

WINTERKILL

A long wooden pier extends from the foreground into a misty lake. The pier is made of weathered wooden planks and has a simple wooden railing on the left side. In the distance, a small red buoy is visible on the pier. The water is calm and reflects the overcast, grey sky. The overall atmosphere is quiet and somewhat somber.

Joyce K. Walsh

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For John

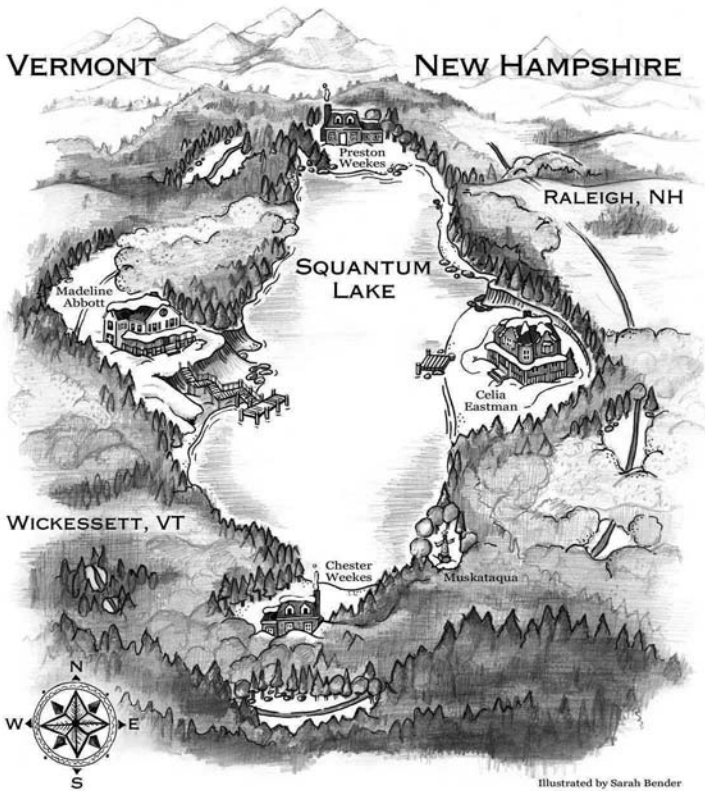
*With special thanks
to Peg Holzemer for producing my play Gooseberry Tarts, and
to David Porter for suggesting it could be a novel.*

About the Author

Joyce Walsh is the author of three mystery novels (Juckets, Swamp Yankees, Bog Men) in “The Pittsley County Chronicles” series. She is also the recipient of a Massachusetts Artist’s Grant in Playwriting as well as a fellowship from the Artists Foundation of Massachusetts and an American Regional Theatre Award; her plays have been performed in Boston and New York. Joyce lives in Lakeville, Massachusetts with her husband, two dogs who run the household, and assorted woodland creatures—including four generations of red-shouldered hawks who expect to be fed several times a day. (International animal protectionist, John Walsh, it may be known, has rescued the greatest number of animals since Noah.) Additional information about the author may be found on her website at www.joycewalsh.com.

win-ter-kill

1. *to kill by or die from exposure to the cold of winter, as wheat.*
2. *an act or instance of winterkilling.*
3. *death resulting from winterkilling.*



Illustrated by Sarah Bender

CHAPTER ONE

*“Thou know’st ’tis common; all that lives must die,
Passing through nature onto eternity.”*

The afternoon sun bounced off the lake ice like a bullet, sending shafts of frigid light deep into the woods and, along its trajectory, illuminating the bronze statue of an Indian woman just above the shoreline. Set on a marble base, she stood erect in fringed deerskin and boots, with arms stretched out over the lake toward the west. The plaque at the base was inscribed:

Muskataqua

b. (?) - d. 1887

The last of her kind.

There were sizable footprints emerging from the woods to and around the statue, then back through the trees. The snow had been

brushed from Muskataqua's upturned face and the icicles that had hung from her arms like stalactites had been knocked away.

