

Storm Passing

Francis W. Perry

NOTE-- SPOILER ALERT!
***If you might read the first book,
Approaching Storm, it would be
best not to read beyond p.8 in
this excerpt (contains summary
of events in first book beyond
that point)***

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Storm Passing

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In Memory of Wendy Ruth Nickerson, 1970–2005
School Counsellor

Prologue

“I’ll fill the tooth, but I give no guarantee that it will work. There’s a very good chance of infection deep in the tooth, in the pulp, as bad as this cavity is. A root canal is what you really need, but I don’t have the stuff for that here.”

If there really was a light bulb that came on overhead when a wonderful idea arrived, it came on above the patient then, dimly at first, then finally rivalling the dental lamp spotlighting his gaping mouth.

He raised his eyebrows, shifted in the chair, and brought one hand up to grasp the dentist by his skinny wrist. The guard near the door, who had been tilted back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest, brought the chair down to the floor with a thump. His right hand fumbled for the handle of the baton on his belt.

Green sheathed fingers backed out of the patient’s mouth as the dentist tried to shake off his grip. Words struggled around the plastic suction tube.

“You think I might need that, Doc? A root canal?”

“Oh, you do. But I don’t know if you have any chance of getting one. This filling might give you some relief today, but it’s just capping things off. It’s abscessed. You’ll end up losing the whole tooth with the infection

down there. And pain. You might get that coming back. In spades."

He couldn't see the dentist's eyes through the protective glasses, only the reflection of his own mouth strained open, bright in the lamp, as the green plastic fingers moved back in and reached along his upper teeth, prodding and pushing. At least no one could detect the grin spreading into the corners of his lips. He lowered his hand back to the arm of the chair.

The old dentist withdrew and muttered to himself as he fitted a small burr onto the end of a drill, holding it up to the light and moving it from side to side. Dr. Garvison was well into his seventies, thin to the point of emaciated, with long arms and legs like some kind of insect. The little hair he had was white and only on the sides of his head. The bare top of his head was decorated with several nasty-looking brown and black spots and one adhesive bandage.

His patient relaxed back into the chair.

A root canal, eh? Now that was the first break he'd had in a long time.

One

Spring in Maine arrives slowly, its work done first in secret within the trees and down in the soil as winter relaxes its hold. The mud from the departing frost gradually dries into dark earth on the surface, and then softens more deeply as temperatures slowly climb, awakening roots and seeds. Tentatively at first, the ground erupts in green shoots spiking through dry yellow grass. Later, each deciduous species in its turn produces tiny buds on its branches. First in the south, then later in the north, like a magician unfolding handfuls of cards, tiny curled leaves appear—more and more every day until summer actually returning is believable.

Along the coast, where Route 1 often runs near the ocean, even in late May the winds from north or east can still be cold.

As they drove beside the many small coves off Flanders Bay, Ruth Wilcox looked at the waves. A swim at this time of year would not be even remotely desirable: the dark water looked positively frigid.

She was heading east, her friend Kathy now dozing in the passenger seat. The lowering sun cast a long shadow in front of the little car, swinging to left and to right with the curves, coming back at them and then reaching out with the hills. Ruth took her eyes from the sea and kept a close watch on the oncoming traffic. When they crested slight

hills, they were often coming straight out of the sun for approaching drivers. She kept the car to the right, watchful for a sun-blinded driver who might be wandering over the centerline on a curve.

The car was only a week old, and Ruth loved it. Seth and her father had ganged up on her the last time around, convincing her to buy an all-wheel drive Ford Explorer. She accepted that it was a wise move, considering the Maine winter and the storms that could strike with little warning, but after four years of climbing gas prices, she was glad to turn it in as a trade toward something smaller.

“You get what you want,” Seth had said. “You’ll be driving it more than I will.” It was a dangerous statement. She took him at his word.

In March Seth had applied for a transfer from field work with the Maine State Police Criminal Investigation Division, and was becoming more involved in forensic work at the Augusta lab. He was already enrolled in several courses at the University of Maine for the fall, cost and time courtesy of the department, to bring his biology and organic chemistry to a higher level. Their new apartment was within walking distance of the crime lab, so if the weather was at all reasonable he walked to work. He had a very high mileage Toyota Camry that would be their second car, and he used that on nasty weather days.

So Ruth had set out seeking a new car on a Saturday morning, taking only Kathy Forbes, a new teacher and new friend from the school where Ruth was a part-time counsellor. Kathy had arrived green last September, straight out of the education program at Presque Isle. Ruth took a natural liking to the young woman, helped her get settled in, and served as a sounding board for the inevitable

struggles of a first year teacher. They had found a fast friendship at school and in the off hours when Seth was busy with the challenges of the job change.

