

## MISS SAGE'S ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

It was hot. Chester Woods, South Carolina was on fire and it was only late June. Miss Hattie Ann Sage stepped out onto the front porch of her house with a queasy stomach. It was a sign. Ever since she was a child there were two things she knew for sure. A troubled stomach was a bad omen and disregarding the feeling meant a horrible outcome. In all her ninety years, she'd only ignored it once and once was enough. She walked over to her favorite rocking chair and sat down to face the day with heightened senses and an additional prayer for protection.

She laid down her cane with spiraling tendrils carved into the cherry wood by her father. They were as thin and delicate as the protruding veins on her weathered fawn brown hands. She settled back into the chair after picking up the fan from the side table. This had been her routine every day that the Lord gave her, except when she was sick, or the weather was too bad. On those days. Hattie would stare out of the window longing for the organic smell of the outdoors. She fanned herself briskly as she gave thanks for being alive, for being surrounded by all she loved, and for all who came before, especially her grandfather who built the house on land he dreamt about one night and made it so.

Hattie's grandfather, Samuel Lincoln, got the deed to land that no one wanted. What the landowner thought was fool's gold started out with five houses, now it was a circle of one hundred homes flowing out like ripples in a pond, surrounded by flourishing woods. She remembered, Poppa Blue saying the man who sold the land asked, "What ya'll niggers gonna do out there in them woods?" Poppa Blue said, "We gonna live like people supposed to live, in peace". From then to now, Chester Woods remained a haven from the troubles of the world.

As the last breeze of the morning swept her face, leaving the scorching hot breath of southern summer, Hattie leaned into its caress and closed her eyes. She drifted off to sleep thinking about the maids, laborers, chauffeurs, doormen, and cooks who crossed the deep sienna wooden railroad ties as they returned home from working in someone else's fields, in someone else's kitchen, driving someone else's car or tending someone else's children. Their faces, despite the varied hues of brown, from damn near white to Indian yellow to African black, wore the same weary expression.

“Ma'am, are you alright? Ma'am?”

Hattie eyes popped open to see a tall, bone-white man in a sagging seersucker suit with a straw hat and a briefcase in his hand leaning over her white picket fence. Her stomach bucked like she'd gulped a passel of snakes. Hattie coughed a couple of times before finding her voice.

“I must have nodded off and swallowed wrong. Give me a minute, please.”

Despite the sweltering conditions and the momentary scare of finding his first customer dead, the man was ready to give his sales pitch. His need to make more money countered any concern of crossing the tracks to gain new clients. No other agent at his office wanted to go into the woods past the railroad tracks to the black section. They said black people only deal with their own kind, plus they don't have money for big policies. Still, he had to try. This could be a whole new territory for him. If he got one, he could get others. After all it was a new day, even in the south.

When he opened the gate to see if he could help the woman, he noted the perfectly manicured yard, the pristine white paint on the house resembled vanilla frosting. Vermilion hued shutters accented the windows while the floor of the wide wrap around porch shone a glistening

light gray. He had to admit this was a fine house by anybody's standards. Yes, there was money to be made here. He stepped onto the initial porch step feeling the squish of sweat in his oxfords.

"I'm sorry...I feel better. Are you lost, mister?" Hattie asked the man. She leaned forward to give him a good look and realized he looked familiar. Her stomach continued to rumble.

"Glad to hear it. You need some water or something."

"No. I'm fine, thank you. My niece, Janie, will be here soon."

"Alright then. Well, ma'am, I'm not lost. I'm here to talk to you about something real important that could bring you and your family some peace of mind" he said showing all his pearly white teeth, while fanning himself with his hat.

"Well, I got all the peace I need in this world, but you can come get out of the sun and sit a spell," said Hattie smiling back with an equally wide grin, knowing he was probably trying to sell something she wasn't going to buy.

"Are you the home owner, ma'am?"

"I sure am."

"Well, my name is David Fulton and I'm here to talk to you about burial insurance," he said as he settled into the rocking chair across from her.