A Model-B Touring Car careened twelve miles per hour downhill around the frozen lake, the snow piled high as hedgerows along the sides of the narrow road. As the young driver chattered amiably away at his silent passenger, the elderly woman had a stricken look on her face. Not only was she apprehensive about the driver's cavalier attention to his driving, the redoubtable Madeline Abbott was even more dismayed that someone of his station in life was attempting to converse with her.

Finally arriving at their destination, Madeline paid the driver from her coin purse, closed her navy leather pocketbook with a dismissive snap, and walked briskly up the path to the green house. She knocked three times with the brass doorknocker monogrammed with an *E*, waited briefly, then continued to knock steadily until the door was opened.

"My goodness, Georgie, what took you so long? I could freeze to death waiting on the doorstep!"

Georgie Skates looked at a loss for words, his eyes downcast in a face whose features resembled those of the bronze statue. Madeline, at sixty-five, twenty years his senior, was still a striking woman—tall, spare, quick, and as upright and unyielding as a white ash. His shoulders hunched, Georgie mutely stepped aside.

It was slightly later that same afternoon when David McKay drove his blue Plymouth coupé the five miles from town toward Celia Eastman's house. His tire chains crunched and rattled over the packed snow atop the dirt and gravel beneath.

It was early spring 1932, five months after he first arrived in Raleigh, New Hampshire, to research his new novel. He had weathered his first New England winter, made a dear friend with a useful library, and fallen in love, as yet unrequited. Because of the latter, his eagerness today to share good news with Celia was overshadowed by his impatience to see her companion again. David's eyes brightened

as he contrived how this time he might manage to be alone with Mira, no matter how briefly. Mira, the embodiment of the woman he had conjured in fiction who was as real and as beautiful as he had ever imagined her. Mira, his Maria. A smile played on his lips as he thought of her raven hair, her gentian eyes . . .

An insistent whirring of a radial engine intruded on his fancy. David frowned and pushed away a forelock of blond hair as he peered upward into the cloudless sky. A yellow bi-wing Stearman skimmed high above the tall snowcapped pines. The pilot was leaning out of the open cockpit, the icy air whipping across his face, holding onto the struts of the plane to get a better view of the hilly countryside.

At the lofty height of two hundred feet, the airman would take in both New Hampshire and Vermont at a single glance, encompassing all four homes on Squantum Lake. There were two small cedar-shake cottages, one at the north end of the lake and its mirror image at the south; opposite and alike, even the smoke from their brick chimneys puffed up in parallel plumes. The other two houses at the east and west, one green and the other white, were larger and more formal. They stood facing each other like queens on a chessboard. The green house belonged to Celia Eastman and, along with both cottages, was on the New Hampshire side.

The white house on the Vermont side was perched throne-like on higher ground above a series of steps and landings leading down to a dock at the lake's edge. Next to the dock, a wooden Old Town canoe was stored upside down on cement blocks. The canoe and the wooden stairs were layered with crusted undisturbed snow. The house, and indeed it seemed the very air surrounding it, belonged to Madeline Abbott. He'd heard of her through Celia but had not yet met the eccentric friend of his friend. Nor had he met the Weekes brothers who seemed to keep only their own company and not each other's.

David clutched and braked then shifted into neutral to watch as the pilot, braving the cold air aloft and the radiant cold from the still-frozen water below, swooped down to nearly treetop level. It could only be Matthias Carson. Anyone that bold, David reluctantly

concluded, had a willful determination that was quite above the ordinary. Such scope of ambition. So like Matthias Carson, he admitted, so unlike me. His grip on the steering wheel tightened.

From the breakfast discussion at David's boardinghouse, he knew Carson's purpose that day had been not merely the pleasure of being airborne and viewing the lakeside geography. The lawyer was returning from a neighboring county where he had expected to get an overview of inaccessible land involved in a boundary dispute. He represented the complainant in the lawsuit and he carried both land and aerial maps of the territory in question, and a camera in his flight bag. He intended to win the case for his client. And of course he would. Carson was a man bred for detail. He made his living at it. Those who knew him said he could count your fillings as you smiled. From Yankees, this was a commendation. Only David thought otherwise.

