



JEFFREY ROUND

THE
SULPHUR
SPRINGS
CURE

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For my mother, Loretta Marion Round
And her parents, Abbie and Henry White

-I-

SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON

THE OLD WOMAN lifts her head from the pillow, feeling confusion and a muddle. A luminous dial on the bedside table reads 12:43 a.m. The edges of a dream that seemed at once both dangerous and inviting are only now beginning to recede. She flicks on the lamp and gazes around. Things take a moment to register. The year is 2009 and her name is Violet McAdams. She is in the bedroom of her home on the outskirts of Victoria, British Columbia. Of course I am, she thinks. Where else would I be? *Who* else would I be? She feels both relief and a huge disappointment on registering this.

Outside, the sky is restless. A branch taps furtively at the window. It reminds her of the dream. Only a few minutes earlier she'd been back on the grounds of the Sulphur Springs Hotel in the summer of 1939. It's the third night this week that she's dreamed it. Each time, she dreamt of lifting the stone that covered the crevice in the wall bordering the hotel grounds like some inquisitive teenager bent on discovering a secret. In fact, she *had* been a teenager at the time. Only her name was Violet McPherson then. And she certainly had discovered a secret. But all that was a very long time ago.

For a moment, she glimpses her former life from a distance. She sees that plucky fourteen-year-old running across footbridges, ducking under hedges, and darting through woods.

And lifting stones.

The past is always with her these days. Maybe it's because of the impending move. After more than forty years, her house is to be sold along with most of its contents. There will be little left but memories once she disposes of the property and relocates to the McPickell Residence for Seniors. Just thinking of the name rankles her. She might as well be pickled once she moves there.

But, yes, it would explain why her memories have started to unravel. The dreams have been very insistent of late. Vivid, almost angry at times. All those shadowy faces and figures from the past clamouring to get at her. Why now, when she's about to leave it all behind? Seventy years have passed since that dreadful day when her childhood ended, leaving Violet stranded on the shoals between youthful innocence and the knowledge that follows in the wake of experience. And soon her little life is about to be rounded by a much bigger sleep than any she has ever known. On days like this, she doesn't feel ready for it.

She struggles to sit up. Her rheumatism has been getting worse of late, making of her hands and feet a battleground most days.

There is a tentative knock at the door.

"Come in, Claire."

Her niece peeks in and sees her propped against the pillows. She smiles sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Aunt Vi. I thought I heard you cry out."

Violet tries to recall. Had she cried out? Her head is still a bit fuzzy. The answer doesn't come.

"I might have," she admits.

"Is everything all right?"

The memory of the stone intrudes with excruciating clarity. Violet looks around her as though the reason for it might be writ, large or small, on the walls of her bedroom. Slowly, she shakes her head.

“No. I think I can say with some certainty that everything is not all right.” She tries but fails to keep the crankiness out of her voice. “I wish it were.”

She can still hear the voices. She wants desperately to shake them off and drive them away, but these days the dead aren’t so easily appeased. Not that they ever were.

Claire sits on the edge of the bed, matronly concern written across her forehead. She’ll get wrinkles that way, Violet thinks. Her mother — Violet’s younger sister, Elizabeth — was just the same. And so was our mother, Maggie, though for some reason I was born with tougher skin than the two of them. Well, the devil looks after his own.

“Is there anything I can do?” Claire asks.

“Such as?” Violet’s voice is querulous.

What she wants to ask is, Can you fend off these ghosts and make them leave me in peace? Can you tell them to drop dead — again? She reminds herself that Claire is here to help with the move. It won’t do to snap at her for no good reason. In fact, Claire, the youngest of her five nieces and nephews, is the only one who offered up her time when Violet announced her decision. “It will keep my mind off the divorce,” she’d said. Violet had protested briefly, though she knows Claire would never have made the offer if she hadn’t meant it.

“Don’t worry about me, dear,” Violet says. “I suppose I’m fine.”

Suppose? Which is it then — am I fine or not? Just seconds ago she’d declared she wasn’t fine at all. It won’t do to be wishy-washy. Claire will think she’s getting fuzzy-headed. She might even tear up. That would be far more aggravating than the matronly concern she’s trying at this moment to express.

