

MILLTOWN

A NOVEL

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and *VENGEANCE BETRAYED*

PROLOGUE

Whether people leave the place where they grew up, or stay in that one spot through their adulthood as I did, there is some longing to romanticize that place. The neighborhoods were ‘small and quaint’, or the streets were ‘broad and busy with the noise of traffic’; the waters ‘babbled cold and shallow across the stones’, or they ‘rushed headlong through town, deep and dark on their way to the sea’. Maybe it’s just a primal need for the familiar. I don’t know.

I remember my aunt Alice telling me once, after I helped her move from her home into a small senior housing apartment, that she missed knowing where everything went. Now, there would be new places to put things and she would have to learn them all over again.

That’s how I feel about Apsley. I’ve been here my entire life, and that adds up to almost fifty years. Living here is comfortable, like a worn leather jacket that ought to be tossed out, but you keep it anyway. Maybe I just don’t like surprises. And like my aunt and her house, I know where everything goes in Apsley, except, sometimes, for myself.

There’s an old French adage: Tell me whom you haunt, whom you have as friends, and I’ll tell you what you are. I believe it’s my collection of friends who make me feel like I belong here, who define me. I’ve known most of them since I was just a small child. I still hang around with them, still see most of them regularly to play cards and drink beer.

It was one of those long-time friends, Max Zenga, who told me I ought to write this story. “Dave,” he said one day over a cup of coffee a few weeks after this episode was over, “you should put all this on paper so people remember what happened.” In some ways, I wanted to put the whole thing behind me and just move on. But Max was right; we needed to remember.

In any case, I’m describing here what I believe to be accurate. I can’t be certain if what I depict is as precise as it ought to be because it comes from my mind with all its bias, from memories that sometimes lie to me bald faced, and puff up or deflate what really was.

Perhaps I should share the passion of true historians who capture as many accounts of the same places and events as they can so that some balance might occur that results in a better portrayal and a more honest report. For now, mine is the only version, true or bent to some part of my will. This is the town and these are the events I remember.

Apsley is a small town by American standards. Its population is certainly growing, but it is not so substantial that it deserves to be described as anything more than a small town.

It owes its existence to geological phenomena that resulted in a winding river coursing through a valley that sat only forty miles from a city. The river gave Apsley its power and the city gave it a place to send the goods that it produced. Apsley was just meant to have factories.

There were some farms on the outskirts of town and they supported dozens of families by growing crops, but by and large, Apsley lived, and eventually almost died, on its mills.

I am sure that some people here thought that Apsley could become bigger and more important than it was, even a city someday. But that never happened. The factories that made fabric and shoes and tools and rubber boots aren’t working any longer. When they closed, the proximity to the city made Apsley a bit more attractive to commuters who wanted a less

expensive suburban lifestyle, and that's where the only real growth has come from. Most of the farms are gone now and the land now has bigger houses and streets with names like Windward Place and Charter Way.

When I was younger, though, Apsley was still a place to work and live, and most of the men left home in the morning with a lunch pail and a thermos. Most of them walked to work, and almost everyone's father served in World War II or Korea. It wasn't poor by our narrow standards, but it was far from rich, and we knew that. The real wealth stayed closer to the city, and we got to see the real wealth when we drove through those towns on the way to the city. The air was cleaner, the houses were bigger, and the cars in the driveways were newer and nicer.

We also knew that there were poorer people than us. To those of us in Apsley, the real poor lived in Eastland, about ten miles away and that much further from the city. That town was rustic beyond repair. In Eastland, there was only one small mill and most of the jobs were tied to the land. Except for a few of the farmhouses, the houses there were smaller and closer together. People from Eastland thought Apsley was pretty hot stuff. At least we had a movie theater and a courthouse and a small branch hospital.

It's not so different today. Eastland is still there, and compared to Apsley it still looks down at the heels. There's some talk that the train tracks from the city are going to be restored all the way to downtown Apsley, and the commuter service will make Apsley and Eastland more accessible and attractive. House prices are still reasonable around here, but quick access to the city would mean big things for us here. Some of us think that's a good thing, but there are still a lot of folks here who like things the way they are.

I own a few pieces of property in Apsley, all of them converted into apartments. My rents are lower than most, maybe even a little lower than they ought to be, but I pick my renters carefully and I'm not afraid of weeding out the inevitable slobs and the non-payers and the loud drunks. My buildings are old but they're all well taken care of. I keep them painted and they all look good. Before my divorce six years ago, I lived in a handsome single-family home with a two-car garage and almost an acre of land, and now I'm in one of my own little apartments near the center of town; it might be a comedown for most people, but for me it's not such a bad way to live.

The stories I remember from my youth in Apsley are stories of playing baseball and riding bicycles and swimming at the town pond. I knew just about everyone around my age in town. Many of them drifted off to other places, but there remains in town a bunch of us who grew up together and never left. They are still my friends and we still speak in a sort of shorthand that outsiders find a little unusual and even uncomfortable. We know the same streets and shortcuts and we had the same teachers and knew the same coaches and policemen.

We also share the same sad memories, of the people who suffered, who were disgraced, or who were murdered. There weren't many of these ... murders. I can only remember a handful in Apsley in my lifetime. The most recent one was about seven years ago when a woman was smothered with a pillow as she slept. One day, the husband came home drunk and an argument with his wife erupted. The husband apparently lost the argument but had the patience to wait until his wife fell off to sleep that night. I remember the headline from the local newspaper: 'Local Woman Slain by Husband – Accused Said to Be Angry'.

Things have been quiet on the Apsley murder scene ever since. I've forgotten some of the others, though if I sat down with a few friends we could recall every single one in the past fifty years and most of their details.

One murder from twenty-nine years ago still stands out like a haunted lighthouse flashing relentlessly and warning of dodgy shallows and perilous shoals. It's the one we ... my friends and I ... were closest to, and the one we were most affected by, and the one we really don't like to talk about.

Then, in the autumn of last year, everything changed. That murder case was taken from its quiet place on a back room shelf, undisturbed for decades, and brought forward for all of us to see in all its horror and under the bright light of a brand new day. It was the only murder in Apsley that remained unsolved. There are some people here who wish the memories were allowed to decay into dust, unfit for resurrection, and who feel its emergence exposed a less dignified side of our town and the people in it. If sleeping dogs ought to be left alone, they'll tell you, maybe the murder of Catherine Marchand should have been left alone as well.

But then, Catherine's twin brother would never have come back to town to try to reopen the case, and we never would have found the truth of how and why his sister died, and we would not have met the people we did.

In the end, I think that's all good. In the process, we've learned a lot about each other and what makes us who we are. Tough as it was, we got through it. In a way, it makes us proud of our town and the people in it. But it also showed us that, in the end, dignity doesn't matter very much. Honesty does.