The plane circled, turned, and dropped down to buzz his car in a provocative gesture that David interpreted as a taunt.

"I know you see me," David muttered under his breath.

His frown deepening, he ground the gears as he shifted back into third and continued on to Celia's.

Madeline swept into the living room ahead of the lumbering Georgie. He followed aimlessly as though intending to announce her if only she would let him.

"Celia, darling, what a ride! What a ride! That driver! Lord, they can't keep four wheels on the ground in this state of yours. I felt like the Russian wolves were snapping at our heels."

From her wheelchair Celia Eastman held out her hands in greeting. "It's so good to see you, too, Maddie, after such a long winter."

Madeline unceremoniously draped her navy woolen coat over Georgie's arm and tossed her purse onto the sofa next to a dark-haired young woman sitting with a notebook in her lap.

"Long and dismal." Madeline took Celia's hands and bent to kiss her on the cheek. "How have you been, my dear?"

“As usual.” Celia smiled engagingly. “I hibernate through winter like a bear.” Her white hair was framed in light from behind by the bay window overlooking the lake.

“And who is this?” Madeline inquired.

Without seeming to have noticed and not looking in her direction, Madeline observed that the maroon velvet sofa seemed to enhance the color of the young woman’s eyes. She wore a simple white middie blouse with its sailor-collar neatly pressed, and a navy skirt flared just below the knees. Quite common, Madeline thought.

“Do you still need me, Miz Eastman?” Georgie asked rocking back and forth.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Georgie, I didn’t realize you were still here. Certainly you may go.” As he turned to leave, Celia added, “Mira will fix supper tonight. So if there’s anything you’d like to do, you’re free to do it.” At his baffled look, she explained, “Mira’s going to prepare a special diet. Not that there’s anything wrong with what you fix, Georgie. But this is supposed to do some special something for my innards.”

“Increase red blood cells,” the young woman offered.

“Increase red blood cells,” Celia repeated to Madeline with a sly smile.

Georgie muttered a glum “Yes, ma’am” and left with Madeline’s coat to prepare their tea.

Madeline arched her eyebrows. “What’s wrong with your cells, Celia?”

“My doctor says they’re low. That’s why I’ve been so weak.”

Madeline assessed the dark circles under her friend’s eyes and her bluish lips. “Who is this doctor who talks about cells?”

“Roland Niles. Do you know him?”

“No,” Madeline said dismissively and gestured toward the young woman. “And this is . . . ?”

“Oh, my goodness, I’m sorry. I’m getting so forgetful. Madeline, may I present Miss Mira Webster? Mira, this is Miss Abbott who lives across the lake.”

“Vermont side,” Madeline asserted with a sharp look at the young

woman's bare collarbone.

"How do you do, Miss Abbott." Mira folded her hands in her lap.

Madeline fixed her gaze on Celia. "And who *is* she?"

"Mira is my nurse, amanuensis, cook, everything."

"Where is she from?"

"Oss-ippee," Mira answered.

Madeline pursed her lips. Was there a slightly disrespectful edge to that voice? She wasn't quite certain.

"And I'm lucky to have her," Celia quickly affirmed. "Mira dear, you don't mind if Miss Abbott and I have a little visit together, do you?"

"Oh no, Miss Eastman." She placed the ledger on the coffee table. "Will you have your tea now, Miss Abbott?"

"Of course I'll have tea." Madeline turned to Celia. "English, is it?"

Celia nodded and Madeline shook her head. "One of my ancestors dumped it in Boston Harbor. One of yours too, probably."

As Celia chuckled in response, Mira hastily retreated to the kitchen.

