

FICTION: SECOND PLACE

Paetin Jennings, author Bay High School Kalina Smith, teacher

A Place in Time

The morning dew settled lightly on the soft ground. A cool breeze floated easily through the early morning air and carried a sweet scent as it moved along. There had been good rainfall in the previous week, so the foot path leading from the white farmhouse out to the dingy, brown barn was impossible to walk in. As the clouds had darkened early last week, Marnie Abel set out pieces of plywood on top of bricks to cover the path from the torrential rain. The woman stood on the porch with her boney hands wrung tightly within her apron pockets. She stood rigid and her eyes were squinted, surveying her farm before her day of work began.

She took a careful step down onto the first wobbly, half rotted step that led out to the trail. Her hands gripped the side rail tightly and she moved with great caution. Her makeshift wooden path would do well enough for now, but some of the bricks had begun sinking into the muddy ground and the boards were unsteady. A tumble this early in the year would spell trouble for her and the little farm that she just barely managed to keep afloat. Marnie was a resilient woman, she always had been, but her old age had turned her into a dying cypress that had been left in a lake. She was doing okay for now, but eventually the weather and the work would beat her down.

Her feet landed on the soft grass outside of the barn with an unsteadiness not unlike a baby taking its first steps. She took a moment to regain her balance and collect her nerves from one too many almost accidents. She opened the doors slowly, they had become much heavier recently than they had ever been. A choir of animals serenaded her in a collection of hoots, clucks, moos, and baa's. She hummed along with their greeting, taking in the love her animals had for her. She moved her weight to her heels and began rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet, slowly with the sound. Eventually their noises died down and she began speaking to the animals. "Good Morning, everyone. Did you all sleep well? I do hope you did, because we have a long day ahead of us!" She smiled as she paced around the barn, patting the heads and backs of animals who asked for her attention.

"Good morning girlies. How are our little chickies doing today, huh?" She opened the hen house and gently picked up a soft yellow chick from beside a speckled black and white hen. The little chick clucked softly at Marnie, but graciously accepted the honor of being picked up. The rest of the hens had dispersed and began pecking around the floor of the barn looking for seed. Marnie carefully examined the chick for any deformations or breaks. She deduced that the chick was just fine and she placed it gently back with the mother hen.

She went clockwise around the barn, talking to, feeding, and letting out all of her animals. She cared for them all the same, but her true favorites had always been her chickens. She thought that they were beautiful ladies and that they were smarter than people make them out to be.

She had just let her chestnut mare out into the pasture when she heard a car pull into her driveway. The sound was distinct because of the loud humming motor that was most definitely not present on a horse and buggy. She stood outside of the barn with her hands wrapped in her apron and watched as two men in pinstripe suits stepped out of the vehicle. They were almost identical. They wore the same color suit, the same black fedora, and they both had the same blank expression on their faces. Their eyes had a far off, concentrated look about them, scanning over the buildings and the pastures of the farm.

"How can I help you gentlemen?" Marnie said cautiously as she kept her distance from the men.

They did not respond immediately, taking time to look her over once and formulate their words carefully.

"Ma'am, we have reason to believe that there is activity going on about here that we are obliged to investigate." One of the men said matter of factly.

Marnie was confused, but then realized she must have been mistaken for another farm down the line. After all, the welfare compounds all look the same nowadays.

"I believe you've got the wrong address, sirs. There is nothing going on round here, 'sept hard working and some sewing." She smiled at the men trying to make a lighthearted joke at their error. Yet, they did not budge. Their stoney faces didn't move an inch and without a beat the same man who spoke before, spoke once more.

"Ma'am, we are not mistaken." He said as he pulled out a metal rod that was foreign to the woman. He began probing the ground with it in various places in front of him. There was what looked to be a miniature silver screen on the top of the rod that the man was looking into intently. The second man held a small device into the air that looked like a dinner plate that had been warped and had a knitting needle stuck to the top of it. Both devices were whirring and making odd noises that Marnie had never heard before in her life.

"What are you doing?" She asked with a growing sense of urgency tearing at her voice. The men did not answer, they continued with looking at their gadgets and would occasionally put it under their arm to record data on a notepad.

Marnie grew restless and began pacing around the men as they recorded whatever kind of data they needed from her so badly. She was not an angry woman and was hardly ever driven to anger, but these two young men who thought they could waltz onto her farm and then ignore her, angered her. She would let them get what they wanted, and a little extra too. They would leave with a piece of her mind.

Their machines beeped and whirred one final time as they picked them up and put them back into their car. The men shared a few words and nodded their heads before turning to speak with Marnie.

"Ma'am, we have concluded that there has been activity on your property that indicates and suggests that there is increased levels of spatial distortion beyond the recommended amount. Right now, we must ask that you come with us. For your safety and possibly the safety of our planet." The man reached out to the woman, but it was not as inviting as intended.

"I don't understand. What kind of activity? Farming? How could that harm the world? And what is a 'spatial distortion'? That sounds made up," Marnie squinted harshly at the men. She was sure that this was her old age finally getting to her and she just didn't understand these young men's new age lingo.

"I'm afraid we do not have the time, nor the patience to explain that to you at the moment. However, if you come with us, we can explain it to you on the trip."

"Where would we be going?" She asked

"We can not disclose that information." One of the men responded.

Despite how serious the situation felt to Marnie, she began laughing. She laughed with her chest and it rattled her entire body. She had not laughed like that in years. At this point she knew that this had to be an elaborate joke being played by some young fraternity boys from a few towns over. She loved jokes and she took being at the end of them very well.

