

Chapter 2: The House on Mulberry Street

The next morning, I awoke to hear Dad and Mom in their bedroom discussing something in low voices. The sound was muffled, so I knew they had their door closed. Finally, I heard Mom come out quietly, closing the door behind her, and go into the kitchen to make breakfast.

The dreaded “next day.” I hated even having to make an appearance at breakfast. I knew everyone would be uncomfortable, especially me. As I pulled on my clothes, I stared at the curtains, recalling the strange phenomenon of the flames.

I also thought about a dream I had. It was a dream about the place Dad had threatened me with – a place where they *made* me behave, where I didn’t have my dad or mom to take care of me, as he had said. It was horrible. But *there was someone* – a stranger – who had come out of the shadows and helped me. A kind of knight...

It was all I could do to get through breakfast. I spent most of the meal staring down at my Cocoa Krispies and banana, not particularly inspired to move them to my mouth. My older sister, Debbie, was full of herself as usual, talking away about one of the new boys in the neighborhood, while the rest of the family listened quietly. As she continued, I thought, *I didn’t think it was possible for anyone to be this boy-crazy.*

“Oh, he’s so cute. And his red sports car is the hottest! (What kind is it, Waitsei?) He usually washes it on Saturday...*with his shirt off.* I wonder if he’ll change his schedule with summer? I may go by there this morning on my bike to see.”

“How old is he?” Mom asked.

“Eighteen.”

“You’re only fifteen. Don’t you think he’s a little old for you?”

Debbie shot Mom a look of incredulity: “I’ll be sixteen in September, Mother. Besides, you and Dad are two years apart. A lot of couples are even more than that!”

“Yes, but, as you get older, the *difference* makes less difference.” I smiled at the maxim she had made.

One of the things that bothered me about our family was how Dad always let Mom make the announcements. He may have been the silent head, but she was his voice. It was not an office she relished because she was not the herald type. Debbie, on the other hand, would have felt quite comfortable in that position. So, whenever Mom made one of these pronouncements, she would be awkward and somewhat embarrassed at first.

“Your father and I have made a decision,” she began, looking over at me. “We’ve decided to let you spend the summer at Nannie’s.”

Linda, my younger sister, almost choked on her food: “The whole summer?!”

“The whole summer?” I echoed, also surprised.

“Yes. I’ve spoken with Nannie, and she and Pa would love to have you.”

This was definitely better than prison camp in Siberia or my being sold to Egyptian slave traders. It was also a stroke of good luck, for my grandmother, Nannie, was probably the most wonderful person I knew. She understood things that no one else did, and she would empathize with my plight. And even if she didn’t, she would show me love, regardless, which, under my present circumstances, would mean a lot.

Nannie was fascinating for a number of reasons. First, she had an incredible imagination, a well-educated mind, a vibrant personality and a facile ability to communicate. Second, she was talented in almost everything that could be considered an art, from gardening to oil painting. Third, having taught school and raised four children of her own, she understood and enjoyed kids, especially boys. Fourth, she loved nature and being outside as much as I did. And fifth, she loved having a good time and made everything seem fun, even work. Who wouldn’t want to spend the summer with Nannie? Her house and yard, and especially her garden, were like paradise to me.

“You all won’t miss me?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Of course we will. But we want what’s best for you. And your father and I think spending the summer with Nannie will be good for you.”

I looked over at Linda, who was dying with envy. Then I looked at Dad. He seemed strangely introspective. He was twiddling his thumbs, which indicated he was worried about something.

“Now, clean up your dishes and I’ll come help you pack.” Mom seemed awfully business-like today.

As I crossed to the sink, Debbie’s eyes followed me. She was the curious one in all of this. Not only did she *not* seem surprised by Mom’s announcement, she even stared at me like she understood the reasons behind it. I, on the other hand, could fathom none of it, but was glad it was happening.

