

*Old
Promises*

by

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<http://www.karengoatkeeper.com>.

***Dedicated to
My Wheelbarrow Cats
Mittens
Grandville
Clyde***

Old Promises

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Chapter 1 Hazel's New Home

Hazel woke up to find the sun low in the afternoon sky. Sunday had been the fourth long day riding in the middle of a truck seat between her Grandfather who was driving and her mother. Each day meant up just after dawn, breakfast, drive all day, dinner, motel at night. Hazel stretched and yawned.

"Where are we? Shouldn't we have stopped by now? It's almost dark."

"Hello, sleepyhead," teased Grandfather. "We left the highway sometime back. We're almost there."

"You slept through town," added Mother.

"We're finally almost there?"

"Only a few more miles," said Grandfather. "I for one will be glad it's done."

Grandfather turned left off the paved road onto a small gravel road. The setting sun blinded them. Dust billowed behind the truck. Four miles later, as Grandfather slowed the truck, dust rolled in the windows. Hazel coughed.

"You can see my place just up ahead. I can park the truck there for the night."

"Can you take the truck to the house?" asked Mother.

Grandfather slowed as he passed his mobile home, veered to the middle of the road and swung the truck right into a narrow rutted driveway. Hazel shivered with excitement. The driveway dropped as it circled right around a small hill. She noticed Mother had straightened. A roof corner appeared followed by a faded white farmhouse. Hazel's insides froze with shock.

Once white boards had curls of paint clinging to them. Under the curls weathered gray boards streaked with brown dirt showed. Green streaks ran down one end of the house under where a huge oak reached out branches overhanging and touching the house. The upstairs window panes in the three gables were so brown with dirt not even the setting sun reflected from them. Piles of brown leaves were mounded up along the back of the entire length of the porch which stretched across the center half of the house. The screen door hung crookedly on the single bottom hinge holding it up.

Hazel closed her eyes. She remembered the neat, clean New York City apartment they had left just the week before. A deep shuddering sigh slipped out between her lips. Mother's matching shudder bumped Hazel causing her to open her eyes. They looked at each other and shuddered again.

"When did you clean the house last?" Mother asked Grandfather.

"About when I moved into my mobile home."

"When was that?"

Grandfather finished guiding the truck around a circle drive in front of the house bumping over a couple of small branches. He backed it toward the porch, shifted into park and turned the key off. His brow wrinkled as he thought about the question. "It was a year or two after your mother died. That would be eight or nine years ago."

"It's too late now to start cleaning," Mother sighed. "I guess we'll wait until morning."

"Get your suitcases and we'll go up to my place. I don't feel like driving into town for dinner."

"You have some cans of soup?"

"Should have."

Grandfather slid off the seat straightening his tall lean frame then stretching the kinks out of his shoulders. Mother's usually carefully arranged brown hair straggled down to tickle her shoulders. She slid out and stretched her tall body to ease her cramped muscles.

Hazel leaned over the seat to pull their suitcases up and pass them out. She was growing and was nearly as tall as Mother now. Her brown hair felt tangled swinging in clumps across her shoulder blades.

Grandfather led the way along a narrow overgrown path up to his mobile home on top of the hill. Thorns caught at the three as they pushed their way through thin leafy arches. Weariness poured over Hazel as she took a last look at her new home and shuddered once again.

Everyone slept in the next day. Hazel woke stiff from sleeping on the floor. Her hair was tangled. She sneezed from a nose full of dust.

Mother was sitting up on the couch. Grandfather was already dressed in faded jeans and red plaid flannel shirt although his thick white hair still stuck up here and there. He had a mug of coffee and was bringing one to Mother.

"I didn't know the house looked so bad," Grandfather mumbled. "I still think the roof and house are in good shape. It just needs some cleaning and fixing up."

Mother glared at him. "From what I saw of the outside it needs major cleaning, painting, new screen door, tree trimmed."

"It's a bit late in the year to paint."

"What about water and electricity?"

"I had the meter pulled years ago. We can call the co-op and get it turned back on. That should get the pump working and get the water back on."

"Unless the pump's broken or the pipes leak," growled Mother. "What cleaning supplies do you have?"

"Just a broom, some cleanser, stuff like that."

"Then we'll go into town first thing."

"Can we have breakfast first?" asked Hazel.

Mother looked at her in momentary surprise. She smiled. "I'm hungry too. We need to get you registered for school as well."

"Can't I help clean? Can't school wait until next week?"

"You're already a month behind. School here starts in August."

"I'll catch up. Please can I help for a couple of days? Then start school?"

"Well, there isn't much room here for you to do homework. And we need to get that truck unloaded today and returned. We'll wait at least a couple of days."

Hazel sighed happily. No school for a few more days. How bad could cleaning up that old house be?

After breakfast the three got in Grandfather's old blue pickup and headed to town. His truck rattled on the gravel road then roared down the pavement. Nine miles later town suddenly started with houses lining the road. Then they made the right turn onto the two lane highway that was one of two main roads in town.

Mother had several stops on her list. First was at the hardware and lumber store between where the second main road angled off to the right and the highway.

"Looks just like when I was here last," Mother remarked. "Nothing ever seems to change in this town. That's why Justin wanted to leave."

"New doors," commented Grandfather. "Built an addition on the back, too."

Mother glared at him.

Hazel read Fergusson's Hardware 1881 over the door of an old brick building rising behind a triangular parking lot occupied by a car and four pickups. The second floor windows had bricks standing on end making arches over them. Rough gray stone ledges formed the lower sills.

Grandfather parked his pickup beside the others. The three went in through the modern double glass doors and back into time. Hazel gawked at the high ceiling done in squares each with a flower design bulging out in the center. Long poles hung down from the flower centers. Some had fluorescent lights hanging between them. Others had big black fans hanging motionless on them.

