

The Last of What I Am

A Novel

By

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C 2020

PART 1

"Whoever pretends not to believe in ghosts of any sort, lies to his own heart."

Lafcadio Hearn 1850-1904

CHAPTER 1

Some might think there's no life in the house, but I know otherwise. I've made friends with the mighty black snakes who take up winter residence. One has grown from a thin, stringy, mean-looking fellow to a thick band almost six feet long and round as my wrist. He enters the house when the days shorten by climbing the gnarled, vine-covered tree hovering over the back porch. Dropping from a low-leaning branch, he traverses the roof and stretches upward along the wood siding to enter the attic window, triangular snout tap-tapping, seeking entry. Hail has splintered the windowpanes, and he slides over the edge into the attic to hibernate. Sometimes he noses his way through the lime and horse-hair mortar on the central fireplace chimney and drops into the rooms below in search of mice.

His compulsion is uncomfortably familiar, though in my case the brown river rat was my prey. Prisoners' fare. So much time has passed, yet those months in a miserable Union prison camp are as real to me today as then. Famished, I slit my quarry from ear to naked tail, tossed aside the oozing hide, and punctured the pink, shiny body with a stick. Twisting it past bone and gristle, I roasted the flesh over fire until it curled crisp. Oblivious to spikey hair and whiskers, I welcomed it to my tongue, as warm, juicy fat dribbled on my chin. The image thins to a film of nausea and is then gone.

Here in my childhood home, the mice are a constant. Their daily occupations exhaust me with their ill-conceived, Herculean efforts. They struggle for days, dragging acorns half their own size through cracks in the stone foundation, hoisting them through the interior walls, gnawing ragged holes in the baseboards, shoving them across the halls, hopping with them up the stairs, and then thrusting them through openings chiseled in the

backs of dresser drawers—all just to find the perfect storage place. It's a treacherous trip through the house when the coiled, black monster with flicking tongue is lying in wait to bulge his belly before the winter's sleep. The whole thing casts me low in spirit; their activity reminds me of the futility of so many human endeavors.

And I remember. Folks say you take nothing with you when you go to meet your maker, but I'm here to tell you that memory tracks your every step like a rabid dog. Things learned and retained in the mind are a pestilence not even God can dispel—causing me to wonder if the strange power of remembering isn't the Devil's device. Even now, when my worn-out body has fallen away and the past is more vivid than the present, I am plagued by mistakes grand and small. There's no remedy for remorse—memory's dark shadow—and no fleeing from the mind. As days turn into months and months into years, I remember, I remember until more than a century has passed.

Soothing visions of boyhood innocence and my marriage have been my only salvation, wrapped round like a soft blanket to ward off the rest. Here in this house lies a way. Here's where I'm beyond the reach of the harrowing war years. In the corners of my mind I can find the soothing touch of my beloved wife Ellen, my sister Mary's playful smile, and my little daughter Cara's pigtails flapping as she skipped toward me. It's there that I dwell.

Now, after decades when nothing interrupted my solitary recollections—not even time's passing—everything has changed. A month ago, in the early afternoon, I heard two sets of footsteps, one heavy, the other lighter, clump on the porch stairs and then rustle through the fall leaves banked against the old screen door. My knees trembled and I couldn't find my voice. No one has approached my front door in over twenty years. Alarmed, but a

little curious too, I floated in the hall near the ceiling as a key twisted in the rusty lock. Two strangers, a young man and a young woman, barged in, followed by their frisky black dog.

I couldn't believe my eyes. What right did these people believe they had to enter my house? Where did they get a key? And both were dressed like hoodlums. He was clad in a collarless shirt with writing on it as though he was a poster board, and she was in long denim pants like a boy. To my mind, the only womanly touch was the silver ear hoops that peeked through her hair when she moved.

This couple wasn't put off by the black snake that slithered from the sofa cushion and escaped up the fireplace chimney or discouraged by the ribbons of faded wallpaper that rippled across heaps of crumbled plaster cluttering the floors. Nothing seemed to deter them! They explored each room, handled the books, used a letter opener to pry up the lid of the cedar chest safeguarding my sisters' high-necked blouses and bustled skirts. They even pawed through the tattered blue handkerchief box that contains my medals from the Battle of Gettysburg 25th and 50th reunions. The dog flopped on the parlor rug, of all places, after making a ruckus about the snake and then sniffing every corner. I couldn't think what to do; my mind was a blank. Stunned helpless by this invasion, I reeled back, as though punched in the gut.

