

*A graduate student researching the history of an abandoned coal town in Pennsylvania makes the acquaintance of a homeless stranger with an ignominious past.*

## **Shades of a Forgotten Town**

By Sondra Wolferman

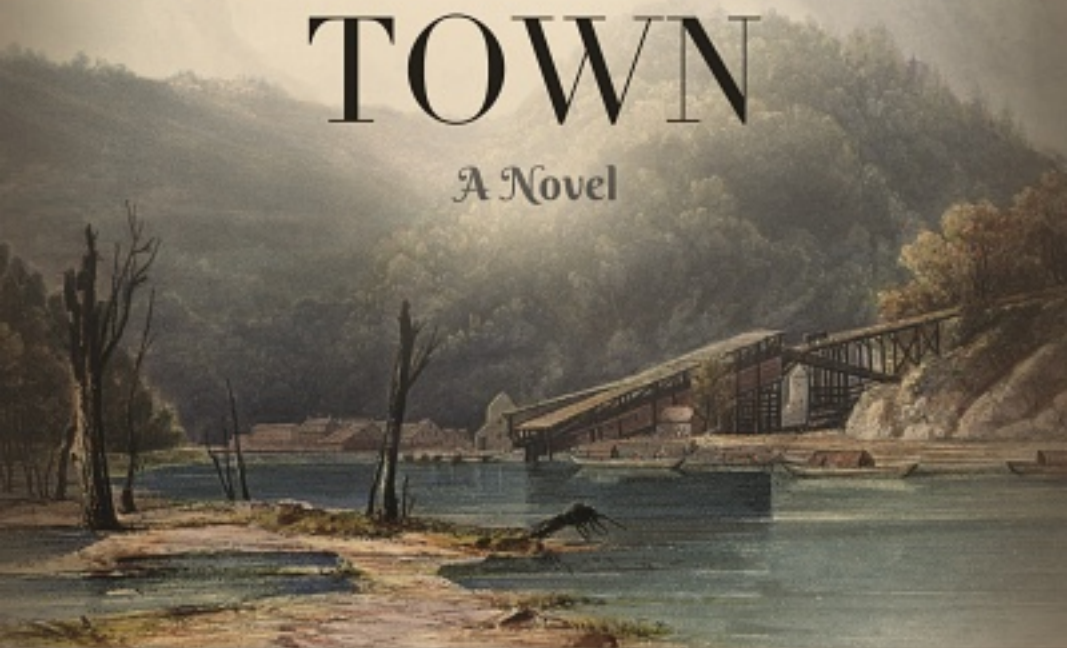
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SHADES  
OF A  
FORGOTTEN  
TOWN

*A Novel*



SONDRA WOLFERMAN

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## CHAPTER ONE

We pulled over onto the soft shoulder along County Highway 209 and parked the Roadmaster at the edge of a wooded lot choked with brambles, mile-a-minute vine, and Japanese knotweed festering in the late summer heat. Although it was not what you would call an inviting spot, this was as close as we could get to the trailhead that would take us to our destination, three miles or so on the other side of Nesquehoning Creek. We had a set of coordinates corresponding to the location of the trailhead, but without a topographic map, there was no way of knowing whether those coordinates were accurate. Yet it was all we had, so Ralph straightened the wheel and shut off the engine, while I collected my windbreaker, bug spray, and insulated lunch bag—all of which, as it turned out, would come in handy—and shoved them into my daypack. For the sake of convenience, I tied my hoodie around my waist and exited the vehicle on the side closest the woods, where we were immediately beset by a swarm of hungry gnats.

I searched my cousin's face for signs of displeasure and, seeing nothing out of the ordinary, signaled him to follow as I proceeded into the woods on an unmarked path that meandered steeply down an embankment. While Ralph managed to stay on his feet as we descended the eroded slope, I dropped onto my bottom and slid down the embankment as if on an invisible toboggan, ripping my jeans in the process, until we bottomed out at the edge of an abandoned railway—the source, no doubt, of the invasion of noxious weeds that covered the hillside.

