

perfect

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Part One

Episode One ♦ *Forecast*

Luis rested in his ergonomic chair watching as the pro forma financial statements closed. His workspace was uncluttered even though he had three wall panels on which to display data. He thought, “NABCo System logoff Luis Antas.”

The North American Banking Company System returned the response thought, “NABCo System logging off Luis Antas at 17:07. Goodbye.” The panels of Luis’ workspace changed from his preferred Caribbean blue to black: the entrance to the smallish, door-less room illuminated.

Luis grabbed a lightweight, weatherproof jacket from a storage cupboard to the right of the entrance, slipped it on, and left only the chair in view of any passersby. He navigated a quiet corridor lined with similar workspaces, some still in use, before passing into the departmental lobby. Workers from higher floors and other companies made room in the elevator: they descended sixty-three floors and exited the building.

It was a pleasant walk though there was a bit of a chill in the air and the sky hung heavy with dark clouds. He joined the thousands of other office workers making their way to various transit stations. The Unity Plaza Station was a relaxed five minutes away. He elected to use the stairs to descend to the lower platform that served the northbound Flower Line.

The platform was bright, clean, and full of patient commuters. Luis examined the current mural of fresh winter snows giving way to the exuberant colors of springtime as it traveled the length of the station’s walls then turned white again. He thought, “Status Willem.”

His Informateur returned the thought, “Willem is at the Hartfield Central Library. His status is unavailable.”

“Leave message, ‘Lunch tomorrow? You set time.’ End.”

“Message left.”

“Weather forecast for this evening in Roseville.”

“The weather report for Roseville is brought to you by McStarMart, your one-stop shop for anything you need, when you need it, made as you like it. McStarMart, now open in the Grand Concourse of Roseville Station.

“The weather in Roseville will be clear tonight with an occasional light breeze, south to southwest. Temperature at 1800 hours will be twenty degrees falling to an overnight low of fourteen. Sunset will be at 1806 and twenty-three seconds. Tomorrow...”

The message terminated when Luis thought, “Message stop. Play *La damnation de Faust*, first act, by the Lyric Opera, Letiffa Smithson conducting.”

A moment later the melody played by symphonic strings was joined by a melancholy tenor contemplating nature. The words might be incomprehensible, but even in the *Perfect Age* the emotion of the music stirred him.

As peasants began singing joyfully the “Ronde des paysans,” Luis felt the press of wind as the train glided into the station. The waiting crowd made room for those alighting to slip past before entering the open doors. Luis shuffled down the aisle, all the seats taken, and found a bit

of wall to lean against. He closed his eyes and settled in for the twenty minute, 125 kilometer ride.

The music dimmed and he understood, “Approaching Roseville Station in one minute. Thirty-three credits will be deducted from your account when you leave the station.” The music returned.

Exiting the train, he opted for the nearest stairwell then strode down the Grand Concourse ignoring the shops and restaurants. Luis passed the Local Produce Market before he reached the station doors. Outside it seemed too dark and a gale blew rain sideways under the walkway lamps.

“Current conditions.”

“Current conditions at the southeast entrance to Roseville Station Grand Concourse are clear skies, wind calm, temperature...”

Luis shook off the erroneous information, turned, and glanced at the beautiful local produce for sale. If only there were space to prepare food in his apartment!

“Continue music.”

He crossed the concourse, climbed another flight of stairs, and walked down the platform for trams to the southeast quadrant. The crowd was heavier than normal – no doubt owing to the weather. He had to queue for the third tram before he was able to board.

The tram whisked its passengers from the station to highrise to sports center to towerblock, each separated by wide expanses of meadows and parkland. Luis was unable to concentrate on the music as he stared out the window at the rain-battered ball fields and a wind-tossed faux Asiatic garden. How could the Informateur be so wrong?

Rolling along its elevated track, the tram slowed into the station in the second story lobby of his building. He crossed the platform to the lift and rode with a few other residents, exiting on the thirty-fifth floor. Turning left, he walked down the extended, immaculate, featureless corridor. On his right side a door slid open revealing his warm, lit room. He entered the space and the door slid shut. Outside the storm obscured the rays of a setting sun.

To his left along the eggshell-white wall was a single bed elevated above a turquoise sofa which opened into a full-sized futon. Both were well-lit. Between this unit and the glass wall that opposed the door was a two-meter-square space where an assortment of houseplants grew. Each container received water and nutrients from supply tubes that ran under the window and behind a large, wood-grained shelving unit and cabinet which took up the entire wall to his right.

“Set window to view out only.” The change was imperceptible where Luis stood, but he knew it was impossible for anyone to see inside his unit. Luis opened a cupboard door, undid his fly, and released the fruity, vitamin juice he drank that afternoon into the goblet-sized urinal. Thus relieved, he remained in position as soap dripped then water streamed from a nozzle just above the receptacle. He washed, rinsed, and a blast of warm air dried his various appendages.

Luis closed the door to the comfort closet as he took a step to the left and opened another. His clothing was neatly arranged: shirts and jackets hanging on top, pants and shorts neatly folded on the middle shelf, a drawer for socks and odds-and-ends, and below that a shelf for

footwear. He removed his work clothes, dropped them into a chute at the very bottom of the wardrobe, and dressed in heavier, taupe, canvas slacks and one of his old, blue and white, rugby jerseys. A large, black number 'five' had been appliquéd on the back.

Closing that door, he examined the shelves to the left. Books were the one luxury he allowed himself in this impeccable, paperless world. Extremely rare and even more expensive, Luis enjoyed the sensation of turning well-used pages and the look of the black letters on the yellowing paper. Sure, he could interact with any existing piece of literature on the Informatteur choosing from a wide assortment of synthesized voices to read to him or simply by sensing the words in his mind; but he preferred the sheer pleasure of reading the way people did centuries ago.

Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* – the corners were rounded, the grayish-brown cover was well-worn with only a touch of gilding left in the thinnest parts of the embossed letters – had cost him almost a week's salary. He turned towards the door. A bookmark guided him to the eleventh stanza of chapter five. Luis read of Tatyana's dream unphased by the door sliding open, the lights dimming, and the door slipping shut behind him. He read of snow and a great bear as he strolled down the corridor and waited for the elevator. Stepping inside and thinking "public dining room," the doors closed. The elevator glided downward.

Luis did not look up as the doors opened and two other men his age entered the lift. Their privacy interrupted, the three rode silently to the floor above the tram station. "After you," one of the strangers offered.

"No, please, after you." Luis held out an open hand, smiled, but just glanced at them not wishing to lose his place. He followed them out of the elevator, finished the stanza, closed the book, and looked around the room. Unable to spot any familiar faces in the crowd, he approached an unoccupied food preparation window.

"Tuscan chicken," he started thinking, "with spinach pasta, grilled vegetable anti-pasto, and a glass of Vernaccia di San Gimignano." This was a meal that Willem had prepared one summer evening in his little place in the city. While Luis knew tonight's formatted dinner could never compare with the real thing, the nutritionally balanced, low-fat food product would remind him of that meal he had enjoyed with his best friend last year.

The window closed and a couple minutes later reopened to reveal a tray with a linen napkin, stainless flatware, the food served on china, and the wine in sommelier-style piece of stemware. "Seventeen credits will be deducted from your account. *Buon appetito!*"

He carried the tray across the room until he found an empty table with two chairs on either side. He removed his table setting and food from the tray, arranged it on the table with the book just above the plate, set the tray on one chair, and sat in the other. "Set noise level to low." The numerous conversations surrounding him became imperceptible. He opened the book to where he had left off, took a sip of wine enjoying the dry, full-bodied taste, and started reading again. The poetry was more engaging than the food.

As he finished his meal, he understood, "Neighbor Nakajima Toshiro approaching."

"Set noise level to conversation."

He stood up, palm extended in greeting. "It's been a while, how are you Nakajima-san?"

“Very well. Was away on business. Some of us are going to the comet viewing tonight, and since you seem to be on your own, I was wondering if you would like to join us.”

“With the weather what it is, I was thinking of going to the observation deck upstairs.”

“Yes. That would be pleasant, but local officials from De Autoriteit are hosting an invitation-only dinner. Do you know not any members of the building council?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“We are going to catch the tram in about fifteen minutes. Please to join us.”

“Let me clean up here and grab a jacket. I’ll see you on the platform.”

“Yes. See you shortly.”

Luis queried the Informateur, “Status Hale and Hearty Comet viewing in Roseville.”

“Hale and Hearty Comet viewing festival in Roseville Plaza to begin in twenty-five minutes. De Autoriteit encourages all able-bodied citizens to attend and reminds employers this is an officially sanctioned observance. Festivities include...”

“Weather forecast for Roseville Plaza in twenty-five minutes.”

“In twenty-five minutes the weather in Roseville Plaza will be: skies clear, temperature nineteen degrees, wind calm with slight occasional breeze from the southwest.”

Luis looked across the room and out a window. The rain beat against the panes of glass. He shook his head as he placed the dirty dishes on the tray. His book under his arm, he walked towards a cleaning station.



Episode Two ♦ *Surprise*

Without curtains on his bedroom windows, the bright light made it difficult for Willem van de Velde to continue sleeping. He always wished he had gone to bed a bit earlier but there was something invigorating about waking up to a glorious new day and he relished the cool air of early morning.

He sat up, planted his feet on the floor, and raised his arms towards the ceiling into an upper body stretch which ended with him standing. Swinging his pelvis to the left and his upraised hands to the right, he moved his hips in a circular motion. He lowered his arms to shoulder level – as if he planned to embrace someone much taller than himself – and twisted his torso to the left and right a few times before he raised his hands towards the ceiling again and bent side to side. A few deep knee bends and toe touches finished off his morning workout.

Through the window he watched his neighbor Avinashika step out of her back door with a mug in hand. Willem waved at her. She returned the friendly greeting then quickly turned away. He never understood if she was embarrassed by his nakedness or just polite.

Willem grabbed a raddled pair of shorts and sweatshirt off the clean pile of clothing. Both had seen better days. He shuffled two paces from studio-cum-bedroom to the bathroom, used the commode but only closed the lid, then continued the three further strides into the room which served as both kitchen and living area. He put some fresh water to boil, rinsed out the tea pot, and spooned in dry leaves from Assam – an expensive luxury for an artist. A long serrated knife coaxed two slices off the pale brown loaf of bread he purchased from a local baker. He spread on a bit of butter – from friends with cows on the edge of town – and topped it off with a couple generous dollops of blackberry jam he made last summer. A quarter teaspoon of sugar (one of those items it was hard to know the origin of) spooned into a ceramic mug thrown and fired at the commune and topped off with piping hot tea. He soaked in the aroma before taking a sip and eating the first slice of bread.

The second slice of bread hung from his mouth as he carried the mug in his right hand and pushed open the screen door with his left. Stepping into a pair of ancient sandals Willem squinted against the full force of the morning sun. He tried to imagine what this neighborhood had been like back before the war: when houses were ordered on streets, streets were made of petrochemicals mixed with gravel, and people traveled in personal vehicles fueled with another form of petrochemical. Back then the building he lived in had been home to just one family. Now a central wall marked his space from the couple on the other side.

Avinashika and Willem gardened the area from Willem's front door to the cartroad, between their homes, and in back of her house. He strolled down the pathway through the garden to Avinashika's doorway. "Morning," he smiled in greeting.

"Another beautiful day," she returned. "Everything is coming along nicely."

"Yes, the garden's doing very well this year. Looks like some peas are ready. Probably can pick some greens, radishes, herbs and make a salad. I can make something with the new potatoes as well."

"What about the asparagus?"

“You wouldn’t mind if I harvest some? It does look really tempting – nice young asparagus with some fresh chicken.”

“No. Not at all. There will be plenty. There always is.”

“I’m going to the market. Do you need anything?” he offered.

“Let me check. When are you going?”

“Maybe in an hour or so. Luis is coming out for lunch. Would you like to join us?”

“Thanks but I’m actually going over to my sister’s to watch her kids.”

“Well, we’ve got to have dinner before I go.”

“I can’t believe your going to do it – leaving all this. We’ve worked hard to make this garden.”

“But I’m leaving it in your very capable hands and the new couple seems pretty excited about the garden and the house, even if it is small.”

“It’ll be nice to have a newborn around, but I just don’t know how they’ll manage when she starts to grow. Your side just seems so tiny.”

Willem pondered the wisteria flush with blossoms. “I’m really sorry about you and Mike. No chance he’ll come back?”

“No. It’s too important to him that he have kids the old-fashioned way. No techno-babies for him even if we ignore the genetic engineering. He just doesn’t trust that they won’t meddle with the fetus somehow.”

“Come with me. No one has to know. We can find a baby and raise it together.”

Leaning over to kiss him on the cheek she said, “Thank you Willem. I know you mean that. Really, you do, but it just wouldn’t work. I need something a bit more settled and I want a father who…”

“I know, who’ll always be there.”

“You’re a good friend, Willem.”

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The market was a jumble of stalls and semi-permanent shops in the center of the East Hartfield Free Settlement Area. At its heart were clustered the most successful merchants in the Free Settlement and they helped draw the customers along the corridors past the smaller, more transient sellers of everything from aubergines to wingtips.

Willem walked down the main corridor that roughly separated the grocery sector from the clothing and personal care quadrant carrying his tote filled with produce he knew had been grown within the Free Settlement. He stopped at a stall. “So, how is my favorite purveyor of potions this fine morning?”

“Willem! Is it true? You’re really leaving us?” The middle aged woman with long, luxurious, grey hair removed her reading glasses and emerged from behind the counter. “Who will I get to play Antony?”

So the rumors were true, he would get the part. “I guess you’ll just have to give it to Dionysus. It really isn’t meant for Teuton. And just think what you’ll save on makeup!”

“True, he does rather look the part but I fear he *lives* the part much too often. You I can keep sober!”

He raised his hand and looked at the gold and silver stars hanging from the ceiling of the booth, “If only the Bard had written about the heroic defeat of Chlodio at Vicus Helena... That is a part I was born to play!” She shared his laughter.

“We’ll miss you, but also wish you best of luck on your great adventure. Give us a hug!”

After hugging goodbye, Willem continued out of the market proper, through the outlying itinerant stalls, and across the tram tracks as passengers alighted.

“Hey! Willem!” came a voice.

Willem turned to see who had called him. He recognized his friend Luis less from his appearance – short-cropped, black hair; clean-shaven face with staid expression; white, cotton dress shirt with pale blue pin-stripes; navy, woolen slacks; and black, leather loafers – but by the way the corporate uniform of the satellite cities made his workaday friend remarkable in a community of farmers, craftspeople, and artists. Willem greeted his friend. “Good to see you! But aren’t you a bit early?”

“It’s 11:54. You said to arrive after noon.”

“Shit. I lost track of time, but that’s easy to do in the market. Always a lot of folks to talk to.”

“No problem.”

“Lunch won’t be ready for a while yet, but I got some nice, fresh chicken for us.”

“Great. Work is quiet now. If anything comes up, I’ll deal with it on the way home.”

They walked together down the expansive concrete path that carried most traffic from the tram station and the market to the northern neighborhoods of the Free Settlement. After a couple minutes of walking the concrete came to an end. From here different paths of various composition branched out like the largest boughs of a great maple tree. Each had a designation like “Primrose Path” or “Red Brick Road.” Willem and Luis took “Sylvan Lane” as it wound through the urban village, under grand old oaks and noble sycamores, past houses both historical and ramshackle, around gardens and intensive farms to another branch, “Marigold Place.”

It was off “Marigold Place” where Willem had found half a house. There was no rent since no one owned land in the free settlements. Residents were squatters, but after De Autoriteit redeveloped the suburbs to the south as a giant industrial park, the populace had to go somewhere. At first the East Hartfield Free Settlement Area was tolerated assuming the

inhabitants would relocate to new residential districts – like Roseville – and in time ancient neighborhoods would be revitalized under the new urban model. That was two generations ago.

Luis asked, “Did it rain here last night?”

“No. Actually there was some cloud cover earlier in the evening, but otherwise it was a nice enough night. Bit chilly, I guess.”

“Did you see the comet?”

“Did I see the comet or did I participate in the comet viewing?”

“Either.”

“Well, there is a difference. One is to merely step out your door and look up at the grandeur of the heavens. The other is our version of paying homage to the gods of the state.”

Luis found these discussions with Willem’s pedantic, organic side tedious. “Did you see the comet? It stormed in Roseville. I couldn’t see anything.”

“Why didn’t you just tune it in on your Informateur?”

“That’s not the same thing.” Luis tried to ignore his friend’s sarcasm and disdain.

“No. But the point of the exercise was not to *see* the comet. Like in Imperial Rome, the point was to participate in the civic ritual. I assume you did that at least.”

The lack of words hung like a broken body from a Roman cross. Knowing to answer he had gone to the comet viewing would launch a diatribe about ‘sheeple following orders’ and answering he had stayed home would trigger a rant about ‘De Authoriteit monitoring our every move,’ Luis entered the minefield. “I went. No one stayed very long. I just walked across the plaza and went back into the station. We couldn’t hear or see anything: the storm was *that* bad.”

“So you opted for conformity.”

“Of course. I want to keep my job!”

“Do you really believe you would lose your job because you didn’t stand out in the rain for a couple hours?”

“It was not just rain, it was a gale and yet the weather report said it was clear.”

“You still trust that thing.”

“Trust isn’t the word. The Informateur is the only source of news and information.”

“Have you ever thought about talking to other people?”

“I talk to people.”

Having taken the silent train to Roseville, Willem was not convinced.

“My neighbor Toshiro invited me to join some of his friends that night, but I could not find them.”

Willem looked at a house. “Huh, the Salkovitches painted their house again. I’ve never understood their fascination with ugly shades of taupe. How can they repaint each year and still manage to find a new shade of taupe? I used to live for the time they ventured into beige. Heaven forbid they make it to ecru! Oh well, just one of the things I’m going to miss...”

Luis stopped walking. He knew the day would come, but the gravity of the situation made it hard for him to react. He watched as Willem kept walking, turned a corner, and disappeared.



Episode Three ♦ *Plans*

“This is really good. What do you call it again?” Luis asked.

“Well, I don’t call it anything. It’s just baked chicken with roasted new potatoes.” Willem explained. “More than anything, I’m going to miss that market.”

“They have to have something out there: people have to buy food some place.”

Willem took another bite and chewed with leisure. “I’ve got no idea what they have but I expect people grow most of their food.”

“You have done research...” Luis let the statement hang.

“Not really. What’s to know? Saint Louis is the end of the line. Civilization stops at the Mississippi. After that, all you’ve got is the Great North American Wilderness Park until you cross the Cascades or Sierras and then you’re in the Northeastern Pacific Sector of the Industrial Confederation.”

“I understand the geography. That country has been wilderness for hundreds of years. No one has been permitted to live west of the Mississippi since the Great War.”

“Yes. One of the two great results of Carmageddon: massive depopulation and final conversion from a fossil fuel to a geo-cosmic economy. And we’re still here.”

“I have heard stories about savages – people returning to the ways of the ancient inhabitants that lived there before European Americans arrived in the middle of the last millennium. They ride horses, live in leather tents, and hunt the great beast.”

“Cool.”

Luis’ voice dripped with urgency. “They might kill you!”

“And they might not.” Willem continued eating and talking as if he was discussing replacing a *Lavandula angustifolia* with a *Lavandula latifolia*. “That’s why I’m going.”

“You want to find savages?”

“No, but if they find me I’ll deal with it.”

“Where will you live?”

“No idea.”

“But...” Luis was stymied.

Willem put his fork down, finished chewing his mouthful of food, and took a sip from his glass of white table wine. He looked his friend in the eye. “I’m going because I want to know what it is like to live; live like our ancestors did. Live with the fear of the weather and the joy of the harvest. Live as every other animal on this planet lives.”

“But you have all that here. Or you could just move to the commune.”

“Don’t you see? Those are only half measures. You still have everything, every conceivable convenience of modern civilization at your fingertips. And you have this thing in

your skull.” Willem tapped the place on Luis’ skull where, as a small child, a surgeon implanted the tiny device that would always interface with the communication infrastructure maintained by De Autoriteit.

“You have not!”

“But I will. I already know of someone who will take it out.”

“What are the risks? You don’t know what will happen if you take it out. You could die without it. What if you need help?”

“I won’t die. It’s as easy to remove as it is to install or upgrade. They just want us to think we can’t live without it. Humans existed for tens of thousands of years without an Informatuur in their skulls. Remember, primitive devices were carried around in the hand and there were *thousands* of people who lived without even them.”

Luis was accepting that there was no logical argument to fight the inevitability of Willem’s leaving for the unsettled lands in the middle of the continent. “How will we keep in touch? It’s not like there will be way to contact you.”

“Actually, how do your books get to you?”

“Someone brings them here.”

“Same idea. In the market there is a kiosk – Confederated Express – where you can send a written message for me in care of their Saint Louis office. I’ll leave word in Saint Louis which way I’ve gone. They will forward the message on.”

“So there really are towns west of the river?”

“Luis, you have to stop thinking of this like I’m time traveling back to the Stone Age. Those I’ve talked with say it’s much like we read about when EuroAmericans first started the Great Westward Migration. People find land to farm or graze and where they congregate, villages spring up. The villages are connected to each other and finally to civilization in cities like Saint Louis.”

“But such settlement is illegal. It’s on wilderness preserve. I thought the whole point...”

“The whole point is to have places where natural forces can play out. Humans are as natural a force as any other predator, as is the wind for that matter. However, De Autoriteit does not exercise control over that land. At least, that’s my understanding. It’s wild.”

“I get that. I just cannot imagine how you are going to live out there.”

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Willem watched as the couple of guys from the cheese stall balanced his mattress on the hand cart. Their trade of some hard, local cheese would travel well. “Are you sure you can make it, just the two of you?” he half offered.

“Oh, we’re used to carting around awkward loads,” one answered. The other added, “I promise, she’ll be most appreciative to have a bed, even used. Thank you again and good luck on

your trip!” The first continued the expression of gratitude and soon they headed down the path towards “Marigold Place.”

Willem looked around his home: not much was left of his few belongings and he felt better for it. He knew little of the new couple that planned to move in, but they had enough furniture to fill the two rooms. Opening the door to the bathroom, he entered. Willem opened a wicker basket and placed the wheel of cheese inside with some other foods he planned to take on the trip: a sausage, some sugar, a loaf of bread (in addition to the one he’d started earlier in the day), apples, pears, chocolate bars, and of course, his tin of tea. He removed the basket and his canvas duffel from the bathtub and returned them to his bedroom. All that remained there was a painting he’d done of Avinashika standing in the garden as it approached harvest. He admired how he had captured her long, black hair waving in the late afternoon breeze. At that time it still reached down to her waist.

“Knock, knock,” she called at the front door.

“Come on in,” he returned. Color burst from the background greens invoking the images of flowers, fruits, and herbs. The painting beamed with pride at all they had grown.

The front door squeaked open and he heard her gasp, “Oh my, where did everything go?”

“I’m back here.”

She paused in the doorway, her chestnut brown eyes wide at the shock of the empty rooms. “I didn’t realize you were planning on going quite this soon.”

“Neither did I, to be honest. But this morning in the market I was talking about getting rid of stuff. A couple hours ago people started showing up willing to take this and that. The new people wanted me to leave the pots, pans, plates, and utensils, but otherwise, this is all I’ve got left.” He motioned her into the room, looking at the painting. “I want you to keep this for me, okay?”

She smiled but he could see it was not out of happiness: she was trying to hide her feelings.

“Unless you don’t want it…”

“No, it’s not that. I just thought we’d have a couple more days before you left.” She paused. Recognizing they were both uncomfortable with the maudlin tone of the discussion, she changed the subject, “Are you hungry? I made some Channa and Toor Daal, Pitla, and even cooked up that asparagus you forgot you were going to use today.”

“Indian style?”

“Of course.” Her smile was genuine now.

“How can I pass on a meal like that? No idea when I’ll eat well again. So, you want the painting, right?”

“Please.”

He took the five foot wide canvas off the nail where it hung and carried it for her. “Get the lights behind us. Here,” he fished a key out of his pocket, “probably better lock it tonight just to be safe.”



They sat on her stoop spooning food from pots onto rice and then eating it with their fingers in a more traditional manner. “Would you like a little more beer?” Avinashika offered.

“Yes, thanks. I’m going to miss this EHSFA Brewers’ Pilsner. Don’t ask me why, but I know I’ll miss it.” Willem looked up at the sky and watched the Hale and Hearty Comet as it moved from Cassiopeia into Perseus.

“It’s easy to drink. I’ll give you that. So, what’s the plan for tomorrow then?”

“No plan really. Just going to head into the city and catch a train north. I’ve got to stop in Appledorf to see a guy named Ugo. Not sure how long I’ll be there. After that, I’ll take whatever train comes next. That’s the joy of having a fourteen-day railpass.”

“And no plans where you’ll enter the park?”

“Nah. None. Might go by way of Norleans and then head up the Mississippi. Or might head straight for Memphis or Saint Louis. Don’t really plan on heading as far north as Twin City, but who knows.”

“I could try and read your fortune...”

“Nah. I’ll go where I go. I’ll try to get you word someday where I settle, but it’s hard to say when that’ll be.”

“And if?”

“And if,” he agreed. Having had his fill, he leaned back against the railing and took a slug of his beer. “Might just try and take up with one of those bands of nomads riding horses and hunting the bison across the plains.”

“How’d Luis take the news?”

“Well, if his arguments were any suggestion, I’m guessing he was pretty upset with the whole idea. But of course he’d never say as much.”

“You’ve always said you were more than just good friends, right?”

“Well yeah. It’s just I’ve never been quite sure if he wasn’t hoping that maybe some day... But you know me, the last thing I want to do is settle down with anyone. I’m only thirty. It’s too soon to be tied down.”

“Do you love him?”

“Not in the way you mean. Never have anyone best I can tell.”

“So I won’t make it hard for you to leave if I offer to let you spend the night? It’s not like you have anywhere to sleep tonight.”

“I’ve got a sleeping bag. I was thinking of just sleeping under the stars.”

“How about one last night in a nice, comfortable bed?”

Looking up at the sky, he watched as the comet disappeared into the west behind a bunch of trees. He thought for a moment about Avinashika’s offer. Willem was never one to say no to an attractive woman who offered her bed.



Episode Four ♦ *Oracle*

Avinashika Joshi woke alone in her bed. On the nightstand was a note. “I hate goodbyes. I’ve left the key for the new people on your kitchen table. Enjoy! Willem.”

She lay there a few minutes trying to sort through the emotions that swirled across her mind. It’s not that she expected anything from him, she just felt disappointed that she didn’t get to say goodbye. Well, not in so many words: not in the way one normally did.

Out of bed, she covered herself with an unbleached cotton t-shirt and panties before heading to the toilet and brushing her teeth. She’d bathe after she weeded the garden and did some chores. From the hook on the back of the bathroom door she removed denim bib overalls, stepped into them, and fastened the shoulder straps with a pair of daisy buttons.

As promised, the key sat on the kitchen table: the stem of a single, pink rosebud through the hole. She removed the key from the stem, put it on the kitchen windowsill, and filled a small glass with some water for the rose. She left it in the middle of the small, wooden table.

She put some coffee on to brew, filled a mug, stepped out her door, and looked over at the empty home next door. She felt it odd not to see Willem stretching. Would the new people be by for the key today? She knew Willem had never been one for planning: he could have agreed they would move in next week. Avinashika took a few deep breaths and released the seeds of tension. Happy to help, it was not her responsibility. She cleared her mind of thought.

Her awareness shifted to the world that surrounded her. The morning was alive with birdsong and she watched as an oriole darted from the pea trestle after some small creature hidden in a patch of sage. Its prey in its beak, it flew to a nearby tree where chicks squawked hungrily.

A long drink of coffee and she was aware of a soft mewing under the wooden stoop. She rested the mug on the step and peered between the slats into the darkness below. She sensed movement but saw nothing. She crept off the steps, examined the structure, and found a gap between the boards and the foundation. This was the first time a feral cat had taken up residence under her steps. Could she have kittens down there? If that was the case, Avinashika decided it would be best not to disturb them.

As she finished her mug of coffee, a couple crows landed on the eaves of the house next door. They took up cawing and cackling as if in a heated debate over which part of the garden to invade first. She surmised the new neighbors would arrive soon. Another pair joined the first duo on the eaves in raucous debate.



Gardening done, Avinashika dried herself after bathing. She dressed in some loose denim pants and a forest green blouse, preferring conservative dress when going to the market. On a piece of paper she wrote “will return before sundown” and hung it from a nail in her door frame she used for this purpose. She slipped into comfortable walking shoes, picked up a canvas tote, closed the door behind her, and headed through the garden.

She enjoyed a brisk walk and paid attention to her breathing and pulse along the way finally slowing as she entered the market. Her first stop: a favorite fabric stall. Avinashika

browsed some stouter cotton fabrics certain she had a ready market for work shorts and pants, but her eyes and fingers were drawn to luxurious, imported silks. Unable to remember when she had last made herself a new dress, she still could not justify the expense. Another day.

Off to the food stalls next she picked up some lentils, brown rice, and a couple apples before stopping in at a tea stand for some sencha. She stood at the two-meter-long counter between two other patrons: a man and a woman who seemed too far apart to be together. Avinashika waited the minute for the tea to steep before pouring it into a wide-mouthed drinking bowl.

As she sipped the hot liquid, a woman with black hair and graying roots walked up. She was short by comparison and wore a bright, flower-print smock over her dress. "I'm so glad I ran into you Avinashika. I just had to see you today."

"How are you, Bubbeh?"

"Oh, the knees hurt and my youngest tells me he is still not ready to marry...but what's new?" Her voice was enlivened despite years of weariness and worry. "When I woke this morning, I had this feeling that something very wonderful happened to you." She reached out gnarled fingers which had worked hard for twice as many years as Avinashika had been alive. Her hand stopped in mid-air.

"Wonderful?" Avinashika was puzzled. She took a longer sip of the tea enjoying how the slight astringency quenched her thirst.

Bubbeh examined Avinashika's face. "Yes, I can see something is different."

Avinashika remembered the warmth of Willem's embrace, felt her face flush, but said nothing.

Stepping closer, Bubbeh's hand made contact with Avinashika's forearm. "Yes. Yes, it has happened. I'm sure of it." The woman closed her eyes and laid her head back. She took a deep breath, releasing it with a guttural sound somewhere between a growl and a moan. She repeated this breathing routine four more times then stopped. A minute passed. Three sharp gasps for air were accompanied by a high-pitched tone.

The female patron drained her cup and bolted from the stand. Avinashika looked at the chai wallah trying to communicate non-verbally that there was nothing wrong – such behavior was normal for her friend. The male customer, oblivious to the spectacle, sipped his brew, probably engrossed in something on his Informatour.

"Listen and know!" The voice coming from Bubbeh's mouth was wispy, otherworldly. It said:

Man of Bright Colors deposits a seed in an empty vessel.

Elephant takes the vessel to a man of letters.

Elephant and Man of Letters take vessel out of diseased garden.

Man of Letters harvests fruit under a distant, barren land.

Man of Bright Colors finds fruit.

"Listen and know!" It proclaimed and Avinashika reached to grab her friend as the woman gasped for air and her knees buckled.

“Don’t you have a chair?” Avinashika demanded.

The chai wallah rustled behind the counter and brought out his short stool and placed it behind Bubbeh.

“Sit, you’ve had another of your spells, Bubbeh.” She lowered the older woman onto the stool. Then to the chai wallah, “Please, some strong black tea.” Then to Bubbeh, “You like two lumps, right, my dear?”

“You know I take three!”

Avinashika smiled. “Just wanted to make sure you were yourself again.”

“Was it understandable this time?”

“Well, the words were English, but…”

“Did you write it down?”

“I don’t need to. Do you want to know what it said?”

“Is the message for me or mine?”

Avinashika shook her head. “No, that’s doubtful.”

Bubbeh changed the subject. “So, tell me about your young man then. When did it happen?”

“Mike and I decided to go our separate ways – I don’t know, maybe it’s been a week now. I don’t think about it.”

“NO! Not that one.” Bubbeh spat the words out.

The chai wallah dropped three lumps into a white, bisque teacup and poured the hot, dark tea after.

Avinashika reached for the cup waving away the offer of milk. “Here, Bubbeh. Drink this.”

“Thank you dearie. No, I mean the artistic fellow who lives next door.” She brought the steaming cup to her lips and puffed away the heat.

“We said goodbye this morning. He…”

“Goodbye? What do you mean goodbye?”

“He left for the west today.”

“Pfft! Such nonsense! How can a man be with such as you and then just leave?” She took a sip and let the silence hang between them for a few moments. “When will he return?”

“I don’t know.” Avinashika shook her head and looked at her feet. “I don’t think he intends to come back here. Ever.”

Bubbeh was pensive. “Promise me you’ll see a midwife next week. No excuses.”

“I will, Bubbeh. I promise. I’m so sorry, but it’s getting late...”

“Yes, I know. I must be going... Have to cook dinner you know.”

“Will you be okay walking home?”

“Pfft! Don’t fuss. It’s not so far.”

“Let me pay for your tea, Bubbeh.” Avinashika handed the chai wallah a couple pieces of market script and then slipped some more into Bubbeh’s pocket. Avinashika recognized the old woman ignoring the gesture. “It was good to see you today.”

“You come see me and tell me what the midwife says. And don’t be too long about it!”

The women waved goodbye as Avinashika headed out of the market. She tried to remember what else she needed but the oracle stuck in her head. The only part she understood was about the seed planted in her empty womb. She shook her head. “No. It’s not possible. It’s just not possible.”



As Avinashika turned off the cart path into her garden, she was greeted by a young couple sitting on Willem’s porch. The mother nursed her infant; the husband stood and approached.

“Please don’t get up. I’ve got your key. Just a second and I’ll bring it.” Avinashika quick-stepped through the garden and up her stairs. She opened the door, set her bag on the kitchen table, and grabbed the key from the windowsill. Back out the door and through the garden, she started speaking before passing the corner of the house. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long. I needed to pop into the market and ran into an old friend...”

The man met her at the corner of the house. “Please, don’t worry about it. I’m Tristam, but most people call me Tris. This is my wife Beatrix and our baby Eton.”

“It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Avinashika. I hope you’ll like it here.”

Beatrix looked up. “No doubt we will. We were rather surprised to find Willem was already gone.”

“He didn’t tell you when he was leaving either,” Avinashika stated.

“Well, he said it would be soon,” continued Tris. “We stopped by to see if maybe we could use some of his furniture.”

“I’m sorry, but he cleared everything out last night. He mentioned you wanted some kitchen stuff. I hope it’s there...”

“Please, don’t worry about it,” the husband dismissed.

“We really do appreciate you holding the key for us,” continued the wife.

“When Eton’s finished, we’ll have a look around. Hopefully we can move in tomorrow – it just depends on the carting situation.”

Avinashika understood. “Well, if there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to come over anytime. And when you’re ready, I’m happy to babysit.”

“Well, we won’t keep you any longer, Avina...” he replied.

“Avinashika. And welcome to your new home!”



Episode Five ♦ *Dreams*

Life had a dreamlike quality for Luis since leaving Willem's house; the train ride, the dining hall felt more like Informateur images than reality.

The conversation with Willem dominated Luis' thoughts: Had his friend gone mad? Why was Willem running away? Chasing aspirations of a natural, wild existence was not beyond Luis' ken – romantic era literature was riddled with pursuit of the idealized *natural man*: a life free of artifice and rationalized presumptions of how the world should be. He too wanted life to be better, more perfect, but running away from society was not the answer.

Approaching this new world with no plans worried Luis most. "When are you leaving? Where are you going? What will you do out there? Where will you live? How will you get food? How will you defend yourself?" *Why not just stay here?* Luis had given up asking the questions which inundated his consciousness like the bank-swollen Mississippi flooded the Delta.

"Will I see you before you go?" Luis had asked.

"Hard to say – might leave tomorrow, might leave next week," had been Willem's reply.

"Well, in case – you know – take care. Get word to me that you made it." Unable to look his friend in the eye, Luis tensed up when Willem put his arms around him. For Luis 'friendly hugs' were an oxymoron. The moment had grown even more awkward: his clumsy return of the hug then mumbling "see you" as he had walked out of Willem's door.

Thinking over the events, Luis wished he could have acted differently but he succored his conscience with the knowledge he would have another chance to say goodbye.

Luis picked up his tray and carried his half-eaten meal of Yankee pot roast, mashed potatoes, and succotash to the cleaning station. He set the tray on the receiving platform, a door opened, the tray glided past the threshold, and the door slammed shut. The suddenness shook Luis from the replayed memory.

Too depressed to go for a walk, uninterested in talking with other residents, put off by the thought of a swim, Luis took the lift back to the thirty-fifth floor. He stopped at the communal sanitary facilities and checked the status displays looking for the first door that showed "ready" above an icon of a sit commode. The door slid open and then closed behind him. At completion Luis thought, "No bidet service," used the proffered swipe, stood, pulled up his trousers, and exited the small room. The status changed to "sanitizing."

Across the room were another set of doors and he stopped at the first one that said "ready" above a spritzing shower nozzle. He entered, sat on the small bench, and started to undress. Across from him a panel opened revealing hatches labeled "laundry," "shoes," and "personal items." He pushed his dirty clothing through the laundry door and placed his shoes in a container.

He stood, the panel closed, and the shower adjusted to Luis' preset temperature, nozzle position, and water pressure. Water cascaded over his short, black hair and down his café au lait colored skin. He allowed himself to cry for three minutes while the water ran.

A small amount of shampoo dripped onto his head and he rubbed his scalp and face with his fingers. When a pre-lathered brush appeared in its window he swiped it over his body. He replaced the brush, the window closed, and the water returned for a three-minute rinse.

When the water ceased, another portal opened radiating warmth. Luis reached for the waiting towel, dried off, dropped the used towel through the laundry hatch and took a warm, white, terrycloth bathrobe and pair of moccasins from the same window. He slipped on the robe, cinched the belt, stepped into the slippers, and shuffled off to his room where he changed into a pair of freshly laundered, silken pajama pants and slipped on the matching top, misaligning the buttons.

Luis flicked off the moccasins, climbed up the five-rung ladder to his bed, and lay on his back. The lights dimmed, he closed his eyes, but sleep was a reluctant companion.

He and Willem walked a hillside wooded with familiar trees – oak, hickory, birch, maple, and pine – when they approached an enormous evergreen which had fallen across a gulch. Luis asked, “Will you cross it?” Willem answered in the affirmative, handed Luis a tiny, ivory egg, and started across the whitish-grey trunk. As Willem walked the tree grew smaller, sagging and bouncing under his weight. At the same time the egg grew in both in mass and volume. Luis watched silently as Willem disappeared into the woods on the other side.

Luis continued up the path on his side of the chasm. The trail grew steeper, the trees less familiar and covetous of sunlight forcing him to struggle against their tangled murkiness before emerging into a dense prairie which covered a now gentle rise. Cresting the ridge, he sat on a large boulder and reveled in the glorious sunshine. His eyes followed the hill brow around a wide, irregular, circular expanse which enclosed a body of sapphirine water too wide to swim across. The ridge’s far edge was obscured by clouds.

A noise – it could not be flatulence – captured his attention. Along the crest he saw the back of a fat man with blond hair sitting on a log defecating over the lake. The naked man stood and walked towards a small, dilapidated hut. Equally naked, a dark-skinned woman with long, black hair greeted him at the door: they embraced and made love on the earth. Were they unaware or uninterested in his presence he wondered.

A rush of wind blew away the clouds and Luis discovered a churning sea beyond the far ridge. Enormous waves barreled towards the shore. Whether from fear or fascination, Luis sat transfixed watching as the waves broke and water rushed up the mountainside. Another and then another wave breaking, each higher than the last, until finally the ridge was bested.

Luis sat resigned to his fate: the seaspray hitting his face. He felt refreshed but guilty.

Having engulfed the pristine lake, the ocean receded. The hut, man, and woman were gone. He looked around for the egg but only found a small chick. Safeguarding the chick in his shirt pocket, Luis started walking home to a collection of small shacks perched on a plateau high above the ocean. He stopped at the lean-to of the old man and admired his cow, its udders swollen with milk, before continuing to the overlook.

Tourists milled around admiring the view. The ocean had receded exposing kelp and crustaceans to the air before again swelling in the distance. Luis feared another eminent tsunami and wondered if they were high enough to escape the sea’s wrath.

As the first wave broke against the cliff, the tourists ran away. Villagers huddled together as this first wave dissipated leaving the broken bodies of seals strewn on the rocky beach far below. Another giant wave broke and Luis could see the drops of spray on his black, leather shoes, but the village remained safe from the angry sea.

Luis woke from his dream.



Avinashika's evening was uneventful. A palmful of raisins, yoghurt, and curry powder seasoned the bowl of rice and lentils she ate sitting on her back stoop. The sun dipped below the roofs of the neighboring houses and trees and the soft mewing started again. She drew comfort knowing that her favorite part of her home – besides the garden – now sheltered a family of feral cats.

She debated if going next door to offer assistance would be helpful or annoying. Curtains were already hung and drawn in the bedroom. Maybe the baby was sleeping. Maybe the parents too? Or maybe they had gone for another load. She decided it was better to wait for some indication they needed help or at least wanted a hand.

Her thoughts drifted to her run-in with Bubbeh's oracle the previous day:

Listen and know!

The man of bright colors deposits a seed in an empty vessel.

The elephant takes the vessel to a man of letters.

The elephant and man of letters take the vessel out of the diseased garden.

The man of letters harvests the fruit under a distant, barren land.

The man of bright colors finds the fruit.

Listen and know!

How strange it seemed to her. The imagery made sense though a couple things gave her pause. Who was "the man of letters?" A learned man? Someone in the market who passed messages? The wording of the oracle seemed to put this man in opposition to Willem – "the man of bright colors."

If she was "an empty vessel" then the man of letters would take her on a journey – a journey of hope and success – for the elephant was a good omen for the traveler. She struggled with the possibilities: Where would they go? Should she travel now? Would she find Willem? Was she really pregnant? And wouldn't it be safer to have the baby here? It just made no sense to her, the granddaughter of fortune-tellers and soothsayers, but she trusted the true meaning would be revealed in time.

Feeling fatigued, Avinashika headed for bed. Maybe her new neighbors would welcome some assistance tomorrow. She donned the simple nightgown of pink, cotton tricot that she wore when sleeping alone, switched off the light, and slipped between the sheets. Replaying the image of the sunset in her mind, her eyes grew heavy and sleep came easily.

"We must find Ugo. He's got the answers," she said to her unseen but seemingly familiar companion. "Appledorf. That's all I know. Ugo. Appledorf."

Together they ran chased by a pair of over-sized Rottweilers with teeth too large for their mouths. They barked “Where?” and “When?” and “Why?” until she pulled her comrade into a large wooden crate and slammed the side shut. The dogs ran past the box and continued barking their one-word questions, the sound fading in the distance.

Pushing against the side of the box it would not give. She tried another side, then another, moved around, and tried again. They were locked in. In the pitch black she sensed her companion’s anger but felt no menace. Continuing to press against the sides of the box she cried for help. Nothing happened.

She tried to slow her breathing and banish the panic. “Don’t worry, we won’t suffocate.”

The top of the box dissolved into a cloudless, azure sky. She rested her hands on the edge and peered over. She was now in a boat with two people – the seemingly familiar partner and a man with a malevolent quality. He demanded, “I want more. Give me more!” He grabbed at her.

She pulled her companion out of the boat box. A single, red cloud hung in the sky. She pirouetted three times and an elephant with many arms appeared. Marigolds rained from the heavens as a tiny Willem sprang from the ground where she had danced.

“Thank you, Ugo!” she sang as she danced with her companion.

Avinashika woke feeling hopeful.



Episode Six ♦ *Standstill*

Ordering up Claude Debussy's *La mer* on his Informateur, Luis waited for his train on the platform of Unity Plaza Station. He moved with the crowd and boarded the train. Finding an available window seat was a pleasant surprise. He sat, rested his head against the glass, and closed his eyes. That Willem had not contacted him with departure information left Luis wondering if he had offended his friend.

The train glided out of the station while the music salved his conscience. The first movement finished, he thought "repeat," and the symphony returned to the initial deep, sustained notes of strings and harp. As violins and woodwinds joined, he recalled the mystery of the sea: his only contact with it a couple childhood shore visits. He had been reluctant to get more than his ankles wet.

