

The book cover features a detailed illustration of a woman with long hair, wearing a tan hat and a white tank top, sitting on a bicycle on a path. In the background, another woman in a blue patterned dress is walking away on the same path. The scene is set in a lush forest with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of red, orange, and yellow. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall style is painterly and evocative of a Southern setting.

VERA JANE
COOK
PLEASANT DAY

SOUTHERN FICTION FOR WOMEN

WITH MURDER IN COMMON
FRIENDSHIP IS INEVITABLE.

In the town of Hollow Creek, South Carolina two separate murders, fifteen years apart, unite fifteen-year-old Pleasant Day and sixty-year-old Clarissa Blackwell. As Pleasant Day struggles with her mother's distance, her father's infidelity and the death of her best friend, she draws closer to Clarissa, an older woman with the secrets to heal her. But Clarissa has struggles of her own as she faces betrayal and seeks to come to terms with old wounds. With her unpredictable psychic ability to 'read people' Clarissa uncovers the answers to a deadly crime and to Pleasant's true identity. In the end, both Pleasant and Clarissa's worlds are transformed by the truths they're forced to accept, and both find solace and strength in the histories that have shaped them.

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PLEASANT DAY

Vera Jane Cook

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ISBN: 978-1-64456-318-2

MOBI: 978-1-64456-319-9

EPUB: 978-1-64456-320-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021938577

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Published July 2021

by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

SECOND EDITION

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INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

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Dedication
For my Aunt Leda, in loving memory.

Books by Vera Jane Cook

Dancing Backward in Paradise

The Story of Sassy Sweetwater

Where the Wildflowers Grow

Lies a River Deep

Marybeth, Hollister & Jane

The Fourniers: Book One, When Hannah Played Ragtime

By Olivia Hardy Ray

(pen name of Vera Jane Cook)

Annabel Horton, Lost Witch of Salem

Annabel Horton and the Black Witch of Pau

Pharaoh's Star

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PLEASANT DAY



PART I

Chaos is Come Again

Chapter One

Pleasant Day

I wanted to let loose with a good right hook to his grin. Son of a bitch was always treating me like I had nothing in my head but air, no way to reason or form thoughts. I had no purpose on this earth but to appease his need to be believed. Little bastard would never get as tall as the tales he told.

"Ain't that something," he said.

He stood there breathing hard, getting fat on bad news. Of course it wasn't true, meant to scare me away from giving John Peter two minutes of my time. I raised my eyes to the sky and put my hands in the pockets of my jeans.

"You shocked?" he asked.

Now listen here, bull shit is not my middle name. I shoot straight from the hip, tell it like it is. But you throw bull shit my way it's going back atcha, that you can be sure. I don't take any crap from anyone and I don't give it. So don't go trying to sell me the frigging Gervais Street Bridge 'cause you can't put a price on something that can't be bought.

"You owe me five shiny quarters for that little bit of news."

"Kiss my white, southern little ass, Angus."

He stared at me like I was a detour he'd come up against, his free ride to money took a sharp left, right off the road. The little bastard was stumped, like a jeopardy question that froze him up. "Duh, what is a summer's day? Can't get much easier than that."

He squinched up his nose, his leprechaun impression, I guess. He looked Irish as a shamrock, eyes the color of a glossy post card pea green sea and his jaw line was just begging to be grown into, waiting for him to get handsome, which one day he would be, I guess. But for now, he was irregular looking, like his poor features didn't know where to go to get caught up with.

"I never understand what the hell you're talking about," he said.

He wasn't too smart. "Shall I compare thee to....."

"What? I swear, Pleasant, you're out of your mind."

"What is a summer's day, asshole. It's a Jeopardy question. It's Shakespeare."

He made some whishing sound in his throat and kicked the dirt, like he wished I was getting the benefit of the end of his shoe. I always made him angry, angry as my daddy gets when he looks at his paycheck and wonders where the zeros went.

"You hear what I'm saying, Pleasant? You're nuts."

"Good thing to be, I hear."

He made a whishing sound again. "Can you believe what I just told you? I wasn't lying. Hell, I wish I was. What the hell reason would I have to be lying about a thing like that?"

"You want to play Jeopardy or not?"

"No. You listening to me?"

"I hear words falling like bricks from your mouth. They have no meaning but they are awfully heavy, hard to bare."

"Why do I bother telling you anything?"

"You don't tell me shit, you are one big piece of crap and your mouth is filled with things that don't mean nothing. Your mind is the same."

"You don't believe me?"

