

Chapter One



January 28, 1922

Miss Rose Ivy
c/o Mr. Delbert Beddington,
General Delivery, Cedar
Nanaimo District

Dear Miss Ivy –

I apologize for the lateness of my reply, but I have only recently returned from abroad. I regret to inform you, I am no longer involved with the Qualicum Military Convalescent Hospital, and now maintain a private practice in Parksville, but to answer your question: yes, I was the commanding officer and physician in charge at the Qualicum Beach Inn while it lay under the purview of the Military Hospitals Provision. In that capacity, I was responsible for the recuperative care of soldiers suffering from shell shock, gunshot wounds, lung ailments, and other various wounds of war.

Because our facility offered a varied and intensive program for young men, I am unable to say with certainty which singular method

worked best for our patients. Many of the soldiers came to us with missing limbs or on crutches, yet we encouraged them to participate in active sports to the best of their abilities. Cricket, golf and fishing were particularly popular. In the evenings, the men embraced billiards, bridge, and dances with youthful enthusiasm, often forgetting their maladies or afflictions. We also taught commercial skills through our vocational department. The highest intention of the Military Hospitals Provision was to provide our soldiers with a means to contribute positively to society as carpenters, plumbers, etc.

The Qualicum Military Convalescent Hospital provided invaluable aid to the veterans of the Great War, and we have certainly made an indelible mark in Canada's medical contributions to the Commonwealth. I am proud to report that our methods were lauded as revolutionary by HM Prince of Wales on his visit in 1919 and, because of our efforts, hundreds of injured men have re-established lives of meaningful service.

However, I regret to inform you that the program was disbanded in 1920. At that time, it was felt that our program had been a complete success and no further assistance was needed. The men have integrated seamlessly into society and provide a much-needed boost to the population of Qualicum Beach and Parksville. I, myself, elected to stay in this fine settlement as a general practitioner, and have not once regretted the decision.

If you don't mind, I shall direct your inquiry to Miss Marjorie Goodly, who was our senior nurse and Lady Superintendent at Qualicum Military Convalescent Hospital. She worked very closely with the young men. Thusly, she is best equipped to provide greater insight into the day-to-day routines of our patients, who are the foundation upon which we built our ground-breaking achievement.

With best wishes,
Yours truly –
Dr. Campbell Davidson



MAKER OF WIDOWS

February 8, 1922

Miss Rose Ivy
c/o Mr. Delbert Beddington,
General Delivery, Cedar
Nanaimo District

Dear Miss Ivy –

I cannot express how excited I am to receive your letter from Dr. Davidson only this morning, and to be reminded of the good work we accomplished at the Qualicum Military Convalescent Hospital. After leaving Qualicum, I became the head nurse of St. Michael's Hospital, a facility run by the Columbia Coastal Mission, but reading your letter sent me on a fine trip down memory lane!

You requested insight into our treatments, and I say enthusiastically, an established daily routine was our primary course of care. A man who has suffered the rigours of battle must have stability, and plenty of good food, and very vigorous exercise. Some hospitals recommend tethering patients to their beds to keep them from wandering, but in my opinion, this only hinders and never helps. If a man wishes to move freely, then let him! When a patient was bed-ridden, we encouraged him to weave baskets or embroider pillows and, as he regained mobility, move onto theatre, gardening, boat-building, furniture-making. We gave him physical exercise in all its forms: cricket, canoeing, dance, theatre. Anything that left him exhausted by evening was therapeutic and helped stave off nightmares.

Secondly, he must have camaraderie with men who have experienced the same trials and tribulations. The bonds of brotherhood which were forged in the trenches offered our patients strength in their darkest hours. The public is unkind to those with physical differences, and each man faced ridicule and abhorrence upon returning home, but upon realizing his fellows suffered similarly, many of our lads opened their hearts to share volumes. I've never seen men connect so deeply! I can't stress enough how important it was to encourage them to talk to one another. The boys even formed a comedy troupe, affectionately named

‘The Follies’, which they took on tour to much acclaim in Alberni and Courtenay. Once encouraged to open up, they craved companionship, and thrived from the support that only common experience can provide. Sharing their experiences gave them hope.

Hope, Miss Ivy, is of utmost importance. They must have hope! A man without hope will spiral into the abyss at the smallest push, and then the road to redemption extends twice as long, and the challenges to overcome grow a hundred-fold. When our patients suffered from physical injuries, we provided them with ether to manage their pain, but never alcohol or luminol: those are depressants and will strip a man of hope very quickly. Nor do I recommend electric shock treatment. Some doctors claim it has a high success rate in abolishing “war fatigue”, but not in my experience.

