

The Silent Watchman by William Wyant

Part 5. Interlude

The Appalachian Springs Weekly Informer

APPALACHIAN SPRINGS -- Janet Sterling Trent passed away quietly in her sleep after a long illness that forced her retirement from a Capitol City law firm and return to Appalachian Springs five years ago to create and direct the Appalachian Springs Community Foundation. Trent was preceded in death by her father, former State Senator Augustus Trent, and her mother, Martha Sterling Trent. Ms. Trent will be cremated and her ashes scattered over the graves of her parents. Funeral arrangements and plans for a memorial service are incomplete at this time.

Previously

REUNION

Yankee's: subdued and quiet, simply named and adorned with photographs and baseball memorabilia—Joe DiMaggio, Peewee Reese, and many others, all in New York Yankee pinstripes—patronized by friend and foe alike in the small town in Appalachia defined by the crossing of two highways that carved the town and the state into four quadrants. Catty-corner was the Palace Theater, and on the other two corners were the banks that gave prominence to this rural crossroads home of five or so thousands. On Saturday mornings, farmers and lumberjacks gathered on the four corners to argue politics, trade pocket knives, and admire railroad watches while their wives attended to the business of the homes and shops surrounding the corner of Main and Third. Sooner or later, though, many of them would wander into Yankee's.

On a late August evening, six life-long friends gathered for the first time since their high school graduation three months earlier. They had been “regulars” in Yankee's since childhood, having been introduced to the pub by their parents, themselves “regulars” and friends of the chief of the house, Joseph “Yankee” Timberlake, who ruled the front of the house while his wife commanded the kitchen. Yankee called them simply, “The Six.” They had not been together since graduating in May, and they were about to separate again. **Mandy** (Amanda Kay Armiston) and **Brad** (Arthur Bradley Cole), **Suzanne** (Sandra Suzanne Simington) and **Wil** (William Denton Broadmater III), **Jan** (Janet Sterling Trent) and **John Paul** (John Paul Anderson), sitting together at a round table under the watchful eyes of Yankee as he stood behind the bar, and listened:

John Paul: Summer's over ... the real world awaits. We haven't all been together since the night we graduated. We had such grand plans, and such a good time gazing into the

future, the coming summer, and where we're going to go, how we're going to get there, what we're going to do when we get there ...

Mandy: And we're ready to go, aren't we Brad?

Brad: You bet!

Suzanne: Go where, Brad? Any changes since the *old* high school days?

Brad: Yes! I thought then that I'd be headed for Seminary this fall. But Monday I'm off to see the world, US Army style: basic training, medical corpsman school, and then, well ... we'll cross that bridge when it pops up.

Mandy: And I'm going to nursing school at Sacred Hearts. This summer Brad and I earned our EMT certificates and answered calls for wrecks and heart attacks; we even delivered a baby on our last run.

Wil: That's quite a change since May. What did your folks think of you going into military service, Brad? That isn't exactly what I thought they had in mind.

Brad: They weren't real pleased; but, when I explained that I'm going to be a medical specialist and then go to PA school on the GI Bill, they came around. Even though he was a conscientious objector, Dad served as an ambulance driver in Spain and France in the '30's. When I get out of the Army, Mandy will be an RN and I'm going to PA school.

Wil: It sounds like you two are ready for what's coming. Suzanne and I are still going to State Teachers College. And I still want to coach the old green and gray with Coach Murphy.

Suzanne: All through high school we planned to be teachers, and nothing's changed. Hopefully, we can come back here to teach after we graduate.

Jan (wistfully): Coming back home.

Suzanne: Wouldn't that be great! What about you Jan; still want to be a politician like your dad?

Jan: I don't think so. I really didn't like some of the stuff I saw in dad's office this summer. Don't get me wrong; he's a great guy and a good state senator. But sometimes he had to go against the grain because some lobbyist or fat cat wanted something special. Someday, I'd like to have the power, but use it to help folks who have a tough time getting along in this wild world. Things are getting pretty complicated out there ... maybe I'll be able to smooth out the road for some who aren't doing so well on their own. So it's business school, MBA, law school: Who knows, I might finish college in time to work long enough to earn Social Security.