"You want me to believe that Mrs. Clottey found a dead body in her son's box-spring? You really want me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

"No truth on this goddamn planet ever made its way out of your mouth. If truth was hanging out of your nose you'd blow that goddamn truth bugger into a snot rag and toss it into a fire pit."

"Fuck you, Pleasant." And off he walked.

Damn Angus Ray would have me believe that Pluto is the planet with rings and Mars got nothing to do with the God of War. Oh no, the God of War is a freaking pansy and he took his name from those little hard candies look like hearts. According to Angus we got Cupid to thank for slaughtering the assassins of Caesar.

He must think I got nothing better to do on a July afternoon but swallow any line of bull he wants to feed me.

Truth is though, I don't have much better to do on a July afternoon but join all the other aimless souls got nothing in their heads but some kind of fuzz. Damn if I understand what we're doing on this earth. I mean, I can't justify getting born. I didn't ask for it, nobody did. Then all of a sudden you're here, screaming at the top of your little lungs 'cause you know what you're in for. Hard times is what you're in for. I can't even begin to tell you what bad news is lying on my path through life but I best be ready for it. I best be putting on my armor and I'd best be prepared to fend off all the bullshit coming my way head on.

People make up things to do before they go insane doing nothing.

Now, ain't that the truth? Most people I know don't take the pleasure in reading that I do. That's what keeps me from terminal aimlessness. I got my own July classroom up on Piper Hill with my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in my knapsack and five dime store paperbacks stuffed under my arm. Beats being stuck in some dusty classroom breathing in chalk in December. I been staring at Mrs. Llewellyn's layers of flesh too many semesters of my life, sneezing at her cheap perfume and pretending I am with purpose. Knowledge is purpose, and I give that to myself. All the knowledge I need I can find in Shakespeare and other great writers. So I get lots of knowledge in July. What kind of knowledge do I get in December? It don't matter none that I can name the presidents of the United States or figure out the area of a goddamn polygon. It matters that I can feel a kinship in the presence of masters and sublimely superior in the presence of fools. Fools being Angus Ray for one, masters being Shakespeare, Charlotte Bronte and D.H. Lawrence, to name but a few.

Sawyer told me I shouldn't put Charlotte Bronte in the same category as Shakespeare but Sawyer is a fruitcake. He's never read anything; he's too busy making sure the part in his hair is straight, which is the only thing about him that is. Sawyer knows nothing, doesn't like to read. Great writing is great writing; don't matter if it's dialog or prose. I tell him he's an idiot all the time and he just slaps me upside my head and says I have no right to my opinions because my brain is yet to be fully formed. Shit, Sawyer wouldn't know Shakespeare from Humpty Dumpty. I don't know what the hell I'm doing on this earth with these people. I wonder if they believe the shit they shew.

It's other people boggle the mind with nonsense. That's why I long to be alone most times, completely alone under a blue sky in Hollow Creek. That's in South Carolina, not too many people heard of it. Shakespeare would have thought the same 'bout Hollow Creek, that it brings the poet out in people, well, at least in me. Shakespeare was a nature lover and he had his own Hollow Creek over there in England, must have had. He fully understood the perfection of a summer day. Why, if a man compared me to a summer day I'd be honored to pass over my virginity with no strings attached. Fortunately or unfortunately, no man in Hollow Creek sees any kind of poetry in a yellow sun or a green field with dancing weeds as high as my forehead. Only thing they see is a bottle of beer on ice and an excuse to stink behind the sweat marks that are so visibly untoward under the arms of their t-shirts.

Looking over yonder I can see my mama putting clothes on a line. There's a bunch of purple flowers between me and her. The clothes are

all white except for one blue towel. It looks so proud to be different. Mama's hair is dandelion yellow, golden against the daylight. She's a compliment to the natural environment around her, like an Oak tree is to a back yard and like a lone cactus would be to a wide desert. I never been to a desert but I can see the beauty of that prickly, dangerous cactus in my mind. Everything has its compliments I imagine, even me.

Mama looked up. You'd think she'd wave. I always want her to wave when she sees me but she never does, she looks off, as if my presence has disturbed her or is about to disturb her. But I bring nothing of any consequence to my mama. She need not fear that my overbearing presence will devour her. I am well practiced in avoidance and indifference though the hollowness in my soul resents her absence; I wear the mask I must.

