

Permelia Lyttle's

Guide to the End of the World

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Jon Robertson



Belvedere Books

WOODSTOCK • VIRGINIA

Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World by Jon Robertson.
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For Jason

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One

An Astounding Discovery

My Uncle Gudrow could keep you on the phone for hours recalling the rural politics of 1940s Virginia or the condition of his gnarly yellow toenails. Almost no one in the family had the stamina for that type of conversation, and we avoided him for that reason. However, when our investments vanished and money got tighter, the Bowles clan eagerly anticipated the day when the wealthy old coot took the pipe. Following a shaky start-up after WWII, my uncle had made a fortune in portable toilets. The tally came in at just under 100 million bucks.

So when word giggled down the grapevine that Uncle Goody's liver cancer had metastasized, that he'd suffered his fourth massive coronary and sixth stroke, had slipped into a brain-dead coma, and was hanging on by a thready pulse, the family brushed off their funeral duds and made travel plans.

Within minutes of his tuneful flatline, four siblings and a dozen nieces and nephews converged on a Comfort Inn in Charlottesville, Virginia, clearing their hotel room tables for war strategies, readying their hankies, and making lists of all the stuff they'd buy with the loot.

My common-law handler, the suffocating Eula Huff, also wanted the inheritance for herself, but it would mean far more than a windfall for me. I was flat broke, and that money would buy me a new life. I was desperate to escape her clutches and the chaos of her bizarre household, which included a brood of menacing children as well as a huge beehive thriving in the second floor bathroom. I was terrified to stay in the house alone but equally afraid outside, so the drive to Char-

lottesville that day was entirely fueled by the promise of my forthcoming inheritance.

Eula dragged me into her chartreuse VW minibus by my ear, and I popped an anti-panic pill against the naked threat of my agoraphobia. She did all the driving from our little town of Gooseneck because she didn't trust me behind the wheel.

"You can't drive, Luray," she muffled through a jelly doughnut. "You're on more meds than a lab rat. You get dizzy outside, you've got double vision, and face it—ya ain't rational most of the time. Hell, you need a road map to find the kitchen."

"So?"

She never let Jason drive, either, but that was understandable as Jason was a border collie. He was my dog and also my best friend. There were other reasons why she wouldn't let me drive, like my tendency to sneak away at night and my fondness for alcohol, but they have little to do with the story of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide*.

Eula never did anything without drama. She was a volunteer actress for the local community theater, so she performed day and night. Driven by ambition, she stomped the pedal to the floor and the VW sputtered past a line of tailgating eighteen-wheelers. She primped her spiky gray-rooted blond hair, her wrist bangles jangling.

"That money's gonna buy me and the kids a lot of swag." She wagged her finger at me. "It's also gonna help me carry your sorry ass 'til you get your book done."

"Please," I pleaded. "Leave me alone."

She squinted up I-64 through her pink retro sunglasses. "I can taste it now. A new car and a new TV. I'll finally be able to afford the therapy I promised the kids." She scrutinized me menacingly. "So, what are you gonna do with your share, Luray? After you pay your back rent, that is."

Yes, she charged me rent. My share? Why, with my share I'd buy my freedom. Find a quiet inexpensive room someplace where I could finish my book in peace. I'd try to get off all these medications they had me on and find a purpose in life. A house to call a home. And a car—I'd buy one of those new electric cars that would hum me safely away from Eula's three-story firetrap. I'd be free at last. Eula would wave tearful good-byes from the porch as her sinister sugared-smacked kids picked their noses around her. I wish to note that I was terrified of those kids.

Eula repeated, "Yo—lamebrain. I asked what you're gonna to do

with your share of the loot.”

Her question was a steel-jawed trap. I crossed my eyes to look like I was thinking, but the truth was I tried never to answer questions directly, let alone truthfully, because the truth never failed to backfire. So I reached into the back seat and stroked Jason’s furry black-and-white head. He seldom answered questions directly, either, so we were of one mind on that point.

“Don’t make me ask again, Luray Fritch.”

“If I must,” I said, conjuring a lie that would throw her off the track. “I merely wish to repay your many kindnesses over these past few years.”

Flattered by my attention, she regarded my heavily bearded self warmly and became lost in some substitute for thought. Jason and I enjoyed some peace and quiet for the remainder of the drive.



During the reading of the will I realized that I hadn’t seen most of those relatives since childhood, though they rarely caught sight of me even then. I spent my elementary school years hiding behind other kids or under my blankets at home pretending to be deceased. The family called me “the scruff ball,” but I was no sucker for flattery. As we sat around the table I fearfully scrutinized their faces for signs of aggression.

My impatient relatives squinted like hungry buzzards as the rotund and eagle-eyed Jonah Moffitt, Esq., a country lawyer separated by half a century from anything he learned in law school, stretched his wire-rimmed glasses over his pink round face and read aloud.

“I, Gudrow T. Bowles, being of sound mind and body—etcetera-ah and etcetera-ah—” he growled as he checked our eyes—for what I didn’t know, though he and Uncle Goody had been lifelong poker buddies.

The reading of the will did not go as expected. Reclusive Uncle Gudrow, a bastion of the Old South, had lived his life frugally with his childless wife, Aunt Mousy Bowles, in a small rented cabin at the end of a gravel road. He had never invested in real estate, art, diamonds, or gold, so there was no equity in any property anywhere. All he had was cash. Shoulders sank and noses blatted. He had five siblings, one of whom was Sue Bowles, my deceased mother. Legend had it that Aunt Mousy had died convulsing during one of my uncle’s tedious solilo-

quies. Uncle Gudrow remained single for the remainder of his days, which can be considered a blessing to all womankind.

