“Time does have a way of making hurts smaller. It’s the distance. It’s like being in the airplane and looking down at Bright’s Pond with all that space between me and the town. Everything looks so small, even my troubles. From up there I had a sense that any problem could be solved. It’s about perspective, I think.”
—Griselda Sparrow

If you’ve seen one pumpkin, you’ve seen them all. Unless the pumpkin is named Bertha Ann. The gourd offspring of Nate and Stella Kincaid created quite a stir in Bright’s Pond a few months back. Well, it wasn’t all Bertha Ann’s fault. As it turned out, Stella had some explaining to do. And Nate? Let’s just say Nate had his own battle brewing to save Bertha Ann and not only control the mildew, a feared and dreaded malady to gourd growers everywhere, but his temper as well.

Nate and Stella Kincaid had been growing prize-winning pumpkins for going on ten years, ever since my sister Agnes Sparrow prayed, and Nate’s pumpkin took first place in the 1967 Tri-County Pumpkin Festival in Shoops Borough with a whopper of a squash weighing an astounding one hundred and fifty-seven pounds.

That was back in the days when Agnes, who weighed just over seven hundred pounds, settled her massive girth onto our red velvet sofa and dedicated herself to a life of prayer. It had become nearly impossible for Agnes to venture outside any longer.
I will confess that when Agnes prayed, things happened: several healings that we know of, a few incidents of lost objects being located miles from where they were last seen, and several other more minor miracles such as car engines starting when there was no earthly reason.

Agnes lives over at the Greenbrier Nursing Home now, where she continues to pray, but no one has reported an actual bona fide miracle in at least eight months.

Some folks claim it’s because the nursing home doctors put her on a strict diet to make her lose weight and this has somehow weakened her powers. Agnes told me she’s decided to welcome the diet and follow her doctors’ orders, but I still find Baby Ruth wrappers and crusts from lemon squares in her trashcan.

Folks can’t help but feed her. I keep my eye out for ill-gotten food booty and confiscate what I can. Just a few days ago I found an entire rotisserie chicken in her closet.

But even I’ve let Agnes eat some sweets and brought her a meatloaf special from The Full Moon Café a couple of times. For those of you who don’t know, that’s a big hunk of meatloaf with a side of mashed potatoes swimming in a pint of brown gravy with a small dish of green peas alongside for color. It’s not about the veggies. It’s about the gravy.

“Does my heart good, Griselda,” Agnes had said as she poured extra gravy on her potatoes. “A body can only eat so much lettuce without worrying she’s going to sprout a cotton-tail and long rabbit ears.”

I remember I smiled that day because it made me see that it’s the occasional sweet or savory indulgence that puts the curlicue on an otherwise plain existence.
Harvest Dance time—the town’s annual celebration of cooler days and good friends—waited for us just around the corner of next month. I sat in a booth at The Full Moon along with the rest of the dance committee as we wracked our brains for this year’s theme. That’s when Stella rushed inside. She looked like she had seen a ghost. In a way she had.

Stella interrupted Ruth Knickerbocker as Ruth tried to convince Mildred Blessing that Bright’s Pond was not ready for a murder mystery theme. Yes, I was on the committee that year. Studebaker Kowalski talked me into serving after Ruth begged him to snooker me into service. I hated committee work. I much preferred my life as a loner. But with Agnes safely tucked in at the nursing home I thought it might be kind of nice to stretch my social skills. Working on the Harvest Dance seemed a safe goal to reach.

“Griselda,” Stella said. “I need to speak with Agnes.”

All the ears in the diner perked up.

I grabbed Stella’s hand that shook so much you’d think she was conducting the “Stars and Stripes Forever.” “What’s going on? Come on now, sit down here and tell us. You look terrible.”

Stella squeezed into the booth next to Stu and Hazel. “I—I just can’t come right out and say it in front of all these people. It’s a personal matter, and Agnes is the only one who can help me sort it all out.”

Zeb stopped by our booth with a pot of coffee. He refilled our cups and asked Stella if she’d like a drop. Zeb owned The Full Moon Café and prided himself on excellent customer service and good food.

“No, thanks. My stomach’s churning something fierce.”

“Something wrong with Bertha Ann?” Zeb asked.

Stu tried to contain a chuckle but was unsuccessful.
“No, she’s coming along nicely,” Stella said. “Nate managed to get the mildew under control, and we built a tent for her. Poor Nate. He’s been camped out with her day and night, spraying for bugs, wiping her down with milk, and checking her vine positions. He says she’ll grow to be more than five-hundred pounds.”

“That amazes me right down to my kneecaps,” Ruth said. “I hope Bertha Ann takes first place. Imagine that—a five-hundred-pound pumpkin. Why, Bertha Ann will weigh nearly as much as Agnes. We sure can grow ’em big in Bright’s—”

She plopped her hand over her mouth like she had uttered the worst insult in the world. I touched her hand to let her know that I didn’t take offense. Everybody knew my sister was big. At last weigh-in she was a quarter pound over 625, having lost thirty pounds since checking into the nursing home.

