

the
cottage

N. D. HAUPT



NOGGINNOSE
PRESS

The Cottage

ISBN 978-1-956611-08-3

Copyright © 2024 N.D. Haupt

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher at info@nogginnose.com.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover design and content layout by Houseal Creative
Edited by Rivers Houseal

Nogginnose Press
PO Box 96
Smithville, AR 72466 USA
nogginnose.com

*To Charlton, always,
and to Justice, Courage, & Favour.*

Life is a story.

*What a gift from God Almighty
that I get to live it with you.*

1

PROLOGUE

CIRCA A.D. 1830

The Pearls got into his blood by accident.

He was twenty when he found them in a forgotten cave. It was supposed to be a simple hike up one of many nearby mountains, a way to clear his mind and relieve the stress of his university studies.

The storm caught him by surprise. There was no sign of impending weather when he started, but as he reached the top, clouds boiled, and an eerie wind sent him hurrying back the way he had come. Gales of sleet raked the air before he was halfway down the trail.

He ran for the first shelter he could see, an outcropping of rock slabs that loomed near the base of a massive pine. With all the deftness of a man on adrenaline, he scrambled into their shadows. With any luck, he could get out of the worst of the sleet before he was soaked to the skin.

To his surprise, the shadows gave way to a cave mouth large enough to step inside with little more than a head tilt.

The prospect of a dark cave was daunting. Staying out in the freezing deluge seemed worse.

He stooped inside, wary and out of breath. When his heart rate slowed and his breathing evened, he glanced around. He knew full well that he might not be the only creature looking for shelter. The air had the musty smell of dirt and old animal droppings.

Something skittered in the darkness. He flinched and almost bolted for the mouth of the cave, but his rational mind held out and listened. The sound had disappeared further into the cavern. Whatever it was, it had run away, not toward him. Still, his skin crawled. He didn't like not knowing his surroundings.

His clothes clung to him, damp and uncomfortable. Shivering, he sat down and pulled his knees toward his chest.

Frigid wind howled through the cave mouth just beyond his feet. Cold overcame apprehension, and he turned to move farther into shelter.

That was when he saw them. There were three, small but unmistakable, glowing with a faint, warm light a few yards away.

He froze. *Eyes?*

But no, these did not blink or move. The light was soft. Inviting.

He crawled closer. All thoughts of wild animals fled. He saw only the light, beautiful and alive, drawing him as water does a parched man.

He pulled himself up and picked his way over the treacherous floor. It was uneven and jagged in many places, pockmarked with cracked stone and ragged tree roots.

He reached the lights, and his heart nearly burst.

They were infinitely, utterly, magnificently beautiful.

Colors—for they must have been colors, though he had never seen their like—whispered through curved surfaces smooth as pale glass. Their iridescence was soft, but piercing. A cool fire held in the confines of liquid stone.

Each was gripped by the tree, partially enclosed by roots that had long ago traversed the cave's ceiling and continued their downward journey through the stony floor.

Trembling, he reached and attempted to pry them from the grasp of the tree roots. The roots held firm. They were gnarled and timeworn. Bark flaked under his hand, but the wood did not budge.

He pulled a penknife from his pocket and went to work on the top root. If he could get that one out of the way, he thought he could dislodge the stones.

It was a grueling task, sawing enough of the root away to strip it back. He was glad he had always kept the little knife sharp. Finally, he clicked the knife closed and dropped it back in his pocket. With his feet braced and his hands clutched like iron, he gave a mighty pull. The root groaned and snapped.

The sudden release landed him in a heap on the cave floor, but he hardly noticed. He jumped to his feet and scrambled forward. All other thoughts melted away. There were only the stones, silent and riveting. As if in a dream, he reached a hand and dislodged them, one by one, from their ancient nest.

They sat on his open palm, three soft lights in a world of dark.

The stones weren't large, perhaps each the size of a quarter dollar coin, but perfectly round.

They were neither heavy nor light. A hint of warmth emanated from under their surface like spring sunlight, and he could swear their swirls of light moved like tiny rivers, though he couldn't see the precise moments of change.

Pearls. That was the closest description he could come to. They must be pearls. Pearls that were not pearls. Soft stones of vivid, aching beauty.

He stared at them for uncounted minutes while the thunder boomed and the wind howled outside the cave.

