

Dunkard Bottom

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Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World
Fire & Light: An Off-Road Search for the Spirit of God
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Edgar Cayce on Oneness

Dunkard Bottom

a novel

Jon Robertson



Belvedere Books

Woodstock • Virginia

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For Jason

Contents

One: Trouble in Paradise	1
Two: Paradise Lost	9
Three: “What Dost Thou Mean, Free?”	23
Four: The Lyceum	33
Five: Anomalies	49
Six: White Lightnin’	61
Seven: Sports Bar Patrons	71
Eight: That Sadie Hawkins Thing	111
Nine: Return to Belvedere	129
Ten: A Well-Regulated Militia	143
Eleven: The Fates on Notice	163
Twelve: Mayday	175
Thirteen: “The Bride Will Depart”	187
Fourteen: God Save the Queen	201
Fifteen: A Bear Runs Backward	213
Sixteen: Abigail’s Dream	227
Acknowledgments	239
About the Author	240

One

Trouble in Paradise

WE STOPPED AT THE CROSSROAD in time to hear the rattle and hiss of an approaching vehicle. Cresting the hill was a rusty old Dodge pick-up bouncing right at us, throwing sparks from its undercarriage. White knuckled, I steered the 1912 Rolls behind a clump of sumac. The truck sped past the stop sign with half a dozen gun-bearing men in its bed. The wheels sprayed gravel off the shoulder, barely missing us. The truck slid back onto the pavement and sped off. We listened as the scrapes receded in the distance.

The road was silent again. But that was the problem. Everything was silent. The air was empty of bird chatter and dog talk. Not even a suss in the trees. I flivvered the Rolls back to the top of the hill from which the valley stretched west in the relentless rosy pink heat and damp air. The landscape appeared normal enough, its narrow roads curving like ribbons over the rolling valley. The trees and meadows seemed unchanged. Familiar farmhouses dotted the open spaces of wide fields of corn and barley grass. Even my dog Jason knew something wasn't right. He whined in my ear.

"We don't have much choice, Jase. Good boy."

The drive was our first venture outside the village since the Snap, and I was the reluctant leader of a party of four. We'd gone to check on our nearest neighbors: two Amish families, the Schmids and the Vogts.

Beecher pointed. "Smoke."

A former soldier with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, Beecher's trained eyes had spotted two black curls rising from distant farms.

Fifteen-year-old Georgie Laine flexed his jaw. "That's not chimney smoke, I don't think."

We drove ten more minutes or so when we came upon the gate of Brom Schmid, a farmer who had helped restore our flour mill and whose children had cleared the brush around Dunkard Bottom. We inched down the long gravel driveway toward the white farmhouse, which was barely visible behind a trio of oaks, the yellow fall leaves nearly white, and the red leaves black in the pink sunlight.

"No one working in the fields," I observed.

Beecher's long-haired brother Cody caught his breath. "Oh man."

Then an acrid stench. Two horses lay on their sides, legs stiff. Further on, we saw a pair of Holstein cattle also lying dead like knocked-over toys. Four cows. Six. A dozen. We slowed to a crawl as an entire field of dead cattle came into view.

Cody tossed his hair out of his eyes. "That Snap thing—it killed them all."

Georgie went pale. "It looks like a battlefield," to which Beecher did not respond.

The crackle of tires on gravel was the only sound as the grim acres passed. We were edgy as we pulled up to the white foursquare house. No one was eager to discover the worst, but we had to find out if the Schmidts were alive.

On the porch, Beecher shaded his eyes to see through the screen door.

"I can see clear through to the back." With the pistol poised, he knocked. No footsteps. No voices. "Hello? Hello in there."

The rebellious Cody did not take after his older brother much.

"We gotta go. I think we should get out of here."

But we weren't leaving until we had done our neighborly duty. I urged Beecher inside. He cocked a round into the chamber and we followed him.

"Yo. Anyone?"

We checked the house room by empty room and soon found our way back to the kitchen.

"They must not be home," Cody quivered. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

The back door was open so we stepped out onto the wrap-around porch, only to behold a ghastly sight. All six members of the Schmid family lay face-down on the ground in a jagged line to the barn. As though struck down while running, the men and boys were in their coveralls and the girls in their blue dresses and white caps. There were Jonathan, David, Rebecca, and Sarah. The family lay face-down, all but Mr. Schmid. He lay on his back, his craggy defiant eyes and his bearded mouth open with indignation, as though he had not liked the last thing he saw.

While the rest of us gazed in shock, Beecher walked past the family to check the barn.

"It killed them," Georgie gasped. "Even the kids. That thing killed them."

Cody could take no more. He bent over the porch railing and threw up, and I wasn't feeling so good myself. The normally rugged Hagerty gripped a post, turning his head "no." Beecher was the only one not paralyzed with the horror of the scene. He checked the family for pulses only to tell us what we already knew.

Georgie asked, "So why are we alive?"

No one had an answer for that.

Scanning the distant woods line, Beecher hurried us on. “You never know who might be roaming around. We better get moving.”

On our way to Vogt’s farm we passed more dead cattle, field after field of them. In one field, we saw the tail section of a passenger jet. We were puzzled to see some spreads with healthy animals beside spreads of dead ones. Cody wouldn’t look any more. He sat slumped against the door, which annoyed Beecher.