The packing went quickly because, strangely, Mom seemed to be prepared for it. Then she drove me over to Nannie’s in our blue and white Olds. On the way, we stopped by the candy store so I could pay my bill. The nice lady wasn’t there – just the unpleasant man. As

I lay my nickel on the counter, he eyed me in his unpleasant way. I wanted to say, “What? Did you think I wouldn’t be back?!” But I didn’t.

As we continued on to Nannie’s, I had my window rolled down to enjoy the warm and inviting weather. As I watched the trees and neatly mowed lawns roll by, the excitement inside was building. There is nothing to compare with the euphoria a kid experiences at the beginning of summer vacation: it’s a feeling of total and absolute freedom. But to be spending it at Nannie’s house – that was a dream!

All the horrors of the previous night had melted away. I closed my eyes and let the air flowing by lift me out of the car and carry me up into the big cumulus clouds overhead so I was soaring. I didn’t think anything could bring me down. Then I heard Mom clear her throat.

“Waitsel?” She sounded tentative.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Do you understand why we’re sending you to Nannie’s for the summer?”

“Kind of.”

“Why?”

“Because you think she’ll be able to handle me,” I answered.

“Your father is under a lot of stress at work. He worries a lot, and I’m afraid his worrying over you may be too much. Do you know that heart attacks run in his family?”

I looked at her: “No, ma’am.”

“Your father works really hard for us. Being on the road all week is no fun for him. Eating restaurant food all the time is not good. Sleeping in motel rooms... He doesn’t get to exercise much and he smokes.” Now Mom looked worried. “I know you resent the time he spends on the golf course and hunting, but don’t you think he deserves that little bit of exercise?”

I felt bad: “Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t you think he deserves to have a son he can be proud of, instead of hearing bad reports about him from school?” She tried to soften what she was saying, so it didn’t sound mean, but I felt worse anyway.

“Yes...”

“I know you’re a good boy. You just worry us.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I think this will be a good break for both of you. You’ll have fun with Nannie and Pa, and we’ll still pick you up and take you with us to church on Sundays. You’ve got Boy Scout camp to look forward to, and... I just wish...” There were tears running down her cheeks. “I can’t cry now or I won’t be able to see to drive,” she laughed.

“I understand,” I said. “I’ll do better. I’ll change. I promise.” Now *I* wanted to cry.

Debbie was sitting in the back seat listening to us talk, yet, uncharacteristically, didn’t add her comments. I was grateful for that. She just let the wind blow through her sandy blonde hair as she enjoyed the moving landscape outside.

As we drove down Mulberry Street – a pretty little avenue that ran through the middle of town – we passed a mansion that had been designed by the same architect that designed Nannie’s house, with the same type of Classical facade. Then we passed some smaller houses before coming to the hospital – a three-story, thirties-style building made of orange brick. Nannie’s house was next door to it.

The first thing you saw when you approached my grandmother’s house were the white oaks in her yard – they were gigantic, and surrounded the house like an army. Then you noticed the big, billowy forsythia bushes on the front corners of her lot. They were full of yellow flowers. The main drive was cement and formed a half circle that began at one of these corners, and, after curving up to the front walk, circled back down to the other corner. At the front walk, it branched off to the left to connect to a smaller, full circle that ran through the portacache and then around by the garage.

The house was a glimmering white Classical temple, as most great Southern mansions were. But all you could see of it coming up the drive was the impressive portico; because two gigantic magnolias, standing on either side of where the drive forked, and reaching well above the top of the roof, hid the rest of the house from view. Four Ionic columns – which are the ones with the little scrolls at the top – framed the two-story entrance.

I loved it when the house would suddenly appear from behind those magnolia trees. It signaled our entry into what seemed like another era, another world. I’ll never forget the grandeur of that house or the extraordinary things that happened to me there: they were more wonderful to me growing up than any dream I could have imagined. I came to cherish that house because I knew I was loved there.