You state in your letter that you have an acquaintance who suffers terribly with the aftermath of battle, but you have not added the particular details of his injuries. Goodness, there are a thousand different ways in which our boys suffered, both physically and mentally! However, in my opinion, all successful treatments were guided by this single principle: you must keep him hopeful. Give him reasons to persist. Encourage him to learn a new skill such as woodworking or boat-building, and offer him liberal reminders that these pursuits will lead to a solid career, where he can once again contribute to his community.

I pray that these small suggestions give relief to your friend. If you have more questions, please direct them to me promptly. It’s been my honour to assist our boys as they acclimatize to peacetime, and I’d consider it a pleasure to extend my expertise to your situation. In your letter to Dr. Davidson, you mention that you are part of a travelling show, and that your schedule will bring you to Winter Harbour and Port McNeill this spring. I would dearly love to hear more about your life in the circus! Please reply and spare no details.

Goodness, I am struck by a sudden inspiration, Miss Rose -- perhaps your troupe would be interested in visiting Rock Bay, just north of Campbell River, too? I’m certain our local children would be delighted by a visit! I’ve included the contact details for the head of operations in Rock Bay, Mr. Robert Bernard, and if your manager is amenable, the men can organize all formalities and add our little hamlet to your tour.

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Let me know the date of your arrival and I'll give you a hearty welcome in person.

Your friend –
Marjorie Goodly
St. Michael's Hospital, Rock Bay, BC



March 18, 1922

Miss Rose Ivy
c/o Mr. Delbert Beddington,
General Delivery, Cedar
Nanaimo District

Dear Miss Ivy –

What a pleasure to receive your reply with this morning's mail! My pleasure doubled upon reading that your boats will arrive in Rock Bay on April 20, and you'll be staying in the area for a whole week. By chance, I'll be visiting my sister in Campbell River during the second week of April; would your captain agree to pick me up as you sail north? We can finish the journey together and get to know each other "en route"!

A little honesty is in order. My purpose in pursuing your friendship is not completely altruistic. From your letters, I deduce that you're an intellectual lady, and from your chosen career, you must have a wide experience with bizarre and unsettling circumstances. Of late, I've found myself in a "bit of a pickle", Miss Ivy, and when you come visit, I pray you may lend insight into my current predicament.

I've only worked at St. Michael's Hospital since 1920 but, as head nurse, I've come to enjoy a level of prestige in our town. I've earned the trust of many parties, and they share their dilemmas with me and ask for my good council, but recently, I've been faced with a situation that's left me stumped!

I don't know how familiar you are with our region, but the communities of Campbell River, Rock Bay, and Sayward are built on logging, fishing, and hunting, and the residents are bound tightly to land and sea. Last year, Campbell River was connected to Courtenay by an overland road, and the whole area has seen a steep rise in population, with Rock Bay growing into a real hub! We boast a cosmopolitan mix of people, including Irish, Scotch, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese workers, and our settlement links homesteads, trapper cabins, and logging camps across central Vancouver Island. The pioneers here are a special breed, carving prosperity out of wilderness.

I mean to say, these folk are self-reliant and intimately familiar with the changing seasons. A man who works for long months in the deep forest comes to effortlessly recognize the creatures that live there; he knows his Roosevelt elk from his black-tailed deer, his black bear from his wolverine. He can identify a ferret, marten, fisher or squirrel from a hundred paces. This is equally true of the fisherman who, from taste alone, can identify the species of salmon on his plate! I hope to impress upon you, Miss Ivy, that these people possess a broad intelligence that, while not gleaned from books or papers, is just as expansive and, in many cases, more practical than musty old Greek or Latin. Do not dismiss what I am about to share with you in confidence as the ramblings of drunkards and rascals.

The trouble began last summer, when an old hunter named Sigurd Jonson claimed that he'd lost his wife's cat. The Jonson cabin is located at the end of a walking path, a mile northwest of Rock Bay, on the far slope of a river valley and only a short hike from the sea. The man is advanced in years, and while he is independently-minded, the rigours of age make him a frequent visitor to our hospital.

Last September, while treating an ailment, he mentioned the missing cat. Naturally I assumed it ran away, but old Sigurd quickly corrected my mistake. He knew it was dead. The loss of the wee beast had shaken him profoundly. He does not like people, but he has a soft heart for animals, and I suppose he yearned for a kind ear to listen.