“Cody, snap out of it. Man up. Here, drink.” He handed Cody a bottle of water. “Two swallows. Deep breaths. Get a grip.”

Cody did as Beecher told him, and he seemed to feel better.

“Sorry, Beech,” Cody lamented. “I—I never saw anything like this.”

I grabbed the water bottle and gulped hard. “Yeah well nobody else has, either.”

I poured water into my hand to give my trusty border collie a drink.

Beecher uncocked the pistol. “I think we’re going to see a lot more of this. Despite what they tell you, you don’t get used to it in combat. The families. Dead kids. Never.”

We followed one of the distant smoke plumes only to find the remains of a farmhouse smoldering on its foundation, its charred walls collapsed inward. Goats ran free. I saw a live goat standing atop a dead cow and a live cow grazing in the kitchen garden without anyone to chase her away. We pulled up to the ruins and checked the barn and yard but found no one. We didn’t have the nerve to poke through the ashes for bodies, so we drove on. All the while, I couldn’t shake the image of those children, lying like dolls discarded in the dirt.

How normal everything had been only a few weeks before. Had we reached the end of the world? Was this a preview of the end to come? I was torn between cursing the stupidity of the human race and thanking my eccentric wife Abigail for having dragged us to Dunkard Bottom in the first place. How the world had changed. When she first told me about the place, I thought she was crazy. Back then, the twilight still shone silver-blue. The black wool sky was pierced with the diamonds of stars. In actual fact, the first time she brought it up we were still at Belvedere, our sustainable mountain haven. It was nighttime, and we were dancing naked in the cool ivory moonlight.



“You want to buy a town?” I queried, not sure I’d heard right. “What do you mean ‘buy a town’? You mean like Ruckersville?”

“No, no. Did I say town?” Abigail attituded, her eyes locked on the Big Dipper. “It’s just a village, really. A hamlet.”

Abigail dropped that little bomb as we swept into the shadow-slashed sculpture garden. That was back when we were still enjoying the easy life. She had ambushed me while my resistance was low, a Chopin nocturne tinkling from the flower beds. My wife’s skin glowed whiter than the statuary.

“It’s because of *Permelia Lyttle’s Guide*, isn’t it?” I frowned. “Because of that damn guide.”

“No, silly.” She gracefully lifted her black sequined high-button shoe to the inside of her knee and turned three perfect pivots. “It’s because of the end of the world. It’s imminent, you know.”

I took her hand and pulled her back to me. She drew her fingers along the edge of her broad-brimmed hat and spun about.

“The end is coming soon, Luray, and we have a lot of work to do. We can’t just—live here—in peace and quiet.”

“Why not? Exactly.”

I tipped my derby, and we pas de deux-ed across the dewy lawn toward the white marble Diana, her bow perpetually drawn.

“It’s selfish, Luray. There’s much more that we can do for our fellow man.”

“Yeah? Well what did he ever do for us? Besides, the end should have come by now. We were wrong. *Permelia Lyttle* was wrong.”

“A year is nothing, relative to the geological ages or waiting in a doctor’s office. But the Guide is not wrong. Sweetie, the Guide used to be the most important thing in your life.”

I had discovered the guide in the form of a handwritten diary, a Victorian manuscript hidden in an armoire bequeathed to me by my crackpot Uncle Gudrow. My initial interest in the papers had been the money, which I desperately needed at the time. But Abby was right—once I understood the value to the world of those ramblings by the psychic diarist, everything changed.

“The Guide—gave me a purpose in life. But so did you, Abigail. So did you. What do we need a town for?”

My wife spun in place like a figure skater, and the curves of hips and waist undulated, delivering the intended effect in the luminous halo of the moonlight. She was being naughty in our first dance of early spring, our breath billowing in the damp air. She mischievously looked me up and down.

“And yet you seem pleased.”

“Not about buying a town, I’m not.”

“It’s a village. A village, Luray—big difference.”

All winter, we longed for the spring when we could dance in the sculpture garden in our hats and shoes and nothing else. Once upon a time long ago,

I had been arrested for dancing naked in a public park—it was my second wife’s fault—but at Belvedere, Abby and I reveled safely in our element. The dance was a nocturnal delight to which Abigail had introduced me when she first brought me there—Abby was my soul mate. A smile broadened her face. Her ogee brows poised for victory, she slid her thick glasses higher on her nose and forgave my clumsy missteps.

“Think of the village as an amusement,” she said, blowing me a kiss. “A hobby.”

“Uh, no—painting sea shells is a hobby.”

We whisked back across the lawn toward the nine muses, their heads tilted expectantly toward Abigail’s little art studio beneath the mimosa tree. I struck a pose as she turned under my arm.

“It’s about community, Luray. The Guide says the human race will only survive in working communities. And what could be better than a made-to-order village to do it in? We’ll live like they did in the nineteenth century. We’ll have horses and bicycles and period clothing. We’ll recapture a simpler way of life, just like the Guide says.”

“But the Guide also says there’ll be treachery and sickness and death.”

My wife kissed my cheek. “Luray, you can be such a pessimist.”

“And you’re a dreamer. Look, honey, I’ve never stood in the way of your projects. But I can’t leave Belvedere. I won’t. You can’t tempt me.”

