

In a Quiet Country Village

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One of the predilections of old men, it seems to me, is to try to recapture some moment of days-gone-by, to revisit a time now grown sweet and gauzy with age when the world held more possibility, when life had no known high-water mark and the future stretched out in a series of adventures and triumphs, a time when youthful ignorance obscured the line between dross and treasure, in short when romance prevailed and reality took second place. Perhaps not just of old men; the best-seller lists are replete with memoirs, some written about teenage experiences by actual teenagers. What follows is a memoir of sorts, not my own but rather of a small country village located not far from here in miles but in many other respects a place unlike this city, or really any city. Yet because this memoir tells of its people and their deeds, and human nature is what it is in any and every locale, perhaps not so different after all. The characters herein live, or lived, actual lives, and the events described actually took place and are based on facts, mostly. I will do my best to leave myself out of this, except perhaps to describe how I came to know these things, either from first-hand experience or the stories shared by the residents.

The village sits at a bend in the river. Upstream, to the west, lies Bellbrook, more prosperous and populous; even before the Dayton suburbs oozed out to swamp it, Bellbrook had a traffic light. Downstream to the south lies the swamp, now known chamber-of-commerce style as Spring Valley Lake, one of the few biomes in Ohio that supports the Mississauga rattlesnake, and then by bend and reach past Mt. Holly to Waynesville. The hills framing the river grow steeper and taller here on their way to the dramatic cliffs overlooked by Ft. Ancient. Cut into one of these hills by the springs for which it is named is enough flat ground for a small village of about 400 denizens called by some imaginative soul Spring Valley.

Like Waynesville, Spring Valley was settled by Quakers and Methodists, and like most nominally pious communities, it harbored its dark stories, known by all and spoken by no one and so hidden but not secret. Or rather spoken by almost no one, as we shall see.

Like the time the hobo rolled off the train as it slowed in the village before climbing the gradual rise to Xenia. Xenia was a town that no freight hopper wanted any part of. Three railroads intersected there and the yard bulls had

the reputation as the meanest anywhere in the Midwest. The hobos hopped off their boxcars outside Xenia and walked around town to hop on again in safer jurisdictions. As a result hobos were a common sight in the village and left alone as long as they kept moving. This hobo was seen in town but unremarked until Mary Riley ran out of her house on Main St. crying she had been robbed.

Men gathered, the hobo was discussed, men went home and returned with horses and guns and rode along the tracks toward Xenia. At a clearing some three miles north of the village where the tracks followed Glady Run, they came upon our hobo camped in a small clearing. He sprang up from his campfire and brandished a knife in the face of this posse. Ignoring the old maxim, "Don't bring a knife to a gun fight," confronted by these armed and mounted men, he faced his pursuers with all he had. The standoff lasted a few seconds. At the sight of the knife, several of the men raised rifles and fired. He was dead in an instant. Someone went for a shovel and they buried him. Among his effects were the items stolen from Mary Riley, or at least that's where they said they found them. I heard this story from the fire chief whose grandfather had been among the posse and a life-long member of the Quaker meeting.

Not only a Quaker but he was descended from people who had claimed land as bounty for Revolutionary War service in this western-most part of the Virginia Military District. These lands had once been home to many natives, as evidenced by the mound overlooking Main Street, but they had been eliminated by European pathogens and other forms of ethnic cleansing, and so the land appeared empty. The Virginians hadn't meant to depopulate the country by means of smallpox and cholera; no one then understood the interplay of contagion and immunity well enough to intend it, but they didn't care much how it was done so long as the natives were gone. The Virginians were hardly more sophisticated in their hygiene than the natives and infectious disease claimed many of them too, but fewer and with more coming west, they could weather the loss. They just knew the land looked unoccupied and so claimable and they settled in.

Virginians continued to arrive in the village depending on the economy and family connections. In the earliest days most had come from the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley around Winchester, but after the C & O came through, Roanoke and Blacksburg were mentioned more often. In the late 20s one such couple stepped on to the platform with all they owned in a

cheap suitcase. He had the hollow stare of a man who has seen more trouble than he can face, and she, ah, she was the loveliest thing seen in the village in living memory. Here, if I could, I would evoke the sighs Ollie Gayle employed whenever he described one of the desirable young women at the heart of most of his stories. Sigh. Even in the modest clothing of the day it was clear she possessed a voluptuous figure and a complexion of peaches and cream framed by long and luxuriant reddish-blond hair. As they came along Main Street several Methodist farmers, or maybe it was Quakers turned and gaped as she passed. However pious, men are still men and subject sometimes to involuntary salutes to beauty. The man seemed not to notice and the woman cast her eyes downward with a shy-seeming smile.