Uncle Goody's deranged bequests played out like in the cartoons. Cousin Willy Steve Bowles, who lived in a condo in Arlington, was bequeathed a riding lawn mower. Having just lost her house to foreclosure, cousin Ellen Raye got a set of left-handed, wooden shafted men's golf clubs. Aunt Lila received a box of dented pots and pans, the handles of which Aunt Pru told us had melted off years ago. Speaking over our waning hopes and dreams, the lawyer read on:

"And I bequeath my brown plaid recliner along with my collection of paint-by-number landscapes to my sweet niece Ophelia Louise."

The pierced and tattooed Ophelia snitted, "Oh great throbbin' balls of fire."

Without lifting her eyes, Aunt Pru reached out her handbag and smacked the gum-chewing teenager so hard in the back of the head, the child's gum ejected in a neat parabola onto the will. The lawyer grimaced, muttered *good gawd girl*, and flicked the gum into a nearby potted palm. He continued reading as the mourners hung their heads in grief. For the following three items not a sound could be heard. I was next.

"And to my dear, creative, and thrifty nephew, Luray Fritch, our own hard-working and astute author who has brought dignity to this no-account family, I leave my automobile, so he can drive his insightful and penetrating manuscripts to the post office in style. I also bequeath to him my armoire, which was so dear to his heart as a wee lad."

Uncle Goody had promised me that armoire for years, only because I hid inside it once when I was little. When they finally found me, my dipso father spanked me numb right in front of everyone for making them worry. I didn't show myself again for a long time, though I eventually incorporated all that falderal into my Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Maze*. But more on that later. I never once asked for that armoire. Insanely, Uncle Goody had remembered that day as a happy one.

We all knew his car. It was a rusty, broken down '52 Henry J, one of the first compacts. Now it was mine, but there was still no mention of money. The family exhaled en masse and returned to smirking and scowling. They traded jealous glares and I imagined their buttocks clenching in anticipation of the final item on the will—the cash. In the meantime, I scratched my straggly beard trying to figure out how much it was going to cost me to have the car and armoire hauled to the

landfill.

Before Attorney Moffitt read the final paragraph of the will, he fumbled with a pill bottle and choked down a couple of nitroglycerines with cold black coffee. Amid high suspense, he fogged and wiped his spectacles, went into a brief but violent coughing jag, and finally cleared his throat to read the rest.

“On to further business—‘Dear ones, as you all know, I laid my life on the line in World War II for those grand ole stars and stripes. I feel a deep love for my country, a love that only a man can feel, only for his country.’”

Some looked around to see if anyone understood what that meant.

Aunt Livia Lutz hissed, “When he was in the army, Gudrow wrote latrine technical manuals out of a Quonset hut in Nebraska.”

Narrowing my eyes, I dared to utter a writerly observation. “A latrine theme emerges.”

Nobody else saw the relevance. The lawyer cleared his throat chastisingly.

“...can feel only for his country, and it is to this country, this great nation, founded upon freedom and liberty, that I leave the remainder of my estate, \$98,999,100 and change, to do my part to pay down the national debt.”

“Good gawd!” Uncle Stu bellowed.

Aunt Pru snarled, “You gotta be shittin’ me.”

The combined growls, protests, and curses raked the air like kennel cough. At least Jason thought so.

“Gawd almighty!” snapped Eula, elbowing me in the ribs. “That whack-job was more nuts than you, Luray!”

I brightened. “Really?”

But I was crying real tears because my dream of escape had evaporated like a watering hole in the desert. I saw wildebeests drop to their knees and tip over. I swallowed dryly. The day had gone all wrong. I’d be stuck with Eula Huff until I finished the new book. Jason gave me a sidelong glance of empathy and laid his white chin on my knee. I wept in earnest.

Uncle Stu shouted, “This is an outrage!” His ruddy eyes implored the jurist. “Hell, Jonah, there must be some mistake. Read that again, come on now.”

The lawyer scanned the papers mumbling to himself and shrugged, “I’m sorry, folks, but they ain’t no mo’.”

Eula smacked herself in the forehead. “And we drove all the way up

here with the price of gas in the stratosphere.”

Aunt Pru, the only other one weeping besides me, shook her head. “Well, all I can say is our Daddy marched to the beat of a different drum, he did.”

Ophelia, sighed, “Oh great throbbin’ balls of fire, we may as well book back to Chatham.”

Uncle Stu popped her in the back of the head, only this time Ophelia caught her replenished gum in her hand.

She laughed, “Hey, looky!”

“Keep that up and I’ll whack you so hard it’ll make your eyes match.”

Oliver and Brian, the bachelor cousin and his fussy partner from Waynesboro, joined hands and fretted.

“Now what do we do? We needed that money to start our year-round Christmas shop.”

Eula snarled, “Goody Bowles was a droolin’ idiot.”

All eyes turned to me. As the favorite nephew, it turned out that I was the only one to receive big-ticket items, such as they were. A Henry J was the brainchild of Henry J. Kaiser that resembled a baby Ford. The antique armoire, if it had any value at all, probably topped out at eight-hundred dollars.

Young Ophelia folded yet another new piece of gum between her braces. Wrestling with her tongue stud, she garbled, “You lucked out, Cousin Luray, but you really oughtta shave. You look like a porky-pine.”

I slipped a couple of tranquilizers between my lips and chewed them at her threateningly.

“You are scaring me,” she bawled, and tugged on her mother’s sleeve. “Momma, Cousin ‘Ray’s makin’ eyes at me again.”