"Fulton, you say? You from around these parts?"

"No ma'am, I live about thirty miles away, near Sumner. But I had family from around here years and years ago. They're all dead now."

Abruptly, the acrid smell of gun smoke engulfed Hattie. Swirling opaque puffs floated across her eyes like dissipating ghosts. Her hands began to burn, as if she were being branded. She felt the impact that threw her back against the thick trunk of an oak tree. Two shots. Two flashes. Two dead. Hattie clutched the rails of her chair as every brilliant detail from that day eight decades ago shook her body. This man is here to kill me she thought, as the thrashing inside of her escalated.

“Ma’am, are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, yes, just can’t seem to get straight this morning. So, you must be the early bird trying to catch the worm?” she said picking up the fan on her lap to encourage any drop of cool air passing to calm her nerves until Janie got there.

“You could say that. May I have the pleasure of your name?”

“I am Miss Hattie Ann Sage and I’m a lifelong resident of Chester Woods. See those tracks you crossed over when you came into town? Well, they used to define the line between where black folks and white folks lived. You rarely saw a white person step over them unless they were lost or selling something. Still like that today, mostly.”

“Well, this is my first time here and it seems like a nice place to live, Miss Sage.”

“You alright? This heat is really something. Lucifer sure is sitting pretty today. No breeze nor a cloud to ease the fire he’s stoking,” said Hattie staring at the broadening wet stains at the man’s arm pits.

The purr of a car pulling into the driveway drew the focus of Hattie and Fulton towards the side of the house.

“Ah, She’s here.”

“Morning,” said Janie as she walked up the porch steps juggling a bag of groceries and her oversized purse”.

“Morning Janie, glad you’re here.”

“I had to stop at the grocery store to pick up a few things for the celebration tonight. Plus, I had some trouble with my son. I’ll tell you about it later. I see you got company calling already this blazing morning?”

“He wants to sell me some insurance. I’m sorry honey, what’s your name again? I can’t seem to keep nothing in my head these days.”

“David Fulton, ma’am. Can I help you with your bag?” He said to Janie.

“No sir, I got it. And don’t you believe my auntie. She’s remembers everything,” said Janie walking towards the front door.

“Oh, I ‘m sure she does,” he said while swatting at a mosquito.

“Yes, sir. Don’t let her peachy heart shaped face fool you. She is proof that no matter what life throws at you, and life has got some pitching arm, you can make it through with grace. My auntie is the sweetest person I’ve ever known,” replied Janie as she looked the man up and down, then at the strange expression on her aunt’s face. She felt caught between taking the bag in the house and staying outside to watch over Hattie. But the man looked harmless with his leather satchel and his twinkling blue eyes, but looks were never a good indicator of character. “Ya’ll want to come inside and talk?”

“That’s my Janie. Always watching over me. She’s more like a daughter than a niece,” said Hattie feeling relief at Janie’s presence.

“Oh, you know I love you to death. Watching over her is pure joy. I’m pretty sure not many folks say that about taking care of an older person. You can pretty much tell that by the number of old folk’s homes cropping up all over. No, folks don’t much care for tending to their own these days. Too much of a burden people say, but I say they’re just scared of death. Now how crazy is that! It doesn’t matter how many vitamins you take or face-lifts you have or how many miles you walk a day. No one is putting off the inevitable. It is coming, and you can be assured of that”, prattled Janie as she put her hand on the screen door knob. She opened it wide silently insisting that they come inside.

“I prefer to stay outside Janie. Get my fresh air before the sun gets too high in the sky.”

“You gonna be alright talking out here, Mr. Fulton?” said Hattie continuing to size up the broad-shouldered man with ruddy cheeks and a dangling mustache covering his thin lips. She didn’t want him in her house. Just in case he was the cause of her jumpy belly.

“Yes, Ma’am. Whatever you prefer,” he said as he swept his hat back and forth to staunch the sweat pouring over his brow.