On a bright Saturday morning, the two of them first cruised the auto dealerships for something that simply caught the eye. They drove into the lots, around between the rows of cars and generally back out again, ignoring salesmen who tried to catch their attention.

“I want something—different,” Ruth told Kathy. “I don’t know what it is, but I’m getting tired of ordinary. I want something that will raise a few eyebrows for a change. But safe. And reasonably good on gas. Safe, reasonably good on gas, and—*different*.” She laughed. “I don’t know what I want. Something outrageous that won’t offend the practical nature that I struggle against!”

While going for different didn’t include Seth—she loved him dearly—it did apply to a lot of other things in her life at the moment. She was afraid that her life was fitting into a routine that could go on for a long time. Her job as a part-time school counsellor and area counselling supervisor was interesting, sometimes demanding, but even in that there was a routine. She had been married to Seth for four years, and had wanted a family from the start, but in spite of their not using birth control, it didn’t seem to be happening.

What was perhaps most significant, a month ago she had just crossed the not so magical forty line. It would be strange from here on to think of herself as not being in her thirties. Twenties seemed in the long distant past. Life was rolling along. If she couldn’t change the big things, perhaps she could alter the small.

She was tempted at the Ford dealership and actually got out of the Explorer to look at a tiny Fiesta in a gorgeous

“Lime Squeeze Metallic”— that’s what the salesman who hurried over called the color. It came very, very close. He had the door open for her, car keys in his outstretched hand, when she finally got the courage back away and say, “Not yet. I just want to look around a little more.” She hauled Kathy back to the SUV and out onto the road again.

“Tempting,” she said, “but I’d have to fold Seth up to get him inside it.”

Then she saw a white Kia Soul, up on a raised platform in front of a long line of cars. She was drawn to its strange little box shape. There were few like it, for sure. They took a bright red one out and circled the neighbourhood.

“It’s got you, hasn’t it?” commented Kathy from the passenger seat. “You haven’t stopped smiling since we left the lot.”

Ruth looked over and grinned. “You think so?”

She fought off the urge to copy the Fiesta with a green that Kia called “Alien”, reluctantly let the red demonstrator go, and at the last minute decided if she was going wild on the style, she had better play it safe with the color. She picked a rich brown called “Java”.

Ruth was sitting on the front step of the apartment building when Seth arrived home. She could see him two blocks away, always looking about, taking in the sights around him. Seth had crossed the forty mark two years ago, and just lately his hair had taken on a sprinkling of white that troubled him more than it did Ruth. Ruth’s shoulder length brown hair had no grey yet, but she supposed it would come. Why was it that men became “distinguished” when it arrived?

Seth could wear casual clothes while working at the forensic lab, and today jeans and a black sweatshirt was his

fashion choice. His blue eyes sparkled when he saw Ruth waiting for him.

The Soul was sitting at the curb and he looked at it and then back at Ruth.

“Tell me that’s not . . .”

“But it is!” said Ruth. “Isn’t it great?” She bounded down the short sidewalk, grabbed Seth by the arm and dragged him over to the car.

“I’ll never fit in that!”

“You just try it. I asked the salesman. He said there is more head and legroom than in your Camry. You just try it.”

Seth took the keys she dangled in front of him, and they both got into the car. He made a big thing of adjusting the seat back for his six-foot frame, then sat and wiggled the steering wheel back and forth. He waved one hand over his head, measuring the distance to the roof.

“Well? asked Ruth. “It’s great, isn’t it?”

“It looks like it could be . . . fun.” Seth admitted. “And you like it?”

“I love it!”

I’m a little over the limit, Ruth thought, as she and Kathy sped along. Wouldn’t do to get a speeding ticket on the first real excursion.

It was Friday evening, the end of a long week of work at the school, and the start of the Memorial Day weekend. Heading for Ruth’s home north of Harrington for an overdue visit with her parents and their ward Belle. It was a trip made at least monthly by Ruth and Seth, but this time he was busy, Ruth wanted to take the new car out, and Kathy was free.

Kathy struggled up from sleep and started looking steadily out the passenger window, taking in the countryside that was just starting to turn green. Some of the trees had little tufts of leaves; others were still bare or had the only the tiny shapes of buds dotting their branches.