In a little while they had taken a rundown farm on the shares and settled in to the life of the town. The man didn't seem a particularly diligent agriculturalist and his crop was no better than the farm had ever produced and yet, as the months succeeded one another, the couple seemed unexpectedly prosperous.

First the clothes improved and as the 20s led into the 30s the woman seemed more and more fashionably dressed, and the smartness of her attire coupled

with her figure put all the local women in the shade provoking their tongues to wag in the cattiest of ways. But even the cattiest of them had it wrong.

Soon enough the man was seen about town in a brand new Model A and shocking news came that the farm they had rented only a couple of years before was now entered in his name at the courthouse. In the next months, as depression shook the local economy, several more parcels were listed as his property, or to be correct, as their property. This news from Grace Mainer, who worked in the recorder's office in Xenia, reinvigorated the cat-tongued brigades to ever more far-fetched theorizing on the couple's unexplained rise in the world. One matron, probably a Methodist since Quakers are forbidden the sin of gossip, opined that there must be a connection between the woman's uncommon beauty and this unlooked-for prosperity. And while this connection escaped detection it did not avoid speculation. How, they asked, does a woman usually go about turning beauty into money? Their speculations, however, lacked the imaginative touch that might have led to the truth.

The truth, of course, eventually emerged, as it always does in a small town. The authors of the cattiest gossip felt validated and showed no little pride in

their own judgment, but only the Methodists; the Quaker wives maintained a posture of humility and were justifiably self-satisfied at their own forbearance.

And what emerged was this. Several of the prosperous farmers of the village, all pillars of church or meeting, had managed a private word or two with our paragon of beauty. Her comportment must have communicated vulnerability and admiration for these prosperous, at least land-rich, farmers. And when the inevitable proposition came, her replies were agreeable but only on her terms. They might meet, but it must be when her husband was away and then in some place where secrecy was possible. And so these trysts occurred in some out-of-the-way shelter or isolated barn. We never learned exactly how flagrante the delicto, but at some moment of compromised dress and behavior, in walked the man with a revolver and that dead-eyed stare that showed no mercy. Before shots were fired negotiations began over how much the farmer would surrender to leave his hide unperforated and his reputation uncompromised. No one ever discovered how many times this extortion was committed, but a look at the courthouse records showed at least five unusual real estate transactions. If there had been a talkative bank teller the evidence might have shown even more. The

village only learned this much by the death-bed confession of Jim Bean, a wealthy farmer from out on Cornstalk Road. Alvena, his wife, despite the shame and perhaps to elicit as much sympathy from her circle as possible, told a member of her Bible-study circle and soon all the women knew.

Wives began to question their husbands' money handling and I'm sure a few households had difficult conversations.

Once the news was out, the couple faded from view but not from the area. After all they had substantial holdings in the township which they converted to one farm out toward Bellbrook up against the hills that overlooked the river where they lived privately; at least she did. The house was a large three storey second-empire affair that by the 70s was stocked with antiques and other finery. The man disappeared soon after the move and she lived in isolation among her possessions. The women of the village speculated about what became of him and some went so far as to suggest he was still there in an unmarked grave, but no one looked for him. She could have sold and moved away; that she stayed said something about her contempt for the village women. What little they knew was from the tradesmen who performed the odd jobs of maintenance when there wasn't time to call out-

of-town plumbers or carpenters. They reported a house filled with expensive antique furnishings, the woman's only companions in her isolated existence.

Shortly after she died the whole place went up in a spectacular fire one bitter January night. The volunteers rallied to the station, fired up the pumper and tank trucks and hauled down Rt. 725 arriving to see the house fully engulfed. Flames and sparks leapt into the sky to disappear in the frosty blackness, along with any trace of the woman who had been the subject of so much village lore.

The night the woman's house burned was the closest I ever came to death or injury in the ten years I ran with the volunteer fire dept. We had two tank trucks, one hooked to the pumper, the other on deck. The bitter cold made handling the wet couplings painful and difficult. After wrestling with the connection, we charged up a hose and threw water at the fire the best we could. It felt kind of cozy up closer to the blazing building and I guess we had edged into danger because a large covered porch, fully ablaze, burnt loose of the brick wall and crashed nearly on my partner and me. We stayed and watered the wreck until the sparks disappeared and went home to clean up, once again living up to our nickname, the Spring Valley Volunteer

Foundation Savers. The conversation back at the firehouse circled around the woman who had lived her solitary life in the now-destroyed house and what had really become of the expensive antique furnishings now lost in the blaze, or at least listed on an insurance claim.