Laughter came easily to the Six.

Brad: You've been pretty quiet, John Paul. That's not your usual style. Where are you headed?

John Paul: Well, things are a bit up in the air. For a while, I'm going to keep my job with the contractor working on the highway bypass ... sort of hold the fort while you guys ride off at dawn.

Jan: You can make sure Yankee holds our table for us.

John Paul rose and raised his glass.

John Paul: Before we part, a toast.

He turned and gestured toward Yankee, who was leaning on the bar, listening and smiling.

John Paul: Listen up, Yankee! You are witness to this solemn pledge given before we set out to wander hither and yon 'til next we meet.

Returning his gaze to the five seated at the table, John Paul continued: "Brave companions, stand, raise your glasses and say as I say."

They stood, raised their glasses, and spoke solemnly in unison: "We each do bid adieu, and pledge, each to all, to join here on Saturday night at each class reunion to tell not less than all the truths, nor more, and renew abiding love."

Then the Six looked at each other, drank, placed their glasses on the table, turned to face Yankee, and again in unison, said: "Yo Yankee, Go Red Sox!"

Laughing, they rushed through the front door as Yankee scowled playfully and threw the bar towel at them, shouting: "Flee, you six ... insufferables!" As he recovered the towel, he muttered to himself: "God keep you safe and happy."

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Five years later, on the occasion of their fifth high school reunion, five of the Six (Brad and Mandy, Suzanne and Wil, and Jan) sat at their round table in Yankee's. Brad, his hand on Mandy's looked on as each spoke, but he did not speak. He was there in spirit only.

Jan: It isn't like him to be late. Yankee, any word about John Paul?

Yankee: Not since the fall you all left. He worked for a while out on the bypass and then just sort of disappeared.

Jan: Well, it isn't like him to be late.

Suzanne: Jan, you know that he'd be here by now if he was coming. A theatrical late entrance would be just like him, but he wouldn't have waited this long.

Wil: Well, I'm dying to begin.

Suzanne: Then start, Coach.

Wil: All right, I will. First, we renew the pledge. We haven't been together for a long time, and I think John Paul set the right agenda five years ago.

They stood and raised their glasses (all except Brad, of course, because he was there in spirit only): "We pledge to join here on Saturday night at each class reunion to tell not less than all the truths, nor more, and renew abiding love."

Wil: Yeah, it's pretty corny but it's tradition, our tradition, and I'm sticking to it. The 'adieu' part we'll save for later. I almost didn't make it. When my knee and hip collapsed during a lacrosse game at the end of my sophomore year, I thought my life was over. But, Suzanne sat me down one day in the student union and told me to quit mopping the floor with my chin, I had never been a quitter, and now wasn't the time to start. She said, and it is my motto today: 'Don't let what you can't do get in the way of what you can do. You march right into old Crafty's office and tell him you'll take the job of undergraduate assistant for Sammy's football scout team, and spend your time learning the playing styles of every opponent we face for the next two years.' Crafty said that by the end of those two years as Sammy's apprentice, I'd be the best high school coaching prospect ever to graduate from State. I did, and by golly I am. When Coach Murphy won the conference championship last year in football, guess who shared the sideline, and the limelight, with him. That's right ... yours truly. The years playing for him and the time at State paid off in spades. This season, it'll be official: assistant coach in football and lacrosse, and top dog in wrestling. I'm on track with a full head of steam. It doesn't get any better than that.

Suzanne: Not any better?

Wil: Well, now that you mention it, the picture might improve next June.

Suzanne: Might improve?

Jan: What's happening next June, as if I couldn't guess?

Suzanne: I think you guessed it.

Mandy: Brad and I would have been there *this* June.

Suzanne: Yes.

For an instant, all were silent. Then Jan spoke up: “Well, I’ll finish my MBA in August, and start law school in September. It’s been a busy five years, but by the time our tenth reunion rolls around, I should be a member of the state bar. No, Yankee, not your bar.”

Yankee: Thank God! It’s tough enough dealing with the bunch of you on that side of the bar. Trying to work around you on this side would be a pain in the ...

Jan: You should be so lucky! While I’m in law school, I’m going to shadow a corporate law professor my first year, and if all goes well, clerk for Judge Trent the summers after my second and third years.

