

Ben Franklin's Time Machine



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by Scott Fosdick

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PRELUDE

The gentle lunatic who believed himself to be Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity while holed up in a cabin in Wisconsin a couple hundred yards from Lake Michigan. This saved him from freezing, but not from starvation, imprisonment, or the intense mood swings that accompanied his grandiose delusion.

It would take a farm girl with a motorcycle to do that.

Still, electricity was a step in the right direction. Any way you looked at it, the man was a fugitive, and a desperate one at that. He believed he was on the run from agents of King George III. In fact he was wanted by the FBI for breaking the newly revised Alien and Sedition Act by spurring destruction of property in the name of revolution.

He was at this moment two personas living in one body. Both were sick at heart, the part of the heart where feeling for country lives. Or festers, when the feeling begins to turn.

Benjamin Franklin, the real Benjamin Franklin, had gone through such a period as one of the last colonial leaders to turn against the crown. This ersatz Ben channeled that, perhaps as a way of dealing with his own estrangement from the nation founded by Franklin and his fellow revolutionaries.

In any case, this one body was in danger of permanent separation from both spirits. It had found refuge breaking into uninhabited summer cottages in the dead of a bad Wisconsin

winter. Sustenance was dwindling. Canned goods were frozen solid. Hard liquor was more fluid but in limited supply. Whiskey and schnapps warmed briefly before bringing on sleep that became dangerous when temperatures hit the single digits.

Electricity discovered the man, actually. A thin beam of red light found the eyeball and thence the dulled mind of this fading soul, who took several minutes to comprehend its source, its meaning, its promise of salvation.

That red light indicates the electric razor is charged.

Twenty minutes passed as he pondered this great revelation.

Electric razor. Electric.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Electrical charge through a cord into the plug in the wall through all the walls. Other things here are electrified!

He lurched from room to room. He flipped on lights. He turned on an electric frypan and thawed a hard red cylinder of Campbell's tomato soup.

Before slurping the soup he bowed his head in thanks and beheld a wondrous sight: electric baseboard heaters!

He scanned the walls and found the thermostat. Within an hour, the temperature had risen to freezing. Within six hours, it was a balmy 62. When he awoke the next morning, it was 85 and condensation was frozen in sheets to the insides of the windows.

He would live to see where life took him next.

It took him down the road to the storeroom of a laundromat where a young woman in a green mask told him to drop his pants.

An odd way to start a revolution, you say? Perhaps it will make more sense when you understand how this fellow came to become Benjamin Franklin in the first place.

Part One: Playing Ben

CHAPTER ONE – SORRY, MR. FRANKLIN

Knee-high white stockings, padded at the calf. Paunch pillow. Latex scalp. Latex jowl. Wire-rimmed bifocals.

The older he got, the less Ben Folger needed these things to successfully impersonate the Philadelphia polymath. Once transformed, he would tell his audience that he, Benjamin Franklin, is standing before them because of the one invention he had kept secret, his time machine. Folger believed in the machine: Our best way of knowing Franklin, or any historical figure, is to listen closely to an imaginative historian like Ben Folger, someone who has scoured the archives and tried faithfully to reanimate the complete person. But it was makeup and costume that convinced the paying public, not scholarship.

The actor learned early on that audiences required hackneyed visual cues to buy into the charade. It never stopped bothering him, this sense of bringing down his hero. Franklin himself often admitted that he was not without vanity, so it seemed a betrayal to exaggerate his least attractive physical qualities. Once the padding was in place, the creases and crow's

feet drawn, the vest cinched, Folger's ritual was to peer dolefully into the mirror and say, "Sorry, Mr. Franklin."

It wasn't fair. Written reports from Franklin's time — his own and those of his contemporaries — suggest that for much of his life he was a handsome, barrel-chested man of great vitality. He was a hands-on scientist in close touch with the physical world. He taught himself to swim from a book — and then invented strokes of his own. But what we remember are the later portraits, complete with paunch, double chin, the bifocals he invented. You had better look the part if you want to walk out on a stage and have folks say to themselves, "Yep, that's the man on the one hundred dollar bill."

Folger learned this the hard way. One night in Baltimore he tried playing Franklin as young Franklin, with none of the standard visual cues. Baltimoreans, as they like to call themselves, have undeservedly low self-esteem. They compare themselves to folks down the Amtrak line in Washington -- or up the line in Philadelphia, Princeton, New York, Boston -- and feel diminished. But the hometown of Poe, Mencken, W.E.B. DuBois, and John Waters has long had a vital intellectual life, and supports its many cultural institutions: the Peabody Institute, the Walters Art Museum, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Theatre Project, the Symphony, the Opera, Bertha's mussel joint in Fells Point.... Those who attend its leading regional theater, Center Stage, are as sophisticated as any patrons you will find in this country, and more polite than most.

Nevertheless, Charm City could not abide Franklin without fat or glasses. Drama critic Penelope Morton fairly skipped the two blocks down Calvert Street from the theater to *The Sun* to gleefully ridicule this inept impostor. Although she would deny it, her *modus operandi* was to support local actors and skewer outsiders. Folger's show was low-hanging fruit. The review came as no surprise. Five minutes into the performance, he knew he had

lost them irrevocably. Lord knows he tried, and in trying, only succeeded in becoming shrill. A packed house was less than a third full after the intermission.

Benjamin Franklin is one of those characters we all think we know well. He is so familiar.

What we know are several different Benjamin Franklins that few attempt to reconcile. Depending on the context, each of us will conjure up a different one. If the subject is monetary, we believe (falsely) that he was the first to write, in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, "A penny saved is a penny earned." We think of his wrinkled face on smooth green bills, the same portrait used in brochures by Franklin Templeton Investments. We think of an old skinflint, a man who was all about the Benjamins. A prudish tightwad. This is the Franklin lampooned by Mark Twain for making life difficult for every American child by providing fodder for parents' insufferable lectures on the values of thrift and hard work.

But if the subject is the debauchery of politicians, we remember (as if we had been there) the old lecher who porked every woman in England, France, and colonial America. It doesn't usually occur to us that these caricatures are mutually exclusive, the prude and the Casanova (his contemporary, actually). We enjoy believing in them both, so we do.

If we are better read, we may also know something of Franklin the typesetter, journalist, and media mogul. Franklin the tinkerer and inventor. Franklin the serious scientist. Franklin the civic leader, founder of volunteer fire departments, lending libraries, universities, business associations. Franklin the abolitionist.

The Franklin we are best at ignoring is the diplomat who convinced King Louis XVI to take our side against the King of England and his vast armies and navies. We must ignore this Franklin or lose the fantasy that George Washington and a ragtag mob of farmers with flintlocks defeated the greatest military power on earth by dint of pure patriotic zeal. A more peace-loving people would put its pride in the right place.

Over the years, “Ben Folger is Ben Franklin” disabused tens of thousands of Americans and many hundred Canadians of their preconceived notions about the man Folger liked to say invented America. But this is an immense land now. Even bigger when you add venues in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. It is possible to take a one-man show on the road every summer for 25 years — playing palaces and storefronts, dinner theaters, in the round, in the woods, on old Chautauqua stages in the Berkshires, national park amphitheaters, and theaters that were once movie palaces that were once Vaudeville houses — and still be able to walk down any street without being recognized, even though you no longer require the big pillow and don’t need the wrinkle pencil and you already wear glasses and your own bunions sometimes hurt so much you do the gout limp without even trying. The point being, Ben Folger had had a good run with the ever-evolving Franklin show, with considerably more positive reviews than Penelope Morton pans, but he was still mostly an unknown quantity.

All of which redounded to Folger’s benefit when he was hired to make multiple appearances at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. If anyone on the convention-planning committee had seen his show, they would have thought twice before handing Folger an all-access pass and encouraging him to roam the halls and meeting rooms offering up his benign face for smooches and selfies and selfies of smooches.

That was all it was supposed to be — \$7,500 for five days of goofing around. But then country singer Billy Jim McNeill went on a bender, leaving a hole in the middle of the red, white, and blue carpet that was to usher the next President of the United States before the truculent faithful remnant of the party of Lincoln.

CHAPTER TWO – THE BALLAD OF BILLY JIM

Billy Jim McNeill rose quickly from recording session back-up singer and guitarist to warm-up act for country stars to headlining shows at smaller venues. Until 2001, his music was largely non-political, straddling old-timey bluegrass/roots music and modern country. He was a solid but unspectacular musician with a gravelly voice of limited range. A native of San Diego, he adapted his accent to suit the song, not developing a consistent country twang until he was a headliner. He sang about working class hard times, hard loving, hard drinking.

On 9/11, he watched the TV all day and drank all night. At 4:30 p.m. September 12th he woke up and wrote, “Don’t Kick My Country, Don’t Kick My Dog.” He recorded it in a studio in Los Angeles and it was on Clear Channel radio stations nationwide by the following week. The tune resembled “Afternoon Delight” closely enough that he ended up settling out of court for a tidy cut of his considerable profits, but he had slowed it down and countrified it enough that most fans never caught the similarity. He certainly didn’t intentionally steal the tune, but intentions don’t really matter in cases like this.

Regardless, “Don’t Kick” kickstarted a new career for Billy Jim. ’Tis an ill wind bloweth no man to good, the saying goes, and Billy Jim was on the spot after every hurricane, border conflict, bombing, or invasion. “Sayonara Saddam,” “Been Real, Bin Ladin,” “Found Your Birth Certificate, Mr. ‘President’,” “Palin Pretty Please (Mother My Moose),” “Hi Ho Hillary (Meet Billary’s Ho),” “Kim Jong-un Your Kim Chee’s Done,” “Trump Me Up,” “Drink Your Java Sleepy Joe,” “It’s My Flag, I’ll Cry If I Want To,” etc. These same songs, if sung without alteration by Weird Al Yankovic, would have seemed like satire. Crooned by Billy Jim, they sounded like the true beating heart of middle America. That, ultimately, was what made him successful: He knew how to stay in character. He didn’t blink.

In 1994, while a Junior at San Diego State, Bill McNeill had recorded a campaign song for the gubernatorial campaign of Kathleen Brown (daughter of Edmund, sister of Jerry), who unsuccessfully challenged Republican incumbent Pete Wilson. He performed “What Can Brown Do For You?” a few times, and liked rubbing elbows with campaign workers. Their enthusiasm appealed to him, even if their politics never really sank in. After 9/11, it was in Billy Jim’s best interests to drift to the right. The more he drifted, the more money he made. He became a fixture at the rallies of the most conservative politicians.

In other words, he drank his own Kool Aid. Before politics drove his career, he played the part of blue collar troubadour. Drinking was an important element of the persona. It was in the lyrics — “I Drink to Forget You Forgot Me,” “Scotch and Soda Yoga,” “Beers on My Pillow” — and it was in his act. His stage manager placed more bottles in easy-to-find nooks around the stage than Janis Joplin ever did.

He left that persona behind in 2001, but it wouldn’t leave him. So even though he would forfeit a hefty paycheck for jilting the GOP on their big convention night, the bottle deposited him passed out cold in a B&B in Buck’s County, just up the Delaware River from

the convention center. Beautiful area — quaint, rustic, and moneyed. Curious how many celebrities have foundered there over the years.

Convention planner Dick Pipken tracked McNeill from the taproom at the King George II Inn — the oldest inn in America, it proclaimed — through a string of taverns up the Delaware to the Porches on the Towpath B&B in New Hope, where the proprietor complained that McNeill had, just a couple hours earlier, been making enough noise with two lady friends to cause patrons in both adjacent rooms to check out without paying. McNeill wrote the man a check for \$5,000 and made clear that it would be cancelled if news of the incident leaked to the press. When the room was unlocked, there was Billy Jim, looking like a corpse in a pool of his own filth. Not able to find a pulse, Pipken called a fixer and an ambulance whisked McNeill away to a private hospital. He awoke the next day with half a song written in his throbbing head.

As he watched the ambulance pull away, Pipken was nowhere near panic. He had become a successful event planner not by planning successful events, but by convincing the customer that whatever occurred — whatever sorry-ass, rubber chicken, high school marching band, turn-up-the-volume and spin that disco ball, flea circus mishmash — was just what the moment needed, was the greatest possible show on earth. He knew how to bang the drum before and after the day's spastic has-been tap danced on and off the stage.

He had been concerned about how he would pull it off for this convention, until he turned to the oldest trick in the book: Put the producer on stage for a cameo and the producer will be too worried about delivering his line to criticize the show itself. In this case the producer, the muscle, was not just the candidate but the party's leading lights, most of whom would be speaking on the night of nights.

So Pipken's plan had been to have Billy Jim do a medley of his greatest hits, with a different politician joining in on the tag line of each song. And every Billy Jim hit had a tag

line. The candidate loved the idea — the superstition about not entering the arena before being officially nominated had been abandoned more than a decade earlier. Several of the other speakers hopped on board eagerly. Only Whitman Brockington of South Carolina had balked, but eventually his campaign manager convinced him that appearing with McNeill was just what he needed to boost his numbers in the western part of the state.

Couldn't do a Billy Jim medley without Billy Jim, though.

Pipken sat on the west bank of the Delaware and stared across the muddy water at New Jersey. What would he tell the senators and governors who were even now practicing their Billy Jim songs before bathroom mirrors in the Rittenhouse Hotel? Speeches they could do in their sleep, but the thought of singing even one line in public woke them up.

Pipken pondered:

Perhaps we could reenact Washington crossing the Delaware, with the candidate as Washington, standing up in the ship of state surrounded by brave patriots? Probably not enough time to build that set.

What do we have on hand that wouldn't require a new set, that could work with the scheduled political talent?

The light dawned. Dick Pipken stood up and grabbed his secure phone. Somebody was about to move from the sideshow to the big tent.

CHAPTER THREE – THE BIG TENT

One of the hallmarks of a Dick Pipken production is the unexpected extra. The additions, the sideshows, the buildup, the cheap giveaways, the balloons and the t-shirts and the bimbos in feathers. Headliners could and often did let you down, Pipken felt, but if you had enough dazzle going on everywhere you looked, that hole in the middle wouldn't sink the ship. As soon as the national committee chose Philadelphia, Pipken knew that he wanted to have Benjamin Franklin roaming the aisles, kissing delegates, reminding folks of the good old days when America was young and making money was patriotic. A walking, talking hundred dollar bill.

On the big night, the candidate himself would enter the arena from the rafters, emerging from behind a giant kite on a lightning bolt, riding down the string as sparks and confetti flew, and stepping out at the bottom, greeted by Old Ben, who would hand him the famous key (an oversize replica). The candidate would then step to the podium and give his speech about the Keys to Economic Freedom. It would be as if God himself had delivered the candidate to America, with the help of the patron saint of American enterprise, Benjamin Franklin.

The previous January, Pipken told his assistant to see how much it would cost to hire Alec Baldwin — the most recent and biggest-name actor to play Ben Franklin on screen — to

work the aisles and conference rooms for four days in full costume. So the assistant called Baldwin's agent and made the pitch.

When the agent stopped laughing, he said, "There is this guy in San Jose who does a one-man show about Franklin. We had him in script meetings and on the set for a while when we were shooting. I think he was a little cheesed. Thought that he'd earned the right to play Franklin in the movie, or at least to audition for it, because he'd been taking his skit around the country forever.

"We explained that without a star the film couldn't be made," the agent continued. "He was a good egg about it. Agreed to the consulting gig. I saw him in the hallway once outside the sound stage, bent over, breathing hard. I asked him if he was all right. He just muttered, 'Not the way I would have played him.' Then he went right back in and kept his mouth shut. Hated the movie, privately, but did some good publicity interviews for it with the highbrow press. Sounds like just the kind of guy you want. I've got his card here somewhere. ... Folger. Ben Folger."

On D-Day in Philadelphia, Pipken called the head of the convention scriptwriters and sketched out the revised scenario, post-Billy Jim. He told him to meet Folger backstage with a completed script in two hours. Then he called Folger, told him this was his lucky day, promised him a big bonus, and told him not to fuck it up. The Lightning Bolt bit would be as rehearsed. Only now, instead of the Billy Jim medley, it would be preceded by a "conversation" between Ben and America's New Founding Fathers, each politician simultaneously playing himself and one of the hallowed greats: Adams (John, not Samuel, for God's sake not Samuel), Jefferson, and Madison. The candidate would appear as Washington. Pipken admonished Ben: "Just wear the costume, smile, and read the lines on the teleprompters."

Folger hung up, walked to the green room — empty now, thankfully — and called his wife.

CHAPTER FOUR – ELIZA AND THE FARM BOY

Ben Folger and Eliza Jain met for the first time three times. Or that, in any case, was the way they chose to tell the myth of their marriage.

Ben grew up on a farm in Sevastopol Township, north of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, an 80-acre rhombus of land east of Highway 57 at the corner of Bechtel and Whitefish Bay roads. Like much of the land on the Door County peninsula, it was rocky and ill-suited for agriculture. Ben's father, August, whom everyone called Augie, made ends meet by adapting the farm every few years to whatever was most lucrative. Dairy cows, sometimes pigs, a truck garden for tomatoes, potatoes, asparagus, and strawberries. Forty acres of field corn to feed the livestock. A ten acre Christmas tree farm of Douglas fir on a strip backing up to the northeast edge of the town of Sevastopol. Twenty acres of marsh of no commercial use on the east. Augie's wife, born Margaret Bach, died as a passenger in a car accident on the way home from a church picnic. At the time, Ben was 9 and his sister, Abigail, was 7. Abby cooked and cleaned and tended the truck garden after that.

Eliza Jain was the daughter of Dr. Raj Jain, a professor of civil rights history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Matty Jones Jackson. Raj grew up in Bangalore, India, in a family that valued education. He earned a three-year degree at nearby Jain University. (Later, Raj let Matty believe that the university had been founded by his family.

Eventually, his mother explained to Matty that Jain is a common name among members of the Jain religion, both a family name and a name bestowed on institutions.)

Because a bachelor's degree in India typically requires just three years of study, even the best graduates often have trouble gaining admittance to graduate programs in the United States, as they lack the prerequisite credits. Raj had studied engineering at Jain U., and was quite prepared to go directly into a doctoral program in the U.S., except for the lack of credits. Delhi University offered a one-year Master's of Humanities that would give him the 30 credits necessary with the least amount of effort and expense. Raj had no real interest in humanities going in, but the program changed his life.

As a boy, Raj was a gifted tinkerer. He worked in a shop that repaired the broken cameras of tourists, impatient folks on a schedule who used cameras as a buffer between their eyes and the horrific poverty of India. Sometimes the quick answer was simply to sell them a new camera so they could be on their way. *If it's Tuesday, this must be Bangalore. Wednesday we bus to Hyderabad. Just get me a damn camera.* (This was long before smartphones, mind you.) The shop ended up with a lot of broken Kodaks, Nikons, Canons, Minoltas. Rarely a Leica. Never a Hasselblad. And some good lenses with stripped threads.

Young Raj was curious what was on the other side of the high wall to the Leela Palace hotel. He heard splashing of water and imagined creamy-skinned girls lounging in bikinis. So he invented a camera with the viewer on the bottom, like an upside-down Rolleicord. Standing on tiptoe on the stump of a jujube tree he held the camera high over his head and inched the pop-out lens over the wall. When he saw in the viewfinder the murky outlines of a human form, he clicked the shutter and snatched the camera back. Thirty-six times he did this over two weeks, until the roll of Ektachrome slide film was used up. Had he used Kodachrome, the resulting flesh tones would have been warmer, redder, more like the skin of his mother and sisters. But the cool greenish-blue palette of Ektachrome only

emphasized the exotic Western paleness. When he developed the roll, he was delighted to find that three of the shots were, indeed, of creamy-skinned girls lolling in bikinis. *Praise Rishabha for light that reflects and eyes to see!* And so the great scholar of civil rights began life by invading privacy.

What captured the imagination of Raj and changed his perspective on his career was a lecture by Martin Luther King Junior at Delhi University in February, 1959. At the invitation of Nehru, King was taking a break from the struggle, having recently been assaulted by a woman with a letter opener. Everything about the lecture astonished Raj. First, the hypnotic voice of this foreigner. Second, his familiarity with Mahatma Gandhi, and his insistence that it was Gandhi's nonviolent credo that, merged with Christian principles, informed King's philosophy and his tactics.

But the thing that most astonished Raj Jain was King's passing comment about the role of photojournalists. If you are going to expose the heads of your people to the brickbats of racism, you must be sure somebody has a camera to record it and show it to the world. Gandhi didn't hide his wounds under a bushel basket, and neither will we, King declared.

A camera could do more than steal glimpses of bottoms and bosoms. It could expose the violent heart of a nation. A gun shoots bullets and kills. A camera shoots and nothing goes out. The violence comes in, is recorded, transformed, projected, and heals the apathy of the world. Why, Raj thought, was the camera not invented by an adherent of Jainism, a faith non-violent to its core?

Raj quickly came to believe that the wonderful gadgets of engineers were just that, gadgets. What mattered was how these gadgets were used — the people and the movements that used them.

Much to his parents' dismay, Raj ditched engineering and earned a PhD in History at the University of Wisconsin. "Camera at Liberty: Projecting Gandhi on America's Civil

Rights Struggle” earned the top dissertation award from the Organization of American Historians, which in turn won him an appointment to the faculty at Wisconsin (back in the days when universities often hired their own graduates). By combining praise of a Great Man with concern for the impoverished, Dr. Jain became the compromise candidate of two warring factions of the search committee, the intellectual and the social historians. Actually, he belonged to neither group. By deconstructing the photos of Bill Hudson, Bob Adelman, Bruce Davidson, Charles Moore, Dan Budnik, Ernest C. Withers, Jack Thornell, and, of course, Gordon Parks, he was functioning as a cultural historian. That’s what he called himself for years, before finally eschewing the labels and embracing the methods and the goals of all three strands of history.

He met Matty Jones Jackson when she was working as a reference librarian at the Special Collections department of the Chicago Public Library and he was looking for images of King’s march in Marquette Park on the southwest side. She thought he said his name was Rajain, and that’s how she wrote it in the ledger. First name? Raj. They laughed about it later, and she came to call him Raj Rajain.

Matty’s grandparents had been born on cotton plantations in Mississippi and moved north on the same trains that had dropped off the bundles of Chicago Defender newspapers that urged southern blacks to find a better life in the North. They certainly found a different life. Fewer lynchings; more geographic segregation. Matty’s mother took in laundry. Her father worked as a conductor on that same train.

They moved one more time, from the West Side up to a smaller but nearly as segregated black neighborhood in Evanston. This is where Eliza was born, in the shadow of Northwestern University. She went to Oakland Community College before earning a degree in Library Science at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

The Chicago Public Library paid her less than her white co-workers, but it was a job that gave her the spare time and the resources to read and let her imagination wander. It could not have conjured a man like Raj Jain. He berated her for not having the issue of Jet magazine that carried the battered image of Emmett Till, and further berated her for not knowing its significance.

“I was just 15 when that poor boy was murdered,” she protested. “My mama didn’t want me to fill my head with ugly things.”

“Young lady, you are not 15 any longer,” he said, eyes gleaming with what she thought was idealism. Ashamed of his early obsession with white girls, Raj had developed an appreciation for dark skin tones. None was smoother, richer, deeper than Matty’s. This was a half-day for her, so she punched out and they walked the four blocks down Michigan Avenue to Johnson Publishing, where the receptionist was happy to sell Mr. Jain a copy of the Till issue. Matty had heard the story of the boy who had been lynched, allegedly for whistling at a white woman. And how his mother had insisted the casket be opened when it arrived at the Chicago train station so photographers could snap and the world could see. But hearing about it and seeing it were two different things. Which was precisely the point.

Matty looked at the magazine cover. She dissolved into tears and slumped into Raj Jain’s arms. He fell in love in that moment. She took a little longer. It helped when he walked her back up Michigan Avenue for a strawberry soda at the Conrad Hilton Hotel.

They were married in the Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church on Emerson Street in Evanston. The reception was catered by Hecky’s Barbeque. Two nights of honeymooning at Milwaukee’s Pfister Hotel were followed by a whirlwind semester in Madison. Eliza was born the following March. Brother Medgar a year and a half after that.

When Raj got tenure the four of them celebrated by renting a cabin for a week in Door County, at the Glidden Lodge resort on Whitefish Bay of Lake Michigan, the quiet side

of the peninsula. Most tourists mobbed the other side, where the water was warmer and the sun set on Green Bay. As a photographer, Raj had always preferred sunrises. They checked in at the lodge and were told, “second cabin, by the road.” They walked past the first one, “Kosy Kabin,” written in recessed yellow block letters on a varnished wood plaque.

Matty saw the sign on their cabin: “Uncle Tom’s.”

It was the first time Eliza and Medgar had heard their mother swear: “Oh *hell* no!”

She stood outside while Raj and Eliza and Medgar carried their bags into the modest cabin. She would not come in. Raj found her pacing the shore in her bare feet, kicking dead alewives into the cold water.

The ensuing conversation revealed to him that while he had a thorough knowledge of civil rights and black America, a knowledge gained from many nights of reading everything he could find on the subject — and that was quite a bit, even then — Matty had lived it, and understood it in a way he never would.

The conversation on the sand began badly.

“Maybe the owner has an uncle named Tom,” Raj offered weakly.

The look Matty gave him would melt a cheese curd.

“I admit, Matty, I’ve never really understood the problem some have with ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” he began, speaking rapidly, as if he were in a lecture hall and the closing bell was about to ring. “As a novel, it woke up the nation. Lincoln supposedly told Harriet Beecher Stowe that she had started the war. He meant it as a compliment. It’s a great exposé of social cruelty. Uncle Tom was a good guy. Simon Lagree was the bad guy. The novel sold millions. As a play, it was performed more times than any other, ever, nationwide. It is a great, great work of literature. No story since has had a greater impact on society.”

Matty stopped kicking the dead fish, turned toward Raj, and for a moment looked as if she might kick him into the lake. She saw the perplexed look on his face and she sighed.

“Raj Rajain, you know a lot about the civil rights of peoples. You understand society. But you don't know beans about individual human dignity.”

She walked back to the cabin, hung her windbreaker over the “Uncle Tom's” sign, and said to Medgar in a voice that meant business, “Quit jumping on the bed.”

Eliza said, “I'm hungry.”

From the windows of its dining room the lodge offered a sweeping view of the lake and the strand of sand stretching up to the dunes and Cave Point. For most practical purposes, a great lake is as big as an ocean. You can't see the other side, even on the clearest day.

As Medgar and Eliza entered the dining room, a pale, wrinkled woman with hair piled impossibly high shrieked, “Ach! Look at the little pickaninnies!”

The white children seated with her slumped down in their chairs and buried their faces in their menus.

Raj stopped and looked at Matty, wondering: Do we stay or do we go? She stood still and surveyed the scene.

“Well now,” she said at last. “Let's all enjoy this nice walleyed pike these people are going to serve to us.”

Some years after, when Eliza read about the lunch counter sit-ins, she felt she could relate a little bit.

A few minutes later as she was piling Jello on her plate at the salad bar, Eliza heard someone clear his throat. She looked up into the cold blue eyes of a big-headed boy in a pressed white shirt. She thought he was going to ask her to leave, or to get her Jello from another salad bar in the back.

She was trying to decide what she would do if he did when he said, “I'm sorry.”

They looked at each other silently.

“What?” she said.

“About my aunt. The crazy old lady over there. Please excuse her.”

Still geared up to defend herself against the attack that never came, Eliza blurted,
“There’s no excuse for that.”

“No,” the boy said. “But I’m sorry.”

Eliza softened.

“Well, at least I don’t have to go home with her.”

The boy laughed.

The boy was Benjamin Folger, and the old lady was his Aunt Lulie, up from Kansas City for a family reunion. Ben and his family rarely ate out, but this was a special occasion. They were trying to live down their imagined reputation as the poor relations. After dinner, when the kids had ordered cherry pie a la mode (which came, as required by state law, with a slice of cheese), Aunt Lulie ordered a demitasse of coffee.

As the waitress turned away — she couldn’t have been more than three steps away — the old bat shrieked (she always shrieked, imagining everyone were as deaf as she), “Ach! I don’t believe she knows what a demitasse *is!!!*”

Ben and Eliza looked at each other from across the room and smiled. Hey, he’s kinda cute, Eliza thought. Ben didn’t know what to think, but he was entranced.

Matty said, “Keep your eyes to yourself, Miss Eliza.”

This was the first time they met.

The second time they met was five years later, just up the beach from Glidden Lodge on the other side of Bark Road. Matty’s father had died, leaving to her the unexpected boon of an Illinois Central insurance policy to which he had been paying an extra five dollars a week for 49 years. It was enough money to either buy a plot on the shore, with no money left over to build, or to buy land on the cheaper, inland side of the road, with money remaining to build a cottage.

They chose the latter, building on a rise of land that still allowed them a good view of the lake. The homeowners association along Whitefish Bay had decided to limit the size of construction so that folks in boats or looking at the shoreline from the beach or from across the bay would still see trees and rocks and sand, with minimal intrusion from man-made structures. Ten years earlier, a Milwaukee grocer had dug into the sand so far that there could be no doors on the Bark road side of his cottage, just a strip of shallow windows just under the eaves. You had to go down steps and onto a wide, low deck to enter. The result was that the small hill on the west side of Bark Road allowed a full view of the great lake to the east. One barely noticed the two-lane road or the house in between the road and the lake.

This was where Taj and Matty chose to build their A-frame cabin. They hired Leist Construction in nearby Valmy to lay the foundation and raise the frame and rafters, but Taj indulged his engineering side — and saved a few dollars — by laying the floorboards, putting in tongue-and-groove paneling, painting, and staining. He even researched and designed the septic system.

Leist Construction refused to put in a septic system that wasn't a standard design, but Dave Leist said that a local farmer, Augie Folger, had a backhoe and would probably dig the hole if it could be done between planting and harvesting time.

So it was that one cool but sunny morning in July Augie Folger and his son, Ben, now 14 and gangly, unloaded their muddy, rusted DitchWitch from an ancient flatbed truck and began checking the measurements Raj had plotted out with little American flags, bought cheaply at the hardware store in Bailey's Harbor on the fifth of July. It did not occur to him that it might be unpatriotic to rim a septic field in such a way, but it did occur to Matty.

Augie and Ben Folger both wore overalls and farmer boots (orange leather with neoprene soles).

“You can trust my measurements,” Raj said. “I have a degree in engineering from the third best university in India.”

Matty said, “Let the man do his job, for Pete’s sake.”

Without a word, Augie stood at the back of the house and held the tape measure above the exit pipe at ground level.

“Walk the other end to the furthest flag over there, Bennie,” he said.

Ben took a few quick steps. The metal uncoiled slowly, and snapped off his grasp. He picked it up, held it tightly and walked slower. Eliza and Medgar observed unseen from the door of a large treehouse, which their father had built high in an oak tree with a precision and solidity quite unusual for structures intended for child’s play.

Medgar whispered to his big sister, “Hey, that’s the honky from the restaurant, the guy with the ofay, jive-ass aunt.”

Eliza nodded, trying to hide her excitement. The overalls accentuated the muscled shoulders and arms of the farmboy.

Suddenly Medgar shrieked, “Ach! Look at the little hillbilly!”

Eliza slapped him and Medgar pitched forward and out. He fell 15 feet and landed awkwardly on his shoulder. Something snapped. After much shouting and commotion, Medgar was carried to the truck on an exquisite quilt that had been stitched 45 years earlier by Matty’s mother.

Augie drove, Raj and Matty squeezed onto the worn leather seat next to him, and Ben and Eliza kneeled on either side of Medgar to keep him from rolling off the flatbed. It was all they could do to keep from falling off the truck themselves. As Augie ran the stop sign and lurched left off Whitefish Bay Road onto Highway 57, Ben reached across Medgar and grabbed Eliza by the arm, just in time.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Do I know you from somewhere? I feel like I’ve seen you before.”

“Nope,” she said. “Must be someone else who looks like me.”

“Nobody around here looks like you,” Ben said. Fearing that might sound hostile, he added, “Unfortunately.”

Indeed, no one in Door County — and few people anywhere else — looked like Eliza. At first glance she was just a normal, skinny, African American adolescent. But her hair was naturally straight, thick, and shiny black. Her high cheekbones and strong eyebrows set off her most extraordinary feature, her eyes. Deep, emerald, alternately lively and dreamy. Ben felt himself diving into them, like quarry water.

“Hey, you lovebirds,” Medgar chirped. “Pay attention to me. I’m the one all busted up.”

Once Medgar was diagnosed with a simple broken collarbone, Augie, Raj, and Ben drove back to the cottage and dug the septic ditch. Many years later, when local health authorities decreed that all septic fields had to be replaced with tanks, Raj protested.

“Yes, most septic fields are inadequate, due to the porous nature of the rock in this area. But not my field.”

To no avail. He had to install an \$8,000 tank and pay through the nose for pumpings every three weeks.

“And still there is poop in the drinking water!”

The culprit was never cabin sewage, Raj said, but run-off from nearby farms.

Ben did not see Eliza again for another five years.

CHAPTER FIVE – DRAMA THEORY

At Sturgeon Bay High School, Ben aspired to be a B-plus student. He knew that was good enough to get into any public university in the state — it was, back then — and saw no point in striving for more. School was just another chore for him, until he met Miss Astrid Christiansen his senior year.

Ben's last year of high school was Astrid's first year of teaching. Fresh out of Lawrence University in Appleton, she was not much older than her students — although five years at that age feels like a lot. She was a classic Scandinavian beauty, with a quicksilver smile that somehow formed icicles and melted them in the same moment. In an experiment that revealed to the school board that it was possible to squeeze more work out of fewer and fewer teachers, Miss Christiansen team-taught English and History and Speech with Mr. Hogsdale, who insisted that he was only qualified to teach the history part, which, for all practical purposes, left Miss Christiansen teaching two classes and getting credit for one (among other courses).

The result of this pedagogical forced marriage was that English composition and Speech played handmaiden to American History. Casting about for a creative solution, Miss Christiansen assigned students a Great American figure and told them to research, write, and perform a ten-minute re-enactment of his or her life.

For the simple reason of his name, Ben was assigned Benjamin Franklin. His research was perfunctory, relying on the old, standard biographies available in the school library. His writing was only marginally better. But what astonished Miss Christiansen, Mr. Hogsdale, the class, and Ben himself was the performance.

As soon as Ben stuffed a pillow in his shirt and put on his grandfather's old wire-rimmed glasses, he became a different person. His knees splayed outward, his back elongated, his gait quickened. While other students — most painfully, Dickie Pfingsten as Alexander Hamilton — got lost in their three-by-five index cards, Ben never took his from his pocket. He easily remembered most of the script, and nonchalantly improvised where he did not remember. The result was in no way the definitive Benjamin Franklin, but it was a fully realized human being, a human being quite different from the Ben Folger who set picks on the basketball court and grew tongue-tied when speaking with the lovely Miss Christiansen. He succeeded by quickly convincing everyone that he was someone else. Moreover, he seemed to enjoy doing it. In all the theories of acting he would read in later years, he never encountered this one simple secret: Enjoy yourself, and others will enjoy you too.

Miss Christiansen was beside herself with pride. "Benjamin Folger," she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "I could just kiss you!"

The mere idea of Miss Christiansen kissing him was enough. Ben was sold on acting, then and there.

Miss Christiansen cast Ben in the romantic lead in the spring production of William Inge's "Picnic," opposite cheerleading captain Heather Robinson. With her cascade of light brown hair, her endless legs, and her heaving chest, Heather made Ben the envy of his classmates (including a few of the girls). The best part, though, was when Heather had to skip rehearsal to travel with the baseball team to Gibraltar or Algoma or DePere. Then Miss

Christiansen would step in and read Heather's lines. And hold Ben's hand. And kiss the big kiss.

You don't have this kind of fun slopping hogs and mending fences.

"Miss Christiansen, I feel like I've hit the wall with my character, especially in that one scene," Ben said between classes one Friday. "Do you think we could work on that a little after school today?"

He knew that Heather would be away at a game in Green Bay. There were no rehearsals scheduled until Monday.

The auditorium was empty. The set-building crew was long gone. Wearing a blue and white dirndl — tight bodice, fluffy skirt — Miss Christiansen sat demurely on the log that Ben and Dickie had hauled in from the woods. (Why build a log with plywood and *papier mache* when there are so many nearby?) At Lawrence, she had played in many shows, excelling in musicals. She had auditioned for the romantic lead several times, but never landed it. Seems like the same girl always beat her out. She was left playing Ado Annie.

Ben strode to the log, said his line, sat as she said her line, said his next line, and then darted his head forward and kissed her.

"Ben, you're a natural," Miss Christiansen said. "But there is a thing called technique. Sometimes you have to override what *feels* better to do what *plays* better to the audience."

Ben was perplexed.

"Try it this way," she said. "Don't walk, stop, talk, walk, stop, talk. You can talk while you're walking. But don't walk while someone else talks. It draws focus."

Ben tried again. He said his first line as he walked, using it to motivate his movement. He sat still while she spoke. Then he leaned into her while he said his line, which shortened the distance he had to travel for the kiss.

"Better," she said. "But there's something you need to know about kissing."

Uh oh, he thought. Here it comes. He knew he was doing it wrong. What exactly are you supposed to do with your lips? Was he pressing too hard? Should he open his mouth wider? And what about the noses? And the tongue?

“The key to kissing,” she said, “both on stage and in real life, is not the kiss itself. It’s the approach.”

Again he looked perplexed.

“You want to create a sense of anticipation.”

More consternation. Ben felt like the sow stuck between the fence rails.

“Let me show you. Let’s switch places.”

Miss Christiansen said the last line, his line, and moved her head quickly towards his. When she reached an altitude of about four inches, she paused, like a pilot having second thoughts about landing in a rutted field. She looked in his eyes, sighed, relaxed her upper body into his, and then, and only then, lowered her lips slowly onto his.

Well. He melted inside. But she was all perky.

“Now, that was the one-pause kiss. A two-pause kiss is also very effective. It creates a sense of doubt, a push-pull of expectation. In the two-pause kiss, you stop ten inches away, then cut the distance in half, then smooch.”

“Is there a three-pause kiss?”

“Only in comedy. I’d recommend you and Heather just go for the one-pause kiss.”

They switched places and Ben did it just the way she had shown him.

“You’re a quick study,” she said.

“Once more,” he said. “To set it in my sense memory.”

Against her better judgment, Miss Christiansen agreed.

This time, Ben paused a little longer. He figured out what to do with his tongue. And his right hand found itself sliding up under her skirt and onto her warm thigh.

“Mr. Benjamin Folger! Do that with Heather and they’ll shut us down. I don’t think you need any more lessons from me.”

Having learned all he could from his first acting teacher, Ben moved on the next year to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Suddenly he was a little fish in a huge pond. Frustrated by the cattle-call try-outs of the university theater, he auditioned off campus at the Broom Street Theater, and landed the role of Algernon Moncrief in “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

The director was Gordon Stewart, who would be kicked off campus the following year for a nude production of “The Snow Queen” and go on to found the Orgasmic Theater in Chicago. Stewart set Wilde’s masterpiece on the planet Tralfamadore in the distant future. Lady Bracknell was an alien with three noses, six ears and a long spiky tail that was manipulated by a stage hand via fishing line strung through a pulley. The men wore their underwear on the outside and carried laser guns. Reverend Chasuble and Miss Prism were robots. Cecily and Gwendolyn dressed in feathers and jeweled g-strings.

Eliza Jain was surprised that the *Daily Cardinal* would accept a review from a Freshman, and further surprised that it was printed without a single editing change. They even used her suggested headline: “Out of the world ‘Earnest’ is out of its mind.”

Her lead left no question how deeply flawed she felt the production was:

Gordon Stewart is a director of considerable theatrical ingenuity but no apparent understanding of the essential point of Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Importance of Being Earnest.’ The play is a satire on the mores of a specific time and place. Remove it from Victorian England and the air goes out. Stewart and his cast of inept hacks have taken it far from that time and place, to the planet Tralfamadore in the year 2525. The result is breathtakingly stupid.

If anything, the rest of the review was even more negative. With one exception. Her professor, Wilmot Ragsdale, urged students to include one positive statement in a negative review, to build credibility. So she added the line, “The robot costumes, designed by Brownie Gluck, amused.”

The high school newspaper had raved about "Picnic" and singled Ben out as "a talent to watch" (which made little sense, as he was graduating). Eliza's was just the second review of Ben Folger's life. He wasn't going to take it lying down. He marched into the office of the *Daily Cardinal* and, finding no receptionist, demanded a fellow in a Cubs hat sitting at a Smith Corona to direct him to the desk of E. W. Jain, the theater reviewer.

"The arts desk is over there," Mr. Cub said. "They keep odd hours."

Ben sat at the desk, pushed aside a stack of novels sent by publishers hopeful of publicity, pulled out his Biology textbook, and waited. Two hours later Eliza walked in carrying a program from the Madison Theatre Guild production of "Heaven Can Wait."

"You're sitting in my desk," she said.

"Are you E. W. Jain?"

"Who wants to know?"

"The fellow whose 'talent consists of waving a popgun and bellowing every line as if the words had to travel across six galaxies.'"

"Well," she said, "What do you want? Revenge?"

"An apology would be nice."

"I'm sorry you can't act."

"You don't have to say so in print! I could sue you."

"You're a public figure. The threshold for libel is pretty high for public figures, bub."

"A public figure! I'm a Freshman. I live in a dorm. Nobody knows me."

"Doesn't matter. You step on a stage, no matter how small, you've made yourself a public figure."

"It isn't nice, writing stuff like that. Reviews should be more generous."

"Why?"

Eliza sat down, placed her purse and program on the desk, crossed her legs, and, for the first time since entering the room, looked Ben square in the face. And he looked back into those emerald eyes.

“Say, I know you from somewhere,” he said.

“I told you then and I am telling you now, we have not met before!”

Silence prevailed for several moments as the inanity of her statement sank in. As if something invisible had suddenly broken the tension, they laughed together, and recalled the two previous meetings.

“That lovely aunt of yours at the restaurant. I do hope she got her demitasse.”

“And your brother — did you ever succeed at murdering him?”

They relived all that and more over Garibaldi sandwiches and Lowenbrau at Paisan's pizzeria.

“Did you really think the only good parts of the play were the robots' costumes? And was I completely awful, start to finish?”

“There was one good moment you had with Cecily, one real moment, but it was in such stark contrast to the rest of the posing and strutting that it did more harm than good to the overall production.”

“Damn, you even *talk* like a review,” Ben said, adding after an awkward pause, “What moment was that?” His ego desperately needed re-inflating.

“The kiss.”

Later, on the grassy bank outside Liz Waters Hall overlooking Lake Mendota, Ben gave Eliza a demonstration of what he had learned the previous spring from Miss Christiansen. Eliza had not ever considered the possibility that a white boy could know so much.

In the years that followed, through marriage, Ben's career as an actor and his becoming a Doctor of Fine Arts and a Full Professor of Theater, Eliza's work as a reporter and as an adjunct lecturer, he had taught her one or two things (such as when to breathe when delivering reports on TV). But the day he called from Philadelphia to say that his Ben Franklin shtick would be on national TV, she was desperate that he shut up and learn something from *her*.

"Are you telling me," she began, "that some Republican speech writer is going to put words on a teleprompter and you're going to read them, no matter what they say? And this Ben Franklin you've been playing — your fucking boyfriend — this character you've coddled over the years, is going to bless that jive fascist commander-in-chief wannabe? Are you out of your mind?"

"If you stand for that, you'll stand for anything. But you'll be standing alone, because the minute I see that on CNN I'm chucking your stuff out the window and changing the locks."

She missed the days when you could slam a phone down in its cradle. Pressing the little hang-up dot gave no satisfaction.

Ben thought:

She never did understand this profession. It's just acting. It's a gig. You're always serving someone else's vision. Professional actors don't get script approval.

She'll feel better when the paycheck comes.

CHAPTER SIX – GO FLY A KITE

In costume and makeup an hour before he was due on stage, Ben Folger eyed the fruit in the green room and fidgeted. There were no lines to review. He was told just to be ready for whatever appeared on the teleprompters. This made him more nervous than he had been in years, since his high school debut in “Picnic.” Twenty minutes before showtime, he broke one of his cardinal rules and checked his e-mail on his phone, an act that he told his students might disrupt the crucial moments of getting into character.

“Read this, Benedict Arnold,” was the subject line of a message from ElizaJ2001@gmail.com. The message had no “Dear Ben,” no endearing emoticons. Just short paragraphs on each of the politicians with whom he would be sharing the stage. Claims to fame and claims to shame — in some cases, one and the same, despicable acts from which they somehow managed to spin virtue. Eliza knew that Ben wouldn’t be up on these details, not being the news junkie she was. He assumed that she sent it knowing that he wouldn’t even see it until after the performance, when it would be more a rebuke than a prompt. So he read it, sighed, put his phone in his street pants on the hanger, and walked to his entrance mark off stage left. A stagehand checked his body mike.

Peering out through the haze of lights, Ben noticed blocks of pinkish-white faces stretching to the far rafters. Some of the blocks had a darker, brownish line on the bottom

edge. At first Ben thought these were railings. He squinted and realized that they were where they put most of the brown people, to mask the over-all lack of diversity. Camera angles.

“Patriots, freedom-lovers, tax-haters,” the loudspeaker blared, “we have a special visitor today.”

Well, here goes nothing.

Benjamin Franklin strode to the center of the auditorium waving a giant key and spouting bromides from “Poor Richard’s Almanac,” altered and expanded for the current purpose.

“A penny saved is a penny earned,” he crowed. “But a penny *invested* is the beginning of freedom!”

Back in California, Eliza watched the TV, gobbled ice cream, and cringed.

As the crowd roared, Ben looked left, right, and middle, locating his teleprompters. He stood confidently downstage center, legs splayed wide, left arm akimbo, right arm resting on the giant key as if it were a cane. His eyes twinkled over his bifocals. To his left he could see three men dressed and coifed like him awaiting their entrances behind a curtain at the bottom of a long ramp.

The chair of the convention read from a script on the podium, which had been rolled to extreme state right.

“Honorable delegates and friends, we are here in the great city of Philadelphia to re-connect to the core values of this great nation. The leaders of our grand old party have consulted the sacred texts of American capitalism, the greatest system of self-government ever devised. Each man has carefully chosen a quotation from one of the first four presidents, a quotation that still resonates today, nearly two and a half centuries later.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our first guest, the honorable senior senator from the great state of South Carolina, Whitman Brockington!”

Ben waited for the applause to die down as the man inched up the ramp. He was helped by his third wife, a buxom former fashion model Dick Pipken had convinced to join the festivities to add visual interest and a dose of gender diversity. She wore a bare-shouldered hoop dress and carried in one hand a giant hollow cardboard cake topped with sparklers. Her other hand tugged at the elbow of Senator Brockington.

The teleprompter prompted Ben to say, and he did, "Brockington? Brockington? You can't fool me. This is my good friend President James Madison."

Eliza howled: *You were dead long before Madison became president! And you were never friends.*

"What words of wisdom do you have for us, President Madison?"

"Americans possess over the people of almost every other nation the great advantage of being armed!"

Ben cut into the applause that greeted this line by reading from the teleprompter:

"And this must be your darling wife Dolly, famous for her cupcakes."

The audience howled. Eliza threw her spoon at the TV.

"You are both most welcome here," the MC crowed. "And you, too, President Madison.

"Next please welcome a great leader from the Little Dixie heartland of Missouri, Representative Truman Boggs."

Again, the teleprompter cued Ben to continue the conceit.

"Why, no, this is not Truman Boggs. Unless I am greatly mistaken, this is the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence — with a little help from me and John Adams — President Thomas Jefferson!

"Out of your great trove of wisdom, what words have you chosen to share with us this fine evening, Tom?"

Boggs cleared his throat and spoke in a high-pitched whine:

“I have two, Ben.

“A free people derive their rights from God, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate.

“And:

“A strong body makes the mind strong. As to the species of exercises, I advise the gun. While this gives moderate exercise to the body, it gives boldness, enterprise and independence to the mind. Let your gun therefore be your constant companion!”

Eliza retrieved her spoon and dug in anew as the hall erupted with glee.

“Delegates and friends, our third speaker binding us to our glorious past is none other than the Governor of Arizona, the land that God enriches, the man with his thumb in the great wall, Lonnie Kraker!”

Lanky Lonnie swaggered up the ramp. The governor was wearing the same short pants, waistcoat, and powdered wig as the others, but he'd pinned a cowboy hat on top and his rattlesnake cowboy boots replaced the buckled pumps.

Ben read dutifully the words on the prompter:

“Lonnie Kraker my aunt Fanny! This is the great second president of the United States, Mr. John Adams! John, old friend, what wisdom do you have for us?”

Kraker surveyed the crowd, soaked in the applause, and spoke in his Gene Autry voice:

“As long as property exists, it will accumulate in individuals and families. As long as marriage exists, knowledge, property, and influence will accumulate in families.”

The crowd loved it. Kraker leaned over and gave the senator's wife a peck on the cheek, his left hand sliding to a part of her dress that only Ben could see. Kraker gave Ben a wink.

“And now, America, the moment we have all been waiting for,” the MC shouted.

“There is one president left, and one president *next*. Ladies and gentlemen, the presumptive nominee of this great body, Virginia’s Harold Powell Smith!”

The hall went dark. Lights flashed upstage. Thunder rolled. A spotlight hit the top of the blue bolt of lightning. At the bottom, the key Ben was holding suddenly glowed. Wagner blared.

Standing on a clear plexiglass platform no more than two feet in diameter and holding a clear railing, Smith, looking from a distance like General Washington, glided a third of the way down the bolt and stopped, basking in adulation. He appeared suspended in the heavens.

“General Washington!” Ben shouted. “General, what great message do you bring?”

In a rich baritone, Smith bellowed:

“A people who are possessed of the spirit of commerce may achieve almost anything!!!”

On cue, Ben held aloft the glowing key. Confetti fell in great curtains. The audience leapt to its feet with a roar.

All that remained was for the candidate to descend to the mortals like a *deus ex machina* and claim the key to the nation’s future. The world waited.

And waited.

The mechanism would not budge, jammed by wads of confetti.

Hubris, the tragic hero’s classic downfall, Ben thought.

He looked into the wings and saw Dick Pipken screaming at the stage manager, who made a stretching motion with his arms, urging Ben to fill somehow.

“What other great words do you have for us, General Washington?” Ben called to the candidate.

Unaccustomed to heights, Smith was beginning to panic. He ventured a foot off the platform onto the lightning bolt, which dipped so abruptly that he sat down on the platform and hugged the railing post. In the process, he cut his mike, so when he tried to answer Ben's question, no one could hear him. His left shoe slipped off, fell to the floor, and bounced. The audience laughed.

Pipken told the stage manager to cut the spotlight and put Smith in darkness, as the man was now presenting a less than Washingtonian figure. They waved Ben downstage. Ben turned and put on a jovial face.

"Every great venture has its little setbacks," he said. "Most of my experiments failed many times before they succeeded.

"Gentlemen, did I ever tell you about the time I nearly electrocuted myself when applying static electricity to the tail feathers of a live turkey?"

Truman Boggs was a dimwit in many regards but a savant when it came to sniffing out an enemy. He had taken an instant dislike to Folger, and, because the kite purportedly was Ben's experiment, Boggs blamed him when it broke. Unlike Smith's, Boggs' microphone was still fully operational, so what he said next boomed through the arena and into the wired world.

"Listen, Benny Boy, you'd better fix this fucker fast or we gonna zap your little gonads!"

"Now Tom," Brockington said, trying to pull Boggs back into character, "You may talk that way with Sally Hemmings, but not in polite society. Ben here is our good compatriot. I'm sure his assistants will have this little kite fixed in no time."

Five wigs turned upstage just as a cherry picker rolled on to rescue candidate Smith, whose whimpering faded in and out over his loosely connected body mike.

Ben had managed to spit the words out when there was a script. Improvising the party line was something else. Brockington's crack about Sally Hemmings pushed him over the edge. He faced the audience, gestured to the cherry picker, and said, "Look, there's the machine you boys used to find your quotes."

Lanky Lonnie laughed. He was one of few in the arena who got the joke. Eliza put down her ice cream.

Brockington carried on.

"Ben, I want to thank you for standing up to crooked King George, and saying a loud 'No!' to the Stamp Tax. That set a fine precedent for America for the ensuing centuries."

"Thank you, Senator Brockington," Ben said. "Yes, I'd like to talk to Senator Brockington now, if President Madison will allow him out."

Ben didn't wait for an answer.

"Senator Brockington, you have been stalwart in defense of state rights and against federal taxes."

"Yes sirree," Brockington said.

Boggs eyed Ben suspiciously. Ben continued.

"Time after time we have heard you say, 'Why should the poor folk of South Carolina pay to bail out Californians from wildfires, Iowans from Mississippi floods, and so on? States need to be more self-reliant.'"

"Indeed they do," Brockington said.

"Then what's this I hear about your demanding federal relief from that little hurricane that swamped Charleston last September? Doesn't South Carolina always get more in federal dollars than it gives, just like all the states that grouse most about federal taxes?"

"You better shut your pie-hole, boy," Boggs muttered.

"Or else?" Ben said. "Or else what? You'll pull out your AR-15?"

"I just might," Boggs said.

"Now gentlemen," Lonnie Kraker interjected, "let's talk about something we can all agree on: taxes, taxes, and more taxes from those tax-and-spend liberals."

"Why that shouldn't bother you too much, Governor," Ben said. "Didn't we all find out just last month that your family corporation moved its headquarters to the Caymen Islands just so you wouldn't have to pay for federal extravagances like interstate highways, cancer research, and armor for our soldiers' transport vehicles? Meanwhile, your yearly income from the company is 450 times what you pay your non-union workers, yes?"

Boggs blew.

"That's it, punk! You are dead meat."

"I'll bet you're packing heat right now, aren't you, Truman?"

"Damn straight I am."

"We are all proud gun owners, Mister Franklin," Brockington said. The three of them each pulled handguns from their blouses.

"Oh, you are more than that," Ben said. "You don't just carry guns, guns carry you. All three of you — four, including the guy blubbering on the lightning bolt — get buckets of cash from the NRA.

"Was that association difficult for you, Mrs. Brockington, when your sister's daughter was among the victims of the Lily Grove Elementary School massacre?"

Dolly Madison put down the cake and began to speak. No one could hear her. Ben pulled off his microphone and handed it to her. She spoke rapidly in a high, strained voice.

"Gentlemen, please put your guns away," she said. "You are among friends."

"I'm not so sure we are," Boggs said, waving his Ruger at Ben.

"Please," Senator Brockington said. "She's a little bit jumpy about guns."

“Yes,” the senator’s wife said, “I am a little bit jumpy. I am a little bit jumpy every time I walk to the bathroom and have to pass the vault that holds an arsenal of automatic weapons just like the one that, the one that...”

She took a breath and continued in the same high-pitched way.

“Why do you need these guns that go bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang faster than I can say bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang? These hollow-pointed, organ-shredding, six-victim-a-second murder sticks?”

Lonnie Kraker reached out to take the tiny microphone from the senator’s wife.

“You keep your fucking hands off my ass!” she shouted, finding her voice at last. She handed the microphone to Ben, kicked the cake off the stage, and swished her skirts back down the ramp.

Things weren’t going as planned. Pipken was determined to reel everything in. While the Senator’s wife was talking, he went up in the cherry picker and personally pried the candidate’s white fingers off the railing and pulled him into the basket. When they reached the floor, Pipken gave him a gentle shove down stage and cued the MC.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the MC said, “feel the significance of this moment as our first four presidents join Benjamin Franklin in handing the key to the past to the president of the future, Harold Powell Smith!”

