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The Influence of Journaling On Self-Actualization and Creative Expression

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THE INFLUENCE OF JOURNALING ON
SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION:
A feminine perspective

By
Ann G. Williamson

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Specialization: Creative Writing

REGIS UNIVERSITY

THE INFLUENCE OF JOURNALING ON
SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

The Influence of Journaling on Self Actualization and Creative Expression: A Feminist Perspective

This project is intended to comment on the importance and affect of keeping a journal on the process of becoming self actualized and in the creative expression endeavor from a feminine perspective. It is this author's perception that keeping a journal is a relevant and crucial factor in these two areas of human development. Journaling aids in critical, analytical, reflective thinking and affords an opportunity for creative expression as evidenced by the large number of published journal keepers. The life and writings of Virginia Woolf is used as a case study. Her life and collected writings support the premises noted above. Included in this project is the author's novel, a work that embraces and evidences the beneficial outcomes of keeping a journal.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Ann Frank, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Wolf, and countless other famous authors kept journals for most of their lives. They recorded life experience, personal observations, poetic expression, emotional pain, and wrote memorable and influential works that have stood the test of time. Their journals became their outlet for creative expression and also served ultimately to be their own self actualization, their life purpose, what they were born to do. It would be impossible to estimate the number of novels published that started as personal journals.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (1971), diagramed as a pyramid, puts self-actualization at the very top of the structure because all other needs must be met before a person can reach his or her fullest potential. One way of moving through these levels, past the initial physiological and safety areas of need, to experience the pain and joy of love, the warmth of friendships, family, the development of self-esteem, respect of other and to reach personal achievement is through the use of journaling. Carl Jung (1962) said "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being." p340 The inference here is that we are all meant to shine and become all that we possibly can.

Writing down emotions, reflections, reactions, and experiences is one way to reach the pinnacle. Writing in this genre can be therapeutic, energizing, and provide an outlet for creative expression. It is also a way to record the spiritual journey of life.

Statement of the Problem

A vast majority of females do not believe that they possess any creative, literary talent. The burdens of career, married and family life don't allow many spare hours on a daily basis to develop their innate skills. A journal or a diary is able to provide a convenient and safe venue for communicating emotions, developing critical thinking, exploring their creative side without the criticism of peer judgment, rules or regulations. The therapeutic effect of journaling is well documented by Kathleen Adams, Tristine Rainer and others. Journaling serves as a safe place to explore spirituality, self-growth and opens the door to self-actualization.

Purpose of the Project

This project was designed to discuss the role that journaling plays in the writers life and in the creative process and to use the life of Virginia Woolf as an example. The creative part of the project was to write a novel that incorporated all of the uses of journaling studied, along with aspects of the life of Virginia Woolf and to weave these components into the fabric of the story. The novel exemplifies the development of believable characters, the development of plot, and a story that engages the reader.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Thomas Mallon, in "*A Book of One's Own, People and Their Diaries*" (1984,1986,1995) wrote "Diaries are so much about the preservation and protection of the self that they demand the word right from the moment they're being composed. Some of them prisoners and invalids, have used them not so much to record lives as create them, their diaries being the only world in which they could fully live." p xi

In times of great trauma people turn to the written word to express what they cannot say to another human. People have been journaling since written and spoken language first developed centuries ago. It is through journals that historical events were recorded and passed on to the world. Journals have given us the key to unlock the spirits and hearts of some of the world's most creative, talented and tortured people.

In order to explore what affect journaling has on self-actualization and creative expression this author will present background on several of the beneficial uses of journaling.

Many diarists started keeping a journal because they were experiencing significant personal problems. Daily life created situations that were not easily discussed with family or friends. Sometimes it is family and friends who created the confusion and emotional difficulties that deeply affected the writers and writing down these emotions and thoughts became a clarifying experience. Journaling is the process of recording on paper the chatter that takes place in our minds and making sense of it. It takes on an order of its own as the words are being written down on paper. It becomes a mirror where we can look at our own image and interpret and critique ourselves in a non-

threatening manner. It allows the creation of a new self-image that can look a little better each time it is viewed. It is a way to be heard when it feels like no one else will listen.

Therapeutic Value

One of the safest and least expensive ways of dealing with the ups and downs of daily life is to keep a journal. There is something about writing it down that helps put problems into perspective and there is a certain safety in the aloneness of writing.

Kathleen Adams, M.A. has devoted her career to teaching therapeutic journaling and opened the Center for Journal Therapy in Denver in 1985. She says that “journal therapy-the use of the journal, or diary, to facilitate holistic mental health and self-reliance-can trace its roots back as far as 10th century Japan, when ladies of the Heian court wrote reflections on life and love in ‘pillow books’.” (Adams, 1990, p xiii) Later Anias Nin, Anne Frank, Virginia Woolf and others gave credence to keeping a diary. Anne Frank said “I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things buried in my heart.” (Frank, 1947, p 2) When Anne Frank received her diary for a birthday present she had no way of knowing just how important the book would be to her and to her sanity. She filled page after page with her thoughts, dreams and a record of the daily events that took place in the small quarters that she and her family hid in during World War II. And when she exhausted the pages in her diary she wrote on any spare piece of paper available. As a teenager she recorded her adolescent emotions and growth. The diary served as her confidant, her best friend and her therapist.

Journals frequently are a tool used by therapists in conjunction with face to face therapy. Many twelve step programs for addiction recovery advocate their use to aid in the recovery process. “By using a diary as an adjunct to therapy you can explore in greater detail a topic that may have been glossed over during the therapeutic hour. Some diarists adapt particular techniques learned in therapy into their journals such as dialogues between the “Adult” and the “Child” used in Transactional Analysis, or fantasy journeys into the subconscious used by some Jungians.” (Trainer, 1978, 2004. p273) The diary also can serve as the therapist when the therapist is not available.

Writing in a journal helps to discover and explore what you think in a safe environment. Since journaling is a task done only by one person and normally in a private setting it is conducive to truly expressing anything that comes to mind. Thoughts can be random and totally unconnected as they are put to paper. No one, unless you want them to, is going to read what is written. It is not important that grammar and spelling be perfect, it is not important that what is written even makes sense. What is written can be as outrageous as possible and it simply doesn't matter. The most important thing to remember about writing in a journal is that nothing you write is wrong.

From a therapeutic view point, journaling can help to reclaim lost memories, both good and bad. Journaling helps in the expression of what you think, know and have experienced in life. Sometimes putting these thoughts and experience on paper enables the writer to think through the problem and helps to unravel the tangled mess of thoughts and issues that are creating confusion and preventing enjoyment. Journaling helps to provide focus and clarity to these confusions.

Many problems are connected to the relationships in our lives. “If your relationship conflicts involve people who are active and present in your life, the journal can provide a safe forum in which to ventilate strong feelings that may not be appropriate for direct expression.” (Adams, 1990, pp18 &19) Sometimes these types of issues appear in a letter format and the writer can unload all of the anger, hatred, resentment, frustration and tears towards the other person without the face to face confrontation and without regrets over what is said. The paper can be burnt or destroyed where in a face to face confrontation it is difficult to take back the words once they have been spoken. This can be a great stress buster for the writer and it will be read by no one without permission (assuming the journal is kept in a safe place). It is a method of repairing fractured relationships by gaining a new perspective after doing some reflective, analytical writing. It helps in the healing process.

Another interesting, therapeutic value is the ability to be creative in writing in a healthy way. You can play and experiment with how you could or should feel. You can try a new perception of the problem and by doing so see a new solution. You can learn and test flexibility around an issue just by creating it on paper.

Journaling helps to keep a record of experiences, knowledge and ideas. The word journal comes from the French word *jour* meaning day. A journal provides a place where a person can record their daily journey in life keeping a record of their experiences. These records may or may not be read ever again. The recording of events may be for the sole purpose of being able to share with others at a later time. It can also be a place to keep notes on topics of interest and ideas that come to mind.

Another interesting, therapeutic use for journals is to increase the ability to see other points of view. By being more critically aware through writing new perspectives open up and the answers to previously unanswerable questions surface.

Gillie Bolton (1999), a well known expert on the therapeutic value of keeping a journal, talks about why we should write. “Writers are the authority of themselves and their experience, knowledge, thoughts, feelings, memories and dreams.” (2006, p 17) Some of the reasons she gives are because writing is fun, it helps us to express our feelings and to make note of issues that are important in our lives. It can help us to remember people and events. Journaling allows us the opportunity to create a beautiful poem, speak to others and even leave a record for friends and family members.

She reiterates that no one is going to critique your work or correct your grammar. She tells the reader that writing is a luxury that we owe ourselves. In our busy lives when so much is happening inside and outside of our worlds it is good to take time to reflect on things that are important to us. It is easy to get caught up in the drama of our worlds that we don't take time to think through issues that are meaningful in a personal way.

Journaling can be done at any time, in any place. There are no rules or

regulations other than the need for pen and paper. There aren't a minimum number of pages required, nor a maximum. That is the beauty of it. You can write while you are alone or in a crowded room. You can write a poem or just a single thought. You can write twenty pages or just a sentence. Interestingly enough, the more you write the more you want to write. People who thought they had nothing to say actually find they have a lot to say once they get started.

Kate Thompson, a contributing author in one of Gillie Bolton's books, states that "in journal therapy the primary focus is on developing intimacy with the self." (2006) p 27. Journaling is a very powerful tool in the therapeutic process. When our personal lives become so unmanageable that it is difficult to make sense of things, writing our thoughts, problems and impressions down on paper can be an incredibly powerful tool. Putting it down on paper is a way to express emotions. It can be a method for uncovering repressed feelings. Events and feelings that are too shameful to speak of to others can be put down on paper for the reader (self) to sort out. Just getting these shameful emotions out and to be able to lift the burden from our minds is phenomenal. In cases of sexual abuse, where the victim was too young to comprehend at the time of the event and too ashamed to tell anyone, recounting the event on paper can be a way to lift an enormous burden from their mind and pave the way to a healing process. Some life events are too horrible to discuss with others because the fear of judgment and criticism is too scary. Keeping these things inside is damaging and eventually they must be dealt with. Journaling is a great way to start the healing process for life events that are too overwhelming to deal with in conversation.

Spiritual Value

In *Creativity, Spirituality and Transcendence, Paths to Integrity and Wisdom in the Mature Self*, (2000), Christopher Edwards says “Spiritual and creative passions have converged in the lives of some of our best writers, leading to the development of literature that asks the deepest questions about life.” p 2. It is through writing that authors delve into the spiritual side of humanity combining imagination and real life experience.

Spirituality is much more than its context in religion. Spirituality deals with the significance of life, our purpose as we see it, our set of personal beliefs about life and our higher power, our connectedness to the world and each other, and appreciation, reflection as well as life experiences. Religious leaders speak of enlightenment and personal power, awareness of others and looking inside ourselves for our hearts and souls and kindness to our fellow spiritual travelers. Spirituality can also be philosophical in nature as well.

Journaling can have a spiritual nature and purpose. Besides expressing our deepest emotional issues, journaling can serve as a venue for the sentient side of our inner selves. We can talk about the worlds around us from a different perspective than the emotional impact of daily events. It is possible to express in a creative way how we feel about, the heavens, the skies, the earth, the flora and fauna. We can speak of our love affair with clouds, the way the birds soar above us, the way the breeze blows our hair and why we love butterflies. We can talk about the taste of butter and the smell of roses. Journaling can help us to create for the purpose of uncovering the deeper sense of self in

relationship to the universe. Exploring the inner self from a spiritual perspective opens new dimensions that lead to self-actualization. Sometimes keeping a journal takes a person outside of themselves to a new spiritual, creative place unintended by the activity. This creative use of imagination and truth in journaling deepens the relationship between the soul and others and enhances the relationship with a higher power.

Christina Baldwin (1990) speaks of life as a journey and the urge people have to write down the details of this journey. She tells us that this is the one trip that humanity shares and that the spiritual journey is what the soul is doing while the rest of the body and mind take care of our daily lives. As she speaks of this journey we all share she reminds the reader that the journey needs a map, a record of the places we have traveled. This map can be in the form of a journal.

When we take up a pilgrimage, consciousness emerges as an ongoing intimate dialogue. With the self awakened, we become aware of and intrigued by the process of our own minds.

Journaling is the ultimate freedom of expression and personal reflection. Journaling is a venue for personal conversation within our own spirit as we go about our pilgrimage in this world. It is a place to think about our consciousness and how we view right and wrong. From a spiritual perspective, journaling helps us to understand the story of our lives and to clarify our life's purpose as we take stock of our lives from time to time. (Schiwy, 1996) It helps us to deepen our spiritual journey and to discover what is sacred in our lives as we engage in dialogue with the world around us. We can share our questions and the insights that come from questioning. In some respects the journal acts as a mirror where one can look at the image, reflect upon and gaze back with a different

perspective of self.

Marlene Schiwy in *A Voice of Her Own, women and the Journal Writing Journey* (1996) discusses journaling in many contexts. Journaling is a way to broaden self-awareness, to explore personal identity, and to create continuity in our lives. Tristine Rainer in the Preface (1978, 2004) pvii of her book *The New Diary: How to use a journal for Self-guidance and Expanded Creativity*, quoted Anais Nin, one of the most famous diarists: “We taught the diary as an exercise in creative will; as an exercise in synthesis; as a means to create a world according to our wishes, not those of others; as a means of creating the self, of giving birth to ourselves. We taught diary writing as a way of reintegrating ourselves when experience shatters us to help us out of desperate loneliness of silence and the anxieties of alienation.”

Praying on paper is a very powerful spiritual tool and can be a meaningful, useful tool in times of trouble. To write to one’s higher power and plead for change and acknowledgment creates personal power. Praying can be dreaming and wishing and to do it on paper can become goal setting and a catharsis for personal change. Writing of personal spiritual issues can be helpful in keeping on our life path. The writer can be their own spiritual advisor. Writing helps bring clarity through reflection.

Spiritual writing is a way to resolve the crisis a soul experiences in this world. Most humans have a spiritual side whether they subscribe to a specific religion or not. One aspect of our spirituality is our sense of self. Writing about this dimension of personal being can reveal to our selves the details of our journey through life. Our basic beliefs don’t usually change but the way we see and experience the world does as we progress along the life path. We can write as we become, as we experience and discover

who we are and what we know and observe from our spiritual side. The path that each person chooses becomes the correct path for that person and in writing about this the path can gain clarity and focus.

Our spiritual self can be better revealed as thoughts and ideas are put down on paper. Writing can help in improving our wisdom and in moving us closer to our higher power. The reflective dimension of spiritual journaling influences critical thinking skills and goal setting.

One way of uncovering our spiritual selves is to journal about it, learn what our spiritual journey is and by doing so create a new life path of self-exploration and development. Life can become complicated and confusing and seeking spiritual truths can be a new source of freedom from confusion and can create a road to inner peace.

Creative Expression

Creativity is the expression of the human spirit. It can be poetry, music, art, literature, a speech, a new invention or just plain doodling on a piece of paper. It can be spontaneous or the result of long hard work. It can be written or spoken. It can be happy or sad. It is a talent that only humans nurture and grow.

Many authors such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath started with journals as a way to self-expression. This recount of their experiences and emotions later evolved into their creative expression. "Creativity, like self-awareness, depends upon being in touch with your intellectual and emotional processes, upon listening for, valuing, and cultivating what comes from within." Trainer (1978, 2004) p276 A diary can work to expand the creative side by opening new channels and exploring new, creative ideas.

“Journal writing can provide a unique channel of creativity for all of us whether or not we are artists by profession. It invites the free play of imagination, intuition, and desire demanding only this and nothing else” (Schiwy, 1996, p 204) A diary is the one venue that allows total freedom to express and create.

Julia Cameron has written a number of books about writing. In her book *the Artist's Way, A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (1992, 2000), she opened the door to the creative writing world for many aspiring writers. Following are her basic principles: “Creativity is the natural order of life. Life is energy: pure creative energy. There is an underlying, in-dwelling creative force infusing all of life-including ourselves. When we open ourselves to our creativity, we open ourselves to the creator’s creativity within us and our lives. Creativity is God’s gift to us. Using our creativity is our gift back to God. The refusal to be creative is self-will and it is counter to our nature. When we open ourselves to exploring our creativity, we open ourselves to God: good orderly direction. As we open our creative channel to the creator, many gentle but powerful changes are to be expected. It is safe to open ourselves to greater and greater creativity.” (Cameron, 1992, 2002 p 3) She blends creativity and spirituality together so that they are unified and inseparable and paints a canvas of inspiration and motivation.

Creativity is a quality that exists in others not just authors and artists. Scientists, engineers, architects and even backyard inventors have a creative side. Journaling is just one way to free the creative brain cells. Journals are used in classroom settings in science classes, nursing programs and others. Writing it down and the free flow of writing is energizing and motivating. Creating something is very simply the act of making something new. There is a creative process and a creative product. Journaling involves

and evokes the creative process and sometimes the journal entry is the creative product. Journaling encourages self-confidence and boosts risk taking in a creative way. It provides opportunities for discovery and making new, innovative choices in self-expression and in exploring creative gifts.

“Creative people in many fields have traditionally kept journals because the form encourages the creative process. The journal provides a place to deposit the first flash of creative inspiration or impression. It allows you to capture the essence of the moment while it is still vivid and fresh in your mind.” (Trainer, 1978, 2004, p 279) Sylvia Plath, Anais Nin, Anne Frank and Virginia Woolf are just a few whose diaries were published as books. Their influence in self-expression through journaling is legend.

It is through the journal process of unfettered expression and reflection that writers can discover new solutions to problems. They can reflect on and appreciate the process of their lives, and exercise creative capacities that don't exist in other venues. Writers can experience the qualities they most enjoy in their writing – spontaneity, honesty, depth, clarity, ambiguity, humor, and feeling. By becoming self-aware one can develop their creativity by developing themselves.” (Trainer 1978)

Creative expression through journaling can assist a person in finding their uniqueness and developing it, growing it and nurturing it as it was intended. As children go through school creative expression seems to be repressed. Children are taught to conform and it is only the unusual child who pursues their creative side. Journaling can help find those creative qualities that are unique within each person.

Dreams, experiences, random thoughts, even a single word can be inspiration for a creative work. Recording life events to be reviewed at a later date is a great source for

poetry, short stories or even just an essay.

Maslow and Self-Actualization

Julia Cameron's philosophy and her basic principles pave the way to achieving self-actualization as Abraham Maslow theorized. In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971) he wrote in depth about self-actualization and the process as he saw it. He states "First, self-actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption. It means experiencing without the self-consciousness of the adolescent. At this moment of experiencing, the person is wholly and full human. This is the self-actualizing moment". p45 It is important to know that he derived most of his theory by self-application as he was able to analyze himself objectively. He defined self-actualized people as being people who "embrace the facts and realities of the world (including themselves) rather than denying or avoiding them." Self-actualization is the culmination of choices the person makes in life. These choices are a progression leading to the fulfillment of life. It is an ongoing process that continues throughout life.

Maslow's initial definition of self-actualization included the full use and exploitation of talent, capacities, potentialities, etc. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and doing the best that they are capable of doing.

The previous discussion about the therapeutic value of journaling supports the importance of writing it down to come to terms with our realities and life events thus aiding in the path to self-actualization. Maslow said that "Looking within oneself for many of the answers implies taking responsibility. That is in itself a great step toward actualization." (1971) p 46 Maslow tells us that there is a self and what he sometimes refers to as "listening to the impulse voices" means letting the self emerge. Recording

the impulse voices in a journal as Virginia Woolf did supports this statement.

Through journaling the writer can become his or her own best friend and arrive at the third level of the pyramid; the need for love and a sense of belonging. People who don't experience close family ties usually seek to find a group where they are accepted and where they feel they fit in the world. This is human nature and this sense of belonging is a crucial need that starts very early in life and continues until death. Teenagers in particular have an intense need to belong and perhaps this is why teenage girls often keep a diary to record their experiences.

Next Maslow describes them as being "spontaneous in their ideas and actions". Again, writing relieves a person of stresses and distractions so that they are free to express their creative side both physically and mentally. Reaching our full potential can be both physical and mental. Maslow wrote about "peak experiences". In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971) he says "The climax of self-actualization is the peak experience. A peak experience is what you feel and perhaps "know" when you gain authentic elevation as a human being." pxvi. He goes on to say "A peak experience is a coming into the realization that what "ought to be" is, in a way that requires no longing, suggests no straining, to make it so. It tells human beings something about themselves and about what the world that is the same truth, and that becomes the pivot of value and an ordering principle for the hierarchy of meanings." pxvii "One main characteristic of the peak experience is just this total fascination with the matter-in-hand, this getting lost in the present, this detachment from time and place. And it seems to me that now that much of we have learned from the study of these peak experiences can be transferred quite directly to the enriched understanding of the here-now experience, of the creative

attitude.” p63

Self-actualized people are creative according to Maslow. This is probably the most important aspect of the self-actualization process because, as Julia Cameron pointed out earlier in her *Basic Principles* that creativity is the natural order of life (1992, 2000). After all of our physical needs are met, we feel safe, etc, creativity is what we are designed to explore. Since we are God’s creations, it only seems reasonable that we should in turn create. Maslow said, “My feeling is that the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing, fully human person seem to be coming closer and closer together, and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing.” (1971) p57 He went on to say “...that the creative person, in the inspirational phase of the creative furor, loses his past and his future and lives only in the moment. He is all there, totally immersed, fascinated and absorbed in the present, in the current situation, in the here-now, with matter in hand. This ability to become “lost in the present” seems to be a *sine qua non* for creativeness of any kind. But also certain *prerequisites* of creativeness – in whatever realm – somehow have something to do with this ability to become timeless, selfless, outside of space, of society, of history” p62

Self-actualized people “are interested in solving problems – this often includes the problems of others. Solving these problems is often the key focus of their lives.” It would seem pertinent to solve our own problems first and journaling, as previously discussed, is an excellent method for doing so.

Self-actualized people “feel a closeness to other people and generally appreciate life, they have a system of morality that is fully internalized and independent of external authority and they judge others without prejudice in a way that can be

determined to be objective”. They tend to form deep close personal friendships, deeper than those of the average adult. They are sometimes seen by others as being remote and detached because while they enjoy the company of others, they do not need other people. They rely fully upon their own capacities. They are governed by far more inner directives, their own nature and natural needs than by society or the environment. Since they depend less on other people, they are less ambivalent about them, less anxious and also less hostile, less needful of their praise and their affection. They are less anxious for honors, prestige and rewards. Self-actualizing people enjoy life more - not that they don't have pain, sorrow, and troubles, just that they get more out of life. They appreciate it more; they have more interests; they are more aware of beauty in the world. They have less fear and anxiety and more confidence and relaxation. They are far less bothered by feelings of boredom, despair, shame or lack of purpose. They never tire of life. They have the capacity to appreciate the sunrise or sunset or marriage, or nature, again and again. In short, self-actualization is reaching one's fullest potential; to be more and more what we are capable of becoming.

Self expression has the power to change you, and the way you see and experience the world. Putting your feelings into words gives them shape and meaning. It allows you to put your feelings and thoughts into the world around you—and by doing that, you connect to your environment and the people in your life. (Baldwin 1990)

In Stephen Covey's book, *The Eight Habit, From Effectiveness to Greatness*, (2004) he mentions journaling as a means of achieving greatness. This could be equated with self-actualization as Maslow defines it. Journaling also falls into the being proactive habit of the seven habits discussed by Covey in *7 Habits of Highly Successful*

People(1989). The term proactive was originally coined by Victor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959). By taking control of one's life and making positive steps forward (through journaling) it is possible to get to that highest level of achievement that Maslow discusses.

Method- A Case Study of Virginia Woolf

Few authors have been studied, analyzed or recognized more than Virginia Woolf. Susan Rubinow Gorsky (1989) captured the essence of Virginia Woolf. She was one of the most influential and innovative female authors of the twentieth century not to mention a true feminist long before the feminist movement gained popularity and momentum in the United States. Her stream of consciousness style of writing was her trademark and there has never been another writer with this style of creative expression since. Her command of language and descriptive verse is exemplary.

She grew up during the Victorian age which is defined by the repression of sexuality and the treatment of women as second class citizens. Her independent spirit and intellectual family upbringing contributed to her successes in the literary world. She possessed an unstoppable will to write so much so that it was her entire world. It was her passion for writing that kept her moving on her lifelong path. This was a path over which, at times, she seemed to have little control. Her need and desire to write was so intense that it literally controlled her life. The words poured out of her in endless streams. She experimented in her journals with new forms of expression and recorded her life and thoughts for the world to read after her death. Her journals, published after her death by her devoted husband, Leonard, were filled with page after page of personal

events, outlines for future works, opinions and whatever popped into her head. She wrote just as she thought and disregarded punctuation and grammar so that she could simply get the words on paper.

In John Mepham's book *Virginia Woolf, A Literary Life* (1991) he notes that "We might say that her writing was a series of experiments in partial self-definition." pxv Her writing became her path to self-discovery and evaluation. Her writing was also evidence of her worth and contribution to society. There were undertones of man's control over women in many of her works and she became an outspoken critic of the Victorian age and the limited opportunities for women in the early 1900's. Her writing was purposely disjointed and rambling and this proved ultimately to be her greatest strength. It was her stream of consciousness style of writing that set her apart from other writers of her time and it was her signature style.

She was born into a family that while not wealthy was well-to-do. The base of Maslow's Hierarchy pyramid is physiological needs such as hunger or thirst and proceeds to needs of safety and protection. Virginia Woolf's parents had both been married before and widowed. Each had children from their previous marriages and with the birth of three children from their union they raised a total of eight children. They were of an upper class in London and so all of the children were considered to be of privilege. It is safe to assume that she and her siblings did not go hungry and were not living in unsafe conditions. It is also safe to assume that being one of eight children posed some issues for her and much has been written about the sexual abuse that she and her sister suffered at the hands of her half brothers (her mother's son's from her first marriage). Louise DeSalvo is considered the foremost expert on this topic and this will be discussed later in

this case study.

The next layer in the hierarchy deals with social needs, a sense of belonging and love. Virginia was deeply affected by her mother's early death when she was only thirteen and then her father's death less than ten years later. She was close with her mother and much of her writing reflects on this emotional bond. She was raised in a loving and intense intellectually stimulating environment. Her father had strong connections to the literary world and her mother to Victorian society. It was at home that she acquired her extensive vocabulary, reading everything she could get her hands on.

The family had several residences in England and Virginia's writings are evidence of fond childhood memories of loving family members and family friends. She was educated at home and given her parents level of intelligence and education she received a broad training. Much of her knowledge was gleaned from the extensive library maintained by her father. It was not fashionable or allowable for women to attend colleges or universities at that time and so she received her formal education at home rather than a university. In her novel "*A Room of One's Own*" (1929) she wrote brilliantly about the lack of opportunity and the unfairness of this lack within society in the early part of the twentieth century. She is credited with starting the women's movement known as Modernism. Modernism refers to a cultural movement affecting the world of art, music and literature that started in the 1870's in England. Bradbury (1978) It ran until approximately 1915. Many noted authors including Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, to name a few, were active in promoting the freedom to create and to reshape their environments as they saw fit and without political and religious intervention. She was a strong, outspoken advocate for

women's rights within this movement and many of her closest friends and mentors joined her and shared her views.

At the next level of the Hierarchy are the issues of self-esteem, recognition, status and issues of self-value. In this level he notes that humans have a great need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. They need to love and be loved both sexually and in a non-sexual way.

Louise De Salvo in her book *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1989) writes in depth about the impact of childhood sexual abuse by Virginia's two half brothers on her and her sister. This abuse had a significant impact on Virginia's life and much of her writing explored her teen years where her life was dominated by the men of the house and women were put into subservient roles. It is safe to assume that her experiences in such a dysfunctional family contributed to her having such a loud voice in the defense of women's rights and her involvement in the Modernism movement. Her writing perhaps helped bring some resolution to these unfortunate experiences.

In 1904 Virginia's sister moved the four children of Julia and Leslie Stephen to the Bloomsbury area of London. It was here that Virginia's talent blossomed. Her brother, Thoby Stephen, died suddenly and his death gave Virginia a determination to be independent and to stay closely connected to the group of intellectuals and artists that became known as The Bloomsbury Group. Some of Virginia's closest life-long friendships began with The Bloomsbury Group and it was here that she met Leonard Woolf. The closeness of the group and the level of intellect had a great influence on her sense of adventure, her professional growth and her sense of self-worth.

This close-knit group influenced political issues along with literary endeavors. The Hogarth Press was a product of their efforts and Leonard and Virginia's passion for writing. Both had well honed writing skills. Hogarth Press published the bulk of Virginia's efforts along with the works of Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster and others. They are best known for the volume of artistic output. The works of Virginia and her sister, Vanessa Bell, influenced a whole new generation of writers, including rock musicians and poets. This group was known for their unusual life styles. Many members had sexual relationships with each other including same sex relationships. They could be equated to the free love movement that existed in the United States in the late 60's. Considering the era this was quite outrageous. Virginia enjoyed the sense of friendship and camaraderie and was influenced by the liberal world views espoused and embraced by the members. This was decidedly different than the conservative high society that existed in London at that time.

It is evident that having these close associates impacted her level of self-actualization. Within Maslow's work self-actualization is loosely defined as the need to strive to be the best one can be, to work to the highest level of achievement within one's given talents and abilities. He speaks of their attributes as being spontaneous and creative. Self-actualized people are critical thinkers and look at life from a realistic approach. They feel closeness, a connectedness to others and can be objective about life issues. According to Maslow self-actualized people have an acute awareness of their world; they have peak experiences and are ethically aware. They have well developed senses of humor and have deep personal relationships. They often have a need for solitude and are quite independent. Also at the top of the pyramid is a spiritual self with

distinct spiritual needs. Self-actualized people have unique experiences and world views and it is these attributes that contribute to their level of individual purpose and achievements.

Virginia Woolf loved to read. She read every book she could get her hands on from her father's extensive library. She was insatiable in her quest for knowledge. It was this desire that led to her writing. She started using her imagination to create fictional stories when she was just five years old. She started keeping a journal when she was just eleven years old. She kept a journal regularly throughout her life for over thirty years. She wrote about anything and everything. She wrote about personal experiences, problems with her novels, spiritual notions, her happiness and her traumatic experiences. Her journal in many ways was her best friend. It was how she solved problems and how she recorded her life. She wrote on loose pieces of paper and in notebooks. She wrote prolifically as thoughts popped into her head and it was through journaling that she developed the stream of consciousness style that was to become her trademark. Her journals provided a safe venue for her to try out ideas for poems and novels. Her journals were a place to confide her secrets and her emotions. The pain and agony of the deep depressions she experienced were recorded on paper. She wrote about going mad and what that felt like to her. She wrote of brilliant ideas for her literary works. Leonard, her husband, was unconditionally devoted to her and kept her diaries safe. He published her diaries in five volumes after she died. She wrote freely without worrying about punctuation or sentence structure. This was a phenomenal way for her to practice her skills with a sense of freedom of expression that was emotionally liberating as well as intellectually challenging. Even her journal writing had a life of its own when published

in sequence. Her whole life was published and her genius recognized, in part, by virtue of the journals she kept.

She is considered one of the most original and innovative writers of all times. From her journal writing she developed a stream of consciousness style that told a story along with unraveling the emotional motives of the characters she created. She was in many ways the first liberated woman of the century. It wasn't until the 1970's that her works were re-recognized for their value and contribution to the Women's Liberation Movement. Virginia fought for woman's intellectual freedom long before it became an official movement when she spoke out about female students not being allowed at Oxford. While her sexual orientation was often discussed it didn't directly affect the admiration and respect that her work deserved. She had a unique way of taking an ordinary activity and weaving a story about it with character development and emotional insights unsurpassed in the literary world. While her writing style is somewhat formal by today's standards her works can entrance a reader and keep their attention with each page. The movie "*The Hours*" (2002), inspired by Michael Cunningham's book of the same name, revived an interest in her works and her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) in particular. The movie deals with the lives of two women who are preparing for a party. The first line of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" is one of the most quoted first lines from novels. There are few authors who can make this claim.

Leonard published her diaries in five volumes covering a span of twenty six years and including entries on the day of her death in 1941. Nigel Nicholson, Louise De Salvo, Quentin Bell, Roger Poole and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman are just a few of the authors who

have written books about Virginia Woolf. Her works have been studied in literature classes, used in songs, plays, and movies. Her novels and short stories have inspired many, many writers because of her unique, creative way of expressing herself.

Her mental illness and deep depressions have been the focus of countless works. Her illness is not necessarily a result of childhood traumas as much as a common condition experienced by many creative individuals. It is important to note that self-actualization and mental stability are not necessary two qualities that always go hand in hand. In fact, many brilliantly creative people suffer from emotional imbalance and it is that same imbalance that contributes to their view of the world giving them their unique perspective on life and human frailty. It is possible that her depression unleashed her genius as she wrote about her feelings and observations of the human condition. By definition, she undoubtedly reached her ultimate level of achievement. Upon her death, the loss of her friendship, her robust sense of humor, her unusual views on the people around her and the characters of her works, her wit and compulsive personality were missed by all who knew her and to the millions of fans she would ultimately have in the world of famous literature including this writer. She truly made a major contribution to the literary world and her style is so much her own that it is impossible to duplicate. This writer would like to believe that her devotion to journaling helped her to reach a level of personal achievement that many aspire to in a lifetime and few reach.

Project Plan

In order to incorporate Virginia Woolf's life and journaling and its various uses into my novel I centered my story on a group of ladies in a small New England town who get together to study Virginia Woolf's works. Each chapter starts with a quote from Virginia Woolf. Each major character in the book is encouraged to keep a journal and each journalist writes for one of the specific purposes outlined in my review of literature.

CHAPTER TWO:

Creative Work

The Shadows

By

Ann G. Williamson

Prologue

Virginia Woolf said, “Someone has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more.” These words held special meaning on this cold November day. The wind, bitter and cold, wrapped itself around every tree and whipped the fallen leaves around forcing them to pile up along the bases of the elm, oak and maple trees that lined both sides of the streets. In New England each year, there is a single day, usually in November when, without warning, fall suddenly turns to winter. The air changes from a brisk, crisp feeling on the skin to a biting cold that drives straight through to the bone. It numbs the limbs and sends shivers throughout the body. It is clear snow is eminent. The temperature drops like the glass ball on the stroke of midnight at Times Square only Dick Clark isn’t around to announce the change.

There was no need to read the obituaries in the local paper. The news of the deaths spread quickly, and the entire town knew within hours of the discovery of the bodies.

Walter Howe clenched his coat as he stepped out of his car. The cold, unrelenting wind made his clothes cling tightly to his body. He paused for a few minutes by the car door looking at the church and breathing in the frigid air. He looked up at the spire and studied the stained glass windows as the wind continued to flatten the crisp leaves against the side of the building. He took in three deep breaths to collect his thoughts before he headed inside. He had been to a lot of funerals at this church including those of his parents and his only brother. The memories of these events crept into his thoughts. He paused for a few moments before he headed for the front door. Walter was not normally given to intense emotions. They made him uncomfortable and he struggled to make sense

of the discomfort. When he was happy he smiled. That was the extent of it. He couldn't remember crying since he was a child, but tears began to burn in the corners of his eyes and the foreignness of the sensation worsened the condition.

He was raised to believe that emotions were to be used sparingly. Each person was given a limit, and emotions were not to be wasted on anything frivolous or fanciful. He felt the weight of sadness today in his heart. His chest hurt with the heaviness of his unclaimed grief. But, true to his family tradition, he would not cry in public for all to see. He would weep silently, and in private because that was who he was.

It seemed an appropriate day for a funeral, dark and uncomfortably cold. It was, in reality, for two funerals. The biting chill of the external temperature and the emptiness of the church gave testimony to the curiousness of the occasion. The grief cast shadows on the floor and walls. Of all the funerals Reverend Goodwin had spoken at, this was undoubtedly the most disturbing. He couldn't recall ever presiding over two bodies in the same ceremony. He looked out over the pews and recognized most of the faces there. There weren't more than fifty people and they seemed to scatter themselves in the nave of the church so as not to be too close to one another. The distance the mourners created between each other was yet another sign of the incongruity of the occasion.

In a few weeks the tongue wagging would cease. In time this day would just be a faded memory. But, today the life of a two of Oxbridge's own would be remembered, and they would be laid to rest in an honorable fashion as was the custom. It would be memorable for its purpose, but it would stay in the minds of some folks as a day of introspection, a day to take personal inventory.

