

*The*

*Pink*

*House*

*Nancy Layton*

Crone House Publishing

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**No author writes in a vacuum.** Events that shape a writer's life must leave their marks upon her creative work. So it is that some may think they recognize certain people from my own past or present days. If such similarities exist, the reader may find themselves upon the pages in their own imagination. Am I Julie Summers? Is she me? She is every daughter who has ever traveled back to her roots to care for a dying parent. She is every young girl who longs for a different life than what she knows in her growing up years. She is every sister who struggles to make sense of her relationships with her siblings. She is every woman who is afraid to love a man for fear of losing herself.

As this story created itself upon these pages, many people participated in its gestation. Its birth was made possible by my patient and loyal husband, Rick Foster. Its fine-tuning and development into a real book came about through the hard work of my vigilant editor-daughter, Laura Slattery. Along the path I received encouragement from daughter-the-younger, Sara Stillely (who married in the middle of its writing!) and by a host of friends and family who cheered me on - Glen and Leslie Mitchell; Pat Morgan, my wonderful mother-in-law, Colleen Foster; my stalwart father, Bill Layton; my two brother-critics, David and Charles Layton; grandchildren, Matt, Jessie, Aimee, and Mitchell; and many friends around the lovely village of Idyllwild and at Idyllwild Arts Academy, who watched and waited as I brought this first novel to life. A huge "Thank you!" goes to M. Victoria Betancourt, who so graciously allowed me to use a photo of her home for the front cover. That lovely, old Victorian with all its pristine gingerbread trim was the visual stimulus that opens the book.

My last loving thought is for Emma Rose who burst forth into this world as I struggled to give birth to this book. Eight months later, she and her mommy joined me for lunch the day I learned this book finally had a publication commitment.

God does indeed work in mysterious ways!

**Thank you and God bless you all!**

**NL**



# 1

I walked past the pink house on the corner of Second Avenue and Hemlock Street as I had nearly every morning for the past three weeks. My Chocolate Lab, Brownie, trotted happily at my side, stopping frequently to read the scent messages left by others of her kind. She and I enjoyed this pleasant walk to start our days. Somehow, coming back to this tiny town in Iowa where my mother now lived was more than a simple act of love. It was a requirement I had to honor in order to move back into my real life with self-respect. I'd left my parents' home early and stayed away most of the years between then and now. This wasn't home to me, this small town where my mother lived, but it was the place I needed to be for a while.

The pink house intrigued me. Even though I varied the times that Brownie and I walked this route, I had not yet seen anyone about the place. Clearly, though, someone lived there. Crisp, white lace curtains and healthy plants in the windows, carefully tended roses along the white picket fence, and tall hollyhocks in flowerbeds around the yard told me the owner was someone meticulous. An animal's food bowl on the side porch adjacent to the gravel driveway showed that someone there cared for other living creatures. But who that person was I hadn't a clue.

The house, itself, kept drawing me to that corner. My steps slowed as I approached it so that I could explore its many nooks and crannies with my eyes. The clapboard siding was painted Pepto-Bismal pink, a color I normally detested. However, it worked on this old house. The copious gingerbread trim was freshly painted white. Though not large, the house had two stories and an attic with large windows that looked out on both streets.

## *Nancy Layton*

Those windows sat inside big gables that spoke to me of hot, dusty summer afternoons playing dress-up from old trunks of clothes put away after high school proms, weddings, and changing fashion.

Across the front and down the side that ran along Hemlock Street wrapped a wide porch complete with a round cupola where the porch turned the corner. White wicker chairs with pink, red, and white chintz cushions and glass-topped side tables sat in the deep shade of the front porch. In my mind I saw tall, sweating glasses of lemonade sitting on those tables and being sipped by ladies wearing large straw hats and white gloves. I could taste the gingersnaps that would be piled on small china plates for dainty nibbling and hear the gossip being shared about neighbors not present to defend their reputations and deportment.

