Twelve Tenacious Tales

Volume 1

Krin Van Tatenhove

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Second Shore
Publishing

(Note: I envisioned the plots, characters, and settings of these stories. I refined them through many hours of editing. But I also credit ChatGPT and Claude AI for helping me enhance certain scenes.)

To survive, you must tell stories. - Umberto Eco

Dedicated to the worldwide family of authors I've met through decades of writing, editing, and publishing

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An Unforgettable Night at the Lighthouse

(According to the U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office, 122 women served as lighthouse keepers from 1845 to 1912)

Port Isabel, Texas — November 15, 1860

The night air tasted like salt and iron. It pressed through the cracks of the lighthouse keeper's cottage, carrying the murmur of the Gulf of Mexico, a sound Hannah Harn had come to know as well as her own breathing. Outside, the beacon atop the Port Isabel Lighthouse shone steady, its beam sweeping toward the Brazos Santiago Pass. Hannah had lit it promptly at 5:00 p.m., ensuring its operation through another night.

Feeling restless, she left the cottage, walked the stone pathway to the lighthouse, and climbed its spiral staircase. The sleeves of her dark wool dress were rolled neatly to her elbows, revealing forearms strong from years of polishing brass and trimming wicks. When she got to the lantern room, she checked her pocket watch. 12:13 a.m.

She gazed out at the sea, its surface ink-black under the stars. As the beam from the great Fresnel lens swept back and forth, she smiled with satisfaction. It felt good to be responsible for such a marvel of engineering, its concentric rings of glass magnifying the flame until its light could be seen for twenty miles. Her late husband, John, had been so proud when the lens arrived from France and they installed it, replacing the old whale-oil lamps they'd tended since the lighthouse opened in 1852.

"It's like holding a star in your hands," he said, his weathered face full of wonder as he lit the new apparatus.

"Just think, Hannah, our light reaching out so far. All those sailors finding their way home because of what we do here."

Hannah's throat tightened. For almost a year now, she'd kept the light alone, ever since John died of a sudden heart attack. They had just finished breakfast and he'd been laughing at something she'd said about gulls defecating on the observation deck. Suddenly, he slumped to the floor and went silent. She tried to revive him to no avail. She ran out of their cottage and into town, knocking frantically on the local doctor's door, but by the time they got back, it was no use. The doctor told her it was the Lord's will, a phrase she had always despised.

The very next day, despite her grief, she told the Harbormaster that she would take over John's duties. He stared at her, first in disbelief, then in mild amusement.

"It's highly irregular," he said, avoiding her eyes and shuffling papers on his desk. "A woman keeper…"

But Hannah persisted. John had taught her everything, she explained. How to trim the wick, how to calculate the right amount of whale oil, how to read the weather in the colors of the sunset and direction of the wind. Then she told the Harbormaster of another Hannah—Hannah Thomas—the first woman lighthouse keeper in America, a story she had learned in Massachusetts before moving to Texas. After her husband died in the Revolutionary War, Thomas tended the strategic Gurnet Light on Plymouth Bay for ten years, an inspiration to other women in a patriarchal era.

"I'm perfectly qualified," Hannah concluded. "And who better? I learned from the man himself. Is it more irregular to appoint me, or let the lighthouse go dark while you search for someone to learn what I already know?"

He'd given her the appointment, saying it was temporary and subject to review. That had been nearly a year ago, and the light had burned every night without fail. Ships laden with Texas cotton, bales upon bales of white gold bound for New Orleans and beyond, had passed safely through the channel under her watch. She'd earned her place as the first female lighthouse keeper on the Texas coast.

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Tonight, the air seemed preternaturally still, the sea smooth as glass. Stars shone clear and bright in a crystalline sky, undimmed by the occasional fog of the Gulf. On the horizon, a faint flicker marked the last departing ship of the day. The town of Port Isabel glimmered with a few lights, and beyond it to the southwest, mainland Mexico stretched into the distance.

She checked her watch again, 1:15 a.m., then sat at a small table she and John had always used. On top of it was a folded copy of the Galveston Daily News, delivered yesterday. She had read it that afternoon. It spoke of Abraham Lincoln's election just two weeks earlier, as well as the growing talk of secession rippling through the South, including Texas. If conflict broke out between the states, she wondered what would happen to Port Isabel and the status of the lighthouse. It concerned her, but with the Gulf so peaceful beneath the stars, rumors of war seemed far away.

She pulled out her knitting from a drawer, clicking the needles in a rhythm that matched the lens's rotation. This had been her evening routine, a meditative cycle of work and watch. During the day, she could walk to town and speak with merchants or sailors' wives, feeling part of the bustling port

community. But at night, she was encased in solitude, alone with the light and her memories.

Her thoughts turned to John. His voice, his laugh, and the rough warmth of his hands. He used to call her "my treasure." He'd said it the very first day he brought her to Port Isabel as his new bride in the summer of '52, when the lighthouse was barely finished.

"This is my post," he'd said, gazing up at the white tower. "And you're my treasure at the top of it." After that, he often used that affectionate name for her, saying "Good morning, my treasure" or "What did you read in the paper, my treasure?"

Their marriage wasn't perfect. They argued like other couples. But Hannah knew that in his heart, John adored her. And unlike most of the other men she observed in South Texas, her treated her as a true equal. It was still so strange to think that she had outlived him and assumed his post.

—

Another hour passed and Hannah stayed in the lantern room, not tired enough to retreat to the cottage. The constellations of the Northwestern Hemisphere wheeled overhead, including her favorite, Pegasus. She and John often pored over a lithograph star chart, a prized possession, testing each other's knowledge of the heavens.

She sighed, lifted her gaze beyond the windows, and that's when she saw it, a brightness on the horizon.

At first she thought it was a ship, its running lights unusually brilliant. But the light grew too bright, too fast, dazzling against the calm darkness of the sea. It shimmered, swelled, and seemed to move not along the water but above it.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. As it got closer, she realized it wasn't a ship. It had no mast, no hull, no motion on the waves. It seemed to be a self-contained ball of molten silver gliding over the water. It pulsed faintly as it drew nearer, casting an eerie radiance.

A shiver ran down her spine. "What on earth…" she murmured.

