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*Addie Harp, who was famous mostly for her eccentricity*

# The Last Visit

By Cale Conger

Yes, you go on out, Bernadine. There's no need for you to sit in here every day and night. If I need anything, I'm perfectly capable of leaning against the buzzer with my elbow. After all, you have it pinned right there on the arm pad of my chair. I know I can't pick it up and press it the way I used to before I had the stroke, but I've learned to do a few things.

Heh, ho, ha. You've lost out, Addie Harp. It's hard to believe that old motor-mouth Addie can't even utter a sound anymore. Of all the things to happen to me. Well, there's one thing about it: I'm not going to be swishing around all over this neighborhood talking about my neighbors. Swish indeed! Not even stumble! I can't even use that four-footed walker. So I'm doomed, I guess, to sit here in this chair and while away my days and nights thinking about the past.

Past? Yes, I really have one to think about. It's just filled with people like Betty Hanks and Helene Goltry and Aggie Norden and Chester and Myrtle Fairbanks and Lige Nelson and Jim Lowry and Marilyn and Old Man Overby and Poppa and Momma and Bertie and Genie and Marinelle Bradley and Bill Potter.

Uh. Bill Potter. I haven't even so much as thought about him this last millennium. In fact, I guess I've conditioned myself not to think about him. Huh! Talk about the perfect crime! I know in my heart that I killed Bill, but didn't it work out wonderfully that Marinelle is the one who went to prison? So both of us have paid—each in her own way. Marinelle has paid in prison, and I've paid in this makeshift snake pit with Bernadine and all these people in white clucking around me.

You really had it coming to you, Bill Potter. If there really is such a thing as reincarnation, and I strongly doubt it, maybe you learned a thing or two that you can use in the next go-around. The very idea! Gypping an old woman out of almost everything she had in the world! And all the time pretending to love her and to want to spend the rest of your life with her! And worst of all, being married to Dr. Marinelle Bradley all the time. That's the unforgiveable thing—the way you used your Chatty Cathy Marinelle to keep me out of my mind. I can hear her now: 'Addie Harp, you don't want to turn into a blarp! Take your pill.' or 'Let me shoot you higher than the sky, my little Flight Attendant.' All the time I thought we were great pals, and she was just setting me up for Bill Potter. Why, Bill, she even warned me about you constantly. It was almost as if she was working against you while all the time she was working for you.

Talk about faking. The way you set me up in that suite at the Launi Hula was really slick! But even slicker was the way you so subtly offered to let Marinelle and Bernadine go along at your expense. They were supposed to be for my enjoyment and companionship, but one of them turned out to be for yours. How you two must have laughed at old

naive, stupid, trusting Addie Harp. Well, so what? I guess you were giving somebody else a rest while you were going on about me.

Who's that standing at my door? It looks like somebody I should know, but I can't quite make him out. If he's someone from my past, won't he be shocked by old Addie's aphasia? Why, people used to have to wait to break in when I was talking. Even the students in my high-school English classes after I'd already asked them questions.

He says he's Doug Norwood. Well, I would never have believed it. Like all of us, he has aged. But he has also spread out a little. And look at that hair graying at the temples. How old would Doug be by now? Must be around 55, I'd say. He wasn't exactly a sprout the first time I saw him. That was on my 75th birthday. Good honk! that was almost fifteen years ago! How time does fly when you're young, beautiful, energetic, and involved.

What's that I hear? He asked me if I knew him. Evidently he doesn't know anything about my condition. He looks as if he can't believe that the old gray-haired woman dressed in an expensive red velvet robe is really Addie Harp. Probably the hardest thing for him to believe is that I'm not uttering a sound. For all I know, he may be thinking 'No, that can't be Addie. Not only isn't she talking, but she also doesn't have a slip that's showing.' I can't give him even so much as a twitch of my nose, a gleam of the eye, a glance of recognition, or a good-humored smile. All I can muster at best is a Mona Lisa look. Good! Maybe it means something to him because he's beginning to talk softly to me.