Lithe and agile, she leapt toward the stars. I caught her high overhead by her hips, which resulted in a tickle to my nose. For etiquette’s sake, I suppressed a sneeze. I lowered her to the ground, but before the Chopin could finish, I rudely broke rhythm and kissed the love of my life full upon the lips. She took my face in her hands.

“I love you, Luray Flicht. You know that, don’t you?”

What could I do but collect her in my arms and carry her into the house?

In the solvents of lovemaking, my dissent over the purchase of a town dissipated, which had been a strategy on my wife’s part that was easy to forgive.

Later on in the quiet wee hours, we were unfit for anything but showers and bed. Abby snoozed in the crook of my arm, her hair pinned up and shining blue-black in the muted light. I was overcome with affection for her. Overwhelmed with gratitude for every eccentric and fearless inch of her—especially when I recalled how she had abducted me at gunpoint and whisked me, Jason, and *Permelia Lyttle’s Guide* to Belvedere. She’d invited me to live with her during our trial betrothal, and within a few months we married. We worked on the Guide together and I revived my career as a writer. I hadn’t published so much as a letter to the editor since my Pulitzer back in the eighties, so it felt good to be back in the harness and working in such a

magnificent home.

So why was she trying to ruin everything?



The next morning I awoke to the curative aromas of coffee, pancakes, and warm maple syrup. But something was wrong—breakfast was my job. I always made the breakfast. Jason and I hurried downstairs to find Abigail hard at work. Every bowl, pan, and utensil we owned was piled dirty in the sink.

“Abigail, how can you make such a mess?”

Even when the day called for jeans and sandals, Abby maintained an elegance from days gone by—a white blouse fitted close around the neck and pinned with a cameo, her soft hair gathered up and held by an antique jade comb.

I defended my morning territory.

“Breakfast is my turf.”

She inspected me with disapproval. “Tuck in your shirt. Please—quickly now.”

She set down two plates of pancakes and I joined her at the table.

“Luray, I want to explain—about the village.”

I ate. She talked.

“It’s right out of *Permelia Lyttle’s Guide*. The world could end this year, so there may not be much time. She described the end—post-consumer villages of cooperative people skilled in the manual arts and crafts. People willing to sustain themselves with simple technology and nourishing food that they grow themselves.”

“The Guide says a lot of things—but it doesn’t mean you have to go out and buy a—village.”

“Come on, Luray. It’s not as though I can’t afford it.”

Truth was Abigail could afford most anything. She had been the sole heir-ess to the Lind Ball Bearing fortune. She’d grown up in Williamsburg, Virginia and had recently donated their twenty-room family manse for use as a period clothing museum by the Historic Williamsburg Foundation. Easy come, easy go. We married in a lavish ritual at Bruton Parish Church.

I rarely interfered with her pet projects, and there had been a lot of them. But whatever she set her sights on, there was no stopping her. An idea would mushroom in her head fully formed on a Sunday, and contracts would be signed by Monday afternoon—cost was no object. Untouched by a devastated economy, Abigail would buy a broken-down movie theater and have it restored, just to see it beautiful again. There were more Abigail Lind Bijous in the Mid-Atlantic States than I could list. She would have an old car restored

only to give it away. She still lived in the nineteenth century. She sponsored scholarships for boys to go to blacksmith school and had founded an entire girls' school for the sole purpose of teaching music, art, charm, and dance. I didn't object to her projects as long as they didn't threaten my low threshold for insecurity, namely anything that could drag me beyond the borders of Belvedere. I had a history of losing my homes.

I thrived in our mountain hideaway, and who wouldn't? Approaching from the tree-shrouded driveway, the house came into view—a sage-green Victorian three-story, a jewel of beveled glass and painted gingerbread amid tidy well-kept lawns and flowering trees, all hidden behind thick mountain-top forest. I never ceased to admire the craftsmanship. The walls of rich natural woods were adorned with romanticist art. The rooms were tastefully appointed with period furniture. The ornate windowed dining room led to a professional kitchen. The structural elements were expertly fitted with joints and pegs—no nails. Also, no adhesives, no carpeting, no plywood. The non-allergenic interior was energy efficient, too, owing to the solar panels on the roof—we sold electricity back to the power company.

The grounds were graced by a manicured sculpture garden, which we maintained ourselves. They included an efficient, raised-bed vegetable garden, the surplus of which we canned for the winter. Behind the mimosa tree was Abigail's design studio where she painted, reveled in her creative impulses, made clothes for historical reenactors, and consulted on costumes for the movies.

Commanding central attention in the backyard was an ornate copper armillary with an eggplant-sized quartz prism that panned its intense spectra around the property on the whims of the breeze. Belvedere would certainly suffice for our own survival of humanity's final curtain—if anyone were to survive at all.

“Luray, try to have an open mind.”

“I'm sorry but it's far too late for that,” I mumbled. “You don't have to prove anything by buying a village. Now, I'm sorry, but I want you to let this go.”

“Not until you've seen it for yourself.”

“You mean go there? Me?”

“Of course, you.”

I hadn't left Belvedere since we married, and felt the old agoraphobic panic swelling inside me—you wouldn't know this to meet me, but I used to have problems some people, doctors mostly, called severe. Jason rested a sympathetic paw on my knee.