Walter stood somberly at the entrance of The First Church of Oxbridge watching

Maggie Braden and Corrine Kellogg walk together up the sidewalk. No words were exchanged as they entered. They took a seat towards the front of the church on the left side and sat in silence as other mourners trickled in, their heads looking straight ahead staring at the coffins. Harriet Pratt nodded from the row across the aisle as she dabbed her tears away with a lace hanky. Ally McCall and her mother sat close to one another towards the back of the church. A salty tear run down Ally's cheek and her mother quickly retrieved a tissue from her purse and handed it to her daughter. Walter recognized a few of the bank employees who worked with Ruth and one lady he knew worked with Brenda. There were a few people that Walter thought looked familiar but he didn't know their names. Flo Myers was there. She had closed the coffee shop for the day. All of the mourners sat facing the altar awaiting the words of the good Reverend Goodwin. They sat frozen in silence. All showed up to say their goodbyes, funerals being the final farewell to this world.

The First Church of Oxbridge was built in the mid eighteen hundreds in response to the growing population of the time. The white wood building took up a corner lot on Main Street and High Street. It was a tall, pristine structure, gray slate roof and arched stained-glass windows. The origins of the windows were documented in the church history written by some church member, retired from regular work and with a lot of free time, who thought it important to write it all down for posterity. A copy of the church history was available through the church for \$14.50. The proceeds from the book sale went to the Ladies Guild. On the east side of the church a colorful rose window looked down on the congregation. The church stood like a fortress, strong and safe. All who entered the sanctuary looking for spiritual guidance or inspiration usually found what

they were seeking if not by the sermon, then, by the influence of the church building itself. Walter's family had been members of this church for four generations according to the family Bible. Walter grew up in this church. The first girl he ever kissed was from this church. He loved the old oaken pews and risers, the dark oiled woodwork, and the craftsmanship of the stained glass windows. The windows, with the deep translucent colors and leaded dividers, created a sacred feeling that validated his faith in a higher power. The heart and history of the church was in those windows.

Walter whispered to Corrine, "I think that must be Brenda's sister up there." He looked to his left and indicated a lady, dressed in dark gray, long blond hair lying flatly on her suit jacket. She was standing next to gentleman that Walter assumed was her husband. In the same row were several other people he decided must be Ruth's sister and brother, and their respective spouses. Brenda mentioned an aunt and uncle once.

"She could be Brenda's identical twin. Don't you think?" he said. He sat straight as an arrow and leaned slightly to the left to speak as softly as possible and moving his lips as little as possible so as not to appear rude or disrespectful.

Maggie nodded in agreement. She was afraid to utter a word for fear that she would start crying. She felt completely numb. She had spoken to Brenda just a few days ago and she sounded fine. She silently wondered what had gone wrong in the life of her friend. The circles under her eyes made her sorrow visible. Her eyes filled with tears and she stood very still breathing deeply to hold back her emotions.

Corrine adjusted her navy blue dress, put her hand in Walter's and whispered. "This is so sad. If only....." her sentence trailed off as she turned to watch the minister approaching the podium.

Reverend Goodwin was a tall man. When he came to Oxbridge twenty some years ago he could have been described as rail thin but as the years passed, and his body filled out he took on a robust appearance. His presence demanded respect and attention. His voice was deep, resonant. He could have headed up a Toastmasters group if the town had one. He walked up the center aisle, and took his position behind the oiled oak and marble podium. His gray thinning hair was combed straight back emphasizing his high forehead. This would have been a severe hair style for some men but it suited him for some strange reason. He adjusted his rimless eyeglasses and gazed at the people before him. He then focused his eyes at a point in the back of the church as was his custom. He struggled to find the right words for this day. He had worked on this eulogy for hours the previous evening. He looked at his notes, took a deep breath, and began to speak.

“It is difficult to find words today for such a heartbreaking occasion. We are saying farewell to a mother and a daughter. It is not often that we say goodbye to two people in the same ceremony but for this circumstance it is fitting. We are here to honor the tragic deaths of two women whose lives ended too soon. Two women whose lives were bound together from the moment one gave birth to the other. Their lives were connected in ways only a mother and daughter could understand. They shared traits. They shared emotions. They shared their daily lives with each other as mothers and daughters often do as time passes. Their relationship had its ups and downs but, each of them was linked and bound permanently to the other.”

His voice was deep and rich. The acoustics in the church carried his words to every corner. His well manicured, tapered fingers grasped the sides of the podium making his knuckles white from the pressure he put on the structure. He avoided eye

contact with the family members as he spoke. It felt unnatural to look at their souls at such a distressing and unfortunate time.

Sitting in the front of the church were identical coffins. This was not an ironic coincidence but a thoughtful choice. The family preferred the mourners not know which coffin contained which body so as to lessen the tragedy and diminish curiosity. Identical white funeral sprays filled with lily-of-the valley and gardenias were draped over the coffins. The smell of the floral arrangements filled the air with a spring like scent that was truly a breath of fresh air. The flowers were chosen with love to honor the lifelong bond of mother and daughter even in death. Reverend Goodwin continued.

“I have known Ruth and Brenda for over twenty years. Ruth was one of the finest women I ever had the privilege of knowing. She was a dedicated worker, a devoted mother and wife. She spent a lot of her time in service to this church. She gave generously to those close to her and to others in the community. She will be missed.”

His voice cracked for just an instant. He took a deep breath and continued. He embellished his remarks about Ruth and her place in the church and in the community.

He paused. It was decidedly difficult for him to talk about Brenda. He lowered his voice and spoke in a softer, quieter tone.

“Brenda was a special girl, sensitive and sweet. She grew up in Oxbridge and left to make a life in New Mexico. I, like others here today, wish I knew her better. In a situation like this it is difficult to find forgiveness. Brenda was a very troubled young woman. We can all say “if only ” to ourselves, and wonder if we could have created a different outcome by extending our friendship to Brenda. We will probably never know if we could have made a big enough difference in her life to alter the course of events that

brought us here today. We cannot change what has happened but we can pray for her forgiveness. And we must pray for self-forgiveness. In forgiving ourselves and Brenda we can find a way to make some sense of these events. Forgiveness doesn't always come easy, but I would ask that we all pray that Brenda and Ruth are at peace. I would ask that you keep their souls in your prayers. And most importantly, seek forgiveness in your own hearts. ”

It was obvious that he struggled to find the right words. The tempo of his words took on a beat of its own as he added more pearls of Christian wisdom to his remarks about the lives of Ruth and Brenda. It was evident this was a truly complicated, difficult eulogy for a man who ordinarily was composed and confident.

He went on with the eulogy interjecting the proper Bible verses where appropriate in the service. Walter, Maggie, and Corrine hardly heard a word he said. Each of them sat consumed by grief and their heads filled with thoughts of guilt and compassion. They sat, rigid and still, as the minister recited the 23rd Psalm and the organist played *Amazing Grace* and a few other standard funeral hymns that all blended together, as organ music often does. The chords were played slowly and the music lingered in the air before silence took over. “Let us pray.” he said. The congregation bowed their heads and waited for the sound of the Reverends voice to break the silence.

“Brenda and Ruth had productive lives and many wonderful memories. They each would want to be remembered for the goodness in their lives. As we gather to say goodbye, please remember them in your prayers today and for always. Amen”.

He stepped down from the podium and walked over to where Brenda's sister was standing with her husband. Her aunts and uncles followed as he walked with them out the

front door to the limo awaiting them. He leaned over talking quietly to comfort them as best he could. The organ played softly as people left the church. Brenda's sister and brother-in-law climbed in to the awaiting limo. They drove off into the direction of the cemetery followed by the cars containing other family members.

Walter squeezed Corrine's hand and she in turn grabbed Maggie's hand as they stood still, silent in the moment, heads still bowed. Walter slowly raised his head and gathered in his emotions with a deep, expansive breath. Tears lay in the corners of his eyes, and he blinked them away. He exhaled allowing the bad, painful feelings to disperse themselves in the large church. He took a second deep breath to clear his head.

"Are we going to the cemetery?" he leaned over and asked Corrine and Maggie. All three remained standing in the church pew afraid to move.

"I don't think I am up for that" Corrine said. She stood up and pulled her coat to her, tying the belt around her waist.

"Me neither" said Maggie. Maggie also turned towards the center aisle. She led the way out of the church. Walter and Corrine followed.

"How about coming over to my place for coffee or a glass of wine?" Walter asked when they got outside.

"That sounds good" Maggie said. Her voice had a melancholy tone. She seemed to be in a faraway place as she walked to her car.

"I agree. I feel exhausted. A cup of coffee would be nice." Corrine said with a deep sigh.

They left the church and slowly made their way to the parking lot after stopping to offer their condolences to Brenda's family as they stood by the limo. Walter noticed the

parking lot wasn't crowded. It was as if the passing of these two women had no significance to the townsfolk. He turned his focus to his surroundings and, as if seeing the town for the first time, felt a cold, insensitive wind blow through his body. From the minute the news of the deaths hit the street, the tongues were wagging and everyone pulled the curtains shut in their living rooms. This was the kind of thing that would never be discussed in public, only in the privacy of a home or on the phone with the neighbors. In a few weeks it wouldn't be mentioned at all. In the minds of some, it never happened. For most of the town life would go on as usual. For those closest to Brenda and Ruth it wouldn't be quite that easy to let go of and the question of "why" would remain and resurface from time to time. Perhaps one day there would be an answer.

Walter drove home slowly. Funerals always unsettled him. New Englanders were so driven by common sense and Yankee ingenuity they failed to acknowledge those occasions that called for compassion and forgiveness, he mused. As he passed the homes of people he had known for so many years he realized that while he knew their names and he knew the houses they lived in, he really didn't know them. Oh sure, he could wave at them as he passed them on the street or nod a cordial hello at the grocery store or post office but he couldn't truthfully say he knew any of them well beyond those casual gestures. They were so guarded and protective of their privacy. They were unyielding in their principles. Most of them didn't have lengthy personal conversations with anyone, even their own families. It was a New England thing to never validate emotions verbally. "New Englanders were on odd lot" he thought as he turned the corner. Yet, he was one of them. They were "his" people and the only people he had ever known and still, at times, he felt as a stranger amongst them. He suddenly remembered a poem by John Donne.

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” The only reason he could remember the entire poem was because he had to memorize it in eighth grade. It was ironic that it came to mind so quickly on today of all days. He smiled through the grief he was feeling.

For some reason he remembered Virginia Woolf's words “If you do not tell the truth about yourself, you cannot tell it about other people.” It was because of Virginia Woolf and her writings that his life finally changed from a comfortable, boring existence to a new beginning. It was Virginia Woolf who brought new friends into his humdrum world. Her works would always hold a special place in his library. And her works that influenced what brought them all to this funeral service.

Chapter One

Walter took the long way home from the funeral. He knew Maggie and Corrine would probably do the same. They all wanted to have time to digest the day, and the recent events. He decided to take Old Essex Road for a change and looked up to see the darkness of the storm clouds building as he drove.

He concentrated on the winding roads of the New England coast. Like most New England towns the streets weren't laid out in grids but ran haphazardly in all directions. There were lanes and roads and streets and avenues all named after the landscape, a local family or ancestral memories of England.

The area started out as farmland and a fishing village. The town was settled in the mid 1600's by some courageous, ambitious Englishmen eager to be free of religious domination by the homeland. The founding fathers of Oxbridge were hardworking, inventive and intelligent people. It was their physical strength and stamina that built the stone walls, the cider mill, the shipyards, the town hall and the old homes that lined the streets closest to town. These were wise people to be sure and many descendents of the original settlers still lived in town. Other families came, settled and just never left. One stroll through the local cemetery would give testament to this. Generation after generation lay at rest in the family plots. The flowers planted during the summer were dead and clinging to the frozen ground.

Stone walls, neat and straight, lined the country lanes of Oxbridge. Walter marveled at them as he passed them. Some of the wall dividers were exact and precise while others were more random and resembled piles of stone heaped in rows to mark a property line. To a visitor they were an architectural phenomenon. To the residents, they

were part of the charm of the village. They provided strong property lines not to be argued with since they had been there for as long as anyone could remember. The records in the town hall indicated that most of the walls had been in existence for well over three hundred years. They were comforting in their solidity and strength. They were respected for their continued existence.

The stone walls along Old Essex Road were put together with the exactness of the pyramids. Each rock was carefully selected for shape and size. The walls were built with an eye for exactness and time consuming perfection. The walls had stood the test of time and also the harsh New England weather. They were one of the things that Walter loved best about Oxbridge.

The walls added value to the properties they divided. They represented a historical era that the town embraced and revered. There was no law against removing them but not one resident would have ever considered doing so, not even for a moment. It would have been sacrilegious to even think such a thing. Walter looked at the leaves of orange, red, yellow and green that blew in piles blanketing the old stone walls. The leaves were starting to rot from the recent rain. The snowy, wintery weather lay just ahead. The colors of autumn would be replaced with blackened piles of snow made by the snow plows when they piled the snow up along the roadside. In March or April the weather would warm enough to melt the snow and make way for the greenness of budding plants, and flower bulbs. The trees budded, quickly changing to vivid green. Every branch would be alive with leaves. It was a living canvas of an ever changing painting.

Walter let his mind wander as he drove in one giant circle around the town. He

actually only lived about seven blocks from the church on Vine Street. Even after taking his little tour around town he was back home in less than thirty minutes. He pulled into the driveway and went into the house through the back door. The wood frame house was built in the early 1700's by someone named Isaac Robinson. At least that's what the sign that hung outside over the front door said. It was a two story house with three bedrooms on the upper level. Walter used one of the bedrooms for a study where he did his writing and kept his book collection. Downstairs included the kitchen, a dining room, and the living room. A white picket fence bordered the front yard. In each of the corners of the large front yard stood an ancient elm tree that provided much appreciated shade for hot summer days.

At one time the back yard was a beautiful array of roses, dahlias, irises, daffodils and other carefully tended plants. His mother took great pride in her garden. Outside the back door was a flagstone patio his father had laid the summer of Walter's tenth birthday. His mother planted rose bushes along the house next to the flagstone. The roses were still alive but the other flowers had been destroyed years before. They bloomed abundantly every summer. Right next to the back door was a half whisky barrel that sat empty. When his mother was alive it contained marigolds but that was a long time ago.

Both of his parents died within a year of each other, shortly after Walter graduated from college. Since Walter was the sole heir, he inherited the property. After his mother's funeral he and Sheila, his ex-wife, agreed that living in a house they could call their own was certainly better than the small apartment they shared in Boston. They quickly learned that neither of them possessed a green thumb and the gardens in the back yard were swiftly converted to ornamental shrubs requiring minimal maintenance. It was

a comfortable house. When they moved back, Walter found himself happy to be in his own house, familiar surroundings; the house he grew up in. He hadn't realized how attached he was to that house and to the town.

Walter had no sooner hung up his coat when Maggie and Corrine arrived. Maggie parked in front of the house and Corrine pulled in behind Walter's car. He drove a seven year old, silver grey, Ford Taurus with 35,752 miles on it. It was a sensible car, nothing fancy. His father had drummed it into his head to always buy American. He looked at the Toyotas and Hondas that filled the parking lots around town but he would have been disloyal to his father not to own a Ford. He was a sensible man, with a sensible car, a sensible house, sensible clothes...just damn sensible! It was how he was brought up and it was the bane of his existence. There wasn't much he could do about it at this stage of his life. Over the years he had grown to accept himself for who he was. There were worse things one could be he rationalized to himself. It certainly made life less complicated and Walter was all about simplicity in his life.

Walter put on a pot of coffee and opened a bottle of merlot. He set the coffee mugs on the kitchen table. The kitchen had a warm, welcoming look for a bachelor's home. The oak cupboards had a masculine feel but the dark blue and green paisley wallpaper, beige granite counters and the collection of coffee mugs hanging from hooks on the walls made it seem not so stark and devoid of personality like most bachelor's pads were in the movies. He had worked with a local decorator at the wallpaper store to pick out the wallpaper and have it hung. He wasn't handy with such things, another thing that sometimes presented problems. He was appreciative of the local handyman and had the phone number tacked to the bulletin board next to the wall phone in the kitchen.

Walter didn't think of himself as a bachelor. He was just a man who wasn't married. In his mind there was a difference, but he couldn't exactly clarify the distinction to anyone. It was just how he saw himself. Being a bachelor implied a playboy kind of image and he certainly wasn't that. He was just not married.

He had spent a lot of years alone in this house since his wife left but he didn't mind anymore. He had settled into his life. It was comfortable. He surrounded himself with things that he liked, and didn't give much thought to what the rest of the world thought. He enjoyed entertaining occasionally. He wasn't a lavish person and the décor reflected his simple tastes. He had overstuffed chairs, a fireplace with plenty of wood stacked on the side, soft lighting and a leather sofa. His dogs, Digby and Doolee, were asleep on their dog beds when he opened the door. They greeted him enthusiastically. He put them in the bedroom before his guests arrived. They had a habit of jumping up on his guests. It was their way of saying hello.

Corrine knocked on the front door and let herself in.

"We thought you'd beat us here." Corrine said as she entered. "We stayed and talked in the parking lot. Harriet stopped us. She was pretty upset."

Corrine pulled off her leather gloves, one finger at a time. She laid them on the table at the bottom of the staircase.

She held the door for Maggie who was right behind her. The ladies laid their coats across the sofa. Walter smiled as he came around the corner. He was always especially glad to see Corrine, and Maggie was a good friend.

"I took the long way home." Walter said. "I think we'll have our coffee in the kitchen if you don't mind."

Walter led the way to the kitchen although Corrine was no stranger to this house. He paused and put his arm around her shoulder. She laid her head on his chest and looked up at him.

“Perfect. Actually I prefer the kitchen” Corrine replied.

She poured the coffee into the mugs. It was evident that she knew her way around the house. She opened the cupboard to get the sugar bowl and the creamer down from the shelf.

“That’s fine,” Maggie said. Maggie gave the room a quick once over with her eyes. She had never been in Walter’s house before. *This is so Walter*, she thought. She had known him for almost fifteen years and had never set foot in his home or him in hers. She smiled ever so slightly thinking just how strange but yet normal this was for this town. Her mind started to drift and she was pulled back into the conversation as Walter spoke.

“This has been quite a day” Walter said. “I still can’t believe Brenda did what she did. Why didn’t we see it coming?”

His face sagged from sadness and he sat at the kitchen table.

“We’ll spend a lot of years telling ourselves that ‘if only’ we had paid more attention,” he said as he gazed out the kitchen window noticing the first snow flakes.

“You are so right,” Corrine said. “She was so quiet. I knew that she had some issues but in all of our meetings and our talks there was nothing that would have made me think she was capable of this.” Corrine grabbed her purse to find her hanky. “I just wish I could understand this. We’ll probably never know the truth. That’s the saddest part.” Corrine sipped her coffee. She put the mug on the table and began tracing the lip of the

mug with her index finger her mind obviously wandering off to some far place to ponder her thoughts.

Corrine was just over five feet tall. Although petite, she carried herself well and Walter always thought she was taller than her actual height. She had a certain sophistication that drew people to her, including Walter. He thought her voice sexy and he noticed that most people turned to look when they heard her speak simply because of the sultriness of its tone. Her lips formed each word with care and precision. She drew the listener in causing most people to hang on each word, riveted to the character of her expression. Walter suspected it was part of the secret of her teaching success, and her popularity with the college students.

“You know, when we started the group she was so excited to be part of something. She and I had coffee a few times. She told me that she was trying really hard to start a new life and get herself headed in a new direction.” Corrine paused. “I think her divorce was harder on her than she wanted to admit but she didn’t seem at all angry about it. I remember thinking that she was unusually unemotional about it considering how long they were married.” Maggie said. Maggie thought of her own marriage and considered herself blessed to still be married to the same man she fell in love with so many years ago.

“She mastered the art of detachment, that’s for sure. That is such a New England thing. It’s always driven me nuts. It’s just not normal to be so composed. I have spent a lifetime trying to not be that way. Both my parents were like rocks....no emotions at all! I never saw either my mother or my father ever shed a tear.” Corrine said. Her green eyes sparkled as she spoke. She stopped talking and looked down at her coffee continuing to

trace a circle with her finger around the edge of the mug.

“I think we thought she was just stoic, but I think it really was much more.”

Walter said. He paused for a moment because he found it difficult to talk about Brenda for some reason. “Brenda really was a very sweet girl. Do you remember when the group first started? She was so excited about studying Virginia Woolf.” he said. Walter looked over at Corrine a little bit concerned by her stillness. He waited to see if she wanted to say anything but she didn’t look up.

“You probably weren’t aware of this, but she bought every book I had in the store by Virginia Woolf, and then she had me order all of the diaries and notes that Leonard Woolf published after Virginia’s death. She was obsessed with Virginia Woolf’s life, and her death.” Walter said. He reached over to the coffee pot and refilled everyone’s mugs.

“Walter, you never mentioned that.” Corrine said “That’s kind of odd don’t you think?” She was back in the conversation.

“I have no idea. A lot of people get obsessed with a particular author. It’s not that unusual. I suppose Virginia Woolf’s works could have made more of an impression on Brenda than we realized. You have to admit, she did have an interesting life. Maybe Brenda identified with her in some way, but I think Brenda’s problems were much deeper than that.” Walter said soberly.

The three friends sat talking for a long time, the time passed so quickly that it was five o’clock before they realized. By the time Maggie and Corrine left Walter’s house there was about an inch of snow on the ground. The flakes were getting bigger and the snow was piling up. The roads would be slippery in another hour.

Walter stood in the doorway and waved goodbye to the ladies. He slowly closed the door. It would be a very cold night. He loved this time of the year. He liked the change of seasons. He knew winter was coming but he enjoyed the surprise of the first snow. The whiteness quickly covered the ground. He looked out towards his garage and saw his snow shovel resting by the door. He thought about the snow. It was refreshing, covering the ground, cleansing the grass, settling on frozen ground where the grass lay dormant. There was just something very special about the first snow. It always felt like a new beginning to him, pure without footprints or vestiges of humanity.

He looked at the dirty coffee mugs on the table and the bottle of wine that hadn't been touched. He gathered the mugs and washed them by hand rather than putting them in the dishwasher. He corked the wine and set it on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator.

I'll save it for later, he thought. *A glass of wine before bedtime would taste good.* As he was finishing drying the mugs, the phone rang.

"Hello", he said as he hung up the dish towel.

"Walter? Are you busy?" Corrine asked. She sounded somber. She spoke with hesitation. "It's so cold out and I feel so alone." she said. He sensed a neediness that wasn't part of who she was normally.

"I'm not busy and I always have time for you. You know that. I was just cleaning up the coffee." he said. He was happy to hear her voice even if she didn't sound her cheery self.

"I just feel kind of strange," she said. "It's so sad and I can't seem to get my mind around it. I have never been this close to something like this and it's really disturbing." Corrine's voice cracked and Walter knew she was holding back tears.

“I know. I understand” he said. He struggled to find the right words for this situation but it was fruitless. Normally he always knew the right thing to say to her but this was different. “I know, I know.” He knew he was being redundant but it was the best he could do at the moment.

Walter’s voice was soothing. It had a comforting quality that put people at ease. He was told once that he had perfect diction and was a popular choice to speak at church meetings and town forums. He had been asked to do a eulogy for the funeral but he declined. He just didn’t think he could do the situation justice and told the minister he wouldn’t be able to help out this time.

“Brenda was obviously more troubled than any of us knew. You know we may never understand what happened. I heard that her sister has turned the house over to a realtor to handle.” Walter said trying to be calm and informative in an effort to help Corrine focus on a different part of the tragedy.

“Walter, I can’t help feeling that I could have done more for Brenda.” Corrine said softly.

“Honey, you did as much for Brenda as anyone could. You can’t blame yourself for this.” Walter said with an emphatic tone. “It’s unfortunate but I am not sure that any of us could have stopped it. Please don’t beat yourself up over it. There was no way you could have known.” He tried to be reassuring.

“Should I continue the book club?” Corrine asked. She felt silly after she said it. At a time like this she had no idea why the question just shot out of her mouth.

“Well, I guess that’s up to you. I thought it was a great idea. Everyone seemed to truly enjoy it but perhaps not Virginia Woolf next time.” Walter said trying to lighten the

conversation. “Think about it. You don’t need to decide anytime soon. I’ll call you first thing in the morning. Now go to bed and try to get a good night’s sleep.”

“I will. Thanks for listening.” Corrine said as the conversation ended. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He hung up the phone. He went to the bathroom to put on his pajamas and robe as was his custom. He should have asked her to come back over or offered to go to her house but he felt like he wanted to be alone this evening.

Walter stood by the window in his living room. It faced the street and he found himself thinking back to the year before when it all had begun.

Chapter Two

It had been a typical fall day. The crisp cool air was invigorating. A clean breeze blew as he watched the town from the service desk in his book store. People walked down the street, their coats wrapped around their thighs, bracing themselves against the wind. The crisp dry leaves were lifted by the breeze, and dispersed in all directions. He had just finished his window display of Virginia Woolf's works. He was hoping he could inspire some of the college kids to read something of substance instead of the insipid foolishness they usually read. Oxbridge depended on Walter for their reading inspiration amongst other things.

His store in the Market Square was a distinctive place. Everyone showed up at Walter's doorstep at least once a year, some once a month, others once a week. Walter was the ears and eyes of the village. He knew just about everyone in town. He knew their history, their children, and their children's children. He wasn't the town gossip but Walter was the kind of person that people confided in because they knew he would guard their secrets well and Oxbridge had a lot of secrets. As tight lipped and stoic as New Englander's could be about their own lives, what went on behind closed doors was often not as private as some thought.

Folks in this town were kind, hard working people but they didn't warm to strangers much. As the old timers died they were replaced by new old timers – folks who worked very hard to be part of the community. Folks who had been there for many years, but were still not part of the founding fathers sector. Slowly, as the town grew and the population grew, the town took on a new dimension but its New England notions, rituals and vulgar superstitions remained intact.

Walter, being a life-long resident and active member on the Town Council, got the first available store space for the bookstore when the new Market Square opened. The new location provided an opportunity to create a special meeting place in the small college town. Walter purchased some comfortable overstuffed chairs and coffee tables. His customers could sit down, read, chat with their neighbors and relax with a nice cup of coffee served by a master at coffee making. He invited Flo to house her café in the bookstore when it opened. Walter had thought of everything. The coffee shop increased his business and his business was good for Flo's coffee shop business. Walter and Flo had a long history together that spanned twenty some odd years. She was one of the first people he came to know when he bought the book store. She was a long time resident of Oxbridge and had always been kind to Walter. Their friendship had grown over the years and they were as close to being family to each other as was possible.

For the coldness of the citizens there was a warm connectedness as well. New Englanders take time to warm up to newcomers but they are extremely loyal once the friendship starts. Walter never missed her birthday nor did she miss his.

Walter couldn't recall a time when he and Flo weren't friends. Flo, her coffee cake and her laughter were integrated into his daily existence. He considered himself a lucky man to be surrounded by the warmth the coffee shop brought to his book store. Little did he know how much his life would be changed by the coffee shop and the book store.

Florence Yetishefsky Myers was born in Oxbridge. She was a tall woman with blondish gray hair, a sturdy build that affirmed her Polish heritage. She was born a red head but after forty the red turned lighter and then to a shade of blonde gray not easily

described. Her raucous laughter filled the world with joy, a testimony to her kindness and humor. In elementary school her laugh was legend. Every student and every teacher recognized it immediately. She met Howard Myers in junior high. It was love at first sight. After thirty years they were still as madly in love with each other as that first day they met. Flo, as she was known as, would see Howard come in the door and still get butterflies in her stomach. Howard never missed a birthday, Christmas or Mothers Day. Even though they never had children he felt it was important to honor her just because she would have been the best mother a child could hope for. She was the most exceptional thing in his life. He never let a day pass that he didn't tell her so. It didn't even need to be a special day for him to buy her flowers. He just loved her so much.

Flo decided after many years of effort, since God wasn't going to bless them with children she needed something to keep her busy. Howard worked for the town road maintenance department and Flo had way too much time on her hands. She made the best coffee cake in town, or so she was told. She brought it to every bake sale the church had. One day someone suggested she open a coffee shop. The more she thought about it and, she and Howard talked about it, it didn't sound like a bad idea. She had a little bit of money saved for the proverbial rainy day. A little shop on the edge of town where Cyrus Hodge once had his handyman business became available. Howard and she worked for weeks to turn it into a coffee shop. They painted the entire building, added tables and chairs, got some new coffee machines and added a kitchen behind the counter so Flo could bake to her heart's content. Once she hung out the sign and opened the doors it became everyone's favorite spot to go after church. It wasn't long before Flo had to hire some help. To keep herself sane she closed every Sunday at 2:30 and didn't reopen until

Tuesday morning. Business stayed very much on the positive cash flow side and grew over the years. When the Market Square was being built Walter came to her with a proposition to join forces. With some careful planning they merged the businesses.

The year she and Walter merged their businesses Howard was diagnosed with cancer. Flo' kept after him to see a doctor when he first complained of not feeling well. Howard, being who he was, just wouldn't hear of it. It would pass he would tell her. Having Walter to keep an eye on the business gave her the free time she needed. Flo was able have a little more time to spend with Howard before he died. She was forever in Walter's debt although Walter just knew it was the right thing to do for both of them. Flo and Howard had been part of Walter's life for many years. They were just damn good friends. Now, their partnership had made both of them successful. When they opened in the new Market Square they changed the name to The Bayside Book Store and Coffee Shoppe. The college kids and townspeople hung out there drank coffee, read, and bought magazines, books and Flo's famous coffee cake.

Flo and Howard lived in a small apartment over the drug store when they were first married. They both worked hard and they saved their money. After a few years they managed to have a down payment on a house. It wasn't the prettiest house in town but it was theirs. It was a two bedroom cottage on River Street. It had been built in the mid 1800's. Howard had great plans for the house but soon discovered that there were limitations to what one could do with a property designated by the historical society as an important part of the town's heritage.

The historical society made it impossible to tear any old house down. It could be brought up to code and renovated but they wouldn't stand for too much progress. With

that in mind and despite the historical society, Howard managed to turn the place into a showplace. Howard was a clever man. Flo' sat in her chair remembering the fun they had remodeling the house.

They didn't have much money for a long time. Howard took his time with each room. He sanded the floors by himself. Once he had removed layer after layer of wallpaper from the walls of each room he realized the value of the lathe and plaster walls he found underneath. He stripped the woodwork and discovered beautiful oak wood. The kitchen was the biggest challenge. Flo loved to cook and he wanted her to have the best. He took on side work doing odd jobs to save the money to get Flo the best stove, refrigerator and sink he could find. Nothing was too good for his Flo'.

Every night when he came home from work there was Flo. She could take a pound of hamburger and turn it into a feast. They both had hearty appetites. He loved her cooking and baking but most of all he loved her. She loved to laugh. He loved to laugh. They managed to have fun in everything they did. Neither one took life that seriously. Their house was always filled with the sound of laughter and the smell of good things baking in the oven.

Flo' sat in her chair for quite awhile. She missed Howard terribly. At her age she knew she would never find that kind of love again. She was happy having had Howard for as long as she did. She still had her memories. No one could ever take those away from her. Every part of this house contained a little piece of Howard and a special memory that brought a smile to her face.

She looked out the window and was surprised at how much snow had fallen. She would have to sweep off the sidewalk in the morning. It wasn't quite dark yet. She put on

her heavy coat and went outside to enjoy the snow. She liked walking in this kind of weather. She brushed the snow as she walked down the sidewalk to the park. She had her boots on to keep her feet warm. Without even thinking about where she was going she found herself at Market Square staring at the front window of the book store. She would have to go in early in the morning to make her coffee cake and the other pastries her customers loved so much. She stood staring at the display in the bookstore window. She thought back to the year before when Walter had put all that Virginia Woolf stuff in the window. She saw her reflection in the window and wondered who the old lady was staring back at her.

Suddenly she felt old. *Well, she was no spring chicken that's for sure*, she thought. She liked being part of the bookstore. It made her feel young again. All of the college kids came in and hung out in her shop. She had to learn how to make lattes and all those other fancy coffees and teas that they liked. She thought about the past year and wondered where the time had gone.

She recalled the day Corrine held the first meeting of the book club. She smiled as her memories returned from the depth of her mind where they loitered, hiding from her and challenging her brain. It had been a beautiful fall day. She was busy as usual baking in her kitchen. She kept hearing Walter's bell on the back of the door ring over and over. She figured he must be doing a good business. Corrine Kellogg stood out from the others on that day. Corrine came over and introduced herself a few days later and Flo' knew she had made a new friend. She liked Corrine right from the start. She was a special lady. When she started her little book club Flo found she looked forward to the meetings. She wasn't a part of them but she liked to listen. She never let anyone know, but she bought a

journal too when Corrine suggested doing so to the book club.

It was a few weeks before she could sit down and write. School had never been fun for her. Going steady with Howard was the best part so she wrote about how she met him, their first kiss, parties they went to and how much she missed him. She didn't feel her writing was very good but she enjoyed the memories she captured on paper. After awhile it became the highlight of her day. She worked long hours but when she got home at night she took a shower, put on her nightgown and sat down at the desk in the corner of the living room to write. There wasn't a piece of furniture in her house that didn't have a special story attached to it and she wrote about that too.

Howard had found the desk at a thrift store in Amherst. It was ugly and beat up. When he was done stripping the varnish off, sanding it and putting a new coat of varnish-stain on it, it was a sight to see. Flo' thought it was beautiful. She felt so important having her own desk. Growing up, her family was very poor. They didn't have a lot of extra furniture and she was lucky to have her own bed. She and Howard never made a ton of money but Howard made sure she had everything she needed or wanted.

After a few months Flo' turned her writing to a new genre. She started doing character sketches of some of the townsfolk. There was Mrs. Downey over on Pine Street. She was a hoot if ever there was one! Flo' had known her for over twenty years. She wondered how many folks knew that Mrs. Downey kept all her money hidden in the well in her back yard. Howard used to work on her plumbing from time to time. He discovered the tin box attached to a rope at the bottom of the wishing well in her back yard. He never bothered it. He pulled the rope up once and opened the tin box. He told Flo' there was thousands of dollars in that box. Flo' wondered if Mrs. Downey's kids

knew about the box. Mrs. Downey was in her seventies now. She probably forgot that it was hidden there. Someone was in for a big surprise some day. Then there was old man Ferry. He drove a truck made back in the 40's. He was another old tight wad. Flo' remembered when he died. The family found money in shoe boxes hidden all over the house. Mrs. Ferry never had indoor plumbing until after he was gone. The list of characters in Oxbridge went on and on. Some of the people Flo' wrote about had been dead for years and others were still walking around town thinking that their secrets were safe. Flo' got a big kick out of writing her stories. She added a recipe to each story because each character had a published recipe. Flo's mother always bought the church cookbooks at every church fair. Flo had them all lined up in the kitchen and they got used a lot when Howard was alive.

She reckoned that she met Brenda sometime in November. She knew it was cold out so it must have been November. She remembered Brenda coming in at least once a week. She always talked to Walter, no one else. Flo' thought she looked like a fairy tale princess with those blue eyes and that honey blond hair. Walter introduced Brenda to Flo', but Brenda never came over to have coffee by herself. The first time Flo' had an actual face to face conversation with Brenda was closer to Christmas last year.

At Christmas, every store owner participated in putting up decorations. The town took on the appearance of something out of a fairy tale. Store windows had moving displays. Bright lights were draped all over the Market Square. The street lights were trimmed as well with garlands of silver and gold. The Village Green turned into a festival of lights captivating the attention of every small child in town.

Walter and Flo' decided they would do something different for the holidays. They

went to the nearest Wal-Mart about twenty five miles away. They bought strings of those lights that look like icicles. They strung them from just under the gutter of the front of the store. In addition, they filled the front window of the book store with Christmas elves. Walter had ordered them from a store in Boston and had them shipped to the bookstore. Christmas carols played softly in the background every day to put the customers in the Christmas spirit. Flo' made batch after batch of Christmas cookies. The college kids ate them faster than she could bake them. She even made extra batches and put them in tins for Walter, Maggie, Brenda, Harriet, Ally and her other friends.

She waited for Brenda to come to the bookstore so she could give her the tin of cookies. Brenda usually came into the bookstore at least once a week. Finally she saw Brenda walking towards the front door from outside. The door opened and she just stood there, with the door wide open. It was like she was in a trance. Walter hollered, in his usual nice way, for her to close the door. She stared straight ahead, mute. Then, suddenly, she realized she was letting the cold air in, and shut the door. Brenda walked over to the coffee shop and ordered a mug of coffee. Flo' gave her the tin of cookies and Brenda was astonished.

“Flo', that is so sweet of you! Thank you!” Brenda said. “I hardly know you.”

“I know. But you've been coming in here for weeks now. You're kind of one of the regulars here at the book store.” Flo' said. She wiped off the table and went to get Brenda her coffee.

