

The Malevolent Heart of Harriot Adams

Harriot Adams strained her eyes, searching the dusty road that led to her house for travelers, but no. No one came and had not come for months. Up one rambling way then down another. The sandy road pitted with troughs of used gravel came and sat awhile in front of the clapboard hovel she knew as home.

“Timmy.” Her voice caught in the breeze and echoed back toward her. “Timmy. I know you’re back there. Get up on this porch.” Erect in her straight-backed chair, she refused the nearby rocker. Her foot tapped the wooden stoop. And the wind, flying around the once white house, grabbed the sound, muting it to a thump, thump, thump.

“Timmy Adams.” Her voice dull, blunted like a damaged sword. “I know you’re behind that shed.”

A long arm reached around the splintered corner. The head angled out. Straight black hair dangled across a forehead, covering the eyes. A thin shoulder followed, an overall strap masking the hollow between the neck and collar bone.

He swept his hair from his face, tucking it behind his ears. He peered at his mother.

“That’s good, now,” her voice an artificial coo.

Timmy stepped out from his hiding place, his lamed foot swinging to meet the other. He hobbled toward the porch dropping his left shoulder each time his poorly angled foot moved. He lurched forward, sitting beside his mother’s chair. Not looking at her, he focused on the ten-foot poly-vinyl rabbit in the front yard. Timmy considered the hole in the back of the statue’s head, a five-inch circle that didn’t allow much rain to get in. He grimaced at the thought of the rabbit’s whiskered face, once white, now gray with a web of mold, the primary colors of its coat and hat

weathered in a flat affect. A plastic wrapped paper hung from its forearm announcing a perpetual garage sale.

“I hate that rabbit,” he said staring at the small door at the base, latched now, just big enough for a child to crawl in and out.

“Well, you shouldn’t of put a hole in it.”

His head hung down toward the wooden steps, peering through the space between the slats, staring at beetles scurrying on the ground below. “You never should’ve made me go in there.”

“If you would’ve just stayed put you’d never of hurt your foot. Your own fault for trying to get out.”

Timmy raised himself on his good leg and pushed up from the porch. His fists clenched, he leaned toward Harriot. “You need to leave me be.” His face grimaced in a hateful stare.

“No need for that attitude. You know I’d do anything for you, Timmy boy. Just anything.” She paused, assessing if her words had the calming effect intended. “Anyway, we got business to do. Pull out the tables tonight and put out the signs tomorrow. Maybe someone will come along.” She finished, a wavy smile on her lips that collapsed into her eternal frown.

“Lot a work, pulling those tables out of the shed,” he yelled. “Lot a work, taking those signs down to the highway. Why we got to do it? I ain’t bored. I don’t like nobody comin’ around here.”

“Don’t argue with me. Who takes care of you, makes sure you’re fed and have a roof over your head? It’s been a while now. Just want to talk to somebody. Visit a little bit.”

The next afternoon, Timmy slouched down to the garage. The two signs hung on the back wall. He heaved them down and dusted the perfectly drawn magenta letters with his hand. *Garage Sale Today*, each letter three inches tall. Moistening his fingers, he drew them across the large arrows that jutted straight across the bottom of each sign, silently suggesting a right turn.

Timmy loaded the signs on his back and slunk through the woods, placing the first sign at the base of the narrow driveway that led to their house.

Stepping heavily, cracking the small branches that had fallen on the ground, he approached the highway that led to the town miles up the road. He slid down the embankment and planted the second sign. Aware of the muffled roar of a car in the distance, he pulled himself back up into the forest of blackjack trees and bramble bushes.

The sound of the car skidding off the edge of the highway and onto the shoulder of the sandy road ratcheted toward him through the mid-morning air. Two women sat in the front seat of a white convertible. The roof back and snapped in place, the feet of an old chair poked skyward. A yellow planter shoved into the corner of the back seat held once red silk geraniums, their limp heads lolling over the rim.

“Garage sale junk,” he whispered.

The larger woman in the driver’s seat glanced at the magenta-lettered sign then at her younger friend. “Why not one more today, Tillie?”

Tillie studied her watch then her phone. “We have no service here. Maybe we should just head home.”