A high shelf ran along each side wall. Dusty objects sat on them lit by the second floor windows except there was no second floor. Hazel wondered what the objects were, turned to ask Grandfather and found herself alone. She looked around but tall sets of shelves formed narrow aisles running the length of the store. The wider center aisle had a U-shaped counter in the center with a cash register on each side. At the end of the aisle stairs led up to a second floor across the back quarter of the store and fronted not with a wall but a railing.

Hazel walked across the front of the store to her right looking down each of the two aisles. Not seeing Grandfather or Mother, she retraced her steps and went across the other side of the store. Mother was toward the end of the last aisle against the wall handing items to Grandfather to carry.

"Some of these are probably still in the broom closet," Mother was telling Grandfather as Hazel joined them. "But I don't know what shape they'd be in after this long."

Grandfather held two plastic buckets. One had scrub brushes, sponges and wire brushes in it. Mother was putting screw drivers in on top of a hammer and two pairs of pliers in the other bucket. She moved to the next aisle and handed two brooms and a mop to Hazel.

A plump old woman with her gray hair piled on top of her head in a bun was coming down the aisle. "Hello, Mr. Edgeman, haven't seen you for a time. Juliana? Juliana Whitmore? Is that you, Juliana? When did you get back? Who is this? Your daughter?"

"Hello, Mrs. Fergusson," Mother said as she turned. "This is my daughter Hazel. We got back last night."

"I'm really sorry about Justin. That was terrible, him getting killed in the war like that."

"We're planning to move into the old house."

"Looks like you plan on doing some cleaning first," laughed Mrs. Fergusson.

"Major cleaning," answered Mother. "Eight or nine years worth of cleaning."

"Landsakes!"

"We better get some small nails and screws for repairs. Oh, a new set of screen door hinges. I hope I found everything else."

"What have you got?"

"Brooms, mop, brushes, wire brushes, sponges, hammer, pliers, screw drivers, buckets."

"Dust pans? Waste baskets? Of course, I don't carry much for those. Wal-Mart has those."

“The dust pans are by the brooms? I don’t know how I missed them.”

Finally Mother thought she had everything. Hazel and Grandfather put the smaller items on the counter while Mrs. Fergusson added up the bill on a little rectangular black machine that clacked as the numbers were punched in then whirred adding the total and printing it on paper pulled up from a roll. She punched the total up on the register. Mother paid for the items.

“You wouldn’t know of anyplace in town wanting to hire someone?”

“You need a job?”

“In a week or so, once we get moved in.”

“I can use someone a couple days a week. You were a good employee before and I’d love to have you back. Of course, it’s just two or three days a week.”

“Full time would be good. But a couple of part time jobs would work. I always enjoyed working for you.”

“Come by when you’re settled in.”

The three maneuvered their bulky loads down the aisle past a couple of men. The men stepped back to stand staring at Mother. Hazel wondered who they were and why they looked so angry.

Grandfather drove a few blocks down the highway into town. Hazel looked at old brick buildings lining the road. All of them were much like the hardware store, two stories with fancy brickwork around upstairs windows. Some of the windows were bricked or boarded up but the outlining brickwork showed where they had been.

When the truck stopped at a signal, Hazel looked over at a big imposing building set off by itself in the middle of a lawn with a few big old trees. Grandfather told her it was the Courthouse. He went on to name the other buildings across from the Courthouse lining the streets that formed the square: the gray stone bank on the left corner, a clothing store, and a café; a big old brick building used as an historical museum and a library on the back street; and another café, a book store, a thrift store and a law office on the last side.

“Let’s go to the thrift store,” said Mother suddenly. “We can get some old clothes to wear for cleaning!”

After getting some used clothing, the next stop was Wal-Mart on the far end of town. This time Mother piled light bulbs, sponges, dish soap, floor cleaner, wood cleaner, floor wax, cleanser, window cleaner, bleach, ammonia, soap, paper towels and wash cloths into waste baskets and dish pans. The pickup bed was filling up.

“The co-op is across the way,” Grandfather told Mother. “They put up a nice new building a few years back.”

“Let’s go get the electricity turned on.”

As the pickup pulled into the parking lot, Hazel saw a new modern single story L-shape brick building. The sign announced “Crooked Creek Electric Cooperative.”

There were forms to fill out. The old account was in Grandfather’s name and had to be changed. There was a new address Grandfather couldn’t remember it. A phone call to the people in charge of the new addressing system answered that. A work order was done to put a new meter in.

“Someone might be out this afternoon or probably in the morning,” the secretary told them.

Finally Grandfather pulled the truck into a parking lot in town next to another old brick building, this one painted pale yellow and only one story. “We need some groceries,” he announced.

“You’re still coming to this old place?” teased Mother. “There were groceries at Wal-Mart or that new market out that way.”

“I like OK Foods. Mr. Satterfield is local. He’s real good to me. Of course, the old man isn’t here much anymore but his son is good to talk to.”

Mother laughed. “You mean Paul Satterfield is running OK Foods now? I can’t believe it!”

“He was a bit wild when he was younger.”

“A bit?”

Mother was still giggling as the three went in the door. Hazel pushed the cart behind Grandfather and Mother as they went up and down the aisles putting cans and boxes and sacks in.

“Juliana? Is that you?”

Mother turned just as a tall dark man came up, wrapped his arms around her, lifted her off her feet and spun around.

“Paul, put me down,” panted Mother.

“Gee, it’s great to see you. When did you get here? How long are you staying? Where are you staying?”

“We got here late yesterday. We’re moving back here for now. This is my daughter Hazel.”

“Hello, Hazel. I’m Paul Satterfield, an old friend of your mother’s. Will you go to Hanging Rock? What grade are you in?”

“Is that the school here? I’m in seventh.”

