

Prologue

This is not a ghost story. But it is a story told by a ghost.

The year is 1961, but the place — WaKeeney, Kansas — is stuck in the '50s like a June Bug in amber.

WaKeeney's a farming town just north of Wichita with a population of one thousand, two hundred and three. That's damn small if you're a misfit with nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Which, during my lifetime, I certainly was.

This humble tale opens with a peculiar panorama of the sky at sunrise. That vast blanket of firmament is distorted. Its red-purple early morning hues bleed sharply into the curvature of the earth, as if captured in a prism.

Limited. Enclosed.

This is the view of the sky through a pair of eyeglasses thick enough to suit a noonday owl. The glasses sit on a pile of shucked pajamas and a fuzzy yellow robe at the edge of Sumner Pond, a quiet eddy off the Smoky Hill River just outside WaKeeney.

It's also the place I killed myself.

A dense ring of sixty-foot, diamond-bark ash trees crowd the pond, hiding it from view. A tinge of marmalade on the dark leaves whisper of the coming autumn. The dawning sun sets the pond a-sparkle like a dark jewel.

Except for some Whitetail Skimmers and Blue Dasher dragonflies bouncing along its surface in search of midges and mosquitos, you'd think the pond was deserted.

But then, beneath a shadowy overhang, Iris Deerborne floats into view. She drifts on her back, her hands gently rotating her body with underwater motions.

Iris is seventeen. She's a plain girl, with a face as soft as pudding and pale, cornflower-blue eyes that look startled and naked without their glasses.

Thick, black tentacles of hair float around the girl's head like a living creature. Her white nightgown billows out around her ample form in a cloudy embrace.

Iris spends most of her waking hours ashore in our small berg as a hunted animal, which I'll tell you more about later. But here, in these warm waters, Iris is safe.

That's because not *one* of the upstanding citizens of WaKeeney has set foot on the shores of Sumner Pond, much less bathed in its waters, since the suicide-by-drowning of that crackpot she-devil, your narrator, Charlotte Owings.

Small town life can have an incestuous feel, with most folks not knowing where they end and others begin. To WaKeeney-ans, the pond represents my death. And the fear is, if they get too close, it might be catching.

The Voices drove me to my fate. They started whispering after I gave birth to my son, Jeff, and amplified each year that followed.

No one else could hear the Voices. Not my community, such as it was. Not my husband, Ned. Nor the dozen doctors we begged for help.

Just me. Alone with the screaming banshees ricocheting in my head, calling my

name over and over, 'til I wished someone would split my noggin open wide so they'd spill out.

On a hot, humid Sunday in June of '51, I decided to drown The Voices in heavy, sinking, dark, dark water and down and down and down.

I still hear voices. Only now they're not inside my broken brain. They're the thoughts and memories of the still-living in WaKeeney, which makes me a crackerjack teller of this tale.

Iris was no more than seven years old when she first came to the vacated pond alone, but she was quickly becoming a misfit just like me. I often wondered if it was my fault.

Her desperate daddy, who had a wife on the lam from their marriage, dropped Iris into my care when she was newborn.

Though I only had her a year, I worried that as I fed, burped and swaddled Iris, I somehow infected her with my Town Scapegoat germs. That they lay dormant in her child's body right up until I left the post.

When Iris waded into my watery grave, it was like she'd come back to me. Like she'd come home.

I wasn't through with my worldly pain and hers was just ripening. I believe it's unfinished business with Iris Deerborne that's trapped me midway between Hither and The Beyond.

What neither of us knows, is that on this day, the 23rd of September, her life is about to change forever. My hope is, in telling her story, I'll finally be able to move on to a place where all memory of my own story fades away, like a dream upon waking.