“But see how quiet it looks up there. So shady and cool. Let’s go to one more then we’ll put the top up before we head back. Won’t be so hot and windy on the way back.” She put the car in gear. With her foot on the brake, she waited for an affirmative nod.

“Oh, alright, Gwen, but if we get stuck up there, it’s on you. Look at the ruts in that road.”

“May be ruts, but it’s all dry,” she said, her foot on the gas as the car jerked ahead.

The dust settled. Timmy swatted a gnat away from his face and studied the highway in both directions. Quiet. No buzz of approaching vehicles. He slumped down the ditch, pulled the sign from the ground, slung it on his back, clawed back up the short incline, his fist on the ground for balance, and vanished into the trees.

Up the hill, where the road took a sharp left, the second sign with a magenta arrow pointing up the narrower lane listed toward the ground. Lifting it from the sand was almost effortless. He held the two signs together and meandered toward the house. No hurry he thought. Harriot wants to get to know them.

The white car was parked in front and to the side of the clapboard house. Two women wandered among the tables full of garage sale treasures. Gwen noticed the glassware. Pink and green Depression plates and bowls sparkled in the afternoon sun. On the far side of the table, quart and pint canning jars clumped together. Various lids and bands filled a cardboard shoe box.

Tillie fingered the magazines stacked on an adjacent table. Picking up a 1950’s copy of Ladies Home Journal, she rifled through the pages and wrinkled her nose.

“Look at this Depression glass. It’s quite rare, I think, or at least I don’t have any like this. What do you think, Tillie? Is it worth ten bucks a piece?”

“I have no idea, but there’s no furniture. Let’s go.”

Harriot watched from the open kitchen window. One eyebrow arched, her eyes unblinking. She noticed the larger woman’s interest in her pink and green glassware and the younger woman eager to get away.

“Well, such a nice surprise,” Harriot said opening the screen door. “You ladies see anything you admire, just let me know.”

Gwen and Tillie nodded a greeting and went on walking around the three tables that had been so hastily set up on the grass in front of the house.

“You have some pretty glass here. Do you think you’d take five dollars apiece if I took the lot?”

“I think that would be fine. I have more in the house. Let me get the box I have in the kitchen.” She turned toward the house. “But wait,” she stopped and moved back toward the tables. “Why don’t you just come on in? It’s so hot out here and I hate to carry that heavy box down the porch steps.

“I don’t think we better.” The clouds had turned dark on the horizon, a spring thunderstorm brewing.

Harriot feigned interest in the oncoming storm. “I know these parts and this weather. That storm will be here quick but will last about as long. Come on in. You don’t want to drive back with that rain slapping against your windshield. And in that convertible, even with the top up. The wind that comes with the rain could just yank that top straight back. Then where’d you be.”

Gwen started toward Harriot. “Just a look, really, then we’ll have to go, storm or no storm. Time for us to get back to town.”

Tillie glanced once at the car then at the house. Harriot stood as gatekeeper, her hand fixed on the knob of the screen door. “I have some old chairs. Been here a long time. And a table that’s older than Moses.”

With her arms clasped in front of her, Tillie followed Gwen and Harriot inside the house.

Pink and green glass filled a cabinet that stood firmly against the wall furthest from the door. Gwen leaned over, viewing the four shelves, her eyes intent on each piece. The clatter of saucers and cups placed on the small table in the middle of the kitchen surprised her. Harriot's back to her, she gave Tillie a knowing nod toward the front door. Tillie, wide-eyed, mouth gaping, shook her head in agreement.

"Very pretty, ma'am. But I don't think we're interested. Thank you for showing it to us." Gwen stepped toward the door, Tillie one step in front of her.

"Do sit down," came the toneless response. The table set with banana bread, the tea pot beginning to wail on the stove, Gwen and Tillie concurred with a shrug and a glance at each other. What would a cup of tea matter? This woman was obviously isolated and lonely.

Thick white cups that sat on heavy saucers were passed to Gwen and Tillie, a tea bag placed in each. Harriot grabbed a rag and placed it around the handle of the whistling teapot and streamed hot water into the three cups.

