

A person with long, flowing white hair is riding a motorcycle on a dirt road. The person is wearing a blue jacket and dark pants. They are holding a handgun in their right hand. The motorcycle has a blue seat with a magpie illustration and a red license plate. The background is a bright, hazy yellow sky. The overall style is painterly and dramatic.

SILENT IS THE MAGPIE

A NOVEL

Vanita Oelschlager

Silent Is The Magpie

Newburn Drive

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Foreword

Silent Is The Magpie is about a woman who looks for and finds her identity, power and voice at an age when others might view her as completely defined (mother, grandmother, widow, usurper to her late husband's business empire).

Jamie Barlow refuses to let the death of her husband consign her to a life of meaningless lunches, countless hair appointments and anxious peeking from curtains waiting for infrequent visits from too-busy children and grandchildren.

Instead, she hops on her Harley and bolts suburban Pittsburgh for their small cabin deep in the Ligonier Hills to spend a year connecting – or reconnecting – with the life and creative forces within. In doing so, she learns more about herself, and others, than she could have ever imagined.

Her path, however, is not an easy one. In places it is blocked by others, some with murderous intent. In other places, however, the difficulty of discovery is rewarded physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Silent Is The Magpie might be described – incorrectly – as a “self-help book for senior citizens.” But those familiar with American Indian cultures will see it first and foremost as something more profound, a vision quest. This quest is aided, surprisingly, by a young Cherokee man who has fled unspeakable tragedy in Oklahoma and found uninvited refuge of a sort on Jamie's property.

Jamie keeps a journal of her year in the woods. Her thoughts, insights, lines of poetry are reproduced on these pages. They become a tangible record of conflict and growth, of potential defeat and ultimate triumph.

Vanita Oelschlager has created a compelling character in Jamie Barlow. As lives stretch into our eighties and beyond, conventional notions of one's senior years are increasingly obsolete. Retirement at 65, followed by some

period of “golden” years spent in semi-lucid repose, now seems as antiquated as a Model T Ford.

Jamie senses this as she flees the comforts of home for the rugged uncertainties of the hills. But it is not until she gets into those hills and starts her trek that she begins to understand why she came there. As with all quests, the journey *is* the destination.

We share Jamie’s journey. We learn with her the connections between our “civilized” lives and the deeper forces of Nature that forge those connections. We come to know her relationships – and ours – with the eagle, hawk and magpie (a chatty bird whose mischievous ways belie something more.)

At the end, we celebrate Jamie’s growth. We know that her journey to a final destination is far from concluded. And the Magpie falls silent finally when Jamie knows this too, deep in her heart.

It has been a personal joy to share Vanita’s journey as one of her editors. From the start she knew where she wanted to go. All she asked was that we have the patience to help along the way. Though it took four years to finish, patience was the last virtue we needed. Getting to know Jamie and her friends was more than reward enough. I hope you will agree.

Kurt Landefeld

Editor

Chapter 1
On the Run

Jamie Barlow leans over the gas tank of her Harley, pushing it into turns at speeds significantly above the posted 50 mph limit. As the farmhouses and occasional trailers blur by the roadside, she knows a sixty-something helmetless widow ripping down these back roads like an escaped convict will cause some tongues to wag. She doesn't care. Let them talk. They always had. They always would.

She and her late husband, John, had been coming to Pennsylvania's Laurel Mountains for decades, usually in a van. Now she's coming alone for the first time a month after his death.

John had introduced her to these old hills. They had bought land, more than 800 acres, and built a cabin hideaway that still had most of the comforts of their Pittsburgh home. Even though they employed a caretaker full-time and up to half a dozen men for various projects over the years, she knew they were still considered 'rich outsiders.' Many of these families could trace their lines back to the 1700s. But, outsider or no, this was where Jamie decided to go when she knew she needed time and space to plan for the next stage in her life. This time without John. Without her daughters and grandchildren too. And she left John's business behind as well.

She'd be back in a year. No less. They would manage just fine without her, she said reassuringly. Or hoped they would, she thought less assuredly.

Jamie had shocked them all with her announcement. But that was the way it had to be, because she knew something even more important was pulling her into these old hills. She couldn't quite put her finger on it yet. Still, she knew this was more than just another vacation ride. She knew this was the beginning of a journey whose destination was not yet known.

Jamie surprises even herself at her aggressiveness. She knows this

bike well. The road too, having travelled it hundreds of times. She pushes herself and the Harley harder than she's ever done before. The wind bleeds tears out of her eyes and pulls her just-above-the-shoulder-length mane out behind her; in a backwash of all that lies behind.

What was this urgency rising from the hollow of her chest into her throat?

Was she feeling trapped by the burdens of John's business, a nationally recognized investment advisory firm? After a month, had she grown desperate to shed the "Widow Barlow" tag that friends (and not-so-friends) had so easily attached to her?