“Well, how far is it? I need to know. I don't take all those medications

anymore—I freed myself from the pharma cartel. I only leave here for—incidental. There’s a possible panic quotient in play here, so...”

She kissed my chin. “Oh—it’s not far, worry wart. Besides, once you see it you’re going to love it. I just know you will. We leave right after breakfast.”

Two

Paradise Lost

BY WAY OF FEMININE ARTIFICE, Abigail had persuaded me and Jason to drive her to the disputed village in her restored 1912 Silver Ghost, the same refitted antique that we'd used to distribute the Guide. I admit that I'm easy where my wife is concerned, but the idea of leaving Belvedere behind gave me a case of the sweats, and, moreover, the shakes.

Only two years before, I was no less than dizzy and confused, taking twelve medications a day for everything ranging from anxiety and depression to panic attacks and jumpy legs. Of course, I also had to take a set of pills to counteract the side effects of the first pills, which included intermittent nasal bleeding and thoughts of suicide. At the time, I had desperately needed a purpose in my life. A goal. Sort of a promise to my long-deceased parents that I would make something of myself. Compiling and distributing *Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World* did the trick. It turned my life around. Driving cross-country in the Rolls, we had sold the books according to the Great Lady's wishes, at a penny apiece. By that time, I had stopped the medicines cold turkey. Ill advised, yes, but I'd been stable ever since Abigail brought me to Belvedere.

The Guide became a best-seller, and the prospect of a coming apocalypse had been trending in the national consciousness since the 2000 Coup. Permelia Lyttle had provided advice to us in the future, those of us who would prepare and survive. She described modern times unmistakably, including "the wars of oil and religion," and told of a cataclysm in our own time. Permelia described economies in decline, madmen drunk on greed, and heartless demons cackling as they gained power. Permelia Lyttle didn't pinpoint a date for the end itself, but it didn't take a genius to see it unfolding. Like a lot of Americans, we stopped trusting the corporate media. To get anything like a consensus of what's really going on, we would occasionally fire up Abby's shortwave radio and listen with mouths agape.

Thoughtless individuals might suggest that I had always been a little cracked around the foundation, that I was agoraphobic and a hypochondriac, but they would be wrong, as I was no longer a hypochondriac at all. For

me, Belvedere was my paradise kingdom on a mountaintop, and Abigail my queen. That was the only medicine I would ever need.



Dressed in our Edwardian motoring outfits and goggles (which Abigail insisted upon), we drove away from Belvedere that morning. It wasn't long before the old symptoms crept in. My mouth was dry; my head beaded with sweat.

Abigail looked younger than her thirty-six years. She rode erect beside me, her wide hat tied with a scarf beneath her chin, her gloved hands atop a sequined walking stick. I wore my derby, green plaid vest, and floppy tie. With Jason safely in the back seat, I punctuated my objections with sniffs. Abigail must have forgotten the condition in which she'd found me. Fresh from the Harpy's southern Virginia lair, I wasn't fit for man or woman. Of all people, Jason had never abandoned me, which shows you the loyalty and compassion of dogs.

"This village—are there going to be people there? When I was homeless, I became—uncomfortable around my own species. Jason will tell you. I intensely dislike other people, because—"

"Shush, Luray. Can't you just enjoy the beauty of the day? The shady canopy of the new spring leaves—they look like lime sherbet. A hundred shades of green in the oaks, maples, pines, and firs. The scrub growths—not weeds, my dear, but palettes of color and textures. And behold the glorious ferns! Flowers of every color line the woods and roads. There is peace to be found in all this, my husband."

I calmed a little. Sniffed again. The sunlight sparkled through an emerald lattice of the forest. The cloudless sky was robin's-egg blue, the spring breeze balmy after the long snowy winter. The world has beautiful spots, I thought.

"Life is worth living for the beauty alone," my spouse told me. "Now, are we feeling better?"

"All except for the nausea."

A half hour into the drive, I imagined how far away Belvedere was, and that if we could view ourselves from there, we'd be the tiniest dot in the distance, beyond the horizon, perilously close to the edge of the world.

"I need to find a place to pull over."

"Nonsense," she cooed, wrapping her gloved arm around mine. "We should be getting close."

She had this magic over me, Abby did. Her strength and confidence. Her love seemed to make all fear seep away.

"So, where is this place?" I finally asked. "We left civilization hours ago."

I don't know what I'll do if we get lost. I bet we're already lost."

"Luray Fritch, calm down. I want you to see this place. It'll be the model village for surviving the end of the world in style."

"If anyone can go out of existence in style, you can."

She squeezed my leg.

For another hour, we crested mountains and plunged into valleys, barely navigating the sharp, snaky turns. Abigail pulled out her copy of the Guide.

"The Guide says to find arable land away from industrial cities and make sure we have a source of clean water. We'll grow all our own food and be healthier."

"Hey I edited the book, remember?"

She lifted her chin. Through the veil of her touring hat she adjusted her gaze down the road. "Life was so much better in the nineteenth century. That's all I'm saying."

"Sure, all except for the Civil War, butcher dentists, economic collapses, and workhouses. They had slaves, cholera, and no anesthetics. And yellow journalism and political corruption. And no anti-trust laws."