"There." She smiled at her guests. "Now, how pleasant is this. I live so far out, you know. Not any neighbors that I know of. Just me and Timmy. He's my boy. Well, I guess he's not a boy anymore but a grown man."

Both of Harriot's visitors blew on their cups, hurrying the tea to cool.

"Interesting array of things you have to sell," Gwen commented. "That big plastic rabbit is one of a kind, I bet."

"Poly-vinyl. It's poly-vinyl, not plastic. Much sturdier. Did you know a child can go in there, be put there if they misbehave. It's big enough for a child."

Gwen and Tillie who had just raised their cups to their lips stopped in unison, mouths open, staring at Harriet Adams. Gwen was the first to respond. "Surely, you're not saying..." she stopped and looked at Tillie.

"We must go," Tillie said, her cup hitting the saucer with a clunk.

"But I have banana bread," a broad toothy smile on her face. Going to a kitchen drawer, she brought out a butcher knife. Laying it on the table, she asked, "Which of you would like to cut?"

Gwen cut three narrow pieces from the hardened loaf, placing one on each of the three small plates. "Here," she offered a piece to Harriot, the knife still in her hand.

"I'll take that," Harriot said, putting the blade next to her plate as if it were an ordinary table knife.

The three ate in silence, the visitors nibbling at the edge of their banana bread, Harriot cutting a large piece with her fork. One sip of tea each and Tillie rose from her chair followed by Gwen. Without waiting for permission or salutation, they turned toward the door.

"Oh, must you go?" Harriot was quickly at the door, eyes bright and wide.

Tillie grasped the knob and glared outside. As if she pulled the string of a bucket poised above the door, sheets of rain, a cloudburst, fell from the darkened sky.

Peering out from the porch, the afternoon light all but gone, Gwen saw someone, or maybe something she thought, run from the side of the porch, behind the drenched rabbit, and vanish behind the shed.

Tillie turned back into the house like a sullen child who could not go out to play. "Our car," she wailed.

“Timmy’ll take care of that. I’m sure he already put the top back up. He’s good at thinking about that sort of thing.”

“We’ll wait just a bit, then,” she said. “Like you said, I’m sure it will pass quickly.”

“Good,” Harriot emphasized by nodding her head. “I think I heard you say you were looking for furniture.” Again a broad smile. “Well, wait till you see the old sideboard I have. Now that I won’t sell, but the chairs, I really think are Louis XVI. I would let them go for a price. They’re right in the drawing room.”

“A drawing room, you say. How quaint,” said Tillie.

Harriot led them into the adjoining room. “Watch your step.” Clicking on the switch at the side of the door, a spare overhead bulb cast a dim light on the room’s contents. Assaulted by the musty odor, Gwen raised her finger to her nose. “We do have a stack or two of newspapers,” she said. “I’ve got everything from Kennedy gotten killed to the Space Shuttle disaster. I even have some real old papers. Back to Ike being President. Not for sale, though.” She edged toward the fireplace. “But these chairs, I could let them go for a price.” Two antique velvet chairs sat opposite each other. Dust covered the top rail and sifted onto the seat as Harriot brushed her hand across the top.

A small rocking chair in obvious disrepair caught Tillie’s eye. Dusting the back with her fingers, an ornate design that mimicked gold leaf appeared.

“This is very nice,” she said, aware of her previous curtness. “Is it for sale?”

“Maybe,” she nodded. “But really, if you like that one, you should see the rest. Come this way,” she instructed.

Harriot followed Gwen and Tillie out of the room. As they crossed the kitchen, her right hand brushed across the table, her fingers wrapping around the handle of the butcher knife. “Just

a nudge to the right,” she said as they reached the back porch. “That’s right. Now let’s see, let me find the light switch.” She opened a door. Steps led down to a cellar. “Here it is.” A click from the switch and three bulbs lit the way down toward a cement floor. “These chairs I like to keep out of direct light. You know light is so damaging to real antiques.”

Harriot descended the steep steps into the cellar holding onto the rail worn by years of service. Gwen turned toward Tillie, her brows angled in a questioning glance. A bolt of lightning lit up the small porch followed by a roll of thunder lasting several seconds. “We have time,” Tillie mouthed, and headed down the stairs.