Madeline moved about the room, taking inventory. Not an item had changed since her last visit. Nor in the years she'd known Celia. Nor, she suspected, in all of Celia's life. The furniture was still the same Victorian furniture with faded maroon upholstery, not out of frugality but simply that the owner paid little attention to such things. Madeline pointed to the ledger.

"What is she writing there, Celia?"

"Oh, that's mine. I'm compiling the town history for our centennial next year. Mira's helping me."

"Really?"

Madeline picked up the notebook and scanned it perfunctorily. In truth, she paid scant attention to the history of Vermont, much less that of New Hampshire, even though her library was stocked with reference books that had been her father's. She had lived most of her life in Massachusetts, whose history she felt she knew well

enough.

She dropped the ledger back on the sofa. "Anything noteworthy?"

"In some ways, I suppose, Muskataqua was our most noteworthy resident," Celia answered. "She was an Indian princess, after all."

"Indeed." Madeline blinked her eyes slowly in evident doubt.

"Well, I found something regal about her. Even in poverty. She just seemed so . . . dispossessed."

"You actually knew her?" Madeline asked in surprise. "You never mentioned it."

With effort, Celia wheeled herself closer. "She was living here when Father and Mother bought this land seventy-five years ago—before I was born—so they let her stay. Her little shack was in the clearing where the statue is now. When I was little, Mother would make up food baskets for Father and me to deliver to her every week. And when I got older, I made them up and brought them to her myself. Sometimes she would come out of her shack, and sometimes she wouldn't. And sometimes we'd just talk through the window—her on the inside, me on the outside. She'd tell me stories about the things as they used to be. I think now, that she must have been quite lonely."

"Well, if that is the highlight of your town pamphlet, it's not exactly *The Pickwick Papers*, is it?"

"Hardly," Celia said with a wry smile.

"I used to do some writing, you know. Years ago, I kept a journal. That was when I had something worth recording. Now I give myself over to knitting and reading French cookbooks. Imagine! Life has become very tedious."

"Then you must find a way to make it less so."

"I scold. That is my amusement now. Don't I do it well?"

"Flawlessly," Celia answered as she struggled to wheel herself nearer the coffee table.

Madeline studied her friend closely. "You look very tired and pale, dear. Do you feel all right?"

"I'm fine. Please sit down, Madeline. It would make us both more comfortable."

Madeline complied, sitting on the sofa where Mira had sat, smoothing her navy blue gabardine dress fastidiously over her knees so the hem draped down past her black-stockinged ankles to her black-laced shoes.

“So tell me, dear, what tasty morsels has Georgie prepared for us today?”

“Gooseberry tarts.”

“Oooh, that’s nice, I love gooseberries.”

“I told him he must not make almond tarts because Miss Abbott says almonds are only for holidays.”

Madeline ignored this gentle jibe. “You are so lucky to have Georgie. I’ve had that stupid girl—Alva, Elva—whatever she calls herself. Hopeless. Couldn’t boil water without a recipe. I had to let her go.”

Georgie reentered with an antique silver tea service. On the filigreed tray were delicate pink bone-china cups and saucers and a platter of hot pastries, perfectly golden tarts with seams of bubbling syrup. As he set the tray on the coffee table, Madeline unceremoniously plucked a tart from the platter as though it were not impolite.

“Just on the perfect stroke. I’m famished.”

Georgie lifted the teapot by the handle wrapped in a pink napkin. “Should I pour it, ma’am?” he asked Celia.

“Yes, quickly, Georgie,” Celia said dramatically, “Miss Abbott is famished.”

As he poured, Madeline relished her tart silently. After Georgie left, she dabbed at her mouth with her napkin, then folded it in her lap before leveling her gaze at Celia.

“So tell me the truth, Celia, what’s going on here? Why are you doctoring?”

“Well . . .” Celia shrugged, sipping her tea. “Right after Christmas I started feeling poorly. I mentioned it to Mr. Carson and he—”

“Who is Mr. Carson?”

“Matthias Carson. My lawyer.”

“Since when?”