For Luis *La mer* was a perfect musical painting: the symphonic motives conjuring up images, not of quiet seaside retreats with his family, but of an ocean capable of a full range of emotions. His favorite passage came about five minutes into the piece and ignited fantasies of traveling across storm tossed waves. Aivazovsky's *The Ninth Wave* came to his mind. Flashing back to his dream of the prior evening — strange with images of an enraged, catastrophic sea — it seemed so opposed to the music drifting through his head and more akin to the sea of Turner's *The Slave Ship* or maybe even Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

Screech! He lurched forward in his seat. He blinked his eyes to ensure they were open but saw nothing. *The train is stopped.* We must still be in the tunnel. The train has never halted without lights.

He thought, "train status." Silence. "Information on this train." No reply came.

"News!"

Nothing.

He tapped the spot on his skull and said aloud, "Emergency alert. Status. Information. Help."

Still nothing.

Disembodied voices vomited out similar commands. He guessed they also received no response. *I am not alone.*

A woman called out, "Anyone got an idea what's going on?"

"No!" another answered.

"Stay calm," a deep, masculine voice ordered. "Must be some sort of system malfunction."

Another man responded, "Yeah? So? Why hasn't anything like this happened before?"

Lots of mumbling and finally someone shrilled, "It has. Just not here."

Luis tuned out the chatter. It was not helping. *I want real information*, not guesses and half-baked explanations. Afraid to move hand or foot for fear of making contact with someone near him, he sat perfectly still.

Is the entire world similarly paralyzed?

Time passed and he re-queried his Informatteur. No response.

The point of someone's shoe found his shin. "Excuse me. Did I hurt you?" It was a woman's voice.

Is a woman sitting across from me? I did not notice.

"No, not at all," Luis fibbed. "I wonder how long we will be here. It is getting rather warm."

No one responded.

Are they feeling this nervous? Has it been five minutes? Maybe ten? Or only two?

Small conversations took place throughout the dark train car. No one cried out in terror. His mind drifted to the world outside the tunnel, coming to an end while they sat inside the train quietly awaiting their fate.

We just sit here, polite, waiting.

A nearby voice offered, "Hi. I'm Stefán. I teach classics at Humana College in Hartfield. I just married and we moved into a one-and-a-half bedroom flat in Wharton Grove. I feel kind of foolish it takes something like this to get me to introduce myself to people I ride the train with every day."

A woman, the proximity of her voice suggesting she probably had bumped Luis' shin, took up the introduction, "Nice to meet you, Stefán. I'd shake your hand but know I couldn't find it." She giggled. "And I haven't played 'touchy-feely' since middle school." The laughter caught on. "I'm Margot and graduated from university in Hartfield last winter. I had an interview today."

"How did it go?" Luis recognized Stefán's voice.

"Fine. I think."

Another woman spoke up, "I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. You know they only invite people to interviews they are thinking of hiring."

"I've heard that," Margot replied. "It was just my first. It all feels so new to me."

"Even if something happens and they don't hire you," this voice was new, "at least you've had your first interview. The first is always the hardest. Now you know what to expect."

OUCH! A blinding flash replaced the darkness. Luis slammed his eyes closed. Cries and gasps popped all around but nothing else happened.

"It's okay, the lights just came back on," someone shouted. A few people clapped.

Luis pried his eyelids open and closed them again, repeating the maneuver a number of times growing more accustomed to the piercing light. He turned his head to the window, bashful, not wanting to look at Margot until he was in control.

The air conditioning kicked in and a voice came from the ceiling of the train, “We’re sorry for the inconvenience ladies and gentlemen. There has been a problem with railroad operations. Rest assured transit operations engineers are investigating and working diligently to return the system to normal working order. We will share any further information the moment we have it. Please relax. You’ll be home as soon as it is safe. Thank you for your patience.”

Luis flashed Margot a brief, closed-lipped smile. She returned it warmly. He looked out of the window at the blackness of the subway tunnel wall.



The commute home usually happened at the same time of day and rarely took more than thirty-five minutes. This time of year Luis usually arrived home before sunset, but today his first sense of how long they had sat motionless in the subway only came as he exited Roseville Station. It was completely dark; the walkway lamps were out. Without the faintest glimmer in the west, he was unable to guess how long it had been since sundown.

Luis started to walk home enjoying the cool, night air. He neared a group immersed in private conversation.

“Excuse me,” he interrupted. “Is anyone getting an Informateur signal?” A couple people shook their heads. “Thanks.” He continued the walk home admiring the brightness of the newly waning moon.

How odd the Informateur is still silent. I wonder if that is related to the train stopping? He walked along the concrete path past buildings, the sports complex, and the faux Asiatic garden. Wow! That is really odd. He is urinating on a bush... and that guy is going on a tree. How uncouth.

Luis entered his building and walked up a flight of stairs. The second floor lobby and the dining hall were both packed with other residents. Luis recognized a face as a neighbor and raised his eyebrows, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s working. Seems this stuff all depends on the same whatever that powers the Informateur. Even the elevators are stopped.”

“People are trapped?”

“Not now. When the lights came back on, they went to the ground floor. You’ll have to use the stairs. I hope you don’t need a toilet...”

Luis shook his head. “Thanks.”

Climbing thirty-four flights of stairs will be useless if I cannot open the door. Why don’t I ever take a book to read on the train?

Luis walked around the dining room until he found a small table where no one was seated. As time passed he grew weary. He folded his arms on the table and rested his brow on his forearm just behind his wrist. His eyelids grew heavy.

“May I have your attention?” An unknown voice projected across the dining hall. Luis sat up. “Thank you. I’m Karl, vice-chair of the building council. I accompanied the chair to the main constabulary office for Roseville and have been asked to share some information with you.

“Today around 5:30 local time, the communication infrastructure of the Middle Atlantic District suffered a severe disruption in service — but I don’t have to explain that to those of you who were stuck on trains and in elevators. Information is still very limited and all we have been told is system engineers are working on restoring communications. I was sent back here to tell you that service is expected within an hour or two. This should allow you to use the elevators, toilets, and enter your rooms and apartments. We’ll have to wait and see what happens to other systems – food, climate control, laundry – as the system recovers.

“We will have periodic updates here until your Informateurs return to service. That’s all the information I have at present. Thank you for your patience.”

Others started talking in small groups. Luis sighed and returned to his resting position on the table top.

This is so strange — no food and I cannot even go to bed. I wish I had had a vitamin drink today. Wait. No I don’t. The idea of exposing himself in public, even at the need of urination, was about as humiliating an experience as Luis could imagine. I should have stopped at the Local Produce Market tonight, an apple or pear or something would help.

Time passed and someone announced the elevators were working. The crowd moved towards the elevators, but Luis decided to wait until the rush passed. Why hurry? Are the doors working? Besides, maybe the food formatters are.

BAM! An intense pressure exploded inside his head. He bolted upright and looked around. The remaining people grasped and prodded and massaged their own skulls in seeming solidarity with Luis’ pain.

A minute passed and the “Ode to Joy” started playing. “Blech. Beethoven,” Luis exclaimed. He blushed, embarrassed by this vocalization. Still, it was a sign the Informateur was again working... and De Authoriteit was still in control.

“Citizens,” the officious voice addressed the Confederation through the implanted receivers. “The following is a statement released by the office of Presiding Minister Diedrich Brandt.

“This afternoon terrorists sabotaged key communication installations in the Middle District of the Northwest Atlantic Sector of the Industrial Confederation. Disruption of communications has been widespread throughout the sector but most systems have returned or are returning to normal operations.

“While we are still investigating the circumstances of today’s disruption, we reassure citizens we will bring to justice anyone involved in this or any terrorist act against the Confederation. At this time we are unable to rule out the involvement of the Islamic League or

the Union of South and East Asia, but, as always, maintain a vigilant stance against international aggression. It is our sincere intent...”

Luis stood and walked towards the elevators wishing he could turn off rather than just tune out the rest of the statement.

The last thing we need is a new wave of violence.



Episode Seven ♦ *Questions*

Waking after a fitful night's sleep, Avinashika queried her Informateur for an update on the previous day's terrorist attack. The information contained only reassurances of a return to 'business as usual' and promises to find those responsible for the crime.

I guess no one was killed; they'd be happy to publicize that.

Dressing in her overalls with the daisy buttons, she skipped her morning coffee preferring to weed the garden and reconnect with the natural world. There was no remorse as she ripped the young dandelions out of the soil – she grew plenty of tastier greens; no volunteers were needed.

If only international politics were so easy.

Rap, rap, rap – knuckles on a door. Since no one had passed her on the garden path, she knew it was not her own and continued with her work.

“Mr. Bennett, I'm Chief Investigator Kreitman and this is Detective Rivers. We understand you and your wife recently took possession of these premises from Willem van de Velde. When was that exactly?”

“Three days ago. Why?”

“We are trying to trace the movements of Mr. van de Velde.”

Avinashika stayed low to the ground and turned towards the porch of Willem's old home. She was unable to see those talking.

“Our information says you transferred one thousand credits to Mr. van de Velde one week ago.”

“Yes. I understand that's a normal amount of key money for a place like this.”

“Where is your wife?”

“She's feeding our baby...”

“Mrs. Bennett, please join your husband at the front door. We need to ask you a question.”

“Is that really necessary?” Tristam objected.

“Don't worry. Eton was just finishing.” The woman's placating voice joined the conversation. “That's a good girl.”

“Did either of you offer any additional compensation to Mr. van de Velde?” A deeper, male voice entered the conversation. It seemed more menacing to Avinashika.

“No, just the thousand credits,” replied the husband.

“And you ma'am?” It was the tenor male voice.

“Tristam took care of all the arrangements.”

“How did you become acquainted with Mr. van de Velde?”

“We really didn’t know him,” Tris responded. “My in-laws run a booth in the market and heard he was looking for someone to take his house when he left. Can’t blame my father-in-law for helping us find our own place – their home was rather cramped.”

“How many times did you meet with the previous resident?”

Tristam answered, “Just once, about an hour after Dad contacted me. I met Willem where Marigold Place meets Sylvan Lane. I followed him here, looked the place over, and transferred the credits. It was quick, but we’ve been looking for some time and I didn’t want to miss the chance.”

“That’s the only time you met?” It was the other voice.

“Oh, and to pick up the key...”

“I see.”

“Did Mr. van de Velde leave any contact information or share with you his travel plans?” The original questioner took up the interrogation again.

“No, just that he was going out west.” Tristam returned.

“I see.” It was the deep voice. “Is there something you wish to share with us Mrs. Bennett?”

There was no reply. It was then that Avinashika noticed her hands supporting her lower abdomen. She released the stress by concentrating on her breathing.

“I have transferred our contact information to your Informateurs.” It was the tenor speaking. “If you should remember anything related to Mr. van de Velde, we ask that you contact us immediately regardless how trivial it might seem.”

“Anything remotely related to Mr. van de Velde,” continued the baritone. “Your comments have been... informative. Good day.”

Oh no, they are coming here next. Avinashika squatted, trembling, but they must have walked the other way down the trail. Images played across her mind: Bubbeh’s oracle, her recent dreams, the disappearance of politically active friends. She forced the panic down with slow, deep breaths and cleared her mind. Rising to her feet, she reentered her home.

She started dropping items into a cloth sack – cheese, bread, apples. Then changed out of her gardening clothes into denim slacks and layered the dark cotton blouse over a T-shirt over her bra. She grabbed a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, and a couple extra changes of undergarments and stuffed them in the bag before putting on a pair of walking shoes and a navy, medium-weight jacket. Last she picked up a wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl, coral, and lapis lazuli.

Closing the door to her home, Avinashika made her way through the garden into the grazing area of a neighbor’s pair of goats, between some houses, and onto a different track towards a more distant tram stop. By going this route she hoped she would be less likely to run into someone she knew.



Luis stood on the Unity Plaza Station platform listening to “Neptune, the Mystic” from Gustav Holst’s *The Planets*. The music stopped mid motif.

“This special bulletin is being released by the Office of Investigative Services for the Middle District of the Northwest Atlantic Sector of the Industrial Confederation. Your attention to this matter is required.”

Looking up, Luis noted the mural’s artistic design was replaced by an agency logo repeated down the length of the platform.

“Investigators seek any information related to the movements and whereabouts of Willem van de Velde, most recently of the East Hartfield Free Settlement Area. Mr. van de Velde is believed to have information critical to the investigation of recent terrorist activities against communication infrastructure in the district. Residents with information about Mr. van de Velde’s movements are required to contact the Office of Investigative Services or their local constabulary immediately. Failure to do so may result in criminal prosecution, a fine, and possible confinement.”

Having finished the final movement of *The Planets*, the Informateur restarted the symphony with “Mars, the Bringer of War.” Luis struggled for breath as Willem’s picture remained on the wall with an ‘If you have seen this man...’ message and contact information. But for the coaxing movement of the crowd surrounding him, he would have remained transfixed where he stood. The image persisted in his mind as he reached for a hanging strap. The train glided out of the station.

Luis thought, “Status Willem.”

“Status unavailable.” No information about Willem’s location was provided.

“Leave message, ‘Call me’.”

“Messaging capabilities with this account are currently inactive. No message left,” the system returned.

That is very strange.

Should I contact the Office of Investigative Services before talking with Willem? If so, what do I say? We ate a meal together a few days ago. He said he was leaving for the West. I don’t know if he’s even left yet. He might be going to Memphis, Norleans, Saint Louis. I have to share this information with investigators.

Then he pealed off the questions he would ask someone who volunteered such meaningless details: How long have you known him? What is the nature of your relationship? Why didn’t you ask him about his plans? What information are you hiding from us?

Maybe I should not come forth, at least not until I have thought this through better. Yes, if I organize my thoughts...

This provided a sense of comfort, but he knew they would come to him.

No, it's always better to go to them. I could go to the precinct in Roseville Station. No, not a good idea. It would be better to go to the Office of Investigative Services tomorrow in Hartfield. Yes, that's what I'll do.

“Approaching Roseville Station in one minute. Thirty-three credits will be deducted from your account when you leave the station.” The inorganic thought scratched the layer just below Luis' consciousness.

He started walking towards the train's door.

A hand rested on his shoulder. “No. Don't get off here.” The woman's voice came from behind him.

Surely, if it's them, they would be escorting me off the train.

She continued, “There are some seats behind us. Come.”

Luis wondered if it was safe to turn around, but nothing in the voice nor the touch had increased his fear. On the contrary, it was calming, soothing.

He followed the woman. She was almost his height with straight, black hair flowing down to her shoulders. Her dark jacket – while a bit warmish for this time of year – and dark, indigo jeans only revealed that she was not obese.

She ducked into a pair of open seats facing in the direction of travel. He caught her profile and immediately recognized her Indian features. “Avina...”

“Shhh. Play some music. We're going to need to change at Brockton.”

“You don't think he...”

“I don't know what to think — it's best not to — not just now.”

◆◆◆

Avinashika walked down the Brockton Station platform in silence. Luis followed her lead while attempting to concentrate on Chopin's *Waltz in A minor, Op. 34 No. 2*. Avinashika looked around; no one was near. She sat on a bench. He joined her.

“Stop music,” he thought to the Informatour sensing she wanted to talk.

“Through trains stop here. I think it's best we go north,” she declared.

“I don't understand.” Luis' panic had long since given way to confusion.

“Two investigators questioned the new people in Willem's home this morning. It's only a matter of time before they come for us.”

“Why? They probably know everything we know.”

“Yes, but they still need to see our reactions, our body language.” She removed an apple from her bag and held it out to him.

He waved it off. “You think he was involved?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I know his politics were...”

She cut him off. “Don’t go there. Listen, as far as I know, he was closer to us than anyone. Even though he told me almost nothing about his plans... Did he tell you he was leaving the morning after you came to lunch?”

Luis shook his head. “I thought he was still at home.”

“I don’t understand why, but he didn’t want us to know details. We both know he was funny that way, and it just won’t past the smell test,” she tapped her forefinger aside her nose, “if you know what I mean.”

“But I have nothing to hide.”

“I take it you don’t know many people who have been active against the government.”

“No. I do not move in such circles.”

“People disappear.”

“But I have nothing to hide,” he insisted.

“Luis, please understand that whatever you two mean to each other...”

Now he interrupted, “We have only ever been friends.”

“It doesn’t matter. Willem knew lots of people. He slept with lots of people. It’s not important.”

Luis was dubious but kept his mouth shut.

“I think I might be pregnant.” She put her hand on her abdomen. “If I am, I’m carrying Willem’s child.”



Episode Eight ♦ *Remembrance*

Luis remained mute, thinking about her revelation. He looked down the well-lit platform; only a handful of people milled about. Thank you for telling me... What can I say?

“If I *am* pregnant,” Avinashika said, “I don’t want my baby born in prison.”

Luis nodded.

“It’s just...”

He sensed she was troubled. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“No.”

“Well maybe you should before running off. You have not done anything wrong, have you?”

“You mean other than sleeping with Willem?”

“No, not that.” He rubbed his forehead. “What did you know about his plans?”

“He planned on taking the first train to come and heading west.”

“Yes. No idea where, when, or what...”

“Exactly.”

After a few moments of silence Luis said, “I know I need to go to the investigators, but what can I tell them? He was going west. That’s about it.”

“I know. That’s what worries me too. They won’t believe us.”

“Maybe if we go together?”

“Won’t help.”

“Okay, separately then. We will tell them what we know — it will be the same. That will be that.”

“I don’t think so.” She shook her head. “That’s not how things work – at least not for my family. See — my grandparents were born in India. They were old-fashioned, fortune-tellers, and married within their caste.”

Luis nodded.

Avinashika took a bite of the apple and chewed. “They were from small villages in the Darkness – remote places – but after union with China people who followed the old ways were hounded by the authorities. So they left India. All four were interred in a Confederation resettlement camp near Minsk.”

“That is awful.”

“It gets worse. At that time international tension ran high. De Autoriteit didn’t want to let in people from the Union or the League. Everyone was a terrorist.”

Luis interrupted, “Maybe I will take an apple after all.”

Avinashika fished another out of her bag and handed it to him. “My grandparents didn’t like to talk about it, but I understand that they endured a lot of forceful interrogation.”

“You mean torture?”

“Probably. They never went into detail, but that’s my guess.”

Luis shook his head. “Oh, how horrible. People are cruel.”

“It might’ve been done to discourage people from resettling in the Confederation. Lots of people would confess to something – *anything* – to get the interrogation to stop. Most would say they stole something and were sent back. Some said they were spies and disappeared. Probably sent to another camp.”

“How do you know this?”

“Well, I know people who knew people... It doesn’t matter.”

“And your grandparents?”

“All four endured. My parents were born in the camp. My father’s parents were settled in Hartfield and my mother’s family were sent to Madrid. But the marriage had been arranged and when my mother was old enough she was sent to marry my father.”

“Are they still alive?”

“No, my dad was killed in a factory accident. Mom didn’t live long after.”

Luis swallowed a bite of apple. “I am sorry to hear that.”

“See, even though my sister and I were born in the free settlement, we’re only resident aliens.”

Luis nodded.

“I just worry I’ll be sent to some camp.”

“But if you have done nothing wrong...”

“I don’t think it matters what I’ve done – or what you’ve done. Right now we’re close to the wrong person.”

“Maybe it will still be better to go back.”

“I can’t.”

“So, where are you going?”

“Don’t know just yet, but there’s someone I have to see first. Will you come with me?”

“I have to work tomorrow.” Luis’ eyes grew wide in understanding. “I won’t have a job tomorrow.”

“Now you’re catching on.”

“But I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Neither of us have.”

They sat in silence eating their apples. Luis broke the long quiet. “I want to go back.”

“Okay.”

The station chime sounded in their heads. “Attention. Now approaching platform three, northbound local for Pittsburgh.”

Avinashika tossed the core of her apple into a nearby bin. “Well, this is my train. Good luck.” She stood and walked down the platform.

Luis was conflicted. I have to go back. He studied his finger as the train pulled into the station.

“All passengers please prepare to board.”

Luis looked down the platform. Avinashika was a couple car lengths away. She stepped through the doorway. His gaze slid down the sleek, white train and stopped at a window near where he remained seated. An elderly woman looked out the window.

“*Avozinha?*”

Luis jumped off the bench and dashed towards the nearest doorway. The doors were closing. He lunged sideways through the opening just before the door shut.

He walked down the well-lit car examining the faces of passengers, but none looked familiar. Back and forth he paced before going into the next car back. And then the next. At the rear of the train he returned forward. He examined the faces; some people gave him an odd look. He kept walking. Car after car, she was not there.

“Luis?” It was Avinashika.

He stopped. “I saw her. As you got on the train. She was standing at the window.”

“Who?”

“My grandma. But I can’t find her.” He flopped down on the seat across from her.

“Are you okay?”

“She’s been dead for fifteen years. *But I saw her.* She was holding a sign with the words ‘Roseville’ and ‘Agosto’ written like an X. The words shared a common O. That O had a dot in the center.”

“Clearly, a message. I understand the evil eye...”

“Avozinha hated the month of August. ‘Agosto mês do desgosto.’ August is the month of grief – more or less. She would not travel during August, hating making decisions, only shopped for necessities.”

“Someone doesn’t want you to go back to Roseville.”

“I do not believe in superstition. It just seemed so real...”

“I understand. Where’re your parents?”

“Dad was transferred to Geneva about six years ago. He works on some highly-classified anti-matter project. Mother is a linguist. She is always traveling.”

“Are they still together?”

“They are married. That is about it.”

“Were you born in Hartfield?”

“Yes. My parents met in Raleigh while doing their doctorates. They married after taking teaching positions in Hartfield. I was born a couple years later. They brought my grandma up from Belo Horizonte after my grandfather died. I never knew him. She pretty much raised me.”

“It seems pretty clear she doesn’t want you to go back.”

“Maybe, but I do not want to believe you.”

The Informateur interrupted their conversation. “Approaching Caseville Station in two minutes. Passengers alighting at Caseville should gather their belongings and proceed to the nearest exit. Caseville next stop.”

“I’m thirsty,” Avinashika said. “Come with me to get a drink, okay?”

“Sure.” Luis followed Avinashika down the aisle. The train seemed mostly empty.

“Maybe there’s a formater in the next car.”

The train came to a halt and the doors opened. Avinashika broke her stride forcing Luis to stop short. She grabbed his hand, dashed, and pulled him out the nearest door as it closed.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“Didn’t you see those two guys wearing black suits?”

“No.”

“One was standing at the train door as it pulled away. They saw us. *They were on the train.*”

“Who was on the train? Who do you think they were?”

“Agents. Like the guys who’re at Willem’s today.”

“You think they are following us?”

“I don’t know. But if they aren’t, I know where they are going. Next stop is near Appledorf.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s go find something to drink. There has to be a pub or diner around here somewhere.”

Together they walked out of the small, dark station ignoring the account debiting message. A quiet street stretched out in front of the entrance. A few shops lined either side of the dirt track, all dark but one midway down the stretch. A dim light glowed above the door.

Avinashika reached for Luis' hand. He tensed for a second then felt comforted. They walked towards the light. On the door was lettered "All Ways Inn." Luis held the door open as Avinashika entered the dingy restaurant. A couple sat at a table eating without talking or looking at each other. A man sat in a booth alone and another sat at one end of the counter.

"Howdy. You're not from around here," said the man wearing a sweat-soaked cap and grease-stained apron; both had once been white. "What can I getcha?"

Luis looked at Avinashika.

"I'll take a grilled cheese sandwich and some iced tea." Her confidence suggested numerous prior visits.

"Make it two," Luis added.

The guy at the end of the counter got up and exited the restaurant in silence.

The cook motioned towards a table. They sat as Avinashika placed her bag on an extra chair.

"You know, I think he might actually cook those sandwiches," she said.

Is that a good or bad thing? A message registered, "Seven credits are being deducted from your account for a sandwich and drink."

They sat in silence as the pair finished eating and left. A couple minutes passed and the cook brought out two plates balanced on his left arm and a glass of iced tea in each hand. "Are you in town for long?" He set the glasses and then the plates in front of Avinashika and Luis.

Luis looked at Avinashika.

"Not long," she answered. "Actually, we got off the train too soon."

"Where y'all headed?"

"Appledorf."

"Train don't stop there anyway. It's a bit longer from here, but you can still get there. Hey Joe," he called to the lone man sitting in a booth. "You know anyone going to Appledorf?"

Joe stood up and strode towards the other three. "Might. Just not tonight. You folks got some place to stay?" He wore navy coveralls, black boots with thick soles, and adjusted a dark McStarMart cap.

Luis felt vulnerable. "No."

"Think someone could put 'em up, Mel?"

"Can't hurt to ask. You mind taking them 'round?"

"Not at all."

Mel returned to his kitchen.

Avinashika moved her bag off the chair. "Please. Have a seat."

Joe sat. "Thank ya kindly. Where ya folks from?"

"Hart..."

She cut Luis off. "Hartford. Here to find a friend that moved down this way some years ago. Know anyone by the name of Ugo?"

"I do. But not in Appledorf."

Luis took a swig from the tall glass of iced tea.

Avinashika swallowed a bite of the sandwich. "Mmm, that's good. Local cheese?"

"Probably," Joe said.

She continued, "So, where does the Ugo you know live?"

"Hard to explain to someone who don't know. Why don't you finish your food? I need to make a quick stop."

They nodded as Joe got up, walked across the diner, and left through the back door.

Luis set down his half eaten grilled cheese. "You think this is safe?"

"We've got to find Ugo. To do that, we're going to need to trust people like him."

Luis shook his head.

They ate in silence.



Episode Nine ♦ *Caseville*

Luis followed Avinashika and Joe out of the front door of the diner. Where is he taking us? Why should we trust *him*? I know I do not.

The trio turned off the main road onto a residential street. It was dark without street lamps lighting their way. Lights shone in some windows. Other homes, while dark, had a lived-in look. Do they really go to bed this early here?

“How big is this town?” Luis asked.

“Caseville? Guess, maybe, eight hundred or so,” Joe said.

“And the train stops here?”

“Well there’re lots of small towns in the area. Caseville just happened to be in the way. Most trains don’t stop — just one in the morning and one at night.”

Avinashika jumped in. “How about southbound? When’s the next southbound train?”

“Late in the mornin’ tomorrow.”

They crossed another street. At the third house, Joe pushed open the gate. “Just go on up to the door. They’re spectin ya.”

“Thanks,” Avinashika said.

“Y’all sleep well.”

Luis let out a deep breath as Joe walked away. “Something about him made me uncomfortable.”

“I think I understand.” Her expression suggested otherwise. “I guess we have until the morning to get out of town.”

They climbed the worn wooden steps to the front porch of the two-story house. It was clean if in need of a coat of paint. A dim light was visible through the glass in the front door. As Avinashika reached out to knock, the door swung open.

A woman with curly, grey hair wearing a floral robe and slippers greeted them. “You must be the couple looking for Ugo. No hotel in town, so we try to find some place for folks to bed down for a night or two. I’m Cordella. Pleased to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Avinashika and this is Luis. We appreciate the hospitality.”

“Well, it’s nothing fancy but the bed’s comfortable and the quilt’s warm. Follow me.”

Closing the door behind him, Luis followed the two women along the dimly lit hallway beside the staircase to the second floor. Ancient photographs hung in chipped, wooden frames. The floorboards creaked as they moved.

“Pa’s already in bed.” Cordella cracked open a door and flipped on the light using a wall switch. “Here’re the facilities if you need ’em.” The light on and the door open, she continued two more steps and opened another door across the hallway, again using a wall switch to turn on

the light. “I hope you’ll be comfortable. We’ll see you in the morning then. Sleep well.” She disappeared up the steps.

Avinashika entered the room while Luis stood in the doorway. The dim light from the ceiling fixture revealed walls painted a pale yellow. To his left and next to the door stood a large, antique, wooden dresser. A crocheted runner, yellow with age, was protected by a glass top from a clutter of old, empty glass bottles on display. Faded lettering said “Coke,” “Pepsi,” “Fanta,” “RC,” and “Dr. Pepper.” Above the dresser hung a large mirror; its reflective surface cracked and peeling. Everything had been dusted recently.

A couple feet in front of the door was a busy, floral-print wingback chair next to a small, round table covered by a lacework doily and another piece of glass. On it sat a green “7-Up” bottle used as a vase for a couple daisies made from stiffened lace. Across the room from the chair, midnight blue, damask curtains were drawn shut.

The four-poster bed filled much of the remainder of the room. It was covered with a yellow quilt of various fabric prints stitched together in blocks suggesting flowers.

Luis struggled to breathe. “Do you need the loo?”

“No, you go first.” Avinashika set her bag on the floor at the other end of the dresser.

Luis closed the bathroom door, turned on the tap, and splashed cold water on his face. In the small mirror, he looked deep into his dark brown eyes. It’s only a full-sized bed! What am I going to do?



As Avinashika used the bathroom, Luis sat in the chair and studied a needlepoint sampler that hung on the wall across from the mirror. He recognized the quotation from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. “God bless us every one!” It was surrounded by a cruciform, a star of David, a crescent moon and star, a swastika, an unknown symbol, and a small circle of blue and green meant to evoke the Earth.

When she returned, he pointed to the sampler. “Do you know what that symbol is? The one that looks like a 3 with a hook?”

“It’s a *pranava*, a Hindu symbol. In Sanskrit it’s read ‘aum’. We say ‘aum’ when meditating.”

“Interesting. Um…” How do I put this?

“No, ah-um,” she said enunciating.

He ignored the correction. “Maybe one of us should stay awake. You know, keep watch?”

“We’ll be safe tonight. Maybe someone will be looking for us tomorrow but there have been no Informateur alerts like Willem’s. Let’s just get a good night’s sleep.”

He avoided eye contact with her. “I am not feeling sleepy. Let me know when you are ready. I will get the light.”

He looked away as she removed her pants and slipped underneath the covers. “There really is plenty of room Luis. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“Play Rachmaninov, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Van Cliburn and the Moscow Philharmonic.”

“Okay, you can turn off the light now.”

Luis walked over to the light switch and cast the room in darkness. He fumbled back to the chair, rested his head on the side cushion, and concentrated on the music.

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“Oh you’re up?” Cordella was at the stove cooking as Avinashika entered the kitchen. The morning sun lit up the room. “I was just going to wake you. Hope you slept well.”

“Wonderfully! What smells so good?”

“We’ve got scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, coffee, and some grits if you like.”

“I usually only drink a couple cups of coffee in the morning. Don’t know about Luis – I mean – I don’t know what he’ll feel like.”

“Well you’ve got a long road ahead and you probably won’t get a decent meal for a couple of days, so you better not let all this food go to waste.”

Luis entered looking much the worse for wear: his hair mussed, clothing wrinkled, and dark circles under his eyes.

“Morning,” Avinashika said. “Cordella tells me we should have a big breakfast since meals might be scarce for a couple of days.”

He looked at Avinashika, his eyebrows pinched together, then mustered a smile for Cordella. “It smells great. I am hungry.”

“What’ll I dish up for you?” Cordella asked as she set down a cup of coffee in front of each guest. “Scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, grits?”

“A little of everything for me, thank you,” Luis said.

Cordella looked at Avinashika. “And for you?”

“Everything but bacon please.”

“Can do.” Cordella started dishing up the food. “Pa’s gone to get a van. We’ll take you part of the way.”

“That’s not necessary.” Avinashika felt the hospitality was enough.

“Well you can hardly walk to Ugo, especially given you’ve no idea where it is.”

Luis looked at Avinashika, wide eyes added to the pinched brow.

Cordella continued, “You’re not the first to come here looking for Ugo. Most folks go to Appledorf, but occasionally people come through Caseville. We put ’em up and get them on

down the road. It's a long trip," Cordella looked at Luis, "and I was saying that you might not get another meal for a couple days. So you best not hesitate in asking for seconds."

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Luis asked, "Can we pay for the bed and breakfast?"

Cordella shook her head. "Ugo takes care of expenses. If you are sure you don't mind doing the dishes, I'm going to tidy up a bit before we head out. Pa will have the van at eight."

"Really, it would be our pleasure," Avinashika said smiling.

Luis took the scrubbed dishes from Avinashika, rinsed them in a sink of water, and wiped them off with a towel he found nearby. He stood the plates in the plate rack, hung the coffee cups, and returned the pots to hooks above the stove. He looked at Avinashika preparing to ask a question.

"Don't talk about it." She cut him off. "Try not to think about it, or any of this for that matter. You really should have slept in the bed."

"It's nothing personal, I just thought..."

"No worries. It was probably the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in, and from the sound of it we have quite a journey ahead of us."

His voice hushed, Luis asked, "You think we can trust them?"

"What choice do we have? We've got to trust someone. They've some connection to Ugo, and we need to get out of town before the morning train arrives." Avinashika used a rag to wipe down the stovetop. "And frankly, I find it much easier to trust average people like them."

Luis shook his head and sighed aggressively. I trust technology. Not people.

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Following the two women down the street away from the diner, Luis wondered at the people who chose to live in such a small, quiet town. The houses were larger than he was used to and there was lots of space around them; there was no sense of crowding like in Hartfield.

As they neared the end of the street, Luis noticed the overhead beam of The Track. High enough off the ground that people could pass underneath with over a meter to spare, it was the only form of automated travel beyond the large cities. Luis would normally be excited by a rare opportunity to ride The Track.

Turning left, they found the lift door open and rode up to the platform. As the doors opened Cordella said, "Good, Pa's here already."

The vehicle was almost as large as Luis' room with a sizable sliding door to the empty, rear compartment. From it they entered the forward cabin through the bulkhead door. Along this wall was a bench seat with two bucket seats in the nose of the vehicle.

"This is my husband, Pasquale, but everyone calls him Pa," Cordella said.

A balding man who appeared to enjoy food more than physical labor stood and greeted them with outstretched hand. “Nice to meet you. Well, if you’re ready, let’s be off.” He was a head taller than Luis.

Pa returned to his seat, the doors closed, and the vehicle eased away from the elevated platform. Avinashika and Luis sat on the bench, the bulkhead door separating them. Luis looked out at the village on the left side and farm fields on the right.

Cordella turned around and said, “I need you to use this.” She held up a small canister with a breathing cup at the top. “It’s nothing harmful. It will help you sleep. Unfortunately you can’t see where we’re going.”



Episode Ten ♦ *Stone*

Cordella handed the canister to Avinashika. “It’s a compound with something to relax and something else to help you sleep. All you have to do is take a deep breath and hold it in for thirty seconds. You should sleep until you get to Ugo, but in case you don’t, remember we’ll be transferring you to someone else.”

Though Avinashika took the can, she held it a minute before asking, “Why can’t we see where we are going?”

“Ugo doesn’t allow it,” Cordella said. “I promise it won’t harm you.”

“And my baby?”

“How far along are you?”

“A couple days...”

“You will be fine, dear.”

Luis stood. Pa countered. The man’s overwhelming physical presence scuttled Luis’ resolve. He returned to his seat.

“It’s okay Luis.” Avinashika spoke with resignation. “If this is what I need to do to get to Ugo, then I’ll do it.” She put the breathing cup over her nose and mouth, started a deep breath, and released a dose of the aerosol. She continued to breathe in until her lungs were full, then rested her head against the bulkhead.

Luis tried to wipe some non-existent goo from his fingers as he contemplated his options. He wanted to go home.

Letting out the long breath, Avinashika held up the canister for Luis and said, “It seems okay. I just feel relaxed.”

“That’s right.” Cordella nodded. “It won’t hurt you.”

Pa asked, “So what’s it going to be, son?”

“Can I just go home?”

As if conspiring against him all three said, “No.”

“You’ve come too far,” continued Cordella.

“We can do this the hard way,” said Pa.

Luis’ chest felt tight. He needed an escape, but understood there was no way out of the moving vehicle. He thought, “Override operational control of this vehicle.”

“Operational control currently assigned. All systems functioning normally. Override operational control not permitted,” the system returned.

Pa was in control: his gaze was stern, unflinching.

Luis grabbed for the can. “Give it to me.” Avinashika’s eyelids drooped. He turned away from her and put the cup to his face.

“And remember, we’ll be transferring you along the way,” Cordella said again as Pa returned to his seat. “Don’t worry if you wake up and there is something on your head. They’ve got to shield it so that your Informateurs can’t be tracked.”

“Who’s they?” Avinashika said, her speech slurred.

Luis could feel the drug taking affect. His fear evaporated. He felt warm and comfortable. He set the canister on the bench next to him and looked out the window. Farms covered the rolling hills zipping by, a hint of the Appalachians in the distance. A vehicle heading towards them blurred past on a second beam. His head nodded as he tried to fight off the overwhelming need to sleep. Why didn’t I...last night? Comfortable bed.

“Play Mozart, *Twelve Variations on ‘Ah vous dirai-je, Maman’*...”

The music started as the drug overwhelmed his resistance.

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Luis was sure he was flying. But unlike his usual dreams of flight he could not see buildings, trees and grass, and gently rolling hills below him; he could only see blue sky and an occasional cloud.

“You’re absolutely sure these are the right ones.”

“Yup. I mean, how many sleeping Indian women do we see out here?”

“Well, I don’t want to make a mistake.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“And we just put them in a mine car? Why no helmet?”

“This shaft is long but the grade is shallow. Someone will take care of that down below.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“So how long you been with Ugo anyways?”

“Couple years. Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Well, sometimes being ‘just curious’ gets a guy in trouble. I mean, you ask too many questions.”

“Okay. Okay. Just making small talk.”

“On the count of three.”

“One. Two. Three.”

Thud.

Luis started to drift again. The blue sky went black and stars shot by.



The room was cold and dark. Luis lay on his back staring up at a bulb in a caged recession in the ceiling. While bright, its light was eaten by the space.

He sat upright, feet on the floor, and stretched his shoulders and back. The light formed a meter-wide puddle on the floor in front of his leather shoes. The floor appeared to be smoothed stone. The focus of the light made it difficult to see anything in the shadows surrounding it.

Thinking back to Cordella and Pa and traveling along The Track, Luis remembered breathing in something that made him sleepy. But between then and now his memory was muddled by dreams.

He stood feeling well-rested. Unable to see the black surface of the walls he started to investigate them with his fingers. The walls were rough and irregular with an occasional ridge or crack. They reminded him of the stonework on the ground floor of the bank building where he worked. He understood the room was hewn out of stone. I must be underground someplace. Wait. Didn't I dream something about a mine? Maybe this is a mine.

His hands traced the cold rock walls until the feeling changed; the new surface felt like sand had stuck to the finish. He tapped it with his fingertips and it gave a faint ping. It's metal. A door? Hands running over the surface, he was able to delineate its width but unable to find a knob or release.

Pounding on the metal surface with the side of his right fist, Luis called, "Hello! I'm awake. Can you let me out now?" He waited a minute and hammered three more times. "Hello?"

"Please sit on the cot. I'll notify your handler you're awake." The voice was unusual. Instead of coming from inside his head, it crackled from somewhere in the room. He looked around to reassure himself he was alone.

He beat on the door some more. "Please. Let me out!" He thumped and hollered but no one responded. He continued pounding on the door until the heels of his hands hurt. It was futile: it was time to follow directions.

Within a minute of sitting down, another voice crackled in the room. "Who are you and why are you here?"

"I am Luis Antas. I am with a friend who is looking for someone."

"What friend?" The voice was a woman's.

"Avinashika..." Damn, Willem never told me... "Uh, I do not know her surname."

"Who's Avinashika looking for?" The voice was cold, dispassionate.

"Someone named Ugo. That is all I know."

"Why's she looking for Ugo?"

"I do not know."

“I see.”

Luis stood. “Where am I? Are you with Investigative Services?”

“I’ll ask the questions. That’s all I have for now.”

“Is Avinashika okay?”

No reply came.

What has she gotten me into? I wanted to go home. Pfft. She was worried about prison. Look where we are. I should have known better. I should have gone my own way this morning.

“Play Debussy, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.”

Nothing happened.

“News.”

Silence.

“Informateur status.”

No response.

It’s not working? How far underground am I? Luis sat on the cot feeling captivity closing in.

“Hello? I am thirsty. Can I have something to drink?”

Silence. Though he listened, he could make out no sound other than his own breathing. No, this is not a prison. It’s too quiet. Luis stood and started to pace between the cot and the door. Pounding on the door is no use. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

No response.

He lay on the cot and started to hum “Muzetta’s Waltz.” Time drifted without meaning.

“Please remain on your cot.” It was the questioner’s voice.

Metal grated against metal. Luis cringed as he looked towards the door. He saw nothing.

Thud. Something fell on the stone floor near the door. Again, the metal grated on metal.

After a short delay the questioner said, “I’ve provided you with some pomegranate juice and a sandwich. We’ll talk again after you’ve eaten.”

“Thank you.”

That was stupid. I thanked someone who is keeping me locked up. Luis rose and walked to the opposite corner of the room. His foot knocked over a liter plastic bottle. That was lucky! I might have stepped on the sandwich. Bending over, he fumbled around the dark corner for the bottle and plastic bag. Under the light he examined them both closely. Looks like they are factory-sealed. I guess they are safe. Not much else they can do to me at this point.

He sat on the cot. His side itched. What is this? Setting the bottle and bag on the bed, he stood under the light. A heavy sweater covered his shirt. Where did this come from?

After a good scratch, Luis returned to the cot and picked up the sandwich. He tore open the plastic bag with his teeth and instantly noticed the delicious aromas mingling: ham, brie, mustard, and onion. A dart of his tongue over his lip and he was alerted to his hunger. Pushing the sandwich out of the bag's opening, he took an oversized bite. The flavors were intense. He sensed a bit of horseradish in the mustard. The bread was an old world white, chewy, with a substantial crust. He swallowed and took another bite.

Oh this is good. He held the sandwich in his left hand and picked up the bottle in his right. Flicking the sealing catch with his thumb, he popped open the top and poured the cool liquid into his mouth. He was thirsty. Having downed a quarter of the bottle, he continued eating the sandwich. I wonder if I can get another of these.

“Thank you. This really hits the spot.”

“You're welcome,” crackled a voice.

Though he was hungry, he tried not to rush. Better not ask for more. It's impolite. He continued with the hearty sandwich and took a sip of juice. I need to save some for later.

He ate and pondered where he might be. The Appalachians were mined heavily a few centuries back. Is this an abandoned mineshaft? That seems unlikely. Maybe it's a government bunker? Why would they bring me here?

Or maybe they are not De Authoriteit? Do they work for this Ugo person? I wish someone would tell me who Ugo is. Why is it so important she speak with him? Well, if this is how he treats his guests...

Luis finished the sandwich, took a final sip and set the juice bottle on the floor. Feeling a bit sleepy, he lay back on the cot, his left foot resting on the floor. He drifted off.

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“Help me! I can't breathe! Help!” Luis struggled. He grabbed at the thing on his face. His arms would not leave his sides. He attempted to kick his feet. They too were immobile. “Let me go!” His words were muffled.

A pillow was removed from his face. “Why do you seek Ugo?”

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Episode Eleven ♦ Catherine

“Help me! I can’t breathe!” Luis struggled but was unable to move his hands or legs. His voice was lost in the pillow held against his face.

The pillow was pulled away.

“What do you want from Ugo?”

“He knows what happened to my friend Willem. I just want to know he’s okay.”

“Liar!” The pillow moved closer. “Tell us the truth. Who sent you here?”

He screamed as the pillow again crushed his face.

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Luis bolted upright flailing against nonexistent bonds and tormentors.

“You’re okay.” It was the voice that crackled. “You had a nightmare.”

Looking around the dark space, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sweater sleeve. He felt colder. The single focused light reminded him he was still in the cell.

“Could I use the restroom?” He knew someone was listening.

“I’ll let your handler know.”

Time passed.

Wondering how long he had been asleep, Luis thought, “Time.”

Nothing happened. His Informateur was still not working.

“Hello Luis.” The questioning voice crackled. “I have a few more questions for you. Why are you here?”

“I came with a friend. She is looking for Ugo.” He paused but decided to share the truth. “We want to know what happened to our friend Willem.”

She asked, “What do you think happened to him?”

“I have no idea. He said he was leaving for the west – the wilderness park. Then I saw an alert. He is wanted for questioning. I want to know he is okay.”

“Do you think he’s not okay?”

“No. I’m just worried about him.”

“Why?”

“He left without saying goodbye. It was strange.”

“You didn’t know he was leaving?”

“Yes. But not when.”

“Did he plan to go any place in particular?”

“No.” Luis paused. “Through Saint Louis.”

“Where do you work?”

“North American Banking Company.”

“What do you do there?”

“I’m an auditor. I verify financial statements and reports to De Autoriteit.”

“Who do you report to?”

“The chief accounting officer.”

“Who does Avinashika work for?”

“I have no idea. I think she does odd jobs, sewing and stuff.”