I didn't think about the cat again until Christmastide, when I heard a rumour of mysterious things coming from the valley. We'd had a dusting of snow – very little, as keeping with our maritime climate –

and Sigurd claimed to have found strange footprints on the edge of his yard. One of the young nurses at the hospital overheard his comment, and (much to my disapproval) could not keep her tongue between her teeth.

First a missing cat? Then strange footprints? Well! You can imagine the frenzy that the combination inspired!

Rock Bay was in a real flap. Children were kept indoors. Tales of monsters and boogiemens circulated. A group of eager huntsmen patrolled the shoreline, looking for any hint of the prowler, and only succeeded in blasting a flock of seagulls to shreds. Sigurd's nearest neighbour, Norman Kerton, dismissed the whole thing as a hallucination, brought on by drinking hooch and eating bad oysters.

For Sigurd, this was tantamount to an accusation of lying.

The surly Swede was deeply insulted by this strike against his honour. He retaliated by writing a long-winded accusation on a scrap of foolscap and nailing it to the door of our hospital, claiming that Norman stole the cat, and no further action was required on anyone's part to avenge it. Norman's house sits on a hill across the valley from Sigurd's cabin, and it is common knowledge that the cat would deposit its faeces in his vegetable garden. Norman, who grew up in Rock Bay, has a few childhood friends to whom he'd voiced complaints in the past. I believe it's possible that, in frustration, he'd perform dreadful deeds to restore dominion over his bean plot!

Please understand, Miss Ivy, that there exists a long-standing beef between the two men. An argument between Sigurd and Norman hardly raises any eyebrows here. Norman inherited the family home from his father, but Sigurd emigrated from Sweden and built his little cabin in 1918. Sigurd's wife, Ana, is a timid woman and never says a peep to anyone – I suspect she knows no English -- and she is insufficient in strength or wit to insert herself between two fighting fellows. Honestly, I don't blame her! The smallest slight from one against another is magnified to outrageous proportions. Between rational men, the poop of one little cat would hardly matter at all, but between these two? It's the cause of a second Great War!

We all know, if it wasn't the cat, it would be something else; they seek any excuse to slander the other. May I share my personal opinion? I

suspect that Norman is unhappy to have a neighbour. If Sigurd abandoned his land, Norman would very quickly pull down the Jonson cabin and return the valley to its previous natural state.

But Sigurd is a standoffish, pigheaded fellow. A missing cat won't drive him away. Nor will a beast in the woods. In my opinion, Sigurd is a queer duck, but he's not a liar.

In January, when Norman's prized hunting dog vanished, the simmering feud fully exploded. Norman accused Sigurd of revenge, and Sigurd accused Norman of thievery, and the two of them have been at each other's throats for two months. Sigurd's canoe was destroyed, Norman's woodshed was set ablaze. Each blame the other. I'm not surprised by the escalation, only disappointed that two grown men could so easily resort to puerile violence.

Now, let me be clear, I am not claiming that a mysterious monster has caused these squabbles – surely that is impossible – but for a person with a fanciful imagination, the indigenous peoples of this region have many stories of supernatural creatures to inspire dread. They claim that a gigantic two-headed monster lives in these waters which they call '*sisutl*', and to which they afford great reverence and respect. There's also '*tsonoqua*', the cannibal wild-woman who abducts wayward children, or the frightful '*bukwus*', who lingers around streams to steal the souls of lost travellers. I do not claim to know much about these frightful stories, but the possibility of an honest-to-God ogre, lurking in the forest, has sent families into a flap. Most people dismiss Sigurd's claims outright as hogwash, but a few have woven sturdy nets and gone a-hunting, and every day, the hospital is visited by injured men who, in their zeal, have left all good sense at home. I've never had to deal with so many twisted ankles, wrenched knees, or broken fingers!

It's getting out of hand, Miss Ivy. If a newspaperman hears of our troubles and writes a piece for his rag, it will plunge our community's good reputation into the mud.

When you visit in April, I hope you'll allow me an opportunity to "pick your brain" on this matter. I only want to soothe fiery tempers and restore order to my beloved town.

Who knows? Maybe you believe in monsters? If so, then please

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come and collect this blessed thing for your sideshow, and solve our little conundrum once and for all.

Until we meet in April,
Madge



April 2, 1922

Rose Ivy
c/o Mr. Delbert Beddington,
General Delivery, Cedar
Nanaimo District

Dear Rose –

The kind encouragement in your last letter was greatly appreciated. You'll find me standing on the dock in Campbell River on April 10th! I'm eager to put a face to your words.