Kathy was shorter than Ruth, probably barely over the five foot mark, with thick black hair that was cut just to chin line, straight down and then hooking toward her face at the ends, bangs covering her forehead. "Old-fashioned" Kathy called it, but it suited her. She certainly didn't have the height for modelling, but her strong features, with large eyes and full lips, often made men turn their heads. Ruth could only see the back of Kathy's head as she stared at the trees, but then she twisted in the seat and turned to face her.

"So, Ruth. Tell me how you met this wonderful husband of yours. I'd like to find one like him. Has he got a brother? Preferably an identical twin? Maybe even a close friend?"

"No brothers. Not many friends, between the demands of his job lately, and the demands of me, I guess. And, I know you don't like to hear it—or maybe you do—he's not perfect either!"

"I guess none of them are perfect, but I would like to meet one that came at least close."

"How I met him is a bit of a long story. You've heard some of it at school. I'll tell you a bit more." Ruth settled back in her seat and Kathy swung her legs to the left, leaned her back toward the door, and looked at Ruth.

"You've at least seen the plaque on the library door marking it as a memorial to Kelly Walters, the teacher who was murdered at the school eight years ago."

“Yeah, they were talking about that back before Christmas. I guess it happened about then, did it? Christmas, I mean?”

“Yes, it was just after Christmas, almost two years before I got there, actually. Seth was the officer assigned a year later to follow up the case. The police had no leads at that time, and it was just considered a cold case. Seth had just gotten to be a detective with CID. As a junior inspector he got stuck with lots of cold cases. We met at the school. I had just been assigned as counsellor there for two days of the week, to work with students and staff still hurting from the killing. I’m sure I told you about Belle, the girl who lives with my parents. Belle Lapointe is part of the story as well.”

“How does she fit into it?”

“Belle had been in Kelly’s homeroom when Kelly was killed, and from the start I felt that she knew something about Kelly’s death.” Ruth slowed down as they approached Ellsworth and the bridge across the Union River. “She was a hard one to get to talk; it took me a long time of mainly being a friend to her before she finally opened up.”

“I don’t envy you your job... it’s enough of a task to teach them school stuff without trying to solve their family problems too.”

“With Belle it was more than ‘family problems’. Belle lived with her stepfather, a man named Charlie, and I knew he was abusive—just didn’t know how far it went. It turned out, when Belle finally admitted it, that he had been using Belle for child pornography.”

“Child pornography! Taking pictures of her? With other children?”

“No other children, at least not with Belle. Pictures of Belle and her stepfather. Terrible pictures. I don’t know just how far it went, maybe the therapist Belle used to see knows that, but it was pretty bad. There was sometimes another fellow with them. They never did catch him, someone named Aaron. He was never in the pictures and Charlie refused to say anything about him to police.”

“What a nasty mess! I say again that I don’t envy you your job—not for a minute!”

Ruth navigated around the streets of Ellsworth until they had run the length of High Street and back onto Route 1 again, concentrating on her driving. Kathy sat quietly and gave Ruth the chance to focus on the traffic.

“What did that business with Belle have to do with the teacher who was killed, Ruth?”

“Kelly was Belle’s homeroom teacher, and near Christmas she learned about Belle’s abuse. As we understood it later, Belle had drawn a picture in class one day that was sexually explicit. Something she should not have known about at age eight, which she was at that time. Kelly took the drawing, but made the mistake of not contacting police or Child Services right away. It’s a tangled mess from that point. Kelly confronted Charlie Lapointe about the drawing, and stirred up a hornet’s nest. I think she was about to go to the police, and went into the school on Christmas Break to get the picture. If things weren’t bad enough, she ran right into another side of the hornet’s nest—an accomplice of Charlie’s, Wally Poulson. He was our Phys Ed teacher at the time—bit of a strange fellow, let me tell you. He’d been secretly taking pictures of the young school girls in the shower room adjacent to his office. He passed these on to Charlie, who sold them to wherever he was selling pictures of Belle. It’s believed that

Kelly caught Wally with his secret camera, and Wally killed Kelly to prevent her going to the police about the whole mess. It could be that Charlie had a hand in that as well, though it could never be proven.”

“Wally wouldn’t tell?”

“Wally was dead.”

“Whoa! There are a hundred turns to this story.”

“You want to believe it... and I still have the occasional nightmare about it. Wally was shot by Seth, just when Wally was trying to kill me and Belle. In the school. In the night. In a blizzard. After Charlie tried to kill me. It was a night to remember, though I would rather not.”

“That sounds like a movie. I guess I’m sorry I asked. Opened a can of worms.”