In addition to the pet feeding dish on the side porch, a rocking chair sat empty, waiting for someone who needed to rest from the day's endeavors. The shady, east side of the porch was the perfect place to sit when the sun was blasting down on the west side in the late afternoons and early evenings. The comfort the porch offered seemed too good to resist. I longed to open the gate, walk along the narrow brick path that wound through lilacs and forsythia, climb the five steps up to the porch and take my ease in that old rocker. I hoped for an invitation to do so someday.

A few days before, I had seen a brief flash of a person looking out the window next to the side door. As quickly as I saw them, they moved away and I had only a glimpse of light colored hair, maybe gray, maybe blonde. When I returned to Mom's tiny house on Elm Street that morning I asked her who lived in the pink and white gingerbread house. She didn't know. Mom had only moved to Nathan Springs two years ago after Dad died suddenly from a massive stroke.

## *The Pink House*

Mom had convinced my younger brother, Ray, and his wife, Giselle, to take over the farm and pay a small monthly rent until the crops came in. Dad's life insurance money bought the small house with two tiny bedrooms, an old-fashioned kitchen, and a bathroom with antique plumbing where Mom now lived. Between the rent Ray paid and the dividends from Dad's various investments, she had enough to live without scrimping.

I asked Mom why she moved to Nathan Springs rather than the larger town of Cedar City, which was much closer to the farm. She said she wanted the slower pace that the smaller town offered.

She had never gone out much when she and Dad had the farm and things weren't much different for her after she moved here. For the first year or so, she went to church on Sunday and visited back and forth with one or two friends, also widows. Her best friend, Edith Stevens, managed to get under my skin both times she had come around. The sound of her gossipy talk was like fingernails on a blackboard to me. I caught enough of it just passing through the kitchen as she and Mom talked to know I needed to keep busy with other things when Edith came to visit.

Now, Mom didn't go out at all. The cancer that invaded her bones and brought me back to Iowa from Southern California now caused her so much pain that getting about had become very difficult. Mom moved in and out of sleep much of the time. Visits from her friends had begun to wane as Mom's pain medications frequently sent her reeling with delirium during her waking hours.

As Brownie and I walked this morning, I realized I was starting to feel hemmed in. Except for a couple trips to the local market for groceries, I hadn't wanted to leave Mom alone for any length of time and hadn't gone anywhere else except these short morning walks

## Nancy Layton

since I arrived. I decided to extend this walk a bit further, trusting that Mom would sleep most of the morning. I walked to the small downtown area for a change of pace.

Only three blocks long with most of the old stores empty and gathering cobwebs, downtown Nathan Springs still provided a tavern, a café, a tiny gas station with two pumps, the office of the Rural Electric Co-op, and a large barn-like building where Jake Riley and Sons repaired cars. Taking a chance on the café, I hooked Brownie's leash around a pipe near the front entry, pulled its wooden screen door open, and stepped inside. The door banged shut behind me with a solid thwack that mentally sent me right back to my grandma's house in Minnesota. In my mind I heard her ghostly voice holler, "*Don't slam the screen door, Julie,*" from the depths of her dark parlor.

I smelled coffee, bacon, and rancid grease from the grill in back. Standing outside before coming in, I had heard voices talking and laughing inside, but now silence greeted my arrival at the counter. I slid onto a chrome-legged stool with a candy-apple red, vinyl seat. The top rocked unevenly on its legs as I shifted my weight. The waitress laid a stained menu in front of me and asked me if I wanted water.

"Please," I replied, "with plenty of ice." I heard a snicker behind me and glanced around to find its source. A booth in the dim, front corner held four men ranging in age from mid-twenties to sixty-something. All wore the uniform of farmers - faded, dirty blue jeans or Osh-Kosh overalls, old t-shirts or plaid, short-sleeved button shirts, brown work boots encrusted with mud and straw, and ball-caps on their heads advertising various seed companies or co-op elevators. The oldest-looking man in the group nodded to me. He broke a small smile then turned back to his companions. The other three looked briefly at me, then down at their coffee cups. I

## *The Pink House*

recognized it as a reluctance to intrude more than rudeness on their part. I also saw a shadow of my dad's life-long resistance to allowing strangers into his life on their weather-worn faces.

