

## MEMORIES OF A COTTAGE

I was on my way back from Baldwin's Book Barn. I had spent too much time and money there for only three used books. As I drove up Route 52 North, I was detoured off at Norfolk Road. Almost out of gas, this was more than inconvenient. It amazed me how many times I ran out of gas but never learned the lesson of paying attention to the gas gauge. Norfolk Road seemed to go on forever and it went from two lanes to one. My car sputtered a bit but kept moving. When I came to a slight hill, the engine died and the car coasted to a stop. Once I got out, I noticed that it was a beautiful day to be stuck, a brilliantly blue sky with only one small cloud visible off to the right. My car had stopped in front of 5232 Norfolk Road, which was a house about ten car lengths back from the road. There was a darkish car parked up the driveway near the house. Its trunk lid was up and a woman was carrying something rectangular from the car to the middle of the lawn. Immediately, I saw her as the solution to my stalled car problem. Because I'd been turned down for rides by women drivers before, I knew to approach her carefully. I wasn't sure whether to wait by the street and ask her for help as she left or to walk up the driveway and ask her there. I realized she might not leave for hours or until tomorrow. She was putting up some kind of sign but I couldn't read it from the street. I decided to ask her halfway between the street and her car by shouting to get her attention. As I walked up the driveway, I noticed that it was made of broken seashells. Just as I reached the halfway point she turned and looked in my direction but the cloud threw a deep shadow over her and her sign. It was then I first saw the house. It was stunning. It looked like something out of English fairy tale. It was a cottage with a genuine thatched and gabled roof, a round-topped front door, huge over-hanging oak

trees, and stone walls of a beautiful greenish stone. It didn't look like any house I had ever seen in America. As I stared at it, someone or something seemed to move behind the larger second floor window but I was too far away to be certain.

“Are you interested?”, the woman said. She had walked over to where I was standing while I was staring at the house. Her immediate presence and voice startled me. Being slow on the uptake, I was flustered. “The Cottage?” she said. After a moment I said, “No, I just ran out of gas.” “Can you give me a lift to West Chester?” I said pointing to my car. “Yes, as time goes by. I first must check the Cottage,” she said as she marched off toward the cottage. I followed her by a pace or two trying to make small talk. I guessed she was in her early forties with an athletic stride, dressed in a longish skirt, light leather jacket, and clogs. She was wearing more rings than I thought were necessary but her fair complexion was flawless. I mentioned the odd wording of her sign, “COTTAGE TO BUY OR LET”, with brown stick-like lettering on a light blue background and with a darker blue beneath. The line between the blues was scalloped. The letters were not laid out in standard line by line blocks but seemed to followed some other scheme, perhaps heraldic. Upon hearing my comment, the woman stopped short, turned, took off her sunglasses, and asked me how long it would take me to walk to West Chester. Noting her sparkling blues eyes and the wonderful expressiveness of her face, I said, “Your sign will probably sell this cottage before I could get there.” Without prompting, she then proceeded to show the cottage and the grounds to me as if I had come for that specific purpose. Now I'm glad that she did. It was and is an amazing property. Realtors are always touting location. The cottage not only had location, it had charm and character fundamentally different from any house I have ever visited or

lived in. Once I crossed the wide, oak threshold, I didn't want to leave, ever. I didn't want to go back to my car or my life in my own house. Every step in the Cottage drew me farther and further into its enchantment: oak floors, maple, linenfold wainscoting, pebblestone fireplace, casement windows with leaded glass of a bluish cast, lathed plaster walls and ceilings, details and nuances of hammered silver, brass, and wrought iron, insets of turquoise and amethyst as medallions in the carved mantel and in the lintels. As we walked through the Cottage, the lady realtor peppered me with an amazing amount of information. I actually began to feel dizzy from the overload. When she went out the back door, I stayed in the Cottage for a few moments to collect my energy. I tried to remember whether I had taken my medication last night. I hoped that a drink of water would steady me but there were no cups. I let the water run in the sink for a few moments. Then I cupped my hands to take a sip. The water refreshed me instantly but the drain seemed to be stopped up and the water was filling the sink. After I turned the faucet to off, the sink began to drain slowly. I tried to look down the drain and I saw my reflection in the puddled water. The water was mirror-like. I could see my reflection perfectly. My face appeared to be five pounds slimmer or five years younger than this morning when I shaved. The realtor startled me again as she re-entered the back door shouting, it seemed to me, "Water here is from a very old and very deep well, it has more character than anything from Maine." As we went out the back door, I noticed that a splinter cut I had gotten at Baldwin's was gone now, healed completely. I idly wished that I'd run my wet fingers through my thinning hair. Once back in the full sunlight, I wondered if the Cottage tour would include a dip in the pool, surprisingly present, in the back yard and if the pool was filled from the well. Ms. Realtor explained that the Cottage

