

Vandevere

By

Linda L. Guyan

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A Note to My Readers

Excerpts of Walt Whitman's poem, *Song of Myself*, are featured in this fictional story, *Vandevere*. Mr. Whitman wrote of life and death, a poem both of unique insight and emotionally moving.

Some of my favorite excerpts are used here to strengthen the premise of this story.

I would like to take this opportunity to recommend reading the full poem of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, written in eighteen-fifty-five, as well as his other works.

Linda L. Guyan

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What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and
children?

They are alive and well somewhere,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait
at the end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier.

Excerpt from Song of Myself, Section 6,

Leaves of Grass, 1855

—Walt Whitman, 1819-1892

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Death is not the end

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Part One

The Past

Port Maine, California

1930—1963

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Chapter One

Sunday, April 27, 1930

11:30 a.m.

Vandevere Point

Vandevere Cemetery was what her mother called resplendent, with headstones and footstones, heart-wrenching and unique epitaphs, tombs, and mausoleums. Thickly forested, its cement paths meandered like a maze. Black wrought iron benches were dotted throughout, waiting for a weary soul to rest and contemplate the dead. Vandevere Old Burying Ground, as well as Vandevere Point, were more like a forest or park that just happened to also serve as a cemetery.

It was a reminder of the way things were when it was merely the old churchyard and burying grounds, a time gone by, as her mother once said, when grave markers were monuments. The ancient cemetery was a beautiful place to spend eternity.

More than three hundred years old, Vandevere was also filled with ghosts.

Meredith Hayden had been able to see and communicate with ghosts since she was a toddler.

She had practically grown up at Vandevere, frequenting both the Old Burying Ground and Vandevere Point. They were her favorite places to play since she was old enough to walk.

The pretty, blonde, six-year-old girl sat on a wooden bench with a pad of paper and pencil, happily copying the names,

dates, and epitaphs on the gravestones, thinking about each and every person who was buried under those stones. She spoke to them as if they were her friends. Sometimes they spoke back, but many did not.

Meredith loved coming to this beautiful place in Vandevere Point.

It was like a park filled with dead people. The grass was a lush green. The thick stands of old trees were taller and bigger than anything she had ever seen before. All of it was surrounded by Lake Maine. All that beauty, but it was the gravestones and the people who had once been alive who fascinated her the most. She kept a list of each person buried and would often go over it at home while she was lying in bed. Meredith knew where everyone was buried.

"Meredith!" Cecille Hayden shouted as she approached from the winding path. "Time for lunch!"

"Okay, Momma!" Meredith called out. She picked up her writing supplies and skipped toward her mother, ponytail swishing at the nape of her neck, her pink dress smudged with dirt from crawling among the graves.

Cecille took her daughter's hand. "And who did you meet today?"

Meredith didn't have to look at her list. "Beulah Cook, Abraham Hadley, Edgar Smythe, Constance and Jackson Wyler, and Audrey and Zacharias Hale."

"Did you have a chat with any of them?" Cecille asked.

She knew her mother shared the same ability to

communicate with the dead, and it was a gift that she encouraged. "Jackson and Audrey, mostly," Meredith said. "But there was another grave that I didn't understand the engraving on the stone."

"What were the words?" Her mother watched as she scrunched up her face and recited the words without difficulty.

"The smallest sprout shows there is really no death."

Cecille smiled. Her mother was proud of her and often talked about how intelligent she was and how much older than her years she seemed.

"Walt Whitman wrote a volume of poems in eighteen- fifty-five, called *Leaves of Grass*. One of those poems is called *Song of Myself*. This particular poem is about his belief that there is no death, that we can be reborn as someone else in another life."

Meredith thought about that. "I do see some of the ghosts here and they even talk to me sometimes. Is that what Mr. Whitman means?"

"Not exactly," her mother said. "Ghosts are the spirits of the dead. Mr. Whitman is referring to reincarnation, where the dead come back in another body to live a new life as another person. Does that make sense?"

Meredith scrunched her face, thinking. "Kind of."

