

Of Water/ Contemporary Fiction/ 52,000 words

## Synopsis

Why am I here? What happens when we die? Why was I made? What is the meaning of my life? Why did they die? These are questions that mankind throughout the ages have struggled with. Follow the lives of two neighboring families as they ask, deal with, and answer these questions.

Marie, Vinnie, Kate, Addie, and Al are poor country siblings who deal with death at an early age when their father suddenly dies. Jane, Judy, and Larry are wealthy siblings who live across the river. Their family also deals with life and death frequently through the loss of newborns generation after generation.

Marie and Jane are bitter rivals their whole life, each claiming and seeking superiority over the other even though they are equals in many ways. Their combative nature is stirred up when Vinnie marries Jane.

Marie marries a rich doctor's son, John who is destined to take over the family practice. John and Vinnie strike up a quick friendship until Vinnie starts questioning his faith when his firstborn infant dies. John, on the other hand grows in faith in God, after his mother dies of what everyone assumes is cancer.

Throughout their lives these two families and their children deal with other life and death issues such as abortion, suicide, euthanasia, and mercy killing. Some embrace faith in God while others shun God or consider him too remote to care about us. The struggles increase when a mysterious illness starts taking the lives of their neighbors, friends, and family.

The struggles two generations of these two families face are no different than every man and women face many times in their life. Current legal, ethical, and moral issues are dealt with through the joys and pains of the Pohl and Weller families.

Chapter 1  
Two Families  
Year 1

“Do you think we’ll catch any fish today, Vinnie?” Marie asked her older brother Vincent. Everyone called him Vince except his siblings. Marie was seven years old. Vinnie was almost nine. Vinnie was a tall slender boy with dark wavy hair and dark eyes. Marie was a tall girl with wide hips, dark hair and brown eyes. Both wore simple clothes and no shoes.

Marie and Vinnie walked side by side eastward down their long stone driveway. They were approaching the road that ran in front of their parents’ farm. The newly paved one lane road ran north and south for most of its track. The road paralleled a small stream for about half a kilometer in each direction. In front of the farm the road and the stream were about half a kilometer apart. To the south the road eventually turned east toward the stream and crossed it. Going this direction the road eventually made its way into a small town. To the north the road dead ended into an east-west road that also crossed the stream. Taking the east-west road to the east would bring a person to another small town. To the north the stream gradually increased in size as other rivers flowed into it until after 200 kilometers it emptied into a large bay that sat in the middle of a large city.

When Vinnie and Marie reached the road in front of their parents’ farm, they turned south. As they walked down the road they approached an old one-lane bridge. On the left side of the bridge just before it crossed the stream was an abandoned stone quarry. The quarry and the stream were lined with tall trees. Sometime in the past the stream had eroded the bank, separating the quarry and the stream. During high water the stream flowed into the quarry bringing with it nutrition and fish. This made the quarry an ideal place to fish.

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Behind Vinnie walked his younger brother Alphons. Everyone called him Al. Al was six years old. Behind Marie walked her younger sister Adeline. Everyone called her Addie. Addie was about to turn five. Addie resembled her sister in appearance. Al looked nothing like his siblings. Like their older siblings the second row wore simple clothes and no shoes.

Vinnie, Marie, and Al had long branches resting on their shoulders that would soon be used as fishing poles. A string was attached to the end of the poles. About a meter from the end of the string a piece of cork bounced in cadence with their steps. The end of the string sported a homemade hook. Addie also carried a branch on her shoulder. However, there was no string on the end of her branch.

“It rained early this morning, Marie. That means the fish will be bitin’. We’ll catch plenty,” Vinnie remarked. Then he added, “As long as Addie stays out of the water this time.” The smell of new tar and worms on the road was combined with evaporating rain puddles. Every once in awhile Al picked up a worm and put it in a can.

“It wasn’t my fault. I just fell in.”

“You didn’t fall in,” Al retorted as he picked up a worm. “You jumped in.”

“Uh uh! You pushed me in!”

“I thought you said you fell in, Addie,” Marie turned around to look at Addie.

“I did fall in because Al pushed me in,” Addie pushed Al. Al stopped, and put his face next to Addie’s glaring eyes.

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

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Vinnie stopped and turned around. “Oh, just hush! If you two make all that noise at the quarry we won’t catch anything.”

“I won’t catch anything because you didn’t give me a string, Vinnie. Why didn’t you give me a string?”

“Because the last time I gave you a string you tangled it up in everyone else’s string. I don’t know why I bring you along. You always make it impossible to catch fish, Addie.”

“You didn’t bring her along, Vinnie. She just came along and there’s nothing wrong with that,” Marie responded.

“That’s not true. Mom makes us bring her,” Al spoke up.