She opened the door that led to the observation deck and walked out to the railing, the night air heavy with the smell of ocean brine. The light was still coming, faster and brighter, until it hurt to look at.

It reached the shallows, then lifted from the sea, tall enough that the beam from the Fresnel lens shone straight through it, breaking into a thousand shimmering fragments like sunlight through mist.

It wasn't lightning. It wasn't fire. It wasn't anything she had ever seen. Then, as she stared, it began to move toward the lighthouse and her heart started pounding.

She turned and rushed down the spiral stairs, skirt clutched in one hand, the heavy ring of keys in the other. Every instinct told her to make sure the tower was locked up tightly. When she reached the thick oaken door, the seams around it glowed faintly as the light approached. She bolted it, her fingers trembling, then pressed her ear to the wood.

At first, only silence. Then footsteps, faint at first, approaching along the stone pathway, growing more distinct. Filled with fear, she quickly retreated up the spiral stairs, making sure the door to the lantern room was equally secure. But now, somehow, the footsteps were inside the tower. *How could that be?* She gripped the door's brass handle, testing its security once again.

Still, the footsteps drew closer, echoing on the iron stairs, until they stopped on the other side of the door. She could feel a presence there, could sense it waiting. The silence was broken only by her ragged breathing and the steady tick of the clockwork that turned the lens.

"Who goes there?" she finally called in a sharp voice.

No answer.

"Who's there?" she demanded again, mustering more courage than she felt.

A pause.

Then, softly, heartbreakingly familiar, came a voice.

"It's alright, my treasure," it said. "I will always be near."

Hannah froze. Her throat closed, and she pressed her hand to her chest.

"John?" she whispered.

But the voice said nothing more.

For long seconds, the world held still. Then the air seemed to exhale. Through the crack beneath the door, she saw the light dimming, softening from white to gold, then to nothing. When she finally dared to open it, the stairwell was empty. But something had changed. The brass railings gleamed brighter than before, as though freshly polished. Behind her, the great Fresnel lens turned in its slow, majestic rhythm, clearer than she had ever seen it.

She stood there for a long time at the top of stairs, one hand resting on the railing as tears blurred her vision.

"My treasure," he had said. The exact words, his voice as unique as his fingerprints.

—

In the morning, the sky dawned cloudless. The wind had picked up from the east, rattling the shutters and carrying the cry of gulls. Hannah went about her duties as usual, though she moved through the day in a quiet daze.

She had convinced herself that, given the late hour, she had fallen asleep at the table and dreamed the whole incident. But outside the cottage, she saw footprints in the sand that led to the stone walkway. They were clearly a man's. She followed them to the shoreline where they vanished into the surf.

She knelt and touched one, feeling the damp impression under her fingers, and for the first time since John's death, she wept openly.

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Days passed. Then weeks. A story spread through the small settlement of Port Isabel about a ghostly light seen offshore. Sailors drinking in the local pub said they'd observed a second beacon burning above the lighthouse, even brighter than the Fresnel lens.

Many townsfolk asked Hannah what she thought of the phenomenon. She didn't deny it had happened but merely agreed with them that it was strange and unprecedented. She never revealed what had happened in those moments. She just kept her routines of tending the lamp and filling the logbook in her neat script. But occasionally, late at night when the wind was low and the sea calm, she swore she could hear footsteps again on the stairs. Never threatening. Never materializing into something she could see. And instead of fear, she felt only comfort and peace.

Sometimes she would speak softly into the silence: "John, if that's you…" And though she never heard his voice

again, the flame of the lens would seem to brighten for a moment, as if in answer.

The Scratcher

Part One – 2021

The towers of downtown Los Angeles glimmered in the distance, their glass and steel reflecting the California sun. But the light seemed faded on Skid Row, as if exhausted by what it revealed. It clung to the cracked pavement in the alleyways, to makeshift tents, to the restless shuffle of those who had nowhere else to go.

Larry Hollis sat cross-legged on the sidewalk outside a liquor store, his back against a wall caked with graffiti. He wore a faded red flannel shirt and jeans stiff with dirt. His tennis shoes were split at the seams, the soles about to separate. A large Styrofoam cup rested before him, its lip bent from days of use, an invitation to alms from the passersby.

He took a deep breath and looked up and down the sidewalk. This new reality of his life had lasted far longer than he'd imagined, the days blurring together, dulled by the need to survive. The shame he once harbored had morphed to a leaden resignation.

A woman in a pencil skirt hurried past, dropping two quarters without breaking stride. A man in a Dodgers cap left a crumpled bill but avoided eye contact, as if kindness might delay him. That was how it went, each transaction as brief and impersonal as the slip of change through fingers.

Larry had been here most of the afternoon, watching the rhythm of the city. He thought of his past less often now: the classroom where he taught history, the rows of students eager or bored, his hope of scheduling a sabbatical to write a book. And then, what he called "the great miasma," a descent into major depression that hit him like a tsunami. The doctors

tried hospitalization, medication, talk therapy, even shock treatment, but it only tempered the worst symptoms, shifting the fog to a lighter shade of gray. His life unraveled until it was difficult to get out of bed. Eventually, he lost his job and his marriage. Friends stopped calling, and after his eviction they disappeared altogether. Too young for tenure or social security, and with the last of his savings drained by divorce, he had no source of income. He first stayed in various shelters, then drifted onto the streets.

It was near dusk when he noticed a man in a gray suit, his gait uneven, his briefcase dangling precariously from his hand. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were glassy. He stopped in front of Larry, swaying slightly, and let out a small laugh.

"Man," he said, his voice heavy with drink, "I thought *I* was unlucky."

Larry looked up, unsure whether the man was mocking him. The stranger reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a wad of lottery scratchers, fanning them in his hand like a small deck of cards. He thumbed through them like a magician, plucked one, and dropped it into Larry's cup with theatrical flair.

"Good luck, brother," he muttered before weaving away into the stream of pedestrians.

Larry stared into the cup where the ticket sat atop coins and a few bills. A scratcher? He knew the astronomical odds with the lottery. Five dollars to buy a sandwich would have been far more useful. He shrugged and left it where it was.