"Think of it as a rebirth," Cecille Hayden explained as they walked through the cemetery, hand-in-hand. "Some believe that each living being starts a new life in a different physical

body after each death. But this is only a belief, Meredith. Lots of people think they know what happens when we die, but the truth is that no one knows until we experience death for ourselves. Always think for yourself, Meredith. Never let anyone else's beliefs become your own. Promise me that."

"I promise, Momma," Meredith said, her young voice serious. "Can I read Mr. Whitman's poem?"

Cecille replied happily, "Of course. I have a copy of it at home."

"What is this thing about being reborn called again?" Meredith asked.

Cecille always enjoyed these intellectual conversations with her daughter. "It's referred to as being reincarnated."

"Do you suppose I could be a ghost and reincarnated, too?"

"I don't know," Cecille told her daughter honestly. "But, I believe that all things are possible."

Meredith turned to face her mother, with all seriousness. "Then I'm going to be a reincarnated ghost when I die."

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Chapter Two

Tuesday, January 1, 1946

522 High Grove Street

6:30 a.m.

Someone was knocking on the door.

The rhythmic sound of the clock ticking away the time made Meredith Hayden glance at the wall over the fireplace. *It's six-thirty in the morning.* She glanced at the kitchen table. *My breakfast is getting cold.* These were the things she noticed as she waited to see if the knocking would continue.

"This isn't how I wanted to start my day, now that the gift shop is closed this week for the holidays," she mumbled. Wearing her dark blue slacks and matching high-necked ribbed sweater, she absently ran a hand through her long, blonde hair. "I'll be late for my morning walk to watch the sunrise."

But, Meredith stood still, sensing that whoever was at her door, was still there. *Who could possibly be here this early?* She wondered if it might be her mother and something was wrong. Suddenly, she was worried.

"Mom?" she asked tentatively through the door, but no one answered. She went to the window and pulled back the curtain just enough to peer out, but the angle blocked her view of the front door.

I should call Mom. But if I'm wrong and she isn't at my door, then she'll be angry that I woke her so early.

Returning to the door, she tried again. "Who's there?" She

was alternating between being cautious and helpful. "Maybe they're hurt." Then again, Meredith had read plenty about the Port Maine Butcher and it terrified her.

But would the Butcher come knocking on my door? Meredith rolled her eyes. Of course he would, you idiot! That's probably how he gets his victims by being nice, friendly, and neighborly so no one suspects. He's probably some ordinary person living here in town. Serial killers don't always look like serial killers.

Her anxiety level was increasing rapidly as she thought about Port Maine's infamous serial killer on the loose. Suddenly, she wondered how she was going to get out of her house to go to work with this unknown person on her doorstep.

Meredith leaned her ear close to the door. "If you're hurt, you need to go to the hospital. I can't help you."

There was silence. Only the tick-tock of the clock broke the eerie stillness. Her heart beat rapidly as it pounded in her chest. No words were spoken, but she knew they were still there. She hadn't heard them leave. *Whoever it is must still be on the other side of the door.*

"Meredith?"

Suddenly hearing a man's distinct voice calling her name frightened her more than she wanted to admit.

"Meredith?" the man asked again.

She recognized the voice. Letting out a sigh of relief, she unlocked, and opened her front door. "What are you doing here, and what's with the stupid game?" she demanded

angrily. "You scared me to death! Don't you realize there's a killer on the loose?" She stared at the man's odd clothing.

"Why are you wearing those weird clothes?"

"Sorry," he said as he took a step inside the house. "Guess I got carried away."

Meredith was caught off guard. Everything happened too quickly.

"Hey! You can't just walk —"

Those were the only words she was allowed to speak before he punched her hard in the face.

The man helped her out of the house, closing the door behind him, pretending that the two were old friends, having a pleasant conversation. It wasn't easy keeping her upright, but he finally managed to get her to his truck, hidden in the orange grove. Her nosy neighbor, Mrs. Clements, was probably watching, but he would be unidentifiable in his old man costume. And she also knew that the Port Maine Butcher would get blamed.