“Recently. Anyway he recommended Dr. Niles—”

“The cell doctor.”

“—and Dr. Niles felt I needed a nurse—”

“Is she an actual nurse?”

“—and Mira’s been very helpful. But I don’t seem to be getting better.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Madeline added milk to her tea and took a sip.

“He hasn’t said exactly.”

Madeline lowered her teacup in astonishment. “Surely he must tell you if you ask.”

“I don’t ask.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really care to know the particulars.”

“But Celia!”

“It’s not important. I have plenty of medicine and there will be no more talk of doctors.”

Madeline scowled her concession. “In that case, tell me about this lawyer you’ve found.”

Celia sipped the last of her tea. “Matthias? He’s only been here a year but he’s already made quite a name for himself.”

“Where’s he from? Oss-ippee?” She mimicked Mira’s rural inflection.

“Boston, originally.”

“A Brahmin?”

“I don’t believe he’s a Brahmin, Madeline.” Celia refilled her teacup but still did not touch a pastry.

“Then what’s so marvelous about him?”

“Well, he has a lot of clients. And he’s on the town board of selectmen.”

“A lawyer-politician?” Madeline sniffed. “Those are secondhand goods.”

“You are most wonderfully opinionated, Miss Abbott.”

“Of course. I think tolerance is greatly overrated.”

Celia laughed softly. “Dear Maddie, without you, there would be no condiments in my life whatsoever.”

Madeline reached for her second tart just as the door knocker sounded.

Celia registered surprise. "It must be David. I completely forgot he was coming today."

"Who?"

"My Californian. He arrived in Raleigh last December. You remember, I wrote to you about him in my Christmas card."

"Oh, yes, the dime-novelist." Madeline wiped her lips on the pink linen napkin as though the very words were distasteful. "What in the world do you want with him?"

"He uses my library and I enjoy his company. You'll like him, too. You'll see."

"A Californian?" Madeline said, as though liking such an individual were unimaginable.

A skeptical expression lingered on Madeline's face as the young man bounded into the room, his blond hair disheveled, his eyes feverishly blue.

"Guess what, Celia! I got it!" he announced enthusiastically. But seeing the forbidding-looking visitor, he brought himself up short. "I'm sorry, I'm interrupting you."

"Not at all. Come in, come in." Celia waved him forward. "Congratulations, David, good for you!" She patted the arm of the sofa. "Come and sit with us and have some tea."

"No, thank you. I won't stay today. But I wanted to tell you the good news about the advance."

"Advance?" Madeline asked Celia.

"From his publisher," she explained. "Madeline, may I present Mr. David McKay? David, this is my dear friend, Miss Madeline Abbott who lives across the lake. In Hill House."

"Vermont side," Madeline said imperiously.

He extended his hand. "How do you do? I live in the Kingdom of New Hampshire myself."

She offered a limp hand in return, which she felt he persisted in holding longer than well-bred. "I thought you were a Californian." Madeline pointedly withdrew her hand.

“One migration only. My parents were from Bismarck, North Dakota.”

“I suppose everyone in California is from somewhere else.”

“Aren’t we all? Us non-Indians?”

As Madeline rolled her eyes to Celia, the other woman quickly added, “David is writing a book about the Abenaki Indians who once lived in this area.”

“Oh. Is that sort of thing publishable?”

“My editor tells me it is,” David answered.

“Have you written other . . . books?”

“I wrote a fictionalized account of the Bickford murder. She came from Vermont, too, you may recall.”

“No.”

“Well, my book is called *The Descent of Maria Danforth*. I changed the name from Bickford to Danforth. Perhaps you read it?”

“I don’t read those kind of novels. Was it popular?”

“Well—” he faltered.

“Well, I certainly enjoyed it,” Celia said. “David’s new book is about a young Abenaki brave whose father is a tribal chief. His uncle kills his father in order to take his wife and become the new chief.”