Just before sunset, he retreated through an alley to the abandoned warehouse where he'd been sleeping near other denizens of the street. In a corner was a discarded mattress, the space he had staked out as his own. He laid down his

backpack, then sat on the mattress and emptied his cup: some coins, a few bills, and the ticket.

He almost tossed it aside but instead took a quarter from the pile and scraped the silver dust from the numbers on the front. He rubbed his eyes, checked the fine print, and read it again.

The message was unmistakable: Grand Prize Winner – $10,000,000.

His heart thudded and his breath quickened. Everything around him was the same: the distant sounds of sirens and traffic, the hollow space of the warehouse, the smell of concrete and unwashed bodies.

And yet, everything had changed.

Part Two — 2025

My name is Elaine Morris, and I'm a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. I've covered wildfires, elections, celebrity trials, and city hall scandals. But the scoop that I've longed for is the story of Larry Hollis.

The basic arc of his saga was familiar to most Angelenos. A man who was once a teacher, undone by depression and cast adrift onto the streets. A chance encounter with a stranger, a lottery scratcher worth ten million dollars. And then, instead of vanishing into his newfound wealth, how Larry used his fortune to lease the warehouse where he'd once slept. With the help of the city council and other donors, he transformed it into a service center for those experiencing homelessness, offering beds, showers, meals, medical clinics, and job training.

But the man himself remained a mystery. He never granted interviews, never appeared at ribbon cuttings, never

allowed himself to be a poster child. “A ghost in a flannel shirt,” people called him.

Until now, because he had agreed to see me.

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Even though I’d seen pictures, the service center surprised me from the moment I walked inside. Nothing about it spoke of its role as a rescue mission. Sunlight streamed through tall windows into the expansive lobby that was painted pale blue. A mural covered the far wall, depicting Los Angeles at sunrise, its skyline glowing, the colors vibrant with hope.

The young woman at the front desk checked my credentials, raising an eyebrow.

“So you’re the one who won the reporter's lottery,” she said with a grin. “Larry’s somewhere on campus.”

I frowned slightly. “Do you know exactly where?”

She shook her head. “He’s around. Just ask people.”

I did, first in the cafeteria where residents served steaming trays of rice, chicken, and vegetables. I asked a man clearing tables if he’d seen Larry.

“He’s somewhere on campus,” the man replied with a smile.

I searched a large activity room where people chatted around tables. Again the same shrugs and comments of “he’s here somewhere.” I began to feel like I was chasing a phantom.

Finally, I found him in the atrium at the heart of the center. It was a vast cathedral where sun poured through skylights onto dozens of people resting on mats. Some slept, cocooned in blankets. Others sat reading or staring upward as if searching for answers in the clouds visible through the glass.

And there was Larry Hollis.

He sat cross-legged on the floor with a group of others, dressed in a red flannel shirt and jeans. His beard was gray, his face lined, and he could easily have been one of the people around him.

When I approached, he looked up and nodded.

"You must be Elaine," he said. His voice was soft and gravelly. "You found me."

He didn't stand as he reached out his hand to shake mine, so I sat beside him, my notebook and hand recorder ready. "Thank you for agreeing to the interview. Is this where you want to talk?"

Before I could ask another question, Larry gestured to the man sitting on his right, thin and nervous, clutching a plastic bag full of items.

"This is Marcus," Larry said. "Lost his job, evicted from his apartment. His story is my story."

"Pleased to meet you, Marcus," I said, reaching out to shake his hand. He took mine nervously, then looked away. I turned back to Larry. "I wonder if…"

Larry interrupted again and motioned to a woman sitting on his left. She had a blanket draped around her shoulders, her dark face etched with premature wrinkles. "Meet Teresa, Elaine. She raised two kids while fighting to stay clean, but a relapse drove her to the street. Her story is my story."

"Pleased to meet you, Teresa," I said, shaking her hand.

Larry suddenly stood. "Follow me."

We walked around the atrium as he introduced me to a dozen other people. He knew all their names. A veteran with a limp. A teenage runaway estranged from her family. An older woman who had worked menial jobs her whole life, just one paycheck away from the street. A young man covered in

tattoos who was missing most of his teeth. Each time, Larry said the same thing: *Their story is my story*.

I was frustrated. I had worked hard to prepare dozens of questions about his life as a teacher, about the night he scratched the ticket, about his decision to reject luxury and lease the warehouse. But each time I tried to steer the conversation, Larry redirected it to the people around him. It was as though he was dissolving into them, refusing the separateness the world had tried to give him.

I grew increasingly irritated. I needed a headline and a story that would justify months of chasing him, especially to my editor. But as I listened, my irritation gave way to unease. Larry's refrain, *their story is my story,* was more than a metaphor. It was an indictment.

You see, I grew up in Los Angeles, my childhood secure and comfortable. I went to college and eventually became a reporter. But there was a day, more than a decade ago, when my father lost his job at the aerospace company where he'd worked for many years. I remember the tension at our dinner table, the forced way my mother kept repeating "we'll be fine," as if saying it enough times would make it true.

We did stay afloat. My father found new work at the tail end of his unemployment benefits. We never lost our home, but for months I lived with fear that everything would come undone.

I had buried that memory, but as I made the rounds with Larry, hearing the back stories of so many people from different walks of life, it resurfaced, raw and insistent. The line between me and them was thinner than I wanted to admit.

Finally, Larry guided me to a small alcove on the side of the atrium. It had a table and two unoccupied chairs. He was silent, just motioning for me to sit.

“Why didn’t you leave?” I asked at last, my voice quieter than I intended. “You could have bought a mansion and disappeared into comfort.”

Larry’s smile was faint, almost weary. “Because this was already my home. And for me, home isn’t about walls or money. It’s about people. It’s about community.”

He leaned back, folding his hands, and for a moment I saw the teacher he once was, the man who unpacked history for his students. “Money gave me a golden opportunity. The chance to make a place where others could feel less broken. I consider this a privileged way to live out whatever years I'm given.”

His words hit harder than I expected. Wasn’t that what journalism was supposed to do? To give people a place where their stories mattered? Yet too often I had reduced them to soundbites and lines in a column, staying at arm’s length, clinical and a bit uncaring.

Larry had done what I had not. He had erased the distance.

