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RESURRECTING LIFE AT NARROW PASSAGE CREEK

Part One: The Search Begins

What is a house without memories? It is simply an empty body of wood and stone whose soul has silently slipped away in the middle of the night and in the light of morning leaving only the fading chirping of the crickets to fill its silent halls. It is now an empty shell longing to be filled, to be claimed, to be loved, to once again hear the laughter of children, to witness the lover's dance, to smell the seasonal smells: cinnamon at Christmas, charred burgers and the charred paper remains of a 4th of July's fireworks celebration. It now sits alone, desiring once again to proudly wear its white winter's coat in protection to the lives within and to eagerly shed the coat as winter gives way to spring and the windows are thrust open to once again let forth the sounds that have been bursting from within. Its blank windowless eyes stare out at me through their empty, decaying sockets.

I look at the unmoving photos in my hand and try to transform them into moving pictures of the past. At first the images are blurry, faded, silent black and white as if a past occupant might have been Charlie Chaplain. Grudgingly they give way to milky, colorized pictures until bursting forth in living color. Unfortunately, my use of the word "living" conjures up no human lives, as there are none to claim this residence.

Nestled between the Edinburg and Woodstock exits off of Interstate 81 in the Shenandoah Valley this house has sat empty for a great number of years. On a recent trip inside

the echoing structure I walk among the ghosts of the past. There is something unnerving about being inside a deserted house. Every footstep, every breath seems magnified. Stepping lightly on the rotting floor as if walking across a surface just slightly stronger than eggshells, I almost expect to suddenly find myself shaking my head while looking up in wonder at the floor I just fell through.

I move from one tiny room to the next looking for any signs of life. I kick aside the occasional beer can, no doubt from some high school students hanging out. Signs of recent life, I think, but not exactly what I was looking for. On the floor I notice a piece of paper peeking out from under some more wooden rubble. More carefully than I need to be, but perhaps out of respect for the house, I slowly move the pile and remove the remains of a payment book from the First National Bank of Strasburg. In neat handwriting is a completed receipt made out to the "*Nat Bank of Woodstock*" in the amount of \$13.40. It is dated January 25, 1966. So it appears to me that as recently as thirty-six years ago there may have been someone living in the house. In the other upstairs room I walk to the back of the house and look through the large gothic window frame and am quite surprised to see another building a little farther down the hill, close to the edge of the creek. I gently walk back down the stairs; once again passing the wall where one of the beer can wielding kids scratched "*BLAIR WITCH WAS HERE*" into the cracked plaster. Back outside, I walk through the snow down to the other building. It was built out of the same darkly weathered decaying lumber as the house. Moving down by the creek I spot what, in better days, must have been a large wooden wheel. It seems to have been a mill of some sort in its prime. I snap a few pictures and return to my car.

The following Saturday morning I go to an old diner just outside of the small downtown area for breakfast. Over my plate of two eggs (over medium, please), crispy bacon, and some of the best biscuits and sausage gravy I have had in a very long time I show my photos of the house and asked for any information. An hour later, with a full stomach but still empty notebook, I

pack up to leave. As I put on my coat I catch sight of an elderly white-haired man who somehow snuck past me and looks like he had been perched at the counter stool since the diner's grand opening years earlier. He appears so comfortable, so belonging to this scene--as if he and the bar stool were one--that I knew he *must* have some information for me. After I make my initial inquiry, he smiles his gap-toothed grin, and informs me that he has only lived in the area for a couple of years, but that if I go to the Shell station there is a group of men that have breakfast and coffee there every day and might be able to help me. I thank him for his time and smile to myself in relief. Finally, I thought I might be getting somewhere. Edinburg is a very small town, and in true small town fashion there had to be that person or persons who knew everyone's business. Sure enough, just as predicted by the diner prophet, there sat a table of four old men, in various old man attire: plaid winter coats with matching hunting hats (just like Elmer Fudd wore in pursuit of that "wascally wabbit"), multiple John Deere foam-mesh caps, on the feet of each were well worn boots and in front of each age-spotted, wrinkled hand was a steaming cup of coffee. As I approach their table they cautiously look up at me through rheumy eyes, not in disgust, but more annoyance as if I am interrupting some ancient secret ritual that any outsider is not privileged to. I ask them my now well-rehearsed questions concerning the house at Narrow Passage Creek, show the man who seems less imposed upon the photographs and he comments;

"Looks like the one over on the Simmons' land." Pointing to another gentleman he continued, "He was the County Sheriff for years, long since retired, but he might know about it."