“Come on, now. You watch your step here. I know they’re steep. I’m used to them, but you be careful.”

Gwen followed holding on to both the rail and the opposite wall with her outstretched hand. “Really cool down here,” she said, her hand wet from the moist wall.

“Yes, sometimes in the hot summer I just come down here for some relief.” Harriot turned her back on the two women exposing the butcher knife she still held in her hand. “Now these two chairs back here,” she began then noticed her visitors staring at the knife. “Oh, do tell, I forgot to put this knife up. You look around, just make yourself at home. I’ll put this up and be back in a minute.”

Before Gwen or Tillie could object, Harriot climbed to the top of the stairs and turned, her eyes wide and on fire, her mottled face stretched in a dense grin. One hand on the doorknob, the other brandishing the knife, she slammed the door shut and shot the lock in place. “You make yourselves at home. I’ll be back soon,” she sniggered.

Harriot heard the two women clambering up the steep cellar stairs. Just before they reached the top, she opened the electric box on the outside of the door, found the fuse that lit the cellar, and clicked it off.

“Hey, you’ve shut off the lights. Let us out of here,” yelled Gwen.

“Harriot, is it, now Harriot, you’ve locked us in here. Just open the door. Our husbands will be worried if we don’t get back to town before dark. Come on, now,” Tillie pleaded.

Harriot leaned against the door, her broad back flat, blocking the ambient light that came in through the cracks. Suddenly, she turned, thrusting the butcher knife through a narrow seam in the wood. “Now, you listen to me. You are my guests. We’ll have dinner soon. Then maybe breakfast,” she chuckled. “I don’t think your husbands will miss you at all, considering neither of you are wearing wedding bands. Isn’t that right, ladies?”

“Let us out of here,” screamed Gwen. Harriot smiled at the sound of her fist pounding on the door.

“Stop it, Gwen,” said Tillie. “Harriot, I, I mean we, really are hungry. What time to you expect to have dinner?”

“Now, that’s better. You two just get settled in for the night, and I’ll let you know when dinner is ready.”

“The night? We are not staying the night.”

Harriot saw a hazel eye and the white circling that eye staring at her through a rotted knothole. Harriot leaned close. Her own brown eye wide open in response. “You have two flat tires. They must be fixed. You’ll be staying.”

Four sat around the table. Crazy white plates adorned each place. To the right of the plate, where the knife should have been, sat glasses filled with water, a film skimming on the top. Spoons and paper napkins graced the left.

“My boy, Timmy.” Harriot nodded in his direction.

Not acknowledging either guest, Timmy stared at his plate, the front lock of his hair hanging down.

Harriot lifted the lid off the clear casserole bowl in the middle of the table. Steam escaped the brown curdled meat rounded into a hill inside the dish.

“Squirrel,” Harriot declared. “Our own. He hunts them, don’t you, Timmy.”

“Yes’m,” he grunted.

Harriot leaned over the table and ladled a serving on Gwen and Tillie’s plates, then Timmy’s and her own. Grasping the hand of the women on either side of her, she bowed her head. Keeping her head poised for prayer, she slanted her eyes in each direction. Both women stared straight ahead.

“Can’t we thank the Lord for this fine evening, now?” Harriot scolded both as if they were children. “Bow.”

Gwen wrenched her hand away from Harriot. “No. This is absurd.” She stood quickly. The chair fell back to the floor. “Tillie, we’re leaving.”

“How?” Tillie asked, her voice a thin stream. “Haven’t you noticed the door?”

A heavy bar had been secured in front of the door, as if the hovel were a castle to protect.

Gwen raced to the back. A second bar secured the smaller door to the porch. Gwen grabbed the bar, jerking it back and forth, moving it only enough to allow a rattle.

“Get back in the cellar,” Harriot said, her eyes cold, emotionless, one hand gripping Tillie’s wrist, the other the butcher knife, cocked toward Gwen.

“OK, OK. We’ll go.”

“Not we’ll. Just you.” She raised the knife gripped in her right hand. Gwen backed down the stairs. The door shut and locked behind her.

Pushing Tillie ahead of her, Harriot headed toward the front of the house.

“Unbolt this, Timmy.”