“You’re traveling with her. How well do you know her?”

“Not very. We share a common friend...”

“This Willem you mentioned?”

“Yes.”

“Please lay back on the cot.”

Luis complied. A clunking came from the door followed by a long creaking. Luis was unable to see anything past the focused light.

Two figures appeared from the shadows. Dressed in black body-suits, no skin was visible. One grabbed Luis’ left arm at the wrist and elbow as he tried to sit up.

“Please come with them quietly and you will not be hurt,” the questioner said.

Trembling, Luis took a deep breath. “I will come quietly.” As he dropped his feet to the floor, the other masked person took his right arm. Their grips were strong: it was foolish to fight or run. “I’m okay,” he said.

The other two stepped forward; Luis followed their lead. They maneuvered him through the doorway. Once outside the cell Luis was blinded by insistent light. He shut his eyes, shuffling where led. A left turn. A long straight walk. A right turn. A quick right then another left. His tottering changed to being maneuvered around something. It ended with, “Sit.”

Luis eased into the chair. He opened his eyes but was still oppressed by a light that only shone in his face. He moved, trying to escape into the shadows of the room. The light followed him. He darted his gaze to left and right. Yes, the guards were still there.

“I’m sorry for the dramatics. However, people don’t just show up asking to speak to Ugo.” The questioner’s voice came from behind the light. It no longer crackled. “Most people who come here make contact with an outreach worker in a free settlement first. You two knew to ask for Ugo in Appledorf, even at the All Ways Inn.” She paused. “I’ve reviewed the

intelligence. I'm confident you're not an agent even though you work for an Authority controlled bank."

"I just want to go home."

"So why did you come?"

"Avinashika said it was not safe to go home."

"It probably isn't."

"So where are we?"

"You're in an UGO facility."

"Huh?"

"Do you even know what UGO is?"

"He's some guy. Avinashika thinks he knows what happened to Willem."

The woman adjusted the light. Unfocused, it lit the table between them. He blinked. The outline of her face materialized. She shook her head. "You don't even know *what* UGO is. It's not someone. It's something – a group of loosely-affiliated independent somethings. You're with the underground now. Get it? U-G-O. Under ground organization."

Sighing, Luis made the slightest movement of his head from side to side.

"You have no idea what you've gotten into. Okay, let's get off to a better start." She leaned over the table and presented her right hand. "Hi, I'm Catherine. I've been assigned to handle your case while you two are with us."

Luis took her hand: her grip was firm, officious. They shook and released. "Our case?"

"Well, as I said, people don't usually show up unannounced, especially in Caseville. Usually they come – are brought *here* – because they are ready to have their Informateur removed. That's all we do. Your friend seems to have understood this."

"Is Avinashika okay?"

"Of course. You can see her in a moment. I just want to talk with you individually before taking you to more comfortable quarters. You need to understand your options."

Luis was perplexed. "My options?"

"Well there are many ways an individual can unplug from the communication network. It all depends on what you plan to do next."

"Was Willem here? What did he do?"

"If I knew he was here, I couldn't tell you. You understand – confidentiality and security." Catherine flipped something in her hands. "Still, you left without reporting to Investigative Services. Explaining that will be difficult."

"But I want to go back."

“Okay. Your life will be different.” Her tone was matter-of-fact. She handed him a visor. “Please put this on.”

He placed the light-weight device so it covered his eyes and was held in place with slight pressure on his temples. His view of Catherine remained unobstructed.

“Please review this document,” she said.

As if displayed on a cubicle wall panel at work, the document appeared in the visor. He began to read. “Luis Antas, Senior Auditor, Financial Reporting Division, Hartsfield Office... is immediately suspended until further notice. All security clearances and access to bank premises are hereby revoked until further notice...” Stunned, Luis’ voice trailed off.

“How is the document signed?”

“By the CAO.”

“I wasn’t sure. I can’t read the code.”

Luis removed the visor and thought for a moment. Yes, he had used the algorithm so many times on company documents he was able to decode the signature without thought. He also knew the CAO’s encryption key was required to sign the document. No one else had it.

“If you return, you must be prepared to do time for not reporting to investigators. However, we can help you with a new identity if you wish to avoid that. I recommend against returning to Hartfield though. You might be recognized.”

Luis shook his head. “This is surreal.”

He looked at Catherine. He sensed compassion as she said, “Don’t worry, I’m here to help. We will talk over the details after you’ve rested. In the meantime, do you want to room with Avinashika?”

“No.” He knew his reply was too strong. Adopting a softer tone he said, “I would like my own room and to be able to see her. And I need the restroom.”

“Of course. If you’ll follow me.”

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Luis perused the spines in the Banned Book Room. While still underground, armchairs, a sofa, a rug, and tables gave it a homey feeling.

There must be a couple hundred books here. Books no one has seen for centuries. “Oh my, George Orwell!” He pulled both *1984* and *Animal Farm* off the shelf. “They are legend among bibliophiles and neither is available in the Informatateur library.”

Avinashika sat in a comfortable, overstuffed armchair. She worked with blue fabric, needle, and thread. Luis was clueless what she was making.

He continued. “All copies were lost during wars and coastal flooding.”

“I’m sure they made certain they were lost — lost in water, lost in fire, lost in machines that eat paper,” said Avinashika.

With both volumes in hand, Luis settled into a sofa placed perpendicular to Avinashika; a floor lamp was positioned to provide light to both. “I have to read these before we go.”

“Uh huh.” She nodded.

“Have you decided?” he asked.

“No. I don’t want to go to prison, and it’s hard to leave my sister and her family. With a new identity, Willem won’t be able to find me. I’ll have to find him.”

“So you are thinking of going west.”

“Luis, I want this bug removed from my head. The price of instant access to information is too high – De Autoriteit knowing everything I do. Everything I think. Everywhere I go. I just want to be free. I can be that – out there.”

“I asked Catherine. She says no one knows what they track.”

“It’s easier that way. If we knew, we wouldn’t be so paranoid.” Avinashika picked up a small scissors. “What are you thinking?”

“I just want to go home.”

“You ready for prison?”

“No.”

“Even with a new identity you still can’t go back to your job or Roseville.”

“I know. That troubles me. But living in a free settlement is not so bad. I could try another – say Albany or Charlotte.” He opened the cover of *1984*. “I never imagined going west. I thought someday I would go to South America. See where my family is from. Or maybe Europe.”

“A new identity will probably work best.”

“Yes, but my savings stay with *my* identity. I will not be able to afford a voyage.”

“It’s a lot to think about.”

Luis looked at where the wall met the ceiling. “You really think he is out there?”

“I do. He has to know he’s going to be a father, even if he doesn’t stay around. Somehow I’ll pick up his trail.”

“Don’t you think that sunglass device sounds risky?” he asked.

“All the options are risky. As I said, I like the idea of being unplugged once and for all. The sunglasses allow me to travel, buy stuff, and when I’m crossing the Mississippi, *oops!* they fall into the water. Temporary identity drowns and I’m still me.”

“But the cost — if I can only get a few thousand credits off my account...”

“Don’t worry about it. My identity is rare and valuable. I’m a resident alien of Indian parentage and can claim Union of South and East Asian citizenship. They will pay me enough to cover both of us and get us started again. It’s not so bad.”

“I don’t know.”

“Take a night or two and think about it. You can’t rush a big decision like this.”

Luis started to read.



Episode Twelve ♦ *Identity*

Luis was more comfortable in his new accommodations. While hewn out of the same rock, this room had a full-sized bed with a chartreuse comforter and fluffy pillows. Against the wall a little over a meter in front of the door stood a small wooden table with a pair of chairs. A rug, the color of grass burnt by the summer sun, united the table and bed. John Rogers Cox's *Gray and Gold* hung as a print above the bed.

An overhead fixture dispersed a warm light that made reading easy. With the pillows between his back and the wall, Luis sat on the bed reading *1984*.

Catherine popped her head in. "I understand you have more questions for me."

"I do. Come in." Luis slipped a borrowed teaspoon into the book to save his place. "This world of the underground is new. Can you help me understand it?"

Nodding, Catherine entered. "I can tell you what I know."

Luis got up, moved to one of the chairs, and gestured for her to join him. "Who controls the underground?"

She sat in the other chair. Her shoulders were relaxed but she maintained her poise. "No one. It exists as long as people subvert the status quo. Many do it by living without supporting corporations. You see them going about life every day in the free settlements. Others prefer a more active approach and find a group to work with. Here, we do it by offering choices related to the Informateur and the identity attached to it."

"So what exactly happens with the Informateurs?"

"It depends. We won't be able to sell yours, at least not until the bombing of the district control facility is forgotten. Might not be too long. Word is the Islamic League was behind the attack. But that may just be Authoriteit propaganda."

Luis was surprised. "UGO did not do it?"

"I've no idea who did it. It might've been an underground cell. It might've been foreign agents."

Concerned, he leaned in. "But you might give my Informateur to some terrorist. He could blow something up. Everyone will think I did it."

"That's unlikely. We don't seek out suicide bombers, give them someone's identity, and point them at an Authoriteit facility. We do check out intelligence and try to get a handle on what the person wants to do with the new identity..."

"Like the questions you've asked Avinashika and me." He rested against the back of the chair.

"Exactly. I'm not here to overthrow world order. I do this because I want to help people – people who for their own reasons want a new start. If they are trying to skip out on child support payments, I won't help them."

"So what do you do with a parent like that?"

“The travel memories are fresh. We can usually convert them into remembered dreams. Then we transport the person to wherever makes sense: maybe back home, maybe to a new city.”

“Interesting.”

“Now you’re quite different. We’ve examined the data and see no signs you are trying to escape from anything other than an unfortunate connection. I’m not going to send an honest, unfortunate man like you for torture and confinement. That violates my moral code. So that’s why I’ve offered you a new identity or a temporary identity. The final decision is yours.”

“You could wipe my memory and send me back to Hartfield. If that is what I want.”

“Maybe. You’d probably think you dreamed you were kidnapped by nice people who fed you well and let you read banned books.”

“Gotcha! I’ll be able to recall things from the books. They do not exist on the outside.”

Catherine laughed. “True, but that’s a risk *you* take. If you run around babbling about Big Brother using the Informatour to oppress the masses and change historical interpretation to suit De Autoriteit’s present policy... Well, how would you react?”

“I would smile and get away.” He deflated.

“Exactly. And if someone knew what you were talking about, you’d be risking investigation again. After all, you’ve knowledge of banned books. Very tricky that.” Her ever present smile momentarily dimmed.

“Okay, so if I take a new identity...”

“Everything functions like it does now. We replace your chip with another, and you assume that new identity. However, you can’t go back to Hartfield or wherever that guy came from.”

“And complete removal?”

“There are two options. First, we can just take out the chip. Your Informatour model has everything on the chip. If we remove the chip, you can move around as you like and install another chip and identity in the future. Newer models have tracking technology in the socket.”

“That requires socket removal as well?”

“Yes.”

“With removal I use the eye glass thing to ride the train and buy food.”

“Yes, this is what most choose to do. We embed a chip in the temple of a pair of eye glasses – most people prefer sunglasses since spectacles are rare – this allows you to move around, make purchases, and in most instances pass security checkpoints.”

He leaned forward again. “What do you mean ‘in most instances’?”

“Most facilities open to the general public. You will want to avoid constabulary offices and the like since they do a more thorough security check. Given your case I’d also suggest some

disguise – change your hair style or color, dress differently, a wedding band, stop shaving. I can help with some of that.”

“And if I just want a different identity?”

“As I say, I do a complete background check on identities I handle. I will share that information with you so you know what you are purchasing. We obviously want you to be free from security concerns, but the identity has to match your age and physical characteristics.”

“So you go out and find someone for me to change with?”

“No. We have an inventory of chips and I network with others who trade in identities.”

Regarding the possibilities, Luis was confident he found the loophole. “De Autoriteit must notice an identity disappearing.”

“It might. We store and move the chips around in a way to minimize suspicion. Don’t worry, we’ve been doing this for decades without arousing any serious concern.” Her confidence never diminished.

“The whole thing is unbelievable. Trading identities. I think of my identity as mine. It’s part of me. *It is me*. How can I be bought and sold?”

“Identity is a commodity. All commodities are bought and sold.”

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Luis sat across the table from Avinashika as they ate supper. The dining hall had two long wooden tables, each with enough mismatched chairs to seat a dozen people. While Catherine had joined them for some meals, tonight they ate alone.

Breaking off a piece of rosemary dumpling with his spoon, Luis said, “This is an odd place. An odd world.”

“How do you mean?” Avinashika brought a spoonful of stewed vegetables and lentils to her mouth.

“There are other people around. You just never see them.”

“We’re outsiders. They risk a lot doing this work.”

Luis carefully spooned up pieces of carrot and chicken with thick, creamy soup.

Avinashika put down her spoon. “I saw a doctor today. We did a hormone test. I’m pregnant. I’ve made up my mind to have the Informatuur removed and go west. I want to find Willem.”

Knowing there was a correct response but clueless what it was, Luis continued to eat without speaking.

“Should be no problem to have anesthesia,” she said.

“That is good.” Though he had been enjoying the meal, his appetite failed him. “I’m sorry. I need to be excused.”



Avinashika sat on her bed and continued sewing pieces of denim together. Catherine had managed to scrounge up an old skirt and pair of jeans after Avinashika mentioned making a baby carrier. Her design had worked well for her niece, serving both as a newborn's mobile cradle and upright harness as the girl grew.

Catherine was supportive, even excited for Avinashika, but it was not the same as sharing the news — this much longed for but forsaken news — of pregnancy with her sister. Avinashika missed the knowing look of joy and the excitement of yet another pending addition to their family. Someday, someday the sisters would share it, but now there were more pressing issues.

Avinashika had to tell Willem. Why had Luis become distant when she mentioned it? Was he jealous? It seemed a bizarre notion considering Willem was a stallion that refused the bit. And besides, hadn't Luis insisted they had never had an intimate relationship? Then again Luis hardly seemed the type to be physically intimate with anyone. Something was wrong.

“Knock-knock.”

She recognized Luis' polite way of announcing his presence in an open doorway. “Come in.”

“Sorry to bother you.”

“It's no bother.”

“I've made up my mind. I'm only going to have the chip removed. I want to go west with you.”

She thought a moment, touched by his offer, and looked up from her sewing. “That's kind of you Luis. Really, it is. But you need to do this for yourself, not for me.”

He did everything – anything – but make eye contact with her. “I want to do it. If I cannot go back to Roseville or the bank, I might as well have a little adventure. Travel seems like a good idea.” His manner was abrupt.

“Well, don't feel you have to escort me.”

“I will not.”

She was puzzled by those three words. “As long as you're sure.”

“I just made the arrangements with Catherine. They will leave the socket. I might want to return some day. I might not. I do not know.”

Avinashika set her sewing in her lap and patted the blanket next to her beckoning him to join her on her bed. She needed to talk to him.

Luis said, “I just wanted you to know. Everything is set for tomorrow. For both of us. I'll let you rest.” He left.

She felt the anxiety in her shoulders. Turning her neck from side to side, she concentrated on deep, relaxing breaths. She exhaled the tension.

He's an adult, capable of making his own decisions.



Luis and Avinashika sat at a small conference table with Catherine. A reproduction of Frederic Edwin Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness* hung over Catherine's shoulder. She said, "The idea of traveling as a married couple makes sense and will aid in your disguise. Have you thought of names?"

"Won't they come with the identities you sell us?" Avinashika asked.

Catherine replied, "No. Temporary identities are complete fabrications. That's why they can't withstand any real scrutiny."

Luis broke in. "I want to be George Winston."

"Not a problem," Catherine said. "And you?"

"Well, since it's only temporary... I've always been partial to the name Anita. How about Anita Winston?"

"Okay. I'll get them working on programming your chips. Anything else before I take you to the prep room?"

Avinashika and Luis looked at each other, then at Catherine. Avinashika said, "Let's do it."

Luis nodded in agreement.



Episode Thirteen ♦ *Sunlight*

Alone in the preparation room, Luis felt less certain of his decision than he had the night before. While removal of the chip was not permanent, it had a feeling of finality. He wondered about life without it and what his parents would think happened to him, worried about not knowing where Avinashika and he were headed nor what happened to Willem, and struggled with understanding why all this was happening to *him*.

He looked around the room. It reminded him of other examination rooms but for the dark stone walls. He sat in one of two stiff-backed office chairs. There was no exam table. Along the wall across from the door was a small basin but no spigot. To its right was an empty cabinet with glass doors above a small table.

There was a brief knock on the wooden door. It was Catherine. “So, are you ready to remove your chip?”

“Um...” He felt very unsure and began to stall. “When do I meet the doctor?”

“That generally doesn’t happen.” She was still confident and direct. She sat in the free chair and leaned towards him. “I have to ask you to trust *me*. I promise that the doctor is competent, well-trained, and board-certified to work on Informateur implants. Given the grey legal area of their work here, they prefer to remain anonymous. However, I can ask about meeting...”

“No. That will not be necessary.” He looked into her eyes, sensed her understanding of his fear, but said no more.

“Second thoughts?”

He shifted position in the chair. “Yes. Until you left me alone in this room, I was thinking about an adventurous life – out on the Great Plains. Have they started on Avinashika?”

Catherine smiled. “I believe they have. Like I will do for you, I helped her onto a gurney and administered a short-acting sleeping aerosol.”

“From a can?”

She nodded.

He said, “We had some of that on the way here.”

“Maybe it’s the same. When you’re asleep, I’ll wheel you into the operating room where you’ll be given a local anesthetic. A small amount of hair will be shaved around your incision to allow the surgeon to access the socket. The surgeon will make a small cut, peel back the skin, and unscrew the cap. Once the chip is removed, the cap is replaced, and the skin reattached with bio-adhesive. The whole procedure takes less than thirty minutes.”

Luis swallowed, unable to find the right words. He started to chew on his upper lip.

“Any questions?” Catherine asked.

Starting to tremble, he shook his head.

She rested a warm, steady hand on the back of his forearm. “We don’t have to do this right now, or ever, if you’ve changed your mind.”

“No. It’s okay. I’m ready.” He took a steadying breath before one last wave of panic overtook him. “Can I get my identity back?”

“If you ask for it tomorrow, most definitely, but once you leave here it’ll be transferred to our chip management unit through intermediaries. The whole process is designed to obfuscate their handling. I’ll be unable to locate it.”

“That sounds like a good thing.” He nodded, returned her smile, and swallowed his trepidation. “I just had to know. I’m ready now.”

She reached into a jacket pocket and produced an inhaler. Luis wondered if she had always worn a jacket; he had not noticed her clothing before that moment. “This is the sleeping aerosol.”

“It’s different,” he said.

She replaced the mouthpiece with one from a sealed packet. Holding it upright just in front of her mouth, she said, “All you have to do is put it between your lips, squeeze the top and bottom between your thumb and forefinger, and inhale. But let me get a gurney before you do that. You’re ready?”

He took the inhaler and nodded.



Avinashika sat at the dining table enjoying her bowl of curried vegetables and rice. The food was good and there always was plenty, but she missed being able to cook for herself. Luis sat across from her; Catherine, at the end of the table. They seemed to be enjoying their food which also included chicken.

Missing sunshine, foliage, and birdsong, Avinashika wanted to begin the next stage of the journey. “So, about these disguises...”

“I was thinking we should go *Twelfth Night*,” Luis said. “I can be Cesario.” He looked at Avinashika. “You would make a great Orsino. Only problem is, do we use Elizabethan costumes or another period?”

Was he serious? She looked at him then made sure her own mouth was closed. He smirked. Avinashika struggled for any comeback.

“I was joking!” Luis burst out in laughter. “Sorry. Sorry. It’d just be fun to dress up like that – a man impersonating a woman impersonating a man. Had to suggest it.”

Catherine said, “As much fun as that might be, it’s better to be less conspicuous. The best disguises are natural and require very little maintenance. I was thinking along the lines of aging you both. It would be easy to give you some grey hair.”

“Let’s keep it simple,” Avinashika said. “Some hair dye, a change or two of clothes, cheap wedding bands, and the like.”

Catherine nodded. “Let me see what I can do. Just remember, from now on you’re George and Anita Winston.”



Anita sat in a separate mine car. Padding had been added to the bottom and sides to protect passengers from what promised to be a rough ride to the surface. She would have preferred to be wearing jeans, but the ankle-length dress would keep her covered. The long sleeves, high neckline, Jane Austen waist, and sober navy fabric made her feel matronly. The bag she brought from home sat next to her in the cart.

“Don’t you think it would be fun? Like a roller coaster maybe?” she asked George.

“This is one ride I’d prefer to be asleep for,” he said. He wore a formfitting athletic shirt under an airball jersey with jeans and jump-nikes. A valise from Catherine, with two changes of clothes, sat next to him. He leaned against the back of the car with his legs outstretched.

Catherine smiled. “You don’t have much choice. Like your journey here, you must be asleep for most of it. But before you go, I have something for each of you.” She handed a plastic box to Anita.

Anita snapped down the side catches, lifted the lid, and flipped through various packets. “A first aid kit. Thank you! It’s the sort of thing I would have brought, if I had time to pack.”

Catherine winked. “Just a little something to help you get started across the plains. And for you George. I hope you enjoy them.” She handed him four bound volumes.

“Cather’s *Prairie Trilogy*, Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, Ronda’s *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*, and Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Wow! Thank you. I will miss my book collection. Do you have any idea what will happen to our belongings in Hartfield?”

“It’s hard to say. Since Avinashika lived in a free settlement, I assume the community will redistribute her things at some point. Luis lived in De Authoriteit housing. Eventually they will declare the room abandoned and take his property.”

“Really? What will they do with it?” he asked as he unzipped the suitcase.

“That I can’t say. I guess it’ll be resold or recycled depending on its value.”

“It’s rather odd to think about. If no one enters my room for a year or two, the plants will just continue to grow.”

Anita looked at him. “Why?”

“Automated lighting, watering, feeding, and climate control.”

Catherine held up a canister much like Cordella had offered some days earlier. “And this should ensure you sleep well. It’s simple. Start a deep breath, press down, inhale...

“And hold for thirty seconds. We remember.” The travelers said in unison.

“Keep in mind you’ll be transferred between vehicles and people. I don’t know how many times. So just remember that when you wake up. It’s been a pleasure and good luck in your new lives.”

“Thank you Catherine.” Anita took the can. “I appreciate all you’ve done for us.”

“Yes. Thank you,” said George, packing his books.

Anita started to inhale, took her dose, and waited. As George took his, she released her breath, sat back against the cushion, and said, “Goodbye. Thank you again.”



George awoke lying on his back. He was uncomfortable, but well-rested. The sunlight seemed more brilliant than he remembered.

“So, you’re awake?” It was Avinashika, no wait, Anita. “Don’t worry, I haven’t been awake long either.”

“Where are we?”

“No idea. On a platform next to The Track.” She sat on the concrete, legs crossed, and looked at him.

George stood up and stretched. All he could see was a large concrete slab surrounded by forest. “It’s nice to be outside, but the sun is so bright. How long do you think we were down there?”

“No idea. It’s going to be hard to tell. I won’t ask anyone or they’ll think we’re nuts.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone knows what day it is – it’s on the Informateur.”

Her statement was a wake-up call. “Right.”

George walked around the platform. He estimated the ground was at least four meters below with an equal space between the platform and trees. “Well, there is a path down there that goes into the forest. Do you think it leads back to the mine?”

“No. They’re way too careful. We’ve already been transported some distance away. There’s no telling where we are.”

“And they just left us here?”

“So it appears.”

“What are we supposed to do next?”

“I’ve no clue,” Anita said.

“Well, we cannot walk on The Track, so it’s either we walk underneath it or find out where that trail goes.”

“Or we can just wait here until someone comes along.”

“But that could be days!”

“I doubt it. Think. Since the diner, everything seems like it has gone according to plan. Someone will be along.”

Yeah. Right. George was skeptical. “I wonder why there’s no control panel or anything up here.”

“Why do you need a control panel if you have an Informateur?”

“But what if it stops working?” George’s question awed him. Only days ago such a concept was inconceivable. Now, not only had he experienced a system failure, he no longer had an Informateur.

“You should put your hat on,” Anita suggested.

“What hat?”

“It’s by your case.”

Behind the valise George found a wide-brimmed sun hat made from woven straw. He put it on. “I hope we haven’t been out here baking for very long.”

“It is a warm morning, that is for sure.”

George walked around the platform. “Hey, there is no way down!”

“You noticed that.”

“Why would there be a platform and no way to get up to it?”

“Oh, I’m guessing there’s a way to get up — just no way to get down.”



Episode Fourteen ♦ *Discomfort*

Anita watched George close his book. She sat, her legs stretched out together, and said, “It’s hard to get comfortable on a concrete slab. I wish there was a little shade.” Sweat ran down her back.

“I know,” said George. “How long do you think we’ve been here?”

She looked at the sky. “Judging by the movement of the sun, a couple of hours.”

He sighed and paced around the elevated platform.

“I’m curious. Why did you pick the name George Winston?” she asked.

“Simple, *George Orwell* wrote about *Winston Smith* in *1984*. And Anita?”

“I picked it because it works in both English and Hindi.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“Something like ‘without guile’ in Hindi. Not really sure about English.”

She wondered. Was she without guile? It was easy to avoid thinking about where they were headed when De Authoriteit might read her thoughts. She had also used the same logic to avoid answering Luis’ questions. That foil no longer worked, and now she had fewer answers.

George seemed ready with his next question when a vehicle slid from the forest on The Track. This one was much smaller than the boxy van Pa and Cordella used. The color of meadow grass, Anita thought it was shaped like a grain of rice had swallowed a mung bean. She was unable to see inside the large windows. Stopping at the platform, the door slid open and two men alighted.

“Hi,” said the smaller, slighter of the two. His neatly-combed blond hair was short and parted in the middle. He wore jeans, workboots, and a sportshirt. Blue dye had been used to reveal a splash of daisies across the right front of the shirt. “I’m Matt and this is my husband Parker.” When he said it, it sounded like *Pahkah*. Parker was bald but with a full set of whiskers. He wore matching jeans and boots but a forest green jersey. He was big-shouldered, quite tall, and thick without being fat.

George brightened and stepped forward with outstretched hand. “Hello. I’m Lu...”

“Honey, can you help me,” she interrupted loudly but was standing before he had turned. “We’re George and Anita Winston.” They took turns shaking hands and saying hello.

Matt said, “We’re goin’ to the market in Sterlin’. Whe’re y’all headin’?”

She sensed it was time to wing it. “We’re heading for Saint Louis.” She worried the next questions would be how and why were they here.

“Oh, that’s easy. In Sterlin’ y’all can catch a train for Louieville and transfer to Saint Louie there. We’d be happy to give y’all a lift.” Matt picked up George’s bag.

George beamed.

Her bag over her shoulder, Anita accepted Parker's help through the doorway. Of the three, only Parker had to stoop while inside the vehicle. He offered her a front seat while Matt set the bags on the floor next to a couple boxes behind the seats. Parker sat in the other front seat; George and Matt, in the rear two. Styled like well-appointed household furniture, each teal swivel chair was roomy, comfortable, and made it easy to look at the others while chatting and enjoy a 360-degree view.

The door closed and the vehicle powered forward along the concrete guideway towards its programmed destination. George seemed a bit excited. Was it delight at their rescue? He couldn't be... *flirting*? She fretted he might talk...

"We gotta place up in Packer Holler," Matt said. "If y'all get back this way, y'all have to stop for a visit."

"That would be lovely," said George, wide-eyed. She waited for him to plead *can we, please!*

Matt continued speaking. "I'm not from around here. Parker is. I bet you're wonderin' how we met. It's a funny story. He was visitin' one of his cousins in Nashville. That's where I'm from. Well, my cousin's sister-in-law had a party and you know me, I'm just a withdrawn purple wallflower..." He batted his eyelashes. "...Hidin' in a corner all by my little lonesome, nursin' my cocktail, when this *gorgeous* man comes over and asks me to dance. What could I say?"

She watched George lean forward in his seat. Was he mesmerized by Matt's lilting drawl?

"He took my hand and led me out into the middle of the dance floor. Of course, at that very moment, the band leader called 'couples only' and they played 'Moon River.' Parker sweeps me up in those muscular arms and you can ask him, we've been in love ever since. Right dear?"

Parker smiled. George sighed, "Really?"

"After dancin' for quite a spell, we walked over to a little place I knew. He treated me to a Kentucky Buck and the best pork barbeque this side of Chattanooga. We talked and talked and talked all night. He invited me back to his room, but I said 'I'm just not that kinda boy.' Had to settle for a hug and kiss goodnight and, of course, my contact key.

"We talked whenever we had a chance, but that wasn't too often since he was tryin' to run his family's farm up here – it's where we live now, Packer Holler – lovely place, if y'all ever have the chance, y'all must come and visit. We raise berries, make jams, and have millions of bees, so of course there's scads of honey. Plus chickens, horses, a couple dairy cows, and some goats. So there's lots to keep up with.

"We didn't date as much as I think proper, but we met up at a cousin's house in Louieville when he could get away. That's where you're headed, right?"

George nodded eagerly.

"Well, my cousin turns out to be related to one of Parker's cousin's somethin' or other thrice removed. So that's where we rendezvoused. They live in one of those ancient houses in Ole Louieville. The story goes they're descended from George Rogers Clark who was related to

that famous guy Lewis Clark who discovered the west and was almost killed by savages before a princess fell in love with him and begged her father to spare him and they discovered the Pacific Ocean.”

Anita saw George was enthralled. Smitten even. She shifted position in her chair about to provide the correct version of the stories...

“Well Parker just couldn’t keep his hands off me, but I told him he was goin’ to have to make an honest man outta me before we...” He raised his eyebrows. “So we talked about marriage, but he made me promise to come and live on the farm for a year – can you imagine? A city boy like me on a farm for a whole year? But of course I took to farm life like a bear takes to moonshine.” He flashed an uneven grin Parker’s way.

“And I never left. We got married a year later and that was, ‘bout ten years ago. So what will y’all do in Saint Louie? I’ve always wanted to go out west and see the wilderness. You know, ride horses on the prairie and sleep in a tent, but it’s hard for us to get away for more than a couple of nights because of the animals. I know what y’all’re thinkin’. How’d we even get away this long? Tell ‘em hun.

“It’s all Parker can do to get his brother and *that woman he’s with* to come and look after the place even though half’s his. We do all the work and they still want their share of the berries and honey and eggs and cheese and meat. You should hear Parker go at it with them, but we finally agreed that they’d come up and spend time each month so we can at least get away to shop.

“But they ain’t comin’ over today! No sir! Today we’ll be back b’fore sundown. We milked the cows and nannies before we left and have to get back before milkin’ time tonight. Sometimes a cousin’ll come over if we need to be gone a little longer. We don’t always know when we’ll get called away like today.

“See, we’ve got a friend, more like a cousin of Parker’s, but we’ve never figured out the exact relationship. She has a stall at Sterlin’ Market – you can catch a train there for Louieville. Oh, which reminds me, you have to stay at the Seelbach Inn. I won’t take no for answer. It’s a lovely, magnificent old hotel. Well, not really. The old place burnt down years ago. They rebuilt the main buildin’ as a restaurant, banquet halls, and meetin’ rooms. That’s where we had our reception, matter of fact. All decked out with white daisies and red roses. Our friends and family traveled from all over. It was simply wonderful.

“So the hotel is gone, but they run an inn a couple doors down and the restaurant is fantastic! Good, fresh, local food. You won’t be disappointed. Our cousin works there. Whatever you do, don’t forget to look for a Daisy.”

Anita opened her mouth to ask...

“Anyway, we got a call this mornin’ that this friend, Parker’s cousin or whatever, needed us to bring in a couple more boxes of jam and honey. She sells stuff like that at the market and only carries local stuff. Ours has to be the farm furthest away. I don’t know why she insists we come, but when she calls, we always do.

“And wouldn’t y’all know it? There y’all were sittin’ on that platform. So Parker says we just have to stop and pick y’all up. Who knows how long it would’ve been b’fore your car got

there. Cars are pretty scarce up here in the hills and everyone and his dog needs one to get anywhere. We don't mind pickin' people up. After all, we get to meet lots of really nice people like yourselves thataway.

“Can y'all believe it? We're already in Sterlin'.”

Anita turned her attention to the village outside the window. The car eased to a gradual stop at the town's station. Matt handed Anita and George their bags, motioning for them to exit. They waited on the arrival end of the platform as a family boarded a car at the departure end. Parker emerged carrying two large crates while Matt carried a smaller box. The door closed and the car moved down the platform where an elderly couple waited.

Matt took the lead, walking towards the stairs. “Come with us. Y'all have a couple hours before your train leaves for Louieville. That'll give us more time to visit and walk around the market. I'm sure it's like the market wherever y'all are from, but there's still plenty to see.

“I bet y'all're hungry. Well, we just need to drop off these boxes and we can get somethin' to eat. Our treat. And Parker won't take no for an answer, will ya' dear? Oh, it's such a lovely day. You know, it was a day just like this when we went off to Louieville to tie the knot. Now you won't forget to look for a Daisy, will you hun?” Matt winked at George, who walked by his side.

Anita and Parker followed a few paces behind. Parker smiled at Anita. “Someone's had too much Faulkner in his diet.”



Episode Fifteen ♦ *Louisville*

Anita and George entered Sterling's train station. "And don't forget to look for a Daisy at the Seelbach!" Matt said as he and Parker waved goodbye.

She was exhausted. They had done little more than walk through the small market to the jam and honey stand before heading over to food carts. Even a roast turkey sandwich and iced tea were unable to keep Matt from chattering like a lonely cricket. She felt as if she had run a marathon. And she had a horrible headache.

"Wow, weren't they the nicest guys," George said. "I would love to visit their place. I bet it's up in the mountains. Maybe the mountains over the mine. You're right, someone sent them to pick us up. Do you think it was Catherine? I wonder if we could raise bees out west..."

Was it contagious? "Shut up!" She just could not take any more. "Sorry. George, my head feels like a train packed with tired commuters."

"Are you okay?" He raised his eyebrows with a scrunch of his forehead.

"I'll be fine. Just need a bit of quiet and some rest."

People hurried to the platform. Matt and Parker had timed it so they arrived just before the train pulled into the station. It was difficult to find two empty seats near each other in the train buzzing with conversations. As she sat, George stored their bags on the rack over her head, then took a seat across the aisle and down a few rows. She closed her eyes as he watched her.

The three people next to her jabbered on about the afternoon's airball game between the Lexington Coopers and the Knoxville Honkies. She imagined herself, alone, back on the forest platform delighting in the sun's warmth as a light breeze tickled the leaves.

In Lexington the train emptied of fans eager to see the match. She opened her eyes as George slid into the window seat across from her. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Quite. Thanks."

"I was afraid the noise bothered you."

"No, since no one was talking to me, it was easy to tune it out and get some rest. Maybe I got a bit too much sun today."

"Would you like some water?"

She shook her head. "Thank you." A moment of panic grabbed at her stomach. "Neither of us have used our — where are our sunglasses?"

George grinned. "Do you honestly think Catherine would send us away unprepared? They're in our bags. I saw mine when I put away my book this morning."

Leaping up, Anita grabbed her bag: she had to be certain. She dug through the clothing and found the glasses wrapped inside a shirt. She removed them, closed the cloth bag, set it on the empty seat next to her, and returned to her seat. She opened the thick, dark brown, recycled plastic frames and placed them on top of her head.

She looked around, making sure no one was within earshot. “We’ll soon find out if they’ll work.”

George nodded. “Were you serious about going to Saint Louis?”

“I guess. It’s one of the places he mentioned, right?”

Nodding, George said, “But also Memphis, Norleans, and Twin City.”

“What do you make of all that,” she shook her head between her upheld outstretched fingers, “nonsense that Matt was blathering on about?”

“Oh, he’s just a friendly guy. Maybe he gets nervous and loose-lipped around new people.”

She pondered the prior couple of hours and said in a hushed tone, “I can see why you might think that, but maybe he does that to confuse anyone listening in. You know, on the Informateur.” She tapped her skull near where they had operated on her. The proximity made her wince.

“Does it hurt? Is that why you have a headache?”

“No, actually that doesn’t bother me at all. Pretty amazing, don’t you think?”

“I’m guessing the bio-adhesive they use has anesthetic properties,” he said.

“That would make sense. Or maybe it has something to do with the bit of engineered skull bone they used to cover the hole where my socket was.”

George pulled a face as if he were in excruciating pain. “I’d rather not think about that. As long as you’re okay.”

“So, back to our friendly magpie. Besides everyone being his cousin — wait, do you think that was his way of saying they’re like a big family? You know, like UGO?”

George’s eyes bugged out; it was clear to her the thought was a revelation for him. “If so, then the only other thing he brought up over and over was Louisville. Maybe it was a message. ‘You need to go to Louisville’.”

“To that hotel to find this Daisy person.”

“So what’s the downside?” he asked.

“I don’t believe it’s a trap. No one can track us, so how could you-know-who find us out there in the forest?”

George looked out the window at the fields whizzing by as the train slowed on approach to Frankfurt.

◆◆◆

Before leaving Louisville’s waterfront station, George stopped to read an historical marker:

Kennedy Interchange (aka *Spaghetti Junction*)

Near this spot stood a multistory interchange for multilane limited-access roadways which made up the *Interstate Highway System*. Built in the mid 20th Century, the interchange allowed human-controlled vehicles to change between routes without stopping by using a ramp system. Thousands of automobiles and tractor-trailers passed daily carrying people and goods across the land. After the Great Petroleum War, the Interstate Highway System was replaced by a passenger rail network while goods returned to historical rail corridors.

“Huh,” George said. “How do you think ‘human-controlled vehicles’ differed from vehicles on The Track? I mean, I assume Parker was controlling the vehicle we rode in — as much control as is needed when one tells the Informateur a destination.”

“Hard to say. But their communication devices were quite primitive. I’m guessing someone had to physically maneuver those *automobiles*. I dread to think what it would be like with everyone deciding how fast to go, when to stop, where to turn, all on personal whim. It must have been utter chaos.” She touched her glasses. “So, you ready to see if these things work?”

Together they lowered the sunglasses into position, George reached out for Anita’s hand, and they passed through the station’s open doors and out into the sunny warm afternoon. In front of his left eye he saw “RAIL CHARGE/FEES \$67.98;” the other eye, “BALANCE \$2,332.02.”

“Huh. That was strange,” said George.

“What was?”

“Instead of the credit symbol, it had a dollar sign, and it showed the fraction of a credit.”

“I didn’t notice, but look, we made it outside the station without a hitch.”

“And that’s another thing – what would have happened if we weren’t wearing them? There are no gates, no guards, nothing. Who would know if we entered or exited without paying?”

Anita shrugged. “So, I’m guessing we need to find that hotel.”

In an inadequate attempt at imitating Matt’s accent George said, “The Seelbach Inn. Look for Daisy at the Seelbach Inn.”

“So where’s it at?”

It was George’s turn to shrug. “Should I ask someone?”

“That would be stupid. People get directions off the Informateur. We don’t need to call attention to ourselves. Let’s just get a cab.”

“Hey, look at that.” George nodded towards a man holding a sign. He was dressed in coachman’s livery and stood next to an open, horse-drawn carriage. “That sign says ‘Anita and George Winston.’”

“What sign?”

He pointed. “That sign the guy next to carriage is holding.”

As they walked over to the carriage stop, George wondered if Matt and Parker had arranged this. Then the thought that it might be a trap slithered across his mind.

Anita spoke to the well-groomed man. "Where do you take people?"

"Ma'am. I drive coach for the Seelbach Inn."

"We're Anita and George."

"Your room is waiting."



George opened the door of the London Mod suite and was wonderstruck by the antique furnishings. One wall, overlooking the swimming pool, was glass. The other three were snow white. An L-shaped, sky blue vinyl sofa was the room's centerpiece. Over it arched a chrome lamp which focused light on a large piece of clear glass supported by a chrome framework. On the table were oversized printed volumes: *Vogue: Fashion for the Twenty-first Century*, *Churchill Downs: The First Two Centuries*, *Manhattan Landmarks*, and *Post Hyperrealism and Remodernism in the Visual Arts*.

To the left was a similar but taller glass table with four high-back chrome chairs padded in either red or blue. On this table sat a thick glass globe. White roses and Shasta daisies rested haphazardly against the rim.

George watched Anita open the double doors to the bedroom. If the main room was bright like daylight, this room held the night. Chrome and glass night-stands stood sentry on either side of the grandest bed George had ever seen. It was covered in a midnight blue bedspread and a cascade of rectangular pillows in colors ranging from the same deep blue to brilliant white. On each side and at the foot of the bed were silver-gray rugs with pile so long they looked like untended lawns. The walls and ceiling were also midnight blue and bore a night sky painted with great attention to detail.

Through another door was the en suite bathroom filled with gleaming white tile and porcelain, chrome fixtures, and a spotless mirror the size of his bed in Hartfield.

When speech finally came George said, "All this for two nights, breakfast and dinner included, and it doesn't cost us a thing. Matt insisted we come here..."

"But I'm sure UGO is picking up the tab. It's not like they can't afford it."

George remembered the one hundred thousand plus credits in savings attached to his former identity. "Yes. That they can."

"I want a shower and a nap before we go to dinner," said Anita.

"If you don't mind, I could use a walk."

She nodded as he left her in the bedroom. He closed the door behind him and walked down the hall reading the names on other doors: Petite Trianon, Monterrey Sunset, Mansfield Park, Twelve Oaks. Each name evoked an image of a time and place with a distinctive style.

He entered the lobby where a young woman with curly ebony hair and mahogany skin said, “Good afternoon, Mister Winston.”

“Good afternoon,” said George. “Tell me, if you wanted to go for a nice walk, which way would you go?”

“You might enjoy walking up Fourth Street away from the river. Between the two college campuses are a number of historic buildings.”

“Sounds perfect.” George exited the inn and noticed two men standing outside. They wore dark suits and sunglasses.

He walked up Fourth Street consumed with one thought: there is only one bed – a very big bed – but one bed none the less. What will she think if I sleep on that couch?



Episode Sixteen ♦ *Daisy*

Anita and George sat in the White Oak Room for the second night waiting for their server to bring their cocktails — a Kentucky Buck for him and for her an Old Fashioned with “only a teaspoon of bourbon for flavor” — and to provide the chef de cuisine’s *suggestions for their dining pleasure*. Anita found the whole place rather pretentious even if the food was quite good. The dark wood, leather furniture, and antique brass fixtures made the room feel heavy. Neither the white china nor sparkling silver helped lighten the mood.

“So, have you given up searching for Daisy?” Anita asked.

“Something will come up. Someone will walk by. We still have breakfast in the morning. I know Matt was trying to tell us something.”

“Have you tried asking for her?”

He looked at her then past her. “I have and the desk clerk swears she’s never known a Daisy in the many years she’s worked here.”

“Well, there’s your answer then. We have to leave tomorrow. Might as well go to the station and see if we can find a train to Saint Louis.”

She found this new situation unsettling. George had to understand that they would have to rely on their own judgement: UGO wouldn’t be looking out for them indefinitely. “Okay, if Matt and Parker paid for our room and board, then that means we are moving beyond UGO. We need to make some decisions...”

“But maybe UGO made the arrangements. Or maybe they told Matt and Parker to help us.”

“It doesn’t really matter. We just need to decide where we are going and what...” She stopped speaking as a tall, smiling man wearing a white shirt, black pants, and a white apron approached their table.

“Good evening. My name is Tom Buchanan and I will be serving your dinner tonight.” He set their drinks on the table. “For the first course, the chef de cuisine suggests, for Madam, a salad of spring greens with goat cheese and vinaigrette and a light tomato bisque served with broiled cheese toast points for Sir. For the main course she has suggested seitan stir-fried with mixed vegetables and a spicy citrus sauce served with brown rice for Madam. For Sir, she has grilled lamb chops served with a mint chutney, braised new potatoes and root vegetables.”

Anita wondered what would happen if she said she’d prefer a massive steak and French fries but smiled and said, “That sounds lovely.” George just smiled and nodded in acceptance.

“Very good then. I will return momentarily with your first course,” said Tom.

“Let’s just enjoy our evening. Maybe the chef can suggest entertainment opportunities for after dinner,” Anita said with a bit of a sneer.

“Don’t you think that will be a bit odd?”

“What?”

“Wouldn’t one just get it off the Informateur?”

“I guess. Don’t you ask for recommendations from people you know? No one thinks that odd. It’s the asking how to get there that is problematic.”

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“May I bring you anything else tonight?” asked Tom. “We have a lovely selection of liqueurs...”