This magnificent temple-fortress was where my grandmother lived. Mom let Debbie and me out with my suitcase while she parked the car, and we began climbing the broad green steps leading up to the porch. Above us, the ceiling of the portico seemed to rise like

an immense canopy spreading overhead. On either side of the steps, friendly black-eyed Susans had been planted in two monumental urns; and, beyond them, there were enormous boxwoods surrounding the white-painted stone foundation. They all fell away as my eyes came level with the green boards of the porch.

My excitement mounted as I reached the top of the steps and crossed the green runner that led up to the entranceway. Over to the right, white metal porch furniture had been casually grouped. Out in the yard, the mammoth oaks and gigantic magnolias formed a protective screen against the outside world. The green floor and shutters, along with the white clapboard walls – all of which normally carried sounds of laughter, singing or some other form of merriment – were quite still this morning. Only the sounds of birds and squirrels playing among the oaks and magnolias broke the silence.

When I reached the screened door, I peered through the glass panel to the right to see if anyone was inside. Fingering the doorbell playfully, I waited to press it, anticipating the sound of the chimes. Debbie let out an impatient sigh.

Suddenly, the screened door swung open.

“Nannie!” *She almost scared me out of my skin.*

“Well, who else would be here?” Her voice had a playful tartness to it that quickly changed to sweetness as she smiled and made a fuss over us with hugs and kisses. Then she ushered us in: “It’s good to see you kids. Come into my messy old house.”

Once inside, I pulled back to look at her. Nannie, as we called my grandmother, was dressed in her usual everyday attire: loose, brightly colored blouse; full, mid-length skirt; flowered apron – and lots of colorful beads. She reminded me of a gypsy: not just in her appearance, which was always loud and colorful; but also in her wild, free-spirited nature.

But there was also a regal quality to her. She had gray hair that was curly from a perm. Her nose had a noble slope to it. Her lips were thin like Queen Elizabeth’s. She had blue eyes that sparkled and were made up as though she were a silent movie star. And she always smelled of Jergens lotion.

“Where’s your mother?” she asked, smiling warmly.

“Out in the yard, looking at something,” Debbie said.

Nannie’s house usually felt cool, just as it did today, because of the mammoth white oaks and expansive wrap-around porch that surrounded it. Air conditioning hardly existed in 1965. Our rich next-door neighbors had one of the few air-conditioners in town, and their unit, which was detached from the house, was the size of a small garage. It was

covered in brown gauze, so that we could see the copper bulb bobbing up and down in the water that was constantly being cooled. It made strange sounds throughout the day, so that we kids were convinced there must be a monster inside.

Nannie's system was less mysterious and just as effective: a gentle breeze coming in through open screened windows. I never knew her house to be hot or stuffy. And it always smelled good: she kept fresh cut flowers in almost every room, and there was the oily smell of furniture polish.

"At what is she looking?" Nannie's English was impeccable, especially when there were impressionable kids around.

"Probably your magnolia trees. She was noticing how many blossoms there were on them."

Nannie scrunched her nose: "She was?! I may need those for my party." Then she shrugged and smiled: "I'm sure I'll have enough."

Nannie liked having parties. She belonged to about a dozen clubs, half of which she helped start: Garden Club, Rose Club, Bridge Club, Brush and Palette Art Club, Book Club, Music Club, Women's Club, Circle, Choir. Her many involvements reflected her broad interests and penchant for society.

I looked around quickly to see if anything had changed since my last visit. The front hallway was dark because she had the curtains drawn in her two front rooms. They were special rooms for special occasions and off-limits to kids, unless they happened to be included in those occasions, like at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The rest of the time, she used them for parties or occasional guests, such as the preacher.

The back hallway was lit with the light from the dining room on the right, the window at the top of the stairs on the left, and the open back porch door at the end of the hall. Her antique chairs gave her hallway the ambiance of an English manor house, which suited her, since she seemed to think of herself as a landed English lady on her country estate.

In the distance, I could hear Nannie's television set going. Evidently, she had been watching the reports on the space launch along with the rest of the world. We had been watching them at our house before we left to come here.