sat on a three acre lot and the Nature Conservancy had title to all the abutting lands. No modifications, extensions, deletions, etc. could be made to the property. She then disclosed a remarkable set of circumstances about the Cottage. The Cottage was not originally built at this location. It was moved here from the Cotswolds in England in 1959, across the Atlantic, every stone, every board, every bit of plaster, by a very wealthy Scotsman. It is the only building in the world under the protection of the U.S. Historic Landmarks Commission and Britain's National Trust. Property records at the county courthouse show that these lands and the Cottage have been owned by an absentee Scottish family from the mid-1600s and that it was bought by an Austrian real estate trust in 1959. At this point I was rather bemused by the entire data stream coming from the realtor. But, before I could ask a question, she volunteered that it was in this Cottage that King Charles I of England spent his last night as a free man before being captured by Cromwell's henchman and executed in London, on Saturday, January 30, 1649. She spoke these words with so much energy I might have believed that she had known King Charles or witnessed the events personally. When she finished the tour of the Cottage and grounds, she was almost glowing with pride.

Without further ado, she asked me whether I wanted to buy the Cottage. I was very surprised at the pointedness of her question, inasmuch as my only connection with the property so far was having my car stalled in front of it. I congratulated her for having such a remarkable real estate listing. Specifically, I assured her that, if I had the ability to buy it, I would do so without hesitation. Her face beamed more so at this. She remarked that the sale price was very steep, without even mentioning the price range. I did not inquire further since I already had a three story Victorian in an adjacent county

that I was paying a steep mortgage on. I assumed that we would leave the property now and she would drop me off at a gas station in West Chester. I was wrong.

We were in a comfortable conversational mode and I was reluctant to ask the lady realtor her name and office affiliation. I was sure that it would come up soon. She walked over to a framed picture embedded in the rear section of the living room wall and she stared at it intently. I walked over to it also because I felt a conscious need to be especially courteous or chivalrous to her, beyond the matter of the ride, to express interest in something that she was evidently interested in. Many times since that afternoon I have tried to reconstruct the sequence of occurrences, circumstances, and events which changed my life so dramatically by drawing me into the life at the Cottage. I have never been able to settle upon a rational explanation for what happened then and after.

As I looked closely at the picture, actually a drawing, I noticed that the young woman depicted was wearing very old fashioned clothing, clothing of some distant historical period, early modern, certainly handmade and of a bold design. Without any specific reason, I felt that it looked somewhat like the Scottish style with doubled sashes across her torso and a longish skirt. There was a circular brooch where the sashes crossed. The dogs at her feet were Dalmatians. In the background of the drawing was a cove or beach with an oared boat at the water's edge. The realtor asked me, "Mr. Groats, have you ever been smitten?" I said that I didn't know because I wasn't exactly sure what that meant. Her eyes narrowed with displeasure at my reply and I worried that my ride might be in the balance. I said, "I am enchanted with the Cottage, with its character, with its ancient connections. I will never forget the first moment I saw it and the delight of exploring it with you. If that's what it means to be smitten, then I'm