Where am I? Meredith was groggy as she opened her eyes. *I can't see, and my face hurts!* She tried to speak but couldn't, tried to move but couldn't. *I'm tied up!* Meredith tried to wiggle as the reality of what had happened began to sink in. *Where am I? Why would he take me?* She forced herself to think, trying to make sense of her situation, trying to figure out where she was.

Listening intently, she felt the unmistakable rhythm. *I'm in a car. No, it sounds like a truck. From my uncomfortable position, I must be on the floor. That means no one can see me.* Meredith

felt an overwhelming sadness as tears dripped down her face. *Mom's going to be so worried.* She tried wiggling again.

The man sighed loudly. "Damn it!"

No! Now he knows I'm awake!

A moment later, something stabbed her shoulder and a curtain of blackness crept into her mind. In her final seconds of consciousness, Meredith Hayden had one last thought.

I've been kidnapped.

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Chapter Three

Friday, October 25, 1946

9:00 a.m.

Toby Blaine's house, 212 Oak Hill Lane

Port Maine Butcher Strikes Again!

Della Blaine read the headline about her husband's most recent murder. She carefully cut the front-page article with the familiar byline by Matthew Thomas out of the Port Maine Daily newspaper. As she did, she attempted to dispel the

bad feeling that had started her day.

It wasn't working.

Della also couldn't get her mind off of the funerals that she knew would be taking place this morning at Vandevere Point. She thought of the two men's widows. *What can I say to these grieving women? I must find some way to tell them the truth. Toby didn't kill their husbands. But I know who did.*

The bold headline included the photos of two pretty, young women with long, blonde hair, and happy smiles. She then shifted her attention to another article written by staff writer Matthew Thomas.

21-year old woman found strangled to death! The death of Beth Clauson is the twelfth known victim this year in our city by the Port Maine Butcher. Beth's younger sister, Anna, is still missing. If anyone has any information regarding Anna Clauson, please call the Port Maine Police Department.

Della thought about that. *They're wrong. It's at least nineteen victims this year.* That fact proved that her husband was good at getting away with murder. She placed the article on her desk and resumed looking for more about Toby's murders. One in this morning's early edition caught Della's attention.

Meredith Hayden still missing! Port Maine Butcher suspected! Meredith Hayden, age 22, was reported missing in January by her mother, Cecille Hayden.

Della was immediately angry. She didn't have to finish reading the article. *They are already blaming Toby for Meredith's kidnapping! He adores Meredith and would never hurt her! This is not the first crime that isn't Toby's in this town.*

There's another killer in Port Maine. And I know who it is. But they're going to blame Toby because they don't know about the other one. I have to find some way to tell them!

Then she glanced at the obituaries of Lloyd Hale and Charles Wyler. *I can't let those women think that Toby would kill those men with pregnant wives. Everyone in this town thinks that the Port Maine Butcher is the only killer. I might not be able to tell everyone, but I can tell those ladies.*

As Della sat at her roll-top desk with her Tiffany lamp casting a warm yellow glow, she pulled out three sheets of paper and three envelopes. Nearby, Toby sat drinking his usual cold Miller High Life beer out of the bottle, all the while fiddling with one of his gold pocket watches and alternately reading a Sir Arthur Conan Doyle book — primarily *Sherlock Holmes* — just as he so often did during their quiet times together.

Those were a few of Toby's favorite pastimes and hobbies.

His favorite hobby was murder.

Della carefully placed the clippings in Toby's Blue Ribbon cigar box with all of the others about murders, missing persons, and the Port Maine Butcher. She looked up to admire her lamp that Toby had bought for her twenty-fifth birthday. It was made in the early thirties. She didn't like new things. Della much preferred antiques — so did Toby — and their home showed it. She knew that it was called a Mission Style Tiffany lamp. The base was a golden metal and the shade was simple with little adornment. The colors were varying rows of yellow and white, beginning with a slender row of yellow at the top of the shade. The bulk of the

panels were an off-white followed by another slim row of a gold shade, then white, and ending with a golden trim.