"Oh boys, you are quite the jokesters. Would you like to come in for a drink? I have some sweet tea, freshly made this morning." She said with a smile, bearing the few yellow teeth that she still had left in her mouth. She turned and began walking to the house, anticipating the men to follow her. She began muttering what different foods she could cook for them and apologizing if she was a bad host for not asking them in sooner.

The men did not follow. However, they turned in unison to open the back doors of their car and they pulled out a metal case that was large enough that it took the both of them to carry. They set it down in front of the car and pressed a button on the side of the case. In an instant, there was a piercing screeching radiating from the box that could be heard from miles away. Marnie had barely made it up the porch when the sound found its way to her ears and she had stumbled and fallen flat onto her belly on the porch. She yelped out in pain, yet it could not be heard over the metallic screaming from the case.

The metal box began emitting an offensive yellow and green light that could be seen even on the brightest summer day. Its rays spun rapidly in a circle until it halted suddenly. Its beam had frozen near the barn, in the pasture. The light was hitting something that Marnie and the men could not make out, but as the light stayed on it longer, the stronger the object glowed.

The men walked over to the case and laboriously picked it up and brought it closer to the object in the pasture. They dodged mud holes and cow patties almost as well as Marnie would. The horse and the cows that had previously been in the pasture had been driven to the far back near the fence by the noise, but were growing closer out of curiosity. They set the case down on a spot they deemed would be dry enough to hold its weight for a short period of time and they began walking back towards Marnie.

"Ma'am, can you please come here." One of the men said, kinder than before, but Marnie still felt that something about his demeanor was not right.

She had not picked herself up off of the porch yet and was struggling to find a footing. The other man, the one who had not spoken yet, moved towards her to help pick her up. He climbed up the steps carelessly, like a man who is in the prime of his life, and he held out his hand to her. She

grasped it with both of her boney hands and brought herself up carefully. Once she finally steadied herself and confirmed that she was not hurt, he led her down the stairs.

The other man stood staring at the two of them impatiently with his hands clasped behind his back. His jaw was clenched and his mind was preoccupied with something that was troubling him.

"Thank you, young man. You are so kind." Marnie said as she patted the man on his arm. "What is it that you wanted to show me over here?" She looked up at the man who had rescued her off of her porch with a sparkle in her silver eyes.

"We need you to take a look at this, ma'am." The man said as he pointed to the glowing object in the pasture.

She nodded her head in agreement and positioned herself in front of the men so that she had a clear view of the object. Her eyesight, although good for her age, was not as good as it could be. She was not quite sure what was actually there and what was simply her degraded vision.

"I apologize, but I don't really know what I am looking at." Marnie said as she turned to one of the men and frowned. She didn't know if she had been there to help in the first place, but she felt that she had let her guests down nonetheless.

"That's alright ma'am. Why don't you get a little closer. Try to touch it. Maybe that will help you understand what you are looking at." He smiled slightly and put a hand on the woman's back to usher her forward.

She obliged and began taking small, shuffling steps forward toward the glowing anomaly in her pasture. It was about 15 feet away from her and it was in an area that had dried shortly after the rain, so her feet found no resistance when hitting the grass. The object in the field was still glowing violently and as she grew closer she brought her hand near her face to shield her eyes. There was a low humming that she could hear that was not present before and she was overwhelmed by all of the noises and lights that had come from this thing in her field. As she drew closer, she extended her left hand out to meet the object in front of her. Her steps became slower and more cautious and she had begun looking back at the men, looking for reassurance. In the instant that it took for the tip of her middle finger to touch the object, everything changed. She no longer heard the low humming or saw the violent yellow and green light, but instead she heard an army of car horns and motors. Before she could lower her hand, she had come to the conclusion that her farm was being ambushed by a foreign military that they talked about on the radio. Her hand lowered and she could not believe her eyes. All around her there were monumental metal buildings that stood like titans before her. They loomed above her and taunted her and her small size. Down on her level there were automobiles like she had never seen and in colors she had never seen. Bright greens and blues and purples all on these big, shiny machines. And the people she saw perplexed her more. They wore odd clothing, if you would call it clothing at all, and they hardly looked like people at all.

"Where am I?" She spoke to herself, half wishing a passerby would answer and tell her to wake up and get back to her work.

But no stranger came to wake her up from her dream, in fact, no one came looking for her at all.

Back on the farm, the men stood staring at the spot where the old woman had once been standing. They did not speak for a moment, simply taking in what had just happened. The spot in the pasture, once glowing and humming, was now gone. It left like it had never been there. One of the men dusted his hands off, signaling that their work was done, and walked to the front of the box to pick it up. The other man followed in suit and they heaved the box into the backseat and organized the rest of the gadgets that they had used that day. They climbed into the front seat and got comfortable for the long ride ahead of them. The man in the driver's seat started the ignition and spoke to the man opposite him.

"Where do you think this one went?"

"I'm going to say 2045, New York." He said smiling and rolling a toothpick around in his mouth.

"I don't think so. Too easy. She probably went to the Middle East sometime in the middle ages." He said, smiling.

"Oh well, either way, we got the rift closed up and that's all that matters." The man with the toothpick said.

"Where do we have to go next?" The driver asked

The other man began digging around in the glove compartment and produced a thick packet of papers. He thumbed through the stack and landed on a page halfway through the packet. He squinted at the paper and tilted it slightly so that it could be hit by the sunlight.

"Looks like we are going to..." He paused, running his finger along the page rapidly, pausing at one of the many bolded words. "Boston, 1776..."

They looked at each other with light in their eyes and gave each other a high five that was so loud it seemed to echo in the metal interior of the car.

"Finally we get to go somewhere interesting for a change."

The man opposite him nodded his head and smiled as he put the car into gear. They pulled out of the long, winding driveway, headed east for their next assignment.