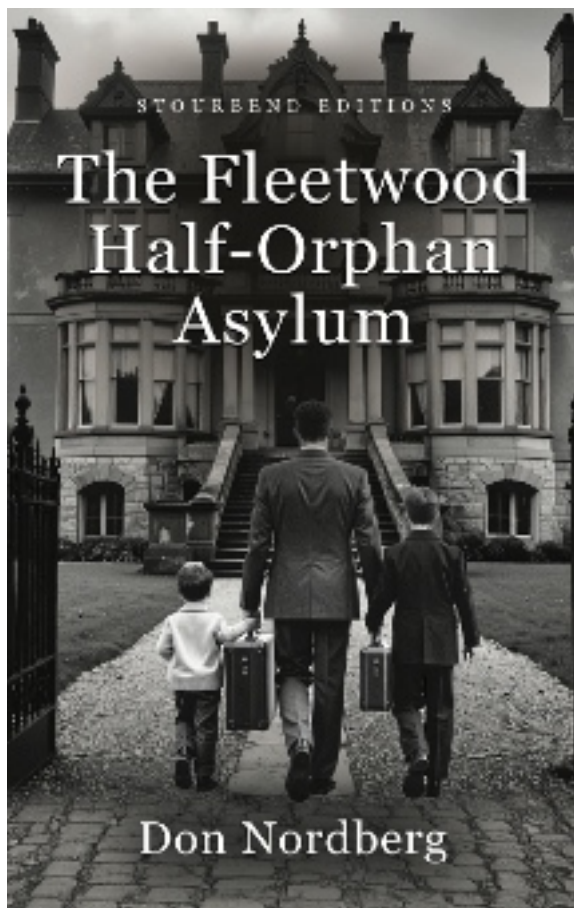
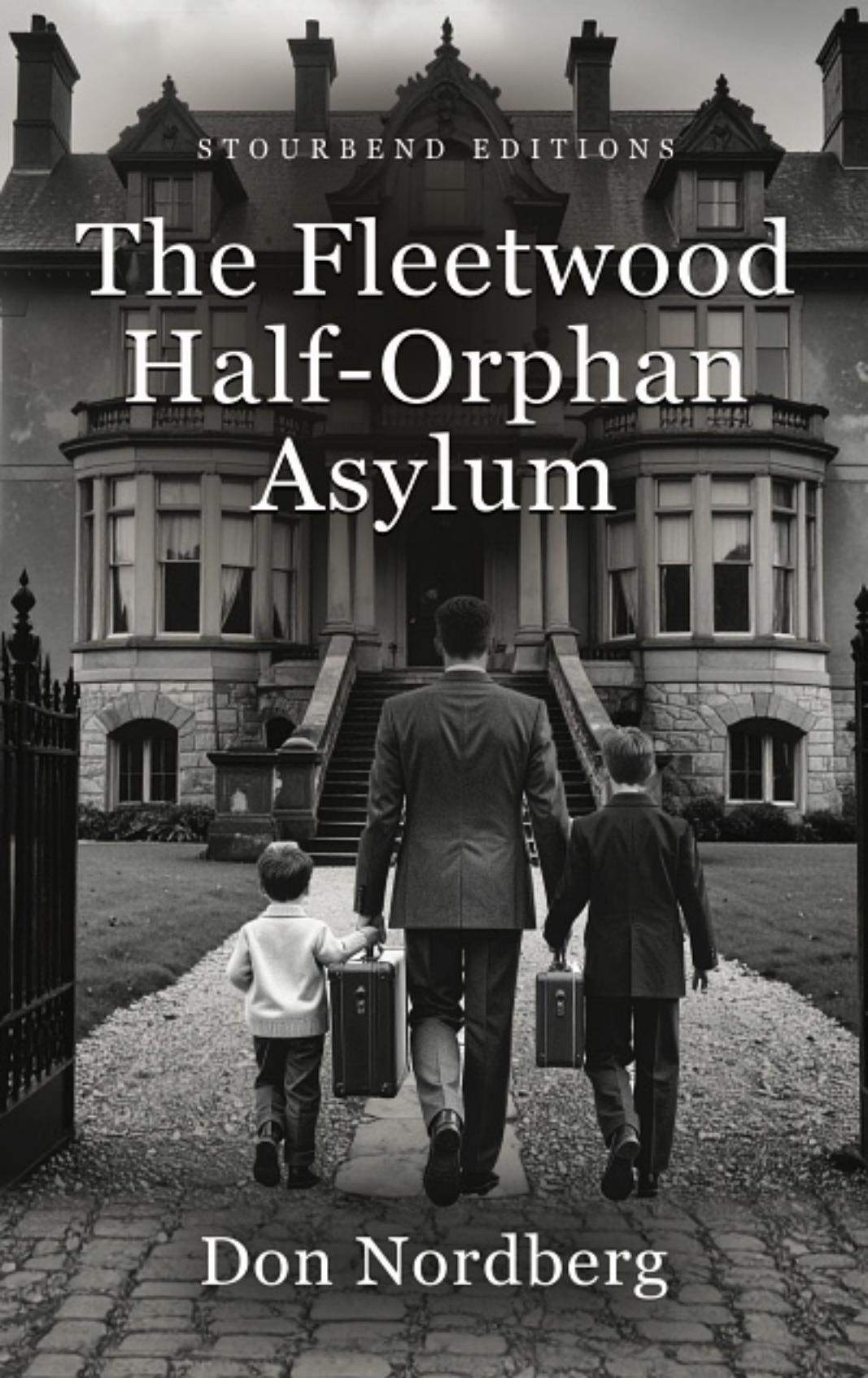