The door flew open, banging against the wall.

“Get that rabbit door open. That’s where you’re going, missy.”

“Hasn’t been opened in a while, not since I shot it,” said Timmy followed by a guttural sound between a laugh and a cry.

“That’ll just make it cozy in there for our little guest.”

The rain had calmed to harsh drops, landing heavily on their backs as they left the porch.

“Now, get in,” Harriot ordered, the knife brushing Tillie’s back.

Down on her knees, close to the small door, her eyes flashed first to Harriot, then Timmy. “It’s too small. I can’t get in there.”

“Do you want cut? Turn sideways.”

Tillie turned onto one shoulder. “No, please. I won’t make any more trouble. I...” she paused, “I want some of that stew.”

The butcher knife flashed as lightning bolted across the sky. Thunder rolled, doming overhead from east to west.

The knife touched Tillie’s back. The tip pushed hard enough to break the skin.

“Stop,” Tillie screamed. She pushed her head inside the hole, then slid through, her arms pulling her in, her knees pushing against the wet grass.

“You know what it’s like in there,” Timmy glared at his mother.

“No, I don’t. But you do.” A chuckle as she looked at her son. “You shouldn’t’ve been so difficult, Timmy.” She turned and strode back toward the house. “At least she won’t get too wet in there, not like the basement. It always leaks after a rain.” Laughing, she entered the house then turned toward the rabbit. “Aren’t you coming in? Of course you are. Now get in here.”

Morning sun showed through the curtain less window, slanting through, bathing the kitchen in the yellow light of summer. Harriot worked at the stove. First, cracking eggs into a plastic bowl that was stained deep rust from previous preparations. Next, she slapped pork side into a hot skillet, the meat immediately sizzling, curling up in the pan. The hardtack biscuits were already in the oven. Flour, water, and salt the ingredients Harriot mixed earlier in the morning.

The table, cleared of the rabbit dinner of the night before, was set again for four. Plates and glasses of water rested on the yellow and red checked plastic tablecloth. A single branch of forsythia curved from a glass vase.

Harriot watched the meat cook and scrambled the eggs. Pouring the mixture on top of the cooking pork side, she turned the flame down, stirring only when the sides of the skillet showed firming eggs.

She didn’t turn around to acknowledge the sound of heavy footsteps on the porch. The door opened, letting the light stream into the small kitchen. Timmy clumped his way into the room.

“Did you fix the tires,” Harriot asked, not turning away from the browning egg and pork side mixture.

“You didn’t need to use those spikes. They was hard to get out.”

Harriot turned toward him, thrusting the rusted spatula in his direction. “I asked you if you fixed the tires. Did you?”

“Yeah, I fixed the tires. Big hole, though.” He shrugged. “They’ll make it back to town.”

Harriot turned back to the stove. “After breakfast, I suspect our guests will drive to town even on tires flat down to the rim.” She smiled at the cooked eggs that swam in the pork side grease. Pulling the hardtack out of the oven, she put the finished breakfast in the center of the table.

“You go unlock that cellar door. Tell that lady breakfast is ready.”

Harriot hurried to the door and onto the porch. “Tillie, breakfast is ready. I’m comin’ to get you.” She stepped down from the porch, holding onto the wooden rail, loose in its stanchions from neglect. Knocking on the rabbit’s stomach, she yelled, “You in there? Well, of course you are. The little door’s locked.” She reached down and unclasped the lock, letting it fall on the grass. Pulling the door open, she bent down and peered inside. Tillie crouched across from the door, her knees pulled up to her chest, her eyes opened wide, unblinking.

“Now, now, don’t be shy. Come on out of there. I’ve got a good breakfast ready, then you can be on your way. Timmy fixed your tires. The rain’s gone. A good day to go home, I’d say.”

Tillie didn’t move.

Harriot banged on the top of the rabbit with her fist. “Now you come on. Everything’s getting cold. Don’t you want to go home?”

Soon a hand appeared from inside the rabbit followed by Tillie's head and shoulders, wriggling as she scabbled her way through the door, her shoulders and hips scrapping the rough edges of the plastic hole. "There now," Harriot singsonged, grabbing Tillie's thin wrist. "We'll just go see how your friend is doing. She had a nice accommodation, too."

