

A Whiff of Walnut

By

Jim Stovall

Copyright © 2017

Jim Stovall and First Inning Press

All rights reserved

Chapter 1

Woody shifted uncomfortably in the church pew. We were way early, practically the only people in the sanctuary.

To keep him from complaining -- again -- I said:

“Remember how she used to tell everybody, ‘You can’t take it with you’?”

He didn’t respond, just looked annoyed.

I looked at the one-page program that we had been handed when we walked into the church:

Service for
ELIZABETH RUTH RUSHTON
1903-1966
Tulip Street Methodist Church
Nashville, Tennessee

I stared at it for a second too long.

“Forty-six.”

I looked up at Woody. “Huh?”

“She was forty-six when you were were born.”

“That’s not what I was thinking.”

“Yes, you were,” he said. “Although she could have been forty-five. It depends on whether or not her birthday comes before yours during the year.”

Woody, the math genius, was accurate and precise, as usual. And when he was those things, he could be very annoying. I opened my mouth to begin a defense of my brain, my thinking habits, and my general character. Before I could get any words out,

someone was climbing over me, then over Woody, and plopping down in the middle of the pew.

It was Marty Batsell.

Elizabeth. The name came as something of a shock to me. Trinity Lane High School, where she was the school secretary, knew her as Miss Lizzie. She once told me to call her Lizzie, not Miss Lizzie, although I knew enough not to do that when other students were around -- with the exception of Woody, of course.

I knew Lizzie better than anyone at Trinity Lane. I told that myself with some pride. I felt her loss as deeply as anyone. And yet, what did I really know? Not that much, when it came down to facts and figures.

I knew that Lizzie was originally from Nashville, but until she got sick and had to leave her job, I had never visited her house on Woodland Street. It was a once grand house in a grand neighborhood. Both had long since lost their grandeur.

I knew Lizzie loved to read, particularly mysteries, and most particularly Agatha Christie. I knew that Lizzie was neat as a pin and that everyone in the school liked and respected her.

I knew other things, too, but I could not escape the feeling that there was something else -- something mysterious or interesting -- about Miss Lizzie that I needed to find out before I write my story. Miss Lizzie was different from every other person I had ever encountered. I just didn't know why.

Lizzie had taken a special interest in me from our very first encounter. As a freshman, I had gone down to the school office, seeking permission to take the Journalism 1 class, even though you weren't supposed to do that until you were a sophomore. The journalism teacher, Miss Flowers, had sent me packing when I asked her about it, saying the only way I could take the class was to get the permission of the principal. And that, she said, would never happen. She said it finally and emphatically.

But I wanted to be a journalist -- from the time I was in the third grade and saved my own money to buy a typewriter -- and I wasn't willing to be put off like that. I went down to the principal's office, introduced myself to Miss Lizzie, and asked her about it.

"What did Miss Flowers say?" she asked.

I told her.

“But you came down here anyway.”

I nodded, wondering if I had gotten myself into trouble.

She stared at me for a moment. I stared back. I didn't look down. One of the ends of her lips went up a millimeter or two, as if she was about to break into a smile. She reached down into a drawer of her desk, pulled out a sheet of paper, and laid it on top of the desk.

The desk was beautiful -- a dark wood that I later learned was walnut. It was definitely not the standard gray metal desks that were issued by the school board.

Even though the paper was upside down, I could read the top of it. Permission Form.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Maxine,” I said. “Maxine Wayman.”

“Why do you want to take the class?”

“I want to be a journalist.”

Without another word, she filled out the form, checked a couple of boxes, and signed it with the principal's signature at the bottom. She picked up a rubber stamp, placed it down on an ink pad, and then stamped the form where she had signed it. Then she handed it to me.

“Give this to Miss Flowers,” she said. “If she has any questions about it, tell her to come see me.”

“No, she didn't. She didn't say that to *everyone*.”

Woodrow Lee Harper III, a.k.a, Woody, was my best friend in the whole world. We had known each other since before the first grade. We had looked out for one another for more than 10 years. He had done my math homework whenever he got the chance. I had written his English papers whenever he needed them written, which was often.

Woody was a genius, and you know how geniuses are. They can plop you down in the middle of a conversation they are having with themselves and expect you to join in immediately. Or, like now, they could resume a conversation you thought was finished minutes, hours, or even weeks ago.

As I was trying to figure out what conversation we were in, Woody said, “She would say that just to you -- ‘You can't take it with you.’ She never said that to me or anyone else.”

Woody was in a bit of a mood.

I think he might have skipped Miss Lizzie's service if I had not insisted that he come with me. And I had made him wear a tie and a jacket. On this issue, I was backed up by his mother, Cornelia, who was herself a bit of a force of nature. Poor Woody had no escape, being ganged up on by two strong-willed females.

So, I could take a bit of annoyance from him.