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I finally got a chance to ask my host of questions, which Larry answered patiently. When we had finished our conversation, he gave me a warm farewell and I walked back through the atrium toward the exit. Sunlight shifted through the skylights, dust motes glittering like stars. Around me, the air pulsed with murmured conversations.

I thought about the article I would write, the profile readers had been demanding for years, and I realized the story didn’t belong just to Larry Hollis. It was the story of Marcus. It was the story of Teresa. It was narrative of *all* of them. And

in every introduction, in every life he pointed to, Larry had already given me the headline.

Their story is our story.

The Duel in St. Anthony's Garden

New Orleans, April 2, 1848

Tendrils of morning fog drifted through the live oaks of St. Anthony's Garden. Nestled behind St. Louis Cathedral's towering spires, the garden was an Old World masterpiece transplanted to the New World. Brick pathways formed a cross that met at a gurgling fountain filled with water lilies. Manicured hedges of boxwood created intimate alcoves. Magnolia trees joined the oaks overhead, their white blossoms hanging like faint ornaments in the pre-dawn light. The air carried a perfume of jasmine mingled with damp soil and the muddy overlay of the nearby Mississippi River.

The aristocracy of New Orleans often gathered here, not for solitude or prayer, but for that peculiar form of justice settled with powder and lead. Duels were good theater, and this morning's contest pitted two successful cotton merchants against each other: Joseph Armand and Nicholas LeDoux. Their story had spilled into the society pages of *The Times-Picayune*, alleging that LeDoux made an unwanted advance toward Armand's wife, Camille.

Fueled by gossip and bloodlust, the morning's crowd was unusually large. Somewhere in the foliage, a mockingbird began its repertoire, oblivious to the human drama about to unfold.

"Here he comes!" a woman's voice sounded from the spectators.

Jospeh Armand's carriage rattled to a stop on Royal Street just as the cathedral bells tolled six a.m. He emerged wearing a rich burgundy coat cut in French fashion. Strikingly handsome, he was tall and broad-chested, his curly black hair

professionally coiffed. A vain man, he arrogantly displayed his wealth and social standing, but he also had the reputation of being fair in his business practice. That is, if you had the guts to stand up to him.

As he walked past the spectators lining the pathways, he tried to hide the trembling of his hand that held the .50 caliber flintlock dueling pistol, its walnut stock gleaming with brass fittings.

Nicholas LeDoux appeared from the opposite direction, announced by murmurs in the crowd. He was leaner, his features sharper, his dark hair streaked with gray. He carried himself with easy grace, his deep blue coat longer than Joseph's, suggesting his merchant dealings in British territories. A devout Catholic, he worshipped every Sunday with his family in the cathedral, and unlike Armand, he used his wealth to support local charities. He had recently donated large sums to Sisters of the Holy Family, the first Catholic order for women of African descent. That association was slowly eroding his views on slavery. He felt a growing sense of guilt that his entire business depended on enslaved individuals.

As he strode toward Armand, LeDoux's face was pale but steady, his jaw set with a determination that masked his own fear.

The rivals halted and locked eyes beneath two trees nicknamed "the dueling oaks."

"Joseph," said LeDoux with a nod of his head.

Armand answered only with a sneer.

Another man stepped up behind them, Monsieur Beauregard, chosen as the sole referee in lieu of traditional seconds. He was a stout merchant in his sixties, dressed in black, with white hair pulled back and secured by a ribbon.

The Bishop himself had asked him to assume a larger role in these conflicts. “Dueling,” said the cleric, “has gotten woefully out of hand. I trust you can be a modifying influence to avert some of this bloodshed.” Beauregard had reluctantly agreed, but he took no pleasure in the task. He had presided over eleven duels, and three men had died under his supervision. But he had also deescalated a half dozen others, so he persisted.

He knew Armand and LeDoux, having shared drinks and merriment with them at high society parties. He also knew the backstory of this moment, and he was skeptical that LeDoux would have done such a thing. Nonetheless, it was not his place to second guess.

"Gentlemen," Beauregard's baritone voice silenced both the crowd and the mockingbird. "Before we proceed, is there no possibility of reconciliation? Is there no way we can avoid the untimely fate that might await one of you this morning?"

Joseph's response was sharp and immediate. "The insult to my wife's virtue cannot be reconciled with words. Only blood will answer."

Nicholas's jaw tightened. "I maintain my innocence, but if Monsieur Armand demands satisfaction, I will give it. My honor is as dear to me as his."

The crowd shifted, drawing their collective breath. There would be no turning back.

Beauregard sighed heavily. “Then let me examine your weapons.”

They presented their pistols, and after inspecting them thoroughly, Beauregard handed them back.

"Here are the terms. Stand back-to-back. At my count, take fifteen paces. Then, at my command, turn and fire at will. No second shots. May God have mercy on both of you."

The men pressed their backs together. Joseph felt Nicholas's warmth through their coats, and sensed a rapid breathing that matched his own. The pistol felt like ice in his hand.

"One!" Beauregard's voice rang out.

Joseph stepped forward, crushing a small flower.

"Two!"

The crowd fell utterly silent.

"Three!"

Somewhere in the crowd, a woman sobbed softly. Joseph thought of Camille, of her tears three nights ago as she had described Nicholas's hand upon her arm and his suggestion that they meet privately. His rage rekindled with each step.

"Ten!"

Nicholas's heart hammered against his ribs. He had shot at targets and had once killed a cottonmouth that threatened his daughter, but he had never aimed at a man. He thought of his wife, Jeanette, pleading with him that very morning to reject this rash and foolish challenge.

"Fifteen! Turn and fire!"

Joseph spun, raising his pistol. Across wet grass and mist, Nicholas did the same. For one eternal instant, they stood frozen.

Then they fired their pistols fired as one. Thunderous cracks echoed off the cathedral's stones and sent birds exploding from the trees. White smoke bloomed, obscuring everything.

When it cleared, both men lay on the ground.

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The room in Charity Hospital smelled of carbolic acid and blood. It was just after sunset, the glow of a kerosene lantern casting a dim yellow light. Joseph Armand had been conscious for about an hour. Tight bandages wrapped his chest, making each breath painful. The ball had entered just below his right collarbone, missing his lung by an inch. Dr. Mercier called it miraculous.

