

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.

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“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.

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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.”



Episode Forty-one Coming 2015

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