I had been watching the sanctuary fill up. A lot of people from Trinity Lane showed up, more than I expected. But there were many others, and I didn't recognize any of them. I wished that Cornelia had come with us. Cornelia knew anyone and everyone who resided in east Nashville.

"Woody's right, Max," Marty Batsell said, leaning forward so he could see around Woody and look at me. Unfortunately, from my point of view, Marty had not disappeared from the face of the earth just yet.

"Shut up, Marty."

I could take being corrected by Woody. Marty Batsell was another story. I disliked Marty for reasons I could not easily identify, and the fact that he decided to sit by us during Miss Lizzie's service was a major league irritation to me. He and Woody were not especially good friends, so I was puzzled -- as well as irritated -- that I had to share the same pew with him. Why would he sit by us?

I wouldn't find out until after the service.

My journalism assignment was to write a story on Miss Lizzie for the Panther Paw, the school newspaper at Trinity Lane High School.

"You're the only one I can trust to do this, Max," Miss Flowers had said. "You're the best we've got. This is going to be the top story in the October issue."

I was managing editor of the Panther Paw. When she told me that, I thought:

If I am the best we've got, why didn't you make me editor, instead of that meathead Boomer McCall, who knows and cares nothing about journalism, who rarely comes to class, and whose only qualification is that he's co-captain of the football team. Oh yeah, and he's a boy -- and I'm not. There is that.

The thought raced through my mind, but fortunately, it didn't make it to my tongue.

Congratulations, Max. For once in your short life, you kept your mouth shut.

Muscling my way into Miss Flowers' journalism class three years before when I was a freshman probably wasn't the smartest tactical movement of my journey into journalism. Miss Flowers resented the way that Miss Lizzie had overridden her veto, and consequently, she resented me. I spent the first term volunteering for assignments I didn't get, being humiliated when she ignored me, and getting to work on the "Steadies" column for the paper's gossip sheet.

But I didn't complain. I did what I was told to do -- and anything extra I could do -- figuring I had three years to prove myself. From almost the first day in class, I knew that I was a better writer than any of the other kids in the class. I had been reading and writing from the time I could do anything. I had won every vocabulary challenge at Tom Joy grade school, where Woody and I walked every day for the first six years of our formal education.

It was spelling and grammar that had finally narrowed the gulf -- to some extent -- between me and Miss Flowers. It must have been something of a surprise when I turned in my first written assignment with every word spelled correctly and every sentence with a subject and a verb in agreement. But when Rita Moseley did the same thing, it must have been shocking to Miss Flowers.

Rita, a sweet, guileless girl who had never written a complete sentence correctly in her short life, freely admitted to Miss Flowers that I had "helped" her with her assignment.

Actually, I had written most of it for her.

Miss Flowers, suspecting such, asked me, "Well, Maxine, how would you like to 'help' some of the other students with their assignments?" She expected me to shrink guiltily and mumble a "No ma'am."

"I would be *dee-lighted*," I said. I had read somewhere that Teddy Roosevelt liked that expression, so I thought I would use it.

The rest of the class laughed, and Miss Flowers looked befuddled.

I suppose she thought she was punishing me. Instead, she had thrown me straight into my own little briar patch.

After that, every assignment that was headed for print was given to me for editing, and sometime that next year -- rarely did good things happen quickly for a plain girl like me at Trinity Lane -- I got the title of Chief Copy Editor. And one of the unintended effects of all this was that Miss Flowers had much less work to do.

Despite what Miss Flowers had told me, I did not consider writing about Miss Lizzie such a big deal. I could put together a few facts about her life and talk some of the

students and faculty about how they felt about her, and that would be that. The year before, a teacher at Trinity Lane had died in a car accident, and that's the way I had handled the story about him.

But, as Woody would have said, had we discussed it:

"You're wrong, Max. It's not going to be like that at all."

Chapter 2

As Woody and Marty chattered away, the church began to fill with people, and my view of Miss Lizzie, and the story I would write about her, began to change -- imperceptibly at first.

The Trinity Lane students who showed up were ones I knew, of course, but there weren't as many as I had expected. I should have known. A funeral service is not a big draw for teenagers on a beautiful October Sunday afternoon.

Beyond the students and teachers from Trinity Lane, there were not a lot of people who came to the service. But those who appeared made me realize that my view of her had been limited to just what I knew and to the conversations that we had had. As I watched people come into the church sanctuary -- sometimes alone, sometimes as couples, sometimes in groups -- I tried to fit them into her life.

Was that older woman a sister, a friend, a colleague from a previous job?

Was that couple related to her? She rarely talked about her relatives. I knew that she had never been married and had no children. The one relative she mentioned was a niece, who lived in Nashville and with whom she talked regularly.

Who was she? Probably the woman sitting at the front of the sanctuary and being greeted by a number of people who came in and stood in front of the casket.

It was a puzzle that Woody could have helped with, but he was still yucking it up with Marty Batsell.