So you're Doug Norwood. Well, I'm a jump ahead of you. I already knew that, and I'm not even a wizard. Yes, I know. You used to be my next-door neighbor. It's too bad you got such high-falutin attitudes, Doug, after you came back from that year's lectureship. You and Laura thought that you had to build a house on Knob Hill. Considering the way Marilyn Lowry treated all of us like dirt the night we stormed her 'fort,' I'm surprised you would want to be anywhere close to her and him. But there you are next door to those snooty Lowrys when you could still be right here on Poplar Avenue next door to Addie Harp. But Doug, even though you haven't kept in touch, I never have done away with the trust fund for your children. No, it's still there intact. In the event of my death, Stephen, Larry, and Jennifer will have no worries education-wise. Even if they decide not to go to the university here in Grimes, my trust funds will pay for a handsome education for each of them.

You ask why. Well, it's simple. For a long time I showered love, affection, and gifts on the Lowry children, but as they grew older, they always seemed to look upon Aunt Addie as moreso a relic than anything else. I lost interest, and they did too. So that's the way it was and is. After a while, even a nice auntie gets tired of laying out gifts and never receiving

as much as a thank-you card.

Thank God for Momma. She may not have been a very well-educated woman, but she really taught us girls the social niceties. I remembered how aggravated Bertie, Genie, and I used to get at her at gift times. She would load up our loot and tell us that we couldn't play with or use any gift until we provided her with a thank-you note all ready to put in the mail. That didn't hurt us a bit and it made us conscious of the need for manners.

My word! How long had it been before today since I had thought of Genie? She had so much going for her, and it ended so soon. My, she was the prettiest little thing, and she never met a stranger. And talk about talent! It was just oozing out of every pore of her body. Her violin teacher, who had once been on the concert stage, told Poppa and Momma that Genie had the potential to be a concert violinist. There wasn't a civic club or church in Grimes that Genie didn't play the violin for. She even had a full Music scholarship at the state university, but she lasted two years. She met a young accounting student, fell in love, and married him. By the time she would have finished a degree, she had died in childbirth. Twenty-two years old! Her death just as surely killed Poppa and Momma as anything imaginable. For a long time after Genie's death, I couldn't pray, and I also couldn't stand to look at Ralph. But the picture always changes, and before long I considered Ralph one of my best friends. But I was always glad that his and Genie's little baby girl didn't live.

Be thankful, Doug, that you didn't have to hear all that again for about the millioneth time. How my mind does rattle on. Talk to me, Doug. There are thousands of questions that I want to ask you. So just talk to me.

It's amazing that you would even want to come out here today. Oh, you're visiting some people from your church. Well, that's good, but you always were a do-gooder — and not in a pious way. Do my eyes tell you anything, Dear Friend? I'm imploring you to tell me about the children, about Laura, and about your job. I know that you have received several advancements since we were neighbors. I wish I could clutch your nice firm hand, kiss you on the cheek, and tell you how proud I am of you. Maybe I would have gone further in life if it hadn't been for that silly dream I had of being the wealthiest woman in Grimes. Poppa was partially responsible for that. He was very aggressive — an overpowering motivator. He thought that Shakespeare and grammar were a waste of time. I remember that I was in my junior year at State and Poppa asked me every weekend I was home when I was going to start making some money. I told him that would come in time.

It was an obsession for me that year to do well because Poppa always kept up with my grades very closely. He had the philosophy that he expected perfection if he was going to shell out money for a girl to be educated. That was a terrible semester. I received a C+ in one of my major courses. I was enraged as I stormed that bastion of academe, Dr. Loring's office. I argued with him for several minutes to no avail. Disgusted, I finally decided to leave. But always being one who liked to have the last word, I paused at the door and told Dr. Loring that I had accepted the C+ on paper but that it would always be a B- in my soul. Obviously the Good Doctor also liked to have the last word because when I received my grades, I learned that Dr. Loring had turned in a B for me. For as long as I remained at State, Dr. Loring always had a special greeting for me: "Addie, I changed your grade to a B-on paper, but it will always be a C+ in my soul." So your

new job is going well. I'm happy but a little surprised since I have always thought of you as a classroom teacher and not an administrator. I know I was miserable to Locono after I was shifted from the classroom to an administrative position. But to each his own, I always say!