Ben picked up the key, looked out at the restive crowd, and said, “This key isn’t for you jokers.” He dropped it in the orchestra pit, turned on his heel and walked off stage to the dressing room. Half the arena was cheering Smith as he walked to the podium; the other half was booing Ben.

In the dressing room, the senator’s wife was slipping into a more contemporary outfit, one with less northern exposure. Accustomed to tight quarters when he was working, Ben thought nothing of disrobing and changing to his street clothes in front of her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I put you on the spot out there."

"No, I'm glad you did," she replied. "Those fuckers had it coming. Want to get a drink?"

Ben glanced at his phone. Eliza had sent an emoji smooch, along with the words, "Your key still works."

"I'm beat," Ben said. "And you don't want to be seen with the likes of me, not after tonight."

"Yeah, you're probably not going to get paid."

"No kidding."

The phone was ringing in his hotel room when Ben walked in. It was his on-again, off-again agent.

"You pissed I blew the gig?" Ben asked.

On the contrary, the agent said. He didn't have time to be upset. He was too busy fielding calls from talk shows.

"Pack and take the Metroliner to Manhattan," he said. "You're on the morning shows tomorrow."

CHAPTER SEVEN – TALK ABOUT IT

The following week saw Harold Powell Smith touring the country in the *Freedom From Taxes* bus along with his VP pick, Truman Boggs. They did not receive the national airtime they had hoped for, given the sudden popularity of Ben Folger, who was dominating every network and platform.

The day after the Philadelphia fiasco, Ben started a week-long string of appearances on morning, midday, and evening talk shows, beginning with Good Morning America, which asked him to appear in his Ben costume. He did, ratings spiked, and everyone else wanted him in costume, too. Sometimes he added a coonskin cap. This allowed him to explain that he had charmed the French as the quintessential American rustic, avatar of the brave new world of natural-grown wisdom.

Yes, you read that right, *he* had charmed the French. He took to responding as if he were indeed Benjamin Franklin, somehow transported to the 21st century. He appeared in character and stayed there.

The most common questions were variations on *What would Ben do?*, focused on this or that contemporary issue. Except the questioner would ask, What would you do? And Ben Folger would answer as Ben Franklin.

It was a giddy week. Ben flitted about Midtown Manhattan, the toast of the town. He chatted excitedly with Eliza in between segments. He and she could not be more pleased as he bopped from Maddow to Colbert and everyone in between. The segments were short and the questions were slow soft balls that he walloped with charm. He was wined and dined, taken to late night parties that moved to clubs that stayed open till 4 am. He hardly slept.

Eliza warned him not to appear on Frankly American, the Fox show hosted by Frank Lee Roberts. But he was on a roll and the show reached a big audience. He was on top of the world, ready to take on all comers.

Having just left a fawning interview at a new gay publication in Tribeca, Ben strained to adjust to a format where the host peppered him with the most conservative-sounding Franklin quotes his army of assistants could dig up.

Although still in costume, Ben fell out of character and began answering as the actor Ben Folger.

“Yeah, Franklin wrote constantly, and published most of what he wrote. Sure, he wrote that. And believed it. But on balance, he’s not the conservative you paint him to be.”

He struggled, unable to counter the sound bites that his questioners pelted him with. He underestimated their ability to sound intelligent, and overestimated his ability to wing it. He wished he had slept more than three hours the night before. He began to feel flushed under the lights.

Finally — as if it had just been handed to him in a note, and had not been orchestrated — Roberts started asking him about a former student.

“I’ve just learned that a story is going around the Internet about a former student of yours. Says you stalked her. And her two college roommates. One night you broke into their place — their dorm room, I guess, it doesn’t say. Apparently, you had a hunting knife. Assaulted her. Sexually. Care to comment?”

“That is an outlandish charge,” Ben said.

“You deny it?”

“Categorically. Whoever this woman is, bring her forward. Let her make that charge to my face.”

“Unfortunately, we can't do that.”

“I thought not.”

“She's dead,” Roberts said, pausing for effect. “Took her own life. It's a sad story, all too common. If the rapist doesn't kill you, you are destroyed nonetheless. The hurt, the dwindling self-esteem, the recurring nightmares.”

Ben was dumbfounded.

“Do you know what the sentence is for rape in California, Professor Folger?”

Ben had had enough. He began to look for a way out. At the stage left exit stood a beefy character in a blue uniform, gun in holster on left hip, handcuffs dangling from right hip. Ben swiveled his head to the stage right exit. Another uniformed figure, larger than the first.

“Eight years,” Roberts said, answering his own question. “Eleven if the girl is a minor. The presence of a deadly weapon adds years. Was your victim a minor, Professor? It says here the age of majority in California is 18. Was she a Freshman, Professor?”

Claustrophobic since childhood, Folger panicked. Were these even real cops? Regardless, he couldn't bear the thought of being bound. He stood up and calculated the distance across the footlights.

“How many students have you molested over the years, Professor?”

Ben leapt past the lights, ran up the aisle, out the theater and onto 50th street, across the courtyard, past the Teuscher's chocolate shop. Even in extreme distress, he couldn't help but glance in at the neat rows of Swiss truffles, longingly, before running out to Fifth

Avenue, turning left, sprinting uptown. A block and a half too late, it struck him, "I should have gone into St. Patrick's for asylum!"

Another church rose up on his left, St. Thomas Episcopal. "Enter, rest, pray," the sign said. He entered, and skipped straight to praying. The church appeared to be deserted. He didn't know whether, in this day and age, police would stop at the door. He dashed from one side of the nave to the other, looking for a nook to hide in, his mind a whirl of confusion. Rape, really? How long would he have to sit in a jail cell? Would he be able to raise bail? Would he get a fair trial? And then an odd thought struck him: *What would Ben do?*

At that moment he tripped on a slightly raised tile, pitched into the side of the stone baptismal font, struck his head, and passed out. A small slosh of holy water landed on his pate without reviving him.

A young priest sat in his paneled office watching the news on his tablet. Ben's Fox visit was re-posting everywhere. He saw the flight, the look of righteous indignation on the face of the host. As serious as the rape charge sounded, the victim had not been named, and there was no indication when this alleged assault happened, whether the statute of limitations had run out, or if the young lady's family would bring charges.

Having painted Ben in a most unfavorable light, the Fox host pivoted to what he pretended was unexpected breaking news: "Let's go now to the Federal Court on Market Street in Philadelphia."

A varnished young blonde woman stood on the sidewalk, microphone in hand.

"Thank you, Frank. That's horrible news about that poor young student. Her family may or may not find justice on that charge, but they will no doubt be encouraged by an indictment that has just been handed down by Judge Morris of the Eastern District Court of Pennsylvania. Professor — and alleged rapist — Ben Folger has been charged on several counts of violating the new sedition act."

At this point the priest stood up to answer the rapid knocks on his door. The distraught sexton led him to a body slumped at the base of the font. The priest recognized Ben immediately. Checking his wrist and noting the rising and falling of his chest, he satisfied himself that the man was alive. The priest at one end and the seton at the other, Folger was moved to a couch in the priest's office.

As Ben floated back into consciousness, the priest turned off his tablet just as the reporter was saying, "A quick look at the records suggests that Folger will be the first to be prosecuted under this law — if and when they find the fugitive professor. Ben Folger: an alleged rapist, stalker of young students, and now a man indicted for inciting assaults on America herself."

An unlucky day for Ben, with one exception: The priest on duty that day was a fan. A man of considerable compassion, and more courage than most, but not unlimited courage. Once it was established that Ben's pain was localized to a small bruise near his left temple, that he had no dizziness, and saw no colors or flashing lights, the priest assumed that Ben was sound, and began to plot his deliverance from Manhattan. In fact, Ben's encounter with the font had transformed him. He was born again, a new man.

Or, rather, an old man. His last thought as Ben Folger had been about Franklin, what Franklin would do in such a situation. For an actor, this is the most common exercise of the craft: Consider your character's present circumstances, your character's immediate past, your character's long-term and short-term desires. Find your motivation. The way to find your motivation is to become your character, to sink into him, feel his feelings, think his thoughts. For an actor of any experience, this comes naturally. You shed yourself and become the other.

He entered unconsciousness as Ben Folger. He emerged a few minutes later Benjamin Franklin.

He was still wearing the clothes of his hero. He blinked. Looked up from the couch in the priest's study. And he smiled, beneficently. He had no memory of having been on TV, or of bounding up Fifth Avenue. His memories were of the 18th century. What he saw was a strapping young man in a clerical collar talking on a cellphone.

Here is where another part of his actor's training kicked in: He said yes to the cellphone. A crazy person with different training might have denied its existence, or struck out against it. Actors say yes. That's how improv works. You build on the ideas offered by your fellow actors, and they build on yours. There was nothing this Benjamin Franklin could encounter—jet airplanes, Apple watches, television sets blaring reruns of “The Big Bang Theory” — that would lead him to doubt he was who he thought he was. It all just got added on. OK, I'm Benjamin Franklin, and look at this wonderful new gadget. Did I invent that?

And so the poster that had appeared on kiosks from Bangor to Flagstaff had become true: *Ben Folger is Ben Franklin.*

CHAPTER EIGHT -- FLIGHT

If the largely unknown liberal priest had wanted to become a famous radical priest, he might have set Ben up in an apartment in the church building, called a press conference, and declared sanctuary. Considering the weakening of civil liberties in recent years in a series of so-called Freedom Laws, the result would have been celebrity for the priest and incarceration for Ben. It wasn't so much the inflammatory nature of Folger's statements on the various talk shows over the past couple of weeks that got him in trouble. It was the fact that inflammatory words led to real flames.

It could be argued that he was simply interpreting history, offering — usually in answer to direct questions — his opinion of what Ben Franklin would say or do about this or that injustice. It made things worse that he had said these things in the first person, keeping up the guise of performance. Asked what Franklin would say to the 21st century middle class, Folger did not begin, “I think Ben would say...” He just said it: “Where's your gumption?” This statement in particular attained viral popularity. Shepard Fairey quickly incorporated the phrase into a pop-art poster of Ben Folger as Ben Franklin, the two faces melting into one.

Middle class resentment had become a mountain of kindling. Ben Franklin's sudden reappearance was the match. It would be difficult to argue that Ben Folger had not struck the

match. He was a perfect test case for the new Alien and Sedition act (renamed before passage the “True American” act).

One rebellion followed quickly upon the heels of another.

The initial incident — “A First Class Revolt,” USA Today termed it — wasn’t taken seriously by anybody. A laid-off engineer from Denver flying home to his mother’s funeral in Indianapolis lost his patience with the airline industry’s increasingly aggressive attempts to increase the profit margin by nickels and dimes. First there was the proliferation of different kinds of security lines. Earlier that year it had reached five, corresponding to new classes of seats on the flights. Ordering those seats had become a nightmare for anyone on a budget. Online sites offered bargains that disappeared when you clicked through to seat selection. Pay more for more legroom, for upgrades to aisle or window, seats toward the front, etc. The engineer found himself in the longest security line, snaking along as the fancy suits arrived late and breezed through the “preferred” seating checkpoints. Once he was on the plane, he discovered his seat was in the very last row, an upright seat backed against a stinking bathroom, with legroom enough for a pipe-cleaner.

The engineer snapped, bulled his way back up to first class, and plopped himself down in one of several empty seats there. When a steward asked to see his ticket and told him to move, he resisted. Loudly. He shouted to those wedged into the back of the plane, “There’s lots of big seats up here, folks.” When they hesitated, he shouted the words that would appear in the Folger indictment: “Where’s your gumption?”

It wasn’t the saying of those words that hurt Folger’s case. It was the reaction: First one, then another, then a mass of angry travelers rushed the front of the plane, which returned to the gate, where several of the offenders were ushered off. The engineer missed the funeral. Some media reports left out that detail, as it undercut the mirthful tone they adopted.

Few laughed at the next series of incidents, planned and executed by an anonymous group that called itself Without Pants, and often dressed accordingly. Taking their name from the *sans culottes* of the French revolution, and their inspiration from the Merry Pranksters of 1960s San Francisco (they read Tom Wolfe's "The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test" as if it were holy scripture), Without Pants found and published the home addresses of the one percent and generated flash-mob trashings that they filmed and posted online. They specialized in destruction of property — mostly broken windows and graffiti — together with the habit of tying their trousers around their heads so they couldn't be identified. Many of their videos became short GIFs that looped over and over and were shared on social media, often with the horrified faces of the rich owners edited in.

Several of them ended with the now-famous phrase, often rimmed in crimson fire:

Where's Your Gumption?

It was open season on mansions. Someone anonymously posted, "Once upon a righteous time, patriots wrecked the house of the Royal Governor of Massachusetts in protest of the Stamp Tax. It's high time we did it again. Gumption!" The trouble was, Massachusetts no longer had a governor's mansion. One fiery night in Boston, a mob led by misinformation posted on un-vetted social media careened from one manse to another, breaking windows, tossing Molotov cocktails, and spray-painting "Where's Your Gumption?" Or, sometimes, "WYG?" This kind of thing came to be known as "getting wyggy" (or "getting wiggy" — revolutions don't come with style manuals). Some then took this literally and donned white wigs and three-cornered hats.

Conservative media connected the dots between Folger's recorded statements and incidents of civil unrest. The commentary was endless, and as slickly edited as a Hollywood blockbuster. One after another: Ben on Colbert projecting Franklinian indignation in a pithy soundbite, footage of a mansion in flames with the words "Where's your gumption?" spray-

painted on the gate. Ben on Maddow, an airport fracas, a closeup of a button: “Where’s your gumption?” Ben on “Top of the Morning,” Oakland in flames, Fairey’s poster burning at the edges. Yadda yadda.

As Ben awoke, the priest made several hushed calls with old friends from his seminary days. Together, they devised a plan.

BeepBeepYeah was an app that exchanged rides for rides. You built up miles by taking other Beepers with you; you redeemed them by taking free rides yourself. You could buy miles, trade them, donate them. You didn’t have to use your own name when setting up accounts. The priest and his friends took a cheap smartphone and disabled its e-mail, microphone, and telephone functions to prevent taps and tracing. They chose Ben Kerouac as the BBY moniker and loaded the profile with enough miles to get him to California. The itinerary was automatic — one ride would hook up to the next, ever westward.

Theoretically.

In the hands of the college students who were the primary users, BBY rides often began in one direction and then veered sharply when the driver discovered he was out of, say, moon pies, or that Coheed and Cambria was rumored to be appearing unannounced on another campus 200 miles off the original route.

The priest gave Ben a change of clothes, stuffed his costume and a toiletry kit meant for the homeless into a small backpack, and walked him to the pickup point on Madison at 58th. He pulled the hoodie’s hood up and over, hoping no one in this media-saturated city would recognize Ben. Two kids pulled up in an overloaded Subaru, Ben squeezed in next to a pile of books and laundry in the back seat, and they were off.

“Hope you don’t mind if we check something out before we leave the city,” the driver said. “My girlfriend said there’s this one building on Park Avenue that has, like, a bunch of the very richest people in the country.”

The trio of strangers drove north on Madison a dozen or so blocks, turned right, right again on Park Avenue, and stopped and idled on the curb.

“That’s it, across the street,” the driver said, pointing toward an old brick building that didn’t look much different from the others around it: brown-grey brick, maybe 15 stories tall, a bunch of windows, a few small balconies, an awning and a doorman out front.

“That’s it?” the boy in the passenger seat said, craning his head around the driver to get a look.

“Yeah, that’s it,” the driver said, sounding a little unsure. “Come da revolution, my girlfriend says, that’s ground zero.”

The passenger shot an uneasy glance back at Ben, who had rolled down the window to get a better look.

“She was kidding, guys,” the driver said. “Her dad works at Citibank.”

Suddenly they were off: cutting across Central Park, flying across the George Washington Bridge and onto the New Jersey turnpike toward Villanova, just west of Philadelphia. Ben slept sporadically, still a bit woozy and feeling both physically and mentally disconnected from his surroundings. They headed straight into country that had deep meaning for both Bens, but the one in the back seat remained oblivious. When they arrived on campus, the next ride was already waiting, with surprising patience.

Ben stumbled out of one car and into the next, a beat-up Volvo driven by an animation student with a multicolored snake tattoo winding down her neck and into the vee of her cotton sweater. He nodded off immediately. *Great*, she thought. The main point of picking up a rider was to have someone to keep her alert while they rumbled down an increasingly dark stretch of Interstate 76. Convenient that he should be sound asleep at every toll booth. Her anger rose with the monotonous slapping of old tires on the gaps between sections of poured concrete.

Somewhere past Harrisburg, though, she began to soften. Like many apps, BeepBeepYeah offered a totally unnecessary social media component, where bored riders — and, all too often, drivers — could post tripblogs. Armrest philosophers on the site had noted a curious phenomenon: No matter how unpleasant or unresponsive a driver or rider appeared to be in the first hundred miles, by the second hundred an odd kind of bonding often took place, a sense of “We’re all in this together, this great quest to discover America,” as Happy Highways gushed. (There was no way to know that Happy was in fact an employee of BBY.) Lacking any real evidence of the character of one’s fellow traveler, one tends to first imagine the worst: *This creep is an ax murderer!* And then, after a while, when the only thing the guy pulls from his daypack is a half-eaten Slim Jim, the imagination swings in the other direction: *We’re all alike under the skin, traveling down life’s byways, wanting only coffee and a place to pee.* Stuck in a car together long enough, even people with little in common eventually bond. Without lifting a finger, Ben came to benefit from this phenomenon.

This lover of ink took Ben to a dorm at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. She dragged him to a single bed, helped him lie down, and pulled off his shoes. He fell asleep immediately, not having ever fully awakened. She left him in the dark.

The middle of the following day, Ben awoke face-to-split-tongue with a sweating snake that smelled like citrus and alcohol. He found this disorienting. Snakes don’t sweat, and they don’t stink. Ben pulled his head back slightly and discovered that the snake’s head was attached to a snake’s body that wound around a white mound. At the mound’s summit, the teeth of the snake touched a beige circle, which was itself surmounted by a smaller dimpled bump. Ben found himself wondering what volcanoes look like before they erupt. Before the top blows off. He recalled paying a boy to find a snake for him to use as a model for his famous cartoon of the segmented colonies. That snake — lifeless by the time Franklin

saw it — was not nearly so colorful as this one, whose scarlet tongue poked at the peak of the volcano.

Suddenly the volcano appeared to move. It swelled toward him, and as it did, the snake's head appeared to stretch and increase in size while decreasing in the density of its emerald and red coloring. Startled, Ben lurched away and tumbled onto the floor. A woman peered over the bed. A mass of curls flowed downward, brown, mostly, but with one unnatural blue coil.

“You all right, Pops?”

“Yes, thank you,” he said.

She reached a hand towards his, “Myrtle. Myrtle Hutchinson.”

“You can call me James,” he said, grasping her hand warmly. “James Franklin.”

The corner of Ben's mouth curled in amusement. Whenever he misbehaved, he thought it a great jest to pretend to be his big brother. This compounded the misdeed, he supposed. But it helped chip away at the resentment he felt like a frozen lump in his heart over years of maltreatment. Blows felt while young linger a lifetime, even if that lifetime is a chapter in a history book fleshed out by Folger's delusional imagination.

Ben pulled himself onto his knees, left hand on the metal bed frame, right hand still holding Myrtle's.

“Have I paid you yet, my dear, for services rendered? Or have you not yet rendered them?”

“What? For the ride, you mean? That's not how BeepBeep works.”

“I have met your snake, and might have swallowed it had I not feared it would swallow me first.”

Myrtle suddenly realized she was naked. She pulled the sheet about her and sat erect.

“I am sorry. Party down the hall. We chipped in on a margarita machine. But you were conked, so you don't owe for that.”

“So while I have met your snake, you have not yet had the pleasure of meeting mine?”

“What?”

“Nor has mine slithered of its own volition into your moist cave whilst I slept?”

“Dude! What?”

“Ah. I can see you are a simple lass, and perhaps I should speak to the proprietor and explain that however I arrived in this bed, I availed myself of nothing more than a tuppence worth of sleep. I shall, rest assured, make clear that you were not derelict in your duties but I was quite simply and regrettably too fatigued take advantage of what I am sure would have been well worth quite a bit more than the six pence I am prepared to pay and not a penny more.”

Dead silence. The animation major and the actor stared at each other with mutual miscomprehension.

“You are, are you not, a prostitute?”

Myrtle threw his hand back at him with such force that he slapped himself in the chin.

“Get away from me! Out, you old creep! I'm calling the cops. Tonya! Tonya, get in here.”

Myrtle pounded on the wall. Ben grabbed his satchel and headed for the door. It wouldn't do to give his rival a juicy item for his newspaper, even if it might be fobbed off on brother James.

On the other side of the door was a long hallway of doors. Heads started popping out. Behind him, Myrtle was telling Tonya, “No, he didn't rape me, but he's the creepiest fucker I've ever met on BeepBeep. I'm not doing that alone again.”

Tonya — whom Ben guessed was the proprietress — caught up with him and with a series of push-slaps on the back drove him before her down the hallway. Girls appeared in their doorways in a variety of clothing that only confirmed to Ben that this was, indeed, a bawdy house. Some of them slapped him as he went by.

Ben protested, “I know not what I have done to offend yon Mistress Snake, but rest assured I have abused her in no manner, unless it be abuse to enter such a house under false pretenses. For that, I apologize deeply.”

Something about the old guy’s manner struck Tonya as genuinely naive, as if he were a boy caught stealing penny candy. Maybe it was the juxtaposition of John Lennon wire-rim glasses with a hoodie. Or his stilted way of talking. They were now on the lawn outside. In one direction stretched a series of early 20th century buildings, which, to Ben’s eyes, looked somehow both futuristic and old. In another direction was the bustle of Forbes Avenue. Behind them was the dorm, two dozen faces pressed against windows, seeing but not hearing.

Tonya put on her stern, dorm supervisor face so that her wards would assume she was giving it to the old man. But all she said was, “Go home, buddy. If I ever see you here again...”

“Fear not, my good woman. It appears that the houses of Bedlam and Mistress Quickly have made a joint corporation, and as amusing as that might be to some, I prefer more docile comforts. Homeward, feet, homeward.”

Tonya returned to the dorm to make certain that Myrtle had not in fact been assaulted, a possibility that tortured both of them with the growing realization that the man could have done anything while Myrtle lay drunk and naked. And yet, the worst that she could say for sure was that he had called her a whore and made colorful references to his penis and her vagina.

Ben pulled the hood over his head and down as far as he could to shield his pinpoint pupils from the sun.

“Might there be a way,” he mused to himself, “to diminish the harsh glare of the midday sun, perhaps smearing pitch on the lenses, but not so much as to block vision entirely...”

He peered left and right. *Homeward, feet.* Where is home? This doesn't look like Philadelphia. And it certainly isn't Boston or London or France. He felt as if he had walked a long ways since arising to meet the day. In fact, he was still a mere 20 yards from the dorm. He spied a bench on the curb, walked to it and plopped down. While his disorientation the day before was primarily physical, now it was geographic. Anyone who has ever awakened in the night in a motel room and wondered where he or she was has a glimmer of what Ben was feeling now. He couldn't shake it. He resolved — he was, after all, a man with a bottomless trove of resolutions — to be more careful next time to visit only those houses of comfort that came recommended by trusted gentlemen.

“Only wholesome whores for me now,” he bellowed aloud.

He laughed at the absurdity, and thought, *Ah me, perhaps it is time to retire my little snake entirely.* He felt happier just thinking about how much better his life would be as he followed his own strictures of moral probity and moderation. He would spend more time refining and playing his glass 'armonica.

Ben sat on the edge of the bench and went through the motion of playing this invention, an invention that inspired compositions from Mozart and Beethoven (not to mention Tom Waits), the haunting hum of 37 crystal goblets set on edge, aligned in harmony. His leg pumped up and down on an invisible treadle turning the rod of invisible glass bowls as his fingers poked the air in front of him. He howled softly, rapidly changing pitch up and down a major scale.

It didn't take long for the young women in the dorm to conclude that James Franklin was crazy, had the mind of a pervert, but was probably harmless. After a while, Myrtle, wearing Uggs, corduroy jeans, a lime green turtleneck and a watch cap, ventured onto the lawn and placed something on the far end of the bench.

"Mr. Franklin."

Ben stopped howling and pumping his legs, let his hands drop to his sides, and turned toward the voice, not recognizing the speaker. He smiled his daft smile.

"I found your phone on the desk. The app says you're headed to California. I put in for the next ride going west." She paused. "I guess you jumped to a conclusion. Maybe I did too. I'm sorry."

"Take your phone," she added. "You'll need it."

She picked up the phone, slid it into the side pocket of his daypack, and took a step back.

"Good luck," she said.

"Good luck to you, my dear boy," he replied, still grinning.

Myrtle turned on her heel, stomped back to her room, and began to scribble on her sketchpad, glancing out the window now and again at the weirdo on the bench.

Ben shielded his eyes with both hands and read a sign on a post: "Collaborative Innovation Center." An arrow pointed to the right. Now that's for me! He leaned forward and stood up just as a red Corolla carrying four beefy young lads swerved to the curb. The driver, confident that the yellow dot on the app's GPS screen was his man, crowed, "Hop in, Kerouac!"

Ben squeezed in, happily, and was soon bound for Columbus.

This was a party on wheels, every truckstop a Chinese fire drill of beer in, empty cans and reefer butts out, rotating drivers and seat assignments. The radio bellowed a call-in sports

show. Callers extolled the total superiority of Ohio State over every other Big Ten pretender. Had Badger Ben Folger been in his right head, he would not have tolerated all this Buckeye testosterone for five minutes.

There's no predicting the effects of chemicals on the delusional mind, though. Ben imbibed freely, and, rather than turning surly, emerged from his 400-mile stupor as the genial young Ben Franklin, the one who had ghostwritten a column for his big brother's newspaper (successfully pretending to be an old widow), escaped Boston before his period of indenture was up, and flirted gaily with the shop girls of Philadelphia as he arrived with a loaf of bread under each arm, a scene Franklin had related in his autobiography. It seemed natural now to Ben, when offered a pair of foot-longs upon entering the car, to stow them in his armpits.

As the Buckeye Bombshell sputtered down Joncaire and up Bouquet, he ducked his head to take a bite of first one and then the other. The sandwiches had been thrust into his hands before his butt had fully settled into the back seat. With more smoke between their ears than sense, the boys had just loaded up on a dozen sandwiches at Pizza Paul's, a popular hangout a few blocks down Forbes street. Paul's has every kind of Italian sandwich — calzone, stromboli, meatball, you name it. The variety was so daunting they finally settled on a dozen identical salami subs.

Stoned to the point of silliness — which is to say, stoned — the boys fell into a game of intentionally and grossly mispronouncing place names as the signs flew by. McMaster's Way became Masturbator's Way. Penn Avenue became Penis Avenue. Crossing Liberty ("Labial") Bridge, they took turns butchering Monongahela, laughing harder with every attempt.

"Monongahela, lads," Ben said, ending the festival of laughter by committing the sin of pronouncing it correctly. The boys glowered at him, until he added, "The original Indian name for the river was Mechmenawungihilla."

They had ten minutes of fun with that one.

Sober drivers who are unfamiliar with Pittsburgh's maze of bridges often get lost there. This group had to change drivers three times and cross the Veteran's Bridge twice before they finally found their way to Highway 376 and thence to Highway 79 toward Columbus.

Shortly after the car looped west onto Interstate 70, the engineering major on Ben's right elbow — Ben was now in the middle of the back seat, legs splayed apart by the driveshaft hump in the floor — hooted with laughter at his phone.

"Guys, you gotta see this!"

He handed the phone to the fellow in front of him, who stared at it a minute, hooted, and passed it to the driver, who drifted down the center line while watching, guffawed, tossed the phone behind him, and corrected their trajectory. The phone finally made its way to Ben. He pressed the triangle and was treated to a short film, a YouTube compilation of Ben Folger's talk show appearances, edited into a brief GIF of ridiculous grimaces and open-mouthed stupid looks. If he is patient enough, a rank novice can take 15 minutes of video of even the most dignified person and edit it down into ten seconds of indecorous leers and ugliness. Slap on a sound track of clown music and you can make the Pope look like a dope.

Making Ben look stupid was child's play, considering that he had appeared on television in full costume. As the red Corolla inched its way across Ohio, overloaded and bottoming out with every pothole, Ben Folger watched the least flattering 10 seconds of his life, ending with his duck-footed scramble out of the TV studio. The creator — the anonymous Dizzy Gee — used a post-production digitally enhanced zoom on his butt cheeks rising and falling in sweaty haste.

No one remains an actor for long without having an ego that knows how to protect itself from abuse. Ben's ego rose to the occasion. It simply refused to recognize who this was on the video.

The civil engineer nudged Ben and said with a grin, "The dude looks like you, man!"

Ben chuckled and replied, "If I ever looked like that I would jump into the Delaware River."

The same costume on the video remained safely tucked into the daypack between his calves. The car pressed on, and no one was the wiser.

Near Zanesville, a state trooper pulled them over, demanded license and registration, and asked, "Do you know how fast you were going?"

They had run out of beer an hour before, but the supply of weed was endless. The sight of a trooper in jackboots brought out the paranoia in everyone but Ben. Each boy assumed the question had been directed at him and that abject confession was the only way to avoid prison and serial rape by a line of 300-pound convicts. They spoke in a jumble of guesses, without filter: "Seventy?...Dude, he wouldn't have pulled us over if we'd been going the speed limit...Must have been 75....More like 80...."

The officer shook his head grimly.

"Eighty-five?" The boys spoke in unison.

"You were driving 15 miles per hour on an Interstate highway," Officer Jackboot said with an air of defeated ennui fit for a play by Samuel Beckett. "All right, everybody out of the car. I'm going to have to take you in."

Only when they were all lined up on the gravel and heading for the patrol car did the officer notice Ben.

"Are these your boys?"

“Yes, yes, a hearty band in a pinch, rowdy as the day is long, but good lads at heart. If you remand them to my custody I can assure you they will arrive home safely and without further incident. Might we offer you a bite for your trouble?”

Ben pulled the remaining stub of sub out of his armpit and held it toward the officer, who ignored the gesture and said, “Practice driving on the state roads. So long as you’re on the Interstate, Dad drives. Got it?”

They all nodded yes. The officer returned to his car and sped off into the growing darkness of the evening.

“Good thing we’re all white,” the short one said, handing Ben the keys.

“Hey, I’m Hispanic,” one said. “And I’m Samoan,” said another, adding, “You mean, good thing we’re not black, huh? *Dude!*”

They found this sobering. Returning to the car, one pulled out a joint and offered it up, eyebrows raised. Everyone shook their heads so he tucked it back in his jacket pocket.

Had the officer asked for and radioed in Folger’s license, the jig would have been up. Ben now assumed the wheel of this amazing contraption and found he knew just what to do (the Folger brain quietly filling in the gaps in Franklin’s knowledge). He checked his mirrors, eased out onto the highway and accelerated to 65, a speed he maintained scrupulously as the boys slept in silence and the car passed Reynoldsburg, looped onto the 270 bypass, cruised by several Columbus exits, returned to 70 west and passed exits marked Plain City, Urbana, London-Delaware, Urbana-London, South Vienna, Harmony, South Charleston Pike, Dayton, Lewisberg...a dizzying array of names that did little to help him figure out where in the world he could possibly be.

When he saw a sign for Camden, Ben brightened, seeming to remember the time when, as postmaster, he had passed through Mifflin's Crossroads, a modest intersection in Delaware that he heard later had incorporated as Camden. As it was the only place he’d

recognized in two days on the road, he took the turnoff and headed south on 127. He pulled into Camden, slowing to 45. Nothing looked familiar. This place has certainly grown, he thought. He turned left on Central Avenue, drove a few blocks, and turned right on Main. The narrow street narrowed further and came to an end just short of a railroad track. Ben stopped in the middle of the road, puzzled what to do next.

The civil engineer awoke first: “Where the fuck are we?”

Boys tumbled out of the car and up the street, drawn by a glowing sign proclaiming Big Dawgz. They filled a sack with wieners and consulted their smartphone GPS maps. At first they were angry with Ben for overshooting Columbus. But one of them had a sister at Miami University who had just posted that she was at a party serving mescal Jello shots. Fifteen quick miles later — more or less sober now, they compensated for driving 15 on the Interstate by driving 90 on narrow country roads — they were in Oxford at the Sigma Nu house, a fraternity with a reputation for partying hard into the night.

Holding his satchel, Ben strode into the midst of the party as if he were a long-lost frat brother. The shots had all been consumed by now, but the effect was still coursing through the veins of the students. Miami University was a school with a good reputation — good enough that it included a mix of students who were thrilled to have gotten in and others who had just missed making it into the Ivy League.

Marti Babcock was one of the former. Somehow in high school, for reasons she had never been able to figure out, she had developed a reputation for being a prude. Marty was a sharp dresser — by St. Louis standards — with pert, angular features, blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, and thin red lips that were quick to smile and offer clever comments that occasionally but unintentionally bruised the young egos around her at Rockwood Summit High. She looked luscious in her ice skating outfit, and easily attracted the attention of Ron Benton, a tall guy with adorable dimples who caught her eye in homeroom the first day of

their sophomore year. She locked elbows with him at the local rink one Friday night, helping him stay upright, and he asked her to the homecoming dance.

Ron was awkward dancing fast. He was white and had grown four inches since eighth grade. That was OK — most of the boys on the floor were lousy dancers. Skill didn't matter with the slow dances. Couples just clung to each other and swayed. Here, somehow, Ron was even more awkward. Stiff in all the wrong places. Marti hadn't danced with a lot of boys by then, but she had danced with enough to sense that there was something hesitant about Ron's embrace. She shook his hand at the door that night and darted inside, catching her parents peeking through the shades.

Ron joined his buddies at the park, where they downed a liter jug of Almaden mountain burgundy that pimply Scooter Fosmark had purchased, using his big brother's I.D. None of them had managed to have any sex worth talking about, but that didn't keep them from talking about it. Ron — in most situations a really nice kid, always sensitive to the feelings of others — ruined Marti's high school reputation with three angry sentences: "What a total ice princess! On the ride home, she sat as far from me as possible. I'm surprised the armrest on the door didn't get stuck up her tiny butt."

Ron's anger sprang from his own sexual confusion. It would be a few years before he figured out he was gay. Until then, he would have many more unsatisfactory dates. Marti had few, good or bad. Allen's words had made an impression on his friends. The reputation spread. It got back to the girls, who, in the guise of kindness, let Marti know. She was determined to counter it at the first opportunity. That opportunity never came.

For people like Marti, the best thing about high school was leaving it. Starting over. If only all those high school shooters realized that their agony of ostracism and bullying could quite easily be left in their rear view mirrors. It's not always a bad thing to run from one's

problems. To start fresh somewhere else. High school is not nearly as important as it seems at the time.

Her first Friday in college, a couple of jello shots emboldened Marti to join a game of Truth or Dare in the living room of the Sigma Nu house. Her dare: Make out with that old guy with the dopey grin sitting on the couch against the wall. No one in the room knew a thing about Marti's high school reputation. That didn't matter. She knew.

Without hesitation, this tiny blonde in a short dress strode up to Ben, fell to her knees, grabbed him by the ears and started pecking away at his face, leaving lipstick marks from forehead to chin. She swung herself up into his lap, her shoes falling to the floor as her legs dangled over the over-stuffed leather arm of the couch. Ben and many in the room could see her bright red panties.

Before long, it became clear that they were the focus of attention. Over the hypnotic pulse of Young Thug streaming from speakers at either end of the couch, Ben stood, lifting Marti in his arms, and bellowed theatrically, "A room, friends, a room. A little privacy!"

The crass fellow who had initiated the dare picked up Ben's daypack and said, "Follow me." Ben did, still carrying Marti, who was lighter than most of the women he had carried across stages over the course of his acting career. Up the stairs, down a hallway, through a door, onto a bed. A black junior in a white blouse followed them, stuck her head in the door and saw Ben sliding Marti's dress down, revealing a push-up bra that matched the panties. Marti was unbuttoning Ben's pants.

"Girl, do you know what you're doing?"

Marti shot a hard look at the woman and barked, "I know exactly what I'm doing!"

The moment the woman left, Marti began to sob.

Ben was confused. Marti had removed his belt, unzipped his pants, was grabbing hard at his shorts. And she was crying. Ben's member, which had been rising for the occasion,

quickly fell. It had always been Ben Folger's belief — a belief he projected, without much evidence either way, onto Ben Franklin — that sex was fun for everybody or it was fun for nobody. Perhaps quaintly, he even believed it should be fun for whores.

Apart from the scarlet underwear, there was nothing whore-like about this girl. In his research about Ben Franklin, Folger had come across some evidence that he had frequented prostitutes, and a little that he had perhaps enjoyed contact with women in various social situations that were less than chaste. His feeling was that Franklin was a man who had a worldview informed by countless moral strictures that somehow stopped short of the Puritanical. In short: He was no prude.

Marti Babcock suddenly realized that she had allowed herself to become defined by her knee-jerk reaction to an unfair reputation. *OK, I'm not an ice princess. But then, what am I? Am I a princess if I don't want to sleep with an old guy who smells like salami?*

"Something is troubling you, young lady," Ben said, leaning back against the wall, legs splayed across the bed.

Marti proceeded to tell him the whole story about ice skating and Ron Benton and the mean girls and the loneliness and the need to find a college three states removed from her humiliating past.

"You felt humiliated because people thought your virtue was too high?" Ben was incredulous. "My dear girl, you are confused."

"Oh, ya think?"

The fragrant man and the girl in red underwear talked long into the night about everything under the sun. Despite all the innuendoes and the accusations, there is no hard evidence anywhere that the mature Benjamin Franklin ever — *ever* — slept with even one of these young women with whom he had repeated intimate social contact. But there is much

evidence that he was happy to while away the hours talking with them, and that some of this talk circled around hints and teases and flirtations about sexual matters.

They liked it then, and Marti liked it now, because Ben's interest, while it might have included the sexual, was never dominated by it. He spoke to women as if they were complete human beings. Women found that damned refreshing. Validating. It made them feel whole, alive, understood, known. The knowledge was not carnal. It was even better.

In Franklin's time, because of his fame as a scientist and statesman, women were especially flattered to be treated as intellectual equals. To sit in a bathtub and play chess with such a renowned man was an incomparable delight.

Because Ben Folger believed so completely that he was Benjamin Franklin, he exuded that air of greatness even though he and his clothes had not been washed in two days.

"I have never seen someone so comfortable in his own skin," Marti said at one point. "Who are you?"

"Just a humble printer," Ben said, smiling a coy smile.

"Do you live around here?"

"Just passing through."

While Ben slept, Marti went through his bag, found his phone, and saw the app that revealed he was headed to California. Downstairs, she found a frat boy eating a giant bowl of Fruit Loops. She told him there was a fellow in room 26 who would need help when he awoke. There weren't any rides coming through Oxford that day. So, she said, in 20 minutes, Krishna Carry Out will deliver a carton of pakoras and tofu. Put it in his room with this note. Make sure he eats. Then take him out to College Corner Pike. Northbound. He'll have to take 27 up to Richmond, where he should be able to find a ride west on 70. Oh, and show him where the shower room is.

The boy did as he was told. He carried the Krishna carton to room 26 and put it on the desk. Before sliding it under the carton, he took a peek at the note, a single piece of paper folded in half. "Thank you!!!!!!!" it read in giant letters. Seven exclamation points and a smeary lipstick kiss. He looked over at the sweaty old guy snoring on the bed, gut hanging out, shank of hair flopped against the pillow, stink wafting. He looked at the note, and shook his head slowly. *Damn!*

Ben and the boy stood on the shoulder of College Corner Pike. They hadn't spoken 20 words since Ben had arisen, eaten, showered, and put on the funny old clothes that Ben had pulled out of the daypack. This guy cut a ridiculous image. And yet, he had apparently spent the night with a pretty girl, a girl who was grateful, and the boy had slept alone, again alone.

"What's your secret?" the boy asked.

"Secret? I have no secrets," Ben said, smiling his daffy, closed-lips smile.

"With women. I don't know what to say to them."

Ben walked into the ditch and came up holding a daisy. He handed it to the boy.

"Do you worry about what to say to a flower? Women have more petals. Petals under petals. Look closely. Notice every one. Appreciate."

Before the boy could ask more, a semi slowed and stopped beside them. Handing him his long trenchcoat, the boy said, "You might need this where you're going." Ben climbed into the cab holding a coat in one hand and his satchel in the other.

The boy watched the truck roll away and noticed the sign painted on the back in old English lettering: Gamecock Casket Company.

CHAPTER NINE – AT LIBERTY

You can drive from Darlington, South Carolina, to Indianapolis in 12 hours, easy. If you don't take long stops. Mason Muschamp had accomplished that feat once ten years ago, but that was when he took his cousin, Calvin, with him and they had made just three stops to unload caskets and recliners along the way. As far back as colonial times, the folks who hewed the loblolly and longleaf pine into caskets and those who turned them into furniture were one and the same, as were the merchants who sold both. To this day it is not uncommon, particularly in smaller towns without chain stores, for one family to own furniture and funeral homes. Many of us spend our horizontal time on earth and under earth supported by slats provided by vertically integrated operations.

Mason and Calvin had painted Indianapolis red the night of their record run. But their pride was short-lived. The trouble with doing any job well is that it moves the bar. It wasn't long before the new owner, Bradley DeMint, who fancied himself an efficiency expert, began to dock their pay if they took more than a day each way, or three days total if the run extended to Chicago. This kind of management turns good workers into goldbricks. After that edict, they made sure to use every allowable minute. A light load with few stops might get them to Chicago and back by noon on the third day, but they had learned their lesson, so

if they happened to be running early, they'd stop off for an afternoon of pulled pork and black eyed peas at the Lizard's Thicket in Irmo. The result was that a quarter of the time they pulled into the plant at 5 pm sharp. The rest of the time they were late, sometimes very late, because of the thousand and one delays that can beset any run that involves dropping off merchandise and picking up allegedly defective stock.

Things got worse when the same kid with the online MBA (Brad De Mintdick, they called him behind his back) rode along with them for one run, the three of them wedged onto the same seat. B. D. observed the way they did everything. Most of the time, he noticed happily, the process of strapping a coffin or table to a handtruck and rolling it off the truck was accomplished by one person. Wes and Calv only joined forces on the davenports and the over-sized coffins, which, while high on profit margin, were a small percentage of the stock. He did the math and figured they could save a bundle if the driver did it all himself. So the kid fired Calv.

"I guess we won't be delivering the big items anymore," Wes said to B. D., knowing the answer but hoping B. D. would realize his error and rehire Calv.

"Sure we will," the kid chirped.

"How'm I supposed to unload a 400-pound oversized, 20 gauge gasketed Northampton all by myself?"

"You got yourself a cell phone, Wes?"

"Yeah."

"Call ahead," Junior DeMint said. "Get somebody at the dock to help."

After the first solo run to Chicago — a run that took a full six days, filled with heated arguments at every stop — Bradley DeMint called each store owner and offered a 50 percent discount on the unloading fee if they would provide a guy to help unload. This was good business for DeMint, still far cheaper than paying Calvin, and it was good business for the

store and parlor owners, who realized a savings without having to pay their own workers more. For the funeral worker, it was just one more task in a day of hauling bodies, setting up flower stands, mowing lawns, and then washing up and putting on a suit and looking somber at showtime (a term that covered everything that involved the public, from services to *sitting shiva*). Increasingly, workers were called on to do both the manual labor and the customer relations. Downsizing hit both ends of this industry even while profits soared.

Mason figured he was doing more work and should share in the savings. He took off his cap, lumbered into the office overlooking the expanse of mown bluegrass between the factory and Chestnut Street, and asked for a raise.

"I'm surprised at you, Mason," DeMint said. "Asking to profit from the misfortune of your own cousin. Believe me, as soon as I can afford it, I'll hire him back. That day will come sooner if we're all just a little less grabby."

Now, on this particular day, the run had not gone well. The three "villes" had gone OK — Greenville, Asheville, and Knoxville — but every stop after that was a snafu wrapped in a hassle and deep fried. Happy Daze Gardens in Lexington was sending back more coffins than it had ordered. Apparently, the last shipment arrived crawling with termites. Mason had spent four hours with his damage control kit — cutting satin down the middle of four coffins, spraying, wiping, and then fastening the satin back with double-stick duct tape.

"Look at that, a crooked seam right down the middle."

"The body will cover it," Mason said. He'd been careful to stop cutting a foot from either end.

"That tape won't hold a week!"

"Well," Mason said, "It will be in the ground by Tuesday."

Four hours of repair work, one hour of arguing, another hour of shuffling things around on the truck so the old coffins were on the bottom, delayed him enough that Mason

hit Cincinnati during rush hour and pulled into the parking lot of Verbarg's at 5:59. The store was still open but the dock worker slid into his Ford and gunned it when he saw the Gamecock Casket truck wheezing up Montgomery Road.

Later, DeMint told Mason he should have continued on to Indiana and hit Verbarg's on the return trip. Oddly enough — although it makes sense when you think about it — it is more important to fulfill custom casket orders on time than furniture for the living. But that would have made the Verbarg's shipment two days late and the late charge would have been taken out of his pay.

Mason chugged a bowl of chili and a Pabst at a nearby Beans and Brew and slept in the truck in the Verbarg's parking lot. He was awakened twice by bored policemen. The store opened on time at 8 the following morning, but they couldn't find anyone to help him unload until 9:30. The new sales clerk suggested he look around and even had the gall to offer him a 15 percent frequent shopper discount on the furniture he had delivered the month before.

Mason finally pulled out of Cincinnati at midday and rumbled up Highway 27. As he passed McGonigle, he phoned the furniture store in Liberty, Indiana, only to learn that there would be two funerals today and all hands would be sticking out of ill-fitting suitcoats and unavailable to unload the casket custom-made for Big Mackey Maibaugh, who would not need it until the following day. Mason, who was nearing the end of his rope, cursed at the Hoosier and the Hoosier cursed at him. Both suffered from increased duties and stagnant pay as their even less fortunate co-workers had been pink-slipped. So it is that a nation full of over-managed and under-staffed companies sets its workers against each other.

Mason rarely took on hitchhikers, but he was desperate. Already a day behind schedule, he knew he would need help off-loading the big box. In Oxford, Highway 27 took an abrupt left turn at High Street, forcing Mason to slow down. As he did, he noticed a tall, beefy guy sticking out his thumb.

Looks like he could manage one end of a casket, Mason thought, so he pulled over and let him in.

It was only after he had made it through town and was gearing up on College Corner Pike that Mason took his eyes off the road and gave his rider a full gander. The guy was older than he had appeared from a distance. And fatter. But what made Mason look twice were the clothes: big-collared blouse, buckles on shoes and on pants, which were fastened just below the knee. White knee socks.

“You going to a re-enactment, pal?”

Ben gave him a bemused look, and smiled his daft smile, but said nothing. This was Ben Folger’s standard response when someone asked Ben Franklin a question for which he had no ready answer. Although he was at least 80 percent Franklin now, 20 percent Folger, it was the most repeated habits that peeked through.

“I’ll take you all the way to Indianapolis if you help me unload a box in Liberty.

Twenty minutes later they were pulling behind the Foster Funeral Home on the corner of Union and Foster Street. It was a well maintained Victorian structure whose most prominent feature was a square tower with a peaked roof. Mason and Ben walked Big Mackie’s casket off the truck and set it on a picnic table. Mason fished a key out of a flower pot and they carried the box down a half dozen steep concrete steps into a basement showroom. Ben nearly dropped his end twice. There were three smaller caskets already there — two closed, one with the lid propped up, revealing the silver silk lining — and three unoccupied casket stands. They put the box on one of the stands and left, Mason locking the door and returning the key to the pot.

A few blocks later they pulled up to the back of Foster’s Furniture.

“If you like old stuff, you’ll love the elevator they have in this place,” Mason said.

“No electricity. Runs on tanks of water that you shift by pulling a rope.”

A rush of cold air filled the cab as the doors swung open, so Ben stepped to the ground, put on the coat he was holding, and, not knowing why they were stopping or how long they would be there, decided to pull the pack over his shoulders. A bald fellow with a pot belly and a ruddy smile emerged from the back door of the store and helped Mason wheel a roll-top desk down a ramp into the store's basement.

"Glad to see you, Don," Mason said. "Wish your brother could have spared a man for just five minutes down at the parlor. Had to pick up a damn hitcher to help."

Although Ben took no offense at this reference, Don thought he might, so, to ease a tension that only he felt, Don dove straightaway into a joke about a hitchhiking rabbi. Don was famous in Liberty for his jokes. Not because the jokes were funny. No one knew if they were funny. Halfway to the punchline, Don would slap a table or his knee, and begin to wheeze with laughter. It was the most infectious laugh Ben had ever heard. Somewhere in the Folger side of his brain, Ben thought, "I'd pay good money to plant this guy in an audience." Don's laugh was so infectious, and his speech so strained by laughing, that no one could ever quite make out what the punchline was. But everyone always assumed that everyone else got the joke — they were all laughing, weren't they? — so they never asked him to repeat it.

The three guys and the desk careened into a tiny room with wood slat walls, all three guffawing with great gusto but only one of them understanding why. Don tugged on a thick rope and the room began to rise. Ben could see the floors pass: fancy armoires and ornate mirrors and such on the main floor, bedroom sets on the second floor, and lower-priced furniture of all types on the top floor, the only floor with customers, and only two of them, newlyweds bickering about dinette chairs — cloth or fake leather seats?

Don and Mason rolled the desk off the elevator and over to an open spot by the bank of windows that looked out across Union Street to the courthouse square. Mason crouched awkwardly and pulled the dolly back to the elevator, Don following behind. Ben had

remained on the elevator, examining the two ropes, grasping them firmly, wondering how much of a tug it would take to set the room in motion. He tugged up on one. Nothing happened. Down: nothing. Up on the other. Finally, he put his weight on the second rope, and began to descend.

Before the third floor carpet had reached eye level, Ben heard someone shout, "God damn it!" He looked up into Mason's scowling face and smiled innocently.

"It'll come back," Don said.

"I can't wait," Mason barked. "If I don't make Indy by six I'll lose another day."

Mason lifted the dolly onto his shoulder and headed for the narrow back stairs, bumping and cursing all the way down. Don hadn't used the stairs in 30 years and wasn't about to start now.

Mason secured the dolly in the truck with a bungee cord, looked around, and, not seeing Ben anywhere, climbed into the cab and drove down the alley to Main, turned north and rejoined Highway 27.

Ben had descended to the basement — not daring to grab the moving ropes. Once there, he circled around to the back of the elevator and stood in the narrow space between box and wall, marveling at the tilt and slosh of the tanks as the elevator returned to the third floor and descended again to the basement, carrying the gifted laughter.

Don opened the basement door to the alley, saw the truck rolling away, waved an unseen wave, and turned back into the store. When he did, he saw this odd fellow in a trenchcoat standing behind the elevator and staring up, mouth agape, nose scrunched to push his spectacles into place.

"Only one of its kind left in the western world," Don said.

It was a statement that had transformed over 150 years from "one of just 200 ever built" to "one of just a dozen remaining in the continental US" to "only one" without any

evidence or news of the demise of other instances. Don was confident he would never be contradicted. Who keeps track of crap like that?

“A marvel of human ingenuity!” Ben said.

“The man who invented the elevator — Otis something or other — must have died a rich man,” Don said.

“Why?”

“Even if he hadn't built it up into a big business, which he did, he would have made millions on the patent.”

Ben walked out from behind the elevator and steadied himself in the basement's dank darkness by putting his hand on a ventilation duct covered in frayed asbestos paper.

“I don't believe in patents,” Ben declared. “As we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by any invention of ours. And this we should do freely and generously.”

“Are you a communist?”

“I don't know what that is,” Ben said, with a smile that suggested he knew exactly what that is.

“Socialist, then?”

“Yes, I am familiar with the concept. The idea of, say, a library or hospital that serves all, not just the rich.”

“We don't cotton to revolutionaries in these parts,” Don said, his once jovial face now locked in a frown. “We're Americans.”

Ben laughed at the incongruity.

Like most of us, Don was a man who loved to be laughed *with*, but couldn't abide being laughed *at*.

“There’s the door. You’ve missed your ride. You should be able to catch another headed north on Main to Richmond, where you’ll catch 70.”

Don led Ben out the door, up the ramp and into the alley. He pointed him toward Main Street and returned to the store, slamming the door behind him.

Ben made it to Main, but turned left, not right. He walked south, crossed Union Street, marveled at the majestic old stone courthouse building, crossed Seminary, then Vine, and stepped into the tiny Liberty Bell Restaurant. One might think the name would have some resonance for Ben — whichever Ben happened to be in charge at the moment — but what attracted him was the promise of food. The day was waning but this spot was still open.

One broad, shallow bowl of chicken and dumplings with steaming broth. A glass of apple cider, thick with pulp and spice. A giant wedge of lemon meringue pie, giant because it was near closing time and this kind of pie does not last more than a day. Ben was most appreciative.

“Made it myself,” said the sweet old lady behind the counter. The tag on her pink checkered smock said “Mattie.”

“What’s the secret to your crust?”

“No secret at all. Lard.”

Ben found a twenty dollar bill in his trenchcoat pocket. That was more fortunate than he realized. An unpaid bill would have led to a night in the police station and a background check. He gave Mattie a tip and a wink and still had a sawbuck left over.

Sated but not over-stuffed, Ben ambled about the town in the gloaming, fireflies flickering, the occasional sound of laughter coming from a craftsman-style bungalow or the wrap-around porch of a Victorian frame house. In this light, he could not see that the town was dying, and he hadn’t noticed it before. He had not noticed the abandoned stores, the flea

market prices on the furniture in Foster's, the "Jesus Saves" sign crudely painted on the glass of a storefront right there on the main drag.

What he saw was the town as it had once been. Before Walmarts in Oxford, Connorsville, and Richmond had sucked most of the commerce out of this picturesque county seat and the town's youth had left for jobs in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Chicago, leaving behind the elderly, the alcoholic, and outlying farmhouses as likely to house meth labs as farmers who owned the land they plowed. Liberty had never produced great wealth. But it had supported a vigorous middle class, folks able to keep their two- and three-bedroom houses painted, their roofs shingled, their larders filled, and their bank accounts fat enough to send a child off to college.

Its most famous resident, Ambrose Everett Burnside, grew up to become one of the least effective generals in the Civil War. He made and lost a fortune in carbines. Eventually moved to Rhode Island. The cannon on the green recalls the time, as do the sideburns of the local stoners. Other famous alumni include a NASCAR announcer, a professional wrestler, and a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan.

But mostly it produced small businessmen and served the needs of farmers throughout Center Township. Until it didn't.

Delusional Ben saw the town that was. The detached garages that once stabled a horse or two and the occasional carriage. The pea patches and peach trees. The ice cream socials on the square. The town wasn't dead yet. You didn't have to be crazy to see its appeal. But it helped.

Ben walked for hours, up one street, down another. Ended up walking most streets more than once. Occasionally someone peeked out a window and thought, "Who's that?" But he kept moving, lost in reverie. He began to wonder where he would sleep. He was heading back to Foster Gazebo when he hit Foster Street, turned north, and found the Foster Funeral

Home, locked tight for the night, a few rose petals on the lawn the only remnant of the day's two funerals.

Unseen, Ben walked around to the back, found the key he had seen Wes put in the flower pot, and let himself in the basement door.

###

The lack of information on the whereabouts of Ben Folger fueled speculation on the 24-hour so-called "news" networks. The radical priest who had set Ben on his journey grew alarmed when he saw footage of a combustible mixture of police, supporters, and vigilantes camped out on the street in front of Ben and Eliza's apartment in California.