Silence pulled him from his reverie. The storm must have stopped. It was time to go. He closed his hand around the Pearls, turned, and stepped toward the cave mouth.

Perhaps his legs were stiff from waiting. Perhaps his mind was distracted by beauty. Perhaps the tree sabotaged him, lifting a root to prevent its long-hidden treasure from being taken. Perhaps he simply missed his footing.

He tripped, and the Pearls fell, making only the softest clatter as they tumbled—one, two, three—onto

the stones of the cave. He dove for them, but not fast enough. They rolled into a crevice and stuck there under a sharp bridge of rock with an opening only large enough for his fingertips.

He would get them. He had to get them.

It took hours. He chipped bits of rock away with his penknife until the blade broke, then strained, scraped, and smashed, desperate to clear enough space to reach through to where the Pearls rested, shimmering, a perfect contrast to the cold, dark stones of the cave.

He was running out of time. The light at the cave's mouth was fading into evening. Shivers racked through weary muscles. His wet clothes felt icy cold, and his feet were numb. He had to get off the mountain.

Finally, he thrust his hand through the opening, which was only slightly larger for all his efforts. Jagged stone tore at his bones and skin, but he forced it through anyway.

He screamed.

Reaching as far as he was able, while the rocks bit at bones and nerves, and blood began to bead and run in trickles, he managed to grip one Pearl with the sides of his fingers. He pulled it close to the opening and grabbed it with his free hand. Repeating the process, he retrieved the other two, then yanked his mangled hand out of the crevice.

He sat, shaking. Blood spilled into the sleeve of his coat. His entire arm burned with vicious pain. He had won. There were the Pearls, safe again in his possession.

He reached for one and let it rest in his injured palm. As the Pearl pressed against torn flesh, heat seeped from the stone, straight into his blood. He felt it move through his wrist and arm, a powerful light.

He snatched the Pearl away from the wound. It scared him. But the act was done.

What it meant, how it changed everything, he did not yet know.

GEORGE

CIRCA 2023

George parked behind the red sedan. There was no other vehicle in sight on the dirt road besides his own, and the shiny red one still had a temporary license stuck to the back window.

“Kathleen must be doing pretty well for herself,” he mumbled, picturing the contrast of his own decrepit station wagon.

He had found her number on a real estate flyer at the dentist office. He hoped she wasn't one of those overbearing, I'll-do-anything-for-a-sale types. The less conversation, the better. She had seemed eager on the phone, but at least the flyer saved him the trouble of sorting through internet listings or asking around. He only needed her here to see the place so she could tell him what it would take to sell it.

George had not even known his Uncle Barry owned a second property, much less expected it to show up in his inheritance. The house was old, though, and too far out from town. He didn't intend to keep it.

George glanced in the rearview mirror. He was a plain man. Thirty years old already, though it still surprised him to think it. Average height, nondescript build, pecan-colored eyes that stared back at him without enthusiasm. There had been a time when those eyes were full of light and laughter.

That seemed long ago.

George smoothed a hand over faded brown hair, sighed, and opened his door. He swung his bad leg out first. It had been twisted since babyhood and surgically corrected as a child, but it never could bend well at the knee. It splayed out a bit and, on bad days, caused a painful limp. George pulled out his right leg, the good one, next. He stood, and shut the car door behind him.

"Mr. Morgan?" the woman asked, beaming a smile. She glanced at the gimpy leg.

"That's me."

"Kathleen Stanwell, Better City Realty. Thrilled to meet you." She shifted a stack of papers, keys, and cell phone to one arm and reached the other hand toward his.

George shook it quickly. She met the firmness of his grip, though her hand felt clammy on his own dry palm. He stuffed his hand back into his pocket.

“So this is the place, huh?” Kathleen said, still smiling. She gestured toward the house. “Looks like something out of a storybook.”

George turned to face the house. It was small and plain.

“I certainly understand why you might sell it,” Kathleen said, stepping forward to stand next to him. She stepped too fast and dropped half the papers.

“It’s awfully small,” she went on, jumping to retrieve the scattered pages. “Someone could always get rid of the house and rebuild on the lot, though.” Kathleen stood and forced a flustered glint behind another enthusiastic smile. “Best I can find, this property has never been listed before. The house has got to be at least a hundred years old. Did your uncle leave any other information about it?”