A heavy canvas curtain divided the room into two parts, each holding a bed. Beyond it, Joseph heard another man's raspy breathing and occasional moans. A nurse moved between the patients, pausing on the other side of the curtain.

"Monsieur LeDoux, you *must* drink this broth."

Joseph's eyes flew open. LeDoux? *Nicholas* LeDoux?

The irony struck like a blow. They had tried to murder each other at dawn, but now shared the same room, too weak to stand.

"Nicholas?" Armand called in a weak voice. "Is that you?"

The response from beyond the curtain was also weak but unmistakable. "Joseph?"

"Yes, it's me, Nicholas." He paused, trying to collect his thoughts and feelings. "It seems we are both poor shots."

Long silence followed. Then, from LeDoux: "I thought I killed you. When I saw you fall..."

"I thought the same. I suppose we're both fortunate, or unfortunate, depending on your perspective."

Another silence, longer this time. "I never touched your wife, Joseph. Not in the way she suggested."

Joseph closed his eyes, weary to his bones. "Then why accept the challenge?"

"What choice did I have? To refuse would admit guilt and brand me a coward. Everything I care about—my business, my reputation, and my children's futures—would be destroyed. So I came prepared to die for honor, even though I was falsely impugned."

Joseph felt something shift in his chest. "Tell me exactly what happened at the Deveraux ball."

"I was near the terrace. Camille approached me. *She* approached *me*, Joseph. She laid her hand upon my arm and said you had been neglecting her, caring more for your cotton than your wife. She asked if I might call upon her to discuss how to invest her household allowance. Frankly, I thought it was odd, and I quickly told her that such a conversation should rightfully include you. That was all. The next day, you sent your second to my house with the challenge."

Joseph lay in the dim light. His injury had weakened his defenses, and he suddenly felt the full weight of truth. He knew his wife, her moods, her need for attention, her talent for dramatic embellishment. He had leapt to defend her honor without questioning her account. He could blame her, but he knew it was his own damn pride that had almost cost a human life. And she was certainly right about his work draining attention from her.

"I nearly killed you," Joseph whispered.

"We nearly killed each other. I aimed for your heart. I meant to leave your wife a widow. For what? Vanity and an antiquated notion of honor?"

Absurdity overwhelmed Joseph. A laugh escaped his lips, painful but genuine. "I am an idiot, Nicholas. And you, too, for accepting my challenge. Absolute idiots."

Nicholas laughed too, dissolving into painful coughs. "Complete fools. They should write an opera about our epic stupidity."

When their chuckling subsided, a new silence fell.

"Your cotton exports," Nicholas said eventually. "You ship primarily to Manchester?"

"Liverpool. Though I'm making some headway in establishing Manchester contacts. And you?"

"Manchester and Leeds. But Liverpool has eluded me. The established houses refuse newcomers."

Joseph's mind began working. "I have three ships in rotation. But British tariffs cut margins. I've been seeking ways to increase the volume on each passage."

"I have prime warehousing on Tchoupitoulas Street," said LeDoux, "holding three times what I can adequately ship. Last season I left two hundred bales waiting, and the prices dropped."

"If you had guaranteed shipping..."

"And if you had better storage facilities and wider British contacts..."

Possibilities bloomed between them like the magnolias in St. Anthony's Garden. Combined resources, shared costs, expanded markets. They knew that their competition had cost them both dearly.

"We could," Joseph said slowly, "in theory, form a partnership."

"Armand and LeDoux. Or LeDoux and Armand?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not in the slightest."

Over the following hour, two wounded men discussed tonnage and tariffs, credit and contracts. They spoke of the

growing British demand and how a unified operation could be formidable.

Dr. Mercier arrived, making his last rounds of the day. He pulled back the curtain briefly, allowing them to see each other, pale and bandaged.

"Look upon your handiwork, gentleman. You will both live, though you will carry scars. You were fortunate."

“Perhaps more than we had imagined,” said Nicholas.

The doctor looked at them again, then shook his head with a sigh. "I don't understand this world," he said, then turned and left.

After he'd gone, Joseph spoke softly. "Nicholas, when we recover, we should draw up partnership papers."

"Equal shares in everything?"

"Equal shares, equal voice, equal responsibility."

"Just one more thing," said LeDoux. "I would insist that we give a percentage of our profit to those who are less fortunate. After all, Joseph, we have been blessed with so much."

"I will accommodate your charitable nature," said Armand. "I'm sure your God, if he even exists, knows that I need more tolerance." He paused. "And Nicholas? I am truly sorry. For doubting you, for the challenge, for all of it."

"And I apologize as well for accepting rather than insisting on truth. Perhaps we both needed to learn about pride and trust."

As evening fell over Charity Hospital and the city of New Orleans, two former enemies planned their future as partners. Armand and LeDoux would become one of the South's most successful cotton operations, weathering the Civil War, passing through generations, a legacy of prosperity born from near tragedy.

But none of that was visible yet. For now, they were simply two foolish men who had learned that honor without wisdom is foolhardy, and that the greatest victories sometimes come from the duels we survive rather than win.

Outside, the city prepared for another sultry night. In St. Anthony's Garden, the magnolias continued their eternal blooming, indifferent to both human folly and human grace.

Lalla the Chick Magnet

Megan Green was content with her looks. She left the mirror every morning with her hair pulled back, wearing jeans and a soft flannel shirt that smelled of her favorite detergent. People sometimes told her she was attractive in a way that snuck up on you. The quiet steadiness of her hazel eyes, the curve of her smile. But at thirty-five, she had no need to turn heads when she entered a room.

She had animals, and that was enough.

The Humane Society shelter where she worked felt more like home than her apartment. Cages lined the walls, filled with eager whines and hopeful eyes. The air smelled of disinfectant and the musky undertone of fur, but Megan breathed it like perfume. Every dog, every cat, every rabbit or ferret that came through the doors received her loving attention. She knew them all by name, as well as the quirks of their personalities. The way Frankie, the one-eyed tabby, insisted on pawing his water bowl before drinking. Or how Milo, a shepherd mix, tried to herd the volunteers when they walked down the hall.