smitten.” Her magnificent smile warmed me instantly and she said, “That’s exactly what it means, John.” “Mr. Groats, John, would you like to lease the Cottage?” Wow, I thought, that came out of left field. As I started to fumble for an answer, she quickly explained that the owner wanted to have the property occupied at once by a responsible tenant if it could not be sold to the right buyer. The annual rent was only such as would cover the land taxes, about Five Hundred Pounds yearly because of the landmark status and the building and use restrictions. My surprised reluctance must have show on my face because she said, “I’m serious, Five Hundred Pounds.” The Cottage was the most remarkable building I had ever seen that I would want to and would be able to afford. I guessed that the rent was about \$1,000.00. I spent more than that on wine in a year. “I’ll have to think about this for a day or two and I’ll call you by Friday,” I said. “No, you must decide now, it is not only the smith who must strike while the metal is hot,” she said. I felt that this matter was becoming ridiculous, regardless of my hope for a ride. Oddly, in her last retort, I thought that I heard some subtle foreign accent or inflection. She was again looking at me with eyes hard and piercing. I glanced at the drawing and I saw the same piercing gaze. Instantly, I knew the accent I’d heard was a very light burr, a Scottish oral mannerism. “If you leave here to day without committing to the Cottage and its lands, they shall be forever lost to you,” she declared without a bit of humor. In the scheme of things, I wanted the Cottage for as long or as short a time as chance would allow. I felt that I would be happy to sell my house as soon as possible and to live here for good and all. I just needed time to handle the practicalities. “I’ll do it,” I said with some trepidation but no reservation, “where do I sign.” “No paper is required, here your word is your bond. You are now a tenant at sufferance,”

she said. “But if you are told to vacate, you must do so within three days, by sundown of the third day,” she said. “Don’t cut down any trees, don’t dig in the cellar. “I’ll visit once a year on my progress to assure myself that you are good tenant and true,” she said. “When should I pay the rent and where?” I asked. “I’ll send my man Ivers to collect it on the traditional days,” she said. “May I ask your name?” I asked. “Yes, John, I am Ms. Stachel and this,” she said while gesturing to the Cottage with her left arm and hand, “is Stachel’s Cottage.” “Do you have any keys for the Cottage?” I asked. “There are no locks on this Cottage, its curse has been its defense for well over three centuries,” she said. I should have known that this was too good to be true or simple. A centuries’ old curse, what next, I thought.

Ms. Stachel dropped me off in town and urged me to move in as soon as possible but only during daylight hours. She gave no reason, but I saw such earnestness in her eyes that it motivated me to follow her directions literally. After I reached my house that evening, I sat down heavily and contemplated what I had done. I wasn’t worried about the cost, it was an incredible bargain. It was the day to day logistics which concerned me. I had bought my house because it was less than a half hour ride to my job. Because it was a work in progress, my house was not readily saleable. The Cottage put me about three times farther from my job in a dwelling of ancient construction, with likely no custodial support, and with the suggestion of odd spiritual emanations. Even moving in would require a good bit of effort. I wondered what the electrical service was like. I decided to go over the following afternoon with my rocking chair, a floor lamp, some books, and cups and dishes. I would be sure to arrive before dark. Before dawn I awoke from an indistinct but very sensory nightmare

involving the Cottage being cluttered with piles of papers (banking forms, death warrants, magazine subscription renewal forms) and me being pursued by a beclotted woman who claimed possession of the Cottage by descent. I also had an overwhelming need to check an almanac to verify when dawn would break in the Cotswolds on the next winter solstice.

Seven months or so into my tenancy of the Cottage, Ms. Stachel appeared and informed me that I must give up possession at once because a buyer had come forward to take possession of the property permanently. I don't recall completely but I believe that I gathered up my few belongings and moved out as quickly as she wanted. I felt that this possibility was part of the reason that I had never been comfortable moving all of my furniture and clothes into the Cottage. I had been in the habit of arriving at the Cottage about dusk and leaving by midnight. I still shaved, showered, and dressed at my original home. About three weeks later, Ms. Stachel appeared while I was walking on Kelly Drive in Philadelphia. She told me that the sale to Lawrence of Paoli had fallen through. She asked me to resume my tenancy upon the same terms as a personal favor to her. Of course, I found her to be hypnotic and I could refuse her nothing. I rushed back to my car and drove directly to the Cottage. I sat or laid on the living room floor until dawn just absorbing the energy and mystique of the Cottage. Norfolk Road was greatly less traveled since the bypass came straight through the area. The Cottage's isolation in distance and time seemed complete. When I arrived there of evenings and closed the three inch thick oak door behind me, I felt alone with eternity but for the ghosts of twenty generations. In some sense the Cottage had such a cozy feeling about it that it bordered on womb-like. In the



