don't think they got a bargain. It was just too old and fragile.

I walked another few hundred yards. I got muddier and soupy under foot. I turned around and went.

My first sales stop was what we called a The ratio of hounds to computers is about 100 to 1 up that far. It was kind of stupid. But I'd done it before. I had this habit of driving around rural areas and taking back roads at random. I'd take a right. Next time It'd be a left. Then two rights. Two lefts. Then straight. Then a right. I wouldn't get worried until there we're any houses at which to ask directions. Graytown had its share of dirt roads and I wouldn't rest until I'd gotten lost on a least a dozen of them. It was all so routine. Shady alley ways of sugar maples. Meadows with wildflowers. Fields with some kind of grain or another. A John Deere sitting in a field for no apparent reason. A gravel turnaround. A white farmhouse with faux pillars but a real watch dog.

I kept thinking about those terrace walls. There must be wonderful sculptures and decorations behind all those trees roots and mud. That might even be some writing. I found a fallen branch and tried to clear away as much mud as I could force. I seemed to be all stones at first. Then they were a few broken carvings. Something looks like part of a rose. Another had the look for a a piece from a flowing robe. All were too heavy to carry. Suddenly the branch sunk in deeper. The wall had a small opening. The tree roots were deeply entwined. I saw parts of three steps. Going down.

The museum in town had very little historical material in the true sense. There was certainly no mention of the old estate grounds. You'd have thought there might have been pictures of the house or its construction. Perhaps the library could help. The librarian on duty was barely out of college. When I asked about the old estate grounds she gave me a blank

look. I tried to remember the name the hotel clerk had mentioned. 'I think it was called the Eastman house or something like that'. She looked brighter. 'It burned down...and I think' all their records were lost. You might check the museum.... This estate thing was really making me curious. With the new marketing project I wasn't going to have any time off for months. But I just had to get back here again. Town Hall was actually a town office with three rooms: a lobby, mayor's office, and all the clerks and records in one large room full of grey metal file cabinets. I asked the clerk at the counter if I could find out about the old estate grounds. She replied that the city owned the woods and it had not been mapped to her knowledge. It was then that it hit me. I wondered if it could be the legendary Eastgate mansion. No one had ever found its art collections. Few had ever seen it. Others said it did not exist.

The old antique shop was one of the few classy places in town. I really hadn't spent enough time. I suppose one never does in a place like that. It was closed. Until Wednesday. There was certainly enough to see in the window. Between the frills of a Victorian lampshade I noticed a very old photograph on the wall near the back of the store. It was a team of four very large horses and three very large men standing proudly next to them. They were hauling something very large and very heavy. I couldn't quite tell what it was. I could only make out the outline of something on top. An urn.

The park was still on my mind. On the seat next to me I uncovered my treasure. I'd have to study it. It had really slipped me mind. At the first red light I opened the cover. A cloud of dust and the odor of mildew filled the cab. I sneezed. The title page had some old penmanship but I thought I could make out the name 'Rutherford'. He was probably the wine keeper or chef or somebody. The next page had a large ornate letter 'E'. Some of the numbers appeared to be years. 1922. 1923. The light turned green. I was in cell range again. The phone rang.

Chapter 7 - SECRETS OF THE HEART

By the time I returned from the truck (two trips up that hill had taken all my breath) Jerome was already well into the work. The sturdy olive army shovel was moving fast but only piling small trowel fulls each minute. 'The roots are slowing me down' he puffed out in my direction.

'Your dad lent me this iron bar. Maybe we can wedge that larger stone face.'

'Maybe. Let me free up some more of this over here...'

I handed him the old forged iron bar which measured a full five feet end to end. The effective end was tapered to a rough wedge like a giant fork for massive olive and very large pickles. (I had better not give the town that idea!).

'Are you going in too?' he asked. I thought the answer was obvious given my new hunting-camping-commando outfit.

'I'll try. I'll need a wider entry point than yourself.'. He smiled back sensing my attitude. 'We'll need a way to get stuff out' he waxed practical.

'I don't want to pilfer. I told DW anything will go to the museum. He seemed to trust me.'

'Folks around town would just as soon let this place rest in peace. Whatever that means'. He sounded wiser and more like his dad all the time. When not with his brother his grammar and seriousness did rise.

'True. There's more pain about Eastgate than most people will admit or can understand. I think...frankly...its long-standing attitude. No one seems to know why really. If you ask me it goes beyond the average 'wealthy envy complex'. Every town has cases of that. In Syracuse...Rochester...down the Hudson...you have a thousand filthy rich clans to hate. This is something else...'

'I feel like I'm in Egypt or something. Kinda like digging out King Tut all over again'.

'I certainly hope we find no bodies. It's within a realm of likelihood. Nobody seems to know when the whole family left...'

'If they did...'

'Somebody had to haul the stuff off. They took about 20 wagons worth downstate.'

'Just the fact there were all these tunnels and underground passages. It's not the normal form of a mansion really. I'm no architectural historian but not a single famous estate seemed to be so hidden...so...uh...subterranean.'

'Maybe he was scarred of thieves...or the fire.'

'I suppose there is a point to that. I guess we'll soon know if anything survived.'

'I wonder if they checked everything before leaving.'

'That's the question of the week, my friend. If he was so very...secretive, protective...maybe no one else knew.'

'Really? That you be...so...'

'Don't say cool...',

'I was thinking excellent.',

'Is excellent back in fashion again?'