Della sat back in her desk chair and looked at her large, roll-top desk that matched her oak chair. She loved the numerous compartments and cubbyholes, the eight drawers, and especially the slide-out writing panels on each side. She guessed the desk and chair to have been made sometime in the twenties or thirties at the latest.

When Toby had given her the lamp, he had told her, "You can't have a desk without a lamp, now can you?" He knew how long she had dreamed of owning a real Tiffany lamp.

Della Armstrong and Toby Blaine had been married seven years, but they had kept it a secret. Toby figured the less association with him the better. He wanted to protect her, keep her safe. And she adored him for that, and for treating her like a princess. Toby also had a temper, but he kept his angry side in check when it came to Della. In her eyes, Toby's good outweighed the bad.

Toby and Della looked a lot alike, so much so that they joked that maybe they were cousins and didn't know it. They both had black hair and mesmerizing dark brown eyes with pale skin. Della was slender and dainty where Toby was muscular and strong. She had a soft and melodious voice, where Toby spoke in a deep baritone. Della wore her raven hair in the latest short bobbed hairstyle that softly framed her oval face. Toby's black hair was unruly and long enough to fall down in front of his eyes, creating the endless habit of using his right hand to brush back the untamed tendrils from his square face, usually to no avail. Together, they made a handsome couple.

Della was seventeen when they met. It was love at first sight. She had been visiting her parents' grave at Vandevere Point. Toby had been paying his respects at his grandfather's tomb.

They were inseparable after that. Toby Blaine and Della Armstrong were married the following year in a simple ceremony in Reno, Nevada on April thirtieth, nineteen-thirty-nine.

It wasn't long before Della found out about Toby's killer hobby and that he was what the newspapers had dubbed the Port Maine Butcher. She also found out that Toby had not been visiting his grandfather's grave that day they met. It was one of his victims, which he confessed was something he enjoyed doing.

"It gives me a sense of power, Della," he had confided in her.

Toby and Della had no secrets from each other.

Della had been raised to believe a woman supported and stayed with her husband, no matter what, and in her mind, murder was no exception. She also believed in love overcoming all obstacles. Aside from Toby's murderous ways, they had a fairy tale love and she would do anything to keep it that way — including washing his bloody clothes. Della was a good wife.

Toby maintained a day job for appearance's sake and to help support them. He opened up a second-hand shop downtown, calling it Times Past to make it sound more intriguing and upscale to the customers, so they wouldn't think he was just the local junk man. Della had suggested

painting it a dark green color, and hanging a matching awning over the door. It had also been Della's idea to spend a little extra money and buy a new door with an oval beveled glass window. "People react positively to pleasant surroundings," she had told him more than once. The large, old-fashioned pocket watch, masquerading as a clock, hanging outside the door, and the small etching in the window of a horse and carriage had also been Della's suggestions. It turned out to be a surprisingly lucrative business, as most people couldn't afford to buy new.

Times Past became the most popular store in town.

To anyone who knew them, Della was merely Toby's long-time girlfriend. She would sneak out at night, and he would pick her up at her house on Willow Court – a modest one-story home that her parents had willed to her – the next day. This became their routine. It was easy for her to leave his house through the basement's secret door, through the tunnel that exited a quarter-mile west, then through a trap door that ended in the orange groves. From there, it was a short walk to her house. Toby had long ago found the secret door and tunnel. It served him well in hiding his victims. Della had found a secret compartment under a loose floorboard in the tunnel and hid her cigar box with all the newspaper clippings and important papers there. The basement was Toby's domain. Della was instructed to come down there only to hide the cigar box, hide from visitors, or sneak out via the secret tunnel.

Other than Toby being the infamous killer, the Port Maine Butcher, their life was rather ordinary, and they were very happy.

Della's biggest worry was Toby's proclivity to rob some of his victims if he saw something that caught his interest. He could never resist a pocket watch to add to his collection. She had warned him more than once that stolen property could be traced back to him, and not to steal anything from his victims, and never take souvenirs.

She had lectured him time after time. "It is the robbery that will get you caught, not the murders."

Della had been right.