

Windblown Clouds

Part 1, EXCERPT No. 1

Preface

This book describes a journey I took many years ago, when I was twenty-two. As with all good things in life, journeys tend to be round, they circle round to their beginnings. This journey was no exception. One goes off, one comes home again, and then one reflects. This journey began and ended in Vermont. During the two years following my return, I spent most of my time writing about my experiences. I wrote the story through from the beginning to the end without stopping to revise or correct what I had written. The resulting manuscript of over six hundred typed and hand-written pages was the first draft of the pages that follow.

Both traveling and writing are bugs for which I have never found a cure. Before I had time to edit the manuscript and shape it for others to read, I was stricken again with the travel bug and set off on other travels. I left the manuscript with my sister, who lives in Washington DC, for safekeeping. When I returned from that journey, I wrote of other things, and quite got on with my life.

About a year ago I started thinking about that old manuscript. It had been many years since I'd seen it. I didn't necessarily want to work on it; I was merely curious. I only wanted to take a look. Like the Indian shopkeeper garnering customers off the street with the call, "Looking only, no buying," I thought I could simply take a peek. So I called my sister and asked her to send it.

My sister had been carefully guarding the manuscript all those years, and she was not keen to give it up to the US Postal Service. She reminded me that it was the only copy in existence and insisted on sending it by overnight express delivery.

I live at the end of a very long driveway off a dirt road that couriers often have difficulty finding. So, just to be safe, I had my sister send the manuscript in care of a friend, Kate Jones.

When I gave my sister the address, she said, "Kate Jones, what an unfortunate name."

I asked her what she meant.

"It's like Jane Doe," she said.

I assured her that Kate received overnight mail regularly and told her not to worry.

A week later Kate had received no package for me, so I called my sister again.

My sister lives a busy life. She apologized for forgetting to send the manuscript and promised again to send it right away. I must have only half believed her, for a good month went by and I hardly gave the manuscript a thought. Then it was her birthday and we were talking on the phone. I reminded her again, and this time she swore she would find the manuscript the moment she got off the phone and would send it the very next day.

Half a week later I called her again. I was beginning to grow tired of her promises and told her so. But she stopped me. She had sent it. It should have arrived four days earlier. She commented again on my friend's unfortunate name.

I called Fed-X, and they tracked the package. The driver claimed he'd been unable to locate Kate's residence, so he'd done what he always did when he had difficulty locating someone in our area: he went to Sam's Septic Service. Since Sam emptied every septic tank in town, he knew precisely where everyone lived.

Sam told the driver that there was a K. Jones living just around the corner. He pointed out the apartment building.

The Kate Jones I know is my neighbor; she lives on a farm, miles away from the village.

But I knew the building Sam had referred to. It had long ago been nicknamed—by its residents, no less—the 'Brown Slum.' It is known for its transient and more down-and-out residents.

So the news couldn't have been worse. And as if that wasn't enough, he'd delivered it not to the K. Jones who lived there, but to a man loitering in front of the building that claimed to know her. He'd signed his name 'J. Miller.'

I was horrified.

I rushed down to the Brown Slum and started knocking on doors. The first door on which I knocked was opened by a man who worked the graveyard shift, and he was decidedly not happy to be awakened at nine-thirty in the morning. He said he had neither seen the package, nor had he heard of the man who'd signed for it, but he told me that indeed a woman named Jones did live in the building, though her name was not Kate, it was Kay. He pointed to the door across the hall. "She lives there," he said.

Kay Jones herself answered my knock. She had the pallid look of someone who hadn't seen the sun in years. The homemade tattoos that ran up and down her arms had a decidedly jailhouse look. She was haggard and tired, a woman worn to the bone by life's vicissitudes.

I pictured this woman opening my package on the off chance that it contained something of value, discovering only pages and pages of my barely legible scribbling, certainly worthless to her, and hiding it under a bed, or throwing it out so as not to be caught having opened someone else's mail.

She stood with the door half open, her hand clutching the doorknob, blocking entrance to her apartment. I explained why I was there.

“I never seen a package,” she said, eyeing me closely.

I told her about J. Miller, who had signed for it.

“I never heard of no J. Miller,” she said.

I had to think fast. If I assumed that she was lying, then my best chance was to make her sympathetic to my cause. So I launched into a long plea, explaining how the missing package contained the only copy of a manuscript I had spent years writing, and how it had no worth to anyone but me. She relaxed a bit and stepped back from the door, allowing me to enter her apartment.