Mandy: In January, I’ll be the lead nurse in the trauma unit.

The others, except Brad of course, spoke together as if queued by an orchestra conductor: “That’s great, Mandy. You certainly have made your mark.”

Mandy, looking down at Brad’s hand on hers: “Brad would have finished his first year in PA school. He’d have been one of my orderlies this summer. Three more years and we’d have been ...” Her words trailed off into silence.

Wil: He was the greatest, Mandy.

Mandy stared vacantly into a distant place, then continued: “I miss him ... a lot. His folks just can’t seem to get past it. They say that losing a child is really tough on parents; children are supposed to out live their parents ... so they say. We studied the grieving process in nursing school, and God knows I’ve seen my share of grief in the ER at City Hospital, but I don’t seem to be able to help his mom deal with it. She just can’t seem to get past it. His dad took it real hard at first, but he understood Brad’s drive. After serving in Spain, Brad’s dad hung around Paris, and when the Nazi’s invaded, he drove ambulances for the French and British. The Germans captured him, but when they found out he was American, they paroled him and he came back home to stay. He understood Brad’s desire to save lives. They say ‘time heals all hurt’; I wonder how much time ...”

For a moment no one spoke.

Breaking the silence, Wil said: “It’s time, now, for the “bid adieu” part. Brave companions, stand and raise your glasses, drink the salute to now and five years from now, and let’s head back over to the dance. It’s supposed to go on till the wee hours, and though I’m a bit gimpy, I can still swing.”

Suzanne: And your cuddle-up fox trot hasn't lost a beat.

Mandy: You guys go on ahead. I'll be along in a few minutes.

Suzanne: We'll wait too, Mandy; we'll all go together.

For a moment they sat in silence.

Mandy broke the silence, beginning pensively, but becoming increasingly bitter as she spoke: "He hated the killing and the dying, but he could not shake that godawful sense of duty. So he kept going back, day after day, trying to save every one of those godforsaken boys in all those goddamned places. And I will hate until the very last instant of my life every one of those tinhorn, born-again politicians who sent them there where he could not help but help."

The only sound was the tinkle of glass on glass as Yankee placed the one he had just dried on the shelf behind the bar.

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Five years later, on the occasion of their tenth reunion, five of the Six (Brad and Mandy, Suzanne and Wil, and Jan) gathered at their regular table in Yankee's. Only three spoke; Brad and Mandy looked on silently.

Jan: I guess he isn't coming.

Suzanne: Jan, you know he would be here if he could.

Jan: I know; but, ten years without a word. You'd think someone would have heard something in all this time.

Suzanne: He always had that quiet side ... that part of him he wouldn't share with anyone, Jan. Just the three of us now that Mandy is gone.

Wil: Well, we're here and we honor the pledge. Murphy retires next year; then I'm taking over football and lacrosse. With wrestling in the winter, I'll be coaching all year. It's exciting, but a little scary.

Suzanne: You'll be great, Wil. It's what you've worked so hard for the last five years. My teaching load will be reduced this year, just one section each of English and Spanish, because I've accepted the appointment as assistant principal. My focus will be on national testing and curriculum development. And Wil and I will move into my home place before school begins; we've got our work cut out for us.

Jan: A block off Main Street and two blocks from the school: Things are really working for you guys. I'll be the managing partner in January. They tell me I'm ready to run the place, but I think they just want more time to play golf. But, it works for me, so I'm looking forward to it. I'll be able to schedule my cases, and balance my work among corporate law, consumer law, and practice management. The down side is that I'll be up in the capitol, so I won't have much time to get back home.

Suzanne: Anything more personal in your career plans?

Jan: I don't think I'll have much time for a personal life. Yankee, I think we're ready to order now.

Yankee: On my way.

Yankee walked to the table, note pad in hand. The three murmured indistinctly as he turned from one to another noting their orders. Then he returned to the bar and busied himself preparing three drinks. They sat quietly as Yankee placed the drinks on the table. Then all three raised their glasses and directed silent salutes to the three "empty" chairs.

Jan: I still can't get over Mandy.

