

Ariel's Gift

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Square Circle Press
Schenectady, New York

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Square Circle Press LLC
PO Box 913
Schenectady, NY 12301
www.SquareCirclePress.com

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First paperback edition 2020.

Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free, durable paper.

ISBN 13: 978-0-9989670-2-8

ISBN 10: 0-9989670-2-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020940384

Publisher's Acknowledgments

Cover: ©2020 by Square Circle Press. Cover design by Richard Vang, based on *Down Rent War, Around 1845* by Mary Earley, ca. 1939-1940. (Credit: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the General Services Administration [Accession Number: 1974.28.367]).

Epigraphs: Part 1, Thomas Taylor, *A Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (1790), in Patrick Harpur, *The Philosophers' Secret Fire*, p. 313. Part 2, Apuleius, from *The God of Socrates* (c. 150), in *The Works of Apuleius*, trans. Mrs. Henry Tighe, Hudson Gurney, Mary Blachford Tighe, pp. 357-358. Part 3, Thomas Traherne, *The Centuries of Meditations* (1660s), quoted in Philip and Carol Zaleski, *Prayer: A History*, frontispiece.

The author's acknowledgments appear in the Afterword.

*For Kristin and Bradon,
the loves of my life.*

BOOK PREVIEW

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Part One

Clinton Falls

Mumford

Clinton Falls

And as to the philosophy, by whose assistance these mysteries are developed, it is coeval with the universe itself; and however its continuity may be broken by opposing systems, it will make its appearance at different periods of time, as long as the sun himself shall continue to illuminate the world.

—Thomas Taylor, *A Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (1790)

Chapter One

IN MY DREAM I find myself in a garage, face down on the floor between a rusty oil tank and a hydraulic lift stuck three feet off the ground. The place stinks of stale gasoline, wet cigarette butts, mildew and rotting mice. My tuxedo, inherited from my father, is soiled with blood, cobwebs, dirt and who knows what else. A sticky dampness seeps through my pants as I slowly raise myself off the floor. I'm unsteady, even on both knees. I fall back to the floor with a groan.

Breathing comes with difficulty and brings with it a sharp pain across my ribs and down my back. Raising my head, I feel more pain pounding through my skull and down the left side of my neck. Up on a knee, I close my eyes and massage my brow and temples to clear my vision and ease the pain. I finally make it to my feet and steady myself against the lift. I concentrate on drawing one breath at a time. I feel my heartbeat slow to a pace approaching normal.

Slowly, my ears begin to register what's happening outside in the streets of Cape Vincent. I hear the wind scream over and around the building in which I've found shelter. Hail crashes onto the metal roof above, bringing a constant barrage of noise. Thunder shakes the cinder block walls of the garage and echoes through the air. With a horrific cracking noise, maples and oaks are splintered by lightning strikes, causing further havoc on the streets of this sleepy river town. Even inside, the electrically charged air makes the hair on the back of my neck tingle.

There are human sounds too, muffled somewhat by the concrete block walls but still audible. People shriek and shout the names of loved ones. They plea for mercy from God and God's only son. Merchants curse as their kiosks, set up with such great expectation on this tourist-heavy day, are blown to the ground by the wind and trampled under foot by people fleeing from the chaos. The voices are periodically silenced by the creak and thump of falling trees. Somehow, I've escaped the madness for a moment. I'm not the least bit confident that the thick walls of this old auto shop will protect me for long.

"You think it's all your fault," someone says from the direction of the doorway.

I turn and see Billy Masterson, my old friend who died to save the river back in 2001. He's thin and pale in my dream, like he was in real life. What surprises me is that he's here, on the river he loved, right now, at the time of the river's greatest peril. I shouldn't be that surprised, though, because Billy's ghost has a habit of appearing to other people, including my cousin Andrew, just when they need him.

"It is my fault," I say, articulating a simple truth from which no concrete walls can protect me.

Billy laughs. "What, you can control the weather now?" He moves closer and takes a pack of Marlboros from his pants' pocket.

Not a good idea with all the combustibles around, I think, even if you are a ghost.

"I know," he says. "You think you never shoulda done what you did. You think you actually had a choice, coulda done somethin' different."

