

Way  
Down  
Deep

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FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX  
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Summary: In the West Virginia town of Way Down Deep in the 1950s, a  
foundling called Ruby June is happily living with Miss Arbutus at the local  
boardinghouse when suddenly, after the arrival of a family of outsiders, the  
mystery of Ruby’s past begins to unravel.

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**T**O UNDERSTAND THE NAME WAY DOWN DEEP, ONE MUST go back to the eighteenth century and the days of adventurers and pioneers. For it was then that an Englishman by the name of Archibald Ward, while exploring the wild Appalachians, stumbled upon a deep hollow cradled between the hills in a place that later became known as West Virginia.

“This is perfect,” Archibald said to himself. “I shall bring my loved ones here and start a settlement.”

When he returned to civilization back east for the purpose of retrieving his family, people questioned Archibald about his findings, with the idea of perhaps following him to this wilderness.

“What kind of place is it?” they asked him.

“The timber is pale, the sod black, and a stream runs through it,” Archibald told them. “And it is naturally sheltered like a nest way down deep in a narrow valley.”

People did follow Archibald Ward and started a town in the way-down-deep hollow between the hills. The

name caught on, but over the years was often shortened to Way Down. The stream became Way Down Deep Creek, but that being too much of a mouthful, was abridged to Deep Creek. Strictly speaking, however, the stream was not deep, nor was it a creek. It was a puny river.

In the 1840s the fourth Archibald Ward built a boardinghouse in Way Down, which he called The Roost. It remained in the same family one hundred years later, when Miss Arbutus Ward took possession of it at the death of her father. She was an only child and the last Ward left in town. Miss Arbutus had been helping out at The Roost since she was barely big enough to peep over the rim of the giant oak eating table. She knew no other life.

Miss Arbutus was—sad to say—plain and dull. Everybody said so. And there was no telling how old she was—somewhere over thirty. The townsfolk called her an old maid, but they would never use that distasteful term in her presence. She had been outside of Way Down only a few times in her girlhood, and never in her adult life. She preferred The Roost to any other place on earth, and felt most comfortable when she was there.

For a meager amount of money, a weary traveler could eat a wholesome supper at The Roost, sleep between clean sheets, and wake up to a hearty breakfast. The mid-day meal, which was locally called dinner, was not offered to guests.

Many boarders were total strangers who appeared out of nowhere and went back to nowhere after a day or two, and were never seen again. But some returning guests

showed up periodically. The most common were traveling salesmen who came hawking everything from encyclopedias to vacuum cleaners to insurance. The Bible peddler was also a regular. He was a circuit-riding evangelist who, when he got wound up good, preached a right decent sermon to the folks living far back in the hollers. Another regular was Judge Elbert Deel, who was responsible for holding court in three counties.

As for the permanent residents of The Roost, there was an elegant lady who lived on the second floor and insisted on being called by her late husband's whole name.

"Mrs. Thornton Elkins," she would say in her thin, melodious voice. "That's who I am and always will be."

Mr. and Mrs. Thornton Elkins had been married for less than a year when Mr. Elkins was killed in a sawmill accident where he worked near Way Down. Mrs. Thornton Elkins came to The Roost to recuperate for a few weeks, then a few months, then a few years. When she ran out of money, she stayed on. The Wards knew that she had nowhere else to go. So what was a body to do? You certainly could not turn her out in the street, now could you?

Townpeople who knew Mrs. Thornton Elkins's situation sometimes dropped off bolts of dress material for her at The Roost, which she accepted without comment. She borrowed Miss Arbutus's sewing machine to make simple but stylish dresses for herself. Others donated various items known to be necessary to a refined lady of the day, and she got by.

There were less generous souls who were of the opinion that perhaps Mrs. Thornton Elkins should earn her keep by assisting Miss Arbutus in the kitchen, or in the laundry room, or in the garden. But they were not bold enough to broach the subject to that cultured lady, and such an idea would never enter Mrs. Thornton Elkins's head on its own, nor Miss Arbutus's either, for that matter.

There were three other tenants who made The Roost their home. One was Miss Worly, the town librarian. She also lived on the second floor, next to Mrs. Thornton Elkins. Miss Worly referred to her room as her "spacious pastel boudoir."

Because Miss Worly delighted in peppering her sentences with fancy words like *whereby*, *heretofore*, *notwithstanding*, *inasmuch*, *moreover*, and even *albeit* and *i.e.* on occasion, the kids in town called her Miss Wordy, but she didn't mind.

Two middle-aged bachelors occupied the third floor. They were Mr. Gentry, the high school band director, and Mr. Crawford, a somewhat gloomy man of independent means, who had been working for years on a book called *A Colorful History of Way Down Deep, West Virginia*. Nobody had ever seen a page of it, but when the townspeople asked him how the book was progressing, he always replied, "Splendidly! Splendidly!"

The other permanent guests at The Roost knew the truth—that Mr. Crawford had the dreadful habit of wasting perfectly good daylight, sleeping for hours and hours, while his clunky black typewriter collected dust.

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