“That is really nice of you. No one has ever done anything this nice for me before.” she said as she opened the tin. She took one of the cookies out to have with her coffee.

“Oh, shucks sweetie. It’s Christmas! No one loves to bake cookies to give away more than me. If I don’t give them away I’ll eat too many myself! The coffee is on the house today!”

Flo’ quickly disappeared to wait on the next customer. Brenda sat with her coffee and her gift just smiling. Flo’ thought she looked a little lonely. She hoped the cookies would cheer her up and put her in the Christmas spirit. Poor kid, she looked so sad Flo recalled. Life was too short to be so despondent. “A penny for your thoughts” Flo’ thought as she watched Brenda sitting alone with her coffee. Even with her loneliness, Brenda was a special young woman but that loneliness would eat her up as time went on. Flo’ thought Brenda needed a young man in her life. That would liven up her world! Flo’ wasn’t much of a matchmaker but she was sure there had to be a fellow out there for Brenda somewhere.

Chapter Three

It was the historical society that influenced the town manager to make the Market Square blend with the history of the town and honor the town's forefathers. The town didn't want anything too modern looking. If folks wanted all that glass and metal they could just go to Boston or New York. Oxbridge was going to remain a quaint village just as the settlers had envisioned. The final product was quaint indeed.

Walter saw a lot of changes in the town in his lifetime. He watched as the main road through the center of town was paved, widened and, repaved. Sidewalks were expanded on some streets. Streets that didn't have them before had them now. The town was changed into a place where one could walk just about anywhere. Walter was very vocal at the town council meetings and influenced the Interstate highway to go around the town rather than through it. He served on the Town Council, the Historical Society Board as well as the Board of Trustees at the College. There wasn't much that Walter didn't know about the workings of Oxbridge. It was a comfortable, trusting place to live even if the residents were indifferent to each other.

Ally McCall slowed as she entered the intersection. She pulled her car into a parking space behind the Market Square. She locked the car and walked quickly through the parking garage and came out right in front of The Bayside Bookstore and Coffee Shoppe. Walter's store was her favorite spot in Oxbridge. She loved the bookstore from the time she was very young. Her mother brought her there for story hour. Books were where she found the solution to every problem she ever encountered. A good book was better than a new friend in her mind. The bell on the back of the front door announced her presence. It was a friendly invitation to enter the cozy piece of heaven on earth that she

came to love. Walter looked up from the cash register and smiled.

He watched most if the local children grow up. He had a soft spot for Ally. She was the first Asian in town. He remembered when her parents flew to China to get her. She was the most exquisite baby he ever laid eyes on. He wasn't an expert on babies, but he recognized a special quality about Ally. As she grew up, she became more and more enchanting. She started coming to the book store when she was three for the story time he offered every afternoon. Bright and inquisitive, she was a veritable question machine bombarding him with query after query. Walter loved her bright eyes and shy giggle. As she got older, she and Walter grew to be trusting friends. Whenever she had a problem she came to the book store to find a book to help her find resolution. Every book she ever did a book report on was one of Walter's recommendations. She read all of Jane Austen, Tolstoy, Ayn Rand, the Bronte's, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Stephen King, Amy Tan and Anne Lamott to name a few. She was a straight A student with an intense intellect. Walter had faith in her bright future.

For over two years she was the only Asian in town. Then, suddenly, every childless couple found new hope and purpose in their lives. Nine more adoptions took place. The parents and their adopted children formed a group. They all learned to cook Chinese food and they gathered once a month in various homes to exchange ideas and socialize. The children ranged in age from two to eighteen now. There was a national organization that contacted each family and provided guidance and information relevant to their child's origins. Ally was well grounded with a good head on her shoulders. She knew who she was. Walter especially liked that quality. It didn't exist in most of her classmates or many of the college kids who frequented his store.

Here it was the middle of October. Walter looked out the front window of the book store as people were passing by enjoying the crisp fall air when Ally suddenly burst through the front door.

“I hate my life Mr. Howe!” she exclaimed. Her dark eyes sparkled when she talked.

“Why Ally, that’s not like you.” Walter responded. “What’s going on?” This was one of those times when Walter felt almost grandfatherly.

“College just isn’t what I expected. Some of the kids are just downright mean!” she added with a scowl.

“Well, life does have its ups and downs. So, what are you needing today?” he asked. He smiled at her as he came out from behind the counter. He stood there, hands in the pockets of his corduroy pants.

“I don’t know. I think I’m depressed” Ally said dramatically. “I feel like life is getting too complicated. I like most of my classes but I really miss Evan, I don’t know why his parents insisted he go to school in New Hampshire. I know it’s not far away but it might as well be a million miles. I never get to see him. Hey, Mr. Howe, did I see you got some new journals in stock?” She bounced from topic to topic with the exuberance of youth making Walter aware of his own advancing age.

“Yes I do. They are over next to the writing paper on your left.” He pointed her in the direction of the stationary and greeting cards. “I think you will like them. They were inspired by the works of Virginia Woolf.”

“Who, pray tell, is Virginia Woolf?” she asked.

“Only one of the most gifted writers of the last century. I can’t believe you’ve not

read any of her books,” Walter replied as he walked along with her.

“Do you have any of her novels?” Ally asked.

“Yes. Come with me.” Walter led the way to the Great Literature section. “I think that you would really like “*A Room of One’s Own*”.

Ally selected the leather bound, gold trimmed journal and the Virginia Woolf book that Walter had recommended.

“Thanks Mr. Howe!” she said as she turned to leave.

“Ally, come back and tell me how you like it.”

“Okay. See you soon!” she said. She left just as she came, with a bold step and contagious smile. The door banged behind her and the bell attached to the back of the door clanged with her departure.

The door no sooner closed than it swung open again and Walter greeted Maggie Braden. Walter couldn’t remember a time when Maggie wasn’t in his life. She was younger than Walter but, like him, she was a lifelong resident. She was the proud owner of the newly opened craft supply store on the other side of the square. The store had only been open a few months but, according to her, business was booming, and she was probably going to have to hire some help.

“Walter, I think I shall lose my mind!” she declared. Her dark brown, curly hair was windblown. She tried to smooth it down but it would have its own way.

“Now what, Maggie?” Walter asked. “What’s your latest crisis?”

“The crewel kits I ordered didn’t come in, the kids are driving me crazy and I have no idea what to have for dinner.” She sighed with fatigue in her voice and Walter noticed the circles under her eyes. She found that owning a store was a lot of work.

“I think I need a cup of coffee,” she said and walked straight to Flo’s and ordered a latte. She carried it over to Walter’s counter and set it down to cool off a bit.

“Maggie, your life is such a drama. You need to slow down and take time to smell the roses,” Walter said. “Why don’t you take some time for yourself? All work and no play....”

“I know, I know, I know. My life is out of control,” she said quickly. “Don is great but we are always going ninety miles an hour. The kids are so busy with school. The store is doing better than I ever dreamt possible but, there just aren’t enough hours in the day,” she said as she exhaled noisily and sipped her coffee.

“Maggie, have you ever kept a journal? I understand they can be quite therapeutic.”

“I never thought of that. I thought only teenagers kept journals.”

“Au contraire mon cher,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “People have been keeping journals for centuries. Come over here. I just got some new ones in. They’re very nice.”

Walter led her over to the rack where the new journals were. She selected the same leather bound version that Ally just purchased.

“This is really nice. I love the way it feels in my hand. Walter, you always know what I need. What would I do without you?” she asked not waiting for a reply. She smiled as she handled the leather journal.

“You remind me of *Mrs. Dalloway*,” Walter said with a smile.

“Mrs. Dalloway? Are they new in town?” Maggie asked.

“You’ve never heard of *Mrs. Dalloway*? You have led a sheltered life” he said

grinning. “Do you ever go to the movies? Didn’t you see Meryl Streep in “*The Hours*”?”

“Yes. I did see that one but I don’t think I got the connection. So who was Mrs. Dalloway?”

“Did you ever read any of Virginia Woolf?” Walter said and realized that it probably was a foolish question. When would Maggie possibly have time to read?

“No I can’t say that I have. I have heard of her. I think we read one of her poems in high school” Maggie commented.

“You know Maggie; I think you would like her. Come over here.” Walter led her over to his favorite section.

“Here is her book “*Mrs. Dalloway*”. I think you and she have a lot in common”. Walter grabbed the book off the shelf and handed it to her. “Go rent “*The Hours*” and have some relaxation time,” he directed.

“Walter, you are probably the wisest person in town and I know you are the kindest. You are the town treasure, no doubt about it.” She laughed as she paid for the books.

Walter felt the warmth well up his neck. He was embarrassed by that kind of attention. She gathered her purchase, finished her coffee and flew out the door. Walter watched her rush across the street to her own shop.

He and Don, her husband, met when they served on a town committee together. Don was a good man who worked hard as an insurance agent. He was active on the Town Council and every year he helped organize the Labor Day Parade. Walter admired him a lot. Don lost his sister last year to breast cancer when she was only 39, his father to lung cancer and his mother to a heart attack all in the same year. Don was a survivor.

The sun was going down and Walter watched as the afternoon crept away. This was his favorite time of the day. He looked around and noticed a few customers lingering in the store. A tall thin man was picking out a fishing magazine, a mother with two small children was waiting for the nine year old to make a selection as the five year old impatiently played at the kids Lego table set in the corner. Over by the journals Walter spotted an older, attractive lady carefully picking up the leather journals, gently running her hands across the covers. She stared at the book in her hand. She obviously had something on her mind. Walter thought he knew everyone in town but she didn't look familiar. He assumed she was probably one of the new hires at the university and he guessed correctly.

Corrine Kellogg approached the sales counter. She had shoulder length light brown hair that showed just a hint of silver around the temples. She wore tortoise shell glasses giving her an attractive intellectual look. She was dressed in a beige trench coat belted snugly around her waist. She smiled at him; a warm inviting smile that rattled Walter. It had been a long time since Walter was rattled by any woman but he found himself with a pleasant warm feeling in his chest.

"I noticed that you are featuring Virginia Woolf. She's one of my favorites but people don't seem to read her anymore," she said in a tone that implied a need for more conversation.

"I understand," he said. "I guess that's why I decided to do my window display. I thought it might motivate the college crowd to read something of substance. So far, this has been a banner day for Virginia Woolf. This is the fourth volume I have sold today. Do you have a special favorite?" he asked. Walter liked her and he wanted to extend the

conversation for as long as possible.

“My favorite is *“To the Lighthouse”*. I seem to have loaned my copy and never got it back.” She extended her hand and said, “My name is Corrine Kellogg. I teach literature at the university. I’m new this year,” she said as she looked directly into his eyes and he shifted his feet, gazing down, uncomfortable with the eye contact.

“I thought you might be new in town,” Walter said as he accepted her hand. “I am Walter Howe, owner of this store as you probably surmised.” He didn’t mean to sound quite so formal.

“Are you a native?” Corrine asked knowing what his answer would be.

“Yes, I grew up in Oxbridge as did my parents,” Walter explained. “And you? Where do you call home?” It had been awhile since Walter had exchanged personal information with anyone and it felt strange.

“I grew up in Vermont, almost in Canada. My parents moved to Pittsfield when I was ten. So I am a native New Englander but not from Oxbridge. I’ve taught mostly at large schools in Connecticut and Rhode Island. The position came open at Stanton and I was ready for a change. Oxbridge is just perfect. I love being so close to the ocean.” Her eyes twinkled when she spoke and her voice was mesmerizing. Walter felt drawn to her and found that even more peculiar. She appeared to be sincere in her feelings about the town and Walter found himself caring about whether she would stay in town; this all in a ten minute conversation.

“It’s a nice town and the people are friendly enough.” she paused.

“Well, as friendly as New Englanders can be, all things considered. I think that’s what you were trying to say so politely,” Walter remarked and smiled. He could feel a

bead of perspiration forming on his upper lip. His hands suddenly got clammy so he stuffed them in his pockets.

She laughed, "I know what you mean. Everyone smiles at me but no one gets too close. I guess that's the heritage."

She sounded a little lonely Walter thought.

"I know exactly what you mean. If you aren't sixth generation they act like you are an alien. For the most part they are good people. I hope that you stay here long enough to get to know them." Walter said feeling affection for her he hadn't anticipated.

"I have no plans to move again for a long time. Packing and unpacking are not my favorite activities. I fell in love with the town when I interviewed for the position. I have no intentions of leaving. I hope to retire here." she explained with confidence.

Walter felt a sense of pleasurable relief. He caught himself wondering how many years she had before retirement. He was a bit taken aback by his own feelings, strange as they were. She looked to be close to his age and he liked the naturalness of her. No heavy makeup covering those laugh lines. Here is a woman who is happy in her own skin....I like that, he thought. They chatted for awhile and, for the first time in more than twenty years, he felt a strange flutter in his heart. He hoped she would come back soon. Walter smiled and counted out her change.

Including the journal and copy of "*A Writers Diary*" he sold to Mrs. Miller that made eight Virginia Woolf books in a single day. One never knew what each day would bring. He carefully counted the money in the cash register and put it in the bank bag. He would take it home with him and prepare the bank deposit at his kitchen table. The sun was gone and it was getting cold outside. He put on his topcoat, hung the "closed" sign in

the door, locked the door and headed for home. Flo' had already closed the coffee shop.

Walter loved Market Square. It began with ten stores and over the years a bakery, a shoe store, a fabric store, a shoe repair shop, appliance store, two beauty salons, one old-fashioned barber shop, a candy store, a card shop, a craft store, men's clothing shop, the hardware store, and one theater that offered two films at a time were added.

Everything the town could possibly need was right at their finger tips. It was the completeness of the town that stifled some folks, especially Brenda.

Chapter Four

The original Bayside Book Store was located on Oak Street. Walter Howe was the second owner of the store. Ken Putnam was the original owner. He opened the store in 1943, and the business survived and provided a good living to Ken and his family until Ken died in 1989. His wife didn't have a head for business and decided to sell after Ken died. Their children were grown and she thought retirement sounded preferable to running a business. She never cared much about the book store.

Walter once married and now divorced, wanted to own his own business. After his divorce this seemed like a perfect choice. He was bored with his job as the reference librarian at the college. He loved to read and enjoyed helping people find the books he thought best for each customer based on their current life crisis or dilemma. Over the years he became an expert judge of character and his observations about the townsfolk could have filled volumes. As he aged he became less judgmental and watched, with a sense of humor and twinkling eyes, the trials and tribulations of the folks he came to know and love. Walter didn't have a mean or malicious bone in his body. He loved them all from the disgruntled middle aged men to the slightly eccentric old ladies. He admired the spirit and youthful energy of the college students. They were so dramatic, amazingly entertaining, and interesting in a peculiar way. He wasn't wealthy by any stretch of the imagination but the book store was a good investment and it kept him on the political fringe in town.

Walter had been skinny as a rail as a kid but over the years he filled out and he wore the extra weight well and thought it gave him character. At least that's what he told

himself. He wasn't the kind of man who spent a lot of time looking in the mirror. His hair turned silver at the temples and it blended with the light brown color that adorned the rest of his head. He had a perpetual windblown look about him. He got just a tiny bit grayer as each year passed. He didn't mind the gray. He comforted himself by telling himself at least he wasn't going bald. His hair was still thick, thanks to good genes, he told himself. Last year he grew a beard. He thought he looked more distinguished with facial hair and his customers thought so as well. After a year of facial hair he went back to shaving. He couldn't stand the itchy feeling it gave him. He did splurge on a new pair of wire framed glasses that the optician told him made him look intellectual and up to date. His smile was crooked and his teeth were a little uneven. His most exceptional feature was his blue, blue eyes. They were incredibly blue. In his younger days the ladies, Sheila specifically, told him his eyes were his best feature. They were the same shade of blue as the sky on a sunny day, a clear blue like the blue on English Bone china. On top of that he had an interesting twinkle in his eye that sometimes indicated amusement on his part and other times meant he truly loved his life and whoever he was conversing with in a special way. Whatever that twinkle was, it endeared him to the townsfolk.

He got over missing being married. At least he thought he had until Corrine walked in to his life. He and Sheila were married for twelve years. They met at a coffee shop when Walter was in graduate school at Boston College. He was somewhat sad they never had children but he wasn't sure he would have been a very good father. He liked things neat. He liked neat corners and tidy cupboards. It drove Sheila crazy and she kidded him about his anal retentive personality. After the divorce, she moved away. She didn't care about the furniture they purchased during the marriage, she just wanted out.

She was bored to tears with Oxbridge. She moved to New York and never looked back even though she still loved Walter in special way. He was a good man but she just couldn't abide the boredom of small town life.

She tried very hard to live in the town because of her love for Walter. He was a native son, she a newcomer since she didn't grow up in Oxbridge or even nearby. Walter loved the oddities associated with the local attitudes. They saw no reason to travel, no reason to spend money on foolishness, and he relished thrift as was the New England way. As far as the locals were concerned, it just didn't get any better than life in Oxbridge. Sheila could never understand that part of the New England thought process. It was a source of constant friction between her and Walter. She fought a valiant fight but finally gave up. She loved Walter dearly, but life in Oxbridge was suffocating her, and she knew she couldn't survive there. She dated some but never found anyone in New York as kind and sweet as Walter. She missed him from time to time but her work was challenging and occupied all of her waking hours and then some. She loved the law and was very good at it. Oxbridge didn't have enough juicy legal cases to keep her interest and in New York each new opened file offered a challenge to her sharp legal mind. She graduated in the top ten percent of her law school class and passed the bar with flying colors. She dreamt of being another Clarence Darrow, but reality set in and she knew it would just never happen in Oxbridge. After she moved to New York, she was fortunate enough to get hired by the third largest, most prestigious firm in the city. She made partner after two years, and was happy with her life. Her position opened the doors to the right social circles. Walter would occasionally see her name in the New York Times online version and smile with pride. He missed her too but he knew that he would never

make it in the city. He was all about life in small town and that would never change. They exchanged Christmas cards each year with fond good wishes to each other and ironically, they both were sincere in their messages.

He had his store. He had a nice house. It was small but comfortable. He had his dogs, his favorite things and his favorite books to read. He kind of inherited the dogs. They belonged to Mrs. Goodrich. She died suddenly of a massive stroke and her granddaughter had no idea of what to do with the dogs. Walter always thought about getting a pet. He just never found the time to find one. When Mrs. Goodrich's granddaughter asked Walter who might like to have them, before he knew it he offered to take them. It turned out to be a good decision on his part. The dogs were both five now and he loved coming home to their wagging tails and energetic greeting. They provided dependable friendship and were truly his best friends. A good term to describe Walter was settled. His life was scheduled and devoid of surprises. He gave up on adventure and excitement many years earlier and resolved himself to comfort and predictability.

His house was only a few blocks from the store. He walked to work most days. Even in the winter it was an enjoyable stroll. His house still had the wide pine floors, the lathe and plaster walls and original fire place that were typical East Coast construction. It was a comfortable home in a quiet, unassuming way. Now that he was approaching his twilight years he had no need to impress anyone but himself. He dated some but no one could ever replace Sheila. He still got gloomy when he thought of the years they spent together. The demise of their marriage had left a gaping hole in his life. The patrons of the bookstore filled some of the gap and were an endless source of friendships that were near and dear to his heart.

Digby and Doolee would be eagerly awaiting his arrival home every evening, their helicopter tails wagging furiously for him the minute he opened the front door. It was nice to be welcomed with such enthusiasm. He unlocked the front door. Digby and Doolee slid across the wood floors piling up the throw rugs. They leaped to greet him, tails wagging in sincere appreciation of his arrival.

“I suppose you want to go for a walk.” Walter said. Even though it was dark Walter never failed to walk his dogs. They sat excitedly waiting for Walter to retrieve their leashes. He put the tethers on the wiggling dogs and out the door they went eager to get to the park. Walter could hardly keep up with them. It was all he could do to keep them on the path. He turned the corner and made it to the park as the sun was setting. Darkness was upon them. The path was lit by the streetlights and the moon. The dogs enthusiastically greeted every person they met by jumping up on them. Walter looked up and to his surprise he saw Corrine coming down the path with a small dog.

“Hello!” he greeted. “And who is your friend?”

He couldn’t believe they met again.

“This is Owen, the best friend a girl could have. I’m not sure exactly what breed he is because he came from the pound. The people at the pound told me he is a half and half dog. I have no idea of what the halves are but it was love at first sight for him and me. I think he has some beagle in him but it’s really hard to tell. He was just so cute and friendly when I saw him. I think maybe he adopted me instead of the other way around. And who are these two guys?” Corrine asked leaning down to give the dogs a pat on their heads.

“This is Digby and this is Doolee. I sort of inherited them so to speak. They keep

me busy when I'm not at work. I know what you mean when you say best friend. I don't know what I would do without them," Walter explained. The dogs lay at his feet waiting for the walk to continue.

"This is a lovely park!" Corrine noted. "I live just around the corner and it is so handy. Owen just loves it. "

"Well, we are practically neighbors. I live just around the corner on Vine Street. I can't believe we've never run into each other before".

"I walk Owen at odd times, no regular routine. This summer I was so busy getting settled that sometimes it would be quite late when I finally had time to go out." she said.

They walked together for a short distance and then she stopped to turn down Elm Street. "Well, it's so nice to run into you. Hope to see you again soon." Walter said. She waved as she walked away.

Walter slowly continued his walk. He waved back to her as she went around the corner and turned right. *Hmm*, he thought. *She must have bought the old Kellam place.* Walter returned to his home smiling like a Cheshire cat. As boring as Oxbridge was, every now and then something happened to take him by surprise. He had a good feeling about Oxbridge's newest citizen. The town needed a classy lady like Corrine Kellogg. Maybe he needed a classy lady like Corrine Kellogg. He was curious to see what reaction the townsfolk would have to someone of her intellect and brains. The college had its fair share of intellects. Most of them were so boring they even made their pets fall asleep. Corrine could stir the pot a little, Walter was sure of that.

A few days later Walter looked up from a display he was arranging next to the travel section and saw Corrine open the front door. He caught her eye and smiled, happy

to see her again.

“Hello, Corrine! How is Owen?” he asked. He hoped he didn’t seem too eager.

“Owen is just great. We took a long walk this morning. This is just such a fabulous day. Owen just loves walking. He could probably go five miles if I had that much energy. How are Digby and Doolee?” Corrine chatted on. She felt a warm sensation in her chest. She felt as if she and Walter had known each other all of their lives. He was a comfortable person to be with, she mused. There was something about him that felt perfect to her, like a pair of comfortable old shoes. The feeling came as a surprise to her; she had given up on meeting Mr. Right many years before.

She and Walter exchanged additional pleasantries as she headed for the coffee shop. Flo looked up and walked over to take her order.

“Hi, my name is Flo. I don’t think we’ve met. I thought I knew just about everyone in this town,” Flo said as she straightened the sugar packets on the counter.

“What’ll you have?”

“I am Corrine Kellogg. I teach literature at the college. I moved in to the Kellam house this summer. Rumor has it that you make a coffee cake that is to die for.” Corrine said smiling at Flo. It helped to mention which house she lived in to everyone she met. She found it gave the locals a point of reference, and they seemed a little bit friendlier knowing that she was the new caretaker of one of the town’s oldest homes.

“So I’m told. I’ll fetch you a slice and you can be the judge,” Flo said as she quickly fled to the kitchen to get the coffee and cake.

Flo delivered the order and sat down across from Corrine. It took but a few minutes to start their new friendship. Corrine drank her coffee and wolfed down the cake

noting to Flo that it is indeed the best coffee cake she had ever had. Corrine said goodbye to Flo and to Walter. She headed out the front door as Brenda came in the front door. She smiled at Brenda as they passed in the doorway and waved to Walter from outside the front window.

Walter found Brenda interesting from the first moment she graced the doorstep of the store. She was quiet. She possessed a childlike innocence unusual for someone over thirty. Her honey blond hair fell down past the middle of her back. If she had been dressed in a white blouse and blue pinafore she would have looked like Alice in Wonderland. She had beautiful light blue eyes and clear, porcelain skin. She wore little makeup. She didn't need it to begin with. Walter thought delicate would be the best word to describe her. She was delicate.

Brenda quietly browsed through the magazines and found herself staring at the journals next to the Virginia Woolf display. Walter watched from the cash register and offered his assistance. He walked over to where she was standing and introduced himself. Brenda introduced herself and they chatted about Virginia Woolf for a few minutes. Walter provided the background on her life and Brenda was noticeably intrigued. She proceeded to buy a journal and two of the novels on the display rack. She kept her head down so she wouldn't have to make eye contact. She was incredibly reserved and detached. Walter found it charming for reasons he didn't understand. She impressed him as being an authentically nice person, he would later recall. She began coming to the store at least once a week. She and Walter became friends of a sort. She remained detached but it didn't detract from her intelligence. She remained shy and rather distant but she always had a topic to question Walter about and he enjoyed the conversation even

though it was a strain at times to keep a rapport going with her.

She didn't live far away. Walter realized he didn't know much about her family. He was familiar with her mother since she worked at the bank where Walter did his banking. They attended the same church. Walter recalled she sat in the third pew back on the west side of the church. He knew who she was but he couldn't say he really knew Ruth or the family other than to say hello when they met.

When Corrine decided to start the book club, he encouraged Brenda to join. He was glad she took his advice. She didn't contribute much in the way of conversation but she never missed a meeting. Walter found Brenda somewhat of a riddle. He instinctively knew her innocent appearance guarded a dark side. There was something about her eyes that gave it away. Behind the innocence of her blue eyes lay a secret, a well guarded secret. Walter saw sadness in her eyes that cast a shadow over her countenance. There she stood looking as innocent as a new born baby yet behind her eyes was an indescribable darkness lurking. She had a difficult time making eye contact with anyone and it made Walter suspicious she was hiding something very unpleasant. He watched over her secretly hoping he could make her feel safe in the world but knowing deep inside himself it wasn't within his power to do so.

Chapter Five

The group started meeting in October and Walter watched each week as the ladies chatted. Corrine presented her mini-lectures on Virginia Woolf. The first night was awkward as initial meetings usually are but it didn't take the ladies long to break the ice and chip away at the layers of protection each had covering their idiosyncrasies and veiled ambitions. The only exception was Brenda. She consistently held back as if tentatively testing the waters but afraid to jump in. Walter refrained from interjecting his own thoughts. He sat near the cash register taking notes. He was drawn to Corrine. Her voice held such magic for him and he was drawn to it like moths to a flame.

In early December, he was ready to step up to the plate and ask her out when she beat him to it. He was at home on a Saturday evening when the phone rang. He had just gotten home from the bookstore and was staring at the refrigerator wondering what he should have for dinner when the phone rang.

"Walter?" she asked hesitantly. "Hi! I was feeling very domestic today and made a huge pot of beef stew. I wondered if you would like to come over and join me for dinner?" she asked. He didn't need to ask who was on the other end of the phone, he knew immediately. He was caught totally off guard, she must have been reading my mind, he thought.

"Well, I must say that's the best offer I have had all day. Can I bring anything?" he asked. His heart beat quickened.

"No, I have everything ready" she said.

"Give me about an hour and I'll be there," he said. He took a deep breath. It had been more years than he cared to remember since he had a date with anyone.

He rushed upstairs to take a shower thinking how ironic it was that she called. They had been out for coffee several times and a quick sandwich on occasion but that was the extent of their relationship. Oh, they walked the dogs together when they happened to run into each other at the park.

Walter felt like a teenager on his first date. He quickly showered and put on his dark green corduroy slacks, a blue striped shirt and his dark blue v-neck sweater. He splashed some aftershave on and hoped he hadn't overdone it. He took a final look in the mirror as he left. He was aiming to look dashing. Yes, dashing was the word to describe him this evening. With his grey temples and the dark blue sweater, he looked dashing! He arrived at her doorstep at 7:15 sharp. He brought a bottle of wine and handed it to her. She greeted him with a smile. She was dressed in a deep brown and tangerine paisley print kimono. It was floor length and had a rust sash around the waist. Her hair was piled on top of her head in loose curls and Walter felt his pulse quicken. He smiled in return hoping his hands weren't shaking as he handed her the bottle of wine.

"Come in, come in!" she said. "It's cold out there! Did you walk over?"

"Yes, I love to walk in the winter. It gets my blood moving," he said.

Unexpectedly, he was at a loss for words and he found himself stammering. She looked incredible! It was at that very moment when he knew he was in love with her. The rest of the evening seemed like a blur. He recalled her pouring the wine, spooning out the stew, offering him fresh Italian bread and real butter. They went into the living room for coffee and sorbet. Like Cinderella, he heard the clock strike twelve. He thought he should leave but his feet wouldn't move, couldn't move. The time flew by as they told each other their life history, talked about philosophy, life, death, travels, and friends. As they

stood at the front door gazing into each other's eyes he impulsively pulled her to him and kissed her, soft small kisses at first and then passionately. Corrine looked up at him. Their eyes were riveted on each other. She pulled him close to her and took his hand in hers. She gently pulled him up the staircase. They paused before they went into her bedroom. He wondered if she had planned this when she invited him to dinner. She wondered if he had this on his mind as long as she had. Walter drew her to him and kissed her again. She kicked the door shut with her foot. She reached behind him and, using the light switch, dimmed the lights. Walter held her face in his hands and kissed her. Corrine melted into him and with passion she led him to the bed. Their bodies moved together, their passions taking control as the warmth of their souls united. It had been a long time for each of them but their bodies remembered without error and their friendship became a deep love that erupted within them. Each knew that this was a deciding moment in their lives and one they would remember forever. They lay in bed, Corrine's head resting on Walter's shoulder. She had never been this happy in her life. They laughed and touched and caressed each other paying no attention to the rising sun.

At six am he walked briskly to his house, whistling all the way. After that night they spent every spare hour together. They were very discrete about their relationship at first. After a few weeks they decided the whole town probably knew anyway so they held hands in public, ate in the local restaurants and threw caution to the wind and even kissed in public. It was just a peck on the cheek but, a kiss nevertheless. Walter's world was turned upside down. He would look in the mirror every morning and not recognize the man who stared back at him. He saw a smile that went from ear to ear. He felt ten years younger and it felt so, so good.

He found himself writing in his journal almost every day. Some days he felt like a love struck teenager. Other days he felt like a learned philosopher. It was becoming a ritual for him. The words came easier, his emotions less difficult to describe and, his thoughts gained clarity and direction. The winter passed quickly. In March he bought a second journal. He locked the first one away in a safe place. He wanted to wait one year before he reread his words.

In early April, Brenda came into the bookstore. She looked distraught. “Hello Brenda, how are you this lovely spring day?” Walter asked trying to be cheerful.

“Fine,” she said curtly. There was a strange sadness mixed with anger to her voice. Her reply was crisp and cutting. This was an unfamiliar side of her, Walter noted.

“Are you alright?” he said not wanting to seem intrusive.

“Yes,” she said offering no additional information. She quickly walked over to the poetry section and started pulling books off the shelf. Her eyes were red and puffy and it was obvious that she’d been crying. Walter decided not to pry since she was so abrupt when he attempted conversation. She spent over an hour looking at poetry books and ended up buying an anthology of modern poets. By the time she approached the cash register her mood had changed. She was smiling her usual soft smile. She appeared to have pulled herself together. She made some small talk and walked out. How odd, Walter thought. He hoped she was okay. He heard a rumor she and Dan Johnson were dating. He thought it a good match. Dan was a nice young man. Walter suspected that Brenda needed someone in her life. He recalled a conversation he had with Brenda back in January. She hinted at her loneliness, just a hint. Brenda was very careful not to reveal much.

The book club was due to meet at their usual time. Brenda arrived over an hour early. She sat in the overstuffed chair drinking her coffee. There were no other customers so Walter walked over and sat in the chair next to her. She smiled as he sat down.

“So, what brings you in so early?” he asked. He got comfortable in the chair and Flo’ brought him a mug of hot coffee.

“Oh, I just wanted to get out of the house. It’s a nice evening. I love coming to your store.” she said. Her voice was so soft and quiet when she spoke, it was almost a whisper.

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment. Tell me about yourself Brenda. I feel like we have known each other a long time but we don’t really know each other. Did you grow up in Oxbridge?” Walter asked.

She looked up slowly. Hesitantly at first, she then proceeded to tell him her whole life story. She spoke affectionately about her sister and her ex-husband. She spoke of her high school days and meeting her ex-husband. She told him how much she loved living in New Mexico. It was more what she didn’t talk about that Walter found most interesting as he reflected back on this meeting. What she never talked about was her mother or her father.

Walter couldn’t exactly put his finger on what struck him as odd about her life story but he had a distinct sense of her personal struggle through the years. There was a sadness regarding the failure of her marriage. Walter said he understood since his own marriage hadn’t worked out well. Then, as quickly as she started talking, she stopped. She put her head down and started reading the book she brought with her. A wall went up around her, an impenetrable wall and he knew the conversation was over.

He smiled at her and let her know that she had made some very special friends in Corrine and Maggie. Ally and Harriet were also very nice people. He knew all of them well and for a long time. He took his coffee mug and walked back to the cash register. He knew the others would arrive for the group discussion very soon.

That night, after the book club meeting ended, he mentioned the conversation to Corrine. She said that Brenda was working through some difficulties. That was all she would offer on the subject. Walter let it drop. Brenda usually gave Walter a shy smile and a friendly nod of her head. That was about the extent of his relationship with her. They had an occasional conversation about a topic of Brenda's choosing. Brenda had built an impenetrable wall of protection for herself and she wasn't about to let anyone it, especially Walter.

Chapter Six

Winter turned to spring, to new beginnings. The crocuses gently broke through the ground announcing the arrival of warmer days. They were followed by daffodils, irises, tulips and other cheerful, colorful flowers covering the yards of the residents. April was a happy month, a month of newness as the yards turned green, the vestiges of snow melted making way for the greenness of summer. Walter and Corrine continued to nurture their romance enjoying each other's company, afraid to think too far ahead. They went on picnics, long walks with the dogs, drives along the coast and up through Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire passing through small town after small town. Corrine took him to her home town, Banbury, in Vermont where they spent hours discussing the idiosyncrasies of the local folks. Every town had its own personality. Corrine shared every eccentric distinction of her home town with him and they compared notes. In reality Banbury wasn't very different from Oxbridge in its complexion and components. They parked his car and walked all around Banbury. They strolled down the street where she lived as a child and she took him back to her roots, her beginnings. She described each of the homes and their occupants. She had a humorous comment about each of the residents who were now long since deceased. They laughed together as they realized Banbury and Oxbridge were more alike than they were different. Each town had their characters. The personalities were the same, just the names were different. It was in Banbury when Walter decided he wanted her to marry him. He wasn't brave enough to ask the big question yet but he knew he wanted her in his life permanently. Neither one of them uttered those three words "I love you", not even in the heat of passion but they knew the depth of each other's feelings. Walter wanted the marriage proposal to be very

special. He waited a long, long time for her to come along; a lifetime. When they were in Banbury he started planning. He thought he should wait until Christmas. That would be the best time. He remembered his father proposed to his mother on Christmas and that made it even more fitting.

It was early in June when Walter stood in his backyard stretching his arms and yawning. He loved the morning. He breathed in the freshness of the early hours. It invigorated him, and renewed his soul. He listened for the birds and focused his mind on the noise they made, their chirping as they scouted the yard for worms. He took a deep breath and briefly thought of the day ahead of him. It was twenty two years ago that month when he bought the bookstore. In over twenty years he missed a day of work. In most years he never took a vacation. He had a nice house on a nice street in a nice town. He didn't drink to excess. He went to church regularly, played golf occasionally, went fishing a few times each year and always came straight home from work. He was very much a creature of habit. Everything in his life was so tidy and neat, so predictable. He stood on the flagstone patio looking at the huge elm tree that grew in the east corner of the yard. It had been there for as long as he could remember. It seemed like it was just a short time ago when he moved into this house after his parents' deaths.

Not much ever changed in this town, he thought for the millionth time. Walter gazed at the cherry trees and the shrubs around the perimeter of the back yard. It was nice but he remembered the flower beds that bordered the yard. His mother planted flowers every summer when he was a kid. She worked so hard on them. His father turned the soil and together they raked the ground preparing it to be planted. Every year they added peat moss and topsoil. They carefully lay out on paper what they wanted to plant and

where. His mother had definite ideas about what went where. She plotted the whole garden out on graph paper. He supposed it was the source of his neatness and organization. She knew where each bulb and bedding plant was to be located based on height, color, growing season. Each year she would add a new bulb, rip out something that wasn't working just right and after twenty plus years, it was perfection. He loved the way she planned for something to be blooming all the time. She was a planner, she was. He had pictures of the garden tucked away in a drawer somewhere upstairs in the house.

