



The Last Handful of Clover

A Novel

SAMPLE CHAPTER – UNCORRECTED DRAFT

by

Wess Mongo Jolley

Life is a bitch, his dark companion said—and then you die.

*Not so! cried Henry. Life is a glorious, shining and splendid adventure—
and then you die.*

—Edward Abbey, *The Fool's Progress*

Book 2, Chapter 37

June 14, 1:07 am

On the way back Richard hadn't spoken another word, and Billy was worried. The pair had jogged quickly down State Street, and then turned up South Temple, heading toward the Avenues. It was dark, and the streets were curiously deserted. Billy had walked two paces behind Richard, intuitively feeling that the man needed space to think. But he also hoped that Richard would turn around and say something to him, even if it was to rage at him for keeping him away from Keith for so long. But the walk was in silence, and Richard didn't even turn around to check if the other ghost was behind him. Billy had the feeling that the man really didn't care, one way or another. All he cared about was getting back to his husband and trying to avoid thinking about all the revelations Billy had been pouring into his brain for the last thirty-six hours.

It would be enough to break most men's spirits, Billy thought. It's no wonder he's needing some time to process it all.

But Billy also couldn't deny that Richard's mood, and the waves of emotions that were pouring off him, were frightening. It was very possible that the man was near breaking, and if he broke and refused to help, then there would be very little hope for any of them. It would be even worse if his sanity snapped—and that felt like a real possibility.

Billy had followed Richard into the house and up the stairs to the bedroom, where they found Keith Woo asleep. Even in the dark bedroom, Billy could see that Richard's husband was sleeping fitfully. His right hand extended onto the pillow next to him,

alternately opening and closing, as if he kept expecting a hand to be there to grasp, and was surprised each time that it wasn't.

Without a word, Richard sat next to his lover, making himself as comfortable as he could on the hard surface. He leaned back on the bed's headboard and gently put his hand into Keith's.

To Billy's amazement, Keith's hand seemed to grip Richard's, even though it was impossible that the sleeping man could feel anything at all. He heard Keith take in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he seemed to rest more easily. His breathing became slow and steady.

For the next several hours Richard sat in silence. Billy made himself comfortable on the bench at the foot of the bed, where he could turn his head to look at Richard and Keith from time to time. But mostly he just looked out the window at the branches of the tree, illuminated in the yellow glow of the streetlamp.

It wasn't until the red numbers on the bedside clock clicked over to 4:00 am, that Billy decided it was time to speak.

“Richard, you're scaring me. Are you okay?”

The man didn't respond, and in the gloom, it was impossible to tell if he had even heard Billy speak.

“Ever since we left Justin, you've been sinking into a deeper and darker place. I need to know if you're still here with me.”

“Are you asking if I’m still among the living?” Richard said, but his voice was so quiet that Billy could barely hear him.

“I guess it’s encouraging that you can make a joke,” Billy said.

Richard was quiet for a long time, and the sense of despair that Billy felt emanating from his place against the headboard was enough to make him look away.

“Tell me what you’re feeling, Richard. If you don’t tell me, I can’t help you.”

“What makes you think, in your wildest dreams, that you could help me?”

Richard said. His voice was flat, but at least he was speaking more forcefully.

“I could try. I’d *like* to try.”

Richard sighed. “Billy, I know you’re old and wise. But there are things you haven’t experienced, and things you’ll never know about. The things I’m thinking about aren’t things you could ever understand.”

“You can try me,” Billy said gently.

Richard was silent for so long that Billy was sure the man wasn’t going to speak again for the rest of the night—perhaps not speak to him again, ever. So, when he spoke again, Billy actually jumped a little.

“Billy, have you ever felt... fragile?” Richard asked, quietly.

The boy wasn’t sure how to answer that. And before he could come up with an appropriate response, Richard spoke again.

“I doubt you have. You died when you were fifteen. And I remember enough about being fifteen to remember that you feel immortal at that age. You feel like you will

live forever, and you don't know a damn thing about what it means to suffer loss. All of that comes later. So, you were fifteen and feeling immortal, and then you died. Which, of course, really *did* make you immortal.”

“Richard, I...” Billy started.

“So, what I'm saying is that no matter how old you really are, and how much you've watched and learned, you've still never really looked into the void, and feared that it was coming for you.”

“Is that what you're afraid of?” Billy asked. “That the void is coming for you?”