"Shhhh!" I elbowed Woody.

He and Marty weren't being all that loud, but they were giggling and smirking in that stupid way that teenage boys do. It was my turn to be irritated.

One reason Marty irritated me so much was that he and Boomer McCall, my nemesis on the newspaper staff, were friends.

"They're about to start the service," I whispered when Woody looked at me.

Woody was about to answer when the organ blared out the opening chords of *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, signaling the beginning of the service. At least I was right about that.

The minister offered an opening prayer. Then the congregation stood to sing the first hymn, *For the Beauty of the Earth*. Miss Lizzie was the kind of person who would have

planned her own funeral and picked out the hymns that were to be sung, and I immediately began to wonder what this hymn meant,

By the second verse, I had my answer.

For the wonder of each hour

Of the day and of the night,

Hill and vale and tree and flower,

Sun and moon and stars of light.

Tree! That was it. Miss Lizzie loved wood.

That sounds like an odd thing to say about someone, and it is. But it was true. She loved wood. She knew about trees. She could recognize grains of wood. She talked about wood in several of the conversations we had.

“You know, Maxine,” she once told me, “not only do woods have different colors and weights, but they have different smells.”

“I know about cedar,” I said, trying to show that I could make a contribution even to this odd conversation that he had a couple of years ago.

She dismissed my comment, though not unkindly. “Yes, lots of people like cedar, but that’s really not what I’m talking about. Come with me.”

She stood up from her chair. Even at her advanced age, she stood straight as an arrow and was taller than I was. She walked out into the main hallway of the school and strode down the hallway toward the gym. I hurried to keep up.

Once in the gym, she walked straight across the basketball hardwood to the outside door on the other side. I was shocked. The rule -- explained to anyone and everyone who darkened the door of Trinity Lane High School -- was that under no circumstances could anyone walk across the basketball court in “street shoes.” Your mother could be choking on the other side of the gym floor. You had to take the long way around to get to her. That edict came from Coach Larson. It applied to everyone without exception.

It obviously did not apply to Miss Lizzie.

I carefully walked around the edge of the basketball court, and by the time I got to the outside door, Miss Lizzie was walking up the steps of the annex building where the shop classes were held. I raced down the stairs from the gym, across the gravel driveway and

through the shop classroom door. You're supposed to knock before going into a classroom. I doubt that Miss Lizzie had knocked, so I didn't either.

By the time I got there, Miss Lizzie had Mr. Tisdale collared.

"So, Henry," she was saying when I caught up, "do you have an old piece of red oak?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you have a piece of poplar?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you have a piece of walnut?"

Mr. Tisdale was already searching through his storage shelves when she asked for the walnut, and it took him a minute to come up with all of the types of wood that she asked for. She took the three pieces -- each a board about a foot long and three or four inches wide -- and laid them out on the table saw next to the raised blade. Then she said to me, "Maxine, pick each piece up and look it over carefully."

I did as I was told.

"What do you see?"

"Well, the red oak has a tinge of red or pink," I said cautiously, not wanting to get anything wrong.

She nodded. "What else?"

"The walnut has both very light and very dark parts," I said, gaining confidence. "It has a beautiful pattern to the grain."

"Good," she said. "What else?"

I picked them up again. "I think the oak is heavier than the walnut or the poplar."

Her face brightened. "Excellent! You have very good powers of observation."

Then she turned to Mr. Tisdale. "Henry, I'm going to turn around and close my eyes. I want you to saw each of these pieces through once on the table saw. When you have cut each piece, hold it up to my nose, and I will identify it by its odor."

And that's what happened. She named each piece of wood correctly when Mr. Tisdale held it up to her nose. Then she opened her eyes and picked up the walnut, held it to her nose again, and took a deep breath. She let it out slowly.

"Ah," she said, "there's nothing like walnut."

Chapter 3

As soon as the service was finished and the pallbearers had wheeled the casket out of the sanctuary, I grabbed Woody and pulled him out into the aisle. I wanted to get to our car ahead of the traffic. It would be a long enough drive out Gallatin Road to Springhill Cemetery, and I wasn't in the mood to go with the funeral procession. Besides, one of the headlights on my '61 Volkswagen was out. Funeral processions required you to have your headlights on, and I didn't want to be embarrassed.

"Hey, Max," Marty called, "wait up."

I kept walking, pulling Woody along side of me.

Woody was a reluctant follower. He didn't want to come to the funeral, and he certainly didn't want to be at the burial service, so I had to bribe him. The only bribe that worked with teenage boys then was food. I promised to fix him a cheeseburger and fries at Doc Miller's drugstore, where I worked part-time, when all this was over.

"Marty wants to talk to you, Max," Woody said when we were outside the church. "How come you don't want to talk to him?"

"Because, he's an idiot," I said and kept on walking.