"Kind of like today."

"Well right. But all I'm saying is it wasn't all so—*peachy* back then."

She cupped my chin in her hand and shivered theatrically to distract me.

"Last night was so lovely, Luray. The way you carried me inside, light as a feather—do keep that, Luray. It's so—*swashbuckler*."

She pried a smile out of me, but it didn't dissuade me from my assault on this crazy idea.

"Abigail, you are a pathological romantic. We've done our job. We published the Guide and that's enough. Let people do whatever they're going to do."

"The Guide says the end will be terrible," she fretted. "A merging of prophecies from many lands—a slumgullion of human blunders set in motion long ago. The world religions mostly agree. Many will die, but some could survive. Permelia herself believed it, and someone has to show the people how."

Abigail read a passage like ammunition against me.

"A century hence finds a world of metal, glass, and celluloid. A frightening world of spying eyes, camera boxes, and flickering windows. But this is not the end, only a portent of the end to come."

"Abby, this 'end' she wrote about might not come for decades. It might never come."

She read more from the Guide.

“In the end, expect the unexpected. Deafened by heaven’s torchlight, blinded in thunder, the remnant shall cower in isinglass.”

“Yeah, but what the hell does that mean, anyway? No one knows.”

There it was again. That obsessed shape to her eyes.

Permelia’s visions were dour but not hopeless. She had envisioned “empty cities,” better than destroyed, I supposed. The Guide only got specific with one city—Washington, D.C.—on fire. And emptiness. The book described fearful bodings for the capitals of the U.S. and the Middle East; a section on geographically safe lands in which to settle. It warned people away from the coasts. The book had a section on high-yield farming, and crafts, such as ceramics, knitting, and woodworking. And she talked of some diabolical alchemy that she didn’t understand, but which she said would help bring it all about. A plot that began in ancient times.



Abigail hooked a gloved thumb. “Hang a left, dear.”

We turned onto a narrow macadam road which we quickly found blocked by a long, waist-high pike hinged to a post on one end. Just then, a strange creature shrouded in a cape and hood burst growling from the bushes. He struck a pugilistic stance as though daring the car to cross the line. We soon realized that it was a man.

“Well I’ll be damned,” I mused to Abigail, “Back when I was on all those pills, I used to see people like him all the time.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, this time I see him, too.”

The man’s face was little more than a beard and beady eyes cowed in the folds of the hood. He loped over to my door, a tin cup quivering in his filthy hand.

“Pay now! You pay now!”

“What the hell...”

Jason barked, but I quieted him. The man threatened with his squinty eye.

“Me troll,” he squawked. “Pay nickel toll. Ante up. Ante up.”

“Do you have a name, sir?” Abigail asked, but the man went ballistic.

“Ayreeaaghhh!”

Abby shrunk back from his menacing snarl.

“Great,” I complained, “a troll. A real one. You’ve delivered us into the bowels of a story book.”

“Luray, could you shush for crying out loud?”

Abigail addressed the man directly. “Would you like to have a nickel, sir?”

The wretched man cackled, shoving his tin cup toward me.

I searched my pockets. “Can you break a twenty?”

Abby whacked my arm. She grinned wide, so as not to upset him.

“Luray, this is no time for jokes. Just give him the nickel, will you?”

“Here. Here.”

I flipped a nickel into the air, and the man caught it in the can—*clink*—with a leap.

Abby consulted her map.

“Mr. Troll, is there some kind of old village around here someplace?”

He threw himself on the weighted end of the pike, raising it high in the air.

“Over the bridge,” he sneered impatiently. “All is gone. The world is gone. The stupids will never know! You go now. Go! Go!”

I rolled my eyes at Abigail—*oh, please*—and she shot me a chastising look. I drove under the turnpike, and, in the mirror, saw the “troll” following us with his sinister eyes.

Abby inspected the woods in deep thought. “Luray, did anything about that seem strange to you?”

“Strange? What could be strange about a turnpike troll? Look—I have had it with this whole expedition. I’m sorry, but that was a bad omen. I’m turning around. Now.”

“No you are not. Now you settle yourself. Did you hear him? He said ‘the world is gone. All gone.’ What did he mean by that?”

“Nothing. Because he’s a certifiable screwball.”

Abigail smiled prettily and patted my arm. “Be patient a little longer, my husband.”

We crossed a river over a rickety wooden bridge and around the next turn found a cluster of forlorn shacks nestled in the loop of the river, all overgrown with kudzu and briars.

“Here it is, Luray. This is it.”

“Here is what?”

“Park the car, will you? I think I’m in heaven.”

“Abigail, this is no village. It’s a ruin. A ghost town of crumbling shacks.”

She sashayed down the rubble-strewn center of the street, strutting with her walking stick, and reveling in her own brand of triumph. As Jason conducted his own nose-to-the-ground investigation, I begrudgingly joined my wife. She had been wrong—I did not love the village when I saw it. Not at all.

“I’ve got news for you, honey. Like that troll guy said—the end of the world has already hit this place.”

“I fail to see the humor,” she lifted her proud chin. “Come. I want you to

take it all in. I see nothing but potential. Beaucoup potential. Luray—welcome to Dunkard Bottom.”

“And such a pretty name. Dunkard Bottom. I didn’t see it on the map.”