We had set out early that morning to explore the Lausanne Ruins (Pennsylvania, not Switzerland), the site of an abandoned settlement where a few building foundations, stone walls, and some crumbling infrastructure was all that remained of a once-thriving coal and railroad town of the late 1700s, being slowly reclaimed by nature. Some shadowy photos I had dug up from a local historical society showed a collection of well-preserved walls and foundations once occupied by miners and their families in the anthracite region of northeast Pennsylvania, while more recent photos showed these relics as they appear today, spread over an area of several dozen acres of wilderness that had been lately incorporated into a public hunting preserve, all but forgotten except by intrepid explorers such as us, and a select group of sportsmen who chose to wander off the beaten path.

It was not an easy place to find. The right-of-way of the abandoned rail line—strewn with decades of litter, rusted auto parts and tires from the adjacent highway—exuded an odor of decayed vegetation and rotting garbage. It was not hard to imagine this had once been the town dump—hence the insects that swirled around our heads, kept at bay only by the smog of insecticide we trailed behind us like invisible contrails. Occasionally a few rotted railroad ties poked through the weeds, offering a few minutes of easier footing hopping from tie to tie, only to disappear again into the jungle-like growth until finally a woods road branched off to the right of the rail line, leading us away from the debris into an attractive forest of mature white oak and pine trees. Presumably, this path—according to the outdated map I carried—would take us to a crossing of the Nesquehoning Creek.

The quality of the forest continued to improve as we covered more distance from the highway and the sprawl of commercial development around the village of Nesquehoning. The tall timbers on either side of the wood road gave way gradually to a forest of rhododendron, almost as tall as the pines, that arched over the trail creating a darkly luminescent tunnel of dense foliage around us. An ominous rumble alerted us to the presence of rushing water nearby, and within minutes we emerged from the tunnel of greenery into a clearing on the south bank of Nesquehoning Creek where, regretfully, we met our next challenge.

Caught up short, I gazed from atop the creek's steep embankment at the swollen current surging over boulders the size of Volkswagens, carrying with it tree limbs, logs, and other debris scoured from its banks during a freak flash flood that had occurred in the area in the days prior to our visit. The fact that we were forewarned of the "difficult crossing" at Nesquehoning Creek did little to allay my anxiety and, for the second time that morning, I searched my companion's face for signs that he might want to call the whole thing off, and for the second time, Ralph's impassive stare as he surveyed the scene in front of us told me he was prepared to continue our journey.

Under ordinary circumstances we might have forded the creek on foot, with or without shoes, rolling up the cuffs of our pants, and using walking sticks to maintain our footing on the rocky creek bed. But these were no ordinary circumstances. The water was too high, and the current too strong to cross safely on foot. Our map showed a "primitive" bridge crossing a short distance upstream from the trail crossing, and so we ambled

upstream along the stream bank in search of this crossing. What we found, a few hundred paces upstream, was a rustic contraption so rudimentary it almost defies description, consisting of a wooden plank, splintered, and rotted in places, suspended from frayed cables fastened to trees on either side of the creek. With no side rails, ropes stretched along both sides of “bridge” functioned as handholds. Clearly this dilapidated structure suffered from infrequent usage and lack of maintenance, and yet it was in current usage, as witnessed by what looked like fresh shoe prints in the mud at the approach to the decking.

As a student of local history (I will get to that later), I knew that such crossings had once been common in rural Pennsylvania, but that didn’t make it any easier to picture myself creeping across that wreckage to get to the other side of a raging creek. In fact, I was terrified, and briefly considered aborting the mission and returning to our vehicle at the trailhead. Before doing so, however, I stole another glance in Ralph’s direction as he squinted into the distance, where more dense thickets of rhododendron awaited us on the other side of the creek.

My cousin was taciturn by nature, and his silence communicated little about his state of mind. However, the look of stoic indifference I had seen on his face earlier had disappeared, replaced by a look of disappointment. Ralph—the only person with the same passion for exploring abandoned places as me—had started out at four o’clock in the morning from Middletown, Delaware and driven more than a hundred miles to northeast Pennsylvania in his aging Plymouth to accompany me on this adventure. We had waited all winter for

this opportunity and, if we did not complete the mission today, the chances were almost zero that Ralph would be coming back for a second visit. It was getting harder every year to tear us away from the comforts of home to go roaming in the backcountry searching for relics of past civilizations.