All of a sudden, Nannie began sashaying around and looking at us curiously, like she had a secret she couldn't keep: "Come on, I want to show you two something." She started off down the hall, looking back a couple of times to make sure we were following.

Nannie was only 4 feet, 11 inches tall, but she was a dynamo fueled by nervous energy. And she had expressive, silent-movie-star eyes. When she was excited about something, which was often, she would suddenly start jerking around and exaggerating her facial expressions, as if she were Charlie Chaplin. On the other hand, when she was sad, she would be just as melodramatic, slipping into an attitude of deep pathos, as if she were Lillian Gish. Whatever her mood, you had to go along with her because you knew she was leading you someplace wonderful.

She stopped at the end of the hall in front of the basement door, right beneath the staircase, and looked at us enticingly: “Guess what I have in my basement?”

“A snake,” I joked. My grandmother hated snakes with a passion.

She frowned: “Better *not* be a snake.”

“A monster?” Monsters didn’t even exist in her world.

“Pshaw. I’ll show you.”

Nannie jerkily turned the key in the door, opened it and turned on the light. It was an unfinished basement with an earthen floor, so the smell of old bricks, rotting boards and damp, sterile dirt began drifting up. It was also cool down there, so the air drifting up felt good. Nannie took a few steps down the old stairs and squat down. When she straightened back up and turned around, there, in each of her hands, was a brand new kitten. They mewed loudly.

“Wow! Where did *those* come from?” I asked.

She tee-heed: “The preacher’s cat: he had to get rid of her, so I gave her a home. But he didn’t tell me she was pregnant! You want to hold one?” She was already placing a little ball of black fur in my hands. It had a white blaze, white paws and blue eyes.

“Isn’t he pretty? Look at this one.” She placed the other kitten in Debbie’s hands. It was white with gray makings.

“They really are cute,” Debbie said. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Give one to your mother, I hope.”

“Give me one what?” Mom stuck her head around the open basement door. She had several magnolia blossoms in each hand. The huge curled petals, imperfectly white and luxuriantly fragrant, were surrounded by large, floppy leaves that looked like polished dark-green leather. She held them carefully by the thick jointed stems, avoiding touching the blossoms since that would turn them brown.

I didn't know anything more Southern than magnolia blossoms, unless it was my mom. She was a little slip of a woman and beautiful, with dark brown hair that she wore in a waved perm, green eyes, very attractive figure, fair complexion with rosy cheeks, and vibrant smile. She looked like a true Southern belle in her neat little white blouse with rolled short sleeves, lime green skirt and matching shoes.

"Where did *those* come from?" she said, noticing the kittens.

"The preacher's cat," said Nanny.

"The preacher's cat! You mean it was *pregnant*?! Why would he give you a cat that was pregnant?"

"I don't know," Nannie laughed, "but she's not pregnant any more!"

"How many did she have?"

"Seven. And I want you to take one."

"Seven!" Mom looked at us like she shouldn't even consider the idea; but she surprised me by saying, "Let me think about it. They really are cute. Let me lay these down so I can hold one."

"Just put them on the back porch." Nannie climbed back down the stairs cackling. "Come look at the others."

We went down about four steps, and there, in a cut-down cardboard box with an old pink towel in the bottom, was the mother and five more kittens. The mother cat was milky white, with tawny and gray ears, and tawny and gray on the tip of her tail. But the kittens were every combination of color imaginable, for a cat: one was an orange tabby; another was solid gray with white markings; a third, tawny and gray; a fourth, milky white with some tawny; and a fifth, gray and black tabby. I looked them all over carefully then studied the one I was holding.

"I think I like this one," I said, indicating the one in my hands.

"All right, then, Blacky's yours." Nannie's voice had a finality to it that I liked. She smiled into my eyes warmly with her nose about an inch from mine.

"Blacky," I said: "that's a good name."

"He'll be a fighter one day, wait and see – a true tom." Nannie sounded so confident.

