

Chilly Autumn Evenings

By Cameron Deal

As I stepped out of the faded Prius that ferried me over from Logan airport, the crisp Canaan, New Hampshire fall embraced me as if an old friend. Scarlet maple leaves intermingled with round sunsets in a carpet on the ground, my favorite part of Canaan all those years ago. I looked up and saw the Cape Cod Jill had gushed about over text. It was a bit shoddier than the images had suggested, and overgrown forsythia crept up a window.

“Isn’t it great, Mom?” Jill said.

“Yes, wonderful.” I smiled with my eyes, leaning into that cozy grandmother charm. Well, I’m not a grandma yet. Hopefully soon.

“Speak of the devil, here he comes now.” Jill threw her maroon-sweatered arm around the neck of a handsome young man, who grinned at me and kissed her cheek.

“Hello, Mrs. Meyers. Nice to meet you in person!” His cheery tone was a bit much. I winced.

“Hi, Bradley. It’s Ms.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Ms. Meyers.” Now there was a note of worry. His eyes darted to Jill and back, then settled into the easy smile that a traveling car salesman must develop.

“Quite all right, dear. Can you show me this lovely house of yours?”

“Of course. It’s been a while since you’ve been in town, right?” Jill said, squeezing my hand. I stepped over a rotten

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pumpkin from Halloween that adorned their concrete steps and then into what could generously be called a small foyer-- more of a coat closet, really.

"More than a while. Almost sixty years," I said, about to elaborate when I was interrupted.

"What was it you did in Canaan?" Bradley said. "I grew up here all my life."

"I was a high school teacher right after college. I taught just north of here at Canaan Secondary."

A waft of basil, thyme, and bay leaf wound through the room.

"Sorry, Mom, but I've got to finish up this roast for dinner," Jill said, then departed to what I assumed was the kitchen. The first time we had seen each other in over a year, and she was already gone. After her father left, she became so closed off.

I turned to Bradley expectantly, but he too trailed down a hallway, mumbling something about car sales and needing to prepare for a big deal. He opened a door, then pulled it shut.

The lock clicked.

"That's fine, I'll show myself around," I spoke to the denizen of a leather sofa in front of me, a well-sized golden retriever. I squinted at his name tag and saw, printed in tiny golden bones: "RUDY." After a couple of quick pets, which elicited a halfhearted tail wag, I wandered around the house, followed by the beast that I had pleased. After a cursory glance out at their ragged flower and herb garden, I straightened several pictures on the wall in the hallway. Beside them, metal block letters spelled out *The home is where the heart is* in ornate cursive, but "home" and "heart" hung crooked. I didn't take the time to straighten those. I bothered Jill for months before she finally invited me to see her house and husband. Rearranging the decorations on the first day might not help

with what she dubbed “control issues”. As I continued down the hall, I tripped over my baggage that had been abandoned by Bradley once we were in the door. What a gentleman. I entered the bathroom, where a vanity took up half the room. A black and white photograph of a young woman sat next to the makeup jars that adorned the mirrored table. Maybe Jill had a portrait done in a retro style. That seemed to be the kind of frivolity that was fashionable today.

But as I drew closer, I saw the characteristic arch of eyebrows. Me. My staff photo that never made it in the yearbook. Much, much younger than the wrinkled face that stared back from the vanity’s cruel surface. I once had lush brown hair, curly and magnificent. This had since faded to a modest gray. I once had plush, full cheeks, with a genuine and joyful smile at the cameraman. This was before everything. I had bright blue eyes. Those were still with me.

“Jill, where’d you get this?” I said into the hall and hoped that the walls were as thin as they looked.

“What, Mom?” Jill yelled through the evidently well-insulated walls. I didn’t answer. I stared at my portrait, then glanced at my reflection. How could those be the same person? I looked innocent. Free. I couldn’t have known what would happen.