Serving as a volunteer was not only dangerous, but also interesting and sometimes heartbreaking. Every volunteer home had a Plectron radio that sounded off whenever an alarm came in. The worst of these calls came on a weekend night with a full moon around the time the bars in Xenia closed. A full moon can make a person do crazy things; this is especially true of drunks who have contributed much fodder for firehouse stories about Route 42. Alcohol, however, played no part in the following scene, just negligent police work.

Having gone to bed on a moonlit Saturday night, the EMT squad was roused by the Plectron squawking, “Attention Spring Valley Squad! Both ambulances are needed at the intersection of Route 42 and Hedges Road.” Calling for both ambulances was never a good sign.

We arrived at the scene to find a badly smashed sheriff's car and a 1968 Camaro broken in two. The engine and front axle lay about fifty yards down the road. Three teenagers were trapped in the passenger compartment, the sheet metal crumpled in upon them. The driver rattled his last breath just as we reached for him. The boy in the shotgun seat was in better shape and we cut him out with the jaws-of-life and sent him on to the ER. The girl in the middle took us a while to cut the firewall oh so carefully away from her mangled legs. She moaned as we finally lifted her out and then, in shock and that curiously pain-free state after the first excruciating moments, asked if we thought her make-up was OK for the emergency room.

The sheriff's car had been responding to a breaking and entering call and traveling at very high speed but without the lights and siren the law requires when it crested a small rise and t-boned the Camaro. Only the bullet-proof vest the deputy wore prevented his being impaled on the steering column. Another ambulance took him away and there we were, a few of us left to sweep the metal shards and glass to the side of the intersection in that state of relief not uncommon when witnessing brutal pain and injury, having done our duty as best we could, still full of adrenalin and a little giddy with the knowledge that we had seen what we had seen and it had happened to

someone else and not us. Waiting for the wrecker to come and collect the mangled vehicles, I noticed the Camaro dashboard tape player and popped the tape to see AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*, a wrenching and ironic congruence between the life of an EMT and heavy metal music.

Life in the village wasn't all sex and tragedy; sometimes it was just sex. The second richest widow in town was old Mary Hyde. She had eight children whose portraits filled one wall of her living room. The portrait of her youngest showed a pretty blonde girl named Susie. Susie, the village gossip had it, wasn't a good girl. Apparently she had been diddled by an older brother or perhaps one of their friends and decided two things. She liked it and she wanted to be the mistress of her own diddling. She lured Dummy Dan, the town moron out into the cornfields between the village and the river for a private conference. He was a big, strapping lad who now-a-days would be considered a mentally retarded mute, but the local parlance had him a dummy, efficiently loading both of his most noteworthy qualities onto one word.

One of the village boys, a Jim Calhoun whose chief aim in life consisted of sneering at anyone who thought they were better than he was (this included

just about everyone who noticed him), spied Susie and the dummy heading into the fields together and tried to sneak up on them to see what was up. They heard him coming and managed to get dressed and tried to look nonchalant, but he had seen enough, he thought, to draw his own conclusions.

Back into town he raced and told anyone he saw what those conclusions were. “Diddling!” he sneered, “Susie Hyde and Dummy Dan! Ain’t that awful?” Well he didn’t say diddling, but he did sneer.

Things didn’t look good for the daughter of the town’s second wealthiest family, and social occasions were fraught with the self-righteous condemnations of those whose own embarrassing foibles remained unknown and at least didn’t sink to the level of diddling the town moron. Susie, however, held her ground and braced it out. She looked the sneerers and the sanctimonious in the face and denied everything. No one knew what Dummy Dan thought of the whole affair and since it was her word against his, she was never contradicted. Susie moved away when she could, and if she ever came back for a visit, she managed it without being seen. Small towns can be like that; there is little hidden from your neighbors and

sometimes the only thing is to get away and find some place where, with a new-found anonymity, you can establish some other reputation from the one your old neighbors will never let you forget. Economic opportunity is not the only reason America's villages have emptied out.