In that moment I decided. I was going to make it over that derelict span if I had to slither across on my belly.

“Well...” I ventured, interrupting my cousin’s reverie.

“It’s either this,” he said, indicating the hanging bridge, “...or we try to come back here later in the summer when the water level is low, and we can wade across.

“We came this far...” I objected. “Are you afraid?”

“Me?” He scoffed. “Of course not. It is you I’m worried about...”

“Did you see the shoe prints in the mud at the foot of the bridge?” I asked him. “It looks like somebody was here recently.”

“And used the bridge.”

“Then it must be safe...”

“Either that, or...there’s a dead body at the bottom of the creek,” Ralph quipped.

“Oh, come on!” I scolded him.

“Just kidding!” He chided me. “The cables look strong, but what worries me is the condition of the deck. The planks are rotten, and some are missing. A slip of the foot, and...”



*“Ahoy there!”*

Ralph and I—having both believed we were alone in this desolate place—whipped our heads around in surprise at the sound of a man’s voice, muffled by the roar of the creek, calling to us from the opposite bank of the stream. For a moment I thought it might be an auditory hallucination caused by the sound of the rushing water, but there was no mistaking the figure that stood on the cement pier at the foot of the bridge directly across the stream from where we stood. The source of the voice was a tall, thin man, who was around middle age, wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat with a pointed dome, of the type worn by field hands in tropical climates, and a pair of denim overalls over a faded long-sleeved tee shirt.

The stranger waved to us in a friendly manner and cupping his hands around his mouth, shouted over the noise of the creek, “Are you okay?”

Given his eccentric costume, I had expected a foreign accent, but the fellow’s mid-Atlantic twang was as Pennsylvania as the shotgun at his side. While Ralph stood mutely by, I, having been raised to believe it an unpardonable sin to ignore the greeting of a fellow human being, recovered myself and shouted back, as best I could over the noise of the creek. “Is the bridge safe to cross?”

The stranger hollered back at me. “Walk sideways and take small steps. Hold tight with both hands to the overhead cable and try not to look down at the water!”

While I winced inwardly in blatant mistrust of the stranger’s instructions—which did nothing to convince me that the bridge

was safe—my cousin Ralph suddenly emerged from his trance-like state. Without further ado, Ralph approached the rickety wooden steps at the foot of the bridge, climbed gingerly onto the deck, grabbed hold of the overhead cable and, per the stranger's instructions, began edging his way sideways along the narrow plank suspended six feet above the churning waters. About a third of the way across, he looked back at me with an expression on his face that could only be described as *glee*, as if he were having the time of his life.

With every fiber of my being, I wanted to turn around and head back to the car, but at the same time, I refused to desert my companion. Reminding myself that I was a strong swimmer—as if that would be of any use were I to fall off the bridge and be impaled by one of those jagged boulders protruding from the current—I followed in my cousin's footsteps onto the bridge, unprepared for the bouncing and swaying of the suspended deck under my weight. I grabbed onto the cable, which was just barely within my reach, turned sideways and with a gliding motion edged along the wooden plank.

Less than halfway across, there was a gap in the wooden deck where a rotten plank had splintered and caved in, leaving a hole of half a foot in diameter, which could have been easily traversed had I been in a less fearful state of mind. In flagrant disregard of the stranger's advice not to look down at the water, I glanced downward and, through the gap in the deck, saw the muddy current hurtling beneath me a mere half dozen feet below the bridge. Seized with a sudden attack of vertigo that left me unable to move either forward or backward, I was vaguely aware of my cousin shouting at me from the far end of the bridge. My knees buckled and the next thing I remember

was sitting on the edge of the sodden, slippery deck with my feet dangling over the rapids below. With the swaying of the bridge, my stomach heaved as my fast-food breakfast came up and spewed over the edge of the deck into the angry creek. Somehow, I had the presence of mind to grab onto one of the vertical ropes attached to the overhead cable that supported the bridge, and through my peripheral vision observed a figure in a straw hat approaching from my left. “Hang on, young lady! I got you!”