Wil: She seemed to be OK. She was perfect in her job in the trauma unit, always calm and confident, never rattled no matter how crazy the people around her were. And she was great with our young athletes. They always think their lives are over because they can't play for a while, but she seemed to talk them back on track, or help them cope with the rehab, or if their playing days were ended, adjust and find other productive paths. She was as much counselor as she was healer.

Suzanne: Yes, but she never talked about him.

Jan: I thought when she married Jason that she had put the past behind her. I knew she could never forget Brad, but I thought she was getting on with her life.

Suzanne: Her work seemed to console her ... then it became a constant reminder of pain and suffering. The marriage seemed right at the beginning, but as she drifted away from Jason, she drifted away from everyone. She started giving things away as though there wasn't any reason to keep stuff in her life. She talked a lot about what it was like for her patients who didn't make it. Looking back, it's easy to see her drifting toward that horrible decision. But, I missed it when it counted most, and it will haunt me forever.

Yankee: And she dropped in here more and more often. I've seen a lot of people come and go; I didn't see her go. You weren't the only one who missed it, Suzanne; no one saw it coming.

Wil: Maybe a busy year is the best thing for us. I don't know what lies ahead, but we are ready to take the field. So, drink up, ladies, and let's get started on the rest of our lives.

Yankee looked on as Suzanne, Wil, and Jan rose and walked out of the bar.

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Twenty-five years later, on the occasion of their thirty-fifth high school reunion, Jan sat alone with four spirits at their usual table in Yankee's. She looked up, then stood up and rushed toward the door, words and tears flowing uncontrollably: "John Paul! Is it you? Is it really you? You're here! You're here!"

John Paul: Hi Jan. Where is everyone?

Jan: Oh ... you don't know.

John Paul: Know what?

John Paul and Jan move to their places at the table, sit down, and continue their conversation.

Jan: They're gone.

John Paul: Gone?

Jan: All dead.

John Paul: Dead? All dead?

Jan: All.

John Paul: How? What happened?

Jan: Brad was killed in the war. Mandy couldn't get on with her life without him. Suzanne and Wil died in a car crash. All gone.

John Paul: When?

Jan: It seems so long ago. Brad was a medic in the war and was awarded the Silver Star for saving lots of wounded soldiers. He hated the killing and the dying, but he felt he should do his duty, should share their dangers and fears. And he would not protect himself. He kept going back into battle, time after time, to try to save all those poor, hurt boys. It broke Mandy's heart. She seemed to get through it. She finished nursing school and was doing real well at City Hospital ... but after a while, she gave up. She just couldn't forget him, so she just gave up. Suzanne and Wil, they went to State Teachers College, came home to teach in our old high school, and fell even more in love. If they had to go, it's good that they went together. How in the world would either of them ever



have got along without the other? They grew up no more than next-door neighbors apart; and after they married, they did not ever spend a night apart. Funny how some old clichés seem to fit some people perfectly. Just imagine how many hours they spent keeping track of our classmates, making the arrangements for our reunions, and fretting over whether everyone who wanted to be here got here. How many lives do you think they enriched as teachers, coach, and principal?

John Paul: I didn't know. I didn't know. But you're here.

Jan: As I always have been. And now, you're here. Where have you been? What have you been doing? It's been so long, but it seems ... now ... like only yesterday, like when we were all together at the end of that summer so long ago. Tell me, tell me everything about you, where you've been, what you've been doing ... why you never came back, to join here when ere we can to tell not less than all the truths, nor more, and renew abiding love. We always wondered. I was so afraid to come here today ... so certain, and afraid, that I would be alone. And then you appeared.

John Paul: And you? How have you spent the years? Married? Children? Career? You always said that some day you would be a lawyer or a CEO. You were the smartest one of us; without you, Brad and I wouldn't have made it through Algebra 2. You look so good ...

John Paul's cell phone rings, interrupting him in mid sentence. He tries to ignore it, but it rings again and again.

John Paul: I've got to take this or they'll just keep calling. Excuse me for a moment.

John Paul rises and walks away. A few moments later, he returns, sits, and takes her left hand in his gloved right one. The glove is soft cloth the color of his blazer. Noticing it for the first time, Jan stares for a moment at the glove,.