Actually, Marty wasn't an idiot. In fact, he was probably a pretty smart guy. But for reasons I couldn't quite form into words, he was extremely irritating. When we were in junior high, he was always playing the class clown and trying to get everyone to laugh. When we made it to high school, Marty turned into class entrepreneur. If you needed something -- like a copy of Cliff's Notes for *Great Expectations* right before your English class -- Marty could fix you up. For a price.

"I think he wants to ask you for a date," Woody said, grinning with a Cheshire cat.

Now that was really irritating.

We made it to Springhill Cemetery in good time, but I had missed one small detail in my planning. Springhill was a huge cemetery, and I had no idea where the burial plot was. And this was not the only funeral taking place on a sunny, October Sunday afternoon. A couple of other folks had been rude enough to die and have their funerals scheduled at

the same time as Miss Lizzie's. So we drove around for a while, saw a group of mourners clumped on a hill, debated about whether or not they were ours, decided they weren't, and then drove on.

We finally came back to the first group that we had rejected and decided it was our group after all.

Woody, bless his heart, was patient through the whole process. He kept humming and singing strands of the Beatles' "Do You Want to Know a Secret," in part, to make up for the fact that my car didn't have a radio. I think he was trying to irritate me some more, but I was too busy trying to figure out where we should be to take the bait.

We parked the car and climbed about 50 yards up a hill to the tent that sheltered the casket and the family. The minister had just finished the final prayer, and they were about to lower Miss Lizzie's casket into the grave. Woody and I stood at the back of a crowd of 30 or 40 people.

"Hey, Max," a voice beside me whispered.

It was Marty Batsell.

"What do you want, Marty?" I said when the crowd began to disperse.

Just as Marty was about to answer, Woody broke in. "Hey, guys. I'll see you in a minute. I see somebody I need to say hello to."

With that, Woody deserted me -- left me alone with Marty -- and I silently vowed revenge. *I'll make you rue the day you were born, Woody Haper. Just you wait.*

"I got something for you, Max," Marty said, reaching into the inner pocket of his garishly plaid sport coat. Marty's tie and shirt were made and dyed in different part of the universe, and his white socks and wing-tipped cordovan shoes were a final sartorial touch.

Marty pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

"Miss Lizzie wanted me to give this to you," he said.

"Miss Lizzie?" I almost shouted. A couple of people turned their heads. Then I lowered my voice. "Miss Lizzie died last week, Marty, in case you hadn't noticed."

Marty had emotional and intellectual armour that could not be penetrated either by criticism or sarcasm.

"I know that. This is her funeral."

I was completely flummoxed. Miss Lizzie had left Trinity Lane last spring when she got too sick to come to work. I had been to see her a couple of times since then, but she never mentioned being in touch with other students, much less Marty Batsell.

"But, I don't see how . . . I don't understand . . ."

"Miss Lizzie called me a couple of weeks ago."

"Called you?"

"Yeah, it was kind of weird. She told me she didn't think she had that much longer to live, which is something really weird to hear somebody say. Anyway, she said she wanted me to be sure to give that to you once the funeral service was over. She said she knew you would be doing a story on her for the Panther Paw, and she wanted you to have it. I tried to flag you down at the church, but I guess you didn't hear me."

I didn't know what to say. I looked at the envelope.

"Why did she ask *you*?"

Marty shrugged. "I dunno. I guess she knew I would do it -- that she could count on me." A little braggadocio seeped into his voice.

"How much did she pay you?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

Chapter 4

“What do you think it means, Woody?”

“Dunno, Max,” Woody shrugged. I think he might have said something else, but his mouth was full of food, and those were the only words I could understand. Woody was grinding away at the cheeseburger and French fries that I had fixed for him, slurping his soft drink, and reading a story about troop movements in Vietnam in that morning’s *Sunday Tennessean*.

“She underlined the word ‘treasure,’” I said.

Woody nodded. “Must mean something,” he said and went back to his reading.

I had fixed myself a hamburger pattie and laid a piece of American cheese over it and had put a few of Woody’s fries on my plate. But I wasn’t much interested in the food.

I had spread the single sheet of paper in front of me -- the entire contents of the envelope Marty had handed me -- and read it again, for about the twentieth time.

You can't take it with you.

So leave a little bit behind.

But sometimes the treasures you leave

Can have a value that's hard to find.

“She wrote this before she died,” I said, more or less to myself.

“Yeah, let’s hope so,” Woody said. “Otherwise, we’re all in trouble.”

“That’s not what I meant, Mathmind.” I was somewhat better at dishing out sarcasm than taking it. “What I meant was that Miss Lizzie had planned this. She was sending me a message.”

“With bad poetry?”

“It’s not that bad,” I said, feeling as though I had to defend Miss Lizzie from all critics, even Woody.. “Besides, it wasn’t supposed to be inspirational or anything like that. These aren’t words to live your life by. There’s a different message here.”