I used to see Dummy Dan in front of the old hardware store next to the tracks down on Main Street. The upper two storeys harbored a gaggle of old men who managed in meager style on Social Security and whatever they could scavenge. In the Fall when the big machines went through the corn fields, these old guys followed after, exercising their Biblical right to glean after the harvest. Each one could find and carry a bushel or two of corn which they would take to the mill and sell. Pooling their money, they sent a representative to Xenia to buy as much cheap liquor as it would afford and went on an epic drunk. The only reason I knew about it was that I lived in the store front directly below their rooms. Fortunately for my peace of mind, gleaning season was brief, and the shouting, swearing and scuffling subsided when the liquor ran out.

A lanky, grizzled man named Snick stood out among the gleaners. He had more energy than the others; unable to sit still, he could be found in woods,

fields or river most days. He knew where the biggest fish idled in the holes of the river and where the best mushrooms could be found on the first warm day after a rain in late April. He didn't want anyone else to know these things and so he operated a little furtively. He was often observed heading south along the tracks on a good mushroom day looking over his shoulder to see if he was followed – there were the biggest woods and the most state reserves, although I don't believe he worried very much about whose land he hunted so long as he could come and go without being observed. When he returned with a bag of hickory jacks or morels, he often came from the opposite direction than the one he had departed in. He traded this bounty for whatever he needed or could get, or if no good swap could be had, these delicacies were milk-soaked, breaded and fried in butter. Oh my goodness! the storefront smelled good on those days.

Snick starred in one of the best stories that went around when the teller believed himself to be free of the wrong sort of audience and could say what he wanted without the subject of the story getting word of it. This story also figured in the lore of New Burlington, another quiet country village just over the ridge in the next valley east of Spring Valley. The Spring Valley version went like this. Dennis and Mabel Harmon lived on back street with their

daughter, Mary, a first grader in the school up on Paintersville Road. On this particular day school let out early for some mechanical failure of plumbing or power supply, and Mary came into her house looking for her mother who was nowhere in evidence. Mary was about to go to her friend's house to play when she heard an unusual noise from an upstairs bedroom. Peeking in at the door, she saw her mother and Snick doing something she didn't understand. Later at Sunday school her class was discussing favorite games and somebody said her favorite was hide-and-seek. Mary piped up with, "Yes, and grown-ups like to play it too. A little while ago my Mama and Snick were playing hide-and-seek and Mama was hiding under Snick." The Sunday school teacher changed the subject, but told someone in the Bible-study circle, and so of course pretty soon everybody knew. Dennis must have heard it because Snick laid low for quite a while. As I have previously noted, he was good at lying low and so his furtive skills proved useful in a way that had nothing to do with mushrooms; Dennis didn't seem the sort of man to peacefully tolerate this sort of thing. What Dennis and Mabel said to one another has gone unrecorded, but it was a while before she looked comfortable in public.

As I look this over so far I realize I must provide some balance. This quiet country village must seem a pit of debauchery and dishonesty. While this is to a certain extent true, it is no truer of this place than any other I have observed. On the plus side I will add some of the virtues of small-town life. For instance, neighborliness is more than nosy sanctimony. The forming and support of the volunteer fire department is a shining example of its neighborly virtues. Not only did the volunteers risk life and limb in their service, we also took care of more than a few who had grown too old or ill to do for themselves. Charlie Green, for example, had only lived in the area for ten or fifteen years when, in his 70s he contracted a cancer that left him too weak to drive and required periodic treatments at Miami Valley hospital some miles away in Dayton. When we heard about it, another fireman and I took the old ambulance, loaded Charlie on the gurney, and delivered him to his appointments several times. We might have allowed him to fend for himself but heard his insurance wouldn't cover the transport and so took care of one of our own. There are probably laws against this sort of thing now and maybe were then, but doing a good thing for a neighbor seemed more important than the strict observance of protocols regarding the appropriate use of departmental resources. The thanks Charlie expressed and the gratitude in his face were enough for my partner and me. And the chief

said as long as we put things back in service properly when we finished, nothing more need be said.

Politics in a small town can be tedious, especially when half the town are Quakers whose method of deciding things is to keep talking until a consensus can be reached. Village council meetings could go on interminably with no sign of consensus any time soon to the despair and aggravation of the less patient. For all of that, elected officials were mostly honest. The inability to keep graft or theft secret and the innate decency of the players in the village's political life led rather naturally to this result. How long has it been since you could say the same of a town like Cincinnati?

Theft rarely happened. Something about theft rent the fabric of small town life and let out the opposite of upright decency. The dark side of righteousness is sanctimony, the permission to judge and punish. The story of America has many chapters, and each, it seems, has lines devoted to those excluded from community, and tell about, each in season, the Indian, African, Irishman, Italian, Jew, and in our own time the Mexican and the Muslim. You may remember the hobo from the beginning of this narrative.

