

Excerpt from *Randham Acts*

By Matthew St. Amand
© 2005

Chapter Forty Five

Nora brought an umbrella on her evening walk, just in case. Heading down Pearl Street she glanced at the sign for Dapple Avenue. Until a few months ago she would swing by Bev's house to pick up her and the dog. Nora enjoyed the company and her husband Will preferred her not walking alone after dark. The area was safe, even Will conceded that, but he was over cautious. She loved him for that. Then, one evening at the beginning of summer, Nora passed Dapple Avenue and hadn't gone back since.

Again, she thought recalling Bev's wide manic eyes. *Another bad spell.*

It was as close as she came to acknowledging Bev's trouble. Nora had witnessed these spells since they were kids, after Bev's mother died, when Bev quit high school, following Adam's birth, while caring for her father after his stroke, at Shopmart since summer's start. During these times Nora pretended all was well. *It's no wonder, she's always had such a hard time*, she thought walking beneath the dripping elm tree canopy. She opened her umbrella. *Her father was as nutty as they came.*

Psychiatrists and psychologists may have differentiated mental disorders, but in Nora's neighborhood there was only one affliction of the mind: *crazy*. The disheveled bums wandering around downtown, muttering to themselves, were crazy. Fidel Castro was crazy. Ronald Melton was crazy, her grandparents' neighbor who dressed in a suit and tie and sat in his basement doing crossword puzzles all day since coming home from World War II.

And Bev's father was crazy.

Weeks after meeting in first grade Nora went to Bev's house one Saturday morning. Climbing the front steps she heard shouting coming from inside. The yelling had the same harried over-the-top urgency as someone wounded in one of the cowboy movies Nora's father watched on television. *Dad would kill me if I played the TV that loud*, she thought, pressing the doorbell. The shouting stopped. A moment later the door swung open. A man glared down at her. He wore a white vest undershirt and black trousers. He wasn't tall, but he was wide, bulky, with forearms as thick as lampposts. His ruddy face was pulled into a collage of confusion, anger, and sadness. His wavy concrete-colored hair was wild like Jerry Lee Lewis' after performing "Great Balls of Fire." Had Nora seen this man on television, she might have found him funny. At that moment, however, she wanted to run. Her six-year-old self could not grasp what exactly frightened her, only that she was seeing *crazy*.

Then Bev slipped past her father. She took Nora's arm and led her down the steps. "Bye Daddy," Bev called over her shoulder.

The question of him being crazy went away that day, but not altogether. It arose periodically afterward, particularly when her mother's friend, Mrs. Delgatto, came over for tea. Mrs. Delgatto was a friendly, heavy woman who spoke with a loud, shrill voice. Nora's mother had known her since they were teenagers. Mrs. Delgatto lived a couple streets away, in the eight hundred block of Chilver Avenue, next door to Bev's family. Nora's bedroom had been directly above the kitchen. When Mrs. Delgatto came over for lunch there was no mistaking what was being said.

He's nuts, Mrs. Delgatto often said, referring to Bev's father. *He goes on like a madman, shouting at his poor wife. Lord knows why he's so angry, but you can hear him clear as day in my house.*

As Nora walked down Pearl Street, it seemed that this neighborhood was lost between seasons. By the glow of the streetlights, she saw crude, faded faces kids painted on the knots around the base of a wide old tree. A few doors down was a house with icicle Christmas lights still hanging along its gutter.

Bev never spoke of her mother's death. Not even to Nora.

It happened in sixth grade, during the month of May. One day Bev didn't show up to school. During morning announcements the principal said that her mother had died the previous day. Bev stayed home for more than a week. Because there was no funeral or memorial service to attend, Nora was unsure what to do. She considered going to Bev's house after school, but when the bell rang, Nora's enthusiasm wilted.

After a week had passed Nora's mother sent her over to Bev's house.

"Go pay your respects," her mother said. "Tell Bev, 'I'm sorry for your loss.' That's what you say when someone's died."

No one came to the door when Nora rang the doorbell. She knocked. Nothing. She tried the door and found it unlocked. Nora stepped into the house and was hit by the sharp harsh odor of ammonia. The odor always made her eyes water. She took a few steps into the foyer and saw Louise in front of the television in the living room. The volume was turned all the way down.

"Hi Louise," Nora said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Louise turned from the TV. She was a pale girl with wispy shoulder length hair, her face void of expression. She regarded Nora with the empty eyes of a sleepwalker.

"Bev's downstairs," Louise whispered.

As she moved down the bare wooden staircase, Nora heard the sounds of sloshing water, and talking, muttering. Hearing Bev's voice, Nora figured Norm or her father was downstairs, as well. When she came to the last step, Nora saw Bev standing with her back to the stairs, working at the large washbasin in the corner. She was alone.