I was surprised to see Sawyer just hanging out by the clothes line, looking like a big, fancy poodle, prancing around and beguiling her. His dark good looks unnerved me. I'm so bewitched by beauty that I always succumb to my fascination with it, my awe of it. I am unnerved by those who have no noticeable flaws. I could pray to look like Sawyer, even though he's my older brother. I could pray to own the same kind of space that his bewitching beauty encumbers, but I don't pray for that. I only pray to grow up and find that I can deal with it all. Maybe I'll be better at that than Sawyer, who knows?

"Hi, Mama."

She doesn't respond, of course. She smirks. I guess she thinks of a smirk as a greeting.

"You hear the news?" Sawyer asked.

"What news?" They both looked kind of consumed. They looked over stimulated by something that had distracted them from their usual boredom and lazy egocentric paragraphs about nothing at all that ever held any interest for me.

"Mrs. Clotey found a dead girl in John Peter's box-spring," Sawyer said. "How gross is that?"

I almost fell over myself. "Holy shit," I managed to get out. "You bullshitting me I'll break your ass, Sawyer Day."

"Don't let it upset you, Pleasant, it's no one you knew. And watch that language." Mama hooked up a shirt on the clothesline. It was white. That blue towel still held its own. I was going to find it later and use it for my bath.

"I know everyone in this town," I said.

"She wasn't from Hollow Creek. She was from Summerford." Mama looked at me like maybe I had known her and she'd have to deal with my

shock and my sorrow by hugging me.

"Did you know that girl from Summerford? She only had one arm," Sawyer asked me. "Poor girl couldn't defend herself. Maybe she could have whipped his ass if she were whole. John Peter doesn't weigh much more than you."

"What?" Shock waves went through my body.

"You all right, Pleasant?" Mama asked.

Well, I sure did know that girl from Summerford and I wasn't all right at all. I slid to the ground as if the weight of my shock had compelled the weakness in my knees. I could smell it, the earth. Grass must have been mowed earlier that day, I could smell that too. Everything felt clean and right, felt good. The dichotomy made me dizzy. There ain't nothing clean and right and good about dead girls, nothing pretty about it at all. I couldn't understand how anyone could get themselves done in when the grass had just been mowed and the sun was out. That's why people make up stories about harps, and heaven and all that shit, makes death look like the better place.

"Get up off the ground, Pleasant," Mama said.

"I knew her," I whispered. "I knew her well."

They both looked at me like I was the crazy bastard stuffed her inside a box-spring.

"Tough luck," Mama said and reached out to touch my arm. Her limp attempt at solace falling short of the hug I needed. She helped me to my feet, begrudgingly, I suspect.

"You sure she's dead?" I asked, like maybe they were messing with me, they were all messing with me, Angus too.

Mama laughed, not exactly a lilt, more like she'd got something caught in her throat. "Dead as a doornail, Pleasant."

"John Peter do it?" My expression was one of deep sadness, I was sure. But I often looked at Mama that way, with sadness. Sawyer too, so I cannot blame them for not being sensitive to my loss.

I heard Sawyer laugh. "Wasn't the tooth fairy, Pleasant."

I ran to my room and sat in the window. Poor John Peter didn't kill anyone. He wet himself that day Angus and I captured a frog and tore him up. We were just curious but John Peter was screaming and crying that we were going to hell. He said he named the goddamn thing 'Preston' and the fact that we'd killed something that had a name made us low life devils. Shit, I had to tell John Peter that I prayed in church every Sunday, prayed to be forgiven for that little frog's death and would God please take that little frog to the pearly gates and treat him like a king. I told John Peter I'd spend every day of my life guilt ridden over what I'd

done to that frog.

I don't think John Peter ever forgave me and I know he never forgave Angus. Now I ask you, how could he kill a girl if he couldn't even kill a frog? I figured I'd go to the Sherriff and tell him what I knew, sort of like a character witness. Millie Grady was the one armed girl that got herself killed. How could so many bad things happen to one poor girl in the span of fifteen years? Millie lost her arm when some old car her father drove smashed into a truck. They had to take off her arm to get her out of the car. I guess she should be glad she survived at all, her mama didn't. Her daddy didn't take to no other woman after that so she was raised without a mama. Her daddy wasn't as rich as mine but they lived on a rich man's property in a cottage, didn't pay any rent on it either 'cause her daddy was the grounds keeper. We lived in Summerford years ago but I don't remember it very well, I was just a baby when daddy bought us the house we're in. It's bigger and better but Mama says it reminds her of a goddamn school 'cause it's red brick and has a fence around it.