“No, I’m fine,” said George. “That was delicious!”

“No thank you, but maybe you can tell us a good place for music.” She glanced at George. “Or maybe some theatre? Since we’re just visiting and don’t know the town, it’s hard to choose from so many possibilities.”

Tom thought for a moment. “Well, you can’t miss at the Barrel and Tumbler. It’s always popular and tonight’s their open mic. It’s a favorite with people into traditional music like bluegrass, country, and Celtic. It’s just down Fourth a couple blocks. Are you interested in popular music?”

Anita looked at George’s blank face then back to Tom. “No.”

“There are a number of places along Main and Market where you’ll find all sorts of stuff. I’m not really sure what you’re looking for so let me put it this way. When I finish my shift, I plan to head over to Black Sox in the Portland neighborhood. It’s a jazz club. You can catch the Portland Streetcar on Jefferson and get off at Twenty-Sixth. You can see the sign from the left side of the streetcar. The current group, Storyville Creole Cabaret, is very good.”

◆◆◆

Anita nursed her iced rooibos and passionfruit tea. She had enjoyed the prior duo’s more melodic style and the poetic lyrics had at least been comprehensible, but this group’s driving beat and aggressive, angry sound nagged at a soft spot inside her. Maybe her headache was coming back.

“Do you like this?” George said, a frown contorting his face.

“About as much as you seem to. I’m getting kinda tired. Maybe one more stop and we head back to the inn. Okay?”

“Great. Let’s go.” He pulled out of the booth. She waved off his hand. Help wasn’t needed, at least not yet.

“So, what did you have in mind?” she asked.

“How about we catch the streetcar and go to that place in Portland the waiter told us about? I’m sure he’s done with work by now.”

“Sure. I don’t really care. It’s not like there is anything else to do besides sleep.” They left Dogg’s, a place specializing in classic hip-hop. Anita felt weight melt from her shoulders as they walked free of the thumping bass.

While the exact time was still unclear to her, she guessed it was approaching midnight and well past her bedtime. The streetcars were busy and she was grateful that George was able to navigate the system.

“There it is.” He pointed out the window to a simple white sign with bold, black letters: BLACK SOX. They exited the streetcar and found people milling around on the pavement outside the place.

George opened the door for her. They passed around a wall that screened the room from the door, candles glowed on tables barely piercing the room’s darkness. The place was crowded with couples and small groups engaged in innumerable conversations. They walked along the bar towards the dance floor. Behind it the stage was bathed in a cool, blue light. The stage was home to a grand piano, bass fiddle, drum set, and various empty stands but no band.

She looked around the room but could only find an empty barstool. George offered the seat to her, but she refused it as well as another drink. The bartenders were harried, and he put little effort into gaining one’s attention. She assumed he didn’t want one anyway.

Anita looked around the room at the mixture of unfamiliar faces. People were smiling, chatting, and laughing: the audience ranged from young to old. In Anita’s mind, this bar could have been in Hartfield or any number of cities.

Something caught her eye. A lone man sat at a table near the blue light of the stage. He wore a blue shirt and was waving at someone. She made eye contact, touched George’s arm, and asked, “See that guy sitting alone?” The guy continued waving from across the room.

Touching his forefinger to his chest, the guy nodded, and then George said, “I think he wants us to join him at his table.”

Anita took George by the arm and they started over. As the distance closed she realized he was familiar. “Hey, that’s our waiter from dinner tonight. And isn’t that shirt the same as Matt was wearing?”

Laughing, George leaned into Anita. “Tom Buchanan wearing a daisy-print shirt! That’s got to be the clue.”

Anita glimpsed at George. “Huh?”

“Matt kept saying ‘look for Daisy’ as in *daisies*. Not a person.”

“Why didn’t he just tell us to find one person out of five hundred thousand wearing the same awful daisy shirt? It would have been a whole lot easier.” She decided to ignore the twinge of guilt she felt for being sarcastic.

Tom stood with outstretched palm. “I’m so glad you found this place. Please join me. The band is really hot tonight. If you want, I know the bartender and can get you a drink.”

“Bourbon on the rocks for me,” said George.

Anita smiled, “I had more than enough tonight with dinner. I’ll just take a water.”

“Sparkling? Mineral?” asked Tom.

“Tap will do just fine.” She smiled as Tom walked towards the bar. They settled into the semi-circular booth. Looking at George she said, “So what’s this about daisies?”

“Daisy was the clue. But like anyone listening to the conversation, we assumed Daisy was a name. It’s not. But it’s really clever. See, Tom and Daisy Buchanan were married at the Seelbach Hotel.”

She looked at George, blinked three times, and let silence express her incomprehension.

He continued, “It’s from a famous book, *The Great Gatsby*. You must have read it in school.”

“Maybe I did. Name’s kinda familiar,” she said, her attention shifted to Tom returning with the drinks. “I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to continue to treat you like our waiter.”

“It’s quite all right. As I said, I know the bartender and it’s easier for me to get served when they’re busy between sets.”

“Matt says hi,” George said. “We saw him yesterday. They gave us a ride.”

“How are the hill cousins? I’ll be honest, we’re only related by marriage – well, ex-marriage, if you know what I’m saying.”

Anita said, “How on earth were we supposed to find you?”

“Didn’t you see the daisy on my name badge at work? Well anyway, you found me and I’ve got a message for you.”

Movement on the stage drew the crowd’s attention to the stage as the septet – four women and three men – took their positions in the blue light with the assistance of a couple of stage hands. While some prepared their instruments, a woman stood in the middle of the stage holding a banjo. She started to speak. “For our last set this evening we’re going a bit further back in time. Women finally had the vote and drinking went underground. We’ll start off with ‘Ain’t We Got Fun,’ before our version of ‘The Sheik of Araby’.” The crowd clapped and cheered with knowing approval. “Then we’ll head down Memphis way for ‘Beale Street Blues’ and closing out the night with ‘Three O’Clock in the Morning’. Enjoy! And remember, the Storyville Creole Cabaret will be back here, at Black Sox, at the end summer.” She turned to her compatriots and started counting out a rhythm.

George was very focused on the band. Anita poked him in the side to get his attention. “Didn’t you hear? Tom has a message for us.”

George leaned past her as the group played the melody straight. “What’s the message?”

Tom slipped a piece of folded cardboard across the table. George read it first and then passed it to Anita. She unfolded the thick, cardboard paper which had been cut from a packing container. Hand-printed in block letters it read, “Nick Carraway says Harmonie by the mark.”

George looked at Tom. “Did you read it?”

Tom shook his head.

“...Every morning, every evening, ain’t we got fun?”



Episode Seventeen ♦ *Harmonie*

Dark curtains fought back the morning sun as George got out of bed, careful not to wake Anita. He slipped around the end of the bed, the carpet pile tickling between his toes, and into the bathroom, easing the door closed. His movement activated the light.

After using the commode, he wanted to shower but thought it would wake Anita. Not knowing what the day, let alone the night, would bring, she needed to get as much rest as possible. He removed his shorts and used a washcloth to freshen up. With all that happened to him since leaving Hartfield, he was comforted to see the same person looking back at him in the mirror.

Willing the light off was futile; he had little choice but to ease the door open, slip out, and close it again knowing a lack of motion would extinguish the light. He crept through the bedroom and into the main room of the suite. Remembering home, it was a subtle thrill to find freshly laundered clothes waiting for him on the dining table.

Dressed, he tapped on the bedroom door. “Anita?”

“Yes,” she said drowsily.

“I’m going to grab breakfast at the White Oak Room. I want to go to the library. Let’s see what they have on ‘Harmonie.’ Should I wait for you?”

“No, you go. Don’t have much of an appetite.”

“Would you like me to send over a tray? Say some fresh fruit, yoghurt, croissants. Stuff like that?”

“Sure.”

“Will do. Be back as quick as I can.”

♦ ♦ ♦

“Leave the tray on the dining table. Please be as quiet as possible. My wife is still sleeping.”

“Of course, sir,” said the waiter.

George exited the restaurant, looked up at the brilliant blue sky, and filled his lungs with fresh air. The growing warmth hinted much of the morning was behind him. As he walked up Fourth Street, a couple passed. “Good morning.”

“Beautiful day, isn’t it,” said George.

“Wonderful,” they replied in unison.

He turned left at York Street and walked up the steps only to find the doors of the Louisville Free Cultural Archive still locked. Sitting on the steps, he listened to birds twitter *what-cheer* and *chuuree* in the trees lining the street in front of the faux Greek temple.

His inclination was to query the hours, but since that was not an option, he thought about the message: “Nick Carraway says Harmonie by the mark.” The only thing he understood was

the name Nick Carraway. That this was yet another reference to *The Great Gatsby* seemed to be a hint. Maybe Willem was traveling under that name? George knew someone was trying to tell him something: he just did not know what. *Yet*.

Tired of sitting, George walked over to the pair of brass and glass doors and looked inside the dark building. Without lights, he assumed the institution's opening was not imminent. He decided to take a short walk while continuing to dissect the phrase as best he could without access to an Informatour. Crossing the street, he wandered down a small lane through the University of Louisville Spalding Campus.

The word 'Harmonie' was a proper noun, the name of a thing or a place, he reasoned. Either way, it seems like something they needed to find. 'By the mark' was more troublesome. The first two words provided no meaning on their own so George reasoned it was a three-word phrase. He knew what a mark was — everyone did — it was a line, a spot and sometimes it meant something. They get to Harmonie by the mark? Or he could find Harmonie by the mark? Ugh! Pure nonsense.

After wandering around the small campus for what felt a reasonable amount of time, he approached the Ionic columns that framed the entrance to the library. George joined a few other people waiting. Light showed through the doors. Soon.

A clicking sound came from the doors. George filed in with the others as the first man held the door to the library open. "Thank you," George said.

Inside the building, George walked across the marble floor, an auditorium to his left and on his right an exhibit entitled "Libraries: From Books to Cultural Artifacts." Just in case, he took a quick peek at the display. It provided information he was well-acquainted with: libraries originally housed collections of books and periodicals, but with universal digitization of print literature in the twenty-first century the need for physical spaces diminished. Dying libraries merged with museums, archives, and historical societies: the Louisville Free Public Library was no exception. Extensive renovations had created a space reminiscent of the original structure's Victorian roots, marble and brass being the most obvious features. The merged facility had even expanded to nearby blocks.

Leaving the exhibit, he turned right and walked past a children's art exhibit. He stopped at a large sign and deduced his location within the main building from its floor plan. To the left were performance halls and rehearsal spaces; to the right, various galleries and classrooms for the visual arts. It looked like what he wanted might be upstairs: Historical and Archive Collections.

Twin staircases on either side, he opted for the one on his right. At the top sat a young woman with cropped brunette hair behind an imposing wooden desk. He approached.

"May I help you sir?" she asked with a polite, possibly insincere, smile.

Listening to his gut, George said, "Historical maps please."

"To your right, third doorway." The reply was curt, efficient.

George approached the doorway. Inside he found another desk covered with paper. His curiosity piqued, he explored the room. In the center were four large wooden tables with wooden

chairs on either side and boxes of gloves at the near end. The remaining space was filled with a collection of shelves holding rather large volumes and various sets of filing cabinets – some with tall drawers; others, very wide drawers only a few centimeters high. The room had two enormous windows. Large trees grew outside.

In the back corner a solitary man labored over a large flat drawer. With gloved hand he gently lifted up corners of what appeared to be ancient engineering drawings. “Why does the mayor’s office always need everything yesterday,” the man said seemingly unaware of George’s presence.

“Excuse me,” said George.

Without looking up the man said, “Yes?”

“In doing some research, I’ve stumbled across a reference to Harmonie.” He spelled the name out. “But I’ve been unable to satisfactorily locate it.”

“Please have a seat sir. I will be with you in a moment.”

George sat. He wondered what it would be like to work with such a collection.

“Sir, that spelling of Harmonie was occasionally used in town names during the early nineteenth century. While I don’t have any maps or plats for Harmonie on the Wabash or the Harmonie north of Pittsburgh, I do show a photograph of the Harmonie on display in our photographic gallery on the basement. Is there anything else?”

“Could you tell me where I might find it?”

“I’m not sure. A docent can assist you.” As George stood and walked away, he thought he heard the librarian say, “Everything’s on the Informatour and they’re still too lazy...” George snorted.

Back at the information desk George asked the question of the politer brunette. “Down two flights, through the tunnel that way,” she pointed behind George, “and to your left is the Gallery of Photography. I will alert a docent you are coming.”

“Thank you.” George hustled down the stairs, found the tunnel, and turned left down a hallway. On his right he found the “Gallery of Photography.” A woman wearing a navy skirt and jacket greeted him.

“I’m looking for a photograph of Harmonie.” He spelled it out to ensure there was no mistake.

“This way sir. That name was taken from an earlier designation for the town of New Harmony, the site of two nineteenth century experiments in utopian, communal living.” George stole glances at photographs from across time as he followed her through the gallery. She stopped and held out her hand in front of one. “However, our photograph is of the riverboat *Harmonie* circa 1910.”

He looked at it. Feeling no better informed in his quest, his gaze returned to the woman. He then noticed a white daisy pinned into the scarf around her neck. “I assume that boat no longer exists,” he said.

“No, it doesn’t, but my cousin arrived this morning from Pittsburgh on the *Harmonie*. The name has apparently been reused for a modern riverboat.”

“Ending in I-E, not Y.”

“Exactly.”

“Thank you. You’ve been most helpful.”

“Excuse me, you’re Nick’s friend?”

“Nick Carraway? I am.”

“Then this is for you.” She handed him a piece of cardboard folded in half like the one they had received the night before.

“Thank you. I wish I had more time to look...”

“It leaves at one.”

George waved goodbye and retraced his steps through the gallery, along the tunnel, and up the stairs. At the top of the staircase he stopped to get his bearings, where, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed nine metal clocks on the wall. The clocks were labeled: Novosibirsk, Sydney, Tokyo, Los Angeles, São Paulo, London, Johannesburg, and Moscow. The largest, center clock was labeled Louisville. It was just after noon.

Wanting to run, George waited until he was outside and down the steps. He sprinted around the corner and down Fourth Street to the inn. The automatic door was much too slow in opening; George kept moving forward and retreating until he was able to slip in sideways.

“Good afternoon, Mister Winston. Your wife is waiting for you in the parlor.”

“Thank you. How soon can we have a carriage for the *Harmonie*? I don’t know where it is docked.”

“Right away sir. A carriage will be standing by in less than five minutes. Check-out has been completed by...”

“Thank you. And the parlor’s...?”

“Around the corner to your left sir.” The desk clerk motioned to her right.

George found Anita sitting at a reading desk, turning the pages of an enormous volume featuring detailed illustrations of birds.

“We must hurry. I figured it out.”

“What?” Anita asked, turning the page again and then looking at him over her right shoulder.

“The riddle. Where are our things?”

“I’ve got them here.” She pointed to the floor at her left.

He moved around her and grabbed the bags. “We don’t have much time.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll show you in the carriage.”

He kept looking over his shoulder, stopping, waiting for her to catch up, before speeding away. “We need to catch a boat that leaves at one.”

“What time is it now?”

“Maybe ten after?”

“One?”

“No! Noon.”

A coachman waited for their approach. “To the *Harmonie* I understand, Mister Winston?”

“Yes. How long will it take?”

“Maybe twenty minutes, sir.”

“Please hurry.”

They were away.

George handed Anita the piece of cardboard. It read “Twain Calaveras and Connecticut. Rails watched.”



Episode Eighteen ♦ *Cruising*

On board the *Harmonie*, George stood with his back against a bulkhead and pushed the door open for Anita. She entered and took two steps into the dark cabin. Following her, his jaw dropped to his clavicle. This room, if it could be called a room, was filled by a bed no bigger than his in Roseville. It was pushed into the far corner, but the remaining space required a sidestep to navigate along the mattress. The only light came from the corridor.

He watched Anita open twin doors to a small closet at the foot of the bed. Inside a feeble light sputtered awake revealing a mirror, sink, and some shelving for baggage. Anita set her bag on a shelf.

Shaking his head in disbelief he said, “There must be some mistake.”

“The receptionist said, ‘second deck up, middle corridor, room 3244’. The door opened for us,” she said unimpressed by his disappointment. “I guess this is a double cabin on a riverboat. What did you expect? Another suite?”

“It’s just so small.”

Her shrug was of no comfort to George. Tossing his bag into the closet on another shelf he asked, “Do you feel like exploring?”

“No. Not really. But you go ahead.”

Her lack of emotion concerned George. “Are you still feeling unwell?”

“Don’t really feel like myself. I just want to rest.”

He weighed his options: expressing concern and understanding, doting on her, or excusing himself to allow her some space. He decided. “I’m sorry you are out of sorts. If you want anything, just ask. Okay?” He took her nod as comprehension. “How about I check back around dinnertime?”

“Sounds fine.”

He pulled the door closed feeling troubled that Anita, always so strong and in charge, was not herself, but he understood pressing her for information would not help. Even he knew it was likely to be morning sickness or changes in hormones. No, she was clear she wanted to rest and it would be best to give her some privacy. Looking down the beige corridor, he decided on the path which they had not used.

At the deck railing, the busy quay receded and George was surprised that the boat’s movement had not been more obvious to him. A few people, both on board and on the dock, continued to wave even though it was hard to distinguish facial features at the growing distance. George wondered if this trip would be like a seagoing voyage. His memory of ships docked in Hartfieldport made the *Harmonie* feel small.

The fore of the topmost, or sun, deck was home to the solar sails and pilot house. From the railing he could see two crew members watching the river as they maneuvered the craft sideways into the channel. Behind the pilot house were a gym and pool. George tried to decide if it was a tiny swimming pool or vast soaking tub. It was currently deserted.

As he walked away from the pilot house, the vessel started to move with the current. Approaching the aft railing, he looked across the Ohio to the northern bank but an island blocked his view of that shore. On the Louisville side they passed cargo vessels loading and unloading: George had been unaware of the importance of river commerce and was surprised at the activity.

Now walking forward, the ship navigated a single lock, another new experience. Once clear, they picked up speed for the downstream journey. George wandered from side to side as the scenery changed from urban to rural. With the sun closing on the western horizon, they passed an occasional farming village nestled on the riverbank, but most of the river appeared wild and untamed.

George took a deep, gratifying breath. “How beautiful the world is.”

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After a morning trip to the dining room, George entered the cabin unsure how he was going to tell Anita. “I’ve got bad news.”

“What?” she said without emotion, still under the covers.

“Remember when the receptionist told us dinner was included?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, breakfast and lunch aren’t. They only serve meals at night.”

“So?”

“They only have formatters.”

“Don’t the glasses work?” she asked as if talking to a child.

“We don’t have any way to *think* the order.”

She remained silent.

George took a long, slow breath – in and out. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out. I just wanted to let you know what was taking so long.”

The desire to ask if she needed anything was strong for George, but having found the fully-automated McStarMart kiosks on board, he knew there was little chance of buying anything on the vessel without a real Informatour. The feeling of helplessness crawled up his spine.

Someone tapped so gently on the door that George was unsure if it was even intentional. He stood still, listening, unable to decide if he should ask permission to open the door or just assume it was accidental. The rapping repeated, this time slightly more insistent.

“Is it okay...?” he asked Anita.

She nodded and adjusted the blanket. Certain she was covered, he opened the door. No one was there. He looked left – nothing. Right, someone strode down the corridor. Deciding to catch the person up, he tripped over a large, wrapped basket resting in the doorway. George righted it. A card dangled from the handle. The person disappeared around the corner nearest the stairs.

He picked up the basket and read the card. "From Nick." Closing the door, he set the basket on the bed. Anita propped herself up in the corner and together they examined the contents in the dim light from the closet: apples, pears, a bag of peanuts, a bag of Appalachian Trail Gallimaufry, a wheel of cheese, a package of Lembas brand hard tack, and two jars. The larger was labeled "Taweret's Evening Supplement;" the smaller, "Garbharakshambika's Morning Comfort." He set the jars next to Anita and said, "I'm guessing these are for you."

George watched as she opened a piece of cardboard much like the other two they had received. She read it and passed it to him without comment. "Beware of hucksters. Find Sid & Mary after church. Where Samuel played."

"I'm going to need to think about this," he said.



With the sun high overhead on the second day, the *Harmonie* left Evansville cruising towards Paducah, the final Ohio River stop before the riverboat headed upstream on the Mississippi. Anita had enjoyed a bit of relaxation on the sun deck before returning to the cabin to get ready for dinner.

"I'm feeling much better." She tried to reassure George as they walked down the corridor and approached a staircase. She appreciated his reserved concern for her welfare. While he entertained himself on the boat, she had plenty of time to rest. "So where did you find a swimsuit?" she asked.

"We are going to have dinner with them. They're a nice, older couple. From Indianapolis," George explained. "They were visiting their grandchildren in Pittsburgh and are enjoying the cruise to Saint Louis before heading home."

She nodded and thought it would be pleasurable to meet someone new.

As they descended the stairs into the main deck's grand salon, George waved to a grey-haired couple chatting as they sat on a wood-frame sofa with leather cushions. "There they are."

"Samuel and Elizabeth Scordato, I'd like you to meet my," George swallowed, "wife Anita."

The three exchanged handshakes and how-d'ye-dos before Samuel suggested they find a table in the stylishly sensible dining room. Most tables sat four, and after a short wait the host guided them to a table. As the men pulled out the women's chairs, the host said, "For the starting course, we have spring salad greens with beets, asparagus, and a light blue cheese or berry vinaigrette dressing or a Creole vegetable soup." The ladies ordered salads; the gentlemen, soup. Samuel also requested a bottle of Amelia Vineyards Pink Catabwa Spumante.

"George tells me you were visiting the grandkids in Pittsburgh," Anita said to get the conversation rolling.

Elizabeth's lips smiled, but Anita saw sadness in her eyes. "Yes, it was wonderful to spend a couple weeks with them."

"How old are they?" asked Anita.

“Jacob’s nine and Sophia’s six. I was just heartbroken three years ago when De Autoriteit transferred our daughter-in-law to Pittsburgh. She manages the regional facilities office there. Our son’s a lawyer.”

George joined the conversation. “Are you on an extended vacation?”

Anita admired his tact.

“No,” answered Samuel. “I sold my interest in a market stall about a year after the kids moved. Lizzie retired from teaching in December.”

“I taught third grade for thirty-five years,” Elizabeth said. “Can you believe that?”

“That is quite an accomplishment.” Anita smiled.

“And what do you do?” Anita understood that the older woman asked of both of them.

“George is an accountant...” started Anita.

“Financial auditor actually,” he corrected.

“And I’m a seamstress.” Anita had never really said that before. It seemed odd, overstated. “But I also love to garden.”

The retirees nodded in approval as a waiter brought the soups and salads. He was followed by two other servers. The first brought four champagne flutes; the second, a silver champagne bucket stand with a bottle inside. She placed the bucket stand to Samuel’s right, wrapped a towel around the bottle, removed the foil and wire cage, and popped the cork with a flick of her wrist. She set the cork in front of Samuel – he didn’t reach for it – and then poured a taste in his glass.

“You’re supposed to taste it, honey. Remember?” said his wife.

He did. “Mmmm. That’s the stuff.”

From the corner of her eye, Anita saw George fight back a grin as the wine stewardess poured some of the fizzy, rose-colored liquid into Elizabeth’s glass. The stewardess then walked around the table to Anita’s glass.

Anita held up a hand. “I’m not drinking.”

“Neither are we!” Elizabeth’s smile was kind. “It’s nonalcoholic, so there’s no worry.”

“Then I’d love to try some,” Anita said, nodding to the stewardess.

After the juice was poured the quartet raised their glasses for Samuel’s toast, “To safe passages and new friends.”

Anita sipped the bubbling liquid. “This is really nice. The flavor’s different from champagne, but it’s quite festive. Thank you.” She looked at George. He nodded but his expression was merely polite.

Over soup and salad the conversation returned to the grandchildren. In mid-sentence Samuel dropped his fork. All around the room glasses tumbled over. Metal hit china. People screamed, cried out. A peaceful dinner remade in shock and horror.

Anita looked to George. His eyes were wide; his posture, stiff. She was gripped by a sense something terrible was happening. The rest of the room suffered in knowledge. George twisted left and right. Anita hated not understanding what was wrong. She reached for George's hand: to steady him and find her own courage.

"Our home!" Elizabeth started to cry.

"They don't know anything real yet. Don't get worked up Lizzie. Our house is some distance from the train station."

"Never dreamed I'd say this," she said through violent sobs. "But I'm glad the kids moved. They're safe. Why Indianapolis? Why would they bomb Indianapolis?"



Episode Nineteen ♦ *Together*

George sat looking around the cacophonous, packed dining room. The Scordatos had returned to their cabin. Had they just left or been gone an hour? The faces George could see, passengers and crew alike, told a continuing story of shock, horror, and grief. Some people cried, others comforted, but all around the dining room people reacted to the bombing of the rail station in Indianapolis.

Then silence.

People returned to their seats. Glasses were righted. Napkins returned to laps. The crew dispersed to their appointed stations, replacing dropped forks and cleaning up spilled food. Conversations returned to polite tones. To George's right four diners discussed, quite calmly, the forecast death count. "I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing was timed to take advantage of people changing trains," said a rather smug, prim man. "When I went to Buffalo last year, the crowds at Indianapolis station were simply staggering. Everyone rushing from one train to another."

At another table George watched a mother chide two children. "There will be no dessert until you've cleaned your plate. You know the rules."

Pandemonium had given way to normalcy.

"Will your companions be returning?"

George studied the speaker, a waiter, and remembered the Scordatos' fear and pain. "I expect not."

"Then maybe you are ready for your main course. Tonight we have a lovely beef ragout served with potatoes or rice. Or maybe you would prefer today's catch, Ohio River bass..."

"Just leave us alone!" Anita's reaction gobsmailed George. The men looked at each other, at her, and each other again.

"As you wish, madam," the waiter nodded once. He walked to the next table and said, "And can I bring you any dessert this evening?"

George stared at Anita. Though hard to perceive, her head quivered. She said, "I have to get out of here." Standing, her chair pushed back and napkin falling to the floor, she walked towards the grand salon.

He reached down for Anita's dropped napkin, folded it and his own, and left them on the table before following her out of the room. Catching up to her as she ascended the staircase, he said, "Anita, are you okay?"

She stopped, faced him, and looking down on him from her higher step said, "Is everyone insane? Someone bombs a large city. Hundreds, maybe thousands, are dead and dying. One moment they are crying and screaming, the next it's back to dessert. It's like someone flipped a switch and the whole thing fell into memory." She turned and continued up the stairs.

Nothing felt right for George: her words made perfect sense even if the events did not. He followed two paces behind her as she approached their shared cabin. When the door opened, she

stepped across the threshold and blocked his entry. “I need to be alone for a while.” She shut the door, leaving him standing in the corridor. His shoulders drooped.

George roamed the corridors of the riverboat. He wanted understanding. He wanted Debussy, Satie, or Ravel. He missed having an Informateur but the imagined notes of *Pavane pour une infante défunte* offered wistful escape.

Aft, one deck up, George stopped at the door to the Captain’s parlor. A dozen people, mostly men, sat in armchairs and on couches arranged around a low, central table. On it bottles rested with a scattering of empty glassware.

A man wearing ship’s uniform beckoned and George entered. “Come. Pour a glass and join us. Rum, whiskey, gin, and some wine. What’s your poison?”

George wanted wine but noticed the color of the red liquid in the women’s glasses. “Whiskey please.”

A bottle slid gently across the table’s inlaid map of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. George poured trying to ignore the large “40” printed on the label. He held the glass up to the group. “Thank you.”

A man with short, wavy, sun-bleached hair, a thick brown mustache, and a navy blue pullover with the monogram “NLYC” nodded. “Manny was just saying he thought De Autoriteit’s early numbers, while undoubtedly based on actual data from Informateurs, might climb as high as fifty thousand.”

“But is Presiding Minister Brandt’s tough talk just bluster?” asked a balding man with skin rarely touched by sunlight. “Will we really bomb ten Islamic League cities?”

“It seemed pretty clear to me.” This woman – with olive skin, curly black hair, and wearing the single-buttoned waistcoat and dress shirt favored by the power elite – carried a certain gravity when she spoke. “He said, ‘For every bomb that explodes in a Confederation city, ten will find their way to League cities.’ It’s only a matter of time.”

George contemplated the table’s map, sipped the umber liquid, took in the conversation, but remained silent.

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Anita dried her eyes on the pillowcase as her companion cracked open the door. She said, “It’s okay, George. Come in.”

He ventured a step inside. “Are you all right? Would you mind a little company?”

“Please.”

He closed the door and joined her on the bed. They sat in darkness, their backs against the wall and legs stretched out across the mattress.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It really creeped me out when everyone started acting like nothing had happened.”

“I know. It was very strange.” He paused. “I think I understand what happened though.”

“Oh, I know what happened. De Autoriteit zapped everyone. I heard it was possible. Just never thought I’d witness it.”

“Well, it seems they can change brain chemistry...”

“You know Luis...” Her choice to use his real name felt right, more intimate. “I have been anxious, wondering what I am doing to you and to this baby. How could I ever think about giving birth away from the safety of civilization?”

“Don’t worry about me. I made my own decision. I have no regrets.”

“But where are we going? At least in Hartfield I had family.”

“Something tells me you made the right decision. I don’t want to go back. I promise to stay by your side. As long as you and the little one need me.”

She felt liquid return to the corners of her eyes already puffy from too many tears. “That’s sweet of you.” It pained her to wonder if Willem would ever say, let alone feel, such a thing. “I know you really mean that.”

“The future feels even less certain this evening.” His silence was not uncomfortable. “It seems we are headed for another war with the Islamic League. Brandt’s made some statement about bombing ten of their cities in retaliation.”

Cold spread down her neck and into her back. She shook her head trying to comprehend the meaning of such a threat. “Any word on the Union’s stance?”

“Not that I heard. I didn’t ask any questions. Just listened to people talking.”

She recalled history learned at school. It had been a century since the Confederation warred with either neighbor. During, and since, that war a missile shield protected Confederation cities, but the enemy used suicide devices to mount attacks. Nuclear contamination had rendered Belgrade uninhabitable, Volgograd and Harare had both suffered terrible biological infection, but the ocean was a moat around America. Before today, she was safer than citizens living on the great, contested landmass of Afro-Eurasia.

“I guess no where’s safe anymore,” she said. “If we had gone by train – to Saint Louis as I’d suggested – how would we have gone?”

George was silent for a while. “You mean, would we have gone through Indianapolis?”

“Yes.”

“Seems pretty likely. It’s the hub west of Pittsburgh and north of Atlanta. That’s why it was chosen.”

She willed her mind away from the possibilities, remote as they may have been. “I’m glad we’re on this boat.”

“Me too.”

Anita could feel his hand moving towards her on the bed. In the darkness, she too groped her way across the divide. A finger touched the side of her palm. Drawn together, she interlaced her fingers with his.

“What if we missed Tom or you never went to the library?” she asked.

“But someone knew that would not happen.”

His confidence was reassuring, but... “How?”

“Well, why did Catherine give me books? Where did I first meet Willem?”

“I don’t know.”

“At Hartfield Central Library.”

“I don’t follow.”

“You love to garden, right?”

“More than anything. There is nothing better than watching seedlings grow. I also love everything about harvest time.”

“That is how I feel about books. They are rare and precious in this paperless world. Finding one is like finding a diamond ring lying under a pile of old clothing. But the book speaks. I love the way the words look, the way pages smell, the feel of ancient covers. Centuries ago someone else held the volume and read the words. I feel connected – not only to the author, but to everyone who protected that book and brought it through the ages.”

She understood the passion of his words, if not their exact focus. “You think Willem is sending the clues.”

“Probably not. Does he know you’re pregnant? No. But the pills came. He told someone about my love of books. Someone knows. And who’s to say that there weren’t other clues we didn’t find.”

While she had thought about missing one of the clues they had found, it had yet to occur to her that there might be others. “You think we’ve missed something? Is that why the messages are so cryptic?”

“It’s possible. Maybe the clues were identical, but hidden in different places. Maybe someone selling seeds or sewing stuff in the Louisville market also had the same clue for us. Maybe someone was watching for us at Louisville Station, ready to direct us to the dock. Does it really matter? We’re here. We have them. They are all we have to go on.”

“But what does it mean?” she asked. “We are going, but where to?”

“You have the clues, right?”

“Yah, they’re in my puzzle box for safe keeping.”

He released her hand and rolled off the end of the bed. In the darkness of the room, the light from the now opened cupboard seemed much brighter than before. George handed her bag to her. She dug past clothing until she could feel the inlaid wood and removed her treasure box from the bundle. Having opened the box thousands of times in her life, she only had to find the polished edges of the carved lotus before she could press and slide the sides until the lid was free.

Anita handed George the three pieces of cardboard and promptly resealed the box. She stood and watched as he laid the clues on a shelf in the light. After rearranging them a couple times, he settled on the order in which they were received.

He read the message. “Nick Carraway says Harmonie by the mark. Twain Calaveras and Connecticut. Rails watched. Beware of hucksters. Find Sid & Mary after church. Where Samuel played.”

He stopped speaking. She could feel his mind processing the words.

“I’ve got it!” said George.



Episode Twenty ♦ *Drooping*

Anita looked over George's shoulder as he studied the repurposed strips of cardboard.

"I've got it!" said George. "Hannibal. We're supposed to go to Hannibal."

She read the clues out loud. "Nick Carraway says Harmonie by the mark. Twain Calaveras and Connecticut. Rails watched. Beware of hucksters. Find Sid & Mary after church. Where Samuel played." She puckered her lips to the left. "So. Hannibal's apparent, why?"

"Mark Twain!"

"Okay..." She held out an open palm, wanting more. "Wasn't he a writer?"

"Only one of the most famous ever published on these shores. Surely you read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some called Huck Finn the best American novel ever written. Twain also wrote 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County' and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. You must have read something he wrote."

Anita shrugged and returned to sitting on the bed. "Maybe. So why don't you think we need to go to Connecticut or Calaveras County, wherever that might be?"

"Because it says, 'Twain Calaveras and Connecticut.' As in, between."

"And these places are where?"

"Connecticut is on the Atlantic. I'm not sure exactly where Calaveras County is, but it's closer to the Pacific."

"There's a whole lot of space between the Atlantic and Pacific. So why Hannibal?"

"Yeah, but..." He pointed at the door as if that would somehow explain things. "...the thing I had forgotten was Mark Twain's real name. Samuel Clemens."

"But it says we're to find Sid and Mary where Samuel played."

George took a second to respond. "It does. And Samuel would have played, as a child, in Hannibal."

"So when did this Samuel play there?"

"Oh, uh...uh." She wondered if he was still trying to query his no longer present Informateur. "Had to be a couple decades before the First American Civil War."

"And we're supposed to find Sid and Mary at some church that probably was blown up in that stupid war."

"No, no, no. It's not about an actual building. We have to find Sid and Nancy..."

"Mary."

"...Sid and Mary at a church. The town where Samuel played as a kid. He grew up in Hannibal. On the Mississippi." To her it appeared his eyeballs would burst from his skull. "The

Captain's parlor! There was a map. Come with me. I'll show you." He reached for the doorknob, looking at her, expectantly, like a small child promised a treat for completing a chore.

Anita preferred the bed. "Can we do it tomorrow? I just don't feel like..." She had snuffed out the youthful twinkle in his eyes. She sighed. "Give me a couple minutes. I want to freshen up a little."

Countenance refreshed, he flicked the door open, leapt into the corridor, and pulled the door closed behind him. She took a couple deep cleansing breaths before opening the closet and facing the mirror. "Ugh. When did you get so old?" she asked, smoothing out the bags under her eyes with her fingertips. She cinched back her hair, now brunette, with an elastic from her bag, wondering if her eyebrows needed plucking.

Words on scraps of cardboard. Letters in old books. Letters. A man of letters. She recalled a life lived long ago, the wispy voice not Bubbeh's own:

Man of Bright Colors deposits a seed in an empty vessel.

Elephant takes the vessel to a man of letters.

Elephant and Man of Letters take vessel out of diseased garden.

Man of Letters harvests fruit under a distant, barren land.

Man of Bright Colors finds fruit.

She turned on the faucet, let the water run lukewarm, and then used the too small, complimentary bar of soap to wash her face. After patting it dry with a towel, she dabbed foundation under each eye and decided to draw attention to her mouth with the cinnabar lipstick, thanking Catherine for including such basics in her disguise kit. Avinashika had never been much for makeup, but Anita wore it. If only she'd brought a scarf.

Suppressing the want of the bed, she reached for the bottle of Taweret's Evening Supplement, dropping one greenish tablet into her palm before downing it with a glass of water. Hadn't her sister taken something similar when she was pregnant?

A forced smile didn't help matters. She tried to remember playing with her niece and nephew, but that thought only reinforced her declining mood with more loss. Again, she was fighting back tears. More deep breaths, recalling the bright afternoon sun warming her cheeks, relaxing on the sun deck, concerns drifting by like trees on the banks of the great river, she steeled herself before opening the door, ready to be dragged around the *Harmonie* by her eager companion.

But instead of George bounding off down the corridor like a bored house dog starting a much desired walk, he stood in the corridor holding a single rose, smiling gently. "For you."

Anita looked at the rose, then into George's hopeful eyes, then back to the rose. It was the palest shade of pink, like cherry blossoms on a sunny spring day. She shook her head. "How?"

She looked at him. His smile was giving, not proud. Maybe a bit mischievous. His mahogany eyes flicked up and to the right. "Magic. If you have a pin, I can..."

"No. I want to hold it." She closed the door behind her. "So, whatever new mystery you have to share now, lead on!"

Offering his arm, she gladly accepted. He asked, "Short or scenic route?"

“Definitely scenic.”

Together they strolled along the railing, the moon reflected in the wide, still waters of the Ohio River. She was unsure which she appreciated more, the light breeze moving the night air, the pronounced aroma of the rose, or George’s easy, quiet demeanor. About midway along the boat they climbed a flight of stairs, continued walking forward, crossed at the front, and then back along the other side.

Just as George turned to reenter the ship, she pulled him back to the railing. Releasing his arm, she held the rose in both hands, admiring its form, the way the petals curved, before raising it to her forehead. With a prayerful voice she said, “Comfort them,” releasing her breath and drawing apart her hands in benediction. The pale rose disappeared into the night but its sweet, heady fragrance hung in the air. They passed a minute in silence, looking off into the darkness.

“So,” she turned to George, “what is it that you wanted to show me?”

“A map.” He offered his arm again.

“Of?” She accepted.

“You’ll see.”

They wandered around a corner, through a door, and down a hallway that crossed the *Harmonie*. Midway George turned and knocked on an open doorway with his free hand. An older man, in uniform, looked out a window at the rear of the riverboat and into the night.

“May we bother you a second?” asked George.

The man turned, his eyes melancholy, his lips pulled back in a trained smile. “It’s no bother. Please. Come in.” He looked at her companion and cocked his head. “You were here earlier but didn’t say much. I’m sorry, but I just had the stewards clear up...”

“No, please, I just wanted to show her where we are going on your map.”

“Help yourself,” said the man, dusty miller hair meticulously parted in the middle, walking over to the table, surrounded by empty furniture, as George and Anita approached, a daisy, drooping after a long, event-filled day, in his buttonhole.

Geography, beyond the Free Settlement, had never been one of Anita’s strengths. She nodded as George pointed out Louisville. He asked, “About where are we now?”

The older man leaned over the table, traced the river from the dot labeled Evansville and stopped. “About here. We’ll dock in Paducah bright and early tomorrow morning. Where are you folks headed?”

“Hannibal,” they said together.

Tracing the Mississippi past Saint Louis, he stopped at Hannibal and tapped the table three times. “It’s the only place we dock on the western bank. We’ll have you there midday, three days from now. We don’t make quite as good time heading upstream.”

“Aye, aye Captain,” George said saluting.

Touching a decoration on his jacket, the man introduced himself. “Melville, ship’s purser. Captain Cheyne is getting some rack time before his next watch.”

Anita saw George blush for the first time.



Was it time or the Ohio that flowed more swiftly away from George? Now on the Mississippi, the ship hummed as the engines worked harder, fighting against the spring thaw in the Rockies. Anita joined him at the riverside railing after they pulled up quayside in Saint Louis, the sun slipping away.

“It’s a beautiful sunset,” she said. “Purple, red, orange, yellow. Behind that magnificent, black arch. Wow! Maybe Willem passed under it.”

George thought about his friend joining hordes of tourists on a westbound ferry ride across the expanse of the boundary river, disembarking beneath an erstwhile symbol of a nation’s expansion across the continent. Now it marked where the wilderness began. George could see people waiting to board a ferry, returning eastward, to the comforts of civilized life.

He said, “I hear there’s a museum under the arch. On the other side of that, people use stagecoaches or trams to go to the attractions set back from the river. I thought we’d be like them. Taking a wagon west. Exploring the frontier towns and settlements as we went.”

“It does sound rather exciting.”

“Now I’ve no idea what to expect.”

“You think we’ll be staying in Hannibal then?” she asked.

“Don’t know.”

The sun dipped, the sky darkening, the breeze dropping off. They walked across the vessel to find a very different view. Instead of trees, hillocks, and the arch, a city grew from the waterfront back towards the world they were leaving behind. Passengers waited patiently to disembark the *Harmonie*.

“Did you see anything like that before?” Anita pointed to the end of the gangplank where something resembling a doorway waited for each leaving passenger.

“Certainly not at Evansville,” he replied. “Didn’t pay attention at Paducah.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Not sure. Something tells me it’s a scanner.”

He recalled the discussion before removal of his Informateur. “Didn’t Catherine say something about certain security checkpoints?”

“If she did, I don’t remember.”

“She said the glasses worked for *most* security checkpoints. That I remember. Then something about constabulary offices using something different.” George was frustrated that he had not asked for details. Most scanners were inconspicuous. This was very different.

“So you think it’s some sort of security scanner?”

“It would make sense. Maybe De Autoriteit has increased security after Indianapolis.”

She stood upright, rigid, her fingers tight on the railing. “We’ll be able to get through it. Our glasses will work. Right? Maybe they won’t be using scanners in Hannibal.”

“What if they are? How do we get off this ship?” he asked.

Anita shrugged. His head ached for lack of solutions as he examined the landing area for possible alternative routes.

A bolt of lightning sliced across the eastern night sky. After a long interval, the deep, dull roar of distant thunder rolled through him.



Part Two

Episode Twenty-one ♦ *Boxed In*

“I’m not feeling well,” Anita said to George, her cloth bag hanging from her right shoulder. “If we’re going to be arrested, I’d rather throw up in private. I’ll be back in a bit.” She winked and walked away. He set his valise at his feet and leaned on the railing of the *Harmonie*, three decks above the Mississippi’s waterline, sunglasses hanging from the neckband of his shirt. Any other day, the warm midday sun and light refreshing breeze would be glorious.

He watched passengers file off the riverboat – families on vacation and adventure travelers using Hannibal as a starting point for trips west. Each disembarking person crossed the gangplank and passed through a free-standing doorway, much like George had seen in Saint Louis. He remained convinced the doorway was a scanner and arrest was imminent without his Informateur.

Past the scanner, the bustling crowd of newcomers – people in jeans and sports shirts, dresses and walking shoes, airball jerseys and shorts – mingled with porters and touts from the town in period costume. Chattering tourists clambered into stagecoaches and wagons. Children offered apples and carrots to grateful, well-fed horses. Using muscles and mules, costumed longshoremen hauled baggage and cargo through a forward hatch of the *Harmonie*. The present mixing into a representation of an age long since passed into legend.

Taking a deep breath George exhaled disappointment, certain he would get no closer to the Tom Sawyer experience than this view. He rather fancied the idea of slipping into the pages of a beloved book, though maybe not this one. While admiring Mark Twain’s skillful creativity and use of colloquial language, George saw himself as a recluse overlooking the Vale of Grasmere, contemplating *Leaves of Grass*, or building the barricade with Marius after Lamarque’s death. Though it was hard for him to imagine a pistol in hand, George craved needing to fight for something, living a life of meaning, having a purpose to every day. Now a different fate awaited him and his traveling companion.

What was keeping Anita? Why did she wink?

He stood and scanned the deck. No sign of her. He turned around. A group of older adults followed a guide towards a stairwell. She was not there. While they had plenty of time to leave the ship and discover their future, he preferred doing it to waiting and thinking about what might or might not happen. Where was she?