"How can you tell?"

"I know. He has spunk."

I sat him down on the carpet to see how he could walk. He lifted his front legs in naive confidence, while his back hips wobbled like a sailor on leave. It was as if half his body

was sober and the other half drunk. He looked at me with wide-eyed curiosity as he tried to make his way toward me; then he began mewling loudly. I picked him back up and looked him over: he certainly was a prize. His little back feet began pounding against my hand.

“I think he’s hungry,” I said: “he wants his lunch.”

I placed him back down in the box with the others. There were so many! The mother cat raised her head and looked up at us contentedly; then she looked down at her hungry babies as if to say, “See what I did?” And, satisfied that all was as it should be, she laid her head back down and stretched lazily.

“Speaking of lunch,” said Nannie, “I have to get something on the stove, or Mac’ll have a fit.” (Mac was my grandfather, whom we all called “Pa.”) She hurriedly turned off the light, shut the door and jerkily turned the key back in the lock.

“Mother?” Mom’s voice came from the dining room. “What’s that smell in here?”

“I don’t know! What’s it like?”

“Something dead! Could there be something dead under your house?”

“Let me see.” Nannie stalked into the dining room, sniffing the air as if she were Sherlock Holmes discerning clues. “Could be...I may have lost a cat. I’ll have one of the boys climb under there this weekend and retrieve whatever it is.”

Mom glanced at me, and I made a face as if to say, “Yikes!” Under Nannie’s house was a place we kids hoped never to have to go: it was dark, smelled like her basement, and was the hiding place of unimaginable horrors. Add to that the fact that it now contained known dead bodies, and it became a source for horrific nightmares.

“What do you mean, ‘the boys’?” Mom asked. “Who else do you have coming?”

“All the boys: Charlie’s, Bob’s and yours. I thought Waitzel would enjoy the company.”

I smiled.

“Are you sure you want to do all that? It’s an awful lot.” Mom was always considerate that way.

“Not so much. Now I have to put some beans on for Mac.” Nannie hurried off in the direction of the kitchen.

“Can we really keep one of those kittens?” I asked, going over to Mom.

“I think so. Just let me ask your father. I think it’ll be okay.”

My dad didn’t like cats; he was a big bird dog man – pointers and setters. As a matter of fact, when he was my age, he was asked by his school newspaper what he would do if

he had a million dollars: “When I grow up,” he was quoted as saying, “if I have a million dollars, I will see that my parents, brother and sister have a good warm house, the best of clothing and all the pleasures they wanted. Another thing I would do would be to help some poor boys and girls: I would give them a warm house, plenty of clothing, and see that they had a good education. Last of all, I would have some bird dogs, rabbit dogs, opossum dogs and fox dogs to hunt with for my own pleasure.”

That little paragraph revealed a lot about my dad’s priorities: family, the poor and hunting dogs. He had a good heart and simple tastes that hearkened back to olden times. I often wished he had as much regard for pet dogs as he did for hunting breeds, because I always wanted a dog of my own to follow me around and be my friend when no one else would. But whenever I mentioned it, he would say, “You’ve got a dog out there in that lot,” referring to one of his hunting dogs. That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.

Dad once told me the reason he wouldn’t give me a dog as a pet: it was because I wanted a German shepherd, like Rin Tin Tin. He never would say why he disliked German shepherds; but I figured it had something to do with his experiences in World War II. At any rate, he never offered to get me a different breed. Instead, he let me console myself with a duck, a guinea pig, two parakeets and a fish. I couldn’t see why adding a cat to the menagerie would make much difference.

It’s not that my dad was mean – he just didn’t understand the needs of a boy. He figured all boys were like him growing up, and what was good enough for him was good enough for them. Since he liked hunting dogs, he assumed all boys would like them. Later, he took to horses and baseball, which, again, he assumed all boys would like. It didn’t occur to him that different people would like different things. And if they did, he figured there must be something wrong with them.