“No, just the opposite actually. It's what I *was* afraid of. Now I'm afraid it never will.”

“I don't understand.”

“Let me tell you what it feels like to grow old, Billy. Something you've never experienced, and never will.” Richard's voice was calm now, but there was a sadness and futility about it that tore at Billy's heart.

“I asked if you'd ever felt fragile. But I think a better question, is have you ever felt the entropy of the universe? I don't mean just intellectually, but *really* felt it—in your soul? That move from order to chaos that is inevitable in the universe.”

Billy didn't reply. He knew Richard wasn't really expecting him to.

“When you're young, it is easy to disbelieve, or simply ignore, that the nature of the universe is entropy. After all, so much argues for order and progress. You have the creativity of the human mind, which is capable of both brilliance and insight. You see the

creation of huge and enduring structures, both physical and philosophical, that mankind has achieved. When you're young, even the very air in your lungs makes you think you can fly and leaves you feeling that this rocket you're on will soar forever upwards. Gravity seems meaningless. Horizons are always expanding. Your mind and heart encompass more and more of the universe every day. It's all glorious, and it's all lovely."

Richard's head fell back, and it was as if he was speaking to the ceiling.

"But at some point, all of that changes. For me, that point was in my early fifties. It was a tipping point, but it crept up on me so slowly that I didn't see it coming. I suspect it's like that for everybody. One day you just notice that your upward trajectory in life is sputtering out. At first, everything seems fine. You marvel at stasis, and you learn to be content with a quiet life, full of order and stillness. But before you can even fully comprehend that you have stopped soaring, you begin to realize that your arc is slowly curving back toward the horizon.

"At first you fight it. You go to the gym and work out harder than ever before. You try to take up running again, even though it was something you gave up when you were in your thirties. And the universe—damn its sick humor—makes you think there was an after-burner still in there after all.

"Then that five mile 'wall' you used to hit when you ran smacks you in the face again, and you can't run through it the way you did in your twenties and thirties. Then the knees begin to give out, and you can't run at all anymore. A quick trip to the physical therapist, who gives you exercises with rubber bands, seems like just what you need. But

then a month goes by, and then two. Your running shoes are pushed to the back of the closet, and you never run again.

“Then you forget the name of your high school crush. You’ve thought about him every day for nearly forty years, and you go spelunking in your brain until you find his name, hiding in a dark black corner you didn’t even know you had. You have the name now, and you swear you won’t forget him again, but then you put the orange juice in the cabinet instead of the refrigerator, and you sit at the kitchen table, wondering if maybe this is it. Maybe this is the beginning of the ‘big fade.’ The struggle to climb stairs you used to bound up. The cane, and then the wheelchair. Staring at book pages that don’t mean anything while your mind wanders. And then the big fear: the retirement home, and the day your loved ones come to visit you and you no longer remember who they are.”

Richard was speaking rapidly now, but quietly, as if he was in some kind of rapture.

“You picture yourself with the napkin tucked into your shirt, and the jello cup and the little dish of goldfish crackers, and that man sitting across from you who looks so familiar, and seems so nice, and you can’t figure out why he seems to be crying. And it all flashes through your mind in an instant, and you realize the afterburners are gone, and the horizon seems closer, and there is nothing left but a long, long fall that you thought you could defy. And none of your raging, none of your pleading, none of your pretending otherwise is going to stop that ground from coming at you faster and faster, until eventually you hit it. And then you’re *under* it, and you have that last handful of clover,

clasped tightly to your chest. And it's *all* you have, because everything else has been taken from you, as the earth opens up and swallows you whole."

Billy realized, in listening to Richard, that he was right. He had never had to face aging, and the realization of what that meant. The weight of it felt heavy to Billy, and the pain he had seen in the eyes of the old and the dying for the past hundred and fifty years seemed so acute that it took away his voice.

"In the last year or two before I died," Richard continued, more calmly now, "I felt that fear of loss, that fear of entropy, all the time. It terrified me, and everything in my life felt so fragile... So very fragile, that it seemed a miracle that it held together at all. There were times in those last years when I felt like the balance of all the myriad spinning plates that made up my life could all tumble together at the slightest breeze. And if it did, I'd wink out of existence like a burned-out match. Literally, I could just be walking around this house, or watching TV, or doing almost anything, when suddenly I'd feel that sense of doom come over me. Or I could be standing in the doorway of my office feeling like I could literally be dead and gone at any second, and I wondered what Keith would do with my books."