Her heart once belonged to a dog of her own, a Jack Russell terrier with more personality than weight. For thirteen years, Brie was Megan's second shadow, demanding fetch games in the hallway of her apartment, curling against her ribs at night. When Brie had been too sick from cancer to even raise her head, Megan held her paw as the shelter's vet mercifully euthanized her. Megan had cried almost as much as when she lost her mother, and the grief over Brie's absence still felt raw.

She hadn't considered getting another dog yet. Instead, she poured herself into her work, her social life slowly shrinking until some well-meaning coworkers finally convinced her to try dating again. Get out of your shell, they insisted. Reluctantly, Megan filled out a profile for an online app that promised compatible matches. She went on a couple dates with other women, but each meeting was so awkward that she resigned herself to the thought that she might always be single.

One morning at the shelter, she looked up from her computer and saw a woman walk through the front door. The stranger carried herself in a way that Megan associated with privilege. She wore tailored linen pants, a silk blouse, a scarf knotted loosely around her neck, and a diamond pendant flashing over her breasts. On a leash beside her walked a dog unlike any Megan had ever seen. Tall and elegant, the animal moved as if carved from sunlight, its tan fur shimmering against taut muscles. Megan prided herself on her encyclopedic knowledge of breeds, but this time she faltered. Greyhound, she thought at first, but taller, leaner.

The woman approached the counter. "This is Lalla," she explained in a smooth voice. "My husband and I are moving abroad and we can't bring her. But I must warn you. She's pretty picky when it comes to people, so we hope you can find her a home."

Megan crouched, extending her hand. Lalla was aloof and regal, sweeping her gaze over the room with indifferent eyes until they found Megan. Without hesitation, Lalla stepped forward, pressing her long muzzle against Megan's palm. Then she went even further and nuzzled Megan's shoulder.

"Now that doesn't happen very often," said the woman. "Lalla has discriminating taste in character."

As Lalla continued to nuzzle Megan, something opened inside her, like a door pushed ajar by a warm wind.

“What breed is she?”

“Sloughi,” the woman replied. “Arabian greyhound. Not to be confused with a Saluki.”

Sloughi. The word felt strange but beautiful on Megan’s tongue. She couldn’t look away from the dog now leaning into her, as if they'd always belonged to each other.

Megan stood decisively. “I’ll take her,” she said before her director even appeared from the office. “I want to adopt her.”

—

Lalla filled the space that Brie had left, not by replacing her, but by initiating something new. She was no lapdog. She wanted the outdoors where she could speed, and because Megan didn’t have a backyard, that meant the large, fenced dog park near her apartment. Megan found herself lacing up sneakers every morning, then walking to the park where Lalla could sprint like a ribbon unspooling across the grass.

At home, Lalla draped herself across the couch with regal elegance, but her eyes followed Megan everywhere. For all her aloofness with others, she was tender with Megan, pressing her narrow head into Megan’s chest during late-night reading, curling up on the floor like a sentinel beside Megan’s bed.

Megan did some research on Sloughis. They were an ancient North African breed, prized by Amazigh ethnic groups for hunting gazelle. She even found images of cave drawings that depicted dogs uncannily like Lalla, their lithe figures

running beside men with spears. Megan traced those lines with her finger on the computer screen, astonished that her companion carried such history in her bones.

The park became their ritual. Lalla rarely played with other dogs, content to race around the perimeter. When strangers approached, she usually ignored them, except on a couple occasions. Once with a young woman tossing a Frisbee, and once with an older man reading on a bench. Lalla went to each of them, tail flicking, and nuzzled their hands. Both times, Megan had talked with those people, and she found herself charmed by them as well.

Megan knew the popular notion that dogs could help you attract the opposite sex. One of her coworkers bragged that his golden retriever was a chick magnet. She began to joke in her head. Maybe Lalla would be her own personal chick magnet, a four-legged matchmaker that could find someone for her.

She laughed at herself, but part of her was cautiously optimistic.

—

The afternoon that changed everything was bright. Late September sunlight illuminated the edges of tree leaves that were just beginning to turn autumn gold. Lalla loped around the dog park in her usual solitary arcs. Megan was leaning against the fence, sipping from a water bottle, when another woman approached, pulled by a stocky mutt with mismatched ears.

"Mind if we join you?" the stranger asked, her voice low and friendly.

Megan opened her mouth to reply, but Lalla answered first. She stopped running and trotted straight to the woman,

nudging her hand. Even more astonishing, she bent down to sniff the other dog with a wag of her tail.

Megan blinked.

"Well," the stranger said with a laugh, "I think we've been approved."

Her name was Dana. She was a slender brunette with delicate features, sporting a tattoo of a flower on one of her forearms. She worked as a graphic designer and lived only a few blocks away. Her dog, Moose, was a rescue mutt with soulful eyes and the energy of a toddler. Conversation with Dana was easy in a way Megan hadn't felt in years, like slipping into water at the perfect temperature. They compared notes on their dog adoptions, swapped stories about their work, and compared their tastes in music and local coffee shops.

When Dana laughed, her whole body seemed to join in, and Megan felt herself leaning closer, caught in her orbit.

Lalla stayed near, content, as if to confirm Megan's growing suspicion: this was someone worth knowing.

—

They began to meet at the park once, twice, then three times a week. Their dogs chased each other along the fence line, Lalla swift and elegant, Moose clumsy but determined. Dana always brought a thermos of coffee to share.

Megan looked forward to those hours with a longing she had long suppressed. Dana's stories brightened her days. She told of a client who wanted a logo shaped like a mango, and the time Moose escaped into a laundromat. Megan responded with tales from the shelter, where puppies chewed through leashes and volunteers fell hopelessly in love with more animals than they could ever adopt.

Gradually, their conversations grew more intimate and vulnerable. Megan shared about her life growing up with a single mom who died too young of breast cancer, the story bringing tears to her eyes. Dana listened attentively and shared her own background. She'd been raised in a military family stationed in so many different places that she never felt like she had roots. Her parents were loving, but their political and religious conservatism was tested when Dana came out as gay. They tried, but there was always a slight distance. Dana was at peace with it; she expected nothing more from them.