“Yes, indeed, I think we will be just fine.”

“I figured as much. Almost every morning and evening Aunt Hattie sits on this porch greeting folks, giving them soothing conversation or wise advice. Folks listen too, especially since life just keeps repeating and she has seen and done it all,”

“Janie can you bring us some sweet ice tea when you get settled? I think we’re going to need it.”

“Ah, water will be just fine for me, please,” said Fulton.

“Oh, that’s right, you young folks are into this water craze. Didn’t think I would see a day where folks bought water like they do today. It sure is a different world out there.”

“Sure thing. Tea and water coming right up, and some of my “Lord Have Mercy” biscuits to start off your special day. Made them last night, just got to warm them up a bit in the microwave. Be back in a jiffy,” said Janie walking through the door.

“Oh Janie, Blake Hamilton is stopping by any minute, so warm some biscuits for him, too,” said Hattie, tacitly letting the stranger know it wouldn’t be two older ladies alone for long.

“Is today your birthday or something Miss Sage?”

“No, it’s not my birthday, but it is a celebration of life. I made the award-winning quilt this year. The Children’s Heritage Foundation picked mine out of all the folks in America. My quilt is going on a national tour after the ceremony at my church today. Of course, that doesn’t mean as much to me as the fun I had making it with our quilting group at the church. Oh, we talk about old times and new. Our families here and gone. Oh, just about everything under the sun while we push that needle through the cloth. That’s the way we let those coming after us know where they came from. Our stories and telling them is how a body can make it through this life. Anyway, I know you’re not here to hear me gabber on.”

“Oh, I think I remember my wife showing me something about that. She said it was real fine stitch work. I don’t know anything about quilting, but it set me to thinking I should extend

my territory. Plus, coming here gives me a chance to drive by the old family homestead, if I can find it.”

“Now you say you stopped by about burial insurance?” said Hattie with an anxious twinge.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Well, like I said, I’ve been in this town all my life. I’ve had many insurance men stop by to sell me life insurance, house insurance, and now you’re here for burial insurance. Funny, I thought around about the time I got to this age someone would surely have found a way to sell heaven insurance. Now, I guarantee you a whole lot of folks would stand in line to buy that. You’d be a rich man in no time.”

“Yes ma’am, I suspect your right about that. I guess that’s what church is for,” said Fulton taking out his handkerchief to profusely dab at his forehead, as Hattie watched his every move.

Janie walked onto the porch with a highly polished silver serving tray. “Here you go, some nice cold drinks and my biscuits. I overheard you talking about Aunt Hattie’s beautiful quilt. I will see if I can find the picture in the newspaper, so you can get a really good look.”

“That’s okay, Janie. You best get to baking them cakes and pies for tonight.”

“You’re right about that. Call me if you need me to freshen up those drinks.”

The last thing Hattie wanted was this man scrutinizing the quilt. Maybe he knows and maybe he doesn’t. Maybe it was a tale told so long ago it’s become mere folklore or forgotten all



together. She kept her fan and rocking at a steady pace despite the intensity of the rising sun and the prospect that this man might be the impetus of the constant roil in her stomach. At the front of her mind she thought it might just be a coincidence that he was here, but in the back of her mind she knew there was no such thing as happenstance. Everything happened for a reason. The irony of him trying to sell her burial insurance had not escaped her.

Janie noticed the steady stream of perspiration running down the salesman's reddening face and neck like a faucet was resting on top of his head.

"You sure you're okay out here, Mister? It's much cooler in the parlor. Maybe you all should move inside. It's only going to get hotter. It ain't even noon yet and it's sizzling."

"We'll be fine out here for a bit longer, Janie. Thank you so much dear".

"You're welcome. Well okay, I still think you need to come on in, but suit yourselves."

"Miss Sage, I sure am enjoying talking with you. But I am going to need to move on soon. I got to put food on my own children's plate."

"I know you do sugar. Everybody is in a rush these days to make some money for one thing or another. How many children do you have?"