“She’ll be at Hanging Rock,” Mother told him.

“My daughter Kayla is in seventh at Hanging Rock.”

“Your daughter? When did you get married?” Juliana demanded.

“You remember Sandy?”

“Sandra Crider? You married Sandra Crider?”

“Yes, about a year after you and Justin left. We have two daughters, Kayla and Brittany who’s in fifth, and a son Tyler in third. You and Hazel will have to meet them.”

“It’ll take a week or two for us to get settled in. I have to find a job. Mrs. Fergusson offered me a part time one but that won’t be enough.”

“We don’t need anyone here right now. Wait a minute. Someone mentioned something. Let me think. Oh, yes. Mr. Braswell was saying he wanted a part time secretary at the historical museum.”

“I can stop by on our way home today.”

“He won’t be at the museum. Try the paper. He might have time today. The paper comes out tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Paul. It’s great seeing you again. We better get going. We have to get our things out of the moving truck and return it today.”

Grandfather insisted they stop at a café on the Square for lunch so they wouldn’t have to take time to fix it at home before getting started. Mother walked up a couple of blocks to the newspaper office then came back smiling in time to eat her sandwich. She had the part time job at the museum starting Wednesday the next week.

Then the three left town behind and started the nine miles back to Grandfather's place. Hazel noticed some of the houses were modern brick ones. Some were older wooden ones often with siding on them. Some yards were neatly mowed. Others had piles of stuff or old cars or trucks in the yards. Dogs lay in the shade at most of the places.

Out of town broad fenced pastures with herds of big animals colored black or red or white or a combination of these lined the roads. Occasional houses sat down long drives running between two fields. Big barns were near the houses. Patches of trees grew in low places in the pastures. After turning onto the gravel road there were lines of big old trees with wire nailed on them along some stretches. There were areas of forest mostly on Grandfather's side of the road and lots of pasture on the other side of the road. The nine miles seemed to go on and on. Then Grandfather pulled his pickup into the space in front of his mobile home.

"Let's carry the groceries in," said Grandfather. "I can put them away while you take the other stuff down to the house. It won't take long and I'll be down to help."

"We're going to change into that old clothing before starting. We'll do that while you put groceries away."

Chapter 2 Mounds of Dust

Grandfather and Mother each took a bucket and waste basket both full of cleaning supplies leaving the brooms and mop for Hazel and started down the path. Grandfather led pushing the branches apart with his waste basket. Mother and Hazel followed.

“Ow!” cried Hazel. “What are these things?”

“Blackberries,” answered Grandfather.

“My mother and I used to pick them every summer for cobblers and pies,” said Mother. “But the canes are too long.”

“I won’t be much help cleaning,” said Grandfather. “Maybe I can trim these away from the path while you clean a place to put things.”

“Anything to get out of using a broom,” laughed Mother.

The three came out on the drive near the truck. Mother and Hazel stopped to look at the house and sigh. Daylight made the dirt show even more than the sunset had the night before.

“Standing here won’t get rid of the dirt,” said Mother picking up her loads again and starting for the steps to the porch. Grandfather had climbed the steps and started to step onto the porch. The board bent from his weight with a cracking sound. He backed up.

“That porch isn’t too safe. Let’s try the back door.” Mother led Hazel around to the far side of the house. This time the porch seemed safe but the back door was locked.

“Great,” Mother groaned. “We have to go in the front door. The back door locks from the inside.”

The two went back to the front steps. Grandfather’s bucket and wastebasket were standing there but he had disappeared. Mother put her bucket and waste basket down. She climbed the steps and tested the porch boards. Only the first one was really bad. A couple of others creaked but held. She got to the door, lifted the screen door and shifted it open. By this time Hazel had shoved the buckets and wastebaskets across the porch and was standing beside her to see inside.

Mother put the key in the lock. It took two hands to turn the lock. The door swung open.

A thick blanket of dust lay on the floor of a large room. Cobwebs filled the corners and hung down from the ceiling. A large stuffed sofa was covered with dust in the middle of the room. A small table with a cloth of cobwebs and dust hanging to the floor was against the far wall. A big metal box with a pipe coming out and going into the wall behind it also covered with dust and cobwebs stood at the far end of the room. A closed door and an open one were to the right. Another open doorway was straight ahead.

“Hand me a broom,” said Mother. “You take the other one. I’ll start to the left. You go to the right.”

Hazel copied Mother swinging her broom across the ceiling to pull down cobwebs for a space then sweeping up the dust. The dust piled up into big mounds. The cobwebs wrapped themselves around the broom and had to be pulled off.

Hazel found she had to push slowly or dust filled the air too. Cobwebs caught in her hair, pulled loose from the ceiling and draped themselves down her shoulders and back. Her throat was soon dry and itchy. She started coughing. Mother coughed. They retreated onto the porch.

“Look at you!” laughed Grandfather. He was dragging a big flat piece of wood toward the porch.

Mother glared at him. She peeled off a long cobweb and flung it onto him. “You can have some too.”

Hazel threw some of hers at Grandfather too. Soon all three were laughing.

“I brought this plywood down to cover that bad area on the porch,” Grandfather said at last. “Can you two help me get it in place?”

Grandfather slid one end across the porch. Mother and Hazel picked it up and carried it to the left as Grandfather came up the stairs with the other end. He stopped on the top step.

“Wait while I go down the steps,” Grandfather said as he set his end down on the porch. “You push your end up while I shift this end so it covers more of that bad spot. Now set it down. And that should be good enough to get your things unloaded.”

“The dust got too bad,” Mother told him. “We’ll be awhile getting the front room swept. Hazel, let’s get stuff out of one waste baskets so we can put the dust in it.”

“I’ll see about that screen door,” said Grandfather taking the new hinges and a screwdriver out of one bucket.