Even if the smartphone he had given Ben had not been disabled from taking or placing calls, it would have been unwise to try to call him, given how easy it had become for authorities to track anyone and everyone. The priest fretted. Then he huddled with the techie — the son of a parishioner — who had set up the phone in the first place.

"We need to stop the guy from continuing on to California," the priest said. "Can we cancel his account?"

"Yeah, sure," the kid said. "That will strand him, as far as Beep Beep Yeah is concerned. If the creepers haven't got him already."

"Why would they have him?"

"I expect they're tracking all the ride-sharing apps for guys heading out of Manhattan, especially ones with California destinations."

"So we need to cancel it pronto."

The teen started tapping his Android in the way kids do, all the energy of his being channeled into his thumb, leaving the rest of his body in a deadened slouch.

"What do you suppose he'll do when the app disappears on him?"

The priest frowned and muttered, "I guess he'll start hitch-hiking."

“And probably end up in California anyway.”

“Damn!”

The kid looked at the priest and grinned.

“Sorry,” the priest continued. “Look, isn’t there any way we could use the app to get him a message?”

“Nope. From here, there are two options. Shut it down or change the destination. But if we change the destination, the spooks will just meet him there.”

“What if we keep changing the destination, changing it so quickly that before he can arrive anywhere, he’s headed somewhere else.”

“Cool. Talk about a sweet ride. Send him on a never-ending roadtrip. Where do you want to send him first?”

The priest thought a moment and said, “Pick corners of the continent. We want to be sure he doesn’t arrive. Can you pick a new spot twice a day? Say, Montreal, then San Diego, then Miami, then Seattle?”

“Sure. But it has to be a specific destination, the name of a place in the town or city. Like a business or school or street address.”

The priest started naming churches he knew of in these cities. Saint George’s. Saint Dunstan’s. Saint Agnes. Saint Mark’s.

Suddenly his face lit up.

“Hold on. I’ve got an idea.”

The teen stopped thumbing.

“Can you put in a series of destinations that rapidly change but always appear in the same order?”

“Yeah, I guess. I could program my codebot to keep repeating an algorithm.”

“*Mirabile dictu!*”

“Huh?”

“Let’s send Ben a message.”

###

Tow-headed Scotty Peterson, at 9 the youngest in his extended family, mostly enjoyed these trips to visit his aunt and uncle and cousins in Liberty, Indiana. Riding horses in a field south of town, bareback when the oldest cousin was not available to heft the saddle. Playing on the cannon in the square. Riding the water elevator at the family furniture store. Setting off firecrackers. Wandering wherever he pleased, a luxury not deemed wise back in Milwaukee.

The only part he didn’t like was the occasional bullying from the eldest cousin, Dudley Foster, the kind of 14-year-old who enjoyed nothing more than finding new ways to scare little kids to tears and then smothering them in comforting good will, a sort of sadist/savior routine that got old fast from Scotty’s point of view.

Scaring little kids wasn’t hard when your family owns a funeral home and lives in its upper stories. Dudley was always finding ways to coerce Scotty into creeping into the basement alone in the middle of the night. Do it and you’ll get ice cream. Or firecrackers. Don’t do it and I’ll pour Mountain Dew on your cot and tell Mom you peed.

Dudley knew there would be a funeral the next day. The mother of all caskets was down there waiting for Big Mackie Maibaugh. Dudley spun a tale of a boy-eating vampire who wandered the cornfields at night and slept in a giant box of dirt.

“I think that box is downstairs right now,” Dudley said.

“Yeah, right,” Scotty said, bluffing brave.

“Sure, there are lots of places it *could* be,” Dudley said, sounding reasonable. “Why would the vampire pick our house?”

“Still, we’d all sleep better if you took this phone down there and took a photo of the coffins, just to show that they are all, you know, normal coffins. *Human* coffins.”

“Do it yourself,” Scotty said, his lower lip protruding with determination. He wasn’t going down there. Not again.

“Do it to protect Hilda, tossing and turning in the room by the stairs. You know you’re hot for sis.”

“I ain’t hot for no girl.”

“You hot for boys, you little queer?”

“I ain’t hot for nobody.”

Truth was, he did have a thing for Hilda. He didn’t understand it. He didn’t have any plans to do anything about it. He just knew that his throat got tight when she stood too close. Dudley had noticed, and knew how to use the information against him.

“Well,” Dudley said. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe there is no vampire box in the basement, or anywhere, and maybe you’re not a queer, and maybe you don’t have a crush on Hilda. But if you don’t take this phone and snap a pic of the coffins in the basement and bring it back in the next ten minutes, I’ll tell Hilda to steer clear of you and the tiny boner you grow every time she looks at you.”

Dudley had him. Again. Nothing to be done but creep three flights down the crooked, creaking stairs to the scariest basement in the world.

The house was a void of darkness, as if someone had sucked up every drop of light with a vacuum cleaner. Scotty crept downward, feet probing forward, hands clutching the spindles, butt sliding on each step. His eyes adjusted. He reached the basement door, turned the old glass knob, pulled slowly, and beheld three coffins, two normal ones on either side of a big one, lit dimly from above by the red lights of smoke alarms.

OK, so there's a large coffin this time. Maybe coffins come in different sizes for different sized people. Big woop.

"I'm not scared," Scotty whispered.

He walked halfway across the room to the big coffin and held his arms out, aiming the camera.

Dudley had set the camera to burst mode, highest number, so it would take 10 shots in rapid succession, flashing with every one. He figured that would spook Scotty. It did. But not as much as what he saw along about the fourth flash.

Startled but not fully awakened, Ben sat up. He saw flashes of light, heard a little yip, like a cross between a puppy and a hen, saw the flashing object fall to the floor with a thunk and die. Feet padded rapidly away. A door slammed. Ben stretched, blinked, and lay down to sleep again.

Pajama pants damp with urine, Scotty flew up the stairs, skidding out at the first landing, sliding into an antique washstand and tipping over a vase on top. He continued upwards, still frantic, skidding out again at the second landing. He crashed against the wall, picked himself up, made it to the top floor, zipped past Hilda's room, dove onto his cot and pulled the pillow over his head.

Dudley cackled, but then made his usual shift to sympathy mode, where he got to be the grown-up who quelled the fears of the poor little boy. Never mind that they were fears he himself had lit and fanned into a blaze. Good Dudley, the older, wiser cousin, would put them out and make everything right.

But this time there was no consoling sobbing Scotty. Dudley apologized. Told him there was no such thing as vampires. Said the big coffin was for a big man in town — he'd known it was there and made up the story just to scare him. He brought a big bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream. Scotty shivered and whimpered, more than he ever had before.

Hilda stood in the doorway and watched. Although she was a year and a half older and one grade ahead of him in school, she'd always liked cousin Scotty. Liked the way he listened to her, went along with her ideas of fun play. When they rode horses and she wanted him to be a knight, Scotty agreed to be a knight. Or a cowboy. Or a prince. So she could be a lady in waiting, Nell in distress, a princess.

Now, she knew something was wrong.

Hilda knelt by the cot, put her hand on his back, and said sweetly, "Don't be scared, Scotty. Don't be scared."

Scotty didn't want to admit his fear. He didn't know what he had seen. But he knew his pjs were soaked and he didn't want Hilda to know it. So he spun around, flung his pillow at her and screamed, "Get away from me, you ugly hag!"

It was a bad night for everyone in that house. Everyone except Ben, whose sleep in the flat, hard coffin straightened out the back that had begun to ache from too many rides down bumpy roads. He awoke at dawn, washed his face in a huge stainless steel sink, found cake and Hawaiian punch in a refrigerator, washed again, and slipped out the basement door 20 minutes before Dudley Foster came downstairs looking for his smartphone.

Ben shouldered his daypack, locked the door behind him and returned the key to the pot. He had neither a plan for the day nor any sense that he should have a plan for the day. All he knew was that there was something enchanting about this town. He saw beyond the peeling paint to a bucolic past where work and simple neighborliness had combined to create a middling life of universal contentment — enough industry, enough leisure, enough ambition, enough amity. He was Ben Franklin, the man who had imagined a nation of such towns. He wanted to get to the center of it, to figure it out.

He walked straight north until weedy yards gave way to the parking lot of a farm implement store, beyond which lay the stubble of a cornfield. Then he began to walk

clockwise around the town. Seventy-five minutes later, he arrived at the same spot. So he walked south a block and circled Liberty again, on a radius one block shorter. Sixty minutes later he shortened the radius by another block. And so on.

When eventually he reached the center of town, he took two circuits around the courthouse and walked up the steps of the library, which, like many such libraries of the era, was red brick and engendered spasms of nostalgia in the minds of generations who had spent their grade school years reading thick volumes of large-type tomes told from the point of view of dogs, horses, and the occasional fox.

Stepping in, he saw a circle of kids sitting cross-legged on the floor around a librarian, who was holding up an old book, "Liberty's Founders."

Ever fluid, Folger's psyche remained in Ben Franklin mode, but allowed itself to be directed by the habits of Folger the impersonator, the actor whose many gigs as a founding father had led him to gatherings of bored kids very much like this one.

Typically, he and the adult in charge would conspire to make it appear that Benjamin Franklin had just happened upon their gathering unbidden. In full, stereotypical costume, Ben would putter around the library or bookstore, pulling out and replacing a book here and there, working his way closer to the cluster of youth. He would hum a nameless tune, tap his toe, and on his hammier days dance a little jig. When he had succeeded in becoming an utter distraction, the adult in charge would call him sternly to account, often with the icily intoned words, "May I help you?"

Librarian Beatrice Foster, nee Peterson, was the wife of the town funeral director, mother of ten-year-old Hilda, and aunt of little Scotty Peterson, who sat at a point in the circle of knees as far as he could get from Hilda. He couldn't wait to get back to Milwaukee and his model planes and his own bedroom in a ranch house that he was very happy had been built over a slab rather than a basement. From his vantage point, Scotty had a direct view of

the door. He went white when he saw the man walk in wearing the kind of clothes he had only seen once before on late night TV on the old-timey ghosts in “The Sixth Sense.” But it was the face that got to him, the broad white face with the wire-rimmed glasses. The same face he had imagined the night before.

Scotty’s eyes followed Ben as he made his circuit around the small room. Everyone else kept looking at Aunt Beatrice. *Doesn’t anyone see him but me? Don’t come this way, don’t come this way, oh my god he’s getting closer, getting closer...*

Aunt Beatrice had indeed noticed the arrival of the peculiar stranger and watched him with her peripheral vision as she read the short book about Liberty’s leading citizens. The whole town was abuzz about this drifter. The sheriff had decided to approach him, “after lunch — give him a chance to leave on his own.” Except for the moment last night when he slipped into the funeral home basement, Ben had been under surveillance from the minute he left the diner last night until he disappeared, and then again from the time this morning when Albert Belcher of the Feed and Seed spotted him walking past the line-up of John Deere tractors out on the lot. Even now, folks were making up reasons to stroll past the library and peer in. Just in case.

Finally, Beatrice found her courage and bellowed like a Lady Bracknell of the Cornfields, “May I help you?”

Like Pavlov’s dog, Ben responded. He put his coat and backpack on the floor, strode to the center of the circle and took over with a patter he had repeated scores of times.

“No, madam, may I help *you!*”

That was the message that was fit for the young: Ben was a helper. He saw a problem, people in need, and he helped. Bifocals. Lightning rods. A mean old king of England and a silly King of France who just needed a little encouragement to become a helper himself. Out of that, a nation was born — a nation of helpers.

Before Aunt Beatrice knew what to say, the man had introduced himself as Benjamin Franklin, a humble inventor from Philadelphia, and had all the kids standing in a long snaking line holding hands. He told the nervous boy at one end — Scotty — to rub his feet on the carpet.

“With vigor, lad, with vigor!”

Then he told the girl at the other end — Hilda — to touch Mrs. Peterson on the elbow, delivering a terrific shock.

Rather than setting her off, the spark melted her. Dang, she thought, this bum is actually teaching them something. And they're lapping it up. Everyone but Scotty, who had been acting strangely all morning.

Ben asked for questions and got the usual:

What do you eat?

“Mutton, birds of all feathers, bread, a tankard of ale,” he chirped.

He winked at the librarian and added, “*Ginger* ale.”

Hilda, who had read a children's biography of Washington, asked, “Did it bother you they didn't make you President, that they picked a soldier, not a diplomat?”

“George was a brave, brave man,” Ben answered, smiling graciously. “I worked for our country talking King Louie into sending his big army to help. We couldn't have beat the redcoats without that help. But George and his men suffered. He earned it. I'm happy for him. He's doing a great job, isn't he?”

Ben smiled his daft smile.

Then Scotty jumped in and the conversation veered toward the supernatural.

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?” Scotty asked.

“Ah, I must admit, when I was younger I was prone to vanity. But I don't look in the mirror often now. If I did, I hope I would see an honest, hard-working man, a helper, a man ready to help his neighbor thrive!”

Again, from Scotty: “You said you eat animals. Do you kill them first?”

“Yes, my boy,” he said, crinkling his eyes in amusement. “Kill them, gut them, drain them, cure them, smoke them, and share them with the less fortunate. We use the hide, the hooves, the teeth, the bones — nothing goes to waste. The small intestines make fine bootlaces.”

Everyone looked at his shoes and noticed the big buckles.

Scotty found little comfort in Ben's answer, but after a sleepless night, a bath, dressing in dry clothes and eating a hot breakfast of farina and smoky links, he was determined to face down evil and save his pretty cousin and the town from vampirism.

“Do you believe in God? Will you vow that Jesus is your ally, or admit that you are working for the devil?”

The children howled with laughter. Aunt Beatrice began to admonish Scotty, but Ben interrupted.

“Tut, tut! Let the lad speak. Freedom of speech, the first amendment, the bedrock of our nation.”

He looked at Scotty. Fists clenched at his side, Scotty glared back.

Ben Folger had considered this question many times before without fully coming to grips with it. First of all, he wasn't sure how Ben Franklin would have answered it, if the circumstances had been such that he could speak his mind without fear of scandalizing his audience. More importantly, he wasn't sure what he, Ben Folger, truly believed on the subject. The answer he gave came from deep within, at a point where Ben Folger and Ben

Franklin intersected. He spoke plainly, though at a level above the heads of his audience. The artifice and the delusion went out of his face. He was just a man speaking of faith and doubt.

“I have seen enough of the wonders of this world and stared deeply enough into its inner workings — its clockwork, if you will — to know that there is a far greater intelligence at work than the smartest among us possesses. So, yes, I do believe in God. As for Jesus — I have worshipped in his houses. I have read the Bible. As a young man, I tried my hand at theology, but looking back I don't think I was very good at it. Jesus — a great man, undeniably. The son of God? I have spent my life considering the evidence. I am still considering the evidence.”

It was at this moment that a different sort of light dawned in the mind of Beatrice Foster. People who live in Los Angeles or New York or Washington expect to see celebrities and public figures. But if you live in a town like Liberty you never expect to see in real life the people you see on a screen. This Ben was the fugitive Ben! The one everyone was looking for. What the heck was he doing here? Why would he stop into a public library, for heaven's sake? Doesn't he know they're looking for him?

The most liberal burg in American has a town conservative. And Liberty, among the most conservative, had at least two liberals, the librarian and her best friend, Elena DuPree, who taught third grade.

Beatrice thanked the children for coming and asked for “a round of applause for Mr. Ben Franklin, journalist, scientist, diplomat, and one of the great, great, great, great, great founders of our nation!”

“Now that is too much, too much,” he said, grinning. “Just a humble helper! Promise me you will be helpers, too!”

She hustled Hilda and Scotty out the front door, telling Hilda, "Go home and pack a toothbrush. Time for Scotty to go home. You're going with us — I need company on the ride back."

Hilda gave her a look and Beatrice said, "Not a word! Just do it. Be ready in 20 minutes. We'll eat lunch in Hagarstown."

Scotty grabbed his aunt by the wrists, pulled her close and hissed urgently, "Don't let him bite you!"

"Scotty! What's gotten into you today! Was Dudley telling ghost stories again last night?"

Beatrice felt a pang of guilt for making the boy sleep in a funeral home every time he came to town. But the motel was a roach trap and she hated spending money when there were clean beds for free in a big house. It was really just a regular nice Victorian frame house that happened to host funerals on the bottom floors.

Hilda and Scotty skulked away. Beatrice noticed that these two cousins who had always loved playing together were keeping their distance, not even looking at each other.

Kids!

Beatrice pulled Ben into a tiny office in back. She motioned for him to sit in the only chair behind the desk while she dialed. He put his coat and knapsack on the desk and sat.

"Elena! Ben Franklin is here....Listen to me, *the* Ben Franklin.... Yes, that one. We need to get him out of town. Bring a hat with a brim to the back door of the library."

She hung up and looked at Ben, who was spinning around and around with a smile on his face. She grabbed the arms of the chair.

"I know who you are," she said. "I'm on your side."

"I never doubted it," Ben said. "You look like a patriot to me."

"You're taking quite a risk coming here."

“A risk?”

“Don’t you know they’re looking for you? They want to arrest you.”

The British! Ben slumped into worry.

“Yes,” Beatrice said. “But I’m going to get you out of here. Where are you going?”

“I...you know, I don’t know!”

“How did you get here?”

“Many rides...a wagon of books and laundry, a snake woman, a cabin full of smokers, a casket carrier...”

“Sounds like you’re ride-sharing.”

Beatrice looked at Ben’s bag. The top edge of a smartphone peeked out of a side pocket. She slid it out and turned it on.

“You don’t have much battery left,” she said, peering into the Beep Beep Yeah app that appeared as it lit up.

“Looks like you’re going to going to a place in Florida called ‘Away From the World,’ in Cedar Key.

“No, wait, your destination just changed. ‘The Trap,’ a dive bar in Sacramento. What in the heck? It changed again. ‘Stay, Dry Prong, Louisiana.

“This thing can’t make up its mind. Now it’s saying Florida again.”

Beatrice sat on the edge of the desk.

“I think someone is trying to send you a message. Write this down.”

She handed Ben a pencil and legal pad.

“Away from the World, Cedar Key, Florida. The Trap, dive bar, Sacramento. Stay, Dry Prong, Louisiana.”

“I can’t write that fast!”

Ben had managed to scribble, Away from, Trap, Stay.

Beatrice snapped her fingers and fairly shouted, "Stay away. Trap!"

"They're telling you not to go home to California."

"California?" Ben said, puzzled.

"Well, you can't stay here. Where would you like to go?"

"Paris?"

"Wouldn't we all. We don't have much time. Look at this map."

Beatrice pointed at an old map of the US on the wall, each of the 48 states in a contrasting primary color.

"We're here. I'm driving my nephew home to Milwaukee. His mother had surgery Tuesday and we ... you don't need to know that. Anyway, we'll pass through Indianapolis and drive to this highway west of Chicago — I refuse to drive through Chicago. My stupid husband says, 'But Be-ah-truss, there ain't nothin' between Liberty and Milwaukee *but* Chicago!'

"Sorry. When I'm nervous I ramble. Look at the map, Ben. Ben, look!"

Ben looked at the pretty shapes and colors.

"Is there any place on this map where you would feel safe? Do you have people? People who might take you in, shelter you, feed you? Think back. The TV says you used to live in the Midwest. Where could we drop you where you might know your way around? Where was your home?"

Ben gazed at the map. He reached out his left hand and placed it flat, covering the state of Wisconsin. Above his finger tips, Lake Superior. To the right, Lake Michigan. In the gap between his thumb and forefinger, Green Bay. He pulled his hand away from the map and pointed to his thumb knuckle.

"Here."

Beatrice looked at his hand. Then she looked at the map.

“Oh. Sturgeon Bay?”

Ben nodded at the familiar name.

“Well, that’s further than we’re going. But we’ll get you most of the way there.”

A knock at the door became Elena Dupree, who slinked in looking guilty. Out of a Dollar Store bag she pulled a hunter’s cap, the kind with fleecy earflaps.

Beatrice said, “Take him to the alley behind your house. I’ll be there in 10 minutes.”

Ben put on his coat and grabbed his daypack. Elena put the hat on his head, pulling the brim down low. He followed her out the door, eyeing her sneakers as she clopped down the sidewalk. When they got to the corner, he looked to the right and saw a crowd of people on the courthouse lawn, all looking in the direction of the library. He started to wave with his right arm, but Elena grabbed his left and pulled him down the street to the south.

They stood in the shadow of a small detached garage behind a red brick bungalow with peeling cream trim. She smiled a tense smile. He smiled a decidedly un-tense smile.

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“No,” he said, telling the simple truth. “Why should I be?”

“Do you have a gun?”

“No.”

“I could find you one.”

“If they get me, I will be diplomatic. That has always carried me through.”

“You are a brave man.”

Suddenly she stepped forward and hugged him hard. When she released him, there were tears in her eyes. He was dumbfounded.

Beatrice pulled up in a green Subaru Outback. Hilda was sitting in the front. Scotty was in the back, on the far side, looking out the window away from them. Beatrice got out, walked over and spoke in hushed tones.

“They refuse to sit in the back together. I’m sorry. I’ve never seen them like this. I hope you don’t mind sitting in back for a while. I guess you’ll be less visible that way.

“Elena, I told them you were coming with us, not him. I didn’t want them to know. They might spill the beans. Or, who knows, maybe if they knew they’d be considered accessories after the fact. I’ll explain it to them once we’re out of town.

“Ben, get in back, pull your hat low, and slump down a little.”

He did as he was told. She drove a circuitous route, avoiding the main drag past the Courthouse — it’s hard to get through Liberty without passing the Courthouse — but within a few minutes they were out of town heading north on a two-lane highway. She looked in the mirror and saw Ben was still slumped down.

“You can sit up now. We’re in the clear.”

Only then did Scotty turn to see that the person sitting next to him was not Elena Dupree. His eyes widened, his mouth opened, and he tried to scream, but nothing came out. Ben tossed his backpack over the back of the seat and stretched out.

“Elena’s neck smelled like jasmine,” Ben said.

Over the next eight hours, Scotty never took his eyes off Ben.

CHAPTER TEN – THE ROAD TO THE DOOR

For as long as Beatrice could remember there had been an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord in Hagerstown. Back in the day, all the kids in the family would make a sport of seeing how much they could cram in their pie holes. They developed a routine. Two days before the meal, they would try to stretch their stomach capacity by eating as much as they could of whatever was around. The day before, they would eat no meat and very little starch. The day of the meal, they would consume nothing but water. An hour of feeding frenzy was followed by the longest 40-minute drive imaginable, punctuated by groaning and vomiting. Stretched out on the back shelf — Grandma called it the *tonneau* — of grandpa's prized green Buick, Beatrice had once managed to crawl just short of the open window before spewing, leading to blowback and shouting and a three-year exile from the smorgasbord, not just for Beatrice but for everybody.

Lost in those happy memories, Beatrice didn't notice Scotty's icy stare, or the way he started with fear every time Ben shifted his weight. Scotty's fear motivated him to make amends with Hilda. When a cube of iridescent Jello jiggled off her plate and onto the stained carpet, Scotty came to the rescue, picking it up with his bare hands and plopping it in the

trash. Hilda's first reaction was to say thank you, but then she remembered why she was mad. So she just looked at him.

Scotty said in a rush, "I'm sorry I called you a hag you're not a hag you're pretty I mean really pretty I've always thought you were pretty but I saw a vampire in the basement last night and I freaked out and he's standing right there."

Scotty pointed to Ben, who was approaching the prime rib station with a hungry look in his eye. The children heard the man in the apron ask, "Rare or well done?" When Ben replied, "Bloody rare, my good man, the bloodier the better," Scotty and Hilda looked at each other and were, once again, of one mind.

As they were finishing up their soft-serve sundaes, piled high with nuts, cherries, crumbled candy bars, caramel, hot fudge, and Reddi-whip, a semi pulled into the lot hauling a big orange container, the kind that looked like a giant box of corrugated cardboard turned inside out.

Beatrice spoke to Ben in a low, serious voice.

"Give me your phone. It's doing you more harm than good now."

On the way to the car, she circled the truck, found a break in the corrugation, and slid the phone in. It wouldn't be found until Denver, where a gaggle of agents descended, guns drawn, much to the puzzlement of the driver.

Scotty and Hilda lept into the back seat while Ben was still ambling across the gravel. Beatrice shook her head, happy they were getting along again, but still mystified. Ben fell into a slumber in the front seat, unaware that now four eyes were drilling holes in the back of his skull.

Beatrice hated driving through Chicago so much that she was always willing to turn a six hour drive into a seven-and-a-half hour drive to avoid it. They drove west until they reached Bloomington — Illinois, not Indiana. As a librarian, Beatrice felt this duplication of

names smacked of bibliographic laziness. Founded a dozen years later, and frequented by the young Abe Lincoln, the town deserved a name of its own. She turned right, headed north on 39, and Hilda — who had begun to have doubts about the supernatural qualities of the guy riding shotgun — begged that they stop at the diner in El Paso. (*El Paso! In Illinois! What were those stupid pioneers thinking?*)

“Well no wonder you’re hungry,” Beatrice said. “You just picked at your food in Hagerstown, where extra helpings were absolutely free. And now you want us to pay for it.”

But she stopped anyway, grabbed a bag of burgers and shakes, and continued the remaining three and a half hours to Port Washington.

It’s hard to stay awake on a long ride in a hot car when you’re a young boy — even if there is a vampire in the front seat. Hilda slumbered and Scotty followed her lead. He always followed her lead. Beatrice tried to engage Ben in conversation, but his answers to her questions were short and cryptic, when he answered at all. He seemed to grow more glum by the mile. For good reason, she supposed. Whatever would become of him?

She decided not to take Ben home. No telling what her husband would do.

CHAPTER ELEVEN – FRANKLIN'S GREY CAT

Winston Churchill accomplished great things — and a few not so great things, depending on one's political persuasion — as a result of his success battling depression. He called it his *black dog*. It visited him regularly, bit hard, never disappeared entirely but retreated a few steps in the face of the Englishman's grim determination to prevail. It helped shape his personality, and in turn informed Churchill's shaping of England's response to the Nazi threat. "Keep calm and carry on" was a rallying cry borne of a kind of emotional detente, a bargain made by a man hounded by gloom. It became and remains part of the English psyche, serving Great Britain well as its era of world dominance ended.

In his preparation to portray the life of Franklin on stage, Folger had puzzled over a brief period of the man's life when he appeared to become depressed. By all reports, Franklin's funk was nowhere near as severe as Churchill's (nor of Lincoln's in the century between the two). Franklin never acknowledged it, never gave it a name. Folger mused that if Churchill had a black dog of depression, Franklin had a grey cat. Less aggressive, less loyal, a companion of a few years that Franklin managed to chase off for good.

Just as Churchill's response to depression reflected or informed his nation's aging psyche, Franklin's was tied up with his invention of America, Folger decided. Like John Adams, who as a lawyer defended the British soldiers in the Boston Massacre, Franklin spent

more than half his life as a loyal subject of the crown. He lived what added up to decades in England, most of them trying to smooth over disagreements, to bring his colonial constituents into a closer relationship with the mother country. The only flak he caught back home was when he was seen as apologist for the English aristocracy, too willing to defend the one-way street of goods and taxes flowing eastward over the Atlantic.

Franklin enjoyed considerable popularity among the philosophers and scientists he met in London cafe society, as well as great Scots like David Hume and Adam Smith. But in the cockpit begging for a more reasonable treatment of the colonies, he faced personal derision and repeated rejection. He was never a great world-view philosopher like Hume, but he was a man of utter reason. It frustrated him no end when his amiable arguments failed to make the slightest impression, and even more when he was forced to stand mutely and be dressed down by the representatives of aristocratic entitlement. On one level, Franklin was arguing for full membership of the colonies in the commonwealth. On another level, he was arguing for the idea of common wealth — which is to say, for the middle class and against the upper class.

Hit your head against a wall long enough and your head begins to hurt. No, Franklin never suffered from a depression as severe as Churchill's. But he did appear to succumb to a period of churlishness. His rosy optimism faded for a time. He grew surly in letters and meetings. The arrow of his life had always arced upwards, but now, in middle age, appeared to bend toward earth.

Folger despised the strain of popular history that looked for personal, sometimes Freudian motivations in the actions of great figures. This sometimes put him in a tough spot as an actor. Asked to portray Henry the Eighth as a randy perv always looking for younger prey, he lectured the director, "Look, Henry was just trying to prevent another War of the Roses. He was desperate for a male heir. Sure, from our point of view, he should have been

happy with his daughter Elizabeth, who indeed turned out to be a great monarch. But if he wanted to screw around, he could do that without changing queens.” Folger lost that argument — one never wins arguments with directors, who are control freaks for good reason — and the result made his job easier. There are few qualities easier to portray on stage than lechery.

Others might have been tempted to see Franklin’s midlife funk as an expression of dismay at the waning of his fabled sexual prowess. Because the driving thesis of his one-man-show was that Franklin invented America, Folger considered this period the turning point. It was necessary for Franklin to grow sick of being a loyal British subject before he could emerge as a revolutionary. It had to be a difficult transition, perhaps more difficult for him than for other colonists because he had loved England so deeply.

Ben Folger arrived back in the land of his youth at roughly the same age Franklin had been when he struggled with visits from his grey cat. Like Franklin, Folger had always had a rosy disposition. He had a farmboy’s habit of working off his frustrations with manual labor. But fundamentally, he was not nearly as sound as his hero.

Atheists sometimes accuse Jesus of having delusions of grandeur. Christians counter that it is not crazy to say you are God if indeed you are. Conversely, it is one thing to get the blues at midlife when you are Benjamin Franklin, the celebrity who tamed lightning; you can work your way through that, set a new course for you and your nation. But it is another thing entirely to get the blues when you only *think* you are Benjamin Franklin, when you know you are at the stage in life when the real Benjamin Franklin went into a funk, and when, submerged and repressed in the deep recesses, you are at some level aware you have been accused of rape on national television while dressed in a frilly blouse, high-water pants and patent leather shoes.

On top of all that, Folger shared one source of woe with Franklin: The rising apprehension that the political entity that had always held his loyalty was coming apart, had turned on him and his brothers and sisters, was no longer the greatest nation on earth. That was the main thing that had faced Franklin, who had reason to feel responsible for the fate of his homeland. As yet Folger's political despair was personal and submerged. So long as he believed himself to be Ben Franklin, he would not consciously consider anything concerning 21st century politics. Consciously, he was Ben Franklin, beset by enemies in the 18th century court of King George. If that was the tip of the iceberg, though, there may have been more contemporary motives under the water line.

In any case, the closer he got to his boyhood home, the more his spirits sagged. The good librarian deposited Ben in a Super 8 motel out by the highway and told him to stay put until morning. The rest was a blur — sleeping in his clothes on top of the bedspread, being wakened in the morning by Beatrice, who had taken the second key with her, a short ride to a bus stop, where Beatrice, aware that Ben was deteriorating, asked the driver to make sure he made the transfer in Green Bay. He stumbled off the second bus, up Michigan Street, across Highway 57 — car horns blaring — along County T eastward toward the family farm.

Consciously, he had no idea where he was going. If you had asked him to his face, forced him to consider his aims, he might have said something like, "I'm looking for the familiar farmhouse of an ally." But no one asked, and he didn't think where he was going.

Shank's mare knew the way. His nostrils filled with the old smells of manure and silage — the latter now in long, horizontal, white plastic tubes along the ground, not the vertical silos of Folger's youth. He sensed the lake over a few rises straight ahead of him. Before he could see it, he zigged up Brauer Road, zagged on Haberli, lurched left on Ploor. The nag who could smell the barn. On the southern edge of the old farm, he came face to face with a donkey.

Much of what young Ben Folger had learned in vacation Bible school had gone in one knothole and out the other, as his teacher would put it time and again. But occasionally a phrase would stick. One that did now arose in the mind of Ben/Ben: "For they have gone up to Assyria, a wild donkey wandering alone." The Bible is full of references to sheep, which are rare in Door County. But a donkey, well, Ben had been responsible for tending a couple of them. Perhaps that is why the Old Testament passage stayed lodged in his pate.

Ben felt like a wild donkey: stupid, useless, directionless, untethered. In their right minds, neither Ben put much stock in omens. But the mind of Ben/Ben was, at this moment, open to the dark, suspicious to the point of paranoia, as skittish as a planchette on a Ouija board, and nearly as irrational. He stopped still, feet in a ditch, looking up over the fence. The donkey looked down at him. It munched a wad of grass.

Ben's eyes narrowed. Something isn't right here.

"Friend or foe?" he said aloud to the donkey, in all seriousness.

If friend, then it must be there to warn him not to come nearer the house. Redcoats, spies, something evil waited there. If foe — well, that would be evidence of dark doings in and of itself.

Ben pivoted slowly on his right heel and slogged eastward across a fallow field. Bechtel Road was deserted as he clopped across. One more field of corn stubble and a low fence and he was into the woods and thimbleberry brush of the Shivering Sands preserve. He had not been this close to home in a decade — nor further from it.

CHAPTER TWELVE – THE WINTER OF THEIR DISCONTENT

The leaders of the American Revolution, the founding fathers, all began their lives as loyal subjects of the crown of England. They turned against the mother country one by one, some quicker than others to take offense at this stricture or that tax. Samuel Adams, for example, called for colonial non-cooperation, which spurred England to occupy Boston with soldiers. When those soldiers opened fire on a gaggle of colonists in 1770, Sam's second cousin, John, served as the lawyer defending the soldiers in court. Of course, John eventually became an ardent revolutionist (and second President of the republic).

Many citizens, leading and otherwise, never turned. Benjamin Franklin's own son, William, was, to the great distress of his father, a lifelong loyalist. He served as the last colonial governor of New Jersey and lived out a life of exile in England after the war.

Benjamin Franklin was an optimist. He was so successful at bringing others around to his point of view that he believed he could speak reason to the agents of King George and encourage a just working relationship between the colonies and England. He was one of the last to give up on England.

Ben Folger never quite made up his mind about how Franklin made that leap from loyal subject to revolutionary. How did it feel? One thing was clear: England saw Franklin as disloyal long before Franklin did. That attitude — and the ridicule that accompanied it —

sped the transformation. Folger thought his play would have been more effective if he could have found a way to show that transformation. A method actor, he felt the most exciting moments on stage happened at the instant a character changed his or her motivation.

But Folger never managed to figure out what it had been like to be Franklin in that moment. He found no words in the public record that sufficiently detailed the feeling of it. He didn't like putting words in Franklin's mouth that Franklin had not penned. So he made the shift off stage, during the intermission between acts one and two, while patrons were sipping wine and he was penciling in crowd's feet.

In his mind, Folger often had compared the moment to the sudden transformation of Lord Jim in Joseph Conrad's great novel. One moment, Jim was the hero, standing on the deck of a ship of desperate souls, peering down into the water where the cowardly officers were escaping in a rowboat; the next he had jumped, joining the deserters. Lord Jim himself never fully comprehended the choice he had made.

So Folger would end Act One the target of abuse at the King's Privy Council, still the loyal subject trying to persuade England to cease its selfish ways and save the colonies. But he would begin Act Two as a committed American patriot ready to sign the Declaration of Independence. He sometimes felt that was a copout. Some critics saw it that way. More generous reviewers said that it was the right choice, that it forced the theater-goer to ask him- or herself, *What would I do in Ben's situation?*

In any case, Folger had never fully processed the pivotal emotional moment of his hero's life. This winter, he would.

The dual plots of Ben Folger and Ben Franklin were now in perfect alignment. While the man in the woods continued to live as Franklin on the outside, and in his conscious mind, somewhere beneath the waves he was also processing a change of attitude toward the country Franklin had helped found.

A truism of dramatic character development is that characters need to have an arc: You don't play the character's end at the beginning. You get there step by step. At any one moment, you are firmly committed to just one point on the arc.

In Folger's delusion of being Franklin, he was now lodged at the point where he felt boxed-in by the British, criminalized, in danger of being apprehended as a threat to the crown — this crown he had served so well and so long.

Folger as Folger felt similarly hounded, similarly disillusioned. Although he realized this was rather grandiose, and therefore never said it aloud, he had often felt that his mission in life was to encourage his country to become the America Franklin had imagined two and half centuries ago. Sometimes he felt we were all making progress: The election of Obama had given him hope. The determination of Republicans to thwart Obama, even at the expense of the common good, wore away at that hope. Trump all but killed it.

For years, Folger had been a voice crying out in the wilderness — often quite literally, as he performed in the log-bench amphitheaters of national parks. Then in Philadelphia, when he went from sideshow to featured performer, he had his fifteen minutes of fame.

That's how the conscious and then subconscious persona of Folger thought of it — a momentary lightning storm of celebrity, followed by national embarrassment, flight, and, now, obscurity, a kind of domestic exile that at a deep level he feared would be permanent. His country no longer had any use for him. And in this winter of discontent, his top-of-the-brain obsession with Franklin's transformation from loyalist to revolutionary had a trickle-down effect: The man underneath began to give up on America.

This came at no small cost. He became, in a word, depressed, a feeling as unfamiliar to him as it would have been to Franklin.

Together, over the course of the winter, they wallowed in despair.

Imagining the redcoats were hot on his heels, Ben climbed a stout oak into a hunter's deer stand. He lay on his belly and peered westward: Every breeze, every rustle in the brush, could be the enemy.

Before long, the sun set and Ben slept, unevenly, awaking once when a family of raccoons lumbered beneath him, and again when what he thought for several minutes was a bear turned out to be an eight-point stag.

He awoke at dawn, bone cold, climbed halfway down the tree, slipped and fell into a bush, and pulled himself up, hugging the tree trunk for a few minutes while he caught his breath. Still fearing British agents in the direction he had come the day before, he headed east.

Between Shivering Sands and Lake Michigan was Glidden Drive. When Ben was a youth, the road had been rimmed on both sides by summer cottages — two-to-four-bedroom A-frames and ranches built to house vacationing families. Ben and his dad picked up a few extra dollars servicing the needs of the owners — draining the pipes in the fall so they wouldn't freeze and burst, replacing chimney caps, chasing out bats in the spring, whatever was needed.

Gradually, many of the cottages with lake views had been replaced by mansions. But the west side of Glidden still had several of the homes Augie and Ben had serviced. Most of them were, at considerable expense, well maintained. The combination of falling limbs, harsh winters, damp springs, mold, wind, and gnawing critters and bugs created a cottage industry (excuse the pun) for local painters, chimneysweeps, septic tank suckers, and handymen.

During his brief stint chasing off-Broadway roles in New York, Ben had once commented on the similarity of that city and Glidden Drive, to the amusement of his urban pals. But he'd meant it. Manhattan was the only other place he'd been where crossing the

street — say, crossing Canal Street from Little Italy to Chinatown — took you from one world to another.

The lake side was always a bit pricier. But back when the original cottages were built in the fifties and sixties, there was no discernible difference in the size of the structures. Every few hundred yards, public access lanes were maintained so that those on the dry side of the road could walk to the lake and picnic or launch a kayak or just sit and look. Once the mansions completed their takeover, one wealthy owner hired a lawyer who found a way to allow the lanes to be bought up, stranding the landlocked cottage dwellers.

On this particular frosty morning of late autumn, no subterranean part of Ben Folger recognized the lakeside manses. But he was instantly familiar with many of the places on the other side.

This saved his life that winter.

As if guided by an unseen spirit, Ben knew enough hiding places for enough spare keys to get him into enough cottages with enough canned goods and liquor cabinets to ward off starvation. Most of these places were owned by folks in Milwaukee, Madison, and Chicago — three to five hours away. Just one instance of driving that distance and arriving to discover you don't have a key is enough to convince anyone to put a key in a fake rock, a fake can, on a hook under the deck, in a flower pot.

This time of year, almost all of the cottages were empty, closed down for the winter. Ben let himself into one, found a can of Dinty Moore beef stew, found a can opener, and ate it cold. He washed it down with a few glasses of Jim Beam and passed out on a bed. He woke up cold in dark night. The toilet was dry — pipes drained for winter — so he peed off the deck in the back yard, which faced Shivering Sands. He finished the bourbon, wrapped himself in a quilt, and slept another ten hours.

The next day he ate a can of corn so cold he felt like he was munching on his own teeth. He had to look in the bathroom mirror to be sure he hadn't been. It was then he experienced what he came to view as his Red Light Revelation. In the mirror over his shoulder he spied a glowing ruby. Turning around, he saw that it came from an electric razor on a shelf. The steady red light indicated it was fully charged.

This was a small blessing. He took it, shaved the stubble from his face and neck, and began to feel a bit more human. As he shaved, a larger blessing occurred to him: If the light on the shaver was on, that meant there was electricity in that socket. And in the whole house.

He recalled the usual late-fall routine: You drain the pipes, unplug the refrigerator and anything else drawing electricity — TVs, DVRs, etc. — but you don't usually turn off the electricity. No need.

Baseboard heat! Suddenly he remembered that, too. Many of these cheaper houses had electric heat — not an economical choice in a year-'round home, but a bargain for a middle class summer cottage. Ben found the thermostat, cranked it to 85, and clapped his hands in delight as the baseboards crinkle-clicked to life.

He had discovered electricity. Again!

That night Ben moved on to a can of Chef Boyardee — heated on the electric stove — chased with Drambuie. He felt almost human.

But he was still fearful of British agents. He could hear the pop-pop-pop of distant rifles (deer hunting season was in full swing). So he never turned on a light. (Again, we should point out that it never occurred to 18th century Ben to wonder why he was surrounded by modern appliances. This was a mind insulated from anything that might shatter the delusion.)

He could shave. There was food and booze in his belly. He was warm. All this gave him a certain high, but the good feeling was transitory.

As they say of travel, wherever you go, there you are. Ben's discontent eventually bubbled to the surface. After enough liquor, he would scream inane invectives at Solicitor-General Wedderburn, then suddenly hush himself — "Mustn't tip off the bloody spies!" — and hunker down in his quilt.

He lurched between noisy and quiet desperation. A recurring manic theme: Pleading with his son to join the cause.

"Oh, Willie, Willie, Willie! Had I married your mum before you were born would you have been so seduced by the sham respectability of the English court dandies?"

Other days he would just stare off into space, slack-jawed, drooling, empty.

And so passed the hard winter. After the first blizzard, he was able to melt snow for water, which he used more for boiling noodles than drinking, so long as hard liquor was available. When the resources of one home ran out, he would move to another — stealthily, in darkness, sweeping his tracks in the snow with a broom. Thus he worked his way up the drive toward Glidden Lodge. No one was the wiser, until the day a woman in Wilmette, Illinois, went online and noticed a spike in the electric bill for a cottage that had been closed for three months.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – POP-UP REVOLUTIONS

Ben was not the only discontented soul that winter.

Resentment in the body politic had festered for years. This winter, it began to erupt, sometimes violently. The uncivil disobedience begun by the Without Pants crowd during Ben's talk show tour continued and grew.

Historians struggle to pinpoint the precise moment a revolution begins. The storming of the Bastille is a convenient though not entirely accurate opening event for the French Revolution. Did the first American one begin in Concord, with the shot heard 'round the world? At the publication of the Declaration of Independence? At the Boston Tea Party?

When does unrest become revolution?

Depending on what were ultimately to follow in subsequent years, any of several events during the winter of Ben's internal exile could grow to be viewed as the spark that ignited the conflagration.

After the airplane revolt and the mansion trashings mentioned earlier, other events crowded the revolutionary timeline. Those early protests were easily dismissed as transient outbursts in an otherwise stable republic, on the same level as the Occupy Movement of 2011, if not quite as violent as the Trumpist assault on the capitol in January, 2021.

The monied elite also managed to brush off the growing environmental movement: Sea levels rose, rich neighborhoods of San Francisco and Miami built dikes, poor ones like one in Oakland simply vacated. Middle class homeowners installed solar panels and demanded compensation for electricity returned to the grid. Poorly maintained gas lines exploded with increasing frequency.

“The robber barons of the Gilded Age, at least they built infrastructure,” one blogger fumed.

Such unrest was manageable.

It began to feel like real revolution, though, when three disparate interest groups turned up the heat: the elderly, the imprisoned, and the teachers.

The largest circulation magazine in the world is *AARP — The Magazine* (formerly known as *Modern Maturity*). Every member of the American Association of Retired Persons gets it. That winter an increasing number of these baby boomers began to sound off in the magazine's chat rooms and comment sections about a variety of economic issues: Pension fund abuse. Insurance companies that found ways to avoid paying off on long-term care policies. Nursing homes that had trouble supporting an increasing number of residents who developed expensive medical conditions but managed to stay alive longer and longer — the result of medical research that was better at extending life than addressing quality of life issues. The willful erosion of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid by Congress. Increasingly, sick old people ran out of money and had no place to go. Senior Squatters, as hate radio dubbed them, filled retirement communities, led food fights and other protests, and, in short, did not go quietly into that good night. They burned and raved at close of day. As did the growing prison population. The increased demonization of minority groups, the rise of non-violent crime as honest employment opportunities dwindled, the growth of “three strikes” and other draconian initiatives, the lobbying of for-profit

incarceration corporations — all combined to load up the prisons. American prisons have always been, to some extent, schoolhouses of criminality. Lately they had become academies of revolution.

State money that flowed into the proliferation of prisons flowed away from traditional educational institutions. A few top private schools — the Stanfords and Yales, the Andovers and Latin Schools — managed to increase their endowments. Public education at every level suffered. State universities depended on over-scheduled, underpaid adjunct professors. ELHI faculty rosters grew and shrank — mostly shrank — annually with every budget battle in state legislatures increasingly dominated by legislators bought by big money. Schoolteachers received pink slips in June, and were hired back in September only if the state legislature had managed to come up with the cash in the meantime. Rather than spending the summer updating lesson plans, teachers took odd jobs mowing lawns and stocking warehouse shelves. Those who returned in the fall met larger classes with less preparation.

Within these groups, victims began to find common cause — college professors aligning with middle school teachers, seniors bankrupt for disparate reasons joining together, ex-cons creating organized mayhem. What was lacking, online commentators began to point out, was something or someone to draw all these groups together and create a unified movement. A revolution with common goals. An organization.

The people had found a measure of gumption. But they needed a leader.

The person most often mentioned for the job — as villain or savior, depending — was nowhere to be found.

Part Two: Animal Husbandry

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – WISCONSIN NICE

Gretchen Koenig was not Wisconsin nice.

She was some kind of wonderful — many kinds of wonderful — but the wonder of her did not include being nice, at least not in the way that folks from Wisconsin have traditionally been considered to be nice.

Wisconsin nice made an appearance on, of all places, an episode of Aaron Sorkin's political fantasy "The West Wing" in the early 2000s. An aide to President Bartlett named Josh Lyman, played by Bradley Whitford, was talking to another politico about his executive assistant, Donna Moss (played by Janel Moloney), trying to convey how incredibly nice Donna was. The politico wasn't grasping the concept. We could say something cynical here: Oh, this was inside the beltway, where they just don't get nice. But anyone who has ever lived in DC knows that it is full of nice people. It's just that too many of them work for rich bastards, or rich bastard lobbying firms, or for the politicians these firms elect. Subconsciously knowing that they are helping evil thrive, they compensate by trying to be exceedingly kind to those they meet day to day. So they understand ordinary, run-of-the-mill nice.

But Josh was having trouble conveying the depth of nice that Donna embodied. Finally, exasperated, he blurted, “She’s from *Wisconsin!*” Enough said. Point made. Scene. (Whitford himself, perhaps not coincidentally, grew up in Madison.)

In Wisconsin, you can go into a grocery or hardware store and workers busily stocking shelves will ask as you pass, “Can I help you find something?” Say anything — *inverted frapples* — and they won’t just point vaguely and mutter “aisle 42.” They will walk you across the store to the aisle, the shelf. They will point out the varieties. They will ask you what you plan to do with the frapple. They will recommend the best frapple for your purpose — the best, not the most expensive. They will tell you why it is best. They will explain how to properly install the frapple. They will stand there while you make up your mind. When you do make up your mind and put the frapple in your basket, they will ask, without a hint of sarcasm, “Can I help you find anything else?” You could go through your whole list like that, treating this poor schlepp like a personal shopper, and he or she will stick with you, never betraying a hint of impatience.

This doesn’t mean they are robots or morons. When they take off their aprons and go home, they might well say to the family, “Boy did I ever have to deal with a royal doofus today. Couldn’t find his butt with both hands.” If everyone were a doofus like you, clerks would never get their shelves stocked. But when Wisconsinites shop, they don’t ask for help until they’ve lapped the store three times. Even when a clerk offers help, if it’s during the first or second lap, shoppers will say, “No, I’m good, thanks.” After lap three, it’s “Oh hey I’m really sorry to bother you I can see you’re busy but I’m having trouble finding the inverted frapples so if you got a minute I’d appreciate it if...”

That’s how businesses run in Wisconsin. Work gets done, and nobody goes home empty handed. It just takes a little longer. Sometimes workers punch out at the end of their

eight hours and go back and finish stocking 'cause they don't want to cheat the company when they should have gotten the work done on regular time.

Well, anyway, that was how things used to go. Wisconsin nice took a hit in the Governor Walker years. He and his henchmen, funded up the wazoo by the Koch brothers of Kansas, broke the public employee unions and avoided recall by filling the air with ads that subtly and not-so-subtly spread the idea that anybody who ever spent a tax dollar was a freeloading bum. Why does this schoolteacher/fireman/cop/DNR agent/professor make more money than I do? Cheeseheads who once carried in their cheesy hearts a bubbling dip of benevolence toward all the people they met — unless, of course, they had Illinois license plates — grew suspicious. They began to have more chips on their shoulders than dip in their hearts. As money in the 21st century continued to flow upstream, pooling in the pockets of the one percent, average Joes in Wisconsin began to blame each other for hard times. The very rich know how to hide in their gated compounds. They don't present much of a target for anger or frustration. But God forbid a schoolteacher should drive a new Ford Focus into the parking lot of True Value Hardware. *La-di-dah, will you look at that? Find your own dang inverted frapple. I'm stocking shelves here. I work for a living.*

Despite all that, most cheeseheads managed to retain a faint odor of Wisconsin nice.

Not Gretchen.

When she was growing up, her father worked and drank like a demon, disappearing for weeks at a time and not always really there even when he was there, slumped in front of the TV making castles of crumpled Pabst cans. Construction work in season. Odd jobs out of season. Nothing steady. He sat in the same recliner he had given his dad on his 70th birthday — used by gramps two years and him for 10 now. He could look out across the same fields, most of them sold off to pay for this or that emergency.

If Gramps' sunny personality had been like that of Curly, the lead cowpoke in *Oklahoma*, Dad's had gradually come to resemble Jud. Sad, glowering, hermetic Jud. Same chair, same view, different outlook. Gramps owned a rifle for deer and a shotgun for ducks. Dad had the same two guns, plus a military-style assault rifle and two handguns. When Gramps looked out the window and saw a figure walking up the drive, his immediate, unthinking thought was, "Goodie, somebody's paying us a visit." Gretchen's dad's first thought was, "Where's my nearest gun?" He'd never been mugged, attacked, or even threatened. But he thought it was important to be ready. Isn't that a man's responsibility to his family?

Mom covered the increasing gaps by patching together three jobs, all of them hard on her feet and joints. Despite her constant activity, she grew round feeding on Pepsi and chips. Lacking sleep, she needed jolts of energy. Ten years into marriage she did not resemble the Junior Prom queen she had been at Sturgeon Bay High. Seventeen years in she looked like a different species entirely.

Gretchen was left to fend for herself, and fend she did.

On the surface, she resembled a fairly common species of schoolgirl, possessing a cluster of attributes that usually appears once or twice in every classroom: Handsome. (In Gretchen's case, a square, peaches-and-cream Germanic face, prominent cheek bones, tip of nose, upper lip, a shock of straight dark hair, on the short side, muscled thighs and calves.) Intensely calm. Quiet. Clearly smart when questioned by teachers but never one to raise her hand and rarely one to chat, gossip, or seek friendship. The gossipers usually peg such a girl as haughty, conceited, holier than thou, stuck-up. Sometimes a generous or smart girl will venture, "Maybe she's just shy." And that is usually the case. Eventually the shy girls show their true colors, make friends, are included.

But Gretchen was not shy. She just never saw the point of joining the social whirl. Why flirt, trade make-up tips, pursue boys, and compete for social dominance if the end of the road was marriage to a deadbeat who saddled you with children and depended on you to feed them and pay most of the bills?

Gretchen didn't think enough about other people to be truly haughty. A haughty person considers herself superior, and therefore expects to wield power. Gretchen wanted power over herself and her circumstances, but not over others. She had great confidence in her own abilities, but this also did not quite rise to the level of pride, the first deadly sin. A proud person compares herself to others and comes out on top. Gretchen didn't compare. She was sometimes surprised by the ineptitude and silliness of her classmates. She just found it curious.

As she passed puberty and approached adulthood, she wasn't often attracted to any of her classmates. But she did develop crushes of a sort on three of her teachers: Mr. Sloop in sixth grade. Mr. Kottrell in eighth grade math. And Miss Christiansen in tenth grade English.

In every case the common currency of the student/teacher relationship was a kind of intellectual spark, electrons flowing both ways. Teachers who love their subject matter trudge through years yearning to find the same love in the eyes of their students. Mostly the eyes of students emit either complete apathy or grade-lust. Not *Oh that's interesting — tell me more!* But *Will this be on the test?* This process teaches teachers to despair of real intellectual exchange; they become organizers of knowledge. Memorize this, then this, then this, and answer this, then this, then this on the test. Students working for grades appreciate that: a clear path to a good report card. Don't go off on tangents, don't speculate, don't confuse us with your enthusiasms.

Gretchen knew how to get through a day in such a class: Keep your head down, don't ask questions, write down the things you know will be on the test. Turn the plow around and dig another furrow the next day. Harvest your A's in December and May.

Mr. Sloop shook her out of that routine. Sixth grade at Sevastopol Elementary was the last one where one teacher presided over all the subjects all day long in the same room. (Before they were cut, there were two exceptions: art and music.) So Mr. Sloop taught English, history, and math. But it was his love of science in general and botany in specific that had somehow survived the natural withering process. Most students found it annoying, the way he glowed when talking about photosynthesis. Gretchen lapped it up.

And Mr. Sloop lapped up her lapping. For once, Gretchen found herself raising her hand, asking pointed, advanced questions.

The first time she did so, Mr. Sloop said, "Good question, but that won't be on the test."

Gretchen blurted, "I don't care about the stupid test!"

Mr. Sloop had to turn his face to the blackboard so the class wouldn't see the tears of gratitude.

That year Mr. Sloop taught a class of one. Yes, 28 other kids were in the room, and they probably learned more than they would have in a normal year because the thing between Gretchen and Mr. Sloop raised the level of discourse, injected a certain energy. He realized something at the end of the year, when he saw the grades were universally higher, and it made him a better teacher: Teach to the best students, not the middle, not the worst. Help the slow ones if they're willing to be helped. Set aside extra time for them. But, in the main, raise the level of discourse and everyone benefits.

For the final science project, Mr. Sloop gave each student six seeds, a different species for each student. He gave Gretchen six kale seeds, which looked like peppercorns.

Following his instructions, she put dirt in three tiny pots, put two seeds in each pot (in case of duds), put the pots in a shoe box, and made three windows in the lid, which she covered with cellophane film squares — one red, one yellow, one green — positioned over each plant. She set them on an outside windowsill by the west-facing kitchen door. The research question: What spectrum of light feeds photosynthesis?