Aunt Pru petted her daughter’s hair. “Shh. Everybody knows he’s harmless, sweetie. Just do like the rest of us and ignore that scruff ball.”

I turned triumphantly toward the lawyer. I had learned long ago to avoid eye contact with mad dogs and relatives. I never even made eye contact with myself in the mirror. Not any mirror. Ever.

Eula bullied me out of the lawyer’s office ahead of everyone else, the collar of my tee-shirt in her fist. She wasn’t merely angry. We had left her disturbed offspring unattended back at the house. I rode shotgun and played my part by trying to look especially normal each time a car passed. I submitted to Eula’s debriefing on the reading of the will.

She was analytical. Intense.

“No doubt your family drew its stock from the gene-pool garage sale. You’re all barkers, Luray, and Gudrow was the lead dog. But we gotta work with what we got. Now, that arm-wire—we gonna cash up that puppy.” She held up an inspired finger. “And me? I’m taking a well-deserved vacation. I’m going to Hedonism IV to sip mojitos and watch the floorshow. I have to think of myself once in a while, Luray, because, you know what? I’m worth it.”

“I thought you wanted a divorce,” I mumbled feebly.

“We live together, dip stick. The only way we can get a divorce is if I throw your ass out, which I’ve a mind to do since they canceled your health insurance.”

“But you were just in there claiming half my inheritance,” I puzzled. “How does that work?”

“Because I pay your bills and buy your medicine, that’s how. Your royalties have dropped to almost nothing. And speaking of bills. Your publisher’s gasping for air. Are you finished yet? You bringing in any money this year? You can be out on your butt by Labor Day, ya skid-row reject.”

“Don’t forget I won the Pulitzer Prize. And other prizes, too.”

“Yeah, twenty years ago. And look where it got you, ya agoraphobic train wreck. You’re afraid of your own shadow. Your first wife croaked and your second went bonkers. What your sticky-fingers third wife didn’t steal, you pissed away on that suicidal shrink in Newport News.”

Yeah, she often brought up Dr. Wilmer. After twenty sessions with me, he upped and slashed his wrists. I swear it wasn’t my fault. He’s the one got me started on all these pills. And Peregrine had swiped the prize money, all right. She took herself and her stoner friends on a one-way boat trip to India to see if they could teach the late Rajneesh’s orgy church how to throw a real party. That’s how both my credit and sanity fizzled. Oh, how I wished Eula would shut up. How I wished I could melt her with a bucket of water.

“Please,” I begged. “Leave me alone. Please, *please*.”

But Eula had more to say.

“And when are you gonna shave? You look like Sigmund Freud on battery acid. And when are you going to take care of the bees nest in the second-floor bathroom?”

Due to the side effects of my kaleidoscope of contraindicated prescriptions, I couldn’t remember just then who Sigmund Freud was, but

Jason and I locked eyes and had a moment. He seemed to say “This, too, shall pass.” We shared a smile.

We soon arrived back at Eula’s place, one of those original Sears & Roebuck pre-fabs, its paint peeling, the gutters half off, and the porch roof propped up on a pine tree trunk. Five years ago, while I was homeless and treading water in the swirling eddy of my phobias, I moved in with Eula thinking I’d found safe haven from the treacherous maze. But that was before I knew her or her tribe of feral offspring. I tried to be friends with them, even tried to bribe them, but they despised me from the start.

Based on something flickering through the fog in my head, I apologized.

“I never said I was King Arthur, Eula.”

“What the Christ?” she spat, twisting her lips around. “King who?”

“Arthur.”

“Don’t try to stump me on Shakespeare, numb nuts,” she smirked. “At least when I found you, you were still coherent. You knew how to talk to people without scaring them.”

“To be fair, that was before they put me on all these meds. The docs said memory loss, cognitive failure, and paranoia were approved side effects—but they’re the reason that I—what were we talking about?”

“Luray, if it wasn’t for your pills you’d be swingin’ from the chandelier or skippin’ around naked in the park at night.”

I searched my memory. “We have a chandelier?”

“You are such a dip stick.”

Much as I yearned for the safety of my third-floor office, I dreaded the gauntlet of those five little savages. They ranged in age from four to nine. One was blonde, one black haired, one red-haired, one wooly haired, and another part hyena.



As soon as I got out of the car, the air ripped with war cries. Then pain. Camouflaged urchins appeared from behind rocks and planters. Lead-tipped arrows stung my legs and back. I was pelted with sling-shot stones, drenched with water balloons, and soiled with dirt-clods.

“Kids!” I laughed nervously. “Not nice to throw dirt!”

“Don’t yell at the children. You’ll stunt their creativity.”

“But they’re trying to kill me.”

“Get ‘im, kids. Lorints—you can aim better than that. Aspire, boy. Aspire.”

Once clear, Jason and I scurried up the stairs two steps at a time. We reached our sanctuary straining for breath, grateful to return to that familiar farrago of my office situated beneath four dormers in cruciform. I grabbed a bottle of water and swallowed a Klonopin before the shock of the Albemarle debacle caught up with me. Outings made me nauseous. But then so did going to the convenience store or even down to the first floor for dinner. Eula wouldn’t spring for Subways on the way home, so I shared an energy bar with Jason.

I relished the safety of my room with its desk, table, narrow cot, little sink, micro-fridge, and the catch-all filing system I referred to as the Western Mound. Jason’s area consisted of his round dog bed, a chew bone, and bowls for food and water, all neatly arranged the way he liked them. Jason, couldn’t abide a mess. He would run downstairs and let himself outside through the back door when he needed to, but asked why I didn’t take him out more often. I vigorously defended myself.