Addie started to snifle. Vinnie took a deep breath. The three stood in a circle as Vinnie addressed them in a commanding voice, “All right, let’s get this straight. No cryin’, no arguin’, and no talkin’ whatsoever. No swimmin’, pushin’, or jumpin’ in the quarry. No nothin’ except fishin’! Okay?”

Marie and Al responded positively. Addie did not. “Well, Addie?”

“Well,” she exclaimed as she put her hands on her hips. The branch in her hand pointed at Vinnie’s chest, “How am I supposed to fish without a string?” Determination was on Addie’s round pale face.

Vinnie sighed as he pulled a string from his pocket. He held it out before him, but did not tie it to Addie’s pole. “Okay. I’ll give you a string if you promise to keep your pole and string away from everyone else’s.”

“I promise.”

“You promise to everything else?”

“I do.”

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“Good.” Vince tied the string to Addie’s pole. “Now let’s get goin’ before the sun gets too high.” The four of them proceeded to make their way down the road without another word. With the rain the night before and no clouds in the sky it was sure to be a hot sticky summer day.

Corn taller than two meters grew on either side of the road. Yet the corn on their left was higher and fuller than the corn growing on their right. Still, the corn on both sides of the road was higher than the siblings with the exception of Vinnie. A windless morning kept corn pollen from being sprinkled on the children and the road.

The corn on their left had been planted to within a meter of the road. That corn and land was owned by the Weller family. The Weller family’s farmhouse was about half a kilometer past the bridge.

The corn that was growing to the right was separated from the road by an old split rail fence. About half way between their farm and the stream the fence turned away from the road. The split rail fence marked the boundary of their farm. At the point where the fence ended, tall lush trees began to line either side of the road.

Just before they reached the bridge the children turned left off the road onto the quarry’s dirt and stone entrance. There was an old wooden gate stretching across the entrance, but that didn’t stop them. They easily navigated around and through the gate in spite of the sign that stated in bold red letters, “Closed! Keep Out.”

A small, dilapidated wooden building sat at the intersection of the dirt entrance and the road. An old sign hanging on the building’s lone door simply stated “Office”. On top of the office was a sign that advertised “Weller Stone Quarry”. Small trees, vines, and weeds were doing all they could to strangle the small office. The children passed right by it and walked up to

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the edge of the quarry's blue water. Most of the quarry was surrounded by large willows and maples.

Vinnie pointed to the right toward the river bank, "I'll fish on that fallen tree by the opening to the river. Al, you can fish next to me if you wish."

"Sure, but I'm goin' to sit on the quarry's edge."

"'Afraid of fallin' in again, Vinnie? You might drown this time," Marie and Addie laughed.

Vinnie sighed. He pointed to his left as he ordered, "Marie and Addie, you fish over there somewhere."

"Why over there?"

"Because I expect that within five minutes you two will begin gabbin' and chase all the fish away from you toward me."

"Will not. We promised not to talk," replied Addie.

Marie leaned over and whispered to Addie, "Will to. What else is fishin' good for?" Then Marie stated in a louder voice, "Come on, Addie. Let's leave the pros alone. They'll only find somethin' to complain about if we stay by them anyway."

"Bye, 'plainers," Addie retorted as she grabbed her sister's hand. The two girls walked away from the boys. They found a large willow tree to sit under. Some of the willow branches touched the smooth surface of the water.

During the next hour Vinnie caught three fish. Al fell asleep after catching one small fish. The whole time Marie and Addie talked. The girls didn't catch any fish. They could have if they had been watching their corks. Both of their corks bobbed after a few minutes of being in the water, but neither girl noticed. The fish took their bait and left their hooks empty without the

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girls missing a beat in their conversation. After that, their corks remained motionless on top of the smooth water.

“Marie, what’s school like?” asked Addie. She began creating small waves with her toes. The only other items to make a wave in the quarry were an occasional falling leaf or Vince catching a fish.

“It’s all right. You get to meet lots of kids and learn things,” Marie took her shoes off and dipped her feet into the water.

“Kids? What kids?”

“Kids that live around here,” Marie said as she moved her arms in half circles.

“Like the Wellers? I don’t like that Jane Weller. She’s mean and bossy. All the Wellers are mean.”

“Yes, they are, but they’re not the only kids that go to school. There are plenty of great kids that you’ll meet when you go to kindergarten this fall.”

“Like who?”

“Like the Liniments kids. They live up the stream on the other side of town,” Marie pointed down the road.

“They’re nice?”

“Yes, they’re nice. There is a girl your age and a boy my age. We ran into them during the church social. Don’t you remember?”

“No.”

“You were probably too busy eatin’ your ice cream to notice them. Well, the next time we see them I’ll point her out to you. She’s nice; you’ll see.”

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“What are you doin’ with our river and quarry, Pohl?” asked a voice from behind the girls. The challenge came from Jane Weller, a girl the same age as Marie Pohl. Jane was with her older sister, Joyce and, younger brother, Larry.