When he and Sheila moved into the house the garden went away and was replaced by low maintenance shrubs. The shrubs bordering the fence were okay. They were well groomed and looked nice but lacked the color and spirit of his mother's garden. He thought about having the garden club come replant it for him but he didn't have the faintest idea of how to maintain so many flowers.

Walter looked across the yard and memories of his childhood, playing on a warm summer day, flooded his mind. He was transported back in time and he could envision himself and his brother climbing the elm tree, shimmying up the side and scaring his mother half to death.

"Get down from there" she would holler as she wiped her hands on her apron.

His father and mother would do the dishes together and then sit on the glider on the patio watching them play each night during the summer. Half the neighborhood played in their yard on most days. His mother made the best chocolate chip cookies in town and she was very generous with them. Sometimes they would cajole Dad into playing softball with them. He would be the pitcher. Their yard was bigger than anyone else's and as long as the kids stayed out of the flowers his parents didn't care. Those were

some good times. He shook his head as he remembered with a smile on his face.

After being married for so many years, his mother and father were able to finish each other's sentences. They knew what the other one was thinking. His thoughts quickly jumped to Corrine. He didn't have to wonder if she was the one who would finally complete his life and his sentences. He knew she was and it comforted him.

He could almost smell his mother's coffee brewing, the sausage frying and the toast ready to pop up in the toaster. Walter loved the smell of breakfast better than any other meal. Breakfast was a renewing meal and he loved the way the smells of breakfast filled every crevice of the house. The aroma swirled around him and wrapped his body in the newness of each day. Most mornings he just came down to the breakfast table, read the paper, drank his juice and coffee and went off to work. It was a dull, drab existence, he thought. Suddenly, he missed the smell of breakfast.

Sheila hadn't been much on cooking and so he had gotten into the habit of making the coffee every morning. When Sheila left his routine didn't change. One day she was there living in the house and then she wasn't. He knew when they moved into the house she wouldn't stay forever. He wasn't at all surprised when she asked for a divorce since he had been anticipating it for so long. He didn't argue. He knew she wasn't happy in Oxbridge but he couldn't change. He knew where he belonged and she didn't.

He missed his father at times. They'd been close. He wasn't prepared for the loss of his parents at such an early age. When his father planned his retirement Walter assumed they would be around for at least another twenty years. Some of his fondest memories were of the good times he experienced in this house with his parents and his brother. Suddenly he felt choked up. He inhaled deeply and then released the air slowly.

He recalled the time his grandfather took him and his brother to the lake on a warm summer day. Gramps was always up early and came by at 7:00 am to pick them up. Usually they slept until nine during the summer but, not when they were going fishing. Walter's mother packed a picnic lunch for them. They were so excited they could hardly stand it. Gramps had a little fishing boat. It was just big enough for the three of them. He and his brother sang in the car as his grandfather drove down the street with the boat in tow. His parents thought they wouldn't be home until late afternoon so it was somewhat of a surprise when they returned at little after one in the afternoon. Both boys were soaked to the skin but, inside a cooler in the back of the car was the biggest fish she had ever seen. He and his brother leaped out of the car together. They were both talking a mile a minute and at the same time. Finally, the conversation slowed and his grandpa told the story of how the fish was caught and why both kids were so wet. As Gramps told it, Walter threw in his line with the worm firmly secured on the hook. Within seconds, the fish took the bite and for the next twenty minutes Grandpa helped him reel it in. In the process both kids fell in the water as they tried to pull the fish in. Grandpa pulled them and the fish out. Every year, they reminisced about that damn fish and they all laughed until tears well up in their eyes at the thought of them both going overboard and the fight with the fish. They loved their Grandpa and his death left a void in their lives. It was Walter's first experience with death of a loved one. For a child death is hard to understand. Suddenly, someone they loved dearly was no longer around. Walter didn't cry when his grandfather passed away but his loss was like a deep wound that wouldn't heal. That he did remember, even now.

His dad died suddenly one summer. He had a massive coronary when he was just

63. He hadn't planned on his wife, Evelyn, dying when she did, six months earlier. He was looking forward to enjoying his retirement and having free time to putter around the yard. He had carpentry work awaiting him. While Evelyn was sick he put the work aside off so he could be by her side. He devoted every waking hour to her comfort until she drew her last breath. Walter got a little teary every time he thought about it. He missed his parents.

Walter's mother, Evelyn, hadn't worked since she was nineteen. She had worked in a department store after high school. Shortly after she married his father she got pregnant. Walter's brother, Richard, was the oldest. Walter came along three years later. He learned to hold his own at an early age since Richard teased him unmercifully. Richard joined the Army two years before Walter graduated from high school. Walter idolized his older brother. When Richard was killed in a freak helicopter accident, a part of Walter died right along with him. In just a few short years Walter found himself with no family at all other than a few aunts and uncles he hardly knew. He supposed he could be considered an orphan except he was too old to use that descriptor. But the fact remained that he truly had no immediate family. He had adjusted to his lot in life.

Walter took a deep breath. He watched the sun as it rose, glowing, illuminating the day. The sky was a beautiful orange, pink color along the horizon. It was magnificent. He realized he should appreciate nature more often. Life was good. He knew that. He didn't have a lot left to prove to the world. He supposed he was approaching those twilight years they talked about in magazines like AARP. He wasn't exactly sure what it meant but he knew Corrine coming into his life made him think more about what he wanted for the next few decades. Life was too short. He was ready to make a change and

it would be with Corrine, if she would have him.

On an average day he had a set routine. He got up, put on his robe and slippers, descended the stairs and looked out at the back yard. He ate his breakfast, went upstairs to shower and shave. He left his home at exactly 7:45 so that he would be at the store at precisely 8:00 am. His routine never varied. But, today was different. He decided he was tired of the same old grind and, for some reason he didn't comprehend, he wanted things to change. It was time to break the routine. His sixth sense told him he was in a deep rut. He wasn't sure how he would change things but he knew that the time had arrived to mix it up a little. It was time he enjoyed life. Walter always put the store first. He had been having some strange dreams lately. He never remembered them, just the sensation he had upon waking each day. The dreams were different than what he was accustomed to having. He didn't put much stock in dream analysis but his instincts told him a new era in his life was waiting just over the horizon.

He made a decision...he was taking the day off! That's it! He hadn't taken a single day off just for the heck of it ever that he could recall! Maybe he and Corrine could go to a movie in the middle of the afternoon. What a novel idea! Suddenly, he felt exhilarated! He hadn't felt this energized in years! Why there was no end to the list of opportunities that were open to him! Why hadn't he thought of this before?

Walter took another deep breath and started to turn back in to the house. He paused and looked to his right. Standing next to the patio was a half whisky barrel. At one time it contained marigolds. It was Sheila's only effort at caring for something that bloomed. Walter glanced over his shoulder. He wasn't sure why. It's not like any of his neighbors would be looking over the fence at this hour. He grinned with delight as he

loosened the belt of his robe. He felt eighteen again and on the verge of vandalizing the school yard. He stared for a few minutes at the barrel and smiled. He found the gape in his pajamas and opened it. Standing strong, shoulders back, legs spread apart; Walter proceeded to pee in the barrel. He had no idea of what came over him but he found a new, glorious freedom in peeing in that barrel. It was a very liberating, defiant behavior. He was taken aback at the sense of power and control he unexpectedly felt after he relieved himself. *This is incredible!* he thought. *Absolutely incredible!* A grin appeared on his face. He smiled from ear to ear. What a brilliant sense of freedom!

Walter walked into the kitchen with the smirk still stuck on his face. He called Corrine and asked her to meet him at Flo's at 9:30. He then called Flo and asked her if she could watch the store for a day. He and Corrine met at the store. They had hot coffee and Flo's coffee cake. After that, they walked all around Market Square and made their way to the Village Green. It felt good to walk. Walter grabbed her hand as they headed towards the pier. They walked for over an hour. They strolled up and down the piers looking at the boats moored in the harbor. They read the names of the sailboats laughing as they contemplated the inspiration for naming a boat King Louie or Anita or Nancy Three. They were as comfortable with each other as a couple who had been married for thirty years.

For the life of her, Corrine couldn't figure out what came over Walter but she wasn't complaining. They stopped at a few of the shops after looking at the boats and headed for the movie theater. Corrine was flabbergasted. She couldn't even remember what movie they saw. *Who was this man sitting next to her,* she wondered? After the movie they went to the sandwich shop and had a late lunch followed by an ice cream

cone. Whatever came over Walter it was okay with her! She never thought Walter had a spontaneous bone in his body. What a pleasant surprise!

From that day on, every morning Walter got up, put on his robe and slippers and headed for the patio. He didn't even let the cold weather deter him. He spent fifteen minutes every morning just staring at the back yard, taking deep breaths and peeing in the whisky barrel. Every morning he relished the sense of freedom he felt relieving himself outside.

He bought a new patio set. He found he liked journaling in the early hours of the day. The journal became a form of meditation. He did it religiously every morning. He found himself writing about all kinds of spiritual issues, love, life and the pursuit of happiness. He was a changed man! He couldn't believe how the words just flowed from his pen. He filled page after page. He purchased a third and then a fourth journal. He bought a special one just for poetry. Who ever thought he could write poetry? It was somewhat juvenile at first and then he discovered that he could use an endless stream of adjectives to describe his feelings. He played around with style and meter. He had no intention of ever showing it to anyone but he liked putting the words together, it made him happy. He wrote about the elm trees and his mothers flowers. He wrote about his childhood and some of the more interesting, colorful characters in town. He wrote about the fishing history of Oxbridge.

He bought a laptop computer and started writing articles for the local paper about the town's history. Dan Johnson asked him to write a weekly column for the newspaper. Corrine was especially pleased that he was a contributing journalist. She told him he had a nice writing style and encouraged him to write more. She chided him about his journals

but he wasn't about to share them with anyone, not even her. He had a special drawer in his desk where he kept them under lock and key. He told her of a little prayer he read someplace: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, throw my journals in the lake!" Corrine howled when she heard it but agreed with every word. She too had been keeping journals and didn't ever want the world to read them. They made a pact to never read each other's journals.

Walter stared at the pages of his last journal entry. It had been several days since he had written anything. The recent events had left him feeling empty and confused. He sat down at the desk and started writing very philosophically, commenting on the value of life and the finality of death. He wrote for almost two hours covering the pages with his confusion and sadness. He finished and put the journal and his pen in the top drawer. Silently he vowed to make every day count for something. In times of great sadness like this he renewed his commitment to his own personal change.

He suddenly realized how many months had passed and how much his life had changed. He stood in front of the fireplace looking at the flames. Christmas would be here soon and he intended to ask Corrine to marry him. So much had happened in the last year. He felt sad and morose about Brenda and her mother. He recalled his first impression of Brenda again. He guessed the dark side he sensed at their first meeting did indeed exist. It was sad to think that she couldn't trust enough to reach out for help. He accepted the fact that they would probably never know exactly what happened on that fateful night.

Chapter Seven

In the middle of Market Square was the Village Green, a spacious park bordered with trees older than most of the citizens. A large statue of a colonial hero greeted the residents at the park's entrance like a sentry standing watch over the town. The statue stood directly inside the black, wrought iron gate. The Oxbridge Ladies Gardening Club had planted a mixture of flower bulbs and maintained the flower beds. In the spring tulips, daffodils, hyacinths and other flowers burst through the ground and bloomed joyously. Irises of deep purple and pale pink bordered the gardens and crocuses were always the first buds to announce the change of seasons. During the summer months the ladies planted pansies, marigolds and other colorful plants to make the park one of the most popular and beautiful spots in town to take a walk, have a picnic, throw a Frisbee, play with your children or just enjoy a warm summer evening. Occasionally local musicians would bring their guitars and people would gather round singing those silly Peter, Paul and Mary songs of the sixties. All of the hopeful rock stars of the sixties and seventies tried their voices and most of the citizens simply rolled their eyes and prayed the song would end. As humdrum as it was the traditions of the town were just another reason some of the citizens never left Oxbridge.

The cobblestones in the center of town added another historical touch. They served to remind all who visited Oxbridge of the history connected to the town. They also served as a reminder of the rocky firmament that covered all of the New England states. The stones were cemented down about fifteen years ago after they were removed from the old town hall building property. The town manager thought having the Market Square paved with them added a historical flavor to the newly created shopping district. The

townspeople didn't disagree since the merchants whose shops lined the square jumped at the opportunities the remodeled square provided. People liked the eighteenth century look and the square was now the most popular shopping area around and the heart and soul of the village. Gold painted wooden signs indicating "Ye Olde Shoppe" automatically added thirty percent to the sales price. The square was an immense source of pride to the long time residents. It was the heart and pulse of the town, a place where neighbors greeted neighbors and information was exchanged; a place where the town gossips could meet to make observations and confirm their suspicions about anyone and everyone.

It didn't matter which road you took in town as every road led to Market Square. This was a definite competitive edge for all of the merchants in town.

Corrine fell in love with Oxbridge the minute she arrived for her first interview at Stanton. It felt like coming home to her. She recalled something Virginia Woolf once said. "One of the signs of passing youth is the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings as we take our place among them." She knew this was her place, where she belonged. From the first interview there was no doubt in her mind about her destiny. She knew inherently the position was hers and she knew Oxbridge was where she was meant to live. She recalled this as she turned the key in the lock.

Corrine sighed with exhaustion as she unlocked the front door of her home. She was never fond of the funeral ritual. She found it a morose and gruesome rite of passage but necessary for the grieving process she supposed. This funeral had been unusually stressful. After all the group meetings and all of her conversations with Brenda she was at a loss as to understand what happened. She thought what she and Brenda shared was helpful to both of them. She felt the loss of Brenda in her life. A part of her died along

with her friend.

She put her coat away and headed for the kitchen. She didn't know what she wanted but she wanted something. She had so much coffee at Walter's that a glass of wine sounded good. She had opened a bottle of Merlot two nights before. She decided to finish off the bottle in hopes it would relax her. She poured herself a generous glass and called Walter. The sound of his voice always comforted her. She put her feet up on the foot stool and Owen sauntered over to sit by her side and hopefully get a pat on the head. He wasn't disappointed as Corrine scratched his chin and moved her hand over his head.

"You are my faithful friend, aren't you Owen?" she said. Owen stretched his head up so she could scratch a larger area. His tail was wagging furiously and he put his head on her knee as if to agree with her question. Corrine rubbed his head and turned her thoughts to her other "faithful friend", Walter. *He was truly a gift from heaven*, she thought. And, he was much more than a faithful friend, he was her soul mate. He was soft spoken, incredibly intelligent, loyal, kind.... It sounded like she was describing a boy scout. Well, maybe she was. As she sat thinking about him she concluded he was probably the most honorable man she had ever met. He didn't have a mean bone in his body. He was perfect and she understood why fate brought her to Oxbridge.

Corrine liked that about him, his perfection. He wasn't even aware of his charm and that made it even better. When she moved to Oxbridge, a year ago, he was the first person to befriend her. The other townspeople looked at her as if she had three heads or they didn't notice her at all as if she were invisible, clad in cellophane and innately transparent. She walked into town just after moving into the house she purchased on Elm Street. The bookstore drew her like a magnet. Walter had a display of Virginia Woolf's

works in the front window with a sign: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" It drew her in, caressing her mind and enticing her just as Walter did as well. From that first meeting she knew he was special.

It was the college that first drew her to the town. Oxbridge was the home of Stanton University, an institution rooted firmly in New England academic traditions. There were a total of 1400 students the majority of whom came from outside the state. A small group of local students attended, although not by choice but necessity. They were local high school graduates whose parents either couldn't afford to send their sons or daughters away or didn't want their children far from the family nest. It was a good school. It was not considered one of the Ivy League schools but certainly a school one could be proud to be an alumnus of at some point in one's life. Most of the students lived in the dorms. There were a few small apartments or homes available to rent to students. There were parties and students drank at the frat houses and sorority houses. They went in to Boston for their serious fun times. There had never been a major scandal at the school until last year when a girl got raped at a party and later committed suicide. Since then, the school placed severe alcohol restrictions on campus. The girl in question was the daughter of one of the state's most prominent political figures. The town and the school were humiliated and ashamed. The boy who committed the rape left town quietly. He was tried and sentenced in another jurisdiction. His name was never mentioned on campus again.

The president of the college, William Clifton Walker, known as Cliff, held his office for over thirty years. He prided himself on running a strong academic institution, debt free. Academically, Stanton was considered one of the finest small liberal arts

schools in the east. Most of the buildings on the campus were built before the last century. The school boasted a brand new event center. The auditorium seated 700. It also contained a fine arts center, music center, dance studio and state of the art exercise facility. It took years to raise the money to build the facility. The school and town were appropriately proud of this new addition to the ivy covered buildings. Large oak and maple trees lined the walks in front of every building. Round flower gardens bloomed every spring. The bright colored crocuses, lilies, daffodils, and a myriad of other gardening delights sprouted out of the ground announcing the onset of warmer weather. It was refreshing. It also signaled the end of the school year.

It was anyone's guess how many young people had graced these hallowed grounds since its inception. The town was very proud of the school. It drew a number of visitors to the normally quiet village every year at homecoming, parents' weekend and at the end of each school year when parents came to pick up their little darlings. During the summer, all was quiet at Stanton. The dorms were closed and the custodial crew spent the summer months painting, cleaning and repairing the damage from the previous year. Come September, it started all over again.

In the late 70's the library was updated and it was the pride of the faculty and staff. In the remodeling process, the large oak library study tables were left in place. The president liked the look of the heavy furniture. He thought it gave a serious, old school look to the main room. On the second floor of the library was a series of computer stations. Students could do research, type their papers, check emails, look up scholarly articles and study for finals. On the third and fourth floors were rows and rows of books, periodicals, and academic resources. The library also contained exhibitions donated by

alumni and members of the Board of Trustees. Included in the collections were political memorabilia from four national elections, a large collection of first edition novels, and a number of leather bound sets of classics. Other miscellaneous art collections filled the walls of the university. Every year something new was donated. The University was very proud of the collections. The collections drew additional visitors to Oxbridge every year.

Each spring the school put on a musical production. The school was proud of their excellent music and drama department. Students with any kind of singing and dancing talent auditioned for a part in the annual event. Several noted theatrical stars had their roots in Stanton. Every few years one of the famous alumni would come back and grace the town folk with their presence. On rare occasions they were given honorary degrees in exchange for some publicity and a large financial contribution. It was a substantial contribution from one very famous alumnus that allowed Stanton to build the event center. The star attached his name to the building and, on the dedication of the building, he showed up to accept all of the accolades that go with such a generous gift. The president of the college graciously thanked the star and then proceeded to celebrate a little too much. He was found, by his wife, sleeping naked in the bathtub covered in his own vomit. His wife never told a soul and the president bought her a new BMW to insure her silence forever.

Corrine had grown tired of teaching at large state universities where each class had over four hundred students. She needed three assistants to help her grade papers. There was never sufficient time for her to help students. This was not what she dreamt of when she finished her Ph.D. She yearned for smaller, more personal classrooms where she would have more control over her curriculum and where she could get to know her

students personally. She loved the naivety of youth and their energy, pushing forward, relentlessly making their way to the future where they hoped to make their marks on the world. Some would leave an impression others not but she loved that they were so vibrant and full of excitement and life passion.

The job as head of the English department was a perfect fit for her. Like most educators, she hoped she could make a difference to some of the student population. At this stage in her life she preferred to devote all of her time to teaching and traveling. She was happy to get back to her roots. She was born less than a hundred miles from Oxbridge, in Banbury, Vermont. Her parents were deceased. She was an only child. Moving to Oxbridge was like rekindling a friendship from the past. It felt good to be back in New England. Even with the impersonal nature of the local townspeople she still felt this was where she really belonged. Meeting Walter soon after she moved in to her house on Elm Street made the move just that much better. He was a special person. Every time she thought about him she got a warm feeling inside.

At Stanton, each faculty member of the college was carefully chosen. They were not awarded tenure by school policy but, once hired they very rarely left. Such would be the case with Corrine. The English Lit department decided they wanted to expand. Several new courses were designed in the creative writing department including a women's studies emphasis. The school needed a teacher who was familiar with the classical women authors as well as some of more obscure and unusual writers. Corrine had seventeen years experience and a Ph D in British female authors from Fordham.

She spent one summer studying at Oxford to get more in touch with her passion for British literature. It was there that she met Charles Doyle. He was terribly British.

They hit it off immediately since they shared a passion for education. They married that summer and had a lovely flat in Oxford. She hadn't planned on living in England forever. When she realized that he had no intention of moving to the United States she knew it wouldn't work. As much as she loved England she was an American. They parted on a friendly basis. She used to hear from him occasionally but all correspondence ceased when he remarried. She often wondered what happened to him. She supposed he had grown fat, fathered four children and was busy boring the neighbors to distraction. What had she been thinking? She didn't feel she made a lot of mistakes in her life but that certainly counted as the biggest one. Thank God she had the sense to leave the marriage early on and didn't look back.

Over the years she read all of the known and many of the lesser known female writers of the world. Virginia Woolf was her all time favorite. She first read Woolf as a freshman at Radcliffe. She had become obsessed with her as a pioneer in women's rights and a radical, powerful female author regardless of how dysfunctional her personal life was. The fact she committed suicide in such a bizarre way only intensified her interest. She could only imagine how hard it was to be Virginia Woolf in a time when society was so restrictive and when women's only value was being the property of the men they married.

When she walked to town that day and saw Walter's window display she knew she made the right decision in moving to Oxbridge. How clever, she thought to herself as she opened the front door of the bookstore after seeing his "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" window display. Walter's face beamed as she entered and he said "Welcome!" He looked so handsome, she recalled. His hair, brown with silver gray at the temples,

made him look so distinguished. He looked more like a college professor than the owner of a small town bookstore. He had that academic, intellectual look about him. He also had a quiet presence that made her instantly at ease. She knew instantly he would be her best friend, a friendship worth growing, and a friendship she had been seeking for a lifetime.

“What can I help you with?” he asked her. He looked directly into her eyes.

“I don’t really know for sure. I am new here and I was quite impressed with your window display. A lot of people have forgotten about Virginia Woolf. I’m glad to see that she hasn’t been totally ignored. She’s one of my favorites.” Corrine said with a smile in her voice.

Corrine walked out of the bookstore that day with four novels, a journal and a fancy fountain pen.....\$112.97. Whew, she thought, I need to watch my wallet!

“Goodbye” she said to Walter as she turned to the door smiling. Corrine took a deep breath and she had a warm feeling in her stomach that she was hard pressed to identify. After the first visit she felt herself pulled, like a magnet, to the bookstore at least once a week.

Corrine had a few serious relationships over the years but, none developed into anything permanent. As each year passed and her clock finally quit ticking, she resigned herself to being an old maid. She didn’t truly think of herself as an old maid or a spinster. She liked the term career woman. It was no longer considered a stigma to not be married. Her lack of family ties enabled her to travel the world and see more than any of the residents of Oxbridge had ever seen, even on the travel channel. Her intelligence and education put men off. Most men she met couldn’t compete on her level. She became

accustomed to living alone and it was okay with her. She guessed she was set in her ways as most people who live alone become whether they want to or not.

She was proud to say that while she lived alone she didn't have a cat to curl up with like most old maids. Instead she had Owen. She should have named him Tiger since he literally bounced when he walked. He was very entertaining and loyal to a fault. He was more devoted to her than any man could ever be. And, he was smart. He would cock his head and look at her straight in the eyes. She just knew that someday he would utter a complete, intelligent sentence to her but, until that time she could bare her soul to him and confide her deepest secrets. She knew they would always be safe with Owen,

Corrine graduated from high school when she was sixteen and was accepted for early admission at Radcliffe. She was exceptionally mature for her age and college was easy. There were some disadvantages to graduating from college when one was only twenty so she stayed to complete her masters and then went on to get a doctorate degree at Fordham. She was a full professor at the University of Maine by the time she was twenty eight. She enjoyed the life of academia immensely. She taught at several other large universities along the Eastern seaboard but grew tired of life at such complex and politically confusing campuses. When the position came available at Stanton she saw an opportunity to be a big fish in a little pond. She jumped at it. It was the right time in her life to simplify her existence. She was tired of traveling and very ready to settle down for once and for all. She came to the realization that her heart was, in truth, in small town New England. She had moved to Oxbridge in June, bought a house and settled in to her new life. It was her desire to stay at Stanton and retire, write her memoirs and grow old with Punch and Owen.

It had taken her two weeks of looking at houses to settle on the small colonial at the end of Elm Street. She was only two blocks from the ocean. The house cost a little bit more than she had expected but it was just perfect for her. She had her bedroom, a guest bedroom and the third she turned into a writing studio. It faced the shore and had great ambiance. Owens's bed was right next to hers and Punch liked the sunlight that spilled into the studio. It warmed him during the day. He was happiest in that spot. The house had a small living room, nice fireplace, roomy kitchen with lots of counter and cupboard space and a dining room. Corrine enjoyed cooking and often invited friends over for a home cooked meal. She considered herself a gourmet cook. She hadn't made any new friends she felt compelled to entertain as of yet.

It took her the better part of the summer to unpack and get settled. Walking Owen and deciding on where to put all of her possessions took most of her time. She spent August getting settled at the college and preparing for the fall semester. She was looking forward to this school year. She was invited to help with the course design in the late spring. She was glad her passion for literature had found a new home where her expertise would be welcomed and respected.

She looked forward to teaching again as opposed to endless political parrying. So far, her experience at Stanton was positive. She didn't plan on entering into any heavy political agendas this go round. She just wanted to teach, write and enjoy life. That didn't seem like too much to ask.

The semester started quietly enough. She would be responsible for developing the creative writing program including the graduate studies. She had a lot of good ideas and was anxious to get started. The days just flew by and there never seemed to be enough

hours in each day. The weekends went by even faster. There were papers to be graded, lesson plans to be written, syllabi to be created and research to be done.

On the day she entered Walter's book store she had a desperate need and desire to start writing again and to reread some Virginia Woolf. She had read every word Woolf had written many times. Each time she read Virginia's work she noticed a new word, a nuance, a hidden meaning. She found her to be the singularly most complex author ever and she never tired of reading her work. She would soon find out the profound effect that complexity would have on her life.

Chapter Eight

Corrine sat down at her desk, opened the new leather bound journal, pen in hand and started writing. The first few pages read like a “what I did this summer” essay from grade school. Once she found her flow she found herself getting somewhat melancholy about her life. It was good to put things down on paper. She reread what she had written. She decided that she needed to start writing on a regular basis. She realized she missed the creativity of writing. She had been a confident and competent writer in her college days. She even had a few of her short stories published. Her world travels made for some nice travel dialogue but, she wanted this journal to be more of a journey, a personal intimate journey. She wanted to capture the core of her emotions and, be creative in doing so. It had been years since she had done anything truly creative.

She opened a fresh page. She just poured a fresh cup of coffee. Owen rested at her feet and Punch was covered up for the night. She grabbed her favorite pen and suddenly the words came. They sprang from her pen like a burst dam. She wrote and wrote filling page after page. When she looked at the clock she realized that two hours had passed. She felt like she just went to confession and finished her contrition. She felt cleansed having purged her mind of pent up thoughts and emotions.

She turned her attention to her collection of Virginia Woolf volumes. She owned every word ever written by the woman. She decided to create some flyers to put up at school and around town. She would save the poster paper for another project. It will be fun start another group similar to the ones she had created over the past years.

She sat down at her computer and wrote:

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Please join Professor Corrine Kellogg for a weekly informal discussion about

Virginia Woolf, one of the last century's most prolific authors.

When: Wednesday evenings at 7:00 pm starting October 1st

Where: The Bayside Bookstore

Refreshments will be served.

Please RSVP to Corrine Kellogg, at ckellogg@stanton.edu.

She added some graphic art from one of her clip art programs and printed off twenty five copies. She would post them on Monday and see what happened. She was excited about the possibilities with this group. She hoped she could share her passion for literature and inspire some interest in Virginia Woolf's works.

She and Walter agreed she would be able to use his bookstore. The store's nice cozy corner with the big overstuffed chairs was perfect for a small discussion group. Flo had expressed some interest in observing the group. She wasn't a serious reader but she told Walter she would be happy to provide coffee and a treat for the group. She had seen Corrine around town and thought she looked like a nice person.

On Monday, after her last class, Corrine set out to post her flyers on any bulletin board she could find. After she finished on campus she headed for town. She opened the door to the bookstore and there was Walter once more standing behind the cash register. He smiled with a broad grin conveying his pleasure at her arrival.

"Hello, Corrine. What brings you in today?" Walter asked.

"I made some flyers to post about my book club. You promised I could put one on your bulletin board over there." She pointed to the back of the store.

“And so I did. Here let me get you a thumbtack to put it up with.” Walter said. He dug in the drawer next to the cash register to find a pin.

“Here we are.” Walter said holding up the tack.

Walter looked at her flyer.

“Very clever, maybe I should drag out my copy of the movie? What do you think?” he said. He was venturing into the unknown territory of humor.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary, Walter. That movie was kind of depressing as I recall. Elizabeth Taylor was such a shrew, I wanted to smack her.” Corrine laughed.

“I like your sense of creativity. I hope that you get a nice group together. I think I will pass. I love Virginia Woolf but I am guessing that this will be strictly a ladies group and I don’t want to feel like a misfit.” Walter offered. “Here, let’s put one of your posters in the front window too.”

“Great idea!” She handed him the last poster. “You are always welcome to join is if you want to.” Corrine assured him. “Flo is going to make a special coffee cake for the ladies. Maggie Braden called me at school when Flo told her about the club.” Corrine smiled with pleasure.

“Well, you’re off to a splendid start. No one has ever done anything like this in Oxbridge before. It’s not that people here don’t read a lot, they do! It’s just they don’t ever sit around talking about what they read. I think this is a wonderful idea!” Walter glanced at the door. Just then the bell rang and in walked Ally McCall.

“Hello, Ally.” Walter greeted.

“Hi, Mr. Howe” Ally crowed. “I read that book you sold me, the Virginia Woolf one. Do you have any more? She’s really interesting.” Ally started for the literature

section of the store brushing her hand across the book shelves along the way.

“Ally, come over and meet Professor Kellogg. She is going to form a book group to discuss Ms. Woolf’s work. You might be interested.” Walter said.

Corrine turned and smiled broadly as Walter introduced her to Ally. She sensed that Ally was very mature for her age. Corrine thought her stunning with her dark hair and clear Asian skin.

“Hello Ally. I am Corrine Kellogg. I am new at Stanton this year. Have I seen you on campus?” She asked.

“Yes. I am a freshman this year. What do you teach?” Ally asked.

Corrine briefly explained her position and encouraged Ally to take one of her classes next semester. She would be teaching Female American Authors. Ally thought that sounded interesting and promised to give it consideration. Ally paid for her new book and left smiling after agreeing to be part of the book club. Her mother would be pleased. Her mother thought she spent too much time in her room moping about Evan. Ally left with her usual energy and the bell on the back of the door gave a resounding clang.

It was almost time for a dinner break. Walter asked Corrine if she would like to join him for a sandwich at Nelson’s Deli. Corrine thought about it and decided it sounded like a good idea. The two walked out the door as they buttoned up their coats. There was a chill in the air and the smell of snow lingered. Their breaths blew clouds of cold air in front of them as they talked.

Nelson’s Deli was just a few doors down. Walter explained to Corrine that they had the best hot pastrami sandwiches in the world and their soup was a gourmet delight.

They walked in and took the last booth in the shop. They gave the waitress their orders and made small talk while they waited. Corrine agreed the sandwich and the soup were wonderful. She was enjoying the conversation when for just an instant their eyes met. They each quickly looked away but in retrospect it had been a moment they would treasure and recall later with warmth and fondness.

October had arrived sooner than she had anticipated. The air was crisp and cool. Corrine had been to the grocery store. She unloaded the groceries and put them away. Punch jabbered away and Owen was underfoot anxious for her to take him for a walk. “Okay, okay, we’ll go walking in a minute Owen.”

She grabbed the leash and headed for the door, Owen leaping and jumping with excitement over the prospect of the park. They walked down the sidewalk in front of the house, turned the corner and soon came to the park. The air was brisk and it felt like winter would be here sooner than she wanted. Corrine loved this time of the year. She paused and took a deep breath of the cold air. It was refreshing! She breathed the cool air in again, and again. She and Owen walked through the park and over to the pier and the marina. There were many expensive boats moored in Oxbridge. The sea was just a little choppy making the boats bob and sway with the movement of the ocean. Corrine loved the smell of sea water. She and Owen wandered up and down the piers and she read the names painted on the back of the boats. She came to one striking sailboat named “Leonard III”. It was constructed of beautifully varnished teakwood. The mast was so tall. The sails were carefully rolled and tied down. From what she could see, this was a fine sailing ship. She wondered what it would be like to sail the seas. Her mind started wandering as she sat at the park bench. She found herself daydreaming of exotic places.

The sun was going down and she decided that it was time she and Owen headed home. Owen could go for miles but Corrine had papers to read and things to tend to for her next day's class. She and Owen neared home and as she turned the corner she almost had a collision with Harriet Pratt. She and Harriet had met in the supermarket shortly after Corrine had moved in.

"Harriet! Hello! I didn't see you coming down the sidewalk!" Corrine said.

Harriet raised her head and said, "I'm sorry. I was in such a hurry I didn't see you either. How have you been? Are you all settled in?" she asked. Harriet pursed her lips as she talked and her eyes sparkled through her spectacles.

"Yes, I spent most of the summer getting settled and now I love my job. How is life treating you?" Corrine asked.

"Oh, I'm fine. These old bones aren't as good as they used to be but I'm getting on okay." She gave a little shiver as she talked.

"Say, why don't you come in? Owen and I are just getting back from our walk and we would love for you to join us for coffee." Corrine said with sincerity.

"Well, that's awfully nice of you. I don't want to put you to any trouble." Harriet said.

"It's no trouble at all. Come on in." Corrine held the front door open for her.

Harriet reviewed her surroundings. The Kellam family used to live in this house. Harriet had known them for over thirty years. When Caroline Kellam passed on, the house sat vacant for a long time. Jon and Caroline had two children who moved away the first chance they got. Jon had died three years earlier and Caroline just died from loneliness Harriet supposed. It was good that someone like Corrine bought the house. She

really did a nice job decorating it and Harriet told her so. Corrine gave her the grand tour and Punch provided entertainment for the duration. Corrine finally covered his cage so they could talk. Corrine brought the coffee and some rolls she had picked up at the bakery on High Street on her way home.

“So, tell me what you’ve been doing this summer and fall. I haven’t seen you since the day I moved in. Where have you been hiding?” Corrine asked.

“Well”, Harriet replied, “I spent August with my sister in Portland and then I came home the first of September. I did my fall cleaning and I have been busy reading and doing a little writing.” Harriet spoke so pleasantly. Her voice was sweet and caring.

“I didn’t know that you were a writer.” Corrine said with surprise.

“Oh, yes. I actually had some poetry published many years ago. I was at Walter’s bookstore a few weeks ago and bought a book by Virginia Woolf. Are you familiar with her?” Harriet asked.

“Oh, yes! She is one of my favorite authors. I have been thinking about creating a class based on her writings. She was pretty ahead of her time on women’s issues you know”.

“Yes, Harriet said. “ I have read several of her works and I am very interested in her writing style.”

“Harriet, I am starting a Virginia Woolf book club. I would love for you to join us. It will be at Walter’s bookstore.” She gave Harriet the details of the meeting.

“Why, I think that sounds lovely. Most everyone in town goes to the bookstore. Everyone goes to Walter. He is the salt of the earth, that man. He doesn’t know it but he is. I don’t know anyone who knows more about literature and books than Walter.

Whenever I need to know something I go to Walter and he knows exactly the right book for me. I don't think I could have survived my husband's death if it weren't for Walter. I just bought a new journal from him." Harriet pursed her lips again and grinned.

"So, did I. I love it. It's leather and it is not like any other journal I have ever owned." Corrine commented.

"Oh, my goodness! That is the same journal I bought!" Harriet declared.

"What a coincidence!" Corrine uttered happily. "I really enjoy my journals. I have kept one for as long as I can remember. Every now and then I go back and reread one or two and it's like visiting an old friend."

Harriet looked pensively. "I have kept one on and off but not with any regularity. I have been pretty lonely since my husband passed. Walter thought it would be good for me. What do you think?" Harriet asked. She drank her coffee slowly.

"Oh, absolutely! I have used my writing to solve all kinds of issues in my life. There is something about putting your thoughts on paper that's very calming. I've found that it really helps me to get focused. You can even just write your poetry in it if you want." Corrine said. "I would love to read your poetry if you want to share. You don't have to if you don't want to." Corrine added.