Millie's bad luck didn't stop there. She had bucked teeth and she was skinny as the cane old Mr. Wiley uses to get down the street. Old Mr. Wiley is our neighbor and he's mean as a Komodo dragon. I avoided Mr. Wiley whenever I could, which isn't easy 'cause he sits on the side of the road all day selling the jellies Mrs. Wiley spends all year making. Sometimes he throws rocks at me 'cause he says my presence on the road is a pleasure to behold, now does that make any sense?

I took pity on Millie 'cause none of the other kids would go near her. They thought she was diseased 'cause she only had one arm. They made fun of her, of course. Half of them were as ugly as water rats and the other half were goons, goons with no souls. The kind of kids that grow up and make no difference to the world except for the puke they left in your wake from their drunken binges, which happened one too many times. Those were the morons who teased poor Millie ruthlessly. She was good about it though. She'd shrug her shoulders and tell me they were just being dumb and didn't mean nothing by it. Poor Millie didn't know rot when she smelled it.

Daddy came and got me after dinner. Mama must have told him I knew that dead girl 'cause he was eyeing me all through Mama's pot roast like maybe I was going to get suicidal and hang myself from the ceiling light in my bedroom after the two helpings of dessert I took.

"Hello, Sweet Pea," he said as he stood there lingering in the open door. His trepidation was charming. That's what I loved about my daddy, he never assumed anything. He didn't take for granted that I'd want to speak with him at all, which I didn't.

"You can come in," I said. "But I don't want to talk about Millie Grady, you hear?"

"Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy." He pointed his finger at me and sat at the edge of the bed. He wasn't as good at playing Jeopardy as Nana but I humored him most times.

"Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*," I said. "How can I make a question out of that?"

"I don't know, maybe who created him?"

I made a face. "You don't get it."

"Does everything have to be a question, Pleasant?"

"Yes, if you're playing Jeopardy it does."

"Does every subject have to be literature?"

"It does if you want to have fun at it."

He got a crease over his nose, a sign of distress. "I'm sorry about your friend." He reached out and squeezed my leg. There was nothing limp about his touch. Matter of fact, it was so filled with emotion that it started stinging and was sure to leave a red mark on my skin.

"The rule was we wouldn't discuss it."

He latched onto my foot with his big hand and squeezed that too. I felt my toes go into a cramp.

"I don't care much for rules but I do care for a ride in my convertible when the night wind is warm."

I grinned. "It's awfully warm."

"Grab a light jacket," he said.



No one understood the relationship between me and my daddy, not even me, not fully anyway. I should have seen his weaknesses and only given him a section of myself but I loved him to my core, no matter who he was. There were no hidden places in my heart that would not welcome him or any sacred ground inside my being that he could not walk upon.

I watched him as the night wind lifted up his hair and he kept reaching up to push it off his forehead. Sawyer did not resemble him but neither did I. He was uniquely himself. If I live to be a hundred I'll never meet anyone that looks like him in the slightest way. He was handsome, yes, that he was, but he was uncharacteristically appealing, the way a bump on one's nose erases perfection and leaves the face vulnerably beautiful. It's all in the smile, I think. That's really where it all begins— attractiveness, seduction, charm and Daddy's smile was the first thing you noticed about him. His smile was a whole conversation just inviting you to

enter in. His straight brown hair was too long at the back of his neck and his sideburns stopped a bit beyond his ears and even if you didn't like that look in a man you'd like it on him. He was approachable but he was too complex to know really well, too gifted at exaggeration to believe fully.

That's what love is all about though, being able to spot the imperfections in someone and getting beyond it, seeing beyond that which other people may call dastardly and offensive. What I saw in my daddy was the port in a storm, should I ever need it. He was the life vest tossed me when I could not swim and was out there treading water. Daddy was all the words of comfort given when I was bruised and battered by the insensitivity of others.

We were going to Buck's of course. Buck's is where we always went. Daddy didn't like Mama telling him he had a two glass alcohol limit at home, so he always found an excuse to take his Vintage convertible out for a spin, to Buck's and back, seven miles one way and seven miles the other. It's a wonder that Mama never asked why it took him so long to cover fourteen miles. Guess Mama had her own secrets.

"So, you think he did it?" Daddy asked.

"John Peter? Hell, no," I said.

"Who else could have done it?"

"Thought we weren't going to talk about this?"

"I just want you to know that nothing is going to happen to you. I want you to feel safe."

"It's not a safe world, Daddy."

He looked at me with that lopsided grin of his, the one in which I could always interpret my own incorrigibility. He'd always grinned lopsided when he called me incorrigible, now he didn't have to say it anymore. I heard it in the grin.