I ordered ham and eggs, whole-wheat toast, a side of cottage cheese, and a cup of coffee. The waitress seemed worn out. She had pale red hair, badly in need of a dye-job, and had obviously applied her makeup without the aid of good lighting. I imagined her bathroom painted a bilious green with a flickering fluorescent light over the sink and small mirror. When she set my plate down in front of me she heaved a deep sigh as though serving my breakfast was altogether too much effort. I couldn't imagine being so worn down, especially this early in the morning. I smiled at her but she only looked toward the group in the corner and said, "You boys want more coffee?"

One of them answered, "Nah, Rose, we're fine over here. You go set down and take a load off yer poor ol' feet."

The only other customer was an old woman sitting alone at the booth on the opposite side of the room from where the four men sat. I looked at her once or twice while I ate, but before I finished she got up and left. Rose moved slowly to that table. She picked up the money left as payment and tip, slid it into her apron pocket, then set the plate piled with the silverware and coffee cup on her left forearm and wiped the table with a wet towel in her right hand. Clearly, she'd been doing this a long time.

The two older men of the corner group left. Just as I finished my toast the other two left, leaving me the sole occupant besides Rose and the unseen cook in the back kitchen who whistled some inane tune as he banged pots around. Rose heaved a weary sigh and said, "Mind

## Nancy Layton

if I set a spell while you finish? You want anything more before I set down?"

"No," I replied with a smile, "I'm fine, thanks." I took a bite of toast and sipped my coffee. "Your name is Rose?"

"Yeah. Rose Whittlesey." She paused and drank from a cup of coffee. She seemed to be debating whether I was worth the effort of further conversation. After a minute she added, "You're new here."

I nodded. "Visiting. Actually, I came back to help my mom."

"Oh, who's that?" Her question sounded somewhere between mild curiosity and complete indifference.

"Grace Summers," I answered.

"Huh, don't know her. She lived here long?"

"No, only a couple years. Dad died, she gave the farm to my brother, and bought a little house on Elm so she'd have someplace quiet to live."

"Which house is that?"

"Little green thing with a dilapidated, old fence running across the front. I keep thinking..."

"Oh, that must be the old Jones house. Stood empty almost five years when old Sam Jones died. Didn't have no family or kids to care about it, so it just sat there. Glad to know somebody's got it now. Kind of a cute little house, ain't it?"

"It has... charm, I guess. Very small, but big enough for Mom."

"You say you've come back to care for her?" She paused as if debating whether to ask more. Curiosity won out. "What's wrong, if ya don't mind me askin'?"

I hesitated. When I was growing up, one of the biggest faux pas I could commit was to share some tidbit of private family information with a girlfriend. Invariably, Mom would hear it round about through the

## *The Pink House*

farm community grapevine and I'd be called to task for blabbing stuff that was supposed to be kept private. My older sister, Joan's pregnancy at seventeen was such a subject. And Ray's defection to Canada to avoid being drafted for the Vietnam War was another. Like the whole area didn't already know about those things, but Mom really thought they were our family secrets until I let the cat out of the bag. I decided it wouldn't hurt now to share a bit.

"Bone cancer," I said, watching Rose's eyes for her reaction.

"Oh, gee...that's a tough one. I heard it can be real painful."

"That's an understatement."

"She got nurses coming out or just you?"

"A nurse comes twice a week."

"She on morphine? Had a friend taking that for pain, some years back."

"Yes."

"Huh. That can really wack a person out."

"It does. She sleeps a lot. It's better when she sleeps."

"I guess when she's awake it's pretty bad."