twenty-three months that I was the tenant of the Cottage, I had never invited anyone to visit. I'd felt complete just being alone with the lares, the spirit of the Cottage.

The Cottage had been carefully oriented to match its original site in England. Allowance was even made for the change of latitude. The front door faced due east so dawn would light the main bedroom. For reasons not clear, the scuffs on the floor of the main bedroom from the various heavy beds that had been in that chamber over the centuries show that all were always placed in the center of the room, not abutting any walls.

Sometimes the Cottage seemed less rectilinear and more organic, its sharp edges and angles morphing into curves and arcs, like a lover in the dark. The architectural details that I had studied carefully by daylight, took on jewel-like dimensions and brilliance when illuminated only by candlelight. The silver and iron and amethyst medallions bespoke feminine or womanly adornment. I wondered if the builders had known that the ancient Greeks had considered amethyst an antidote for intoxication, alcoholic or romantic. The smooth oak floors were as hard as an ex-lover's heart or the decisiveness of the word "No". But, these same floors could support any weight that a man could lay upon them, yielding a little, but holding firm. The filled-in cellar seemed like a deep reservoir of undefined mystery, fear, and emotional confusion, almost like the subconscious of the Cottage. Like the currents ebbing and flowing through a woman's mind, outwardly rational and predictable, these elements suggested deeper, more primal needs and motives. One's guesses about others' sensuality is frequently well wide of the mark even if one is already enmeshed in it. Such connections found counterparts in the pool, the fire-

places, the odd-shaped rooms, and the windowless warren of the attic. The countless details of lives lived and now past, including conceptions, births, and deaths, and the almost palpable sexual echoes made it clear that one's tenancy in the Cottage, or anywhere, was transient. The weather worn elements of the Cottage, inside and out, reflected the hard living aspects of women's lives from overworking themselves for others' benefit to excessive indulgence to mask or dull pain, fear, and loss.

Ultimately, Ms. Stachel was a substantially uncommunicative as the Cottage was a keyless riddle. Each allowed me to make assumptions, reliances, deductions, and decisions without logical or emotional discussions or dialogue. Each expected me to pay absolute attention to cues offered in languages and codes that I did not know or was not able to learn instantly. I was using seed corn for popcorn and I didn't know it or perhaps care.

Soon after I initially took possession of the Cottage, I prowled about in the fading daylight or with a candlestick. I quickly learned that flashlight batteries died within minutes in the Cottage. My searching disclosed to me the remarkable construction and the durable materials used in the Cottage. I purchased many books showing the details of historic cottages and I learned the names and configurations of many of the joints used to make the Cottage, essentially, one solid piece of craftsmanship. I took photos of some joints and odd details to experts to obtain explanations. Some of these experts asked to visit the Cottage but I always put them off, being unwilling to share the Cottage with any other mortal soul. I felt that I was living a unique experience granted to me alone almost by magic. I quickly came to the belief that protecting and being protected by the Cottage would recreate in me the ability to

hope and trust others and inspire trust as well, would make me a person who could gain or have confidence and reliability.

One of the burdens of living in the modern world is the profusion of choices in food, mates, furnishings, cloths, architecture, lifestyle, religion, etc. Though possibly boring, the style of the Cottage was an unsentimental mix of utility, availability of materials, and time-tested skills. There was also the certainty that this is how everyone built. This certainty or decisiveness undoubtedly carried over into most aspects of people's lives. Taken too literally, it could become the dead hand of tradition. But if tempered with imagination and reasonability, it produced people who weighed the facts evenly, made reliable decisions and then stuck to them. I guessed that the builders of this Cottage, sometime in the 1500s, were such people, practical and decisive. Without consciously meaning to do so, I also characterized Ms. Stachel in my mind as this kind of person. I overlooked certain other aspects of her character, however, and that to my misfortune.