“Nah,” George said. He edged away from Kathleen and looked over the stone front, the simple porch, and sloping roof line. It was a mix of greys and browns. Rough-hewn stones held both colors, and the wood siding was weather-warped and faded from its original tones.

There was no garage attached. The driveway, just a worn track through the grass, cleaved before it reached the house and led further back to a small, wooden barn with a split rail fence around it. The barn, if empty, might prove to be big enough to work as a carport, with the doors left open and the fence out of the way.

George returned to the front of the house. It was well-situated. The front yard was more ground cover than grass. Patches of clover grew among a smattering of short

green leaves and tiny stalks. A reel mower would make quick work of that maintenance.

One massive maple tree, the biggest he had ever seen, towered near the house's east face. The other trees were all out back.

The house sat comfortably away from the dirt road, a dead end lane with no other homes in sight. *A cottage*, George thought. *That's the appropriate word for it.*

Kathleen glanced up and down the lane, shifted the keys in her hand, and cleared her throat. "May I see inside?"

George remembered that was why she had come, and nodded. He led the way to the front door and turned a key in the lock.

"Thank you," Kathleen said. "I'll just pop in for a minute, then wait out here. Take all the time you need to look around; there's no hurry." She aimed another cheerful smile in his direction and started through the house.

George stepped inside a moment behind her, glad for the solitude. He limped through the cramped entryway into a pleasant living room with wood floors and a stone fireplace. The fireplace was empty, but a blackened grate and chimney showed evidence of much use.

The walls were vertical wood planks covered with a thin coat of whitewash. He could see the wood grain through the wash. It gave the room a cabin feel without overdoing the wood's natural color. George had always thought that too much of the same wood made a room feel claustrophobic.

He wondered how long, exactly, the house had sat empty. It did not look at all run-down. Aged, perhaps, but in a comfortable way, as if the former occupant had spent most of a lifetime there and only left recently. He had expected more dust.

Why had Uncle Barry never mentioned this place? It seemed he had held onto it, but never done a thing with it. The will had listed it as Morgan Family Property, along with the parcel number and address. There was a note that the previous owner was Abel Morgan, whom George knew to be Uncle Barry's father and his own grandfather. He could only conclude that the property had been passed as an inheritance to his uncle, who had kept it and passed it to George.

George had been raised by Uncle Barry and Aunt Pam, once his parents died when he was seven. His aunt and uncle had no other children, so it did not surprise him that he was the sole inheritor.

Why his uncle had never told him about the house remained a mystery. That question itched the back of George's mind, but he didn't bother thinking too far into it. There was no answer to be had at the moment. Here was the property, and he was the unexpected owner.

George realized, much to his surprise, that he liked the feel of the space. He had not predicted that. True, he was more than ready to get out of his apartment back in town, with the yappy dog next door and the upstairs neighbor rattling the ceiling all hours of the evening. Town, with all its bustle and noise.

Now that he thought about it, he wouldn't need to be going to town very often—not with his two-weeks' notice already filed at the accounting office. A bit of a commute for groceries wasn't that big of a deal, was it?

George stood still and listened. Nothing. He furrowed his brow and continued perusing the cottage.

He didn't need much space. It was only him, after all. A fresh breeze filtered through the open front door. It smelled of sunbaked grass and summer pine. George breathed it in. It was so quiet here. He could work better in the quiet.

Off the left side of the living room, George found a kitchen with space for a small table. These walls, too, were whitewashed, as were the few cabinets that hung in a neat row.

One window in the far wall let in sunlight, dappled by the maple leaves dangling near its outer face. Below the window was a stone sink set into a smooth, wooden countertop. George eyed the faucet. There were no knobs, only a single pump handle. Gingerly at first, he tried the handle. It rose smoothly, only squeaking as he pressed it back down. After a few pumps, water gushed through, brown and stale-looking at first, but then clear and clean.

Good enough.

George wiped his hand on his jeans and tried the drawers on either side of the sink. Both slid smoothly. That was nice. The kitchen drawers back at his apartment had cheap runners that jammed far too often. They irritated him.

He turned and scanned the remaining space, pausing to stare at the old-fashioned iron-top stove with its claw-foot legs and multiple oven doors.

“Good grief, do people still use those things?” George muttered to no one in particular.