It's 1927. Brothers Amos and Horace enter an orphanage for a short stay. It turns into years. One runs away. They meet again three decades later, and fight. Some 30-odd years later, Horace's son gets a chance to learn of their secrets.

The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum
By Don Nordberg

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STOUBEND EDITIONS

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959624-75-2

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-141-9

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Published by Stourbend Editions, Dorset, England,
via BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Nordberg, Don

The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum by Don Nordberg
Library of Congress Control Number: 2025918985

Stourbend Editions, via Booklocker.com, Inc., 2025



Chapter 1

March 12, 1996

Maybe I should have done this years ago. Back when he died. He let me be his executor, begged me. I'm the only person he trusted. Thirty years ago, it was, give or take. Have I betrayed that trust? Have I been guilty of keeping secrets – his secrets, and mine? They were things he wanted to let go of, things I now need to let go of too. Whether or not anybody cares.

Christine is talking to herself, again. She's been doing that a lot lately.

Maybe it's too late. Still the package is ready now. Finally. I hope the address is still right, or that the new owners will have the decency to send it on. The decency I haven't had.

Old age settling it? Old debts being settled? Still, Christine is a woman fully in command of her senses, up each morning at the stroke of six, showered and dressed – immaculately – by half-past. So says the grandfather clock in the hallway, and Granddaddy was always right. Has been for ages.

She always wears some combination of sky blue and white, and just so today. It intensifies the dark sheen of her skin. She smiles about that every day to the mirror, with an even wider smile on sunny days. Though the patterns change between floral and stripes, her dresses are always crisply ironed, her hair combed and perfectly arranged, a thin coat of unnecessary lipstick, even before she settles into breakfast. The butter knife precisely three-quarters of an inch away from the tangent to

her plate. China teacup and saucer set just so. Loose tea, Earl Grey, usually, Lapsang Souchong by exception, like today. A small pitcher of milk, whole milk, not that thin variety, drained of its substance. Bread sliced for toasting, cereal at the ready. High fiber. Good for the digestion. She has a lot to digest. Especially today.

The last few days have not been quite so orderly, however, at least by her standards. Once she accidentally dropped a bowl on route from the kitchen to the room in front, the one she uses for dining. Then there was the upset, the frustration, when the remote failed to change channels. Probably just a battery running low. These things happen. Even to Christine. She knows that. But still.