* * *

At twenty-three, a girl has priorities. After a long afternoon reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in my favorite grove by the high school, where a knotted old elm tree cupped me in its branches, I was ready to work. A group of men parsed through the forest as I got ready to depart, perhaps to scout a hunting route or survey the land. One, a tall brunet in a suit coat, called out to me, but I couldn’t hear his words and decided instead that I shouldn’t be late. Who wears a suit in the woods? I walked over to Mrs. Dern’s house, but my mind wandered. The crisp autumn

evening hung over Canaan like a chilly hug. In 1960, the University of Vermont cost \$1534.70 per semester, and I intended to be there four semesters to get my MBA. Then, I could open my own accounting firm and find and fix the simple errors that others make. I already had a fair bit of money saved from teaching at the high school. However, I needed to make more through odd jobs--baking, sewing, and, of course, babysitting. Mr. and Mrs. Dern were a well-to-do couple, which meant they paid an extra \$1.50 each hour to watch their five-year-old, Barbara. She was a sweet thing, always bowed-up in her Sunday best whenever her parents were out.

Mr. and Mrs. Dern were well-respected around Canaan. He sat on the local board of aldermen, she was the Women's Club President. They were high school sweethearts--my teacher friend Dot claimed she could still find the G+H carved under the old wooden bleachers that signified Gertrude and Henry Dern's love. They frequented Margiano's, the local white-table joint where every well-to-do couple went for dinner on Friday nights.

But there were always rumors.

I heard she ran off with a traveling salesman and only came back when his father called the attorney general.

I heard he hits her whenever she talks back, and you can hear her sobs if you lean in as you walk by their drive.

I heard they ran off to Cuba for a few years and spent their days on the beaches, their nights dining with Castro.

Okay, I'm pretty sure Dot made that last one up, a product of 1960s cold-war hysteria. But still. Their love was mysterious to the town, much as a porch light is to a moth. Outwardly, they seemed loving. Regardless, they paid \$5.50 an hour, and I needed cash.

I walked up the sidewalk. Mrs. Dern swung the door open, causing a jack-o-lantern to plummet from their concrete

steps into the bushes. Its candle had fallen into the bush, causing a small fire. She stooped to pick the pumpkin up, and with polished leather heels, stamped out the smoldering forsythias that crept toward their windows. She was tall, sharp, and severe in her looks, but also beautiful. Her belly showed the first signs of pregnancy.

"Hello, Nancy dear. I don't know what we'd do without you!" Her voice was overly sweet, but you could tell it was genuine warmth and not a sense of false cheer.

"Of course. Barbara is such a sweet thing."

"You're too kind. Henry and I have a reservation, so better go. We should be back around eleven."

Henry honked several times while the car idled in the driveway.

"Wonderful, have a good time," I said.

Mrs. Dern turned around: "I almost forgot; Henry had me prepare some tea for you!"

They departed, Mrs. Dern in her evening gown and Mr. Dern in his suit coat. I crouched to pick up Barbara. She was all gussied up, with pale pink bows in her hair and a matching princess dress. She loved princesses, and her favorite was *Sleeping Beauty*. Her mocha eyes matched her mother's perfectly, but her hair was something of an anomaly-- a straw-colored blond. Both Mr. and Mrs. Dern were brunets. I read that some kids' hair darkens as they grow older, so maybe that was why.

After several rounds of Battleship, we worked on an art project. I gave her a huge sheet of poster paper. We broke out boxes of crayons and markers and filled every nook and cranny of our canvas with the wildest products of our imagination. Around nine o'clock, I remembered Mr. Dern's tea on the stove, now cold. I poured a mug and popped it in the microwave. I sipped the chamomile as I sketched a perfect little house with a

tidy fence and a jack-o-lantern out front. Barbara, having finished her rendering of a dragon (which looked more like a dog), reached for the pink marker and knocked my mug right over. Tea spilled across the paper.

Immediately, I lifted her up, then ran to the kitchen to sop up the mess. Barbara wailed, lamenting the loss of our masterpieces. I cleaned the mess and comforted her, squeezing her warm hands in mine. Then, a stroke of genius hit. *Sleeping Beauty*. I turned on the television, praying that the Disney logo could flash across the screen. Some distant deity smiled on me and the prince was leaning down to kiss her tenderly.

As the movie progressed, Barbara calmed, and my eyes sank lower. It was strange. I'd never been one to fall asleep early. But those cups of tea were warm and the couch a giant pillow into which I plummeted.

"Nancy. Nancy. Wake up." It was not Mrs. Dern's sweet voice. Instead, Mr. Dern's deep baritone interrupted my slumber.