Claire reaches over and gently rubs the skin on the back of her aunt’s hand. Violet looks down at the wrinkles and liver spots — old age in all its glory. She withdraws the hand. She hates being

treated like a fading flower. Sympathy's wasted on me, she thinks. I'm old, not delicate. Besides, "old" isn't something you can help being, otherwise I'd never have got old. I'm still a tough nut underneath it all. Just try cracking me.

"Shall I make us some nice chamomile tea?"

Claire asks this in a way that Violet would find patronizing in others. For some reason, her niece can get away with it.

Despite the girl's meekness, Violet trusts her intentions. She can't be doing this to get a larger share of the estate — there won't be that much to leave. Besides, she has made it clear that everything will be divided equally among all her nieces and nephews. When the time comes, of course. She hasn't heard the wingèd chariots yet. In any case, why not? She loves them all equally, not a bad apple in the bunch, though she's always felt a stronger connection with Claire. If what the Buddhists claim is true, then Claire must have been someone Violet was fond of in another life. And who can say they're wrong? It makes sense, in a way. She far prefers life's profit-and-loss ledgers to add up properly. Give a little, get a little. It should all be made clear when we arrive in the world: Take what you like, but don't forget you have to pay for it when you leave.

"Tea, Aunt Vi?"

Violet looks up.

"Chamomile? To help you sleep?"

Before she can answer, the tapping resumes at the window. Violet turns to look. They're here — all the long-lost dead. She can't see them, but she can feel them. Still, she's not afraid. She pats Claire's hand.

"Why not? Would you mind?"

Claire smiles, glad to be of use. "I'll be right back."

When her niece is gone, Violet looks around the room. Shadows cover the walls. She knows they're waiting for her. Lately there seems to be nothing but ghosts to keep her company.

“Come on then,” she challenges. “Don’t hang back in the shadows. Show yourselves.”

The room remains hushed and unchanged. She hears Claire moving about downstairs in the kitchen, opening cupboards and clanking the kettle against the sink. Violet’s eyes roam the walls, pausing over a sepia photograph of her mother from the 1930s. Maggie is wearing a long-sleeved dress with a lace collar. Her expression is inscrutable, just as she often was in life. She has a book resting on her lap: *The Noble Lord* by Mrs. Emma D.E.N. Southworth. Violet read it once several years ago, surprised to have unearthed a copy in a second-hand bookshop. A soppy romance. Well, that’s what they wanted back then before they had television to pollute their minds.

The branch taps at the window again. *Ab, there you are!* it seems to say, as her mother might once have said on discovering Violet hiding beneath a hedge. *You can’t catch me*, Violet would have replied. *Wrong*, her mother would say, grabbing and tickling her till she screamed with delight.

Outside, the wind tosses the leaves about, the world unfurling in the soft contours of night. Changing, always changing. There’s a pulse that runs through everything, in darkness and light, in winter and summer. You can feel it, Violet thinks. Birds migrate, plants grow, tides ebb and flow. Change unceasing. You can’t hold it back. It’s the natural order. But what of the unnatural order? What of an early death? What of a death by design? These things aren’t part of any order she understands.

She turns from the window and tries not to think of the stone. It’s like *not* thinking of a white bear. She’d heard it was an exercise the great acting coach Stanislavski asked his pupils to attempt during their classes with him, to show how pitifully weak the mind really was. They all failed. So, too, the stone has a great hold on her dreams lately. She’ll be damned if she lets it disturb her waking

life too.

Keep calm, she thinks. Claire will be back with the tea soon and the conversation will resume with talk of everyday things. They can talk about what needs to be done to ready the house for the sale: cleaning and packing, repairing the fence and trimming the garden. In fact, a good deal more than just memories has accumulated in forty years. Sometimes the reminder of the past is a pleasant relief; at other times it's a torment. One has to choose one's memories as much as the right moment to let them in. Otherwise, they bring misery.