Sometimes, while they shared, Dana studied Megan with eyes that had a quiet and inquisitive warmth. Each time, Megan was the first to look away, afraid to trust what was happening.

One evening, as the sun dipped and shadows stretched long across the dog park grass, Dana reached over and brushed a strand of hair from Megan's face, her fingers lingering on Megan's cheek. The touch was fleeting, but it lit Megan like fire.

"Sorry," Dana whispered.

"No," Megan said. "Don't be."

—

Their first real date wasn't called a date. Dana invited Megan for dinner. "Nothing fancy, just pasta," she had said. Megan arrived with a bottle of wine she'd agonized over choosing, feeling a bit nervous. Moose bounded at the door, and Lalla walked in as if she'd always belonged.

The evening passed with laughter and wonderful ease. By dessert, Megan realized she hadn't thought of Brie's absence once, nor the loss of her mother. For the first time in a long while, she felt unburdened and full of possibility.

Later, as she stood in the doorway ready to leave, Dana leaned close. Their kiss was gentle and exploratory. Lalla pressed against Megan's leg, Moose barked, and both women broke into laughter.

—

Weeks blurred into months. Megan still poured herself into her work at the shelter. She still memorized the names of every new arrival. But now her life was fuller and brighter. She looked forward to walks with Dana and the dogs, movies sprawled on the couch, nights full of tender lovemaking, quiet mornings drinking coffee side by side. They hadn't moved in with each other yet, alternating between apartments, but their relationship grew stronger by the day.

There were moments of hesitation. Megan sometimes pulled back, fear whispering that somehow her happiness would vanish. But Dana was steady and patient. And Lalla, her unlikely matchmaker, always seemed to approve, nudging Megan toward a newfound trust.

Sometimes, late at night with Dana asleep by her side, Megan would reach to the floor and rest her hand on Lalla's sleek fur. "Thank you," she would whisper. "Not just for your companionship, but for opening a door that I was afraid would always be locked."

Lalla's tail would thump gently against the floor.

—

Spring arrived with green bursting from the trees. Megan and Dana sat on a park bench one afternoon, the dogs tangled in joyful play nearby. The air smelled of damp earth and possibility.

“You know,” Dana said, breaking a comfortable silence, “I think Lalla deserves partial credit for this.”

At the sound of her name, Lalla trotted over to be near them. Megan laughed, sliding one hand into Dana’s and resting the other on Lalla’s head. “More than partial. Without her approval, none of this would have happened.”

“I’m so glad I passed the test,” Dana said with a chuckle.

The two of them looked at each other, and Megan felt the final ache of her loneliness slip away. Love hadn’t arrived with fireworks, but in a quiet and steady way, ushered in by a dog who seemed to know the future before either of them.

Megan leaned over and kissed Dana softly while Lalla’s head pressed warmly against her knee.

The Certificate of Merit

December 29, 1890, Wounded Knee Creek

Snow lay thick over the plains. At the edge of Wounded Knee Creek, the air crackled with a cold that bit through wool and leather. Private Edward Dutton adjusted his overcoat, stamping his feet to keep warm. The rising sun offered little comfort, its light sharpening the outlines of the Lakota camp below. He could hear their distant voices, punctuated by barking dogs and neighing horses.

The 7th Cavalry had encircled the camp under orders to disarm the Miniconjou Sioux, but the regiment's formation felt like a noose, not a peacekeeping mission. To fortify their plan, they had four Hotchkiss guns positioned on the ridge, cannons able to fire 68 rounds a minute. At eighteen years old and only a few months into his enlistment, Dutton felt dread twisting his gut. He had expected to see armed action, but not like this.

The Lakota knew that the US Army, spurred by increasing numbers of settlers, were fearful of their participation in the Ghost Dance. The ceremony was sweeping through tribes of the plains, promising an apocalyptic end to the white invaders. Now, numbering about 350 with the cavalry perched above them, anxiety rippled through the Lakota ranks.

The order came to move down from the ridge. Dutton heard Colonel Forsyth, using an interpreter, order the surrender of weapons. The cavalry began confiscating rifles and knives, placing them in a pile, but a Lakota medicine man

named Yellow Bird started to harangue the native warriors in a loud voice.

"Do not be afraid of them," he shouted in their language. "Be brave and resist! The Ghost Shirts you are wearing will stop their bullets!"

Then came a single shot. No one knew where it came from, but chaos erupted. Gunshots burst like thunderclaps and screams pierced the air as soldiers fired indiscriminately into the tribespeople. Edward raised his Springfield rifle almost unconsciously, the instinct of his training fueled by fear, and it bucked against his shoulder with each discharge.

Most of the Lakota fled in panic, but some of the braves tried to fight back by grabbing rifles from the pile. The Hotchkiss guns roared from the ridge, spewing death in iron bursts. Explosions ripped through the tipis, flinging bodies into the snow.

Edward watched as a young boy ran past him, his cheeks flushed with terror. The soldier beside him, Sergeant James Ward, pulled his trigger. The boy crumpled face-first into the snow as Edward's breath caught in his throat. Then he saw a woman clutching a baby scurry from behind a tipi. Ward discharged his rifle. The woman dropped and the infant rolled from her arms, mewling in the bloodied snow.

Edward lowered his weapon. He couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. His mind screamed for this madness to stop.

"Keep firing, son!" ordered Ward, and Dutton did, zombie-like, contributing to the bloodbath, each bullet chipping away at his humanity.

By mid-morning, the field was a massacre. Nearly three hundred Lakota lay dead. Their bodies froze where they had fallen, limbs twisted, faces caught in final moments of agony.

Soldiers walked among the corpses, overturning bodies and collecting weapons. One trooper laughed as he pulled a necklace from a dead woman's neck. Another prodded the body of a warrior with his bayonet, checking for movement. The young brave lay still, wrapped in his buckskin Ghost Shirt with its fringed collar. Edward stood in the middle of it all, his rifle limp at his side, his eyes hollow.

In the weeks that followed, Edward received the Certificate of Merit for "gallantry in action." His citation praised his "steadfastness and courage under fire." He accepted it with a blank face, unable to meet the eyes of the officer handing him the parchment. He wondered to himself, *had no one else doubted their actions that day?*

He kept that certificate rolled tight and locked in a cabinet, until years later when his new wife insisted that he hang it in his study.