Though not a young man, the stranger was nimble and light on his feet as a mountain goat as he moved expertly along the rotted decking until he was leaning over me, grasping my upper right arm with a grip that was firm and strong, dragging me backward away from the edge so that I was no longer perched perilously over the water.

“Can you stand up?” His voice was gruff but reassuring.

I tried lifting myself off the surface of the deck, but my legs were like jelly, and I feared another attack of nausea if I rose from my seated position. It occurred to me the stranger had seen me retching moments earlier, which was embarrassing, but this was no time for vanity. “I might need some help,” I conceded, overcome with shame at my predicament, for I was not one of those women who enjoyed being labeled ‘the weaker sex’.

“Grab my hand!” he said, with such authority and confidence that I could not but trust him to keep me safe. I reached for his outstretched hand with both my hands, and he pulled me to my feet, like a fallen player on the basketball court.

“Where’s my cousin?” was all I could think of to say.

“He is waiting for you on the bank. Come on...Let us get you off this thing and see if we can find your shoe!”

One of my sneakers was gone, I realized, not without a pang of regret, for they were newly purchased and expensive. “That thing is long gone,” I lamented.

“Do not be so sure. Things have a way of turning up in unexpected places around here.”

I decided against asking him what he meant by that and followed close behind as we edged our way along the deck, still holding fast to the overhead cable, until, within sight of the pier, I saw Ralph standing in a clearing, looking relieved, if not quite ecstatic, at this turn of events.

“Are you alright?” he queried, ogling as if I had just emerged from a hole in the ground.

“I think so...except that I lost a sneaker, and I don’t know how I’m going to continue without it...”

“We’ll figure something out...”

At that moment, my rescuer caught up with us, looking winded. “Here we are...he quipped. Safe and sound!” He extended his hand to Ralph in a formal way that was curiously at odds with the setting we were in. “I’m Saul,” he said, introducing himself.

My cousin returned the handshake with enthusiasm. “I am Ralph. And this is my cousin, Valerie.”

“How can we possibly thank you...?” I chimed in, still in awe of what had just transpired.

Saul waved his hand as if he were batting away an annoying fly. “Don’t mention it,” he said. “You’re not the first hiker’s been put out by this godawful thing...” he indicated the infamous bridge. After a pause he said, “Are you guys headed for the Ruins by any chance?”

“How did you guess?” I said, marveling at his insight.

“That’s pretty much the only reason people would be foolish enough to risk their lives mounting this old thing,” Saul said, indicating the derelict bridge. “Most hunters and anglers come down from the northern entrance and stay on the other side of the creek to avoid this crossing. There is nothing up yonder except those ruins.”

“Are you calling us foolish...?” my cousin quipped, good-naturedly.

“No... I wish more people would take an interest in stuff like that...’stead of sitting in front of the TV all day. If I had more time, I would give you a guided tour.”

“Well. I am not going to walk the rest of the way barefoot, that’s for sure,” I said with a wry laugh.

“Say Ralph...” Saul interjected, his face brightening. “What do you say me and you take a stroll downstream along the stream bank and see if we can find that sneaker. This young lady should not be walking around here barefoot, what with fishhooks, rusty nails, broken glass and all kinds of nasty stuff left behind by kids partying...”

My cousin looked doubtful. “That shoe is probably floating in the Lehigh River by now!”

“Maybe not,” Saul objected. “I know this creek like the back of my hand—every twist and turn and boulder, and I am willing to bet that shoe won’t get very far. It will get wedged between some rocks or trapped in a log jam...or left sitting on top of a beaver dam somewhere downstream. If we do not come up with anything...I’d like to invite the two of you to my campsite—it’s only about a half mile from here—and I’ll make us all a cup of tea. From there we will see if we can figure something out to get you guys back on the trail to the ruins.”

“Oh, let’s!” I said, clapping my hands like a little girl. I could REALLY use a cup of tea right now!”

“I guess it’s worth a try...” Ralph said, feigning reluctance while lifting himself from his seat on a fallen log by way of response.

“Don’t do anything dangerous...” I admonished them as the two men set off on a narrow path that bordered the stream. “It’s only a shoe!”