An hour later most of the dust was swept up in the front room, the cobwebs were gone, the few pieces of furniture, minus their dusty cobweb shrouds, were pushed to one end of the room. The screen door hung on both hinges although Grandfather mumbled he needed a new one or at least new screen. It took a long time to unload the truck. Finally everything was piled in the front room leaving narrow pathways to the doorway and room beyond.

“We need to return the truck.”

“That presents a problem,” said Grandfather. “I can drive the truck into town but then I’m stuck.”

“I haven’t driven in years,” said Mother. “I don’t have a license. Is there anyone who can bring you home?”

“The Satterfields live a mile past me. Maybe Paul would bring me out on his way home. I don’t know when that is. I hate to ask.”

“I’ll call the store and ask,” said Mother. “Hazel, why don’t you look around a bit while I go up and call. I guess we should have a phone put in soon or get a cell.”

“I’ll meet you up there with the truck,” said Grandfather. “I don’t think a cell phone would work here at the house.”

“Probably not,” said Mother. She walked back to the path up the hill as Grandfather started the truck.

Left alone Hazel looked into the house. She didn’t really want to walk through more dust and cobwebs. Maybe she would walk around the house.

Hazel walked around to the back porch passing a little metal house with a chimney. Another big pipe connected it to the house. Three poles with the broken remains of ropes between them were along the side of the hill. She stood on the porch looking off. The ground sloped gradually down away from the house. Lanky stems covered with lavender and white and yellow daisies filled spaces between big old trees scattered behind the house. One tree almost straight down from the porch had a broken platform in it.

A small building built of stones stood a short distance toward her left away from the house. Further left was an old building with broken pieces of wire attached to it. The wire looked a little like netting and must have been six feet tall when it was new.

More fence but not as tall continued down the slope. There didn't seem to be anything behind this fence. The remains of a gate hung from a post. Even further Hazel could see trees in rows behind the fence.

To Hazel's right she could see a driveway going down and forming a loop in front of a big building. This one looked like some pictures she'd seen of barns except it was old and gray instead of neatly painted red. A fenced area was behind the barn.

Everywhere wildflowers waved on tall stems. Vines tumbled out of the trees. Grass grew in clumps with blades so long they curved over.

"This is the Ramble gone wild," Hazel said to herself remembering her favorite part of Central Park in New York. Crickets called from all around. She heard tapping in one tree and looked for the cause. A woodpecker was working its way up the tree stopping every foot or so to tap vigorously.

A loud strident rasping series of squawks came from a tree near the porch. A second set started up as Hazel spotted two little brown birds hopping from place to place with their tails held straight up. Then a series of chattering squawks came from a tree farther away. Hazel spotted a squirrel flipping its tail and looking at her.

"Hazel?"

"I'm by the back porch, Mother." Hazel walked back to the front of the house where Mother was waiting on the front porch.

"Paul will bring Grandfather home when he leaves the store at five. That gives us another hour to start on the kitchen. I think I'll go through and open the back door before we start so some of the dust can blow out."

Hazel sighed. More dust and cobwebs. Maybe school would be better.

"I'm really glad you wanted to help clean the house up, Hazel. It's a lot of dirty work. Let's try to get the kitchen done a bit tonight before dark."

The two picked up their brooms, dust pans and waste baskets and started for the kitchen behind the front room. Hazel had never seen such a large kitchen. She stood just inside the doorway looking around.

A large table surrounded by six chairs stood in the center of the room. On the wall to her left was an open box with chunks of wood in it. Next was a large iron stove. The back of the stove was taller than the flat part and curved into a metal shelf. A more modern stove was next to it.

Shelves with pots and pans of various kinds were on the wall between the modern stove and an old refrigerator. A closed door was on the other side of the fridge.

The entire far wall had a counter running across it. Lines of drawers were at each end under the counter. Cupboard doors with a single drawer over them filled in the rest of the space. The drawers were missing under the sink centered in the counter and under a long triple bank of windows. Cupboards were hanging from the ceiling at each end of the counter.

Mother had gone through an open doorway on the right wall near the counter. Now light and a breeze came in so that must lead to the back door. A tall cupboard stood against the wall between the door to the back porch and another open doorway.

The wall jogged out to take a chunk out of the corner next to the door where Hazel stood. Another closed door was in this wall too.

Everything was covered with a thick blanket of dust. Dusty cobwebs hung from the ceiling and filled the corners. They hung from the table and counter tops to the floor.

“Do you want to go right or left?” Mother asked coming back into the kitchen.

“Right, I guess.”

“Meet you at the other end.”

By the time the two met up at the other end of the room it was almost too dark to see. But the kitchen was cleared of the blanket of dust and the many cobwebs. Hazel and Mother were dirty and tired, ready to quit for the day.

“How many more rooms are there?” asked Hazel.

“Let’s see. Downstairs there are the dining room, mud room, bathroom and bedroom.”

“Mud room?”

“It’s the room off the back porch. When you come into the house from working outside, you take your muddy shoes or boots and coats off in the mud room, put on clean shoes to come into the house.”

“Oh.”

“Upstairs there are two bedrooms, a center room and two rooms. I guess you will use one of those bedrooms.”

“It’s going to take days to clean all of these rooms up,” groaned Hazel.

“We should have the dust and cobwebs out of them in a couple of days. But you are right. It will take days, weeks maybe, to really clean this house. We haven’t opened any cupboards or closets yet.”

“No,” wailed Hazel.

“I think we will just get enough done to move in. Then, with the electricity and water working again, we can work on just a room or two at a time and take our time.”

“I’m ready anytime. That floor is hard even with that thick comforter.”

Chapter 3 Monsters

The next day, Grandfather started trimming more blackberry canes along the path between the house and mobile home while Hazel and Mother cleaned more dust and cobwebs out of the house. Hazel worked in the bedroom marveling at a double bed with four corner posts topped with balls. Mother took the bathroom.

