

THE KEEPER

In the room of his own, in the house of his own, at the end of the road of his own, Conrad Campbell picked up another box. The disturbance of the dried cardboard raised the fecal dust that had come to cover everything he had dragged out of Rose's old house. These 10 boxes, the remnant of 50, sat on the floor in front of the bright maple bookcases.

Conrad Campbell had moved to the end of this flat, sandy road a decade earlier. He had searched for a place that had both the feeling of home and that avoided the tendrils of the world. Much of his career had him working on a series of impossible problems that were, in the end, the same. They were all problems of ample resources, poor distribution and primitive power; twice in the past 35 years he had been quoted as a "career diplomat" in the *Washington Post*. He was an expert on famines and epidemics. Campbell labored under the idea that he held the best interests of all and worked for a higher cause, but in the end he left with profound fatigue and uncertainty.

Rose Winstead Williams was a relative of questionable connection; they shared people in the same hometown whom they both called cousins by marriage. Camp-

bell found Rose, a childless widow, seemingly forgotten, living on an ancient estate along the shore of Nassawango Creek. The discovery followed from his answering an odd advertisement in Pine Hill's free weekly paper: *Curious and watchful neighbor needed for guest house. Rent to own. Need Cash.*

Campbell bought Rose's guest house and 25 acres of land and took up residence about 200 yards from Rose's

house, where she cured herbs, distilled oils, and stored all that she collected. On thick, old paper, she maintained journals of her discoveries, including pencil and watercolor sketches. They shared a garden, and he became her conduit for routine supplies.

From these rotting boxes Campbell was trying to construct order, to save the farm. Strewn across card tables around the room were related piles. On the power company table were four piles. In the first were letters asking for payment of derelict bills. In the second were invoices from appliance repair shops called in to fix powerless appliances. The third pile contained letters from Rose to Eastern Shore Power and to various Maryland agencies complaining of electrical waves that were being pumped into her house, trying, if not to kill her outright,



Donald Mulligan

NEGOTIATING A PEACE WITH ROSE WILLIAMS' LOYAL CAT IS CONRAD CAMPBELL'S GREATEST CHALLENGE.

By RICKY ROOD

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to disorient her and take her property. In the final pile were uncashed dividend checks from 25,000 shares of Eastern Shore Power stock. The checks Campbell had found totaled more than \$135,000.

The envelopes and papers in today's box were from six years ago. On top was a letter from A. K. Hillston, Agent, Internal Revenue Service. There were three high-priority goals of Campbell's, and maintaining the peace with Agent Hillston was one. As Rose carried on with Eastern Shore Power, Hillston came to collect what the government was owed. Over fruit pies and iced tea, he and Rose had spoken many times. Hillston realized that Rose was unable to deal with the world, and he decided that anything the government was owed would come at her death.

The second goal of Campbell's was to keep CreekShore Homes from getting Rose's land at the end of his road. Rose failed to pay the property taxes, and CreekShore Homes led the charge to have the land sold at auction. Constant calls to the tax-hungry council reminded them of what a hundred new waterfront houses would mean to the local contractors.

Quietly, Campbell had borrowed the money against his savings and paid the taxes in Rose's name. In the year that followed he obtained a power of attorney, with Rose's signature coming after his invocation that CreekShore's owner was trying to damage her husband's business. Mr. Williams, Rose's husband, had died 30 years earlier, and his partner's son, T. R. Raines, owned CreekShore Development Corporation. The Raines name agitated Rose, and Campbell had found a common enemy whom he could use to advantage.

Every month the company lawyer asked about Rose's condition and sent flowers. Campbell only lamented that Rose was intestate, and he meekly conjectured that the land would certainly go to auction.

The power of attorney was fragile, especially if some lost cousin was to figure out that there was a \$7 million pot of land and stocks. Campbell proceeded discreetly, using the shield of charity. Nassawango Creek was

wild and was the northern reach of the bald cypress. On the higher parts of the land there was remnant American chestnut. Campbell was arranging the transfer of the land into a private conservancy that would produce enough cash to handle Rose's perilous debts. He carried on all of his business with lawyers in the capital, Annapolis.

From his desk that looked out over a ragged field, Campbell could see the tundra swans in the famous wide cove of the creek. The swans had arrived two weeks ago, the Friday after Thanksgiving. They flew in behind a strong storm, a storm that had toppled the old sweet gum tree into the creek. He watched Mal-ku, the last of Rose's cats, walk down the trunk of the fallen tree. Everyday, Mal-ku walked the 50 feet out to the end of the trunk. From there he shimmied out one of the branches until his front legs dangled in the air. He sat motionless as the black-billed swans circled, unconcerned, below him. The fur on Mal-ku's neck occasionally stood.

Mal-ku was Campbell's greatest failure; he had negotiated no peace with the cat. The only building that remained on Rose's land was a Norwegian-cut log barn with 30 five-foot-long, 14-inch-square timbers. One end of the barn had a massive chimney. On summer evenings, Mal-ku straddled the peak of the barn's roof, watching the bats and swallows at sunset. In winter, he walked the shores of Nassawango Creek, shadowing the flock of tundra swans. He'd not been in a house since Rose's was burned down for practice by the fire department.

