

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 15 October 2014

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