John Paul: I've got to go.

Jan (gazing into John Paul's ice-blue eyes): "But ..."

Softly, John Paul interrupts her: "I've got to go."

Jan: Please, don't go. I have so much to tell you.

John Paul: I must ... meet me; meet me here on this date next month. I promise to tell you everything ... not less than all the truths, nor more, and ... and to listen for as long as it takes to hear everything. Will you ... will you come?

Jan, her left hand still in his right hand glances again at the soft cloth glove, then looks directly into his eyes: "Yes, oh yes."

They rise, embrace for a long moment, step back, holding hands and looking into each other's eyes as Yankee looks on. John Paul releases her hands, turns, and walks away swiftly. Jan, her hands still held as if in his, watches him go. Then she sits and buries her face in her arms on the table.

### Epilogue

Entering Yankee's a month later, John Paul Anderson sees only apparitions at the round table (four appearing not to have aged during the thirty-five years since he last saw them, Jan looking as she did a month ago, sitting in their regular places).

Yankee: Well I'll be damned, John Paul, haven't seen you for 35 years and then I see you twice in the last month.

John Paul: Hey Yankee; long time for sure. Who's leading the American League East these days, the Red Sox?

Yankee: The Red Sox! Bite your tongue, mystery man. What'll you have?

John Paul: A light red wine of local vintage, my friend. Have you seen Jan? I'm supposed to meet her here today.

Yankee: Jan ... She passed away about three weeks ago. Heart failure: You know, women executives are suffering the same ailments as men these days. Stress, that's what gets 'em when they're still young and have a lot of living left in 'em. She was a great lawyer, *defended the poor and downtrodden* while bossin' the biggest corporate law firm in the state. Then she came home to lead our community foundation ... accomplished a lot of good things. She was quite a lady.

John Paul takes the glass of wine Yankee placed on the bar in his gloved right hand, turns and walks slowly to the table, stands at his old seat, looks at each empty chair, pauses at Jan's chair and says to himself: "You didn't say. You asked me not to go, but you didn't say."

He lifts his glass and continues: "Gone. You're all gone. The irony of it: You who played so graciously upon this stage, leaving your legacies of light while I skulked through the twilight from role to role, from deceit to deceit, from lie to lie, weaving destructions into my web." He pauses, then: "You were my safe anchorage, my North Star, the home that kept me sane. Where is the hand of Almighty God in your dying and my living?"

Shaking his head emphatically, John Paul Anderson denies the loss: "Alone. Alone? With memories of your modest mediocrities, moderate mendacities, and magnificent merits, meandering through my mind ... with the bittersweet of your lives enshrined in the past while mine looms somewhere in the fog. I *shall* see you again, in another dimension, where we *will* sit together and relate our lives lived out in the passing of time,

telling not less than all the truths, nor more, and renewing abiding love. Thomas Wolfe said we can't go home again. But we *are* home again, as you have been throughout the years, memories in our minds mingling with feelings in our hearts. We are forever home again."

John Paul raises the glass to his lips, drinks, places the glass on the table, turns slowly, nods to Yankee, and trudges into the darkness as if weighed down by a heavy burden. Yankee, eyes on John Paul as he walks away, slowly dries a glass; then, he turns away from the bar and places the glass beside others on the shelf.

## RESURRECTION

On a rainy day a week later, Simon Stoddard sat at a corner table in a historic pub in Fredericksburg, Virginia, watching as a non-descript gentleman moved quietly through the thinning lunch crowd to pause in front of him and nod. Simon gestured toward the empty seat across from him. The gentleman sat and when the waiter approached to take his order said simply, "A light red wine of local vintage, if you please." After the waiter placed the glass of wine on the table and departed, the gentleman lifted it in silent salute with a hand encased in a soft, cloth glove that matched in color the raincoat he was wearing.

"You are a hard man to find when you do not wish to be found," began Simon. "May I assume then that I found you so easily because you decided so?"

"Perspicacious as always, Simon."

"You're sure?"

A moment passed while the gentleman sipped his wine and appeared to search his mind.

"I am sure," he replied softly.

"Then while we wait for our lunch, I shall begin a tale that I think you will find both intriguing and familiar."