I waited until the sound of their voices faded into the distance, then I dropped onto the log that Ralph had just vacated, marveling at how easily our new acquaintance had befriended my cousin, an incorrigible introvert not prone to conversing with members of his own family, let alone a total stranger. Saul’s act of heroism in rescuing me from the treacherous span was even more commendable in that I was not at my most appealing that day, in my outfit of worn out jeans that hung off my skinny frame like a pair of farmer’s overalls, a soiled tee

shirt washed so many times the screen-printed Eagles logo on the front had long since peeled off in tatters leaving only a faded imprint above the sweatshirt tied around my waist, and of course the athletic shoes of which one had gone missing. To complete the ensemble, my outfit was topped by a bucket hat I had yanked over my prematurely graying hair. In a word, I was a mess, and, with self-denigrating humor, I assumed the friendly stranger had performed his heroic deed more to give himself a pat on the back than out of any sense of chivalry toward a female in distress.

While I sat awkwardly on the hollow log recovering from the trauma of my frightening mishap on the suspension bridge, a part of me hoped, somewhat remorsefully, that the missing shoe would *not* turn up—which would give us an excuse to abandon this ill-fated mission, at least for the time being, and come back another day. At the same time, however, the part of me that still retained the adventurous spirit of my youth was itching to continue my quest for the elusive ruins that still lay ahead of us another few miles along the trail, before the site was entirely swallowed up by the earth like those ancient Mayan ruins in the jungles of Mexico and Peru—not that I would dare to compare my obscure little piece of local history with those world-famous antediluvian wonders.

But let me take a moment to explain my obsession with the Lausanne Ruins in a little more detail. I was at that time a graduate student working toward my doctorate degree in History at Lewistown University, and I had chosen as the subject of my dissertation an episode in local history pertaining to the demise of a thriving coal and railroad town known as Lausanne Landing in the anthracite region of northeast

Pennsylvania back in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Long forgotten in the woods north of Jim Thorpe, only a few residents of the area had any knowledge of the Ruins, and now, given the logistics of getting to the site, I knew why! Still, it was worth visiting, and unlike many of the other abandoned places I had visited in the region—all of which resembled some version of a movie set with its own defunct coal breaker, rows of company housing, and pairs of rusting rails to transport coal around the state, Lausanne Landing was never a tourist attraction, nor did it have a colorful history to brag about. Even its demise was unremarkable. There had been plans for its expansion during its heyday, but those plans were never realized. The railroad boom was fading and the town, which had always been prone to flooding, was already beginning to slide into oblivion when a massive flood dealt the final blow. Oddly enough, it was this very anonymity that enticed me to choose this town as a subject for my thesis. I had only recently completed the desktop phase of my research, and today's visit was to have been the first of several field trips to the region to collect first-hand data for my project.

I was still ruminating twenty minutes later, when I heard my cousin's voice hollering my name from the direction of the creek. I rose to meet him as he trudged along the bank of the stream, slightly out of breath, waving the errant trail shoe in the air as if it were a prize trout he had caught somewhere downstream. He was alone.

"Where's Saul?" I queried, a little too anxiously considering the man was a total stranger we had met for the first time less than hour ago.



Ralph—either because he did not notice or did not care that my concern for our new friend was a little premature—was undaunted. “He went on ahead to his campsite a half mile up the trail. He said he would meet us there since it is on the way to the ruins.”

“I hope he doesn’t forget about the tea,” I remarked, covering my tracks. “Where did you find the shoe?”

We found it floating in slack water a few hundred yards downstream. We could not reach it from the shore and Saul offered to wade in and grab it, but I thought he’d done enough for us already, so I rolled up my cuffs and waded in myself. The water was a little deeper than I thought...”

“So now we’ve both got wet feet,” I quipped. “But thank you for finding the shoe, and...thank you for not letting Saul go in after it. We are beholden to him enough as it is.

“We owe him a debt of gratitude, that is for sure. Are you still game for continuing to the ruins? If so, we will be seeing him again in a little while.”

“We came this far...”

“I will take that as a yes. Let us start walking. The fastest way to dry our socks and shoes is to walk in them. At least it is warm out.”

We headed uphill, away from the tumultuous waters of the creek and the loathsome bridge, until we intersected with the hiking trail. “I was just thinking...” I said as we walked side by side along the grassy forest road.

“What...?”