Over time, Rose had closed off portions of her house — first the upstairs, then random rooms downstairs. She said they were full. There were cats, some indoors, some out, and eventually they had overrun the house. Rose started to forget, to wander, and to set fires on top of her cold electric stove and in her sink. Three years ago, Campbell arranged to move Rose into Pine Hill to live with Mae and Big Jimmie. This was his final goal — that Rose was well cared for and did not die alone. Campbell became the keeper of Mal-ku.

Rose let any visitors, even Campbell, only onto the back porch. She said that the rest of the place was too messy. One day, after noticing the kitchen curtains had not been raised, Campbell ventured in to see if Rose was alive or dead. Nothing could have prepared him for the

Ricky Rood is an atmospheric physicist whose sister is a member of the Foreign Service. Originally from North Carolina, he currently lives on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. In addition to scientific publications, he writes short stories, poems and essays, which have appeared in Faultline, Arnazella and Night Music.

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sediment of newspaper, feces, bones and fur that covered the floor. Even the historical society had no interest in preserving the place.

Campbell signed another letter generated by the lawyer of the trust he had set up for Rose. He was just a few weeks away from completing the transfer to the conservancy as well as providing Mae and Big Jimmie a modest annuity. Standing to go get more coffee, he heard a large splash, like the dropping of a brick into a barrel. This was followed by a chorus of bellows and whistles of straining air. At the window he saw 60 swans running across the water, their wings slapping the surface as they crept into the air. Four swans remained under Mal-ku's tree, two reared high with their wings spread broad like sheets, foaming the water between them.

Mal-ku was in the water. The other two birds swam around, their heads darting at the water, snapping; one had a tuft of orange fur in its bill. Campbell watched as they trapped Mal-ku in a cold, frothy cage.

As he headed to the door, the phone rang.

Campbell ignored it, ran from the house to the dock and untied the canoe. The tide was low, and he had to drag the canoe through icy muck.

Mal-ku was waterlogged; he'd swim one direction and the four swans would corral him back to their center. The water beaded off their feathers; they hovered, almost standing on the water. Mal-ku was simply an annoyance that would be easily dispatched. Campbell paddled, but with the way the shore ran, with all the fallen trees and brush, it was hard going. Mal-ku's head was below the water more than it was above.

The two reared swans settled down. The four of them swam tightly together. They seemed to be using their bodies to hold Mal-ku under water. Campbell yelled. He threw the canoe's bailing bucket at them.

An explosion burst out of the woods.

As the sound resonated through the cove, a second, more percussive shock followed. Steel pellets rained

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into the water, several clanging in the bottom of the canoe. The four swans scattered. Mal-ku's head rose above the water, nose pointed skyward.

"That damned cat of yours finally jumped." On the shore, in a cloud of blue gun smoke, stood Bobby from across the creek.

"He'd a-been drowned long afore you got there," Bobby yelled. "Those swans are the meanest damn birds I know." Bobby turned and walked back toward his house.

Mal-ku clawed onto a branch hanging into the water. Campbell picked up a piece of spent shot from the bottom of the canoe, rolled it between his fingers, and began to paddle toward the cat. "Thanks," he mouthed to Bobby's back.

The cat scrambled up to the trunk of the tree and ran to his barn. He was sodden and scrawny. Campbell turned back and finally noticed the 40-degree salt water that soaked his pajama legs and burned his shell-cut feet.

He dragged the boat to shore. The phone was ringing again, or maybe, still. Campbell looked at his watch: Sunday, 7:33. He picked up the phone and words started to pour out.

"Praise God you're home, Mr. Campbell, you gotta get up here as fast as you can!" It was Mae. "Miss Rose done gone completely wild. She's been runnin' all round the house for the last 30 minutes. She's tearing things off the wall and throwin' them on the floor."

"How?" Campbell asked. "I mean ..."

"Mr. Campbell, she's got the strength of Samson. Big Jimmie had to grab her like a bear. He's sittin' in the chair holdin' her on his lap now, an' she's just pounding his legs. We needs you."

"I'm on my way," Campbell said. "Call Doc Willoughby."

"We have," Mae said.

Campbell washed the mud from his legs, put on some pants and soft, thick socks, and started the 20-minute drive to Pine Hill. Mae had spent most of her life

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taking care of other people, mostly white people. Along with her husband, Big Jimmie, Mae was stuck somewhere between the Civil War and the 21st century. Both their families had been in the county forever, usually as domestics and laborers. With a bit of good fortune and a lot of ambition, they were now licensed in geriatric care and had an old house in Pine Hill. They always had one or two live-in wards. Their children, all except for Little Jimmie, had finished college and dispersed across Maryland and Virginia. Little Jimmie, the oldest, stayed at home and did whatever needed doing.

Rose had been bedridden for three months. If you were there when she woke, she'd say hi, smile, and start to sit up. Then the smile would disappear, fear would take her eyes, and what strength she had mobilized into rigidity.