Weeks passed. The morning of May 22 arrived, the day all the students were supposed to bring in their projects, lay them on the big table at the back of the room, and show, incontrovertibly, that one and only one spectrum of light feeds plant life. Gretchen woke early and ran to the windowsill. Her box lay crushed and mangled on the ground. Drunk and unsteady, her father had stumbled in, reached a hand to the sill for balance, grasped the now somewhat soggy box, fallen to the ground with it, and, in spite, pounded it with his fists before rising, giving it a stomp or two with his boot, and lumbering to the sofa.

“You fucking shit!” Gretchen screamed at the sleeping man.

She dumped the mess into a bag, hopped on her bike and made it to class an hour early. The school was locked, so she sat in the parking lot trying to reassemble her diorama of dirt, stems, and leaves.

She knew immediately somehow that the hand on her shoulder was that of Mr. Sloop.

“It’s ruined!” she sobbed.

“The plants are smashed,” Mr. Sloop said, kneeling to put himself at her level, “but you can still see which one thrived, and under which light.”

“I could have told you that before we planted them! It’s the red one.”

“Then why are you upset?”

“I wanted to see it happen.”

Mr. Sloop, still kneeling on the gritty cement, pulled out a cloth handkerchief and dabbed a trickle from her face. He was surprised when she darted her head forward and

kissed him full on the lips. He was shocked and disgusted that he liked it. He recoiled, dumbfounded, and tottered onto his butt. A minute later he was still sitting there when principal Wilkie bustled by and, without slowing or looking him in the eye, said in quiet, resigned tones, "There's coffee in my office if you need a cup, Mister Sloop."

By this time Gretchen had scooped up her things, pedaled home, and, with mom gone and Dad oblivious, called in sick.

Twenty-eight children took home their best plant that day, the survival not of the fittest, but of the one that had received the good light — or, rather, had not been denied the good light always present in sunlight but capable of being filtered out. Yes, some seeds are duds. And some seeds are wonders, capable of thriving in the harshest conditions. Most often, the seed that grows is the one that is planted in good soil, watered, and given the best light.

Children are like that.

Of those 28 plants, twelve went straight into the trash. A few died within weeks, having been put in a dark corner or denied water. Eight were left outside over the next winter. A zinnia and a sultana spread and filled gardens for a few years to come.

Gretchen's kale survived the drunken rampage, sent down new roots, became her obsession, and, eventually, one of several revenue streams.

Two years later, Gretchen fell in love with math, and her math teacher. Mr. Kottrell had been teaching eighth grade long enough to not be surprised by the occasional doting pupil. He was steeled against the effects of hormones gone berserk. Still, he enjoyed the shining curiosity of Gretchen Koenig, while making sure to keep his door wide open when she came in for after-school help that she didn't need. He gave her a few advanced algebra problems and sent her on her way. For her part, she liked the way he would jot an answer on the blackboard and tap it emphatically, three times: *This...is...it!* As if the deepest secrets of

life could be found by solving for x , y , or z . She loved the certainty of the gesture, the certainty of math, the certainty of him.

One sweaty night she dreamed a hazy dream of Mr. Kottrell drawing equations down her belly and up her legs with a piece of chalk. Three equations, one unknown, all meeting and resolving at the throbbing intersection. She awoke with a shout. She had been pressing up against the damp knot in the drawstring of her pajamas. Breaths came rapidly.

This...is...it! Her eyes were suddenly wide open. A mosquito buzzed in her ear and the moment was over.

Mr. Kottrell wondered why Gretchen suddenly stopped coming in for after-school help, but by then it was clear to everyone that she had a gift for math. She liked a puzzle. Toy with any problem long enough and it will reveal its answer, if there is enough basic information. While Mr. Sloop had taught — or, rather, witnessed — the emergence of Gretchen's curiosity, Mr. Kottrell and the world of mathematics brought out the virtue of patience. If Gretchen could look at the numbers and variables long enough for the patterns to emerge, she could also wait for a man like him to enter her life some day. She would have to, she thought.

As for the third crush, on Miss Christiansen, well, as you might imagine, that was a bit more complicated.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – KISSING PRACTICE

Pyotr “Zippy” Zaske was born fast. Four weeks premature, he fell into his mother’s sweatpants as she was getting ready to go to the hospital after her water broke. As a kid, he was always either flopped down resting or running flat out. He never strolled or jogged. By high school he had become the region’s top sprinter. Somewhere along the line someone called him “Zippy,” and it stuck. He didn’t complain because he was never fond of Pyotr, given to him in honor of some relative back in Slovakia.

When he wasn’t on the track, he was chasing Gretchen Koenig. He chased her from the moment he hit puberty, which was nearly a year before any of his classmates. Before anyone else was dating, he pestered Gretchen. She finally relented and agreed to go to the Homecoming dance their Freshman year. They would have been the only Freshmen there but they never arrived.

Halfway to the dance — driven by his big brother, Karel, who sat in the front seat with his date — Zippy put his hand up Gretchen’s dress. She slapped him and insisted Karel turn the car around. She returned to the house to find mom and dad in an embrace on the couch, taking advantage of a rare moment of solitude on a Saturday night.

Zippy didn’t give up. The whole school knew the track star had it bad for Gretchen Koenig. The result was that no other boy would ask her out. To anything. It wasn’t that they

were afraid of Zippy. But he was well liked, a guy's guy. Anyone hitting on Gretchen would have been viewed as a traitor to the male gender. Mom told her it was for the best.

“Boys that age are just hormones with hands.”

Gretchen couldn't argue with that.

So she hung out with girls, when she hung out at all. Not a jitterbug like Zippy, Gretchen was no slug, either. She had a fast mind but a methodical way of keeping moving, finishing each task before moving on to another, hardly pausing in between. She had the family truck garden to take care of, what remained of grandpa's livestock, and her own produce business that she hoped to build up into something that actually made money.

She had built a greenhouse out of plastic tarps and a few poles on the south side of the old barn where she experimented with hydroponics. Mr. Sloop's kale flourished there, but the asparagus, lettuce, and spinach sold better at the tiny grocery stores in Valmy and Jacksonport. With homework, animal husbandry, gardening, and her gigs as a breakfast waitress at Al Johnson's in Sister Bay, she filled her days.

Her one largely unproductive habit was cruising the Internet, her escape to a larger world. She ranged widely — horticulture, astronomy, politics, war, the workings of her laptop itself. Whatever struck her. If she heard the name of a town or country, she wanted to know all about it. What did they grow, eat? Who ran things there?

She was quite interested in people in other places, perhaps because she had very little interest in people nearby. She had a Facebook page, but she never posted. After a month of following the drivel of her friends she even stopped reading. One night she signed up for a Twitter account. At the end of the sign-in process she was faced with two questions: Whom do you want to follow? She thought for a moment and concluded, *I don't want to follow anybody*. Whom do you want to permit to follow you? *Nobody*. At that point she realized that Twitter was for other people.

One day in the cafeteria Ashley Debord asked her, “Hey! Gretch! When you gonna respond to my invitation?”

“What invitation?”

“You’re such a Facebook Neanderthal. Slumber party, my house, Friday night. You busy? Got a date?”

Ashley knew Gretchen did not have a date.

“OK.”

“Don’t you need to ask your parents?”

“Nope.”

Most of Door County’s housing stock consisted of summer homes, ranch houses, and wood frame houses that would lack a specific architectural style if the real estate agent didn’t assign one. (Put a dormer on a box and it’s a Cape Cod.) There were a few old, sprawling Victorians in the old part of Sturgeon Bay — solidly built by shipbuilders but in need of constant upkeep — and the Debords lived in one of them. The slumber party was in the finished part of the basement. Ashley firmly instructed mom and dad to remain on the third floor until breakfast, which would not under any circumstances be before 11 am.

Gretchen arrived on her bicycle (she was saving up for a Vespa scooter) as quickly as she could after slopping the hogs and tending her plants. The other girls had been there for an hour. One piece of deer pepperoni pizza remained.

“I kept Abigail from scarfing it,” Ashley said.

The girls were working their way through a case of Bubbler, an effervescent concoction from the Door 44 winery. One of the girls worked in the tasting room — on the cheese and fudge side, not as a pourer — and managed to slip a rejected case into the trunk of her car.

“Why was it rejected?” Abigail howled. “We’re all going to die!”

She and the others kept drinking anyway. The only thing wrong with the wine was a hint of smoke taint due to a haybarn fire next to the vineyard near Kewaunee. Nevertheless, the next day all the girls would blame the “bad wine” for their hangovers. All the girls except Gretchen, that is. She awoke hangover-free, having started drinking late and stopping when Ashley informed them they would all be participating in an activity that proved even more diverting than getting tanked.

“We need to practice kissing,” Ashley declared in a tone of voice that made clear she would brook no dissent.

She was a natural leader, this girl. No one ever said no to her, and they didn't now. Still, she felt the need to explain.

“For our boyfriends. After the dance next week our boyfriends will expect kissing and I'm sure we all want to do it right.”

Those girls who did not giggle pulled back a little, wide-eyed with amazement and apprehension. Gretchen leaned forward, brow furrowed. What weird ritual is this?

“I'm not going to the dance,” she said.

She didn't have to explain why.

“We need you anyway,” Ashley said. “I invited an even number of girls — eight, four couples — so we'd all have a partner.”

“Well, you could have taken turns,” Gretchen said. “You know, practice with more than one partner.”

“You think we're sluts?” Abigail said, laughing the laugh of a drunk 17-year-old who thought she'd just said something hilarious.

The other girls assured Gretchen that some day some boy would want to kiss her. Which only made her feel like more of an oddball.

Of course, most of the girls had already kissed a boy or two. Two had done more than that, much more, and one had done more than that with more than one boy. So the whole idea of practicing kissing seemed absurd for most of them. Various things kept them from saying anything to stop the kissing practice session. First of all, the Venn diagram of sex with high school boys and good sex is two circles that barely touch. The room included a few girls who were just plain bored with sex and eager to find something Cosmo wasn't giving them. A couple of the girls, like Gretchen, had little experience of any kind, good or bad. Some of the girls were truly considerate and didn't want to hurt Gretchen's feelings by bragging about their experiences in parked cars. Many of them were curious about kissing one of their own gender. And they were all to greater or lesser degree under the paw of alpha dog Ashley.

"Here's the deal," Ashley said with the same serious voice she used when chairing yearbook committee meetings. "Three rules. First rule: Everybody does it. That way, nobody can tell on us without being, you know, implicated. Second rule: Think of your boyfriend and only your boyfriend. Anybody thinks of *my* boyfriend and I'll break your kneecaps."

She was smiling when she said this. Still, most felt that she would somehow know if they envisioned her Jake Schwaba, the Casanova of Carlsville.

"Third rule...um...I forget the third rule."

Ashley walked to the cupboard, wobbling just a little, and returned with a blue Wedgwood bowl already filled with slips of paper with their names printed on them in her favorite font, Papyrus. Each slip was folded horizontally once and vertically thrice. She stirred the names with a swizzle stick she had picked up at the Hard Rock Cafe in Chicago during a family trip the previous August.

"Gretchen, you were the last to arrive, so you pick first to get us started."

Gretchen pulled out a slip, unfolded it, and read, "Taylor."

She stood up and was about to squeeze in on the couch next to Taylor when Ashley said, "Hold on. That means Taylor picks her substitute boyfriend."

"I pick Brianna."

"Wow, that didn't take much thinking," Abigail said.

"No no no no no," Ashley said. "When I said you pick, that means you pick another name out of the hat and that's who you kiss. That way nobody's feelings get hurt, and nobody thinks you really want to kiss anybody in particular, other than your boyfriend."

"Too late for that!" Abigail chirped.

Taylor glared at her and drew a name out of the hat. Brianna looked at her toe nails, which she had painted "Blue me away!" blue for the occasion.

"Brianna."

"No way!" Abigail said.

"Read it," Taylor said, holding the slip in front of Abigail's rummy eyes.

Everyone on the couch got off it to make way for Taylor and Brianna, who sat down at opposite ends. They leaned toward each other, hands on the middle cushion, pushed their lips out until they touched, and rapidly pulled away.

"Okay, not bad for the first round," Ashley said. "Work on prolonging the contact a little. I don't think Freddy and Mark are going to be satisfied with that."

And so it went, timid peck after timid peck, followed by encouragement from Ashley, who ended up going last with Gretchen.

"Show us how it's done, Ashley!" Abigail crowed.

Gretchen was pretty sure none of the pecks she had seen so far would qualify as real kisses, but what did she know? She wasn't about to break the mold. So when Ashley leaned in, she delivered the briefest of pecks and stood up.

Ashley was disappointed.

“OK, OK, OK,” she said. “I think I know what we’re dealing with here. Let’s call it what it is: Homophobia. You all know I’m not gay. I’ve got the biggest stud in the school. I want to keep him. That’s why we’re doing this. But you girls are kissing like we’ve got a Web cam feeding straight to YouTube.”

“Omigod!” Abigail said. “You don’t, do you?”

Scared eyes darted around the room. Taylor walked over to a teddy bear on a shelf and turned it toward the wall.

“Oh for God’s sake, bitches, you think I’d do that to you? Do you?”

The girls sat down sheepishly, looked at the floor, shook their heads.

“No... sorry...sorry.”

“Sounds like a mixed message to me,” Gretchen said. “I mean, on the one hand, you seem to deplore homophobia, when you blame it for our lousy kissing. But then you go out of your way to repeat, ‘I’m not gay! I’m not gay!’”

In the uncomfortable silence, each girl thought one question, and more than one followed with a second. One: Are you gay, Gretchen? Two: What about me?

Puberty had been a series of shocks for these girls. First, menstruation. *Ick!* Then — or sometimes before — they heard the messy details about sex. *What? The guy puts that ugly thing where?* Just when it couldn’t get any weirder, they heard that sometimes it’s guys and guys or girls and girls (*How does that work?*), and sometimes it’s guys who were girls and girls who were guys.

“You know who I really feel sorry for? Transvestites,” Abigail said, out of the blue. “I mean, I guess I can understand how gay guys would want to do it with gay guys and gay girls would be attracted to gay girls. But who would be attracted to a transvestite? Not even another transvestite, right? Unless you were a tranny of the other sort.”

“In which case it technically wouldn't be gay at all,” Taylor said. “I mean, if a guy who was a girl makes it with a girl who was a guy...”

“Look, all I'm saying is, if we're going to do this thing, let's do it right,” Ashley said. “Everybody take a swig of Bubbler — except you, Abigail, you've had enough. Take your partner to a chair, couch or rug, and let's get serious. Gretchen, come here.”

Ashley pulled a pilates mat out of the corner and unrolled it against the far wall.

“Get over here, Gretchen.”

The other girls found their spots. Eventually.

“Go ahead, you two take the couch.”

“No, you can have it.”

“No, please.”

Ashley flipped off the overhead light.

“Even if there were a camera, it's too dark now.”

“Could be infra-red.”

“Shut up, Abigail.”

“Just sayin' .”

“Shhhh!”

Hands fumbled, rings and bracelets tangled, a couple girls said “Ouch!”

Ashley laid on her back and whispered, “It's easier for me to imagine you're Jake if I'm on the bottom.”

“Whatever,” Gretchen said.

And they went at it. The rhythm of the room gradually slowed from pecks to slurps. After a time, eyes adjusted. It's hard to make a room totally dark in the age of chargers and digital clocks and LEDs. A band of white light from the stairs left a bright square that diffused dimly about the room.

Gretchen treated this like a scientific experiment, trying one level of pressure, then another. She tried head-on and corner-of-the-mouth kisses. She observed when Ashley frowned, and saw that she had two kinds of frowns, the *ewww* frown and the *mmmm* frown. Three “mmmm”s in a row and Ashley’s eyelids fluttered open.

“Hey!” Ashley cried. “You’re supposed to keep your eyes shut! That’s rule number three!

“Hear that everybody? Eyes shut at all times.”

“Sor-ree!” Gretchen said.

Two couples away, someone groaned. Ever the scientist, Gretchen thought, well, if I can’t see the subject, I’ll have to watch with my fingers. She began to explore. Ashley *mmmm*-ed, her voice a few steps lower, and shifted her legs.

An odd thought occurred to Gretchen. Her studies had taught her that there are observers, and there are participant observers. *I’ve been looking for responses in Ashley, in my subject. What about me? What if I am the subject?*

She began paying attention to what made *her* feel good. That changed the experience, and felt interesting for a while. When she tried combining the two protocols — splitting her attention between her external subject and her internal one, tuning her response to Ashley’s — her head began to spin.

Hers wasn’t the only head spinning in the room. Drunken Abigail should not have followed Ashley’s order to close her eyes. Suddenly and without warning she puked on Jessica, who screamed bloody murder.

The lights were on and Ashley’s mom was in the room surprisingly quickly. Girls bumped into other girls trying to get as far away as they could from their “boyfriends.”

“Your father said you might be doing this,” mom hissed. “‘It’s perfectly natural for teens to want to experiment,’ he said.

“What have you got to say for yourself, young lady!”

For the first time in her life, Ashley was tongue-tied.

“It’s not what you think, Mrs. Debord,” Taylor said.

“That’s right,” Brianna said, wiping her face on her bicep. “It’s for our boyfriends.”

“Now I’ve heard everything,” mother Debord said. “Getting drunk for your boyfriends!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – HOW DID I LIKE THAT?

Many of the girls had drunk enough that the sense of shame spurred by Ashley's aghast mom was nicely atoned for by the following day's hangover. They moved beyond it easily, not bothering to probe what precisely they were feeling guilty about — the drinking or the sex.

Gretchen didn't feel guilty. She felt scared. Her experiment with Ashley was with Ashley and Ashley alone. She hadn't bothered to try to imagine a boy in Ashley's place. What would be the point of that? Don't put a mouse in a maze and pretend it's a rabbit.

What scared her was that she had begun to like the sensations of touching and being touched. Quite simply, she feared she might be gay. Despite the legalization of gay marriage, that remained a fear for many teens. It's one thing to have an open, accepting attitude toward others. But when *you* might be the one...

For Gretchen, it wasn't about fear of being shunned or discriminated against. When you grow up with one vision of a future of love and family in partnership with the perfect man — an ideal for which you keep trying out models, from Mr. Sloop to Mr. Cottrell — and then the gender changes, it's as if your future has been shifted to an alien planet. She felt unmoored. What could that possibly be? She tried to put a face on it. Ashley's would never do. God no — imagine being bossed around by her for the rest of your life.

Probing the question of whether or not she was gay was, for Gretchen, less about introspection than it was about trying to project a vision on the outside world. What would that even look like?

The following week at school, she found herself watching her English teacher with fresh curiosity. Like many Scandinavians, Miss Christiansen had aged well. Phenomenally well. Her figure remained slim, her cheekbones high, her eyes radiant. Gretchen had overheard classmates speculating: Do you think Miss Christiansen is gay? The teacher lived alone in Bailey's Harbor. How could anyone that pretty not be married unless she was gay? Oh, she was gay, definitely, they concluded. *Nothing wrong with that*, some felt the need to add.

An uneven balance of power makes for unhealthy relationships. The boy gazing at a Victoria's Secret model who is gazing back at him via the magic of light and lens and ink on glossy paper can imagine a reciprocal relationship, but he knows it isn't. The model doesn't even know he exists. Similarly, schoolgirls, feeling powerless, focus on the ones in control, the teacher who seems to know everything and has the power to make everyone else in the room succeed or fail. From the teacher's point of view, of course, that power is in each student. But that's not how it feels from the desks.

At those moments in a girl's life when she feels least in control of herself and her environment she is most likely to envy the power of the teacher, and to want it for herself. This explains the syndrome of the "mean girl," the queen bee of clique-ville. It also helps explain the dynamics of a crush.

Boys are not less likely to have crushes, but they are less likely to admit to them or to act on them. They know it is hopeless because they know that they have nothing to offer. Western culture puts a premium on young female beauty, though; many girls grow up feeling

that this is the only chip they have. Some play that chip in an impulsive moment, as Gretchen had with Mr. Sloop.

That old longing rose in Gretchen's eyes as she watched Miss Christiansen pace the English room the week after the kissing party. Some teachers sat and droned. Miss Christiansen burned calories. Every question — *Who can give me a sentence that begins with a gerund?* — was accompanied by walking, leaning, encouraging, beckoning. Every correct answer — *Teaching is for people who can't do.* — elicited an excited clapping of the hands.

“Yes, Jake, teaching is a gerund in that sentence.”

She never took the bait, always opted for the high road, always kept control.

With the drama program fallen on hard times — no budget, senior speech class replaced by core courses — Miss Christiansen had managed to take up some of the slack by increasing the emphasis on plays and playacting in her English classes.

She required each of them, even people like Gretchen who hated the pretense of acting, to prepare a scene and present it in front of an assembly in the auditorium. She thought this was especially valuable for those students who dreaded it the most. Students were to choose monologues or near-monologues — scenes where the other character speaks so little that the teacher could play that part without drawing focus.

On Friday, Miss Christiansen knew that many of the students would be too antsy about the dance to concentrate on acting or pay attention to anything she said. So she showed “The Glass Menagerie.” She picked the John Malkovich version because she had actually seen him play the same role (with different co-actors) back when Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre was operating out of a church basement in suburban Winnetka. (A friend of hers from Lawrence had invited her down for a weekend in Chicago.)

Like many Midwestern teachers, Miss Christiansen always felt guilty when she showed a film, as if she were cheating somebody. She also felt sorry for the girls and boys

who were too shy or awkward or ridden with acne to get a date. She gave them an alternative to a lonely night at home.

“We really need to work on our scenes today, but I know some of you are too obsessed with tonight’s melodramatic event to concentrate, so I hope you’ll enjoy this movie,” she said. “Stars Joanne Woodward, and John Malkovich before he became a full-blown oddball on screen.

“I have a special invitation for those of you who aren’t participating in the costume piece in the gym this evening. Come to the auditorium and we’ll work on your scenes. If you haven’t decided on one yet, bring several and we’ll try them all. Pizza and Pepsi and fun!”

She’d been doing this kind of thing for many years now. She always bought too much pizza and Pepsi — paying for it herself, of course — and ended up with lots of leftovers that she took to the homeless shelter her church had opened recently in a small warehouse behind the old Red Owl grocery on Jefferson Street.

She never knew how many kids would show up. The proms themselves went in and out of style. Sometimes the popular kids would lead everyone else to the dance, and at other times they would lead them to her stage parties. Sometimes a sub-clique of non-prommers would show up en masse.

This time, three students showed, mumbled through their scenes, gobbled pizza and left. As Miss Christiansen was packing up the pizza boxes, in strode Gretchen Koenig, script in hand. After school she had gone straight to the library and picked up a copy. Next stop, the Dollar Tree, where she bought a toy plastic horse. The horn had her stumped.

“I shoved a toothpick in its forehead,” she said, holding the horse up to Miss Christiansen. “I’ll make a better horn for it before the performance. This looks flimsy.”

“It’s not about the props, Gretchen. When Gregory Mosher directed David Mamet’s ‘Glengarry Glen Ross’ on Broadway, the actors in the restaurant scene kept fiddling with the

silverware, the napkins, the salt shaker. So he cleared the table. Only restaurant in New York with completely empty tables. But it worked.”

“What worked?”

“The scene. Forced the actors to find the characters within them rather than distracting the audience with a bunch of fancy stage business.”

“Oh.”

“Do you have Laura in you?”

“That’s what I’m here to find out.”

“There’s a bit too much Gentleman Caller here for our purposes.”

Seeing Gretchen’s disappointment, she added, “But let’s give it a try. Have you memorized your lines?”

“No, but I will. Was I supposed to?”

“We’ll have to share the script until you do.”

Miss Christiansen pulled her reading glasses out of her purse and sat on a bench center stage.

They sat hip-to-hip, trading lines. When they arrived at the kiss, there was a bit of a struggle: Gretchen leaning in, Miss C leaning away, Gretchen pulling on her arms. It became clear to both of them that this was about more than doing the scene.

“Listen, Gretchen. If I were going to kiss a girl I would be as likely to pick a pretty girl like you as anyone in all creation. But I don’t kiss students.”

She gave Gretchen a sympathetic look and continued.

“I expect you’re wondering if I’m gay. You’re not the first student to wonder that, nor the first to try to kiss me.”

Her mind briefly returned to that day long ago when Ben Folger had groped her thigh on a log on this same old stage.

“Well, are you?”

“None of your business.”

“You brought it up.”

“No, I think you did.”

Miss Christiansen had grown up fast after that encounter with Ben. She decided quickly that teachers would lose some of their ability to teach if students were allowed to become too familiar. She also decided that a little mystery was a good thing for a teacher to maintain. Not only did familiarity breed disrespect, it also closed down imaginations. Gay kids and straight kids alike need role models. Let them imagine what they like about her.

She realized that this “None of your business” approach meant that most students would assume she’s gay.

“Actually,” Gretchen said with surprising nonchalance, “I was wondering if *I’m* gay.”

“Be careful how you seek the answer to that question,” the teacher said. “Remember, it’s not just your own feelings that can get hurt along the way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No no no, that’s not what I meant. You didn’t hurt my feelings at all. On the contrary, dames my age appreciate the attention.”

“How old are you?”

“Again, not your business!”

They both laughed.

“Listen, there’s a youth group at our church where kids explore all kinds of difficult questions. We meet Sunday nights. It’s the church just this side of Jacksonport. Come try it out.”

“Will you beat the devil out of me?”

“Goodness no! But we do try to find the good in each other.”

“Thank you, Miss Christiansen. For being a great teacher.”

Ordinarily not much of a hugger, Gretchen impulsively leaned over and wrapped her arms around Miss Christiansen's shoulders. She just as quickly let go and pulled back, an apologetic look on her face.

“Hugs are OK,” the teacher said. “Hugs are great!”

Gretchen stood up to leave.

Miss Christiansen stood, a look of sympathetic concern crinkling her eyes, and spoke slowly, pausing to find the right words.

“It's tough being a teenager these days. You've got more freedom, more options, and that's mostly a good thing. But it can be confusing, too. Don't avoid exploring who you are, but don't be in too big of a hurry, either. It can consume you, make you think only about yourself. High school can be a selfish, self-obsessed time for lots of teenagers. Don't forget that it takes two to tango.”

Gretchen looked confused. That last line rang about the room like one of the many hackneyed cliches that sully many of the plays deemed fit for high school productions.

“All I'm saying is, if you take the time to help others with their problems, yours will shrink a little.”

Gretchen walked down the hall toward the exit. The sounds of the band and the laughter of her classmates drifted toward her from the gymnasium. She turned a corner and saw Zippy sitting on a bench near the door. He'd been waiting for her.

“Gretchen! I'm sorry!”

She stood still, about 10 feet away. He kept sitting. At rest, for once in his life.

“What?”

“I'm sorry I grabbed you. In the car. That time.”

“That was a year ago. I've forgotten all about it.”

She had not forgotten about it. In fact, it played a role in the cross-examination she kept giving herself about her possible gayness. *Why did you react so violently when a boy touched you?*

“Well, you shouldn’t have done that,” she said. “You should ask first.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Quit saying you’re sorry.”

“But I am.”

“You’re just sorry I didn’t like it.”

“Well, yeah. Is that so bad? To want someone to want you the way you want them?”

“That’s just it, Zip. When you come on so strong ... I mean, you didn’t give me the chance to figure out whether I might like you.”

“Come on, Gretch. We’ve know each other since grade school. What more do you need to know about me?”

“I don’t know. If our parts respond.”

“What?”

“Isn’t that what these dances are for?”

Gretchen nodded toward the gym. The band was playing a slow song.

“You dance with somebody,” she continued, “like it’s nothing. Hold hands. Feel each other’s heat a little. See what it does to you. And then you keep dancing with other people until you feel that special jolt.”

“I don’t need to dance with you to know that you give me the jolt. I like you. It’s my curse.”

“Well I don’t.”

Zippy looked as if she had slapped him. Again.

“Now *I’m* sorry,” she said. “That was mean.”

She looked at his twisted, yearning face. He was having trouble figuring out where to look.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go in there and dance. One dance. One. I feel like I owe you that.”

Gretchen stood there in the dress she had put on for her scene with Miss Christiansen. It had green flowers, the closest she could get to Laura’s blue roses, which, of course, would have been too on the nose for the play.

“I can’t,” Zippy said.

“Come on, I’m sure you’re no worse of a dancer than the rest of that club-footed track team you hang with.”

“Abigail is in there. It would be rude.”

“Abigail? You brought Abigail? Holy shit, you are desperate! I’m sorry. Jeez, why am I so mean tonight?”

“Well, you wouldn’t go with me! I kept hoping you’d change your mind.”

“Let’s dance right here, then. She won’t see us.”

Zippy began to rise, but quickly sat down again. Gretchen grabbed his hands and pulled.

“Come on, Zipster, you might never get an offer this good again.”

“Leave me alone!”

“What is the matter with you?”

Zippy couldn’t take it anymore. He turned back, angry.

“You want to know what’s the matter with me? Well listen, be-yatch, so do I. I have this embarrassing problem that happens to me all the time. When we go to track meets, I’m always the last one off the bus. I pretend that I want to pray alone, for success on the track. But that’s not it. The bus jiggles, my tracksuit chafes, and I arrive with a hard-on. And then

every time I see you I get hard. It's fucking annoying! I don't know what to do. I feel like a pervert half the time."

Gretchen looked at the crotch of his khaki trousers. The natural fold did seem a little bigger than normal.

"Are you hard right now?"

"Oh, come on, you gotta ask? Yes, just look!"

He stood up, but immediately had to bend over due to the pain of the sudden pressure against his pants.

When Gretchen handled the livestock on their little farm, she often had to *handle* the livestock. Infections, glands, breach births, impacted bowels — the animal world was full of nasty problems that required a human touch. Give her a rubber glove and she could deal with anything. She wondered how animals survived in the wild.

Gretchen looked at Zippy, the pain in his eyes, the swelling in his pants, and said, "I can fix this."

"Follow me," she said.

With the matter-of-fact air of a veterinarian, Gretchen walked into the girls' lavatory, grabbed the pair of yellow gloves that were hanging on the janitor's bucket, and walked into the first stall. She slid on the gloves as the confused boy hobbled after her. Two fingers shoved into one rubber sleeve, leaving the glove's pinky dangling.

"Unzip, Zippy."

The boy wasn't sure if this was a dream come true or a nightmare, but he felt it would be a poor policy to say no to any opportunity for any kind of sex, rare as those opportunities seemed to be for a high school kid. He wanted to enjoy every second of it.

“Every second” proved to be about exactly one. The moment the glove’s limp pinky brushed Zippy’s purple head — before she could even get a grip — it unloaded its charge against the wall above the toilet. Zippy’s knees buckled involuntarily and he nearly slid in.

“You *are* fast, aren’t you, Zip? Will you be wanting a cigarette now or are you going to sleep right away?”

Gretchen’s quip revealed more about her wide-ranging reading habits than anything in her personal experience. She turned and walked away, depositing the gloves on the bucket as she left.

“Clean up after yourself. Don’t make the poor janitor deal with that.”

“Wait,” Zippy mumbled.

He grabbed a handful of toilet paper, wiped the glob off the wall, took a quick pee to clear himself out, tucked his thankful limpness back in his pants, zipped up, flushed, and ran out the door, shouting, “We can dance now!”

But she was gone. He walked into the boys’ lavatory, washed his hands, and cried.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – THE TASTE OF PENANCE

The problem with Pyotr Zaske's malady was the rapidity of its return. Relapse was inevitable. Gretchen had saved Zippy's life that night in the girl's restroom. That's how it felt to him, anyway. His attitude toward her grew from infatuation to idolatry. If the pope were to bestow on him the power to grant sainthood, Gretchen would have been well on the way.

Zippy wanted to thank her. He also hoped for a second miracle. Five tortuous months after that night at the dance – a hard winter indeed – he finally found the courage to seek out Gretchen again. Feeling stupid and ashamed, he had spent the rest of the school year avoiding her in the hallways. But on a balmy afternoon in June, he borrowed the family Dodge and drove up to Valmy.

Gretchen's greenhouse extended the season for kale and other vegetables into several over-lapping seasons. Her dad had recently sold off a few more acres to raise cash to buy the laundromat in Midtown Valmy, as residents liked to call it. They enjoyed this kind of humor; when two neighbors parked their bass boats next to each other, one of them erected the sign, "Valmy Yacht Club." The Happy Hour bar and restaurant defined Uptown Valmy. The gas station/Foodland and the car repair place on the highway made up Downtown Valmy. The laundromat, nestled between the Foodland and the Happy Hour, held down all there had been of Midtown after the Vee Bar closed.

The Valmy laundromat had changed hands dozens of times over the years. Ancient Speed Queen washers made an island in the middle of the main room. Along the far wall were giant built-in dryers, mustard-yellow paint chipping off the sheet metal housings. Four of them sported names above the doors: Koni, Lauri, Tweed, Penny. Gretchen had no idea who those people had been. She imagined they had been the queens of the laundromat at some time. Even Mom, who had lived here forever, couldn't recall anybody with those names.

But it gave Mom an idea: Why not offer a laundering service? No locals would use it, but summer visitors would probably pay top dollar to be able to drop off their sheets and Hawaiian shirts and pick them up a day later. The problem with that scheme was that Mom already had four jobs. So it fell to Gretchen. She balked at first, but gave in when Mom said she could convert the back room and one of the counters to storing and selling her vegetables. She hated when the folks at Foodland paid her pennies and then took the lion's share of the profit.

Working at the laundromat made Gretchen ansty. Unlike gardening, where you're constantly busy, laundering is mostly about waiting, unless you've got several loads to monitor, which was rarely the case here. So Gretchen cruised websites on her old Android phone and got bored. So bored that she actually perked up and smiled when Zippy walked through the door carrying a big paper bag in front of him so Gretchen wouldn't see the inevitable bulge.

"How's it hangin', Zip-man?" Gretchen chirped, immediately regretting her choice of words.

"Well, it's not, you know, and you know why."

"Sorry. Just a figure of speech. You buying vegetables?"

"What's good?"

“The kale is great!”

Zippy hated kale.

“OK, give me some.”

Gretchen reached out for Zippy's paper bag, assuming he'd brought it to carry groceries. Even northern Wisconsin stores had started charging extra for bags. As she reached, he took a step back, bumped into a wheeled basket of folded underpants, and dropped the bag. Out popped a brand new pair of purple rubber gloves and a tube of KY Jelly.

A long, quiet, awkward moment followed. Gretchen considered Zippy's face. It scrunched to the middle, like a sinkhole about to collapse, or an inverted volcano. It reminded her of the face of a hog with impacted bowels. Once again, she took pity on the boy — but only a little.

“Yikes, man! How often does this happen to you?”

“You don't want to know.”

“You look miserable.”

“Yeah.”

“And you expect me to help. Again.”

“I don't expect it. But I'm hopeful.”

“Yeah, judging by what you've got in the bag.”

“I wish I could do something in return for you.”

“How much kale can you eat?”

“As much as it takes.”

I'm going to regret this, he thought.

“Nobody is buying it! The most wonderful vegetable on God's green earth! I've got a ton of it in the back room. And even when I do sell a bag, I don't make much.”

“I see what you mean. But then, I’m not really here to buy kale. I’d pay extra. For the relief.”

Gretchen started flipping through websites, googling “veterinary services.”

“Anal gland expression: Twenty-two dollars and fifty cents. Breeding soundness examination, stallion, sixty dollars. Bovine rectal palpation, \$20. Castration, including anesthesia, one hundred fifty.”

“I won’t be needing anesthesia.”

“Hey, you’ve got a sense of humor! So, shall we do the castration and get all the misery over with, or go with the recurring costs?”

This was all just joking around, in Gretchen’s mind. But Zippy wanted to come to an agreement.

“All right, I can see that this is a nasty business and you deserve to be paid for your trouble. For the *ick* of it. How about twenty bucks?”

“The same as bovine rectal palpation?”

“Whatever.”

Gretchen thought for a moment. *I’m a gardener, damn it! A fucking horticulturalist. Why can’t I just make money at that?*

“So far as anyone is concerned, Zip, you’ve done nothing but buy kale from me. Five dollars for the first bag — the usual price. Twenty-five for the second bag, which comes with, um, benefits. No, *benefit*, singular.”

“Deal,” Zippy blurted.

He would have paid fifty, without the kale.

Zippy gave her two tens, a five, five singles, and the bag. She led him into the back room and performed the service into a laundry tub. It took about five seconds this time.

While he was cleaning up, she put two bags of kale into his paper bag and opened the exterior door.

As he headed for the Dodge, she called after him:

“Don’t come back until you’ve eaten both bags.”

She wanted to think she was doing him some lasting good. Also, if she could get him to like kale, maybe he would encourage others to like it. And that would be a good thing for everybody. Nevertheless, she did feel a little unsettled about treating a human being like livestock.

A couple hours later, Zippy’s mother walked into the kitchen and was shocked to see him eating a large bowl of kale smothered in ranch dressing.

“I thought you hated kale.”

“I do,” he said. “This is awful.”

“Why, then....?”

“Coach says it’s good for sprinters. Feeds the fast-twitch muscles.”

He felt guilty for talking sweet Gretchen Koenig into servicing his sweaty need. Eating kale helped. It was bitter. It tasted like no other vegetable or meat. It tasted like penance. With every bite, the guilt ebbed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – KALE WITH BENEFITS

Ashley Debord walked up the slope from the Foodland looking like the cat who swallowed the canary.

“This a regular thing, you servicing Zippy?”

“The boy needs his vegetables,” Gretchen said.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Gretch. I saw the way Zippy looked when he hobbled in and the way he slunk out. Like he’s the noodle and you’re the pot of boiling water.”

“Nobody puts his noodle in me.”

“Still using rubber gloves, then?”

Gretchen looked aghast, and puzzled.

“I was in the next stall at the dance.”

Oh shit.

“I suppose you’ve told the world by now.”

“I came close a thousand times. But I like you, Gretchen. I’m not sure what you’re up to. Miss Christiansen told us never to run a story we don’t understand ourselves. I’ve been waiting for Zippy to return for more.”

Ashley hung with the crowd that produced the yearbook and the school newspaper. As the English teacher, Miss Christiansen advised both.

Gretchen explained Pyotr's regular visits, couching her relationship with the boy as a combination of humanitarian concern and simple business. Ashley was amused and intrigued. Turned out she had a similar problem with Jake Schwaba, who, as the summer progressed, had become more aggressive in asking for more than Ashley was ready to give.

Ashley called another slumber party, promising her mom there would be no alcohol, and telling the invitees there would be "no more *practicing*...unless you really want to."

The turnout was a bit smaller. Brianna, for one, was afraid she'd be pressured into more kissing, and wanted none of it, so she didn't show. The others were invited an hour before Gretchen, who came partly because she still hadn't made up her mind about whether she liked kissing girls and partly to try to keep a lid on Ashley spilling the beans about her and Zippy. But that was the point of inviting the others early.

By the time Gretchen arrived, Ashley was ready to present her business plan, as if she were an entrepreneur pitching to venture capitalists. She even had a flip chart.

"Each girl arranges with her boyfriend to arrive at the laundromat at a precise time, on the hour or the half hour, so there is no overlap, no dudes bumping into dudes and sharing notes. The girl arrives five minutes earlier and proceeds to the back room. The guy comes in and asks for two bags of kale.

"Nobody ever orders *two* bags of kale, do they?"

"Sadly, no," Gretchen said.

"Just like you and Zippy," Ashley continued, "the boyfriend pays five bucks for the first bag and twenty-five for the second. That's your cue to let him into the back room. He leaves by the side door. We come in, pick up fifteen dollars, and you keep 15, even-even. You get money for the kale and a little for the use of the room.

"Everybody wins. Our guys stop bugging us to go all the way. We all pick up a little cash."

“And the dudes learn a healthier lifestyle,” Gretchen said.

Abigail laughed.

“Hand jobs are healthy?”

“Kale, people,” Gretchen said, perturbed. “Kale! Believe me, it’s the best thing for a body.”

Some of the girls were worried that the boys would tell other boys. They didn’t want to lose control over the situation.

Abigail remembered her fear that Ashley could have set up a camera at the kissing practice session.

“Let’s record it,” she said. “Hide a Go Pro. If anyone snitches, we put their O-face on You Tube.”

“Great idea, Abigail!” Ashley said. “You do have a brain. When you’re sober.”

“No,” Gretchen said. “We don’t hide the Go Pro. We put it in plain sight. First time, we tell them it’s there. We tell them what will happen if word gets out.”

Taylor asked, “But won’t that nix the deal? A smart person would walk out at that point.”

“Not if they want it badly enough,” Ashley said. “And believe me, they want it.”

Abigail looked puzzled again.

“Gretchen, you said, ‘First time, we tell them.’ First time? You think we’ll have repeat business?”

“We’ll see,” Ashley said, smirking.

Business was indeed brisk. At first, it seemed only right that each girl should service only her own boyfriend. But after a while, that proved logistically challenging. It made more sense for two girls to be there each day than for all of them to rotate through the day. They had other chores. Boys were instructed to look straight at the GoPro, think about only their

own girlfriend, and avoid eye contact. The interns, as they called themselves, wore kale masks to disguise their identity. The boys did what they were told, unless they'd been drinking. After a few drunken gropes, evening service was shut down. Frequency was stepped up to the quarter hour — four boys an hour from noon until five, six days a week. Gretchen cleared in excess of \$1,500 a week.

Within a few months, she had her Vespa.

CHAPTER NINETEEN – BEN FRANKLIN DISCOVERS KALE

In every medium — mainstream, social, anti-social — credit and blame for the election sweep was heaped on Ben Folger. At first, Ben's performance at the Philadelphia convention had given courage to the opposition. The Democratic candidate had been quick to call Ben a new American hero. That led to a brief lead in the polls. But then came the charges — rape and sedition — followed by the series of protests, the vandalism, the repetition of Ben's phrase, "Where's the gumption?"

The Democrat was forced to offer weak tea: "I applaud the sentiment, but not the destructiveness."

The election turnout was high. Fear ruled the day up and down the ticket. In the end, the violence of the protests spurred more law-and-order voters.

The new Neo-Marxists who had begun calling for revolution applauded the electoral outcome: With all branches of government now firmly grasped by the most conservative elements, no longer could the public pretend that progress was possible by working within the system. The system itself was rotten and needed to be dismantled. Most of this rhetoric occurred online and anonymously. The only face associated with the movement was that of Ben Folger.

Which suddenly made Door County famous. Infamous, most residents felt. Gretchen Koenig's father was livid. The increasingly foul invectives he hurled at the TV piled up higher than his empty Pabst cans. The more Pop swore, the more Gretchen idolized Ben. He'd grown up on a farm just down the road! And gone to the same high school. Gretchen and other students pestered Miss Christiansen with questions about him. Before long, the beleaguered teacher made the topic off-limits. Miss C was smart enough not to take sides in the hero-or-villain debate, but Gretchen suspected that the drama teacher retained some fondness for her most famous student.

As for herself, Gretchen passed the tedious hours behind the kale register scouring the Web for all she could find on Folger, and that was a growing mountain of conjecture. The left deified him and the right never tired of blaming him for the latest eruption of unrest. Both assumed the professor was smart enough to have fled the country. Eliza Folger's home in California was staked out by lawmen and journalists. A few hopeful freelancers periodically poked around Sturgeon Bay fishing for leads. Criminal investigators had positioned a webcam on the north fence of his boyhood farmhouse, just in case.

No one expected to spot him half a mile away wandering through muddy fields toward Valmy on an unseasonably warm March afternoon.

At the turn of the new year he had arrived at the northernmost cottage on the old caretaking circuit. It was time to start rationing food, or he wouldn't make it to spring. Something about watching his diet reminded him of another regimen that had gone hand-in-hand, back in his high school sports days. He began to do calisthenics: push-ups, crunches, isometrics. The hungrier he got, the more he worked out. He lost his paunch. His jowls shrank, leaving creases. Wisps of silver hair reached beyond his shoulders. He kept shaving with that razor he'd found in the first cabin, but he never bathed. Takes a lot of melted snow

to make even one pot of water, and he wasn't motivated. By March 1, the food was gone and the bottles of booze were dwindling.

Conserving energy, he would sleep for days on end, awake, pee out the back door, shave, do some push-ups, plank until his shoulders shook, drink until he passed out, and hibernate away the days and nights.

One morning late in March he awoke, drained the last of the Peppermint Schnapps, and stumbled into the bathroom. He stared into a lean, unrecognizable face in the mirror and mumbled, "You look hungry."

His brain was a wasteland, devoid of thought or motivation. So his legs and arms took over. He grabbed the pillowcase that he had been using to haul stuff from cottage to cottage and headed out the front door. Tufts of mud and brown grass showed through the melting snow. Plows had deposited a ridge of sooty ice on both sides of Glidden Drive. He managed to slosh over one ridge, but slipped crossing the one on the other side of the road, sliding sideways into the woods.

Rather than returning to the road, he continued down the fire lane that paralleled it until he reached the driveway to Glidden Lodge. The cabins — Uncle Tom's and all — had been replaced by a bank of condos, all with balconies or terraces facing the lake. The old lodge was still there, somehow managing to offer meals every day of the year. A lunchtime crowd looked on with amusement as the old man tottered to the beach and plodded through the windblown sand northward toward Cave Point.

Ben's legs carried him along the shore. The sun on the water, the wind in his face, the lapping of the waves, all combined to lift his spirits a few inches off the cellar floor of his despair. Mother Nature did not cure him, but it nudged him a bit in the right direction. Folger had spent the winter a couple hundred yards from the lake without ever seeing it. At first, the

glittering expanse buoyed him. Soon, though, its immensity overwhelmed. He could not comprehend the vastness. It became more than he could bear.

When he reached the boat launching ramp halfway up the bay, he turned away from the water, walked up the incline, and found himself crossing Bark Road at Whitefish Bay Road. He ignored the many cottages here, any one of which might have held more food and drink: This was the territory of the competing caretaker, Ye Olde Norwegian. Had he turned up Bark Road, he would have reached his father-in-law's shuttered cabin within a few minutes. But he continued westward.

After he passed the old Hitching Post cafe, the road angled right for a stretch. When it angled left again, he didn't notice and so kept on straight into the field. He straightened out and followed the corn stubble westward toward Valmy. He didn't notice the trio of Sturgeon Bay police cars speeding in the opposite direction, and they didn't notice him.

The day before, a lady in Wilmette, Illinois, had phoned Wisconsin Power and Light and confirmed the unusually high meter readings at her Glidden Drive summer home. She had then phoned the caretaker, who had promised to check the cabin first thing the next morning, which, as it turned out, meant around 11:30 am. ("Can't you go over there today?" she said. "It's only 1 pm!") He put down his beer and said, "Yah, well, no, ya see, I got family here today down from Oconto. But first thing tomorrow, you betcha.")

The caretaker found the home ransacked and called the police department, which sent one patrol car with two deputies. They confirmed the break-in, and then started peeking in windows up and down the drive. After finding two more break-ins, they phoned for back-up. There was no one to question on the drive, as the cabins were still all in winter shutdown mode. Lacking options, they stopped in for a cup of coffee and a sandwich at Glidden Lodge, and eventually learned from diners of a suspicious character wandering up the beach toward Cave Point.

By that time, Ben was clopping into Valmy, down Grasshopper Lane. When he reached Butterfly Lane, he saw the nose guard of the high school football team do the walk of shame out the back door of a small one-story building with a flat roof. The boy was carrying two clear plastic bags stuffed with dark green produce.

This was the first person Ben had seen in several months. Just seeing another human being was enough to raise his spirits another notch, such that he was capable of registering surprise when the boy tossed the bags in a garbage can. Ben actually laughed out loud at the incongruity of it. The act of laughing raised his mood yet another level. (Laughter will do that, even forced laughter. That's the theory behind the Laughing Yoga movement.) Ben could feel his thoughts lifting.

“Like to the lark at break of day arising from sullen earth,” he said aloud.

The nose tackle looked up, saw this old man grinning at him, and assumed his secret was out. He ducked his head, blushing with shame, crawled into a green Dodge pickup, and sped off.

Ben plucked the green bags out of the can, and, holding one in the same hand as the pillowcase, headed toward the door. He wanted more food, and thought this was the door to the old superette. He walked into a dim, windowless closet. The door closed behind him.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the light. Abigail stood at a laundry sink, washing one bright pink rubber hand under a steaming faucet. Without turning around, she said, “So, you got your kale?”

Ben raised the bags high and quipped, “Yessir, yessir, three bags full!”

She turned toward him, puzzled, and said, “Three bags? *Three* bags?”

Ben looked at the girl in the green mask and grinned his daft grin.

Abigail looked at Ben and said, “I guess we're taking all comers now. Well, put the kale on the counter and drop your pants.”

Ben's pants fell easily to the floor, no longer held in place by middle-aged blubber.

Abigail opened the other door a crack and hissed, "Gretchen, get in here!"

Gretchen, mask-less, squeezed into the closet. Ben stood there with his johnson dangling as Abigail lit into Gretchen.

"What is this? You were the one who said 'No outsiders,' and then you sell this total stranger not two but three bags of kale! What are we supposed to do for three bags? Use both hands? Gretchen, I just don't understand you sometimes. You've got your Vespa. Now you're just getting greedy."

Moments before, Gretchen's Snapchat and Twitter feeds had blown up: "Homes ransacked on Glidden Drive." "Old man escapes to Whitefish Dunes State Park." "Manhunt!"

Gretchen turned on her phone's flashlight app and pointed it at Ben's blank face.

"Holy shit!" she said, taking a step back. "It's you."

Gretchen pushed Abigail out into the empty laundromat and told her to "Mind the fort."

"What if we get customers? You know, two baggers? Or god forbid, three baggers?"

"Just tell them it's one to a customer today."

Abigail stared blankly, not comprehending.

"That business is closed today."

Abigail said, "You gonna give this dude his three-bags-worth yourself?"

"Oh Abby!"

Gretchen closed the door to the laundromat. She looked at Ben.

"Pull your pants up, sir."

He complied, cinching his over-long belt tight.

She opened the door a slit and hissed at Abigail, "Take off that stupid mask."

She closed the door.

Abigail opened the door and handed her the mask, saying, "You'll need this if you're doing him. Although he's already seen you."

She closed the door.

Gretchen said, "What are we going to do with you?"

Ben said, "I'm hungry."

CHAPTER TWENTY – THE FISH BOIL ON ONAN

Three times Ben fell off the back of Gretchen's Vespa on the short ride to the family barn, just east of Valmy.

Wary of patrol cars, Gretchen dipped into the deep ditch on the north side of Whitefish Bay Road. The problem came with the driveways, which rode high over 42-inch culverts. Ben managed to stay on as Gretchen angled left up to the gravel driveways, cut straight across, and angled right down to the ditch. It was the final dip and swerve left that deposited Ben in the moist grassy ditch two driveways in a row.

Each time, Gretchen patiently stopped, pulled the scooter up on its kickstand, helped Ben up, and told him to hold on tight. After the second fall, she pulled both arms around her, said "grab your wrists," started up, and cranked the accelerator slowly with her right hand while letting out the clutch with her left. Once they were moving forward, she grabbed his bony hands with her left hand and stayed in first gear until they were out of Valmy — just a couple more driveways. A few minutes later they made the slow turn onto the muddy tractor path to the old Koenig barn.

Gretchen eased around on the side opposite the house and stomped on the footbrake. Ben's momentum carried him forward into her back. He rebounded backwards and came straight off the back, hitting the wet weeds with a swish and a plop.

She pulled him up and led him through the barn door and into an old stall half filled with little lumpy bags. The bags were made of waxed paper and fastened with rubber bands. They had big red stickers on the side reading “Cheesy Chips” in big white letters. Much smaller letters read: “All organic ingredients. Kale, sunflower oil, cheddar cheese (milk, cheese cultures, salt, enzymes), whey, buttermilk, salt.”

A close reading of the package would reveal that Gretchen cared more about the planet than the people on it. She protected the former by using bio-degradable paper bags (which wouldn't keep the chips crisp as long as plastic bags), and tried to hoodwink the latter by putting the ingredients in eight-point type. She hoped people would become hooked on the flavor before realizing they were eating kale. There might be places where kale was still trendy and worth trumpeting in large type, but Door County was not one of them, and never had been.

“Help yourself,” Gretchen said. “And stay put. I'll be back.”

She took a hard look at this muddy, grizzled geezer. He peered back and shivered once in his sodden blouse. She shook her head and walked out.

Ben sat on a drum of vegetable oil, opened a bag of Cheesy Chips and munched. Then he opened another. And a third. His winter of booze and calisthenics had trimmed his body but done little for his stamina. The walk and ride had sapped him. He crunched kale chips and looked out of the stall into the heart of Gretchen's agribusiness enterprise.

This was an old barn, with traces of darkened red paint still visible on what was left of the outside wallboards. They had entered from the west through a doorway big enough to accommodate a hay wagon. The north hayloft above Ben's head was still intact, as were the long northern wall and the shorter eastern wall, 30 yards beyond which stood the house.

The southeast corner of the barn was caved in, as if kicked by a clumsy giant. For a long stretch, the southern wall was missing the lower half of its wallboards. It would have

been completely exposed were it not for a greenhouse made of translucent plastic sheets nailed tautly to a frame of new two-by-fours. Every breeze rippled the plastic audibly.

Beneath the plastic stretched row after row of kale plants, in rectangles of varying heights: a block of seedlings, a block less than a foot high, a block three feet high, and a block mostly picked clean of its leathery green-black leaves. Every plant was healthy and evenly spaced from its neighbors.

Ben muttered aloud, "Peculiar pokeweed, this."

But he kept eating it.

"Would that it were a trencher of scrapple, pop-robbins 'round the rim."

Gretchen was glad to find the house empty. She knew it wouldn't be for long, and that the barn would not be a safe place to harbor a fugitive. She didn't like to think what her dad would do if he found Ben. He fumed and spluttered every time Ben's face flashed across the TV screen.

She called Pyotr Zaske on her cell and told him to organize a flash fish boil, "at the usual place."

"You mean —"

"Don't say it," she interrupted.

"But I was planning on —"

"Zip it, Zippy," she barked. "Just do it. And invite the youth group gang."

"Miss Christiansen?"

Gretchen thought for a moment. Her first instinct was to protect her favorite teacher from trouble. Gretchen had never been one to ask for help from elders. She was used to making her way. But she decided this thing might be a bit more than she could handle.

"Yes. Ask her personally. Call her, don't text."

“Say, did you hear about this vagrant on Glidden Drive? Some people think it might be —“

“Shut up Zippy!”

After a pause, he said, “You know, Gretchen, you oughta treat me a little nicer. I practically paid for that Vespa of yours myself.”

“You got what you paid for.”

“I know, I know. I’m not complaining. But do you have to crab at me all the time, order me around like a pet dog?”

“I’m sorry, Zips. I’ve got a lot on my mind. Please, just get the gang together. And Miss C.”

“What if she won’t come.”

Gretchen considered this. She looked out the window and saw another patrol car speeding toward the lake.

“Tell her Ben will be there.”

“What?”

“Tell her and tell nobody else. I mean nobody.”

She hung up and phoned Ashley Debord.

“What up, Kale Queen?”

Ashley had grown to accept Gretchen’s rise in the highly stratified society that high school girls occupy. At first, Gretchen’s power derived from the fact that she didn’t really give a shit — at least not to the extent that most high school girls care about status. But as the business grew and everyone prospered, respect was due to the brains of the outfit. And then there was that unresolved business of the kissing party. Just who had enjoyed it more?

Ashley could tell that Gretchen had something more serious on her mind.

“Bring the posse to Lakeside Park, pronto, A. D.”

“Something wrong, Gretch?”

“I’ll let you know when you get there. Gotta go.”

Gretchen hung up and checked her feeds: “The one-man wilding on Glidden Drive.”