He grasped one of the front handles and turned it. Metal grated on metal. George shuddered at the sound but brought the handle to its full twist. He pulled. The door swung open with surprising ease.

Peering inside, George examined the empty, cast iron expanse that, as far as he could tell, required an actual fire for cooking. Bits of ash still clung to the corners.

He shook his head, latched the door, and stepped back. *Unnecessary anyway.* He rarely cooked with anything but a microwave.

There was no fridge or any other appliances, but off the left side of the kitchen he found a pantry with shelves and a cellar door. The cellar proved larger than expected, but empty, save for a straw broom in the corner and an unsavory number of cobwebs.

George left the kitchen and crossed through the living room to the other side of the house. There he found a large bedroom where windows gathered sunlight into bright rectangles on the floor. A narrow staircase spiraled upward in one corner of the bedroom. George navigated the spiral, only putting his bad leg down to steady himself while his good one did all the work.

He opened the door into an attic room, complete with sloped ceiling and a solitary window facing whatever lay

behind the cottage. The attic walls were bare wood, but a welcome honey color that seemed appropriate for an attic. The whole room felt warm and inviting, full of possibility.

George walked to the window and looked out. There was not a soul in sight. Only the acre or so of backyard with scraggly patches of grass and a few trees basking in the late summer heat. The backyard disappeared into a forest of smooth, grey trunks and leafy branches.

According to the description of the property in his uncle's will, the forest behind was uninhabited. That meant guaranteed quiet. George saw what looked like a footpath in the edge of the woods. A walking path perhaps? He needed walks, both for writer's block and for limbering up his leg.

He listened.

Silence.

Maybe town was overrated.

From the front door, Kathleen cleared her throat. "Mr. Morgan?" she called, her cheerful tone relentless. "Still need a few minutes? Or are you ready to talk about pricing?"

George needed more than a few minutes. He needed days. Weeks. Months of quiet to think, and work, and create.

He thought of the neighborhoods back in town. They were Midwest American cookie cutter neighborhoods. Houses all alike, pocket-sized yards that stared into the neighbors' back windows, privacy fences that offered little

privacy. Neighborhoods were crowded. All concrete and door-to-door salesmen.

He would only be able to afford a basic subdivision house there. The inheritance from Uncle Barry was large, sure, but he would have to be careful. He figured between the inheritance and his own savings, he could live comfortably for four years. After that, he would have to get creative.

He hadn't expected such a large sum. He had not, for that matter, expected Uncle Barry to die so soon. Maybe it was wishful thinking, assuming his uncle would still be around for awhile. Mid-seventies seemed too young to die.

The doctor said heart attacks were very normal for men that age, even men of decent health, like Uncle Barry. But George still found it hard to believe he was gone. Then again, every other person he had really loved was gone, so it shouldn't have surprised him. Heck, twenty-three was too young to die too, and that hadn't stopped...

George shook his head. There was no use going down that road. The point was that Uncle Barry had been the last to go.

He had left everything to George. Over two hundred thousand dollars, his remaining personal possessions, and this rural property that George hadn't even known about. George had not known, either, how much money Uncle Barry actually saved. He was not stingy, by any means, but he and Aunt Pam never seemed to have much. They had lived simply and seemed content to keep it that way.

About the time George graduated college, they sold the house they had lived in for thirty years and moved to a ground-level, rented townhome with no yard to upkeep.

They hadn't bothered buying another car once their sedan kicked the bucket. Aunt Pam said she would just as well walk as drive anyway, since they were within walking distance of anything important, and Uncle Barry said he would rather walk with her than drive on his own. So that was that.

They would go to the movies once in awhile and order take-out when no one felt like cooking. Then Aunt Pam died. It was a short, brutal fight with lung cancer. Uncle Barry didn't do much after that. He ate microwave meals and ambled around town with George on the weekends.

All that money just sat in the bank. He gave it all to George when he passed away.

George wondered how much his aunt and uncle had scrimped to leave him such a large gift. It would be like them to think that way, to purposely save more for his benefit. The inheritance was his ticket away from the corporate world. He was grateful.

Still, though, they had not been wealthy. It would hold him over while he got his writing career off the ground, but not much more. If his writing didn't take off, well...

George would not let himself think that way. It *had* to work. And for it to work, he needed a place to write.

He looked around the attic room once more, then out the window at the emptiness of grass and forest.

This would do.