

Murder At Ten Mile in Cottage #8:  
Miss Vause And Miss Gunn

Jackie Mott Brown

"Get more water, Violet, no telling what will happen tonight!!"

Their fresh water spring is located half way up the steep steps from the lake to their two story, rambling house. The ladies hauled water from there or sometimes from the lake. Why they built way up in the woods, I'll never know. You can barely see the lake from the porch swing.

I call them "old maids" but Mom says Miss Vause and Miss Gunn are too young for that title. But in their zippered house dresses and navy blue wool bathing suits that sag in the water, they look old to me. I bet they are Auburn school teachers. My brother Billy and I didn't stop to visit them too much.

There were so many teachers and professors in these fourteen cottages that stretched for more than a mile south of our jointly owned parking lot, but I guess that made sense since it's a perfect place for families to live all summer while school is out.

"We've got to get this place cleaned up. I'll do the upstairs; you whoosh out the living room and pick up your magazines before you start another fire around the wood stove, Violet." Miss Gunn was organized to a fault. Strong and fit she loved lake living, and especially nights like tonight when they'd all gather at Grout's tent for the annual murder mystery kickoff at seven.

Our parents had a colleague coming from Syracuse for the event. Dad calls her brilliant, but Ursula just looks fat, loud and clumsy to Billy and me. "I guess you don't have to look good to be a professor," Billy said.

We knew it will be just awful trying to get Ursula into our rowboat from the parking lot dock. City visitors don't "get" the rules, even when they are simple ones, such as: step into the middle of the boat, or sit in the center of the seat and don't wiggle around when Dad is rowing.

Ursula's friend, Jimmy Ellison, drove her out from town and parked next to our 1937 Ford. Out she burst from the front door.

"Ah, beautiful lake, so blue, nice day, hi kids, hello Leonard," she shouted, like we were deaf.

"Keep it down, Ursula. We are on the water, voices really carry!" Jimmy grabbed her arm but she "paid no mind" as Grandma Minnie used to say.

"OK, Ursula, hop in my boat." Dad stood ankle deep in the lake to steady the bow. We watched her big foot leave the dock, landing starboard -- and flipping the boat. She landed in three feet of water, the gray dress floating to the surface before her body like loose skin on a whale.

"I see her underwear!" Billy hid his eyes.

"That does it, hit the trail!" We ran as fast as we could until we reached Lyons' cottage and sat on some leaves where we watched two grey squirrels play tag in the big oak tree. "They should give Ursula balance lessons," I thought.

Jimmy drove home after helping Dad haul Ursula to shore, promising to come back to pick her up tomorrow. From the trail we watched Dad turn the boat on its side to drain the water. This time Ursula poured herself safely onto the stern seat. Dad muttered something and rowed them back home for a picnic lunch.

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This year Art Dubois and Irene Garrett wrote a powerful script, chose the victim, assigned a police chief, county sheriff, witnesses and friends of the deceased.

"Attention all! I am sorry to inform you our dear neighbor, Violet Vause, has been found dead on her porch swing this evening." Art bellowed out orders after instructing Violet to return home and slouch on her swing during the investigation, which she did, imbibing a few snorts of whiskey to look relaxed and dead-like.

Mr. Fenn, the police chief, named possible locations to look for clues (Purcell's cottage, Kelley's beach and Doc Lewis' outhouse area) where Art and Irene had planted clues earlier in the day. Billy and I knew this by snooping from the trail all afternoon, but we didn't tell anyone. We were too little to go at night to show anybody, anyway.

Envelopes were handed out to the others with the entire script plus their assigned roles in the Mystery, and clues were hidden in between the lines.

The first to name the murderer would be given a bonfire gathering in his honor next Saturday.

The whole mystery evening was always hectic, with all the detectives for a night rowing by flashlight from camp to camp, cottages lit only by kerosene lamps so clues were almost impossible to spot. Boats passing back and forth carried cottagers all trying to outdo each other. Meanwhile Ursula, too out of shape to join in, watched people come and go from the comfort of Vause's lower step, being careful not to disturb the dead Violet.

At midnight everyone gathered back at the tent where all clues were turned in and discussed by authorities. Mr. Fenn had found Violet's magazines in Doc Lewis' outhouse. Ken Dubois drew a duplicate of muddy shoe prints at Violet's back stoop that looked like Mr. Lyons' size, there was broken glass by the sink, and Mrs. Brown had guilt written all over her face.

Finally, highballs in hand, the cottagers toasted a winner who successfully solved the murder mystery. Thoroughly exhausted, they shoved off their rowboats and filed down the lake under a blanket of stars brighter than any flashlight, no electric lights around to diminish their beauty.

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Early the next morning, our friend Ginny, who was the oldest among us kids, ran down the trail to give Billy and me the scoop. She loved gossip and breathlessly started in.

Mrs. Lewis had solved the murder. And, surprise, Mr. Lyons was not guilty after all! The murderer was Tom Tradup who had done in Violet by slipping poison in her whiskey. It was revenge for Violet maliciously spreading rumors that Tom's wife, Jean Garrett, planned to run away with Mr. Bartlett. Evidently, they had been making out behind Violet's outhouse for weeks, Ginny reported with glee.

No one had ever dreamed that of Mr. Bartlett. Wide eyed, Billy sighed, "I can't wait to grow up!"