The Weller siblings were handsome and well dressed. They wore bright colored swimming clothes, new sandals, and straw hats. The girls had long blond hair with a hint of red. Larry’s hair was the same except it was cut short and neat with the front parted to the left. Their faces were round and their eyes were hazel. The three received their looks from their mother and a lofty temperament from their father.

“Fishin’. What’s it look like, Well-head?” Marie yelled in reply without turning her head. “And this ain’t your quarry and it ain’t your river.” Marie paused for a minute and then corrected. “And it ain’t a river. It’s a stream, Well-head.”

“Oh yeah? Then why is our name on top of the office?”

“That’s just what they call it because the county bought the land from your great grandparents.” Marie continued to slowly move her feet in the water. Addie took her feet out and tensed up.

“Well, we’re going swimmin’ in our quarry and you can’t fish in it any more!” Jane ran for the quarry and jumped in. She was followed by her sister and brother.

When the heads of the three Weller siblings’ reappeared above the surface of the water, Vinnie yelled from the other side of the quarry, “Marie and Addie, you promised that you wouldn’t go swimmin’.”

“It ain’t us,” Addie responded. “It’s the Wellers.”

“Yeah, it’s us, and this is our quarry and river and you ain’t allowed fishin’, swimmin’, or doin’ anything else in it. Now git before we tell our parents you were here,” Joyce yelled.

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“Yeah? This ain’t yours, Weller,” Marie retorted.

Crack! Al jumped and fell into the quarry. When he resurfaced, he yelled for help.

Vinnie grabbed a limb from the fallen tree next to him and stretched it out to Al. Everyone else in and around the quarry looked up as the rumble of thunder following the lightning echoed and faded away. Tall cumulus clouds that produced the lightning were quickly rising in the west.

The clouds were scarcely seen by the children because of the intense humidity hanging in the air. Yet the children could see that the horizon was dark and their skin tingled. All knew that this meant only one thing. A fierce late summer storm was blowing in.

“Go figure! The Wellers show up just in time to ruin everyone’s day,” Marie yelled to no one in particular. “You’re a curse, Well-head. I hope lightning strikes the quarry while you’re in it, Jane Weller.”

Al climbed out of the quarry with Vinnie’s help. Then the Pohl siblings started making their way to their parents’ farm. Behind them the Wellers were climbing out of the quarry. When the Pohls reached the road, Addie spoke up, “Why are Wellers so mean?”

Vinnie put his hand on Addie’s shoulder as he responded with a smile on his face, “It’s because they are always born when a volcano erupts.”

“What’s a ‘cano and what’s it got to do with the Wellers being mean?”

“It’s volcano,” Vinnie emphasized the ‘vol’. He continued, “Down south there’s a bunch of tall mountains. Every once in a while the rock far beneath one of the mountains gets so hot that it blows the top of the mountain off. That’s a volcano,” Vinnie stated. He saw a puzzled look on his sister’s face so he added, “It’s like when Mom turns the stove on to heat up the coffee pot. After a while the water in the pot gets hot and steam comes out the top.”

Addie’s eyes lit up. “Wow! Can we go an’ see a ‘cano sometime, Vinnie?”

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“I doubt it. They’re far away. It would take a lot of money to get there.”

“Oh,” Addie’s shoulders dropped.

From an early age the Pohls were well aware of their social status. They were one of the poorer Verlassens families. The younger Pohls, including the four now briskly walking down the road, carried shame because of their lack of wealth. Most Verlassens families believed that wealth was a sign of the blessing of God due to righteous living. Reality, however, was something else.

The Pohl ancestors were one of the first Verlassens families that the priests led into the black swamp because they were the bravest, the strongest, and the smartest. Like the other first families the Pohls bought and settled in land that was higher than the rest because it wasn’t wet as long and as often as the lower land. The lower land was usually near the streams. When the swamp was drained the higher land proved to be less fertile and not as profitable as the lower land. Thus, the first Verlassens families were always poorer than the later arriving ones.

The Wellers were late comers to the black swamp. They bought the fertile land along the stream that separated them from the Pohls. So with each harvest the Weller family grew richer than the Pohl family. They claimed they were wealthier because they were righteous and thus blessed of God. The priests backed this statement up with speeches from the pulpit, not because they believed it was true. Rather, the priests claimed this to patronize the richer families to ensure their constant tithing. Whether rich or poor everyone accepted the priests’ word as if it was from God Himself.

Another reason that the stream dwelling families were always wealthier than the first arrivals was that the lower land was closer to the bed rock. Thus, many quarries and mines were dug along the streams. Since, the families that lived along the streams grew rich because of the

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fertile land, they also had much influence among the politicians and the priests. They used this influence to convince the counties to buy the land along the streams at an inflated value and for a percentage of the profits. This in turn made the Verlassens who lived near the streams even richer. Many of the first comers eventually learned of the land conspiracy and began to resent the richer stream dwelling Verlassens. They also began doubting the words of the priests.