Although I was completely relaxed at the Cottage, I established the routine of leaving it at midnight for the ride back to my house. I always left for work from my house because I found the Cottage to be too alluring in the morning. While there, I just wanted to laze around, to paint, to write, to carve, to read, to dream. Shortly after I took possession of the Cottage I began staying over until dawn. I was late for work a few times and I missed work entirely one day. I was also trying to organize the contractors to get my fixer-upper in shape to sell.

After I had been settled in the Cottage for a few weeks, some of my friends voiced concern about the import of some of my metaphysical comments about rights and

responsibilities. Though the remarks didn't seem much more pointed than my previous arguments, most of these friends stopped seeing me or inviting me anywhere. As a result of my odd bilateral residential circumstances, and my argumentativeness, my social life dropped to nil. This didn't bother me then, however, I was happy to be left alone.

During my last month as a tenant in the Cottage, I sensed an emotional charging, sometimes positive sometimes negative. Occasionally, when I arrived at the Cottage, the doors would be stuck closed so I couldn't gain entry. I then would have to return to my own house and I felt like an outcast. Other times, there would be no water from the tap. For several days in the next to last week of my tenancy the weeping in the bathroom produced a puddle on the floor which I slipped in and fell hurting my back and my ego. Once, when I arrived at the Cottage, my rocking chair, normally by the front window on the first floor, was on its side by the drawing on the wall. Ashes were tracked out of both the upstairs and the downstairs fireplaces and strewn around the fenders. I was sure that I had never even ignited a fire in the main bedroom fireplace and I couldn't imagine who had. I found dirty footprints, large and small, human, animal and other and debris tracked from the filled-in cellar. I discovered, mixed into the fill now at the top of the cellar steps, crockery, fabric, clothes, bits of metal, glass, sand, figured and charred wood, paper, seashells, and bone. These discoveries scared the bejesus out of me. I was now afraid to be at the Cottage at night, but I still came because I couldn't stay away even if it meant my life or my sanity. Only occasionally in the last few weeks did I feel any genuine kinship or connection with the Cottage, as at first. On the whole there was a growing ambivalence inching toward distain, then hostility. Having had the wonderful earlier feelings toward the Cottage, I knew that I couldn't

abide her disdain or hostility no matter my attachment and need.

Sometime in the late Spring, I saw a sign in the middle of the lawn with the odd stick-like letters and blue coloring. I immediately phoned the realtor's office and asked what it meant. Oddly, I got the first woman with whom I had spoken over a year earlier, Ms. Stachel. She said, "Oh, you can ignore that if you choose to, it's not really intended for you personally." I was late for an out-of-town trip so I just let it go as more of her eccentricity. Ms. Stachel thanked me for my care of the Cottage and bade me to "Travel well!" At that time it seemed a commonplace, not a prescient remark. When I returned several days later, I was out of possession and my head was spinning, it is still spinning. The realtor's office disclaimed any knowledge of Ms. Stachel and of Mr. Ivers, and of the Cottage. Now I can't even get a phone listing for the new occupant or owner.

I remember Ms. Stachel stating my long term right to lease the Cottage. She said, "You have the right to make the Cottage yours permanently until someone else takes up permanent possession by purchase outright, which might happen at any time with no more prior notice to you than this explanation." In retrospect, it does not seem all that secure but her smile and eyes made it seem everlasting. I remember telling her about my unsettled affairs and how long it might take me to be able to raise the cash to buy the Cottage. I remember her reply clearly because it was so comforting. She said, "Take as much time as you have."