Taking her into my confidence, I told her how I would understand if one of her neighbors had taken the package—just to see what was in it. I even said I might have done the same myself. I stressed that no questions would be asked. I even suggested that an anonymous phone call telling me the manuscript was sitting in a hall would suit me fine.

All I wanted was to have the manuscript back.

The entire time I was making my plea for help, I was moving around the room, trying to pick up some clue amidst piles of dirty clothes and overflowing bags of garbage. I was looking for the corner of a Fed-X envelope, or a box of the right dimensions.

At first she was rather cold. I was, after all, barging into her apartment and basically accusing her of stealing my mail.

But how could anyone feel bad toward someone in my predicament?

Soon she was looking worried for me, especially when I told her that if it was truly gone I'd probably go mad and start banging my head against the closest wall.

What else could I say?

It was the truth.

Before the manuscript had been lost I was merely curious to see it. I had pictured myself flipping through the pages, cringing the whole while at my abuse of the English language, and perhaps recalling a few details of a journey that the years had swept from my mind.

But when I first heard the manuscript had not been delivered, its stock had risen a notch. And as the situation became more hopeless, I had even begun to see myself working on it again. Now that it was probably gone forever, I felt the full tragedy of its loss.

So I made a promise, a solemn vow. I vowed that if I could find the manuscript, I would complete it. I even believed the manuscript had become lost only to extract such a promise from me. I felt destiny at work.

I left my name and phone number with Kay Jones. That was all I could do. She promised to call if she heard anything.

Then I proceeded to knock on doors up and down the halls of the Brown Slum. At every door I repeated the entire story, left my phone number if they'd let me, and grew more desperate as the word gone rose like a lump in my throat.

By the time I reached the last door, and delivered my story for the umpteenth time, this time to a middle-aged woman dressed in an old coffee-stained bathrobe, I was entirely discouraged and thoroughly depressed. Still I tried to remain upbeat.

But it was no use. Halfway through my impassioned plea the phone rang. The woman answered it and started arguing with a man from a collection agency. He was threatening her with court and jail and worse if she didn't come up with a certain sum in short order. "I have no money," she said, "especially none to give you!" She argued desperately for a good ten minutes while I stood in the doorway. Finally I gave up.

I went back outside and started walking away. None of the people to whom I'd made my plea seemed likely to go out of their way to help.

I went over again what must have happened. Someone must have gotten their hands on the package, (most likely Kay Jones but there was no telling), and thrown it away.

Then it hit me: if so, it would probably have ended up in the tenement's dumpster.

I went to the parking lot, lifted the dumpster's lid, and was almost blown off my feet by the stench of death. Holding my nose, afraid of what I might find, I looked inside.

There on top of dozens of plastic bags of trash were the remains of a slaughtered pig. Huge ball joints—the cartilage still white and glistening—leg bones, and whole sides of fat—from which, under happier circumstances, bacon would be cut—were all draped over the shiny black bags, slowly decaying beneath a thick cloud of flies that rose when I opened the lid, then settled again on their quarry.

Holding both my breath and my nose, I looked beneath the carnage for something resembling a box of paper. But I saw no such box. I thought of ripping the bags open, but the festering pig flesh and the flies turned my stomach.

I could not endure it.

So I closed the dumpster and walked away, riling against the fate of having lost the manuscript at precisely the moment I realized its importance. I tried to get used to the fact that I would never see the manuscript again.

I couldn't.

That dumpster was my only chance.

I found a broken broom handle lying underneath a bush and returned to the scene of the carnage. I opened the dumpster again, held my breath, and started poking the bags of trash, ripping them open, and trying to see what lay beneath.

I worked my way systematically through the dumpster, from one side to the other. When I reached the farthest corner and moved the very last bag of garbage I spied a plastic grocery bag tied shut around something the size of a ream of paper. Catching the handle with the stick, I moved the bag to the side. Then I held my breath, leaned deep into the dumpster, and snatched it out.

I opened the bag and there it was, hundreds of typed and handwritten pages that I hadn't seen in a decade. Someone had ripped open the box, taken the pages out, shuffled through them, and then stuffed the whole mess into the bag. Every single page was there.

Having literally saved the manuscript from the jaws of death, I walked away from that dumpster clutching the plastic bag to my breast.

And so it was I had no choice but to finish the project I had begun so long ago.