"Four ma'am. Two boys and two girls."

"Children can be a godsend and sometimes they can be burden. I'm sure yours are pure joy."

"Now about this policy Miss Sage. Please excuse my bluntness, but do you have a burial plan? Do you have a plot somewhere with beautiful views of God's bounty? Because if you

don't, Marlin's Insurance can help you rest in peace in the place you select. Planning now, will take the burden off your family during a real stressful time for them." He leaned forward in his chair and began to pull paperwork out of his bag, never noticing Hattie flinch.

"Well that's a burden I don't have. You see I am the only one left in my family. I have buried each and everyone, even my own four children. My daughter Rachel died from pneumonia at 5 years old. My son Jeffrey died in the Vietnam war. My daughter Vivian died of liquor and my son Charles died of prostate cancer. My husband, well I hear he died in a bar fight many, many years ago. He left me when the children were small. Yes, I've seen a lot of death, a lot of burying in my time, but I guess it is to be expected when you live as long as I have."

"I'm sure sorry to hear that ma'am. I sure am enjoying talking with you and these biscuits are delicious, but won't you look through a few brochures while I devour these pieces of heaven?"

"Pieces of heaven...I haven't heard that in a long while. There used to be a general store in Chester Town called Pieces of Heaven back in the day."

"I remember one of my great aunts talking about that place. She said it had everything."

"Yup, it did, especially for kids on a hot summer day."

Memories blow through Hattie's mind like an ice cube sliding down an unaware back in the heat. A cooling, but unwanted sensation. With her hand on the brochures in her lap, she gazes out, over the head of the insurance man eating his biscuits, into the yonder of the day in 1936 that changed her life forever.

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“I got ice cream money,” Hattie declared to her cousins, Jabez and Saffron.

“Where you get money from?” demanded Jabez as if he were grown instead of fourteen. He was the protector of his eleven-year old cousins, not just because he was the oldest, but because they were girls.

“Grandma. I helped her do the laundry and she gave me some money to get ice cream.”

“It’s too hot to walk into town. It’s at least two miles. No way” said Saffron before throwing her braids away from her perpetually pale citrine colored face. Her long silky ash blond hair nearly brushed the back of her knees. It was ’s pride and the bane of her existence since her momma had to comb through it, braid it and bind it on the top of her head every morning before she left for work. Her tender headedness was known by her wake up the world hollering in the still dark hours of the morning.

“I can ask grandpa to take us. My stomach’s been hurting all morning. I don’t know if I can walk it either,” said Hattie.

“You know full well he is not going to take us to town for no ice cream. Come on. It ain’t that far. We walk it to school some time when the trucks broke down,” replied Jabez

“I don’t wanna go,” said Suzie scrunching up her nose.

“You just worried about your light skin getting burnt up?”

“You almost as light as me, Hattie. Anyway, it’s not my fault I got the skin I got,” snapped Suzie.

“Well, I’m the darkest one here and color don’t have nothing to do with getting some ice cream. We can cut through the woods and jump in the river to cool off. Come on Saffron. I can’t go unless you go. Momma said I gotta stay with you.” said Jabez

“Come on. Ya’ll making my stomach hurt worser,” said Hattie.

The sound of wagon wheels turned their heads to the dust riding up in the sky as they waited to see who was approaching on the road from town. When they saw the Fulton brothers, Jabez stepped in front of his sister and cousin. Everyone in Sanford County knew about the Fulton family, black or white. Dirt poor, always struggling to make a living on their rickety farm, and the Fulton men were always in trouble with the law. They pulled to a stop at Jabez’s feet, then hopped down to say they were gonna take the girls because their momma needed some help with chores on their farm. They said they would pay a little something for the work. The look on their nasty faces was ravenous. Jabez looked them dead in their eyes and said no.