Without knowing exactly why, I felt that my bipartite living arrangement was not what Ms. Stachel wanted for the Cottage when she leased it to me. But my practical issues seemed paramount to me at the time. I didn't know or choose to realize,

that the Cottage somehow drew strength from the tenant or owner as well as vice-versa. Each month that I enjoyed possession of the Cottage lulled me further into the belief or feeling that I could continue to do so indefinitely. Unfortunately, my lack of genuine commitment to our unorthodox arrangement would ultimately tell against me. There was no literal writing on the Cottage walls, except maybe the set of the jaw of the woman depicted in the drawing in the wall.

Last week, I stopped at my house to pick up some furnishings and food to take to the Cottage. I found on my front porch all of my possessions from Stachel's Cottage, neatly boxed up, including my rocking chair. I immediately drove to the Cottage. There was a car parked up by the Cottage and a small light shown through the main window on the second floor. Instinctively, I knew that Ms. Stachel had allowed me to be dispossessed. I was afraid to go to the Cottage and raise a ruckus as the evening lengthened into full darkness. I had always sensed that Ms. Stachel's powers extended well beyond simple legalities. I decided to wait until daylight to attempt to regain possession. It was clear now that the inexplicable sign I had seen weeks ago was the harbinger of my dispossession.

The next day I learned from another local realtor that the transaction was the talk of the community, \$800,000.00 cash. I went directly to the Cottage and I met Ms. Stachel at the bottom of the driveway. She confirmed my eviction and the sale. She said she was so sorry for the haste and she wished me well. I asked when the new owner was to take possession. She looked at my archly and said, "He has been taking possession, bit by bit, for several weeks while you read quietly and went home to your other house every night before midnight." "I don't understand," I said. "It was not a matter for

understanding, but for feeling and action only,” said Ms. Stachel. “He’s all in now, you can’t dislodge him. The Cottage is as surely his as a wife belongs to her husband the day after the wedding.” As I walked down the driveway to my car, I turned and looked back at the Cottage. The sun was full upon the front, glaring the windows. But, at the main window on the second floor I’m sure I saw someone watching. It appeared to be a woman. I took half a step to the side to break the glare. I then saw no one. I must have imagined her, perhaps I had imagined her from the first moment. I returned to my own house, my own life, my own future, dispirited because dispossessed from the Cottage.

Just in the weeks before my dispossession, I’d felt that my connection to the spirit of the Cottage was growing stronger. I didn’t think that the spirit of the Cottage was the least bit passive. Although the walls of the Cottage were not talking to me, I sensed that its needs were being felt and met. Now I feel I took that sense too literally, hanging pictures, rescuing pets, building birdhouses, securing doors, etc. It now seems to me what the Cottage needed and wanted was security and protection against physical and psychological ravages of time and the irrelevance that time engenders. I only saw the short term, more time for me in the Cottage, not more time in existence for the Cottage. How sadly short-sighted I had been to think that I could anticipate or understand the the circumstances of such a preternaturally complex sensibility.

I felt some continuing kinship with the Cottage, some personal connection, me to it, her to me. I also couldn’t stop thinking of the nature of the connection between Ms. Stachel and the Cottage. She was certainly no ordinary realtor as this was no ordinary dwelling. I idly wondered if she existed apart from the Cottage or was she somehow a manifestation of the Cottage, of all the people who had lived and died in and

about and for the Cottage over the centuries. She was certainly flesh and bone and rings, she was comely in a regal sense, but what was she at other times. Was there more or was there less to her than I'd discerned. I recalled that once I came to the Cottage much earlier on a weekday than was my practice. I surprised Ms. Stachel at the pool. I watched in amazement as she swam a half dozen vigorous laps in what I knew to be bone-chilling spring water. As I then walked toward the pool, she climbed out, naked, effortlessly and donned her dress and clogs. As I noted to myself that there is now no doubt that she was a flesh and blood woman, she remarked, "It is invigorating to battle with water and win." Then she asked how I liked being a tenant at the Cottage. I said I loved it and that I hoped it would never end. Ms. Stachel replied, "What has a beginning always must have an end, hope is for maidens waiting for princes not for tenants." She had said these words in a pleasant tone but her eyes had gone to a piercing stare which always unnerved me. She then said that I should sell my house at once and buy the Cottage. Without trying to provoke her, I reiterated that the sale of my house would raise too little money to allow me to buy the Cottage, even though I didn't know what it might cost, because my house was in terrible condition and the market was turning cold. Ms. Stachel said, "You would be surprised at how a flush buyer can be conjured into existence when needed." I didn't know what she meant by that. She marched up the lawn to the Cottage and I strained to keep up with her. We walked around the Cottage, clockwise, twice before she headed for her car without another word or backward glance. Later I saw that she had left her sun hat by the pool and I picked it up to save for her. I also noticed steam rising from the pool which, to my knowledge, was only filled with ice cold spring water. For no apparent reason, I put her sun hat in the second floor bathroom