“I’m not really agoraphobic, Jase. It’s an act of—self-preservation. Like if this was a cat house, and you didn’t want them to recognize you, you’d dress up like a cat. Like that.”

Jason was a smart little border collie. He liked analogies.

I whispered, “Look, I promise to take you out more, okay buddy?”

I turned the lock on my garret door and flipped on my computer, where I struggled to make sense of my new book: a world of medieval wizards at war with a horde of ex-wives. After twenty years, it still wasn’t finished. Eula and I hadn’t been on speaking terms in weeks because of that book and the back rent, too.



Blissfully alone, I worked on my novel until that fateful morning a tow truck pulled up in front of the house. Reluctantly, I went downstairs to sign for the delivery. The burly driver tried not to laugh as he winched the rusty old Henry J to the ground. After signing his papers, I gawked in disbelief at the once cream-colored, now rust-eaten hulk. The ceiling fabric hung in rags and the corrosion was brilliant in color and variety. I got in and turned the ignition key. The thing complained with an ear-splitting whine. I clunked the car into reverse and chugged it in agony into the bushes beside the ramshackle single-car garage

where Eula kept the VW bus. And there the Henry fell unconscious once again.

No sooner did I get back to my office than Eula hollered up the stairs.

“Ya gotta come back down again, Luray. Another truck’s here. Move your ass.”

It would be the armoire, and I wanted no part of it.

“Tell them we don’t want it.”

She shouted like a drill sergeant. “You get your skinny butt down here. We drove all the way to Albemarle for that thing with gas outasight. Get down here or I’ll tear you a new one.”

Jason and I lumbered once again down the stairs to make sure they put the armoire in the garage. If I’d left it up to Eula, she would have brought it inside where we’d move it eighteen times while she practiced changing her mind. Jason nosed around taking inventory and generally supervised.

However, when the movers opened the back of the truck, I was stunned. The so-called armoire was a monstrosity. Standing six feet tall, the mixed-up creation would have stumped *Antiques Roadshow*. It was at least four pieces of furniture joined together. It bore a pediment from a forties-era china cabinet, the case from an ornate Rococo chest, the frame of a country dry sink, and the sawed off legs of a table from *The Great Gatsby*. Worst of all was a pipe rising out of one side bearing a red lace shade—the old skinflint had actually turned it into a lamp. Finishing the effect, the whole mess had been spray painted gold and flecked with cupcake glitter.

I held up my hand and hollered, “Do not unload that hideous thing!”

“Sorry, buddy,” the guy wheezed. “The bill says I leave it here.”

I didn’t have the stamina to argue, so I signed for it and opened the workshop door, cursing that I’d have to hire someone to drag the thing away. The men jockeyed it inside and left.

“We won’t make any money on this piece of junk,” I lamented to Eula. “It’s firewood.”

“Now you wait a cotton-pickin’ minute,” Eula protested. “This is kitsch. It’s great kitsch.”

“Who can afford kitsch, anymore?”

“Someone can. It’s folk art. I want to keep it. I want it in the parlor.”

“The parlor?” I withered. “You’re out of your mind. It has to go. It reminds me of my thorny, broken, abused, impoverished—and with alcoholic parents—childhood.”

“Aw you and your precious freakin’ childhood. You think my childhood was a picnic?”

I didn’t want those pictures in my head. Jason mistakenly got in her way.

“Out, damned spot!” she emoted. “That’s from *Twelfth Night*.”

“Jason, you best give her a wider berth next time.”

Eula squinted malevolently. “The arm-wire stays and that’s final.”

“Does not.”

“Does so.”

“Does not.”

“Does so,” she sneered. “Or I will-cut-off-your-beer.”

“Inhuman bitch!”

I’d forgotten Jason’s objection to defamation of *canis lupus* in all their forms.

“Sorry, boy.”

Eula’s nostrils also flared at the cross-species slur. She shot me a sinister knowing grin that I had long ago learned to fear. Her mind was made up.

“You just ‘old the phone, ‘enry ‘iggins, or you’ll be sorry.”

She’d sic that mob of kids on me, no lie. I needed a plan.

Eula returned to her TV set where soap operas would occupy the remainder of her afternoon. I was alone but still steaming. I’d had little sleep and was suffering the jittery side effects of my potent cocktail of medications. In a fit of exasperation, I slammed the workshop door, sealing me and Jason in the shadows with the hideous armoire. I switched on a single dim light bulb.

“You!” I snarled at the armoire. “The very symbol of my wasted life, my crumbling personality and sick relationships. You—you are *The Maze* come back to haunt me.”

It felt good to vent. I thought it ironic that in Uncle Gudrow’s entire will I had gotten the best stuff of all.

“Thanks a lot,” I smoldered.

The cabinet reminded me of how *The Maze* came to be, thousands of milligrams ago when the aromatic smell of gin still perfumed my world. My parents, who had been freelance journalists, looked so sweet passed out at their partner’s desk, hugging their Remington manuals like toilets—a collaboration in unconsciousness. I loved them most when they were unconscious. I remember the red circular imprints of the keys in my mother’s qwerty face. She could have been pretty but she never fixed herself up. Her hair sprung around like straw.

They often endeared me with a variety of grammatical errors.

“Please don’t be a split infinitive today, sweetie,” she’d say. “I have a deadline.”

And my father? His hands black from respooling ribbons, he tried to focus.

“Clear out these empty bottles, ya dangling participle, and be quiet about it.”

