



YEARLING

The Mailbox

Audrey Shafer



Chapter 1

Vernon Culligan was as good as dead to the town of Drayford, Virginia, for so long that when he actually died, not many folks noticed. For decades, his bloodshot eyes, permanent three-day stubble, rifle held over his head, and snarl meaner than a coon dog's had naturally taught everyone to keep a good distance from his property line. The postal delivery truck did venture all the way to the teetering mailbox, and mail was regularly delivered through its yawning trap into the dark, corrugated steel tunnel. Outgoing letters, mostly bill payments, were collected, the addresses written in shaky black ink, as if little

spider legs had grouped themselves into crooked letters. Such was the old man's communication with the world.

Twelve-year-old Gabe Culligan Pace lived with his uncle in Vernon's simple home cradled within a valley west of Virginia's Blue Ridge, north of Roanoke County. Gabe had arrived in early spring, two and a half years before. Woodland rhododendrons had splashed their purple heads against spikes of sage green as Gabe whizzed by in the backseat of a social worker's Ford Escort.

Over the space of time and in the shadow of the mountains, Gabe came to appreciate, if not understand, many of Uncle Vernon's habits. For instance, Vernon always kept a fan blowing, no matter the season. He preferred the fan to the cabinet full of smoker's lung medicines. So when Gabe arrived home from school and saw his uncle's electric fan lying on the wooden floor in the study, like a turtle that couldn't right itself, Gabe dropped his backpack at the door. He held his breath and crossed the narrow hall. Vernon's chair lay toppled to one side and Vernon himself lay motionless on the floor, flat on his back.

Gabe had never really touched his uncle, though sometimes he had accidentally brushed Vernon's rough hand while passing the margarine tub or clearing the table. Gabe stood by his uncle's work boots and softly called his name. Vernon, a veteran, had had his left leg amputated below the knee during his final tour in Vietnam, thirty-five years before. But with the latest prosthesis, Vernon walked with barely a limp. "The thing's a chore to get on. Can't *mau len*, can't hurry it up no more, but can't stub my toe, neither!" Gabe saw that the fake foot

wasn't angled quite right to the rest of his uncle's body. That twist gave Gabe a little courage. He knelt and touched the plasticized ankle, then moved up, methodically pushing one finger against his uncle's pant leg. He stopped at the thigh, rolled back on his heels, and looked at his uncle's face. Gently he placed a finger on his uncle's cheek.

The skin was cold. Gabe fetched a thick plaid blanket and lay down with his uncle, covering them both. Gabe closed his eyes. Hours later, after dusk had swept the last particles of light from the room, Gabe awoke. He scrambled out from under the blanket, sat hugging his knees on the floor, and cried. Messy crying, the kind of crying that leaves you swollen, red, and leaky. After a while, he snuffled his nose along his arm and sleeve and stared in the direction of the fan. He crawled toward it, fumbled for the switch, and turned it off. The absence of the low rumble startled him. And then he smiled.

Gabe walked into the kitchen, flipped on the light, and fixed himself a peanut butter and honey sandwich. The first bite brought back the first words his uncle ever spoke to him.

"You as skinny as a starved rat. Don't you eat? Come on, let's eat somepin. What'll it be?" Vernon had scowled at Gabe's silence. "Don't tell me they's foisting a dumb one on old Vernon."

When Ms. Rodriguez, the social worker, had nudged Gabe, he'd whispered, "No, sir."

"No, no," answered Vernon. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm no 'sir.' They can save all they's fancy sirs and salutin' for the dress parade. No, life's a jungle,

Vernon Culligan has been dead to the town of Drayford, Virginia, so long that when the crusty Vietnam vet actually dies, only one person notices. Twelve-year-old Gabe grew up in the foster care system until a social worker located his uncle Vernon two years ago. When Gabe comes home from school to discover that his uncle has died, he's too stunned to react—so he does nothing. But the next day, he discovers a strange note in his mailbox:

*I have a secret.
Do not be afraid.*

And his uncle's body is gone.

Thus begins a unique exchange between Gabe and a secret correspondent. Flashbacks reveal how Gabe and Vernon's relationship changed their lives, and how war affects soldiers, even decades after the fighting stops. Eventually, Vernon's death is discovered, and Gabe and the mystery note writer must learn to move forward.

The Mailbox is a touching and beautiful story about connections—and about how two people in need can save each other.

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