“Breaking and entering added to Folger’s growing rap sheet.” “Doom in the dunes for fugitive Ben?”

She walked into the garage, yanked grandpa’s old blanket-lined canvas jacket out of a trunk, and hustled back to the garage in time to hear Ben mumble something about Philadelphia cream cheese.

“How about a fish boil, Ben?”

He looked up. The dirt floor around him was littered with empty bags of Cheesy Chips.

To the uninitiated, a fish boil sounds like a big pimple protruding from slimy scales. In Door County, though, it is an edible ritual. Find an open area, build a bonfire, boil salted water, dangle a wire basket of potatoes and onions. When they are nearly done, immerse a second basket, this one full of cross-cut slabs of fish — trout or whitefish, most often. Inevitably, a scum of scales and fish oil floats to the top. You need to get rid of that before pulling up the baskets, or your dinner will be coated.

So you toss a cup of kerosene on the fire, causing a whoosh of flames to shoot skyward, a sudden increase in heat, and a boiling over. The scum boils off, the flame recedes, and you pull the food out, to be smothered in melted butter. The tower of flame announces to anyone who has wandered off that dinner is ready.

Fun for all, and bland enough for the least adventurous eater. A good choice to reintroduce a schnapps-soaked stomach to solid food.

Gretchen wrestled listless Ben into Grandpa’s jacket, begged him to hang on, and used the backroads north to Jacksonport. She wanted to avoid Highway 57 — a bit too fast

for a Vespa slowed by an extra passenger, and also too visible. But she risked getting too close to the dunes, where detectives were searching for Ben. That left a narrowing stretch of land. Highway 57 angles northeast and hits the shoreline in Jacksonport, a few miles north of the dunes. Gretchen rode the shoulder the last thousand feet before ducking into the park. Once there, she deposited Ben on a bench.

...

Astrid Christiansen was giddy. She loved the feeling, but hated that she loved it. When that odd boy Pyotr Zaske told her Ben Folger would be at the fish boil, something inside her did a back flip. She felt stupid for it.

This isn't the way it usually goes. Had Ben been told he was going to meet the prettiest teacher he'd had in high school, it would make perfect sense for him to get excited. That's the way it usually works: As a student, you only go through high school once. If you have a special feeling for anyone in high school, it imprints on you, and just waits for a trigger to make you a schoolboy or schoolgirl again. That's why mature people routinely misbehave at high school reunions.

It's different for teachers. After a while, the names and faces begin to mush together. A student from 10 or 20 years ago shows up, gushes that you changed his or her life, and you search your memory, desperate to remember who this balding, fat, babbling person is, or was, hoping to find one little ember of memory to fan into a compliment. Sometimes you remember, sometimes you fake it, say it's so great to see them, so mature and all, you just knew they would amount to something, the whole school is so proud of them. The students practically jump out of their skin with emotion, the memories of being young flooding back. The teachers — not so much.

It surprised Astrid, therefore, the intensity of this feeling. She puzzled over it as she tried on first one dress and then another, put her hair up and let it down, applied more make-

up than she had worn in years. Ben was the student who had taught her she had to set down some rules of comportment for herself. One, no rehearsing kissing scenes with students. All right, maybe just one rule, but it was an important rule. The memory of that lesson reminded her of when she was young and pretty. She was still astonishingly pretty for her age. High cheekbones, straight white teeth and a fit figure often preserve Nordic types into their later years. But she hadn't felt attractive to anybody in quite some time. Hearing about Ben reminded her that once she had been.

And then there was his newfound celebrity. As opposed to his old-found celebrity. Decades ago when Ben was working as a young professional actor, Astrid had caught a few of his performances in Chicago. She had even bumped into his young bride, Eliza, backstage, when the teacher went to tell the student that he had grown beyond her. Right there in front of Eliza he had brought up the memory of rehearsing for "Picnic," and Astrid had blushed, and Eliza had shook her head in mock dismay. Astrid joined them for a beer at a bar and left before her glass was half drained.

She'd lost track of him after that. Heard he had become a college teacher out west somewhere. And then, suddenly, he was on TV, on You Tube, on everyone's tongue. The people of Door County were proud, then ashamed, then conflicted. Most of the pictures and video of Ben since the convention had not been flattering. That pot belly is real, isn't it, she thought, and then scolded herself for being ungenerous. Watching the talk shows after the convention, she had marveled once again at his easy charm, and gasped when that charm eluded him in that final Fox interview. Even more than the allegations of sexual harassment, this sudden inability to cope dismayed Astrid Christiansen.

Why then, she asked herself, am I going to meet this troubled man as if it is some kind of date? Then she began thinking about the more recent allegations, and the manhunt

sweeping up the dunes just south of Jacksonport. Doesn't seem like a good idea to light a bonfire on a beach, as if say, "Look over here, coppers! Here's your man!"

The drive from Bailey's Harbor to Jacksonport is only 15 minutes, but Astrid fretted the whole way, and berated herself for wasting time getting dolled up. She thought about pulling into the parking lot at the Maxwellton Braes golf course, calling that Pyotr boy, and telling him to put out the fire. But it was just another ten minutes at that point. She pressed on, gunning her old van up to 77 miles per hour.

As a small child, Astrid had loved fish boils. As a teenager, she disdained them, thinking of them as tourist food. In college, her friend from Chicago had begged to go to one, and she relented. At the burst of flame, her friend shouted "Opa!" The friend explained that this is what the waiters shouted at the restaurants on Halsted Street in Greek Town when they lit the flaming Saganaki cheese. This all sounded quite exotic to Astrid. Eventually, she changed her tune. Why enjoy the rituals of other ethnicities and turn up your nose at your own? These days, she got a genuine kick out of it. She doubted she would enjoy this one. She pulled a tissue from the side of her purse and started wiping off lipstick.

As she pulled into the park's gravel lot, Astrid scanned the scene: five girls clustered around Gretchen at a picnic table. Four boys playing frisbee football. Pyotr and another boy a few steps upwind of the kettle and fire at the juncture of the flat lawn and the short, steeply down-sloping beach. Beyond the fire, the steel blue lake and low bank of clouds reflected the setting sun behind her. No sign of Ben.

As usual, the arrival of the beloved teacher created a hubbub, cries of "Miss Christiansen," smiles all around. Except from Gretchen, who looked worried. And Pyotr, who was busy tending the fire with a stick in his right hand and a tin can of kerosene in his left. The crucial moment was at hand.

Ben was just out of sight, down the slope at water's edge, beholding a lake that felt familiar somehow. ("Am I at Durwentwater, on a jaunt with David Hume?" he wondered.) At the shouts of "Miss Christiansen!" he turned and slowly plodded up the bank of sand, slipping halfway backward with every step forward. Astrid saw his old head bobbing up over the lip of the bank, a mane of silver hair flapping past his ears in the wind. His eyes looked hollow and sad. She could see right away that he had lost the plumpness of last fall's videos. She sucked in air at the sight: *How could a boy once so vital and self-assured come to this?*

What happened next transpired in a flash (quite literally), but seemed to unfold in slow motion, like a cheap horror flick.

Pyotr tossed the kerosene at the base of the fire, which shot upward 20 feet. Startled, Ben pitched to his knees. A finger of flame ignited the right side of his head. It seemed to Astrid at that moment as if his eyes suddenly found hers. His lips opened into a kind of ghastly smile. And then green foam gushed out of his mouth, light green foam with flecks of darker green, iridescent, unworldly.

It was a colorful sight. Orange flames. Pink clouds. Green puke.

Ben tipped forward slowly, like an old tree in the forest gradually giving way to a lumberjack's axe. His face touched the ground, hair still burning.

With a shout, Astrid dashed forward, got down on her own knees, and smothered his burning head with her skirt.

"Pyotr," she cried. "You and the guys get him into my van."

Pyotr and his pal were in the midst of extracting the wire baskets of food from the kettle. Ideally this is done with one quick motion, to prevent any remaining scum from sticking. He gaped helplessly back at Miss Christiansen.

The girls took over. As usual. Two girls grabbed knees. Gretchen and Miss Christiansen held Ben on either side at elbow and armpit. Ashley Debord grabbed the belt of his pants.

Ben was as light as a gutted bluegill, spikey bones and skin. They flopped him into the back of the van onto a pile of "Pirates of Penzance" costumes. Astrid pulled him over onto his side, licked her finger and put it under his nose.

"He's breathing," she said to Gretchen. "Passed out but breathing. He was eating your kale chips, wasn't he?"

"I guess," Gretchen said.

Miss Christiansen said to Ashley, "You and the girls go back and enjoy the food."

When they were out of earshot, Gretchen said, "What are you going to do with him?"

"He needs a hospital."

"That's like turning him in."

"What's the alternative?"

"Take him home."

"Come on, Gretchen. A dozen witnesses saw him here, saw me, and saw us put him in my van."

"They won't tell."

"High school kids won't tell?"

"I can guarantee it."

"The girls — you have some kind of power over them for some reason. I hate for them to be put in a position to lie to protect me. And they'll be in even more trouble once one of the boys tells. Accessories after the fact."

"He hasn't been convicted of anything."

"That doesn't matter. Once he is, we're all accessories."

“The boys won’t tell. They can’t.”

“OK, Gretchen. You talk to them. And then come to my house and convince me.”

Astrid drove across the highway and onto County A, taking the back roads home, just in case.

Gretchen appealed to her friends’ sense of fairness. Yes, they had all seen the parade of allegations against Ben Folger. The vicious video meme loops online. The angry speeches from politicians looking to make hay.

“But remember,” she said. “He’s one of us. He went to our high school. Until six months ago when Fox News got ahold of him, he was everybody’s hero. He’s still mine. I think.

“Shit, I don’t know what to think. But for six months we’ve heard his story told by everybody but him. If we turn him in, we might never get to hear his side.”

The fish and potatoes sent up wisps of fragrant steam in the silence that followed. Some of the highschoolers were thinking about the hell they would catch if their parents knew. Many of the boys were thinking about what Gretchen didn’t say. That she had all their O-faces on video.

Pyotr broke the silence.

“I don’t care about his politics. I don’t care that he humiliated our president. I want to hear from his face that he didn’t rape that girl.”

“Fair enough,” Gretchen said. “If you all keep your mouths shut, I’ll bring him to the Christian Fellowship group Sunday night.”

No one doubted she could do it.

Moments later three cop cars pulled in, gravel flying, lights flashing, drawn like moths to the flame. You spend an afternoon on the cold trail of a criminal, going back and forth over the same trackless ground, and you’re likely to grasp at straws. A spire of fire

looks like a signal. Like the oil truck exploding in *Thelma and Louise*. They grilled the kids for a while.

Then they chided them: “You shouldn’t be doing a fish boil without adult supervision.”

And then Pyotr put plates of buttered white chunks in front of them. Their frustration ebbed with every bite.

Gretchen slipped away on her Vespa, following the same back-door route her teacher had taken. Seeing the van parked in the driveway, she rolled the scooter behind a tree in back and ducked in the side door. She found Miss Christiansen sitting in the rocking chair in the living room, sipping a mug of green tea. Sheets and blankets were tucked neatly into the davenport.

“He going to sleep out here?”

“Looks like I will. He’s got the bed.”

Gretchen peeked in the bedroom. She could see the burned side of Ben’s head. Most of the hair was gone. His face was red. She looked closely in the dim light and only saw a couple of small blisters by his ear.

She walked back into the living room and asked, “You have any trouble getting him out of the van?”

“I held him from behind, let his legs drag, and pulled him in backwards. There’s not much to him. Must have been a hard winter.”

Gretchen sat on a chair by the opposite wall. They sat there for 10 minutes without speaking. Sometimes you have too much to say to talk. Astrid waited her out.

“Teddy Burmeister, Bill Todd, Dink Thompson, and three other cops showed up. We fed them. The boys kept their mouths shut.”

“Now, how did you manage that, Gretchen?”

“I dunno. My girly charm?”

Five more minutes of silence.

“I’m not buying it, Gretchen.”

Gretchen Koenig sighed. Stood up. Sat down.

And then she told the teacher she idolized the tale of the kale whores of Valmy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – THE SCHOOLTEACHER'S BED

Miss Christiansen sat in stunned silence while Gretchen detailed the lucrative exchange of kale and other hand-grown things for cash. Gretchen finished and blurted, “Gotta go. My mom sits up for me if I’m late, and Dad gets upset.”

She couldn’t read the expression on her teacher’s face as she darted out the door. Miss C did nothing to stop her. She offered neither sympathy nor admonition. As Gretchen kicked her Vespa to life, Astrid ran to the stoop and shouted, “How did he find his way to your business?”

“Dunno. It is still a laundromat. His clothes look like they need a wash.”

And she was off, this time straight down Highway 57.

Ben Folger slept and slept.

Astrid Christiansen was too keyed up to even lie down.

Her mind ricocheted between two topics: Gretchen’s sordid news and the man in the bedroom. She wondered what she would say to her long-lost student when he awoke. There had been an unspoken but deeply felt reversal of status common to high school teachers and the students who seek success in big cities.

In her domain — the classroom, the auditorium, and even at the youth fellowship meetings she advised — Miss Christiansen was idolized. Meeting them later, on the street, at

reunions, in the grocery store, students jockeyed to appear to have lived up to her high expectations.

"I'm selling Pontiacs in Green Bay," one would say, proudly. "I specialize in the high-end models."

Astrid could be depended upon to look properly impressed. She was, after all, an acting teacher. And then, sometimes any steady job was a welcome surprise from a once-scatterbrained student.

Occasionally a student would rise in local business, or even run for political office. One became a state senator.

But Ben Folger was something else.

In his own mind — his right mind, before he bonked his head — his star had not risen the way he had once hoped it would. He had played some major roles on some tiny stages in Chicago, and a few minor roles on big Chicago stages and small New York ones, Off Off. His one-man-show had rippled across the arts pages of North American newspapers without ever appearing above the fold on a section front, except in small towns. He'd received major inches in the Door County Advocate and the Resorter Reporter. Local boy makes *meh*. That's how he read it.

He'd retreated to the theater department of a middling state university, where he made sure the spotlight was on the students. Until the accidental promotion in Philadelphia, he had never even been on national TV.

But to Astrid, Ben was the student who made it big.

Which, in this dark March night, made her feel small. What could she possibly have to say to this man of the world, this globe-trotting actor and university professor, this Doctor of Philosophy?

She found it hard to reconcile the giant in her head with the shriveled, stinking wreck of a man in her bed. (How many women throughout history have had that very thought?) At three am, she could no longer bear the sight of Ben's ridiculous hair — bald on top, flowing grey to his shoulders in back and on one side, burned short on the other. She found a pair of scissors and sheared him evenly. She had to wait for him to flop over before she could finish the back. The stench of the man overwhelmed her.

Finally, toward dawn, Astrid walked to the living room and fell asleep on the couch. Fully clothed.

Ben slept for 18 hours. Solidly for the first 17. Then he was visited by a version of an old frustration dream he'd had with some regularity when he was hopscotching North America in "Ben!" In that dream, he would be scurrying through an endless terminal looking for a flight to his next gig, only to find cancelled flights, broken-down jets, gates closing, and, frequently, agents clattering keyboards only to repeat the refrain, "Can't get there from here."

This night, however, he was on an impossibly long wharf in 18th century London, fighting crowds along the Thames as he shouted up to pilots and captains on decks, "Can you take me home?"

Nonsensically, he never said "Philadelphia" or "Boston," just, "Home! I need to go home!"

Boat after boat turned him away. As he worked his way down the wharf, the gaps between boats lengthened, from a few yards to fifty. The boats themselves grew more dilapidated, less seaworthy, and the number of masts dwindled from five to three to two. The wizened tar on the final dinghy mutely shook his head and pointed. Off in the distance, at the very end of the wharf, bobbed a creaking sloop with a torn mainsail.

Ben ran and fell and crawled and gasped and got up and slogged some more.

When he finally reached the end of the wharf, he stopped and called up to a figure on the deck: "Home?"

Dressed like a Disney version of a captain in high boots, pantaloons, and brocaded jacket festooned with ribbons and medals, the figure turned. It was pretty, young Astrid Christiansen.

"Home?" he called again.

She beckoned him to board.

A fifty-foot two-by-ten board was all that connected boat to land. With every bob, the plank wobbled and pulled away several inches. Ben tottered up the plank and leapt the final few feet as it slipped into the briny, preventing any thought of return.

Captain Astrid caught his hands and pulled him closer, ever closer, pursing her lips for a kiss that never came. With the bobbing of sea, those smiling lips moved closer, bobbed slightly back, then closer still. When he could stand the suspense no longer, Ben moved in to consummate the kiss. But Astrid stepped briskly back, turned and pointed to a group of the most curious sirens, comely young lasses clad in sheets of thick green leaves. They danced and undulated on the open deck most provocatively.

Astrid nudged him in their direction.

"You shant kiss me, naughty boy. Kiss *her!*"

She nodded toward one in the middle, who snickered and drew him into a deep, wide hammock. The others clawed at his britches, pulled them down, urged him on.

Filled with a fearful longing, Ben thrust forward once, twice, a third time. With each incursion, the girl — for he realized, too late, this was just a girl — crumpled, crinkled, disintegrated into a cloud of green dust.

"Monster!" Astrid shrieked.

The remaining girls clutched his elbows and knees, swung him forward, back, forward, back, and with one mighty heave forward over the gunwales, up into the air, down, down, down into the salty deep, where seaweed and kelp clutched at him, pulling him deeper.

Ben awoke, tangled in sweaty sheets in a room darkened by drawn shades. Bright slits of light cast dual shafts across the bedroom.

Astrid leaned over. "Ben?"

"Water," he whispered.

He drank a tumbler down, handed back the glass, and slumped back into the mattress. When Astrid returned with a cup of broth, he was asleep again.

This time he dreamed he was at Passy, on the outskirts of Paris, cajoling the wives of French courtiers to, in turn, cajole their husbands to help America in its birth struggle. He played chess in a bathtub with a lady who wore nothing but a towering white wig.

Many years ago, Folger had toyed with the idea of leaving the one-man-show format and adding a woman, if for no other reason than to display this most theatrical scene, which poor John Adams — our nation's most inept diplomat (who later became a quite *ept* president) — is said to have stumbled upon, to his horror and Ben's amusement.

Unfortunately, there was no other reason, no other scene demanding a second player. An argument with his son? A discussion with Jefferson? And then, what, split the paltry box office 50-50?

That scene never happened on stage. But it rattled through his skull from time to time, looking for an exit.

Astrid gave Ben half a banana when he next awoke. He devoured it in two bites.

"You need bathing, Ben. Bath or shower?"

"A round of chess might amuse. It's been a while, dear."

Baffled, Astrid shook her head and led him to the bathroom. While Ben bathed, she changed the sheets, which by now stank almost as much as him.

Astrid was not a hoarder, except when it came to costumes. She couldn't bear to discard clothing that might serve another production. She didn't have time to keep making stuff from scratch. So she maintained an overflow closet in her home. She threw Ben's well-worn high-water pants and blouse in the washing machine and found a pair of slacks that had been worn by Willie Loman and Harold Hill and a red plaid flannel shirt from "Lumberjacks in Love." She folded these and put them on the counter in the bathroom where Ben's clothes had been. She also placed a fresh Lady Bic razor on the counter and a can of Gillette Venus Violet Swirl Gel. On the floor she placed a pair of boots (from "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers") and black tube socks. She left without his noticing she had been there.

Ben toweled off, shaved, and put on the clothes. They all fit perfectly, a testament to Astrid's haberdasher eye. He found her in the kitchen, warming the broth. He sat at the small, round table and slurped it down with three slices of buttered spelt bread and a mug of tea.

Astrid wasn't hungry. She sat opposite Ben, hands folded stiffly on the table, mind racing.

"Do you remember me, Ben?"

"Of course, *mon ami ravissante*."

He reached across and took her hands. Astrid blushed, despite herself.

"My, but you have become worldly."

"And yet I return here, drawn by beauty not to be found anywhere else."

She needed to change the subject.

"What do you make of Gretchen?"

"Gretchen?"

"Gretchen Koenig. The girl who brought you to the fish boil."

“Ah, Gretchen. She didn't tell me her name. Is she the one with all the salty vegetables?”

“Sadly, yes. Such promise, that girl. Truly a bright light in our muddy little corner of America. But my God! Using kale as a cover for prostitution! And then acting like it was just animal husbandry.

“Ben, tell me. Tell me the truth.”

“Always, my dear. The best policy, you know. Except when dealing with spies.”

“Did she, did you...”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you avail yourself of that confused girl's services?”

Now it was Ben's turn to blush.

“Yes, I'm afraid I had more than one bag of kale.”

Astrid looked horrified.

“I needed it. I hadn't had anything in a long time. And there it was for the taking.”

Over the course of these exchanges, voices had risen to compete with an annoying buzzing sound that began imperceptibly and grew louder until it was right outside the window. Suddenly it stopped. Gretchen Koenig alit from her Vespa and burst through the door.

“Miss Christiansen, you're late for Fellowship. The boys are getting impatient. If we don't get Ben there soon, they're going to call the cops.”

Ben looked at Gretchen. Astrid looked at Gretchen, began to speak, stopped, and turned back.

“Ben, Gretchen and I need a moment.”

Ben stood up, and, with a twinkle, bowed and said,

“Of course, Madame Anne-Louise Boivin d’Hardancourt Brillon de Juoy. When the ladies talk behind my back, it usually redounds to my benefit.”

Ben walked into the living room.

“Say what?” Gretchen said.

Astrid whispered, “Some literary reference, no doubt. This one went off to college and became a bit affected.

“But you, Gretchen, what are we going to do with you?”

Gretchen began to whisper, too.

“I’m not the target of a manhunt. We need to go or his ass is grass.”

“Watch your language, young lady. Maybe jail is where he belongs.”

“Have you been paying attention? There is a revolution out there waiting for its leader.”

“But what if he is, what’s the word? A pervert! Someone who preys on girls. First time you saw him, what did he say?”

“Not much. His pants were down.”

“Good god, Gretchen!”

“Look, the guys are upset, too. If this were just some wandering bum, I wouldn’t care. But he has *blown up*. What happens to him next could change history.”

“I don’t know, Gretchen.”

“If we sit around here gabbing, Zippy and the gang will call the cops. If they haven’t already.”

“Well, I suppose he’s not a flight risk.”

“Seems pretty tame. You cleaned him up good.”

Ben sat on the floor of the van for the short trip to the Jacksonport Ecumenical Church. Gretchen left her Vespa in the driveway and rode up front with Astrid. When they

arrived, a phalanx of track and field athletes escorted Ben into the church and down the stairs to the basement fellowship hall. It looked to Astrid like a lynch party.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO – TRIAL BY TRACK TEAM

Before the runners and shot-putters could get started on Ben, Astrid tried to lower the temperature.

“OK, folks, let’s start with our usual hymn and scripture.”

Jake Schwaba, Ashley’s boyfriend, set a fast tempo on the beat-up string bass. The motley assemblage of kazoos, home-made cajon box, and guitars followed along. All were eager to get it over with and move on to the main order of business. The result was a herky-jerky, frenetic rendition of *Be Thou My Vision*. Ben stood in the corner and danced a jig. Zippy reached the final words — *Still be my vision O ruler of all* — a full three beats before Miss C, with the rest of the group crossing the finish line at various points in between.

Still troubled by Gretchen’s recent behavior, Astrid asked her to read the night’s Bible passage, from a lectionary laid out in three-year cycles.

Gretchen read plainly, true to form, without “acting” the dialog.

“A reading from the Gospel of Mathew, chapter twenty-one. Jesus Curses the Fig Tree.

“In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, ‘May no fruit ever come from you again!’ And the fig tree withered at once.

“When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, ‘How did the fig tree wither at once?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, Be taken up and thrown into the sea, it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.’”

Miss Christiansen asked, “What do you make of this passage?”

Silence ensued. One of the boys breathed noisily through his kazoo, stopping when Miss Christiansen shot him a look.

“OK,” she said. “Why did Jesus curse the fig tree?”

“He was hangry,” Abigail said to a scattering of laughs. “No, seriously. It says he was hungry. A fig tree should have figs, otherwise what good is it? And the previous part we read last week said he had just whipped the money changers, driven them from the holy place. He’s angry. And he’s hungry. He’s hangry. There wasn’t a Jack in the Box nearby.”

Again, laughter, the derisive kind that Abigail seemed to attract. Sometimes she felt that was her role, to be the ditz that brings laughter.

“I’m impressed,” Miss Christiansen said. “Abigail was listening last week. Remember, that is one of the keys to understanding scripture, particularly the gospels: What went before? What are the pre-existing conditions? When Jesus walks into a scene, what just happened, what happened the day before, how is he feeling at this moment, and what is his objective?”

Even when leading a prayer group, Astrid relied on the kind of textual analysis one learns in acting classes.

“But why take it out on the fig tree?” Gretchen said. “A fig tree will produce fruit when it is good and ready.”

The discussion devolved into bickering over how Jesus made the tree wither, whether his halo seared the leaves, or tongues of spiritual fire leapt from his forehead, or maybe he summoned a hot wind.

“How he did it is beside the point,” Zippy said. “I think the passage is there to show us that Jesus is both divine — able to command nature — and fully human. He hungers. He has wants. He understands what it is to be a person on this earth who wants things. And to feel frustration when those things aren't forthcoming.”

“That's great, Zippy, just great,” Jake said. “I think you nailed it. No need to say more, is there, Miss Christiansen?”

Astrid knew she could delay no longer, even though she felt the boy had missed the larger lesson about the power of faith.

“Yes, very insightful, Mr. Zaske. And let us remember this lesson of the humanity of Christ as we seek to learn more about the troubling situation of my former student. Ben, please sit here where we can all see and hear you.”

Ben sat in a chair in the middle of the circle of highschoolers.

“Troubling?”

Ben seemed happy to be the center of attention, and curious to see what the group had in mind. He expected questions about his early electrical experiments.

“Knowledge does not always come quickly, but we need not be troubled when it eludes our grasp. As in matters of the heart, patience and persistence wins out.”

“Well, there, that's the real question, *sir*,” Jake said.

The sarcastic emphasis of the word “sir” escaped Ben's notice.

“How much persistence was there? Was it forcible rape?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Ben raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“Rape is a serious matter, sir.”

“Indeed it is,” Ben said. “And not fit for mixed company. I will speak no further on this topic in front of the ladies, and would rather not speak of it at all.”

After considerable grumbling, the girls agreed to accompany Astrid out of the room.

Jake Schwaba hoped to become a lawyer one day. As member of the high school mock trial team, he excelled at prosecution.

“Earlier this week, you were observed entering a certain establishment in Valmy, Wisconsin, via the back door. Please tell the court what transpired.”

Zippy interjected, “Objection! This is not a trial. Let’s keep it real here.”

Jake considered this.

“Mr. Zaske makes a good point. Sir, consider this a preliminary hearing, to determine whether you should be remanded to the authorities for a proper trial.”

Ben played along.

“A jest! A fine jest indeed. Tell me the charge, sir!”

“Rape,” Jake said gravely. “Zippy here — uh, Mr. Pyotr Zaske, will represent you.”

“What?” Zippy exclaimed.

“The accused deserves representation.”

“I am most glad to have you do so, Mr. Pass-key, if, as your name suggests, you can unlock the gates to everlasting justice.”

“Zaske.”

Jake continued.

“Let me ask you again, sir: What transpired in the Valmy laundromat?”

“Is that where I am supposed to have raped someone? In the washer or the dryer?”

“You know perfectly well that the rape happened years ago in California.”

Attorney for the Defense Zippy Zaske spoke up: "Then why are you asking about the laundromat?"

"It's called 'laying the groundwork.' I want to establish the low character of the defendant."

Having been assigned the task of defense, Zippy began to get into it:

"If frequenting that laundromat is a sign of low character, then every guy in this room is guilty."

"Cleanliness is next to godliness," Ben chirped, as if reciting from Poor Richard's Almanac.

"It appears you have cleaned yourself up for this inquest, sir ..."

"Oh, so now it's an *inquest*," Zippy interjected.

"...But no amount of soap can wash clean the mind of a pervert."

"Objection!" Zippy hopped to his feet.

Jake barreled on.

"We all know the real reason a man goes into that place, because we have all done it," Jake said. "You buy two bags of kale for a jacked-up price, you walk into the back room, and a girl in a disguise rubs your penis unto ejaculation into a laundry tub. You were seen with two bags of kale. No man with operating taste buds buys even one bag of kale for any other purpose but sex."

"He might have eaten it," Zippy offered. "Maybe he likes kale."

"Please," Jake said with a theatrical look of disdain.

"So," Zippy continued, "you contend that the defendant entered the Valmy laundry with evil intent, and, like the rest of us, hates kale. If I could prove that he had in fact eaten a large amount of kale that very day, would you withdraw your accusation that his presence at the laundry is evidence of a dirty mind?"

"I suppose," Jake said. "But we can't just take his word for it. Any fool can say he likes kale."

"Gentlemen of the court," Zippy orated, "how many of you were present at the recent fish boil? Say aye if you were there."

A chorus of impatient "ayes" filled the room.

"At the moment of conflagration, I assume all looked toward the fire, as one always does. It's instinctive. Say aye if you looked toward the fire when I pitched the kerosene."

Ayes all around.

"If you noticed an old man standing by the fire at that moment, so close that his hair was singed, point to that man."

Everyone except Jake pointed at Ben.

"Please note also the blisters on his temple."

"Noted," Jake said. "Get on with it."

"Before falling to the ground, what did the accused do?"

The boys offered a variety of disgusting expressions: "He lost his lunch...he spewed chunks...he puked."

"Yes," Zippy said, "he vomited. And what, pray tell, was the *color* of that vomit?"

"Green!!!" the boys shouted, suddenly realizing the point of Zippy's questions.

"Yes, green, green, green. Kale green.

"Young men like us go to the laundry to get our peckers cleaned out, but an old man actually eats the kale. The defendant is guilty of nothing more than hunger, hunger so severe that he would rather eat kale than do anything else, including avail himself of the sex he had coming to him by virtue of having obtained the requisite quantity of the bitter weed. We may be dirty young men, but there is no evidence here that my client is a dirty old one."

Some of the boys applauded, oblivious to the insult. Zippy correctly calculated that no self-respecting teenaged boy would admit to eating the kale, even though he himself did. They would sooner admit to paying their own girlfriends for hand jobs than to eating something so representative of everything that is evil about about elite, big city, blue-state culture.

“OK, Zippy, you win that round,” Jake said. “But let’s get down to the real charge.”

Jake motioned to a hulking boy — the same lineman who had passed Ben as he left the laundry, and had later identified him to Jake. The boy turned on a TV set on the wall. It had been pre-loaded with the by now infamous recording of the suicidal girl speaking of the time Ben Folger had assaulted her. Certain bits and pieces of this interview had been broadcast across television and the Internet many times. No one in the room had seen the full interview, though, until now.

The group watched in disgust until the girl made clear that it was Ben Folger who had raped her, at which point Zippy shouted, “That’s enough. That’s enough. Pause it. I’m not defending this creep any more. I think we have our answer.”

To his credit, Jake wanted to be sure that the case was air-tight. He didn’t want his buddies having second thoughts later.

“Let me ask you, sir: Do you think women ever pretend to be raped?”

“I saw it happen once,” Ben said soberly. “In a certain neighborhood of London, a customer tried to get away without paying. The woman followed him on the street until she spotted a constable on duty. She cried rape. The rascal paid double.”

“But what about respectable women?”

“They never lie about something like rape. That would ruin them for London society. Boston and Philadelphia as well.”

“So when a respectable woman cries rape, it is to be believed?”

“Oh yes.”

“The young woman we just witnessed on the screen. Did you have the intent of hurting her?”

“Yes, I wanted to hurt her. That was a decision I made early on. Without that intent, the sex part would have been unsatisfying, lacked dramatic effect.”

The boys were appalled, not just at the words, but at the matter-of-fact way Ben delivered them. No hint of regret or shame.

Jake pinned Ben's arms behind the chair while Zippy bound him with a couple purple cords from the choir robes that hung on a rack nearby. One of the boys retrieved Miss Christiansen and the girls.

“He's guilty,” Jake told her. “I think it's time to call the cops before he hurts one of you.”

“What's your evidence?” Miss Christiansen said, trying to appear calm.

She avoided eye contact with Ben. They played the tape from the beginning, stopping at the same point.

“Let's watch it to the end,” Miss Christiansen said.

The young woman on the tape described how Folger forced her down, holding a knife close to her neck.

“It's the kind of knife they use to cut a deer,” the woman said.

“Play that part again,” Miss Christiansen said.

There was something odd about the way the woman said those particular words. This videotape was the raw footage from an extended interview with a campus reporter, retrieved from the online archives of the student newspaper. Most of the time, the woman was answering questions in a conversational tone of voice. When she got to the part about the knife, though, Astrid felt she became — what to call it? — *theatrical*.

“Play it once more.”

They played the passage a third time, and then, thoroughly puzzled, paused to see if their teacher wanted to see it again.

“I’ve heard that before,” she said. “If I’m not mistaken, that is a line from a play.”

Miss Christiansen began rapidly Googling on her phone.

“Yes! *Extremities*. By William Mastrosimone. A play about rape. OK. *Extremities* AND Ben Folger. Bingo! University winter production, 2007.”

Jake took a step toward Ben.

“So,” Jake said, suddenly less confidently, “When you say violence was necessary to make the sex dramatic — you were talking about a play?”

“What do you think?”

Following Ms. Christiansen’s lead, they quickly probed online archives and found more quotes from the actors, including one from the same actress — a graduate student doing the production as part of a Master’s project — in which she said how wonderful it had been to play with a gentle, generous actor like Ben. Further research showed that her suicide had followed a period of unemployment and opioid addiction. What the right wing press had done with this material to tar Folger would make a good case study in fake news.

“Untie him,” Miss Christiansen said. “Boys, I believe you owe Ben an apology.”

Up until this point, Ben had remained quite calm and affable — unnaturally calm, given the circumstances. This patient demeanor was a choice he had made early on in his development of Franklin as a character. Truly gifted individuals typically struggle with the annoying slowness of others. In any discussion, their minds leap ahead, and must wait for the group to catch up. Until they learn patience and tact, this can make them annoying and reviled outliers. Perhaps this is why James Franklin beat his smartass little brother. In Folger’s internal history of young Ben, he decided that those beatings had taught the boy to

be careful about displaying his brilliance, to be magnanimous, to deflect credit to others, when possible.

A case in point: In his autobiography, Franklin mentioned that he was often credited with building a hospital for the poor. Although it is clear that Franklin was the driving force — gathering funds from donations and the colonial assembly — he took pains to give the credit for the initial idea to a doctor, Thomas Bond.

In his writing, Franklin occasionally chided himself for being impatient. Ben decided that this impatience was an internal feeling that Franklin successfully curbed in human interactions. No doubt the West in the 18th century lacked the anti-intellectual tenor of the 21st. It was good to *be* smart and to *appear* to be smart. But Ben felt human nature always abhorred a show-off, and decided that while Ben had more opportunity to show off than any man in his time, he appeared to most to embody humility.

Not everyone liked him. Stiff John Adams was appalled at his flirtatious behavior in France. But Ben's research uncovered no suggestion that anyone considered Franklin haughty or impatient or disdainful of those less intelligent (which would have been everyone he met in the new world, without exception, Thomas Jefferson included, Ben felt). The Benjamin Franklin that Folger created on stage knew how to bring people along slowly to an understanding of his point of view. And when he could not persuade people of his opinion — as he could not persuade the representatives of King George who dressed him down for several humiliating hours one fateful day in London, the day when Franklin finally gave up on England and became a revolutionary, Ben had decided — he simply shut his mouth and endured.

Now that Folger was in a state of being Ben Franklin, that patience and jocular demeanor filled him. He maintained the dual focus of incorporating 21st century fact into 18th century reconstruction. When asked about something Folger had done — choosing, for

example, the most hateful motivation for the rapist character Folger had portrayed — he answered with a consciousness that seamlessly merged Folger and his memories with the created character of Franklin. Accuse Folger of rape and Franklin will receive that charge with the attitude that it was just an amusing misunderstanding, easily dispelled.

The truth was on his side, and the truth will out. Until it did, he remained calm.

But once it did, his mind became uncharacteristically agitated. Didactic Franklin emerged. Clearly, here was a room full of youngsters in sore need of instruction.

“Now that I have been cleared of a spurious charge,” Ben said, standing and rubbing his sore wrists, “I hope that I may be permitted to speak.”

“Of course, Ben, please,” Astrid said, immensely relieved at the turn of events.

“While you have been examining my character, I could not help but notice a flaw in yours — all of yours, with the exception of this lady here, who I trust knows nothing of your youthful frolics. It is a serious flaw that must be plucked out before it becomes a habit of mind.

“I speak of the exchange of vegetables for sexual favors from these most enterprising young ladies, who, if I understand correctly, have managed to take your money and give very little in return. This must stop.”

Zippy stood, placed himself between Ben and Gretchen, and mustered a manly voice.

“If you or anyone is going to pass judgment on Gretchen Koenig, you’ll have to deal with me.”

“My boy,” Ben said, “it is you I want to deal with most of all. You and your misguided fellows.

“You take God’s greatest gift and squirt it down a drain, quite literally. The world needs that gift to grow and thrive.”

Jake shuffled his feet and said, "Um, the world is overpopulated already. We don't need more babies, burdening us and tying us down."

"That, sir, is a dark thought. But I'm not talking about procreation. I am speaking of creation itself.

"Boys, play along with me. Think for a moment about that urge, that stirring in your loins that drives you to seek relief. Can you remember that feeling? Not the crude action that follows it, but the initial feeling itself, the buzzing longing."

"Remember it?" Zippy chirped. "It never goes away!"

"Good, excellent! Ponder that feeling. Consider it from all angles. It is a kind of inchoate energy, is it not? Neither good nor evil but potent. Powerful. Like lighting in a jar.

"It can't stay in the jar. That would drive you mad."

"No kidding," Zippy muttered.

"You must let it out somehow," Ben said. "But how?"

Ben paused for effect. The boys looked at their shoes.

"You have a choice. You can seek to simply snuff out the light, dissipate the energy, make nothing of it. You can lose yourself in fantasy. Imbibe frivolous fleshpots and diversions, consume what the French call books you read with one hand. You can fritter your money and your spirit of enterprise.

"Or you can harness it. Do something worthwhile with it. Build something."

"Like what?" Jake said.

"A nation. A new world. Are we not under the thumb of a distant ruler and his emissaries who bleed our coffers, take the resources of many to line the pockets of the few, while trampling our rights?

"Do not settle for the limp hand of expedience when the body politic yearns for liberty!"

“Yes!” Gretchen cried, beaming.

This was the Ben Folger she had been reading about, hoping for.

Ben turned his attention toward Gretchen and her sisters in horticulture.

“Although I put the burden of change on these fellows, I must admonish the young ladies here to play your part, the part history always gives you. You inspire the desire of mankind. I daresay you have desires of your own. But yours must come with a greater sense of control, lest you find yourselves struggling with impoverished motherhood.

“Say yes to the men. Do not dismiss them with a wave of your hand. Give yourselves completely.”

The boys in the room perked up at this.

“But not unconditionally. Demand loyalty, commitment to a shared future. Make of your energies a fusion of light that is a beacon to the world. Shine on! Shine together. Don't help each other *dispel* life. Help each other *make* a life for yourselves and for others. Leave the world better than you found it! Better for you. Better for him. Better for us all.”

At this the young congregation erupted into applause. After hand shakes, a kiss on the cheek from Gretchen, pledges of support — *I'll join your militia!* — the gathering dispersed.

Astrid noticed that some in the group exited as couples, closer than usual, excited. Zippy slapped Ben on the back, thanked him, and saw Gretchen striding up the stairs. He reached the parking lot in time to see her get in the back of Jake's car, Ashley riding shotgun.

Astrid worried about how the young couples had interpreted or misinterpreted Ben's sermon. She herself found his words stirred her idealism and her latent desire in a way that one fed on the other. She was disturbed, but rather liked the feeling.

Astrid locked the door to the church and drove Ben home. Halfway there, they passed Gretchen heading the other way on her Vespa. At a stopsign in Bailey's Harbor, Astrid

looked over at Ben. He seemed revived. A new man, ready once more to face whatever should come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE – A DALIANCE DEFERRED

Astrid's svelte figure was a small miracle, given that she had lived for decades a short walk from the Yum Yum Tree, a magnet for tourists and locals that drew crowds all summer long with its wide selection of fudge and ice cream. Kierkegaard's Yum Yum tree had been its name until it was sold by the original owners, who traced their lineage to Soren and would tell anyone who enquired that the position of church (*kierke*) guard had once been an important one in Danish culture. A college class in Existentialism had taught Astrid about the philosopher's idea that sin was not an action that depended upon one errant choice but was, rather, the result of a linked series of choices. The murderer sins when he buys the gun, sins again when he puts the bullet in the chamber, and sins afresh every step he takes toward the victim.

With that in mind, Astrid came to feel she was committing a minor sin every step she took in the direction of the purveyor of her favorite fudge — penuche with walnuts — and that every step in the other direction amounted to a form of repentance. Living for so many years so close to the fudge factory permanently established this habit of thought in Astrid.

In the annoying corner of her brain that kept track of such things, then, she wondered whether her actions upon their return home were sinful. It would depend, of course, on what they led to. In any case, she opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio that she had been saving for a

special occasion and laid out a spread of delectables for her famous guest. It had been too long since she had shared a meal alone with a man. She tried to make it special. Not so much for him as for herself.

Ben slathered butter and cream cheese on knækbrød and topped it with smoked salmon and lingonberries (this last intended for another purpose, but Ingrid just smiled as he wolfed it down, the salmon slurping and the crackers crackling).

A dozen worries buzzed through Astrid's head. Should she encourage Ben to find a lawyer and take a stand? Should she harbor him indefinitely, or hurry him on his way? What were the young couples of the youth group up to at this very moment? How would the parents, the town, the principal, and the superintendent react if they heard that fugitive radical accused rapist Ben Folger had been the guest of honor at the Youth Fellowship meeting? Was she ready for tomorrow night's opening rehearsal of *Pirates of Penzance*? Was the van overdue for an oil change and tuneup? Having missed laundry day tending Ben, did she have enough clean undies to last the week?

Astrid poured herself and Ben another glass of wine and marveled at his calm. Perhaps he was feigning cool out of consideration for her. She wanted to tell him that she would share his burden, but he seemed completely at peace. It was as if his only concern in the world were how many lingonberries he could pile on top of a cracker without losing too many over the edge. In fact, that *was* the only thing in his head at the moment. He was not so much in command of his thoughts and emotions, as Astrid imagined, as he was devoid of them.

Astrid thought to herself, *If he can pretend not to be worried, so can I*. She decided that all her troubles and his could wait until morning. *Be here now*, she said to herself, quoting Baba Ram Dass (nee Richard Alpert), whose name had appeared on the same weird

course reading list as Soren Kierkegaard's. (Kierkegaard was early in the term; Baba Ram Dass came at the end, in the "offspring of existentialism" module.)

Astrid poured the last drop of wine.

"More?" she murmured.

She held up the empty bottle in one hand and the empty salmon plate in the other.

The winter of want had left Ben's stomach small and easily sated.

"No more for me," he said, "but thank you for your hospitality. The ladies of this *arrondissement* have always been so welcoming to me, so *amical*."

I'm sure they have, Astrid thought, chuckling at his sophisticated word choice. She played along, using her best French accent.

"What shall we do wit zee dregs of zee evening, monsieur?"

"We could retire to the bath for a game of chess," Ben said.

(Again with the chess reference!)

"Or we could lance the passion that has lain between us lo these many years, simmering, festering even, an unnatural distraction to our larger task of moving the king down the checkered board to a point where he can be of real assistance."

Astrid looked confused.

"You might at least grant me a kiss," he said, with a fake pout.

Ben expected her to demur sweetly, in that sexy way so common among the wives of French diplomats, women who never tired of playing this game with the old rascal of the American colonies. Both sides knew how to play. Ben would pretend to be consumed with admiration for the charms of the ladies, who were genuinely flattered. Because of his advanced age, all participants understood without saying so that nothing much could possibly come of all this innuendo. The women enjoyed playing with a powerful celebrity and Ambassador Franklin hoped the women would speak well of him to their husbands, some of

whom were in a position to lend real assistance to the fledgling nation across the briny swells. The wives kept America on France's radar, so to speak. The flirting was a game that always ended the same, or so Ben Folger had decided when building his character.

He was completely unprepared for what Astrid did next.

Murmuring "What zee hell," she put down the bottle and the plate, pivoted into Ben's lap, laced her hands behind his neck, leaned in so close that both their eyes crossed, executed the crucial pause she had taught him long ago, and plunged forward for a salty sweet fishy kiss.

She knew now that the opening of the wine, the placing of the linen napkins, the lighting of the candle, all these little sins had been marching lock-step to this moment.

What would Ben do?

Folger did what he was trained to do. He played along.

For Astrid, what followed was nostalgia sex. Just as the sex at high school reunions is never half as zipless as the participants imagine it should be, Astrid's coupling with her former student required surmounting obstacles. First, light was still streaming through the kitchen windows. She lurched into the curtained bedroom, pulling Ben behind her. They sat on the edge of the bed, kissed and groped, slid onto the floor and climbed back onto the bed. They wrestled off clothing, at first trying to help each other.

When that didn't work, Astrid said, "You take off yours. I'll take off mine."

When Astrid closed her eyes, it was easier to imagine young Ben. But that made her feel guilty on two levels. First, it was just dishonest. Second, young Ben was a little too young, especially now that she was older. She tried to remember the early career Ben, the one she had met backstage, but the image was hazy and she could not erase the memory of Ben's young wife sitting there. A nice enough woman — charming and pretty and smart — but not one she wanted occupying her mind's eye as she attempted to screw her husband.

It was a slow slog. At one point they took a break. Astrid walked naked into the still-bright kitchen, saw a window shade suddenly go down in the neighbor's house, and opened another bottle of Pinot, which she took into the bedroom without glasses. They traded swigs and tried again.

She was *secco* and his noodle was something less than *al dente*, but both of their brains were *frizzante* enough to keep trying. Forty-five minutes were spent persuading Ben's indecisive soldier to join the cause. She blew hot breath on it. She spoke to it, first baby babble and then more adult words she had never before said aloud. Fingers, lips, and tongue finally succeeded in bringing him to full attention, at which point they realized *she* needed help.

Still naked, she hunched into the bathroom and rummaged through the cabinet under the sink looking for a long lost bottle of KY lotion. Meanwhile, he ambled to the kitchen and retrieved the plate of butter. He licked one of the lingonberries off the top and applied the stick and its remaining berries to the bony end that protruded from the cabinet.

In a testament to the signature product of America's Dairyland, the sex suddenly got better. With her head in the cupboard, Astrid was no longer distracted by the harsh spring sunshine. Still spacey, Ben's mind drifted, so that the finish line approached and receded but was never reached. After a while, Astrid opened her eyes and found she could see a little.

"Oh there you are!" she chirped, spying the bag of makeup sponges she had been looking for since the previous fall's production of "Arsenic and Old Lace."

"As if you didn't know," Ben said, chuckling.

A lone lingonberry — this one unripe and hardened — found its way via gravity and Ben's thrusting to a spot where it rolled forward and back, forward and back, gently abrading the clitoris. Astrid could not imagine what this was. It momentarily disgusted her. Soon, though, the physics of the situation drew from her a guttural moaning that grew louder and

louder, amplified by the soundbox of the sink cabinet. The neighbor's window shade rose an inch.

Ben was confused. This didn't sound like a lady. Perhaps he had happened upon the scullery maid. With this in mind, he shifted his technique, believing a less gentle approach might be appreciated. He thrust forward with a mighty lunge. His head hit the cabinet. Astrid's face pressed hard against the P-trap and her forehead bonked the hot water shutoff valve.

"Ow!" they both cried in unison.

Ben backed out, leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Astrid extracted herself, closed the cabinet door and stood up. Seeing a red crease on Ben's bald pate, she put on a bathrobe and left, returning shortly with ice cubes inside a dishcloth. She pressed it to Ben's head. He saw the bump on her forehead and the outline of the P-trap on her cheek.

Without irony, he said, "What in heaven happened to you?"

He stood up, led her to the bed, took the ice pack, and dabbed at her with great gentleness.

And then he made love to her in a manner he imagined was appropriate for a French lady. He felt a little guilty for having boffed her maid (who had made herself scarce). When he touched her, he paid close attention to her reaction, pressing forward when it was positive and retreating or changing course when there was the slightest frown or coolness. The sun was finally setting, sending warm light around the edges of the drawn curtains, a light that washed out the wrinkles of skin and took 20 years off each of them. They made love with their eyes open. Bony hips still collided, but more gently now.

Astrid had been physically sated an hour ago. Now she felt emotionally satisfied, as if she and her lover had communicated a deep truth, had somehow revealed what was most important about themselves to each other, and been accepted and loved for that inmost thing.

This was how making love should be, she thought: two mature adults, fully aware, eyes open, one person completely and openly understanding and accepting the other. A ballet of reciprocity.

Ben was careful not to climax until she did, and she did with a shout of unbridled joy.

"Zut alors!" he gasped an instant later.

They slumped back against the pillows, kissing gently, her eyes misting. She pressed her dented cheek against his chest hair.

Ben gently wrapped his arms around her and began to speak in a dreamy, intimate, bedroom voice.

"I have heard from General Washington. They have spent a terrible winter at Valley Forge. The troops are hungry, disheartened. They need a bit of good news. I would be endlessly appreciative, Madame Anne-Louise Boivin d'Hardancourt Brillon de Juoy, if you would be so very, very kind to convince your husband to meet with me, Mr. Adams, and that brave young Frenchman, the Marquis de Lafayette. At your husband's earliest convenience."

"But please," he said, kissing the bump on her forehead. "Don't make me wait."

And then he fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – HOT ON THE TRAIL

Captain Bill Todd told Teddy Burmeister and Dink Thompson that they would have to work overtime until they caught the radical fugitive. They were happy to comply. All three were avid hunters. Game didn't get much bigger than this. Teddy and Dink had been the first officers on the scene of the cottage break-ins. They had followed the trail for two days, looking, scanning the sand, dirt, and pavement before them for tracks. They had wasted a day in the dunes on Friday. Seeing the sudden tower of flame, they had radioed in, and Bill had driven out.

“We've reached a dead end,” Dink said.

“Look,” Bill said, “I'm thinking the feds will show up soon. You know what it's like on opening day of hunting season if you don't reach your blind by dawn.”

Saturday, they met for breakfast at The Hitching Post. Bill and Dink ordered the sausage gravy bowl. Teddy ordered the bacon swiss quiche. Bill said that would take too long so he reluctantly switched to the same giant bowl of lumpy grey delicious goop.

Bellies full, Teddy and Dink headed for their squad car.

“Leave it here,” Bill said. “We're walking.”

A good 20 years older, Bill lagged behind on the short walk along Whitefish Bay Road toward Lake Michigan. By the time they reached Bark Road, he had become annoyed. He yelled for them to wait for him there.

Bill spoke slowly, trying to cover the fact that he was out of breath.

“You guys seem very observant. Heads down, eyes squinting like gun sights. You were really staring down every pebble in the road, every weed in the ditch, weren’t you?”

Dink shuffled his feet. Teddy raised his gaze toward the end of the road where the sun sparkled off choppy waves. Dink and Teddy were both were familiar with their captain’s sarcasm.

Dink made the mistake of answering.

“Yeah, scanning the ground. That’s where the tracks would be.”

“Deer tracks, yeah. Man tracks — maybe.”

While Teddy and Dink had been roaming the dunes the day before, Captain Todd had been doing online research. Everyone had assumed that Folger would return to the old family farm. It didn’t take much digging to learn that his father-in-law had once owned a place on the cheap side of Bark Road. He thought they should check that out.

When they came to the address, Captain Todd motioned for Dink to walk around the north side and Teddy to go around the south side to the back.

“Do you have a search warrant?” Teddy whispered.

Captain Todd shot him a look, and replied, “I’ll knock. If he’s there, he’ll go out the back where you numbnuts will apprehend him and read him his rights with all the gentleness and respect the law demands, thank you very much. And if no one answers, there will be no one to report that I searched without a warrant. I always wipe my feet.”

Captain Todd waited two minutes, knocked five times, waited two more minutes, and said in a voice Teddy could barely hear from around back, "If anyone is in there, come out now. You are surrounded."

The words sounded funny, as if he were in a hackneyed old movie.

Captain Todd stood on tiptoe and peered through the glass at the top of the door. Dink stood off the northwest corner looking expectantly at the back door, his gun drawn and pointing at a mud puddle halfway between him and the stoop. He shot a glance to his right and was annoyed to see Teddy standing, legs apart, hands on hips, facing away from the house. He was looking up in the trees as if he had spotted a pileated woodpecker.

"Teddy! Teddy!" Dink hissed.

Startled, Teddy pivoted and grabbed at his gun just as Bill Todd was walking out the back door.

"Please, gentlemen," Captain Todd said with a long-suffering look. "Holster your sidearms."

"What in hell were you looking at, Ted?" Dink said.

Ted turned and pointed up at a wooden platform that peeked out from the branches.

"Bill told us to set our sights higher."

Now Captain Todd drew *his* pistol. He motioned for Dink to walk behind the platform.

"Anyone up there?" Captain Todd called, louder now.

He waved for Teddy to go up. Office Burmeister ascended the ladder on the side, crawled onto the platform, and then poked his head over the edge.

"Great view from up here," he said.

"Oh," Captain Todd said, sarcastic again. "And what do you see?"

"The lake."

“Any fugitives?”

“No. But I can see a security camera hanging from the eaves on the house across the road. Probably recorded you going into the cabin without a warrant.”

Captain Todd glowered. Then he smiled a tight, closed-mouth smile.

“What?” Dink said. “What, what, what?”

“We should check the cameras up and down the road,” Teddy said.

“No shit,” Captain Todd said.

He felt stupid for not thinking of this earlier.

For the rest of that day and most of Sunday, Teddy and Dink searched Bark Road for security cameras, texting the addresses to Bill Todd back at the station. Todd then contacted owners and security companies, gaining access to the digital recordings for the previous three days. Most of the cottages were empty this time of year. Some absent owners couldn't be contacted. But those who were available didn't hesitate to grant permission to review their recordings. When you buy a security camera, you spend years wondering if it was a waste of money. They were happy the expense could finally be justified, especially if it caught someone who was trashing their neighbors' places.

Only one resident refused. He had been following the Folger case, thought all the charges were bullshit, and assumed the trashing reports had been exaggerated too.

“That's OK, sir,” Teddy said. “You might be right. You have a right to your own data. Call us if you change your mind.”

Dink was floored. No one on the force ever talked politics. It was one of Captain Todd's iron rules. Dink just assumed that Teddy was as offended by the disgusting actions of Ben Folger as he was, and as eager to bring him to ground. Their relationship was never the same.

As it turned out, one more video from that location would not have changed the pattern. Bill Todd followed the digital trail of the pathetic man in the muddy blouse from Glidden Lodge to the second, fifth, eighth, and eleventh houses on Bark Road. His prey did not appear on any video north of Whitefish Bay Road.

“You were wasting your time in the dunes,” he told Dink and Teddy. “When he hit Whitefish Bay Road, he turned away from the lake.”

He sensed a certain coolness between the two, and decided to call it a day.

Monday at seven a.m., they met for coffee and another bowl of sausage sludge at the Hitching Post. They rang doorbells in farmhouses along Whitefish Bay Road, working their way west toward Valmy. Teddy pressed the Koenig doorbell at 8:40. The doorbell didn't work, but Gretchen's mom had heard the patrol car crunching up the gravel drive, and opened the door. Gretchen was in the barn, cleaning up the mess of kale bags Ben had strewn about. Gretchen's mom shook her head and sent them on their way, which wasn't far.