Woody continued to chew and read. I continued to ponder. We were sitting on the round stools at the soda fountain counter, and Woody started to twist back and forth on his stool, which made a racket, which distracted me from my deep pondering.

Doc Miller's drugstore was normally closed on Sundays. I worked there in the evenings after school and for a few hours on Saturday. In the few months that I had worked for him, Doc Miller had shown more and more confidence in me, had given me more responsibilities, and had handed me keys to just about everything inside and outside the building. I closed the store for him on weeknights, and he didn't mind if I used the place like we were doing that Sunday afternoon.

Woody kept turning his stool as he read. Screech, screech, screech.

"Stop that!" I snapped.

Woody stopped and looked up at me. He caught my don't-argue-with-me tone. He folded his newspaper up and turned his stool to face me, making one final screech.

"This thing really has you buffaloed, doesn't it?"

I grunted an assent. "There's something here that I'm missing, and I don't know what it is."

"So, let's start from the beginning."

Woody, the math genius. He truly was Trinity Lane's math genius, complete with a plastic pocket protector for his pens and pencils. School officials made him stop taking math courses the year before because he knew and understood far more than the math teachers there -- although no one would admit that. He was now taking special tutoring in math under a new assistant principal who had been hired last year.

Woody always said you don't solve a problem by starting in the middle or at the end. You start from the beginning.

For the next quarter hour, Woody grilled me on what I knew about Miss Lizzie. That conversation revealed that I had lots of opinions and not very many facts. I liked her and thought she was a sweet person, but I really did not know much about her. In all of the conversations we had during the three years I had known her, she never said very much about herself.

Woody approached it like a math problem: Figure out what you know; then identify what you don't know; then consider how to solve the problem by finding the unknowns.

By the end of our conversation, I at least had a clear idea of what I did not know and where I should start looking.

We sat on the circular stools for a few seconds in silence. I was exhausted by the mathematical journey that we had just taken, but Woody was revived.

"You got any algebra homework you haven't done?" he asked.

Algebra homework? Late on a Sunday evening after a long, beautiful weekend? Are you kidding?

"Old Wilson gave us about twenty-five problems to do on Friday." Miss Wilson was our tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners algebra teacher. Well, my algebra teacher. Woody was well past her classes. She thought Woody had hung the moon, of course. She thought I had hung around life too long and needed to be exterminated for the good of mankind.

"How many of those problems have you done?"

"Most of them."

Woody looked at me. I looked away.

"You haven't done any of them, have you?"

"That's not exactly true," I protested. "I've thought a lot about them."

"Hand them over."

Woody had been doing my math homework since we were in about the fourth grade, and I had been writing most of his English assignments. Since Woody loved doing math and I liked to write, the arrangement seemed destined by the Fates. We never considered it cheating.

I went to the back room of the store and got my algebra book. It was where I had left it on Friday afternoon. I showed him the problems we had been assigned.

"You got anything for your English class I need to do?" I was trying to get back on equal footing with Mr. Mathbrain.

He shook his head. He looked at his watch.

"It's going to take me fifteen to twenty minutes to do these problems," he said. "Just time enough for you to make me a milkshake and for us to get going so I can watch *Bonanza*."

Bonanza, that testosterone-filled television show for which color television was made, was the Sunday night event around which the week must be planned. How could life continue if we missed Ben, Hoss, Adam, and Little Joe -- and whatever fair maiden would show up and be dead or gone before the show's end. No girl could occupy even a semi-permanent spot at the Ponderosa ranch.

I thought these things but didn't say them. Woody was doing my algebra and needed encouragement, not distractions.

"One vanilla milkshake, coming up," I said brightly.

Woody was the last person on the face of God's green Earth who preferred vanilla milkshakes over chocolate or strawberry.

Good old Woody.

Chapter 5

Monday morning came too soon, as always.

My Dad always got up early and left for work early, despite whatever amount of alcohol he had consumed over the weekend. He was an alcoholic, pure and simple. He had been through a great deal of misery during the war and even more misery during the years afterward in his marriage to my Mom. He coped by visiting my Mom on Saturdays at Central State and then getting quietly drunk at the VFW post on Saturday and Sunday nights.

My mom had been committed to Central State for a prescription drug addiction so long ago that I could barely remember when she lived at home. She tried returning home a couple of times, but it never worked. The drugs wouldn't leave her alone.

My only choice then was to be as independent as possible, and by the time I had made it to the class of 1967 at Trinity Lane High School, I had learned those lessons well.

I was independent but not entirely alone. Woody's family had more-or-less adopted me from the time we were in grade school together, and Woody's grandfather -- Grandpa Neely -- had become my grandfather, too. He was responsible for me having a job at Doc Miller's drugstore and a car, a '61 VW, to get me there and back.

I never spent much time dwelling on what I didn't have. Instead, I submerged those feelings with an ambition for what I wanted to be. I wanted to be a journalist. I had known that almost from the time that I became aware that there was a world beyond Trinity Lane and East Nashville.