George paced five steps away from his bag towards the bow then returned. He paced another five steps towards the stern and returned. Should he try to find her? Had she returned to their cabin? No. She was probably in the women’s lavatory. No. It was better to wait. George continued pacing along the deck, convinced she had been gone long enough to eat another breakfast and throw it up too. He stopped and watched a pair of teamsters maneuver a wagon carrying two large crates through the quayside host. To the south of the landing was a covered warehouse facility; beyond that, trees marched down rolling hills towards the mighty river still swollen with the spring melt.

“Mr. Winston?” The voice came from behind him. He turned to find a young woman in ship’s uniform, her insignia indicating she was a steward or assistant. George was unsure which. Her nametag said “Bonden.” She touched her right hand to a single daisy sticking out of the

breast pocket of her jacket. “The purser and your wife are waiting below deck. May I help you with your bag?”

“I’ve only the case. It’s no bother. Thank you.” George picked up his valise; holding it a representation of control over his fate. “So where do I find them?”

“If you’ll follow me, sir.”

George trusted the simple flower and hoped better news awaited. He followed a couple steps behind, forward along the deck, down two flights of stairs, through the elegant grand salon, and empty dining room. She opened a door labeled “Crew Use Only” and they descended a final staircase.

Below deck the floors were bare; metal walls were covered in faded grey paint. The light was harsh and inconsistent. Staff scurried down tight, warm corridors wearing either ship’s livery or grey tunics, names stenciled across the back, and pants. George decided there were two classes of crew members: those allowed contact with passengers, who sported dress blues with a white shirt and tie, and those who inhabited an underworld of heat, toil, dirt, and sweat.

They passed a grey-suited worker, perspiration staining his armpits and back, carrying a carton of vegetables into the busy kitchen. In a dark alcove along the passage, pressed up against a closed hatch, a pair of women talked loudly. George, disbelieving, was certain one said, “He’s a total slut.” Craning his neck to look at the women as he passed, George wanted to stop and listen, but his escort continued marching down the corridor and disappeared around a corner. He sprinted so as not to lose her.

A left turn after another left turn, George was certain they had walked aft and fore in the maze of passages below deck, glad of the guide, knowing he could never find his way through the labyrinth. She made a couple more abrupt turns and paused outside a small room where Anita and Melville, the *Harmonie*’s purser, stood chatting.

“Enter Bonden,” Melville said to George’s escort.

“Sir, if I may?” asked Bonden.

“Yes?” Melville replied.

“There isn’t much time.”

“Thank you, Bonden.” Melville approached George holding out his right hand. George accepted the quick, firm handshake before the officer pointed to George’s sunglasses. “I’ll need those,” Melville said holding open his right palm.

George hesitated, looked to Anita and after her nod of reassurance, removed the glasses from the neckband of his shirt, and handed them to Melville. George turned to Bonden and said, “Thank you for navigating. I would have been out to sea without you.” He chuckled at the joke even as the rest remained stony-faced.

Bonden reached out a hand. George, surprised, took it. She said, “My pleasure, sir,” pressed something into his palm and released. Embarrassed, not expecting it, not knowing what it was, but understanding that it needed to remain secret, he slipped his hand into his pocket and hid the small, flat item there.

George wanted to ask what the plan was, but the conspiratorial attitude in the room kept him quiet. Melville handed Bonden the two pair of sunglasses and motioned to the doorway with his eyes. Bonden nodded and left.

“This way,” said the purser as he strode out of the office followed by Anita and George. Down another corridor they walked, George feeling lost but trusting he would understand any plan soon.

They entered a large, open hold with an assortment of shipping boxes, crates, and palettes. A few grey-suited workers used handcarts and lift-trucks to move items that could not be carried. George looked down a long row of crates and could see daylight through a large open hatch. He reasoned they were in the forward hold he had noticed minutes before from his perch on the third deck.

Leading the couple around the room’s periphery and away from the workers, Melville stopped. Hidden from view by stacks of shipping crates, he pointed inside a box and said, “Be patient. It will take time, but someone will come.” Melville offered no further explanation, a single daisy worn as boutonnière.

The box seemed much too small for them both. George, eyes wide, looked at Melville’s daisy, then into the purser’s steel grey eyes. While each dimension was over a meter, he was certain it was not by much. His head shaking and starting to sweat, George wanted to ask if this was their *only* way out, where they would be taken, who would help them, but the purser’s shifting eyes and glances over his shoulders made it clear time and discretion mattered. Anita squatted, backed inside, and held out a beckoning hand. George knelt, eyes fixated on a nodding Melville, before scooting backwards into the crate. Pulling his feet in closer than necessary, his bag to his left, Anita to his right, George wrapped his arms around his bent legs, trembling.

Melville moved the front panel into place and hollered. “Hey! You forgot one.” In the darkness George felt dizzy and nauseous. Feet ran towards them, voices mumbled, hammers banged away at the crate. A final command. “Make sure it’s placed in see nine.”

In the darkness, sweating and shivering, George reached out for Anita, groping at her like an overeager teenager on a third date, finding her hand, squeezing it for reassurance, begging for comfort, much too panicked to speak.

The box moved.

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The crate had been still for a long time. Occasionally Anita heard phrases that lacked meaning for her. Light snuck through tiny holes and cracks, but she could not see anything outside the crate nor tell how George was doing. She reached for his hand, hoping to offer a bit of encouragement, but remained silent long after the noise outside faded away.

Anita leaned into George’s shoulder, turned so her mouth approached his ear, and said, “It’s okay. I went to him because I remembered the daisy in his buttonhole from the night when you showed me the map. If they are scanning passengers leaving the ship, we needed another way off.”

George’s clammy hand still trembled. “Did he say what would happen?”

“No, and I was too afraid to ask. Clearly, with a job like his, he’s going to have an Informateur. I didn’t want to take any chances he was being monitored.”

“So wha’d you say?” George asked.

“I touched the flower on his lapel and asked, ‘What’s the best way west?’ It was a risk.”

“Wha’d he say?”

“He smiled, stroked the daisy, and said, ‘Talk to a guide in Hannibal.’ Before I could say anything else he asked if we enjoyed our voyage. Then you appeared. I think he was waiting for us.”

“That woman gave me something. When she shook my hand.”

“What?” asked Anita.

“Can’t see it. Too dark. Bet it’s another clue.”

“Probably. And here I was worried we didn’t have anything to go on in Hannibal other than to find Sid and Mary.”

George let go of her hand. He leaned away from her for a moment. “Still can’t read it.”

“Well, just keep it safe. We won’t be in here forever.”

She rested her head against the back of the crate. Something was different with George. Patience had been little problem for him in the couple of weeks they had been traveling companions, but she didn’t know him very well. She understood he needed to roam, especially when stressed. He wandered the streets of Louisville and around the ship when she wanted time alone to think or rest.

She leaned back over so her arm touched his. “You okay?”

“I hate small, dark spaces.”

She found his hand, still cold and clammy. “Someone will come.”



Episode Twenty-two ♦ *Breaking Out*

Anita sat inside the dark, muggy box and wished for a glass of water. *Screeeeech.* Something was happening outside. Their container remained stationary. The thick air vibrated. She reached for George and found his arm. He was trembling again. Taking his hand she said, “Try to relax. It won’t be much longer. We’re fine.”

Quiet returned. His trembling ebbed.

She sagged to her right against the side of the crate, taking slow, deep, meaningful breaths. “Someone will come. No need to worry.” Her eyelids closed. She released his hand and accepted sleep’s approach.

The dogs ran past the box barking “Where?” and “When?” and “Why?” The barked words morphed into George crying. “I need out. Let me out.” She said, “Be patient. Someone will come.”

But no one came. Long hours gave way to days. The top of the box dissolved into a cloudless, azure sky. She rested her hands on the edge and peeked over as the side shrank, the front pointed. They were surrounded by dark, muddy water. George by her side, they sat on a wooden bench. A malevolent voice demanded, “I want more. Give me more!” A fat hand at the end of a thick, hairy arm grabbed at her. George held an oar like a shotgun and said, “Leave her alone.”

The smelly, sweaty man said, “Give me what I want or I’ll take it.” He pawed at her.

George aimed the oar at the stranger then cocked it.

Yama’s messenger draped the man in a crimson cloth. “Thank you,” Anita said. The cloth disappeared. The man was gone, but the messenger – his eyes black holes, his ears flaming pointed crescents – held his stick between the couple and said, “We’ll meet again.”

She pulled George, shaking, inconsolate, out of the boat and up the bank. With each step a single, lentil-sized bead of gold fell from under her dress. She left them; George was more important. He started to walk on his own. Thirst clenched at their throats.

She reached for a golden bead. Bending down, as thumb and forefinger closed, a blade of grass sprang from the earth. She tried for another bead, but it too became a blade of grass. Again and again she tried, but grass grew, the first stalk now heavy with seed.

Standing, she surveyed the country in all directions: the omnipresent grass, extending midway up her thigh, going dormant under an angry sun. Sweat dried on George’s forehead. She said, “Not much farther. I see it now.” A single, red cloud hung in the sky...

Bam!

She gasped. “What was that?”

“Getting out. No one’s coming.” Barked words, George’s voice was high-pitched.

“Give me a minute.” She was confused. “I was asleep. I need...” She remembered Melville, asking for help, going below decks, getting in a box.

Another thud. George caused it. “Can’t wait.”

Leaning into him, she grabbed at boney limbs and fought to hold him down. “Just give me a minute!” she said. He had to relax. “It’s okay George. We’re okay.” Muscle tension eased. Pulling back she found a sweaty armpit and helped him back into a sitting position. He smelled stale, unclean. She placed her right hand on his chest. His shirt was drenched; his heart beat like a small bird’s. Moving her hand in small circles she calmed him. The heartbeat slowed.

“Maybe if we try together, but no banging. Let’s just push,” Anita said. “And take a couple deep breaths first.”

“Okay. I’m okay.” Air rasped entering his nostrils; humid air exhaled, he must be looking at her. He said, “Feet at the top. To get more leverage.”

“Let’s give it a try,” she said moving into position. “On the count of three.”

“Okay. One.”

“Two.”

“Three,” they said together and pushed. The nails squealed, unwilling to release them.

George said, “Again. One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Nails giving way, light snuck in through the fist-wide gap. He urged her on. “Now the middle.” The need for air – space – infected her. She moved her feet halfway down the front as he restarted the count. Less effort yielded a stronger squeal. A much larger gap. More light. At the bottom, the final nails bent, the front of the crate arcing downward. George scooted forward. Too much light. She closed her eyes against the brightness.

“Look around at least. Make sure it’s safe,” she said and cracked open an eye. George pulled himself up and darted out of view. The other eye opened. They were concealed by a row of stacked crates five meters in front of the opening. She stretched out her legs, curling her toes, flexing her ankles, luxuriating in freshness as cooler air streamed in. Moving into the middle of the box she stretched her sides, rotated her shoulders, loosened stiff muscles.

George reappeared, springing from foot to foot. “Hurry. Your bag.” He grabbed it before she could move. Flinging it over his shoulder, he grabbed his satchel and yanked her out of the box. “We gotta go. Someone’s coming.”

“Who’s there?” A man’s voice came from beyond the concealing row of crates. It didn’t sound close; no need to worry.

“Maybe he’s looking for us,” she said.

“Into the brush. Not far.”

“George, what’s going on?”

“Read the card. It says, ‘Be cautious. In Hannibal. Like Tabeau wrote of York’.” He pulled her towards the river, the brightest stars gleaming in the dusky sky across the water.

They sprinted around the last crate as well as a protective wall behind and were free of the warehouse lighting. She asked, “But what does that mean?”

“Not sure. Need to find Sid and Mary. We can check out the town. At night. Then decide what to do.”

Shaking her head Anita said, “I don’t know...”

“I trusted you. Back on the train. In Caseville. Now you need to trust me. Hurry.”

They stumbled into the brush.

“But I had a plan back then,” she said. “Even if I didn’t know the specifics.”

“So do I. Trust me.” His whisper, pleading. He pulled her into the forest and held a finger to her lips.

“Oh great,” the unseen man said. “It’s happened again.”

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George stopped, resting his case against his leg, but could not see Anita in the darkness of the moonless night. “You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” she said. He sensed her approach as the loud, short trill of frogs and chirping of crickets quieted.

“We better rest.”

“Please. It felt good to move at first, but it’s impossible to see the trail. I have to feel each step with my foot before shifting my weight forward.”

As they stood still, tiny lights darted around them. “I’ve always loved fireflies,” George said, exhaling a deep breath. “Never saw fireflies in Roseville.”

She asked, “How long you think we’ve been walking?”

“An hour. Maybe two?” He shrugged.

“So what’s your plan?”

“Let’s rest. There was a bluff south of the landing. We’re downstream now.” He pointed into the darkness knowing she could not see his hand. “Hannibal’s on the other side. When the moon rises, we can look for a gully and trail up.”

“Hello!” The voice came from behind him. It drowned out the chorus of amphibians. “Do you need help?”

George turned ninety degrees to his left. A spot of light advanced through the darkness. It came from the direction he had planned to go.

“Yes,” Anita called as the light neared.

“Shhhh.” He said, “Duck down. It might not be safe.”

She ignored his warning. “We’re over here.” A moment passed and in a softer voice Anita said, “It can’t be any worse than stumbling around in the dark all night.”

George waited, squatting, trying to move into the tangled brush between the trail and the river. The silence grew.

“Are you lost? You shouldn’t be wandering out here at night. You might get hurt.” The voice was gruff but the pitch too high to be masculine. Now a couple meters away, George saw a single daisy held in the light ahead of the speaker. “You *are* headed to Hannibal, right?”

“Yes,” Anita replied.

“I have a wagon, but it’s on the bluff. I can guide you.”

Anita said, “Thank you. That would be a huge help.”

“A couple left the excursion train at Sawyer’s Creek this afternoon. They were walking along the river into town. Since they didn’t arrive, I was sent to find them. Have you encountered anyone else along the river?”

“And you are?” George asked, standing.

“In Hannibal, I’m Jane Canary. And you are?”

“I’m Anita and this is George.”

“My lost couple. Why didn’t you stay in the crate? Doesn’t matter now.” Jane tossed the daisy into the bushes and swung her backpack down onto her left arm opening it with her right hand. In the limited ever-moving circle of light, she pulled out two pair of sunglasses like those Bonden had taken from them on the *Harmonie*. “Here. They show you taking the excursion train from Gateway Entrance and your accounts have been charged accordingly. You’ll work in town for a couple of weeks while you make your next contact and no, I don’t want to know, so don’t tell me. Or ask about anyone you’ve been told to find. Your best bet is to hold your cards very close to your chest. Don’t put yourselves in the position to be asked a lot of questions. Most folks don’t know anything about the underground out here, and those that do aren’t your friends. Are we clear on that?”

“Quite clear,” George said convinced it was unsafe to trust anyone.

“Here. You’ll need these.” Jane handed them both a strap with a small gadget attached. “When did you last drink some water?”

George said, “Hours ago. Before we left...”

“Don’t need to know.” Jane was curt but not offensive. “Okay, here’s a water bottle for each of you. Do either of you need emergency rations?”

George remembered the food in Anita’s bag, wishing he had done so sooner.

Anita answered. “No, we’re good. How much farther do we have to go?”

Probing and testing, he examined the strap and device, trying to understand its function.

“Not far. Just depends how quickly you walk. Any injuries? Any other needs? Toilet paper maybe?”

“Um. We’re fine. Right George?” Anita said. “George?”

“Yeah. Fine,” he said.

“Take a minute to get your headlamps on and have a drink of water. Take occasional sips from your bottle as we go. I’ll lead when you’re both ready,” Jane said. “It turns on when you cinch the band into place.”

“Oh. No wonder,” he said setting the water bottle between his feet. Cinching the band around his skull, the lamp came on. He moved Anita’s bag to the left shoulder, picked up his bag with his right hand, and left the bottle on the ground. He followed a couple paces behind the women, the path through the waist high grass and dense bushes easily seen in the glow of the headlamp.

“I was going the right way,” he said to himself.



Episode Twenty-three ♦ *Finding Hannibal*

George stopped as Anita drank from her bottle. He wished he had not left his behind. “If I may ask,” he said to Jane, “how did you find us?”

Jane’s headlamp left her face in shadow making her expression hard to read. She said, “Your tracks were easy to spot. I would have followed, but you had two hours on me and I needed supplies. Why didn’t you wait?”

“We needed out of the crate,” answered Anita. “Then some man came and we got scared. So we took off into the forest.”

“Well, it was risky. We haven’t far to go now.” Jane motioned her light to a spot in the distance. “Road’s just over there. You ready?”

“Yes,” the couple replied.

Emerging from a gully onto a well-worn dirt road, George found Polaris. They were walking towards Hannibal. Ten minutes along the road a dim light flickered. They closed in; a couple rested on a log, torches in the ground on either side.

“You found them!” A man with a tangle of white hair and wearing a pale suit stood and ambled towards them. “Never understood why they call you Calamity Jane. Seems finding people is a good thing. Unless you want to be lost.” He brought a thumb-sized cylindrical object to his lips. The tip glowed.

“Thank yah, Mister Mayor. Sumpin’ told me they’d settled in fer the night. Found ’em right down in the gully back thar. Tired and thirstin’. Bet they could use some vittles too.”

George looked at Anita. Her raised brow and pulled back head showed she too was bewildered by the sudden change in Jane’s vocal demeanor.

The four walked towards the log, the man calling ahead. “She’s found them, Livy. Word is they’re a hungry pair. Could probably eat a buffalo. But they’ll just have to make do with what you brought.”

Seated on the log beneath the torches, the woman opened a basket. “I brought supper. Fried chicken, sliced raw vegetables, bread and cheese, and apple pie.”

The man’s bushy mustache became a straight line. “I’ll have pie, Livy.”

“Jane, introductions are in order,” said the woman, standing.

The mustache drooped as the smoldering object returned to his lips, the end flaring.

Posture erect, Jane said, “Mister Mayor, ma’am, it’sin a pleasure presentin’ George and Anita Winston, Hannibal’s newest shop keepers.” She turned to Anita and George, “And it’s my honor presentin’ you to the Mayor of Hannibal, Mister Mark Twain and his wife Olivia.”

The four shook hands saying “pleased to meet you” and nodding in agreement with the shared sentiment.

“My hand, son. Whenever you’re through with it. I’m rather attached to it,” Twain said. Embarrassed, George let go.

“Thank you.” Twain removed the smoldering object from his mouth. “Politicians live for this moment. Yea-ah. You’ve traveled a long way. Hungry. Probably tired as well.” He waited a moment. “Perfect time for a lengthy speech. A bad politician can talk for hours. A good one can talk all day. And not say a thing. Which of you is the politician?” He pointed the glowing cylinder at Anita then George.

Olivia rested her fingertips on his forearm. “Let’s not keep them waiting for supper any longer.”

“Beggin’ yur pardon, I’ll be tendin’ to the horses,” said Jane with a brief nod. She passed the log. Four horses stood harnessed to a wagon waiting on the side of the road. Twain sat near one end of the log, his wife on his left, Anita to her left with plenty of room for George. George squeezed in on Twain’s right.

Removing a piece of gingham cloth from a bowl, Olivia said, “The quarters above the store aren’t much, but I’m sure you’ll be comfortable there while working in Hannibal. Get a good rest tonight. You’ll have orientation and costume fitting tomorrow. We hope you’ll like it here.”



A dim glow ahead stoked George’s anticipation: they approached Hannibal, but well outside the village Jane guided the wagon off the road, down a well-lit ramp, and into a building with clean white walls and a dirt floor covered with hay. It reminded George of a subway station, only for horses. He asked Olivia, “We’re not going into town?”

“We’ll travel underground from here,” said Livy. “Thank you, Jane.”

“Yes, thank you for all your help, Jane,” Anita said as they got down from the wagon.

Jane touched a non-existent hat brim. “Pleasure ma’am.”

“We don’t usually join her in looking for strays,” Twain said. “But there was a council meeting tonight. So I decided Jane needed our help. Livy, will you help them to their store? I have to arrive at the end of the meeting. Preferably, just after.” Not waiting for an answer, he walked away.

“I’m sure we can find a handcart,” Olivia said leading. “The most important thing to remember is, Hannibal does not exist in the present. People come here because they want to experience the past.”

George asked, “So it’s roughly 1845 in Hannibal? Tom and Huck’s era?”

“That’s the idea. Since residents west of the Mississippi were resettled over a century ago, no one is allowed to live here permanently. But the company received permission to build a destination resort on the prior townsite. Please remember, everyone is a visitor here and has come to experience a time long since passed into mythology. We encourage those working in Hannibal to stay in period at all times. Don’t worry, you’ll learn all about that tomorrow.”

Grinning, George nodded and looked at Anita. Her eyes rolled.

Olivia held out a hand next to a three-wheeled cart. “You’ll see a bit of technology like this handicart underground.” She steered the electric vehicle through an underground network of mostly deserted concrete tunnels. They stopped in front of a red door. It said, “Trade Goods Shop 3.”



A good night’s sleep wasn’t enough preparation for Anita’s day spent learning *the old fashioned way*. The trainer explained, “Nineteenth century technology was mechanical, not neurodigital. Since most people here want to experience that, we don’t use the Informatour.” Anita longed for digital osmosis as a day of meetings would extend into two – the costuming people were unavailable until the next. Bored with orientation, she slipped away from the underground tour as they neared the shop. She wanted to see the town, but only those in costume were allowed on the streets. Ready to go, the shop only lacked trained staff. While George attended merchant training she cleaned the living quarters and napped.

George bounced on his chair that evening saying, “I get to use real money!” She was used to dealing with market script back in Hartfield, so the wooden coins they would take in the shop weren’t as new to her as they were for George. But that would have to wait until they were costumed. “I’ve only been an accountant. Just numbers on the Informatour. Here I get to track sales in a register. Balance at the end of the day,” he said. His exuberance wasn’t infectious, but she smiled for him.

They’d been warned about the schedule. The little store was two doors down from the Daniel Boone Theatre – currently featuring *Lewis and Clark Meet the Indians* three times daily. They would be busiest when the show let out; kids wanting stick candy, trade beads, coon-skin hats and war bonnets, keelboat toys, cornhusk dolls, and peace medals. They also sold copies of some Mark Twain books.

The next day the costumer said, “Corseting a pregnant woman is undesirable even if the wife of a successful 1840s shop keeper would have worn stays well into her pregnancy.” Until Anita could alter her dresses – one, a heavy-weight cotton day dress of alternating forest green and ivory bands making horizontal stripes on the full skirt and a V on the bodice – she gathered the waist with a green belt to produce the desired shape so she could help George in the store or explore Hannibal. George opened the store that afternoon.

The following day Anita pulled her needle through yellow cretonne with thin vertical grass green stripes and piping, knotted the thread, and snipped off the excess. Alone upstairs, she rose from the straight-back chair wearing an unbleached muslin shift and white cotton petticoat. She pulled the day dress over her head and let the full skirt fall to the floor. Starting at her navel she closed an uncounted number of tiny hooks until the grass green collar closed at her throat. She walked over to the free standing mirror.

Pleased that her darts created the historic silhouette, she pulled at the puffy sleeves. “These’ll have to go,” she said to her reflection, “but that’ll wait until we get out of here.” She picked up a white apron from the nearby chair, tied it in place, and added a green bonnet that matched the piping. Holding her gaze in the mirror, she twisted her torso from side to side, enjoying the billowing skirt.

Ting-ting. A small bell rang on the shop's public door. Lifting her skirts, she approached the narrow stairway down to where George was serving the morning's customers.

She wanted to look for Sid and Mary and took the advice on the last card to heart – “Be cautious. In Hannibal. Like Tabeau wrote of York.” – keeping to herself. She trusted George to figure out the part about Tabeau. Stepping through a curtain onto the shop floor she said, “I'm going to the church now. I'll be back before the theatre lets out. Can I have your pocket watch?”

“Uh huh.” George handed her the watch and continued with his customer. “That will be fifteen dollars and twenty-five cents, young master.”

Ting-ting. She walked along the wooden sidewalk past the Daniel Boone Theatre, through the town square where families queued, parents paying a small fee to have their children punished *the old fashioned way* – with a long board tapped on clothed buttocks. She shook her head, lifted her skirts, crossed a dirt street, and passed the Hannibal Library and a large, two-story, white clapboard house. A young blonde with striking blue eyes and wearing a white muslin dress stood on the porch, embroidered pantalettes showing far below the hemline. Anita shook her head again, crossed another street, and entered the open doors of a white building with ringing bells.

Inside the church, well-lit by the late morning sun, was less than half full. Most of the people were in costume, sitting near the front. Anita slipped onto an empty wooden bench midway down the aisle and looked around, a few guest families scattered here and there.

At the front and costumed like the blonde on the porch, another young woman arranged some flowers before the podium. She finished and, nose in the air, walked past an older woman sitting with two young men on either side. The one to the woman's left fidgeted and squirmed. A young lady to the left of the restless one said, “Sit still Tom.” He looked out the window.

Anita followed his gaze outside where a dirty young man paced. She returned her attention to finding the sign and saw flowers on bonnets, in buttonholes, and on display. But nowhere could she find a single daisy.



Episode Twenty-four ♦ *Mary's Advice*

"I don't know who Sid and Mary are," Anita told George after visiting the church. George bought a set of Twain's most popular works from their shop. Even with such flimsy covers and poor quality paper, they made a good addition to the small library Catherine had given him when they left the UGO bunker. It took three nights for Anita to put down her sewing and start *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

"Okay, I'm starting to figure out who some of these people are," Anita said. "I mentioned the girl I see on the porch as I go to church – blond curls, white dress and pantalettes."

"Yes," he answered, eyes holding his spot in *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*.

"She must be Becky Thatcher. Sid and Mary are related to the main guy, Tom Sawyer. He's the only name I remember hearing." She gave three quick nods. "Okay, now I think I have a better idea who I'm looking for. I'll just go up to them after the show tomorrow."

George marked his place in the book with a finger and made eye contact. "Not a good idea. Remember. 'Beware of hucksters'."

"But what exactly does that mean?" Her eyebrows pinched together and the corners of her mouth drew sharply back.

"Not sure. Has a couple meanings. Huck is a character in the books."

"Huckleberry Finn, right?"

"Yes. He's an untamed scamp. Not bad, but not a *good boy* either. Maybe we need to beware of him."

"But hucksters are sellers..."

George nodded. "True. Use caution when shopping."

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While George was thankful for the meals Anita brought back from the commissary during the day, he enjoyed closing the shop at night and joining her for supper. The staff dining hall reminded him of the one in his building back in Roseville; though in Hannibal the room lacked a wall of formatters. Here food was served from large metal pans resting in hot water. They were able to select from three different main dishes, vegetables and salads, bread and grains, dessert, and beverages. At the end of the food line, the cost of dinner was deducted from the chip in his sunglasses. George still had a tidy sum of 2,163 Confederation credits.

Another difference from home was the long tables and benches which ran perpendicular to the room's longest axis, dividing the buffet from an array of smaller tables with chairs. Tonight the tables with chairs were taken so George said to Anita, "Will this work?" He stood at the end of a long table, well occupied by other workers, but with just enough room for them to squeeze onto the end of a bench.

She shook her head and said, “Looks empty over there,” and continued down the aisle. Midway down a table, a young man dressed in ragged clothing and with a greasy mess of dirty blond hair, ate alone. They sat at the end.

George snatched a piece of fried chicken from his plate and started eating. Once all traces of meat disappeared from the leg bone he said, “So, any luck finding them?”

Using her fork, she poked at the flaccid pieces of broccoli that covered her plate, a piece of cornbread on the side. “Well, Sid and Mary were there, but played by different people today.” She leaned over the table and said, “And no daisies.”

“Maybe Sunday? We can close the store. I’ll join you. Traditionalists go to church on Sunday.” George picked up his fork and pierced a broccoli crown.

Anita swallowed a mouthful of cornbread. “So, are you sure you don’t want me to cover some of your time tomorrow so you can explore? There’s all sorts of things going on. And I know you want to spend some time in the library. Our stay might be short...”

“That’s right! So much to do.” He pulled a strip of meat off the breast. “I like the store. It’s fun. Kids get so excited.”

“Well, as long as you’re enjoying it, but let me know if you want to get out.” She chewed a piece of broccoli.

“Sure. Wish we knew how long...”

“I’m on my own, do you mind if I join you?” the stranger said. His clothing was tattered and he’d been made up to look dirty.

George struggled to understand the minimal upward movement of Anita’s shoulders and raised eyebrows. He glanced left and right, wanting to suggest another couple to annoy, but said, “No. Help yourself.”

“I’m Huck. Sorry, overheard you’re looking for someone. Friends maybe?”

George grunted, only wanting to acknowledge a question had been asked, feeling a twinge in his gut, remembering the warning, “Beware of Hucksters.”

“Well, from the sounds of it, you’re shop keepers. You might not know that those of us playing roles switch. So, for example, there’s got to be twenty-some guys playing Huck and we can share some spots, you know, to keep it interesting. When a choicer spot opens, people move around. Actually, it’s the same thing with shops – you can ask for a different one if you want and it’s open.”

“That’s nice to know,” Anita said, glancing towards Huck and then looking at her plate.

“Where’re y’all from?”

“Hartford,” George said. “You?”

“A free settlement outside Charlotte called Mount Holly.”

“Never been.” George pulled more chicken off the bones and ate. “Nice there?”

“It’s hilly. Green. Warm. People are friendly.” Huck picked up his knife and fork and cut away a piece of roast beef. He chewed it noisily.

George grimaced, noticing his own foot twitching.

Huck picked up some mashed potatoes. “I take it you’re a couple. Married?”

George looked at his plate.

“Honey, this isn’t sitting very well tonight. Would you take me back?” Anita asked.

Snatching up her plate and silver, George scraped the remaining food onto his plate and said, “Please excuse us. She’s not been well.” He shuffled Anita’s plate and tray under his own, picking up the lot as he stood. “Nice meeting you.”

Following Anita towards the door, George set their dinner service on a black conveyor belt which whisked the trays from view. Three quick steps caught him up to Anita as she scurried out of the room and into the underground passage.

“Want to walk? Get a handcart?” George asked.

“I’m fine. He just made me nervous. All those questions.” Anita smiled.

Returning the smile, George reached for her hand and said, “I know. He was too into his role. Chewing with his mouth open.”

“Kinda like Willem when he was acting, could never really shed the character at home.”

“Yes. Remember when he played Stanley Kowalski?” he asked.

“Stella!” they called out together and broke into laughter.

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Sitting in the church, women fanning themselves against the muggy heat, the performance baffled Anita. Judge Thatcher had just presented Tom Sawyer with a Bible. She knew of the book, remembered great wars were fought in its name, but didn’t fathom the meaning of the scene as it played out.

The Sunday school leader said, “Answer the gentleman, Thomas—don’t be afraid.” Then a woman coaxed, “The names of the first two disciples were...”

The young man playing Tom Sawyer rocked from heels to toes and said, “David and Goliath!”

Cast members, seated in the front rows, either gasped or laughed, women hunting hankies to dab cheek or brow. The audience clapped and for a moment it seemed like the show had finished as the actors returned to their seats. But another man, dressed in black, approached the podium, quieted the crowd, and led the cast in song.

Shall I be carried to the skies,
On flowery beds of ease,
Whilst others fight to win the prize,
And sail through bloody seas?

The whole thing was odd. She used the song as cover to whisper in George's ear. "See the daisies? The other day the young woman sitting next to Tom Sawyer brought the flowers. She's Mary, right?"

George nodded. "After it's done."

The song ended and the man dressed in black said, "Let us pray."

Anita watched as the costume wearers lowered their heads. She looked to her left and right, seeing most of the room doing the same, she looked at her lap.

"Today, oh Lord, protect us from the evil in the world. Protect these fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, from the evil in the world. Protect us all from the Islamic League as our glorious confederation punishes Bamako, Kabul, Pekanbaru, and Sanaa. Your wrath is just, for many are suffering in Indianapolis. Protect our cities from future attacks as Khartoum and Sylhet feel our righteous anger..."

The world closed in. She thought back to the riverboat and George mentioning the promised bombing of ten Islamic League cities in retaliation for the attack at Indianapolis Station. Her hands were cold and she rubbed them together, hoping it was a play, fearing it was real; the audience in rapt, reverential silence. Cold advanced up her arms and legs until ice gripped her heart. It was starting again. Another great and terrible war. She wanted to jump from her seat and scream NO! but could only shiver at the cold.



George hesitated to leave Anita sitting alone. She was trembling despite the heat. The talk of bombing was too terrible – he knew the League would target more Confederation citizens. Any distraction was welcome. He looked at the young woman rearranging the flowers under the rostrum, then at Anita. "Do you..." but she shook her head violently and looked away. "I'll just be a moment," he said and stood.

At the head of the aisle George passed a mix of people, some in costume and others in everyday clothing, talking with the preacher. A man wearing a Chattanooga Charlies airball jersey said, "I'm unable to believe in an all-powerful eternal being but I still found your words comforting." A high-pitched voice hidden by a sun bonnet added, "Thank your for your thoughts. God's will be done." George continued towards the podium.

He took the stem of a daisy between his fingers, twirled it, and said, "You bring the flowers? They're beautiful."

"Thank you sir." The young woman took the sides of her dress between her fingers, looked at the floor, and gave a brief curtsy. She had a tatted daisy pinned to her pinafore.

Emboldened, George made eye contact. "We want to go west. Do you know any guides?"

"I am afraid I do not sir. But I am told trade beads are always useful." Another quick curtsy, her body lowering six or seven centimeters. "If you will excuse me sir." She walked up to Sid, took him by the hand, and when alone in the middle of the hall whispered in his ear. They joined their aunt at the street door where she chatted with other townswomen.

Anita met him in the aisle. "So?"

He sighed then drew his left hand to his forehead, rubbing it, fearing this news would add to her upset, but knowing he had to be truthful. “Asked about a guide. Didn’t know a thing. Said, ‘trade beads are always useful.’ I know what you’re thinking. She’s the right Mary. Had a daisy on her pinafore.”



Episode Twenty-five ♦ *Trade Beads*

“Thank you,” Anita said to the money changer and scurried down the street – five twenty-credit coins in hand. The sun neared the horizon. She turned the corner, entered the store, nodded to George, and went upstairs. Alone in their room she removed her bonnet grabbing for the sunglasses hidden underneath. After removing her belt, she undid the bottom hooks on the dress, slid her hand just inside the skirt, and slipped the coins into a belted pouch she had sewn. Hearing George ascend the stairs, she turned.

“Shop’s empty. How much do we have?” he asked.

Reaching inside the pouch she removed the wooden coins and started to count. “One, two, three...”

George advanced and held out his right hand. “There’s a quicker way.”

After giving him a handful, she watched him make piles of five wooden disks. Each natural wooden coin was four centimeters across and stamped with a picture of Sojourner Truth. After three handfuls she said, “That’s it.”

George continued making piles and counted them. “Twelve stacks of five twenty-credit coins. So that’s twelve hundred.”

“Will that be enough?”

George shook his head and lifted his shoulders to his ears. “Wish they had something bigger,” he said snatching up two stacks of coins. Ting-ting. “Put the others back. I’ll buy more beads.” He bolted down the stairs.

Returning the hundred coins to the pouch, Anita pulled the strings shut, redid the hooks on her dress, and smoothed the fabric. Neither the pouch nor her belly showed. She wondered when it’d be obvious she was pregnant, but it had only been a month and a half. Hartfield felt years, a decade, away. She was homesick and missed her family.

The stairs rumbled and George tossed strings of beads on the table. “Here.”

“What should I do with all of these?”

George shrugged. Ting-ting. “Customers.” He thundered down the stairs.

Anita counted the strings of pea-sized glass beads. “Five. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty.” Each strand had twenty beads and cost ten credits. They were a variety of colors – some with simple geometric designs – blue, red, green, yellow, purple, and white. She shook her head and sighed, wondering what to do with thousands of glass beads.

She sat in the chair and picked up needle and thread. Lifting her skirt, she drew the thread through her cotton petticoat. With a strand of beads in her free hand, she poked the needle through the hole of the end bead, looped the thread around, reentered the fabric, and knotted it.

She repeated the process with another strand. The bell on the street door to the shop rang again. She sighed. Knotted and started the next chain. Finishing the final string she shook her head and forced her breath out through her nose, knowing it wouldn’t work. Thinking of places

inside George's clothing where she could attach the bead strands, she shook her head, rejecting that option. No, this was another load she'd have to bear.

His approach was quieter. "Shop's closed. Ready for dinner?"

Holding up her skirt, she stood and turned so George could see the forty strands attached to her petticoat. "This just isn't going to work. See how it weighs down the front of the petticoat? It's already pulling down on my hips."



George helped Anita out of the large handcart at the stop underneath the town square. "Thank you," he said to the driver as she accelerated past a staircase that took workers inside the library. The low whir disappeared into concrete silence. He felt alone in Hannibal's tunnels.

Together, they walked towards the red door of the shop. He worried over trade beads and the Tabeau and York clue. Like at dinner, Anita was not talkative. Her mood was growing sullen, smiles were rare, and it made him uncomfortable that she spent so much time alone. She was not making other friends, even temporary ones, on this trip. He was desperate to pry from her the reasons for the melancholy, but knew it was better to wait for her to tell him. When she was ready.

He opened the red door, allowed her to enter first, then closed it behind him. He wished it was lockable, but they were only able to secure the street door. The company trusted employees more than visitors, but George was uncomfortable trusting anyone if beads function as currency beyond Hannibal. Thus why sewing the beads to Anita's petticoat seemed a good idea. He wanted to keep coins in his pockets at least, but she had shaken her head and said, "They don't weigh all that much."

She started up the stairs and he said, "I'll be up shortly. They delivered more inventory. Let me see what."

She did not reply. Yes, something was definitely wrong. He looked through the crates of trade beads, coonskin caps, and cornhusk dolls, but a small brown box caught his attention. Unlike the others, it was the size of a melon though cubic in form, the sides extending five millimeters above the top. Box in hand, he bolted up both flights of stairs after Anita. She was undressing in the darkest corner of their shared room. He turned away and set the box on the table. Under the light he could see black, hand-painted letters.

"Look here," he said. "This box is different. On top it says, 'T-O-L-A-A-J heart me'." He traced the heart shape with his forefinger.

Anita walked over wearing only her shift which she used as a nightgown on those warm nights. A soft breeze moved humid air through open windows of the second story room.

He held crossed forefingers to his lips, traced the L and A before pointing to himself, then the A and J and pointed to her. "Someone knows."

She looked at him, eyes wide, brow pinched, her lips formed a circle. He heard a puff of air. A silent question. Who?

He shrugged his shoulders, stumped, his head quivering.

Anita turned the box so the letters faced correctly for her. With her right hand she lifted and slid the lid out of the box. One by one she removed strands of gold beads and laid them on the table. Each had a tag: one hundred credits per strand. In the bottom of the box was a piece of cardboard. On it was written, “My pioneers. West. Find me under a red cloud.”

George counted the beads on a strand. Ten. Then counted the strands. Twenty. He picked up a strand and took it to the chair over which Anita hung her beaded petticoat. The gold beads were much smaller. He lifted a strand of the glass beads with his free hand and compared the weight to his other hand. Nodding he said, “Much lighter. Looks like someone has solved one of our problems.”



“Thank you,” George said holding the door for two women and a small child as they exited the shop. He watched as the small one held a toy keelboat in one hand, sailing on an imaginary river, and stumbled. A mommy grabbed the child around the chest and said with kindness, “Are you okay? You have to watch where you are going.”

George turned from the scene, smiling, and approached the large man who wandered the shop with his back to George. It was odd that on such a warm summer day, when most guests were in shorts and light shirts, this man wore heavy boots, a long dusty canvas coat – the vent reaching up to the man’s waist – and a forest green, sweat-stained, felt hat with a wide, flat brim.

Taking a step towards the customer, George said, “May I help you sir?”

The man turned to face him. George was awed by his size – the stranger’s chin cleared George’s head. “It’s th’other way around. I leave from the western stables, an hour after sundown, in three days.” The stranger’s voice carried the robust weight of percussion in the finale of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*. A couple strides, the stranger opened the door and left.

George locked the door behind him as Anita stepped through the curtain, a box of cornhusk dolls in her hands. She asked, “Who was that?”

“Dunno. His skin was *so dark*. Did you hear him?”

Anita nodded. “Yea. Three days. Are you sure it’s him? Is he safe?”

George shrugged, passed Anita, and climbed the stairs. He grabbed his copy of *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*. Anita had followed him. “I should have done this sooner,” he said as he flipped pages in the index, comparing numbers under the topic headings for York and Tabeau. “Yes, this is the cipher. ‘And, of course, there was York. As Tabeau wrote, “The most marvelous was, though, a large fine man, black as a bear who spoke and acted as one”.’ I read this last week. I just didn’t understand.” George shook his head.



Three days later Anita stood fidgeting with thirty strands of glass beads on the counter as George used a pencil to fit small numbers in tiny boxes. She asked, “Does it really matter? We’re leaving.”

“It matters to me,” he said. “We leave it like we found it. In order. The books will balance.” He repositioned the strings of beads in the rectangle, removed the last fifteen twenty-

credit coins from his pocket, stacked them next to the beads, and pressed the button to read the nano-circuitry embedded in each coin and price tag. When the light turned green, he fed the coins into a slot under the counter, handed ten strands to Anita, and distributed the rest between the pockets of his vest and trousers.

Closing the book and straightening the counter, he asked, “What about a necklace of glass beads? They’re not worth much.”

“Maybe. I’m just not sure it’s a good idea. We might need them out there. They should be easy to get at but I don’t want to be wearing money where people can see it.” She picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder. It bulged with the added clothing she’d acquired in Hannibal.

George picked up his valise and held open the curtain. “You’re sure we’ve got everything?”

Annoyed, Anita said, “Yes, I’m sure. I’ve checked five times. All three floors. We better go. Sundown was fifteen minutes ago.”

“Shush. Don’t call attention to it.”

She rolled her eyes before following him down the stairs, passing the store room, and leaving the shop. Having set their bags on the floor of the handicart, George carried two closed but empty boxes inside, returned, and shut the door for a final time.

Sitting, he leaned towards her, his left hand on his right knee; the intensity of his gaze made her uncomfortable, but she didn’t look away. He said, “You’re sure you can make this trip.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” she snapped. “Let’s go.” She wanted out of Hannibal.

“It’s just, you’ve been...” He looked down the concrete corridor.

“I’m fine. It’s just the hormones.” She let that be her reason for every crazy thing she felt or did of late.

“Okay.” George depressed the joystick button and the handicart accelerated forward. Gently. Automatically.

She didn’t understand why, but she turned and watched the red door disappear into the endless white walls. Sadness gripped her soul.



Episode Twenty-six ♦ *Night Riders*

The door read “Western Stables.” George, hand on the knob, stopped and looked at Anita. “I want to say something.”

Anita’s face scrunched. Her bag slung over her shoulder and her right hand on her hip, she looked away from George down the long, empty, white, concrete corridor.

“I’m a bit worried. Stables. Horses? Should we really be doing this?”

“You mean, *should I being doing this?*” Her tone biting.

“Yes,” George said. “I’m worried about you. Your health. And you’ve been, um...”

“I just want to get out of this stupid, fake place. These sterile tunnels. Twenty-five year olds playing kids and wearing pinafores and pantalets. It’s just dumb. And I’m fine.”

“But the baby.” George removed his hand from the knob and moved it towards her stomach, stopping short, afraid to touch her, worried he had overstepped the bounds of their friendship.

“George. Honestly. I’ll be okay. Pregnant women have been riding horses for centuries. I’m fine. I’ve just been a bit moody and with war starting, well, how does it make you feel?”

“I don’t think about it.”

She sighed, raised her hands, stopped, and said, “Let’s see what’s upstairs. If it makes me at all uncomfortable, you’ll be the first to know. Okay?”

He put on a forced, closed-lipped smile and buried his fears inside his gut.

Anita said, “You don’t have to come. I’ll go on my own. I can take care of myself.”

“No.” He shook his head and opened the door. “I want to go. We’re in this together.”

♦ ♦ ♦

At the top of the stairs Anita found an empty room. Three meters across the space was a door. She opened it. She hesitated. “Hello?”

“Over here.”

The air was perfumed by hay and horse. Drawn to the thick rumbling voice, Anita strode over to the small group. The large black man wore a long, dusty coat and checked the tack of the pair of horses harnessed to a small wagon. A man and woman stood by: they looked like a couple, both young, blond, and wearing modish jeans and jackets. Another man – in period shirt, trousers, and dirty work boots – held the reins of three horses.

“Wasn’t sure y’all’d show,” the black man said.