The woman spread out on the dresser top the crumpled reunion ribbons of crimson and indigo, ornate with rectangular silver bars and gold medallions. She held up to the light the yellowed newspaper article describing how Confederate and Union veterans clapped one another warmly on the shoulder as if we'd shared some mutual rite of passage, nothing more. "Here, take a look at this," she said. The man's hand passed right

through me as he reached for the paper, but he paid no mind. Finally, I found my voice and yelled at the top of my lungs, "What the hell are you doing here? Get out! Get out right now!" The woman only shivered and knitted her dark brows together. She looked momentarily annoyed, as though a horsefly had buzzed her ear, and then continued to rifle through drawers. There was no reaction from the man. I wondered if these interlopers were stone deaf, although no one ever seemed to hear or see me. It used to break my heart in the years after I passed, when my wife Ellen was still alive. I yelled again, "Don't you dare touch my things! Or else!" But with no effect. I began to sense that threats would be useless. Panic clawed at my throat.

Now these harbingers of doom invade every weekend, armed with mops, odd liquid soaps, and a noisy machine that sucks up dirt. They show up out of nowhere, she with long brown hair twisted on top of her head, ready for messy work, and he in another shirt with a meaningless message. They unsettle everything—piling sheets, hairbrushes, combs, dented pots and pans, my sister Mary's sewing remnants, my daughter Cara's aprons, faded velvet curtains, and whatever else they deem disposable in a heap of glossy black bags in the backyard. I look anywhere but at their industry, feeling queasy in my stomach and weighted in my heart. They are senseless to the distress they are causing.

What has happened to my years of silence broken only by birdsong, the hum of rain, and the wind's murmur? That calm has been destroyed by buzzing machines that slice wood, the whack-whack of pounding hammers, and the dog's piercing bark. The riot of noise drives me to the opposite end of the house, but even there I find no peace.

They have no respect for the fact that even though my shell and those of my family were borne away to the cemetery behind the church, everything else, including dried-out face cream and rusted hairpins, has stayed where the last hand placed it.

My daughter Cara was the last to live in the house. Childless and widowed in her late twenties, she had moved back home into the embrace of her family. Eventually, my parents, two sisters, wife, and I were gone too. Then she had relied on the things we'd left behind to keep her company, same as I do now.

These new people act as if the wide wings of the armchair don't still hold an impression from Pa's daily ritual of reading the latest issue of the *Staunton Spectator*, or the silver-handled hairbrush isn't imbedded with the touch of Mary's hand. Or that my dark serge coat, the special one I wore to Sunday services every week and that still hangs in the upstairs cupboard, doesn't remember the slope of my shoulders.

These intruders seem ignorant of the fact that I'm still here, that this is my home, that every object, as I touch or catch sight of it, floods me with warm memories that reaffirm my sense of who I am. I won't stop being Tom Smiley as long as evidence of my life surrounds me. And as long as I'm Tom, I'm safe from whatever happens to unworthy souls.

But now they are stripping away that evidence, piece by piece, memory by memory. I'll lose my grip if they continue. First, the outer layers will slide away, like an onion in the hands of a cook. Those layers are the man reflected within my home's four walls and its furnishings—the guileless boy, loyal husband, and admirable citizen. The knife's edge next will slice into the core, leaving disconnected bits of soldier Tom scattered about. Finally, with the last cuts, the secret I've kept from everyone will lie exposed, radiant in

the dark. I'll erode to nothing more than a formless shade that yields to Hell's gravity. The heavenly judges who decide a soul's fate will then have no choice but to speed my fall. This man and woman will destroy me.

How their presence makes me ache for my own family and their affection, when my home stirred with a multitude of their voices and activities. Ma, Pa, my sisters Mary and Tish, and then my wife Ellen and our four—Grier, Argyle, Will, and Cara—still sound in my ears. Our only grandchild, sweet little Helen, would shriek with summer joy when Grier drove up with her in his smoke-belching Ford, all the way from Kentucky.