America was at war in Vietnam. We hadn't declared it, but by October of 1966 we had nearly 400,000 troops in that little country. And I wanted to be there to see it -- and to report it.

That's what I was thinking about that Monday morning when I was sitting in Mr. Adams' first period civics class. Mr. Adams had pulled down a large map of the world to talk about how we had inherited and adapted our political system from various countries in Europe. My eyes kept drifting toward Southeast Asia, however, and my thoughts were far from Europe.

I could see myself as the intrepid journalist in the Saigon office of the Associated Press; attending the daily 5 o'clock briefing by the military; on patrol in the jungle with a

company of Marines; in a helicopter as we flew on a rescue mission for a unit under fire .

..

“Miss Wayman!”

Mr. Adams’ voice was distant but loud.

“Maxine!”

I awoke somewhat startled from my reveries, evoking a snicker or two from those close by.

“Maxine, there’s someone here to see you.”

I looked up at Mr. Adams and then over to the doorway. Standing here was Anita Powell, one of the school’s English teachers. She was apologizing for pulling me out of the middle of a class, and he was saying -- with a little too much enthusiasm -- that it was okay.

When I got out into the hall, she apologized to me for the same thing, and I said it was okay with even more enthusiasm than Mr. Adams had shown.

“I didn’t know when else to catch you,” she said, “and there’s something I need to ask you about.”

I was still dealing with the surprise of this conversation. I didn’t know Miss Powell well at all. I had interviewed her the previous year for the Panther Paw when she had just been hired as the “special assignment” English teacher, as our principal, Ed Chapman, had put it. She was very nice then, but as far as I could remember, we hadn’t spoken since then.

“I was wondering if you would like to join my Special Literature and Writing class next term?”

That question compounded my surprise. Spec Lit was a class lots of people wanted but was limited to less than a dozen people. And you couldn’t apply for it; you had to be invited. I had just received my invitation. This is something I had hoped for, but there were a lot of smart kids in the building who had better grades and more going for them.

“Yes,” I gasped, “of course, I would. I mean, I never thought . . . It’s only . . .”

“Only what?”

“Well, I just thought -- I mean, I never thought I could get into your class.”

“Really? Why not?”

Okay, Big Mouth. You're about to talk yourself out of one of the things you have wanted most in your high school career.

"Well, because of my grades."

"What are you having trouble with?"

"Algebra," I said.

"Are you taking that this term?"

I nodded, not offering the little fact that I was taking it for the second time.

"Do you think you're going to fail?"

"Oh, no," I said, way too quickly. "It's just that I'm not sure how good my grade will be." All of that was true. It wasn't the whole truth.

She smiled. "That's fine, Maxine. We'll check at the end of the term and see how you're doing. I'm sure you will be fine with your grades. I'm glad you want to take my class. It won't be easy, you know."

"Yes ma'am, I know that."

She stopped for a moment to let me take it in.

"I've been reading the articles you have written for the school newspaper. I think you have talent. And it's obvious you enjoy writing."

"Yes, ma'am, I do."

"Good. Well, it's settled. The class meets during sixth period. You won't have a problem scheduling that, will you?"

"No, ma'am. Not at all."

"Great. I'm glad you're going to be in the class, Maxine."

She looked like she was about to walk off, but then she paused.

"I need to ask you something else," she said.

"Lizzie Ruth Rushton. She was such a sweet person. Were you able to attend the services for her yesterday?"

"Yes, ma'am, I was there."

"Good," she said. "I wasn't able to go. I had some other commitments." She stopped and seemed at a loss for words. "Did you -- you may think this is an odd question -- did you

get any kind of a message from her. I don't mean anything spiritual. I mean a message from her delivered by someone who was there."

Marty Batsell. The envelope. The poem.

"Well, yes, I did," I said. "How did you know that?"

She looked relieved.

"I'm not sure I'm supposed to tell you this, but I will anyway." She lowered her voice. "I got a call from Miss Lizzie a couple of weeks ago, which surprised me because I didn't know her all that well. She didn't sound very good and said she didn't think she had long to live. She wanted me to do three things with regard to you, Maxine."

"Me?"

She nodded. "She said I should select you as one of my Special Literature students for next term. You know, she was always very direct with us teachers about what she wanted." She paused and smiled. "Actually, she didn't need to ask that. I was going to do it anyway. But I thought it would be good for you to know that she was acting on your behalf."

I didn't know what to say. I just stared at her.

"The second thing she wanted me to do was to make sure that Miss Flowers assigned you to write the story on her for the newspaper. That wasn't hard either. Right after her death was announced last week, I spoke with Miss Flowers, and she told me that you were going to do the story."

"I . . . I don't understand any of this," I said.

"And the third thing she wanted me to do was to make sure you got the message at her service yesterday."

"She asked you to do all of that?"