I approach the retired lawman and showed him the picture.

"Yep. That is the one on the Simmons land." He confirmed. "I don't know anything about it but Mrs. Simmons lives in a trailer on the opposite side of the interstate and might be able to help." Allowing them to return to their ritual I thank them and leave feeling only slightly better about finally having a name to associate with the house. I thought of the men one last time. They were not unlike many old men I know. Being old, perhaps wise, and probably seeing more

things than they cared, they earned the right to be cautious or any other way they wished to act, I supposed.

I call directory assistance from my car outside the gas station and am given a listing for a Mrs. Floyd Simmons. I dial the number and a shaky-voiced, quite old sounding lady answers. I introduce myself for the umpteenth time that morning and once again ask her my questions. She informs me that she and her husband moved to the area *years* ago (the stretching out of *years* imply that was in another lifetime) and that when they did the house was already abandoned. After a few more polite questions she assures me that she really did not know anything about the house or any past residents. What seems like my first real lead (yes, I use the word “lead” as I am feeling much like a detective by now) fades as fast as it arrived. Gone like the rising steam from the cups of coffee on the table of the respectfully grumpy old men. I think of Sherlock Holmes and wonder where one could find a deerstalker cap like his. Desperation was setting in and anything might help, and certainly could not hurt, my search.

My last stop of the day is the Shenandoah County library. I ask the librarian at the desk my now worn-out questions. She says that the person I need to speak to is out but she will take my name and phone number and have her contact me. I scribble my information on the back of the photo of the house and leave it at the desk. Driving back home I marvel a bit at the lack of information on the house. The house has been abandoned long enough that residents in their seventies and eighties have no memory of it. Many, many questions remain unanswered. I think of my own life. My grandparents are now gone. When they were alive a youthful indifference held back the desire I now have to know my own roots. Appreciation for my own past comes at a time when answers are not as easily found. The life we live and how we touch those around us is what is remembered. Good or bad, we all leave something to be remembered by. Yes, my grandparents are gone and so are their memories. For the first time in my life I feel like a part of me has passed with them. *Would there be anyone to speak of me when I am gone?* Somewhere in time I can picture a table of old men sitting that when shown a photo of my house would

without hesitation say; “*Oh, yeah. That is the Hudak house. Do you remember the time when...*” and launch into some fond remembrance. The history of the house at Narrow Passage Creek remains unknown to the dozens of nearby residents I spoke with, but I was determined to find something.

Time slips away as it has a habit of doing. I return from an out-of-state trip, check the answering machine and there is the voice of a Miss Jean Martin, the archivist at the library. The voice informs me that she has some information on the “Sheetz House” that might interest me. At last I have a name to associate with the house, the Sheetz house. *Why am I not more excited?* I felt like the mystery had been solved by the voice on my answering machine without my assistance. I feel a little disappointed. Just when I was warming up to the idea of a deerstalker cap and pondering whether or not a pipe might help me in my search; if not to find clues, at least to make me look a little more scholarly during my search.

Part Two: Clues Come Grudgingly

On my way out of town the following Monday I stop at the library to meet the voice on my answering machine. The owner of the kindly voice leads me to two books on the history of Shenandoah County which hold quite a bit of information. What strikes me as kind of strange is that the entries in the books are too brief, as if written by someone creating sentences to pack inside some brand of historical fortune cookies. As with fortune cookies, the history book entries are concise, but not very filling, leaving me wanting more. The earliest mention of a Sheetz house is listed as follows in a thick book entitled “A History of Shenandoah County, Virginia” by John W. Wayland:

It is probable that most of these houses were constructed shortly after the Rhodes massacre of 1764. The old Sheets mill, on Narrow Passage Creek, is built up partly of stone and finished above with massive hewn logs. This ancient structure, it is said, was used as a place of refuge during the raids of Indian wars. It is located in a neighborhood that frequently suffered from attacks, due perhaps to the fact that it lies on or near one of the warrior paths that led across the Valley from northwest to southeast.

The book goes on to state other such references to Narrow Passage Creek as the site of numerous Indian-Settler skirmishes. Life is coming into bloody-focus surrounding a Sheetz house; a bleak one, but life nonetheless. This is the latest entry I can find as to there being life in a Sheetz house at Narrow Passage Creek. The entry was not dated but other similar entries lead me to believe it was written in the early 1900's. I look from the faded gray photograph in the book to my own pictures and try to make them one. The historical photo is not very clear, but if I apply decades of harsh weather and disuse to my own recent pictures, turn the photo sideways, remove some stones and boards, and add years of tree growth...I am still more than a little doubtful.

