

**From *The Inhabitants: A Novel*
By Beth Castrodale**

With its gabled and turreted roof, bay windows, and patterned shingles, Farleigh House appears from the outside to be quite the ordinary Victorian. Certain features of its interior, however, push back against the typical tastes and conventions of that time, just as the home's architect and original owner, Nathaniel Farleigh (1809-1881), was known to have done with his other designs and constructions. Some have found these features disquieting.

--From *Vermont Homes of Note*, 1971

Chapter 1

Farleigh House. The name had struck Nilda as self-important, and ironic given that no Farleigh had lived in the place for nearly a century.

Now, because of what felt like some cosmic mistake, the house was hers.

On her knees in its back yard, she was pulling weeds in a name-only flowerbed, trying not to think of the much more important tasks she didn't have the energy, or the money, to tackle: patching the failing roof, upgrading the dodgy, underpowered electrical system, remortaring chimneys that threatened to send bricks tumbling. That all these things were now Nilda's responsibility might never cease to bewilder her.

Sidney was closing in from the left, holding out her maybe-kitten/maybe-bear plushie.

"Fuzzy's tummy hurts."

"Awww, I'm sorry. Does she need a kiss?"

Sidney shook her head, still pouting.

“What about a cookie?” For Fuzzy, invisible cookies usually did the trick.

Another head shake. “She doesn’t like it here. She wants to go home.”

Since they’d moved here two weeks earlier, Sidney had said she wanted to go home at least five times, and now she was bringing Fuzzy in on the case. There seemed no way of getting across that they would never return to their beloved but cramped and bank-account-busting apartment in Boston, which within hours of their departure was occupied by the next tenant.

“*This* is home now, sweet pea. Remember?”

“No, it’s not.”

Nilda tried another argument for this place, knowing it was a reach. “Angus likes it here.” The last time she saw him he was on the couch, sleeping.

“He likes everywhere.”

She was right.

“Come here,” Nilda said, out of ideas.

She drew Sidney close and rocked her, rocking being the one thing that almost always soothed her. Going through the usual motions, humming the same wordless tune into her daughter’s hair, Nilda realized she was only encouraging Sidney’s clinginess, which had picked up after the death of Nilda’s mother--Sidney’s only remaining grandparent--and worsened since the move here. Once a remarkably independent child, she seemed to have slipped back in time, as if she were six years old going on three.

I’ll set more limits, soon, Nilda told herself once again, knowing she’d break this promise as soon as Sidney needed her to.

A sound stopped her humming: a chattering--no clucking. Looking to the source she saw a chicken emerge from a break in the fence that separated their yard from the neighbor's--the only other neighbor in sight.

Nilda knew that Nathaniel Farleigh had built the place next door for his eldest son, but like Farleigh House, it hadn't remained in the family. The most recent occupant, apparently, had been some lone, elderly doctor who'd lived in the home for years, until his death a few months before. Supposedly, his former caretaker was still checking in on the place, including the chicken coop at the edge of the property. But the trespassing bird reminded Nilda that she hadn't seen him for days.

She, and now Sidney, watched the creature strut along the fence line. Looking both puzzled and dauntless, it jerked occasional glances their way, prompting giggles from Sidney.

"Hi, chickie!" she said at first. Then, "Come *here*, chickie!"

No, Nilda thought, *go home, chickie*.

Usually a hardcore animal lover, she couldn't deal with one more needy thing at this time in her life. That included the rotting fence, which evidently was her responsibility. For now, she felt capable of nothing more than finding some object to block the breach--after she got the chicken back through it.

"*Here*, chickie!"

The bird shifted course and started strutting in their direction. Nilda waited, knowing if she went for it too quickly, she'd spook it out of reach.

Down the fence line, a rustling and crackling sounded from the hedges along the neighbor-facing side of the house. As Nilda tightened her hold on Sidney, the rustling stopped.

"All right if I come through?"

A male voice, friendly-sounding.

“Uh, okay,” Nilda called.

Seconds later a tall, lanky man emerged from the greenery: not the caretaker, at least not the one she’d seen before. This guy was younger-looking, and something about him--maybe the black T-shirt and vintage Converse, or his mop of dark curls--telegraphed *musician*. Surely, a misperception born of masochism.

He crept forward, holding out some dowsing-rod-like wire contraption: a repurposed coat hanger, Nilda realized. As if noting her confusion, he paused and held her gaze, then chicken-flapped his arms, grabbed one wrist.

I’m here to catch that bird, was the message Nilda took.

In Sidney, his movements set off another round of giggles. He put a finger to his lips, quieting her.

As he closed in on the chicken, the creature picked up its pace and clucking. Then it stopped, started pecking the grass. Behind it, step by cautious step, the man crept closer and extended the hanger, the end of which was bent into a small hook.

With a lunge and swoop, he hooked the chicken by one ankle and grabbed it by the other, letting the hanger drop onto the grass. After taming the flapping, squawking chaos into something manageable, he held the bird close to his chest, looking pretty pleased with himself.

“Nice work,” Nilda said. She rose to her feet, keeping hold of Sidney’s hand. Up close, she saw that there was a chemical symbol on the front of his shirt. She had no idea what it meant, if anything.

“I’m sorry it was necessary,” he said. “I gotta fix that door to the coop. And that gap in the fence.”

Nilda decided to keep her mouth shut about the fence being her responsibility. If he was up for fixing it, she'd be happy to let him.

“Well, thanks for coming to get him--*her*?”

“Her. Fortunately, there's only hens in the coop. No roosters to wake us at dawn.”

“Are you the new caretaker?”

“In a manner of speaking.” He shifted the chicken to free a hand, which he extended to Nilda. “I'm Graham. Graham Emmerly, your new neighbor.”

Emmerly. If she was remembering correctly, that had been the doctor's last name.

She gave him an awkward, left-hand shake, not letting go of Sidney. “I'm Nilda Ricci. And this is my daughter.”

She knelt and murmured to Sidney, “You wanna tell our neighbor your name?”

Sidney turned away from him, buried her head in Nilda's shoulder.

Sorry, Nilda mouthed to him.

It's okay, he mouthed back. Then he knelt to their level.

“Hey,” he said to Sidney. “This chicken needs a name. Would you like to give her one?”

Sidney gave him her grouchiest face. “I already said it. She's *Chickie*. And I'm *Sidney*.”

“Chickie it is. And pleased to meet you, Sidney.”

As Sidney melted back into Nilda, he headed for the gap in the fence and got the chicken through it.