Miss Powell nodded. "Yes. I don't understand it either, but she had something in mind for you after she died. I know that she thought a lot of you and wanted you to do well."

We both stood in the silence of the long hallway for a moment.

"Did she say anything else?" I asked.

"Just one thing -- and this is really odd. She said for you not to miss the picture of the two young girls."

Chapter 6

Good sense. Punctuality. Preparation. Kindness. Discretion. Sitting up straight. Listening. Loyalty. Bravery. Reverence. Respect.

All of these were areas of my life that could stand slight improvements.

But from this time forward, those would be my watchwords, I told myself. I would be an exemplar of those virtues for the rest of my days. That is how I would show my gratitude -- repay the spiritual debts that I now owed -- for being invited into the Special Lit class.

Those were my thoughts when I returned to Mr. Adams' civics class.

I was happy -- and grateful -- beyond words to be part of that class.

But then reality began to intrude.

You're not there yet, you know. You still have to pass algebra.

By the time second period was finished, most of my good intentions and vows of virtue had dissipated. Second period was when I had journalism class, and I couldn't resist needling the supposed editor of the Panther Paw, a football knucklehead whose jockstrap attitude about just about everything, including girls, was a constant irritation to me.

The only reasons Boomer McCall was editor of the paper were that he was popular, he was a football star, and the football coach had prevailed on Miss Flowers to name him editor to "enhance his academic credentials" so he could impress some collegiate scouts who would show up for the games.

Boomer's one contribution to the paper was that he had been its chief photographer for two years before becoming editor. The requirement for becoming chief photographer was having the best camera of any of the kids on the staff. Boomer had that -- a single-lens reflex Pentax that he loved to show to anyone who was willing to take the time to look and listen.

Needling Boomer was a pretty easy task -- he was anything but an intellectual giant -- but it didn't make me any friends. Boomer was popular, and he was a football star -- something of a rarity for Trinity Lane since we were traditionally known as a basketball school. In other circumstances, I might have liked Boomer. But he had taken something from me that I really wanted: the editorship of the newspaper. I wasn't about to let that go unavenged.

So, that Monday, when Boomer brought in photographs he had taken at Friday night's football game -- the photos were taken when Boomer wasn't playing -- most of the kids in the class told him how good they were. And Miss Flowers pointed out how difficult it was to take good photos in low-light conditions.

Boomer was basking in this bit of glory when I opened my mouth.

"Gee, Boomer," I said, shuffling through the pictures, "you've got lots of pictures of the cheerleaders here, but the only one I recognize is Katie Anderson. Did she finally agree to go out with you?"

So much for Good Sense, Kindness, Discretion and Respect.

The one virtue I held onto in my Gratitude Pool -- the one that lasted into third period, my study hall period -- was Preparation. And that was out of necessity.

My fourth period class was Algebra II. Woody had done all of my assigned problems, at the cost of two milkshakes, the night before and had explained them to me. I wasn't sure I understood them, however, so I spent a good part of third period going over them. The algebra teacher, Miss Wilson, was a sadistic old bird who over many years had fine-tuned two of the oldest teaching tools -- sarcasm and humiliation -- and used both freely in her classes on a daily basis. I had been a frequent target, but I was determined that today I would be prepared. After all, getting into Special Lit depended on my doing well in that course, at least until the end of the term.

That day, however, seemed to be my day. Not only did I get invited into the Special Lit class, but old Wilson ignored me and decided to visit her humiliations on some other poor soul. She must have sensed my confidence and preparedness and decided I would be too formidable as an opponent.

But the rest of the day was filled with minutiae that could not be ignored. Even at the drugstore that Monday evening -- Mondays are usually slow nights -- the customers seemed to flow into the store in a steady stream. There wasn't much time to think about anything.

But I did think. Special Lit. Treasure. Miss Lizzie. Picture of two young girls.

Too many pieces of the puzzle still missing. I needed Woody.

Woodrow Lee Harper III, alias Woody, was probably the only non-sports student in the history of Trinity Lane High School to have his own office. I am told that the managers of

the football team and the boys basketball team had offices inside the boys locker room, but I have no personal knowledge of that. Nor was personal knowledge of that desired.

Woody's office was a small room just off the main office of the school where the principal's and vice-principal's offices were located. It was very small but big enough to hold a couple of desks, a couple of chairs, a small bookcase and not much more.

Because Woody had been barred from taking any more math courses, he had been given that office to be under the direct tutelage of Mr. Daniels, the vice-principal who had been hired a couple of years ago. Mr. Daniels was also supposed to be some sort of math whiz, so he and Woody could sit around for a couple of periods a day and talk math stuff.

I found Woody during third period, totally absorbed in some book that had words on the front of it.

"Hey, Woody," I said. "What's up, doc?"

It was Tuesday. I had been too late getting home and too tired on Monday night to give him a call and share my good news -- and my puzzlements.