A truck pulled up in front of the house. Hazel walked to the front door to see Grandfather walking down the path. Crooked Creek Electric Cooperative was printed on the truck door.

Grandfather and the man walked off toward the electric pole at the base of the hill across from the front corner of the house. While the man worked on the meter, Grandfather made sure all the circuit breakers in the house electric box on the mud porch were turned off. Hazel had followed him and counted fifteen breakers.

“Hazel,” called Mother. “Let’s put in light bulbs. Grandfather, we’ll need a ladder to reach those on the ceiling.”

Hazel, Mother and Grandfather made the rounds of the first floor. Hazel standing on the kitchen table could reach to replace those bulbs. Mother steadied the ladder in the front room while Hazel took the old bulb and handed Grandfather the new one. Mother stood on the bed in the bedroom.

There was a reading lamp on a small table by the bed. Mother took it to the kitchen and put in a new bulb.

Once the meter was in and the paperwork done, it was time to turn on the lights in the house. Grandfather would turn on a circuit breaker calling out where to check. Mother or Hazel would check every light. The lamp let them check the receptacles to be sure all of them were working. A couple of receptacles weren’t so they were marked for Grandfather to check the wires. Finally only the breakers for upstairs and the water pump were left to turn on.

“We’ll wait until we start cleaning upstairs to do those rooms,” said Mother.

“I’ll clear the path to the well house so I can turn the faucet on before flipping that breaker. The pipes and water will need to run and clean themselves out. Then the pressure tank here in the house can fill.”

“We’ll get back to cleaning,” Mother told him. “Let us know if you need us to help.”

Later Grandfather came back to the house to flip the breaker. Hazel asked to go back to the well house with him. She didn’t know what one was. Besides it was an excuse to get away from the dust and cobwebs for a little while.

Rusty brown water was gushing out of a faucet sticking out of a little rock building down by the other building Hazel had noticed the day before by the time the two got to the well house. Grandfather listened inside the building.

“Hear the pump working?” Grandfather asked Hazel.

“I guess I do. I hear a motor. What’s that building over there?” Hazel pointed to the building with the remains of the tall fence.

“That was the original cabin. Now it’s the chicken house. Your Grandmother kept a nice flock of hens. Store bought eggs just aren’t the same as those big fresh ones.”

“Why don’t you keep some hens?”

“I’m too far away in case some varmint gets in the hen house.”

“What’s a varmint?”

“A possum, a coon, some creature that gets in and eats the hens.”

“Can’t you lock the door and keep them out?”

“I could although that doesn’t always stop them. I just didn’t want to do anything to remind me after she died. Then I just didn’t. The varmints make a good excuse. The water is clear now. I’ll turn on the line to the house. You turn off the faucet.”

Back at the house Grandfather turned on an outside faucet. It spit air, then water, then more air sounding like it was going to explode. Finally rusty brown water poured out with only a few more explosions of air. When the water ran clear, Grandfather turned the faucet off and went into the house.

The same explosions of air spewed out of each separate faucet on the back porch, in the kitchen and the bathroom sink and bath. Dirty water first splattered out wetting the dust into mud spots then flowed out of each one. Finally the entire house had water but the pump kept running, shutting off, turning on. Its rumble vibrated through the pressure tank and pipes.

“I need to put air in the pressure tank,” said Grandfather. “I’ll go up to my place and get the air pump.”

“Air? Isn’t it supposed to be full of water?”

“The air sets the water pressure. If there’s not enough air, the pressure isn’t right and the pump keeps turning on.”

“Oh.” Hazel reminded herself again this wasn’t New York.

Hazel went to help Mother sweep some more. She was sweeping the last room, the dining room. Another large table surrounded by chairs dominated the room. A cabinet with shelves behind glass doors on the top half stood against one wall. Dishes stood on the shelves. Next to it was a long low wider cabinet. Hazel helped put the last of the dust into a waste basket and took it out to dump on the big pile outside.

“Why don’t we take a look upstairs?” Mother asked when Hazel went back inside.

“How do we get up there?”

“The stairs are through this door in the front room.”

A light switch was just inside the door but didn’t work.

“That’s right,” said Mother. “We haven’t put new light bulbs in these sockets and checked that everything worked. Let’s do that now. Will you go get a package of bulbs? I’ll get the lamp.”

The light showed a thick blanket of dust on the stairs with Mother’s footprints on each stair. Hazel sighed and got her broom, dust pan and waste basket. She swept off each step on her way upstairs to a landing.

The footprints on the landing disappeared with the dust into Hazel’s wastebasket. She followed the footsteps around to the right and into a room. Directly across from the door was a window. The ceiling was much narrower than the floor. The left wall slanted down from the ceiling to the floor. To her left the wall was straight up with a large window and a wide bench in front of the window. The ceiling over the window formed an inverted vee.

To Hazel’s right was an open door into a closet half the length of the room. This was the first empty room she had seen. All the others had furniture in them. There was still plenty of dust and cobwebs.

Hazel sighed and looked down the wall to another doorway. Mother was standing there looking into the room. Hazel walked down to join her.

A bed and dresser were in the room. Shelves with trophies, model airplanes and other sports things were on the wall. A small desk and bookcase were against the far wall. Dust turned everything into soft fuzzy brown objects.

"This was my brother's room," said Mother quietly. "My mother never walked into it again after he was killed, just closed the door. I guess my father never went in it again either."

"I remember looking at his pictures that time in New York. He was killed in that car accident?"

"Yes, high school graduation night."

"Should we leave it alone for Grandfather?"

"I don't know if he cares about the room. My mother started getting ill a year or so after your father and I got married and moved away. Since no one stayed upstairs and it was hard for her to come up the stairs, she just didn't, even if she wanted to. The question is whether you want to use this room or that one as yours."