"Oh, that's nice of you to say. I haven't written anything in so many years. I don't even know where to start. I used to enjoy getting up early and writing first thing in the morning before the sun even came up. It was so nice and quiet. The sunrise inspired me. It was amazing how quickly the words came. Now, since my husband passed, I have a hard time getting up early and I just stare at the blank paper." Harriet said.

"I have heard that writing in the early morning is the very best time. Perhaps you

could set your alarm.” Corrine offered.

“Oh, I suppose” Harriet said in a sad tone.

“Harriet, I really look forward to this book club. Maybe you could lead the group in a writing exercise one evening.” Corrine said.

“Well, you know that sounds like it could be fun.” Harriet looked excited.

“I’ll tell you what. I have some work I need to do tonight but if you would give me your phone number I will call you next week so we can get together.”

Corrine opened a drawer in the end table to get a pen and paper. They exchanged phone numbers and promised to get back in touch with each other within the next few days.

Harriet put her coat on and bid Corrine goodbye.

“Corrine, I am really glad that we met.” Harriet said with a slight hesitation in her voice. Corrine sensed the New England reserve as Harriet spoke.

“I am too Harriet. I’ll see you soon”. Corrine smiled as she closed the door.

Corrine was somewhat taken aback at the number of new friends she had already made in this quaint New England town. She wondered if New Englanders were becoming friendlier and then immediately cast the thought aside. She knew better than to believe such a preposterous thought.

Chapter Nine

Finally, it was Saturday! Corrine rolled over and looked at the clock on her nightstand...7:05 am. *Well*, she thought, *I had best get up and get myself moving*. Owen raised his head and cocked his left ear. Owen thought, *must be time for a walk!* Corrine got out of bed, took a look at Owen and said, “Not yet my friend. I need some coffee first.” Corrine put on her slippers and robe and headed down stairs with Owen right on her heels. She put on the coffee pot and waited patiently for it to be done. She thought about her conversation with Harriet. *It would really be fun to start a book club*. She had done this once before when she lived in New Haven. She had made a lot of new friends in her book group. She kept in touch with Shelley, Kathy, Beth, and Judy. They had a wonderful time studying J. D. Salinger’s works. After Salinger, she started another group to study Hemingway, then Jane Austen, and even a few of the romance authors. Over the years she had led fourteen groups and felt that she helped a lot of women get in touch with women’s issues. The discussions that they had each week opened the doors to a lot of emotions buried deep inside the ladies of the group. Deep friendships grew out of the confessions of the souls creating new bonds between women who needed each other. Many of the women in her groups found great comfort in these studies. They kept journals and shared intimate thoughts and emotions as their trust built. Corrine felt a special calling to help women deal with their lives. It wasn’t her life study but she found literature to be a great venue for delving deeper into issues that have been around for centuries. The women who joined her book groups always left the group in better emotional shape than when they started. Corrine was a gifted teacher but she had another special talent that thrived in these books groups. She had a unique way of getting women

to open up to each other. They formed lifelong bonds that served them well as they trotted through life's struggles and challenges. Corrine received Christmas cards from all of them and each card usually contained a nice letter bringing Corrine up to date on their life drama. She loved these annual updates and she wrote to each of them with sincerity and inspiration. She always had a new, different book to recommend to each based on their needs. If anyone loved literature more she couldn't imagine who it might be.

She finished her coffee and roll, got the leash for Owen and off they went. They walked a long way. It was a perfect fall day. The air was crisp and cool. The sun shone through the drying fall leaves and she loved the way Owen rushed through the fallen leaves making them fly in every direction. Owen was elated as he trotted along the path in the park. Corrine thought she might run into Walter but then she reminded herself he had to work today. Maybe she would stop by the bookstore when she ran her errands. She felt a sense of being reborn as she completed her walk and headed for home. She already felt a connection to this town and it made her feel warm inside.

Corrine took Owen home and changed her clothes. She sat down at the kitchen table and made a list of what she needed. The phone ringing startled her.

"Hello" she answered.

"Hi, Corrine. It's Harriet. I wondered if you were still serious about putting the book club together." Harriet asked.

"Harriet, it's good to hear from you. Absolutely! I was just getting ready to walk to the square. Would you like to meet me for coffee?" Corrine asked.

"I would love to!" Harriet replied.

"I will meet you at the coffee shop at the bookstore at 11:30 if that's okay."

Corrine asked.

“That would be fine. I have some errands to run myself.” Harriet declared. “I will see you then.”

“Great, see you there.” Corrine finished her shopping list and grabbed her coat. She decided that it was such a great day she would walk to the Market Square. It was only a few blocks and she could get some more exercise.

She headed up the street and turned the corner. As she walked she took a closer look at the colonial homes she passed and found herself wondering what the town was like when it was first settled. She transported herself back in time when women wore long dresses that got muddied by the dirt paths, when men ruled their lives and before women’s liberation. She felt the history of the town as acutely as if she had been born in Oxbridge. There was something about old New England villages she found inspiring. She often thought she was born in the wrong era. She loved the literature of the Victorian age and she loved lecturing about the struggles of women as they broke free from the bonds forged by marriage in those days. To do a book club on Virginia Woolf would be a challenge. Woolf’s unique writing style had proved difficult for the young women in her classes. It was hard for them to identify with Virginia Woolf’s struggles. This could be great fun!

Corrine went in to the craft store. She wandered around looking at all of the fun craft kits. She looked a little lost and Maggie Braden approached her and offered her assistance. “Well, I need some purple pens. I teach at the college and I have decided to start a book club. Have you ever read Virginia Woolf?” she asked.

“I just bought one of her books, “*Mrs. Dalloway*”. I haven’t started reading it yet

but Walter highly recommended it.” Maggie said.

“Well, Walter has excellent taste but I guess I don’t need to tell you that. He is quite a character. It seems that everyone loves Walter. I guess he has been here almost forever.” Corrine smiled.

“He is the best. We’ve all come to depend on him. He is the nicest person I know and I don’t know what the town would do without him” Maggie said as she straightened the display on the counter top.

Corrine smiled and asked, “Would you be interested in joining my book group?” Maggie thought about it. She didn’t know when she would find the time but sure why not. “You know, I think I would. It sounds like fun. Here is my number. Give me a call and let me know where and when. I’ll be there.” Maggie said.

Great! thought Corrine. She had just put up the flyers and she already had two members. She paid for the pens and writing paper and looked at her watch. It was almost eleven. She walked down street and crossed at the corner. She looked in a few store windows, stopped to buy some birthday cards and found herself standing in front of the bookstore. She opened the door and listened for the familiar bell. She walked in and there he stood, as always. He looked so handsome. Their eyes met for that instant and they exchanged greetings. Harriet arrived and the two new friends had coffee and left together. Walter smiled as he watched them walk down the street.

The first meeting of the book club went well. Corrine gave each member a purple pen and explained that Virginia Woolf loved to write with purple ink. They introduced themselves to each other and spoke quietly about their lives. They decided they would read “*A Room of One’s Own*” as their first work. They did a short writing exercise.

Corrine left feeling good about their new group.

A few days passed and Corrine sat, pen poised as she began a new page in her journal. Her mind wandered as rivulets of water do on a pane of glass, first individual memories and then, just as rain drops do, they merged to one larger one.

She was suddenly back to her tenth year, swinging on the porch swing. Her grandfather, a large man, appeared in front of her. She smiled in acknowledgment of his presence and he nodded to her. "Come child." He beckoned her. A flash of fear ran through her and she knew what was about to happen. There was nowhere to run except the recesses of her mind, her secret hiding place where no one could enter. She stayed in that dark place until she saw blue skies again. It never lasted long for him but to her it was an eternity.

It was during that time that she learned to escape mentally. It was in the secret hiding places of her mind where she learned to live for years until he died when she was fourteen. It was a sad time by the standards of others but for her it was the light at the end of the tunnel. She shed no tears and felt no loss, just relief. The tunnel she had been in for so many years had been very dark and she felt so lost and alone. She was invisible, so small as to be insignificant to the rest of the world.

She took herself back in time to the days before her grandfather became such an issue for her, when she was still a child. It was before the loss of her innocence. She wrote in her journal about the wonder of the world, the bright colors and the smell of summer air, of cool breezes wafting over her as she lay looking at the clouds above. She wrote of the wonderful smell of cookies baking in the oven and the feel of her mother's apron in her hands. She wrote of the pink wallpaper in her room and the smooth floor she

stepped on every morning.

She was calmed by the memories of the earthy, fresh scent of cut grass that, in her mind, represented the color green and burning leaves in the fall, pungent with the charred ashes of their demise. These memories sustained her. But then, when she was eight, the darkness of the world around her took over and the goodness of her earlier years was gone. It was replaced by fear and nausea created by the passions of a deranged, perverted man who resided in the same house. There was no escape from his desires and strength.

What she remembered most was having nowhere to go, no one she could tell, except God. It was then that she learned to put her mind in a safe place, a place where God gave her light and sustained her. It was here that she found her oasis and she drank from the well of heaven. It was here she found light and hope. She clung to this with a tenacity that became as comforting as the quilt her grandmother made that warmed her on cold winter nights.

She went deeper and deeper into this safe place in a state of hypnosis imposed by the pain and anguish her grandfather caused at those times. It was here where she found her personal meaning. It was a place where she could just be and not suffer criticism or judgment. No others were allowed in, only herself. It was her secret club with only two members, herself and God. It was this comfort that sustained her and it was this that her pen captured today. It had been years since she thought of those times. And now, with just a single thought, the recollection of the pain, the tears, the black skies and the humiliation flooded back and took over.

She stopped. She felt the hot tears running down her cheeks. With a deep sigh and a sense of renewed commitment to blue skies she closed the book and wiped the tears

away. She took a deep breath and sighed. She cleared her mind as she got ready for the day ahead of her. She had a class to teach and students to deal with; she didn't have time for this kind of foolish melancholy.

She stood in the shower letting the hot water cleanse her. The steam helped her body cast off the poisons. She turned the water to a cooler temperature to awaken her sense of the day. By the time she finished her morning routine she felt refreshed and ready to confront the realities of the moment. The sadness and depression had left her for the moment. It was as if she shook them off like Owen did the wetness after his bath, relieving his body of the water that made him uncomfortable. It was gone, at least for the moment.

Once her grandfather died she felt a freedom. When she was a sophomore at college her world fell apart again. She spent the rest of her college days in counseling. She was fortunate to find a therapist with whom she could identify. It was through her counseling sessions that she forgave herself. The sessions were painful but she knew without help she would have ended her life. Ironically, she couldn't even remember the therapists name any more. She gave a silent prayer of gratitude as she got dressed.

She gathered her briefcase and walked briskly to the campus. One of the great beauties of this town was she could walk everywhere she needed to go. People she encountered on her way to work nodded and after a few months she knew their faces and they recognized hers. They became a part of her routine. It was comforting to have this morning sameness each work day. Even the weekends became predictable. She began to take comfort in this fact as well. She liked routine. It had become what sustained her in life. She had learned to not appreciate surprises.

With routine came the predictability she could expect and prepare for. Surprises caught her off guard and she didn't like the emotions that came with the feeling of not knowing. She needed time to prepare mentally so she felt some control over her day. Teaching gave her the comfort she needed. The material never changed only the students' response to it and that was something she could anticipate. She knew her subjects. She had studied literature since she was a child. She found reading a place of refuge. She could immerse herself into the characters and the written word. Reading took her out of the horrific reality of her existence and took her to a world far away where she could become a new character with each novel she read. It took her to a world where she could be someone else, where she could experience the lives of others more interesting and exotic than her own hellish being. It was a safe world that, like a revolving door, took her in and out of places safer than the one where she simply existed, filled with fear and anger.

The library and thousands of books became a wondrous world of fantasy for her. It also made her smarter than most of her classmates. The world of reading was a world critical to her safe existence. It also became the fountain of knowledge ignored and not needed by her friends and school chums. The teachers thought her mature and brilliant. Others thought her aloof and unapproachable. It didn't matter to her, it was how she survived and the respect the teachers had for her became her self-esteem and ultimately her success.

She thought for a moment of the day he died. He had been in the hospital for a week or so. Time was irrelevant. It was just a relief to her. It was as though the skies had opened up and the sun, bright and warm, flowed from the heavens. When her mother

came into her room to give her the news of his passing, it was not sadness she felt but exhilaration. The next few days were surreal. She floated on the perimeter of the adult world of funeral preparations and the grieving process of the rest of the family. She had quit feeling a long time ago. He made sure of that. She still could never tell anyone but now, now that he was gone, it didn't matter. What she felt wasn't sadness at all. What she felt was a tingling sensation. It was like when your foot fell asleep and suddenly, the feeling started to come back and the blood flowing back made your foot tingle. She felt a breath of fresh air and hope for a future that previously didn't exist. She would escape, far away from the gloom of these past years. What she wasn't mature enough to realize was the remnants of the memories would be there for a lifetime, no escape was possible. She learned to numb herself to emotions, it was safer that way.

Someone once said "Religion is for people who don't want to go to hell; spirituality is for people who have already been there." By that definition she was a spiritual person. She had escaped hell the day her grandfather died. Organized religion had failed her early in her life so she didn't often attend church anymore.

As years passed she sought a spiritual existence. She made peace with the God who lived within her and outside her physical body. She found herself in prayer several times a day. He never left her and He dwelled within her in her love of humanity. She made peace with her past. At least she thought she had until this morning. It was as surprising to her as anyone that the memories had erupted and spilled with such great heat over her. She wanted inner peace, had sought it with passion and perseverance. She experienced the calm serenity and certainty of resolved conflict within herself. It was a splendid release she knew to be healthy. This felt as a cancer would, growing silently

within for the ultimate purpose of destruction. She needed to have it excised somehow. It needed to be gone forever never to darken her mind again. These memories would be relived in the days to come.

Chapter Ten

Corrine ran through her day robotically and arrived home in time to catch a daylight walk with Owen. Dear, sweet Owen. He was the only man in her life who didn't cause her pain. He had become her best friend, her confidante. He worshipped her without prejudice, without judgment. Over the years an emotional void developed within her. The numbness sustained her. Only when Owen came into her life did she allow herself the luxury of love again. It was a safe place for her because Owen was dog incapable of purposeful emotions. In the mind of Owen, she was goodness, perfect in every way and he couldn't look inside to the depths of her pain, he only worshipped and adored her. What an incredible gift from God dogs were. She knew anything that expressed that kind of devotion had to be from the Almighty. And then there was Walter, another unexpected gift.

Owen led the way to the park leading her briskly along. The foliage had long left

the branches of the trees and bone chilling cold had rushed in filling the day. With the sun fading on the horizon the air grew even cooler. Owen kept a daunting pace that warmed her blood and kept her from experiencing the reality of the December day. Her cheeks grew rosy and her nose started dripping from the chill in the air. Still, it was a kindness that came over her as she let exercise banish her depression and lift her mood. Life again became good and she moved back into a more spiritual, happy place. A good, warm place deep inside her welled up and oozed into the holes left by the memories she expressed in her journal earlier. She coaxed Owen to return home and he led the way in his bouncy, exuberant fashion.

Corrine Kellogg's lit class, in one semester, became the most popular class on campus. The students loved the energy and passion she brought to her lectures. She brought new challenges to the students and they rose to the new level she set. She made reading the archaic literature called the "classics" an adventure. The other professors were in awe of her and her ability to pull the best from each person in her tutelage.

Not only was she still attractive for a woman her age but she was a brilliant lecturer, able to captivate and inspire the listener. Her energy was contagious and there was a palpable electric charge all over campus. The President of the college, Cliff Walker, was puffed up with pride over this new energy and gave himself a strong pat on the back for hiring her. If he could find ten more like her he would be elated but he knew that the teachers like Corrine were few and far between. In all of his years he had experienced this talent only once and it was for just a fleeting time when he was a sophomore in college.

One day shortly after the first semester Cliff invited Corrine to his home for

dinner. She was shocked to say the least. In all of the schools she had taught in she had never been invited to the home of the school president. Cliff was generous in his appreciation for her teaching passion and she reconfirmed to herself she made the right decision in coming to Stanton.

The book club had been meeting for almost two months. For the most part Corrine was happy with the outcome. Everyone in the group seemed to have formed a tight bond with the exception of Brenda. Corrine didn't quite know what to make of Brenda. She was so quiet but Corrine strongly suspected that 'still waters do run deep'. She wanted to help penetrate that brick wall that Brenda had built around herself.

The topic for discussion for the next week was a quote from Virginia Woolf - ***"Yet, it is our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth comes to the top."*** Corrine knew that it's impossible to really know someone. Oh, you can think you know their mind but everyone has secrets, deep secrets. She opened the discussion with this thought. Harriet always had a pearl of wisdom to share.

"I think I'm able to reveal my inner self through my poems. When I start to write I am overcome with feelings that miraculously pour from my pen. When I go back to read them later I am sometimes quite amazed that it was I who wrote the words. Do any of you have this experience?" Harriet asked. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke.

"Harriet, that is so strange that you mention that. I've had the same experience. I feel deep inside me is this really creative soul that's been buried for years. When I write in my journal and then I reread it a few weeks later I am amazed at my command of language. I think sometimes that a different person was writing but it's my handwriting alright. It's truly incredible!" Maggie said.

“Most creative people share that same experience. I wrote poetry back in my college days. A few weeks ago I ran across my old papers and I can remember writing the poems but the words feel like they came from a stranger yet I know I wrote them. Virginia Woolf wrote almost daily in her journal. She was a true student of the human condition. She was exceptionally observant from a very early age. It was her constant need to express herself on paper that helped her hone her craft. Most of what she wrote was from personal experience and observation.” Corrine said.

“She had an interesting life; much more interesting than mine.” Brenda said in a whisper. “My life is so boring.” She sighed.

“We all have different experiences. It’s what makes each one of us different. You may not see it as fascinating but if you read Virginia Woolf’s diaries you can see she wrote about everything that ever happened to her. She just found an unusual way to write about everyday events. Her works also reflect her political opinions and personal philosophy. The more you write the better you get at communicating your experiences. Don’t ever think your life is uneventful! We all have a story to tell, I am sure of that.” Corrine said.

“But, how do you find new ways to tell the same old story?” Brenda asked. Again, her head was down and it was as if she spoke into thin air. She never made eye contact with anyone. “You can look at your experiences from a different viewpoint. Let’s say you go to the grocery store for bread and milk. How about if you wrote about it from your next door neighbors viewpoint? You could describe yourself as your neighbor might see you. Think about what that might look like on paper.” Corrine said.

The ladies all began to chatter at the same time and Flo entered with the coffee

and a platter of the infamous coffee cake. Everyone fixed their own coffee and the conversation turned to plans for the upcoming week. Brenda sat back quietly with her coffee. Corrine sat down next to her.

“Brenda, I would love to hear your story. I don’t think it’s as boring as you think it is.” Corrine said.

“Oh, I don’t know Miss Kellogg.” Brenda said. “I just don’t think I am that interesting. You are so educated and you have been to so many places.”

“Brenda, I am older and I’ve had the means to travel. You are still very young. Didn’t you say you had been to England?” Corrine asked. Before Brenda could respond she said, “Why don’t you come over for dinner? We could talk. I am done with class tomorrow at 4:00. Can you be there at 6:15?” Corrine asked.

“That would be wonderful.” Brenda said. “I’ll be there.” Her mood picked up. There was a sense of excitement for just a short moment before she regained her composure and the wall went up to protect her.

The following evening Brenda showed up at 6:15 on the dot. Corrine welcomed her in and they had soup and salad. Corrine explained that while she loved to cook she didn’t seem to have much spare time any more. The two chatted through dinner and then Corrine moved them into the living room.

“Brenda, I sense that something is really bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?” Corrine asked. Brenda lowered her head. In an almost inaudible voice she said, “Yes.”

Corrine leaned forward to hear her better. Brenda was crying. Corrine waited for Brenda to speak.

“I don’t have many friends, I never have. Things in my life have been difficult.”
Brenda said.

“How so?” Corrine asked gently. Corrine sensed Brenda had a lot to say.

“I have been in therapy for a lot of years. My father.....” Brenda said. She had a faraway look in her eyes.

“I think I understand, Brenda. Did your father” she paused, “mistreat you?”
Corrine chose the words carefully.

“Yes.” Brenda said. A long breath escaped as she relaxed. The wall seemed to be down Corrine sensed.

“You will be surprised when I tell you this but I had a similar experience. My grandfather was a son of a bitch. He was meaner than hell to my grandmother. He constantly yelled at her and he even hit her a few times. I was actually happy when he died. I was ashamed to admit that to anyone for years.” She paused. “I was very young the first time he came into my room. I couldn’t tell anyone because I didn’t think anyone would believe me. It’s odd that we are having this conversation. It has been a long time since I have even thought about that time of my life. I was writing in my journal and all of those bad memories came back a few weeks ago. I thought I had put it behind me but, I find it is a very difficult experience to deal with and to talk about. I spent a lot of time in counseling over him. I think I knew you’d been hurt that way the first time I met you. As a woman I have a sixth sense about it. I don’t know what it is but I always know.”

Corrine said.

“I still can’t talk about it without getting really upset. My mother has never believed me. When I tried to tell her years ago she just kept telling me my father was a

really good man and he would never have done anything to hurt his family. He hit her. I remember it but she just denies it. It is hard for me to live with her but I just don't know where my life is going anymore." Brenda sobbed and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Brenda, anytime you need to talk, I am here." Corrine said. "Here is my cell phone number, call me anytime. I can't really counsel you because I'm not trained in that field but I can be your friend and I'm a very good listener." Corrine put her arm around Brenda's shoulder to comfort her.

"That is so kind of you. My mother and I fight about things a lot. I know you think I am so quiet. My mother brings out the worst in me. If only she would believe me. I feel like I am just invisible to her. My sister Connie is really sweet but my father never laid a hand on her. It was just me. I don't think my sister understands either. We don't talk about it at all anymore. After she got married and moved to California she forgot all about it. My husband tried to help me but the whole thing just tore us apart. We decided that we both would be happier with other people. I know he has someone but I can't even imagine dating anyone. It scares the heck out of me." Brenda said. She seemed to be a little bit more relaxed.

"I totally understand. It took me a long time to trust. I was lucky my mother did know what a bastard he was. She still loved him, he was her father, but she did try to protect me. I had the benefit of some great therapists over the years and they helped me work through it. It is probably the hardest thing I ever did. You can work through it too. I will help you as much as I can. I'm not a trained therapist but I am always here if you need to talk." Corrine said. "You don't have to feel so alone."

Brenda left, grateful to have a new friend. She felt good that she found someone

who understood. She walked home that night feeling better.

As weeks passed, Brenda and Corrine got together outside of the group about once a week. Sometimes Corrine felt like she was talking to a completely different person but she thought Brenda was developing trust in her and that explained the personality change. Brenda obviously enjoyed this new found friendship.

As weeks passed Corrine learned more about Brenda's past. Her father started molesting her when she was thirteen. For some unknown reason he never touched her sister. He told Brenda that if she ever mentioned it to anyone that he would kill her. The abuse went on until he died from a massive heart attack when Brenda was eighteen. Brenda never shed a tear. She was so relieved to not have to deal with him anymore.

Her mother was devastated at the time. Brenda didn't want to upset her more. Brenda's sister, Connie, was much more outgoing and confident than Brenda. Connie was the baby, the favorite. She was popular, she was a cheerleader, and she had a lot of boyfriends. When Brenda started dating she had some horrendous experiences but she thought that a prayer was answered when Bill came into her life. Bill was so kind and good. When he asked her to marry him she thought she would burst with joy. The marriage started out fine but it wasn't long before her issues surfaced again. He loved her so much and he just wanted her to be well.

She went for therapy and made some progress but then they moved to Albuquerque and she had to start all over again. It took her time to find another therapist but she did and again, it was okay for a time but, it didn't last. Eventually, when she kept backsliding and her behavior became so unpredictable, Bill threw in the towel. He had tried in every way he knew to make her happy but nothing worked. They both agreed it

was best to end the marriage. That was when Brenda decided to move home for awhile to get her head together. She didn't feel therapy was helping as much as she hoped and needed. She thought maybe a break from everything and going back to her hometown would help her sort out her life. She really enjoyed the book club and she told Corrine so. Writing in her journal had been a major step for her. She wrote every day. She felt like she was making progress on her issues. Being able to confide in Corrine and have someone who understood made a big difference to Brenda. Corrine enjoyed her meetings with Brenda because, at last, she could use her experience to help someone else. She cried inside for Brenda and wished she could help her make the pain go away. She came to understand that the best she could do was just be a good listener. That was a gift she had, being a good listener. And Brenda desperately needed a good listener.

Chapter Eleven

In early December Corrine awoke to a domestic ambition. She would make beef stew. It had been years since she had made stew. It was really cold outside and it sounded so good. She drove to the market to get the ingredients and bought some fresh Italian bread to go with it. This would be fun, she thought. It took her until two o'clock to get it cooking on the stove. She looked at the huge pot and asked herself, what were you thinking? She could never eat that whole pot. *Hmmm, I think I will see if Walter would like to come for dinner*, she thought. She kept hoping he would ask her on a date but it wasn't happening. So, she would have to make the first move. She waited until she knew he was home from the bookstore to call him. She was a little nervous about inviting him to her home. She dialed the number and waited for him to answer. She was nervously tapping her pencil on the counter. He answered on the third ring and said he would come. He accepted! She was thrilled. She ran upstairs to shower. She picked a kimono that she had purchased on her travels years before. It was one of her favorite things because the warm fall colors blended with her hair. She had been letting her hair grow and she piled it up on top of her head loosely with hair pins. She put on a little blush and some pale peach lip gloss. Perfect!

She guided Walter to the dining room after welcoming him and taking his overcoat. *He looked dashing*, she thought. They talked during dinner, just small talk and then, after clearing the table, they went to the living room for sorbet and espresso. They talked and talked and talked. She took off her shoes and tucked her feet under her as she sat in her favorite chair. As Walter was getting ready to leave, their eyes met, and their lips met, and their bodies met. Corrine led Walter upstairs to her bedroom. Corrine's

world was suddenly turned upside down.

Their relationship took a dramatic and romantic turn after that night. It wasn't long before they were spending nights at each other's homes. She had some clothes she kept at his house and he had some at hers. She wanted a relationship for so many years but had given up on finding anyone. Now, just when she was least expecting it, it was here! Walter was, without a doubt, the greatest man she had ever known. They were so perfect for each other it was scary. She knew that it was all about timing. Neither would have given the other a second look in their twenties but now, in their twilight years, it was nothing less than sheer perfection.

They were very discrete at first and then realized most everyone knew anyway so why hide it. It was the twenty-first century and it was what happened. The New England prudishness that had cursed her life for decades was long gone. They weren't getting any younger and they deserved this happiness. The town loved Walter so much that most folks were thrilled that he finally found someone. In addition, they approved of Corrine, the respected professor at Stanton. As far as the town was concerned, it was a match made in heaven.

Corrine never gave marriage a second thought. If it was meant to be it would happen. She was so deliriously happy she didn't care. She just relished each moment they were together.

Winter passed and spring arrived. Corrine continued to write in her journal every morning. Her writing became happier and less morose. She started writing short stories again and encouraged Walter in his efforts. She was very proud that Dan Johnson had asked him to write a weekly column about Oxbridge. Often they would work on the

article together. Corrine found Walter's writing style warm and peppered with subtle humor as he told his version of the town's history. Apparently the readership of the newspaper agreed with Corrine. People stopped by the bookstore to give Walter their comments on his column in person. Dan had talked to Walter about publishing the articles in a book form for the town's upcoming celebration. The town was celebrating 350 years of existence and a huge event in the village square was in the planning stages. Walter liked the idea and Corrine was supportive and excited.

The book group meeting in May was eventful. Each member was asked to bring something they had written or created and share it with the others. Corrine was looking forward to the evening. She had created a small book of poetry she had written and made copies for each person. She had printed it on linen paper and bound the two punched holes with lavender ribbon. She entitled the book "*Lavender and Lace*". She included some of the poems she had written in college along with some of her recent efforts.

Harriet brought her poetry in a small volume as well. She had found some lovely purple stationary at the card shop and the entire volume was bound with a fine silk ribbon. It was exactly what Corrine expected from Harriet.

Ally printed copies of her short story. It was printed on a Chinese print stationary she found at the Office Depot in Gloucester. It was youthful, refreshing and Corrine could have picked it out as Ally's in a heartbeat. She had read a few things Ally had written for class and she felt that Ally had a lot of potential. She was anxious to read it.

Maggie had put together an art portfolio to share with the group. It was held together in a special folder made for artwork. She was very secretive about it and Corrine was dying of curiosity to see what she was hiding. Maggie just grinned with excitement

as she held it close to her. It was obvious that Maggie was proud of her work.

Brenda, shy as always, was carrying a small book bag. Corrine guessed they would just have to wait and be surprised.

Corrine opened the meeting with another quote from Virginia Woolf.

“Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works.”

“So, how do you all feel about sharing this evening? Virginia Woolf wrote so much about the people in her life. She wrote whatever came to her head in her journals. Her writing style for her novels, essays and poetry was similar. I don't know about you but I was never trained to write that way. She was fortunate because she didn't allow herself to be bound by punctuation and grammar. I've always thought that was her brilliance. Even though she came from educated people she was home schooled. You have to believe that her father's writing had an influence on her. Yet, she disregarded the norm and simply wrote.” Corrine said.

Maggie offered to go first. “I loved to paint when I was in high school and I took some art classes when I was first married. Then the kids came along and one thing after another got in my way but it wasn't long after we started this club that I decided to buy some water colors and start again. Don thought I was nuts but I did it anyway. I want to tell you all that it was your insights each week that helped me free my creative side.” She took a breath and continued. “I started to keep a journal early on, right after our first meeting, as a matter of fact. It was in December when I started sketching and then came the water colors. This group has been such an inspiration to me. I had totally forgotten how fun it is to paint and to create.”

“Let's see what you've done.” Harriet said.

“I will in just a minute. I sincerely want to thank you all for sharing yourselves with me. I could never have done this without you. My first one is a picture I did of a

bouquet of roses...” Maggie pulled out the painting and held it up. It was brilliant. The colors blended in deep tones of pink and a darker rose color. The green stems and leaves were in such detail as to be almost photographic. The vase holding the flowers was English porcelain with a pale blue design. The vase sat on a glass top table against a background of a window. In an impressionist fashion, the scene behind the roses was Maggie’s back yard. Maggie pulled out several more still life paintings, each more lovely than the last. The ladies in the group sighed in appreciation of Maggie’s work. Maggie had signed and dated each painting and with each was a gift card. She presented the rose picture to Harriet explaining the sentiment behind her choice. She considered Harriet a wonderful, warm friend who loved roses. For Corrine she presented a scene of the boats in the bay, to Ally an impressionist style rendering of the library at Stanton, to Flo a still life of coffee mugs and a spoonful of sugar, to Walter a picture of his bookstore and to Brenda a beautiful picture of a Mexican vase. Every member of the group was thrilled. They accepted their gifts with surprise and deep appreciation. Maggie wiped away her tears of joy and the other ladies dabbed their eyes too.

“I can’t tell you how much this experience has meant to me and how important each of you has become in my life. I am working on some new things and I am even thinking about doing a show. Walter, could I show some of my work in your front window?” Maggie asked.

“I would be honored, Maggie. You just tell me when.” he said standing by his office in the rear of the store.

Harriet raised her hand and offered to go next. To each lady including Flo, and to Walter, she handed her little book. “Walter, you have such a lovely voice. Would you

mind reading the first poem?” Harriet asked.

“Well, I didn’t expect to play a part in your club but yes, I would love to read your poem, Harriet.” Walter said.

He cleared his throat and read:

*As I take this pen and write these words
My life will take a turn
Along the path of memories,
Along the road of truths forgotten and kindnesses recalled...*

*Truth isn’t always kind and memories not always true.
But friendship lingers like the scent of lavender as it dusts the
pages of time.*

A tear welled up in Walter’s eye as he recalled the scent of lavender; it was his mother’s favorite.

“Harriet, that is so touching!” Corrine said.

Maggie was speechless. “Harriet, I love it. Let’s hear the rest.”

Walter read four more poems from Harriet’s book. Everyone expressed their admiration and praise for Harriet’s poems. “Harriet, thank you so much for sharing!”

Corrine said. “You have quite a gift. I mean that sincerely. Do you have more?”

“I have a lot more at home but I would have to dig them out.” Harriet said.

“Well, if you like I think I can help you get them published. I have a friend who is a literary agent and I think he could help you. Call me next week and we’ll see what we can do.” Corrine said. Walter agreed to sell the books for her.

Harriet agreed and in her lovable fashion she sat back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. She was beaming from ear to ear.

Flo came around the corner with a plate of the most delicious scones they had

ever seen. "I know you think my coffee cake is my only specialty but my mother passed the recipe for these scones down to me. She only made them on very special occasions because they're so rich. I want to thank each of you for being so open and kind to me. I don't have any talent in writing or drawing but I do know how to bake. I started writing in my journal when we first started this group. I wrote a lot about missing my husband but then I started writing about my mother. She and I had a very close relationship and it was my mother who taught me how to bake. We baked every Saturday and I realized when we baked we talked. We talked about everything during those times. My mother was a big woman with a heart as big as all outdoors. Cooking and baking were her talents and she passed that gift along to me and for that I am forever grateful." Flo spoke quickly. It was obvious that her little speech was an effort for her. She set the platter on the table. She continued. "Mealtime at my house was something special. My mother made everything from scratch. We never had store bought anything. We had a huge garden and my mother and I spent most of the summer canning fruit and vegetables. I realized through my journals those were some of the happiest times of my life. I haven't made these scones in years because they always made me cry, remembering Mom. But, tonight I decided to share them as my special gift you all of you. Your friendships mean a lot to me. I'm not much on fancy words or nothing but I hope you like these scones as much as I liked making them for you." Flo' said as she lay the platter down.

"I can't tell you how special that is! Thank you so much!" Corrine said.

Flo went and got the coffee cups and the big pot of coffee. Everyone loved Flo's special gift and they all realized that food could be just as much a creative expression as art or poetry. Flo just beamed as she watched the group devour the scones.

Walter stepped over to collect his scone and he realized that he didn't have a contribution. He wasn't really a part of the group but he felt like he should have something to offer on this special night. He sat thinking about his dilemma as he enjoyed Flo's delicious gift.

Ally, in her youthful liveliness grabbed her folder and handed out a copy of her story to each person. The paper she chose to print it on was a colorful, pastel abstract of Chinese symbols. The story was about her heritage. She explained that ever since she was a little girl her parents celebrated a Chinese holiday to honor her heritage. The story was about this celebration. June first was Children's Day in China. Every year, on June first, Ally's parents would take her to an amusement park and made the whole day all about her. She loved that day when she was growing up. As she got older it was still a special day even though the venue changed as she got older. The essay talked about how she felt about being Chinese in a white world and she talked lovingly about her parents and their efforts to preserve her background. They promised when she graduated from college they would take her back to the village where she was born.

Her command of the English language was impressive. "I started my journal back in October when we first started this group. I wrote a lot about how I missed Evan at first but then I realized that even though I am only nineteen years old I can write about other things. It was keeping a journal that inspired me to write about being adopted. I've had some wonderful conversations with both my mother and my father since this group started. I missed Evan terribly at the beginning of the school year but I've made a lot of new friends at Stanton and I am so happy to know all of you. I know you probably don't think we have much in common since I am so much younger than you are but we actually

do have a lot in common. Learning about Virginia Woolf has been a great experience for me. She is not the kind of author I would normally read. When Mr. Howe encouraged me to do this I wasn't sure what it would mean but I am so glad that I did. Thanks Mr. Howe, as always you know me better than I know myself." Ally said. She turned to Walter and gave him that infamous smile of hers.

"Ally, you are a bright spot in my life and I am grateful that I know you. I have great expectations for you." Walter said.

They all laughed as they applauded Ally's work. Corrine wondered how Ally would fit in with the older ladies but her gut feeling told her that the group would benefit from some youthful opinions and she'd been correct. Corrine could see how Ally had grown in the time since the group started. She was always pleasantly surprised at the changes young women experienced in that first year at college. Ally would do just fine in this world. She was bright, talented and emotionally far ahead of the pack.

Brenda shyly spoke. "I have brought some of my poetry for you to read. If it's okay, I would like Corrine to read it for me. It just would sound better with a woman's voice. Would that be okay?" she asked shyly as usual.

"I would love to read for you, Brenda." Corrine said. Brenda handed each person her packet and Corrine asked which one Brenda would prefer she read. Brenda indicated that the one on page two would be best. Corrine opened the packet.

Darkness looms, the night begins
Tears run down my face.
The walls close in, the door is shut
I've found my secret space.