"Yeah...sometimes," I said. Searching for a way to change the subject, I asked, "Say, Rose, do you know who lives in that pink and white house on Second Avenue?"

"Pink? Oh, sure, that's Milly Jones. As a matter of fact that was her just left a few minutes ago. Why?"

"I walk my dog past that house almost every day. I've been wondering who lives there."

"Yeah, Miss Milly used to be married to Sam Jones who owned your mama's house." I smiled at the odd ironies of life in a small town. "They were quite the match back in the fifties. They came from way different families. Ever'body said it'd never work. Sam, he was

## *Nancy Layton*

pretty much a bum, even before he met Milly. She came from Chicago, some big rich family there. She had a cousin she came out here to visit one summer right after the war ended. She and Sam hooked up when they were just kids, I guess, and she was just swept off her feet by him. He was a real hunk in those days, played football and wrestled at the high school.”

“I would love to see that house and meet Milly. I never see her outside so I haven’t been able to even wave ‘hello’ as I walk by.”

Rose nodded as though she understood my dilemma. “She don’t go out much. Comes down here once a week or so for breakfast or lunch, that’s about it. I don’t think she even goes to church. Never learned to drive, you know. Has an old car, probably worth a mint today, sittin’ back there in that old garage, just rustin’ away. Nobody ever drives it. Her daddy gave it to her when she left old Sam, tried to convince her to take driving lessons, but Milly refused. She’s real stubborn. Quite a character. Really keeps to herself, mostly. You kind of have to meet her somehow. Problem is, she doesn’t keep a regular schedule, not like some o’ the others around here.” She tilted her head at the now empty corner booth where the men had been sitting. I imagined them showing up every morning like clockwork for their coffee and eggs – farmers with no wives or whose wives worked at jobs that took them out of the house early.

“Huh. Wonder what would happen if I just walked up and rang her doorbell?”

“Oh, she’d probably just ignore you, go hide in her bedroom or something.” Rose laughed, apparently amused at the idea of someone just barging in on Milly Jones.

“You think? It might be worth a try.”

## *The Pink House*

“Nah. Ya might blow any chance of her ever talkin’ to ya if ya do happen to meet her like on the street or in here or somethin’.”

“Maybe so. Well, I’ll just keep walking by and maybe one of these days she’ll be out tending her roses or something like that.”

“Yeah, maybe. That’d be better than being, ya know, too pushy.”

“You’re probably right. So, what do I owe you, Rose?” She gave me the check. I paid it, leaving a generous tip. I wanted to stay on Rose’s good side, for sure. In a small town like Nathan Springs, having someone at the center of the town’s information circle could be useful.

Around three o’clock that afternoon, Mom’s nurse came to check on her. Mom was having a good day, so the three of us took the opportunity to discuss the long-term picture. What none of us said, in so many words, was that “long-term” probably meant only a few months at the most, since Mom most likely wouldn’t survive more than that. At the rate her pain and weakness were increasing, I sincerely wished she would not linger on too long. Every time I looked into her eyes, I saw her silent wish to just be done with it and gone from this earth. Seeing that always gave me a sharp stab of sorrow, but I could not deny the validity of her wish.

We talked about pain control and bodily functions, a subject Mom found acutely embarrassing. We discussed the possibility of moving her to a hospice home in Cedar City where she’d have constant nursing care when she became completely bed-ridden. Mom had a fit at the notion. “I will not go into a hospital. Those, those homes you’re talking about, they’re even worse. I know. I’ve visited people in them, so just forget that idea. Forget it!”

“Okay, Mom, we’re just talking about options here.”

## *Nancy Layton*

“Well, that’s not one, not if I have anything to say about it.”

“Alright, Mrs. Summers,” the nurse said soothingly. “You certainly don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want to go. We’ll keep coming here to help you as long as necessary.”

“Besides, Mom, I already told you, I’m here as long as you need me.”