She looks over the photographs again, scrutinising the faces of her ancestors, some of whom she barely remembers and others not at all. There is a portrait of her grandfather, frowning sternly down at her. He's seated at a desk and dressed in a suit and bowtie, an accounts ledger in one hand, as though prepared to meet the Day of Judgment in good order if not good cheer. Next to him is a replica of the McPherson family coat of arms and, underneath, its motto: *In patience lies wisdom*. Just words, she thinks. Like most children of her day, Violet was raised on these so-called truisms: Cleanliness is next to godliness. Patience is a virtue. And so on. Even then she suspected that certain kinds of moral uprightness had little to do with godliness and virtue, and far more to do with hard-won strength and overall endurance. Like a stone — a hardness that was in itself considered a virtue. Can't make a stone cry. Can't wring tears from a stone. What was so good about being a bloody stone then?

Don't think about the stone.

Some of the portraits are more than a century old. That's older than I'll ever be, she thinks. And thank goodness for that. There's no great art to living long — the art is in living well. Not that she's lived any better than most — if she had, there might have been more to life, both for her and Edgar. Children, trips abroad, and all

the things that other people had seemingly effortlessly. But never mind all that. It's too late to complain. And to what purpose? *If your problem has a solution then why complain?* her father used to say. *And if your problem has no solution then why complain?* He smiles down at her from the wall, as if he still lives on in some other place just out of reach.

Those beautiful, hand-carved frames were passed down to her from her parents. Had the carvers known their work would outlast the hands that made them? Had they understood how the frames took on lives of their own as they passed from carver to merchant, from seller to buyer? From one set of hands to the next? Probably not. Back then people were too caught up in their day-to-day lives to notice the extraordinary around them. They were oblivious to how a face in a photograph could come alive again if looked at in the right light or how the youthful features of a woman who had withered and died long ago still seemed to glow with life in that brief moment when she sat in a hotel that has long since burned to the ground.

In the photograph, Maggie looks as young and vital now as she looked then. Violet wonders if she'd been wrong to hang that particular picture again after all the years it sat unseen, tucked away in a closet. When she'd retrieved it, it had seemed just another portrait in a frame — a moment in time that could never return. Not so now. It seems to be speaking to her. How long would the memories continue to haunt her? It has already been the better part of a lifetime.

She tries to recall what prompted her to place the photograph over her bed. Some sentimental urge, perhaps, though Violet considers sentiment suspect at best and treacherous at worst. Thinking about it now, she realizes that's when the dreams started. Why hasn't she connected the two?

The dead are gathering. They left her alone for years, but now

they've come back to claim her. She senses them hovering in the shadows. Shape-shifters. Here come Ned and Julia, followed by Violet's mother and father. Don't they know they're ruining her peace of mind, giving her restless nights? Like photographs, memories are funny the way they bring back the dead and make them seem alive again. In a way, of course, it's because they are still alive whenever Violet chooses to recall them.

Nonsense. There's no "choosing" in the matter. Memories intrude whenever they damn well please. It's as if they have a will of their own. She can't help remembering the past any more than she can stop herself from dreaming about it. If she closes her eyes, she can still see the flat, grey stone that covered the cavity in the wall, can still see her hands eagerly pushing it aside and reaching down to the fateful slip of paper nestled on the bottom.

Why?

Why had she done it? What had driven her to meddle in other people's affairs? If she'd had a daughter like that, she would have throttled the nosey wretch.

The tapping starts again, more urgently now, sounding almost desperate against the glass. Never any peace! Is it prompting her to speak up or warning her to stay quiet? Does it want her to confess her awful part in the past or forever shut it out and let it die with her? It's been seventy years, after all. Seventy years that she has kept it all to herself. What difference could a few more years, or even months, make?

Blood will out.

Claire's footsteps return. The door flies open.

"Here we go!" Claire exclaims, a trifle loudly, as though to cover someone's social blunder.

Violet scrutinizes Claire's face. Has she been talking out loud, mumbling up here in her room all by herself while Claire made tea? When the ghosts gather, she sometimes does.