"I want to look east."

"The sun will get you up early," warned Mother.

"That's the way I looked from the back porch and I like seeing the trees and barn."

"So let's just get the worst of the dust up in these rooms for now. Then it's time to quit for the night."

"What about the rooms over there?"

"That's the attic. Let's ignore them for now."

Over dinner that night Mother said "I think we only need four rooms really cleaned in the house and we can move in."

"Only four?" questioned Grandfather. "What's the rush? It is a bit crowded here, but you're welcome to stay."

"You just like someone else fixing meals and washing dishes," teased Hazel.

"I'll just have to wash dishes tonight."

"Which four rooms, Mother?"

"Kitchen, bathroom and two bedrooms."

"Which ones will we do tomorrow?"

"I'll take the bathroom. You start in the kitchen and I'll join you."

The next morning Hazel stood looking around the kitchen. Light seeped through the dirty window over the sink. She sighed. Cleaning was really hard work. Where should she start?

Mother appeared behind her carrying a dish pan full of cleaners. "Won't get far standing in the doorway," she teased. "Use the table for things left in the cupboards and on the shelves."

"I just don't know where to start. It's so big. I'm so tired of dust and dirt."

"But a couple more days and we can move into our own house."

"And it will still be dirty."

"But it gets better every day. If I were you, I'd start up high somewhere."

"I suppose that way the dirt falls down so I don't have to clean something twice."

"Doing it twice might get it cleaner."

"Mother!"

Mother laughed and left to start cleaning the bathroom. Hazel decided to start with the ceiling. She walked around the room carefully sweeping it. It had been swept before but more dust and cobwebs rained down on her hair and shoulders.

If Hazel were going to put things on the table, that should get done next. She filled a bucket with water and soap and a sponge to wash the last of the dirt and cobwebs off. As soon as she dipped the dust filled sponge in the bucket, dirt spread through the water. Quickly she found she was just spreading mud around, not getting it off.

Hazel got a clean bucket of soapy water. This time she rinsed the dust off the sponge before getting more cleaning water on it. The bucket stayed clean enough to finish the table and chairs.

Hazel looked at the wall to the right of the door. She swept it again. She could only reach about two thirds of the way to the ceiling with her sponge. Maybe Grandfather would let her use the ladder. She started to look for him but he walked into the kitchen.

“Let’s look in the broom closet,” said Grandfather as he put more cleaning supplies on the big table. “Your mother thought I should bring down the rest of this stuff.”

Grandfather opened the door in the wall next to where Hazel had been working. A straw broom with the bristles mostly broken off and a rag mop with the rags mostly gone leaned against the wall. Buckets filled with scrub brushes, their bristles missing and piles of soap missing most of their boxes stood on the floor. A folded metal stepstool leaned against the other wall.

“The ceiling looks like an upside down staircase.”

“Those are the stairs to the second floor.”

“It’s strange to see the bottom of the steps.”

“Here’s your Grandmother’s stool. Let’s get it out for you to use. I’m on my way out to cut brush around the house and trim some branches on that tree.”

Hazel pulled the stepstool out. Grandfather opened it up pressing the steps firmly.

“Thanks. Now I can reach the ceiling.”

“Getting tired of cleaning?”

“Yes.”

“If we get done early, I’ll take you down to the creek this afternoon.”

“The creek? Where’s the creek?”

“Down past the barn. But we better get busy or there won’t be time.” Grandfather went back out the door.

Hazel sighed. She set the stool next to the wall. She got her wet sponge. She climbed up to start washing the dirt off the wall. She stepped down to rinse the sponge, rewet it with soapy water, back up on the stool again.

She did the same routine over and over. The wall turned from light brown to creamy white. She didn’t need to get up on the stool. Then she had to kneel down on the floor. The wall was done.

The broom closet wall was next. The routine began again. The door made this a bit different.

The broom closet was next. She started taking the old cleaning supplies out. Dirt and cobwebs got swept out next. Then the wall cleaning routine finished the closet.

Hazel finished the other outside wall of the closet. Next was the door frame for the way to the dining room. No door hung here. The dining room frame was really dirty on top but narrow. Now she came to the tall closet looking cupboard.

After sweeping and cleaning it, Hazel opened the cupboard doors. Tiny squeaks followed by furry bodies sped across her feet and across the floor.

Hazel shrieked! Flinging down the sponge she fled. Screaming she ran through the mud porch and onto the back porch.

Chapter 4 Moving In

“Hazel? Hazel, what happened? Are you all right?” Mother ran onto the back porch.

“Something was in the cupboard. They ran over my feet.” Hazel shook, stomped her feet and wailed.

“Sounds like mice. Actually I’m surprised we haven’t seen some already. Let’s go take a look.”

“You go look. I’ll go back when you’re sure they’re gone.”

“They won’t hurt you. They just scared you. Come with me. You have to get used to mice around here. We used to trap them every fall and winter when they moved inside because of cold weather.”

“How do they get in?”

“These old houses have lots of little gaps here and there. Sometimes the mice chew a hole through a baseboard.”

“Oh.”

“Come on. Let’s go back and take a look.”

Slowly Hazel trailed behind Mother back to the cupboard. There were nests on several shelves. Baby mice with soft brown fur, big ears and dark brown eyes huddled in the nest on the bottom shelf. Mother swept them into the waste basket along with the nests, dumping them outside.

“Won’t they die?” asked Hazel.

“They’re ready to leave the nest so they will be fine. Do you think you can keep going now?”

“Yes.”

“Watch out for snakes.”

“Snakes? What snakes?” Hazel looked around the kitchen. “Where?”

“With all these mice there may be a few black snakes around. They eat mice.”