“Of course not. It’s abandoned. Isn’t it simply beautiful?”

You could throw a rock from one end of the village to the other. The five crumbling buildings leaned this way and that. Roofs had fallen in and glassless windows gaped. We observed what used to be a general store and a smithy. Across the street were a two-story public house, a post office, and a four-room schoolhouse. Just down river from the bridge behind the public house was a decrepit old mill; the waterwheel canted off its bearings and rotting in the water. On the public house porch, my foot broke through a board. I peeked in the window.

“The whole floor is rotted out of this place, and the stairs are falling down,” I commented. “You can’t be serious.”

“Think of it as yours, dear. As ours.”

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Because. See. Honey, I kind of—already bought it.”

“You *bought* it?”

I must have turned pale.

“Sit, Luray. Breathe, sweetie. Don’t be upset.” She giggled with pride. “I had to buy it. The village and twelve acres. Everything you see in the bend of the river. It’s going to be our little Utopia.”

“Abby—then what were we debating about?”

“I don’t recall debating,” she mused, then shook her head with determination. “The agent called yesterday and told me someone else was interested. I couldn’t let it slip through my fingers. Besides, this is a quest. My personal quest to make Permelia Lyttle’s vision a reality.”

“You’re as crazy as that troll guy—look, I hate ladders. I can’t even hammer a nail straight.”

But she wasn’t listening.

“Oh, Luray! Will you just look at this adorable little post office!”

I was steaming as we looked over its two-rooms, which had shut down long before zip codes. A peeling sign over the door read:

Dunk rd Bottom
Virgini

Across the street, the two-story general store was smaller than the public house. The porch roof hung unsupported on one side. Along the river, east of the main street, was a small gray barn sided by a rail-fenced paddock. A dirt

lane led off behind the store, ran down a ways, and returned to the main street at the smithy and schoolhouse.

I tried to be gentle.

“Abigail, you’re crazy. There is no amount of money in the western world that can fix this place. This is a huge mistake. Huge. Now, I’m sorry but I’m putting my foot down on this thing. When we get back, I want you to call the agent and get out of this deal. It shouldn’t be a problem with that thirty-day rule thing or whatever.”

“No, my sweet. I’m afraid it’s much too late for that.”

“Would you listen to your husband for once? You have to get your down payment back.”

Abigail whipped out her cell phone and pressed a number on the speed dial.

“Hello, Mr. Sandidge? This is Abigail Flicht. We have arrived and we are ready. Let the work begin!”

“Huh?”

Within minutes, trucks began rolling into town from the south. Dozens of men emerged from the woods, many of them full-bearded men in identical denim coveralls, blue shirts, and straw hats, like they’d transported into our world from the nineteenth century. They carried wooden tool boxes, ladders, and lumber over their shoulders. The scene was surreal. The world must have already ended, like the troll said. Living isolated in the mountains like we did, we just never heard the news. Everything the Guide predicted had come about. It was over. We had already missed last call.

My vision tunneled. Prickly snow salted my vision. I telescoped inward toward unconsciousness. Jason barked his concern.

“Crimony, Abigail. What have you done?”

“Here, grab onto this fence post.”

As I steadied myself, a team of horses pulled a wagonload of lumber over the bridge. A cascade of ladders slapped against the buildings and men were crawling over the roofs. Men were prying the rotten boards. But one man was clean-shaven. He held a plug of tobacco in his cheek and wore jeans, work-worn Tims, and a flannel shirt on his beefy frame. His ratty blond hair protruded from a scuffed red hard hat. He seemed to regard us with caution, but I think he was secretly envious of our outfits.

Jason sniffed him in as Abigail introduced us.

“Luray, this is Mr. Sandidge, the general contractor who’s overseeing the work. Mr. Sandidge, this is my husband, Luray Flicht.”

“Glad to know you.”

“One hopes.”

I staggered.

“Luray—are you going to be all right?”

“I doubt it. Seriously I do.”

“*Tch—*”

Abigail surveyed her realm just bursting with the pride of yet another trophy. She spread her arms.

“Roofs that shed water, Mr. Sandidge. Walls that can withstand the winds and snows of winter. Insulated windows for efficiency. And level floors.”

He spit. “I have my Class A master builder’s license, ma’am, so I think I get the general idea.”

“I *knew* you were the right choice,” she bubbled. “The walls will be insulated with natural materials, Luray. And the roofs will have solar panels like Belvedere.” She smiled with satisfaction. “And Mr. Sandidge, please keep the outside walls weathered like they are—it’s so charming.”

“It’s your nickel, Mrs. Flitch.”

“Are these your men?”

“Well, not really,” Sandidge squinted. “I had a crew and subcontractors lined up. But when word got out about Dunkard Bottom comin’ back, these Amishmen came out of the woods to ask if they could help. I guess their kin did business here a long time ago. They live over Eden Valley way.”

I had one more question. “Why did they come through the woods instead of down the road?”

He tugged down his hard hat. “‘Cuz of that damned fool with the turnpike. You have to pay him comin’ and goin’.”

“A lot of that going around these days,” I submitted.

But he was right. When we left for home, the self-described troll made us pay again. Making change was an aggravating ordeal. I asked him if he had considered EZ Pass, but he only screeched and waved us on.