“We’re here. So what’s the plan?” asked Anita.

He glanced at her. “Bags in the back of the wagonette. You’ll ride with me. Hope your man can handle a horse.”

Anita looked from the speaker to the other couple – she never looking in one direction, he shifting in place and rubbing his hands on his jacket sleeves. “What’s the plan?” Anita asked again. The group stood around. Silent. Anita knew they were appraising her and her companion.

The man in period dress said, “I’ll give you a minute.” He handed the blond couple the reins and left through another door.

In a deep, quiet voice the guide said, “We ride west.”

“Where?” Anita asked.

“We’ll talk tomorrow.” He looked at her long green and ivory dress and then at George in his dress vest, white shirt, and trousers. “You wanna go, don’cha?”

“Yes. We want to go,” said George.

Anita, feeling a flutter in her diaphragm, lacked George’s confidence.

“Then you ride with me in the wagon, ma’am. Name’s Kent.”

“Nice to meet you Mr. Kent,” George said extending his right hand.

“Just Kent,” he said taking George’s hand. “You do ride.”

After Kent released it, George massaged his hand. “I did. As a kid. At camp.”

Every moment Anita felt less certain about the outcome of this adventure. She had a good life back in the free settlement: friends, family, the garden, a home. Thoughts of her sister and the kids tore her heart. She wanted to go back to a time when the future felt predictable, resembled her past. But words from Bubbeh’s prophecy haunted her. “Out of the diseased garden.” Yes, war was a disease. She wanted better for her baby. No, it was time to go. West. It didn’t matter where. Yes.

She said, “We’re ready. If he can’t handle the horse, he’ll learn or I will. So let’s go.”

“All right.” Kent nodded then called, “Samuel? We’re ready.”

“Sorry boss, but these are the best I could find.” Samuel returned carrying two leather coats and a pair of canvas pants. He handed a long coat and the pants to George and the shorter garment to Anita. “Get’s quite cold on the prairie at night. You can return them when you return the horses.”

Anita looked at Kent. He closed his eyes and gave a single shake of his head. She understood. “Yes. Will do. That’s very kind of you, Samuel,” she said.

“Pleasure ma’am.” He touched the forefinger of his right hand to his forehead and stepped over to the wagon. “May I help you up, ma’am?”

Kent looked at the blond couple and pointed to the horses. “You two already know your mounts,” he said. Then he pointed to a tan horse and said to George, “You’ll ride Whisper, a fox trotter. Change into the pants Samuel gave you. He’ll help you mount.”



George glanced over his shoulder, across the gently rolling prairie. Stars disappeared above the eastern horizon as day broke fine and clear. Even with the easy pace, riding through the night had taken a toll: George thought he had worn away skin from the inner parts of his thighs. Kent slowed the wagon and dismounted.

Addressing the group, Kent said, "We should walk a while. Y'all need to stretch your muscles before breakfast." Kent held out a hand to Anita. "That way, y'all'll be able to ride the rest of the day."

George watched the others from his saddle.

The blond couple groaned before the man lowered his right foot to the ground. He struggled to stand upright and stretched before helping his companion down from her mount.

Anita, now standing, said something to Kent. He walked towards George. "Give me the reins. Put your right hand on the pommel, stand, and swing your right leg over the back of the horse. Hold the pommel and slide down. I won't let you fall. If you get hurt, it'll only slow us down."

"Thanks. I can handle it." George sniffed and held his breath at the extra attention paid to him. He stood, wobbled, and swung his right leg over the horse's rump. His boot prodded the animal's left hip, and it lurched and started to circle. George lost his balance and slid sideways, his left foot in the stirrup.

A strong arm wrapped around his waist. "Pull your foot out of the stirrup. I got the horse."

George found firm ground under the soles of his boots but struggled to gain equilibrium, the earth seeming to sway in front of him. He felt warm and flushed. Quietly he spoke to Kent. "Thank you, but I need to do this for myself."

"Exactly. But you didn't take riding lessons in Hannibal."

"I was working!" George coughed against a constricting throat.

"It was a statement." Kent's tone calm and moderated. "Not an accusation. You're doing great. Take the reins." Kent walked around the wagon and team. "Okay, I'll lead the wagonette. Y'all'll follow. We'll stop for breakfast when the sun's up."

Anita walked with George. "He asked me if we'd ridden in Hannibal. What could I say?"

"It's fine. Just embarrassing. How are you feeling?" George strained to smile.

She returned it. "Fine. Though honestly, I want to ride. I miss it."

"Where did you ride?" They fell in behind the blond couple.

"The commune. They never allowed The Track to be installed on the land. So if we wanted to go into town, we rode."

"Yes. Willem mentioned it. Should have taken time off and joined you two for vacation," George said. When Anita did not reply, he let the conversation drop. He worked at moving an aching leg forward, shifting his weight – every muscle below his chest protesting – then

repeating the effort with the other leg. Still he took pleasure in the horses and morning air. It smelled green and fresh but not familiar.

As cramping eased, he stretched the tight muscles while walking. Time was irrelevant and yet, as soon as walking was tolerable, Kent stopped and staked out the team. “Men, there’s wood in the back. Get a fire started. Women,” he slapped a cloth sack. Dust rose. He pointed. “Flour’s here. Eggs, milk, salt, etc. You’ll find tinned fruit and some sausages next to it. Flapjacks and sausage will hit the spot before we continue on the trail.” With that he gathered up the reins for the other three horses, staked them, and filled bags with water from the wagon’s barrel.

The blond man started to remove wood from the wagon.

George asked, “How much do we need?”

The stranger shook his head.

“And what about kindling?”

The man seemed mute.

“Hi. I’m Anita and that’s George,” she said looking at the supplies. “Someone can certainly pack a wagon.”

The woman replied, “I’m Sig. This my man Eetu.”

“Work now, talk later,” Kent said.

George looked in the direction they had come from. The sun rose golden and full of promise.

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Even if Anita had ridden with Kent in the wagon most of the day, and even if she enjoyed an occasional nap, she was exhausted after setting up camp, the warm western sky burning bright with purple, pink, orange, and red.

They sat on the firm earth, not yet cooled by night. Sig dished out beans cooked without meat, much to the men’s displeasure. “No worry. I have sausages. We cut for beans,” she said.

Kent did not wait for sausages and began eating when handed his plate.

“Thank you,” George said with a smile as he took his plate, waiting for a sausage.

“Maybe you guys would like to cook tomorrow?” Anita asked.

“That’s fine.” George chuckled. “No one will eat it.”

“Maybe. We’re all hungry. I don’t mind cooking, but thought I’d offer to share the joy,” Anita said. She looked at Sig. “And where are you going?”

Sig gave a quick glance to Eetu and then looked at Kent.

Kent didn't look up but said, "Better not talk about it. None of us have Informateurs, but if ever asked, we can't tell what we don't know. All y'all need to know, we're headed for Saint Jo on banks o' Big Muddy."

They finished without more discussion, cleaned up, and each couple crawled into a tent. Kent preferred to sleep under the night sky.

Anita's eyes closed, feeling quite drowsy, she thought she dreamed George's questions. "How are you doing? Still glad you came?"

"Did you say something?" she asked.

"Are you okay?" He whispered.

Eyes still closed, a smile formed deep inside her essence. She smiled. "Yes, George. Get some sleep." She let out a slow, deep breath and thought about the wide open space they had traversed that day, never seeing another person. For the first time in weeks she felt the weight of fear and worry release her heart. Her only regret was she hadn't brought her sister and family along.



Episode Twenty-seven ♦ *Twelve Gauge*

Twelve days, mostly riding, long and difficult, but George struggled to remember a time when he had slept so well at night. Each morning he crawled out of his bedroll, muscles aching, ready for another day of the same food, the same people, and an endless view of gently rolling grassland – and occasionally a tree if water was near. He was happy to be alive and eager for another day in the saddle.

The small band had settled into their roles: George and Eetu were responsible for the camp, Sig and Anita made the food and cleaned up, and Kent took care of the animals, wood, and water. But provisions were running low, not knowing how far they still had to travel, George felt a touch of unease.

They finished eating another filling breakfast of flapjacks, tinned fruit in heavy syrup, and sausage – hunger was the best antidote to the monotony of trail food. Kent said, “Don’t bother striking camp.” He pointed to Eetu. “You’ll join me in the wagon. We’ll go to town for supplies.”

“Can we all go?” George asked, eager to see a wilderness town.

“No. I’m dark but they know me. You two won’t be welcome. They won’t mind him and he don’t talk. Just the way it needs to be. We’ll be back around sunset.” Kent reached into the back of the wagonette and removed a shotgun. He tossed it to George who, now used to having things thrown his way, caught it. “Know how to use a coach gun? Twelve gauge.”

“No,” George said looking at the weapon’s side-by-side barrels. He was surprised by the gun’s heft. Its potential secreted in its mass, not its volume. The wood butt was scratched and nicked. The barrel too, scratched. It was a bit longer than his arm. “Is it loaded?”

“Not yet. Follow me,” Kent said walking, carrying an empty tin can and a piece of string. He removed two cartridges from his belt and handed them to George. “Move the lever on top with your thumb to breech the gun. Horses should be fine around shotguns, but no need to stress ’em. Don’t let that stop you if you need to use it.”

They walked towards the small stream, their source of fresh water. It was far enough to require shouting to be heard at the camp. Kent pulled out a pocket knife, punctured the side of the can, and hung it from a tree branch while George breeched the gun and figured out which end of the cartridge fit in the barrel. Kent helped George position the butt against his shoulder. “You’ve two triggers. One for each barrel. Pull one trigger at a time. Bend your knees. Not that much.” Kent pushed George’s knees back then moved his right foot so it was at a thirty degree angle to his left. “Gun’ll kick. Lean into your left foot. Brace with your right.”

George tried to keep up with each of the commands – left hand here, butt in shoulder pocket, front trigger for this barrel, back for the other, cheek next to the stock, both eyes open, do this, don’t do that. He was just about to hand the weapon back when Kent said, “Looks good. Aim at the can. Then fire.” George lined up the sight with the can and squeezed the front trigger. He struggled against the recoil, pushing himself forward with his right leg and tensing the muscles in his back.

“Wait for the can to stop swinging,” Kent said.

“I missed it?”

“Yup. Now y’know what t’expect.”

George checked his stance, put the butt to his shoulder, aimed, pulled, but nothing happened.

“Other trigger.”

“Forgot.” George moved his finger and sighted the can. The gun kicked, but George held his ground.

“Good shot. Winged it. Need to practice. I’ll give you a box of shells at the wagon. Keep four or six in case you need them. Keep the used cases. Keep the gun loaded. Come out, shoot a couple rounds. Go back to the women. It’s unlikely anythin’ll happen. You’ll protect them if needed. First shot should be a warning. Never hesitate if you need to kill. Center of the chest.”

“Protect them from what?” asked George.

“Wolves, maybe. Lawless types are rare here’bouts.”

George swallowed, closed his eyes, and massaged his temple. His head swam. Life, especially Anita’s and the small one, was precious and yet suddenly precarious on the plains: he felt every hair follicle bristle as he contemplated the importance of his charge. He opened his mouth as they started back to the camp, but they walked in silence.

Anita spoke. “The horses were fine. They barely looked up.”

“Good. As expected. Samuel knew what we needed.” Kent handed George a box and joined Eetu on the bench of the wagonette.

As the two men rode north from the camp, Sig asked, “So, did gun shoot good?”

George nodded. “Still need practice, but I can handle it.”

The right side of Anita’s mouth drew upward. “He shoot good.”

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Resting that day was more difficult than riding and even more boring. George watched the sun make the slow arc across the sky wondering if it was the right time for a bit more target practice. He remembered his limited supply of ammunition and decided to read from *Huck Finn* instead. Maybe he could find the meaning of the last clue. “My pioneers. West. Find me under a red cloud.” But sitting still was hard: his backside, sore.

He determined a game was what they needed and set about looking for rocks. After finding nine egg-sized stones near the stream he fired off a couple rounds at the hanging can – it now had a few holes in it – and returned to camp. He removed the airball jersey from his valise and laid it on the ground. He took three paces away from the shirt and started tossing the stones. Landing all but two and drawing Anita and Sig’s attention, he gathered up the rocks and took four paces from the shirt before tossing the stones.

“We play too,” said Sig as she picked up the stones, divvied them up, and stood beside George. They cheered as all three of Sig’s stones landed on the shirt’s “8” and laughed as Anita’s

landed short. George gathered up the stones as the women stepped back half a pace and the three tried again.

“You’re way too good at this, Sig,” said Anita. “Maybe you should be learning to shoot.”

“We play game like this young kids. But use circles, not manshirt. I no like gun.” She shook her head ferociously from side to side.

Anita turned to George. “How are you doing with it?”

“Fine, but I wish I could practice more.”

“Shoulder hurt?”

“Yes. But doesn’t everything out here?”

They laughed and threw more stones.

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The women cooked supper and George felt uneasy that Kent and Eetu had not returned. Only half the sun remained above the horizon and he worried six remaining shells were too few. Carrying the gun, he started to pace away from the camp in the direction the men had ridden out. He returned to camp, then paced a bit farther.

After a few trips Anita met him fifteen paces from the fire. “Please come and eat. You’re starting to make Sig nervous. They’ll be back soon.”

“But what if they’re not?”

“We’ll be fine. Come.”

Sitting by the fire, the loaded shotgun at his side, George refused seconds. “Better save it for them. They’ll be hungry.” His left foot twitched out in front of him.

The red sky deepened into the gloaming night. There was no sign of the men.

Anita put a couple more pieces of wood on the fire as Sig entered her tent.

“What if someone sees the fire?” asked George.

“That was kind of my idea,” she said. “I’m going to move the horses closer before going to bed. I’ll get some sleep now. Wake me in a couple hours.”

George’s gut clenched as his dinner rumbled inside his stomach. “What? Did they tell you they weren’t coming back tonight?”

“No, George. Don’t worry. I’m sure it just took a little longer is all.”

“So why did you...”

“I’m just saying, if you start getting sleepy, wake me. That’s all. Okay?”

“Okay, but...” He stopped speaking as thoughts crowded his brain. He needed to prepare. They might not return that night. They might not return at all. What would the three of them do then? As the adrenaline entered George’s bloodstream he fought to control his shaking limbs

knowing, no matter what, he needed to remain calm. Sig, Anita, and the baby were depending on him. Kent had given him the shotgun. “Nothing. Get some rest.” I can do what needs to be done.

With the women inside their tents, George patrolled around the camp, practice aiming at trees, stars, the rising moon, anything that caught his eye.



George looked up at the sky as the women slept. He pulled his coat closed and tried to remember the constellations from childhood nights spent stargazing at summer camp. He found Ursa Major and Minor but imagined he saw an octopus with eleven tentacles and something else resembling a crown of many jewels. Which one was Cassiopeia? He always liked that name.

He stood, the shotgun in his right hand, and walked to the dwindling pile of wood. Grabbing another piece, he tossed it in the cinders before walking away from the camp. Time to urinate. He stopped halfway to the stream and looked up at the constellation of a herdsman, unable to remember what it was called.

The night sounds changed. Was he imagining it or were the crickets chirping slower now as the night air cooled? Frogs croaked by the stream.

He cut off the flow. The new sound was familiar. It came from the west. No, Kent had ridden north. George was certain of that.

George stuffed himself into his trousers. Ignored the buttons. Swallowed deeply. Raising the butt to his shoulder, he stood still and listened. Yes, someone definitely approached from the west.

Walking away from the campfire, he looked for the source of the noise, hoping it was them. The waxing moon was low in the southern sky. George scanned the horizon. Nothing stood out. He was not imagining it. A slow, distant grinding of metal wheel in the prairie dirt. The sound came from the direction of the stream. They must be close to the trees.

George hated that he had not checked to make sure the shotgun was loaded. No, he was positive. After firing two shells at the can he always reloaded.

The sound grew. They were closing. If it was Kent, he would call out. No voice. It was time. First shot would be a warning. George swiped the sweat off his brow. He held the gun firmly. Aimed at Hercules’ heart.

A single shell exploded into the night sky.



Episode Twenty-eight ♦ *Failed Test*

A single shell exploded into the night sky.

George scanned the darkness for a sign. The night was still, the waxing gibbous moon providing light as George searched for the intruders.

Silence.

George sighted down the shotgun. Forefinger on the second trigger.

Nothing.

“George. It’s us.”

The gun pointed at the words. They could be trying to distract me. He held true.

“How do I know that?”

“Anita likes daisies.”

George exhaled.

“Who’s with you?”

“Eetu. Lower your weapon. Anyone else’ve shot you. You’re outlined in firelight.”

Feeling foolish and confused, George said, “Why are you coming this way?”

“Let us approach. I’ll explain.”

George pointed the barrel at the ground two meters ahead. He remained alert, watching for the wagon, fearing someone was with them. A quick glance at the fire, he started circling to the north, searching for cover in the darkness.

The crunch of metal covered wheel against prairie dirt. A slow advance, increasing distance from the stream. George detected the movement of the wagon, team, and finally, two men. Still searching the night for signs of treachery, he watched the wagonette approach the camp.

The women stood together behind the fire. Kent neared and said something. Anita moved and George stalked towards the group.

Anita watered the horses. Fearing Kent’s reaction, George crept towards the fire, worrying the women had been needlessly upset. Kent broke George’s ice-bath. “You did what I wanted you to do. Good job. One problem. We could see your outline in the firelight. You were an easy target.”

George stuttered. “I... I...”

“You’re learning. This’s a new world. Like I said, you did fine.”

George found no comfort in Kent’s reassurance. He failed his test despite Kent’s words to the contrary. If they had been bandits, he would be dead and the women captives.

Sig held out two plates. "Here. Eat. Hungry men."

Grunts became thanks as the men devoured the beans, sausage, and cornbread. Sig scraped the Dutch oven and spooned the remaining food onto each man's plate.

Finishing, Kent said, "Hits the spot. Didn't eat in town. Not a good reception. Too many strangers passing through lately for their liking. I got what we need – cheese, beans, meat, grain – so we're okay. But we were followed leaving town. Took the road to the west. Couldn't turn south until we were sure they'd turned back."

◆◆◆

Morning came too early. Anita was fine but worried about George. It took too long for him to come to bed, and he tossed and turned the few hours he slept. She hated to wake him; everything but their tent, bedding, and his breakfast was packed and ready. She leaned into the tent. "George. George."

"I know." He propped himself up on elbows. Then just one as he wiped the sleep from his eyes. Boots still on, gun in his hand, he rolled over and backed out of the tent. After a stretch George said, "He's ready to leave."

"Yes."

"I'll go to the creek. Any food left?"

"Of course."

He walked away from her. She took a couple quick steps after him and stopped. "George, I wanted to say, thank you." He stopped, turned, and raised the left side of his mouth, lowered his lids in a weak smile. He continued to the stream; a changed man.

Anita rolled up the bedding, Eetu packed the tent, Sig arranged the wagon, Kent checked the horses' tack as George scarfed down breakfast. Kent carried another piece of leather to George's horse, Whisper. Still wary, George approached Kent. "Morning sir. About last..."

"Scabbard's for your shotgun. We'll have more time after lunch. I'll show you how to draw from the saddle. Don't expect you'll be needing it today."

George mounted and brought up the rear of the small company.

◆◆◆

Anita got up the nerve to ask, "Why don't we stick to the road?"

Kent said, "It's riskier. My way's better."

She wasn't about to challenge him. After all, they'd had no trouble the way he guided them, unless she wanted to complain about beans, cornbread, pancakes, and fruit in horrible, thick syrup. Everyone accepted her no-sausage-in-the-beans thing. No, for traveling in a wagon, the trip had gone quite well.

"You don't eat meat," he said.

She looked at him, feeling a bit exposed on the wagon seat.

“Meat’s good for babies.”

“No one in my family eats any flesh. It’s taboo. My sister and I grew up just fine without it.”

“Uh huh. Back in the city. You got other proteins. Here. Only beans. One kind. Beans. That’s why I got cheese.”

She wanted to thank him. She wanted to feel thankful for the advice, but it reignited that worry buried deep inside her. She came west for the baby. Her little one. She left because she knew she had to. For the little one’s sake. For her child’s freedom. But there was always doubt. What if she’d made the wrong choice? Maybe they would never have taken her away. Or she would only have been questioned. Kent’s comments poked at the insecurity and doubt that gnawed at her confidence.

Changing the subject she said, “It’s hard to believe that there are still any hard roads out here. People moved away – well most did – so long ago.”

“No one lives who remembers the old ways. No one remembers anyone who did.”

Kent maneuvered the wagon around another bend, the riders on horseback following. Once the path straightened out again, he continued. “Remember. No Authority out here. No underground either. I’ll leave you soon. You’ll be on your own after that.”

◆◆◆

“This is where we part ways,” Kent said to George as Sig and Anita finished clearing up the lunch dishes. “You keep the shotgun and the shells you have on you. Also your coats. I’ll settle up with Samuel when I get back to Hannibal.”

George said, “Thank you.”

Kent motioned towards the southwest with his right hand. “Circle into town from the south. You’ll be there before sunset. We’ll camp north of town and leave tomorrow. We don’t know each other. Understand?”

“Yes. Thank you for all...”

“Just doing what I got paid to do.”

“Who paid you?”

“None of your business. Good luck on your trip.” Kent extended his right hand, George honored to have it crushed one last time. Three weeks had gone by quickly.

George put on his coat, then the scabbard hanging diagonally over his back, and picked up his bag in the hand he would not use to draw. Anita carried her coat under her arm, her bag over her shoulder. “Why don’t you let me carry your bag for you?” asked George.

“What if you need to shoot someone?”

He was not sure how to take her question. It might have been sarcasm or just a simple statement of fact.

They started walking, turned, waved, and said, “Goodbye!” and “Thank you!”

“No. Southwest.” Kent was motioning minus thirty degrees off their course. “The clump of trees is the town. Enter from the south. You’ll hit a road. Turn right.”

◆◆◆

Anita was tired of walking. Even without the coat, it was hot under mid-July’s afternoon sun. They found the road and approached the village. There was even a bit of traffic on it – walkers and people on horseback, a wagon – something they hadn’t encountered since leaving Hannibal.

“How’re you doing?” George asked her.

“Fine. Tired. What do you think we should do about tonight?”

“I’m hoping there’s room at the inn.” He looked at her, his lips curled up in a soft smile.

“Inn? You really think they have inns out here, do you?”

“With the traffic on this road? Sure! There has to be something. Also, why’d Kent send us into town without bedrolls?”

“Maybe ’cause we couldn’t carry them?”

“Good point.” He stopped a second. “Which would you prefer? A comfortable bed or a hot bath?”

She thought, readied an answer, thought again. “Don’t torment me!” They both laughed.

To the right of the road sat small, roughly-made houses surrounded by vegetable gardens. Other than the settlement, the terrain was flat, bland. The sun hid behind the trees; they walked on the north-south road of a village caught between two times. The street was dirt, the buildings simple wooden construction. Most had flat fronts, a door, and maybe a window. People eyed them from the sides of the street. Some looked out of windows.

A wrinkled old man sat on a wooden porch, watching them. Anita waved at him and said, “Hello.” He just stared.

She grasped George’s arm, feeling the need to associate herself strongly with a man, even a man such as George. She remembered the gunshot, how he’d stood out there alone on the prairie ready to defend her and Sig. No, she didn’t care what anyone thought. He was a good man. A good man.

“We must be in the center of town,” he said.

She looked around. Even by free settlement standards, it was primitive. “Why do you say that?”

George pointed to a building and said, “Bar.”

Yes, that’s what was written. Another read, “Stables.” Another, “FOOD.” Simple words, but words none the less. There were also crudely painted pictures – something that looked like a

mug of beer, a horse head, a plate of – she decided it had to be beans and rice. Yes. Beans and rice.

George stopped and turned to her. “I can ask if there’s a place to stay.”

She let go of his arm and did a slow pan around. Eyes watched, but she didn’t sense hostility. No, the feeling wasn’t even dislike. It was, *Wonder where they’re from*. Then she heard someone say, “Don’t look like they’re from KC.” She pivoted, but no one was in earshot, at least not without yelling.

Then she saw it. A sign. A painted sign that read, “Books.”

She put her arm around George’s wrist again. “Come with me.” He put up his usual fight. None.

They neared the building and there were many letters on the front of the building. Four words caught her attention: “Comfortable Accommodation” and “Satisfying Refreshment.”

George grinned.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Won’t hurt to investigate.”

George opened the door, looked inside, and entered. She followed behind him wondering if he could really use that nasty thing on his back if he needed to.

“Welcome to Clearie’s Letters. My, but you two look like you need a good bath and supper cooked on a real stove.”

George’s mouth hung open as he stared at the shelves crammed with books. Anita was certain a tear ran down George’s dusty cheek. The stranger approached. His dress reminded her of what George had worn in Hannibal – nicer vest, dungarees, a white shirt, and lace up shoes. He had deep green eyes and golden hair with just a hint of red. And maybe a touch of gray.

Anita smiled and pointed her thumb at George. “He’s got a thing for books.”

“And I’ve got books about things. Let him be then. I’m thinking you need a good cup of tea.” The stranger reached for her coat. “I’m Clearie. This is my place. You sit while I go put the kettle on.”



Episode Twenty-nine ♦ *Saint Jo*

A malevolent voice demanded, "I want more. Give me more!" A fat hand at the end of a thick, hairy arm grabbed at her. George held the shotgun and said, "Leave her alone."

Red.

Yama's messenger stalked them on the trail, through the grass, into town.

Anita woke, desperate to free herself from the bed sheet. She rolled over, comfortable on the straw mattress, took a deep breath, and drifted back into the dream.

Below a single, red cloud she pirouetted three times and an elephant with many arms appeared. Marigolds rained from the heavens as a tiny Willem sprang from the ground where she had danced.

She floated above the scene.

The messenger – his eyes black holes, his ears flaming pointed crescents – cackled and her sense of self diminished. The flourish of his red cape.

George, Clearie, and a young boy – eyes of pale blue and wheaten hair – emerged from a well, their arms filled with books.

The wind blew her away.

A couple night's sleep in a bed and Clearie's cooking didn't take the edge off Anita's dreams. Doubt gnawed at her confidence in the decision to come west. Life was quiet and peaceful if nothing like what she had left behind east of the Mississippi.

"Walk with me to the river," George said. Here, between the town and water, prairie grassland gave way to a mix of scrub, cottonwood, and willow near the banks of the wide, murky river. They returned towards town. George spoke. "This isn't a bad place. We could live here."

Anita mulled his statement for a few paces. "So, you've also been thinking about what we should do next?"

"Yes."

"Me too. You're right, Saint Jo isn't a bad place." She considered her next statement. "I think you'd be happy here."

George was silent for many slow steps. He stopped and asked, "You don't want to stay?"

"It's not that, George." She stopped walking, looked into the distance, her will unclear. "Don't we still have a clue to solve?"

"Yes. 'My pioneers. West. Find me under a red cloud.' I've no idea what it means."

She chewed her lower lip and started walking again. He kept pace. She said, "I've been thinking a lot about the meaning of 'under a red cloud.' I haven't mentioned it before, but I've had dreams about a red cloud. Even before leaving Hartfield."

George's eyebrows pulled together. "You've dreamed about it?"

She nodded. “Yes, before we left. I felt hopeful, about the baby. Later, it scared me. Thought, maybe it’s not a good omen after all. Then we got that last clue with the gold beads.”

George nodded. “So?”

“Well, when we got here I started to feel things. Hear things. I told you my grandparents were fortune tellers. That’s what my real surname means. My mother’s mother had the sight. I’ve had dreams, feelings, but something has awoken in me I’ve never felt before. Messages. I think the red cloud is important. Do you have any idea what it means? So many of the other clues came from books.”

“Nothing has come to mind.”

“Let’s ask Clearie. I have a good feeling about him,” she said.

He remained quiet for a number of steps. “But there are no daisies at Clearie’s.”

“I know. Kent told me that De Authoriteit’s not out here. No UGO either. We’re on our own now. And Clearie’s been the first to ask for payment.”

“His price is fair, don’t you think?” George looked at her.

She nodded. “Very. Two gold beads a day for room and board is a steal.”

“I’ll think about it.” George nodded. “After dinner. I’ll ask if he can think of any literary references to ‘red cloud’.”

They walked in silence.

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George asked, “You really made this pasta yourself?”

“Uh huh.” Clearie nodded.

Anita said, “Your green bean, zucchini, and tomato sauce is wonderful. Thank you, Clearie. It’s great you grow everything out here.”

Clearie smiled. “I don’t grow the wheat or raise chickens but it’s easy to find someone who does and trade. Having a connection to Confederated Express and being literate means people need something I have. It all works out in the end.”

George smiled, finished his chicken, and asked, “How did you end up out here?”

“My parents left Ireland when I was young. They were both over-educated and wanted to see life in the wilderness. We moved around observing before I finished my education back east. I just didn’t feel I belonged there.”

“So you came to Saint Jo?” George asked.

Clearie nodded. “And since I have an Informateur, I can return any time I like. I usually make a trip to Quincy or Saint Louis once or twice a year. Been to Twin City, but the journey’s harder.”

“Do you go alone?” asked Anita.

“Never. While there isn’t a lot of trouble with bandits out here – they don’t live long, honestly – it’s still better to travel with a group. Also you need to know which towns are safer and which ones aren’t.”

Anita yawned and stretched before saying, “I’ll clean up since you cooked.”

“No,” Clearie protested. “You’re my guests.”

“I insist. You’ve taken such good care of us. I’m happy to do it. Plus you two are enjoying your conversation.”

“Only since you insist but I’ll make breakfast tomorrow.” Clearie smiled.

“Deal.” Anita stacked the plates then poured what was left of the tea into their cups.

George took a sip and said, “I was really surprised by your book collection. Books are so rare back east.”

“I remember. Started collecting them as a kid. My first was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It wasn’t in great shape.”

“I’ve heard of it but never read it,” said George.

“Traded it to a guy interested in slavery. He talked about people in the deserts to the south and west who still had slaves.”

With a finger on the handle, George rotated his cup. “It’s been so long since slavery ended that no one thinks about it in the Confederation.”

“But humans are still human. It’s the strength of De Authoriteit’s control that keeps such from happening now, well, where they’re in control.”

“So where did your library come from?”

“Sometimes when traveling I come across an abandoned farmhouse or hamlet. You can still find things. I’ve found a few books, and others find them and bring them to trade. But I decided to settle here,” Clearie stopped, his emerald eyes tearing up, and looked away. He choked against the words. “Most were his. Lived with him for a couple of years before he didn’t return from KC.”

“What’s KC?”

“South of here. We call it Kan-sin City. It’s a rough town. Anything goes. Lots of trade. Things you can’t find anywhere else. It’s not a good place. Not a safe place.”

“So why’d he go?” George asked.

Clearie bent forward. Teardrops fell on the table.

Feeling the red glow in his cheeks, George said, “I’m sorry. Shouldn’t’ve asked.”

“No, it’s okay. We loved each other but he needed more than I could give. Don’t get me wrong, we were together in every possible sense of the word. He just didn’t believe in monogamy.”

“Do you know what happened? Did he go somewhere else?”

Clearie shook his head and wiped away tears. George reached out a hand. Clearie took it, starting to cry. George tugged his chair closer and put his arm around Clearie. Anita looked in and mouthed, “Is he okay?” George waved her off.

When the sobbing eased Clearie said, “Not sure, but got word he was robbed and fought back so they stabbed him. That’s what happens in KC. Promise me you’re not going there.”

“Never crossed my mind.” George repressed the urge to stroke Clearie’s hair and backed away to give him some space.

Clearie said, “I’m sorry. I don’t like to... You know. But it’s not often that I feel so comfortable with someone. You’re special. You both are. But everyone leaves.” Clearie stretched and took a drink from his teacup. “So, you are into Romantic Era literature and music. What’s going on in the arts now?”

George thought for a minute and shrugged. “Well, a good friend would be able to answer that. He’s into everything modern. All seems pretty crazy to me.”

“You only like the classics?”

“Pretty much. Let me ask you this. Have you ever run across the words ‘red cloud’?”

“How do you mean?” Clearie cocked his head, his hair amber in the lamplight.

“I don’t know. A name. A place? A symbol?”

“Too bad the Informateur doesn’t work out here.” Clearie leaned forward, his chin resting on his fist, elbow on his thigh. “Red Cloud was the name of an Indian leader who fought EuroAmerican invasion.” He tapped his forefinger across his lips. “I also remember a woman author – famous American who wrote during the early twentieth century. She grew up in a small town west of here, wrote about it in some of her books. Let’s see if I can find one.” He stood.

George followed him into the front room, between the bookshelves. He ran his finger over worn spines and barely legible embossed text. “It should be in this area. North American. Eighteenth century. Nineteenth century. Twentieth. I don’t see...wait, this might be her.”

Clearie pulled a book off the shelf and handed it to George who flipped to the title page and read, “Willa Cather. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.” George scratched his head.

“What’s up?”

“The name’s familiar but I’ve never read this book. Give me a second.” George handed Clearie the book, grabbed a candle, ran upstairs to the room he shared with Anita, tapped on the door, but got no response. He cracked the door, making sure she was not sleeping, entered, and pulled his books out of his bag. He nodded and took one downstairs.

The teacups were gone and Clearie poured ale into two mugs. “What do you have there?”

“Going away present. Cather. *Prairie Trilogy*.”

“That’s it. I mean, the same author. What are the book titles?”

“*O Pioneers. Song of the Lark. And My Antonia.*” A shiver ran down George’s spine, out to his digits, bounced back, causing his hair to prickle.

“Where are they set?”

George read from the first page of *O Pioneers!* “...the little town of Hanover.” He paged to the next book. “...staying overnight in Moonstone.” More pages flipped. “North America. Nebraska. Blue Ridge.” He scanned the text.

“Nebraska was a place to the west of here. Not far.” Clearie said, encouraging.

“Chicago. ‘We go Black Hawk, Nebraska’.”

“That’s it!”

“What?”

“That’s what I was trying to remember. Cather wrote about Black Hawk, but it’s the fictionalization of the town she lived in. See if there’s an ‘about the author’.”

George paged through the book. At the end he found it. “Born near Winchester, Virginia, Willa’s parents joined relatives in Red Cloud, Nebraska in eighteen eighty-four. The town was named for an Oglala Sioux leader and inspired settings for each book in her *Prairie Trilogy.*”

“I think you found your answer,” Clearie said.



Episode Thirty ♦ *The Ferryman*

Anita couldn't look at George. She gazed out the window, across the town's sunny main road. She asked, "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know" said George.

It wasn't fair. She had answers. Two of them. She just didn't know what to tell him. It was prophesied before she left the free settlement. And in her dreams. They had to make this journey together. Even if George's future were tied to Clearie, George had to go to Red Cloud.

She swallowed. "George, maybe you should just stay. I... I..." But the words were lost in unsteady emotions and ever-growing doubt. "You should stay. You two could be happy together." She regretted saying it. When a seer knew, misleading, no matter the reason, violated her beliefs.

"I just don't think it's safe for you to go on your own," George said. "Why don't you stay here?"

"Because it's my destiny. I have to go to Red Cloud. It's my connection to Willem. I have to tell him he's going to be a father."

♦ ♦ ♦

George hated this conversation. He disliked her need to find Willem, knowing Willem would never be there for her, but he could not tell her that. If he did, he would have to explain Willem's distrust of attachment, of commitment. This distrust was fundamental to his friend's personality. No, Willem needed freedom.

George accepted his friend's needs as he understood his own. His need of companionship, ideas, living the right way. With a purpose.

He had promised to take care of her and the baby. He had to go with her.

George said, "I want to go."

The desire to stay was strong. An ache. The need to understand it. To know Clearie. Torn. He had to go. Torn between the possible and the promise. He wanted them both, knew she would leave. Alone. Beyond the reach of UGO. No stranger could be trusted to travel with her. He had to go.

"Let's put our heads together. Figure out what we need," George said.

"You're sure?" Tears welled in her eyes. "George, how do I say this?" She looked away. "I want you to think long and hard. I will not accept an answer today."

George grabbed his shotgun and left the room, needing space. He did not want to think about it. He needed to go.

♦ ♦ ♦

Anita sat on the bed and gave into the tears. They ran down her cheeks. She was tired of being strong, of making the decisions, of shouldering the burden. Knowing was too much for

her. She remembered her grandmother telling her mother, “At least you aren’t burdened with the sight. I pray your daughters are like you.” Now she understood how painful it was to know and not understand.

There was a firm knock on the door. Turning, ready to tell George to leave her alone, she found Clearie holding a tray. She wiped away the tears.

He asked, “Talk over some tea?”

She smiled. “Yes. I’d love a cup. Join me?”

“Of course.” Clearie smiled at her, set the tray down on a table, and said, “I know if someone comes in the shop. George’ll be gone awhile. Now that the Rubidoux have taught him to hunt, I’m dreading what he might bring home for dinner.” Clearie poured the tea.

She took the proffered cup. “How do you get this out here?”

“I buy or trade for it when I can. And people know how much I like it. Always get plenty during the winter holidays.” He paused then said, “I understand you’re ready to head west.”

“I am. Don’t get me wrong, I like it here, just don’t want to impose.”

“No imposition.” Clearie leaned over and patted her hand. “Stay as long as you like. You’re always welcome.”

She smiled and glanced at the window. “I’ve enjoyed it.” She remembered the dream: George, Clearie, and a boy, emerging from a well, arms filled with books. “I hate the idea of taking George away.”

“It’s okay. He’ll be back.”

She looked at him, stunned, feeling like she’d been told she’d have triplets. Clearie knew something.

His grin was light, playful. “He’ll have to visit. Can’t resist my library.”

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George darted from room to room looking for Anita. She was chopping vegetables in the kitchen helping Clearie prepare dinner. “Come look what I got!” He grabbed her hand and pulled her from her work. Clearie followed along behind.

“Isn’t it great!” George said. “Only two gold beads.”

“Who sold you that thing?” Clearie asked.

“Jess Rubidoux.”

Clearie said, “Looks like something his grandfather used when he first came out here.” He shook his head a bit.

George took a step back. True, the wood was gray. “But I checked it over. It’s in good shape. Solid.” George kicked a wooden spoke, to demonstrate.

“But what is it?” Anita asked.

Her question surprised him. “A handcart! For heavier stuff. Pop out these pins to break it down.” He pointed to the axle nearest her before climbing behind the crossbar and lifting it. The handcart’s wheels came to his shoulders allowing the crossbar to rest in his hands. Between the wheels was a shallow box. “You wanna go for a ride?”

Anita shook her head. “We’re getting dinner ready. Or they feed you too?”

He shook his head, disappointed by her lack of enthusiasm, he dropped the crossbar. “All we need is to find some bedrolls, a tent, a sack of beans, flour, a water barrel...”

Anita looked at Clearie and said, “Things packed for our wagon trip here.”

“Oh,” said Clearie. “How about putting it in the shed for the night? We can talk about supplies for the journey over dinner, okay?”

◆◆◆

After a couple days of trading, Anita was relieved George thought before piling too much on the handcart. Clearie’s help proved invaluable; he knew who to talk to about what and how many beads to pay. Now that they were packed – Clearie trading a weatherproof rucksack for George’s valise – it was time to say goodbye. She wanted to give them some space, but George strained against the crossbar.

Clearie moved towards him, George offered his right hand, nodding at the handcart’s crossbar in his left, miming against its weight. Everything about Clearie drooped. “Write and tell me what you thought of *Brideshead Revisted*.”

“Will do. Thanks.” George moved forward into the road.

Clearie turned to Anita. “You sure you’ve got everything?”

“I hope so! Thank you for everything.” She gave Clearie a hug and whispered in his ear, “Don’t take it personally. He doesn’t want to leave, he just wants to go.”

Clearie squeezed her tight and said, “Remember, don’t trust ferrymen and things only get more expensive the farther you go.”

George turned and waved. “Goodbye! Thanks!”

Heading north, Anita walked next to George as he pulled the handcart along a path near the river. The sun was high in a cloud-free sky when they came to the first hut, but no one was around. Continuing along the path they found a man camped on the bank a few feet above waterline. His empty flat-bottomed boat was large and in good repair.

“Hello,” said George.

The ferryman replied, “Mornin’.”

“We’d like to cross. How much you charge?”

The man looked them over, then the handcart. “You can break that down?”

“I can,” answered George.

“What’cha got to trade?”

George pulled a gold bead out of his trouser pocket.

The ferryman smiled.

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Packing the rowboat took the rest of the day. George and Anita camped in the grass twenty paces away from the ferryman, sleeping under the stars, one keeping a surreptitious watch while the other slept.

Just after dawn George and the ferryman broke down the camp and stored it in the boat, while Anita cooked sausages and flapjacks for breakfast. The ferryman ate more than his share before disappearing into the brush. George used the opportunity to check the shotgun. It was loaded. He slung it in the scabbard across his back.

Waiting by the boat, Anita fidgeted with items sticking out here and there. George watched her fish her sunglasses out of her bag and put them on. He was relieved she did not want to talk. Anxiety unsettled his breakfast leaving him nauseous. The four meter boat, crowded with provisions, seemed small against the wide expanse of brown water, but the ferryman had insisted they would be fine.

Ambling down the bank, the ferryman adjusted the front of his pants. He took Anita’s hand and pulled her along the boat and pointed. “Sit there.”

George dug his fingernails into his palms, questioning his decision, and turned away.

“You gunna help?” The ferryman leaned into the prow. George grabbed the side, and together they forced it off the muddy gravel. The ferryman moved down the side, pushing George backwards waist-deep into the river. “Get in,” the ferryman barked.

Anita leaned towards him offering her hand.

“Stay put.”

Grabbing the seat with one hand, the gunnel with the other, George flexed his knees, propelled himself upwards pulling his legs over the wale and into the boat. Dripping and shivering in the cool morning air, he sat next to Anita, water streaming down his stomach and legs. He tried not to get her dress wet.

The ferryman sat across from them, oars in hand, grunting as he brought the craft around and into the current. He was strong; the boat, stable; his shirt, sweat-soaked as he fought across the current. The banks ripped by, George wondering if they had passed Saint Jo yet, the western landing south of the town.

The ferryman lifted the oars and set them inside the boat.

“Why did you stop?” asked George.

“Landing’s still downstream. There’s sandbars along here.”

George bit his lip, distrusting, digging fingernails into palms, certain they’d made a mistake in trusting this man.

The ferryman looked from one to the other. “Hard work. Stuff’s heavy. Should’ve charged more. How ’bout two more strings of gold beads?”

“We agreed on three,” Anita said, voice firm.

The man leaned towards her. “I want more. Give me more.”

“Here. Take these.” Anita handed him her sunglasses. “There’s over ten thousand Confederation credits on the chip inside.”

He batted them away. They hit the resting oar and fell into the river. “Credits are useless out here.” He put a fat, hairy, sweaty hand on her leg. “Or there’s something else.” His mouth half open, the fat tongue rested on teeth and lower lip.

“Leave her alone,” George said, his right hand reaching.

“You’re almost pretty for a darkie.”

The ferryman scooted towards her.

“Get off me!” Anita screamed.

George drew the shotgun. The butt shouldered. His finger on the trigger. The muzzle aimed at the heaving chest. “I said leave my wife alone!” George’s chest seized.

The ferryman’s eyes narrowed. He grabbed the oar near George and swung the blade.

George pulled the trigger.



Episode Thirty-one ♦ *Another View*

From the time they arrived at the campsite, Anita tried to leave, the ferryman's gaze discomfoting. She pulled George to the side. "Let's go," she said, but George shook his head. They had agreed on the price – three strands of gold trade beads worth three hundred credits. Hiding behind the handcart, she snipped the strings from her petticoat and handed them to George. The ferryman's eyes were on her, if she dared look his way.

Night came. When George kept watch, she pretended to sleep. Dawn broke. She tried to hide from that man as she readied for the day, keeping her back to him as she cooked breakfast. The food smelled awful; a couple bites and her stomach rebelled. She swallowed the bile, the fear.

The dream, of a boat and Yama's messenger, haunted her. She wanted to be invisible. She needed to leave.

The day was cloudless and new. She avoided George. Waiting by the loaded rowboat, she made sure things were well-packed, poking and rearranging. She found her sunglasses and bonnet, putting them on to provide cover in the flat-bottomed rowboat. Something to hide behind.

Too soon it was time to go. "Get in," the ferryman said before he and George pushed the boat into the river. She tried to help George in, but the horrible man barked at her. "Stay put."