With pen in hand, the paper waits
The words rush out to meet
The ink runs out upon the lines

The trail of nothing sweet.

I write with pain, I write so fast
The memories scurry about
The agony of life so short
The horror I wish to shout.

My heart has broke, my soul has gone
I feel the empty spot
The spot where love once lived in me
No longer is, I rot.

Corrine paused. The pain Brenda wrote about was pain Corrine had experienced herself. She wished she could stop but she read on until she finished the poem. Harriet, Flo, Maggie, Ally and Walter were speechless. A dead silence filled the room. Corrine jumped in quickly before anyone else had the chance to comment and said

“Brenda that is so poignant. I know that it took a lot for you to share this. Your poetry reminds me a lot of some of Virginia Woolf’s poems and Sylvia Plath’s. Not all poetry is uplifting and some, like Brenda’s, is a bearing of the soul. I think you did a wonderful job of communicating your emotions.” Corrine stood and softly clapped her hands and smiled. The others joined in and Brenda smiled hesitantly at first but then with acceptance. Brenda sighed as she accepted the appreciation

Harriet said, “Brenda, you have a great talent. You are able to put your thoughts down in such a lyrical way. It is sad poem but that’s okay. You should do more! I would love to read them.” Harriet smiled her sweetest smile and adjusted the lap of her dress, smoothing it over her knees. She reached into her purse and extracted a delicate handkerchief and held it in her hands, curling the edges over and over. She smiled broadly hoping that Brenda would return the gesture.

“Brenda, have you ever tried painting?” Maggie asked. Maggie nervously

changed the direction of the conversation hoping that Brenda would take the bait of her offer.

“No, I have always wanted to.” Brenda said head down as usual and with her soft voice replied to Maggie’s interest. She looked less beaten as she regained her composure and reengaged with the group.

“When you have time please come by the store. I’ll help you get started. I have noticed you have great clothes style and I’ll bet you have some art talent. If you like, I would be glad to help you with some lessons.” Maggie said. Her offer was sincere for the moment and she felt that her offer was the right thing to do but inside she felt quivery and fearful. Her stomach fluttered and she had a queasy feeling as she reached for her mug of coffee.

“That’s very nice of you. I’ll try to come by on Saturday. Would that be okay?” Brenda said. Brenda kept her hands clenched together close to her knees leaning forward towards the coffee table.

“That would be perfect. I will set some things aside for you.” Maggie said. “I have the perfect beginners’ book for you.” Maggie got up from her spot and reached for her purse at the end of the coffee table. “I’d better get going. I have a busy day tomorrow.” She stood, uncomfortably, by coffee counter hesitating as she turned toward the front door.

Corrine was about to wind up the evening when Walter came over with a large bag. “I don’t have the talent that you ladies have but I do have a little something for each of you.” He said. He reached in to the bag and brought out a new journal for each of them.

“Harriet, the lavender reached out and spoke your name,” he said with the familiar twinkle in his eye as he handed her a journal covered with lavender flowers and a deep purple binding. “I hope you fill it with more of your lovely poems. Harriet’s cheeks pinked up like budding roses as she took the journal and held it to her chest.

“Ally, I have know you since your parents brought you back from China. This book had your name all over it.” Walter handed her a journal with an oriental design of gold and deep rust. “Your secrets will be safe there.”

“Flo’, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know you!” Walter reached into the bag and pulled out a dark blue journal that was covered with lighter blue flowers and an old wood burning stove etched into the front cover. Flo’ accepted the gift graciously and rushed back into her kitchen before anyone could see her blush.

“Maggie, you’re not getting out of here so quickly” he said. She reached over to get the book covered with a Monet landscape, bound with dark gray leather and gold foil on the edges of the paper. She ran her hands over the cover and looked at the blank pages of the sketchbook. She grinned from ear to ear with joy.

“ Brenda, you were not easy to pick for but I know how much you loved the South west and I found this online and hope that you will like it.” He handed her a dark, hand-tooled leather volume. It was an Indian design and judging from the look on Brenda’s face he had made the right choice. Brenda was dumbfounded and just smiled. He thought he saw a tear forming and quickly pulled the last journal from the bag. “Corrine, this is for you” he said and held out a burgundy, soft leather volume that had a quill pen on the cover. “I hope that you all continue your writing. Enjoy!” he said.

“Walter, this is lovely!” Corrine said. Her eyes gleamed as she felt the smooth

leather. She turned it over in her hands and opened it to see the fine lines on each page. The paper was silky smooth and the pages turned as she ruffled the edges. This would be a special diary, she thought. It would be a new beginning, a special beginning, a new page in her life would start with this book.

“Mr. Howe, this is beautiful!” Ally said. “I love it!”

“Walter, this is so nice. How did you know I love Indian designs?” Brenda asked. She took a deep breath and the sentence came out as a gust of wind. A calmness spread over her face and the anguish of the poem dissipated as she held the new book in her hands.

“I just guessed.” Walter answered and he winked at her.

“Walter, you always know the right thing to do!” Flo said. “I’ll put on a fresh pot of coffee!”

“Walter, I don’t know what we would do without you!” Maggie said. “Thank you, so much. Thank you.” Maggie felt such a feeling of relief and she was suddenly struck with a wave of gratitude for her old friend. He always knows the right thing to do, she thought.

The ladies chatted for awhile over another cup of coffee talking about their work and sharing mindless banter as they prepared to leave. One by one they left to go home and soon it was just Walter and Corrine standing there, both still, both enjoying the quiet.

Corrine went over to Walter after the door closed and threw her arms around his neck.

“You never cease to amaze me!” She said nuzzling his neck taking small tender nips around his chin.

“It just seemed like the right thing to do. You’ve done a wonderful job with this group. Oxbridge residents don’t normally share much with each other. You’ve accomplished a lot here my love.” Walter said accepting her affection. He held her around the waist and pulled her closer enjoying the warmth of her skin. “Brenda worries me tho”.

“I know she worries me too.” Corrine said. “I don’t know what else I can do to help her. She seems to make some progress and then she goes back to the darkness.” Corrine said. She stared out the front window of the book store. Suddenly, changing the topic she “My place or yours?” She said in her sultriest voice.

Walter grinned and they walked to the parking lot arm in arm, swaying with each footstep. Walter opened the door to his car for her and she eased in to the front seat.

“So, how about my place? I’ll make us a nightcap.” Walter said.

“Sounds delicious” Corrine sighed.

Chapter Twelve

“Hello, Buttons.” Harriet said. She picked the cat up and stroked his head. She gently set him back on the floor. “Are you hungry my little kitty?” She cooed to her pet. Buttons rubbed up against her legs and followed her into the pantry as she took down a can of gourmet cat food. Opening it with the pull tab she scooped the contents into a dish. The dish had a picture of a Siamese cat in the bottom. “Here you go precious!” As was his normal routing, the cat moseyed over to the dish, took three bites and walked away. Harriet threw out more cat food than the cat ate but she didn’t care.

Harriet heated up a left over pork chop in the microwave. She put a dollop of applesauce on her plate and carried her dinner to the living room. She set them on a TV tray in front of her favorite chair, an overstuffed chair covered in blue brocade. She loved Jeopardy and never missed an episode. She kept a pad and paper by her chair on the end table so she could keep track of her answers.

Harriet Pratt was a lifelong resident of Oxbridge. Her parents, grandparents and great grandparents were born here. Harriet was born an Endress. She married Marshall Pratt when she was twenty three. Their two children were grown and both had moved out of Oxbridge as soon as they possibly could. Claire, their daughter, married one of the Anderson boys when she was twenty-two. They had two children, a boy and a girl, and lived in Cleveland, Ohio. Randall, their son, never married. He lived in San Francisco. Harriet always talked to her children on Sunday afternoon and she visited each of them once a year. She didn’t mind visiting Cleveland so much but she wasn’t overly fond of San Francisco, too many people and too many hills.

Harriet had one sister, Lillie, who lived in Vermont. They usually saw each other

a few times a year. Both Harriet and her sister were widows. Harriet's husband died from cancer when he was just 57. Lillie's husband suffered a massive heart attack when he was 62. It took Harriet some time to adjust to living alone. She didn't mind it so much anymore. She had Buttons. She had her little part time job at the craft store and she loved the book club. The phone rang and startled Harriet.

"Hello." She said. Her voice went up an octave on the "o".

"Harriet. It's Lillie. I just called to see how you were. Wasn't that funeral today?"

"Oh. Hello." Harriet said with a sigh. "Yes, the funerals were today. They had one service for both Ruth and Brenda. It was rather awkward for Reverend Goodwin but I suppose it was the best thing to do under the circumstances."

"Did you know that girl well?" Lillie asked.

"No. I knew her from our book club. She was always very pleasant when I ran into her. I thought she was a very sweet person." Harriet said.

"Do they have any idea of what happened?" Lillie asked.

"No, I don't think so. If they do, no one is saying. She was just such a nice person. I just can't imagine what happened. I knew Ruth. I've known her for years. She and I worked on the church Christmas decorations together last year". Harriet said.

"I guess you never really know a person, do you?" Lillie said. "How is Claire?"

"She's fine. Her husband may get transferred to Oregon." Harriet said.

"Oh, dear. That's even further away. What will you do?" Lillie asked. Lillie wished that she had been blessed with children but it just never happened.

"I suppose I will just have to pay more money to go visit. Andy, Claire's oldest, you remember him don't you?" Harriet said. Not waiting for an answer she went on.

“Well, he is in the Air Force now. He is stationed in Greenland somewhere. Claire said he is getting married to a lady from Greenland!”

“Greenland!?! Why on earth would he marry someone from Greenland?” Lillie asked. “Aren’t there any American girls he likes?”

“I don’t know what these young people are thinking. This is his second marriage you know.” Harriet and Lillie talked for almost an hour before they ended their conversation. Harriet missed final Jeopardy. She took her dish into the kitchen, washed it, dried it and put it away. She watered all of her plants. She let Buttons out and waited an hour for him to come back. Just like clockwork she heard the meowing at the door and she let him back in. His fur was cold and wet and Harriet noticed it was snowing outside. She watched another television show. It was getting late and she thought she had better get herself to bed.

Harriet went upstairs and performed her evening routine. She brushed her dentures, put on her nightgown, put a nightcap on her head to keep her hair in place and read for a short time. Harriet’s life was orderly. She learned it from her mother who was an extremely orderly person. Harriet lay in bed thinking about her day. If I live to be a hundred and ten, I will never understand Brenda. Such a sweet girl, she thought. Tomorrow Harriet would be off to the library. She helped at the library on Tuesdays and Thursdays. She had been a volunteer there for fifteen years. Oh, my lord, can it be that many years, she thought?

The town library was the pride and joy of the library association. It took twelve years of fund raisers and saving but, thanks to a gift by a single donor, Mrs. Harry L. Hotchkiss, the Hotchkiss Library opened its doors in June, five years ago. Mr. Hotchkiss

made a fortune on Wall Street with the money he inherited from his father. His father owned the largest woolen mill in the Northeast. Harry Hotchkiss never strayed far from Oxbridge. He and his wife lived simple lives and the town was aghast when Mrs. Hotchkiss died and left the balance of her estate to the library association. The committee felt it was fitting to name the new library after her and her husband. The new library was built across the street from the Town Park to the west. It was all red brick, white shutters, black wrought iron fence around the perimeter of the front and a warm, inviting landscape plan. The ribbon cutting ceremony was a gala event and in the foyer of the library was an oil painting of the Hotchkiss's done from a family photograph.

Harriet didn't quite understand what was wrong with the old library but she did enjoy helping out with the book returns. Every week she arrived promptly at 9:30 am to sort through the book returns and put them on the book carts. She and Esther May would each take a cart. They returned all of the books back to their proper place by noon. After that they walked over to Flo's coffee shop at the bookstore for a cup of tea and a muffin or some type of sweet treat. By one o'clock, they were back at the library. For the rest of the day they dusted the shelves and straightened the books.

When Harriet woke up to dress for the library she was surprised at how much snow had fallen. She would call Justin from down the street to shovel her walk. He was a nice boy, she thought. She dialed the number and within twenty minutes Justin was at her door. It didn't take him long to clear her sidewalk and the driveway. She paid him the fee they had agreed on last year. Harriet donned her knit hat and gloves, a present from her son last Christmas, and went to the garage to get her car started. She sat there waiting for the car to warm up. Phil, her mechanic, told her she didn't need to warm up the car but

her father always said she should warm up the engine and so she did.

The town's roads were kept clean in the winter time and well paved the rest of the year. The town boasted two large snow plows with sanders and the road crew did a passable job plowing the snow from the roads. Every street in town was plowed, no exceptions. The town was well cared for and no one complained about much of anything in this quiet little village.

Harriet drove slowly over to Market Square and parked near the library. What a lovely day, she thought. She didn't mind the first snow. She found it refreshing, even at her age. She stood looking around the square as was her habit.

She grew up in this town. She still didn't think there was a better place on earth to live. The streets were lined with ancient elm, maple and birch trees so tall that the power company had to trim them each year to keep them off the power lines. They provided shade and protection to the houses along the main streets. Their leaves turned brilliant reds, oranges and yellows in October and by mid November their branches were bare and rigid as the temperatures plummeted and winter settled in bringing snow, sleet and freezing weather to force the population off the streets and into their warm homes.

Harriet's house was built in 1872. It wasn't the house she grew up in but it was the only house that she and Marshall ever owned. Harriet was one of those people who resisted development of the town. Thank God there weren't that many new houses in town. All that growth had a detrimental effect on Oxbridge. At least that was her opinion.

The newer homes were on the outer edges of town where they wouldn't disturb the historical flavor of the town. They all resembled the architecture of the years past but the new siding and neatly bricked paths, fastidious landscaping and shining brass fixtures

didn't fool many but the new blended nicely with the homes built when the town was settled located in the center of the village and everyone felt comfortable with the combination of old and new. No one really cared what the head count in town was but according to the latest census Oxbridge boasted a population of 11,493 folks.

While New Englanders historically resist change and growth, the citizens of Oxbridge had no choice but to accept the few newer homes. As long as their village could retain its ancestral complexion they were okay with limited expansion. The townsfolk conceded that it didn't hurt to allow some modernization that included a new school, an expanded grocery store and two donut shops.

During the summer Harriet would drive out to Banning Lake where all of the summer recreation activities took place. Large trees provided shade for the picnic tables scattered on the lake's perimeter. There were wide walking paths that meandered around the four hundred acres surrounding the body of water as well as riding trails for those lucky enough to own a horse. Bikes were welcome but not motorized vehicles. The police enforced the rules as diligently as they could. The lake was stocked every year by the Fish and Wildlife Department and everyone who liked to fish could be guaranteed to catch something. Harriet didn't fish but she liked to take her folding chair and sit by the water reading a book and watching the people. Harriet was a great people watcher.

Oxbridge was a bedroom community to Boston. It was an easy commute to the city if the traffic cooperated but most folks only went to the city a few times a year. The locals loved Oxbridge and they didn't see any reason to leave their own city limits. The lives of the Oxbridge citizens revolved around a three square mile radius of the town. Harriet very rarely went to Boston. She hadn't been into the city in years. The last time

she went to Boston it was with the ladies group from church. The church had rented a large van. Seven ladies from the church, including Harriet, went to Boston to the symphony. They had a wonderful afternoon at Boston Commons. They went to eat at Red Lobster, a real treat for Harriet and the other fish loving ladies. It was late when they got back to Oxbridge but Harriet had a wonderful time. That was five years before and Harriet wasn't sure she had the energy to do it ever again.

Harriet noticed that one of the stores in the square was putting out Thanksgiving decorations. It seemed a little early for that.

Each season in Oxbridge was celebrated by a predictable ritual of some sort. Christmas was the parade of lights and Santa Claus along with the lighting of the huge spruce tree in the center of the town park. New Years Eve was celebrated quietly. On Thanksgiving everyone watched the Macy's parade on television while their turkeys cooked. Veterans were honored with a parade of their own in early November. Columbus Day saw sale days at all of the local stores. On Easter the fire department hosted an Easter egg hunt for all of the little children on the Village Green.

The town's population took great comfort in the predictability of each event. The fact that things don't change from year to year is the New England tradition. It is said that food companies have no test cities in New England because New Englanders just don't try new things.

You could tell what night of the week it was by what everyone was having for dinner. Saturday nights there wasn't a house anywhere that wasn't sitting down to hot dogs and beans. There were no fast food restaurants, no chain restaurants and only one liquor store in town. Residents marked the change of seasons by noting how many town

fairs were coming up and who had what planted in their gardens. Everyone knew when each parade was held, where it started and where it would end. If there was trouble in any of the homes it stayed put and was not discussed with anyone outside the family. People minded their own business and it was the custom to not air any dirty laundry for the whole town to see. Oxbridge was a town of strong traditions. There were a lot of rules to learn about this town but none of them were written down.

Harriet stood in front the shelves of books looking for the right spot to for the book she held in her hand. She was staring at the title. It was "*To the Lighthouse*" by Virginia Woolf. She looked at the shelf and counted all of the books the library owned that were written by Virginia Woolf. It was a long shelf. She thought for awhile about Maggie, Corrine, Walter and Brenda. And Ally. What a wonderful group they were. She so enjoyed all of them. She wished she had known Brenda better but she was sad to say she and Brenda just never found time to talk. Brenda seemed to be closer to Corrine than anyone. "What could have possibly gone wrong for that young lady?" she wondered.

Harriet thought back to her first meeting with Corrine. It was at the grocery store last summer. What a lovely lady! She was very glad to have the opportunity to get involved with the writing group. She loved the journal she purchased from Walter last year. She wrote in it every day. Corrine was a godsend. If it weren't for Corrine she would never have started writing her poetry again. She felt so blessed to have made some new friends. Even with Brenda's death she was happy to have such a wonderful group of new friends. As many years as she had lived in Oxbridge she always found someone she didn't know each year. Harriet opened a book about Virginia Woolf and read: "Each has his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by his heart and his

friends can only read the title.” Virginia Woolf

She reread the quote three times and thought how true the words were. She knew so many people in Oxbridge from church, the library, the coffee shop *but did she really know any of them*, she wondered.

Chapter Thirteen

Maggie pulled into her driveway very slowly. The roads were starting to ice and it took her longer than usual to get home. She drove slowly up the driveway. The lights were on upstairs so the kids must be getting ready for bed. There was a light on in the kitchen as well. She pulled into the garage, pushed the remote to close the garage door and headed for the kitchen through the breezeway that connected the garage to the house.

“I’m home!” she said. “Is anyone here?” She called.

“Hi honey, how was the funeral?” Don said.

“I am exhausted. It was so sad. If I live to be a hundred I don’t think I will ever experience anything like that again. Her sister, Connie, could be Brenda’s identical twin. It was very strange, very strange.” Maggie said. “We all went over to Walter’s after the funeral. I don’t mean everyone, just Corrine and I. Harriet made it to the funeral but she left right afterwards and Flo’ wanted to get home.”

“I’m sorry, honey. That was the most bizarre happening this town has seen since old man Miller killed all of his own chickens with a shotgun thirty years ago.” Don said.

Maggie hung her coat up and went over to the fireplace to warm up. Don had started a fire. She gave him a hug. He was so thoughtful. Maggie considered herself very lucky. They had a good life together, she and Don.

“How’s Walter?” Don asked.

“Walter is Walter! He’s amazing. Meeting Corrine has certainly changed his life. It’s so nice to see him with that perpetual grin. She is a nice lady and they’re good for each other. I’m waiting for the wedding bells.” Maggie said. “Where are the kids?”

“Now don’t go planning the man’s life!” Don said. “The kids are upstairs. They

all had a lot of homework to do before tomorrow.” He went back to reading his newspaper.

Maggie sat in her comfy chair and stared at the crackling fire. She’d known Walter for fifteen years or more. They met when Don owned the appliance store right next to Walter’s bookstore.

Maggie grew up in Oxbridge, married her high school sweetheart and had three kids. When the kids were finally all in school she got bored. She had always loved sewing and crafts. With the encouragement of her friends and family and a small business loan, she opened the craft store in town. She and Don did their homework and decided the spot right across from the bookstore in town would be the perfect spot for the Crafting Corner. They had fun coming up with a name. Maggie spent months ordering the stock and fixtures for her store. They had a big family celebration on the day the store opened. That was five years ago.

Maggie had known Walter for years but not well. She had always admired him from a far. She thought he was handsome in his own way but more than that he was so easy to talk to. She had a few close friends but they were wrapped up in inane housewife issues. She and Walter became good friends over the past few years. She found herself stopping for coffee at Flo’s place almost every morning since her life became such a hectic whirlwind. She found herself constantly hurrying from one place to another. Walter helped her slow down.

She stopped at the bookstore after lunch one brisk autumn day to talk to Walter. She was busy all the time but she felt her life lacked something. She just wasn’t sure what that something was. “Walter would know” she thought. And, of course, he did. He

walked her, arm in arm, over to the journals and helped her select a lovely leather bound journal. He then proceeded to sell her a very expensive fountain pen and a copy of Virginia Woolf's book "*A Room of One's Own*." "I think you will like this" he told her. Walter instinctively knew what was right for people and she trusted him. He is the salt of the earth, that man, she recalled thinking.

One day last fall Maggie was running down the sidewalk as if she was being chased by a firing squad. "Slow down Maggie," Walter hollered. "I can't! I'm going to be late opening the store!" she answered. "No you aren't. It's only 9:15!"

"It can't be. My clock at home said 10:15! How can that be?"

"Maggie, did you forget to turn your clock back last night?"

"Oh, Walter...I did! Well, I guess I have a little time to spare. Care to join me for a cup of Flo's coffee? She always gets in early to bake." Maggie asked breathing hard.

"Sure. Let me put my furry friends in the house. Come on boys... come along." Walter quickly released their leashes and opened the door for them. He filled their bowls earlier and they could go out the dog door while he was away. Walter shut the door and joined Maggie down the sidewalk. No one in Oxbridge locked their doors. There had never been a robbery in Oxbridge and likely never would be. The two walked the few blocks to Market Square. Walter opened the bookstore and the smell of Flo's coffee and coffee cake filled the room. "Flo does make the best cake I've ever had. She should patent her recipe." Walter commented. "Flo, bring us two pieces of that delicious coffee cake and some coffee. Can you believe it? I forgot to change my clock and I thought I was going to be late."

"Maggie, you need to slow down. Life is too short" Flo said as she brought the

coffee.

“You’re right. Walter, I started writing in my journal. I write every morning. I never thought I was much of a writer but I find it relaxing. I am writing some poetry. It’s not real professional but I like to make words rhyme. It’s kind of fun”

“Many famous poets started just that way. You will find your voice and when you do I am confident that your words will come together beautifully. Just speak what’s in your heart.” Walter said wisely.

After the first few weeks, Maggie found herself looking forward to her Wednesday group meetings. It was so nice to take that time out of her busy week. She found she was making time to write and read. It helped her relax. Her priorities were changing and her family was pleased with the change. She wasn’t so frantic all the time. She really liked Corrine and she had a special place in her heart for Harriet. She knew Harriet but only to say hello to in the grocery store. Now, Harriet stopped by her store at least once a week. She was so sweet. Maggie was so taken with Harriet’s knowledge of sewing and crafts that she offered her a part time job. Harriet was delighted and having Harriet there freed up time for Maggie to go to the library and do some reading. Harriet was such a dear and a blessing.

Harriet used her journal to write poetry. Each week she read one of her poems at the book club meeting. They were all as sweet and loving as Harriet was. Harriet’s optimistic view of nature and life was inspiring. It was refreshing since everyone else was so caught up in the excitement of their own lives that they didn’t take time to stop and smell the coffee. Harriet had a way of bringing the group together and making them cohesive; except for Brenda. Brenda remained silent most evenings. She smiled but the

smile seemed glued on and lacked emotion. Harriet commented something was missing from Brenda. There was a strange void in Brenda's essence. It was difficult to pinpoint but it was unsettling. Harriet wanted to pinch her to see if she was real. Maggie noticed that Brenda held back. She didn't reveal much of herself to the others. Maggie wondered if it was because she had been gone from Oxbridge for so many years. Maybe her life had been hard in ways she couldn't express. Maggie tried several times to get Brenda to loosen up but all the cajoling didn't produce much more than another smile. Brenda appeared numb and sometimes she appeared to be in a faraway place that she wasn't willing to share with anyone.

At some point Maggie noticed that Corrine seemed to have a special relationship with Brenda but she wasn't sure what it was all about. It just happened suddenly right after Christmas. The week after Christmas Brenda was different. She sat closer to Corrine and seemed more attentive to everything Corrine had to say. She had attached herself somehow. She still didn't offer much most weeks but the fact she had a friend seemed to comfort her. There had been a few outbursts from Brenda early in the club's formation but Corrine's expert leadership caught them before they became disruptive. Brenda seemed much more comfortable with the group from then on.

Maggie loved to write. When she first opened the journal, she stared at the blank pages. Writing was a struggle. The words just didn't come. Her early pages were a hodge-podge of recounts of her daily life. She made herself do it every morning and after a few weeks the words came easier. She began exploring her feelings, and thinking and writing about relationships. When she was mad at one of her kids she wrote about it. When she had a bad day, she wrote about it. When she had a good day, she wrote about

it; she wrote about dreams, her mother, her Aunt Polly, her grandpa, her husband, her neighbors, her life. She wrote long rambling sentences and sometimes she wrote carefully thought out sentences and she never went back to reread. She made a vow to herself that she wouldn't reread any of it until the anniversary of the day she started her journal. She experimented with poetry and discovered poetry was not her thing. She doodled in the margins and made strange geometric patterns. She got ideas for her store and made notes about her business plan.

She added some artwork to her journal and wrote about the pictures she pasted on the page. The more she wrote the more she wanted to write. It was borderline obsessive, compulsive. She found she really enjoyed reading more and after she read most of Virginia Woolf's works she started reading Jane Austen and all of the books on the New York Times best seller list. She started ordering books from Amazon and coerced Don into building her a bookcase in "her" room. "Her" room was what used to be the spare bedroom. Maggie took it over and added a sofa she picked up at a yard sale.

She loved to decorate and once the bed was out of the room she immediately changed the wallpaper, added plants, little funky tables, a rocking chair that had been her mothers and an old desk that Don spent six weeks refinishing. She loved "her" room. It was her retreat from the day to day grind and Don and the kids respected her time in "her" room. They all knew better than to disturb her when the door was closed. They didn't know quite what to make of the change in Maggie, but they liked it.

One day in February she brought some water colors and a pad of water color paper home from the store. She started sketching and soon she was holed up in her special room every night after dinner. Every Sunday she spent most of the day in her

room. Don grumbled a little bit and the kids got cranky with her but she didn't care. She lost herself in her art and it felt wonderful. Since she had Harriet working part time she was able to take off early a few afternoons a week and come home to paint. She hadn't felt so energized in years. She purchased a large portfolio and starting filling it with her work. Painting after painting sat around the room drying. She stood back and looked at them. She was proud of herself. She never thought she could do this again. It was as if the lion was unleashed and out of control. Virginia Woolf said it the best when she said: "Odd how the creative power at once brings the whole universe to order." Her painting calmed her and made her feel whole. It was just unsettling how it was changing her life.

Chapter Fourteen

Ally McCall sat down at her desk in her bedroom. She actually liked her bedroom now. Her room had been totally redone as her high school graduation present. Her mother thought since she was now a college freshman it was time for something slightly more mature than small pink rosebuds on her walls. She and Ally looked at wallpaper for hours and hours, brought home sample book after sample book from Lucas' Paint and Wallpaper Store before Ally selected a bold turquoise and tan plaid. The new décor made the room seem much bigger than it had looked with the juvenile pink theme. Ally had picked a matching corduroy bedspread, throw pillows for the bed, drapes and a new chair for her desk. All in all it was very comfortable. She wished that she could have her own apartment but she knew her parents couldn't afford it.

Chuck and Melanie McCall met at college, Stanton College to be exact. Chuck completed an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering. He went to U Mass for his graduate degree. Melanie never had a desire to go to college. Right out of high school she went to work for the Williams and Turner law firm. She started as a file girl and worked her way up. Mr. Williams was very supportive and paid for her to get her paralegal certification. Over the years he came to depend on her knowledge of the business. She knew she had a job for as long as she wanted it. There were times she thought about going to law school. She met Chuck when they were both 25. It was a blind date that blossomed into a quiet romance and the two got married a year later. They managed to buy a house in Oxbridge after a few years and hoped to start a family. When the family didn't materialize after five years of trying, they decided to adopt. Through her work, Melanie was able to contact a good adoption agency. After two years Allison

Grace arrived from China. Chuck and Melanie thought she looked like the most exquisite China doll in the world. She had bright eyes, shiny black hair that stuck out all over and Ally bonded with them immediately. As she grew, a streak of independence surfaced and presented a challenge to Chuck and Melanie. There were moments when it was quite entertaining and others when it tried their patience to the max. It served Ally well and her inherently inquisitive nature coupled with her sense of independent strength made her one very bright young lady. She graduated at the top of her class and was the class valedictorian. Chuck and Melanie knew whatever Ally chose to do with her life she would be successful. They wished they could afford to send her to one of the Ivy League girl's schools but their budget wouldn't allow it. Ally received a partial scholarship from the Rotary Club to go to Stanton. Stanton was a strong academic school and would provide her with a good, solid education. Perhaps when it was time for graduate school, Chuck and Melanie could afford to help her go to a good school.

Ally was normally a happy, content person. She went "steady" with Evan Chapman all of her junior and senior years in high school. She cried every night for a week when Evan announced that his parents wanted him to go to Dartmouth. It was his father's alma mater and he didn't have much choice. Evan would have preferred to stay with Ally and go to Stanton. They made plans to see each other at every holiday break. They both wrote religiously for the first few weeks of school and then the letters became less frequent. Ally knew in her heart he had met someone else. He didn't need to put it in writing.

Ally looked over at her bookcase and there sat her collection of diaries and journals she had kept since she was twelve years old. She pulled them out and spread

them out on her bed. She had organized them by year, starting with sixth grade. As she reread all she had written over the years she experienced the pain of her emotional growth all over again. She read with an active memory of all of her adolescent crushes, her fights with her best friend, her anger at her parents when they forbid her to do something she really wanted to do and her intimate thoughts and immature revelations about life. How she had changed, she thought. She read what she'd written about meeting Evan in Sophomore English, their first date, the deepening of their feelings for each other. A tear ran down her cheek and she brushed it away. It was time to start a new journal.

She rolled over on her bed toppling the journals to the floor. She picked up the Virginia Woolf book and started to read. "A women must have a room of her own and her own money if she is to write". Interesting, she thought. She read on and suddenly came to the end of the book. She jumped off the bed and looked at the clock on her desk. It couldn't be midnight! She brushed her teeth, put on her pajamas and jumped in bed. She had an eight o'clock class!

The alarm went off. She did her usual morning routine and was out the door at 7:35 promptly. For a teenager she was incredibly disciplined. She was never late for class, ever. As she drove across town to school she was still thinking about the book. She would go to the library after her last class and do some research on Virginia Woolf.

Ally was a little uncomfortable the first week of the book club but Walter assured her she would be just fine. She was so young compared to the others. She was quiet the first few weeks as the discussions got started and then she found herself voicing her opinions. Corrine knew so much about literature and Ally knew she could learn a lot if

she just listened. Ally made notes each week. She enjoyed Harriet's poetry. It was a little sappy but sweet and bright. A lot of Virginia Woolf's works seemed disjointed and difficult to understand. The language was obsolete and formal compared to modern literature. Harriet sometimes got starry-eyed over her memories of her husband and the good old days but Ally didn't seem to care. It was fun to hear about a generation even older than her parents. Ally tried to strike up conversation with Brenda but Brenda would just smile that strange, eerie smile and turn away. Ally didn't know what to make of it. Every week Ally tried again to engage Brenda but Brenda resisted. Ally finally gave up.

Evan's letters were becoming less frequent and they took on the tone of a good friend rather than the love of her life. It saddened Ally but she wrote religiously to Evan every week. She told him about the group, about her classes and she gave him the current scoop on their classmates who were stuck at Stanton like she was. It seemed like he was in a different world. He wrote about his new friends. Not one person at Dartmouth was from Oxbridge. He wrote about someone named Clark and another friend named Wes. There was a group he was part of that included Sam, Penny, Lu and Melissa.

He mentioned Melissa several times. Ally was starting to wonder if Melissa was "special". She didn't have the courage to ask him because she didn't really want to know the answer. She wrote in her journal about this and she wouldn't allow herself to write about their relationship being over but deep in her heart she knew it was. The Wednesday night meetings helped her mask her feelings. She read every book, poem, and essay Virginia Woolf ever wrote. She started reading Amy Tan's books and researched Chinese history and the place of women in Chinese culture. She spent hours and hours at the college library in the section about China. One night as she sat at one of the huge

tables in the back of the library, on the second floor, a young man approached her.

“Hi. My name is Mark. I’ve seen you around campus and I’ve wanted to meet you” he said quietly.

“Hi. My name is Allison. My friends call me Ally.” She said.

“You are the only other Asian student I have seen on campus.” He said.

“I guess it’s just you and I.” Ally laughed quietly.

“Are you adopted?” he asked.

“Yes. And you?” she said.

“Yup, I was two when I came to this country. My natural parents were killed in an accident. At least that’s what I was told. It is very hard to adopt Chinese boys you know.” He said. “No other relatives showed up to claim me so I was adopted by my parents. I grew up in Coventry.” he said.

“I know where that is.” Ally said. “Are you a freshman?”

“No, I am a sophomore this year. Do you live on campus?” he asked.

“No, I live at home.” Ally liked him. He was kind of cute. She liked the way his hair spiked up. He had kind eyes and a giant smile. She had never given any thought to how many Asians there were on campus. She was accustomed to being different and she didn’t pay much attention to race or color. It had been difficult when she was growing up but her heritage became less and less important as time went by and she rarely thought about it at all anymore. She and Mark left the library that night and went to the coffee shop on campus. They talked until after ten.

“Can I call you?” he asked.

“I’d like that” she said. She scribbled her phone number on a piece of notebook

paper and handed it to him. He walked her to her car and stood as she got in. Mark touched her face gently and kissed her. Ally stood, looking up at him. She knew. He was the one. She waved as she drove away watching him in her rear view mirror. When she got home she rushed to her room, opened her journal and started writing.

The following day he called her, as he did every day thereafter. It wasn't long before she stopped writing to Evan and he to her. That chapter in her life was over. She and Mark soon became inseparable and her folks were pretty happy about her new relationship. They asked her to invite him over for dinner one night, much to her surprise. They liked him immediately and Ally was thrilled. She sensed that her parents never really approved of Evan even though they never said so out loud. Ally was walking on air these days. It came as a surprise to her as she reread her journals one day that her problem had pretty much solved itself. She didn't hate Evan anymore. She had found someone who was much more suited to her and she was so happy, so very happy.

On the other side of town things were not quite so bright.

Chapter Fifteen

It was a cold, bitter day in January. Maggie called Harriet and asked her to open the store. Maggie had a terrible cold and just couldn't go in that day. Harriet said she would go down and work all day if Maggie wanted her to. Maggie was so lucky to have Harriet. It was dreary and wickedly cold out and she doubted if there would be many customers.

Maggie pulled the covers back up over her head. The house was quiet. She went back to sleep for awhile but forced herself to get out of bed. She made herself a cup of coffee and headed for her room to putter around. She opened the closet and started taking out the boxes she had stacked in there last fall. Don had insisted that she get some of her old boxes out of the garage. She pulled them all out and opened the first one. Inside she found her high school yearbooks. She sat in her chair scanning the pages and enjoyed the memory flashbacks that took over with each turn of a page. She had forgotten about most of these people. Where do you suppose they all are? She knew a few still lived in Oxbridge but most had moved away. There were two kinds of people in Oxbridge; those who wouldn't think of leaving and those who couldn't get away fast enough. She opened another yearbook and inside the front cover was a flattened, dried, yellow rose. Don had given her that rose. It was the first flower she ever received and her mother told her she should press it in a book.

She looked at the faded bloom. It was dry and brittle but the memory of that night came alive. She smiled and a tear rolled down her cheek. She dug deeper in the box and found her diaries. She had totally forgotten about her journals. She laughed out loud as she read what she had written so many, many years ago. How totally silly and foolish she

had been at age fifteen. She wasn't much better at eighteen but she remembered vividly how she felt on graduation night. It was a milestone in her life. It was the end of innocence and meaningless friendships. It was the beginning of adulthood.