Not that those words were ever said. But she could tell already the difference in how her women friends approached her. She could also tell the difference in how John's men friends approached her as well. Was she shocked, despite his warnings, at how many were now calling and suggesting dinner? An evening at the orchestra? More?

Coming out of a long curve into a semi-flat straightaway, Jamie guns the bike past 65, edging to 70 mph. She loves the feeling of the deep, appreciative rumble between her thighs. Could she push it to 75? 80?

This was John's birthday present on her 65th birthday. An older model...a 1985 Sportster 1200. The "least dangerous" bike he could find. But still a Harley! She took six months learning how to ride it. She also learned what John meant by least dangerous. So, secretly, she'd had some custom engine work done that boosted its top speed to 140 mph. At least that's what the dealership said. She hadn't quite tested that limit yet.

When John found out he tried hard to be angry. "You'll kill yourself on this!" But Jamie knew he loved and admired her independence, even willfulness. He found it exciting, something that helped keep their sex lives active long after friends had lost theirs, or traded spouses looking for rejuvenation.

The Mail Pouch barn is coming up on the right. She glances quickly at the John Deere tractor mounted high above the doors. That was a story! But in letting her mind wander, the bike wandered too, suddenly spitting stones. Jamie corrected gently, regaining the road's bend to the left. She knows what happens when high-flying bikes and riders drift onto gravel berms. She was as bad as some of the locals. Bikers, usually young men, often pushed their cycles way past their driving skills or response time. Many paid the price in laydowns, broken legs and arms. Some with their lives, little plastic-flowered crosses marking where they tempted fate and lost.

At the end of the straightaway the road began a long up-and-down climb into the deeper, higher hills. Jamie slows some, but is no less determined to put Pittsburgh and all its chains and tendrils behind her. Way behind her. It is still forty miles to the cabin. Yet the miles and minutes seem to melt away. There is never much traffic on this road during the week. A little heavier on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays when other weekenders like she and John would head up or back from their own sanctuary in the hills.

If you wanted to find these Pittsburghers, they'd be in restaurants and bars that catered to this elitist crowd. But John wanted to avoid them "like the plague." Their cabin was miles – and worlds – away from 'neighbors.' To Jamie, it felt closer to the mountains of North Carolina where her father's people had come from and where she'd loved visiting cousins. Where a smile was a smile – not cover for an agenda.

As she climbs, the road gets worse. She backs off on the throttle some. But even as the postings went from 50 to 45 to 35 and sometimes to 25 mph, Jamie has enough confidence – or is it compulsion – to stay over the limit a good 10 or even 15 mph. She is in a hurry!

As hillsides close in, rhododendron and mountain laurel are the only green in the still-brown April woods. It seems she is pulling a clearing sky behind her, the sun casting blinding shafts amid abrupt shadows of trunks and limbs crossing the road. She crosses some invisible line, and her shoulders fall at ease. Getting close!

John loved these last miles best. He told her this road had begun as an Indian trail. It was one of many that formed a pre-colonial network, smaller ones feeding into larger ones. The large trails led, inevitably, to the two great rivers – Allegheny from the north, Monongehela from the south – that joined in what is now Pittsburgh and became the Ohio. The Shawnee, who lived farther west, gave the "o-hi-o" its name, "beautiful river."

Jamie crests one last hill, then descends into a hamlet that sometimes had a name, sometimes not. But for as long as she and John had been coming here, it was known as "Ram Cat Run".

Jamie drops the 1200 into second gear and slows to a 20 mile per hour "waddle" while she makes her way along the three blocks or so of houses and a few commercial buildings that made up Ram Cat Run. From the corners of her eyes she can see heads moving to check out the rumbling sound outside. She can only imagine their surprise to see her instead of some tattooed and bandana-ed man. Now she downshifts and rolls crunching to a stop in front of the general store. This was her and John's usual stop for

supplies before driving the final five miles to the cabin turnoff.

The building is a single story. Brick. Dating from the 1850s or '60s according to John. A wooden storage room was attached later, date unknown. Its large window fronts a buckled cement sidewalk. In a semi-circle professionally-painted lettering announces proudly:

**RAM CAT RUN GENERAL STORE
EST. 1938**

The font suggests the store was last 'remodeled' in the 1950s. Perhaps a centennial celebration of some sort. Below are the week's specials written from inside:

Jumbo Eggs 99c

2% Milk Gal \$2.19

Chuck Roast \$2.99/lb.

Even though hand-painted, the lettering looks experienced and sure, as though the scribe has been writing backwards for years and knows customers will jump at the weekly sales.

Jamie stretches and surveys the street again. Quiet, as usual. A few cars or pickups are parked as she is. The gas station at the end of town where she came in has the same Exxon-Mobil sign it's had for years. But wind knocked out the "M" two years ago, so from a distance it almost reads "Exxon -obit."