Well, Doug, you're really paying me back. All those years you listened to me rattle, and now you're doing the same thing. But it's not fair! At least you were always able to break in occasionally. And now all I can do is sit here and try to smile, which I can't do of course, and try to look interested.

You say you really enjoy my fountain? I do too. In fact, I think I would go mad (or **madder** heh, heh) sometime if I didn't have that fountain to look at and this parakeet to listen to. Don't be confused by the bird, Doug. Even though he keeps asking "Wanna buy a bird?" he's still not for sale. No, Sir, I couldn't do without that one. The fountain came from the Rankin Gift and Flower Shop. You'll never guess who had it sent up here — it and the bird too. You got it — your neighbors from Snob — uh Knob — Hill. Yes, Jim and Marilyn Lowry. I used to think that they were able to build that mansion because Jim was stealing from me. I think maybe I still believe that deep down in my soul. It's just impossible for me to conceive of how a country lawyer who never goes any farther than the county seat to try cases could ever amass all the possessions Jim and Marilyn have. And I understand that it's really expensive to send children to school nowadays.

Well, anyway, one day not long after my last attack when I lost the grip in my hands and the ability to speak, Jim and Marilyn were out here whispering around with Bernadine. I heard Marilyn tell Bernadine that she thought a fountain down at Rankin's and a parakeet from Downing's Petorium would be just the thing to make me take interest in life again. She described in detail the dazzling beauty of the fountain and told Bernadine that she wanted to have it delivered and installed. Bernadine told her that I had even lost interest in my stories on TV but that she supposed it was worth a try. She was right. I no longer really cared whether Bob and Lisa ever got back together or whether Ed and Holly ever derived lasting happiness from each other.

I think it was later that same day that the fountain arrived. Bernadine even had to move out one of the beds to make room for the fountain. From the first I made up my mind not to like it, but as soon as it was turned on, I wondered how I had done without it. The subdued lights and the sound of trickling water were soothing. And that bird — oh that bird — has been my favorite companion during my moments of silence. His fowl instinct tells him that I am here in body but unable to communicate. He's the tamest thing I've ever seen. Sometimes Bernadine lets him out of the cage; and he comes over here, perches on my shoulder, and yaks on and on — ha — just the way Addie Harp used to harp! "Wanna buy a bird? Pepper's a nice bird. Addie's a good girl."

But honestly, Doug, everytime I look at that fountain and listen to that bird, I think of those Lowrys. As long as I live, I'll never forget about the way Marilyn treated all of us the night we dropped in — you know that night after we had been to the cemetery and Harp Park on Memorial Day. That was a long time ago, wasn't it? I really think Marilyn was upset mostly because we had interrupted her watching THE ADDAMS FAMILY on TV. Marilyn's a TV addict. I don't suppose she has read a book since she finished high school — and maybe not before then. There's always someone

around who'll do a book review for a price. Ask me. Addie's Underground Research Paper Bureau was a thriving business at State during my senior year. Finally I was so tired of Poppa's constant heckling about when I was going to make some money that I decided to get into a lucrative business. Sometimes I would get as much as \$250 for a ten-page paper, depending on the economic status of my client. I've always regretted that I didn't stay on at State the next couple of years after I finished my Bachelor's. As a graduate student, I could really have cashed in on Master's theses and doctoral dissertations. But by the time I went back to work on a Master's, I had to do it in the summers since I had a teaching job at Locono nine months of the year. So there was no time for ghost writing.

By that time anyway, I was beginning to dabble in the stock market. I had an excellent broker who was managing to help me get good dividends, so I considered my research bureau a mundane idea. Besides, researching was more work than playing with the stock market. . . .

"Well, Dr. Norwood, as I live and breathe! I haven't seen you for a long time!"

"Hello, Bernadine. You're looking vigorous. You don't seem to be getting any older. What's your secret?"

"Well, Sir, if I have any secret at all, it's hard work. And maybe being here at Hilltop Manor and seeing all the people who suffer constantly or those who are lonely and depressed or completely unaware of where they are. I can't help but be thankful to the Lord God that I'm still able to be up and going. So what brings you here, Doctor? I was preaching so hard that I didn't even think to ask you."