“I know you said that,” she replied, frowning deeply, “but I worry about you missing too much of your work. I know how much you depend on your work to pay your bills.”

“It’s really not a problem, Mom. I’m seeing to the little bit of work my clients need over the phone or using my laptop computer. I’m really fine here, so don’t worry about that. Okay?”

“I just don’t want to be put away somewhere and forgotten. That’s what happens, you know.”

“Not in this family, it doesn’t. If Dad hadn’t gone so fast, you know we’d have been there to help you with him, too. So, let’s talk about something else, now, shall we?”

The nurse left some supplies and a list of food supplements I could get to help Mom keep her nutrition up in spite of the tiny amount she was eating. The most important thing was to not let Mom get dehydrated and the nurse emphasized pushing fluids, even liquid meals, if necessary.

That evening, Ray and his wife, Giselle, came to visit. They live about ten miles on the other side of Cedar City, which puts them about a forty-minute drive from Nathan Springs. Ray’s face betrayed his shock at Mom’s condition. The last time he’d seen her, Mom was still walking fairly normally and eating most things she was offered. Now, just two weeks later, she needed a walker to keep from falling down. Ray said, “Mom, Julie says you’re not eating much.”

She answered, “I can only keep soft, bland food down. But I don’t want to talk about that now.”

## *The Pink House*

I told him her poor appetite and occasional nausea were partly the effect of the high doses of morphine she was getting for the pain. Ray nodded but his brow remained deeply furrowed. Mom ignored him and talked, instead, to Giselle. While Giselle and Mom sat on the sofa, chatting about farm things, Ray and I talked quietly in the kitchen about my concerns.

“You okay here, Jules?”

“Meaning what?”

“Is this getting you down? Is it too much for you? Should we be here more? How about Joan? She hasn’t been up since you got here, has she?”

“No, she hasn’t. We’ve talked, but, no, she and Larry haven’t been here yet.”

“Well...”

“I guess I should call her, huh?”

“One of us should. Mom doesn’t look good.”

“That’s an understatement. I’m starting to search for things I can do with her to get her up and out a bit more. I think she’s...maybe she’s too housebound here.”

“Good idea. How about a trip to the farm? She hasn’t been there since...jeez, it’s been about three months, I guess. I didn’t realize it had been that long. Time really flies when you’re busy.”

“I know you and Giselle have been busting butts getting things going the way you want out there. That’s the main reason I didn’t want you two to try being the primary caregivers when we found out what was wrong with Mom. And Joan, with her school to manage. I really was the best one to be here with her.”

“Yeah, but this has to be taking a toll on you, too.”

“A little, but, I’m okay, really. When I’m not, I’ll let you guys know.”

“Promise?”

“Sure, I promise.”

## *Nancy Layton*

Ray and I went back into the living room. Giselle was telling Mom they'd been getting so much produce from the garden they were giving it away. "We're thinking about putting up a little stand and selling some of the excess. I can't even can or freeze it all, it's coming so fast." Ray said it was all the good cow manure they put on the garden before they planted.

Mom said, "We always had good gardens when your father was alive. He did that, too, spread a thick layer of manure, then dug it in with the little tractor and tiller."

I said, "Oh, man, remember the clouds of mosquitoes that used to torment us when we went out to pick peas and beans? Good lord, it's a wonder they didn't carry us away."

Giselle laughed and said, "Well, that hasn't changed. I pour on the repellent and still have to suit up in long sleeves and long pants. It's not so bad if I pick in the morning, but if I wait till night, whew-eeee!"

This lively conversation about the farm was exactly what Mom needed and kept her awake and alert until about eight o'clock. When she began nodding off, Ray and Giselle stood up to go. I was so grateful for Ray and Giselle's presence that night, I could have cried. Mom was fading so fast that I was starting to be afraid my sister and brother would miss too much of her last days. At the same time, I was very glad I could take the time from my work to be here with her. There was no way we could have let her face this long, downhill run by herself.