The bartender at The Happy Hour said he had noticed a stumblebum walk through his parking lot, pull something out of the trash can, and enter the laundromat through the back door.

“Not the regular entrance,” he said, as if that were a significant detail.

He didn't mention that in recent months he had been puzzled by the sight of high school boys regularly exiting via that door, rarely carrying laundry. Or that one such boy had done so just before the bum went in.

Teddy waited outside, ready for who knows what. Dink went around to the front and entered the empty laundromat. Captain Todd knocked on the back door.

“This is Captain Todd of the Sturgeon Bay police,” he said. “Is anyone in there?”

He let himself in. There wasn't much to the room. A laundry tub, a few pairs of rubber gloves, a couple plasticized green costumes and masks hanging on a hook. And a GoPro Hero8 clamped to a pipe on the ceiling.

At six-foot-six, Dink was tall enough to remove the camera without standing on anything but his flat feet.

Captain Todd called Teddy in. The three of them huddled in the dank closet and watched the playback on the GoPro's tiny screen. Twisted acned faces flashed by with no plot and little dialogue. Mostly it was just heavy, mouth-open breathing followed by suddenly squinting eyes.

Dink began to feel like they had invaded the boy's privacy.

"So, they had a little masturbation club going here," he said. "Not anything that should concern us."

"I'm not sure we have a right to see this," Teddy concurred.

"Shut up," Captain Todd muttered. "If we don't find anything, we'll just put it back up. Remember, an old guy was seen entering this room Friday. He might be on here."

Suddenly, a purple rubber finger flitted in and out of view.

"What was that?" Dink said.

"Probably the guy's own hand. They used gloves, for some reason."

Dink was going to say something about the tactile preferences of masturbators, but didn't. He had no good answer for the inevitable question, "How do you know that?"

Once, a rubber hand slapped a face.

"Are they slapping themselves?"

The final sequence showed a wasted old man, slack-jawed and disinterested, and, briefly, the back of someone's head. Someone with rather long hair.

Captain Todd had little interest in the craven hobbies of teenaged boys. But he rolled back the video several seconds to the clearest image of the final face.

“This is our man,” he said.

He took out his smartphone and snapped a photo of the screen.

“Just in case we lose custody of the camera,” he said.

“What was he doing here?” Dink said.

“He wasn’t alone,” Teddy said, pointing to the costumes on the hook.

Captain Todd phoned the station and asked a desk sergeant to find out who owned this laundromat. Dink stuck his head in every one of the giant wall dryers. Teddy walked over to the Foodland and asked the clerk if she had seen the fugitive leave the laundromat Friday, and if perhaps he had been here.

“No sir,” she said. “I tell you though, that laundromat has been awfully popular since the Koenig girl starting selling kale on the side. You’d think that would drive business to us. Who eats kale all by itself? These young guys stop in for HoHos and chips, but nothing that goes with kale. They try to buy beer, but we card ‘em, you can count on that.”

“The Koenig girl?”

“Yeah. The Koenigs own the laundromat. Their farm is just up the road.”

...

Teddy pressed the Koenig doorbell for the second time that day at 11 am. Again, Gretchen’s mom opened the door, having just returned from the breakfast shift at McDonald’s and not due at the Walmart until 2.

“We’d like you to look at a video of a suspect who had entered your laundromat...”

“In our laundromat?” Gretchen’s mom said. “Oh sweet Jesus!”

“Let’s put it on the big screen,” Gretchen’s dad said.

He was proud of his TV and of his ability to run various devices through it.

“It’s very high res. We’ll be able to count the asshole’s nose hairs.”

Mom shot Dad a look, which he didn’t notice.

Captain Todd had left the unit cued to the moment where the fugitive’s face was most visible, intending to show just that part to Mr. and Mrs. Koenig. But in the process of being firewired to the TV, it skipped back to the beginning, and the contorted faces of boys.

Mom’s eyes opened wide.

Dad looked sideways at the cops, smirked, and said, “Is this part from your personal collection?”

“No, this is the camera in the laundromat,” Captain Todd said.

“There is no camera in the laundromat,” Mom said.

“Beg your pardon, but I have to disagree,” Captain Todd said. “We found this attached to a pipe in the back closet.”

That shut them up. Teddy managed to find the fast forward button, which sped the parade of teen grimaces while somehow making them even more grotesque.

“Now here’s the important part: Have you seen this man before? Do you have any idea how he got into the back room or what he was doing there?”

“Rewind the tape,” Dad said.

“Sir,” Teddy said, “I don’t think there’s any reason to look at those boys again.”

“Not that far. Just a few seconds. There! *Stop!*”

Teddy stopped at the frame that showed the back of a head of long hair.

Dad looked at Mom, who shook her head, trying to stop him.

Dad screamed, “Gretchen! Gretchen, get in here.”

Gretchen emerged from her bedroom dressed for her job at Al Johnson’s Swedish pancake house: a full-skirted, tight-bodied, orange and blue dirndl. Farmer boots stuck out

the bottom. (She typically changed shoes at the restaurant.) Teddy inched the feed forward, pausing on a shot of Ben's face.

"Do you recognize this man?"

"I'll ask the questions here," Dad said, his voice throttled with emotion. "This is my house and my daughter.

"Young lady, what the hell has been going on at the laundromat?"

"Nothing much, pop."

"Nothing much? Someone has put a camera in the tub room and recorded teenage boys getting their jollies. And, by god, you are there! Have you or have you not been having sex with one goddamned boy after another!"

"Sex? Oh, heck no."

"Then how do you explain this?"

Dad rewound the tape to a pimply face.

"That isn't sex. We were just helping, I mean, *I* was just helping guys with a swollen gland problem. It was all very sanitary and clinical. I wore rubber gloves and a plasticized apron and a face mask. Pay your money, aim to the drain, rinse and get out. A simple service, no different from what we do with the livestock. Drain the fluids before something bursts."

Mom saw the bile rise in Dad. She had seen it before, had suffered from what followed, and feared what he would do. She stepped in between the girl and her father, turned toward Gretchen, and smacked her into the storm door with a mighty roundhouse punch to her left cheekbone.

The sequence and details of what followed next would be the subject of much discussion in the days to come among officers Todd, Burmeister, and Thompson.

Teddy and Dink restrained Mrs. Koenig.

Mr. Koenig pulled a revolver from somewhere and fired it purposefully into the ceiling.

Later he would explain:

“You buy a weapon for self-defense, and go over in your mind again and again how you will use it to defend your family against a perpetrator. You begin to wonder if you will ever use it. I just felt, damn, if this isn't a time to pull the trigger, I don't know what is. But I didn't know who to shoot. So I just pointed to heaven and squeezed.”

Captain Todd had him disarmed and in handcuffs in seconds. Both parents would be taken to the jailhouse and charged, one with child abuse, the other with discharging a firearm in a reckless manner. You can do those those things and get away with it more often than not in America, but not with three cops in the room.

With the adults temporarily preoccupied, Gretchen opened the storm door and strode calmly but without delay to the barn. She took a Ziploc bag of cash from under the hay in the loft, put it in the compartment beneath the seat of the Vespa, and took off. In case anyone was watching, she headed south past the bend on Highway 57, and then turned off on Brauer Road. Out of view of anyone, she stopped and texted Zippy: “Need help. Come to the C house.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE – THROUGH BUSH, THROUGH BRIAR

Tears streamed from Gretchen's eyes across her temples and into her hair. She told herself it was the wind. She pulled in from the back way to Miss Christiansen's house, dismounted, knocked on the door and waited. After a while, she knocked again, louder.

"Just a minute!"

Astrid Christiansen had been up all night, wondering what to do with the deluded fugitive in her bed. Turning him over to the police would be cruel. Clearly, he needed psychiatric help. At 8 am, opening time for a small mental health facility in Green Bay, she phoned an ex-student who had become a clinical psychologist. He was non-committal at first and said he would look into options. When he called back, he said he could admit Ben and not report him for three days, by which time he could work with a lawyer to argue for a protective custody arrangement that would afford Ben a degree of protection from the degradations of the county lockup.

When Gretchen knocked on the door, Astrid realized she was still in her bathrobe. She dressed hurriedly and was still buttoning her shirt when she opened the door.

"What happened to you!"

She saw a purplish-black bruise swelling beneath Gretchen's eye.

"Me?" Gretchen replied. "What happened to *you*?"

Astrid looked in a mirror on the wall and noticed for the first time an indentation shaped like a sink pipe.

The two women sat in the kitchen holding ice to their faces. They could hear Ben snoring.

Astrid was about to ask again about Gretchen's face when Pyotr Zaske rapped on the front door.

"There's a cop next door," Zippy said.

Miss C pulled him inside and locked the door.

"Oh shit!" she said. "Shit shit shit!"

"What's the matter? Is Gretchen here? I think she's in trouble."

"We're all in trouble," Miss C said. "They've come for Ben."

Gretchen threw the ice in the sink and walked into the living room.

Zippy grew protective as soon as he saw Gretchen's wound.

"Did Ben do that? What else did he do?"

"No, no, no, it wasn't Ben," Gretchen said.

"Well who?"

"None of your business."

"Dang it, Gretchen! When are you going to realize that I am on your side? I care about what happens to you more than what happens to anybody, myself included. Somebody abuses you, you abuse me, you never tell me what's going on with you. Sooner or later, this has got to stop. Today would be a good day."

Gretchen put her arms around Pyotr and hugged him hard. He liked it, hated it, was a confusion of feelings: rage against whoever had hit Gretchen, tenderness for her, surprise, fear, longing, an awareness of the strength of her arms, the softness of her breasts, her moist breath in his ear. He always thought she was especially hot in that Swedish waitress uniform.

Just then, three more members of the track team arrived.

“What are you doing here?” Miss C asked.

“I texted them when Gretchen texted me,” Pyotr said.

Miss C looked out the living room window and saw the nosy neighbor speaking with the officer, who was looking straight at Miss C through the window.

“Lord almighty, it’s Dink Thompson!”

She drew the curtains.

“We have to think fast, folks,” Miss C said. “I think they know Ben is here.”

“Did he hit you?” Pyotr asked.

Astrid and Gretchen answered “No!” at the same time, both a little too adamantly.

“Did you get into a fight with each other, Gretchen, you and Miss Christiansen?”

“Pyotr,” Miss Christiansen said, trying to regain her schoolteacher calm, “these are excellent questions but we don’t have time for them now. I’m afraid the police are coming for Ben, and I’m wondering if we should let them have him. Not that he did anything wrong, no, he didn’t, my bruise is an accident, and Gretchen’s, well, Gretchen can you tell us quickly, very quickly, what happened to you?”

“The cops found the videotape in the laundry and Dad went apeshit and Mom hit me so I left.”

All four boys looked abashed. They all knew that the other boys knew how they had been spending their money. They knew that Gretchen knew. But the idea of their teacher possibly knowing filled them with shame. Astrid looked at Gretchen, imploring.

“That’s pretty much it,” Gretchen said.

No one spoke for a long moment.

“Hey, they don’t care about the kale business or any of you. They just care about Ben Folger, who stumbled into the place Friday and was caught on tape.”

Greatly relieved, the boys were suddenly full of ideas.

“We determined he was innocent,” Jake Schwaba said. “But he’s already been convicted on Fox. I don’t much feel like turning him over.”

“And if he is found here,” Toby the hurdler said, “that might implicate Miss Christiansen.”

“If he’s going to be caught,” marathoner Eric said, “it would be better if it were somewhere else.”

“Yes,” Gretchen said. “We should consider Miss Christiansen’s reputation.”

The next words came from the back of the room, in the doorway to the hall. Ben had awakened, dressed himself, and looked surprisingly presentable.

“There is no reason to impugn this lady’s reputation, which I can assure you deserves nothing but our highest esteem,” he said. “She is simply an angel.”

Ben winked at her.

“But appearances to the contrary can damage the image of the most saintly among us,” Ben continued. “If the enemy has indeed tracked me down, I should take pains not to be caught here, where my presence might cause hardship for another. Are we all agreed on that point?”

Everyone nodded.

“Then I think,” Ben continued, “what we need is a diversion. Who among you can best outrun a man who is in uniform and weighed down by his shooting iron?”

Astrid peeked through the curtains and saw the policeman edging away from neighbor Harland, a lonely sort who did not know how to end a conversation. Ben’s question sparked a competition among the boys about who was faster. Only Eric had ever run a marathon. Jake specialized in middle-distances. They couldn’t agree on who, in general, was faster.

Ben, oblivious to his own danger, was, as usual, amused.

“It looks as though any one of you is fit for the position,” he said. “But I suppose it is the first one hundred paces that will make the biggest difference.”

The boys all looked at Zippy.

“What do you have in mind?” Zippy asked, adding, “*Sir.*”

“Put on my clothes so our foe will think you are me. Run past him like baitfish before haddock — fast, but not too fast. Make sure he sees you, but not your face. Lead him eastward on a merry chase. I shall escape westward. By the time he realizes you are not I and returns, there will be no evidence that I was ever here.”

Ben began to take off his clothes. Astrid stopped him.

“They will be looking for you in the clothes you were wearing on Friday,” she said. “I’ve washed them.”

She pulled Pyotr into the bathroom and handed him Ben’s white blouse, stockings and three-quarter britches, which had been neatly folded and left on top of the dryer.

There was a knock at the front door. Astrid herded Ben, the remaining boys, and Gretchen into the bedroom, where they stood uncomfortably, contemplating the bedclothes that were strewn about the room as if a sex hurricane had just blown through.

Only Ben was at ease.

He sat on the edge of the bed and said, “Chess, anyone?”

Gretchen hushed him with a finger to her lips.

There was more knocking at the door. Astrid hurried past the bathroom door, whispering “Hurry!” She quickly composed herself and opened the front door.

“We’re looking for a former student of yours,” Dink droned. “I’m sure you’ve heard the news about him. Ben Folger. We have reason to believe he is here.”

“Oh you do, do you? Now who could imagine he would come here?”

Astrid leaned out the door and waved.

“Hello Harland!”

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, turning back to the officer, “but you’re mistaken, Dink.”

“Do you mind if I come and look around?”

“I most certainly do,” Astrid replied. “Do you have a warrant?”

“I can get one. If you insist.”

“I do.”

The officer turned and walked toward his squad car.

In the meantime, Pyotr emerged from the bathroom, looking ridiculous and a little scared.

Gretchen met him in the hallway and said, “You’ll do.”

She kissed him full on the lips. It took him a moment to respond. Before he could, Gretchen hurried him to the back door.

“Be careful, Pyotr,” she said in a kinder voice than he had ever heard from her. “If he pulls his gun, put your hands high and visible, turn slowly and show your face.

“I might not be able to see you for a while.”

She kissed him again, and he kissed back. And then she pushed him out the door. Never has a soldier felt more motivated to seek glory and yet less eager to leave. For once, though, curiously, there was no stiffness in his pants to slow him down.

Astrid watched the cop walk to his car as a figure from the 18th century edged around the corner of the house. The officer didn’t notice.

“Oh my, who is that strange person?” Astrid declared theatrically.

“Stop!” the officer shouted.

Zippy took off as if he had been shot from a musket. The officer took the bait and followed. Moments later, both were gone. The squad car sat empty on the curb.

“It worked! You can come out now.”

The remaining boys walked through the living room and onto the front stoop. Ben was about to follow when Astrid stopped him.

“Stay away from the windows, Ben. You never know who or what is watching.”

“Quite right, Madame Anne-Louise Boivin d’Hardancourt Brillon de Juoy. There are spies everywhere!”

Ben sat on the davenport, eyes darting left and right. Astrid pulled Gretchen into the hallway for a hushed conversation.

“He is quite mad, Gretchen! He really thinks he is Benjamin Franklin and that we’re in the midst of a revolution.”

“Well, maybe we are,” Gretchen said.

Astrid frowned. Gretchen glanced down the hall into the bedroom.

“Looks like you two had a time last night.”

“I didn’t know until then how unstable he is. Look, you and the boys need to get out of here. I’m taking Ben to the Brown County mental health facility in Green Bay.”

The girl looked surprised.

“It’s the best thing for him, Gretchen.”

“But won’t they just turn him over?”

“Not right away. He’ll still have to face charges, but as a mental patient. He’ll have a defense and better quarters than the county jail. I’ve arranged everything.”

“Listen up, boys,” Miss Christiansen called. “We need to get going before that officer drags Pyotr back here.”

“Oh, he’s not going to catch Zippy,” Jake said.

“Well then maybe he’ll give up and come back. Either way, I don’t want anyone here when he returns. Let’s go!”

“Too late,” Eric the marathoner said, pointing down the street where two squad cars were approaching fast.

“What do we do now?” Astrid cried, exasperated.

Things were beginning to catch up with her: the wine, the hours of sex, the lack of sleep. She hadn't even had her morning coffee yet.

“I have caused you all far too much trouble,” Ben said gallantly. “I shall turn myself over to the redcoats and submit myself to whatever fiendish torture they can devise. Your name, Madam of Joy, shall never cross my lips again!”

“Hold on,” Gretchen said. “If this worked once, it can work again. Eric, find a blouse and knickers in the costume closet. Miss Christiansen, get in the van with Jake and Toby. Eric can get the cops' attention, hop in next to you, and you can lead the cops north. When they're gone, I'll take Ben to Green Bay, to that, uh, home of the Yankee sympathizer.”

“On your Vespa?”

“Ben and I rode to the fish boil on it,” Gretchen said, not mentioning the times he had fallen off.

“Yes,” Astrid said. “Our helper's name is Jacob Snow. Be careful. Of everything and everyone. Don't let Harland see you.”

Captain Bill Todd knocked on the door. Astrid gave Gretchen a quick hug and waved her and Ben back into the bedroom. While Eric dressed in the bathroom, Astrid ran to the front door and opened it.

“Do you have a search warrant, Bill?” she asked Captain Todd, who laughed.

His amusement annoyed her.

“What's so funny?”

“Well,” Captain Todd said, “Is that how you usually greet folks at the door? I haven’t said a word and already you’re asking if I have a warrant. A warrant is only necessary if an individual is searching for something.”

“Aren’t you?”

“As it turns out, yes. Your old student, Ben Folger.”

“He’s not here.”

“May I come in and confirm that? I trust you, but not everyone back at the station feels the same way about schoolteachers.”

“I repeat, then: Do you have a search warrant?”

“No, but...”

Miss Christiansen slammed the door and threw the deadbolt. She walked through the house and inspected Eric.

“When you hear the van start, walk out the front door and get in on the passenger side. I’ll pull around. Keep your head down so they don’t see your face.”

She glanced down the hall to the bedroom, where Gretchen was pacing and Ben was lolling on the bed. It bothered her to leave the bed unmade and the kitchen table strewn with lingonberries and plates of fish scraps. She and the remaining track team members walked out the back door. She had them sit in the back on the heap of Pirates of Penzance costumes. She took a deep breath, started the engine and eased the van around.

Eric hunched out the front and slammed the door, making sure to draw attention. He jumped in the van and Astrid made the tires squeal as she sped the short half block to the main road and turned north.

“Are they following us?”

“Yeah” came a voice from the back.

“How many.”

“Uh, one. I can see one cop car.”

Astrid's heart sank.

“No, wait, here comes the other one,” Jake said.

“Put on pirate costumes. I'm going to drop you boys like depth charges along the road. You know the drill.”

Indeed they did. She dropped Jake at Mud Lake. He ran into the preserve and kept running without looking back. If he had, he would see that no one was following him.

Toby got out at Al Johnson's restaurant in Sister Bay. He made sure a cop saw him before he clambered onto the sod roof and pulled the ladder up after him. He buried his face in a goat so Officer Burmeister down below couldn't see that he was not Ben.

That took care of one of the cop cars. The other became snagged in Sister Bay traffic. The van sped north to the tip of the peninsula. Eric boarded the ferry in full pirate costume, much to the amusement of the tourists, who assumed this entertainment was a regular part of the ride. He stood at the stern, back to the dock, as the boat pulled away.

The final squad car pulled up beside the van. Astrid Christiansen stood outside, leaning against the door.

“Looks like you missed the ferry,” Captain Todd said.

“I did. But he didn't.”

Astrid grinned and nodded her head toward the ferry.

Captain Todd saw Ben Franklin standing on the deck surrounded by laughing children.

“He'll never get away. Washington Island is, well, it's an island, as you know. There are no other ports, no boats but this ferry.”

“Well,” Astrid said, “maybe he'll fly off. On a kite. Ben is pretty resourceful.”

Captain Todd searched the van — she didn't ask for a warrant. Then he radioed the station, which sent every available squad car north, where they commandeered the next ferry. Eric outpaced the kids and was caught two hours later in the middle of the Fragrant Isle lavender farm, smelling like a rose.

Every time a boy was apprehended, and discovered not to be Ben Folger, the police involved would leave him (saying, just to put some fear in the boy, "We're not finished with you!") and join the growing force of police converging on the remaining sightings.

Toby at Al Johnson's was the first one identified as *not Ben*. Eric on Washington Island was next. Jake was never found because he was never pursued. Eventually he stomped back out to the road and danced on the shoulder every time he saw a cop car coming. They never seemed to notice, although everyone else in the world did. He had to call Heather for a ride.

Pyotr Zaske topped them all, leading a growing army of sweating officers through the swampy swales of the Ridges Sanctuary just northeast of Bailey's Harbor. There are five parallel trails in the Ridges, separated by impenetrable muck, and criss-crossed with nearly a dozen connecting trails and wooden walkways. Zippy made his pursuers look like Keystone Cops, scurrying this way and that as he loomed in the distance on a trailhead, lay underneath plank walkways as the police clomped overhead, and popped up again somehow in the middle of the bog, just so they wouldn't give up and leave. He knew his mission was to always be on the verge of getting caught.

They finally did catch him, inside the housing of the lower range light by the beach. (The harbor channel was so narrow that two lighthouses had been constructed, positioned in such a way that lakeboats could find the deep passage by lining up one light above the other. It was a system Ben Franklin would have admired.) Zippy had crawled into the housing exhausted, hungry, and hopeful that his heroic series of sprints had done the job.

Indeed, Gretchen and Ben were long gone by the time Zippy was brought to ground.

Shortly after the squad cars had followed the van out of view, Gretchen had pushed her Vespa westward down the lane and behind a copse of pine trees. She started it up with a low whir, told Ben to get on and to stay on. He was much revived from the previous Friday, and had no trouble complying.

Gretchen wondered what she would do after she dropped off Ben. Her cheek ached where Mom had struck. Her heart ached worse. She had been a sometime defender of Mom against Dad's excesses, and always felt Mom was in her corner, too.

Was the girl's transgression so terrible? Yes, she had made money off the unfortunate conditions of her classmates. But she liked to think she had prevented a rape or two. If, that is, aggressively persuasive teenaged boys who wear down the defenses of equally frustrated teenaged girls amounts to rape. She didn't know what to call it, but she didn't like it. She had solved a problem and made money for it. Sure, it was an icky business, but so was sticking your arm up the butt of a cow. Mom had some romantic notions about decorous behavior that Gretchen did not share.

But to be in a room full of men and hit your own daughter. Gretchen couldn't forgive that. Could she return? Could she just leave?

With the extra weight, the Vespa barely broke 50 as it rolled down Highway 57. Suddenly, a stream of three squad cars zoomed past in the other direction. Gretchen realized she had been reckless to take the main road, but figured they must not be looking for a girl and a man on a scooter.

Indeed they weren't. The all-points bulletins that kept changing location always had one thing in common: the suspect is an old man on foot in a large white shirt and pants that stop at the knee. A recent photo showed long white hair.

Doesn't seem like they're looking for me, Gretchen thought. Once she dumped the old man, there would be no one in the world looking for her. Except maybe Pyotr.

They pattered past Valmy without slowing down. If they had bothered to turn their heads to the left, both Gretchen and Ben could have taken a final gander in the direction of the farmland where they had spent their youth. More cop cars sped past periodically, and kept coming until they hit the "new" bridge in Sturgeon Bay. Decades old, it was still called the new bridge, because it was newer than the other two.

They stopped for gas outside Howie's Tackle south of Sturgeon Bay. It reminded Gretchen of the brief period in her girlhood when she and Pop had enjoyed picking out leeches and hula poppers and fishing for small mouth bass from the pier by the old quarry. Those excursions always began well, but her father usually drank so much beer that the ride home was scary. More than once he had belched and farted his way home, ordered Gretchen to tend to some task in the barn, and disappeared inside with Mom.

"Did you screw her?"

Gretchen jammed the nozzle back in the pump and looked Ben straight in the eye.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My teacher," Gretchen continued. "Looks like you two got it on last night."

"Ah, Madame de Juoy has been tutoring you, I see. But apparently not in manners, or else the lesson didn't take."

"Fuck manners," Gretchen said. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"I will not impugn the honor of my most gracious hostess," Ben said. "As for myself, I will say this: Whatever I do in *this* country, I do for *my* country."

Yeah, he's nuts, Gretchen thought. Doesn't even know where he is.

Part Three: Cowgirl and Indian

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX – REST STOP PROPHET

Gretchen pulled to the shoulder across the road from the BC looney bin (as her friends callously called it). She stared at the building next door: the Brown County Sheriff's Department. That's a little too close for comfort, she thought.

In Youth Fellowship meetings, Miss Christiansen often liked to quote somebody, Yum Yum Kierkegaard or something like that, the ice cream philosopher. Sin, she said he said, is not some magic demon that grips your soul. Sin is the ordinary, everyday behavior of a lazy person who with every step toward a bad thing does that bad thing even before really doing the bad thing.

Was dropping Ben here a bad thing?

Gretchen decided she needed more information. But she couldn't just let Ben sit in the lobby next door to the Sheriff's joint while she questioned the shrink friend of Miss C's.

She could drop him at the Pearly Gates Bar and Grill, Dad's go-to place during those rare trips to Green Bay. (He was partial to the Friar Tuck Burger. Once Gretchen asked, "What do Robin Hood and Friar Tuck have to do with the Pearly Gates theme of this fine establishment?" Dad took a swig of his Pabst and snapped, "Shut up and eat your cheese curds.")

She took Ben to the rest stop off Highway 42. It was just over the county line and was fenced in, with little opportunity to wander off. Gretchen gave him a wad of singles and left him in front of the vending machines, pondering the many options for sugar and salt.

"I'll be back soon," she said. "Don't talk to anybody."

Jacob Snow was a forty-something man with a beer belly, a bushy red mustache, and a demeanor that carefully projected a single message: *You can trust me*. Gretchen didn't.

"Where is the individual Miss Christiansen phoned me about?"

"I want to be sure you're not just going to walk him next door."

"Not for three days, I won't, as I explained to Miss Christiansen. Say, is she still the prettiest teacher in the school?"

"What happens after three days?"

"By then, we'll have a lawyer and a mental health profile that should keep him out of the county jail."

"But he'd still be locked up here, yes?"

"Or someplace similar. And completely humane. For as long as he is under indictment. There's no way to avoid that."

"My main concern is that he gets the help he seems to need. If he is as delusional as Miss Christiansen says."

Snow paused and looked into Gretchen's impassive face.

"Is he?"

"Is he what?"

"Delusional."

"Oh, yeah, completely. But harmless."

“For now,” Snow said. “The world out there has a way of challenging delusions. And when the world denies one’s reality, the delusional sometimes fight back in unpredictable ways. For your sake and for his, you need to bring him in. You have no right to do anything else.”

Gretchen considered this. Neither one spoke for several moments.

“Didn’t Miss Christiansen say I could be trusted?”

“She didn’t say anything about you.”

He tried not to show his disappointment.

“Would she have told you to bring him here if I couldn’t be trusted?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe there’s some kind of revenge thing going on.”

“Revenge? Revenge for what?”

“Nothing. I don’t know why I said that.”

Again, a long pause. Jacob Snow shifted in his chair as this strange girl with the blank gaze sized him up.

“It doesn’t matter if you trust me. You should, but it doesn’t matter. The code of ethics of my profession directs me to treat the patient first, to do what is in his best interests. And it is in this individual’s best interests to come in out of the cold and get treatment.”

“This individual? Why do you keep calling him that? He has a name.”

“We can keep him longer if he is registered as a John Doe.”

“You would do that?”

“Absolutely.”

All the way to the rest stop Gretchen had the mindset of a soul prepared to do the right thing. She would pick up Ben Folger, leave him in the capable hands of Jacob Snow, and return home to face whatever music there was to be faced. She would patch things up with Mom. Steer clear of Dad. Finish high school. And then get the hell out of Dodge.

When she pulled into the rest stop, she saw a crowd gathered around a table in the picnic area under a large oak tree. She saw the faces in the crowd but not what they were looking at. Some were smiling and nodding. A few had happy tears in their eyes. There were occasional shouts of affirmation: "Yes!...Tell it, brother!"

Must be a folksinger, she thought. Or maybe a preacher.

She worked her way around the outside of the crowd until she could see over and past the heads to the center of the circle. There was Ben, eyes twinkling with empathy and zeal, speaking naturally but in words that sounded a bit old and stodgy: "...the course of human events...Governments should not be changed for transient causes...a long train of abuses and usurpations..."

Gretchen must have looked confused. A wizened black fellow leaned toward her and whispered in her ear.

"You know who that is, young lady? Ben Folger! He's alive!"

It was as if Jesus Christ had come again and decided to begin saving the world at a public toilet on Highway 43.

The experiences of the past few days had made Gretchen forget what Ben Folger had become in the public imagination, what he had been to her, too, before he showed up in the laundry holding bags of kale, hungry, dirty. Dying, really. She and Miss Christiansen had resurrected him.

He cleaned up pretty good.

Gretchen herself had thrilled to the online legend, until she met him in person. She looked into the faces of the crowd and saw the simple naked yearning for hope. Could she take that away from them?

She stared into her phone for a few minutes and then walked back to her Vespa and rode a short mile to Tom's Cycle and Salvage. She traded her three-month-old Vespa straight

up for a 2003 Indian Chief Roadmaster with leather saddlebags and a backrest behind the passenger seat, which was raised nicely, affording a view for any passenger who was not shorter than the driver. A helmet was fastened to the back brace. Tom explained that he would not sell a used helmet — no telling if it was still structurally sound — but if a bike came in with a helmet, it went out with it, no extra charge.

Unaccustomed to a real motorcycle, Gretchen inadvertently popped a wheelie while she was still in first gear. She slowed down, went around the block once, closed the deal and transferred the plastic bag of cash to the saddlebag. Tom's eyes bulged. I could have gotten a bit more for this, he thought. He also wondered if this girl sold meth or something. But if you're in the motorcycle resale business, it doesn't pay to wonder where the money is coming from.

When Gretchen cruised into the rest stop, she could see the crowd had doubled. More vehicles were entering than leaving the lot. She rode up over the curb and over to the back edge of the crowd. She stopped next to a guy in a Badger hoodie who was pointing his phone at Ben. She saw the image of Ben on the phone. He looked more dynamic somehow on a smartphone screen than he did in person.

"I'm streaming this live," the hoodie boasted.

"Not a good idea," Gretchen said, gently lowering his arm with her hand.

"But look at the crowd we're drawing!"

"Exactly. Not everyone out there is on our side."

Suddenly, it was *our* side. Gretchen had made up her mind. Saint or sinner, she was in it now.

The crowd parted as she eased the low-slung motorcycle forward.

"Time to go, Ben," she said.

"Of course, my dear. But why the rush?"

“The redcoats are coming.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN – HEAVEN ON EARTH

Eliza Jain had heard the news in bits and pieces throughout the day, relayed by folks who came in from places with cellular service.

“Saints be praised! He’s alive,” she said. “I am going to be killing that man.”

Ben had long ago observed that in joyful moments, Eliza would channel her mother’s Sunday service idiom. When Eliza sounded like her father, Ben knew he was in trouble.

Eliza sat on a boulder outside Ben’s old pup tent. She hated camping. Always had, although she hid that fact early in their marriage. She liked nature. She liked hiking. She didn’t mind sleeping in a sleeping bag. But she was terrified of exposing her bare bottom to snakes every time she hung it over a log or makeshift latrine. One morning in that position 20 years ago, she did see a snake. That was the last time they had camped together. Now she had no choice.

The past several months had been a nightmare for many in the country, but a particularly frightening one for Eliza. She blamed herself. If she had not threatened Ben the night of the Republican convention, he would have said his lines, collected his paycheck, and come home. Initially, his performance had elated her. Her colleagues in the Cal State South Bay Journalism Department had thrown a viewing party for Ben’s appearance on Rachel Maddow, and Eliza glowed throughout.

It dampened her fun only a little when Chair Higgins announced with a show of sincere regret that budget cuts prevented him from offering contracts to any adjuncts for the coming academic year.

Eliza's spirits remained high as Ben became a celebrity that week, touring the talk and comedy news shows. She cheered when Ben's Franklin character landed a verbal blow. She also cheered reports of the demonstrations and even the vandalism, the Ben slogans spray painted on mansions and bank buildings.

Things went bad in a hurry. The rape allegation on Fox, and Ben's clumsy exit and disappearance. The formal indictment for sedition. The cessation of his paycheck when he didn't show up for the first day of classes. The sporadic reports of Ben sightings. Many of them were unfounded, but some had enough detail to ring true: The college kids who used BeepBeepYeah to haul Ben westward. The Villanova boys seemed OK, but she didn't trust that tattooed girl from Carnegie Mellon who recklessly blogged about "my night with Ben" once she figured out who he was. Then there was the student from Miami in Ohio who told a campus reporter that Ben's wise approach to women at a frat party would forever be an inspiration to him.

In addition to the more serious-minded political slogans scrawled on walls, signs began to show up in dorms across America: *Ben slept here*. None of this sat well with Eliza, even though she knew he couldn't possibly have been in all those places.

Until today's report, the final one with any ring of truth had come from a babbling young boy who swore that he had seen the ghost of Ben rise from a casket in a funeral home basement in Liberty, Indiana. Eliza could not have explained why that outlandish story gnawed at her. Perhaps it was because it combined her morbid fear of ghosts with the apprehension that Ben might in fact be dead.

Eliza sold the Honda Civic to pay the rent and was fast running out of cash. She gained 20 pounds eating rice and potatoes and watching mindless speculation about Ben on TV. With the growth of Ben's fame (or notoriety, depending on one's point of view) came unwanted calls from fans and foes, the occasional threat, flowers, and obscene graffiti on the brick wall of the apartment, none of which moved the landlord to extend credit.

All of this put Eliza in a frame of mind to say yes when two of her laid-off colleagues suggested they pool resources and live in the family cabin in Bear Valley for a while. She and her friends disposed of much stuff at a yard sale and at the Salvation Army store. They prevailed upon a tenured friend to let them cram some things into an already over-taxed garage. (Lacking basements, Californians often park on the street and use garages for storage.)

Eliza shoved clothing and camping gear into an old backpack. She was perfectly reasonable about the space she would take up in the station wagon — with one major sentimental exception.

When Eliza's mother, Matty Jones Jackson, was small, she heard a pastor say that the true measure of civilization is how much heaven we manage to bring down to earth. So when Eliza's father, Raj Jain, got tenure, Matty bought a harp. Whenever anyone asked why she owned such a cumbersome instrument — one she never quite mastered — she would reply with one word: "Civilization."

That is what Eliza and Ben always called it, too. Never just *the harp*. It was one of those family heirlooms that carries more meaning than function.

None of the former professors knew how long they would be living in the cabin. If a revolution had indeed begun, or was about to, how long would it be before things returned to normal? Before it became Silicon Valley, the area south and west of the San Francisco Bay had been known as the Valley of Heart's Delight, a land of fruit trees and canneries.

Prosperity had driven the cost of living through the roof, such that teachers and service workers had trouble finding housing even when fully employed. It was no place for middle-aged former adjunct professors of humanities and social sciences.

Eliza's friends pointed out that there wasn't room in the station wagon for a harp. She began weeping and babbling about "civilization." When they realized she was beyond reason, they lashed the harp to the roof.

The idle scholars dubbed the wagon their "little Conestoga," and mused that their eastward journey was a reversal of manifest destiny. Gallows humor pervaded. Their route took them through Stockton, a bellwether city in the decline of the Middle Class, gone bankrupt before civic bankruptcy became the rage. Just over two hours into what should have been a three and a half hour drive, the road got curvy and steep. On one bend in Highway 4, the wagon lurched left and the harp continued forward into the ditch, breaking at the joints where the arch and pillar met the soundbox.

With 47 strings, the Lyon and Healy Salzedo harp is sturdier than most. But no harp should be thrown from a moving vehicle. Eliza began weeping about the demise of Civilization as her friends bundled the collapsed instrument into a tighter roll and lashed it again to the top of the car. They continued swerving eastward and upward, the cold evening air now streaming through the car. The windows couldn't be completely closed because of the rope wrapped over and under the roof and around the harp.

Bear Valley is beautiful, but not as spectacularly so as Lake Tahoe to the northeast or Yosemite to the southeast. Hence, it has long been a vacation spot for those of more modest means. Cabins like the one Eliza and her friends were approaching are owned but the land on which they stand are leased, which can lead to disputes over liability when sewer mains burst. That was not the problem they encountered, though.

In recession and riot, police of various types pull back to protect rich enclaves, leaving places like Bear Valley lawless. The cabin in question sat on a rise at the end of a one lane dirt road a few hundred yards off the two-lane highway. The women found it occupied by a gun-toting band of backwoods marijuana growers who would neither budge nor share the space.

“Evict us if you can,” one of them said, laughing.

The women backed out to the road and continued east a few miles to Lake Alpine. They were amazed at what they found. It had become a tent city, full of refugees like themselves, several hundred and growing. There was a surprising degree of organization, evident immediately when an old man in an orange reflective vest told them where to park and mustered four teenagers to help them carry their tents and gear to a designated area on the other side of the low dam. They moved the harp into the car. It reached from the back between the seats to the stick shift.

“Hurry,” one of the teens said. “It’s almost time for the sunset service.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT – CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

Reverend Larry Mulder stood on an old redwood stump and spoke.

“Who remembers the first of Jesus’s miracles, according to John’s Gospel?”

“He went to a wedding and turned water into wine,” offered Hau Nguyen.

“Yes, excellent, Mr. Nguyen,” Reverend Larry said.

“But not just any wine,” Frankie chirped. “Really good stuff, better than any of the wine that had been served. Top shelf. Grand cru.”

This being California, with a few amateur winemakers in the group, a lively discussion ensued about what kind of wine that might have been, what temperature it would have been served at, how good could it really have been.

“Given that it was new wine,” someone said, “that had not aged in barrels, I mean, Jesus, the tanins would have been overpowering.”

And so it went for a while. Reverend Larry eventually wrestled the conversation back to the Gospel.

“Now, it’s very interesting what he did next, his very next act in John. Jesus was dismayed by all the commerce going on in the temple, *his* house. So he braided cords into a whip, drove out the livestock and the people, and overturned the tables of the money changers, scattering coins. He went a little berserk.”

“He kicked butt!” Frankie said.

“Yes, Frankie, he kicked butt.

“Now, this is a popular chapter for preachers of all stripes. Some of my colleagues like to concentrate on Jesus’s religious fervor, as prefigured in the Old Testament. Others see this as a pretext for sermons on not letting the love of money take over your life, or for the interests of business to take over our communal life. You can look at the event itself and squeeze many meanings out of it.

“But I’d like to stop for a minute and look at the larger picture. What do you suppose John was trying to tell us by placing these stories side by side? Gentle, loving Jesus, the perfect guest, bringing wine to a wedding, offering it only after people had already been drinking freely. And we must assume, being fully human, Jesus joined in. He celebrated the secular life. And then, right after that, he goes to church and opens up a can of whoop-ass. What does this tell us about the nature of the Messiah?”

“That he’s a mean drunk,” Frankie said.

Several in the congregation had grown tired of Frankie’s profane interjections and tried to hush him up.

“Frankie has a point,” Larry said.

“I do?”

“Yes. If we look at Jesus as our role model, if we ask, *What would Jesus do?*, the answer can’t always be, ‘Drink wine and mellow out.’ He is the God of love. But he recognizes that for everything, there is a season.”

Eddie Froeling, who hadn’t been following very closely, roused himself and started playing the Byrds “Turn, Turn, Turn” on his accordion.

“Not yet, Eddie, not yet,” Larry said.

“I think John is telling us — and by that I mean Jesus’s *life story* is telling us — that yes, we should try to get along, we should be loving and generous. We should share our wine, share our gifts.”

Rev. Larry looked out over the congregation scattered along the southern shore of the lake. He noticed three new middle-aged women sitting on a log in the back. He furrowed his brow and continued.

“But if that doesn’t work, if being nice isn’t enough to make the changes that need to be made, we must grow a backbone, push back, stand up for what we believe in, be strong. And live with the consequences.

“That is what we are doing now. We tried to get along, to make democracy work. But the moneychangers were taking over every corner of our national community, our politics, our democracy, our ability to make a decent life. They would not relent. They had driven our country far, far off track. So the spirit of our founders, the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, a peace-maker, the man who tamed lightning and spoke truth to power, returned and woke us up.

“And now we find ourselves in the wilderness. Like Jews in exile. Wondering if God has forsaken us. Lord, what next? What would you have us do?

“I believe the answer is in the third thing John relates about Jesus after Jesus came out as the Messiah and revealed himself and his powers.”

“Out of the closet!” Frankie chirped, and several sighed.

“Knowing, I think, that these two sides of Jesus — winemaker and table turner, friend and fanatic — would lead people to a state of confusion, to wonder which way to act, how to follow a leader who is so capable of seemingly contradictory actions, he brings us Nicodemus. Jesus reminds Nicodemus of the trials of Moses and his people in the wilderness, and tells him to believe, to be born again into a new life of faith and trust in God.

“And that is what we must do, friends. We have crossed the Jordan. There is no going back to our old way of life. We have been born again. We will never be the same. America will never be the same. Let us embrace our new life and see what we can make of it. With God’s help.”

Eddie led the congregation in singing “Turn, Turn, Turn,” shouting out the operative lyrics in the space between lines, “A time to be born...to die...plant...reap...”

At the Prayers of the People, they prayed for Ben Folger.

And then, just before the peace, Reverend Larry walked through the crowd and directly over to Eliza and her friends.

“Welcome, pilgrims!” he said. “Please let us know who you are and whether you will be staying with us or just passing through.”

“I am Eliza Jain Folger.”

The crowd gasped.

She wondered if perhaps she should have made up a name. She seemed to have enemies everywhere.

But then Rev. Larry grinned, shook her hand and said, “You are most welcome here, my dear!”

The congregation stood and applauded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – ARRESTED DEVELOPMENTS

Gretchen and Ben rode the Indian south toward Milwaukee. Police cars going the other way reminded her to seek roads less traveled, so they left the Interstate and zigged among county and state roads in a generally southwesterly direction. They shared a footlong in a Subway in cute little Rosendale.

Gretchen considered her options. He should be with his wife. She could protect him and tend to his delusions. If she put him on a Greyhound alone, though, he might wander off at the first stop. Could this motorcycle make it all the way to California? Maybe. What route should they take?

Miss Christiansen had been urging her to consider the University of Wisconsin. Madison was between them and Norcal. She decided to give the campus a look, if for no other reason than to see what she was missing by dropping out of high school, something she realized she had just done.

Evening found them sitting on the terrace of the student union watching the sun set over Lake Mendota. Within minutes, students recognized Ben and started bringing him Spotted Cows.

It seems his sermon at the rest stop had gone viral. And no place was it better received than the Madison campus. This was a different crowd. The folks at the rest stop were drawn

to Ben for his celebrity and his promise of hope, balm for their stunted expectations. Many in the Madison crowd were already looking forward to revolution. They looked to Ben for tactical advice. They also understood that Ben's schtick was to offer perspective in the guise of the founding father.

"What would the honorable Doctor Franklin say on the issue of..." one began.

Folger interrupted: "Ben. Call me Ben. All my degrees are honorary, and not to be compared with those earned through hard work by true scholars."

"When does the revolution begin? With the Boston Massacre?"

"It may surprise you to learn, sir," Ben replied, "that at the time of that incident, I was on the side of the redcoats, who had been surrounded by a jeering mob, one much less amenable than you."

He chuckled and raised his glass to his new friends, winning them with an easy charm that baffled Gretchen, who sat taking tiny sips of her too-hoppy beer.

"At the time of that so-called massacre, all the major players of the revolution, with the possible exception of that heady brewer, Sam Adams..." — again he raised his glass, and again the crowd laughed — "...all the leaders were still hoping, with me, that England would come to its senses and afford colonists the full rights of Englishmen. Sam's cousin John defended the offending British soldiers and won acquittal in front of a jury of colonists. They were merely defending themselves. Mob action like that did more harm than good to the cause."

"But Doctor Franklin, uh, *Ben*, might not things have gone better if you had struck sooner, before England could send more ships of soldiers?"

"On the contrary, my dear lad, on the contrary."

He gestured to the small boats that had gathered at the shore, their passengers straining to see and hear him.

“Those who too hastily land their ships on the shore of revolution are crushed by the next wave.”

Ben drew his index finger across his throat, thoroughly mixing his metaphors.

“I fear for France,” he said dourly.

Only Gretchen noticed his odd choice of the present tense.

His interlocutor persisted: “But you concede, my good sir, that revolution is inevitable.”

“Revolution is never inevitable,” Ben said amicably. “Our opponents are reasoning creatures who might yet be brought to see the light. I endured more than ten years of abuse, insult after insult at the court of King George, trying to patch things up. I succeeded in persuading them to withdraw the Stamp Tax.”

“And yet, the battle was joined.”

“The crown would not grant us basic rights,” Folger replied. “They gave their colonial governors property and the income from that property tax-free, while heaping new taxes on the hard-working farmers, laborers, and shopkeepers. The many had become nothing but tools for lining the pockets of the few.”

“Is that not exactly what is happening now?”

One by one voices in the crowd offered examples: healthcare, bloated prisons, regressive income taxes coupled with tax loopholes for the one percent, ravaging of the environment, the selling off of national parks and monuments, etc. Ben smiled and nodded while Gretchen scanned the crowd for cellphones.

A few blocks away on State Street, the youngest member of the Madison police department was on bike patrol. It bugged his older partner that he checked his phone every time they stopped. The rookie saw the live feed and recognized the union terrace's signature brightly colored metal chairs surrounding the famous fugitive.

“That’s on campus,” his partner cautioned. “We should wait until he is on the street. The street belongs to the city.”

They called for support and split up, the older cop positioning himself at the end of the city street between the union and the Helen C. White undergraduate library.

The younger one straddled his bike behind a tree next to the Old Red Gym. That is where he apprehended Ben and told him he was under arrest. The pair were immediately surrounded by a dozen young zealots.

The cop did his best to appear unfazed. Rather than giving up his quarry, he doubled down. Pointing to Gretchen, he said, “You must be the young lady he kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped!” she exclaimed.

It was pretty dark, but she turned her head so the cop wouldn’t see the bruised side of her face.

“Yes. I’ll need you to come with us. A squad car is on the way.”

“I was not kidnapped. I am here of my own free will.”

“You are a minor. Statutorily, your purported will makes no difference.”

At this, the crowd bristled and moved closer. One bearded fellow grabbed the officer’s bike by the handlebars. The young cop didn’t like the looks of the tattoos on his biceps and legs, which stuck out from a green leather kilt.

“Do you want to come in too, buster?”

“You’re not taking me or our friends anywhere.”

“Shall I add resisting arrest to the rap sheep?”

The two young men were roughly the same age, but worlds apart in fashion and outlook. They could smell each other’s breath.

Before push came to shove, Ben stepped between them.

“’Tis me you want. I’m the big fish here. Let the girl go and I will accompany you peaceably.”

The young officer hesitated.

“Take her away,” Ben said to one of the women in the crowd.

“But what about you?”

“Tut, tut! I’ve been in tighter scrapes. I depend on Providence and the good sense of my captors. Hurry, now, away with you all.”

Gretchen and the group hustled past the fountain on library mall as a squad car arrived.

The officer who booked and fingerprinted Ben knew that a catch like this required a call to the chief of police. The chief of police knew enough to call the mayor.

Well past the usual retirement age, the mayor was already in bed. He pulled on jeans and a cotton sweater and drove himself downtown. Just a few blocks from Ben’s cell was the state capitol building, home now to more than a few legislators who would like nothing better than to see Ben’s head on a pike strapped to the statue of Miss Forward on the top of the dome.

Fortunately for Ben, the jail was in the control of the city, not the state, and the city was led by the country’s most famously radical mayor, the first U.S. mayor to have met with Fidel Castro. Over his various terms in office — separated by stints in the private sector — this old Chicago boy had racked up civic improvements that would make any mayor proud. He had worked amiably with town and gown, helping keep Madison high on the various “most livable cities” lists. Fiery rhetoric elects mayors; good government re-elects them. There was more Chamber of Commerce than firebrand on his resume now. But he would be damned if he would go down in history as the mayor who handed Benjamin Folger over to the Feds.

Eager to make a name for himself, the arresting officer insisted that he had apprehended Folger on the street between the campus library mall and the student union. That street belongs to the city, doesn't it? I mean, we patrol it and hand out tickets on it.

The mayor would have none of it.

"You're an excellent officer," the mayor said. "You've demonstrated admirable enterprise.

"It isn't my call," the mayor continued, winking at the chief of police, "but I wouldn't be surprised if you received an early promotion."

"Can we release Folger in the city," the rookie persisted, "follow him for a few minutes, and arrest him again?"

"Well now, you know better than that. There was a crowd of witnesses who saw him arrested on campus."

"But it wasn't on campus..."

The mayor drove home alone. A few minutes later, the Chief of Police personally drove Folger to the mayor's house and into the garage, where he wouldn't be seen by neighbors.

"Are you sure you'll be safe with him?" the chief said. "I could send a man over."

The mayor waved the chief away. He walked to an old walnut credenza and brought out a bottle of Courvoisier and a box of Cuban cigars.

Ben felt right at home.

CHAPTER THIRTY – CHASTE HUSSY

Dink Thompson felt humiliated when he finally cornered Ben Folger and discovered it was really a pimply high school boy. Pyotr Zaske sat in the back of the squad car and pestered Dink all the way to the station, making overwrought threats about what he would do if they laid a finger on Gretchen Koenig.

Dink leaked the tape to Fox that very evening. He caught hell for it from Captain Todd — hell being six months of weekend duty checking the taverns — but he thought it was worth it.

Todd saw no reason to tell the public anything that didn't relate directly to the case of fugitive Ben Folger. That was bad enough. They had him dead to rights and were snookered by a bunch of high schoolers in pirate costumes. But Dink was full of righteous indignation against anyone who would harbor such an evil, anti-American pervert, even if some of those doing the harboring were minors.

The details were perfect for Fox. Ben Folger, their biggest money villain since Hilary Clinton, linked to a prostitution ring. They edited down the video to its most salacious moments. Lawyers made them blur the eyes of the boys, but not the drooling grimaces. Nor did they obscure the grunts, sighs, and splats on the soundtrack. The video always ended with

a freeze frame of Ben at his most disheveled. The widespread use of this image would help the cleaned-up Ben escape detection at truckstops and parks across America.

At first the old men at Fox weren't sure how to play Gretchen. Was she the brazen ringleader of a group of cheap and conniving whores? Or was she a helpless young girl kidnapped by the radical fugitive?

They decided to do both. And their public bought it. In stories where Ben was the focus, Gretchen was the sweet young victim, chaste as a nun. With the pretense of helping the public find and free her, they broadcast her name and her yearbook photo. But she became something else when the story was the Valmy laundromat.

Helmet-haired announcers practiced shuddering in the mirror before they went on the air with the latest developments in the Whore of Valmy story. If there were no developments, they made some up. "People want to know," they would begin, without ever naming those curious people.

"People want to know if perhaps Benjamin Folger was the mastermind behind this sudsy whorehouse."

"That's right, Trudy. I, for one, can't believe small town Wisconsin high school girls — the salt of the earth, A students, many of them — would do such a thing unless there was some sort of coercion involved."

That part of the story had not yet broken when Ben entertained the crowd at the union terrace. What the students knew was that Ben had been flushed, had been spotted several times all over the Door Peninsula, and that each time had turned out to be a high school track athlete in a pirate costume. They also had seen the feed of Ben's sermon on the picnic table near Green Bay.

That is all Anne, Ellen, and Allan knew as they gently shepherded Gretchen across the library mall. Gretchen looked over her shoulder and saw Ben, grinning his dopey grin, as the officer handcuffed him and backed him into the squad car.

“I shouldn’t have brought him here!” Gretchen said.

“Hi, I’m Anne,” said a woman with inquisitive, kindly eyes.

Anne was just a few years older than Gretchen, but she and the others made Gretchen suddenly feel very young.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Gretchen. I’m from Sturgeon Bay.”

She had long ago given up telling strangers that she lived on a farm outside Valmy. She named the nearest place people might have heard of. Even then, she sometimes had to add that Sturgeon Bay is north of Green Bay. Which is north of Milwaukee. Which is north of Chicago.

Ellen and Allan introduced themselves as they walked. They began to form a first impression of this shy girl, an impression that required adjustment when she stopped and said, “This is my ride.”

Allan whistled.

“That is huge,” Ellen said. “What is it, a Harley?”

“It’s an Indian.”

“How many cc’s?” Allan asked.

“Beats me. Just bought it today. I was in kind of a hurry. Had to make an, uh, a getaway. Get Ben out of Dodge.”

“Do you have a place to stay?” Anne asked. “Why don’t you come over to my place and tell us all about it.”

Gretchen busied herself with her helmet while she scrutinized the three.

"If you are on Ben's side," Anne said, "you are among friends."

"What are they going to do with Ben?"

Ellen looked at Allan and asked him, "Do you know a lawyer?"

Allan put on his most calming, lawyerly voice.

"Gretchen, I'm a third year law student, almost. I will go to the station, let them know Ben has legal representation, and then I will make sure he does. *Movement dot org* can gather a team of attorneys quickly. City cops aren't supposed to arrest folks on university property."

Anne sat on Ellen's lap on the back of the Indian so she could shout directions. Ben's helmet bobbed on her little head. They missed a turn but eventually arrived at a run-down Victorian house on Dayton Street in the heart of the Miffland neighborhood, notorious back in the day as a freak/activist haven, Madison's Haight Ashbury.

They left the Indian on the bare, hard-packed back yard and walked in the back door to the kitchen. A bare bulb, operated by a pull string, dangled next to a fly strip, full of flies.

"Be careful you don't pull the wrong one," Anne said.

Ellen laughed.

"Allan did once," Ellen said. "Pulled the mess of sticky flies down on his head."

In the light of the kitchen, the college women noticed for the first time the bruises on Gretchen's face.

Ellen blurted, "Did Folger do that?"

"Why does everyone say that?"

"Well," Anne said, "you know. A teenager hanging out with an old man. It's a natural assumption."

"I could say I fell off my bike."

"But you didn't," Anne said. "Did you?"

"No. But it wasn't Ben. He's harmless."

Anne and Ellen prodded her to talk. When that didn't work, they tried to convince her to see a counselor at Briar Patch, a center for runaway teens that had a social worker on call all night. They would give her options.

"I'm not going back to Sturgeon Bay," Gretchen said with a cool resolve that ended the conversation.

Over the next couple of hours, Gretchen received a thrilling introduction to the wonders of college life. Friends, pizza, beer, and marijuana tumbled in. Soon the main floor of the house – kitchen, living room and dining room – was packed. The conversation bounced between the inane and the intellectual. Seems everyone had a different major, a different obsession. They were her kind of people. Not grade hounds, but people who rode their curiosity as far as it would go.