"Well, originally, I came out here to visit with some friends from my church. Before they had to give up farming, they used to rent some of Addie's farms."

"Could that be the Nordens?"

"That's right, Bernadine. So you do remember them."

"Yessir, I never could forget those two. They gave Miss Addie some very uneasy times several years ago before it became evident that she was no longer able to live at home even if I stayed there most of the time."

"What happened?"

"Well, Sir, Miss Addie received a letter in the mail that had all the words pasted from cutouts. The message was **BE SURE TO WATCH THOSE HICKS WHO FARM YOUR LAND. THEY'LL BE THE DEATH OF YOU!**"

"So what did Addie do?"

"She took for granted that the note meant that the Nordens were out to kill her, so she began barricading herself in a little basement room every night. She must have slept there like that for three months."

"Do you think the Nordens were capable of murder, Bernadine?"

"No, Sir, they never did strike me as that type. That's the reason I tried to get Miss Addie to quit sleeping in that stuffy place."

"Bernadine, if they were ever capable of murder, they have surely changed now. You have never, I'm sure, known two nicer people. They are calm, peaceful, contented old people waiting for death — never complaining, never feeling sorry for themselves."

If Bernadine and Doug had been watching closely, they could have almost detected a wince from Addie. She was delaying judgement about the Nordens, but as for now, there was no way that she could believe anything but the worst.

"Who do you think sent that note, Bernadine?"

"It's the kind of thing that either Bill Potter or Marinelle

Bradley could have done."

"I'm a little hazy about the Potter-Bradley episode in Addie's life."

"Well, Sir, it was those two who finally pushed Miss Addie off the deep end."

"I remember you told me a little about that the last time I talked with you. My, that was the night Laura and I were out here to see Laura's aunt. We didn't even know Addie was here until we heard her fighting with the aides."

"Yes, I remember that. Miss Addie still had it in her mind then that Hilltop Manor was her home on Poplar Avenue. She was always grabbing hold of the visitors out here to take them on a tour of her home."

"Does she still think she's on Poplar?"

"I can't be too sure about that. All I know is that she gave up the tour business after that night. One day I heard her mumbling to herself that they could just have it — that the upkeep and the bills were too much anyway, that she would just sit back and let them take care of it."

"So you think she's still in that dreamworld?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"What **did** trigger all this trouble?"

"Well, do you remember that tea party Miss Addie gave for Dr. Bradley?"

"How could I ever forget it? I was the only male there, and I was the featured vocalist who had to sing to Birdie Kincannon's accompanying."

"It was after that party that Miss Addie started giving away everything. She hadn't figured it out at the time why they were doing it, but Mr. Potter and Dr. Bradley started interfering."

"How did they do it?"

"Well, they sent me on a long errand one afternoon while Miss Addie was resting. I shouldn't have gone, but I did because they convinced me that Miss Bertie and her husband needed to be met at the airport in Marsden. Knowing how Miss Addie loved her relatives, I jumped into her car and drove off without another thought."

"So were they there when you got to the airport?"

"No, and I waited for the next two flights. They never did show up."

"So what did you do then?"

"I finally went back home. When I got there, Miss Addie was flapping around like a drunk dolphin talking about how hard she had worked moving everything to Marinelle's."

"Was it true?"

"Indeed it was! I started looking around and found out that all kinds of priceless things were missing."

"As I remember, this was about the time Addie left for Hawaii with Potter."

"Yes, Sir; and although Miss Addie didn't know it, Dr. Bradley went too. A few hours after they got checked into a hotel, Miss Addie went out into the hall to look around. She heard Mr. Potter in an alcove talking to someone."

"And it turned out to be Dr. Bradley?"

"That's right, and Miss Addie found out the two of them were married to each other."

"What did she do then?"

"Well, there she was with no money and wondering what she would do. Suddenly she remembered that she always carried one bank card for insurance, so she booked a reservation on the next flight home."

"Did Potter ever return here?"

"No, but by that time the enterprise here in Grimes that he had started with Miss Addie's money had already folded,

so there was no reason for him to come back."

"Is he still in Hawaii?"

"No, Sir, we heard later that he died from poisoning. Dr. Bradley escaped to Puerto Rico. For a long time, we thought she was still there, but then we heard that the Hawaiians had picked her up and charged her with murder."