She and Don were married one year later, to the day. She read about her aspirations to be a great artist. She opened the second box and found a brittle manila folder. It was her artwork. She couldn't believe she had saved it! She remembered drawing every picture and felt the memory of each brush stroke deep inside her mind. It had a certain style, she thought, whatever it was. She remembered mixing the colors together and seeing the results. One picture was of her mother's garden and the beautiful flowers her mother grew. She missed her mother terribly. Another tear ran down Maggie's cheek and she grabbed a tissue to wipe the tear and her nose. They were good memories, she thought. She considered herself very lucky to still be married to the same wonderful man she had met so many years before, when they were children.

She and Don had known each other since they were six years old. They didn't live in the same neighborhood but they went to the same schools since first grade. It was in junior high that Don developed a crush on Maggie. She didn't give him a second look. Her true love was Scott Eldridge. By the time they were sophomores Scott was going steady with someone else and when Don asked her to the prom she thought, why not! At least she had a date. It was that night she fell hopelessly in love with him. He was in seventh heaven. He gave her his class ring at the end of junior year to wear on a chain around her neck. After high school the relationship continued and as soon as he saved enough money for an engagement ring he popped the question. Her parents and his parents weren't too excited about them getting married at such a young age but they went

along with it. She and Don were as much in love now as they were in high school. Her heart still skipped a beat for him.

When they were first married they lived in Don's parents' basement. They saved enough money after two years to buy the house they currently lived in. It was an older home but it was one they could afford. It was a typical Cape Cod style with a separate garage. Don added breezeway to connect the house and garage when the children were infants. He finished the basement for a playroom for the kids. They added a flagstone patio, more trees and shrubs and now the house was quite comfortable. It was located on Pine Street, eight blocks from Market Square. Maggie walked to the store when the weather was nice but during the winter she drove. Don now had his own insurance agency. He was his own boss and he liked it that way.

She sat with the contents of the boxes all around her, nose dripping and tears running down her cheeks. She gathered the contents and put them back in the boxes since it was almost three o'clock. She put the boxes back into the closet. She decided to take a shower and bake some cookies. It was a cookie baking day if ever there was one!

Maggie knew she had to paint. It was after looking at those pictures she did in high school that her creative juices started to flow. Every day when she was done with dinner she would go to her "room". She tried watercolors, oils, pastels, charcoal sketches and art pens. She filled page after page with sketches and color. She ordered a really nice easel off the Internet and set it up in her studio, as she now called it. Her mind was filled with brilliant colors and shapes. , Don said she was like an insane person. He seemed a little hurt at first that she wasn't sitting by his side watching television each night. After she showed him what she was doing, he was all for it. She seemed more passionate these

days, more alive! He envied her too. He didn't possess any talents like hers. He knew in high school she liked to draw but he didn't give it much thought. All he knew was she was the light of his life. If she wanted to paint and draw it was fine with him. The one truly great part of their relationship was they supported each other and stood by each other's side no matter what.

One Saturday morning Maggie was opening the store. She turned and spotted Brenda walking towards her. She stopped to wave to her but Brenda's face was beet red and the scowl on her face made Maggie decide not to pursue anything more than a wave. She was a strange one, Maggie thought. They had been meeting every Wednesday evening for months and she didn't feel like she really knew Brenda at all. Brenda was nice enough but she had an invisible wall built around her that was impenetrable. Maggie paused as Brenda passed. Brenda was muttering under her breath as she walked by. Maggie strained to understand what she was saying but it sounded like gibberish. Brenda's head was bent down towards the sidewalk. She didn't even look Maggie's way. Her walk was almost a stomp. She walked quickly and each foot hit the cement with force. Maggie couldn't imagine what was going on. After she got the front door unlocked she called Corrine.

"I just saw Brenda and I'm worried about her." Maggie said a little frantically.

"Why?" Corrine asked.

Maggie described what she had just seen and Corrine sounded worried too.

"I think she's having some problems at home. I'll give her a call later. Thanks for the heads up. I worry about her too. She's really sweet if you get to know her but I know she doesn't let many people in." Corrine said.

“That’s for sure.” Maggie said. She and Corrine exchanged pleasantries and hung up. Maggie opened the store and greeted the first customer of the day. She never gave the incident a second thought until after the funeral, months later.

Maggie’s portfolio continued to grow. Besides her painting she was religious about her journaling. She didn’t find writing as strenuous as she had a few months earlier. The words and ideas just came. It was as if her mind was connected directly to her pen through her hand. Occasionally she would reread what she had written and she was surprised to see how her vocabulary was growing. Some of what she had written sounded like a totally different person, a smarter person. She must have written it because it was her handwriting.

Corrine liked Maggie. She saw a lot of potential and was anxious to see some of Maggie’s artwork. This group was taking on a personality of its own. She had found with her previous book clubs the personality differences of each group gave the group a unique quality. This group was especially different because of the age differences. Ally was only eighteen and Harriet was over sixty-five. It made for some interesting discussions.

They had spent a lot of time talking about the liberation of women. Harriet was from a generation Ally had only read about so the questions and exchanges between those two made for a lively evening. Brenda still held back. She kept it all in and Corrine sensed her stress level was rising as the months passed. Corrine had Brenda over for dinner frequently. She suspected she was the only person Brenda could talk to and Corrine was glad she could be there for her.

In the late spring, Corrine called Brenda’s home to see if she was up for dinner.

Brenda's mother answered the phone.

"Mrs. Jenkins, its Corrine Kellogg. Is Brenda there?" she asked.

"No. She isn't. I don't know where she is." Ruth said. There was an edge to her voice and she didn't sound like she wanted to talk.

"Ruth, I am a little worried about Brenda." Corrine said.

Ruth's voice softened. "I am too. She is so angry with me all the time. I don't know what to do." It sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

"I'm aware that Brenda has some anger issues." Corrine said.

"Anger issues don't even begin to cover it! She is always mad, especially at me." Ruth said sharply.

"I know it must be difficult. Brenda is still working on some very serious issues." Corrine said.

"What kind of issues are you talking about?" Ruth said defensively.

"I don't want to break her confidence. She and I share some common history and I think that's why we get along so well." Corrine said quietly.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Ruth's voice rose and she was noticeably agitated. "Brenda has had a long history of mental issues. She suffers from depression. Are you depressed?"

"That wasn't what I meant. Brenda and I have talked about the difficulties she had because of her father."

"Her father?! Her father was a fine human being. I know she has some strange notion he was mean to her but I can tell you that just wasn't true. He was the kindest person I ever knew. Brenda should honor the dead and quit dwelling on things that never

happened.” On that note she ended the conversation.

Corrine sat staring at the phone. She couldn’t believe Ruth hung up on her. Corrine decided to go for a walk. She put Owens’s leash on him and they headed out the door. They walked briskly down the street and headed for the harbor. It had been awhile since they had gone to the ocean. Owen loved the water. Corrine struggled to keep up with him. He obviously knew where they were going. As she turned the corner to Oak Street, she spotted Brenda walking slowly near the pier.

“Brenda!” Corrine hollered.

Brenda turned around and saw Corrine headed her way. Corrine could tell Brenda wanted to run in the opposite direction but she smiled and quickly caught up to her.

“Hello! I just called your house to see if you wanted to come over for dinner tonight.” Corrine said.

“Oh, I’d rather not, if you don’t mind. I’m not feeling very sociable right now.” Brenda said. She didn’t look at Corrine but instead just stared at the ocean. Her head was glued to her chest looking down at the ground..

“Brenda, is everything alright? Your mother sounded a little upset when we spoke.” Corrine said.

“We had an argument.” Brenda said raising her chin and staring out at the ocean.

“I understand. Is there anything I can do to help?” Corrine said.

“No. My mother doesn’t want to hear anything I have to say.” Brenda’s voice quaked. She had been crying. She pulled a handkerchief out of her purse and covered her face.

“Brenda. I know it’s hard. My mother never would believe me either. To the day

she died she insisted that my grandfather was the salt of the earth. In her mind he was the kindest, smartest, hardest working person she ever knew. She wouldn't face what had happened." Corrine spoke softly as she put her arm around Brenda's shoulder. "She never really accused me of lying but she sure didn't want to hear anything about my feelings. I went to counseling for years to come to terms with it. I finally decided that deep down inside she knew I was telling the truth but it was too much for her to believe that her own father could do such a thing. It took me years but I finally let it go." Corrine paused. "Brenda, I know that someday you'll be able to move on. What happened to you was a terrible thing but you can't let it ruin your life. You can't let it continue to define who you are. You are so smart and so pretty. You have sunny days ahead of you if you just find a way to close the past." Corrine said trying to be encouraging.

"I know that you're right but it's so hard. I should never have come back to Oxbridge. I really do appreciate everything you've said." Brenda wiped her eyes with her hand. "It is good to have a friend like you. I know I'll figure it out in time. Thanks again." Brenda said. She stood up and just silently, quickly walked away her head down and shoulders slumped forward disappearing into the evening.

Corrine sat for awhile thinking about Brenda. She hoped Brenda and Ruth could work it out. She had to admit that Ruth sounded pretty mad and hard-headed but perhaps with time she could understand Brenda better, at least she hoped so.

Chapter Sixteen

Spring turned into summer and clear blue skies. Crocuses bloomed, tulips opened up and the grass turned a beautiful shade of green. The breezes from the ocean filled the air. Spring always brought a smile to Corrine's face. She knew the school year would be ending soon. She would have another commencement ceremony to endure, kids packing up for the year and heading home. She would have a couple of weeks of finalizing her records and then the summer was hers to do with what she would. She and Walter were planning a trip. She was going to take him to her home town so he could see where she grew up. They both looked forward to getting away. It had been years since Walter had taken any time off.

He hired Ally to work in the bookstore for the summer. He never had a reason to hire any help before but now that Corrine was in his life he liked taking a day off here and there to spend time with her. The book club disbanded for the summer and agreed to start meeting again in September.

In late June the Town Planning Committee gathered to plan the annual 4th of July celebration. This would be Walter's seventeenth year on this board and he enjoyed helping make the event a fun time each year. Gimpy Shaw, the long time mayor, sat at the head of the conference table in the town hall. Walter looked around the conference table at the familiar faces, same people each year.

Miles Anderson Shaw was the mayor of Oxbridge. Miles was a tall, willowy thin man. He stood at least a head above any other citizen and in gatherings he was easy to spot. His thinning, blond hair, always blown by the wind, stood sticking up in all directions. He was almost comical to look at. When he was two he fell off his

grandfather's horse. He sustained a broken leg and suffered a permanent limp as a result of a bad healing process. His classmates teased him and called him Gimpy. He resented the name at first but came to see it as a term of endearment. It didn't seem too appropriate when he was elected mayor but the name was as much a part of him as the leg was.

Gimpy Shaw was an only child of an only child. His great-great-great grandfather was one of the original settlers of the town. His grandfather had been the head of the town council for many years. Gimpy married his college sweetheart, Linda Hollister. They had two lovely children, both married and both living right in Oxbridge. Gimpy had been the mayor since he was 32. He was the youngest mayor Oxbridge ever elected. He had good sense and was somewhat of a visionary for Oxbridge. He knew how to play the political game and he played it well. He had kept the mayoral position for twenty five years. The town loved him and he loved the town.

Walter sat along with the other loyal members of the planning committee as they mapped out the parade route and finalized the program at the park. This year they hired a new pyrotechnic firm to do the fireworks and they appropriated a sizeable increase in the amount they would spend on fireworks. The parade route never changed and neither did any of the floats or groups that marched in the parade. Walter sat there wishing he could change the whole plan just to stir things up but he knew he would be met with incredible resistance if he even suggested changing anything. It didn't take long to be done with the planning which left plenty of time for Walter to get home and make plans with Corrine.

Walter walked home. It was a nice June day and he liked walking along Water Street. As he turned the corner at the Post Office he ran into Brenda.

"Hello." he said as he stepped out of the way to avoid bumping into her.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Howe ” Brenda said. She looked down at the sidewalk avoiding eye contact.

“What a great day, don’t you think?” Walter said. “Say would you care to join me for a Coke or some iced tea? “

“Oh, sure, I guess so.” Brenda said. They walked along, side by side, and stopped at the deli. Walter opened the door for her. Brenda commented on his manners.

“I guess you can thank my mother for that. She made sure that I always did the mannerly thing. I miss her some times.” Walter said as he held the door open for her.

“So, how is your summer going? Is the bookstore busy during the summer months?” Brenda said.

“Actually things do slow down some when the college kids leave. But, I still have a lot of regular customers. I understand that you ladies are taking the summer off from the book club.” He said.

“Yes. I miss the club. It has been a lot of fun and I enjoy the other ladies, especially Corrine.” Brenda smiled.

“Corrine is pretty special. So, what are you doing this summer? Are you and your mother taking a vacation?” He said.

“No. Oh no. My mother and I live sort of separate lives. I was hoping to go visit my sister in California but it doesn’t look like it will work out this year. I am planning to move out of my mother’s house and find something of my own. I am still undecided about what I want to do with the rest of my life.” Brenda said. She paused and looked out the window. Walter sensed that she drifted away somewhere.

“Shall we order?” Walter said. The waitress took their orders and quickly returned

with the beverages.

“Do you have any idea of what you would like to do?” Walter asked. He was hoping he could draw her out. Brenda always seemed to be reaching out for help but whenever Walter tried to help her she withdrew. He wanted to be of some help if he could. Corrine and he had talked about Brenda a lot.

“I wish I did. I have thought about going to college but I don’t think I am smart enough.” Brenda ventured. “I didn’t do that well in high school.”

“Brenda I think going back to school is a great idea. I have given some thought to doing that myself. I already have a degree but I would love to just take a few classes. I have heard it’s easier to go back to college when you’re older. You have better focus and more determination. I am sure Corrine could give you some help if you want to go to Stanton.” Walter said.

“I’ll ask her about it. I haven’t decided whether I want to stay in Oxbridge. I was thinking about moving out west again. Maybe to California near where my sister lives. I just haven’t decided.” Walter sensed that Brenda was getting anxious. “Well, I had better get home. My mother wanted to go do some shopping. Thanks for the company.” She suddenly got up and left leaving Walter a little surprised. Walter thought it strange but, that was Brenda, he supposed. He paid the check and walked home.

Every Fourth of July the town had a parade that ended at the cemetery where taps was played just before the fireworks display turned the sky shades of white, in explosive joy to the amazement and wonder of all who attended.

Fourth of July arrived and the parade went as expected. Walter and Corrine sat on their blanket under the oldest Elm Tree in Oxbridge at the edge of the park. The sun had

gone down and now it was just a matter of time before it was dark enough for the fireworks. Walter told her the fireworks display this year would be spectacular. They chatted and laughed as they waited. As they sat, they turned to the left to see Brenda walking alone at the edge of the crowd. Corrine hollered her name and she turned. She gave a half smile and turned and headed in the opposite direction. Brenda scurried away as if she didn't want to be seen.

The first boom was heard and Walter and Corrine watched as the sky lit up with explosion after explosion. The crowd did the usual "ahhhhh's and oooooh's" as they watched in wonder. Walter loved it.

"Did you have a cap gun when you were a kid?" Corrine asked.

"Absolutely! Didn't everyone? My father would come home with boxes of caps and my brother and I played cowboys and Indians for hours. I love 4th of July. It was more fun when you could actually buy your own fireworks but this is fun too." Walter said. He held her hand. "What did you do on the fourth when you were a kid?" he asked.

"Since I was an only child I just played with the neighborhood kids. I loved sparklers the most." She said.

"Wait here!" Walter said and got up. Before she could say anything he was off towards the concession stands. He returned with a box of sparklers in one hand and a big grin on his face.

The fire department was a volunteer one. Every man worth his salt was a member. They trained one weekend a month and once a year they went to Boston for classroom lectures and training on the latest firefighting and life rescue techniques. In twenty years the town had only one fire. The Henderson's house over on Fern Street had a kitchen fire.

The team rallied and rushed to put the fire out in record time. How proud the townsfolk were of their men. The roster of firemen was up to thirty seven, last count. Should a fire occur, a loud, sharp siren signaled the men to hasten to the fire house where they quickly donned their apparel and rushed to the needs of the situation. Everyone in Oxbridge was proud of this team. The Fire Chief, Leonard "Red" Schulte, was the proudest. Red got his name from his hot temper and flaming red hair. He calmed down as the years passed. The red hair turned grayish blond but, he kept the name and most people forgot what his real name was, they just called him Red.

Walter said, "I know the fire chief and the pyro-technician. They had a few boxes of sparklers left after the kid's hour." He pulled one out along with a cigarette lighter he borrowed to light the sparkler. "For you my queen!" He said, bowing gallantly. Corrine took the sparkler and watched it burn to the bottom. "Let's light another!" They laughed as they waived the sparklers around in the air like a couple of kids.

The display lasted close to an hour. It was as brilliant as the pyro-technician had promised. Gimpy Shaw stood nearby with the biggest grin on his face evidencing his pride in having pulled off the extravaganza.

Walter and Corrine gathered their blanket and walked hand in hand to Corrine's house. Walter just couldn't imagine life getting much better than it was at that moment, except for being married, of course.

Brenda stood alone behind a tree not far from Corrine and Walter. How happy they looked. A large tear ran down her cheek and she quickly brushed it away with her hand. Anger rushed over her and replaced the sadness she was feeling. Her jaws tightened and her body stiffened. She felt rigid. Her fists were clenched. She suddenly turned and

started walking towards the bay. It was dark and she could hear the waves crashing on the shoreline. She walked to her favorite spot; a place where the huge rocks lined up forming a jetty. It was her place. She felt the cool breeze of the ocean. She could sit there amidst the rocks, unnoticeable to anyone walking by. Although she noted there weren't a lot of people at the ocean after the fireworks. They all went home with their families. She came to this spot often to be alone. It helped her clear her head. She watched as the waves broke against the rocks below over and over. The water foamed as the waves receded back into the Atlantic. The moonlight cast a white reflection on the water. She was drawn to the movement of the waves and it made her relax. She had no idea how long she sat there watching the water. Her thoughts were garbled with memories of the past, fear of the future and confusion of the present. She fought back the tears as she faced her reality. Here she was, thirty three years old, filled with undeniable, uncontrollable rage and nowhere to go. She hated living with her mother but she was afraid to leave. Where would she go? The force holding her there was so strong, it was magnetic and unbreakable. There was no knight in shining armor ready to take her away from this hell. She wanted adventure, romance, excitement but she wasn't the type that attracted those elements. She was boring. She was dull. She was terrified of closeness. Inside her was a tangled mass of emotions. Love, hate, compassion, freedom, anxiety, depression, anger, madness...all woven together and impossible to pull apart; no matter how much counseling she got it never made a difference. What good did it do to rehash the past? Her mother, her own mother didn't believe her!! Her fucking bitch of a mother who had affairs with other men, who ignored her children in their time of need, who smiled that foolish smile – Brenda wanted to slap her face.. She thought Brenda didn't

know about the other men. She saw her mother and the Fire Chief of all people. They were coming out of a motel in Westwood. Mothers didn't have affairs. She was fifteen at the time. She and her friends had gone for a little joy ride. Her friends didn't see the cars but she did. When she got home she watched her mother serve her father his dinner so graciously, smiling as she piled his plate with mashed potatoes and put the perfectly cooked roast beef in front of him. Her in her little ruffled apron thinking she was Betty Crocker. Brenda sat at the table wanting to throw the bowl at her mother's face. Her father, drunk as usual, screamed orders to her mother and Brenda sat as her mother dutifully obeyed, the smile never leaving her face. What a hypocrite she was! That night her parents had a horrendous argument. She heard the frying pan hit the wall in the kitchen and she lay in bed with the covers over her head. The door to her bedroom flew open and he stood there in the doorway. She knew what was coming and she was hoping if she laid really still, feigning sleep, maybe he wouldn't bother her. She prayed silently. He slammed the door and went down the hall. She could hear them but she laid there silent and thankful. Maybe if her mother wasn't such a slut he wouldn't do what he did! She had heard their fights over the years. It wasn't the first affair her mother had. She knew that. She didn't recognize the names her father screamed out but even when she was eight and nine she knew. She knew what her mother had done. That bitch!!

Brenda calmed herself down. She took deep breaths and let the sea air fill her lungs. She liked the smell of the salt water and the way the mist formed on her face as the waves came in and crashed on the sand. She pulled herself up and climbed over the rocks to the shore. She knew it was late and she headed home. The streets were empty and she enjoyed the quiet darkness of the early morning.

Chapter Seventeen

The Trask house was located on the corner of School Street and Mill Road. Ruth Trask Jenkins lived in the house her entire life. It was a small frame house built in the early 1900's by her grandfather. It was on a corner lot and sat close to School Street on the front of the house and High Street on the side. Window boxes filled with petunias and marigolds were mounted to every window of the first floor of the dwelling. Ruth maintained the tradition started by her mother so many years ago. The house had a gingerbread look to it because of the remodeling her husband had done back in the fifties, right after they were married. Both of Ruth's parents died in a car accident the year before she met Ed Jenkins. Since she was an only child she inherited the place.

Ruth was petite with light brown hair and stunning green eyes. She was shy around boys and hadn't dated much. She would go out with her friends occasionally. She was completely lost after her parents died so suddenly. She was grateful to have met Ed Jenkins. He worked at the marina and she found him very handsome. She was so shy and quiet it was a miracle they ever met. But, thanks to Ruth's friend Mary Ann, they did meet and Ruth was swept off her feet. He was muscular, good looking and had a few coins in his pocket. He was considered a "good catch" at the time. Ruth thought Ed a financial genius. His job at the marina paid well. Ed was good with his hands. His father had been a mechanic and he taught Ed well. Ed's boss thought he walked on water. They only dated for a few months and then went down to city hall, got the marriage license and that was that. Ruth realized halfway through her second pregnancy in four years that he wasn't the "catch" she thought he was. After they had been married for about three years when the trouble started. Ruth was pregnant with Brenda when Ed

came home drunk one Friday night. They had a terrible argument that lasted well into the night. At least once a week Ed came home drunk, a fight would ensue and the pattern was set. It never changed. Finally, Ruth anticipated the argument and pretended to be asleep when he came in to avoid the conflict. He was a good provider and she knew he loved her and she loved him. He wasn't a model father but he was devoted to Ruth and the girls. Ruth never for one minute thought her life could be better and divorce never entered her mind. The marriage had not been a dream one. It was filled with verbal abuse and alcoholism. Ruth saw no other choice but to stick out the marriage. It's what her parents would have expected and she had no close friends or relatives to advise her. Connie and Brenda were the joy of her life. She was so proud of her girls and they both knew it. When Brenda was fourteen and Connie fifteen things changed. She wasn't sure what happened but when Ed died of liver disease at age 44 she felt a sense of relief. Not a lot of people showed up to mourn his passing.

After Ed died, she evaluated her financial situation. She concluded she needed to work. She was okay financially but she would need a little extra to meet her budget and she was lonely. She devoted most of her adult life to the caring for her home, husband and children. She had no idea of who she really was. She took some classes at the local college and landed a job as a bank teller at the bank. She loved her job. The people she worked with became her world along with the customers. Working proved to be just what her life was lacking – a purpose outside the home. She hadn't realized how boring her life had become before Ed died. Working at the bank made her a different person. She took on a whole new persona and she wore it well.

Connie was the first to leave, being the oldest. She got along fine with Connie and

they were very close at times. She knew that Connie was anxious to experience the world and Ruth didn't try to stop her. She envied Connie's spunk, a quality she didn't possess. Brenda was another story. Brenda had been difficult. Brenda jumped for joy when her father died. It hurt Ruth but she understood. Ed was harder on Brenda than Connie. Brenda was definitely not as strong as Connie. Sometimes it was a total mystery how two sisters so close in age could be so totally different.

Things went along pretty well until Brenda was fourteen and then, it all changed. Ruth was never certain what went on but Brenda became almost impossible to deal with. Ruth and Brenda fought incessantly. If Ruth said black, Brenda said white and the battle started. Brenda could be the sweetest person on earth one minute and a rabid dog the next. Ruth was relieved when Brenda met Bill. The romance seemed to settle her down some. Ruth was thrilled to pay for the wedding and even more thrilled when they announced they were moving out West. Ruth endured the wrath of Brenda for more years than she needed. It was time for Brenda to move on and for her own life to settle down.

She was able to save some money over the years and when Brenda moved back home she had the house paid off and she was debt free. Ruth's life couldn't have been better. She had grown to value her privacy. It had taken time to adjust but she liked living alone. She had a few friends at the bank where she worked. She busied herself with her garden and her friends. She was looking forward to retirement. She worked her way up to assistant manager in her years at the bank and she was hoping to do some traveling when she retired. She always wanted to see England and Italy. She sent away for tour information and her desk was covered with brochures from Trafalgar, Rick Steves and others. It would be a few years but she was dreaming about her trip and it

didn't cost anything to dream. Then Brenda returned and everything changed.

Brenda didn't really wanted to move back home to Oxbridge. It was not her first choice but she didn't know what else to do. She couldn't stay in Phoenix. She didn't have a lot of close friends. She and Bill had managed to hold it together for twelve years and when the marriage unraveled it did so with speed and efficiency. One day they were eating breakfast and within what seemed like a few short weeks they had drawn up the paperwork, sold the house and parted. It was just that simple. The marriage hadn't been quite that simple but the divorce was. She arrived at her mother's doorstep with her luggage and the rental agreement on her storage unit.

Brenda was back for just a few weeks when Ruth started gently nudging her to get a job. She could tell Brenda was having a hard time since the divorce. Ruth felt having a job to go to every day might be just what the doctor ordered. At least, she hoped it was.

Brenda moved back into her old bedroom. It hadn't changed much in the years since she left at eighteen. Ruth had always meant to paint it and buy some new furniture for it but it just wasn't a priority for her. She would get to it one of these days. The house was small but comfortable. Ruth had only herself to please so when the living room furniture wore out she bought what she liked. She had a lovely blue flowered sofa and matching chair. A recliner that went with the sofa and chair, a nice oriental type carpet over the hard wood floors and the lamps and other items she had acquired over a number of years. Every time she walked through the living room she smiled. She really liked having a room filled with furniture and things she loved. When Ed was alive he picked out everything. Sometimes he made her feel like she didn't have a brain in her head. Working at the bank changed that perception. Ruth had a natural knack for numbers and

for multi-tasking. She was so efficient the manager took her under her wing. Ruth was so proud when she made assistant manager she went out and bought four new suits with all the matching items – shoes, purses, jewelry and scarves. She was on top of the clouds. She hadn't realized how much Ed had put her down. For the first time in her life she felt a sense of pride and freedom.

Brenda couldn't believe when she arrived in Oxbridge that nothing had really changed, even her old bedroom. She arrived at the end of August from her European vacation. When she arrived from Phoenix she stayed only long enough to put her furniture and boxes in storage. She then left immediately for the airport. Now she was settling in she couldn't believe her mother hadn't even changed the bedspread on her bed. It was still the same. Everything in the room was still exactly the same. She stood in the doorway looking at it all. She was overcome with memories of high school, junior high, childhood experiences and other unpleasant events. She felt rage start to boil in her gut. She caught herself and before it could erupt she headed out of the house. She walked briskly down the street to the Market Square area. She paused to look in the store windows. This part of the town changed at least. The Market Square wasn't there when she was in high school. She liked this even though it was still Oxbridge and still New England.

After wandering around for an hour she found herself staring at the window of the Bayside Book Store. She opened the door and walked in. The owner, Walter, smiled at her and asked if she needed any help. He seemed nice enough. She really wasn't sure why she stopped at a bookstore of all places. She enjoyed reading. There was a time when she read a lot of books. She hadn't done much reading lately although she wasn't

sure why. She supposed she really didn't have time.

When she and Bill were married she was always working. She first worked with him in the jewelry store his parents owned. When he was tired of doing that, they each got their own jobs. He always had an interest in real estate so he went to work for a realtor. He got his license and was doing really well. He liked selling real estate and had a natural sales personality. She, on the other hand, wasn't as outgoing as he was. She preferred not to be dealing with other people and got a job with a map company. They taught her how to use the computer and sent her to school to learn the graphics so she could create maps. It was a solitary, intense job. The days went by quickly and she was grateful she didn't have to talk to anyone. That's what made it so perfect for her. It was the kind of job that totally absorbing preventing her from thinking of other things.

She chatted with Walter for a short time. She liked him. He was easy to talk to and she found him to be interesting. He talked her into buying a journal and a couple of books by Virginia Woolf. She thanked him for his guidance and walked home to start reading. She went straight to her bedroom and sat down at the very same desk she had done her homework at so many years before. A flood of memories about high school rushed over her. She recalled every teacher and every class she took. Her face changed from a quiet smile to contorted rage. There were some good memories of high school but most of her recollections didn't fall into that category. She pulled out the journal she had purchased and wrote:

I hated high school! It fucking sucked! I hate my mother! I hate my sister! I hate my life!

Once she started, the words poured out like a gushing faucet. The juvenility of her

language turned more mature and the words flowed smoothly on the paper as she vented her life, page after page. She suddenly transported herself back in time and all the anger, the hurt, the emotions that lay dormant for so long resurfaced with a vengeance so intense it became uncontrollable. She wrote in a script, not her usual neat penmanship, and filled page after page with hatred and malice. She became someone she forgot existed except for those rare moments when the rage consumed her. The rage turned in to tirades of foul language directed at anyone in her way. She hated it when the force took over. It scared her as much as it did those around her. Bill didn't know quite what to do with her. Early in their marriage he could usually cajole her out of it but as the years went by the episodes became more frequent and intense. She refused to be treated and after twelve years, he knew it wasn't something he could deal with for the rest of his life. He had no idea how to end the marriage. No one was more surprised than he was when she did it for him. He never knew what her motivation was but, when she asked for a divorce he didn't argue. She wanted the marriage over and that was that. She didn't argue about a settlement. They simply split everything down the middle. When the house was sold and, the divorce finalized she disappeared out of his life, vanished. He had no idea of where she went, she was just gone. At times it was as if she never existed.

Brenda looked at the clock and it was past eight. She wasn't hungry while she was writing but now she was famished. She opened the refrigerator to see what there was to eat. Her mother walked in with take-out from the Chinese restaurant. "Hi!" she said. "Would you like some lemon chicken?"

"Gosh, mom, you must be a mind reader. I've been reading and I lost track of time. I was just looking to see what there was to eat. Where have you been? I thought

you usually got home at five-thirty.”

“Normally I would but, I went out for a cup of coffee with Alice and time got away from me too. I stopped at the Rose Garden and got some lemon chicken. Here let’s just split it. They always have such huge portions. I can never eat it in one sitting. You get the plates and I’ll get us a couple of sodas from the garage.” Ruth said.

“That sounds great!” Brenda said. She had regained her composure and felt like a new person. It was the quiet, friendly Brenda now.

They sat down at the kitchen table and ate their meal. “So, what did you do today?” Ruth asked.

“I walked to Market Square and did some window shopping. They’ve really done a nice job on the downtown. I love the cobblestones and the way they laid out the stores. It’s like a little village.” Brenda said.

“Yes. It is nice. It’s better than those huge malls and shopping centers they have closer to Boston. I get so overwhelmed when I go to the malls. I like small town life better, don’t you?” Ruth asked.

“I miss the malls but small towns can be fun, I suppose.” Brenda said. A twinge of anger rose in her but she fought hard to keep it in check. No she didn’t really like small town life and she really didn’t like Oxbridge but, since she didn’t want to start an argument she kept her opinions to herself.

“I meant to call you today. There is an insurance agency two doors down from the bank that’s looking for a receptionist. I told Marge, she’s the office manager that you would stop down tomorrow to talk to her.” Ruth said.

“Well, I guess you do want me out of here fast.” Brenda said. “I can take a hint.”

“I never said that, Brenda. I just think it would be good for you to go back to work. I think you need something to fill your days.” Ruth said.

“So, what are you saying? You want me to move out?” Brenda was getting agitated and she stood up ready for battle.

“I didn’t say that! I am just trying to help you honey.” Ruth knew she better change subjects quickly if she didn’t want an argument. “Did you see the news tonight? Ben Hall has announced his retirement. After forty years! Can you imagine? I don’t know who they will ever get to replace him. I suppose it will be Gerry Matson, he’s next in line. I never liked him. He’s kind of mean.” Ruth knew she was rambling but she just needed to buy herself a few minutes.

“Shut the fuck up!” Brenda screamed. “Just shut up!”

Ruth knew what was next. Brenda had been taken over by the beast. That’s what Ruth called it when Brenda was like this. Ruth better figure out how to deflect the venom or it was going to be a long night.

“Okay honey, just calm down. I think I’m going to bed now. I’ve had a headache all day. I’ll see you in the morning.” Ruth headed for the doorway.

“You’re not going anywhere you old bag! I hate your fucking guts!” Brenda screamed. She followed Ruth down the hallway staying right on her heels. Ruth tried to walk faster.

“Brenda, now calm down. I was just being helpful.” Ruth said, her voice shaking.

The phone rang. Ruth rushed to answer it. “Connie! It’s so great to hear your voice! How are you?” Ruth sighed in relief. Brenda glared at her and stomped upstairs. Ruth talked to her other daughter for about thirty minutes and then went straight to her

room. Why did she let Brenda move back in? What had she been thinking? She brushed her teeth and slid under the covers. I hope she moves out soon. I don't know if I can deal with this again, she thought.

The following morning, Ruth got up before Brenda and hurried off to her job at the bank. She hoped Brenda would go talk to Marge. If Brenda met some people and had a job maybe it would be better. At least that's what she hoped.

Brenda got up and headed down to the kitchen. She felt bad about her outburst last night. Maybe she should go talk to her mother's friend Marge. Her mother was probably right. It would be good for her if she had a job. She got her coffee, headed upstairs for a shower. She was ready to go within an hour. It was such a nice fall day she would walk to the insurance agency. The cool air would be energizing.

She headed towards the Village Green and noticed a lady walking a cute dog. She and the lady approached each other and the lady spoke. "Isn't it a lovely day?" she asked. Brenda hesitantly replied. "Yes, it is." They each went their own way. Brenda walked into the agency, introduced herself to the lady sitting at the front desk, who turned out to be Marge. They had a pleasant thirty minute conversation and when Brenda left, she was employed. Well, that was quick, she thought. She would start on Monday. Great! Brenda walked along the north side of Market Square and went into the craft store. She browsed for awhile and purchased an embroidery kit. This should keep her hands busy, she thought. She left the store and without even realizing where she was, she found herself looking in the window of the Bayside Book Store again. There, in the window, was a poster about a book club that was starting next week. They would be studying Virginia Woolf. Brenda already finished *To the Lighthouse* so she went in and bought four more

Virginia Woolf books. She found she really liked Virginia Woolf's style. Walter seemed nice enough but, in some ways, he made her uncomfortable. He was just too nice. She walked at a crisp pace home and sat down in the big comfy chair in the den. The flowered sofa in the living room gave her the creeps. She started reading and fell asleep.

She found herself in a room. The room had no doors. How did she get here? There were no windows either. On the walls were pictures of her father. They were all over the place. Every wall was covered with his face. Brenda was trapped, she started screaming but nothing came out. She threw herself into the walls. She thrashed and thrashed and screamed and screamed. It was incredibly dark. It got darker and darker. She ran and ran and ran. There was no light. Suddenly, as she was running as fast as she could, she hit a brick wall!

Brenda awoke. She sat straight up in bed. She was drenched in sweat and couldn't catch her breath. She went to the bathroom to splash some water on her face. She looked in the mirror and saw a tear sliding down her cheek. That bastard! Fuck him! Rot in hell!

She gathered the book she was reading in headed up to her room. She sat at her desk and took out the journal.

I had another bad dream. I hate that bastard. I was glad when he died. He could never hurt me again. I hate d his hands on me, his breath, and his liquor mouth. I can still feel it and my mother did nothing! Bitch! I don't know what did wrong. I loved my father when I was six. I thought he was a God! Then it all changed, he changed, I changed. My innocence was gone and I felt so alone, so dirty and alone. There was nowhere to hide. I hid in the bottom of my closet after school. My mother never knew where I was. I hid behind my shoes and hoped he wouldn't find me. I wish that I had an older brother to protect me. I remember my first Barbie doll.

She was so pretty and then he ripped her head off and threw her across the room. I put her in the trash behind the school so my mother wouldn't know. I told her that I lost the doll. I don't understand how he could be so mean! I just don't understand.

Loving lies brought down on me,

Loving lies that none could see.

Crying eyes, all red and sad,

Crying tears wrapped up in mad.

Hateful men, on top of me

Hateful men, others don't see.

I will escape, I will, I will

And then the nights won't be in hell.