Of my own offspring, Cara was the last to perish. I watched her grow old alone at the farm, into her eighties. Cara's thick, ebony hair that her mother used to plait and tie with silk ribbons faded to a wispy white halo with pink flesh showing through. Age contorted her hands into painful claws. She ventured out less and less and kept a lonesome journal that mostly tracked the weather. Most nights, she indulged in a dram of alcohol and groped her way up the stairs to her bedroom at the back of the house. As a father, it wracked my soul to see my daughter fall into such a state.

When she was gone, there was no one left to care about. Over time, the house has soaked into my being, and I've expanded out into it until there's no difference between it and me. The dry rustle of a roach scooting across the floor, the construction efforts of a nesting chimney swift, the drilling of a borer bee in a porch beam—all merge with who I am.

I've overheard these peculiar people speak of "modernizing" the farmhouse for a weekend place as if it's theirs, as though my presence matters not one whit. By damn, I won't permit it.

In addition, on warm days this woman strides about unconcerned that her slip of a dress immodestly displays her long, bare legs. What in God's name is she thinking? Perhaps this is all for the man's sake. He calls her Phoebe and watches her with a happy gleam in his eye. I suppose some might consider her pretty, but my wife never revealed her legs or wore her hair loose in that way, long brown strands swaying with every step, except in private moments. This woman also has a sprinkling of freckles across her nose, frowned upon in my day when flawless pale skin was prized, and she's almost as tall as her male companion. I don't see the appeal.

My dear Ellen was diminutive and plainer than this woman, but her upbringing in a Lutheran minister's family instilled qualities of forgiveness and forbearance that were attractive to me. I met her a decade after the war. I remember spying her for the first time across the oak pews at New Jerusalem Presbyterian Church. What a graceful neck, what slender wrists! Not one loose strand escaped from the raven-black hair twisted tightly on the back of her neck. The tenderness with which she calmed fidgeting siblings and tended to her elderly aunt beguiled me. When she felt the heat of my stare, I struggled to glue my eyes to the hymnal. Such thoughts rampaged through my mind! A woman like her might save me from myself. I imagined how the touch of her hand would replace my black moods with shivers of pleasure. She'd love me despite my shortcomings, just as she seemed to love and have patience with her family. Her serenity appeared contagious. I fell for her that very first morning and determined to win her. My ten-years' seniority didn't put her off and, after six months of unrelenting courtship, she broke down and became my wife.

Poor Ellen had no idea what she'd gotten herself into. The private pleasures of new marriage kept my sickness of heart at bay for several months, but one day she found me in despair, head bowed. "What's wrong?" Tears flooded her soft eyes. "You spoke so impatiently to me this morning when I asked your plans for the day. It was as if you despised my very presence. Is it something I've done or said?"

"No, Sweet. Please forgive me." I paused, the heaviness in my chest choking the words. I couldn't bear to look at her. "I'm not worthy of you, or anyone, for that matter. It was a mistake for me to coax you into my life." She averted her face so that I wouldn't see her pain and clenched the flowered fabric of her full skirt until her knuckles were white. I arose from the sofa, abandoning her in the middle of the library. The porch door banged shut behind me, and I headed for the overgrown cow paths along the fence line on the hill above the house. There I paced until I wore myself out.

Over the years, Ellen found a way to cope with my moods and irritable temperament. When our children were born, she ran off to her mother's in Greenville, North Carolina for as long as six months for each child. She claimed she was going for reasons of health, but she didn't fool me. For the last baby, Argyle, she enrolled Cara in school for a semester and didn't come home for Christmas. The best I could do was send letters enclosing the bedtime stories that I usually recited to my three little ones, or small gifts, such as a puzzle or a wool scarf pattern for Cara, who was eight and learning to knit.

During my bad times, Ellen tried to talk me into a better state of mind. She said, "Why can't you accept that you are a good man? And find peace in that. Why must you be so hard on yourself?"

"I can't help it. I would do anything to change, if I could. I hate causing you pain, but it's due to something you would never understand."

"You've never tested my understanding." She smiled and added, "Although you do test my patience sometimes." She touched my arm tenderly. "If only you'd give me a chance to learn what ails you so." But I could never risk that. Not ever. "I feel I never see anything of you but your shadow," she said, her voice trailing off.

Then Ellen seemed to gain resolve and shook her head in frustration. "The children and I love you because you've never taken a switch to them, regardless of how disobedient, and you listen patiently to my needs and troubles with a generous and understanding heart. That should count for something." She nodded her head emphatically as if she'd settled the matter.