The men sat. The ferryman pulled the oars and leered at her. His eyes examined her. Her hair. Her face. Her hands. Her arms. Her fully-covered bosom. Feeling exposed, she crossed her arms over her belly, hiding her pregnancy. Her green and ivory dress absorbed water puddling on the shared seat from George's wet trousers.

The shore rushed by as the current carried them downstream faster than they crossed the dark, muddy river. The ferryman lifted the oars out of the water.

"Why'd you stop?" George asked.

"Long way to go to the landing," the ferryman said, eyeballing her.

She turned her head and looked at the eastern shore. Nausea gripped her stomach, his stink of sweat and poor hygiene overpowering in the still, warming morning air.

"I want more. Give me more," he said. "Give me two more strings of beads."

"We agreed on three," Anita said, firm, avoiding eye contact.

She felt his breath on her neck. "I want more. Give me more." She fought her legs, swallowing a gulp of air, contemplating a jump from the boat. She pulled off the sunglasses and gave them to the ferryman. "Here. These are very valuable. Over ten thousand Confederation credits on them. You can have them," she said, looking to the riverbank.

He took them and she breathed. Relieved.

He put a fat, hairy, sweaty hand on her leg. "You've something else I want. You're so pretty. I like dark women."

George growled, "Leave my wife alone."

"Give me what I want or I'll take it," he said, pawing at her leg.

"Get off me!" Anita screamed.

BANG!

She knew the sound, tried not to look, her ears ringing. The ferryman slumped forward, his head between them. Together they pushed the heavy body off them and towards the point of the boat. A shared glance. He thumped back, head on the oar handle nearest her, mouth open, eyes unblinking. Blood from the wound in the center of his chest soaked his shirt. She vomited acid over the side as Yama's messenger cackled. She swallowed bile and looked at George. He still held the gun to his shoulder, the barrel smoking.

"What'd you do?" Her voice a hawk's scream. George didn't respond. The gun eased from its position. "We gotta do something. Quick. Put the gun down and grab an oar. We have to get to shore. Hurry George." He moved drunkenly. She leaned over the dead man and pulled the oars over him, handing one to George.

"Is he okay?" George's mouth and eyes wide.

"He's dead. We need to row."

The bank screamed by as they each used the wood in the water. First they turned a bit towards the left bank, then the right.

"When I say pull, put your oar in the water," she said. "Pull."

"This won't work." He swung his head back and forth.

"It has to work." Annoyed, she wanted, needed, to slap him.

George was shaking his head. "No. Sitting wrong. Row backwards. Push."

She followed his lead. It wasn't perfect, but when she matched his rhythm, they moved the boat through the water.

He said, "We need to turn the boat right. Towards the western shore. Hold your oar up."

It didn't make sense. They both needed to work.

"Don't row!"

She held her oar out of the water. Yes, when he pushed his oar through the water, the boat pivoted towards the western shore. "Let me help," she said.

"Okay. Push the oar away from you. Down. Push. Up," he said.

"Down. Push," she echoed. "Up." She followed his command, repeating the strokes with him, until they faced the western shore.

"Now together," he said. "Down. Push. Up."

Sweat soaked her bonnet and bodice, but she was an equal partner crossing the river.

As the point of the boat nosed into the bank, they both dropped the oars, her muscles drained of energy, struggling for breath; he stared, unmoving, at the corpse draped over bench and baggage. When breathing came more easily, she asked, "What now?"

George's gaze crept towards her but never quite met her own, shuddering paroxysms gave way to violent sobbing. Anguish seized her companion.

She removed her dress and petticoat, the hem stained crimson. Her shift provided enough coverage as she climbed out of the boat, leaving George to his emotions. She found her bag, used the sweatshirt she had brought from home as a towel and changed into her long-forsaken cotton blouse and denim slacks, but the slacks would no longer close. She rolled up the cuffs and hunted around the boat until she found a length of rope to use as a belt, avoiding the body.

Having cried himself out, George sat in the rowboat, the sun high in the sky but still shy of noon. She trudged back into the water and pulled him onto the shore. "We'll get through this, George. It'll be okay."

"No it won't."

She wrapped her arms around George, wishing she had something to ease his pain.

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"George, we have to talk about it sometime." She was nagging.

"No. We don't." He put his weight into moving the loaded handcart through the grass. Having missed the landing, he found a small trail, maybe used by game to access the river. Sweat poured from every part of his body. He lifted a blood-stained boot and moved it forward, straining against the crossbar of the handcart, drained of spirit.

"It's no good not talking about it. Why won't you tell me what's going on?" Anita walked in front of him. Her job was to look for obstacles in the grass as he slogged towards a hoped for wider trail.

"Doesn't matter. It's done."

"But he's dead."

George stopped. "You think I don't know that? I pushed his body and boat out into the current."

"I just want to know you're okay."

"I'm not okay. We just need to go."

"You don't need to yell. I'm worried about you."

"I'm worried too. What if he had friends? Or maybe someone saw?"

Turning in front of him, she scanned the grassy landscape. "Seems we're on our own."

"Maybe we are. I don't know!" The need to flee was overwhelming. He wanted to run away from the river, from himself, from her, but she could not move the handcart alone. The first step, moving the stopped cart, was the most difficult. The crossbar pressed into his abdomen.

“Just tell me why you did it.”

He stopped again. “He was going to hurt you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Fine. He wasn’t.” George grunted against the crossbar’s inertia, pressing for a road.

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They camped in the grass overnight, neither sleeping well; George tormented by nightmares; Anita worried. They each drank small cups of water and ate half a Lembas brand hard tack biscuit as well as a couple handfuls of trail mix. She wanted to understand why he did it, George never impressing her as a violent type. There had been no warning, just a shotgun to the chest. She hadn’t seen the murder in her dreams, only death, but her dreams were coming true. The gun changed him; now it was changing her.

They trudged along with one wheel in the grass and one on the narrow path. She let him stew, alone, in whatever he was feeling as she concentrated on watching for rocks or holes that might catch a wheel or cause her burdened friend to stumble, George insisting that was more important than pushing the handcart. He wouldn’t be able to expend such energy for long, at least not without better food than they had eaten since crossing the Missouri. They needed a clearing for a campfire so she could cook. They’d brought beans and cornmeal, and George labored so hard to move their supplies through the grass.

Midday approached and the small trail entered another trail large enough to accommodate the meter-wide cart. Well-packed, the dirt path meandered across the prairie.

“You sure we’re going the right way?” he asked.

She stopped and listened with her heart. Eyes closed, she took deep breaths, feeling the earth. There was no wind under the clear blue sky, but she sensed a current beckoning her on, understanding it like a compass needle knows north. Without looking she turned until she had the direction. She pointed and said, “The red cloud’s that way.”

Opening her eyes she looked across the grass plains, the trail going to her right and left.

“We have to go through the grass?” he asked.

“No. This path will take us to a road west. We’re fine. Now let me walk behind and push, okay?”

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“So you really believe a red cloud is calling you to it?” George asked, doubtful, poking at their fire, a dinner of beans, sausage, and cornbread filling his gut.

“It’s not the red cloud. It’s destiny.” She paused. “Do we have anything better to go on?”

“No. No map. No markers.” He shook his head. “This is insane. We’re out here, alone, in the middle of the continent. We’ve got supplies, but that’s about it.”

“It’s hard to explain, but I know where we’re going. I’ve known all along though I didn’t actively listen. The underground was ferrying us along. It wasn’t until after Kent left us that I started to hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“Can’t explain it. It’s a feeling. A knowing. Well, and there are the dreams.” She was quiet for a minute then rested a hand on his leg. “I dreamed someone would die in the boat. I didn’t know how or understand it, let alone believe it. So I’ve been asking you why it happened.”

“I don’t know that.” He saw the ferryman slump forward then fall back, bloody. He should have warned the man off but knew the ferryman would not have listened. It was painful to think about. “Let’s get some sleep.”



Episode Thirty-two ♦ *The Fork*

Midday, George stood, crossbar pulling his shoulders towards the sun-parched earth, sweat streaming down his torso. He looked at the fork in the road. After twelve days grinding west, they had a choice. “Which way?” he said, waiting, beyond caring, incapable of deciding.

“I don’t know,” she said.

He dropped the crossbar to the ground and sat right where he was, in the middle of the road. He could move if someone came but that seemed unlikely. The road, though well-packed, had little traffic. George looked at the two paths then at the great, black mound looming before them. He found a single distinction between the options: one road would take them to the north of the hill, the other to the south. Besides this lone hill, the land extended out to the horizon, appearing flat, covered in tall grass dried by the summer sun.

“Let’s have lunch,” she said.

He shrugged and used the cart to pull himself back onto his feet. She opened the bag of trail mix then broke a piece of hard tack in half, offering him a piece. Holding it in his mouth, he put the tin cup under the spout of the wooden water barrel. Full, he offered the cup to her.

“No. You first,” she said.

He drank half before passing it to her then sat against a wheel to choke down the dry, calorie-dense biscuit.

“I wish you’d talk to me,” she said, joining him on the ground.

Taking his time chewing, he swallowed and said, “What’s to say.”

“You’ve been brooding since we crossed the Missouri. You need to let it go.”

He snorted. Yeah. Right. Easy for her to say.

“It’s behind us. If someone was following, well...” She went quiet. “You did what you felt you had to do.”

She kept talking but he stopped listening. It was the same every time they rested. Her need to talk about it kept him dragging the load down the road. Or feigning sleep. She was quiet when he slept.

He finished the biscuit, refilled the tin cup, and washed down the paste of chewed hard tack with water before taking a handful of trail mix, long since caring about the road dust that seeped between the fibers of cloth bags.

Staring off into the distant sky he saw a dark line above the horizon. Not caring if he interrupted her, he said, “Look there.”

“Where?”

“The southwest.”

“What about it?”

“It’s dark.”

She did not respond. He wondered if it was some sort of a sign, if it would influence her choice of which fork to take. He chewed.

“It’s not like you can change it,” she said. “I wish it didn’t happen, but I’ve accepted it. You did it to protect...” She stopped, picking up the tin cup. Time passed. She said, “To protect the baby – and me. I’ve accepted it and moved on. Wish you could too.”

“Why don’t you accept that Willem won’t be there for you?” He continued to munch on small handfuls of trail mix, enjoying the sound of peanuts crunching between his teeth. The band of darkness thickened.

“I don’t understand.”

“You nag about the ferryman. I keep saying let it go. Don’t want to discuss it. You keep saying I need to accept it, talk about it. On and on and on.” His voice, like his emotional state, was in need of life support – flat line monotone. “So why do you need to find Willem? It’s not like he’s going to take care of you and be a father to his child.”

“How do you know that?” Her voice shot up an octave. It reminded him of bad opera. “How can you presume to know what he’ll do?” Then a long silence.

At least that shut her up for a while. He took another drink of water and closed his eyes, enjoying the quiet.

“Tell me!”

“What?”

“Why you said that?”

“What?”

“About Willem.”

“It’s the truth.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Okay.” George thought for some time, picking some dried berries and slices of apple and apricot out of the bag to chew on. “What was he like starting a new play?”

“How do you mean?”

“Was he nice to be around?”

She took her time before saying, “No. Not really.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“Dunno. Nerves? Concentrating on learning lines?”

“Nope. He felt tied down. Panicked. Like he’d never be free again. He’d go on and on. About leaving. Coming out here.”

“I dunno. That what he told you?”

“I just think he will run. Not the minute you tell him. But after thinking. It will get to him. The nerves. Taking care of you two for decades. Commitment.”

“I don’t want to get married or anything! I don’t need him or anyone.”

“What does that have to do with commitment?”

“I just want him to know that he’s going to have a child. It’s his right to know. It’s important.”

George let the conversation drop. Sitting against the wheel, he drifted off to sleep.

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Anita stewed in her emotions as she put the trail mix away. George napped against the wheel and she let him be. Besides, the choice of road lay before her. She swallowed her annoyance with him, once again, leaving the decision to her. She sat down against the other wheel, pulled her bonnet forward, listened, but heard nothing. The day was windless; the sun, high in the sky; the prairie, quiet.

She replayed George’s comments in her mind and wondered what he was getting at. His tone had been flat, lacking emotion, but the words stung her as if spoken in rage, wanting to inflict pain. Yes, in a way, she knew he spoke truth. She delved for reasons why she must tell Willem about the baby but came up empty. All she had was the concept that it was his right to know and her responsibility to tell him. She expected nothing from him.

The doubts, about her pregnancy, resurfaced. They had plagued her for weeks. Maybe she should suggest turning back for someplace near civilization. It couldn’t hurt. No. He’d never shown any interest in going any direction but west. Even when she suggested he stay in Saint Jo.

She stood, dusted off the seat of her pants, and looked at the two choices. He was right. Darkness grew above the left fork, darkness that heralded a mid-summer storm. Walking a short way down that fork she cleared her mind and listened to what the road said to her, how it felt. It was silent.

Returning to the cart, she stood a couple meters from George but was confident he was still sleeping. Or that he wanted her to think he was asleep.

Walking towards the right-hand fork she felt an invisible hand wrap around her heart and squeeze. She struggled for breath as she inched along the road, each step a battle between her will to go forward and something pushing against her. Eyes closed, she backed away, feeling the pressure in her chest ease, her breathing returning to normal.

George jogged towards her. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You screamed.”

“Did I?” She couldn’t remember screaming.

“Like you swallowed a scream.”

She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. We need to take the left fork.”

“You sure? Storm brewing that way.”

“I’m sure.”



Since taking to the road that night in Hannibal, this was the first storm they had encountered. George stood, looking at the barren path, grass to the left and right, clouds the color of the coach gun’s barrel. He flashed back to the print that hung above his bed in UGO’s bunker, life imitating art. Electric root systems probed downward from the sky, seeking the earth. George pulled Anita under the handcart telling her not to touch it. Thunder defeated his words. He repeated the warning. A gust of wind blew dust and bits of grass across the landscape, the handcart offering no protection from the wind. Flashes then more thunder. She pulled his shirt over his face and covered her own with her bonnet to fight off the dust, grass seed, and other detritus. The earth shook. Rain came. Thick, viscous rain. Drops of cooking oil falling from skillet-colored clouds onto sun-baked earth. Puddling. Then oozing across the ground.

They passed a long, wet, sleepless night.

With the first rays of sunlight, they struggled to their feet, trudging ever onwards.

Water pooled in the prairie’s slightest depression. The heavy rain, unable to penetrate the earth, sought out the nearest creek. Their road was packed earth, worn down by years of people, animals, and wagons coming and going. It became a creek bed, the water drifting towards terrain only a millimeter lower in elevation.



“Hey, there’s a small house or something near those trees,” George said, pulling in the same direction, unable to remember if it had been three or four days since the last settlement. They had refilled the water barrel and were promised another oasis within three days’ walk. With deprivation, and thirst, they could stretch the barrel’s contents to five days.

The day was humid after the rain and his wet clothing made him sweat more. Why had he not thought to open the barrel while the sky vomited buckets? Because he feared the lightning, unprotected as they were, on the plains. Everything – clothing, bags, beans, cornmeal, the handcart, his books – was soaked with water. He would bet a string of gold beads the cart weighed ten kilos more today.

It took the rest of the afternoon to near the insignificant settlement and a woman, her dress stained brown, approached them as they clomped down the road.

“Hello!” Anita said and waved. “It’s nice to see someone out here.”

“What’cha want?” The woman held a shotgun against her leg.

“Can we camp overnight?” asked Anita.

“It’s free country.”

“And water,” George said.

The woman snorted. “Only got well. Water’s precious. How much you want and what’cha got for trade?”

George set down the crossbar and slapped the water barrel. It was about the size of his torso.

Anita said, “Will gold beads work?”

“Small ones?”

“Yeah,” she answered.

“Two of’ m. Follow me. Gotta unlock it.”

Anita mouthed at George as he picked up the crossbar. “Forty credits for water?”

“Streamwater’s not safe downstream uh that.” The woman thumbed at the black mound. Her dress was stained from sitting in the dirt.

“What is it?” asked George.

She shrugged. “Called Mid’n Mount’n. Nothin’ lives up there. Plenty dies downstream uh it.”

The woman drew a long string up from her waist, the key at the end. She unlocked the well and held out her palm. George fished two gold beads out of his pocket and dropped them in her hand.

He pulled up the bucket and poured the water into the barrel. After two turns, his arms burning, he took a break. Anita picked up the bucket and continued the work.

Once full, George closed the barrel, and the woman locked her well. George caught Anita’s gaze and glanced towards the road. She nodded. He lifted the crossbar.

Before nightfall they approached the first stream. Above the gully was a carved sign with three wavy blue lines at the bottom. Through these was a red X. Above it was the outline of a skull painted red.



Episode Thirty-three ♦ *Well Water*

“I don’t know,” Anita said. She moved sodden bags around in the handcart. “Just don’t think it’s a very good idea.”

“Why not?” he said sighing. “We need the rest. A day or two. We can spread stuff out to dry. Road’s empty. Spot’s nice.”

She looked around the small clearing; some sad, stunted trees grew along the banks of the gully. Shaking her head she said, “It’s just not a good idea. No water.”

“Barrel’s full.” Her reticence was maddening.

“But we’ve no idea where we’ll get more.”

“Cut my ration.”

“That’s foolish and you know it. If you stop sweating, it’s heatstroke. You could die.”

He stood, stalled picking up the crossbar. Once he bent over, she got behind the cart and used her bodyweight to push it down, coercing him to move.

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She was different since they talked at the fork. George was relieved to speak of anything other than the ferry crossing, though he could not drive that memory from his mind. Time. It was the healer. He hoped time would remove the filth of the vicious deed.

He looked down the road, straining with the handcart, wondering why he felt no stronger after two weeks of putting one tired, sore foot forward and leaning into the crossbar. The first time Anita pushed, he warned her off – because of the baby – but she would not listen to him. She stopped nagging about the ferry, he returned the favor. Her effort helped.

Eyes scanning the horizon, he lived in hope that something would announce a water hole: a small settlement, a bunch of trees, a big sign saying “WATER” with an arrow pointing down. There had only been false hopes the last four days, stream crossings, now nearly dry, with warning signs. The water barrel was low enough they tilted it to get water to the tap.

Something grew along the horizon, to the left of the road. But unlike bands of trees that announced a creek bed, this was a clump. Yes. His confidence grew, thinking about water, trudging across the empty landscape.

He slowed and said, “Stop.”

Her voice, from behind the handcart, weak, tired. “What’s up?”

The thought lodged in his dry throat. He stood holding the crossbar, sweating.

Anita joined him. Neither spoke. He pointed about an hour down the road.

♦ ♦ ♦

The hamlet, surrounded by trees and fields and a few minutes south of the road, consisted of a dozen buildings, less than half inhabited by humans. In the center was a large metal tank

held three meters in the air on metal stilts. A crooked-neck pipe emerged from the bottom of the tank over an area staked off by forearm-thick logs a bit taller than George. On the other side stood a giant metal flower supported by a pyramid of four very long pieces of metal. He set down the crossbar and pointed up at the motionless phlox-like object. “What’s that?”

Anita raised her right eyebrow. “The windmill? Haven’t you ever seen one?”

“No. Not like this.”

“Hello. Welcome to Owensville. I’m Lars Owen.”

George looked to the man who walked up from the side. Lars had a full head of sun-bleached hair but looked old, that is, until George looked into Lars’ bright, aqua eyes. His leathery skin misled – looking like that of a bird cooked too close to the flame – suggesting he was older than his spryness indicated. “Will you be resting from your travels?”

“If you’ve got clean water,” George answered.

“Freshest well water in these parts.”

Anita pointed at the black hill to their north. “Why isn’t well water affected by that?”

“Midden Mountain?” Lars glanced at it. “Our well is very deep.”

George scratched his head. “Midden? As in garbage heap?”

Lars shrugged.

George looked from the mound to the tank. Chickens pecked at the earth.

“By the way, I’m Anita and this is my husband George.”

“Nice to meet you. If I may ask – and it doesn’t look like much from what I see on your handcart – what do you have to trade?”

Anita replied, “Beads.”

“Gold or glass?”

“Both,” she said.

“We prefer gold. Size?”

George fished one out of his pocket and held it between thumb and forefinger.

“Ten beads a night for the both of you.”

Anita gasped then covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry. Fly or something.”

“That includes a private sleeping porch with bed, big dinner and breakfast, water for your barrel as well as however much you care to drink while here. Oh, and that stockade-looking thing is our shower. Water is not city hot, but the sun does a good enough job. No one complains about it in summer.”

She said, “We’ll take it.”

“Good. It’s fried chicken night.”

George smiled at the plump birds scratching in the dirt around the stockade.

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Anita hung and set their possessions around the porch to dry in the warm afternoon air. George strode back from the shower holding the now oversized airball shorts up with his hand. She worried at the weight he’d lost the last couple weeks. Her high-waisted dress did little to conceal her pregnancy, but she forced away the thought that she wasn’t gaining enough to support the baby.

“How was it?” she asked.

“Wonderful!” he replied running his fingers through his shaggy, damp hair.

“If I can borrow some shears, would you like a haircut?”

“Love one.”

“I’ll ask at dinner.” She looked out of the porch so he would only see her hair. “I’m thinking about trying the chicken tonight,” she said, hoping he missed it.

“Bet it’ll be good. I’d eat fried squirrel. If that’s what they served.”

“Exactly.”

“Do they have something you can eat? Eggs? cheese?”

No need to hope; he was listening. Sort of. “I’ve been thinking, since we had to leave the cheese in the boat, I’m not getting enough protein for the baby.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“What could I say? It was covered in blood.” She stared at an apple tree; under it a couple horses munched on fallen fruit. “I thought we’d be able to trade for some along the way.”

“Maybe we can.”

“Yeah. Maybe. But until then, think I’ll try a little meat.” She turned to him. “Just didn’t want you to be surprised or make a big deal of it. Okay.”

His brow furrowed. “Okay? You think that’s wise?” He could be so annoying.

“Don’t know what else to do.”

“What if it makes you sick? Ever eat meat?”

“Never.” She shook her head and looked at the contented horses.

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“Thank you for the use of the clippers,” Anita said handing them to a Mrs. Owen. The woman nodded.

George had forgotten the names of thirty-odd members of the clan, four generations calling Owensville home. He ran his fingers across the scalp stubble; it felt like a two-day-old beard. He wished he hadn't lost his hat – he had no idea where – since the kerchief Anita tore from an unstained part of her bloodied green and ivory dress felt a bit too feminine for him to wear, but the sun would soon be high above. Unrelenting.

They joined the Owen family at the long table behind the cookhouse for eggs, bacon, biscuits, potatoes, and green tomatoes – everything but the biscuits fried. Serving bowls passed from hand to hand, but before anyone lifted a fork to eat, the oldest gentleman stood at the end of the table. “We are thankful to the earth for providing us this bounty, to those who harvested it, and to the cooks who prepared it. Enjoy.”

Taking the cue, everyone said, “Thanks. Enjoy!”

George watched Anita break off a tiny piece of bacon and put it in her mouth. She grimaced, and, unlike the speck of chicken breast she ate the night before, spit it out. He nodded then crumpled up a strip of bacon over his scrambled eggs before mixing them together with his fork. She shook her head.

Once the eating slowed – and as agreed – George asked, “Ever heard of Red Cloud? A town. Not far from here.”

The Owens looked around the table before the oldest gentleman said, “No son, don't believe I ever have, but that doesn't mean it isn't out there.”

“Do you have a map?”

“No. No need for maps. We know what's up and down the road,” the balding, gray-haired man replied. “Your best bet is to head for Concordia. Main trading town in this part of the world. Ask the Confederated Express agent. If your town exists, they'll know of it. Concordia's about ten days from here, though I'm guessing, since you're traveling with that handcart.”

“Thanks. We just take the road west?”

“No. In about two days you'll cross a bridge. Water's safe, just a bit too swift some seasons. Next day you take the left fork to the southwest. Keep heading west. Third crossroad you turn left. Concordia's just south of the river. Largest river you've seen since the Missouri.”

“Thank you.” George smiled.

“Mind if I ask something?” Anita looked at the old man a couple seats away.

He smiled. “Please. Ask.”

“We bought water from a woman before crossing the poisoned streams.”

“Yes. That'd be my sister Lilith,” said a gray-haired woman, not old enough to be clan matriarch. “She keeps up the signs.”

“Is she on her own?”

“Not unless the men are away hunting or trading.”

“She greeted us alone.”

“That’s her usual way.”

“If the men were away, what stops someone from harming her? Stealing the key? Seems that well is pretty valuable.”

“It is,” a younger man joined the exchange. “But no one’s foolish enough to try. First off they’d fight.”

“Then word spreads,” the woman next to him said.

“We’d ride over as soon as we heard about it,” another man said. “It’d be bloody business.”

The old man at the end of the table nodded – in agreement or approval, it was unclear. “But mostly, it’s not the way things are done out here. Every person is important in this land, but one who steals will be shunned. Everyone has a part to play. We all work hard to survive and together we thrive.”

“Well put Dad.”

“Exactly Grampa.”

The family started clearing the table. Lars approached George and Anita. “Would you like to rest another night? Or can we fix you something to eat along the road?”

Anita replied, “As much as we would like to stay, we better head for Concordia. Another ten days on the road...”

George wondered at her incomplete thought; maybe the road wore her down too. Then he remembered the cost and their limited supply of beads.

Lars said, “Very well, I’ll bring something round in a bit.”

“No rush,” George said. “We haven’t packed yet.”

George leaned towards Anita and said, “I tried refusing, but Clearie insisted on returning a string of beads. We’ll need them.”

“You’re kidding!”

“What? You too?”

She nodded and smiled.

Lars returned. “Remember, if no one greets you when you cross the Concordia Bridge, check your shotgun with the Urp before entering town. No one carries weapons into Concordia.”



Episode Thirty-four ♦ *Black Miners*

“A night or two more wouldn’t have hurt,” George said as he pulled the cart off the wooden plank bridge onto the dirt road.

“It was too expensive,” Anita said. “We’re running low on gold beads as it is.”

He craned his neck around. “It’s only two weeks. And we’ll be near the river most of the way. The water’s clean. Won’t need to buy much.”

“But we have no idea what we’ll need when we get there.” She pushed the cart from behind.

It helped. They were a team, the cart heavy with new supplies. He looked at the road; it meandered along the edge of the floodplain. “We’re going uphill now.”

“I can tell.”

The plains looked flat, but the road was never level, the grade often not visible. George always fought the weight of the cart as the road rose or fell. He remembered their conversation at a Concordia livery stable. A horse would be doing the hard work now but they would be broke.

“Be nice to get there,” he said. She was right – they were running low on beads – three strands of gold remained. Anita wore a necklace under her shirt made from the glass ones. In total, they had five hundred credits.

“George?”

“Yes?”

“How much farther is it uphill?”

“Not much. Can see the crossroad.”

“We take the first left.”

“Yes.” The agent at Confederated Express in Concordia provided clear directions. Following the river road, Red Cloud was about two weeks away. “It’s going to be hot today.”

“What?”

He spoke up. “Another hot one.”

“Uh-huh.”

Trudging along the road, he wished for rain. Not another big storm. Just a quick shower to cool down the afternoon. He looked at the river on his left and smiled. He liked to swim.

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She stood. The red disk rode the wide haunches of a black stallion. The crimson sky, Yama’s domain. The steed vomited twice, two black stalkers born of anger and rage. Red veins bulged on famished bodies. Bloody eyes searched for souls to shackle, flesh to feast on.

Long black fingers gripped George’s neck. He choked out words. “Lone. Trav’ alone.”

Another black hand overturned the cart. Searching. Screeching. "He lies." Fingers held the green and ivory dress. Stained by Yama's messenger. Gleaming in the bloody dawn.

She fought through a green palisade. Spines pierced, thorns gnawed at her skin.

George, smaller than the wheels, looked up at the cart, his wrists in his ears.

Now was her chance.

It floated in the grass, between her feet and fire. She reached for it. Held the stick in her hand. It belched flame. Their lives, bright beads, rolling across the flat land.

Yama's messenger hissed.

She woke. Sitting on their shared bedroll, she looked at the pale golden glow above the eastern horizon.

"What's up?" George rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Nothing. A dream." She shook her head knowing the lie was ineffectual. "Teach me how to use the shotgun. Today. Okay?"

The skin of his forehead rippled. "Sure." His eyes wide, she looked away. He said, "Something in the dream? What?"

"Not really sure." She looked at the sky. It was a clear, brightening blue.

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After washing the pans in the river, Anita returned along the path, through heavy brush growing above the river's spring flood line. Willows and cottonwood gave way to brambles and berries then a mixture of grasses. Birds, songs now familiar, twittered and chirped on branches.

Strolling, knowing berry season was over, she longed for the day when she would have fresh food again, especially fruit and vegetables. She missed her garden at home. Things she planted in the spring were ripe, ready for picking. At home she would be making salads from the summer squash, tomatoes, eggplant, cucumbers, carrots, and green beans. Canning. Soup. And blueberries.

"Whoa there, little one. Take it easy. That's my bladder you're poking." She smiled, petty discomfort. Her baby was fine. Healthy. Growing.

Then it hit her like the first rain after an extended drought. She understood why she came west. Realization washed over, refreshed her. She was giving this baby a better life.

It was hard to understand, before Concordia, during the early days after they crossed the Missouri, why she was out here. Endless prairie. Drying grass. Relentless heat. Dust and dirt. Yes, she wanted to tell Willem he was a father, but in morning quiet she knew. Here they were free. The air was clean and clear, the land wild and green, and people were not crowded together. Everything seemed possible. Life wasn't easy in the wilderness, but it had a simplicity. Each day they woke, ate, cleaned, packed, and walked. They took breaks when tired, ate when hungry, rested under the shade of the trees during the hottest part of the day, and slept under the spectacular night sky. They were together: George, the baby, and her.

This was to be her child's legacy.

As she left the thickest growth in the floodplain, the morning sky blazed red as the sun rose above Midden Mountain. "That's odd." Her heart turned to ice, her breathing stopped.

There were voices. She stopped, listened, but couldn't make out words. High-pitched, frantic voices. She set the pans beside the path, backed into the brush for cover. Every snapping branch a sentinel announcing her presence. Working her way along the edge of the brambles, she stopped when the campfire was between her and the cart.

The voice was strange and coarse. "... said ... traveling with?" That was all she heard.

Varnished fingers emerged from rags stained black and grabbed at George's throat, choking him. A couple coughs and his familiar voice. "Lone. Trav' alone." George was kneeling a couple meters from the handcart, arms behind his head. The wiry figure towered over him.

Another figure, slight and hunched over, also in black, caught her eye as it flitted around the cart. Pulling and tossing, their food and belongings flew to the ground. In the sunlight, the remnants of the green and ivory dress drawn from her bag. The remaining skirt might pass for a piece of cloth, but with the bodice attached, it was obvious it was a dress. Her dress.

He reacted. The owner of the strangling hand, aggressive, released and backhanded George. One fluid motion. "Where's she?" George fell over.

It hurt to see him abused. She used the commotion. Dodged from tree to bush. Hid a couple meters from the campfire. She scanned the grass where George rested the shotgun while they ate. Couldn't spot it. Had he picked it up again? She shook her head, unable to recall.

The violent one drew a knife from under dusty clothing. "Don't wanna 'urt'er." He laughed and looked to the other.

"Nuh-uh." The other held the dress close, like a dance partner. "Telled Mama we find bride this time."

"Nuther miner too."

They danced with the dress. George crawled away from the cart. Looked up. Directly at her. His eyes wide. Nodded once, towards the fire.

"Tell me," the knife wielder said, "where's she. She ain't by fire. She go river?"

"You win. I'll take you. Can I stand?"

The one with the dress said, "Ewww. Mama's gunna like this'un. Manners'n' all."

The holder of the blade grunted, circled. George planted a foot on the earth. Drew up. "Move." Another grunt. A foot on George's back. That cruel, wicked, searing laugh.

George fell forward. Screeched with pain, lay flat, and waved his hands above his head. The visitors took positions on either side of him.

"This'un's bit soft. Maybe got us two wives."

"Ain't picky."

Anita sprinted out of the brush towards the fire. She stepped on it, jumped back, knelt. Pulling it from the leather scabbard, she backed towards the brush while the strangers passed the dress between them, circling George on the ground. Taunting him. Cackling. An unknown dance. Aiming above their heads, she fired a single shot.

The strangers looked around, moved behind the handcart, leaving George flat in the trampled grass.

Trembling, she aimed at the handcart. Her eyesight shifted from the left to the right. They stayed put, hiding behind the cart. That was her hope. There was enough distance between the handcart and nearby brush. If they moved, she would see.

The morning was still, paralyzed. Birds now silent. No one spoke. She had time to wonder. Where did this pair come from? Her eyes darted around the area. No sign of horses. They were on foot. Did they follow from Concordia? Or come the other direction? Sweat ran down her forehead, into her eyes. She blinked it away, resisting the need to wipe her shirt sleeve across her face. It was too risky.

She felt it in the earth. The pounding of hooves.

“Get outta here,” one of the strangers said, standing and sprinting. “They’s comin’.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Who cares.”

“Mama ain’t gunna be happy.”

The pair ran down the road towards Concordia. Horses’ hooves on the road. Louder.

Thwunk. Thwunk. An unknown sound.

Screams. The running pair stumbled, crashed to the ground.

From behind a small copse they appeared. Five riders galloped along the road. Such good fortune. They circled the strangers crawling in the dirt. Whining. Begging. No longer laughing.

One rider broke away and trotted up to the handcart.

Thwunk. Thwunk. Anita heard the sound but didn’t understand it.

“That’ll finish those two.”

Passing the cart, the rider made for the campfire then looked around the brush. He spotted George first. “It’s okay. You can get up now. We’re not your enemies. We ran them off last night but decided to check the road.”

George struggled to his feet. Trembling. Shaking.

Rounding the campfire, Anita held the shotgun to her shoulder as the first rider dismounted. “Who are you?” she asked.

Removing his hat, blond hair kept short, skin a golden bronze, wearing undyed shirt and trousers, and boots. “Name’s Egor Dagfrid, ma’am. We’re from Friorby. Just down the road.” He had broad shoulders and a confident wide stance.

“And who are they?”

“We call ’em Black Miners. They’re from the north side of Midden Mountain.”

George was beside her. “How can we thank you?” His voice cracked.

“No need. We disagreed about what to do with them last night.” A woman rider, bow in one hand, dismounted next to Egor. Her hair was long, blond. She dressed like Egor, without color. She said, “I told you they were trouble.”

“That you did,” said Egor. “Since you didn’t come our way, I assume you’re heading towards our village. Magnus’s the big one retrieving the arrows. Let’s get you two packed up and he’ll pull your cart into town. You two can ride his horse. Or are there more of you?”

“No, just us two,” said Anita.

“Realizing your business is your own, you’ve picked a mighty hard way to travel the plains. Maybe we can be of assistance.”

Anita smiled at the offer but worried just how much help would cost.



Episode Thirty-five ♦ *Red Cloud*

George rode behind Anita on the horse. His hands alternated between her shoulders and hips whenever one position grew uncomfortable. He wondered if people on the plains questioned his masculinity and detested the thought crossing his mind. Putting her needs first mattered.

After a two-hour ride, they were in Friorby. The settlement was located off the road on a bluff overlooking the floodplain. It was similar to Owensville in size and roughness of the buildings, but this settlement lacked the central fixture of windmill and water tank. Friorby had a dusty open area that even chickens ignored. Around it, in a circular pattern, buildings sat under trees, leaves rustling in the slight, late morning breeze.

George dismounted and helped Anita down. She handed the reins to another woman rider; he had not caught her name. Magnus parked the handcart in the shade of a large oak tree.

Egor looked down from his horse. “Pleased join us for our midday meal.”

Looking to Anita, who nodded, George said, “Would like that. Thank you.”

Egor pointed to a small building. “That’s the washhouse.” His hand moved to the next building. “The large one is the hall where we eat.” He looked at the sun. “Make yourselves comfortable. It will be about an hour before lunch.” He rode towards another building. It was not obvious if it was a house or stable.

Anita pivoted then looked to George. “They seem friendly enough. Do you think it’s safe to ask about Red Cloud?”

George hunched up his shoulders, the answer unclear.

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Anita and George sat in wooden chairs on the shade porch of the main hall after lunch. It wasn’t the offer of hospitality that kept Anita and George overnight in Friorby. She was tired of walking and eager to accept Egor’s proposal of a wagon ride to Red Cloud.

Egor said, “It will take you three or four days on foot. If we leave an hour before sunup, we should be able to make it in a single day.”

“Oh, we couldn’t be such a bother,” Anita said. She looked away from him, towards a large pasture where cows grazed, hoping to disguise her attraction to Egor’s strength and confidence. Hating her raging hormones, she tamped down the deep need for security. It wasn’t so much to spare George’s feelings; Egor was married.

“No bother.” Egor’s smile: honest, open, warm. “It’s a bit early for a trade visit since the harvest isn’t in yet, but my brother Tyler’s at that age. He needs to meet marriageable women. But it means leaving your handcart behind.”

“No problem,” George said nodding and smiling.

“Either way, you two talk it over. As long as we’re packed before dinner, we’ll be okay.”

Anita said, “Thank you, Egor. We appreciate your help more than I could ever say.”

Egor left them and disappeared beyond the washhouse. Like Owensville, this was a tight-knit clan; one extended family. She mused over what courtship might be like out here and wondered how far they had to travel to meet someone who wasn't a relative.

"Thanks for not asking," George said, "about what happened at our last campsite."

She smiled at him, but he stared off into the distance. He would talk about it when, and if, he wanted. Remembering her dream, she knew all she needed to know.

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The sun had yet to rise. After a quick discussion, George relented and rode with Egor in the wagon so Anita could ride horseback. "If you have *any* pain, we switch," George said.

"Deal. I enjoyed riding yesterday and would like to do it on my own."

George was happy if she was happy, knowing she was better able to judge what a pregnant woman should and should not do.

"Will ask Egor to teach me to drive the team," George said. "A good skill out here."

Egor showed George how to stow the shotgun so he could draw it easily if the need arose. With George and Egor in the wagon and Anita and Tyler on horseback, the small band left before the first glow of morning found the eastern horizon.

In the brightness of morning Egor handed George the reins. "There's really nothing to it when things are going well," said Egor. "It's when the horses get spooked or you're navigating obstacles, like a river, that experience is important. Not sure that you'll get any of that on this trip. This road's in good shape."

"Appreciate the chance," George said. "If I may, has your family always lived out here?"

"The easy answer is no. Many generations ago, my people came from Scandinavia to a land called I-oh-way – some place between the two great rivers east of here. After generations on the original homestead, they were resettled east. My grandfather didn't like the city and came out here as a young married man."

As he had been instructed, George held the reins firmly in hand and kept his eyes on the road, though his posture was tense. "Wondered if your people avoided resettlement."

"I've never been east but heard tell there are organizations that help people come west. We're not certain, but have always suspected Grandfather was involved in something like that."

"Did he join an established community?"

"For a short time, then he found the area where Friorby sits. He convinced his brother to join him, and slowly they built up the community."

George thought about this. Yes, if people were helped by some UGO predecessor, it made sense they would in turn be willing to help those who came after. This idea George kept to himself, thinking it better to keep his affairs private.

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Anita enjoyed the morning ride and took a shorter turn after lunch. The exercise moved her blood in a way that pushing the handcart didn't. Now riding in the wagon with Egor, he didn't seem to mind when she dozed off in the evening heat. She woke with her head resting on his shoulder. The sun had already set. "Excuse me," she said, hoping her cheeks weren't red.

"My wife naps when she comes along. Besides, your timing is pretty good. We're almost there." Egor pulled the team onto a spur which rose out of the valley and approached a town more like Concordia or Saint Jo than Owensville or Friorby. "That's Red Cloud."

She turned to George, who rode with Tyler a distance behind the wagon. Pointing at the town she gave a thumbs-up. Even with the summer warmth it gave her the chills. Thinking their long journey was finally at an end, she hadn't prepared herself for this moment. Since leaving Hannibal, and especially after crossing the Missouri, it had only been about the road. The never-ending road.

Red Cloud was an island in a sea of grass. Something, or someone, had drawn them here. She expected to soon understand why. Her thoughts turned to Willem and she practiced ways of telling him their news. It had been many years since anticipation so flooded her; she wanted to fix herself up, like for a first date.

"Are you okay?" asked Egor.

"Yes. Why?" She looked at him.

"I said it was nice to meet you and George. I only wish it had been for a happier reason."

The incident he referred to was distant, closer in recalled time to the ferry than to now.

She said, "Yes, I'm glad we met. Hope we'll get the chance to visit again."

"It's likely if you're staying in Red Cloud. We visit each other a lot."

"Then I'm sure we'll see you again."

Egor eased the wagon along the road that ran west into the community. They passed grazing animals – goats, cows, and horses – and farmed fields. The town was larger, but Anita thought it might appear larger since the buildings were arranged on actual streets. After crossing a couple north-south roads lined with houses of varying sizes, mostly single story, they turned right along the town square. In the middle was a single building that was neither shop nor home, surrounded by some open patches of short grass, a flower garden, and clumps of trees. She had never seen anything quite like this town. In appearance, it was what she wished Hannibal would have been.

Egor pulled on the reins. The horses halted. Bells rang. One was more immediate, coming from near the building in the square. Others rang around the town. As they dismounted, people, ranging in age from young to old, came from all directions to the town square. Some carried torches. Like Concordia, this was not the home of a single clan. Many families lived here. Some were blond and fair like Egor but others were very dark, like Kent, and there were varying skin tones in between.

"Egor!" a woman said. "We weren't expecting you for at least a month."

“But you are always most welcome,” said a man. He carried four tankards. “I’ve ale but can get water if you’d rather.”

Egor took a tankard and a long slug. “Best in these parts. Before I forget my manners, this is Anita and George Winston. We met them after they’d run in with some Black Miners.”

Gasps from the gathering crowd. A woman pushed a plate of bread and cheese in front of Anita. A man asked, “Anyone hurt?”

“No, we’re fine,” answered George, shaking one hand before accepting a tankard of ale.

“Happy to say it wasn’t the same for the Miners.” Egor took some bread and cheese as someone took the reins of the horses from him. “But it works out for the best. Seems the Winstons were headed to Red Cloud.”

“Oh?” echoed around the gathering circle of people. With the young ones, they easily number over a hundred residents. Anita wondered if the entire town was assembling in greeting.

“We believe a friend is here,” she said before realizing that just as she’d been introduced with an alias, Willem might be using a different name. “He’s about Egor’s height though quite slender and more of a golden blond.” She looked around the crowd, hopeful but realizing that if Willem were here, he’d have recognized her quickly.

“Well, it might be some time before everyone responds to the bells.”

“If your friend lives outside of town, he might not come tonight.”

“True. It wasn’t an alert.”

Anita lost track of who was speaking.

“We’ll find a place for you in the meantime.”

“I can put Egor and Tyler up.”

“We’re happy to make room for the new people,” an older woman said. “But you’ve undoubtedly been traveling some distance. Maybe you’d like to freshen up. Come with me dear.”

Anita turned and looked at George. He was content to eat, drink, and shake hands with the crowd as it grew around him and the wagon. The old woman led her away. Taking a bite from his piece of bread, he waved goodbye.

“It’s hard to be a pregnant traveler. How far along are you?” The woman smiled and nodded. “I’m the midwife, you see. Please call me Margaret though most call me Auntie Meg.”



Episode Thirty-six ♦ *Carl Marpole*

“You’re absolutely sure there’s nothing to worry about?” Anita looked into Auntie Meg’s brown eyes, needing support. Graying hair cut short, Meg was twenty years Anita’s senior, her easy-going directness comforting. Especially now. Anita wanted reassurance she hadn’t made a mistake coming west.

Meg smiled, accentuating lines around her eyes and mouth. Hand resting on Anita’s knee, Meg said, “Absolutely. My only concern is you’re a bit underweight for a woman entering her fifth month, but life on the road does that. On a positive note, you’ve stayed active and are in good shape. So no, and I’ll say it again, you’ve absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Meg stood, walked through a shaft of late afternoon sun, and picked up a small towel to dab her forehead and neck. “It’s warm. Is it true buildings in the east are always the same temperature?”

Anita nodded. “Yes, but I lived in a house like this one. Small and comfortable until the warmest part of the day.”

“Dinner’ll be ready in ten minutes.” Bethan’s voice came from another room.

“Wash up and I’ll see if I can find that husband of yours. You’ve good news to share.” Meg left the bedroom.

Anita’s emotions flagged at that one word: husband. She’d yet to mention that she and George weren’t married nor was he the father. She still hoped to find that man here in Red Cloud.