At the house, Campbell hurried to the steps. There was a gust of cold wind, then three loud clanks on the tin roof. The clanks were followed by the rat-a-tat of acorns rolling down and falling with a soft thud into the yard. He picked up two large nuts from the ground. The door was cracked. Campbell looked in.

The room was quiet and hot. Rose lay on the couch. Mae sat in a straight-back chair, Rose's hand in her lap. Big Jimmie was at the end of the couch at Rose's feet, holding his face in his hands. "How are things?" Campbell asked.

Big Jimmie looked up slowly. "Miss Rose is dead," he said. "She woke up with the sun today and was thrashing all around."

"You sure?" Campbell asked.

"She was all worried about her cat, Mr. Campbell," Mae said, as she stroked the still hand in her lap. "She's always worried about some cat or another."

"We'd catch her," Big Jimmie continued. "She'd pull away and run pick up something, swing it around and throw it." On the floor under the radiator was a small shattered bottle; the house smelt of honeysuckle.

"And that picture," Mae pointed at a crumbled frame on the floor. It was a watercolor of the cove in the creek.

"Yes sir," Big Jimmie laughed. "She got that picture and snapped the frame in two. Then she just stood there. I grabbed her and held her tight." Big Jimmie looked at Rose's body and swallowed the end of his laugh. "I carried her over to the couch and set her down. She just sat there, calm as snow."

The lyric voice of a radio preacher came from the kitchen, "We start to worship the created ..." There was a long pause, "Instead of the creator."

Campbell walked over to Mae and Rose. "Look at her face, Mae," he said. "She looks like she did in those old pictures we found."

"She's at peace, Mr. Campbell." Mae laid Rose's hand on the edge of the couch. Humming along with the beginning of a hymn on the radio, she stood and walked down to sit next to her husband. "So, I'm sitting with her and Rose looks at me and says, 'Thank you, Mae. I'm tired now,' and she lay down."

"Laid down and died," said Big Jimmie. "I'm sorry, Mr. Campbell."

"It's for the best, Big Jimmie," Campbell said. With a finger he touched Rose's cheek, and pulled her hair back from her eyes. "Mae, what do we do?"

"Wait for Doc Willoughby."

"No," Campbell said. "I mean, I don't know what to do. What's next?"

Campbell walked to the front window. People were collecting at the Methodist church across the street. A still vigorous Lawrence Godbold, who had worked with Rose's husband to convince the Army Corps to keep the river dredged after the Second World War, walked to the church's steps. Rose's husband wanted the dredging because he didn't think the town could maintain the light manufacturing the war had brought. Today there was a modest collection of restaurants and marinas at the river that kept Pine Hill vital. T. R. Raines walked up and shook Godbold's hand. He paused and looked at the extra car parked in front of Mae's.

"Oh, we'll have a fine funeral, Mr. Campbell," Mae said. "You'll need to write an obituary. You might be the only thing she could call family, but people will remember Mr. William's Rose."

Campbell walked back over to the couch, then to pick up the broken picture from the floor. "No, Mae, I don't think these people really want to know. Let's have a service in your church. You and I can talk about Rose, the choir can sing, and Reverend Johnson can call on the Lord."

"Mr. Campbell," Mae said. "You think that'd be okay with Miss Rose?"

"Yes, Mae. I think she'd find it curious and appealing." Campbell pieced the picture of the cove back together.

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“Mae,” Campbell said. “We need to keep Rose’s death quiet. We need to wait as long as possible before we file the death certificate and the death notices — before we do whatever we have to do.”

Mae, Big Jimmie and Conrad Campbell sat in the kitchen, waited for Doc Willoughby, and set a plan. In the quiet of the evening, the funeral home used by the black folks of Pine Hill would come and get Rose. If noticed, most would assume it was some other person Mae cared for. They would cremate the body, have a private memorial service, and spread Rose’s ashes on the shore of the creek. The next day Campbell would take a room in Annapolis and accelerate the land deal and solidify his power.

“I’ve got to go,” Campbell said as soon as the plan was hatched. “I’ve a mess to clean up down at the creek.”

Slowly he drove, without the usual worry of being a hindrance if cars lined up behind him. The way was

dotted with old wooden barns and new metal sheds; houses with fresh paint and houses with sagging roofs; boats for sale in front yards; empty vegetable stands with a few darkening pumpkins on the ground. Five miles from town was the entrance to “Cypress Grove at Dialeigh, A CreekShore Community,” named for the developer’s daughter, Diane.

Five more miles along, at a heavy stand of oaks and beech, a sandy road ran down the side of one of the fields. There the swans spent the afternoons rooting out lost kernels of corn. Down this road, after a hard curve into the woods, cypress trees, clung to the shores of the creek. It was these trees, that reached like knob-by fingers from the south, that held Campbell to the creek.

As the car bounced into the clearing, Mal-ku looked from the door of his barn. He started to trot, then run. With a single jump he went from the ground to the raised porch of Campbell’s house. He nuzzled at the door. ■

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