The taller of the two men with golden hair sweeping his stocky sunburnt neck got out of the wagon and punched Jabez in his face sending him to the ground. The smaller one, whose thin face was so sallow and pockmarked he looked diseased, grabbed at Suzie as Jabez tried to get back up and stop him from taking her. Hattie jumped on the short man’s back. He tried to swat at her while maintaining his grip on Suzie, who was screaming her head off, but he lost his balance and in his fall, Hattie could smell the alcohol pouring out of all his nasty pores. The tall one went to help him corral his momma’s help, but Jabez got to his feet and commenced to whipping on him, as the other one was still trying to get up. Hattie grabbed Suzie and dragged her to the edge of the road to wait for Jabez, so they could run back into the woods.

Everything stopped when the shorter brother got his shotgun and pointed it at Jabez. They forced him into the wagon and before they knew it, all Suzie and Hattie could see was dust and all they could hear were their own screams as the wagon disappeared. The girls ran and didn't stop until they were at Suzie's house. No one was there. Then, they ran to Hattie's home where she told her grandfather what had happened. He told them to stay put and rushed to his old pick-up truck and took off. It was too late. When he got to the bridge, near town, he saw Jabez's fourteen-year old body swinging from a noose thrown over the side of the bridge. His was the first and last lynching in Chester Town Woods.

The night of the hanging everyone came together at Suzie's house to see the body of Jabez lying in the parlor. None of the adults would let Hattie or Suzie see him. "Not like that, they said while shooing them away". Hattie waited for an unguarded moment and pulled back the sheet. The copper glow tone of his skin was dark and gray. His tongue hung out of his mouth like a dog. His eyes bulged. His once pronounced cheekbones were hollowed. His neck and his fingers were bloody and broken. His tightly coiled hair was matted with blood. Everything in her stomach rose, climbed her throat and coated her mouth with a visceral anger that could not be swallowed or retched.

The men were outside talking about how the Sheriff said there wasn't much he could do on the word of two little girls. How, he told them, the Fulton brothers said they didn't have anything to do with it because they'd been working on their farm all day. With the women continuing their wailing, Hattie snuck into her father and mother's room to take her father's revolver. She grabbed Suzie and together they ran into the woods headed for the Fulton farm. Suzie eyes, wide with fear, never said a word.

Since Hattie had been seven years old her Father had taken to teaching her how to shoot a gun. They would go out in the woods for target practice against her mother's wishes. After all, Hattie was her only child and a daughter to boot and she wanted her to learn to be a lady, but her father said she needed to know how to protect herself and her own. Hattie got so good, the kids would tease and call her Annie Oakley.

The night sky was lit up almost like the heavens were guiding their way. Any fear she might have had was so far inside that she walked with the authority of a soldier on a mission. She had to keep telling Suzie to keep up and be quiet, fearing the panicked possibility of losing someone else she loved or being lost herself to the hungry appetites of crazy drunk white men.

As they neared the clearing to the Fulton Farm, they laid low in the brush to survey the area. Lights were on in the dilapidated house and they could see people moving around. Hattie mumbled that she was thankful the animal pens were way on the other side of the house, so they would not alert them too soon. Suzie just shivered. They laid down in the high grass and waited.

About 30 minutes later, the two brothers came out to smoke and drink on the porch. They were comfortable and laughing. Hattie lifted the gun like a she was aiming at a bullseye. Her hand stopped shaking when she thought of them laughing as they put the noose around Jabez's neck. Ten minutes into their drinking Hattie stood up, walked towards them, aimed the gun at the tall one and in the swiftness of an arrow soaring through the air she shot him dead in his head. The short, brother jumped up to rush to his brother. Hattie aimed again and caught him in mid motion sending a bullet straight through his heart. Then they ran like the wind under clouding skies, trailed by screams that sounded like justice.

Hattie and Suzie got to Hattie's front porch with the warm gun in her hand. Her father came forward just as Hattie said, "they're dead", and went to her knees in breathless tears. He lifted the gun from her hand while her mother shook. He picked her up and sat in the rocking chair and rocked until her heaving became one long exhale that entered the house and laid atop Jabez like a blanket.