Claire sets the tray on the dresser, lifts the teapot, and pours. She extends a cup, smiling like a benevolent Angel of Mercy. Violet doesn't mind her gentleness too much. At least Claire is real flesh-and-blood company. She's grateful for that, at least.

She sips her tea then sets the cup on the side table.

"Feeling better?" Claire asks hopefully.

The question unsettles Violet.

"No, I'm not," she snaps, surprised by her crotchetyness.

A worried look steals into Claire's face. How did I age into this person? Violet wonders. How did I become this old crab! She recalls a handful of neighbourhood women, already ancient when she was young. She remembers watching them with scorn. Why would anyone let themselves grow into *that*? The faces lined with anxiety and frustration, the eyes clouded with suspicion and regret. Never a smile or a pleasant word. How could they let themselves get that way? As if willpower had anything to do with it. Though perhaps willpower has more to do with it than we realize, she tells herself. There aren't many eighty-four-year-olds living alone, still driving cars and doing their own shopping without help from others. At least, that had been the case until her fall the previous month.

It was inevitable. She'd always been careful, but the statistics finally caught up with her and down she went, like so many others her age. All the sensible shoes in the world couldn't have prevented it. She was lucky she hadn't broken anything. A slight sprain had been the worst of it, and that was mostly healed now.

"Probably the gin and tonics," she told her doctor, amused by his disapproving look. "Not the fall," she added, though she was tempted to let him go on thinking whatever he liked, the silly old bugger. "I wasn't drinking when I fell. I meant that was why I didn't break anything." She's convinced that a drink every now and then keeps her limber. And probably sane, too, if she thinks about it. But now they're all terrified the silly old bat is going to do herself in.

She smiles at the thought then catches Claire watching her. What must this sensible young woman think of her old aunt? One moment she's crabbing about how terrible she feels, the next she's smiling to herself and staring off into the distance.

"Are you thinking what a doddering old woman I am?" she asks, catching the guilty look on Claire's face. "You are, aren't you?"

Claire quickly shakes her head. "No, I'm not thinking that, Aunt Vi. I'm worried about you. You seem distracted. Is something bothering you tonight?"

The question catches her short. What to tell this girl who is far wiser than most of the silly young things her age? Should she tell her the dead are haunting her? Should she say they crowd her dreams at night and won't let her rest in peace? Claire would think she was out of her mind for sure. That was bad enough, but if she claimed the spirits talked to her then she would seem positively barmy. Though in any case, it would help if they spoke plain English rather than all this tap-tapping against windows and blowing out of candles in the night. If only they would just come out and say what they wanted to say. But no, it's always the same meaningless signs and incomprehensible symbols.

Outside the wind is almost a howl. There's a storm coming. A flash of lightning shifts the patterns on the wall, followed quickly by a second burst. For the briefest of moments she sees Ned's face in the frame where her father's ought to be. In that fleeting instant she is actually frightened. Perhaps it's not so meaningless and incomprehensible after all. The flare dies and the picture returns to normal.

Claire's voice intrudes on her thoughts. "I know what it was like at Sulphur Springs," she says.

Violet is startled almost out of her wits. How on God's green earth could Claire have known about Sulphur Springs?

She turns to her niece. "What did you just say?"

Now it's Claire's turn to be startled, this time by her aunt's vehemence. She watches with evident concern. "I said, 'I know what it's like when you start thinking things.'"

Is it true? Had Claire really said that and not the other thing about Sulphur Springs? For one paranoid instant, Violet's mind seizes on some film she'd seen where an old woman's relatives try to drive her crazy by saying and doing things and then denying them. Was it Bette Davis? Elizabeth Taylor? One of those screen legends who had turned into an old bat like her.

Claire nods. "It's as though our thoughts get out of control and we can't help remembering. I've had many sleepless nights since the divorce ..."

Violet feels a twinge of guilt. She's been so wrapped up in her own concerns she has barely given Claire's troubles a moment of reflection. That's really all ghosts are, she thinks — stray thoughts, memories unleashed in idle moments.

She nods and takes a sip of tea.

"Sometimes our thoughts get the better of us. They're like unwanted guests at a party. Once you let them in, they don't leave until they're ready. Do you think of him often?"