But it wasn't enough. Every morning, the old brown rooster on the chicken house roof awakened me to an inescapable dark state of mind. I'd lie motionless and track the black mood as it radiated from behind my eyes, slid down to my heart and then plumbed my limbs until it claimed even my toes and fingers. Against this burden, I strove daily to prove the value of my existence. Ellen had no idea how hard it was to lift my head from the pillow, much less to soldier on for one more day.

Yes, I was even a good citizen in some people's minds. Folks re-elected me for six terms to the county Board of Supervisors, and it's true I championed ways to make their lives easier, such as paving the county roads. Now they can haul their vegetables and meats to market during the spring muddy season. Afterwards, in the 1880s, when the state wanted to cancel the voting rights of Negroes by forcing them to prove they could read, all the while exempting whites, I railed against this injustice. I spoke in community

halls and on the steps of the courthouse and thumped on flag-draped lecterns in protest. Folks only turned sour faces towards me and heaved rotten eggs at our front door. They elected someone else as their delegate to the state convention, but I had fought hard for the right thing. And, as Ellen often said, "After all those years as Sunday school superintendent, look at you. You're a church Elder, one of the most respected positions in our community."

But these efforts never made up for my failings. Ellen was heroic for trying, but not even an angel could disentangle me from the web of shame I'd woven. I was guilty of a rash and naive act that resulted in the killing of someone I cared for. For whom I was responsible. I might as well have killed him with my own hands, wrapping my fingers around his neck and squeezing until there was no breath left. Never a day passed in my life that I wasn't reminded that this was yet another day he wouldn't see.

Ellen didn't suspect I hadn't started out as a devout churchgoer. Faith had nothing to do with it. It was because religion was the only prescription for a diseased mind in those days. And after the war, I had a diseased mind. Folks were convinced that lack of faith in God and His Son was the reason melancholia took root. I never considered either trustworthy, but I continued to hope that churchgoing would provide a cure, even to the very end.

I do believe in one thing. Hell is real. I know it lurks just beyond these four walls. New Jerusalem preachers' fiery exhortations, year in and year out, persuaded me of its truth. Beyond a doubt, the demon realm exists.

To be honest, my good works were entirely a form of atonement. A hedge against an eternity of hellfire and damnation. They were a wager that my four decades of church

work and my community service were payment enough for my sins. But the debt was never fully paid. My utmost dread was for my family and friends to discover what I'd done, the shameful secret I'd buried for so many years. I couldn't bear for them to know what a sorely unfit man I was, and then, finally, for me to be driven from the gates of Heaven, if such a place exists.

While I've been distracted by these thoughts, that strange woman has been digging through the library like a terrier after a rat. She has scattered across the floor piles of dog-eared and dusty books from shelves stretching from floor to ceiling.

What a mess she's made of the room. After all, it is my room. Strolling around edges of the sunlit library, I lightly tap my sons' engineering texts and college annuals and glide my fingers across the soft leather spines of books about Biblical times and the many ladies' novels that consumed Ellen's and my sisters' afternoons. The Bronte sisters' works were their favorites.

Here also are my parents' tiresome texts on Presbyterian Church history, as well as favorite classics of English literature. I can still hear Pa's sonorous voice reading from Dickens's spirited *Oliver Twist*, as we three children listened wide-eyed. Inspired by Longfellow's great romantic saga *The Song of Hiawatha*, I memorized long passages during my twelfth summer, perched on the sturdiest limb of my favorite oak beyond the pasture, the words rustling in my skull. The poem's melancholy Milky Way—a broad, white pathway guiding ghosts of plumed warriors heavenward across a frozen sky—too often comes to me in an evening.

Now the woman's fingertips have brushed something behind the newly exposed

bookshelf—something misplaced a century before she was born. She strains to disengage a moldy packet wrapped with a twist of shattered twine. I feel a jolt. They are the letters my younger sister Mary wrote to me during the war! I haven't seen them for more years than I can remember. "Get away, Emma. Shoo," the woman says to the dog snuffling at the thin sheets. She lifts away one or two papers, and after scanning through the stack for a few minutes, places the packet on the oval sofa table. She suddenly looks up, stares in my direction, and hesitates as if she senses something. Shaking her head, she hastens away from the room with the black dog, its neck hairs bristling, pressing into her calf as if its life depends upon it. Mary's letters remain on the table.