Gretchen found herself in conversations about Ben — she was guarded on that topic — and about the cultivation of marijuana. She had seen it before, in field and joint, and had decided she liked it more on the stalk than clouding her brain. She discoursed knowledgeably on the superiority of kale, its heartiness, its nutritional value. An Ag major was impressed. A business major gave her marketing tips for her kale chips.

The most interesting person in the room was Anne, who said she was a grad student studying Transformative Anthropological Journalism.

"Subcultures turn violent when they feel misunderstood," Anne said. "When they are unable to share their story with the larger world without fear of being ostracized, marginalized, or imprisoned. I try to give them the tools and the platform to reveal their most sensitive truths to the world, without fear."

Gretchen liked Anne, her spark, her enthusiasm, her ideas. But it was in Gretchen's nature to zero in on the flaw in any proposition.

"So Hitler's problem was that he couldn't get his story out?"

“Um, maybe,” Anne replied, brow furrowing.

The business major butted in.

“Yes, the bookstores gave poor shelf placement to *Mein Kampf*. And that’s why no one ever heard anything about this obscure unknown fellow named Adolf Hitler.”

While Anne prepared her defense in her head — *I’m not saying ALL violence comes from a lack of exposure. And maybe the world could have done a better job listening to the average poor workers of Germany after World War One, and removed the fertile ground that allowed a man like Hitler to flourish.* — Gretchen plowed ahead.

“Is a corporation a subculture? Do the Koch brothers really want their true story told? When people are all telling their own stories, is that journalism? Or is it public relations gone wild? And if everybody is busy with their own stories, who is left to listen?”

“Damn, girlfriend,” Anne said. “You’re still in high school?”

“I couldn’t have said it better,” the business major said.

“That’s high praise,” Anne said with a smile, “coming from the biggest mansplainer on campus.”

Gretchen had never been a part of anything like this scene. It wasn’t just the intellectual banter. It was the combination of strong opinions and good will. They somehow managed to shoot down each other’s ideas without becoming pissy about it.

At the height of the noise and bonhomie, an engineering major looked up from his Samsung and said, “Hey! You’re the kale whore.”

The room went silent.

“Say what?” Gretchen said, still cool, but with brow suddenly dropped.

The story of the Dairyland madam had broken on Fox and bounced to more legitimate networks and around social media with much speed and no new reporting.

Gretchen clammed up, withdrew without moving, while the students searched their phones and relayed details to each other, mostly in hushed tones, some more tactfully than others.

Had Ben abused her sexually? Did he beat her? They could see the bruise. Was she really the ringleader of a band of high school prostitutes? She looked young, but didn't look helpless. Did she need help? Was she expanding her business to Madison, one guy wondered, doing a poor job of masking his own interest as he let his eyes wander over her outfit.

"Do all the, uh, *ladies* in your business dress like that?"

Gretchen noticed for the first time that she was still wearing the ridiculous folk costume she had put on that morning in preparation for slinging Swedish meatballs at the restaurant.

"I could use some kale," the fellow continued.

At that, little Anne kicked them all out.

She and Ellen couldn't tell what Gretchen was feeling. Neither could Gretchen, really. She had always had a peculiar disregard for her own reputation. Most high schoolers obsess about reputation, not realizing that it rarely follows one after high school unless carried by its owner. College, a new job, a new town — all are great places to shed the tar and feathers of high school regard. Gretchen was the Teflon high schooler. Nothing stuck, because she did not care.

But it had not occurred to her that some might see her back-of-the-laundry service as prostitution. It had never felt like sex to her at all. It was just making a little money by solving a common annoying little problem. In stories and movies, prostitution came off as a grand illicit tradition, the dark side of romance, people looking for fantasy and something resembling love. There was a passion to it, akin to mob vendetta violence. Dangerous and wrong but alluring.

Sure, the kale exchange was a messy business. But dermatologists pop zits, don't they? They lance boils and get paid for their trouble. Some folks clean latrines or pump crap out of septic tanks. Others scrub operating room floors and walls after bloody spurting surgeries.

She knew, of course, that there was this thing called love, romantic, sighing, dreamy love. The stuff of songs. She had little idea what that was, and sometimes wondered if it was anything at all, although she knew many lived for it. Even some farm girls did. Perhaps she had seen one too many artificial insemination procedures to get gooey-eyed about the functions of reproductive organs.

In any case, something about the voices and eyes of her questioners tonight made her burn. She felt a kind of freakish shame. Like she had taken advantage of a natural urge, had profited from the suffering of her classmates, and had pulled her sisters into something dark that might taint them for years to come.

Maybe for the first time she did care what others thought. These college students with their shining brains had accepted her fully and then rapidly cooled. All of which made her determined to get out of town as soon as they heard what was going to happen to Ben. She thought she might head south, to Peoria, just to see what Teddy Roosevelt had called "the world's most beautiful drive." Strange factoids encountered on the Internet can dig into a young mind and make it itch.

Anne and Ellen got nowhere with her. They could see she was exhausted. What a day she'd had! A visit from three cops, a slap in the face from Mom, the sight of Miss Christiansen's sex-wrecked bedroom, kissing Zippy Zaske, buying a monster cycle that was almost too much to handle, the crowds at the rest stop and the Union terrace, the arrest of Ben. All topped off by humiliation in front of people she had just met and instantly admired.

Ellen showed her the bathroom, gave her a towel, and gave up her bedroom. She crawled into Allan's bed, knowing he was likely to be spending the night trying to spring Folger.

Gretchen peeled off her dirndl and retreated into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE – CAMP WAKONDA

Anne, Ellen, and Gretchen were munching granola with dried fruit and Greek yogurt when Allan called Ellen.

“They’re releasing him into my custody,” Allan said. “I think. Don’t know when. Stand by.”

Ellen could tell he was a little hyped up. Probably hadn’t slept.

“Looks like Ben will be out soon,” Ellen said.

She was surprised at the lack of response from Gretchen. She just couldn’t read this girl.

“What are you going to do with him?” Anne asked Gretchen. “Where are you two going?”

Gretchen chewed and swallowed.

“He’s got a wife in California. Figure I should take him there.”

Everyone chewed a while. They looked at Ellen’s phone resting on the bare wood table by a blob of spilled yogurt.

“Do you think that’s safe?” Ellen asked. “There must be federal agents staking out their house, now that they know he’s alive. He needs to disappear again.”

More chewing. Anne checked the news on her phone.

“Someone trashed the Chicago Board of Trade last night.... And the on-going riot in Oakland is picking up.... Here’s a Slate headline: *Wall Street has become an armed camp, full of armored Escalades and body guards.*”

Ellen passed the tin of granola.

Gretchen finally spoke:

“If Ben disappears, the bad guys win.”

Anne and Ellen couldn’t argue with that.

“I mean,” Gretchen continued, “he’s a wack geezer, but he sometimes says things the world needs to hear.”

“You’re right,” Ellen said. “But he won’t be saying them long if the Feds get hold of him.”

Anne made a decision.

“This might chill my grant, but I’d like you to take a TAJkit.”

Anne’s Transformative Anthropological Journalism kits included a blue tarp, putty to affix the tarp to walls, a Bluetooth lavalier microphone, two tiny but powerful battery operated spotlights with pipe cleaner legs for attaching almost anywhere, and a tiny sheet of instructions on downloading the app for automatic uploads. Everything fit into a nylon pouch the size of a lunchbox.

“Use the blue tarp,” Anne said. “Don’t let any geo-identifiers in the shot. Many of our reporters post anonymously. I review all videos first. Unless you tell me — and I suggest you don’t — I won’t know where you’re posting from. But I can swap in a background that puts you anywhere: Paris, the United Nations, Mars.”

Gretchen immediately embraced the idea.

“This is genius!”

“You need to tell Ben’s story,” Anne said.

"Absolutely," Gretchen said.

"You also need to tell *your* story."

"My story? I'm just a farm kid from Valmy. A nobody from nowhere."

"There is no such thing," Anne said.

Gretchen stared into her cereal bowl, unconvinced.

"How did you become Ben's deliverer?"

Just then, Anne's phone buzzed.

"Time to move," Allan said. "Meet us by the pole. They're going to Canada."

Anne hung up, surprised that Allan would be so careless as to mention the destination over an open cellphone connection.

"The pole" was code for the former site of Camp Wakonda, now subsumed by Gaylord Nelson State Park. In their youth, Allan, Ellen, and Anne had attended YMCA day camps on the western shore of Lake Mendota. The entrance once sported a totem pole, right where Ellen's car turned off the county highway, Gretchen following on her cycle.

Anne and Ellen waxed nostalgic about their lost youth, as only twenty-somethings can. Gretchen observed the lake's white-capped chop, a noticeably different pattern than she was used to seeing on Lake Michigan.

A few minutes later, Allan drove up, alone.

"They're bringing Ben here," he said.

"You shouldn't have mentioned Canada on the phone," Anne said.

Before Allan could reply, a black sedan with tinted glass rolled down the mossy lane and stopped. Out stepped Ben, red-cheeked and jovial. The window rolled down, and the mayor's arm held out a bottle of brandy.

"Don't forget this, pal! It's cold in Canada."

Ben took the bottle and the car retreated. Anne gave Allan a look.

“You should get going right away,” Allan said to Ben, ignoring Anne. “You’re not going to Canada. They’ll expect you all along that border. You’re going to Mexico, by way of Texas.”

Allan pulled a business card out of his pocket. Ben refused the card.

“Please,” he said, nodding toward Gretchen. “Arrange all details with my aide-de-camp.”

Allan considered Gretchen skeptically, but handed her the card.

“That’s my phone number on the front. Call it day or night if you’re in trouble, but only if it’s serious. The call might reveal your location. On the other side is an address in Corpus Christi. Try to make it there as fast as you can, but don’t take major highways.”

“What will I find at this address?”

“Allies,” Allan said. “Members of Gumption.”

“Gumption?”

“That’s what we decided to call the movement.”

“Are you the head of Gumption?”

“No, just a foot soldier.”

“Then who is?”

“Him,” Allan said, nodding to Ben, who had wandered over to the edge of the water.

“Oh,” Gretchen said matter-of-factly. “I’ll let him know.”

Ben walked to Gretchen’s motorcycle and put the bottle in a saddlebag. He put on his helmet, climbed on the back seat, pointed west down the lane and said, “Onward!”

He was eager to fly. He liked the rush of air, the illusion of progress.

Anne put the TAJkit pouch in the other empty saddle bag.

“You travel light,” she said.

Ellen opened the trunk of her car, pulled out a sleeping bag in a red nylon sack, and fastened it to the rear of Ben's backrest with a pair of bungee cords.

Gretchen peered at the address on the card. Anne sensed her unease.

"If Allan says you can trust these people, you can," Anne said.

"Don't seem to have an alternative," Gretchen said.

Anne hugged her.

"Tonight, before you bed down, put up the tarp and send me a video. I'll make it look like you're in Canada."

"Try not to be conspicuous," Allan said.

Gretchen didn't hear him over the roar of the motorcycle. She tried and failed not to kick up stones as she sped away, still not quite accustomed to the machine's high idle.

The three Badgers danced away from the flying gravel, then stopped and watched the Indian disappear through the woods. Gretchen's orange and sky-blue dirndl skirt billowed to the sides, nearly covering Ben. The leather fringe on the saddlebags jiggled and swayed. The last thing the students saw was the black X of the bungee cords on the big red circle of the sleeping bag. Ellen thought they looked like crosshairs.

"They're doomed," she said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO – HOW IT PLAYS IN PEORIA

The first thing on Gretchen's agenda was to ditch the fucking dirndl.

Just outside Verona, Gretchen pulled off at the Blaine's Farm and Fleet. While Ben ogled the various gadgets in the automotive department, she tried on a pair of Carhartt Zeeland sandstone bib overalls and a flannel shirt. She kept them on, paid for them, and stuffed the rolled-up dirndl in the bottom of a saddlebag, cradling the bottle of brandy in the pleats.

She avoided the bigger highways, opting instead to take highway 69 to the Illinois border, where it became 26 and headed more or less straight south to Peoria. They stopped for lunch at the This Is It Eatery in Freeport. Gretchen had soup and salad. Simply because he marveled at the genius of it, Ben ordered the boneless wings. Gretchen rolled her eyes when he also ordered deep-fried Oreos. But she ate one out of curiosity.

Sunset found them in Peoria Heights cruising along Grandview Drive, the most beautiful in the world, according to Teddy R. She pulled off into Hillside park. They dismounted, took off their helmets, and stood staring down at the silvery ribbon of the Illinois River.

To her surprise and Ben's, Gretchen began to weep.

The two hadn't spoken ten words to each other all day, but Ben rose to the occasion with an expression of sympathy so complete it looked like he was about to cry, too.

"What's troubling you, my child?"

"I, I am a..."

She blew her nose on her sleeve.

"I am a disgrace!"

"Oh tut, tut," Ben said. "You're too young to have had time to do anything very disgraceful."

"My parents hate me," she wailed.

"Impossible!"

She pointed to her bruised cheek and said, "My mother gave me this."

"Now that you did not deserve."

"I don't know Ben, I don't know. I started a business that has ended in disaster for my partners, and humiliation for the boys we were trying to help. And here I am holding the profits. The whole world thinks I'm the worst kind of criminal.

"Doesn't that sound like the textbook definition of disgrace?"

Ben took her hand and led her to the bench of a picnic table.

"I have known disgrace," he said. "More than once. In such times I find it a comfort to reflect on the words of someone much wiser than I."

As an acting exercise, Ben Folger had memorized Shakespeare's twenty-ninth sonnet. What Ben Folger knew, Ben Folger's Ben Franklin knew, too. He recited each of the fourteen lines, pausing now and again to be sure this sad girl understood, and to explain when she didn't.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes...

"Does that describe how you feel?"

“And how,” Gretchen said. “There was this asshole last night whose eyes I’d like to poke out.”

I all alone beweeep my outcast state...

“Outcast is right,” Gretchen said.

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries...

“Of course,” Ben said, “heaven is never deaf and our prayers need no boots to reach that high. But it sometimes feels that way, as if even God can’t hear us.”

Gretchen wiped her eyes in the elbow of her shirt.

And look upon myself and curse my fate,

Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,

Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,

Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope...

“Scope?”

“Range of powers.”

With what I most enjoy contented least...

“What do you most enjoy, child?”

“Good question. I’ll tell you when I find it.”

Haply I think on thee, and then my state,

Like to the lark at break of day arising

From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate.

For thy sweet love remembered...

Here, Folger followed his theatrical habit of pronouncing every Shakespearean symbol: re-mem-burr-ed.

...Such wealth brings,

That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

“The implication,” Gretchen said, “is that everyone wants to be king. If we’re going to make a true revolution, we’re going to have to stop wanting to be tyrants.”

“You sound just like Sam Adams,” Ben said, chuckling with admiration. “Someone as young and smart as you won’t wallow long in self pity.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

Ben shrugged.

“Pretty poem,” Gretchen said. “I suppose it works for you because you have a sweet love to remember. I don’t.”

“I think I am growing to love you,” Ben said, adding carefully, “as an old man loves his daughter. And we always have someone who loves us no matter what.”

“God?”

“Yes, my dear.”

Gretchen thought for a moment.

“Nice thought. But doesn’t the poem fall apart, then? I mean, the point is that even when heaven is deaf, and our cries are unheard by God, the person who has had a true human love, even a dead one, carries with him a kind of comfort.”

Ben gazed at the barges inching along the river. He suddenly looked old and sad.

“You miss her, don’t you?”

“I seem to miss someone,” Ben said.

He couldn’t recall the face or name. He was consumed by a kind of free-floating need.

Gretchen watched a park ranger vehicle wind its way up a park lane.

“Let’s go.”

They shared a pizza at Agatucci’s in Peoria. Ben marveled at the clock on the wall, which ran counter-clockwise — an 11 where the one should be, a 10 where the 2 should be,

and so on. Gretchen felt much better and wondered why. She didn't think it was the poem.

How could a poem do that?

She decided that what made her feel better was the fact that another human being could care enough to try to cheer someone up with a poem. Shakespeare cared enough to write the poem. Ben Folger cared enough to share it with her. He took the time and effort. Not enough people had done that in her life so far.

She looked at this strange old guy. Wrinkles marked the places where the fat had melted away. He was quite lost, and yet he bobbed on the surface of rough seas, buoyed by his knowledge of greats like Franklin and Shakespeare. And every now and then he said something wonderful.

She yawned.

"We need to find a place to sleep. It might rain."

Back on the bike, they passed a minor league ballpark and a golf course.

"Turn here," Ben shouted.

Laura Bradley Park was dark and empty. At the end of the drive was a giant tent. A painted sign proclaimed, "Corn Stock Theatre!"

"How did you know this would be here?"

Ben shook his head. A sense of déjà vu filled him. "Ben Franklin's Time Machine" had played here once. He couldn't consciously recall it, but some shard of memory had pierced through.

In the sleeping bag on the dusty plank floor, the two reversed their riding position. Without saying anything, each understood that it would be a less sexual situation if Gretchen were the spoon on Ben's backside, rather than the other way around.

He got up in the night to pee, scrambling under a flap and finding a bush. He strolled the stage and estimated how many people the bleachers could hold. He was careful not to awaken Gretchen when he returned.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE – TROUT AND BEAR

While Ben slept, Gretchen puttied the tarp to the inside of the tent and fastened the two lights to the back of the bleacher supports. She nudged the sack with her boot and Ben crawled out.

“Stand here,” Gretchen said. “Face me. Say something.”

“What should I say?”

“Something important. What’s the most important thing you’ve learned in your life so far?”

Ben considered for a moment. Gretchen touched the red button on the screen.

“Where light flashes,” Ben bellowed, pausing for effect, “tremendous power is unleashed.”

That was the entirety of Gretchen’s first TAJ message.

In Madison, Anne’s phone beeped. She was relieved to see the pre-post.

“They’re on the grid!” she shouted.

Ellen and Allen rushed into her bedroom to see.

“Brilliant!” Allan said.

“Perfect first post for the site,” Anne said. “‘Where light flashes!’ That’s what journalism does, it casts light into the darkness.”

Tens of thousands of Ben followers had similar reactions — after Anne uploaded, using a background of Thunder Bay, Canada — and proliferated the message via social media postings and repostings.

Ben's foes saw it as a call to violence.

“The use of Molotov cocktails is bound to increase after this latest incendiary statement from Dirty Ben,” Fox News crowed.

Ben himself was simply thinking of lightning and his experiments with Leyden jars.

Eliza Jain sat on her boulder and said to the nearest chipmunk, “Papa was right.”

Her father, never a fan of western theater, had often referred to Ben as “my son-in-law, the professional idiot.”

Although Bear Valley lacked cell service, select data was transferred to local smartphones from those of visitors who came and went from the central valley and beyond. This kept folks updated with a frequency somewhere between that of a daily and a weekly newspaper. Ben postings could come in bunches, or not at all. It kept Eliza on edge. Yoga and her chipmunk friends helped.



Heading due west, Gretchen and Ben stopped at the Casey's in Hanna City for doughnuts and gas. A few miles further, Gretchen was intrigued by a sign pointing south: “Eden.” She turned, and in less than a mile came upon a small cluster of houses in the midst of fields in every direction that were being prepared for planting. In the middle of the settlement was a house with a huge garden out back. Seeing no apple tree — and no snakes — Gretchen circled the houses on the town's one short loop of road and headed back to the highway.

Having read “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” for English class, Gretchen decided to cross the Mississippi River at Hannibal. The view of the immense ribbon of water

invigorated Ben. Gretchen parked on the curb near Mark Twain's boyhood home. While she ducked into the gift shop, Ben sat on a park bench and struck up a conversation with passing tourists. A crowd quickly formed. Eventually, he was recognized, to the delight of most.

Gretchen emerged and began recording just as a literature professor from nearby Westminster College proffered an erudite if rather long-winded question asking Ben to trace the progress of the American dialogue on race from Colonial America to Twain to Black Lives Matter.

Franklin could not follow most of the professor's drift, but his synapses fired at these last words.

"Black lives matter," Ben said. "I like your phrasing, sir!

"Black lives have always mattered. The questions are, to whom? And how much? And for what reason?

"Black lives matter to the slave owner in the same way livestock matters. They are a source of income. To some — I will not sully the reputations of otherwise upstanding men by naming names — to some they matter as a target of lust. Or even love, I suppose."

Ben winked at a young Hispanic woman, who was taken aback.

"How much, though, how much? Can their worth be converted to a fraction, as has been suggested, for census purposes?

"I have seen the promise, the intelligent sparkle, in the eyes of dark young faces. It is clear to me that that race has every bit as much ability to serve science, the arts, and our national institutions as any other race. Even if we set aside all considerations of what these folks justly deserve, what God's plan for them might be, for the good of the republic we must afford all individuals equal opportunity to contribute. They won't be happy until we do. And neither will we."

At that, the crowd applauded. Gretchen wondered why. Except for the weird part about lust and love, she'd heard it all before. But she recorded it all dutifully.

She sent the video to Anne and helped Ben get on the bike. Some in the crowd with less than friendly faces had begun to raise their phones.

Anne, Ellen, and Allen decided the video was too good to suppress, even though Gretchen had not used the green screen. They couldn't swap in a Canadian background, but they also couldn't identify the locale, and hoped that by the time the Feds did Gretchen and Ben would be far away.

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Eliza was troubled. She could see that Ben was slipping into his Franklin impersonation — the voice, the verb tenses. She hoped that he had somehow explained himself before the camera began recording, but she began to sense that something was off about him, not quite right. She longed to see the real Ben, for all his foibles. He looked so drawn, like he was fading away.

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The travelers continued south. They grabbed a sandwich at a gas mart in Louisiana, Missouri. Planning to cut away from the river and avoid St. Louis, Gretchen wasn't sure that they would encounter much civilization for a while. She wanted to avoid people. But they had to eat. She picked up a bobber, a fishing line, some hooks with sinkers, and a can of corn. She put in the bag packets of salt, a stack of napkins, and plastic sporks.

Northerners like Gretchen do not descend into the South for the first time without taking with them a spooky overlay of fear and wonder. At every fork in the road, she made her choice after conducting a quick tripartite calculation: 1. Which road gets us closer to Texas? 2. Which road affords better cover from increasingly hostile natives? 3. Which is less spooky?

The second and third considerations were always in direct contradiction; prudence dictated choosing the spookiest route. It didn't matter that the spooks were primarily constructions of her own making. Every leafless tree along the way was a lynching tree. Every field hand was a cruel master, a toothless cracker, or a long-suffering descendant of slaves, depending on dress and skin color.

After they crossed Interstate 70, the air grew heavier, the towns smaller, and the names on the arrowed signs stranger: *Gasconade, Bland, Bourbon*. Some miles after Butts she turned into the oak forest that surrounded the road and rode an old pickup track until it petered out. She hid the bike in a bush. They set up camp, such as it was with their paucity of gear, in the mouth of a tiny cave. Just in time, as it turned out. Rain turned the already thick air solid. It was hard to tell when the rain really stopped, because water kept dripping from the trees.

She heard a distant gurgling and grabbed her sack. Ben followed close behind like a puppy. Long ago, when she was in second grade, Pops had taken her trout fishing. She opened the can of corn with her utility knife, and threaded a half dozen kernels on a hook. She put a bobber on the line a foot and a half above the hook and tied the other end of the line to a stick. The current took bobber and hook 20 feet downstream. She could see the corn leading the way, jiggling on the surface. The bobber staff leaned at a sharp angle.

"Well, that won't do," she said.

With her free hand, she pulled the plastic cup of sinkers out of the bag and then pulled in the line — an awkward, jerky process without a reel. Before the bobber reached shore, a 10-inch rainbow trout struck. Moments later it was on shore flopping in the tall grass.

Given that success, Gretchen reloaded the hook without adding a bobber. Two more rainbows — nine and 12 inches — were followed by a half hour of calm. Those three were skinny. One more would be nice. Gretchen added a sinker and let the bobber float just

upstream of a half-submerged log. The next strike broke the stick with a crack. The top half snagged in a bush so Gretchen was able to retrieve it and haul in a speckled brown trout that was twice as big as the other three fish combined.

She handed it to Ben by the gill and grinned. He grinned back.

At the cave mouth she built a small fire using dead twigs and branches yanked from under the canopies of the larger oaks. She cooked the remaining corn in its can and salted it. They passed it back and forth until the can was empty. They cooked chunks of fish in small batches in the empty can. Their hunger made it delicious.

As darkness came, the spring air retained its moisture but grew chilly. Ben shivered. Gretchen told him to spread his jacket on a rock in the cave so it could dry and get into the sleeping bag.

"I believe there is a bottle of brandy in the saddle bag," Ben said, "if you would be so kind as to fetch it."

She thought for a moment.

"Will you behave?"

"But of course, my dear!"

Gretchen retrieved the bottle, and buried the fish remains a good ways from the cave so as not to attract critters.

Ben sipped and looked at her admiringly.

"You are a marvel!"

"You think?"

"I would not be in better hands if General Washington were my body guard."

Gretchen laughed.

"Take your last swig for the night and make some room in there for me."

"There'd be more room if you weren't so good at fishing."

They fell asleep to the trilling of a thousand frogs. Gretchen relaxed into his back, a little less wary tonight.



The next day, the South got Southier.

It didn't help that they were awakened at dawn by the grunting of a brown bear snouting out the buried fish bones. It was a good ways away, and so happy with the fish that it was unlikely to take any interest in them. But they were spooked nonetheless and scurried like wet skunks to the Indian. Gretchen shoved stuff in the saddle bags. She rolled the sleeping bag and was bungeeing it to the backrest when Ben cried, "The brandy!"

"Leave it," she shouted after him, but he continued.

He returned in a minute, hands empty.

"Our hirsute friend was licking the neck of the bottle," Ben said. "I told him to consider it a gift of the Continental Congress. I think we made another ally."

The damp bike started on the fourth kick and skidded down the lane to the main road.

They glided through dense woods past Huzzah, Courtois, Viburnum, Boss, Bixby, and West Fork before the trees thinned. An hour later they passed a sign riddled with bullet holes: "Welcome to Arkansas. The Natural State."

Negro Head Corner seemed to be nothing but a cemetery. Ben's stomach rumbled against Gretchen's backbone as they passed a sign announcing White County. (*As if people need to be reminded*, Gretchen thought.) In Bald Knob, they found the Southern Maid Donuts & Diner, which featured on its door the outline of a belle engulfed in a ruffly cotillion gown. The menu heralded Bald Knob as the place "Where the Ozarks Meet the Delta."

Ben tucked into his biscuits and gravy. Gretchen eyed the other diners critically. Men in short-sleeved white shirts and ties with no coats became, in her imagination, used car dealers who would swear the old Chevy with the busted transmission was a powderpuff steal

only driven on Sundays by sainted Aunt Tillie, bless her soul, deceased just 10 days now leaving a destitute crippled son, cuz'n Leroy, who sorely needed cash or he'd lose the homestead.

The women in the place got even worse treatment in Gretchen's overactive mind. One sashayed in wearing a tube top and frayed cut-offs. The breeze carried a smell of unwashed human flesh. Gretchen's repulsion was total.

And then she realized that the smell came from Ben, who sat between her and the door. She pretended to attend to something on the bench beside her so she could duck her nose down closer to her own armpit. Damn, but she was dreadful rank, too. She realized that she and Ben were far and away the seediest folks in the place. She began to berate herself. Who did she think she was, a farm girl from Wisconsin looking down her nose at every person she saw south of I-70?

That evening, she found a Motel 6 in Nacadoches, Texas, and insisted they both take showers before finding a restaurant. On the way into town they had passed Zippy's Car Wash. The name gave Gretchen a pang. She nearly pulled in, thinking for a crazy nanosecond that she might find Pyotr and then for a couple slightly less crazy seconds that a full dousing of bike and passengers couldn't do any harm. The sight of the giant spinning brushes dissuaded her.

Inside the motel room the air was stale and moist. Gretchen didn't want to crawl back into dirty clothes, so she washed her shirt and underwear in the sink, hung them to dry, wrapped herself in towels and sat on the bed watching CNN as Ben showered. He did the same after the water turned cold.

The news was astonishing.

Spurred apparently by reports of the re-surfacing of Ben, three agitated groups hit the streets in a dozen cities: Ben supporters, Ben haters, and random, gun-toting lunatics not

affiliated with any particular denomination. Where there had for years been mass shootings by the latter almost every day, those events had tripled in frequency. Oakland was burning. Chicago saw opposing mobs chasing each other across Grant Park and into Michigan Avenue. In Philadelphia, someone tried to blow up the Liberty Bell. A right-wing militia linked arms to protect the Denver Mint.

Gretchen puttied the blue screen to the motel room wall and positioned a chair so that the shot would not show Ben's naked shoulders.

She was torn: Should Ben fan the flames, or douse them? Could good come from any of these actions? On the face of it, this all seemed like senseless violence. And yet, real change, momentous change, was needed. Somehow.

She decided to let Ben be Ben.

"People need leadership," Gretchen said. "Give 'em what you got."

She touched record.

Ben's sober demeanor fit the occasion.

"It appears the revolution may have begun. You all know what side I am on. I am heartened by the enthusiasm and courage of our foot soldiers. But I would caution anyone against taking individual, uncoordinated action. Listen to Washington, and then make the most of your opportunities as you find them. Ours is an army of redoubtable alacrity. We know the territory. The enemy — so recently our brothers but now stubbornly opposed to a just relationship — the enemy is powerful but predictable and slow. Be swift, my friends. Be swift, be true. Godspeed!"

Gretchen sent. Anne posted.

Ellen said to Allan, "I wonder where they are."

Gretchen and Ben were hungry. He put on wet but clean clothes, and she decided to go commando, wearing just her overalls — buttoned tight to prevent gapping — and boots without socks.

On the way out, she said, “Lay low, Ben. We’re in the heart of enemy territory.”

His head ducked and his eyes darted.

Cutting across the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University, they saw a peculiar thing. Two concentric rings of ROTC cadets surrounded a raised rock, on which someone had spray painted in red letters, “Where’s your gumption?” Gretchen turned the corner and saw that on the other side were the letters, “WWBD?” Young women in sorority t-shirts were trying and failing to scrub off the paint with buckets and brushes. A crowd looked on.

At Bullfrog’s, over plates of fried pickles and pulled pork sliders, Gretchen and Ben witnessed a battle for the remote controlling the giant TV over the bar. Some of the regulars wanted to see the Astro’s game. Others wanted local news.

This was not the kind of joint where news ever defeated sports, but tonight it did. Through bits of overheard conversation, Gretchen surmised that the painting of the “spirit rock” had caused as much outrage as spray painting a crucifix would have.

The crowd hushed when the latest Ben video came on. Gretchen was dismayed to see that Ben had apparently sat up straighter and leaned forward when she hit record. Tufts of hair on his chest peeked through the words of the lower third, which read, “Dirty Ben urges guerrilla warfare.” Incongruously, the Banff Springs Hotel loomed in the background.

Shiner Bocks and Wild Turkey sidecars fed the mood and led to boasts of *What I would do if I could get my hands on that Folger sonofabitch....He’s lucky he’s in Canada...We should go up there and cook his goose...*

Gretchen put enough cash on the table to cover tab and tip and hauled Ben out by his soggy shirt. The waitress saw the imprint of two damp cheeks on the vinyl upholstery and shouted, "Jayden! Jayden, we got a Depends breach here."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR – END RUN

Gretchen washed her overalls, wrung them out, and hung them on the shower head. The rest of their clothes, still dripping, filled the shower curtain rod and towel racks. They slept naked that night, which was an improvement in decorum over sharing a sleeping bag. The next morning their clothes were stiff in places and damp in others. Gretchen was happy to see the room had two single-use toothbrushes, pre-loaded with powdered paste. She gave one to Ben. They brushed, and she packed them away.

Seven hours of chugging along back roads, punctuated by stops for gas and moon pies, brought them to the little town of Agua Dulce on the outskirts of Corpus Christi. Just past the water tower on Franklin Avenue — a coincidence no one noticed — was the designated safe house, a small brick ranch that flowed without break into a ramshackle shed with a metal roof. Two pickups, a black van, and several bicycles occupied bare ground in front of the shed. When Gretchen and Ben pulled up, a half dozen children ran into the house.

Wary, Gretchen left the motorcycle running and said to Ben, “Stay here, in case we have to leave in a hurry.”

She peered into the dark house through the screen door as she walked up the path of concrete bleached white by the sun. Shadows shifted and a tiny dynamo of a woman burst through, gave her a hug, and spoke excitedly.

“I am Josefina — I’d tell you my last name, but that’s something you should not know in case you get arrested tomorrow. Oh but don’t worry you’ll be fine, my husband and his brothers will be very careful. Señor Benjamin!”

Gretchen was surprised at the pronunciation: *BANE-ha-meen*. She was more surprised to see Ben standing right behind her. She looked back at the Indian. It was surrounded by children — at least 10 of them, four on the seats, hands playing with the controls. Where did they come from? A tall girl twisted the throttle and grinned at the roar she made. Gretchen sprinted and shut it off before anyone kicked it into gear.

Josefina showed Gretchen a horse stall in the shed. Half the stall was taken up by an old single mattress covered by a green Army blanket.

“You and your bike can sleep here tonight.”

She put Gretchen to work in the house cutting onions for the night’s feast. Ben was given the biggest bedroom and urged to sit in the recliner in the living room. The moment he drained a Modelo another was brought to him by a five-year-old boy who had been assigned that task as if it were a great honor.

Throughout the evening, a parade of young and old entered the front door, bowed, shook his hand, said *Tengo el honor de conocerte* or *Me siento honrada* or simply *Gracias*, and continued into the kitchen for plates of beans, carne asada, shrimp ceviche, and tortillas.

Gretchen washed a mountain of dishes and went to bed, using her bag of cash as a pillow. She felt like she was already in Mexico.

It was still dark when Josefina’s husband, Miguel Angel, jiggled her foot with his boot.

“Señorita.”

He had draped rain gear across the motorcycle.

“Put this on,” he said. “Bring nothing with you.”

He saw her concern and said, “We will take good care of this fine machine of yours. Do not worry about that.”

Gretchen was puzzled. She had never seen a place as dry as Texas. It was hard to imagine that it ever rained here. How could this dust heap have hurricanes? Was one coming? It wasn't the season for that, was it?

She put on the yellow rain pants, rolled the legs into 10-inch cuffs, and tightened the suspenders. The jacket sleeves required cuffs halfway up her forearms.

Bring nothing with you. Gretchen didn't have much, but what she had she wanted to keep. She left the key in the ignition of the bike. The rain jacket had two giant pockets with flaps that snapped. She put the TAJkit in one and stuffed the cash in the other. She put the shredded ziplock baggie in a saddlebag.

Breakfast was cornbread fried in lard, chunks of papaya, and coffee. No one spoke. Everyone but Ben seemed nervous.

Gretchen asked Josefina, “What do I do at the border? I don't have a passport.”

“Border? You're not going to the border.”

Gretchen looked puzzled.

“The less you know the better for all of us.”

Two and a half hours later the sun was rising like a broken yolk over the gulf when they piled out of the van and into a shrimp boat in Port Isabel. Three boats headed southeast over gently rolling swells. Concerned that someone would notice her bulging pockets, Gretchen sat on the deck in a corner of shade. She noticed that Ben's face had tanned considerably in the past week. He blended in with the fishermen.

Midday, they pulled alongside two other boats.

An argument ensued in Spanish. Miguel Angel spoke to Ben and Gretchen.

“My cousin will take you to Mexico. Two from his boat will come to ours. We need to return to port with the same number of people.”

“Is he changing his mind?”

“No no no, everything is fine. It’s just a little rough to bring boats together. Don’t worry.”

A pole as thick as a mast was lowered from one boat to the other. Two men held each end against the gunwales. A man in yellow rain clothes shimmied across, hugging the pole and inching along carefully. Next came a woman. She shouted happily when she reached his arms. It was as if they were already safely in the United States, Gretchen surmised.

Ben was halfway across when a swell caused him to lose his grip. He made a great splash. Without thinking, Gretchen lept in after him. Both pilots reflexively leaned toward the swimmers. The boats clonked together. Shrimp boats have hulls that slope very little at water level; there was barely enough room between them for the swimmers’ heads. Always a strong swimmer, Gretchen pulled Ben to the stern.

She looked up and saw the men gesticulating and shouting. They pointed to the other boat. So long as they’re already in the water, they might as well swim to the Mexican boat. Gretchen helped Ben up the ladder, where a bottle of Mescal waited to warm him.

“Give her some, too,” Miguel Angel shouted. “She’s earned it.”

Gretchen had always like owls, so she took a swig from the owl-shaped bottle of *El Buho*. She did not enjoy the burn. One of the men cracked a joke. The others laughed. Gretchen and Ben looked puzzled, but no one knew English well enough to explain to them that they would be entering Mexico as wetbacks.

Both sets of boats dropped their nets and trawled for shrimp as they returned to their respective ports. It would be a waste not to. And arriving without a catch might raise suspicions. That slowed their arrival. The sun was dipping into the trees as they docked in tiny La Pesca.

Ben and Gretchen were greeted by Bruce and Bryce, two forty-something venture capitalists.

Bruce's real name was Robert.

As they would reveal on the long drive to San Miguel de Allende, the two had met the first night of an Atlantis cruise in Auckland.

"Hello there," Bryce had cooed over a giant bowl of prawns. "I'm Bryce."

Just for the hell of it, Robert had replied, "I'm Bruce."

Bryce didn't learn the truth until they were back in Austin and he noticed a stack of mail addressed to "some guy named Robert — your brother?" By then, they had become Bryce and Bruce. They liked it that way and saw no reason to change.

"How do you like our Land Rover Range Rover Evoque?" Bruce asked in the middle of a series of mountain switchbacks.

Bruce and Bryce laughed. This was a running joke with them. In the coming weeks, Gretchen would never hear them call it the SUV, the Evoque, the Land Rover, the Range Rover, or the Rover. It was always the *Land Rover Range Rover Evoque*. If anyone else called it anything else, they pretended they didn't know what the person was talking about. When they said "the car," they meant the silver Jaguar or the flame orange Lamborghini — either one, it didn't matter.

Gretchen didn't get it.

But she quickly decided she liked these guys. They had put together an amazing feast in a picnic basket that sat in the back seat between Ben and her.

When they arrived in San Miguel de Allende well after midnight, Gretchen was shown to her room, which had its own bathroom and a high stack of fluffy white towels.

“This is better than last night,” she said, adding quickly, “I shouldn’t complain. Those people risked jail time for us.”

She was exhausted. But the bills in her pocket were soggy and salty. She laid out towels across the floor from one end of a long wall to the other. She rinsed the bills and placed them on the towels one layer deep. And then she crawled into the softest bed she had ever slept in.

Around 11 a.m., she was still sleeping when Lupe, the live-in maid, tip-toed in, took one look at the display of singles, fives, tens, and twenties, and hurried downstairs to the kitchen, where Bruce, Bryce, and Ben were eating huevos rancheros and papaya.

“I’m very sorry, Señor Bruce,” Lupe began, “you have always been very good to me, but I cannot live in a drug house. I quit. *Effectivo inmediatamente.*”

Bruce and Bryce peeked in the room and returned to the kitchen, where the cook was trying to persuade Lupe to reconsider.

“I’m sure there is an explanation,” Bryce said. “Ben, where do you think Gretchen got all the Hamiltons?”

“Kale,” Ben said between gulps of orange juice intended to put out the fire of the peppers in the omelet.

Gretchen entered wearing a terry cloth bathrobe she had found hanging on a carved wooden peg in her bathroom.

“Have you been laundering money?” Bruce asked with an impish grin.

“Money you made selling kale?” Bryce added. “Really? What’s your secret?”

Gretchen yawned and said, "It's all about value added."

"One car ride with us and you're already picking up the lingo," Bryce said. "Is she always this quick?"

"Oh yes," Ben said. "She's a blue-stocking natural, that one."

Before they could ask Ben what that meant, Lupe began quizzing her on horticulture.

"My husband, he sells vegetables from our garden," she said. "But kale — no one buys the devil's weed here. What is this value you add?"

Gretchen just shook her head.

"She puts cheese on it," Ben said, trying to be helpful. "Powdered cheese."

"I knew it! I know what 'cheese' is. I was not born yesterday."

"Huh?" Gretchen said.

"Tylenol PM crushed and mixed with heroin. It kills."

Ben managed to convince her that it was just cheese, but she had trouble believing anybody could make money by putting it on kale.

Lupe stayed. Over the summer, Ben learned to like spicy food, and Gretchen became the beneficiary of Bryce and Bruce's two main hobbies: haute couture and contract bridge.

Gretchen didn't see the point of expensive clothes that would not hold up to a real day's work, but she played along and let the guys fill her closet with embroidered bolero jackets and suede gaucho pants. She even let them put make-up on her and play with her hair.

Fully decked out and painted, she looked in the mirror and exclaimed, "If Ashley Debord could see me now!"

Once her bruise had healed, they took her to a portrait studio and had a framed photo sent to Ms. A. Debord, 111 S. 7th Ave., Sturgeon Bay, WI 54235. They sent it via a friend in Vancouver so as to create a misleading postmark. No note, no return address, no

photographer's stamp on the back of the photo. At the last minute, Bruce had reached into the studio's prop box and draped a bandolier of bullets across her shoulder.

"Damn!" Ashley said when she saw the photo. "I had no idea they dressed like this in Canada."

Bryce worried that circumstances had interrupted Gretchen's education. He and Bruce began giving Gretchen instruction in patent law and the principles of entrepreneurship. They knew what they were talking about.

Bryce had invested family oil money in a score of high tech schemes. The one-in-five that succeeded more than paid for the failures. As for Bruce, he had invented an improved valve for IV tubes that earned a pretty penny on sheer volume. That was his first and last invention. There was more upside to investing in the inventions of others.

Ben raised an eyebrow when he heard the story.

"Sir," he began, "do you mean to tell me that you gave up after one invention?"

"There's more money in VC," Bruce replied.

"Any beef-head can make money," Ben said. "But how many of us can make things that improve the lives of others?"

"You don't care about money?"

"Certainly, certainly," Ben said. "Up to a point. I made my money in printing — handbills, newspapers, a magazine, books. The everyday commerce of ideas, the lifeblood of our democracy. But once I had enough money, I handed my paper mills and presses over to younger men. I was about your age when I did that."

Bryce and Bruce were puzzled. They knew Ben Folger had been an actor and a professor. They had not heard about this earlier life.

"But I didn't sit on my money. I used it for good. I endowed a lending library and a hospital. I bought equipment for my experiments. And when God favored my efforts with

inspiration — bifocals, a smokeless stove, a rod to divert lightening from heaven to earth, sparing our homes from fire — I gave these things freely. How can you patent a medical device and profit from the ill health of your fellow human beings?”

Bruce might have felt guilty if he wasn't distracted by the chilling realization that he had brought a crazy man into his house.

That evening over cards, after Ben had gone to bed, Bruce and Bryce confirmed the diagnosis with Gretchen.

“Does he wake up each day thinking he is Benjamin Franklin,” Bryce asked, “or does he slip in and out?”

“Twenty-four seven,” Gretchen said. “He picked a good dude to get delusional about.”

“Yeah,” Bruce said, “but, I mean, talk about stark raving.”

Bruce swirled his port.

“Franklin himself must have been pretty crazy. Imagine: Making money in publishing and giving technology away for free.”

“Pretty much the opposite of what we do today, huh?” Gretchen said.

They fell into the routine of recording the wisdom of this lunatic every day before dinner. The first few of these were rather flat. Gretchen, Bruce, and Bryce prompted him with questions about fiscal policy, the importance of diplomacy over bullets, and the place of civil disobedience. His answers were generally curt and uninspired.

His energy picked up significantly the day Lupe's children sat in. After that, they moved the event to the walled-in courtyard. They tacked the tarp to the brick wall, set up rows of chairs from the adjacent dining room, and filled them with members of Lupe's family who did not speak English. They were paid and told not to say a word about what they saw. One of them recognized Ben from a You Tube clip.

Lupe hushed him up: “Do not kill the golden goose, Enrique!”

The United States was burning, metaphorically and literally. Social services like firefighting were breaking down as folks who might otherwise have volunteered for forest crews were building their own bunkers out of fear of spreading revolution. Bruce, Bryce, and Gretchen felt a great responsibility for tending Ben and steering him to say things that would lead to positive change without hurting innocents — an impossible task. Depending on the proclivities of the listeners, Ben’s words could fan flames in one place and douse them in another. Overall, his impact was incendiary. He gave hope to the agents of change.

In saner times, voicing an educated guess about Franklin’s opinions on this or that 21st Century issue might have been fodder for a lively panel discussion, and no more. But the nerves of the body politic were frayed beyond easy repair. Once a day — and into the dinner hour — this ad hoc Gumption cell worried about what appeared to be a growing revolution — its potential for success, its collateral damage. They also fielded suggestions from the Madison cell of Anne, Ellen, and Allan, all of whom were less cautious.

The rest of the day was taken up with educating Gretchen and enjoying the quaint yet plush charms of San Miguel de Allende. The ornate, neo-Gothic Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel dominates the town like a giant wedding cake made by a mescaline-inspired baker. Its bell tower erupts sporadically at all hours of the day and night. Gardens, museums, and restaurants adorn the historic center.

San Miguel de Allende had housed other revolutions: the Chichimeca War in the 16th century, the war of independence from Spain in the early 19th. By the end of the 20th century, it had become a magnet for artists and moneyed retirees and ex-pats from the United States.

The wealthiest newcomers built villas on the eastern bluff overlooking the town or poured money into extensive renovations of walled compounds in the historic district,

sometimes buying several adjacent properties and knocking down walls between them while maintaining the high walls along the streets. Dogs patrolled the rooftops. As things went south in the U.S., the wealthy went mostly south — Mexico, New Zealand, Switzerland — building fall-back bunkers.

Bryce had been a Young Republican in high school in Houston and a Log Cabin Republican at Duke. He broke left during the Trump fiasco. Bruce had grown up in Redding, California, the smart fifth child of a man who bounced between construction and fighting the annual fires of Mendocino. Bruce went to Berkeley and thrived. By the time they were 40, both men had money and time to burn. San Miguel de Allende was the perfect place to deal with both. They felt they could be themselves here.

Each gave to liberal causes. They had followed the tale of Ben Folger with great interest, from the convention in Philadelphia through the talk shows, the sudden disappearance, the sudden re-emergence. Through a former Berkeley friend involved in Gumption, Bruce had offered haven to Ben. Gretchen turned out to be a delightful bonus.

Their days followed a pattern: Breakfast at nine, followed by two hours of instruction, after which Bruce, Bryce, and Gretchen strolled the town and had lunch out. Ben was confined to quarters, which were large and well stocked. There was a walled garden, various musical instruments in the music room, a library, and unlimited food and drink. The trio returned in the heat of the day, by 2 or 3, showered and lounged until 4. They prepped Ben for a half hour and recorded his words of wisdom at 4:30. By 5 they were sipping Margaritas or mojitos or wine. After dinner, they played bridge until midnight.

Ben lacked the killer instinct to be a decent bridge player. He was happier when others won. He became the designated dummy. As soon as the hand was bid, he would switch places with the dummy bidder so as to give Gretchen more practice.

“I am the dummy!” he would announce with inane glee when house staff happened into the room.

He tired early, and was replaced by the cook after his 9:30 bedtime.

Gretchen, on the other hand, was phenomenal. She had a knack for remembering every card that had been played, who played it, and how the card — combined with how the player had bid the hand — suggested the odds for other cards not yet played. Unlike Blackjack, you only played with one deck at a time. A quarter of the cards were on the table, another quarter in your hand. Bidding revealed the likely location of the rest.

Within six weeks she was as good as Bruce and better than Bryce.

Beginning and intermediate players do well to read the expressions, the pauses, the unconscious signals sent by opponents. Experts, however, know how to give false impressions, encouraging opponents to try finesses and other gambits when they are doomed to fail. For all her positive attributes, Gretchen was blind to such signals. She neither sent nor received. This proved a boon once she reached the expert level.

One day at dinner, Bryce smiled at Bruce conspiratorially and told Gretchen to “put on makeup and a distracting dress.”

“We’re heading out,” Bryce said.

Ben pouted a little when he was reminded again how important it was to stay indoors and away from windows. The cook mollified him by making an extra pitcher of Margaritas.

Bruce and Bryce were eager to show off their protege at the Thirty-six Hundred Club, named for the number of points one gets (give or take, depending on the suit) for bidding and making two slams in one rubber without yielding a game to the opponents. The club was in an old mansion, a place that looked modest from the street but turned out to be anything but. Members were wealthy and mostly much more conservative than Bruce and Bryce, but there was an unspoken rule barring talk of politics.

Bridge is a dull game when you're dealt one poor hand after another. You just sit there following suit, wasting the night away. Gretchen, looking cool and stunning in a simple black dress with a short hemline, played with Bruce as her partner at a dollar-a-point table. They lost \$8,000 before their luck began to change.

They were playing against Grand Slam Sam and his wife. Sam had a gold tiepin that said 3600. He saw Gretchen eyeing it.

"You get one of these when you bid and make two slams in one rubber," he explained, beaming.

"Why?" Gretchen asked.

"Well why not," Sam said. "It's quite an accomplishment, don't you think?"

"It's harder to make one no trump than seven," Gretchen said.

"How do you figure?"

"You don't bid seven unless you've got pretty much all the high cards. It's either a laydown or maybe a finesse away from making.

"But one no-trump can be hard. Your opponents might have a long suit, and nearly as many face cards as you do. Usually you have to give up the lead at some point."

"I suppose you're right," Sam said.

His wife, Klaudie, a platinum blonde with an eastern European accent who was often mistaken for Sam's daughter, offered a different explanation.

"The award is not for talent but for grace," she purred. "Those who get the cards, and play them well, bask in the favor of the almighty. They have taken their talents and multiplied them. They are chosen by providence."

Grand Slam Sam earned his name because he never stopped the bidding at six of anything. He couldn't bear the possibility of making seven without bidding it.

Bruce had always kept score at home. He and Bryce took pains to teach Gretchen the ins and outs of bidding and card play, but hadn't bothered to explain all the details of scoring. When she and Bruce set Sam and Klaudie one trick on a slam bid, she saw Sam jot 50 above the line for *They* — but 150 above the line for *We*.

“Excuse me, Sam,” Gretchen said, trying to sound diplomatic. “You just put 150 dollars on your side.”

“Yes, my dear.”

“But you lost the hand.”

“I'm sorry,” Bruce said. “I neglected to teach Gretchen about honors points.”

Everyone spoke at once, but eventually Gretchen sorted it out. In Bridge, you get points just for having all the face cards, provided you bid them and get the contract.

“Let me get this straight,” she said. “You were dealt all the top cards. You played them poorly, lost the contract, and still came out ahead. What kind of fucked-up game is this?”

“It makes perfect sense to me,” Sam said. “In a capitalist system, you want to incentivize risk-taking. That ends up being good for everybody. Sure, some corporations fold, but the ones that succeed are good for one and all.”

“How is that *risk taking*,” Gretchen asked, “if the rich win no matter what? And the poor — those dealt lousy hands — lose no matter what, even when they are smarter and work harder?”

“Are you saying you're a better player than me?”

“I think the last hand proves that.”

“The score sheet tells a different story, young lady.”

Bruce consoled Gretchen on the way home.

“You outplayed them all,” he said. “You just didn’t get the cards tonight. Play enough and you’ll come out ahead.”

“I was watching you from across the room,” Bryce said. “Good job dodging Sam’s gropes under the table.”

“With his wife right there,” Bruce said, shaking his head. “It’s that capitalist love of risk.”

“Next time,” Gretchen said, “I’m wearing gauchos. Fuck the dress code.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Bryce said.

“No kidding.”

Bruce was glad to hear she wanted to try again.

While they were losing at cards, Ben was playing a different game.

After Bruce, Bryce, and Gretchen had left for the club, Ben polished off the pitcher of margaritas. The cook prepared a charcuterie tray to greet the card players upon their return and then retreated to his bedroom under the stairs.

Ben was antsy. He began to explore the compound. Turning a corner, he saw a man approaching him from the end of a dimly lit hallway. He took a step back and appraised the fellow: elderly, balding, pale, thin, dressed like a wealthy rancher with silver tipped cowboy boots and a suit subtly embroidered with silver threads on the lapels and cuffs. The man had a quizzical but not unfriendly look on his creased face. As Ben slowly approached, the man approached, just as slowly.

They were five feet apart when Ben realized he was looking in a mirror that ran floor-to-ceiling on the hallway to Bruce and Bryce’s bedroom. The tip-off was the clothing, not the face: The man in the mirror was wearing the clothes, borrowed from Bryce, that Ben had put on before dinner.

Ben thought, "If I can't even recognize myself, what's the harm in taking a stroll outside at night?"

The evening air was pleasantly warm and smelled of *huele de noche*, a strain of jasmine with tiny white flowers. Ben had not walked three blocks before he attracted the attention of a friendly young woman in what looked like a Girl Scout uniform who asked if the distinguished señor was in the mood for a little fun.

"Always," Ben said.

The scout took his hand and led him up three steep blocks and down an alley to a small green door in a nondescript stone wall. Looking at the door and wall, no one could guess the extent of the wonders on the other side.

"'Tis a merry buttock ball!" Ben exclaimed to no one in particular.

A small combo played jazz next to a fountain as couples danced. Ben noticed that there seemed to be a shortage of men, forcing several women to dance with each other. At the doorway, his guide went back out into the street after handing him off to an older woman who led him to a large alcove under a pergola of pink gardenias.

A long table held champagne in buckets and carafes of brandy at one end. The other end held plates of shrimp, lobster, meats, cheeses, and chocolates. Behind the table was a banquette seating an assortment of women of various sizes and shapes. The woman at his elbow told Ben to help himself and make his choice. He misunderstood.

"How can I choose when confronted with so many delicious delicacies?"

The woman eyed his clothes shrewdly and decided he could afford the smorgasbord treatment. She held up her hand, fanned her fingers wide, and nodded toward the seated women.

Before Ben knew what was happening, he found himself naked in a giant bed. Five women kissed and caressed him and made a great show of auditioning to be "the one." They

were expert at bringing a man close to climax, backing off, and starting in again. The women took turns in various positions around his body.

“Pick me! Pick me!”

Ben's boozy gaze rested longest on Jaimica. There was something about her that drew a sad longing from his chest: the dark skin, the thick but straight black hair, the emerald eyes. She reminded him of someone from a distant past.

Jaimica straddled him backwards for a while as the others took turns grazing his lips with various body parts. Then they retreated to his hands and feet as Jaimica deftly spun 180 degrees and leaned over him, letting fall a curtain of locks that put them in a private place far away, noses close, panting, green eyes twinkling. All five women moaned in unison, as if somehow this were all for their benefit.

Ben peered into Jaimica's eyes, pumped once, and cried, “Eliza Jain!”

He was woke.

At long last, Ben Folger had returned to his senses. Benjamin Franklin disappeared in an ecstatic rush, into this strangely familiar woman or into the ether, and was replaced with a melancholy realization of just how far Folger was from his beloved. Ben knew where he was and how he had gotten here. But he felt as if he had been watching someone else's movie ever since he left New York. He was profoundly sad. And not a little embarrassed.

Around him, five women shrieked with laughter. The hostess stood in the doorway, eyebrow raised, a fresh glass of champagne in her hand.

When Ben had shouted “Eliza Jain,” it sounded like the way a *gabacho* from Wisconsin would say *se gane*, to win. *I win*, they repeated.

“Si, señor, you win,” Jaimica said, swiveling off the bed.