"All the time," Claire says softly.

Violet has heard only the bare bones of the story. It sounded to her like a simple story of mismatched passions. The sooner you find out the better, of course. She'd like to know more, but out of compassion rather than curiosity. It would help her to understand what her niece went through. So far Claire has kept it largely to herself.

"From the little you've told me, you're better off without him."

"You're right, of course. More tea?" Claire asks, changing the subject.

Violet holds out her cup. "Please."

Claire refills the cup and passes it thoughtfully back into her aunt's hands. "But what about you? Are you worried about having

to sell the house? Is that what's been on your mind the last few days? Change can be a frightening thing ...”

“I'm not afraid of change,” Violet declares.

The worried expression returns to Claire's face. “You don't have to sell, Aunt Vi. Nobody wants you to give up your place here, but we have been concerned.” She smiles guiltily. “Actually, the others asked me to report on you while I'm here.”

Violet gives her a stern look.

“I'm not spying,” Claire says defensively. “Any decision you make is up to you. If we need to, we've agreed to hire a nurse to come in and look after you on a part-time basis. We just want to be sure you're all right and know you're happy with your choice.”

Violet nods. “So you *do* think I'm a doddering old woman.”

“No, Aunt Vi, please don't say that.”

She looks chastened. Violet felt the same having to tell her own mother she would need to be taken care of by somebody else, and at a far younger age. Maggie had become too much to handle alone. Violet had learned to stagger duties looking after her mother with her teaching schedule, but by the end there had always had to be someone on hand, and so it was eventually recommended that a care home be sought. Violet had been desperate to move on and start her own life. Edgar had proposed to her by then. He'd agreed to wait for as long as it took. Kind, patient Edgar. And they *had* waited till it was inevitable before suggesting it. But it was still no easier for all that.

Poor Maggie. Violet had looked after her through nearly twenty years of illness, the last five on her own after her father died. Elizabeth had grown up and gone off to school by then, but she'd at least had Edgar. It had been far more difficult than anyone could have imagined. For her mother to lose her motor skills was as great a tragedy as having that brilliant mind imprisoned in a withered body. Both had dwindled slowly, neither kindly. But Maggie had

clung on, the muscles turning to mush and trapping her mind like a bird in a cage, flitting dimly back and forth till she finally died.

Tap-tap!

The branches again. Would they never give her any peace? Was she doomed to end her days plagued by things she would rather forget? *O Guilt, thou'rt a pitiless master!* The past was like a shadow that took a step with your every step and breathed with your every breath, reminding you of all you could never be free from.

But why *should* I be free? Violet wonders. Why should any of us be expiated for the sins of our youth? Nevertheless, the sentence has been mine and I have borne it all my days. And now those days are dwindling, their numbers running out like sand in an hourglass.

Still, they haunt her, all those things that never will be.

“That’s Grandmother McPherson, isn’t it?” Claire asks, looking up at the portrait of Violet’s mother. “I don’t recall seeing it before. Where was it taken?”

For a moment Violet doesn’t reply. It’s a simple question and there is only one answer, but it takes her a while to find the strength to speak the words.

“It was at a spa just before the war, right before she was diagnosed. We had gone there seeking treatment — a sulphur cure — before we knew what she had. It was called the Sulphur Springs Hotel. It had beautiful gardens.”

“The Sulphur Springs Hotel.” Claire quietly repeats the words as though trying to place them in her memory. “Where is that?”

“It was in Dundas, Ontario. It doesn’t exist now.”

Claire nods, as though to say she understands all that it says about time and decay. “It looks like a lovely place,” she enthuses.

“It is — or rather it *was* — a very lovely place.” Violet’s hands are shaking. She moves to pass her cup to Claire. “I think ...”

Claire takes it from her, watching with concern. “What is it,

Aunt Vi?”

Tears spring to her eyes. Imagine! After all these years, she’s finally crying over it. She reaches for Claire’s hand and squeezes hard, as though she must never let go or she’ll be lost forever.

“I think I killed someone there.”

The teacup falls to the floor.