“Anyway,” Vinnie pointed to the ground as he continued, “Deep down below the ground is where the devil lives. When volcanoes explode, the hot rock and ash that makes up the devil’s home are thrown into the air and lands on the snow in the mountains. The hot rock and ash melts the snow and the water and ash goes into the river. That ash is full of evil since it was in the devil’s house. As the river rises the ash flows down the river. You can’t see the ash in the river, but some say they can taste it.”

“Like Grandpa?” Addie asked.

“Yeah. And if a mommy drinks the evil ash water just before her baby is born, the baby will have some of the devil’s ash in them. They are evil babies and turn into mean and bossy people. People say that the Wellers are always born before a volcano erupts. The Wellers have the devil’s ash in them. That is why they are so mean and evil. Some are even born with deformities and even die at birth.” Vinnie gave a wicked smile as he said “evil babies.”

Marie interrupted, “That’s a bunch of hog wash, Vinnie, and you know it.”

“Grandpa says it’s true,” Alphons spoke up.

“Grandpa also said you were going to be a great basketball player. I don’t see that happenin’.” Alphons, unlike his older siblings was a short stout boy. He had a round face and the blondest hair that anyone had ever seen. His eyes were deep blue.

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As the four children approached the homestead, the wind began to lift cut grass and leaves high into the air. “An updraft. We better hurry it up,” Vinnie stated. More thunder was heard in the distance. It continued to grow darker as he continued, “Soon it’s going to pour.”

“What’s going on at the house?” Marie asked as she and her siblings walked at a brisk pace. In the driveway sat several vehicles including Doc Liniments’ expensive automobile.

“Don’t know, Sis.”

The four young children started to run quicker when large cold rain drops began to pelt them. They rushed up the back porch steps and were greeted by their older sister, Catherine. Everyone called her Kate. She was a tall teenager with long dark hair. Thin wire rimmed glasses hid her brown eyes.

Hard rain and hail started to beat loudly on the roof of the porch. The wind blew some of the rain and hail onto the edges of the porch’s wooden floor forcing the children to stand against the house.

“Let us in, Kate. We’ll get wet,” Marie yelled after she jumped at a loud clap. Marie was afraid of lightning. Addie began to cry, and Marie pulled her close.

“You’re already wet. You can’t go in. The grown-ups said so,” Kate had a melancholy and stressed look on her face. She tried every once in awhile to smile in order to fool her younger siblings. Her ploy did not work. The four youngest Pohls knew something was wrong.

“What’s up? Why all the cars in the driveway?” Vinnie asked. His back was against the house. He was staring at the cars parked in the back and side lawns. The rain was coming down so hard that the ground didn’t have time to soak up all the water. Puddles began forming in the yard and driveway. A small stream began running down the wheel paths in the driveway toward the road. Kate did not answer.

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After a few minutes the wind began to let up, but the downpour continued. Moving his back off the house, Vinnie exclaimed, "This is ridiculous. I'm going in." He started towards the back door, but he was stopped by his grandfather, who was coming out. Grandpa Pohl was a large powerful man even in his advanced age. His face was weathered by years of working in the sun. His head wore a crown of shiny skin. His powerful stature made everyone respect him especially his grandchildren. Vinnie moved out of the towering man's way.

"How's Pa?" Kate asked.

"What's wrong with Pa?"

Grandpa Pohl stopped at the end of the porch and looked toward the road. "Pa was working in the field with me and your Uncle Mel when he grabbed his chest and collapsed. We took him to his room and called Doc Liniments. The doc's lookin' at him now."

As Grandpa Pohl finished speaking, a fancy car drove into the driveway. The sliding front spoke wheels caused orange water to splash onto Doc Liniments' car. Father Hemmingway stepped out of the new car. Father Hemmingway was a fat young man. He opened an umbrella and began running up the short back yard sidewalk. The umbrella kept the priest's head and torso dry; but the rain that was hitting the orange puddles splashed dirty water onto his long black vestment. The dirty water turned the lower half of his vestments dark orange. The air carried the smell of the orange earth.

"Figures they'd send a young priest," Grandpa Pohl muttered.

"How's he doing?" asked Father Hemmingway as he and Grandpa Pohl entered the house.

"Not good. Doc says he doesn't have long..." their voices were drowned out by a clap of thunder. Marie, Addie, and Kate clutched each other. Addie and Marie cried. Vinnie stood with

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his back against the house. His face was white as ash. Al ran out into the rain toward the big red barn. His tears helped the rain form puddles. The fish that he and Vinnie had caught were flopping on the edge of the wet porch along with their scattered poles.