For the first time in all this, Billy felt Richard's eyes on him.

"It was the strangest feeling, and it was terrifying. And yet, I also knew on an intellectual level that there really wasn't anything wrong with me physically that would indicate I was about to just *die* at any second. But I couldn't shake the feeling that the end was a hair's breadth away, that if I turned my head wrong, or blinked too quickly, or

listened too closely to the beating of my heart, I'd hear it stop and have just those few seconds to contemplate the entirety of my life, as I passed away from it forever.”

Billy cleared his throat, and when he spoke, he thought his voice sounded quiet—almost reverential.

“Perhaps some of that feeling comes from the state of the world right now... Maybe it is normal to feel like everything is fragile.”

Richard looked at him with what could almost pass for pity.

“Maybe. Certainly, it feels like this country, and the world itself, is on the verge of snuffing itself out like a match. But what I'm talking about isn't climate change or pandemics or social injustice. It isn't a fear of some dystopia. It is more existential than that. It is this feeling that the universe is, by its very nature, cruel and destructive. And that in the end, there is no meaning to any of it.”

Richard's head dropped, and Billy could see him looking at his lover, who still held his hand so gently in his sleep.

“I was watching television with Keith one day, not long ago. It was a show that talked about super-volcanos, and it talked about one that happened many thousands of years ago and wiped out huge swaths of the planet by blocking out the sun and disrupting the weather. Of course, they painted this picture of devastation and destruction that was terrifying, even to think about happening centuries ago. But then they went on to say that an even bigger super-volcano is sitting under Yellowstone right now, and when it blows,

it will be even more destructive. That it could bring on another ice age, and the end of human civilization.

“And it’s not just super-volcanoes. There are tidal waves preparing to wipe out our major cities. Earthquakes could swallow entire cities. An asteroid could crash into the sea and burn the atmosphere off in a matter of hours.”

“It sounds like what you’re describing isn’t just something unique to you. Or even to people who age. It is just about fear.”

“Possibly. But for years, maybe ever since my mother’s death, I felt like everything was very tenuous. And not just my life, but Keith’s life too. The life of everyone I cared about, and everything that mattered to me. I suffered from a sense of mortality and impending doom that kept me constantly on edge. I thought of it as living with an invisible gorilla who was constantly behind my shoulder, just out of sight. But one that I always knew could smash me to bits should my attention falter, or if I made a single misstep.”

Billy didn’t know what to say. He’d encountered no one with such a bleak world view, or one who embraced nihilism so thoroughly. He felt like he wanted to test the edges of the darkness that Richard found himself in.

“It’s been suggested,” Billy said, “that the knowledge of our own mortality is really the only thing that separates us from the animals.”

“I’d argue with you on that,” Richard said, with no genuine passion in his voice. “I’d argue that our ability to *deny* our own mortality is the only thing that truly separates

us from the animals. Yes, we say we understand that life is fragile, that we could be gone tomorrow. We say that we accept it. But do we really? Could we even hope to go on if we *truly* accepted that everything we build, everything we work for, everyone we love, everything we hold so tightly, could just be gone in the wink of an eye?”

“Most of us don’t see death in those stark terms, Richard. To most of us, there is something on the other side. We have to pass through this life, to get to whatever it is that is waiting for us on the other side.”

“I know you believe that, Billy. But I’ve always thought all of that was unmitigated bullshit. Mythology and theology envision death as a kind of rest—a peaceful time where you ‘get your wings’ and are free from toil and care. But as far as I can see, nothing in life supports that. And since my death, I have all the more reason to believe that nothing is waiting for us on the other side. Nothing but pain, heartache, and a never-ending feeling of crushing loss and loneliness.

“I can’t buy that, Richard. It’s defeatist and bleak, and if true, it would mean that there really is no meaning to life at all. That it’s all just pointless crashing of atoms into each other.”

“Physics and cosmology would tell you that’s exactly right.”

“But you’ve completely discounted the *spiritual* dimension. You’ve discounted *wonder!* You’ve extinguished any hope or faith or joy that springs from the very miracle that we’re alive on this planet! How can you see all of this as a meaningless slide into entropy and chaos, when there is art and music and literature? When there is philosophy

and spirituality!” He pointed at Richard and Keith’s hands, grasped on the pillow. “When there is love!”