Billy's right. Now, with the world loosed from its moorings, I know that the sum of my choices, returning to the Thousand Islands among them, was a huge mistake. Would I have done so had I known that the horrors of this day would be the inevitable consequence of my actions? Would I have done something different had I known that my cho-

sen course of action would destroy so much of what I, and others, hold dear?

Something—a tree?—slams onto the garage roof. Stricken with fear and needing protection above all else, I gather objects to barricade the door. After a few minutes of piling up old tires and transmission parts and toolboxes and exhaust pipes, I'm bone-tired and breathing heavily. The pain in my ribs and back is worse than it had been before. I sink to the floor and rest against the tires.

Billy, laughing again, puts a cigarette in his mouth and lights it. "Buildin' yourself a barricade's a waste of time," he says. "Might not be your fault, might've been no other options back then, but that don't mean you can hide from what's out there now, or from what's comin'."

Billy gestures to the wall above the oil tank, where images appear of the destruction for which Billy tells me I'm not to blame. Heron's Nest, the summer home where my family had shared so much joy for so many years, is a pile of timber on the edge of a desolate island. Valhalla, the Ostend family castle and the most spectacular structure in the Thousand Islands, is a smoldering shell of stone.

"They're only buildings, ya' know," Billy says. "What really matters is the people."

"And where are they?" I ask.

Billy tells me that the River Rat Reporters, my father's friends and my friends, are either dead or, like me, in hiding. He says that my brother Patrick is who knows where. He says the same of a man he calls "the magician." Finally, he begins to tell me that my beloved, beautiful Mindy, who stood with me at the altar only moments ago as we exchanged wedding vows in the company of the people we love ...

"No!" I shout.

Billy stops talking and smiles.

I rub my eyes and feel the sting of sweat and dirt. If I refuse to acknowledge the truth of what Billy says is hap-

pening to Mindy, then perhaps all the other unthinkable events of this day will cease being true. I breathe deep, far past the pain in my ribs and back. I remove my coat and bow tie and hang them on the hydraulic lift. I breathe again and move to the door. The smoke from Billy's cigarette makes me cough.

If there's any chance at all of seeing Mindy again—if there's any chance of seeing anyone—I must leave the tenuous safety of this shelter and face up to the consequences of what I had begun. Slowly, with as much determination as I can muster, I begin to disassemble the barricade I had just built.

“Eff yeah,” Billy encourages. He claps and the images on the wall disappear. “The only way to save her is to get out there and do it.”

As I turn to ask him for help, the door bursts open from a ferocious blast of wind, which sends the remaining pieces of my barricade tumbling past me. The gust also blows Billy's cigarette from his hand into a pool of gasoline. Or did he flick it there? Either way, I awaken just as the explosion sends me through the door and into the street.

About the Author

THOMAS PULLYBLANK has served as a college history professor and a United Methodist pastor. *Ariel's Gift* is his third novel, which completes the Tom Flanagan historical mysteries. He followed the first two novels of the trilogy, *Cornflower's Ghost: An Historical Mystery*, and *Napoleon's Gold: A Legend of the Saint Lawrence River*, with a collection of short stories related to *Napoleon's Gold*, titled *The Ghost of Billy Masterson & Other Thousand Island Tales*.

In addition to Upstate New York historical mysteries, Pullyblank is also the author of *For None Can Rank Above Thee: A History of Cal-Mum Red Raiders Football*, a chronicle of his legendary high school football team in Caledonia, New York.

Pullyblank now works as a conflict mediator, and lives with his family in Fly Creek, New York. As he did as a child with his parents, he still spends time with his family every summer in his beloved Thousand Islands.

The Ghost of Billy Masterson
& Other Thousand Islands Tales



Thomas Pullyblank



Also available from
Square Circle Press



**The Ghost of
Billy Masterson & Other
Thousand Island Tales**

by

Thomas Pullyblank

A collection of short stories supplemental to *Cornflower's Ghost*, *Napoleon's Gold*, and *Ariel's Gift*.

The beautiful Thousand Islands often seem like a magical place and in Thomas Pullyblank's new book of short stories they actually are magic—a place of underwater spirits and time travelers. ... [As] I read this book, I imagined sitting next to Pullyblank on a cool summer night at an island campfire. As he spun out his tale, the mighty river pulsed along the shore, its water filled with secrets.

—*Betsy Kepes, North Country Public Radio*

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