She wrote for another hour and then took a shower. She was exhausted. Her eyes were still puffy from crying. She put a cold compress on them and carefully put on some eye makeup. Perhaps her mother wouldn't notice. Of course she wouldn't. *She never noticed anything*, Brenda thought. *She never has and she never will.*

Ruth arrived home at 5:30. Brenda made a salad and some pork chops for dinner. She wasn't the world's greatest cook but she could get by. She told her mother about the job. Ruth was thrilled. It would be nice having her right down the street. They could go to lunch together; Ruth would introduce her to the people at the bank. Brenda let her mother babble on thinking what a fool she was. Well, if it made her mother happy that was what counted. It would be okay for awhile. Maybe she would meet a nice man...

She decided on Wednesday to go to the book club. It might be fun to meet some other people. She arrived at the bookstore promptly at 7:00 pm. She saw that a group of ladies was sitting over in the corner in the overstuffed furniture. She walked up and noticed one of them was the lady she met who was walking her dog.

"Welcome to our group! I am Corrine Kellogg. Please have a seat," she said. She recognized, Harriet Pratt. She must be a hundred years old, she thought. Ally McCall was a very pretty young lady. Maggie Braden was nice. She vaguely remembered her. "Welcome to Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." Corrine said. "Let's go around the circle and introduce ourselves and tell us something unique about you." Brenda felt a little shy but she said she loved Jane Austen and James Patterson books. "Now there are two authors at opposite ends of the spectrum" Corrine smiled. Brenda felt a little unnerved but didn't comment. Take a deep breath she told herself. "I like to start each meeting with a quote from Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf once said '*If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people.*' What do you think about this?" Corrine said.

Maggie was the first to respond. "I think she's talking about being honest about your own emotions, being true to oneself."

Each lady had something different to say about the quote and then Corrine started a lecture about Virginia Woolf's life. Brenda was fascinated. Corrine certainly knew everything there was to know about her. Brenda regretted not going to college. She could have gone to Stanton but she wanted out of Oxbridge and away from the memories. She couldn't get out quick enough. Marriage to Bill did it beautifully. He wasn't a native New Englander so she knew it would be easy to talk him into leaving. In fact, she didn't have to talk at all. He was the one who brought it up first. When he asked if she would like to live in Phoenix, she had her bags packed and in the car so fast it made his head spin. He wasn't sure what it was all about but he was perfectly fine with it. He wasn't impressed with Oxbridge. It had a prison like feel to it. The people weren't very friendly and he felt like an outsider. They left Oxbridge three weeks after the wedding and never looked back. Brenda went back to visit her mother once a year and she occasionally visited her sister in California but she seemed much better, calmer if her contact with family was kept to a minimum.

Brenda liked the group. Corrine was so smart and all the ladies had something to say. After a few weeks Brenda started to relax in their company and she found Virginia Woolf was more than just interesting, she was fascinating. Brenda went to the library at the university a couple of times a week. She liked sitting among the students. She was so young looking they just assumed she was one of them. One of the boys even hit on her. He didn't believe she was thirty three but when she showed him her driver's license he beat it real fast. It was so nice and quiet in the library. She looked around at all the books, the huge study tables, the nooks and crannies where the students came to study kiss in the rows of volumes. She liked the feel of the rooms. She even thought she felt

smarter just being there. She could have gone to the town library but she liked this one better. There was just something special about being on the campus. She made arrangements to check books out, even if she wasn't a student. She found they had a huge section on Virginia Woolf. She started reading everything the women had ever written.

Brenda found herself at the library more and more. First she went on Saturday afternoons, then Saturday and Sunday and by Christmas she was at the library more nights than she was at home. One Thursday night she was sitting in her usual spot in the library, next to the magazine section when a young man approached. He looked familiar but she couldn't place him.

"Aren't you Brenda Jenkins?" He asked.

She felt her heart thump and she weakly whispered. "Yes."

"You probably don't remember me. I'm Dan Johnson. I graduated the year before you did. I knew your sister Connie."

"I haven't lived in Oxbridge for a long time." Brenda said.

"I know. I wish I could have moved out but I inherited the newspaper from my father..." Dan let the sentence trail off.

"Now I remember you. Yes. You lived over on Union Street, the yellow house."

Brenda said her face relaxing.

"Right, hey, would you like to go have coffee?" Dan stood up.

Brenda paused and thought why not. "Sure."

"I will meet you at Flo's. You know where the Bayside Bookstore is?" Dan asked.

"Yes, I know Flo's. I will see you there in a few minutes." Brenda stood and grabbed her coat.

She found herself a little excited. He seemed nice. She vaguely remembered him. It would be nice to have someone to talk to, she thought. She gathered her books and walked slowly out of the library. It was a little cold out but the cool air felt good on her face. She was at the door to the bookstore in less than five minutes. Walter stood there as usual. He smiled at her. Dan walked in right behind her and Walter smiled at him as well. The two sat down and Flo quickly filled their orders.

The local newspaper, The Oxbridge Chronicle, was run by Dan Johnson. Dan too was a local boy. He studied journalism at Boston College and aspired to be a world traveling kind of writer. He was forced to change his plans when his mother suffered a heart attack after his senior year. His dad asked if he could come home and help with the paper. Within two years both of his parents were gone and there he was. He couldn't just leave the town although that had been his plan since he was fourteen. Not a lot happened in the town but he managed to put out a weekly paper containing all of the stories the townsfolk valued and provided an advertising venue for the businessmen. Everyone in town subscribed and it was a good living for him. Now, at thirty five, he couldn't see himself anywhere else. Occasionally he submitted an article to the Boston Globe and they printed it. One of the editors even called and offered him a job but he couldn't accept it; it just wouldn't be right to leave his home town. He kept hoping to meet the right girl but that didn't happen either. He wanted a wife and children very much but he wasn't about to just settle for any old girl. He would just keep waiting and hope that the good Lord would see fit to bless him one day.

Brenda and Dan talked for what seemed like hours. They reminisced about high school, filled in the blank spots in their personal histories and promised to call each other

soon. Brenda left with a smile on her face and Dan was whistling as he closed the door.

Brenda and Dan saw each other several times over the next few weeks. They went to the movies, out to dinner in Gloucester and took some long walks. Things were going well. Dan was excited to have someone in his life. He found Brenda a little difficult to get close to but he was okay with that. He was in no big rush and he enjoyed her company. Just as quickly as the romance started, it ended. He had no idea what happened. He called her one day and she announced that she couldn't see him anymore. There was no explanation. She was very businesslike about her announcement. He was totally befuddled not to mention hurt. He was just starting to believe she was the one.

Brenda really liked Dan but she found her emotions difficult to control. He was just too nice. He tried to kiss her and something inside her snapped. It was all she could do to get through the date and she knew she couldn't continue. She was hearing voices again. The voices were screaming inside her head. She had to get control of herself.

Ruth was excited about Brenda and Dan. She was hoping Dan could make a difference in Brenda's life. She knew Brenda was having a rough spell. Ruth was successful in avoiding Brenda's outbursts so things were going well for the time being.

Month after month passed and Brenda became the foremost expert, after Corrine, in the group on Virginia Woolf. She wrote in her journal every day. Her writing took on a new style. She started writing about everything she read, all the people she worked with, and people on the street, shows she saw on television, anything she had an opinion about. In some ways she felt like she was becoming Virginia Woolf. She had Corrine read some of her poetry and Corrine really liked it. She suggested that Brenda look at Sylvia Plath's work. Brenda started reading Plath and loved it. Something inside her was changing but

she didn't understand it. It was wonderful. She was still having the bad dreams but she was able to write about them and she was feeling better.

She bought a special journal just for her poetry. It was a dark green color, leather bound with the Celtic cross engraved on the cover. She adored the book. The leather felt rich when she ran her hand over the cover. The edges of the pages were gold. The paper was high quality and her pen glided over the pages as she wrote line after line of verse.

As each week passed and the seasons changed, Brenda felt a new person emerging in her. She found she was enjoying her job at the insurance agency. She and her mother hadn't fought lately. Maybe she was getting better. She talked to her sister once a week and they laughed and joked. She was starting to like life for the first time in many years. And then, as suddenly as the weather can change, she changed.

She talked to Connie on Sunday afternoon. It was late September and the group was still meeting every Wednesday. She came to like the way Walter stood by, not commenting, just watching. She felt safe in his store. She felt she found a good friend in Walter. He wasn't judgmental like most of the other people in Oxbridge. He was just a nice safe friend and she really needed a nice safe friend. As the days passed she was finding the voices more difficult to control and the anger was simmering just below the surface. She wasn't sure how long she could maintain her sanity, the darkness was looming around each corner of her day.

Chapter Nineteen

Brenda's week started out like every other week. After the club met on Wednesday, she went home. She read until she fell asleep and woke up at 4:30 in the morning. She was drenched with perspiration. Her bed was a total shambles. *What the hell happened?* she thought. That was the strangest dream I have ever had. She stood looking at herself in the bathroom mirror. There was a scratch on her face, a fairly deep one. She was confused. Her face was pale. She had dark circles under her eyes. She walked down the hall past her mother's room. The door was closed. She quietly went down to the kitchen to make the coffee. She tried not to make any noise as she counted out the scoops for the coffee pot.

She dropped the metal scoop on the floor and when she bent down to pick it up she hit her head on the kitchen table. The table lifted up and when she stood up it hit the floor with a thud. *Oh, I hope I don't wake mom up,* she thought. The coffee started brewing and the aroma filled the kitchen. Nothing smelled better than coffee in the morning. It was 5:15. Her mother should be up soon. She sat at the table waiting for the sound of the shower upstairs. Nothing. She looked at the clock on the kitchen stove and it was 6:30. *Where is my mother?* Brenda walked upstairs and knocked on her mother's door. She didn't hear a sound. She carefully opened the door. She walked in to the room. She stood at the foot of her mother's bed and screamed. There was her mother, lying in the bed with the pillow over her head. *It wasn't a dream! It wasn't a dream!* She screamed "OH, MY GOD!!!! Mom! MOM!" She shook her mother but her mother's head just fell back on the bed. Her mother felt cold and stiff. *Oh, my God! What have I done?! What should I do?* Brenda was in an uncontrollable state of frenzy. She paced.

She kept going back to her mother's room hoping she would find her sitting up in bed. There was no one she could call, no one she could tell. They would never believe her. *What should I do?* Quickly, she wrapped her mother up like a papoose. With almost super-human strength she lifted her mother's lifeless body out of the bed. Somehow, she managed to get the body down to the basement. She was astounded at her own strength. She rushed back up the stairs and picked out her mother's favorite suit, a pair of shoes that matched the suit, jewelry, underwear, hose. She made the bed and cleaned the room from top to bottom. She was frantic. It was as if someone else was in control of her actions! It wasn't her! A confident calmness came over her. She slowed down and, like an organized office manager; she collected her thoughts and made a list of what she needed to do.

It was eight o'clock. She called her own office first.

"Marge? It's Brenda. Mom's not well and I need to stay home with her until she's okay. I don't know when I will be back to work. I will call you as soon as I know something!"

"Hi, this is Brenda, Ruth's daughter. Yes. Ruth isn't feeling well. I'm not sure when she will be back to work. I will call you as soon as I know what the doctor thinks." She said. "Yes. Thank you for your concern."

Brenda walked in slow motion around the house. She straightened up every room in the house. She cleaned the bathrooms humming as she worked. She was smiling a strange, contorted smile. She turned on the computer in the den and Googled - Body preservation and read what Wikipedia had to say. Salt was a preservative. She would pack the body in rock salt. She dressed and drove to the super market. The nearest

grocery store was two miles away. She walked in and bought three bags of rock salt.

“You must be preparing for a snowy winter”. The cashier said. “Yes.” she said smiling.

This isn't going to be enough, she thought. I need more. I will drive to Westbridge.

There's a grocery store there, she thought. She drove slowly as if she didn't have a care in the world. She could have been going to buy a loaf of bread. She drove cautiously. She didn't want to get a ticket. For four days she made trips to every grocery store she could think of in a twenty mile radius of Oxbridge. She made a box for Ruth out of some cardboard she found in the garage. She set the huge box on top of the saw horses that her father had built years before. She put boards across to support her mother's weight.

Mother, I love you. I know this isn't very comfortable but it will be okay she reassured the corpse. I am so sorry. I don't know what happened. I am so sorry. God, please make her come back to life, please! She prayed every waking moment. She bought candles and set them around the box on the concrete floor. She lit the candles and prayed and prayed. She brought a couple of blankets down to the basement and fell asleep next to the body. Her mother was just sleeping she told herself. She was just taking a rest. She had been working too hard and she was resting.

She remembered the dream. It had to just be a dream. They had been sitting there eating dinner. For one instant, one flash of a moment, she saw her mother coming out of that motel with Red Schulte. Something inside snapped. Her face suddenly was contorted with rage. Ruth watched as her daughter's face changed and she was frightened. She tried to calm Brenda down. She didn't understand what was happening. Brenda was screaming at her, screaming about Red Schulte. She knew! She knew Brenda knew! Ruth tried to talk to her but her throat closed up and the words wouldn't

come out. Brenda's face was red, almost purple with rage. Ruth ran up the stairs to her room with Brenda following right on her heels. Ruth fell onto the bed. Suddenly Brenda was holding the pillow over Ruth's head. She pushed and pushed as Ruth fought and then Ruth quit resisting. Her body went limp. She quit fighting. Brenda, having spent her rage, walked slowly out of the room and went to bed. She removed her clothes, put on her pajamas and smiled as she pulled the covers back and put her head on the pillow. *That takes care of that*, she thought. When she awoke the next day she thought it had just been a dream, just a bad dream.

Sunday afternoon around three, the phone rang. It was Connie. "Hi. Yes everything was fine. No. Mom can't come to the phone; she's got the stomach flu. Connie, I had the strangest dream. I dream that I smothered mom with a pillow. It was so vivid. Isn't that weird? Do you ever have strange dreams like that? Yes I am fine. I like my job now. I'm not sure what I want to do next. I know I can't live with mom forever. I am thinking about going to college. What do you think about that?" She talked quickly not breathing between sentences. "I might move out to California so we can be closer. What do you think about that? Won't that be fun?" She rambled on and on for almost ten minutes and then said goodbye.

Connie hung up not knowing what to make of the conversation. She told her husband about it. He scratched his head and made a comment about Brenda's wackiness. Connie had a strange feeling. For the next four days she called her mother's work number. She was told her mother was ill. She called Brenda, mom was sleeping, mom was in the bathroom, mom was taking a bath, or mom would call her back. She had a strange feeling about this. Something just wasn't right.

She asked Don, her husband, “Do you think I should have the police go check on them?”

“I don’t know. You know your sister better than I do. Do what you think is right.” he said.

Connie sat for a long time just staring at the phone. She knew Brenda had serious issues but lately, Brenda sounded a lot better. She joined a book club, was involved in her job, was reading and staying busy. She never understood Brenda’s mood swings but she thought maybe it was hormonal. Just to be on the safe side she was going to call Ben Hall.

Ben Hall was the Chief of Police. He was a sturdy, stocky man who was a no nonsense enforcer. He held the position for over twenty years. He had silver hair and an English bulldog demeanor most teenagers chose to avoid. He was really a kind person but he enjoyed the reputation he had with the young folks in town. He ran a clean shop he liked to say. He had two deputies. Other than handing out a few parking tickets now and then and providing security and parking direction at various town events, he and his men didn’t have hard jobs. They took pride in the low crime rate in Oxbridge. The last time a major crime was committed was long before Ben took office.

Ben was married. Kitty was the love of his life but she became a recluse after the death of their only child, a boy they named Henry, eighteen years ago. It was a constant source of worry to him but he quit caring after a few years. He still loved her but she had no desire to help herself and after consulting with a myriad of medical experts he decided he could do no more. He would never divorce her but he came to understand he couldn’t solve her problems. He was devoted to her and made sure she had every comfort she

needed. She had a few friends who stopped by occasionally to chat. Other than that she seemed perfectly content to stay within the confines of their small home. Ben flirted with a few waitresses in town but he had never cheated on Kitty. He prayed one day she would snap out of it. Until that time came, he had his loyal friend, Buddy the beagle. Buddy followed him everywhere and was an exceptionally good listener. Ben couldn't think of a more loyal partner than Buddy and vice versa. The two were inseparable.

“Hi, this is Connie Randolph. I am Ruth Jenkins daughter. I just had a strange phone call from my sister and I am a little concerned. Do you think someone could check on them?” Connie asked the police woman. Connie explained the phone call. Ben thought she was worrying for nothing but told he would run over if it would make her feel better. It wasn't like he had a million other things to do anyway.

“Sure. I can have someone check on them” Lucy Hodge said.

“Ben, could you stop at Ruth Trask's, I mean Jenkins' house on your way home tonight?” she hollered to the back room.

“Yeah! I'll run over there right now.” he said.

“We'll give you a call back. What's your number honey?” Lucy asked.

Connie gave her the number and sat back in her chair. She didn't have a good feeling about this, not a good feeling at all.

Ben Hall pulled the cruiser out of the station. “Hey, Hal, hop in! I have to make a stop at Ruth Jenkins house. Ride along and then we can go out to the lake and do our patrol!” Hal Harrison got in on the passenger side and adjusted his seat belt. “What's going on?” he asked. “Oh, Ruth's daughter, you know the one that moved to California? She wants us to check on Ruth and Brenda. It'll only take a minute.”

The patrol car headed towards Ruth's home. At the same time, Brenda decided she needed to go get some more rock salt. She left the house and decided to drive to Beverly down the coast. She noticed it was almost 2 o'clock. She wanted to get back in time for Oprah. She headed for the highway and turned south.

Ben and Hal arrived at Ruth's house at 2:35. Everything looked pretty quiet. Ben rang the doorbell. No answer. He started to knock on the door and the door opened of its own accord. It wasn't locked. Now that was not like Ruth. Ruth was very cautious. Ben and Hal entered the house. "Ruth?" Ben hollered. "Brenda? Anyone home? This is kind of strange. Hal, take a look out back and in the basement. I'll check upstairs." Ben headed up the stairs. He opened the door to Brenda's room. It was a bit of a mess. Ben always took Brenda for a neat freak. He opened the door to Ruth's room and it looked like the bed hadn't been slept in. This was really strange. Suddenly he heard Hal. "Ben, come quick. In the basement! You aren't going to believe this!" Ben took the stairs two at a time and raced to the basement door. He flew down the stairs. Hal stood in front of a large cardboard box. Around the box were about thirty candles all lit and burning brightly. Inside the box was the body of Ruth Trask Jenkins. Rock salt was packed all around the body. She looked peaceful.

"What the fuck?" Ben said. "I don't believe what I am seeing!"

"I came down here and this is how it was!" Hal exclaimed. "What do you make of it?"

"Well, it looks like someone was trying to preserve the body. Look, call the coroner's office and have them get over here. Call Lucy and tell her to send out the Crime Scene photographer. Do we have crime tape and rubber gloves in the car? Go get them.

And don't touch anything!"

"Ben, are you sure she's dead?" Hal asked.

"I have never been surer of anything in my life! This is the damndest thing I have ever seen. This is one for the Crime channel! Damn! I sure wasn't prepared for this!"

Chapter Twenty

Brenda found three different stores and purchased as much rock salt as she could without people asking questions. She looked at the clock in the car and it was after three. She needed to head home. She got back on the freeway and headed north. She entered Oxbridge from the south side of town and took the back streets home. She was just turning the corner and saw the Oxbridge police cars in front of the house. FUCK!!!!

She turned the car around and headed out of town. She drove slowly and hoped the cops hadn't seen her. The calm demeanor disappeared and was replaced with terror. Her mind raced, her heart was beating so fast and hard she was afraid she would pass out. She was beside herself. She didn't know which way to drive. She drove very slow and headed for Mariner's Cove. She didn't know why, it just seemed like a quiet place to think things through. Her thoughts were a tangled mess and she couldn't think clearly. She felt lost and scared. She felt alone, all alone.

She parked the car on the gravel at the edge of the road. She turned the ignition off, turned the lights off and just sat watching the time pass on the dashboard clock. She heard the waves crashing on the rocks. The rhythm of the waves calmed her. She stared, transfixed on nothing for over an hour. The thoughts in her head were in slow motion now. She knew what she had to do. She knew this must end and she was the only one who could make it end. She got out of the car and walked towards the shore. The gravelly sand was hard to walk in. She removed her shoes and dropped them in the sand. It was cold. Her coat had deep pockets on both sides and she shoved her hands in as deep as they would go. The wool of the coat kept her warm. Her wool socks were wet and her feet were cold. She got close to the breaking waves. The bright light from the lighthouse

cast a path across the ocean. It lit the way for her as she got even closer to the water. She heard the horns of the passing fishing boats on their way to Gloucester. She suddenly experienced clarity of mind so vivid it startled her. She knew. She knew what she had to do. She bent over and loaded both pockets with the biggest rocks she could find. When she was sure she had enough, she slowly and peacefully walked into the waves her body rising slightly with the crest of each wave. She didn't have to walk far when the coast dropped suddenly and she was pulled with a strong force to the bottom. The undertow was exceedingly strong on this part of the coast, she knew that. She no longer heard the voices. She no longer felt the pain and confusion. She felt peace as she was pulled deep into the cold darkness of the icy, cold water.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Jenkins house was flooded with police officers, the fire department and an ambulance. It didn't take long after the police arrived for all hell to break loose. The body was removed and the candles blown out after everything was photographed by the crime scene investigation team. The CSI team was brought in from Boston since Oxbridge was not equipped for this type of crime. An APB went out for Brenda and it didn't take long before her car was found. The footprints in the sand were still there since the ground was so cold. They would search for the body tomorrow. It was too dark to look at night.

The news of the deaths traveled fast via the Oxbridge telephone system. Nothing like this ever happened in the history of the town. Dan Johnson arrived to get the details and a tear ran down his face when he heard about Brenda. He really liked her, he really did. He just didn't understand what happened between them. Now he would never know. He took notes about the story and headed back to the office to write up the front page story. This was the strangest story he would ever write. Since he dated Brenda and knew her mother he was careful in his choice of words and tried not to make the story too macabre.

It didn't take long for the news to travel. Dan called Flo who called Walter who called Corrine and on and on. Sometimes Dan wondered if the town even needed a newspaper at times like this. He sat down at his computer composing the story and writing the obituaries. He stared at the screen for a long time after he finished the news item. Life had taken a strange turn and he didn't know what to make of it. Even the true crime channels couldn't top this one.

The following day, before he released the story he got a call from Brenda's sister asking him to not run the story but just the funeral arrangements. She felt what happened was too unusual for the residents of Oxbridge and the less they knew the better. Dan agreed not to publish the details. He always liked Connie and they agreed they would get together after the funerals. Maybe Connie could help him understand what happened.

He knew that the citizens were expecting a headline story about this event but he made it a very brief obituary on page seven and left the details to the town's imagination. Ben Hall agreed that the less said the better.

Epilogue

Walter was a bit surprised when the phone rang and it was Connie. He never met her or at least didn't remember ever meeting her. She remembered him. She had been in the bookstore a few times when she came home to visit her mother. She asked if he would come over to the house on Friday night at seven. Walter agreed and called Corrine. She had also received a call from Connie as had Maggie and Harriet. Flo called Walter and apparently they all had been invited over on Friday night.

It was cold on Friday evening, bitterly cold. Walter arrived promptly at seven. Corrine and the others were already there along with Dan Johnson. Connie opened the door. It was like looking at Brenda.

"I know you're all wondering why I called you here. As you can imagine this is a very difficult time for me. This is my husband, Don." She turned to the tall blond man standing in the dining room. "Hi" he said and then he disappeared into the kitchen to get the coffee tray.

"Please sit down. I don't know exactly where to start. I imagine you are all in a state of shock over this strange course of events. Let me start by telling you that Brenda spoke fondly of all of you and I felt you're owed some explanation of our family and perhaps after I tell you about Brenda and my mother you'll be able to understand what happened." Connie sat in the comfy chair that Brenda liked.

"There was a time, a long time ago, when Brenda and I were very happy in this house. It seems odd to say that." Don sat down on the floor beside Connie's chair and held her hand. "My father wasn't an easy man to live with. He was mean, he drank and he was abusive to Brenda and my mother. I have given a lot of thought to my teen years

and I have no explanation of why he picked on Brenda and not me. Maybe it was because she was the weakest. He and I had our share of arguments but I stood up to him and I stayed out of the house a lot. Brenda didn't. I would imagine you were startled to meet me. People thought Brenda and I were twins growing up. We are – were close in age.” Connie's voice broke.

“Brenda and my mother had a rocky relationship through those teen years. I didn't really want to know what went on with them. I hated living here just as much as Brenda did but I joined a lot of clubs and I had a social life. It made it easier for me and that was all I cared about at the time. I had no idea until after Brenda and I both left home just how bad it was for her. My mother was a good woman but she turned her back on Brenda. She didn't have the confidence or resources to walk out on our father. She was one of those women who married for better or worse. In her case most of the time it was worse but she never once thought of leaving. Brenda and I used to pray she would leave but she wouldn't. Our father was a miserable excuse of a man. He was mean. He was even meaner when he drank. They would have fights that lasted until the wee hours of the morning.” She took a deep breath and sighed.

“Brenda was about fourteen when he started abusing her sexually. I didn't know about it until we both were out of the house. I knew something had happened but I didn't know what. I was so busy being a teenager and trying to not have to be home any more than necessary that I just didn't care. I saw Brenda sink slowly into a deep depression. She withdrew from me. Then she and my mother started fighting. It seemed like I always came in at the tail end so I never really knew what they fought about. A couple of years ago Brenda called me one day. She was hysterical. She told me all about the abuse. She

told me about my mother's affairs. She was out of control. I encouraged her to get some help. I talked to her husband for hours. He found a really good therapist in Phoenix and they made a decision to commit her to a private hospital. She was there for three months. With medication and a lot of counseling she was able to go home." Connie took a deep breath.

"Shortly after she came home from the hospital she asked for a divorce. I didn't know what to make of it but I didn't pry. I knew that her depression and anger had taken its toll on their marriage and I figured that was what happened. A few months ago her ex-husband called me. I hadn't talked to him in over a year. He asked how Brenda was doing. I told him that Brenda had moved home and was living with Mom. He was concerned. Apparently, Brenda was violent with him on more than one occasion. She had even pulled a butcher knife on him. That was shortly before she was hospitalized. He thought about divorcing her because of his fears but he couldn't bring himself to even bring it up. He said it was a relief when she went to the attorney and had the papers drawn up. She presented them to him one morning at breakfast and wham bam it was over before he knew it. He had no idea what prompted her actions. He was relieved and he didn't argue with her. They settled their divorce quickly and quietly. He said she just left town. He had been thinking about her and wondered where she was. When I told him she was back here he was alarmed. He told me that Brenda talked about killing Ruth many times. Brenda hated her and blamed her for all of her problems. He said that Brenda was enraged that Ruth never took her side and Ruth did nothing about the abuse." Connie stopped for a moment. Walter and Corrine held hands and Flo, Maggie and Harriet sat very still. Dan just listened quietly.

Connie continued. "I had many conversations with my mother about Brenda and the abuse. She told me that most of it was true but that Brenda had a tendency to dramatize and embellish the events. My mother felt really bad about what happened but she thought Brenda had made a lot of progress. She did tell me they had been fighting more recently. She told me that Brenda had become extremely violent a few weeks ago. I should have come out here to see what was going on but I didn't. I will always regret that." She wiped her nose.

"Brenda thought very highly of all of you. Corrine, she was so happy to meet someone who understood and I want to thank you for all of your efforts. Walter, Brenda spoke of you as if you were a God. She expressed her admiration of you many times. Flo, you made Brenda feel welcome and she talked about bringing me to your coffee shop for some of your coffee cake. Harriet, I know you probably thought Brenda a little stand offish but she thought you were the sweetest lady she'd ever met. I wanted you all to know you did make a difference in Brenda's life. It is sad it had to end this way but I am trying to convince myself that it is for the best. Brenda could never get past those horrible years. I believe my mother had moved on emotionally but having Brenda back just brought out the worst in both of them. I'm not sure I will ever understand what happened that night." Connie sobbed and her husband got up off the floor and pulled her into his arms. "Thanks for coming." He walked Connie into the back room and Walter and the others left in silence.

Walter and Corrine walked together to their cars. "Call me." Corrine said. Walter arrived home. He took his coat off and headed to the kitchen. He put on a fresh pot of coffee. While he was waiting for it to brew the phone rang. "Hi. It's me." Corrine

said.

“So, what do you make of that?” Walter said.

“Can I come over?” Corrine asked.

“Of course. See you in a few.” Walter said. He no sooner hung up the phone when Corrine walked through the door. “I called from your driveway. I just couldn’t go home after that.”

“I understand. That had to be hard for Connie. I feel a little bit better but I still feel so sad.” Walter got the coffee mugs down and set two on the counter.

“I feel like I should have done more.” Corrine said.

“You did as much as you could. I don’t think anyone could have helped her. She was in a lot of pain. I sensed that a few times but I didn’t know how to help her.” Walter said.

The phone rang. It was Connie. She had something to give to Corrine and could they come over. Walter and Corrine grabbed their coats and drove over to Connie’s together.

Connie answered the door. “I have been going through Brenda’s things and I came across these.” She handed Corrine seven journals. “I can’t bring myself to read these. Brenda told me she considered you the only true friend she ever had. Brenda enjoyed writing and she wrote a lot of poetry. I can’t bring myself to even open the covers. I think Brenda would have wanted you to read these.”

Corrine took the journals. She looked at the familiar covers. She had one just like the one on top. She smiled. “Connie, thank you for having us over. I know this is a very difficult time for you but it means a lot you took time to help us understand. If there is

anything I can ever do for you please give me a call. I would love to see you again before you leave town.” Corrine and Walter turned and got into the car. Neither one spoke.

Corrine went back to Walters and had coffee. They didn’t speak of the journals again. They didn’t speak of Brenda again. She had gone quietly into the night and floated to her peace in the next life. Corrine thought of Brenda often but she never talked about those events again. She read all of the journals privately and cried as she felt Brenda’s anguish. If only she met Brenda earlier in life, perhaps she could have made a difference. After reading the journals she thought about how little she really knew Brenda, how little any of them really knew each other.

December came quickly after the funeral. The book club took a new turn. Corrine decided that the club should continue but they would study Jane Austen instead. Jane was such an incurable romantic. Corrine thought it would be a pleasant change. The first night of the new study all the ladies went to see Anne Hathaway in “Becoming Jane”. They had a great time.

Walter put up a new display in his window – everything Jane. Corrine helped him design it and it turned out perfectly. It made the front window of the store look more Christmas-y he thought. They added garlands of pine boughs and English Christmas ornaments. Corrine located every Jane Austen book ever written and carefully arranged them along with some of her own English bone china. The bottom of the window was covered with burgundy colored velvet. On the day they finished doing the display Walter surprised Corrine with an evening in Boston. They dined at the Ritz Carlton and after dessert Walter produced the little jeweler’s box he’d been carrying all evening. Corrine was a little starry eyed from the dinner wine and when Walter asked that most important

question she thought he was kidding. Then she saw the box. Walter opened the box and slipped the ring on her finger.

Walter and Corrine were married in June in Walter's back yard. The whiskey barrel was filled with marigolds. Walter didn't share his little secret with Corrine. She'd find out soon enough when she moved in with him.

Walter hosted Maggie Braden's first art exhibit in April and it was a great success. Corrine was able to publish Harriet's poetry and Walter displayed it in the bookstore. Ally and Mark got engaged in June. Flo published a cookbook with her mother's favorite recipes that went in to its second printing three months after the first printing.

The residents of Oxbridge went about their business as if nothing ever happened. Corrine decided she would write Brenda's story one day. She felt it should be told for all who suffer at the hands of relatives, for those who struggle with secrets and anguish but for now she was happy and Brenda wouldn't want her day spoiled.

The End

"Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible. "

Virginia Woolf

Chapter 3

DISCUSSION

The creative portion of my project, my novel *The Shadows*, is predominately a work of fiction. Some events and some characters were based on events I experienced or people I have known. It was written for the sole purpose of combining what I learned in my graduate classes in creative writing with the research portion of my project dealing with journaling, its many purposes and the life of Virginia Woolf. It would fall into the category of women's fiction. Many works of fiction have been written to be like journals, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but, I don't know of any that are written about journaling as works of fiction. Michael Cunningham wove Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* into his novel *The Hours* which was later made into a film.

Writing a novel is not as simple as one might think. It is much more than expanding on a short story. My novel grew out of a bundle of ideas. First, I wanted to capture the many reasons people keep a journal. Second, I wanted the purpose of the journaling to reflect personal growth and/or therapeutic purpose. Third, I wanted to incorporate the essence of Virginia Woolf, her works and her life into the storyline.

I am, and always have been, an avid reader. I know from my personal reading experience it is vital that the author keep the interest of the reader page after page. Each page should entice the reader to keep reading. The author must involve the reader in the characters and the plot.

When I constructed the plot of the story, the entire work evolved on its own. It started out to be the story of strangers becoming friends. It was after I wrote the first few chapters many times that I made the decision to include a murder. By including the

murder I had a beginning, middle and an end. The crime gave the characters and the story direction and bound them together . I learned what a challenge it is to keep things in a proper order, to be constantly aware of a timeline, to maintain consistency and to carefully develop my characters staying true to those personalities when writing about each person and as each person.

Creating a character is more than describing what they look like and their age. It involves breathing life into them on paper through voice, action, experience and interaction with other characters. It involves getting inside their head and bringing the reader inside their thoughts as well. A writer should strive to make the reader be a part of the character's persona. The challenge in writing a novel with multiple characters is achieving that character development over and over. I attempted to do that in *Oxbridge* by utilizing the tools and knowledge about character development learned in class.

Writing a novel presented many personal challenges. Once I started writing and had about fifty pages done, I found I was struggling to keep events sequential and readable. As the author, I knew what I wanted to convey but, to achieve success in that task I found it necessary to write and then put the work down for awhile. Only after I reread what I wrote was I able to see where clarification was needed. The final product is the result of many, many edits and several rewrites.

The quotes within the storyline helped me remain focused on the life and words of Virginia Woolf. They weren't put there as a distraction but for the purpose of maintaining her presence throughout the story. Also, I would note that the name of the book is directly connected to Virginia Woolf. She was home schooled because it wasn't fitting for a woman to attend university. Oxbridge is a term she coined that combines Oxford

and Cambridge.

Another key facet of my story is the setting. It takes place in New England. I grew up in Connecticut so I felt I could speak to this part of the country with some degree of expertise. The people who have read my book commended me for the descriptive parts. I hope that I successfully captured the New England spirit and countryside.

I first thought about being a writer when I was in junior high school. I did some writing in high school and the urge to write lay dormant for over fifty years. When I chose to make creative writing my emphasis I had many story ideas whirling around in my head. With each class I found even more story ideas emerged until the urge to write became almost an obsession.

Creative writing is an academic way of looking inside one's self. People who are really good at storytelling and creative writing also read a lot. People who read a lot develop a sixth sense about language, character development, vocabulary.

The classes I took built on each other. This was helpful for me in learning the various aspects of creative writing. The most crucial factor in writing is keeping the perspective of the potential reader in mind. Each class gave me an awareness of the factors that comprise a good story. I gave a lot of thought to why I liked some books better than others, some authors more than others.

Another element in the development of my writing skills was the people I met in class. I was privileged to experience the writing styles of other creative writers first hand. We read to each other and we read each other's work. This is an incredibly powerful assessment tool. My style is my style. My classmates have their own style different than mine but, it is only that, different. It isn't better. It isn't worse. It is just different. By

experiencing those differences I learned to be more creative in the way I write. I received helpful criticism in a non-threatening atmosphere. I was encouraged to learn about other genres and find where I fit in the world of creative writing. I learned to respect the writing of my classmates. I also observed how life experience influences writing. I noticed some classmates were gifted in areas that I am not, such as screen writing or poetry.

The most interesting development in my creative writing journey was discovering my voice. Every author has a singularly distinctive voice. Every person on earth has a story to tell. The uniqueness of that story is based on their world view and in how they are able to express it in the written word. Not every person has the desire to write but, those that do find a way to communicate their stories using their voice, their perspective. I learned, through class discussion and through reading, there is no right or wrong voice. With every short story I read, every novel I read, I find that I have a deeper appreciation for voice and a greater understanding of the author's inimitable way of storytelling.

In the process of writing a novel I learned to be proud of who I am. I developed self-confidence that didn't exist earlier in my life. I, like many others, would like to say, one day, that I am a published author. I could only hope that will be true. As a result of my education, I plan on writing more. I finally have the courage to submit some of my work for publishing consideration. I have two other novels in the beginning stages. I have a short story ready to be submitted. I have met so many wonderful people in this journey and made new friends. This novel is just a beginning. I have a lot of stories inside my head. One of my friends asked the question – "What do you want to tell the world?" The answer for me is "a lot" and I am now ready to begin my writing career.

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Appendix A

The following works influenced the writing of this paper:

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