Emotion seethed from deep within me. My teeth clenched. I addressed the armoire formally.

“I know what I’m going to do with you. I am going to parse your verbs. Diagram your sentences. I’m gonna disassemble you into harmless parts of speech!”

I would separate its anachronistic components from each other—free them from their constraining nails, screws, and glue.

It was the only answer.

Avoiding the mirror on the wall behind my cobweb-shrouded workbench, I picked up a claw hammer and hefted it in my hand.

“Scalpel,” I cackled. “Yeah, I’ll take care of this little legacy once and for all, and Eula be damned. Jason, take cover!”

I took some practice swings like a major league batter and aimed, one eye closed, at the back of that cabinet.

“Batter, batter, batter—*swing!*”

I let loose with a superhuman arc and follow-through, but the hammer bounced off. I wound up again and let ‘er fly, but nothing broke free. Digging around in the tool bench, I found a three-pound hammer and fixed my eye on the pediment. I swung, and it was a clean hit. The pediment splintered on impact, hurling a volley of fragments against the far wall.

“And it’s a pop fly to center field.”

The main cabinet proved to be a challenge—they made furniture really strong in the nineteenth century. I applied the perennial wisdom on making repairs: “If it don’t work, get a bigger hammer.”

Not even Duncan Phyfe could have thwarted my ten-pound sledge.

For the main cabinet, I squatted and grimaced like a Maori warrior. Then a running shot. I packed the blow with all my resentment for Uncle Gudrow, my stubborn second book, my pathetic marriages, my father and mother, and my medicated life with Eula Huff. The impact reverberated like a sonic boom. Chunks flew everywhere. One of the cabinet’s oak legs struck my shin and a spindle barely missed my right eye. I ended up flat on the cement floor in a daze.

I looked over at my dog. “Jason, you okay?” He was okay.

Considering the unpredictable result, I realized that I had completed my first planned act in a long time. Moreover, the armoire would be a problem no more—Eula would get used to it.

Brushing myself off, I hit on an idea. I examined a jagged stick of wood muttering, “I’ll tell her some kitsch-loving galoot ran off with it. Kitsch-loving galoots are everywhere, these days, what with all the lost jobs and bad credit. Collectors have to steal their kitsch, now.”

I scooped up the pieces with a snow shovel and tossed them into two large plastic trash cans. I dragged the big chunks out the back door, where I heaped them onto the pile with the broken ladder, the old washing machine, and a stack of rotten lumber for the unbuilt yard gym. And it felt good. The emotional release was deeply satisfying. The air invigorated my lungs and for a change I felt uncannily clear-headed. For the first time in years I felt coherent.

Making sure the mess was swept clean, I took a last look around. But one chunk of debris had escaped my eye. I spotted it protruding from beneath the workbench hiding among the cobwebs and spider crumbs. At first, the item looked like a bundle of rags. I picked it up. It was heavy. Musty. It smelled like beach jetsam and rotting mulch. It must have been hidden inside the armoire for years.

The bundle was damp and moldy, but I hefted it onto my workbench. I monkeyed with it a little and, in a moment, the rags fell away, revealing the remnant of an old swatch of carpet. No. More precisely, it was a carpetbag tied with a leather thong. I fiddled with the knot and the thong broke. The carpetbag fell open.

“Pray tell, what’s this?”

Inside the carpetbag was a thick sheaf of wrinkled papers, cards, and clippings about four inches thick. The pages were covered with old-fashioned cursive handwriting.

“Jason, this looks like an old manuscript or something.”

I caressed the motley collection with my fingertips. I must disclose that I was not unfamiliar with historical paper collectibles—I had once volunteered for the preservation society, sort of ordered by a judge. I’m an admirer of old pen script, correspondence, advertising ephemera, maps, stock certificates, and post cards, and have an abiding love for all things antiquarian, particularly books and records from the murk of history. So the faded gray strokes of handwriting on those old papers made my spine tingle. I knew I had found something quite old. But where did Uncle Goody get it, and why had he hidden it in the armoire?

Jason concurred. I couldn't believe my luck. My neck twinged with possibilities.

"Just what do we have here, boy?" I queried the attentive canine. "The lost *pensée* of Lizzie Borden? The bath-house *scuttlebutt* of Walt Whitman or the *billet doux* of Alice Roosevelt Longworth? Whatever it is, Eula can't know anything about this—not a word until we figure out what it is." Just then, my liberal arts education kicked in. "Hey, maybe we can make some money off this thing. It could be our ticket out of this madhouse."

Smelly as it was, I was not about to give up the orgasmic high of being the first and only human to see this tome since it was hidden away. But I needed better light.

"Ears open, boy. We have to carry this thing up to my office without you-know-who smelling a rat."

Jason whined apologetically as though he hadn't thought of that.

"It's always a factor, little buddy," I reassured him. "We need a diversion. You scratch at the front door while I sneak up the trellis. Then run upstairs and I'll let you in."

Jason barked once for yes. (For "no," he barked twice.)

Two

A Mystery Unfolds

Jason and I were soon back upstairs in the wasteland of my office.

“Space. I need work space.”

With a sweep of my arm I cleared my table, movie-like, scattering books, magazines, beer cans, pill bottles, and notes in all directions. I opened the curtains for extra light and placed the musty bundle in the center of the table. I opened it again and discovered a magnificence that I’d only ever seen in my imagination.

“Just what do we have here?” I asked myself. “A lost Twain manuscript? The guidelines for government Ben Franklin copped from the Iroquois? Or maybe Amelia Earhart’s flight log?”