After her father and the others got the whole story from Suzie, they bundled up the two girl's things and an hour later they were in the back of a neighbor's car headed to Chicago. Hattie and Suzie didn't see their home again for three years.

When they came back, their developed breasts were sitting high, and they were taller and even more beautiful than before. They hardly resembled the children that left in the midnight darkness that ended their childhood. The town folks had a special service upon their return. A place deep within the forest of trees that surrounded Chester Woods had been cleared and filled with a multitude of wild red rose bushes. In the center of the bushes was a wooden sculpture of Jabez standing erect and tall. His face was intricately carved to show the handsome strength in his face at fourteen. At his feet were two little girls kneeling, and a gun lying beside them. Two words were etched into the base, "Never again".

Eventually, Hattie went on to college in the next town and became a schoolteacher. Suzie got married on her eighteenth birthday and moved back to Chicago. Despite all the sniffing by the sheriff and the townspeople, the murders were never solved, at least no one was brought to trial, because everybody, black or white knew justice had been served.

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“Aunt Hattie, Pastor Mason is on the phone. He says he needs to talk to you real quick, hollers Janie from the front hallway.”

“Okay Janie. Tell him hold on. I’ll be there in a minute. Well, Mr. Fulton, your brochures are pretty, but like I said there is nothing here I need nor want. Would you like more water before you move on?”

“No ma’am. Thank you. It’s been real nice sitting here with you. I’ll be back this way. Maybe you can tell your neighbors about me. I promise to stop and chat with you again. Maybe you can tell me some of your memories of this neck of the woods back when my great grandfather lived in these parts. I heard they were a rowdy, bad bunch that came to a bad end. Well, you know the old saying, ‘you reap what you sow’.”

“I expect I could tell you a few things. You might be surprised what this old head remembers and what these old hands can do. I put it all in my quilts. You be safe out there now. You never know when trouble is going to find you, especially on a hot sunny summer day.”

She watched him walk to his car and climb in it, then realized her stomach was calming. She grabbed her cane and walked to the front door, but not before she made sure Mr. Fulton’s car was gone from view.

“Janie, do you know who that was?” Hattie said as she pulled the screen door open. Both women talked about the visitor all afternoon until it was time to get ready.

Sitting next to Janie at the celebration in the only church in town, Hattie looked up at the quilt hanging like a banner inside the altar area. At the center was a black boy, at his center was a shotgun and all around them was farmland with ecru tufts of dust swirling. To the top left was a brown boy slamming into the earth with supersized fists. To the top right were black tears and



red hearts atop a sea of moving water. At the bottom left was a hanging noose dangling through rainy skies. At the bottom right was a dilapidated farm house with two brown girls sitting in the bushes.

Hattie picked up her cane and got up when the pastor called her to the altar. As she walked towards the pulpit, the doors of the church opened. The whole church looked back at Mr. Fulton entering with a long white box under his arm. Janie jumped up and ran to her aunt's side. Hattie's stomach felt like a million butterflies were flitting from one side of her insides to the other. A collective drawing in of breath left the church silent. The church erupted in confused mumbles when the door opened wider and in walked four children and a woman. Several men got up to shelter Hattie from whatever menace might be facing her and their congregation. After several assaults on Black churches throughout the south, it seemed the right thing to do.

Mr. Fulton quickly became aware of the strangeness his presence was creating. He stopped midway in the aisle and opened the box producing a dozen long stemmed red roses. The wall of men parted, and Hattie stepped forward.

“Good Evening Miss Sage. My wife, Marsha, found the newspaper. We talked about the quilt until I remembered my great aunt telling me, as a child, what my grandfather and my grand uncle had done. I figured, if I came tonight, I might be able to repent for the ill-doings of my family and drum up some new business at the same time,”

Mr. Fulton made a nervous chuckle and smiled with his mouth and his eyes as he put the roses in Miss Hattie's arms.