“Do you think Saul is homeless...?”

He didn’t strike me that way,” Ralph replied. “He was clean. His clothes were clean, except for the mud on his boots, which cannot be helped in a place like this. He looks well-fed and healthy. Homeless people are usually scruffy looking, aren’t they? Unshaven and smelly...”

I suppressed a laugh at my cousin’s naiveté. “This is not the New York City subway system...” I countered him. Homelessness is different these days. Not all homeless people sleep in cardboard boxes and spend their days on street corners panhandling for nickels and dimes. They live in shelters, or even hotels, or sleep in their cars. They take showers and have gym memberships. Some have jobs. They look just like everybody else except they do not have a permanent residence to go home to.”

“I guess you would know...” Ralph quipped, with a wink in his voice. “Being from Philly and all...”

“Ha-ha. But seriously...” I persisted. “Why would a man his age be camped out alone in the woods unless he had nowhere else to go...?”

“Some people just like to be outdoors...sleeping under the stars, that sort of thing. And what makes you so sure he is alone? There might be somebody with him... We will find out soon enough, when we get to the campsite. Anyway, it is none of our business whether he is homeless or not.”

I decided to drop the subject for the time being and focused instead on our surroundings. The noonday sun had warmed my damp clothing, and I had all but forgotten my earlier mishap as

the trail led us through yet another thicket of vibrant green rhododendron shrubs arching over the trail from both sides, bathing us in an eerie green glow where scarcely any sunlight penetrated the jungle-like growth. The effect was both ghoulish and enchanting. The leafy tunnels of rhododendron went on and on in a brilliant display of nature's abundance protecting the streams and wetlands that were all around us as we approached our destination near the headwaters of Nesquehoning Creek, where the historic settlement of Lausanne Landing had met its demise in a mighty flood.

The trail veered away from the main stem of the creek along a much narrower tributary that was more like a babbling brook than a whitewater creek, and soon this tributary branched into a kind of delta of rivulets and seeps that sprang from invisible channels underground.

My euphoria came to a speedy close when I felt a crawling sensation on my right leg and discovered the deer tick that was in the process of embedding itself into the flesh of my right calf. As an experienced hiker, I was no stranger to these gnarly beasts and I had had my bouts with what we locals called tick fever, which was nonetheless a nuisance one would rather avoid. I had timed this trip carefully to avoid the height of tick season in mid to late May. It was now mid-June, but, we hadn't waited long enough. I removed the offending creature—a bloated adult tick—with my fingernails and chucked it into the brush, knowing I might find more of them later that evening when I got home.

Ralph was ahead of me by then. We had checked our map a few minutes earlier and, upon realizing how close we were to

the elusive ruins, a burst of enthusiasm propelled us forward as the deep-green stained-glass world of the rhododendron thickets gave way to a sparsely wooded barrens-like community dominated by stunted pine trees and scrub oak that could easily have been at the top of some wind-swept ridge, except that we were on flat ground barely above sea level in an industrialized region of a densely populated state. Scattered about the pine flats were piles of construction and demolition debris illegally dumped in the woods near a construction site, until I realized with a mixture of surprise and relief that we had stumbled upon the outer ring of the Lausanne Ruins. Those piles of waste material consisting of soil, rocks, wood, concrete, and masonry materials were the actual remains of collapsed buildings and infrastructure left behind after the inundation that had engulfed the town and its surroundings a century earlier.

While I was mesmerized by what we had found, Ralph was more interested in locating Saul's campsite than in searching for more ruins. As much as I appreciated the heroic stranger who had come to our aid that morning, our captivating new acquaintance was NOT the primary focus of our mission that day, and I was determined to set my companion straight. As my official photographer, Ralph was supposed to focus on the job of documenting everything of historical interest, including the debris fields that surrounded us along the way. Though he was a dozen or more yards ahead of me along the trail, I cupped my hands around my mouth and hollered his name, following up with a blast on the Fox 40 Classic emergency whistle that hung around my neck. My cousin responded with a high-pitched warble that clearly came not from an object around his neck

but from his own mouth. A moment later he was back at my side like a faithful hound, and I knew he had gotten the message that I had not come to this place to make friends, but to complete my research.