I pulled up a chair, and with quivering fingers lifted the first brittle and odiferous page into the light. By the alphabet and cursive script I could tell that it was no older than nineteenth century. It wasn’t a title page but some type of foreboding imprimatur:

*This guide sets forth a future soon to be,
The end of the world is what I see.
A cry and a hue,
To warn the many or the few,
The riddle of the pilgrim and the bride to be.
PL*

Whoever PL was, he'd identified the manuscript as a "guide." I could think of no historical personage, either in political, literary, or scientific endeavor with those initials, but the dour line pertaining to the end of the world mesmerized me. I turned the page and discovered a series of miscellaneous papers: two blank sheets of foolscap folded eight times and brown at the folds; some curled blank jar labels as one would use for canning; a small left-hand lace glove, yellowed and brittle with age; and a formal piece of correspondence, the first paper to bear a date.

The round slanted strokes of a fountain pen had barely grazed the paper, which indicated the light hand of a woman.

5 January 1912

Ms. Daphne Whitehurst
10 Wickerbottom
The Groph – Behind the Rock
New Dover, England

Dear Ms. Whitehurst,

For many years my letters have been seized by the head office of this institution, and such will no doubt be the fate of this one. However, I attempt one more entreaty upon your mercy and understanding, for day-by-day, I perish a little more within my cheerless chambre, condemned here by your not-so-dainty hand.

You know it was neither the scandal nor the murder that placed me here, but your need to silence an already silent partner. You know that I adored Simon until you stole him from me, and for that he certainly deserved to die. But you are the guilty one, not I. You pursued me all the way to New York City, where you prosecuted your pitiless revenge against me.

I implore you to withdraw the accusation and allow me to see my beloved England once more before I die. Should you refuse, I hope you will overlook my smile, for your own fate is known to me, one that a simple act of kindness would alter. Despite you, I continue to in-

scribe a detailed written record of actual events, and even now hasten to complete it—your treachery shall be exposed before the world!

I implore you to exonerate me!
My fate is in your hands,

Permelia Lyttle

“PL stands for Permelia Lyttle,” I explained excitedly to my dog. “This collection seems to be some type of journal. The date’s 1912.”

I turned the page over and found a ripped envelope, brown and brittle, with an uncanceled one-cent stamp curling off the corner. The writer’s address had been torn out.

“Whoever Permelia was,” I told Jason, “she was in jail in New York City. This letter—was apparently to the woman who snagged her husband. Permelia was begging for mercy from the home wrecker herself!”

Equally baffled, Jason sat attentive by my elbow. I turned over a few more pages and found several receipts, including one dated 1881 for an advertisement in the *London Dispatch-Gazette*. However, I didn’t immediately find any correspondence from Ms. Whitehurst herself, at least in the top layers of the material. I took careful note of the date on this letter: January 5, which, eerily, happened to be my birthday.

I found it interesting that the compiler had placed the Whitehurst letter near the top, as though to compel some future reader to pursue the mystery of Simon’s murder. The temptation to thumb through the pages was strong, but I steeled myself. I would have to play the academic’s game and work carefully.

“Easy does it,” I coached myself. “One page at a time.”

I noted these words on a steno pad and moved on.

Next came a curled, yellow receipt from Bluestone Hardware and Sundries, 308 Houston St., New York City, dated 1896 for some green thread, ink, fifty sheets of writing paper, and a measure of chintz, and I marveled at the total of 82¢ for the entire order. The bill was made out to: P. Lyttle, “no charge” scrawled across the bottom.

The next item was a folded piece of card stock holding a lock of black hair and the word "Mum."

The corner broke off between my thumb and forefinger.

"Crapola." My fingers quaked and shivered. "Jason, you should never trust me with fragile antiquities. Criminy. I've got to steady my hands. Quick. My anxiety pills."

Jason was kind enough to select the correct orange pill bottle with his teeth from a basket full and bring it to me.

I was on the verge of tears. "Of all the pieces to break, I broke the card holding Mum's lock of hair. *I broke Mum's lock of hair!*"

I wish I could say I was unfamiliar with proper historical research procedures and the dangers of handling archival documents without forceps and protective gloves. I also wish I could deny my gut instinct to alert qualified authorities at Virginia Tech, UVA, or the College of William and Mary, who would have kept the moldering clump intact, painstakingly lifting each leaf in a climate-controlled chamber, photographing and cataloging the pages for examination by wizened scholars as adoring, nubile young assistants recorded their tedious observations.

But screw that. This jewel was mine. Jason was sniffing it with more questions than I could answer. I patted him on his head.

"How I long to live in the past," I sighed. "I wonder if this material could be the subject of my next book. At the very least, it might be a sneak peek into Victorian life."

Jason was on the ball. From the Western Mound he retrieved the pair of archivist's gloves that I had used at the preservation society.

"Gloves from my last real job. Good thinking, Jase."

But I would certainly need tools to pull the rest of these matted papers apart.

"I'm going for tweezers, boy. And a quick whiz."

He shot me a worried glance.

"I know it's dangerous, but I have no choice. You wait here."

When I first came to live with Eula Huff, I asked for the downstairs office, but she told me no. It was the one she used to teach scrap book classes and sell exercise DVDs over the Internet. The negotiations went downhill from there. She was the guardian on my threshold. The Grendel. The gatekeeper. The tax collector. The spirit-thirsty incubus and the phone company rep all in one.

Anytime I needed to relieve myself, I had to descend to the fiery pits of the second floor, ergo, my nervous bladder and the pill I took for it.