on a hook on the “weeping” wall.

There is now a line of large yew hedge halfway between the street and the Cottage. I didn't know that you could have a hedge delivered and installed like a fence. It is a fine hedge except that it completely blocks the view of the Cottage but for the very top of the gable. Two workman are also erecting a masonry gated entry. Two signs now flank the macadamized driveway. Both read “Private Property – No Trespassing” in standard black letters on a yellow background. No more than once a month, usually at midday on a Sunday, I drive slowly by the Cottage but the hedge and the gated entrance block all view from the road. After I pass by, I stop at Baldwin's Book Barn to lose my thoughts in stories of other lands, other centuries, but never of other dwellings.

I would probably never have learned all the secrets of 5232 Norfolk Road but it would have been satisfying to have tried. Now all I have are sharp-edged questions: why was the cellar filled in and was the pool dug only to get fill for the cellar, why was pool sited in the tree line, why was the pool water steaming hot after Ms. Stachel's swim, why did the bathroom wall “weep”, with regularity and then for the whole last month of my tenancy, what did the stylized (winged) “B” volant architectural detail mean, why were there such strange leasing arrangements and conditions for the Cottage, why was there no TV (or even cable) reception at the Cottage while the neighbors had no problems, why didn't the realtors know Ms. Stachel and Ivers, what mistakes had I made in my life which dictated that I could have the Cottage as my home and focus for only so long as it took me to fall utterly in love with it and then be dispossessed abruptly for the benefit of Someone who paid a fortune for it though he loves it not a farthing's much as I?

If one loses his status as a tenant or owner or lover, can he not re-cast himself as a friend, associate or some other less integral character? Or is he to be cast out into the cold darkness with short shrift, and not thought of again?

I have tried mightily to reconstruct my last conversation with Ms. Stachel. I think that, in retrospect, I sensed an undercurrent of sadness and resignation in her voice. I have not been able to get any further. I'm still drawn to the Cottage as I was on that first day but now I stay away for fear that my interest will somehow cause harm. Through my contacts at the courthouse, I have learned that the new owner has taken out permits to excavate the cellar to store wine and to reconstruct the second floor bathroom to fix a leak and to install a hot tub. Although I wish that I could do something to protect the Cottage from such depreciations as Ms. Stachel warned against, I suspect that the "curse" she alluded to may be defense enough. The only other bit of information that my researcher passed along to me, which may bear upon these matters, is a reference in records from the 1640s about a woman, second cousin King Charles I of England, who was trying to avoid an arranged marriage. She was Barbara, Princess of York. I suspect that the drawing on the wall of the Cottage is of her. It is suggested that she fled to Burton-on-Water in the Cotswolds when Charles was there and that he helped her go to Dover where she boarded ship for the Continent. It is believed that Charles aided her with money and a letter. The ship was listed as lost in the crossing and she with it. There is, however, another anecdotal tradition that she was not lost at sea but that she made her way to Salzburg, Austria where she lived anonymously until she tried later, by plots and bribes, to save King Charles from execution. Nothing came of her efforts on behalf of her cousin, he was executed in London, and she was lost to history.

The same researcher did note that the name Stachel is also a German word meaning 'barb', as in the barb of an arrow. A search in heraldic tradition revealed that the escutcheon of the Stachel family shows an arrow flying over the ocean.

It comforts me to believe that my Ms. Stachel is somehow connected to that 17<sup>th</sup> century noblewoman and that she's protecting my Cottage still.

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