“No, that’s OK. I’ve talked about it many times by now. Someday when we have more time, I’ll tell you even more about it.”

“So what happened to the stepfather? And that other fellow...Aaron?”

“Charlie got sentenced to fifteen years in prison, for what they called creating and distributing child pornography, and various charges of sexual assault on Belle, not to mention assault on me, which was close to an attempted murder charge. He won’t be getting out of there for another nine, unless he gets breaks for good behaviour, which I doubt, with his temper. Seth thought Charlie could end up killed by some of the other prisoners after they learned he had been abusing a child, but as far as I know, he’s managed to stay alive.

“Wally was killed, and the fellow named Aaron disappeared, it seems. Belle couldn’t give a clear description of him; I suspect she blanked out a lot of memories, and she said he was usually behind the lights.

Charlie refused to give anything about him to the police, and he never turned up in any of the pictures they found. Apparently he helped with the cameras and with distribution to people in Asia. There was some thought that he might actually be Asian, but Belle couldn't clarify that."

"So Belle lives with your parents?"

"Yes, she and I hid out there for a while in the middle of this mess, and they took a quick liking to her. After it was all over, Belle had no family left, and we thought it was best to get her away from Parker Mills and the school where all this happened. She went to live in Harrington with my parents. She's another daughter for them now. You probably don't know that my maiden name was Hammond. My father is Bob, and my mother Helen. I should have told you that before this."

"So how old is Belle now? Fifteen?"

"Sixteen, actually. Just got her driver's license a couple of months ago. Hard to believe. It seems like yesterday that she was just a little girl. Turning into a young woman."

"I look forward to meeting her. She sounds pretty special."

"She is special...very special. Like a younger sister now to me, I guess. Seth and I thought of adopting her ourselves, but decided after all she had gone through, she needed the stability of my parents, who were not running off to jobs everyday. They've just kept her over the years as a foster child, but they love her like one of their own, of course."

"Weren't they afraid that someone else would try to adopt her?"

“A little bit, but it’s hard for older children to be adopted, everyone wants a baby, and we had a bit of an ‘in’ with Child Services, to be honest.”

“How’s that?”

“They made some screw-ups about Belle at the time, caused a bit of the whole mess. Most of the trouble was one woman, who made some judgment errors. She came to me later and apologized, cried a bit in my office, and actually we’ve become almost friends. She told me on the sly that she was happy with Belle’s situation, and she and her supervisor would see that Belle was never promoted as a child to adopt, and if anyone showed any interest, she would call me and Seth so we could get an application in as well.” Ruth slowed again as they rounded a curve and started across the bridge over the water between Taunton Bay and Sullivan Harbour.

“The point is moot now, anyway. Once she reached sixteen, she has the right to choose who she wants to live with. Although she’s still a ward of the state, Child Services is no longer concerned with placing her unless she is not in a good home.”

“And she’s in a good one?” Kathy smiled at Ruth from her side.

“The best. I should know.” Ruth grinned back. “And it’s changed her. Changed her a lot. She was so quiet when she was at Parker Elementary. I guess she was frightened and put down by her stepfather, and really couldn’t fit in with the other students who had more stable lives, so she withdrew. Over the last six years with my parents she has really matured, and developed a backbone... a lot of backbone. We didn’t realize she had that potential. There’s almost nothing she won’t try, sometimes it scares me.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“It is, and probably it comes from the support of my parents, especially my father. He encourages her at every step—the two of them get into a lot of trouble with my mother from time to time. Belle can do no wrong in his eyes. I hope it never gets her into trouble.”

Ruth relaxed and watched the miles tick past. The little car hummed along, and she reached out and triggered a CD in the player.

She couldn’t help smiling while thinking of the way Belle had developed so wonderfully. Ruth’s mother and father would enjoy having her around the house for at least a few more years. They had given her the love and support that was so lacking in her early life, and laid a foundation for her future.

Ruth had once taken Belle back to the elementary school where she had been attending when she lived with her stepfather Charlie. It took the staff a minute to recognize Belle; she had changed so much over the years. Few of them realized that within the withdrawn little girl there was so much potential.

It had been a frightening time back when she first met Belle. Most of the trouble had come from Charlie Lapointe, truly an evil man. Belle was free of him—they all were. By the time he got out of prison, Belle would be almost twenty-five years old, perhaps even married.

It was good that it was all behind them now.

(If you really think it’s all behind them, read on into the novel.... select Purchase Information on the website to see how you can get the paperback version of the novel, or connect with sites to download eBook versions)