I realized where I was and with a burst of energy, sat up. I was underwater, moving in slow motion. Mr. Dern faded in and out of clarity as I strained to focus. I glanced around the room until my eyes fell on Barbara. She slept on the couch, legs draped over the armrest. Thank god. But I was woozy, as if still in a dream.

"Mrs. Dern will come in a minute. I'll go put Barbara to sleep, okay?" Mr. Dern's words were blurry, obscured by the haze of sleep.

"No, I can." I struggled to squeeze the words out, but it seemed he was already on his way to the nursery. I rose and stumbled toward the door, pushed forward by Mr. Dern. Or did I go to the bedroom? As I pitched down the walk to the car, I heard snippets of conversation behind me.

"Where's Barbara?" Mrs. Dern's sweet, sweet voice. Warm, calm, and perfect.

"Nancy put her to sleep," Mr. Dern said firmly. "I'll check on her again."

Had I put her to sleep? Couldn't remember with everything so hazy. This was as bad as my five margaritas at the school staff party last year. But Mr. Dern seemed sure. I was about to correct him when a new wave of dizziness hit. I struggled to even keep on my feet.

"I'll check on her one more time, honey," Mrs. Dern said.

"Gertrude, go to sleep. I'll drive Nancy home and I'll check." There was an edge to his voice.

I made it to the car, strained to open the passenger door, then collapsed inside.

The next morning, I woke to the newspaper hitting my front drive. As I struggled to recall the previous night, I ambled out and glanced at the *Canaan Courier*. My staff picture stared back. The arched eyebrows, lush brown hair, full cheeks. Me.

Before I could process my surprise, the phone rang in the house. I gaped down at the newspaper and read only the headline before I answered the call.

YOUNG GIRL MISSING; LOCAL TEACHER SUSPECTED

Before I could read the next line, a low growl interrupted.

"Nancy?" Mr. Dern's deep voice became scratchy. "Is this Nancy?"

"Yes," I said, an involuntary quiver in my voice.

"If you know what's good for you, girl, you'll run."

"Why?"

My mind was racing. What had happened the night before? Why did Mr. Dern sound so angry? How did the newspaper get my picture?

“Because it doesn’t work like the city in Canaan. All we have is the court of public opinion. And you will lose here.”

The undertone of menace rang out. How had his voice become horrifying? Was this the same man who made me tea, who took his wife to Margiano’s last night? Was this the same man who debated the merits of Thoreau and Hemingway with me?

Then, I saw the article’s first sentence:

Nancy Meyers, 23, is suspected in the abduction of Barbara Dern, 5, in the late hours of November 9th. The child’s absence was discovered and reported by Mr. Dern. Police from Orange, NH have been notified and plan to apprehend the suspect...

“But, I didn’t do anything.” I’d never hurt Barbara. Right? I went straight to the car and left. But did I put her to bed? I can’t remember.

“Are you sure? Because you told me you put her to bed. I even drove you home. After you had taken our baby and put her god knows where.”

I struggled with the memory. Was I positive? I couldn’t be sure.

“Leave. Now. Or you don’t want to know what happens next.”

And so I left.

I was twenty-three, terrified of New England towns that killed young women for witchcraft. I was scared that Mr. Dern was right. I told myself this was my chance to go to grad school. I told myself this was freedom.

My parents never asked too many questions. I told them I was fired from the school and let me stay with them in Nevada as I got back on my feet. The only one from Canaan who still called was Dot. Poor Dot. She must have been confused. But after enough empty ringing lines, even those calls halted.

I still think about Mrs. Dern. She loved Barbara dearly, with her pale pink bows and straw-colored hair. She can't have asked too many questions: why he didn't want to prosecute, how he knew, for certain, it was me.

* * *

"What did you say, Mom?" Jill stood in the bathroom doorway and stared like I was crazy.

"This photo, right here. Where did you get it?"

"Oh, I found it in our mailbox right after we moved in. I thought it was such a miracle." Jill turned to go back to cooking.

I took one last glance at the contrasting images in the mirror and picture before I returned to the living room. Rudy had resumed his perch.

"I'm going to take a walk," I said, not to any specific person. "See if Canaan has changed at all."

"Can you take Rudy?"

"Fine." I grabbed the leash and harnessed the beast before I descended the concrete steps into the chilly autumn evening.