To venture downstairs risked an encounter with the urchins. I unlocked the door, inched it open and listened. Not a sound. I peeked out. No sign of them. Slowly and quietly, I stepped into the hall. Descending the stairs, I stepped over the squeaky third step, only to remember it was the second step that squeaked. The squeak produced a munchkin face at the corner. Goldilocks' face was grimy with mud and cookies, her teeth jagged and loose, and her breath of sour milk. She flashed a sinister smirk with red, hooded eyes.

I warbled urgently, "Bathroom. Gotta go."

"On the floy. Hands over you head!" she ordered. "You gonna play wid me!"

Play? Hah! That's not what she meant at all. Last time I played with them, they tied me with lamp cords and dropped ants on my eyes.

"I'd love to play wid you," I lied, trying not to make eye contact. "I can't play now, Goldilocks, or Medusa, or whoever you are. Potty. Potty."

I tucked and rolled into the bathroom like a commando and locked the door. A voice sired outside.

"He's loose! He's loose!"

The bathroom bees hummed loudly in their basketball-size gray nest, taking no special notice as I conducted my bathroom business. I had to admire them. They'd come in through the broken window pane and built their home. The busy little guys zoomed and swooped around the bathroom freely engaged in their industry. As I relieved myself, they caromed off my cheeks and forehead and other parts. I felt oddly at peace whenever I was with them. Moments later, I managed to find the tweezers in the drawer.

My brain raced for a way back to my office without the children attacking me. They had received no discipline, rules, or schooling—part of Eula's self-devised "classroom without teachers" home-school program. In my opinion it wasn't working very well. Then I saw it: in front of me, perched on the edge of the bathtub, was my ticket out: Pete, the rubber platypus, was

six inches in length, its orange paint bleached to yellow. By its smile, I could tell that it would enjoy serving a special purpose that day.

I winked and whispered, "Ready for some bath-time fun, Pete?"

The old house still had transoms, and this one was open. I grabbed the sorely abused creature from the tub and climbed on top of the toilet tank. With astounding precision, I lobbed Pete in a perfect arc through the transom. He banked off the far wall and down the steps, squawking like a beaten thing.

Beet, bee, bee.

The Pavlovian imps waiting to ambush me, instead rumbled downstairs chasing that rubber platypus like a pack of dogs.

I took my chances and leapt into the hall where I banged my ankle on the door jamb. Terrifying rebel yells split the air in an *a capella* chorus.

"He's on the stairs!"

"Make him beg for death!"

I dashed toward the stairs, but suddenly came another disturbance—the thrashing of a much larger creature. It was Eula, and she was on the warpath. I limped and grunted as fast as I could back up the steps while she set her nag-o-prompter on full gain.

"The sink's stopped up and a pipe's busted in the basement. Sparks are shootin' out of the porch light and the mailbox is falling off. And what about that bee's nest? They ain't gonna fix themselves, dick-wad."

"I wasn't really down there!" I yelled over my shoulder. "Goldilocks threw Pete at me, and now I'm going to sue."

"Don't you dare blame Pete again."

I slipped back inside my office and locked the door. I caught my breath as the snorting and complaining receded into the distance.

Finally returning to the old manuscript, I continued my evaluation. With my tweezers, I carefully turned the items over and soon realized that this was going to take longer than I thought. The components followed no apparent order. Most of the papers were undated and unsigned. An hour later, I began to doubt that the manuscript would be of much value.

"Maybe we're wasting our time, Jase. These aren't the notes of

some literary luminary. Just the scrawls of some loopy dowager of dubious character who had been roundly hated and thrown into jail—probably for good reason. Maybe we ought to throw this thing out.”

But Jason barked twice for no.

Skeptically, I continued snooping, finding only miscellaneous correspondence, shopping lists, old bills, and colorful advertisements (Victorians saved colored printed pieces because color printing was rare at the time). I also encountered a miscellaneous, heavily foxed note that appeared ripped out of a scrapbook.

“Listen to this, Jase.”

Professor Morehaven recommends the laudanum, which I admit is not without its goodly effects. Although the visions have not let up, at least my mood is calm. The spells persist, but I have not taken the ether in two months. God bless you, Professor Morehaven.

“Permelia was a doper, Jase! A Golden Age tweaker. A lot of women at that time used laudanum to calm their nerves. It was a highly addictive opiate.”

I munched ravenously from a bag of stale corn curls as I explained.

“Whenever a woman experienced what they called female hysterics, which constituted just about anything but a placid smile, they’d clamp an ether-doused rag over her nose to knock her out. People would then wake her up with smelling salts and ask if she was O.K.”

Jason moaned. Rubbed his nose with his paw.

“Too much species-specific information. But the women fainted mostly because the tight corsets they wore restricted their breathing.”

My phone rang—I hated the telephone, its sound, and talking on it, too. I froze. It was Raven Tourneau, my agent. I let the answering machine do the work.

“Luray Flicht, are you there? A lot of people want to see the manuscript. Just tell me when I can have it. E-mail me. Anything. I mean now, Luray.”

Tell me something I don't know.

Back to the smelly clump of papers, where I came upon two little boards holding a pressed rosebud inside, its leaves and stem still green. I lifted it to my nostrils and sniffed, but it smelled only of must like the rest of the papers. Next to the rosebud was a scribble that looked like "fnpguQanrn." The scribble comprised a few severe strokes, the way an accountant might mark a ledger. I tried to see "Simon" in the scratches, but could make no such connection.

Thinking I should put the journal aside and get back to my book, something caught my eye. It was an older letter, apparently written during better times. Unfortunately the top was ripped off, so it had no date or salutation. At the bottom of the missive, however, I found the name, "Simon."