I moped all the way home.

“I should be under a doctor’s care.” I held up my quivering hand. “I have a bad feeling about this. Look. Shaking, just like before.”

“Then all the more reason for you to get away. I’m more convinced than ever that taking you to Dunkard Bottom was a great idea.”

“Buying that broken-down excuse for a town was not a great idea.” I stammered. “I—I just can’t wait to get home.”

“You still won’t admit it, will you? Dunkard Bottom could be the best hope for those who survive what’s coming. Think how proud you’ll be. After the buildings are restored, we’ll put up a website. People will come from all

over to see our little Utopia. Think of it as an extension of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide*."

Tact had never been one of my strong points.

"Abby, you are living in a dream world. I always thought it added to your charm, but now it's demolishing the apple cart of our life."

"The apple cart of our life?" She looked through her handbag. "I—think I must have some aspirins in here somewhere."

"Abby, you were brought up in an environment of—privilege. You were protected from life's frustrations. What makes you think you can create a model community single-handed? Besides, the Guide never refers to the community as Utopia—the word is never used."

"It would have to be something like Utopia," she said. "People will live out of their gardens again. Entertain each other with live music and play real games instead of computer games on the icky Internet." She shook a wasp out of her veil. "We already have builders hard at work—and you can't beat the Amish for speed and precision. Our village will have crafts like Colonial Williamsburg. And no politicians, either."

"Yeah, we'll see about that."

For having grown up in Williamsburg, she didn't know much about modern colonial tourism.

"Sweetie, for your information, the tradespersons in Williamsburg are specially trained and paid to be there," I told her politely. "At the end of the work day, they go home and watch TV. They go on the icky Internet. Listen to reason—we're safe at Belvedere. Besides, how will we manage the town from Belvedere? The stopped-up toilets alone would drive us nuts. Do you really want to be an absentee landlord?"

It was a reasonable question, but Abigail didn't answer it, just bunched her lips and soured into a whimpering cry.

"You are such a big phony, Luray Fritch." The tears flowed. "Where's the brave man I married?" she sniffed. "Where's the man who dodged bullets in order to bring *Permelia Lyttle's Guide* to the world?"

I felt ashamed. "Yeah, but—I hadn't seen Belvedere yet. I didn't know you yet."

She pouted, "Then, maybe I wasn't so good for you after all."

"That's not what I meant!"

"When you spoke to all those people in front of the White House your hands were steady as a rock."

I kept an even tone. "They wouldn't have been if I'd known you were going to go completely off the rails."

"Yes, my husband. But look who's going off the rails now."

When we pulled up in front of Belvedere, Abby regarded me squarely.

“Luray, please tell me you’ll help me. Please. I can’t do this without you.”

I shuddered. Jason rested his chin on his paw.

“Don’t worry, honey,” she said. “Together, we’re going to create a kinder gentler maze.”

Jason barked once for yes. (Twice meant no.)



Four weeks later we were working in the garden on a splendid spring day. Under the cerulean dome of the sky, the pine-sweet air felt room-temperature. The sun smiled on the young leaf vegetables, the lawn, and the shrubbery, and, as far as the eye could see, the newly greened mountain tops caressed the blue.

“Abigail, I like the ducklings gardening apron and hat, but you’d better put some clothes on underneath or you’re going to get burned. You’re back and—elsewhere.”

“Oh, I’m all right. A little while longer, okay? Mmm—the sun feels so good.”

The trees nodded politely in the breeze and, despite the beauty of the day, a nightmarish vision intruded from when we first published *Permelia Lyttle’s Guide*. I just couldn’t shake them. I could see the entire Blue Ridge forest blasted to charred black poles, whole towns exploding into dust, and people across the land incinerated in an apocalyptic fire. I wiped sweat from my temples. Sipped water.

While weeding the spinach, Abby’s cell phone rang its *Afternoon of a Faun* ringtone. We couldn’t find the phone at first, as it had fallen among the pea vines.

“Yes?” she answered. “Yes? Really? Oh, yes! Thank you, Mr. Sandidge. Oh, thank you.”

After pocketing the phone in her apron pocket, she tried to suppress a thousand-watt smile.

“Abigail, I wish you would put your clothes on when you answer that damned cell phone.”

“Luray, you are so ridiculous.”

“Did you win the lottery or something?”

“No. It was Mr. Sandidge. He has great news. The work is on schedule and the apartment’s ready.”

I stood, mystified once again. “When you say apartment, exactly what do you mean by that?”

“Remember when you said we couldn’t manage Dunkard Bottom as ab-

sente landlord?”

I gawked like a big dope.

“Well, that was a big help, Luray. We can’t manage it from here, but we can from there.”

“There? You mean go live there? Us? Live *there*?”

As though I weren’t already on the verge of hyperventilation, she continued.

“The apartment is above the general store,” she prattled on in her dream world. “We’ll live there while we supervise the construction. We’ll invite the right people to come to make Dunkard Bottom hum again.”

“What are ‘the right people?’”

“People who—know things. People who can make things. Nice people. What are you waiting for, Luray? It’s time to pack.”

She was moving too fast for me, but that wasn’t all. Whenever my wife shifted into high gear, she got downright managerial. A flare of determination lit her eyes, one whiplash of a brow crooked—she was going to build a post-apocalyptic community whether I helped or not.