She's singing to herself, Nora thought, and nearly believed it.

"Hi Bev," she said.

Bev turned, looking at Nora with eyes that seemed too awake, too alert. She was perspiring even though the basement was ten degrees cooler than the main floor. She was winded from her work, washing curtains.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Nora said.

Bev stared at her, then turned to the washbasin. "The drapes were a mess."

"Are you okay?"

"Busy busy busy," Bev said, breathless. "There's dinner, and laundry, and ironing..."

Mind your own beeswax, was Nora's grandmother's old expression.

Saying nothing, Nora went upstairs. She paused at the living room doorway, looking at Louise sitting cross-legged, transfixed before the silent TV. Nora went to the telephone. She called her mother to say she was staying for dinner at Bev's house.

"I'll finish these," Nora said, returning to the basement. "You sit and rest. Then we'll start dinner."

An hour later as she and Bev readied dinner, the front door opened. Nora froze. It was Bev's father. She listened to his heavy footsteps move into the living room. Heard the hiss of his chair's seat cushion as he sat down, followed by the flap of a newspaper. Not a word was spoken, not even through dinner. Bev's father didn't seem to notice Nora at the table. Norm didn't come home. No one mentioned where he might be. Nora could hardly stomach her food, breathing the ammonia-laced air. No one else seemed bothered by it.

She helped Bev with the dishes. Louise remained at the table. Their father returned to the living room, to his newspaper. Nora thought to ask Louise if she wanted to help or if she wanted some tea, but decided not to break the silence that fell upon the house like a pall.

Days later Mrs. Delgatto came over for tea. Nora, just home from school that afternoon, sat on the floor in her bedroom listening to the voices rising through the vents. Since the announcement at school about Bev's mother, a morbid curiosity lurked in Nora: *How did she die?* Bev's mother hadn't seemed ill when Nora saw her days before she died. At the farthest, darkest end of her curiosity, Nora wondered if Bev's father had killed her.

As her mother and Mrs. Delgatto had their tea, the details of Bev's mother's death unraveled around the kitchen table. Nora soon learned a lesson about getting what she wanted. She heard everything. The knowledge curdling within her, leaving her tearful and heartsick. She had no appetite for dinner that evening. Didn't feel like playing at school the next day. When Bev finally went back to class they remained friends, though Nora never went inside her house again. She rarely encountered Bev's father after that. When she did, Nora couldn't meet his gaze, even at Bev's wedding.

At least Bev got the money from selling her dad's house, Nora thought, falling back on that cushion of consolation. *The old creep did that much for her.* That single thought counterbalanced her fear and pity for Bev over the past five years, believing that all was ultimately well because Bev finally got her fair share. However, it did little to unknot her dismay tonight. And it occurred to her that Bev never mentioned an inheritance. More than that, Nora never saw evidence of it. In fact, after the burial, and following her six weeks in Randham Regional, Bev only spoke of her family's financial problems.

Is it possible the old creep left her nothing?

That's crazy, who else would've got his house, and money? Louise took off twenty years ago, and Norm didn't even go to the funeral. Bev, God love her, was devoted 'til the end.

Receiving an inheritance was no occasion for a shopping spree, but Nora couldn't recall Bev buying herself even a new teapot or purse after she came out of the hospital. There was no indication that she received anything from her father.

Where in the world...?

Martin. The thought rang like the crash of dishes.

Although Bev was a lifelong friend, Nora didn't know Martin very well. They attended one another's weddings, but never got together as couples. Much of what Nora knew came from Mona Walker. Nora heard about the gambling, Martin's protracted absences from home.

Nora approached the cluster of shops where Bev's was located.

Well, why not have her own business? she thought.

Nora slowed as she neared Bev's shop and wondered how the renovations were coming along. There was wan light inside the shop. A candle stood burning atop the coffee table between the wicker chair and loveseat. Nora blinked—

—and jumped, startled.

By the candle's pale light she saw someone sitting on the loveseat. It was Bev. Under different circumstances, Nora would have smiled and scolded herself for being a "nervous Nelly," as her mother would say. She might have knocked on the window and gone in for a chat. But she didn't. She didn't move, for she saw Bev sitting within the shop, talking away, deep in conversation. Nora glanced past the empty wicker chair, wondering who was there with her.

There was no one.

There was something in Bev's hand, which she waved around, gesturing as she spoke. It took a moment to see that Bev held a lit cigarette.

Nora stood there, swallowed whole by memory, feeling the same unhinged fear when she first met Bev's father. She felt the same stab of apprehension as when she went to Bev's house to pay her respects. Her mind scrambled to rationalize what she saw, but there was no denying it. Nora was

looking at *crazy*. And when her initial shock wore off, she turned back, heading for home at a near run.