'I don't know. My mother uses it alot.', '

Over the fall of small lumps of dried soil and maybe some window casing, I heard him exclaim something with volume. The volume was lost deep down somewhere. I was startled with his lantern which obscured the view I had.

'Am I going fall here?' I shouted pushing my legs down first with so little care for whether I ever walked again.

'Only about ten feet. Hold on. I'll catch ya...'

I doubted that. But he steadied me enough to keep the uneven floor from embarrassing me.

'It's kinda grimy. But those sure are walls...'

The smell of wet earth, decades of decayed ashes, rotten wood, and all the small mammals who'd live and died in the world's finest nest hit me at once. I think adrenalin makes life less repulsive. It should anyway. Fine tips of trees root perforated the ceiling and a hall of fame for web-weavers met our lamps. There was enough texture, sculpturing, hint of muddied gold leaf to tease. Brass fittings still held firm into the walls. Jerome used a rag to reveal a massive pylon of granite on one wall. The entire floor had been covered with half a foot of ashes (evently falling through a less than comforting ceiling) and thereafter encrusted or rivered with water, mud, and years of lower life forms.

Jerome proved to be a mad man (second only to me) and we both swiped and ravaged and dug like fools. I cautioned him and in so doing calmed myself. I had already found a marble vase about a foot tall and still having little patches of gold on its rotten wooden base plate. He and I agreed to make a little pile near our entrance and covered the things in two black trash bags from the Wainwright kitchen.

Before the hour was out we have a few little treasures. There was the shell of a clock with some of the elaborate internal gears of some of the face intact. It was a real mess but one had the idea it took a month or so to build. Someone in that field would want it. Jerome found a frame thickly caked in hard mold and ashes. I was sure some expert knew how to restore the thing. There was clearly a surface within the slightly loose rectangular frame. A hint of paint showed under my lantern at three inches off. We found more but this time four of them were fused

together by their margins as if set against a wall and then left behind. Jerome under my close guidance moved the fragile mass to our portal of light. He accidentally broke away a corner of the back frame and he shouted as the ancient treasured metal shone back at him. I'd have to work a month to own a frame that ornamental.

I found a little ceramic figurine but even after this much time the entire pile of a dozen pieces was easy to recover - as long as you didn't worry what the sticky, jelly-like masses were. It was of a lady in a long dress and I could still see the charm of her face. The glaze was cracked but in old things that can be a matter of value and pride. I think a skilled person with ceramic glue and a toothbrush or two could make something of this.

The next day DW joined the boy and myself and by now we had the benefit of plastic containers lined with foam eggcrate stuff and a pile of newspapers. The historical society leader proved to be so out of control he was nearly ashamed and apologized a little to me the next day. He had always assumed that Eastgate was burned down to the stone foundation as so widely believed and written. No one had any idea that deep chambers and hallways and tunnels might have spared such wonders.

The finds were so large and so grand the large dark wooden storeroom of the museum was cleared of administrative furniture and its center was made into an exhibit. (The walls still held books, binders, boxes, letter files, etc. of unrelated things). The find was so resplendent a private security guard (two of the Gurney boys) were kept nearby to guard the display. The treasure made an abbreviated column in the NY Times but more importantly a few TV stations around the state told our fascinating tale. I looked ten pounds beyond obese (I now distrust Becky's choice of my green suit) but I think overall came off as a bit of a scholarly sort chap. Unfortunately they cut off my last two sentences which came out with polish and ease.

The lovely little pixie face statue was scrubbed according to the proper methods and is placed on a bright stand in the back of display, giving the place the class and beauty of a Greek exhibit. Under subdued lighting it catches the eye first when you enter the room. Visitors know that fine things are ahead. This is no country craft show.

The central joy of the collection (and there were by now rumors of a new museum annex to be built with security stuff on the back of the hall) was a large eagle who endured the fire, heat, time, wet, fungus, and isolation. Fortunately he was carved from black and white marble with wings folded back (any more expansive pose would have been cracked). He has the five foot high scale, manner and position of a great predator scanning down (on us the visitor), knowing all, seeing all, and able to grasp any beast smaller than an elephant. His eyes were gouged deep and filled with blue sapphires of some distinction. (A jewelry appraiser from Elmira said

so). His powerful feet were cut from the fine stone perch and made of fine brass which we could restore to brightness and only a few scratches. We have not yet had time or funds to recraft his crystal claws (known only on account of a few tiny slivers) but he stands clean and proud now with a spotlight to show his sapphire omnipotence to full effect.

In all these diggings, curatorial exercises, tours, lectures, and even a short piece for the state historical society I said nothing of the wood nymph. She was far enough from the glut of stone and gold to be missed. And no one would think of charging into an unfruitful hostile woods unless bored like me. I always thought it would be pleasant to keep something back for myself - and not by hoarding an object. No I would hoard a place, the knowledge of its being, and the potency of her will over uncarved man. It was as close to an affair as I ever kept from my wife.

I am pleased the lady in ceramic was repaired quite well and enjoys a small glass case in which to show the glazing which shows every thread in her dress and some romantic emotion in her face. I have never thought much of dolls as a representation of womankind. She however shows elegance, poise, majesty, charm, and female mystery like no two-dimensional art could. My wife actually agreed with me on that point but as the artist is thought to be a man (Phillip Drasin of Paris) she gave me her pitch on the subject. Men she says always like to exaggerate the imponderability of the other gender; favoring us in the event of success and conveniently explaining any prolonged series of poor outcomes. She had after all appeared after such a prolonged series and as we were now back in our room, we managed to drop the subject in favor of happier, prolonged events.