Then the visit to the doctor, the youngster she had to see this time. Her old doctor was, well, old. Unlike her, he had needed to work full time in his profession, while she managed to retire from the daily pursuit of sustenance, what, forty-five years ago, 1951, when she got this house. That young child of a doctor, whatever does he know? Why, she is fit as a fiddle. Always has been. Not the double bass of many women you see walking around town these days. No, sir. She is just fine, thank you very much.

Still, the uncomfortable words he spoke have lodged in her brain, and she cannot shake them. Though they are medical terms that she does not wish to remember, she associates them with more familiar ones – debt, obligation, duty, loyalty. Those terms remind her of things she should have done, years ago, just after he died, rather than putting off uncomfortable tasks – the debt, the obligation, the duty – until later. She prevaricated, she knows that now, out of a misplaced sense of loyalty to him. He is gone, after all. He provided for all this, so she would not need to worry.

The table is laid. Was last night. She takes great care with all her arrangements. Always has. She moved the table to stand

directly in front of the bay window, looking out over the veranda, past the palms, across the road, to the harbor. She opened a cupboard door under the bookshelves precisely 83.5 degrees, withdrew a cardbox box into which she tidied some papers, before replacing the box and closing the cupboard door.

She's changed which chair she will sit on, too, not her usual one facing the bookcase, no. She wants an unrestricted view across the water, today. After breakfast she'll go to the post office and dispatch this small parcel, to be signed for upon receipt, to the only address she has for the lad, Nate. It's somewhere called Fleetwood, a section of West Middleton, the place where Amos met Nate all those years ago. The place where Daddy Aloysius died.

West Middleton. How can it be west if it's in the middle?

She smiles. That puzzle is not really her problem, just another prevarication. None of this will matter very much longer. She just hopes the parcel will arrive at all. She wants it to arrive on time. Time is what matters. Especially now. Clock's ticking.

April 2, 1996

Three weeks later, the parcel arrives at its destination. The doorbell rings.

Nate hears it, only vaguely. He is not expecting company. He rarely has visitors of any kind. He does not like to be disturbed when he's working. Let it go. He scratches the itch on his left temple, pushes the graying hair from his forehead, remembering the blond curls of his youth. Gray is good for business. So he thinks.

In his office, the back bedroom he uses to run his accounting practice, he can focus, separate work from his modest private

life, though he is not sure why he bothers. It was important for a long time, during Mother's long, slow decline. He cared for her. Had to, no one could or would. For the last five years, though, he has lived alone.

She was dropping things. Objects first, a teacup, a plate.

Then conversations. They would end suddenly, start and never end, ending and starting again. And again. She would wander off with his papers – his clients' papers – and then forget where she had left them. Once, hearing noises in the house at night, he got up to find she had taken a stack of them, her *memories*, she later called them, and wandered out the back door. Then left and across the main road behind the house she went. Lucky for her there wasn't much traffic, that time of night. Or was it bad luck? He thought about putting a padlock on her bedroom door. Had to put one on the office door. Still uses it.

As her mind emptied, so too had his life. He stopped seeing people, except clients, and always at their offices. By the time she finally died, it had become a habit he couldn't break, or chose not to. His life filled with absence.

As he did then, so he does now. Nate is concentrating, which he does by squeezing out the ordinariness of daily life, the nagging, unanswered, unanswerable questions of past and future. He fills the present with work.

He squeezes a zinc model car, a 1955 Pontiac station wagon, dull gray-green, with white wings rising from its rear fenders. Nate uses it to concentrate when tackling difficult tasks – a long calculation, the logic of a complex spreadsheet formula. The car is one of a few dozen he collected as a kid, using his pocket money and his earnings from delivering the *Middleton Evening News* on his bike. He keeps the collection in the living room and has continued to build it, slowly filling gaps as missing specimens come up for auction.