From there, we poked around in the heavily overgrown fields, choked with exotic plants like forsythia, knotweed, bayberry, Australian ferns, and even phragmites in the wet, swampy areas, all of which attested to an agricultural past that was more concerned with profit-making than preserving the landscape. The silence was broken only by the trilling of unseen crickets and cicadas, and the raucous cawing of crows and scrub jays. This was not the kind of place where you would find any rare or endangered species, for those had long since disappeared from this inhospitable environment. And yet, there was a haunting beauty about the place that reminded me of illustrations in a child's book of fairy tales.

As we penetrated the outer ring of debris that surrounded the abandoned town of Lausanne Landing, moving closer to what had probably been the more prosperous central business district, the ruins were in pretty good shape, preserved by the remoteness and inaccessibility of the site that prevented hordes of visitors and graffiti vandals from mutilating the property. Deep foundations and the dry-stone construction of the few walls left standing bespoke a prosperous community where the clearing of land for agriculture resulted in huge supplies of large stones and boulders used in the construction of buildings, bridges, and homes. The architecture was simple and unadorned, suggesting a population of Mennonite or Amish heritage.

Moving closer to the center of town, some ruins were so well preserved one could almost feel the presence of residents who had lived and worked here a hundred years ago. The grassy woods road that steered us through the defunct community was the remainder of an old stagecoach road that had once carried residents into town from coal mines to the south and east, where they worked. We came to another bridgeless stream crossing, not nearly as intimidating as the first, where we were able to rock hop to the other side, to find more ruins, and there we chanced upon the only building we had seen with all four walls still standing, although its collapsed roof of clay tiles lay in ruins on the earthen floor of the structure. Clay tiles, I had learned, were preferred over other materials because they were fireproof. Curiously, somebody had spread a blue, water-resistant vinyl tarp, tattered and paint-stained, over a pile of rubble at one corner of the structure, as if using it as a shelter.

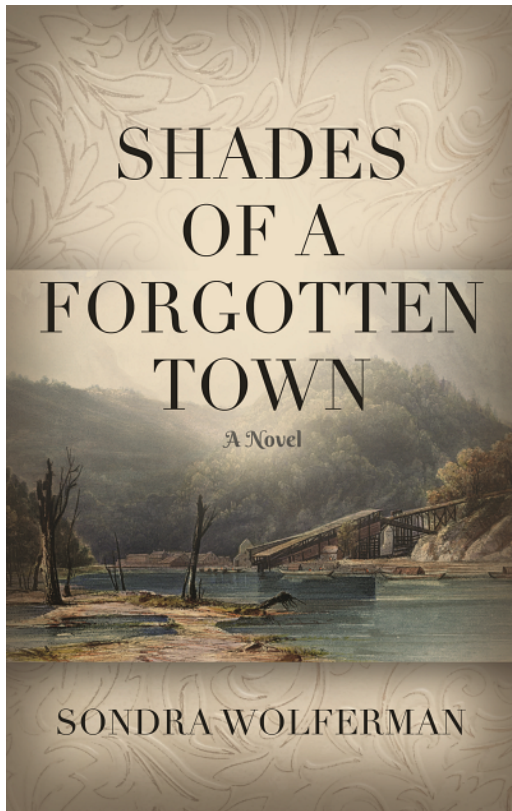
“Gosh,” I heard my cousin explain as he lifted a corner of the tarp. “What’s all this?”

I lifted my gaze from the ground where I had been searching for clay tiles and other artifacts that might be useful in my research and shuffled over to Ralph’s side to see what had intrigued him so. Underneath the tarp there stood a rickety card table laden with sundry items including a camp stove, coffee pot, plastic utensils, a mirror and shaving equipment, a couple of cereal boxes, a can of powdered milk, a package of sliced whole wheat bread and a jar of instant coffee—all of which looked like the products of a recent dumpster-dive—plus an assortment of rummage-sale clothing neatly folded on the surface of the wobbly table.

The message was clear: We were not alone in this desolate place. Either a family of squatters had taken up residence in the abandoned town of Lausanne Landing, or...Ralph and I looked at each other as if both entertaining the same thought.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I queried my cousin.

“Saul!” Ralph declared.



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