“None of it will mean anything, once the sun goes nova,” Richard said, his face down. “Then we’ll just be atoms bumping together, as you so gracefully put it.”

“To believe that,” Billy said, his words now sounding angrier than he intended, “is to give in to the gorilla. The one that you said was standing behind you, waiting for you to let your guard down. To give up all faith and hope is to let the gorilla win.”

“But don’t you see, Billy? That’s my point,” Richard said, sadly. “The gorilla always wins.”

“He doesn’t have to!” Billy was on his feet now and pacing in the dark bedroom. “Once, when I was walking back to find Mattie after one of her resets, I saw something that was so beautiful it made me weep. It’s easy to describe, but the spiritual import of it hit me like nothing I had ever seen before. I was walking through a tract of forest in the mountains, very near to Round Valley. And I came across a large tree that had fallen many years before. It was nothing more than the rotted husk of the trunk, already breaking down into the soil. And from that trunk, a new sapling had sprouted. It was young and tender and possibly wouldn’t survive. But to me, in that moment, it was the triumph of life over death. Of order over entropy, as you put it. Your gorilla that you feared so deeply could do nothing about the *persistence* of life. That little sapling was truth. That was God.”

Richard actually laughed at him, and it made Billy angry.

“You’re talking about faith, Billy.”

“Yes, I am. Exactly.”

“Well, I’ve seen the Void, and it terrified me. I didn’t see any evidence of a city of God on the other side. All I saw was loss and regret and dissolution.”

“Maybe you didn’t look hard enough. Because when I was there, that isn’t what I saw.”

“You saw heaven?”

“I sensed it. I trusted it was there, beyond the darkness. That once I traveled that last river, I would find it. I had *faith*.”

“Look, Billy,” Richard sighed, sounding exasperated, “it seems to me that we have three possibilities for what is on the other side. First, that we lose everything and suffer that loss forever. That’s the reality that we’re living in, right now. And it absolutely sucks. The second possibility is the one I always thought was the most likely—that we lose everything, but we also lose ourselves, so that there is no ‘we’ left to suffer that loss. It sucks too, but maybe not so bad. And I’d give anything for it, at this point.”

“And what is the third possibility? I mean, as you see it?”

“The third possibility is the one you’re describing. And that is that we lose everything, but we really *don’t care*, because we’ve joined some heavenly version of AA, where we find eternal peace and joy in the arms of God. That sounds great, until you realize that you still have all that loss, so in my mind it is a pretty pathetic reward for the wounds the world inflicts on us. Even if you’re right, which I doubt, it’s still all loss and

loss and loss. The very concept of heaven just says ‘yeah, you’ve lost everything. But you don’t really care, because you have a fluffy little cloud to lay your head upon.’”

“I can’t believe how cynical you are, Richard Pratt,” Billy said, and wasn’t sure if he felt more pity or disgust in that moment.

“Maybe. But the only thing that feels real to me right now are moments like this, with my hand in Keith’s. And the only faith I have is the faith that Keith senses me here and is comforted by me. My trajectory long ago bent toward the ground, so none of this is a surprise. I have lost almost everything. The gorilla has won... Mostly. But in this moment, I still have this one thing. I still have Keith’s hand in mine.”

“Is it enough?” Billy asked.

Richard paused, but then said, “I guess it will have to be.” He sighed heavily and looked up at Billy. To the boy’s surprise, the man’s eyes were moist and glistened in the dim light of the room. “And I have one other thing. I have a friend. You’d be surprised how few of those I’ve had in my life.”

Billy could sense the tears in his own eyes now, as he looked at Richard. The sense of futility and sadness around the man was so heavy that it was a surprise he even had the energy to speak. Billy sat down at his side.

“Richard, how long can this go on? Have you been here every night since you returned?”

“Almost,” the man said, his voice sounding suddenly weary. “Except the nights I’ve been with you. It seems like the only times I’ve felt at peace since I died have been

in the moments when I'm holding Keith's hand. Touching him. Or even just being in the room with him."

"But Richard, he doesn't know you're here."

"Are you sure? Part of me believes that he does."

Sadly, knowing that what he was about to say would wound Richard, horribly, Billy asked, "Richard, do you really think that your constant presence here is helping Keith through his grief?"

To Billy's surprise, Richard's voice sounded thoughtful. As if the question wasn't a surprise to him. "I don't really know. I sense that sometimes, yes, I am a comfort to him. Like tonight. He seemed restless when we first got here, but now he seems calm. Almost peaceful."