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The Pontiac is a model of one of Father's many real-life clunkers. It is precious, though, much more so than his model of the vastly more elegant 1926 Pierce Arrow Series 33 roadster. The Pontiac was the first in his collection. Even now it recalls a happy moment in Mother and Father's life, and his. Father gave him the toy car. Happy Birthday! He was eight. The Pontiac was first offered to the public in September 1954, the month of Nate's birth. He got the Pierce Arrow a few years later, another birthday present from Father, but one laden only with Father's memories, ones Father refused to share as his eyes glazed over that day.

It is tax season, early April, a stressful time, for everyone, of course, but particularly for people who run small businesses. And their accountants. This is his busiest time of year, demanding every scrap of attention he can find. The bell rings again, longer this time, insistent.

"Coming," he shouts, annoyed. He slams the 1955 Pontiac on the desk, breaking a wheel off its rear axle. Even more annoyed.

He rushes through the kitchen, along the corridor between bedrooms, across the living room, and then yanks the front door open. No one there. He looks around, then down.

Whoever delivered it has not waited for the required signature. Nate stoops over, and picks up a parcel, the size of a small book.

Thanks to the new standards of the United States Postal Service, overall efficiency of the system takes precedence over efficient delivery of any individual piece. He is not to know, but his parcel has followed a path from Charleston, South Carolina, via Guadalajara and Flagstaff, to Middleton, and from there to the edge of town and the houses built after the Second World War on the fringes of the old Fleetwood estate. All Nate knows is that the postmark is much earlier than the arrival, and the

letter inside the envelope taped exactly in the center of the parcel is dated precisely one day earlier than the postmark.

Dearest Nathan,

You'll not know me, not heard of me, I suspect, though I trust and hope that the photograph enclosed and the contents of this parcel will convince you of the earnestness of my inquiry.

I've heard all about you. No. Something, anyway. He didn't know all that much. About nothing, really. Amos wasn't a bad man, however, and I've known a few of them.

Please come see me sometime. There is a train that leaves Middleton on the afternoon of April 2. I'll meet you when you arrive. Or you can come on another, a more convenient day, if you wish.

Do please let me know, however, if you cannot or would rather not make the journey. Either way, the money and the contents of the parcel are yours to keep, as is much else besides.

Don't leave it too long, mind. Time's a racing. Hugs and XX (though I cannot expect such in return).

With fond regards, Christine O.

With the letter is a photograph, a note attached with a paper clip, and five hundred dollars in cash.

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This should be enough to cover the train fare,
and a nice meal aboard, in first class. One way.
That's all you'll need. C.

The photo reminds Nate not just of the face of the man standing in front of the car, but of the car itself.

He had seen pictures of that face, or a younger version of it. They were in an album Mother assembled from Father's shoeboxes of odd bits and pieces. That was in the first months after Father had passed away, fifteen years ago. Her way to bring order to his chaos. The photo shows a man Father mentioned on rare occasions, with a combination of admiration and disgust. A seaman. Uncle Amos.

Nate knows so little about his uncle, and always wanted to know more. He met Amos, briefly, during that one exciting, intriguing, painful week in 1964. But anytime Nate mentioned his uncle, or the orphanage where the two brothers had once lived, Father quickly changed the subject.

The car played a big part in the excitement and intrigue that week, he remembers, a memory that helps him block out recollection of the pain.

Even to this day, Nate can identify each and every model of each and every year of each of the American carmakers, from 1939 onwards, and some even earlier than that. Such knowledge is of little and dwindling use, he knows, but still the source of much pride.

A 1941 Buick Roadmaster convertible, sky blue and white. The car Uncle Amos drove up to the front of Mother and Father's house all those years ago, when it was already an antique. It stood before this very house, the one he, Nate, inherited, five years ago now, after Mother finally died. This is the very car in which he took several surreptitious rides with Uncle Amos, before emotions exploded at the end of that week. And the photo he has received today? Here that car is, standing

in front of an elegant Victorian house. It has a wide veranda and palm trees in the front lawn. Its clapboards are painted sky blue with white trim.