"They might all be talking about it at Buck's."

"Talk without poetry is backwoods dumb. You think I got nothing better to do than put any stock in backwoods dumb?"

There was that grin again. I watched as he pulled into the parking lot, his confidence was bubbling over and it was all due to the convertible. It was a 1969 Chevy Camaro, the color of lime candy. It was pure vintage and Daddy treated it like it was the Shroud of Turin. When Daddy drove his 69' Camaro around town he was sixteen again, and he could conquer anything. I remember when he first bought it at the vintage auto show, it gave him the courage to take a second mortgage on the house and file his three years of back taxes.

Buck's was attached to an apartment house. It looked like a motel but

the people that lived there had leases and kitchens and even little backyards. It was called Lilac Gardens but I never saw a lilac there in my life.

Of course everybody was talking about the murder around the bar, making fun of John Peter, saying how they never thought he had it in him, like murdering someone was a hero's act and John Peter had never shown courage before. Now it seemed like they were going to give him the medal of honor for killing Millie.

We slid into a booth with ripped red leather seats and scratches on the table so deep we could have stood our dimes up in 'em. Kidd Rock was blaring off the radio singing "Redneck Paradise" and someone's voice screams out, "little bastard probably raped her first."

"Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines...." Daddy was looking right in my eyes.

"For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."

"Different sonnet," he said.

"Same author. Same wisdom."

"Well," he said, looking around, "we could use some poetry to soften the stench of the backwoods dumb chatter."

I agreed, of course. He took a book out of the bag he'd brought in the bar with him and slid it over to me. I could read the title upside down. The Time Travelers Wife. I was used to this. Daddy always gave me a book to keep me preoccupied while he slipped over to apartment Six to get whatever Karlene McFaddy was going to give him. Whatever it was, it was fast and satisfying, that I can tell you. Daddy always came back to the table with his cheeks flushed and I could smell the mouthwash he'd swished around his mouth so Mama wouldn't smell anyone's vagina on him.

"I'll just be a minute, baby face."

I sucked in my lips and raised my eyes and avoided the anger in my gut. If he could have done it in a minute I guess he would have.



"Like the book?" He'd been gone forty minutes so when he slid back into the booth I wasn't smiling.

"I already got a book. I'm reading A Confederacy of Dunces."

"Good book, but when you're finished, read the one I gave you. It's better."

"Not one book of literature is better than another. Nana says that. It's

always about what book you're reading in the moment. It's subjective. You can't compare *The Brother's Karamazov* to *Wuthering Heights* but they are both great books that I enjoyed reading."

"That so, smarty pants?"

Well, his book was good, I'd started it while he was visiting with Karlene McFaddy and getting himself laid, or whatever.

"I started it, while you were gone." I glared at him, emphasized the word 'gone' but it only made him grin wider.

"And?" he raised his eyebrows and leaned in, then he made his eyebrows move up and down, which made me laugh.

"Pretty when you're laughing," he said.

"And when I'm not?" I asked, giving him my worst mug of a scowl.

"You're downright scary."



When we got home Mama was watching television. She didn't even look up when we came in. It was like we were co-conspirators and we'd both been out together getting drunk on good times and country music. It was like we should have gotten a tap on the head and a slap on the ass for our wicked adolescent behavior. Of course all I did at Buck's was read a book and maybe Mama thought Daddy wouldn't cheat on her if he was with me, but I think something in the back of her mind told her that he got away with doing whatever he wanted no matter whom he was with. Maybe that's why she always looked at me like I was bad luck. She knew I was his and all of his secrets were safe with me.

Vera Jane Cook

PLEASANT DAY

Pleasant Day is Vera Jane Cook's eighth published novel. Her first southern fiction novel, *Dancing Backward in Paradise*, received a five star ForeWord Clarion review and won the Eric Hoffer Award for publishing excellence in 2006 and the Indie Excellence award for notable new fiction, also in 2006. Her second southern fiction novel, *The Story of Sassy Sweetwater* was a finalist for the 2012 book of the year awards. The novel also received a five star ForeWord Clarion review as well as being an honorable mention winner in the 2013 Eric Hoffer Award for ebook fiction. Also by Vera Jane Cook, *Where the Wildflowers Grow*, *Marybeth, Hollister & Jane*, *Lies a River Deep*, *Annabel Horton*, *Lost Witch of Salem* and *Pharaoh's Star*. The author lives in New York City.

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