"And how long will that be true, do you think? At what point will he need to let go of your hand, and move on? At what point will your presence here be what *stops* him from healing? Can he really become whole and move on when you refuse to walk away from him?"

"Fuck you, Billy." Richard said, his voice so deep and rough that Billy barely recognized it. "You're just saying that because you want me to fight in your god damned war. You don't care about Keith, and you don't care about me."

Billy took a deep breath. He knew he had to hide from Richard how much his words stung. If the conversation continued down this road, he would lose the man forever.

“Richard, that isn’t true.” He tried a new approach. “Think about this. It is clear that the Wanderer wants to hurt you. So, let me suggest this: What if Justin were to walk in here right now, in some other body? Maybe even Michelle, or Pil, or any number of well-meaning friends just coming over to visit. What on earth could you do to save Keith from him?” He waited for Richard to reply, but he didn’t. “You couldn’t stop him. You wouldn’t have any ability whatsoever to prevent Justin, in a physical body, from doing anything he wanted to do. You could leap on him and pummel at him, but in the end, you couldn’t do anything but watch as Justin killed the man you love.”

Richard didn’t speak, but Billy heard a squeak from the man’s throat.

“You would have to watch Keith die, just as I had to watch Frances die. And Mattie. You tell me that I don’t know death and loss the way you do, but you’re wrong. What I witnessed that day almost destroyed me. If Justin were to kill Keith in front of you, could you bear that?”

Richard stayed silent, and Billy could see now that his eyes were closed. His breath was shallow, and he had his free hand over his mouth, as if he was trying desperately to stop from crying out.

“Can you think of anything that would hurt you more, perhaps even break your mind or your spirit, than watching Keith die? Have you thought that by staying here, you are giving Drouillard exactly what he wants?”

“Billy, stop it,” Richard said. “Please. Just stop.”

“I wish I could. But Richard, you have to realize that you’ll never save Keith by sitting next to him on this bed. If anything, you’re guaranteeing that the Gorilla will take him.”

It was hard to hear what Richard said through the hand that was clasped over his mouth. He was clearly trying to control his tears.

“Maybe... Maybe he’d come back. Maybe he’d come back, like I did...”

Billy was appalled but kept his voice steady. “Would you sacrifice him for that slight chance? And if you truly believe that death is nothing but unending loss, would you rob Keith of everything, the way you’ve been robbed?”

Richard let go of Keith’s hand and buried his face in his palms. And Billy could hear him weeping now. He wanted to go to him. To wrap his arms around him. But instead he just waited for the tears to calm themselves. When he felt that the worse of it was past, he spoke again.

“Richard, you can’t save Keith by staying here. But if we find Justin, maybe we still have a chance. And if you are not here, you will rob The Wanderer of a very important lever that he has over you.”

It was a good ten minutes before Richard finally spoke. But when he did, Billy felt the claw that had been squeezing his heart let up just a bit. Richard’s voice sounded calm and stronger than he expected. There were depths of strength to this man that he didn’t realize. Maybe he could save them after all.

“God damn you, Billy. Okay. But there is one other way. I need you to know that I’ve been thinking about this. And that it is a step I’m going to take if I need to.” Richard finally released Keith’s hand and stood up. He moved quickly to where Billy was sitting, and his hand shot out and grasped his arm. “I need you to hear me, Billy. And I need you to believe me.”

“I’m listening,” Billy said, already knowing what Richard was about to say.

“Good. So here it is: If I feel that the only way to save Keith is to use the Fourth Gift and possess somebody that can physically protect him in his world. You damn well better believe that I’ll find a way. I’ll do it. I’ll do it in a fucking *heartbeat*. You won’t be able to stop me, and I won’t regret it. I won’t think for a moment about who I have to possess to do it, and I won’t worry about the consequences. For you, or for this city.”

Richard’s look was hard and desperate, and it frightened Billy. In that moment, he had no doubt that the man was telling him the truth. If he could master the first three gifts this quickly, how far behind was the fourth? Billy was sure that if Richard chose to do so, he could find a way to possess.

And then, God help us.

After a moment, Billy replied. “I hear you, Richard. And I believe you.”

The silence drew out for several minutes before Richard let go of his arm.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we can go.”

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded heaven,
And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolders of those orbs, and the pleasure and
knowledge of every thing in them, shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?*
And my spirit said *No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.*

—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*