Nannie’s formal dining room was situated on the south side of the house, so that the morning light streamed in through the sheer drapes, creating an atmosphere of elegance. The room had dark oak floors, white ceiling beams and china rails, leaded glass cabinets, Colonial wallpaper, Sheraton furniture and a magnificent crystal chandelier in the center. The chairs had been arranged around the room against the chair rails, so they wouldn’t hide the two pedestals of splayed, fluted legs supporting the massive mahogany dining table in the middle of the room. In the center of the table, Nannie had placed a long arrangement of magnolia leaves and blossoms. Their distinctive fragrance filled the room with a sweetness that was intertwined with something else – the distinct odor of death.

Today's newspapers, magazines and mail were piled at one end of the table; I walked over to see what had come. The Thursday, June 3, 1965 edition of *The Charlotte Observer* had a front page full of stories and pictures about the Gemini IV space launch. Ed White, the pilot, would be the first American to walk in space. He had gone up with Jim McDivitt as commander. Theirs would be the first space flight ever to be broadcast internationally; plus, it was the first time NASA had used its new Mission Control Center in Houston.

Another piece of mail that caught my eye was the latest issue of *Look* magazine: it had a cover shot of the new Princess of Monaco, the former actress Grace Kelly. There was also an open package that looked like a book had arrived.

Mom had gone into the kitchen with Nannie. When she returned, she went back over to the basement door, re-turned the key in the keyhole, opened the door and turned on the light. I followed her. Squatting down, she looked into the box of kittens with their mother then smiled back up at me with the excited face of a little girl.

"Can you believe it?" she thrilled. "Seven!" She reached in and picked one up. "Which do you like?"

"The black one – Blacky." I leaned against the door jam watching Mom.

"He is pretty...they all are. You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Mom cooed sympathetically as she stroked the head of the mother cat. She responded appreciatively by looking even lazier and stretching her paws. "I wonder what's going to happen to her?"

"The mother? Join the rest of the cats in Nannie's yard, I guess." Nannie had what seemed to be about twenty cats, not counting these new ones; but it was hard to tell, since they all lived outside and under the house – some of them showing up only at meal times – except for her favorite, a large white Persian named Missy, who was mistress of the back porch.

"Hmm. That would be a shame, to put her out with those other cats. She's too nice." Mom had some sort of scheme forming in her head.

"You're not thinking about taking her, too?" Surely she didn't think Bird Dog Bob would let us have *two* cats. "Are you?"

Mom just looked up at me and smiled. She looked pretty sitting there enjoying those kittens.

"Look what came in the mail for me this morning, Waitzel." As she came back into the hallway, Nannie had a musicality to her voice that indicating she had something important

to share. She handed me a little hardbound book: a collection of drawings by Rembrandt. “I belong to an art book club, and this is what they sent me this month. Would you like to have it?”

I was never surprised by my grandmother’s generosity – just by its unexpectedness. “Yes, ma’am. You don’t want it?” Nannie knew I loved pictures and had an interest in art. Being an artist herself, she encouraged me every chance she could.

“I don’t need it.” She wrinkled her nose and smiled. “I have more books than I can read.” She was right. There was a stack a mile high next to her bed. And, even though she often read late into the night, it never seemed to shrink.

“Thanks.” I took the little volume and went out on the back porch to examine it.

As far as I was concerned, Nannie’s screened-in back porch was the focal point of her house on Mulberry Street. That was the beginning of the world I knew as Outside. From there, I could see the edge of the carport, the garage where Pa kept his mowing equipment, the hospital next door, the part of the yard that reminded me of a jungle, the grassy area where Nannie fed her cats, the garden that was as varied and interesting as Nannie herself, the ancient walnut tree next to the compost pile, the muscadine vineyard, the apple orchard behind it, the backyards of her neighbors that sloped down to the creek running along the back edge of her property, and the distant blue of Hibriten Mountain. It was quite a panorama.