“What do I do?”

“Call me.”

Hazel shuddered. Maybe school would be better than cleaning after all.

By lunchtime Hazel was cleaning the cabinets beside the sink. Mouse nests were in all the cabinets. She would fling open the doors to let any mice run away, check for snakes then clean the nests out. It took a fresh pan of water to clean each cupboard and lots of paper towels.

Mother came in. “You’ve made a lot of progress. I finished in the bathroom so I’ll help in here this afternoon.”

“I’m almost out of paper towels.”

“So am I. Maybe Grandfather can go into town and get more this afternoon. We’ll need lots more tomorrow. And we need more cleaner. I seem to need new water often.”

“Me, too.”

By the time Grandfather returned with the paper towels and cleaner Hazel and Mother were finishing up in the kitchen. The oak cabinet doors shone softly golden white. The cherry wood table was a deep reddish brown glowing under its new polish. Only the wood floor remained a stubborn dirty brown even though it was clean.

“I haven’t seen this room like this for a long, long time,” commented Grandfather as he set a sack on the table.

“It’s nice enough to eat in,” said Mother. “But the old refrigerator doesn’t work. There’s no propane for the gas stove and no wood for the wood cook stove.”

“I did bring take out from the Chinese restaurant in town.”

“Hazel said something about going down to the creek this afternoon. Why don’t you take her down that way while I get the dishes and microwave out. Dinner will be ready when you get back.”

Hazel ran to the bathroom to wash some of the dirt off. Then Grandfather led her out the back door, past the well house and hen house toward the old driveway leading down the hill.

“What was that?” asked Hazel pointing to the platform in a tree as the two walked by.

“A tree house. It’s probably not very safe anymore. It used to be a little room but the walls and roof are gone now.”

“Who built it?”

“I helped my father put the original one up. I guess I was about ten. Then I fixed it up for your mother and Thomas. Tom was your mother’s brother.”

“He was killed. Mother told me. Did you build the hen house too?”

“I’m not that old! That place was built before the house was, over a hundred years ago.”

“A hundred years!”

“It’s built out of logs. Here, let’s go look in and you can see.”

Grandfather stomped down the weeds to the hen house door and pulled the door open part way. It caught in the dirt refusing to open any further. Hazel stuck her head in. The walls were logs. Cracks ran the length of some of the logs. Some logs had places crumbling away. Dust, dirt and cobwebs were everywhere. Some contraption of sticks filled half the house. A metal cylinder with a tray hung from the ceiling. Another rusty version sat on the floor.

“Those log walls are white oak. My great grandfather built those walls when he first came here with my great grandmother. He was born in Germany in eighteen sixty-nine. His parents came to the U.S. in eighteen eighty-three. He and his new bride moved here in eighteen ninety-one. This was their house until he built the big house. Our family has lived on this place ever since.”

“Wow.”

“The house is in good shape. The yard needs new wire, posts. It wouldn’t take much to get it ready for chickens again.”

“I don’t know anything about chickens. I couldn’t even have a cat in the apartment.”

“Cats are good for catching mice and stuff. We always had some in the barn.”

“If they’re good for catching mice, we sure need one in the house. We found mice or their nests in all the cupboards in the kitchen.”

“I think I still have some traps. Those work in the house.”

“Who built the barn?”

Grandfather started walking toward the barn with Hazel following. “I’m not sure. I remember a log barn when I was young. It was closer to the house. There was a big storm and a huge oak blew over on it. But the other barn was built before that happened. I guess my father or grandfather built the foundations. The original barn on them

burned before I was born my father told me. He built the present barn on the old foundations because they are so solid.”

“Did you raise cows?”

“I had some cattle. Before we got a tractor we had horses.”

“Where are all the rocks from?” asked Hazel looking over the barn foundation which came up to her waist.

“They were cut from bluff rocks down by the creek. I wonder how bad the fence is. Probably needs all new wire and posts. Lots of brush to clear to put it in. It would be nice to have some cattle again.”

Grandfather opened the side barn door and stepped inside. Hazel looked in then inched in behind him. She looked up in surprise.

“There’s a ceiling! Is there a room up there?”

“There’s a loft. That’s where the hay was kept for the winter. That ladder on the wall over there and that one behind you go up. The horse stalls were over there.” Grandfather pointed to his right.

“What’s hanging on the posts?”

“The harness.”

“I love horses. Father was going to let me take riding lessons when he got back from Iraq. Maybe Mother will let me get a horse.”

“Horses are a lot of work and cost a lot for feed, shoeing. And there is a tractor.”

“I want a horse to ride for fun.”

“Let’s get down to the creek and back. I’m getting hungry.”

“So am I. Why don’t we just go back for supper?”

Mother had their dishes from New York set on the table. The microwave sat on the counter near the pantry door by the refrigerator. The food smelled delicious to Hazel after working all day.

“How did you like the creek?”

“We only made it to the barn. The log walls in the hen house are really neat. And Grandfather might get cattle.”

“Really?” Mother looked at Grandfather.

“Just a thought.” Grandfather cleared his throat. “Dinner smells good. I’m hungry.”

“Why don’t we take tomorrow morning off and go to town?” suggested Mother as she put dinner on the table. “We need to get a refrigerator. Is that propane tank still out there?”

“It’s buried under vines and weeds. The lines are all copper but they may leak.”

“I wonder if the stove and hot water heater still work.”

“The only way to find out is to get gas and turn them on.”

After breakfast the next morning the three went to town. The first stop was the hardware store so Mother could talk to Mrs. Fergusson. Her face was white with anger when she came out and got into the pickup.

“Let’s go arrange for a tank of propane,” she snapped.

By lunch when the three sat down in the same little café on the Square, Mother was calm. The propane and refrigerator would be delivered the next day. She had spoken to Mr. Braswell at the museum giving Hazel and Grandfather a chance to look around at the exhibits.