Observing my resistance, she made puppy eyes and cupped my cheek. “Do you really want your one-and-only living all alone way out in the woods—with all those brawny plumbers and dashing young, uh, carp—”

“Well—no. No, of course not. I was being thoughtless.”

She patted my head. “Good boy.”

Running up the stairs, she called out, “Be a dear and fetch the suitcases from the attic.”

I was out of options. “Can we pick up a skid of Xanax on the way?”

She laughed as though I were joking.



The next morning, Abby descended the stairs in khaki slacks, a crisp plaid shirt, and brand-new Wolverines. She handed me some L.L. Bean jeans and work shirts—designer construction duds.

“For green community building,” she decreed, “there’s no reason why we can’t blend in.”

“Oh, we’ll blend right in, we will.”

I seriously doubted that my lily-white partner had ever done hard physical work in her life. We went outside, where I backed the Rolls out of the garage.

“That’s the spirit, Luray. Come on. How hard can it be to start up a town?” Abigail cleaned her glasses excitedly on her shirt. “There are towns everywhere.”

“Have you given any thought to how you’re going to cultivate twelve

acres of land?”

“I’ve thought of everything,” she beamed proudly. “I even bought a tractor.”

“You bought a new tractor?”

“Well—a used one.”

“Maybe we should stay here until the solstice, or something.”

“Try to be positive, Luray.”

With bleak resignation, I tried to look on the bright side.

“Okay, I guess. I wonder what it’ll feel like to be a mayor.”

“Oh, thank you, Luray. You’re my rock.” She hugged me, muttering a polite correction. “Except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to be the mayor.”



We loaded the Rolls with suitcases, boxes of garden seeds, pots and pans, some radios, and as many books as we had room for, while also leaving space for Jason. My resourceful wife even brought boxes of food to get us through the construction phase. We checked the house to make sure everything was turned off. However, just as we were ready to lock the front door, a pair of white Volvo vans pulled up.

Two doctors in green scrubs emerged along with a nurse and some EMT people. Just seeing them brought me to the cusp of panic. I froze. Were they there for me? Had they found out about the naked dancing? Was it possible that I was actually an escaped inmate with amnesia?

“Good morning,” said a balding, sandy-haired doctor with wire-rimmed glasses. “I’m Dr. Palmer and this is Dr. Campbell. We hope we can ask a favor.”

“And what would that be?”

“We’re volunteers with Rural Remote. We give free medical and dental services to folks who can’t afford it. Anyway, our normal place west of here has been taken over by Agro-Technick for fracking, and the field east of us was padlocked for strip mining. We hoped we could set up in your yard to treat the local people for a day.”

Abigail and I were always glad to help, but she seldom gave much thought to the consequences of favors, especially big ones.

“Of course you may,” she grinned. “And what perfect timing. We’re going away for an extended project to help the world. You’re most welcome to use our place.”

Their faces lit up. “You mean, we can set up in your yard? It would in-

volve a tent.”

“No, silly. Use the whole house.” She tossed him the keys. “Move on in and use the house. The rooms, the kitchen, everything.”

I tried to smile. “But dear, it’s our *house*. And we’ll be coming *back*. So I don’t think we should just hand over the—”

“Nonsense, Luray,” she laughed. “We won’t be needing this place for a good long while.”

I clarified for my wife, “A few weeks on the outside.”

But it was said and done. I gathered my courage. I laid an arm around Dr. Palmer’s shoulder and walked him a few steps away.

“Doc, I have this condition. I get anxiety and panic attacks around people. Can you give me a prescription? Something that’ll last a while?”

He seemed reluctant to do so without a few thousand dollars’ worth of tests. Frowning, he reached into his van and fiddled a moment. He handed me a small envelope.

“Here are some samples.”

“Samples?”

He shrugged politely. “You’re not my patient, Mr. Fritch.”

“Right. Well, I hope you enjoy this place—that we’re *giving* you for *free*.” Abby poked me hard. “Luray!”

The doctors smiled at Abigail. “This is most generous, ma’am. Did you hear that everybody? We can use this beautiful place.”

Before I could speak, Abigail had more words for the doctors.

“The house has its own well and sells power back to the electric company,” she explained. As an afterthought to the doctor, she said, “Oh, and you can harvest the leaf veggies from the garden.”

“Sure. Why would we need them?” I squirmed, but the medical team applauded us.

And why wouldn’t they? We’d just handed them Belvedere.

“We’re so very grateful,” the doctor intoned. “I promise we’ll take good care of the place.”

As we drove away, my insides swirled down some type of existential drain. I dreaded the thought that we might never see Belvedere again. I dreaded being lost once again in the maze. Making sure Abigail was out of sight, I quickly downed one of miserly Dr. Palmer’s pills. Would those doctors really take care of the house? Would they trim the lawn and bushes? Would they weed and harvest the garden? And what if Dunkard Bottom failed more quickly than I thought it would? Would they willingly give us back the keys? No lease was signed. No agreement—it was all just so *Abigail*.

As Belvedere disappeared in the rear view mirrors, my wife busily re-

viewed her many lists. She made calls on her cell phone as I dreaded what appeared to be our penultimate swan dive into the abyss.