As they entered the house, Harriot saw Gwen sitting at the table, stone faced, her once perfectly coiffed hair matted flat on either side of her head. Timmy standing behind her, knife in hand, told Harriot her guest did not come quietly from the basement.

"Sit." Harriot indicated the chair opposite Gwen.

Harriot reached out her hands toward Gwen and Tillie. "Let's pray," she commanded.

"Dear Lord, please allow a safe journey for these ladies," she looked at her guests, "after we eat."

Harriot spooned the eggs, curdled in the grease of the pork side, onto the four plates then added a flat hardtack biscuit. Gwen and Tillie stared at their plates. Harriot picked up her fork and stabbed a piece of egg and pork. "This is delicious," she said, her mouth full of the yellow and brown combination. Timmy also began to eat, forking bite after bite into his mouth.

Gwen glanced at Tillie and picked up her fork. "We really do need to get back to town," she began, her eyes on the mound of egg, grease, and pork on her plate.

"Eat some breakfast so you'll have strength for the trip home."

One bite at a time, Gwen and Tillie speared each piece of egg and meat, chewing gingerly before swallowing.

"Biscuits are good today," Harriot said, crumbs falling out of the side of her mouth onto the table.

“Timmy, bring the car around. Our guests are just about finished.” She nodded at their plates. “So glad you both could come. Your car should be ready for you. You don’t mind if I don’t see you off, do you? I need to do up these dishes.”

Tillie and Gwen walked toward the door, then out on the porch. At each step, they expected to hear Harriot coming from behind, knife in hand, ordering them to get in the cellar.

Timmy drove the car around to the front of the house. Getting out, he brushed off the back of his trousers. “Real wet. I guess you forgot to put the top up.”

Not minding the seats that oozed water as they sat down, Gwen slammed one foot on the gas pedal, let out the clutch, and launched the sedan toward the sandy road that led to the highway.

A knock on the door that afternoon roused Harriot from her nap. Again, a knock followed by a man’s voice. “Harriot Adams. You in there?”

“I’m coming. Just hold your horses.” Opening the door, she saw a man in a sheriff’s uniform standing on her porch. “Yes.”

“Mrs. Adam. We’ve had a complaint from,” he glanced at his clipboard, “Gwen Elliott and Tillie Brady. They say you threatened them and held them against their will in the basement and in that rabbit you’ve got outside.”

Harriot mustered a wounded expression, tilting her head, and letting her mouth slacken. “I can’t believe some people. Just out to cause trouble and mischief is what I think. Those two women stayed because they ran over nails or something. My boy fixed the flats, but it was raining so you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face. Did it rain in town where you were?”

“It sure did rain. I’ll give you that.”

“I offered them rabbit stew, last night. They wouldn’t even touch it. And you know how good rabbit stew can be. But I guess that’s just for us country people. I bet you’ve had a supper or two of rabbit stew in your life.”

“Well, yes ma’am, I have. Can be mighty good.”

“Those two city women sure did eat up eggs and pork side this morning. Didn’t even say nothin’ when they left. No thank you for fixin’ the tires or the hospitality of stayin. Nothin. And then they say I kept them here. Let me just tell you something. Those two can come out here and say that to my face. I bet they won’t because they’re liars and troublemakers.”

“Mrs. Adams, I must check out something like this. You understand, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do. You wouldn’t be doing your job, otherwise. I may have some of that pork side left from this morning. How about I fix you a sandwich for the way back into town.”

“Pork side. I haven’t had that in a while.”

The sheriff walked around Harriot’s house, a sandwich in his hand, opened the door to the basement, peeked inside the rabbit, got in his car, and drove away, down the sandy road that came and sat in front of Harriot’s house for a while.

That evening, Harriot settled in the straight-backed chair on her porch and stared down the road that twisted and turned leading away from her home. “Never can tell what that old road’ll bring when we put the signs out.” She laughed, a great guffaw. “Maybe next time’ll be more fun, right, Timmy” she yelled in the direction of the shed. “Ole Gwen and Tillie.” Her foot thumped the wooden planks of the porch. “They was crazy.”