"How did they connect her with Potter?"

"Well, when they went to that hotel, Mr. Potter put Miss Addie in one room and then registered himself and Dr. Bradley as husband and wife."

"I guess Dr. Bradley left in a hurry."

"Yes, she left too fast to please the Five-O people. They checked her room and found an assortment of needles. That was all the evidence needed."

"So Dr. Bradley-Potter is rotting in prison now."

"That's the story, and she never realized anything from what she helped Bill Potter do to Miss Addie."

"What about her property on Poplar?"

"Well, there had to be a sheriff's sale to dispose of everything; the woman was heavily in debt."

"Was it a combination of all these things that did **this** to Addie?" He gestured at the limp, velvet-attired figure in the only chair in the room.

"Yes, it was only about a week after she returned home that she became completely uncontrollable. Mr. Lowry, as her executor, made the decision to send her out here to Hilltop Manor. He said that there would be barely enough money left to see her through the remainder of her life. But he told me that he wanted me to be her paid companion."

"I don't know how she would have made it without you, Bernadine."

"Really, Dr. Norwood, it's been an act of love. How could anyone turn away from someone like Miss Addie?"

"How long has she been speechless?"

"For only about six months."

"Does she ever try to speak?"

"Never."

"Do you think she knows what's going on?"

"She definitely does. Don't you, Honey?" Bernadine squeezed Addie's arm. Addie looked as though she might be

about to say something.

"Does anyone ever come to see you?" He decided to use a new approach.

"Well, actually, Dr. Norwood, most of Miss Addie's friends are already dead. The only ones I can think of who have been here were Mrs. Goltry, Miss Hanks, and Mrs. Fairbanks."

"Myrtle Fairbanks? Why in the world?"

"Well, she had her reasons. Grimes had a centennial celebration last month, and Mrs. Fairbanks won the title Mrs. Grimes Centennial. She had to come out here to strut her okra."

"Oh yes, that would be Myrtle Fairbanks' immediate reaction—pour vinegar into Addie Harp's gaping wound."

"If it had been anyone else, I wouldn't have believed it."

"How did Addie react?"

"There wasn't any change in her expression, but she seemed to be pushing herself away. I hope Mrs. Fairbanks pays for this."

"She will. Be assured."

"Well, Dr. Norwood, I've enjoyed this chat. But now I have to go look in on my mother. She's out here too, you know."

"You go right ahead, Bernadine. I want to say a few words to Addie."

"You come back, Dr. Norwood. I have the feeling that this visit has been a help to Miss Addie."

As Bernadine left the room, Doug began trying to talk with Addie. "Addie, thank you for so briskly stealing into my world. Having you for a friend has been one of the most interesting things in my life. I'm going to try to come back to see you often. When you get those hands back, we can play dominoes or canasta. I remember how you have always liked table games. What else can I bring? You know you can depend on me."

For the first time in several months, Addie seemed to want to speak. It was painstaking work. "D....d.... d...d....d....d....g....g...."

"Bernadine, come quick," Doug screamed as he ran down the hall. "She said **Doug!**"

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"The messenger glanced at Kenny and back at Lamar, silent and supercilious, unbelieving. "I'll tell my boss you'll have the money in a week." And he left.

In a week and one day the letter came. Lamar's fingers fluttered toward it again — and moved back.

A car pulled into the yard. From the kitchen table, Lamar could see the black roadster bounce over the rain-

washed gullies in front of the house. Lamar was standing when the front door opened. The same young man had returned — the same fixed smile and flat brown eyes.

"Mr. Holland, I believe you have a packet of money for me."

"Why don't you just sit down — we'll talk —" Lamar's voice was weak and breathy. He put his hands on the table to support himself.

"No, Mr. Holland, I didn't come to

talk. If you'll just give me the money, I'll be on my way."

"Mr —. It just wasn't possible. I didn't have enough time. Give me awhile. I'll manage some way. I'll —" Lamar watched, mesmerized, as the young man's hand moved slowly toward the inside of his coat.

Kenny, crouching under an April-green mesquite behind the hen house, heard the shot.