I have a name and a tiny bit of information but even more questions flew at my mind like ghosts from the Sheetz house; answers not yet visible yet their presence could be felt. *What could've ended life at a house that had survived numerous Indian attacks and a Civil War? Could it have been the depression of the 1920's? Was it someone's idea of progress that in more recent times paved a major north to south Interstate just yards from this once proud structure?* The answers were not giving themselves up very easily so another trip to the library was in order.

Part Three: A Twist

The following Saturday I return to the library and find another tidbit provided by my now favorite librarian, this from the Virginia Department of Historic Records. It is dated March 25,

1994 and contains a survey by Scott M. Hudlow from April 24, 1993. The form causes even more confusion as I read the following:

The abandoned James W. Sheetz Farm features a Gothic Revival-inspired farmhouse that probably dates to the second quarter of the 19th century, and a sawmill of about the same period or slightly later.

As an old acquaintance of mine was fond of saying, “*The furtherer I go, the behinder I get!*” (I make a mental note to find this book of “*Old Man Sayings*” for my later years which seem likely to occur long before I find recent signs of life at Narrow Passage Creek.) For what his saying lacked in proper grammar it made up for appropriateness to my situation. This survey form contradicted my previous findings in two major areas. It made the house appear much newer than the Wayland text and it refers to a sawmill in lieu of a flour mill. I suppose a very old abandoned, decaying mill could just as easily be one type of mill as another, but the time difference of about over a hundred years could not be ignored. I have the sinking feeling that I am stumbling blindly down the wrong path of some darkened woods and wonder what awaits me as I burst forth into the light. I puff on my imaginary pipe, tip the phantom deerstalker cap further up my head, squint my eyes as I imagine Sherlock Holmes may have done and ask the invisible Mr. Watson-sounding board that has taken up residence in my mind; *Why the large gap in time? Why can I find a reference to the 1700's but have nothing to support more recent life? Why the confusion?* It is as though a biblical rapture occurred in this little part of the world taking all the necessary human pieces to my puzzle to a better world. The only thing left is the slowly dying shell of the Sheetz house.

Attached to the survey form are photocopies showing various views of the house. Without the benefit of the originals I could still make out similarities to my own photographs. I see my budding detective career fading faster than these poor images. I have been on the wrong path. There are two Sheetz houses! Both offer little in the way of historical information or comfort as I still am missing something. *What is it?*

Part Four: A Realization

It is four-thirty on a Saturday morning and I take a sip of strong coffee to chase away the pre-dawn fog from my head. As I drive south to the Sheetz house I wonder about my task at hand and how something keeps drawing me back.

I do not know what I hope to find this morning other than perhaps a spectacular sunrise. Walking down the gravel road leading to the house I slow to watch two deer working their way through the woods stopping occasionally to look back at me as if trying to get across the point that this is *their* morning, *their* vegetation, *their* house and I am an intruder.

The sun oozes up over the hill; I snap a few more pictures. As I walk around the corner of the decaying structure and down the hill to the mill my footsteps on the dry ground scare up a great long-necked bird and with a long-necked bird cry he flies low over the creek's surface and off to some undisturbed place.

I guess I had hoped to find something else here, if only a feeling, but the only feeling to be found is sadness at the forgotten life that passed through, the lost life that makes a house a home.

Sitting down to watch the sun continue to rise and declare that a new day has begun over the house at Narrow Passage Creek, I pause to let all the information I have gathered simmer to see if answers would bubble to the surface to be skimmed neatly off the top, but the filmy brew reveals nothing further. I was searching for any bit of human life I could touch from this house, something beyond the cold historical references buried in the pages of an old text much as the recent mysteries surrounding this house are buried deep within its silent walls. I had hoped to touch life in a grand old house, and in a way, I have. Like a comfortable silence shared with a loved one or the blank spaces between words, there is no need to bridge this gap. It just is; and it belongs. I knew I could stop searching for life at the home of Mr. James Sheetz for I have found what I was really searching for all this time. I stand and walk to my car, pausing to look back one

last time. I had found what I was searching for in an old house. After nodding a silent thank you to Mr. Sheetz I turn and continue my walk. Sometimes life just fades away, but often that life can continue to live on in our children and the people we touch around us. The past is to be remembered and cherished, but life must be lived in the present.