Nate tears open the parcel and finds a notebook, written in a script very like that of Father's. Its precise formation of letters shows the same discipline of Father's penmanship and his steady stream of drawings and doodles. The product, no doubt, of a strict education, which, through lessons, once learned, will never fade. Nate often wishes he had received similar instruction. He tries nonetheless to reflect such precision in the way he deals with the spreadsheets of his clients. Neat, clear; no, transparent, with everything disclosed. No secrets. Not like the rest of life.

The train mentioned in the letter is leaving this afternoon. The sleeper to Charleston, with just one change. Flying – from the little airport just east of town – might be easier, and surely much faster, but that isn't part of this lady's plan. Nate's mind is flying, though, and without radar.

What do I do now?

Uncharacteristically breathless, he calls the three clients he is due to meet this week. Owners of small businesses. Their taxes aren't all that urgent, or difficult. He'll just pull a few all-nighters, as he did back when he was studying for his accounting exams. Drawing a deep breath before speaking, and trying to keep the pitch of his voice down, he explains the situation to the first:

"It's a bit of a family emergency, I'm afraid. [he listens ...]

"No, you're right, my folks died quite a few years ago. [...]

"Yes, I don't have close relatives, but I do have some distant ones, one I've just learned about, and she needs my help. [...]

"Look, I'm sorry but it can't be helped. [...]

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“When? I’m not quite sure. Surely in a week. [...]

“Yes, let’s reschedule. Thursday, next? At eleven. Thank you, very much. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Making it up is not something Nate finds comfortable, in either sense. The impromptu fiction he has concocted must sound insincere. He is *not* a good liar. Which is what made him a good accountant, though not a rich one. And that is the other sense. He will miss out on what was anyway a rather modest fee. Having to “make it up” to the client might squeeze his finances to his cautious limit. Still, he takes some comfort from the fact that he owns this modest house outright. That’s thanks to Mother’s frugal ways, the antidote to Father’s occasional extravagances. Nate has never had a mortgage, despite repeated sales pushes from the banks and his own professional opinion that a little debt is good for you, just as the textbook says. That bolsters his courage, and he calls the other two. His stories grow more elaborate:

“I am terribly sorry. Really. My uncle, a long-lost relative has suddenly washed up on the East Coast. [...]

“Yes. Washed up. He was a seaman you see, all his adult life. My late father’s brother, and a bit of a rogue. He is a very elderly man, or was, and he could not imagine facing the prospect of a being placed in a home. Not again. Not after what happened to him as a boy. So he set sail on a ship captained by one of the lads he had trained many years ago. They set off from Charleston. [...]

“Yes. South Carolina. And my uncle, well, I can’t bear to say. He jumped overboard, poor soul. [...]

“They tried to rescue him, of course they did. But it was hard to stop the ship. And he was so close to the shore, well, his body just, well, washed up.”

Years ago, at a conference in Las Vegas, the keynote speaker advised the fifteen-hundred-odd accountants assembled there what to do with their clients. They should go home and immediately fire twenty percent of them. “That twenty percent gives you one hundred percent of your grief and will cost you eighty percent of your time. And time, my friends, is money.” Nate has finally understood what he meant. For the third, this version:

“He leapt from the bow of the ship. His body dragged along the keel. From what I have heard, his leg was caught in the propeller, and to free it up the captain ordered full steam ahead. [...]

“No, of course it’s not a steam ship. That’s just how seamen speak. The point is, he died from his injuries, and I am the only relative. [...]

“But I have to arrange the funeral, take care of his pension and insurance, and [...]

“Yes. I will have to do his final taxes. [...]

“Sure. [...]

“Look, it won’t affect you making your tax deadline. I promise. [...]

“Of course. I will let you know as soon as possible. [...] Yes. Of course. Goodbye. [...]