I sipped my coffee, and Zeb set a Full Moon pie—a luscious lemon meringue in an aluminum pie tin—on the table. “You all might as well split this,” he said. “I plan on making quite a few for the dance. Think I’ll add some orange food coloring to the meringue this year.”

“Ooooo,” Ruth said, “that’ll give your pies a harvesty look.”

Zeb smiled even though I could tell he was upset that his punch line had been hijacked. He would have said he was making Harvest Moon Pies.

I smiled and let my fingertips brush his arm. “That’s a good idea, Zeb. Full Moon Harvest Pie sounds like a great idea.”

He smiled back at me, and for a moment my heart sped and I felt my toes curl in my white Keds. Zebulon Sewickey was a handsome man, even if he was wearing a greasy white apron and paper hat.

“Anyhoo,” Stella said, “I just have to talk to Agnes. Do you think it would be all right if I went over there this afternoon sometime?”
I sipped coffee and then let a breath escape through my nose. “I—I suppose so. Nate can drive you over around two o’clock—after lunchtime.”

Stella leaned into me and whispered. “I can’t do that. Nate doesn’t know anything about my predicament, and I’m afraid to tell him what with all his stress over Bertha Ann and the contest and the rain and all.”

I patted her hand. “Okay, okay, don’t fret. I’ll drive you over myself. I planned on going later anyway.”

“Thanks, Griselda.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek, hugged me, and then scampered out the door like a mouse. Stella was a little thing, only about five feet tall, with long brown hair she always kept in a ponytail that hung straight down her back. She had a preference for blue jeans and flannel shirts—usually green and red and gray.

Stella never learned to drive. She said it was too hard—too many things to be aware of all at the same time—so she often relied on me or her husband and sometimes Studebaker to get her where she needed to go. But Stella never seemed to want or need to go anywhere. She could walk to the Piggly Wiggly and to see Doc Flaherty, who treated her for a rash that erupted on the same day Nate switched to a new herbicide. Marlabeth Pilky at the Paradise Trailer Park had specially mixed it for him. She was known in these parts as an herbalist—a folk-healer—and Nate relied on her expertise for various pumpkin afflictions.

The committee table grew quiet for a few moments after Stella left. I figured everyone was debating whether to comment on Stella’s interruption. But leave it to Ruth to get the ball rolling.

“What do you suppose that was all about? My goodness but she seemed all in a swivet. You don’t suppose she’s got the
cancer now. Lot of that going around these days what with my Hubby Bubby and all.”

Ruth’s husband died from a malignant brain tumor nearly six years ago, but the event still resonated like a raw, freshly pumiced callous in her thoughts.

“Nah.” Stu waved away Ruth’s theory. “She doesn’t look sick, and believe me I know.”

He sipped coffee and pulled a piece of crust from the pie. Studebaker had been one of the first cancer healings in Bright’s Pond. The doctors wrote him off as pretty much a goner until Agnes prayed for him. He said he felt as though a million fire ants were crawling all over his body. Claims he tingled for three days. It still gives me the willies when they give Agnes the credit. But that morning, Studebaker stopped short of singing Agnes’s praises, and I was proud of him. After all, as Agnes always says, any miracles come express from God.

I sliced a piece of pie and licked lemon off my finger. “I can’t imagine what the trouble is. Stella is usually so quiet, you know. Just sticks to her pumpkins and such.”

“And for her not to tell Nate,” Ruth said, “it must be something mighty troublesome.”

“I suppose we’ll find out sooner or later,” Studebaker said. “Right now we have bigger fish to fry. We need to decide on a theme for the dance or it’s going to be nothing short of a sock hop.”

That was when Mildred, who had been silent through the whole Stella visit, finally added her two cents. Mildred Blessing was our Chief of Police and an odd combination of feminine brawn and schoolgirl curiosity.

“I can tell,” she said. “I can always tell.”

“Tell what?” Boris Lender asked. Boris was the Bright’s Pond First Selectmen—kind of like a mayor, but a clause in the town charter prohibited the election of a mayor per se. And to tell
the truth, the First Selectman had just the right amount of power—kind of like salt in a stew—with just enough to make all the components work together.

“That there is criminal activity afoot,” Mildred said. “Stella Kincaid is acting suspicious. Her body language and facial expressions have all the earmarks of someone hiding a crime.”

Ruth laughed and said, “You’re crazier than a bedbug. Stella is not a criminal, Mildred, so just stuff that talk in your sack. My goodness. I can’t imagine Stella Kincaid ever engaging in anything illegal or criminal, and you should be ashamed for even thinking such a thing.”

I tapped Ruth’s foot under the table. “Let’s get back to committee business please, and let Stella worry about her own problems.”

“Fine,” Mildred said, “but mark my words. Something foul is afoot in Bright’s Pond.”