Miniature graveyards adorned the yards and a plastic dragon perched on the roof of a nearby house. Inflated with hot air, puffed up on childish hopes of ambition and candy, it stared down at me, a plume of fire reaching from its mouth like the outstretched hand of god. These houses used to represent so much. Their perfect Cape Cods and cookie-cutter white picket fences taunted me. Now, I had grown weary of this desire, as I'd glimpsed the tension beneath their veneers. I wandered aimless, the solitary row of perfect, cheap houses pointing me towards the high school at the end of the block. I wondered if I could find the faded G+H carved under the bleachers that Dot promised long ago. Rudy tugged me away. His huge nose suggested the woods.

A squirrel darted through the bushes, and Rudy took off, pulling my arm and the rest of me along. He dashed through the forest, and I stumbled to keep up, caught on brambles as he bore ahead with determination. Soon, however, the critter evaded Rudy, and he looked up with a doleful grin. Had we come from behind those bushes? Perhaps over that rise? We wandered, a beast and an old woman winding through the forest.

As I looked around, I recognized the trees. The willow with the giant bough, the oak split down the middle as if a great lumberjack had decided to leave only the base intact. This was my grove, where I once read in the trees and got away from Canaan's fishbowl, with its gossip and insular social scene. There was the aspen I used to shake like crazy in the fall recreating the sound it made when the wind twirled its leaves like pinwheels. And there was the old knotty elm that I used to climb every afternoon to steal a precious hour away from teaching and sitting. The knots in the tree had grown, and it resembled a hunched maternal figure, offering a lap of support to all who asked. I drew closer and ran my hands over the soft wood. I let go of Rudy's leash so he could sniff around and glanced toward the tree's heart. A hollow filled the center. I hadn't been here since that afternoon before Barbara went missing. Before everything fell apart. I hoisted myself up onto the first root and began to climb. I could already hear Jill's stern condemnation: *Mom, you shouldn't strain yourself*. She worried too much, that precious girl. I pulled myself up over a bough. I was nearing the top, where I could see above the canopy. Then, I looked down. Bad idea. I was very high up. Something glinted in the fading evening light. I descended a bit and reached to brush leaves aside. A metal box. I grasped at it, my outstretched hand reaching as far as possible. My fingers brushed the cool metal. I stood on tiptoes and snagged a clasp

with my finger. The resistance was too much. I tried again and tugged with all my might. It came free with a shudder. I fell in a heap on the ground, box in hand. Rudy licked my cheek. The metal cube was fastened with two clasps and sealed from the elements with a rubber flap. I opened the lid to reveal a square of wood with a sheet of paper, folded in six. I unfolded it:

Dear Nancy,

I'm sorry it had to be this way. You were my favorite sitter, and I never wanted to hurt you. Unfortunately, I couldn't stand to look at Barbara any longer. I'm sure you've heard the rumors of my wife's extramarital affairs. They are patently false--except one. She, being the woman she is, decided to take off for a couple of nights with a traveling salesman from Boston who was passing through. She always loved blondes. I'd never have found out, but she made a mistake. She kept the child. I believed we would have a beautiful girl and begin our family here in Canaan and do all the things families here do: buy jack-o-lanterns, decorate for Halloween. But when Barbara turned three and her hair still hadn't changed, my suspicions grew. I confronted Gertrude and she broke down, told me everything. I lied. I told her it was okay, that people make mistakes, that I forgive her. I didn't. You just happened to sit on the wrong night. And you took the fall. When the townspeople heard, the rumors spread faster than you could run to your grove. No one would believe you even if you ever find this note. So, thank you.

*Best,
Henry*

P.S. You might want to know we're expecting. I know it's a boy, and his name will be Bradley. Hopefully, this one works out better. He won't know about any of this, of course. I doubt my wife will even speak Barbara's name after some time.

I folded the letter, stuffed it in my coat, then broke down sobbing. Rudy lapped up my tears, but he couldn't stop them. Night descended on the grove. Soon, a fog crept through and covered the woods with a gooey haze. Rudy whined loudly until I stood and began the long slow walk back to Jill's.

When I burst in the door, Bradley and Jill rushed toward me.

"Mom, we were about to call the police if--" Jill stopped when she saw my face.

"Bradley, dear?" I filled my tone with overwhelming sweetness.

"Yes?" A slight fear crossed his face

"Can you get your father on the phone?"