The hostess handed Ben the glass of champagne.

“Our clients always win,” she said. “But in this game, the winner pays.”

She placed a slip of paper on the bedside stand.

Ben looked at it, and although it was steep, the charge seemed reasonable given the labor and overhead involved.

Ben put on his clothes and searched the pockets, knowing he would find them empty.

"I'm so sorry, so very sorry, but I brought no cash with me."

At that moment, a tall man stepped into the doorway. He had a face that could curdle milk.

"You must be paid, of course, don't worry."

"Oh, I am not worried, señor," the woman said. "All our clients win, and all our clients pay. One way or the other. It is you, perhaps, who should worry."

"I will go to my place, get money, and return here immediately."

"Pedro and Jaimica will go with you. The longer it takes, the more charges he will add to the bill. If you do not find your money soon, you will wake up in a jail cell in bloody clothes with a charge of rape of this poor girl."

"Jeez, not again!" Ben said, immediately regretting it.

Pedro held Ben's arm like a pipe in a plumber's vise as Jaimica and the scout girl led them to the spot where she had initially found him. Ben stood on the corner and looked up one street and down another. He had arrived in San Miguel de Allende in nighttime. He had never been out in it during the day. It wasn't a big city, but most of the streets looked the same: narrow, with skinny sidewalks abutting high stucco walls.

As they began to traverse some of the same blocks twice, Pedro started slapping Ben. Jaimica gave a few samples of her *cry rape* routine, sotto voce, for Ben's benefit. The slaps got harder and the cries louder as Ben led them down the same street for a third time. Suddenly, floodlights came on, putting the three in a pool of light. Out stepped the cook, wearing pajama bottoms and a leather jacket.

Ben tried to explain, but could not make himself heard over the increasingly loud argument between Pedro and the cook.

Jaimica translated for Ben:

“Your friend, he say has no money, but the master of the house — Señor Bruce, or did he say Bryce? — will pay tomorrow. Pedro no gonna wait for tomorrow. I hope he not beat you up too bad before you go to jail.”

By this time, curious heads were poking over the walls across the street.

Just then, Bruce, Bryce, and Gretchen came around the corner and joined in. Ben kept saying “I’m sorry” to anyone who would listen.

Jaimica started shouting, “He rape me!”

Bruce looked at the revised bill and said, “You lost more than we did.”

They didn’t have that kind of cash on hand, so Pedro and Jaimica rode home in the Jaguar.

“Aren’t you going with them?” Gretchen asked the scout.

“No, I work out here.”

The scout looked at Bruce and Bryce.

“How about you two?”

“Not tonight, honey,” Bryce said.

They all went straight to bed.

“Ben seems different,” Bruce said.

“A night at Lupita’s will do that to you,” Bryce said, before adding, pointedly, “so I’ve heard.”

“No, not that,” Bruce said. “Different.”

Part Four: After Ben

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE – DOUBLE REVERSE

At breakfast the next morning, Ben, contrite to the point of tears, spoke in a voice Gretchen, Bruce, and Bryce had not heard before. Gone were the 18th century phrasing, the jovial confidence, the twinkle.

“I am so very sorry,” he began. “I have repaid your hospitality with scandal and expense. I have never been to a house of prostitution.

“Ben is gone. I must go home.”

The ensuing discussion bounced between two topics: Getting to know this new person, Ben Folger, affirming that he was indeed back in his proper mind, and the revolution that was simmering across the United States. Now was not the time to return, Bruce and Bryce insisted.

Ben was insistent:

“I am no good to anybody without my Eliza. She understands politics much better than I ever did. All I know how to do is *play* a politician.”

“We’ve had presidents like that,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, and how did that work out?” Gretchen said.

Inquiries with Anne and the growing Gumption network revealed that Eliza had left the Bay Area and was most likely in an outlaw zone. This was a term the President's communications people had given to the growing areas no longer served by police or utilities. Or National Guard, who had pulled back to secure the cities. The term "outlaw zone" put the onus on the residents.

"This is good news," Bruce said. "If she were still home in your apartment, the place would be staked out. If you can get yourself to where she is without being caught on the way, you might be OK for a while."

They looked at a map of the zones.

"Alpine Lake," Ben said. "We have a friend with a cabin there. She wouldn't go to a tent city. She hates camping."

They agreed to try to set up a return trip via the same boats.

"It's harder to go north," Bryce said. "Each boat leaving and entering the harbor must have the same number of people on it. Which means you have to wait for two people who want to come south."

Ben passed the hours fitfully. He read the news and felt guilty about all the trouble he had caused. When he couldn't stomach current events, he sat in the study and read. He was deeply moved by the tale of the Mexican whiskey priest in Graham Greene's "The Power and the Glory."

Bryce walked in and saw the tears in Ben's eyes. He raised an eyebrow.

"I miss my wife," Ben said.

Gretchen won back some of the money lost at the bridge club. She steered clear of Grand Slam Sam. Some things are more important than revenge.

Eating poblanos with Bruce at a sidewalk cafe, she was approached by a young woman who leaned over and whispered, "You are not safe, maybe."

Gretchen smiled at Bruce and said, "Oh, I'm perfectly safe."

"You don't recognize me, do you," the girl said.

She was wearing jeans and a black shirt.

"No."

"I was standing next to you the other night when Ben Folger could not pay his bill."

It was the girl scout.

Bruce put down his pepper.

"Who?"

"Ben Folger," she said, "*el guerrillero heroico*."

"How do you...?"

"Look on the You Tubes."

The girl pulled a scarf over her head and walked away.

Someone on the opposite rooftop had recorded the fracas in the street. Someone else had identified Ben, which made the video a Fox meme, juicy with its cries of rape and Ben's repetition of "I'm sorry!" The only one who identified the well-dressed young woman at the edge of the photo was Gretchen's mother. She sobbed when she saw the video.

Eliza Jain swore.

The Mexican President's office issued a statement that they would play no part returning Folger to the U.S. But Bruce and Bryce worried about the long reach of the CIA and of any of a number of thriving hate groups. They had been stalling Ben, pretending to seek a return trip but keeping him in their home for his own good. That no longer seemed like such a good idea.

As it turned out, the border-crossing economy had changed. Now, Mexicans were flooding back, eager to escape the U.S. In San Miguel de Allende, winter homes of northern snowbirds filled up in summer. Bruce had noticed, and now he understood.

“You sure you want to return to that madness?” he asked Ben.

“I contributed to it,” Ben said. “Perhaps I can make amends. I can’t just cower.”

They packed and drove through the night to La Pesca. They boarded the shrimp boat at dawn, and switched boats without incident. By evening they were back in Agua Dulce. Ben insisted that Gretchen get the bedroom and he sleep in the stall with the Indian.

Josefina and Miguel Angel asked them to stay as long as they liked. Gretchen could tell they were relieved when Ben insisted they leave after breakfast. Josefina hugged them. Miguel Angel said they had turned down the idle on the motorcycle.

“We rode it a little,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind. It is a fine machine.”

The children waved and ran after them for half a block.

Gretchen and Ben stopped for gas in Beeville. Ben paid with a Benjamin peeled from a roll he pulled from his pocket. Gretchen’s eyebrows rose.

“Bruce insisted I take it,” Ben said. “For the movement. Yikes.

“Why don’t I drive the next stretch, Gretchen? I watched the way you shifted with your foot. Down, down, up. Give your arms a break and enjoy the scenery.”

Gretchen pointed across the street, laughed, and said, “Look!”

It was a Ben Franklin Five and Dime store.

Ben didn’t even smile. He wanted to get going.

Gretchen sat on the back, clung to the wiry old man in front of her, and watched the scrubland as it passed, endless manuscripts of nothing punctuated by bobbing derricks. She realized she was on a journey with no clear end bound to a man who was not the one she thought he was when they began the trip, not the same man at all. How many women across the centuries had come to a similar terrifying realization, she wondered, sometime after the wedding?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX – BALLING THE JACK

Ben drove relentlessly northwest, as if he couldn't wait to get out of Texas. They gobbled whatever food they could get quickly at gas stations. Greenish-brown hot dogs and sugary pink slush. He drove all day, never asking if Gretchen wanted to take over again.

During a hurried dinner at the Burrito Depot in Pecos, with the sun melting into the dust, Gretchen said, "We should post a video before the light is gone. It's been a few days since the last one."

Ben shrugged. "I don't have anything to say."

She snapped.

"Then what am I doing here? You don't talk. You keep driving *my* fucking motorcycle. And now you want to give up on the revolution you started."

She retreated to the women's room and splashed water on her face. He paid the bill and sat on the back of the motorcycle. They didn't speak for the rest of the day. She drove until well after dark and pulled into a motel parking lot in Alamogordo. They walked silently into the office where a long piece of jerky in a bolo tie stood behind a counter.

"Two rooms, please," Ben said.

Gretchen looked at him, expressionless.

“If you have a horse, feel free to put it in the corral out back,” the clerk in the bolo said.

Ben looked surprised.

“Thought your daughter here might be a barrel racer. She’s got the build for it.”

Gretchen grabbed one of the keys and left.

“That’s a compliment,” the clerk called after her.

“They can be a little balky at that age,” he said to Ben. “You’re not here for the rodeo, are you?”

“Just passing through,” Ben said.

He paid in advance. One Franklin and two Jacksons covered it, which was one more Jackson than usual because of the business generated by the county fair.

Ben bought sandwiches and milk at the Hi-D-Ho Drive In across the street and put the bag on the table in his room. In the morning, he showered, dressed and sat on a bench outside watching the Chihuahuan Desert turn pink as the sun rose over the Sacramento Mountains. He was finishing one of the sandwiches when Gretchen came out of her room. He handed the other sandwich to her. She ate in silence, watching the pink hills turn brown.

Lunch found them squirting honey at the Navajo Fry Bread Cart at the Four Corners Monument. Afterward, they walked to the intersection of the state lines of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona.

“We’re in different states,” Ben said, pointing out the obvious.

“We may as well be,” Gretchen said.

“Gretchen, I’m sorry. It’s just...so damn embarrassing.”

“What is?”

“How we met.”

Gretchen thought back to the day Ben had eaten too many kale chips. Seemed like a long time ago.

“I wasn’t in my right head,” Ben continued. “I guess I was hiding inside a character. And I’d spent a hard winter foraging for food. I hadn’t spoken with anyone in months. The world didn’t seem real. Your friend told me to pull down my pants, and then you walked in.”

“Nothing I hadn’t seen before,” Gretchen said. “That’s what the room was set up for.”

“I don’t know what Ben Franklin was thinking — he wasn’t really thinking at all at that point. But I want you to know, I would never do anything like that. I’ve spent my career as a teacher only looking at students from the neck up. During office hours, I keep the door wide open. It wasn’t that hard, really, to avoid situations. But once I flipped into Ben, it seems situations sought me out.”

“I’m glad you’re back to normal,” Gretchen said. “Whatever that is.”

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s summer.”

“Anyway, Gretchen, I’m sorry. And thank you for rescuing me, keeping me safe, and taking me home.”

“Feel like posting a video?”

“I need to sort some things out first.”

Until now, they had navigated haphazardly, taking any road that headed generally northwest. Now they looked at the giant map by the restrooms and considered alternatives. Gretchen thought Arizona would be a bad place for Ben to be arrested. The southern part of Utah was a maze of twisty canyon roads.

“I’ve always wanted to see Telluride,” Ben said. “A student of mine wrote a play about their film festival. Even our best drama students yearn for movie careers.”

The elevation rose gradually past Cortez and Dolores, then sharply after Rico. They passed Sheep Mountain, Lizard Head Pass, and the Ophir Needles. Before curling down into the box canyon that surrounded Telluride, they stopped the bike and looked around. The jagged Needles poked the clear air southeast of them. The four great mountains of the Wilson range towered to the southwest. To the northwest, blue mesa stretched to the horizon, a string of upended canines in Utah.

“Makes you feel small, doesn't it?” Ben said.

“Why do people always say that? Nature is big and powerful. We're part of it! Makes me feel I could do anything. I went to Chicago once. *That* made me feel small.”

“As a teacher,” Ben said, “I always thought my job was to build my students up. That's why good teachers don't seduce their students. It diminishes them to something less than they can be, to just pretty objects. Gretchen, I am so sorry that I was a part of—“

“Shut up!”

Ben was stunned.

“You are so selfish!”

She could see he didn't understand.

“Quit obsessing over your petty little guilts. There's a big world out there! And it's hurting. You started a revolution to change that, and then you retreated into Benjamin Franklin, and now you're retreating into the pleasure of beating yourself up.

“Sometimes men make me sick. They don't know what to do with their power. They are always wasting their energy on stupid stuff. Video games. Pornography. Crystal meth. The fucking Green Bay Packers. They chase irrelevance as if it were their job!

“And look at you, worrying about your poor little reputation. The other side has done its best to paint you as a sex fiend. You're worse than that. You're a coward.”

Ben stared at her, mouth agape, breathing the high mountain air in short gulps.

“Don’t you realize you are the most influential person in the country right now? You speak and cities burn. Take responsibility for what you have become.”

Ben walked to the other side of the gravel parking lot. It seems they had stopped off at the southern entrance of the Telluride ski area. He was surprised at how run-down the place looked: weeds in the gravel, paint peeling on the ticket booth. A sign listed prices for season and half-season passes, but the year was out of date.

They rode the rest of the way into town, along the main street and past the old Sheridan Hotel. When they reached the east end of town they came to an expanse of tents. “To-hell-you-ride” was painted on a sheet strung between posts. A grinning adolescent came up to their bike.

“I’m Jimmy,” he said. “You’re new.”

“Yes sir,” Ben said. “What’s going on here? Is this the weekend of the film festival?”

The boy laughed a rasping wheeze of a laugh.

“I’ll tell you everything you need to know if you’ll buy me a hamburger.”

At the Flora Dora bar and grill, Jimmy explained that Telluride was not the booming tourist destination it used to be. Two snowless winters had closed the ski area, killing the winter economy. The hotel industry shrank, so there weren’t enough rooms for the annual film festival. Its final season had been a fiasco the previous year.

A century ago the town ran on mining. The miners built a nice little opera house at the Sheridan. Then it ran on snow. The tourism bureau used the opera house for a film festival.

“Now we got nothing,” Jimmy said, eyeing the fries on Gretchen’s plate.

“What are all these people doing in tents?” Ben asked.

“Got no place else to go,” he said. “The revolution put the ‘conomy in the shithouse. That’s what my dad says. He had a defense support job in Colorado Springs until somebody

firebombed the place. He blames Folger, but he keeps his mouth shut. To-hell-you-ride is full of Gumptioners. Dad hopes they'll all move to Mexico to look for their hero."

Gretchen pushed her plate of fries across the table.

"Is this an outlaw zone?" she asked.

"Not officially," Jimmy said. "We got an understanding with the rich people in the trophy homes west of town. "They give us some supplies — beans and a little meat sometimes."

"What do you do in return?" Ben asked.

"We don't burn down their houses."

Jimmy grinned and wheezed at that.

"Hey, if I didn't know better, I'd say you look a lot like Ben Folger yourself."

He wheezed at that, too.

"If Ben Folger ever came here, he'd be a God. They'd build him a throne or something. If they didn't kill him first. People here either love him or hate him. They're always fighting about it. Got so bad, the elders passed a resolution: You can only discuss Folger at the campfire. We're probably breaking the law now talking about him."

"What's this campfire?" Ben asked.

"Buncha hot air," the boy said. "Every night, people vote on boring resolutions. They sing songs and play stuff. Between songs, they debate, usually about Ben Folger. It's stupid. Everybody has his mind set already. Nobody changes. They can't even agree on the smallest fact."

"What do you think?" Ben asked.

"I think he's a coward," the boy said. "Running off to Mexico with a girl."

There was that word again.

"Are all the motels closed, then?" Ben asked.

“You can still get a room at the Sheridan, if you’ve got the dough.”

The boy’s eyes widened when he saw Ben pay with a one hundred dollar bill.

Ben and Gretchen got a suite at the Sheridan and walked to the tent city. The sun had dipped behind a high ridge two hours earlier, but the sky was only now beginning to dim.

They sat on a log in the shadows on the outer rim of the throng that formed around a string of campfires. A woman even older than Ben reminded people not to gather wood too close to the compounds. Another proposed a resolution banning children from playing upstream of the water intake; that failed, but parents were urged to take care lest the water be fouled. Although it was midsummer, preparations were made to prevent having another winter like the last one, where frostbite, influenza, and poor nutrition had taken a grievous toll.

The Folger hour revolved around irreconcilable differences. The man was a communist, a failed actor, a long-time womanizer and rapist, a petty thief who trashed homes and left a trail of liquor bottles, a kidnapper, a coward who set fires and ran. Or he was a Franklin scholar, a great teacher, a liberator who insisted this nation would achieve its promise only if we reduced the economic extremes.

“Look at the results,” one father of four exclaimed. “He’s reduced the extremes all right. Now we’re *all* poor!”

“This is just a transition,” a young woman in glasses and a red headkerchief pleaded. “We’re living through the birth pangs of a better, more just society. The day will come when there are no rich, no poor, when we are all equal.”

“Yeah, that day is coming,” the father said. “It is very near. As a matter of fact, it’s right over there.”

He pointed north, and many laughed. Gretchen craned her head, and was surprised to see the Jimmy standing behind her, staring at Ben.

“What’s he pointing at?” she asked the boy.

“The graveyard.”

He laughed his raspy little laugh again.

Back at the hotel, Ben brought two beers and two Cokes from the bar into the common area of the suite, holding them by their necks between his fingers. He offered Gretchen a Coke.

“That stuff is poison.”

He gave her a beer, and took a long draw from his.

“Maybe I am a coward, Gretchen. Maybe that’s why I ran away from New York and buried myself in Ben Franklin. And maybe I came back to this country not to face my demons, but to hide out with my wife.

“But you’re right: I need to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions. Did you see how skinny those kids at the campfire are? And the worry on their parents’ faces? You tell me not to wallow in guilt. But guilt isn’t always a bad thing. It teaches us to make amends for our mistakes.”

“Do you think you made a mistake, Ben? Was it a mistake to say what you said at the convention? And later? Those emotional speeches about income inequality? Who is right, Ben? The man who said those things, or the industry bosses?”

Ben finished his beer.

“Nobody’s right if everybody’s wrong.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN – GREAT BASIN

Ben worried into the night, feeling guilty for being in a warm bed. He finally fell asleep at 4:30. He awoke at 9 when Gretchen knocked on his door and shouted, “Breakfast!”

“I thought Door County had rocky soil,” Gretchen said as Ben dug into his hash browns. “This is worse. I talked to a girl about extending the growing season with greenhouses made of plastic sheets. Maybe I’ll come back here and help after I dump you off.”

“Did you see the kid with the weird laugh?”

“Yeah. Jimmy wanted to join us for breakfast. I gave him five bucks and told him we were in a hurry.”

“Indeed we are,” Ben said.

The Indian didn’t want to start.

“It’s this thin air,” Gretchen said.

She got off the bike and broke a thumbnail trying to adjust the idle screw.

“Got a dime?”

“I don’t have any coins,” Ben said.

“I do.”

Gretchen looked up. Jimmy was standing behind her, holding out a dime.

“You’ve got a light step, Jimmy.”

“I thought you’d be gone by now,” he said. “My Dad is coming. He’s got a gun.”

Gretchen looked down the street, shielding her eyes from the sun that was just shooting over the canyon wall. A block away and closing fast was a man walking down the center of the street as if he owned it. A shotgun angled upward from his left hip.

“Get away from the bike,” he shouted, adding after a pause. “Or I’ll shoot.”

Gretchen looked around: Jimmy was gone. She slipped the dime into the groove of a brass screw and gave it a hard turn to the left.

“Start her up, Ben.”

Ben slid forward onto the front seat. The bike started on the first try. Gretchen slipped on behind and shouted, “Go!”

The bike sped forward, its front wheel lifting a foot off the ground before drifting back down. A loud crack echoed between the storefronts. Pellets whizzed by. One shattered the rearview mirror on the right handlebar.

Steep mountain switchbacks gave way sometime after Norwood to gently descending mesa, scrubland, desert. They crossed the state line without knowing it and had lunch at a gas station in Moab.

“Guess we’re in Utah now,” Gretchen said.

Ben nodded and moved to the back seat.

“You going silent on me again?”

He grinned.

Motorcycle, man, and woman melted together in the dust and the heat as they tried and failed to keep up with the sun. With a third of a tank left, Gretchen started looking for a

gas station. They were scarce in this part of Utah. With the gauge dipping below 1/4, she slowed to enter a Phillips 66 but sped past when she saw a state patrol car at the pump.

With the gauge at E and the sun gone, Gretchen shouted "Hurray!" when a Sinclair station loomed in the distance. Suddenly its light went out. They pulled in just as the owner's pickup truck pulled out. The pumps were locked down for the night. They got off the bike and peered in the window.

"Now what?" Ben said.

"We're running on fumes," Gretchen said. "No telling how far the next station is, or if it's open."

"We'd better stay close, then," Ben said. "Until Anthony Quinn returns to give us access to the well."

"Say what?"

"Lawrence of Arabia. One of the many movies Eliza enjoyed explaining to me. Quinn played a guy with a well in the middle of the desert. Cast list was a Who's Who of the greatest actors of the day: Peter O'Toole, Alec Guinness, Omar Sharif, Jose Ferrer. Another Anthony, Anthony Quale. Claude Rains. Arthur Kennedy. Long, long movie."

"Not long enough to have any roles for women, I guess."

"Damn, it's dark."

They rode a ways down a blacktopped road perpendicular to the four-lane. Turned off that to jiggle down a potted gravel road. Then they turned again onto a hard-packed dirt path. When that dwindled to nothing, they stopped the motorcycle and unrolled the sleeping bag.

Ben insisted that he would be comfortable just lying on top on the edge. Gretchen was too tired to argue, and Ben was so tired he actually did fall asleep.

Minutes or hours later they were awakened by a rumbling roar. A machine with one great headlight was bearing down on them at a great speed.

Telling the story later, Ben would always mention how amazed he was that although the thing was coming at them fast, the world seemed to slow down. He remembers having plenty of time to make a decision. The choices: Run away, and be crushed from behind. He dismissed that option straight off. Run to the right of the headlight. Run to the left of the headlight. Or stay still and hope the thing saw them and stopped or passed them by.

Gretchen was never one to just sit still and take it. She slipped out of the bag, grabbed Ben's arm, and tried to haul him to the right.

"It's an airplane!" she shouted. "We're on a runway!"

She lost her grip on Ben, lurched into the motorcycle, knocked it off its kickstand, and bounced backward just as the machine reached them.

It wasn't a plane. It was a night freight, the Union Pacific running from Las Vegas to Salt Lake City.

The experience shook them up. But they were still dead tired.

The air was cold and dry as the moon. Gretchen crawled back into the sleeping bag. She could feel Ben shivering.

"Get in, damn it."

Ben slid in, turned his back to her, and tried to create some space – an impossibility.

"That must be the monthly train," Ben said.

"Yeah," Gretchen agreed. "I mean, this is the capitol of fucking Nowhere U.S.A."

They both slept soundly.

Until the next train roared by. And the next. In all, there were five trains that night. Each time, they burrowed deeper, covered their ears, and thought, *That's gotta be the last one.*

Dawn delivered Ben another torturous choice: Get up and pee or try to go back to sleep?

He slid out, trying not to awaken Gretchen, walked a ways down the railroad track, and, for lack of anything better to aim at, peed on the rail. When he returned, Gretchen was out and up. She held up the bag, revealing an arc of five little holes left by Jimmy's daddy's shotgun.

Just then, Ben felt a sharp prick on his calf. He slapped his pants. Out fell a scorpion.

He tilted his head back and screamed theatrically: "Eeeliizaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

The desert swallowed the sound.

Gretchen picked up the dead scorpion and examined it.

"You'll live," she said coolly. "This is a white one. You can almost see through it."

Ben looked at her, trying to figure if she knew what she was talking about and how, in any case, she could be so calm about it.

"It's the red ones that kill ya," she said.

It took both of them to right the motorcycle.

"The Indian saved your life, Gretchen."

"Yeah, I was heading toward the tracks. Damn."

She peered down the rails and shuddered.

"Looks like the train clipped off the remaining mirror," Ben said.

A chrome spike protruded from the handlebar. The mirror was nowhere to be found.

"There's no looking back now, pardner," she deadpanned.

"Dog my cats, Gretchen. I believe you told a joke!"

She slapped him playfully on the shoulder. Somehow all the tension of the night was gone.

It left them both ravenous.

The bike roared to life, carried them two hundred yards, and died. An hour later they pushed it into the Sinclair station. An hour after that they were wolfing down Hippie

Pancakes in a joint called Kerouac's. Ben considered ordering the Neal Cassady Cocktail (gin, lemon juice, and honey) and a Park Ranger Punch for Gretchen. He thought better of it. The paper placemat was full of factoids about nearby Great Basin National Park.

Gretchen read aloud with enthusiasm.

"Do you want to check it out?" Ben asked.

Gretchen did, very much.

"No, we need to get you to Eliza. If we push, we can make it to Lake Alpine by supper."

They made good time through the desert along the secondary roads of Nevada. The sun was still high when they stopped for gas on the outskirts of Carson City.

Gretchen bought bottles of lemonade and gave Ben a long look. He carried moles of the past 300 miles in the creases of his face and clothes.

"You sure you want to power through to Lake Alpine?"

"Absolutely," Ben said. "I never knew I could miss a person so much."

Gretchen looked skeptical.

"What's the matter?"

"You look like walking goat crap."

They spent one last night in a cheap motel in Garnerville. Two rooms. They washed their clothes, washed themselves, and were asleep by 8:30.

Ben was up by 4:30. His clothes were dry and stiff. At 5:30, he was rapping on Gretchen's door, a bag of waxy doughnuts and coffee in hand.

They were on the road by 5:50 and crossing the state line 20 minutes later.

The road wiggled up steeply to Ebbets Pass, and down nearly as steeply through Hermit Valley and past Mosquito Lake.

Around 8 am, at the eastern edge of Lake Alpine, Gretchen pulled the bike to a stop at a crudely made single-log barricade. A scruffy boy several years younger than Gretchen stood up and shouted louder than necessary.

“What’s your business?”

“What’s yours?” Gretchen said. “This is a public highway.”

“You’re in a zone now,” the boy said. “And we’re full up. Can’t sustain any more refugees. Unless you’re a relative.”

“I am the husband of Eliza Jain,” Ben said.

The boy laughed.

“Oh yeah, no doubt,” the boy said. “Well, *Mr. Folger*, she ain’t here.”

“Mind if we look around?”

“I do mind. You’ll have to go back the way you came.”

“We’re not leaving until we’ve looked for my wife.”

“Look, I know the name of every single person here. Eliza Jain is most definitely not here. A person like that, I’d know it.”

Ben stared at the kid, pleading.

“She’s probably with the other Indians at the Big Sur zone.”

“That’s on the ocean.”

“Yes sir.”

“The ocean is due west of here.”

“I can’t fool you. It is indeed west.”

“Then please let us pass through. It would take an extra day to go back over the mountains and loop around.”

“No can do.”

Gretchen slowly turned the bike, headed 25 yards back up the road, turned around again, and swung by the barrier on the high shoulder. The boy lifted a smartphone and took a photo as they passed.

Ben observed the squalor of the camp along the lake, the hungry faces, the smell of campfires and open latrines. He was glad Eliza was not there, and hoped the Big Sur zone turned out to be more accommodating. The barricade on the western side was much bigger. That made sense. The cities were to the west; nothing but mountains and desert to the east. The western barricade was staffed by a dozen or so men and women, some of whom had rifles. Gretchen figured they would have no objection to letting them leave, but didn't want to ask permission, so she executed another end run. Formerly a straightforward person, Gretchen was learning to go around the obstacles life presented.

Ben noticed a stretch of crudely marked lumpy graves in a field north of the barricade.

A few minutes later, the young eastern sentry found Eliza Jain perched on her favorite rock and drinking spruce-tip tea from an aluminum cup. He proudly informed her that he had saved her from yet another crazed supremacist. In these days of unrest, the only person in America who attracted more vicious hate than Ben Folger was his wife. She was not under indictment for anything, but that made no difference. A fertile strain of American craziness blamed her as the Lady Macbeth behind Ben's evil doings.

"Look here," the boy said. "I got a picture."

Although the photo was blurred and didn't show Ben's face, Eliza took one look at it, dropped her cup, and wept.

Reverend Larry tried to console her.

"He'll be back. I'm sure you'll see him again."

She wailed louder at that. The possibility of never seeing him again had not occurred to her. She began to grasp at straws.

“Maybe he’s doing it on purpose,” she said.

“Doing what on purpose?”

“Teasing me. He has this crazy idea that sex interrupted is better sex. He is the worst kisser ever. He leans close and then stops like a stupid moron idiot fool. He hovers. Just kiss me, damn it, and get it over with!”

Reverend Larry looked puzzled. She tried again.

“I’m thinking maybe he drove by on purpose just to tease me, and will be right back.”

She thought for a moment and added, “With that farmer’s daughter!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT – BIG SUR

Gretchen and Ben continued down into and through the central valley, past Manteca and Livermore and into the South Bay. Ben had no interest in visiting any of his old haunts at the university. He insisted they make a beeline through San Jose, across the Santa Cruz mountains and down Highway One toward Big Sur. Gretchen cried hunger as they passed Carmel-by-the-Sea. They bought sandwiches at a deli and pulled off at Point Lobos to eat them. The Midwestern girl was dazzled by the beauty of the rock formations and the crashing surf.

She had never seen an ocean before today. The expanse of water made her nostalgic for Lake Michigan. The similarities are obvious: Water as far as the eye can see. No sign of land on the other side.

She began to ponder the differences. The ocean has a stronger smell.

Something else struck her as odd. There was no wind. The sky was empty of clouds. But the waves were huge. A storm on Lake Michigan will have an immediate visible and audible effect on the waves pounding the shore. Gretchen had seen it, time and again. It was rare that big waves came on days of clear, windless skies. That's fairly common on an ocean. Far off storms, already played out, reach shore long after.

Gretchen looked at Ben, sitting on a rock, munching a pickle. She missed his version of Ben Franklin a little. That Ben might have something wise to say at this moment.

Gretchen gave it a try, in her head, imagining what Franklin might say: The waves begun by the tempest of the American Revolution still beat on the shores of our republic more than 200 years on. Who knows the long-term effects of the waves we stir? What shores will they reach, what ships propel or dash?

“Let’s get rolling,” Ben Folger said.

By the time they got to San Simeon, Ben knew they had somehow missed the encampment. They stopped at the Hearst Castle visitor’s center. A helpful docent told them to head back up Highway One and turn inland at Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park.

“Then follow your nose,” the woman said with evident disdain.

While Ben used the restroom, Gretchen watched a short film about the castle. It was narrated by Patty Hearst. The name struck a bell, so Gretchen Googled around and read a few sentences about the Symbionese Liberation Army, the bank robberies, the commuting of Patty’s sentence by Carter and the pardon by Clinton. Gretchen wondered whose side she was on now, this granddaughter of the man who trumped up a war with Spain just to sell newspapers.

Ben took one brief glance up the steep hill at the ornate structures on top. He had performed his one-man show there once, trying to compare and contrast Franklin and Hearst, to the detriment of the latter. He was not invited back. The castle was yet another attraction Gretchen would forego in the service of finding Ben Folger’s dotting wife.

A few miles into Pfeiffer, Ben picked up the scent. Curry. To Ben’s nose, there was no more welcome smell. It smelled like Eliza’s kitchen when papa was visiting. He knew they would find her there.

What they found was a welcoming committee of camp elders. No barricade this time. It was as if they knew they were coming—because they did know.

“Our brothers and sisters at Alpine told us of the big mix-up,” said a wizened lady in a buckskin sari. The outfit made her look like two kinds of Indians at once.

“Mix-up?” Ben said.

“Your wife is not here,” she said. “She is indeed at Lake Alpine. They try to keep people away from her for her protection.”

“Protection from what?”

“From hateful people.”

“Why would anyone hate Eliza, for God’s sake?”

“Because they hate you,” the woman said, smiling serenely. “They have so much hate for you that they do not know where to put it all. So they give the excess to your dear wife.”

Ben wanted to leave for Lake Alpine that minute. The elders convinced him to join them for dinner, spend the night, and leave the next day. They would get a message to Eliza that he was coming. They would not reveal how.

“Tell her I love her,” Ben said.

“Of course, of course,” the old lady said.

Ben introduced Gretchen, and stumbled trying to convey that their relationship was beyond reproach, despite anything folks might have read or seen online. He waited for the woman to introduce herself.

“I call myself Alice Standingwater,” she said. “Many in this settlement have visa issues, so we decided to discard our birth names and take on American Indian-like names of our own devising. Some of us of South Asian origin feel a certain responsibility for Columbus’s mis-apprehension of Native Americans. By creating these new names, we

provide a degree of protection from INS agents while at the same time honoring those persons of color who were here before us, who suffered before us, who are still among us.”

Gretchen looked confused.

“Just call me Alice.”

Ben smiled, glad to be back in California.

This camp appeared to be better organized than the higgledy-piggledy one at Alpine. There were more big tents, and despite the uneven terrain they were lined up in a grid. A prejudice sprang to mind, which Ben reflexively dismissed, that this was because the South Asians who predominated here had a racial memory of living in tents.

Each big tent was devoted to a separate endeavor. A tech tent, of course — these were, after all, predominately refugees of the engineering incubators of Silicon Valley. A clothing tent. A medical tent. A cooking tent.

Before dinner, they took Ben into the clothing tent. Without asking, a bald man in a Nehru jacket stretched a cloth tape measure along Ben's arms, his legs, his chest, shoulders and girth. The man did not respond to questions.

“We'll explain later,” Alice said.

Dinner was goat biriani, curried greens, and tea. It all tasted strange to Gretchen, until dessert. The Wisconsin girl asked for seconds of the sweet cheesy concoction *ras malai*.

A nod from Alice sent the young filing out of the tent. One of them gently tugged Gretchen along.

As soon as it became clear that the remaining elders wanted to talk strategy, to discuss the revolution, he insisted that they send for Gretchen. They were reluctant.

“I trust her completely,” Ben said.

He said flatly that he would not continue without her, so they brought her in.

The council of eight had discussed what to say to Mr. Benjamin Folger all day, since the moment they received word that he was heading their way. It was agreed that they would begin by trying to rein in the great leader. They wanted to impress on him that everything he said in his postings had significant consequences, many of them dire. Riots, withholding of tax payments, an economy in a downward spiral, layoffs, closings of national and state institutions, hasty mass deportations, open gunfire between well-armed factions on left and right, disruptions in the food chain, the collapse of FEMA in the face of fire and flood — every ill was laid at Ben's feet, with some justification.

Finally, they let him speak.

He said all this terrible suffering was precisely why he had gone silent.

"I feel terrible guilt," he said. "The last thing I want to do is make things worse."

The tent went quiet. They could hear the thrumming of distant frogs. Finally, Gretchen spoke.

"This is the problem," she said, so quietly that everyone leaned in to hear. "Ben has lost his nerve. His gumption. Perhaps anyone would, in his shoes.

"But do you all just want to give up?"

Again, a silence. Alice searched Ben's eyes, sizing him up.

"Jonathan Roaringthimble is making you a fine suit of clothes," Alice said. "He is making it for you not so you can look good when you surrender. But so you can make a better impression in your speeches, which we urge you to make *more* often, not less.

"When we heard you were coming, we expected to meet a headstrong man who needed to be taught restraint. That was a mistake. What you need is our encouragement. No one here wants to turn back.

"We have many ideas about what you might say, and how you might lead the movement forward."

“I will not post again until I meet with my Eliza,” Ben said. “But I am grateful for your ideas.”

With Ben stopping them only for clarification, the Big Sur campers strategized well into the night. One suggested a council of representatives from all the outlaw zones. Another suggested specified periods of street actions — bursts of mayhem — followed by periods of total calm; this would convey power that could be unleashed at will, and would bring the enemy to heel.

“In service of what?” one cried. “We have to have a platform.”

Ninety minutes went by in discussion of the various legs of that platform. Tax wealth, not income. Open the borders. Raze the prisons. Someone suggested that it was dangerous to have one mouthpiece, one leader, especially one with so many questionable associations. Gretchen bristled silently at that.

Ben yawned and stood up.

“I never intended to become the voice of a movement,” Ben said. “I urge you all to post your own statements, to take whatever action you think fit. I may post again, if after consulting with Eliza I think more good than harm will come of it.

“Good night, and God bless you all.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE – THROUGH HELL ON A LIGHTNING BOLT

In his new charcoal business suit, Ben looked like a million bucks. He wasn't sure if he wanted to look like a million bucks, but he kept the clothes on and thanked Jonathan the tailor.

Alice handed Gretchen a small beaded satchel of “essentials”: duct tape, super glue, a beeswax candle, and a worn copy of the writings of Mahatma Gandhi.

As the Indian roared off toward Highway One, Alice spoke her thoughts to no one in particular: “He's not the man we thought he was, but perhaps he'll do.”

Back up the coast, across the Santa Cruz mountains, over the ridge to the central valley, and up the swerving road to Lake Alpine.

Ben happened to be driving when they arrived at the western barricade. They were met by a brigade of smiles. Someone fired a shot in the air. A motley band with kazoos and brass instruments quickly assembled and led a parade up the road to a lineup of picnic tables set for lunch.

Reverend Larry led Eliza from her tent to a clearing on a rock shelf overlooking the lake. Birds chirped their approval.

Tears dotted her glowing face as Eliza strode to the motorcycle and wrapped her arms around Ben, who managed to turn the machine off mid-hug before it could lurch away. Still hugging Ben hard, with her chin on his right shoulder, Eliza opened her eyes and saw that she was nose-to-nose with Gretchen, who maintained her usual impassive demeanor.

Eliza stood upright and slapped Ben across the face, startling Ben and the crowd. Then she leaned in and kissed him — no pauses along the way.

“Is everyone in California schizo?” Gretchen asked.

“I don’t even want to talk to you,” Eliza said.

“You should thank this brave young woman,” Ben said, disengaging from Eliza so he could get off the bike. “She’s been keeping me safe.”

“Was that a hard job?” Eliza asked.

“Gretchen Koenig saved my life. More than once. Saved me from the cops. Kept me out of the asylum. Caught fish on corn when we were hungry. Jumped in after me when I fell into the Gulf of Mexico.”

“Don’t forget the guy who blasted us with a shotgun,” Gretchen said. “Or the freight train that nearly squished us. Or the scorpion that bit you.”

“And that’s just in the last 48 hours!”

“Of course, it was the Indian that saved us from the train,” Gretchen said, “not me.”

Eliza could see that Ben and Gretchen were, at the least, good buddies.

“Well, you have had your fun,” Eliza said.

“I’ve been through hell on a lightning bolt, Eliza.”

“That’s what you get when you seek fame and fortune.”

Eliza and Ben hurried through lunch and then took a walk.

Reverend Larry and the membership committee sat with Gretchen and explained that after a winter of starvation they had been forced to establish a policy of exclusion: No one

could join the community unless they were a close relative of an existing member (Ben's ticket in) or had demonstrable practical skills. She asked to see their garden. Once there, she explained what they were doing wrong, how they could extend the growing season and increase yield. That sold them. She didn't even have to mention her familiarity with small machinery and animal husbandry.

At the end of the long, skinny field, Gretchen saw an emaciated man dart out of the trees, grab a few ears of young corn, and dart back. Reverend Larry explained that he was one of a group of marijuana growers who had taken over the cabin of Eliza's friend.

"I guess pot doesn't provide many calories," Gretchen said.

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On the other side of the lake, Ben and Eliza took stock.

"Have you come to your senses, Ben?"

"Yes. How did you know I had left them?"

"There were dozens of stories of you sleeping with everyone, everywhere. I knew most of them were made up or twisted. Like the story of that poor graduate student who committed suicide. I understand you've become a target of fake news.

"But I haven't been able to shake a few of the reports. Those coeds in Pennsylvania and Ohio. You seem to have scared the crap out of a little boy in a funeral parlor in Indiana. There's a video of you apologizing to a lady of the night in Mexico. And then there's the Kale whore, which I wouldn't believe at all if you had not brought her all the way here.

"None of this sounds like the Ben I married."

"Please don't call Gretchen that. She deserves better. When you get to know her, you'll realize what a fine person she is. Really quite extraordinary."

Eliza half-smiled and shook her head.

"What?" Ben said.

“You are yourself, all right. Your response to all these accusations is to defend somebody else. What about *you*?”

“I was, quite literally, for several months, not myself.”

“I could see that in the videos.”

“It’s the most extraordinary thing, Eliza. You know I had always wondered what it would be like to truly be Benjamin Franklin. To spend a day in his skin. Think his thoughts. See the world through his eyes. When I ran into that shitstorm in New York, I panicked. I think I was, subconsciously, looking for an escape. I found it, for several months, in Franklin. Ben Folger disappeared for a while. I stopped playing Franklin. He played me.

“I know what I did as Franklin. It wasn’t all pretty. I’m not proud of it. I didn’t sleep with any college girls, and most certainly never touched Gretchen.

“It’s a cowardly thing, to hide away in a convenient mental illness. I hope to God it never happens to me again. Try to forgive me if you can. I’m done with Ben Franklin.”

“I hope not,” Eliza said, “at least not completely. We might need him. We have some work to do on our relationship, but in the meantime, you have an obligation to this movement you started.”

“*We* started, Eliza. It all began in Philadelphia. You kind of put me up to it. And I need your help now.

“Eliza, I don’t know what to do.”

Over the next few days, residents labored at various tasks during the day and debated in the evening. Eliza told Ben about the cabin squatters. Having surveyed the camp, he could see that a cabin with four walls and a fireplace would make a much better clinic than the drafty medical tent.

Eliza said the pot growers appeared to be starving, but they fired warning shots every time somebody approached the cabin. It had been a while since anyone had gone near the place.

“Maybe they’re hungry enough now to come to a compromise,” Ben said. “Join the community and share in our bounty.”

“There’s precious little of that,” Eliza said.

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Ben and Reverend Larry approached the cabin carefully, hands high holding white rags on sticks, shouting, “Hello! Let’s talk!”

Out of one window poked a gun barrel, held by scrawny hands. Ben and Larry stopped still.

“We’re unarmed,” the reverend cried.

They could hear Spanish voices arguing inside. The door opened. A skinny young man stepped out and leaned his rifle against the house.

“C’mon in,” he said.

Inside, two other men, skinnier than the first, lay on cots. One coughed and spit in a cup.

Turns out they had thousands of dollars worth of crop in a hidden field but their distribution network had broken down. Although marijuana had been legalized in California, taxes and permits made it expensive. A black market of cheaper weed sprouted, but had lost many of its workers.

“It’s your fault, señor,” the spitter said, glowering at Ben.

Reverend Larry told them that the encampment had much to offer — hot food, a nurse, blankets. It didn’t take much to convince the men to give up the cabin.

“Let’s make one thing clear,” Ben said. “When you join the community, you join the community. No one holds anything back — your talents, your work, your good will. Love for love.”

For the moment, he felt as though he had become Franklin again, Franklin the charming diplomat.

The men were introduced to the group at the lunch tables. Afterward, Gretchen followed the most able of them northward, up a trail and over a ridge, down a steep slope to a long hollow filled with marijuana plants irrigated with hoses from a nearby creek. It was a better set-up than the community’s garden. By the end of the week, she and the man had ripped out 90 percent of the marijuana plants, planted potatoes, and transplanted other crops from the other field.

Reverend Larry told Eliza’s friend that her cabin had been liberated. He arranged to tell her this after asking her to join him on a visit to patients in the medical tent. He smiled when she said the cabin should be reserved for the ailing.

Like the Big Sur campers, the people at Lake Alpine supported Ben and were full of ideas about what he should say in his next video-post. Anticipation was building. There was no question that he should speak again soon. There were many questions about how inflammatory or conciliatory he should be.

They all liked his new suit.

That first night of debate, Gretchen tired out first.

“Mind if I take the sleeping bag?” she asked Ben.

“It’s yours,” he said. “No more sharing.”

Eliza gave him a look.

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The night was cold, and Ben found himself once again sharing a sleeping bag, this time with his wife.

“We’ll never fit,” she said. “Remember the last time we tried to share this bag? We nearly split it.”

But there was room to spare. Bone bumped bone where there once was ample padding. Eliza faced away from Ben, moved to the far side of the bag, and stuck her icy feet on his shins.

“Where’s the rest of us?” Ben asked. “Guess we both had a hard year.”

“No kidding,” Eliza mumbled, and she was asleep.

The broken old harp, Civilization, still bundled in a tarp, poked Ben in the back. He gave it a shove, buckling the side of the little tent.

The next two nights Ben slept by fits and starts. He felt great pressure to deliver a killer video. He prayed for guidance with Reverend Larry. New drafts kept arriving from the Communications Committee. Most were full of good ideas but dreadfully long. Rhetorically, they were a mishmash.

The third night, Reverend Larry read the riot act, so to speak.

“Look, it’s Ben’s neck that is sticking out here. We can make all the suggestions we want, but what he says is up to him.”

Time and again, Folger asked himself, “What would Ben Franklin do?”

In the end, he found a better option. He decided that for this particular moment, John Adams was the better model. He thanked the committee for its service and rested on the wise counsel of Eliza Jain, his Abigail. She organized the list of grievances and provided succinct rhetorical justifications for each. It was an exhaustive list.

“You are brilliant, Eliza,” Ben said.

But he wasn’t sure they were there yet.

He convinced her to let Gretchen weigh in, if for no other reason than to give the perspective of the younger generation.

Gretchen read the screed in silence, put it down, and stared out the opening of the tent. She had to be encouraged to give her opinion.

“You’ve identified all the weeds,” Gretchen said. “So what? Where’s the plan? What next? You haven’t shown the enemy why they should give in to your demands, and the list is so long that there’s really no way they could even if they wanted to.”

Ben and Eliza could see she was right. Their faces drooped.

“Look,” Gretchen said. “You need to do four things. First, show them your power. They do what you say or you’ll turn up the heat. Let them know you command the armies of revolt.”

“Do I?”

Gretchen showed her exasperation.

“If you don’t, nobody does! Your only card is to pretend you do. Pretend hard enough and it will be true. You’re an actor, aren’t you?”

Ben didn’t answer.

“Second, list your most important demands. Concrete things they need to do. Keep it short. Four at the most.”

“Third, give them a deadline.

“Finally, put the onus on them. It is up to them if the revolution ends or burns out of control. Accede to your reasonable demands and you will spare them.”

After Gretchen left, Eliza said, “I’m beginning to understand what you see in that girl.”

Gretchen sent Anne and Ellen a test video of the setting for the speech: a log chair on a wide shelf of rocky ground in front of the lake rimmed by trees. They decided it looked just

like Canada, so Anne advised her to dispense with the blue screen. Anne wondered why it had been so long since the last posting. She said the app now allowed for live streaming.

“We’ll do it live if you think Ben is prepared to do well,” Anne said. “It will have more impact that way, and still get replayed later.”

“He’s as ready as he’ll ever be,” Gretchen said.

The campers arranged themselves in semicircles in front of the chair. Reverend Larry explained to them the importance of staying off camera. Going on camera exposed them to prosecution as co-conspirators with Ben.

Ben buttoned and unbuttoned his suit coat and tried to get into character. This was a problem. Who was he? Certainly not Ben Franklin. He had no stomach for that, literally, and felt he could no longer wear that mantle. Marc Antony seemed a poor choice — this wasn’t Caesar’s funeral, or anyone else’s. Perhaps the firebrand Jack Cade, from *Henry VI*? That didn’t end well.

He was about to deliver words written by others in service of a rebellion he had not planned. He yearned for a prop, a bit of business to perform, some kind of dramatic device. He was out of tricks.

He looked out at the gathering of expectant, hungry faces. Good people, *in extremis*. They deserved better. A better spokesman. But also a better shake. He did not want to let them down.

In the end the actor decided to do his best not to act. He would simply project the words without emotion, with no ginned-up gravity or passion. The moment called for common sense from a common man. Whatever voice God had given him would have to do.

As Ben traversed the rock and sat in the knobby chair, Eliza thought he looked worn down. He had aged so much in the past year. But his voice rang clear, from California to Wisconsin, Indiana, New York, Mexico, and points beyond.

“This may well be the last time I speak publicly.

“Many in government and the various media have asked me to condemn the violent acts that have become increasingly common, threatening young and old of all walks of life.

“I am more than happy to do so.”

Off camera, many in the crowd voiced their disappointment at this capitulation. He raised a hand to quiet them.

“Let me be clear: I condemn all violence.”

The discontent around him grew louder.

“Please, friends, allow me to speak. If you have ever held me in high esteem, give me the civility that I hope you will continue to give each other and those who oppose us.

“It is not enough to simply speak out against violence in general. Anyone can do that. Let me be specific.

“I condemn all the violences.

“I condemn the violence of poverty.

“A wealthy society that sends a child to bed hungry is a violent society.

“I condemn the violence of planetary abuse.

“Pouring pollutants into the world wreaks misery on future generations.

“I condemn the violence of prison sentences disproportionate to the crimes committed. Sentences that assume people are only as good as their biggest mistakes, that they cannot be saved, can never rejoin polite society. We are not a vindictive, unforgiving people, but our prison system assuredly makes us appear that way.

“I condemn the violence of disenfranchisement. Voter suppression and gerrymandering are violent acts against individuals that result in violence against democracy itself. Our nation cannot survive it.

“And, yes, I condemn the violence against the rich and the property of the rich. I condemn that violence, too. I do.

“But if you think I have the power to make that stop, you overestimate me. That kind of violence is the inevitable consequence when one small group of people uses the institutions of government — whether of a monarchy or of a supposed democracy — to amass fortune and power at the expense of the greater populace. Just as bad management gives birth to unions, bad government yields revolution.

“Revolutions are terrible, bloody struggles. Inevitably, innocent people suffer. No one in his or her right mind proposes revolution as a lark. We should avoid them if we can. Some would say at all costs. But if you read our founding documents, you must concede that long-term intransigence on the part of a tyrant class gives the citizenry little choice but to rebel. Indeed, at some point, it becomes our duty.

“We may have already reached that point.”

Here, many in the crowd cheered, while others shushed them.

“I have just one little voice. It astonishes me that so many choose to listen to it, and that some act out in response.

“I could argue — or hire a lawyer to argue for me — that I never intended my words to lead to violence. And that would be true. But it would also be beside the point. I said things that led to violence. I kept saying them. And there was more violence. It is no defense to say that I was not reading the newspapers, that I was unaware of the effects of my words.

“And yet, my words were just sparks. Injustice has filled the land with the kindling of resentment. When an imbalance becomes severe enough — whether it is an imbalance in positive and negatively charged particles or an imbalance of personal wealth — nature impels a resolution. The greater and longer the imbalance, the more violent the thunderclap. Houses, fortunes, and lives are lost in a flash.

“I am here to offer a solution. A lightning rod, if you will.

“I ask anyone who values my opinion, who follows my words, who has committed or is thinking of committing acts of civil and uncivil disobedience, to desist for a while. Limit your actions to petitioning your representatives. Give the lightning rod a chance to work.

“This lightning rod must include four braided strands, most of them forged by the end of the next session of Congress:

“One, a return to the progressive tax rates of the 1940s, '50s and '60s, with the removal of loopholes, together with a tax on accumulated wealth.

“Two, complete support of climate change measures already undertaken by the majority of the world's nations.

“Three, the dismantling of the business of incarceration. The renewed pursuit of justice, mercy, and rehabilitation for our brothers and sisters behind bars.

“Four, the establishment of a national bi-partisan commission on gerrymandering and voter suppression, with the teeth to make sweeping changes at all levels of government.

“Pass the first, second, and fourth of these by the end of the next session of Congress, and make real progress on the third, and I will beg my followers to stand down. I will turn myself in. And you won't have to reduce the charges. I will plead guilty and gladly serve my time.

“Some of my friends here do not share my optimism. They say that the wealthy of this nation will never willingly cede a penny of what they have stolen. They think it is a waste of time to make this pie-in-the-sky offer, that in three months we'll be back in the same position.

“Every one of the founders of this nation was a loyal Englishman, a supporter of the crown, until abuse piled upon abuse led each to follow a bloody path. The constitution they wrote did not produce an automaton of government, a nation that could survive all threats

internal and external regardless of the actions or inactions of its citizens. Our nation is what we choose to make of it.

“Consider these four requests carefully. They are ambitious, but they are not outlandish. They are what justice, history, and the majority of our citizens demand.

“Congress is on the clock. The nation is watching. I plead with my fellow citizens whose patience is thin: Let your representatives do their work. Let your relations with each other be infused with charity, love, and hope. Put down your rocks and spray paint for a while.

“But ready yourselves.

“For if by the end of that period insufficient progress has been made, I will cry havoc and unleash the dogs of revolution.

“It will not be my words or Shakespeare’s or anyone else’s that visits Godless hell on the rich. I won’t have to say anything. Remorseless nature will take its course. Lightning will crash to earth.”

Ben paused. The crowd was silent, wondering if he was finished. He looked into their faces: The reverend standing tall behind the back row, Gretchen at the camera, Eliza on a stump, the wheezing marijuana growers sitting next to the woman whose cabin they had commandeered. He felt a sudden pang for all of them and their uncertain futures. His sight blurred as his eyes teared. He continued in a shaky voice.

“Many will ask, ‘Why listen to this foolish old man, this bad actor who has acted so badly?’ I will not say a word in my own defense. I am indeed an unworthy vessel for this message. And the message is not my own. It was crafted by minds sharper than mine, brilliant women, mostly, who would stand before you if they could do so without risking prosecution from this stupid new utterly unconstitutional sedition law.”

Without Ben noticing, Eliza slipped off her stump, walked around the side and stood behind him. Gretchen joined her, and then the Reverend. The three locked elbows. Quickly, quietly, the entire group massed on the stretch of rock behind Ben, who continued speaking in the general direction of the camera on the tripod.

“Ben Folger will remain a fugitive until these demands are met or I am captured, fall prey to a contrived accident, or am otherwise silenced.

“I hope to speak again in a few months, to express thanks for prayers answered on my way into voluntary custody. It’s up to you, America.

“This might be the last time the world hears from Ben Folger. That’s OK. But for your sake, for all our sakes, I hope you keep up the conversation with Ben Franklin. You lose him, you won’t really be America anymore.”

Ben’s eyes cleared. The seats in front of him were empty. His first thought: *Was I that bad?*

Eliza leaned over and kissed his cheek. Ben looked around at the crowd behind him, a little bewildered. There was a smattering of applause. The band got their instruments from a nearby picnic table and began to play. Ben and Eliza danced to the water’s edge and back.

The youngest, healthiest marijuana grower asked Gretchen to dance.

“You’ll have to teach me,” she said.

Some joined in while others brought out precious hoarded bottles of wine and plates of acorn cookies.

One by one members of the communications committee shook Ben’s hand, each saying more or less the same thing: *Pretty good speech, Ben. Not the one I would have written, but pretty good.*

Someone announced that the video replay of the speech was now available. Although it had streamed live, it would not seem real to them until they viewed it on a little screen.

Anne had chopped off the footage of the post-speech party.

Ben looked at the camera and noticed that the red light was still blinking. He walked over and turned it off. The last thing viewers of the live feed saw was a close-up of Ben's hairy nostrils as he fumbled with the device.

Ben walked to the Indian in the parking lot. He fished superglue and duct tape from the saddlebag and carried them to Eliza's tent. He pulled Matty's harp out into the sunlight and began to fit it back together, hopeful that it would again yield sweet harmonies along with the inevitable sour notes.

-The End-