“Mrs. Fergusson told me she couldn’t hire me. It seems Mr. Whitmore and his sons do a lot of business there and will stop doing so if I work there. One of the sons, Daniel I

think, was standing down an aisle laughing when she told me this. She wants me to call her later. I don't know if I will or not. The son walked by me as I left and said the Whitmores didn't want me in Crooked Creek."

"Why would he do that?" asked Hazel.

"Elijah Whitmore always was a vindictive man," growled Grandfather. "But this is going too far."

"Crooked Creek is much bigger now. The Whitmores can't run all of it. I think I will call Mrs. Fergusson. She may know of somewhere else I can work."

That afternoon Hazel cleaned her new bedroom. It was easier with no furniture to move or go around. All the other rooms had at least a few pieces of furniture. Hazel wondered what happened in this room.

Once the floor and walls were clean, Hazel went looking for Grandfather. He helped bring Hazel's bed, dresser and desk up the stairs.

"What happened to the furniture that was in here?" asked Hazel.

"There was a single bed, dresser, desk and small bookcase. I'm using them in my trailer."

"Now I can unpack my clothes and things. Why's the wall slanted?"

"This house is a story and a half farmhouse. That means it has a main floor and some rooms under the roof for a second story. The roof is outside that wall."

"And that is a gable."

"That's a gable. The house had to have windows when it was built. There was no electricity. We didn't get electricity out here until nineteen fifty-six."

"I read cities had it by World War One!"

"That's in the cities. Out here we didn't get it until the county formed a co-op and put it in."

Grandfather helped Hazel bring suitcases and some boxes of her things up to her new room. He left her opening boxes.

After putting her clothes in the closet and dresser, Hazel opened the box with her computer in it. She looked over at the desk. It was in front of the window in the end of the room.

That window was still brown with dirt. So was the window in the gable. Hazel sighed and got the paper towels and window cleaner.

Hazel cleaned the inside of the window by the desk. Most of the dirt was on the outside. Opening the window she cleaned the outside the best she could as far as she could reach. That was the bottom two panes out of four on the bottom part. The top four panes were far out of reach.

Hazel cleaned the inside of the gable window. She opened the window and looked out. The house roof was just a couple of feet below the window. It didn't look very steep or slippery. She could hang onto the window. The screen pushed out easily. Hazel set it inside the room and carefully stepped out onto the roof, lowered the window and started to clean it.

"Hazel, what are you doing?" yelled Grandfather.

"Cleaning the window."

"Standing out on the roof isn't safe. You could slip and fall."

"How else do I clean the outside? The roof isn't slippery."

Just then the bottle of window spray slipped out of Hazel's hand, hit the roof and skidded down the shingles to drop to the ground. Hazel watched it fall. Her stomach

knotted up. Maybe standing out here wasn't such a great idea. She took a deep breath, started to toss her head but grabbed the window frame instead.

"Hold on. I'll come up and open the window for you."

Hazel waited hanging on tightly. Her hand cramped. What was taking him so long? It seemed forever before Grandfather was opening the window and helping her in.

"Maybe we shouldn't say anything about this to your mother."

"Maybe not."

"I'll get a rope so you can clean the window safely."

"A rope?"

"We'll tie it to something in here and around your waist so you can't fall off the roof."

"It didn't seem so bad until I dropped the cleaner bottle."

"Here it is back. It looks like you're ready to move in here as soon as you put sheets on the bed. I have the propane tank cleaned off and have some time. I'll get that rope so you can finish the window."

"That leaves the outside of the other window," said Hazel stepping back in the gable window.

"That takes a ladder. We'll do that some other day."

By suppertime Hazel had set her computer up. Mother had given her some sheets and a blanket so the bed was made. Having her things around again made this almost like home. She sighed. This was home, now. It felt so alone. No friends. No phone. No Internet. New school. No people around. No traffic. No Central Park. She threw herself on her bed and cried.

Mother cooked up a special meal the next night on the old gas stove. The pile in the front room was much smaller. Hazel's things were in her room. Mother's things were in her room. All the kitchen things were put away.

"The house is awfully cold," commented Hazel. "How do we turn on the heat?"

"There is the outside wood furnace. It still works as far as I know. And there's the old one in the front room. Just need some wood and the ducts cleaned."

"Who sells wood around here? How much do you think we'll need?"

"Hunters do. I get some from them."

"Let's call after dinner. What do you think? Would four rick be enough?"

"Probably not but we can cut some. There's a couple of down white oaks by the creek and a walnut. If I split it up right, you could use the old cook stove. That warms the kitchen up real well."

"Bakes up the best biscuits, breads and pies too."

Grandfather smiled. He was whistling as he went up the hill to his trailer.

By Sunday night Hazel was so tired and sore she could hardly move. The three had gone to town for groceries Saturday morning. The rest of the weekend was spent bringing in wood. Hunters delivered four loads and helped stack it in an old wood shed under the back porch. Grandfather took the tractor down by the creek and cut up the oak and walnut trees. Mother and Hazel walked down and stacked the wood on the tractor trailer. Once that was full, Grandfather allowed Mother to drive the tractor up the hill while he walked with Hazel. The wood was unloaded and stacked in the shed. They went back for another load. Hazel pulled branches off and piled them, got covered with wood chips from the chain saw, scraped her hands on broken branch stubs and rough bark, slipped and fell in mud near the creek.

Sunday night the house was warm enough for Mother and Hazel to stay. There was a new layer of dust that blew out of the furnace ducts onto everything even though the ducts had been cleaned out. Hazel knew how to start a fire in the outside wood furnace and put wood in to keep the fire going. This was definitely not New York she sighed as she fell into her own bed for the first time since leaving New York and went to sleep.