John always laughed at that, she smiles to herself. He really wanted it to read "Exxon- RIP." He'd never cared for oil company stocks, not trusting the quality of their management. She can hear his voice clear as day, "If I was a smart, young businessman why would I waste my career in a dying industry?"

It was this kind of short, direct analysis that drove John to seek out new, fast-growing industries where a few, well-managed companies would emerge as big winners. Just as the oil business had been when it was young, and a few – John D. Rockefeller most famously – had made fortunes and names that became household words. It had earned John Barlow a reputation on Wall Street as a "gambler" which he never liked. But his investment instincts had earned him and his clients untold millions over the years.

It had also afforded a quiet lifestyle that she and John both cherished. Which is why they'd bought the property and had the cabin built. He had loved these hills more than any other place on earth. And he and

Jamie had seen a lot of the world, despite his disability. She thought by coming to the place he loved most, she could escape the sadness and gaping emptiness brought by his death. Jamie reaches for her backpack. She has a short mental list of things she'll require to get settled.

Jamie depresses the door's handle and gives it a slight nudge. As the door gives way, the bell above tinkles gently. Familiar smells quickly greet her.

As her eyes adjust to the musty interior, she can hear stirring in the back. Two women, one early middle-age, the other just in her middle teens come out, wiping hands across towels. Both were inches shorter than she. The mother is pudgy but solid. The daughter slender, but rounded. Their bodies made taut from the hard work of minding a store six days a week. She always felt large next to them. But then she was taller than just about any woman she'd ever met.

"Well, hello, Missus Barlow!" said the older one, already looking past her to the motorcycle.

"Hello, Cora. Just stopping in for a few things."

After more than a decade, Jamie and Cora had finally 'introduced' themselves a few years back. Cora always deferred to the older, wealthier woman calling Jamie by her last name. Jamie was slightly embarrassed by this, but never insisted on a first name.

As Jamie makes her way down the aisles, Cora and her daughter, Ellie Mae, look at each other, eyes widening, saying nothing. A few minutes later Jamie puts a chunk of cheese on the counter, then a loaf of bread, a few sundries and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"I'd like a pack of Marlboros, also, please. Hard pack."

Mother and daughter eye each other again, Cora directing with a nod. Ellie Mae turns to find the cigarettes.

"Beautiful day, don't ya' think?" asks Cora as she starts ringing up Jamie's purchase.

"Beautiful! Felt good to get out and ride."

"Here're the smokes, Mama."

"Thank you, Ellie." One more ring and "That'll be twenty-four thirty-one, Missus Barlow. Do you want a bag?"

"Oh no! Think I can get them all in here, thanks."

As Jamie puts the groceries, liquor and cigarettes into the backpack,

Cora tries to continue the conversation.

“Hank Fuller was in the other day and said your husband had...died. We’re sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you. Yes, about a month ago.”

Jamie looks past Cora, eyes sad again at the memory.

“He was a very good man. He loved coming here.”

Cora re-rolls the fallen sleeve on her frayed denim shirt and looks back at Jamie and tries a more personal tack.

“So, you holdin’ down the fort all alone now?”

Jamie is a little surprised at the intrusion. Irritation rises quickly. What was she supposed to be doing, bringing a lover along? Somebody she’d kept on the side for years waiting for John to die? She hated it when women went digging for gossip. It was the thing that drove her to these hills. And here was this store woman asking her the same gossipy question as the wives of John’s business associates! Instead she just answers coolly, wiping a loose strand of blond hair off her cheek, suddenly chiding herself: is that caution or paranoia?

“Yes. Just me. I wanted to get away for a little while.”

“Hank said he was a good man, too. Paid fair. We’re really sorry for your loss.”

Jamie detects a sincerity that goes deeper than the woman’s curiosity and softens to the gesture. She smiles and ends the conversation, “Well, time to get up to the cabin and make sure it’s still standing!”

Outside, she straddles her sun-warmed saddle and eases backward while firing the engine. Expertly delivering a quick rev and a small spray of gravel, she leaves her parting comment behind: a snarl and a spit in the face of cloying shadows (or encroaching demons). Got to keep moving.

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by Vanita Oelschlager

“I have been witness to Vanita’s amazing growth as a writer. Her children’s books have won a dedicated nationwide following due to her keen ability to touch on subjects of interest and significance to young people and those who care for them.

“*Silent Is The Magpie*, her inaugural novel for adults, is by turns, touching, thrilling and finally, inspiring. Women of all ages will be encouraged and changed when reading this insightful and courageous journey of one woman who comes to realize her own many strengths and her own place in the world. When finished, readers will say, ‘I want to meet Jamie Barlow!’

“They will also realize that we truly never stop growing and learning, and then saying to the world with both feet firmly planted on the ground: ‘This is who I am.’ Hurrah for Jamie! Hurrah for us!”

Carolyn S. Brodie, PhD

Professor

Reinberger Children’s Library Center
& Marantz Picturebook Collection Director

Virginia Hamilton Conference Director



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