The back porch was where we spent most of our time at Nannie’s, when we weren’t out in the yard. It was the next best thing to being Outside. Just about the only furniture out there – unless she had set up a card table or two – was a collection of green-painted rustic hickory seating: rocking chairs, straight-back chairs and love seat.

On one end of the porch she had stacked all her old magazines. Nannie subscribed to almost as many periodicals as the Library. She was a voracious reader, devouring everything from *McCall’s* and *Post* to *Reader’s Digest* and *Prevention Magazine*.

I walked over to the stacks and began browsing through them. They had a musty smell. There was a pile of *Life* magazines: one had a photo on the cover of a lady getting a blood test for German measles; another showed a kid skateboarding – “the new sensation;” one had a picture of John Wayne in a cowboy hat; another had an incredible shot of an 18-week-old human fetus; another showed the inside of a helicopter in Vietnam; and one cover depicted Robert Kennedy on the summit of “Mt. Kennedy.” Then there were *Time* magazines: one cover said, “Rock ‘N’ Roll: Everybody’s Turned On;” another was called

“The Communications Explosion;” one showed the gang from “Peanuts;” another was called “The Computer In Society,” with an illustration of a room-size computer that looked like a monster; and one had an illustration of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I had spent many hours cutting, tracing and copying pictures out of those magazines. One weekend, when I was in the first grade, I sat on Nannie’s back porch copying the picture of a boy from a Northern Tissue advertisement in crayons. I took the drawing to school on Monday to show my teacher – she didn’t believe I had drawn it. So, while the other kids went out on the playground for recess, she made me stay behind and recopy the picture to prove I had done it the first time. I don’t remember the results, but that incident had a profound effect on me. It added to an already developing pattern of feeling insecure, inadequate and unappreciated that in later life I would try to overcompensate for.

Relaxing in one of the rockers, I began perusing the book Nannie had given me: it was a neat little edition about two-thirds the size of an ordinary hardbound book. The drawings inside looked like they had been done mostly in red and black chalk, and in various shades of brown and black ink. Some of them were quick studies done with a brush, while others were more finished, containing detailed pen-work and rich-toned washes.

As I flipped through the collection, I came upon one drawing that particularly impressed me: a pen and brown ink sketch of a man in a garden with a woman kneeling at his feet. The man was wearing a robe with a wide-brimmed hat, and was carrying a shovel. It was called “Christ as a Gardener Appears to Mary Magdalen.”

I had never seen a picture of Christ like this before. Usually artists made him look otherworldly, with a beam of light behind his head or his body hanging on a cross. But in this one, he looked earthy and human. To see him as a humble gardener further surprised me. The landscape surrounding him reminded me of Nannie’s yard: mammoth trees, vegetation everywhere. As a matter of fact, *he* reminded me somewhat of *Nannie*, with his big floppy hat, short stature and kind face. Of course, he did have a *beard*; but, still, there was something about him...

As I continued examining Rembrandt’s drawings, I felt a kinship with the artist and, somehow, a greater connection to Nannie. His work was warm and intimate, like she was: human, in a miniature sort of way; yet, at the same time, monumentally spiritual. It was as if he had one foot on earth and one in heaven when he drew. He seemed to have believed that there was something more to what he was drawing than just physical form. Nannie seemed

to believe the same thing: the secret to enjoying everyday life and appreciating everyday things.

Both seemed to have realized that things were more than just what they appeared; that there was something else there, some spiritual truth behind each bird's song or plant's blossom that made it important to look or listen or smell. I guessed that Nannie and Rembrandt had discovered how to look at life with a different set of eyes. It was a secret I wanted to discover, too.

I turned back to the drawing of Christ as a gardener and looked at it again. Then I lay the book down to think about it. When I did, something in the garden caught my eye that caused me to rise up out of my seat. I walked over to the screen to get a better look. I stood there for a long time just staring, wondering at what I saw. The light was soft and clear, so there couldn't be a mistake: there was someone digging among Nannie's roses, and he looked just like the man in Rembrandt's drawing.

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