David sat down on the arm of the sofa. “Then Nawasta pretends to be the ghost of his father and accuses his uncle of murdering him, and the uncle runs off, never to be seen again.”

“Sounds like *Hamlet*,” Madeline said brusquely as she reached for the largest pastry on the tray.

David hesitated. “I suppose it does, in a way.”

Madeline pondered between bites of her gooseberry tart. “That ghost business with the uncle. That wasn’t proof positive though, was it?”

“Well, no. But Nawasta knew his uncle was guilty. At least for the purpose of the tale.”

“Whereas in real life,” Celia said somewhat wistfully, “things are seldom that simple.”

“But that’s the beauty of a novel,” David replied. “You can make things happen the way you want them to.”

Celia chuckled. "I'm afraid I don't have that liberty with my stories for the Historical Society."

"Then you should try a novel," David suggested.

"I'm afraid I don't have the imagination for it."

"Don't be silly, darling," Madeline said, "how much imagination does it take to change a name here and there?"

David grimaced.

"I think there's a little more to it than that, Maddie," Celia said. "And David is a very talented writer. Some day, he'll be famous in his own right."

"Doubtless," Madeline replied.

David grinned painfully and stood up. "Well, I don't want to interrupt your visit and I've got to be getting back home to work. I'll come by tomorrow, Celia, if that's all right."

"Of course, David. But stop in the kitchen before you leave and get some tarts to take with you. Georgie just made them. Tell Mira I asked her to make up a package up for you."

"Thank you, I will. I'd never pass up a chance to have Georgie's desserts. Miss Abbott, a pleasure to meet you. Good-bye, Celia."

After he left, Celia's voice dropped conspiratorially as she leaned closer to Madeline. "I'm trying to make a match between him and Mira," she confided.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Celie, really."

"Why not? He's a sweet young man, don't you think?"

"Charming."

"I don't believe you mean that, Madeline Abbott, you're being very naughty."

"I just wonder what he wants."

"What do you mean?"

Madeline sipped her tea noncommittally.

"Madeline Elizabeth Abbott," Celia said sternly.

Madeline yielded with a shrug. "There's a look about him. Underneath all that boyish charm."

"He's young, Maddie. That's what it's like. Don't you remember?"

“Darling,” Madeline replied eyeing another pastry, “I can barely remember menopause.”

As the afternoon progressed, their conversation continued onto topics social and political, in particular the upcoming United States presidential election. Madeline lamented that after Mr. Herbert Hoover trounced that Irish Catholic, Alfred E. Smith—from New York, no less—in the last election, now he was faced with the “damn Democrat” Roosevelt, who was rumored to be Jewish. In fact, neither Catholic nor Jewish was as repugnant to Madeline as Democrat. The whole idea of a Depression was nothing but party propaganda.

“Mr. Hoover says we have a slight recession, but prosperity is just around the corner,” Madeline concluded.

“Then Mr. Hoover hasn’t looked at the breadlines outside the White House windows.”

And so it went for the next hour, with Madeline decrying the usurpation of the social order by the lower classes with Celia contrapuntal at every turn. Suddenly, in the midst of conversation, Celia bent over holding her sides.

“Celia? What’s the matter? What’s wrong? Celia?”

But Celia did not respond and her breathing became irregular.

Madeline rose swiftly and rushed to the door of the living room. “Girl! Girl! Come quick! Miss Eastman’s ill!”

Within seconds, Mira entered. Celia had slumped over the side of her wheelchair. Mira moved quickly and efficiently to Celia’s side, motioning Madeline out of the way. She knelt down next to her charge.

“It’s all right, Miss Eastman, it’s Mira. I have your medicine.”

She deftly set Celia upright but her head lolled back and her eyes were still closed. Mira laid the medicine bottle and spoon on the table and extracted another smaller bottle from her pocket.

Madeline watched anxiously as the girl removed the stopper from the smaller bottle and passed the smelling salts under Celia’s nose. The pale woman inhaled the acrid odor and sputtered to semi-

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