Honestly, Rose, I'd hoped to "pick your brains" about our community's little faff, and together devise a way to settle everyone's jangled nerves, but I'm afraid our meeting will come too late. What started as a ridiculous tiff between two men has blossomed into a hateful crime that threatens to divide the very fabric of our town.

I believe I described the tension between Sigurd Jonson and Norman Kerton, the squabbling neighbours? Over the last two weeks, it multiplied into a full-fledged battle, with each man digging in and holding tightly to his own righteousness. Sigurd demanded compensation for his canoe, Norman refused to budge. Their houses are within sight of one another, each built on a rise with a quarter-mile of large woodland between them, and the men took to practicing their aim on the other's chimney. I don't know who started this childish prank, and frankly, I don't care. The gunshots could be heard from the upper story of St. Michael's Hospital, and the crack of rifles sent shivers down my spine.

Three days ago, on March 31, Sigurd visited our clinic. His wife Ana had left for the week to cook at one of the logging camps (no doubt wishing to escape this fiasco!) and he'd suffered a cut upon his left arm that required stitches. Without Ana to attend him, he was forced to visit St. Michael's Hospital. While I bandaged him up, I told him that he must be the bigger man, put down his weapon, and extend an olive branch to Norman. You can imagine how well that went! He threatened to mash Norman into chum and feed him to the beast. I warned him that such talk could get him in real trouble with the law, at which point he dismissed me as a meddlesome old bag, only good for bandaging wounds and prescribing pills, and that I ought to "shut up and put up". Goodness!

I'm not the sort to "put up", Rose, and I'm certainly not the sort to shut up! Maybe he bullies Ana into submission but I'm not so easily cowed. I told Sigurd that I would no longer attend to him if he continued on this path, at which point he glowered and went mum, but from those shifty eyes? Oh, he seethed! I didn't trust Sigurd to keep a cool head, but what more could I do? I felt just sick, threatening to withhold medical care, but a woman in my position must use whatever leverage she has. I warned him, if he persisted with these shenanigans, then by golly, I'd cut him off: the choice was up to him!

I let him go, thinking my part was done.

But the next day, Sigurd was gone. That morning, there'd been no gunfire aimed at Norman's chimney, and wouldn't you know it? Norman was the first to realize that his nemesis was missing. He crept up to Sigurd's home, fully expecting to be blasted with rock salt, but instead he discovered an empty house with a half-eaten plate of salted fish on the table and warm ashes in the fireplace. The back door was wide open. Sigurd's boots and rifle were gone, but his jacket hung from its peg by the stove.

Driven by this strange display, Norman came directly to the hospital. From here, we organized a search party, and spent a full day searching for any hint of him, but the man had completely vanished. Not a footprint!

Plenty of folks felt it was a waste of time. Mr. Lambert, who owns the saloon, pointed out that Sigurd would never have volunteered to

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find someone in peril, so why should we do the same? Mr. Sandford, who runs the General Store, figured that Sigurd was playing a Fool's Day joke, while Mr. Boone, who works in our hospital, thought the old man had finally tired of sparring and fled back to Sweden. In his opinion, a search was fruitless.

But this morning, a couple of loggers were securing a raft of timber in a cove close to Sigurd's property, and fifty feet above the high tide line, at the foot of a large alder tree, they spotted a heap of freshly turned soil. Buried there, in a shallow grave, was Sigurd's mangled body. I was summoned to witness the state of his corpse before a group of men carried his remains to our hospital. They laid him out in the basement, and when I washed off the dirt, I could scarcely believe my eyes. Old Sigurd was covered in bites. From their width, the span of the jaw is five inches wide, larger than a full-grown man, and the punctures are sharp and made by fangs. The back of his skull was fractured and, in some places, his flesh was chewed to a pulp. I saw, too, the site where the body was found: the earth around his grave had been churned up by humungous hands, and scratches marred the alder's trunk, twelve feet in the air, as if scratched by the nails of a giant.

I've been a nurse for decades, Rose. I've seen all sorts of injuries, and I've learned to identify a manner for every wound. I know the look of an ax wound, a stab wound, or a dog bite. I understand the natural rhythms of the world, and I've seen a thousand ways for a man to die.

But gazing upon Sigurd's mangled remains, I was sharply reminded that this universe holds great mysteries to which I remain ignorant. I'm too much of a pragmatist to believe in ghosts, goblins, or boogeymen, Rose, but *something* ripped the life out of Mr. Jonson, and it lies beyond my knowledge. Something left him mangled and buried in mud, but I can't identify the culprit, and all my accumulated experience has been rendered useless.

And for the first time, Rose?

For the first time, I'm bloody terrified.

Yours truly,
Madge