It was easy to take George’s support for granted; he’d been with her across half a continent. When she proposed he stay in Saint Jo, he insisted on continuing the journey. It was too much to expect him to stay. There would always be something – another Clearie – to draw his attention. If George needed freedom, this was the perfect time for him to go.

A gentle knock on the door.

“Come in George.”

He nudged the door open but didn’t enter the bedroom they shared. “How did it go?”

“Meg says I’m a bit underweight but otherwise fine. There’s nothing to worry about.” She wanted that to end the conversation. “Did you wash up?”

“That’s wonderful!” George bounced towards her but stopped abruptly, as if he’d wanted to hug her but changed his mind. “Never been around a pregnancy.”

“None of your coworkers were ever pregnant?”

“Sure. But they were coworkers. Not close.”

With such a relaxed manner George had no trouble getting along with people on the trip, but she sensed he had few good friends, other than Willem, back in Hartfield.

“Figured you were fine. Quite healthy.” He smiled, cheeks large and full. He stepped over to the window, then to the washbasin, and back to Anita. Arms floating around him, like he’d drunk too much champagne, forgotten the steps but was too giddy to care, making up his own dance. “Such wonderful news.”

She smiled, warmed by his enthusiasm.

“I’ll go down. Washed already,” he said, leaving, humming, the tune familiar though she didn’t know its name.

Alone in the room, she walked to the washbasin, poured a bit of water, and opened the top buttons of her shirt. A few splashes on the face and neck, the cool water refreshed.



Anita walked around Meg and Bethan’s porch. George helped the women arrange plates on the small, square table. “You’re just in time,” said Bethan, a smile on her face. “That’s everything. Have a seat.” Linen napkins matched the tablecloth.

Anita sat across from Meg with George to her left and Bethan to her right. From the porch they looked across the vegetable and flower gardens, past trees, to other houses where children played on porches or families dined in the open air. Chickens pecked and scratched. All they needed was a breeze.

Bethan, brown hair bobbed and less tanned than Meg, handed the bowl of green salad with beans and corn to Anita. “Help yourself.” Spoons clinked against serving bowls then forks against plates. They were too busy eating to talk. It had been many hours since lunch. Bethan broke the lull. “You’re hoping to find a friend in Red Cloud, right?”

George nodded.

“What’s his name?” Bethan asked.

George rested his fist on the table, empty fork sticking up over his plate. He chewed a mouthful of salad and didn’t answer.

Anita said, “He’s from the east. Like us.”

“I take it he might have traveled under an assumed name?” Meg raised an eyebrow. “Don’t worry, people leaving the Confederation do so for many reasons. Some reinvent themselves. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Realizing she trusted Meg with her pregnancy, Anita shared his first name with the women. “Willem.” She put a slice of cheese on a piece of freshly-baked brown bread.

Bethan asked, “When did he leave?”

“Don’t remember the exact day,” Anita said, “but it was mid-May.”

Bethan looked at Meg. “When did that couple arrive?”

“Three months ago?” Meg shrugged then cut a piece of sectioned muskmelon with her fork. “Don’t remember exactly and no idea where from.”

George swallowed, head bobbing a few times, one eyebrow higher than the other. “Seems too soon. Considering how long it took us.”

“True, but he had a plan,” Anita said.

“What were their names?” Meg asked. “Maypole?”

“His was Carl Marpole. She was Ruth something. Can’t remember what.”

“Right.” Bethan nodded.

“So they weren’t married?” asked Anita, curious, but not quite hopeful. Rethinking the question she said, “Never mind. Our friend traveled alone.”

George, nose pointed at his plate, lifted his eyes to look at her. “Probably.”

Anita wanted to tell him to keep his mouth shut but settled for a furrowed brow and another forkful of salad.

“It doesn’t sound like him,” George said, picking up a piece of cheese.

“Well, if he’s here, you’ll see him at meeting.” Bethan bit into a boiled egg.

“The community gathers every fifteenth day. It’s rare for anyone to miss. Someone from every household must attend,” said Meg. “That’s enough for me, I need to watch my weight, but help yourselves to more. There’s plenty.” She poured some water into her glass.

Bethan looked at Meg and shook her head. “You go on about your weight so. Tell her,” she looked to Anita, “she looks big because she works hard. She’s strong as half the men in town.”

Meg took a sip of water. “True. My busiest season is starting. That’s when the babies come. Rest of the year’s pretty quiet so I do whatever needs doing to contribute.”

Anita was unsure why babies came in the fall but decided not to admit it, just like she thought it better not to ask how long these women had been together. They dressed similar, both wearing dungarees though Bethan opted for sandals and pastel blouses; Meg, work boots and shirts.

Meg continued. “After we get you two settled somewhere – by the way, do you think we should introduce them to Sandra?”

Nodding, Bethan said, “I’ll see her tomorrow.” She set down her fork. “She’ll know about housing, that is, if you’ve decided to stay.”

Anita looked to George. He nodded then she nodded too.

“Once we get you two settled, you’ll need to think about contributing to the community,” Meg said.

“Happy to contribute.” Anita wiped her mouth and chin with her napkin.

Bethan asked, “What skills do you have?”

“I’m an accountant.” George looked at their hosts, frowned, and shook his head. “Not much need for auditors here.”

“I can sew,” said Anita.

Bethan smiled, shaking her head gently. “Lot’s of us sew.”

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George, Anita, and Bethan walked down the dirt street to Sandra’s home. Three children, all under ten, played on the porch as Bethan knocked on the doorframe.

A woman – about George’s age, wearing a faded indigo dress – wiped her hands on a white apron. “Have a seat around the side. I’ll get something to drink.”

He followed Bethan’s lead around the porch and sat with Anita on a twig settee. Bethan took one of two chairs on either side. Sandra set a tray with a pitcher and glasses on a corner table. “Kids, come have a drink.” She poured a golden brown liquid into each glass. “I hope you like cider.”

“We do. Thank you,” Anita said.

After finishing their cider, Bethan made introductions, and the kids disappeared around the corner. “They want to stay in Red Cloud. Any ideas about housing?”

Sandra sighed and leaned back in her chair. “That’s not an easy one. We’ve only one place that might be available and it isn’t much.” She looked at George and Anita. “Has Bethan explained about meeting?”

“I haven’t. Not fully.”

“Well, all decisions are made communally, by consent whenever consensus isn’t possible. If I knew the Tomcyck place was vacant...”

“You mean the Marpole’s are gone?” asked Bethan.

“That’s just it. They weren’t at last meeting and people have been saying they left with that nomadic band that rode through.”

“Huh. They were barely here two months.”

Anita, like George, listened.

“But that means their place might be available,” said Bethan.

“Probably. Frankly, there’s not much demand for it and I doubt the town will build for new people.”

“Could we see it?” asked Anita.

“You can, but I stress, I cannot make promises. A decision about housing has to come before the entire town at meeting.”

Anita and George nodded. “Okay.”

“It wouldn’t hurt for you to look at it,” Sandra said shrugging. “I don’t know what else to suggest. Meg will need your extra room come September.”

Bethan looked to George and Anita. “She uses the room you’re in for expectant mothers.”

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The next day, a couple minutes after leaving the road, Bethan pulled on the reins of the small horse-drawn gig. They stopped next to a large kitchen garden. “I said it was a trip. Sure you want to be so far out of town? There’s only one family past this place but at least you have access to irrigation water.”

Anita looked around. The garden was a bit overgrown. “But where’s the house?”

“They’re called soddies though only the front of this one is made of sod.” Bethan pointed to a small mound. “Hello? Anyone here?”

“And the rest?” asked George.

“Dug out of a small hill.”

Anita looked at the mound. There were two openings – a doorway and small window – both open. Outside the slatted wood door stood a bell the size of her head.

Bethan got down, called again, and smiled. “No one’s home.”

George helped Anita down before heading to the door. She walked through the garden. It felt familiar – how things were inter-planted – reminding her of the land she worked with Willem. Then she saw a purple tomato. Willem’s favorite.

She passed the gig on her way towards the door. Just inside, in the dark, she could hear George breathing. Anita waited for her eyes to adjust. She didn’t want to admit disappointment. The walls and floor of the single room were dirt. Someone had made furniture – bed, table, chairs, and shelves – out of rough-milled timber and thin logs.

George held something. A metal box the size of his fist. Willem had one just like it. He stored tea in it. This one was a bit more dented than she remembered.

“It’s empty.” He opened it. “But you can still smell the tea.”

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Episode Thirty-seven ♦ *The Meeting*

“I think, if people make an effort to meet and talk with the new couple during the midday break, we can address most of these concerns,” said a middle-aged man. He stood on the other side of the hall from where George, Anita, Bethan, and Meg sat.

The meeting’s chair asked, “Will that be acceptable?” Heads nodded, some answered affirmatively. “And to the new couple?”

George nodded as Anita stood to speak. “We’d like that very much.”

“Then we’ll continue after lunch.” There were no gavel claps when the Red Cloud town meeting started or recessed. People stood, making their way to the doors. It took time for the four hundred residents to leave the simple, unadorned meetinghouse in the town square. George hoped it would be cooler outside and prayed for a breeze. Only the volunteer-powered fan system – large woven mats hung from the ceiling, swaying to and fro – made the heat tolerable.

Looking to Meg and Bethan, Anita asked, “So what does it mean?”

“We make decisions by consent,” Bethan said. “Not everyone has to agree, but we all must support the decision. We don’t have consent yet.”

Anita sat back down. “I don’t get it. Consent, agree, support – it’s all the same to me.”

Bethan nodded gently. “I may not agree that something is right – in this case, I don’t want anyone to live in that soddy – but I have to decide if I can accept it.”

“Or at least not be opposed,” George said. “You can live with it. Right?”

“That’s the idea,” said Meg. “You two should get some food and continue meeting people.”

“Together?” asked George. “Not sure I can remember who we met before the meeting.”

“Anyway,” Bethan said standing, “you’ll figure it out. We’ve got something we need to do.” Meg joined her in leaving.

George looked to Anita. She shrugged and said, “If we want to do more than say hello, maybe splitting up would help. Let’s grab some food and decide.” He retrieved a basket from under the bench.

It was easy to find food after leaving the hall. Dispersed around the square were tables filled with dishes residents brought from home: salads, cold meats, cheeses, bread, fruit pies. George marveled at all the food. Families opened blankets in the shade of trees.

From the basket he took a tin plate, cup, and flatware wrapped in a linen napkin and handed the basket to Anita before dishing up salad and a piece of chicken.

“So, how about I go clockwise around the outside of the square and you go the other way closer in?” Anita asked, spooning up bean salad then sweet potatoes, herbs, and green onions.

“Someone might want to meet both of us,” he said, dropping a scoopful of mixed fruit on his plate.

“Good point. So let’s go clockwise and keep in eye contact.”

A man approached. “Hello. Fred Wanamaker. Nice to meet you. Would you like to join us for a while?”

They chatted with the Wanamakers for few minutes. George excused himself, grabbed a piece of cherry pie, and headed closer to the meeting house.

“Hello Mister...” a pre-teen said, her voice high-pitched with uncertainty.

“Winston, but please call me George,” he said smiling and nodding to the family lounging in the dry grass.

The girl said, “I’m Kate and these are my parents. We have some tea. It’s kinda warm, but would you like some?”

“Thank you.” George offered the tin cup, spent time with Kate and her parents before continuing through the crowd, saying hello and answering questions. To break the ice he said, “Forgive me if we’ve already met. There are so many new faces today.”

Around the building the crowd thinned. George walked up to a group of teenagers relaxing and talking in the shade.

An older, auburn-haired boy said, “I just wish we could do something different this year.”

“What do you mean? There’s only one harvest pageant,” a girl with dark skin and long brown hair said.

“That’s my point. Every year it’s the same. Let’s try something new, be original.”

“Like what?” another boy, fair and freckled, asked.

“I’m with Ike,” a girl in a checked dress said. “Pageant’s boring.”

“Excuse me,” George said before introducing himself. “New in town. Brought some books with me. One is by a writer who grew up in Red Cloud centuries ago.”

The teens looked at him as if he had just emigrated from Saturn.

Ike said, “Nice to meet you, sir, but what’s a book?”

George thought for a moment. The last library was in Hannibal and he had not seen books other than his own since leaving Clearie’s. “A story. Printed on paper. Bound together. Do you call them something else?”

The group looked at each other, shaking heads and frowning brows.

“We *tell* stories here. We *listen* to the storytellers,” the girl in the checked dress said. She pointed to a girl with chestnut hair in tight curls. “Suz is an apprentice storyteller.”

George thought through her words. The Informateur had replaced printed media in the Confederation; without it, he assumed they still had books in the wilderness even if uncommon. “This’ll sound silly. Forgive me. Do you write things down?”

“We use slates in school, but mostly for numbers,” said the boy standing next to Ike.

“And letters?” asked George.

“Sure, we know the alphabet, learn to write our names, but everything else is... What do you call it?”

“Oral?” George and Suz said together.



Back inside the wooden meetinghouse after lunch, a man stood and addressed the room. “I had the chance to visit with Anita. Will you and your husband please stand?”

George and Anita stood. She raised her hand in a tentative wave.

The man continued speaking. “I hope you’ve met one or both of them by now. I suggest we provisionally accept them into Red Cloud and let them use the old Tomcyck place until they have been here for a year. Next summer we can discuss building a new residence if they plan to stay.”

Some people said, “Hear, hear.” The chair called a new vote. “Green badge for consent.”

George looked at the sea of green items held in upright hands. Ike held up a green board.

“Red badge if you refuse consent.” No one held up anything red. “And yellow badge if you stand aside.” There were a few yellows. “Then let’s welcome Anita and George Winston to Red Cloud with a round of applause.”

The attention embarrassed George. They sat and the clapping tapered off.

Anita squeezed his arm and said, “We did something right during the break.” Her face was a big smile. He thought about the hovel carved out of the earth, far from town, and wished he could share her enthusiasm.

“And next we have a report on fire prevention,” the chair said.

Part way through the discussion of building inspections and firebreak clearing, Anita slowly drew to her feet. She raised her palms to her ears as her chin dropped to her chest. George heard air entering and leaving through Anita’s nostrils.

Meg stood, took Anita’s arm, and asked, “Are you okay?”

Anita remained rigid. Only her head moved, her chin rising from its contact with her sternum until her nose pointed at the ceiling. Looking forward, a sonorous, almost masculine voice boomed from Anita’s mouth. “Heed my tidings!”

George’s first thought was Anita would never say anything like heed my tidings. It sounded like something out of a Regency Era novel about Imperial Rome or ancient Egypt.

Heed my tidings that ye may know.

From the mountain in middle, chaos sends forth vengeance and retribution.

Ten for one. Ten for one.

The fair day, hunted, burning, burning.

The morning sun. Fire devouring all.

Morning sun burning the red cloud.

*Mind the break. Ten people. Fingertip to fingertip.
The void surrounds, protects.*

Anita collapsed onto the bench.

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After a short break to make sure Anita was okay, lots of tongue wagging, and more than a little head shaking, the chair regained the town's attention.

"What's it mean?" a woman asked. George fanned Anita with his soiled plate. He bit his lip, fearing Red Cloud's reaction, certain to be driven from the community. Voices mumbled, words not understood.

A young man stood. George remembered him from the ride into Red Cloud, Egor's younger brother Tyler, he said, "Our name, Dagfrid. It means beautiful, or fair, day. Also peace. A couple weeks ago we caught two Black Miners sneaking around our village. One said they came looking for a wife. Some of us felt they planned to steal. My grandfather sent them away. A small band followed them."

George stood. Inside him two forces battled: fear and truth. He coughed, trembled. "My wife, Anita, was washing up at the river. This dirty person came to me and said, 'So hungry. Gimme food.' Thought it was a woman. Alone. Walked to our cart. Got her some hardtack. Someone came from behind. Hit me across the back." George looked down, the day's shame weakening his knees. Struggling with anger and fear he said, "Too stunned to fight. Shotgun by the fire. He hit me until I knelt. My hands behind my head."

Rising, Anita said, "I saw them as I returned from the river, one rummaging through our things, the other strangling George." Her voice was normal. "I got the gun and fired a warning shot. Then the Dagfrids arrived. Without their help – it's nothing I like to think about." She shook her head.

A woman asked, "Who were they?"

Anita hunched her shoulders and shook her head.

An elderly man stood. He cleared his throat. "Black Miners or Middenites." Nodding heads and whispers swept the room. "We don't trade with them. Don't trust them."

"Why?" Anita said, an innocent.

"Legend says the Middenites came from a place called Kansas City. After the great and terrible war when the three powers – the Confederation, League, and Union – accepted a truce, Confederation leaders decided there wasn't enough population for the prairies. It was returned to nature."

"The wilderness park." George said.

"Yes. People relocated to the more productive lands in the east. What could be used to rebuild the bombed out cities on the coasts was taken. The rest was put into great pits, pits that grew into large hills. The one closest to us we call Midden Mountain. That waste was poison.

“Most people moved to the coast. The true believers and the ancient ones hid – in the mountains and deserts. But there were people who didn’t trust the Confederation. They fought and made their final stand at Independence Bridge. The Confederation left them what remained of a great city on the river. Kansas City. But they fought among themselves.

“A small group left and started mining Midden Mountain. The Middenites. Their work poisons and deforms them. They steal when they can’t get what they want in trade.”

Tyler stood again. “My family killed the two who attacked you.”

The old man shook his head. “If they were not alone, and knowing the Middenites others lurked in the shadows, they will seek revenge. It is their way. It is of them we speak when we tell the young ones not to wander at night.”



Episode Thirty-eight ♦ *Anita's Day*

The horrible man slumped forward, into her lap. He lay unmoving. She pushed him back, off of her.

The boat spun around its center point, trapped on a whirlpool. Despair. But that wasn't right and she knew it. Something was missing.

Her stomach cramped as nausea ground within. She leaned over the side of the boat to vomit but screamed in horror. The boat lurched forward, a river of blood flowed toward an angry sea. The shore slipped away from her – on one bank George stood with a small boy, on the other bank hovered Yama's messenger. Cackling. Always cackling.

The cockerel crowed. She sat up in the bed, uncomfortable as always, and looked towards the small window. It was morning again. Hadn't she just fallen asleep?

"Another bad dream?" George asked. Next to her in the bed made of wood and rope, with a straw mattress, he blinked and wiped his eyes.

"It's nothing," she said. "Go back to sleep."

"No, there's work." He rolled away from her. "You go first."

Nothing was as she expected. Life was hard in Red Cloud. She walked over to the stool Meg had lent her. It was a seat with a hole. "Trust me, you'll be glad to have it," Meg had said. "The further along you are, the more you'll have to go." No privacy. Pretending he was somewhere else – Anita knew that is why George rolled away from her.

Even going to the toilet was an ordeal in the soddy. Besides the chamber pot, they had what passed for an outhouse but it was some distance from the front door. She never thought twice about squatting on the prairie; there, in the open, she never felt watched. Now, with a sawdust composting toilet, she had to separate the types of waste.

She reached for the rag she kept tucked away behind the seat. Both she and George pretended he didn't know it was there.

"I'll empty it," he said. Today and everyday. For six weeks. Every morning. She no longer answered, tossing her sweatshirt – now too tight – over her shoulders, and went outside to wash, check for eggs, and start a meager breakfast.

The Fosters, the family of five on the next farm heading into Red Cloud, had organized a house warming party that first week. Many came out from town bringing things: used pans, dishes, blankets, cheese, yeast, flour, a bucket, some lumber, seed, chickens.

Terence Foster helped George build a small coop, the birds her only company during the long days when George was gone. She envied him his work but not the long walk to and from Red Cloud. At least his days varied: working in the fields, cleaning the irrigation canals, clearing the firebreak surrounding Red Cloud, or reading at the meetinghouse school.

Three eggs and they still had some bread left from yesterday. A tomato and squash sat on the shelf below George's books, her puzzle box, and sewing kit. With a stick she poked at the embers in the hearth and blew before tossing in some dried grass and kindling.

“It’s cold today.” George returned the chamber pot to the bench. He said, did that every morning as she got the fire going. “No, really. There was ice.”

“Uh huh.” She couldn’t find energy to care or say more. Unless she was at the fire, she was always cold.

She dished out scrambled eggs, tomato, and squash while George sliced the bread. She always put more on his plate, feeling guilty there wasn’t more food to give. They ate in silence.

“That was good,” he said with food still on his plate. He always left food in the morning. She didn’t understand why but didn’t let it go to waste. There was room for a second breakfast.

George stood in the doorway. She struggled not to cry. She just couldn’t get used to his leaving. “Need anything from town?” he asked. “Besides everything.”

She shook her head. “Not today.”

“Be right back.” It was his ritual. Instead of goodbye he said he’d be coming right back. She stopped saying anything as he left her. Alone. With chickens.

If not for all that needed to be done around the soddy, she wasn’t sure what she would do all day. Initially days were consumed with two things: fixing up their home and tending to the garden. While there was a lot more she wanted to do with the house, she lacked things like plaster, paint, lumber, roofing materials. A couple days and she could do no more with the house.

The garden was a different matter. The growth of weeds told her either the garden had been ignored or the Marpoles had been gone for weeks. Still, somehow, much had survived the heat of summer and there had been plenty to harvest. Janelle Foster had arranged for Anita to join a canning party one weekend. Anita remembered the talk and laughter of the women, and missed that camaraderie. Alone. All day long, she was alone.

Walking through the garden she admitted that this morning was different. There had been a hard frost. The tomato plants were dead, so she set about picking any and all fruit that remained on the vines, even green. Tomatoes on the ground were picked up. Nothing wasted.

She dug around in the mulch to see how badly the radishes and potatoes had been affected. No, below ground nothing suffered damage and hardier things – cabbage, turnips, carrots – were fine.

Back inside she had another piece of bread, toasted, and the remainder of George’s breakfast before mixing flour, yeast, water, and butter for another loaf. Letting the dough rise provided time for a nap. Her back ached. As the bread baked, she considered doing laundry. Maybe she should work in the garden some more. Make sure things were protected from the coming winter.

If only her sister were here. Or maybe there was some reason, any excuse, to visit Janelle.

She swept the dirt floor with some stiff grass tied to a stick. Then she swept the area outside the front door. She swept the outhouse and the path in between. The sun approached noon. She stood in its warmth and stretched her aching back.

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George returned after sundown with stories about his day. Anita knew it wasn't fair to hate him because he'd spent a couple hours reading to the kids at school. He usually returned loaded with wood, food supplies, sawdust, butter, anything. Tonight he brought her someone's cast off shawl. Always asking about her day, he found something positive to say: the loaf of bread looked delicious or the fabric she hung in front of the window was a nice touch.

Yes, he was kind, considerate, caring. She knew that should be enough, but it wasn't. She looked away from him. "Uh huh. That's nice."

He asked, "You don't want to go to a dance?"

She wanted to complain about being twenty-six weeks pregnant but bit her lip.

"It's the biggest festival of the year." His words were peppered with rising tones.

"Of course we'll go, but I missed something. What's the biggest festival?"

"On the eleventh day after the first hard, killing frost – that was last night – Red Cloud has a four day harvest festival. It's all the fall and winter holidays rolled up into one. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Solstice, New Years. Plus, there's something called the draw where the overseers are selected for next year. Everyone was talking about it today."

Even after a hard day, with long walks to and from town, George was excited and full of energy. She tried to fake a smile but instead tears came.

"And I've been asked to help the kids with the harvest pageant. That's the second night." He stopped. In a quiet, calm voice he asked, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Sounds great." Her tears flowed freely.

"What about that yellow dress? Can you wear it?"

She glared at him.

"I mean, will you be comfortable in it? For the ball."

He was concerned for her, but his happiness gnawed at her. Nothing seemed to dampen his spirits. Not hard work, deprivation, nor the lack of privacy. And she was hating him for it. She knew he would never be happy with her. She said, "I'm sorry we didn't stay in Saint Jo."

"What?" Brows up, his mouth hung open. "Don't understand."

"It was wrong for me to bring you here." Regret.

George shook his head. "Don't understand. It's fine."

"It's not fair making you live this way." Regret piled on nagging regret.

His head still shaking, he kept repeating. "Don't understand."

She couldn't look at him. "It's okay if you want to go."

"Go where? What's wrong?"

She crumpled on the bed, overcome with the stupidity of coming to Red Cloud, wailing.

“I promised to stay. To help care for the baby. Don’t want to be anywhere else.” He sat on the edge of the bed.

She rolled away not wanting him to touch her; she couldn’t deal with that. “It’s just not right. You can go if you want.”

“Why are you pushing me away?”

She could feel him moving closer. She got up, went outside, ran towards the garden.

“Anita. Anita!”

She turned towards him. “I am Avinashika Joshi!” The power of those words startled her.

“Oh my. Listen.” He stood in the doorway, ignoring her pain.

A gust of wind came from the southeast, almost warm. She heard it too and returned to the soddy. Bells ringing endlessly.

George walked over to the cast iron bell mounted on a wooden post. He pulled the handle up and down so it rang constantly, loudly. He shouted something over the noise it made.

She covered her ears against the sound. “Huh?”

He paused. “How long do we ring? Before heading to town.”

Someone had told her about the bells. Rung slowly, it was a message that something was happening. That was the sound the bells made when they rode into Red Cloud that first night. Short bursts, ding-ding-ding, meant go towards the sound, someone needs help. Ceaseless ringing called everyone to the meetinghouse – something was wrong.

She shook her head. “A while? Let me see if I can hear the Gonzalvos’ bell.” As long as the last family on the road had heard, there was no more reason to keep ringing.

Walking towards the road she was afraid. A mistimed sunrise, reddish-orange. Flickering. George must have seen it too. Their bell was silent and he walked along the path at her side as the Gonzalvos’ wagon pulled up.

Jose Gonzalvo said, “Ride with us. We need to make good time. Range fires move quickly and are very dangerous.”

George helped Anita onto the seat as Jose’s wife Rosie moved to sit with her children in the bed. Rosie said, “I’m glad the town widened the firebreak even if your warning was strange. Fire is always dangerous in dry grass. Wind makes it very unpredictable.”

Dread gripped Anita’s soul. She wished a storyteller hadn’t repeated the prophecy to her. She wanted, needed, Red Cloud to be spared.



Episode Thirty-nine ♦ *Harvest Festival*

“All able bodied people east to the firebreak.” Sandra directed a small group. “Yes, women will help with the bucket brigade.”

Anita accepted George’s help climbing down from the wagon. “Should we have brought our buckets?” she asked then glanced at the glowing sky in the east.

He shrugged.

“You’re pregnant, right?” Sandra approached. “Inside the meetinghouse to help care for the little ones.”

Anita started toward the building; George grabbed her arm. She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. He said, “Know I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

Her heart relaxed, she turned and embraced him. “You be careful tonight.”

“Okay,” he said. “Is there something I should know?”

She thought for a moment, a bit unsure what he needed to hear, and said, “You’ll be fine. Just come home.”



Nine days had gone by quickly after one long, terrible night. “It was the worst range fire I can remember,” an old, old man had said. There was much debate on that, but many agreed Anita’s warning led to better preparations. Some were certain her prophecy saved Red Cloud.

A couple days after the fire, George had returned home following a day spent with the schoolchildren preparing the pageant. He had rushed and was short of breath. “The Dagfrids – Egor, his wife, Tyler, an aunt, and some kids are in Red Cloud – lost everything. About half dead. Priorby looted, burnt, razed. Livestock stolen or slaughtered. Survivors scattered.”

Anita hurt for those who protected and helped her, wanting to be there for the Dagfrids. “What can we do? What do they need?”

“They’re being looked after.” George had smiled. “It’s amazing. Red Cloud opens arms and accepts those in need.”

After the fire, more goods came to the soddy: feather pillows, an elk skin blanket, canned fruit and vegetables, a bag of beans, a very pregnant cow. If things worked out as planned, the heifer would be nursing before Anita was due. At first Anita figured these items arrived because Harvest Festival approached. Then people came with questions. “Will I have a boy or girl?” “My parents are getting up there in years. How much longer?” “Will we have more rain next year?” “Whom should I marry?”

Anita explained she didn’t have the answers. Occasionally she touched a hand and had a flash of sight. “Watch winter illness closely or you might lose him.” But usually she had to send the asker away with hope. “Does it really matter if it’s a boy or girl if you love the baby?”

“Can’t you read some bones or something?” a woman asked. Anita shook her head.

Anita looked around the small room, starting to feel a bit cramped by the things people brought her in anticipation of answers and reassurance.

One afternoon, while George was at the meetinghouse rehearsing with the children, Janelle Foster came with some tea, cakes, and most importantly, dressmaking pins. Janelle said, "It's really a beautiful dress. Very elegant. You'll be the belle, I promise."

Anita took a bite of a small spice cake. "Should I wear something else? I mean, if it's too much."

"Of course not! It's lovely and different. All the women will adore it and want to copy it for next year. Now how about putting it on and I'll pin it for alteration." As Janelle helped adjust and pin the untapered bodice and puffy sleeves on the yellow cretonne dress from Hannibal, she said, "I don't know how to ask this and I know it's silly, but what I want to know is, Terence had quite a thing for another girl in town when we were growing up." She looked away.

Anita guessed at the question but preferred it be asked outright. "Yes?"

"Well, it's just, he's gone all day long. How do I know – for certain – he's not straying?"

Anita took her friend by the wrists. "The answer's in your heart. A wife always knows."



"It's not that much farther," Jose said to Anita, both perched on the wagon's bench. Next to George, in the back of the Gonzalvos' wagon, was Clearie's pack filled with things they'd need during the four days in town. Rosie huddled with the small children under a blanket.

"I can't believe he walks to town every day." Anita shook her head. "It's so far."

The bright morning sun glittered on the frosty, dead grass. Leaves had turned yellow, orange, red and dropped to the earth. Within the firebreak, from the Gonzalvos' house into Red Cloud, fire consumed nothing. George had reported close calls on the eastern side of town; there the bucket brigade made the difference. Outside the ring the fire consumed all and continued to the north and west. Some unharvested grain had been lost.

In town, walking to the Wanamakers' home, George said to Anita, "Just like the market. In the free settlement."

"How do you mean?" Anita asked.

"Organized chaos. So many people. Yet there's a place for everyone and everyone knows what to do."

She knew her face had one of those looks; she did not get his comment. "What about the animals?"

"Terence, Jose, Beto, and I will take turns going out and tending them twice a day. We'll just have to watch and see what happens. Wow. Our first Harvest Festival in Red Cloud!" As usual, George was happy and excited.

"My back hurts," Anita said. "I need to sit. That wagon ride didn't help."

"We're almost there," he said.

Aida Wanamaker stood at the door, wiping her hands on a towel. “Welcome. You’ll share the kid’s room with another couple.”



George sat with Anita and the Fosters in the back of the meetinghouse. At a single table in the front sat eight people: five had been overseers for the past year and three were storytellers. The storytellers took mental notes, remembering for the town, and were frequently called on to speak of the past.

The chair stood. “Every resident twenty-five or older will approach the council.”

George leaned over to Janelle and asked, “Does that include us?”

“No,” Janelle said. “You’re not residents, like children, you can speak in meeting but can’t vote yet. After a year, the citizens will have to consent to make you full residents.”

George thought he understood. He watched as, row by row, the adults stood and walked to the front of the hall.

Each man and woman approached the table, offering a wooden card to the overseers. Most cards were put in a box, but occasionally one of the storytellers would say something like, “Allen Chen served as overseer three years ago.” Then the chair would say, “Allen Chen, thank you for your service, you are excused.”

George was struck by the gravity in the room. No one seemed impatient though the whole procedure took hours. He squirmed on the bench, maybe once too often. Most residents were quiet and contemplative. Occasionally short conversations took place, especially with children as they were not excused from attending.

Terence said, “This selection process is one of our most important rituals. This and consenting.”

“So what happens when all the cards are collected?” asked Anita.

“Each of the current overseers draws a card,” said Terence. “Those five will be overseers for the coming year.”

“Who gets what job?” asked George.

“All ten – this year and next’s – will make a recommendation at the start of tomorrow’s meeting. Then the community consents.”

Realizing any adult could serve, George asked, “What if someone isn’t suited to the task?”

Terence’s eyes narrowed, but Janelle said, “Past overseers always help.”

Meg offered her card.

“Margaret Agnodice, as town midwife you are ineligible to serve as overseer. Thank you for your service.”



After drawing the names the community spent a quiet night eating the traditional small meal of bread and milk. The following night the pageant was held: the young entertained and recounted a history of Red Cloud. The final night everyone came to the hall wearing their best. At one end food covered tables, benches hugged the walls, the center was cleared for dancing, musicians played at the other end, but the hall remained undecorated.

Anita sat on a bench next to Bethan. “Congratulations. So what does the overseer of industry and trade do?”

Bethan smiled but Anita sensed tension. “I’ll coordinate with people like the weavers and blacksmiths. It’ll be my job to see they have the supplies they need.”

“Sounds important, are you excited or a bit worried?”

“I’m happy to serve, but it’s a lot of responsibility.” Bethan touched the sleeve of Anita’s dress. “You look good in yellow.”

Anita smiled. “Just wish I wasn’t so pregnant.”

“When are you due?”

“February.”

Bethan’s eyebrows pinched together.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Anita. “The Red Cloud calendar still confuses me.”

“It’s simple. Tomorrow is the first day of the new year. Every fifteenth day is meeting and the end of a cycle.”

Guessing it was now late October – she hadn’t seen a calendar since leaving Hannibal – Anita counted out the months, doubled it, and subtracted one. “In about seven cycles.”

The band started to play again; the music fast, folksy.

“Everyone loved the pageant last night. By the way, where’s George?” asked Bethan.

“He should be back any time. It was his turn to care for the animals this afternoon.”

“I see. Have you danced yet?”

Anita shook her head.

“Do you waltz? It’s the only dance I can do besides that really slow, hold’er close dance.”

“I can.”

“Then may I have the next waltz?”

Anita’s face flushed and she struggled for a good answer. It had been many years since a woman had asked her to dance, and then they were both schoolgirls.

“Don’t worry, Meg doesn’t get jealous and she hates the waltz.”

“Of, of course,” said Anita. “I’d like that. Will you lead?”

Bethan smiled.

As the waltz – all Anita knew was it wasn't *The Blue Danube* – ended, Anita thanked Bethan and they returned to the bench at the side of the meetinghouse. “Does everything in town happen here?”

“Pretty much.” Bethan smiled and looked past Anita. “If you'll excuse me.” Bethan stood.

The musicians, all neighbors from Red Cloud, slowed and softened the music. The song was familiar.

Anita turned, saw him walking toward her, really noticing George for the first time. He wore his Hannibal dungarees, a clean white shirt, and the dress vest with his pocket watch chain threaded through the bottom buttonhole. His gait was confident and that ever-present smile announced joy and satisfaction.

George held out a hand. “May I have this dance Mrs. Winston?”

She took it. “Yes, Mr. Winston.” She was tired but didn't care. It was easy to ignore the aching back and sore feet.

He held her close but with enough room for the baby and breath, his right hand firm in the small of her back, his left hand clasped her right, both held together at their shoulders. As a light tear drifted over each cheek, her spirit soared. She asked, “What's this song?”

“*Moon River.*”

He hummed along softly, there for her, supporting and caring, and she knew. He would be a good father.



Episode Forty ♦ *Howling Wind*

Winter had settled on the plains, and more than anything George despised the cold. He got up in the middle of the night to add wood and a dried cow chip to the fire, but it was still chilly inside the soddy. Daylight came, his teeth chattered, and he was lonely under the blankets, unable to sleep well for worry.

“Why can’t Meg come out here this time?” he had asked Anita.

“Another mother is due this week. She’s not doing well,” Anita had said. “I haven’t gone to town since Harvest Festival. That was five meetings ago.”

Janelle took Anita to Red Cloud overnight leaving George home to care for the animals. Oh the musty, musky smell of the animals: the soddy felt cramped with the pregnant cow and chickens on one side of the hearth, the bed and table on the other. At least Anita was not alone. He hated the thought of her on the road alone.

Winter kept him from making the daily journey into town; it was better to stay home, splitting and carrying firewood and cow chips. He kept the bucket near the fire full with melting snow and the chamber pot empty. He stirred pots and massaged Anita’s swollen feet and aching back. Anything he could do to help. And keep busy.

Looking at the lowing cow, he wished she would calve already, even if he had no idea what do. Anita promised she knew. She would coach him on what she could not do herself. Her voice looped in his head. “I was with my sister when she had her kids.” But what did that have to do with cattle? He disliked being clueless about birth.

He stirred a bland porridge of ground oats and corn over the fire. Breakfast made palatable with a spoonful of preserved fruit – when the calf arrives he would have some milk too. Sugar and honey were in short supply, more precious than the novels he saved to buy from Hartfield antique shops. He recalled the book he read before leaving, *Eugene Onegin*, and the images of Tatyana’s dream. Snow and ice. The bridge. The defiant water. The bear. Oh, the terrible bear.

George just wanted Anita back. She would return and say she was okay.

He looked outside. In addition to cold and snow, the sun was hidden by a brooding sky. Snowflakes floated; their paths altered by the breeze. She would return soon.

♦ ♦ ♦

“Why are you walking? Alone?” George asked. His watch showed it was early afternoon.

“I had Janelle drop me off when it started to snow again. Didn’t want her to get stuck. I could see home and make it alone.”

She barely held the elk hide closed around her. An insistent wind fought the hide. He opened the door, ushered her inside, and grabbed a chair. “Come. By the fire,” he said, pulling the buffalo blanket from the bed.

“I’m okay. Really I am. It was good to walk.”

He wrapped Anita in the blanket and asked, “So, what did Meg say?”

“Everything’s fine. Probably another cycle to go. But since it’s winter, she’d like me to stay in town after the next meeting.”

Town? But that meant he would have to stay in the soddy. Alone. How long? He would not be near her when it happened.

“Moo. MOOOOO.”

“Have you checked her?” Anita pursed her lips.

“How do you mean?” He looked away. “She’s been doing that for the last hour or so.”

“She might be having contractions.”

Dread grabbed at his chest, emptied his mind. “What did Meg say?”

“I’m fine. Couple weeks yet.”

“Mooooo.”

“Really George, she’s always been so quiet. You should’ve checked.”

“I... I...”

Anita stood, dropping the buffalo skin, and walked to the cow – her corral a couple poles jutting from two walls and tied to a large stake driven into the dirt floor.

“I cleaned the pen before lunch. Maybe it’s gas or something.” He bit his thumbnail.

George watched as Anita moved the tail. “George! She’s delivering!”

“What?”

“She’s going to drop any minute now. I can see the legs. I got here just in time.”

“But... You’re tired.”

“Then get your ass over here.”

George obeyed, dread digging pointy fingers into his gut.

◆◆◆

The wind howled as a gray day closed to dark night. It had been snowing and gusting non-stop for four days since the calf came. George expended great effort clearing drifts between their door and outhouse.

Anita monitored the cattle. The calf was nursing and offered an occasional, gentle moo. Mom was calm and healthy.

As Anita stretched her back upright, she stopped and put her hands on her stomach. “Whoa. That was different.”

“What?” George asked.

“I think it’s a warm-up contraction.”

Panic doused George. “Contraction? What do we need to do? Are you in pain? Do you need to go to Meg’s?”

She laughed. “No. It’s okay. Totally normal. It’s just the first one I’ve had. A little unusual is all. See? It’s gone already.”

It was hard for him to release the tension. Thoughts – what ifs – crowded his consciousness. Just as the calf almost arrived while he was alone, he feared being alone with Anita as her unknown time approached. He said, “Really wish we were in town.”

“I’m fine George. Just need to rest. It’s almost night anyway.” She washed her hands and headed to the bed.

George was too nervous to sleep. “Get some rest. Will read a bit.” Opening the Cather trilogy, bookmark resting in Book IV of *My Ántonia*, he started reading the third chapter of “The Pioneer Woman’s Story.” It was hard to concentrate. If not for the blowing, drifting snow he would insist on going to town. He pulled the shawl tight and closed his eyes.

Tiny pink toes poked from under the cow’s tail. Mooyeeowww!

He sat upright, the embers dim, realizing he’d slept in the chair. A deep grunt and low groan. They came from the bed.

“George. I need your watch,” Anita said between panting breaths.

“It’s on the shelf.”

“Get it.”

He stood. “Why?”

“We need to time these. The pain is different now, more intense.”

Stumbling the couple paces to the shelves, he grabbed the pocket watch, held it, and returned to the fire. “Two thirty-five.” He stood, shivering, and approached the bed. “Can I get in bed?”

“Not if you can’t read the watch.” Her voice was hard, driven, uninviting.

It was too dark to see the watch face. He tossed another chip and a log on the embers. Wrapping up in the shawl, he sat in the chair and stared at the watch. And waited.

Another groan came from the bed. “What time is it now?”

“Almost two forty.”

“I’m in labor George.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!” He felt her glaring at him through the darkness.

“It’s too soon. You said after the next meeting. Meeting isn’t for two days.”

“Okay. It’s passed. How many seconds?”

George looked at the watch, struggling to remember where the second hand was when he last looked. “Um.”

“This is important.”

“Forty-five or fifty seconds.” He trembled as stress hormones hit his system. “How long do we have?”

“That’s the magic question. Hours?”

He shook his head, stood, and approached the bed. “Have to get you to Meg. I’ll ring the bell. Someone will come.” He paced. “Hope they bring a wagon.”

“It’s too risky.” Anita caught him with her hand. Her voice was composed, solid, even. “We can do this together.”

He steadied his hand before taking hers. “Okay.” His legs tensed; he needed to run. Instead, paying close attention to the length of each contraction and the interval between them calmed George. He kept the fire going with twice the usual fuel. Anita talked him through each stage, telling him what to prepare, when to light candles and wash, and coaxing him into position between her bent legs. She sat propped up in bed. A bit of light showed in the window. A new day and an easing wind.

He described what he saw, trusting her to tell him what to do. “There’s blood.”

“Of course there’s blood. How does the baby’s head look?” Her voice tense and clear.

“Hard to see. Too much blood.”

“Is it slipping back in?”

The question seemed crazy. He swiped a rag across his face. “No.”

“See anything other than the head? Ohhhhh.” A strong grunt.

“Just hair.”

“Take the head. Guide it but don’t pull. I’ll push.” She moaned and bore down. “Tell me what’s happening.”

“I see a nose.”

“Up or down?”

He was confused. “Nose nearest your spine. Okay, rotating left. Here comes a shoulder.”

“Ummmmm. Okay. Ohhhhh. Ummmmm. Uh.”

“The other shoulder.” It happened so fast. George held the newborn in his hands, overwhelmed by the mixture of excitement and pride. “We did it!”

“Lay the baby face down on my belly.” Her voice hollow.

He hesitated, not wanting to let the child go but feeling she knew best. “A boy.”

She pulled the baby between her breasts then wiped away blood and fluid with a laundered rag. George looked at the blood on his hands. The newborn cried. George stopped, awash in their new responsibility, so small, so helpless.

“Get the pan for the afterbirth,” she said, calm, but the words were strained.

He grabbed the prepared pan and put it in place. Action relieved nervous worry.

She guided him. “Tie off the cord in two places. Then use the knife. Cut between where you tie. Don’t worry, we won’t feel it.” She took a deep breath. “Okay, last one. Afterbirth.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Hold him.” George held the little one in a clean rag as Anita bore down. Worrying it was too cold, he wanted to open his shirt, hold the child close, but feared it might be harmful.

She grunted a couple times then said flatly, “Done.”

“Anita. You’re bleeding.”

“I know. It’ll stop,” she said without inflection. “Give me the baby. Take the pan away.”

“No. It’s too much.” He returned the newborn to his mother and replaced the pan with the rag she used on the baby. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired. Sort of floating. It’s cold.”

George pulled up the covers and looked into Anita’s eyes; she seemed far away. The child latched on to her breast. She rolled on her side and lay with the baby.

“I need to rest. Call him Luis,” Anita said, voice faint. “Luis William Joshi Winston.”

George covered the pair, worrying, but certain mama knew best. Some more fuel for the fire and he sat on the chair to catch his breath. Exhaustion overtook worry.

The great wave broke against the cliff.

He bolted awake. It was bright outside. The storm had passed. He rubbed his eyes while walking to the bed. “Anita.” No response. Lifting the covers, little Luis lay sleeping next to his mother’s breast. Anita did not stir.

“Anita?” He touched her gently. “Anita? Avinashika?”

She flopped from side to back. Eyes shut. No response.

He needed to go for help, wanted to vomit. “Don’t leave me. I’ll be back. Must ring the bell. Don’t go. Please don’t go.”



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