His theft coupled with his outsider status gave a kind of permission to treat him like a rabid dog or any other threat to the community. The villagers knew this and remembering the hobo story, largely avoided the sin of theft. That and there really wasn't all that much worth stealing. Many of the residents made a living but not much more than that. Only a few had enough to be tempting to the locals, and strangers stood out to a remarkable degree. I bought a house in 1974 for \$6500 and lived there for 15 years. The lock on the front door broke in the first month and remained inoperable for the duration of my residence. I never really worried all that much about my stuff, in part because I knew theft was unlikely in such a town and in part because my village mates knew there wasn't much worth taking. The security system salesman rarely bothered to come around Spring Valley.

Among other virtues two seem prominent. First, a small town can be a wonderful place to raise a child, if you believe a sense of security that lends them the courage to explore the world is a virtue. Not all Spring Valley childhoods were idyllic; remember Susie Hyde and her brothers. The same family pathologies that appear on Channel 9 News could be found to some extent in the village, including physical abuse and drug and alcohol addiction. But since everyone seemed to know everything about everybody,

children could be warned. Mistreating other people's children rated with theft in village tolerance.

In addition to safety and security, clean government and the best of neighborliness, the natural world made Spring Valley a good place to live and raise children. A quarter mile in any direction took me out of town and into woods, fields or river side. Once the trains quit running, the tracks provided easy access to miles of right-of-way to explore for animal life and the ongoing quest to discover Snick's mother lode of morels (alas I never did). Marginal farms, fallowed because of big-machine agriculture, provided textbook examples of progressive forest restoration. First the cedars, honeysuckle, and berry patches, then ash trees, oaks and maples. The natural world reasserted its dominion and everywhere birds sang, deer roamed, and the small furry critters of woodland margins led their lives as they had done since the dawn of the age of the mammals. Imagine a forest floor carpeted in wildflowers and the knock of the woodpecker in the sylvan gloaming and you may get some sense of the allure of the village's natural setting. My house always needed some fixing – all \$6500 houses probably do – but the lure of nature had a claim on my time and attention that often won out.

In the early '70s, Little Miami Incorporated and local groups pitched in and cleaned the river. Except for the remains of cheap Styrofoam coolers abandoned by canoe-livery patrons, the river returned to something like its ancient natural beauty. Weekends were noisy and boisterous with throngs from nearby cities, but weekday mornings provided solitude and an opportunity to forget that the world was going to hell for an hour or two while paddling and floating down the Little Miami, silently slipping through the world of heron, kingfisher, teal and turtle.

So there it is, a sketch of a place full of decent people who occasionally did awful things, who tried to live up to their Sunday school lessons yet failed as often, I suppose, as the rest of the world. Close-minded folk who tolerated me and a small tribe of hippy musicians who had come for the cheap rents and the sense we had moved away from the modern world back toward some more innocent time when the rhythms of farm and forest guided our daily lives and we could pretend to something like natural virtue.

In preparing this paper I consulted with my daughter, Miriam, who spent her childhood as part of the village. She insisted I include her favorite recollection, that of the family clog-dance team who lived across the street

from us. Their name was Kratzer. Ken and Karen made one of those country couples that look like they came from different species. He, a large barrel-chested man with skinny legs and no hips, and she a woman best described as pear-shaped. Their children were Kevin, who resembled his mother and Kendra who took after her father. You may have noticed the alliterative nature of the family group, Ken, Karen, Kendra and Kevin Kratzer, who practiced their dancing in the afternoons after work and school. They gathered on a concrete slab porch overlooking Main Street wearing jingle taps, boom box blasting Bob Seeger's *Give Me That Old-Time Rock-n-Roll*, repeating it endlessly as they did their steps and figures, while their little dog ran around their feet yapping and doing her part. Her name was Cricket Marie Kratzer. There they danced, a remarkable looking family, top and bottom heavy, old and young, tall and short, to "Give me that old time rock-n-roll, it's a music that will soothe my soul," tap-de-tap-tap, jingle-tap-yap, tap-yap-de-tap jingle tap, huffing and puffing away. Inevitably, given Ken and Kendra's heft, they were dubbed the Klydesdale Kloggers. In alliterative bliss they clog away in my memory. It brings a smile and a wistful sigh for a bit of innocent folly that leavened life in a quiet country village.