Woody didn't respond. He didn't even flinch when I walked into the room.

"What are you reading about?"

This brought a response. "Binomial theorems."

Well, of course. Binomial theorems. How could the presence of a stunningly gorgeous female such as myself compete with binominal theorems for the attention of any red-blooded American male?

"Put that down and listen to me!" I said it a little too harshly and then followed up my words by kicking his swivel chair so that it turned toward me. Woody looked mildly surprised, but his emotions didn't move beyond that. I suppose that binomial theorems can have a calming effect on the spirit.

"Oh, hey, Max."

"I have good news and not-so-good news. Which do you want first?"

"I've told you before: bad news should always be followed by good news."

He said it like it was one of Newton's Laws.

"Okay, the not-so-good news is that Miss Flowers says our stories for the next issue of the Panther Paw need to be turned in by next Monday."

"And yours is about Miss Lizzie. Why is that 'not-so-good news'?"

“Because, Mr. Numbers, I don’t have a clue about what I’m doing with that story. I thought I did on Sunday, but yesterday messed me up. But that’s the good news.”

“The good news messed you up?”

Even someone as brilliant as Woody could get lost in my incoherence. That gave me some intellectual solace on occasion.

“Okay, okay, Woody, I’ll back up,” I said. “Here’s the good news: Miss Powell asked me to be in the Special Lit course next term. Isn’t that fantastic? Can you believe it?”

I was giving full throat to my enthusiasm, but Woody wasn’t responding. He was just looking at me.

“You’re sounding like that’s a surprise,” he said.

“Well, yeah, it’s a surprise,” I said. “I never thought . . .”

He shook his head. “It’s not a surprise, Max. In fact, it was inevitable. You’re the best writer in the school. Your vocabulary can match up with any high school senior in the county. You write the most readable and coherent stories for the paper. Everybody knows that. You in Special Lit? That’s no surprise. That was a certainty.”

Woody, bless your heart. Sometimes I could hug the you. But, of course, I couldn’t hug Woody. We were on school grounds.

The good feelings generated by Woody and Special Lit did not in any way alleviate my questions -- and doubts -- about the story I had to do on Miss Lizzie. Plus, there were all those puzzling things that Miss Powell had said. I told Woody about them.

“Picture of two girls?” Woody, for once, seemed baffled.

“That’s what she said.”

Woody thought for a minute. “I guess you had better start looking for a picture of two girls.”

“But where?”

Woody shrugged. “If it were a math problem . . .” he said and trailed off. He was sinking into a level of thinking where I did not want to follow.

We both sat there in silence for a few seconds. The din of the middle of the school day drifted into the outer office and then into Woody's small space. I suppose there was comfort in knowing that life was continuing while we contemplated our little problem.

"If this were a math problem . . . well, you're always supposed to start with the simplest and most obvious solution. Some mathematicians call it 'the one closest to home.'"

"And how does that help me?"

"I dunno, Max," he said. "I'm just trying to get you started."

"Thanks, my noble Math Pal, but I don't feel anywhere close to the starting gate on this one."

Woody shrugged again and picked up the book he had been reading when I came it -- that magic story of binomials, or whatever it was. I tried to look glum for a couple of minutes, but Woody wasn't having any of it. This was my problem.

The one closest to home. What the heck does that mean?

The din suddenly grew louder, and I looked at the clock in the outer office. It was class-changing time, and I had about 90 seconds to get up the stairs and down to the end of a long hallway where Old Wilson held her daily torture sessions, also known as Algebra II.

"Gotta run, Woody," I said, gathering up my books, purse, notebook and assorted paraphrenalia. "Keep thinking about this, okay?"

"Hmmm."

I walked through the outer office with a bit of dignity, preparing to tear through the hallway as soon as I got there. Janette Simpson, the sweet woman who had replaced Miss Lizzie as school secretary last year, was sitting at her desk and greeted me warmly. "Well, hello, Maxine. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Simpson," I said. "I'm about to be late for class."

She glanced at the close. "You certainly are, my dear," she said. "You'd better get going."

I was half way out the door when it hit me.

Closest to home.

"Mrs. Simpson?"

She looked up from her typewriter, surprised. "Yes, dear?"

"Your desk?"

She looked down at her desk, a gray metal thing just like a hundred other desks in the school.

“That’s not the desk Miss Lizzie used, is it?”

“No, Maxine, it isn’t. When I started here, they told me that desk belonged to Miss Lizzie personally, and she would probably want to move it back to her house.”

“Is that what she did?”

She smiled. “No. She called a couple of times. We had very nice conversations. She was such a sweet person, you know. She wanted to make sure the desk was okay. In fact, she called a couple of weeks ago and asked about it. She didn’t sound very good.”

“What did you tell her -- about the desk, I mean.”

“I told her we had done just what she had asked with it.”

“What was that?”

“We moved it into that little office Woody is using. Didn’t you see it in there?”