Clearly, this was from the husband Ms. Whitehurst had stolen and accused Permelia of murdering.

—you in the full bloom of health, as traveling on the continent always restores my constitution. And I must admit, My Dear, that I feel better overall than when I was so restless, an effect I attribute to the restorative French countryside.

But great news. In Paris, I had the good fortune to meet a Professor Denzil Onsellier of the Rue Chat Noir Sanatorium du Paris, who just last year treated a patient with a similar hysteria to your own—vivid dreams and disturbing visions. He spoke of various theories and remedies, like applying ice to the forehead. You may wish to wait until I return home to try this, as you upset so easily, and you know how you tend to exaggerate.

I am unable to imagine what it must be like, tortured day and night by that terrible "mystic window," as you call it, opening in your thoughts without warning. You so often swim in the otherworldly stream; I sometimes sense that you are far away, even as I embrace you. Of course, I want only what's best for you, My Dear, to stop these troublesome female complaints once and for all. I am willing to try anything that might afford us both some relief.

Tomorrow, we train to Genoa, and I hope your health continues to improve—I shall be spanking new by the time I return to your side, thirty days hence.

My heart bursts with love,
I miss you,

Your Devoted Husband,

Simon

PS. Messrs. Ingersoll, Martaud, and Pope thank you most sincerely for your warning about the financial collapse, and also your advice regarding Standard Oil. We anticipate '94 to be a better year. Hugs.

“So, Simon was her husband,” I mumbled. “And she had visions and psychic experiences, which was considered a mental illness back then. Apparently her husband sought treatment for her while he and his buddies cashed in on her visions.”

Jason had fallen asleep in his bed. His paws were twitching, but I shared my thoughts anyway.

“According to the letter, she had predicted the Panic of 1893 and gave advice about Standard Oil—stocks, Jason, stocks. Those businessmen profited from our country’s first major depression. Permelia had some type of clairvoyant gift—something she apparently couldn’t control.”

Prodded on by the potential of this discovery, I got up from my desk and paced. I fished a beer from my tiny office refrigerator and took a deep satisfying swallow of the golden elixir. Turning a few more leaves in the manuscript, I found several pages nearly black with fungus, the light scrawl, like fine gray hairs, impossible to read. I made a note to bring them to the college for analysis. I figured the letter from late 1893. It also seemed that her marriage had still been good at that time.

The next item was a home-sewn chapbook of sixteen pages, without boards, bearing a date of 26 October 1902. Unlike the other documents, the handwriting was jagged and jerky, an almost horizontal slant with irregular features.

A scene of dizzying horror! Throngs of the youth of the world, screaming. America, London, Melbourne, and Paris. I see women burning their foundations and unmentionables! Young girls screaming and pulling their hair. I see mass sobbing. There are four boys of the lower class, apparently off to the guillotine or some such fate—sixty-eight years hence. The world laments the smashing of insects. I see the headline of a newspaper, as through a fine mist: ‘beatles [sic] break up.’ Oh! the future is a Boschian nightmare of unimaginable madness, and yet I am the one incarcerated! I despise this gift, Oh God!, for it is a curse! A curse!...

I woke Jason.

“She foresaw the Beatles, Jase,” I brimmed with awe. “Unless it was just some coincidence. You weren’t around then, but women burned their bras sixty-eight years into Permelia’s future. And the Beatles broke up in 1970—b-e-a-t-l-e-s, Jase not the type you’re familiar with. I remember the girls screaming for the Fab Four, and the ‘smashing’ or break-up was a shock heard around the world. So—a new mystery: Was her prognostication a coincidence or a clairvoyant vision?”

The concept of extra-sensory perception was certainly no stranger on the Victorian landscape, especially in Britain. They delighted in their séance parties, parlor games, and Ouija boards. By the 1870s and ‘80s, spiritualism had become all the rage, but Permelia Lyttle’s diaristic vision smacked less of parlor games and more of chilling precision. Whether she saw it, dreamt it, or guessed it, Permelia Lyttle had described an actual event six decades into her future. I drained my beer and opened the fridge for another.

But the shelf was bare.

“Out of beer,” I whinged. “At least I don’t drink gin anymore, Jase. That’s a plus, eh? That’s progress in anybody’s book. The apple turned out better than the inebriated tree from which it fell.”

I shifted some junk around on the floor and found a pen. A moment later, I taped a reminder to the door among many others:

Need beer.

Those were the first coherent words I'd written in hours.

"I wonder what laudanum tastes like."

Jason observed wearily as I continued my analysis.

I wondered if those papers could have been a hoax or a work of fiction by some desperate lit major. I knew by experience that no one could be trusted—except your dog. Anyway, the handwriting, the topics, the stationery—it all looked genuine. If someone did fake that stuff, why did Uncle Goody conceal it in the bowels of the armoire?

Jason had no appropriate answer to that question, and due to my equivocation, he didn't seem to care any longer whether I studied it further or tossed the whole thing onto the Western Mound.

"Well we're not throwing it away, Jase. Not yet. I mean, it's no literary treasure, but she did predict the break-up of the Beatles. That's got to count for something. And there's that end-of-the-world thing."

Jason moaned and, ultimately, we agreed to disagree.

I only knew a little about spiritualism or psychic phenomena. I was suspicious by nature, but the prophecy angle caught my interest. I wanted to verify if Permelia Lyttle really had precognition or if the writings were just the scrawl from an opiated bender.

"Besides, Jase, there's a murder afoot. Don't you want to know who killed Simon?"