“Fuck off. Asshole.” *Did I just say that?*

Nate is not at all used to brushing off clients. He is just a small-time accountant, keeping overheads low by working from home, charging less than the going rate. He thus attracts clients who are, well, less than the best. They provide the means to match the life he has chosen to live, however. Or which his means had chosen for him.

He throws a few clothes into an overnight bag, belatedly tossing in a hairbrush. He forgets his toothbrush and

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toothpaste, though. And his zinc 1955 Pontiac with its missing wheel. He will not need his laptop, not this time, this trip. That much of his brain is still calculating. He will instead read the notebook on the journey. He opens it to the first page: “The Fleetwood Half-Orphan Asylum.”

Late that afternoon, Nate finds himself in an almost empty carriage on a train bound for Washington, D.C., fingering the notebook, getting ready for the journey inside it.

That shit!

And again.

That shit!

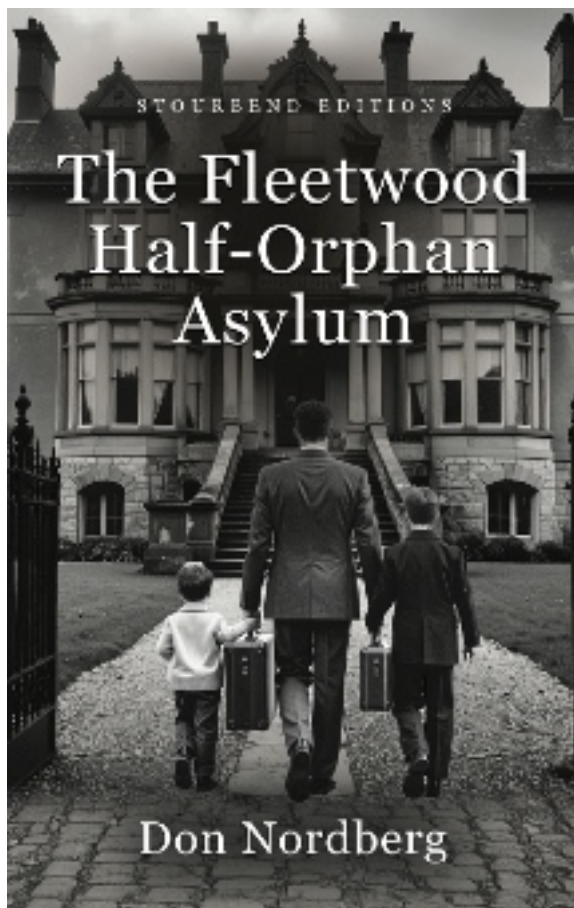
Did Uncle Amos write that? The handwriting in those two lines, just before a few blank pages at the end, is in a considerably larger script than what he had seen as he thumbed through the leather notebook before settling in to read it. The words jump off that final marked page. They are in blue ink, though the rest of the volume is in black. And the hand is less steady – was he agitated? Ill? There was room in that journal for more notes. Had Amos run out of things to record? Or out of the will to write about them? Had he come back to this volume at a different time?

Nate should know by now not to jump to the end of a book. Always start from the beginning, Mother always said. Best just to let the story come to you. Which it did, but through a side door.

In their one encounter, more than thirty years ago, his uncle Amos was friendly, but a man of few words, and impulsive. Is it odd that a man who dutifully kept diaries would be so tongue-tied in conversation with other human beings? Yet a life lived mainly in the company of other men, often below decks, might

have left him seeking alternatives to conversation. Better to compose his thoughts, his emotions, and then record them on paper to solidify events into memory, ready for interpretation.

Nate sets the journal down on the empty seat next to him. He does this often – starts reading with the best of intentions, and then stops as soon as reading begins to feel like work. Something he *should* do. It's not procrastination, though he's good at that. No. This is like bundling up before going out into a storm. Or deciding whether going out is worth it.



It's 1927. Brothers Amos and Horace enter an orphanage for a short stay. It turns into years. One runs away. They meet again three decades later, and fight. Some 30-odd years later, Horace's son gets a chance to learn of their secrets.

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