He spoke rarely of that fateful morning, but the nightmares stayed with him for decades, persistent images of red snow, the cries of women and children, and the echoes of gunfire.

Edward became a clerk, then a station manager for a railway in Denver. He lived a quiet life, raising his family. He drank very little, but when he did, he drank alone, and every year on December 29th he would take the day off, retreating into his study and not emerging until the next morning.

Denver, Colorado, 1928

Dad's house always smelled of pipe smoke and oiled wood. He was mostly a quiet man, but I knew some of his history, including his time with the 7th Cavalry. Occasionally, I sat with him in his study where his Certificate of Merit hung on the

wall, framed in mahogany, its edges curled with age. Because he spoke so rarely of that event, I filled in the gaps as a child, imagining a glorious battlefield, my dad a hero among men.

To his credit, he never encouraged those fantasies. When my mother died, he became even more withdrawn.

Now, in the spring of 1928, he was dying from the slow, rasping decay of throat cancer. I was with him in his study, where he sat in a chair by the window, thinner than I'd ever seen him, a blanket over his knees. His eyes, however, were still sharp, filled with something I couldn't name.

"Will," he said, "I need you to take me to South Dakota."

I raised an eyebrow. "To see someone?"

He shook his head. "No. To do something I should've done a long time ago."

When he told me our destination would be the site of Wounded Knee, I didn't pry any further. If this was his dying wish, I felt privileged to grant it, especially since my siblings had moved far away from the family home.

We left two days later in my Ford Eifel, the engine humming steadily as we drove across the plains. He didn't talk much on the first day of our trip, just stared out the window at the endless horizon. But the land seemed to draw something out of him, something buried deep. He spoke a little on the second day, telling me of his enlistment in the Army at age 18. How the promise of adventure and romance in the West had seemed infinitely more enticing than living in hardscrabble poverty on the family farm in Kansas. Then he went silent again.

As we crossed into South Dakota, his posture stiffened and his breathing grew shallower. The reservation settlements were quiet and somber. Children played in the dirt, and elders

watched us with unreadable expressions. Since it had been so many years, Dad asked directions to Wounded Knee, where a monument had been erected in 1903. No one spoke much, but they pointed the way.

The monument stood alone on a slight hill, a granite obelisk reaching toward the sky. Dad stepped out of the car slowly, leaning on my arm as we walked toward it. Wind whispered through the grass, as if the land was alive with memory. Dad stood before the monument, shoulders hunched, hat in hand. I stayed a few paces behind him, but I could still read the inscription on the marker.

This monument is erected by
surviving relatives and other
Ogallala and Cheyenne River Sioux
Indians in memory of the
Chief Big Foot Massacre
December 29, 1890
Col. Forsyth in command
of U.S. troops
Big Foot was a great chief of the
Sioux Indians. He often said, I will
stand in peace till my last day
comes. He did many good and brave
deeds for the white man and the
red man. Many innocent women and
children who knew no wrong
died here.

Dad stayed there a long time, the grass moving in small waves around his feet. Then, from his coat pocket, he pulled out the Certificate of Merit. I didn't realize he had it with him.

The edges were browned, the ink faded. He held it up, staring at it as if it were a stranger's face.

"They gave this to me for killing people who couldn't fight back," he whispered. "I've kept it for thirty-seven years and it has never stopped haunting me. "

His hands trembled slightly. He took out the fancy inlaid lighter he used to stoke his pipe, flicked it once, and held it to the paper. The flame caught, then danced along the edge until the certificate curled and blackened, flakes drifting to the earth.

When it was nearly consumed, he let the ashes fall from his hand at the base of the monument. Then he knelt and touched the earth with his palms. He whispered words I couldn't hear, but they streamed out of him with a vitality that belied his illness. Then I saw his shoulders begin to quake from quiet sobs.

He remained like that for many moments, then stood to his full height, wiping his cheeks.

"Please take me home, Will," was all he said.

We didn't speak much on the drive back. but I could see that something in him had eased. His hands trembled less, and in a small motel near Cheyenne, he slept without coughing.

Two weeks later, he was gone.

We buried him with a stone cross and little fanfare, just our small family, a few friends, and the wind at his gravesite. I thought about the Certificate of Merit, how it too had found its final resting place in the soil of a land soaked in blood and finally, perhaps, forgiveness.

Epilogue

In the years since, I returned to that hill and its mournful monument. I stood where Dad stood, the sky stretching wide over the plains. I listened, and I swear I could hear his whispers once again.

Some days, sitting in my own study, I wonder what kind of man I would have been in his place. I did some research and discovered that 20 soldiers had received Medals of Honor for their action at Wounded Knee. Would I have been one to gloss over the massacre? Or would I have tried to resolve my grief as Dad did, burning a certificate that others would say was sacred?

Now and then, when I close my eyes, I imagine Lakota women and children running terrified through the snow, and I see Dad again as he knelt on that hallowed ground. It's not his guilt I carry. It's something older, something quieter. A kind of witness. A resolve to remember, to return, to always listen.

The pain he carried never fully left him, but he gave me something that day, and it was more lasting than history books or war medals. He gave me the truth. And the truth, I think, is what finally gave him partial peace.

When I teach my children about him, I tell them not just about Edward Dutton, but also the Lakota. I teach them not what was written in the official reports, but what was felt by those who suffered so much. Just as the monument still stands, weathered but firm, so does the vow of so many to never forget what happened there.

It's a vow I now share, and I believe this is the real merit my Dad sought in his final chapter. The courage not just to fight, but to face the truth when it comes calling.

On Top of the World

Kevin lowered the hydraulic wrench, pulled off his goggles and ear protectors, then leaned against the Ferris wheel's steel frame. The setting sun bled pink and gold into the horizon near Springfield, Missouri, their latest stop on the circuit. He'd been sweating since noon, his muscles sore from bolting the enormous machine together with his coworker, Rick. The Ferris wheel was their kingdom. Dangerous and heavy, it required meticulous attention. It could thrill hundreds of strangers in a single day, but a missed bolt or an untested wire could wreak havoc. Just a few years earlier, a similar model in New Orleans had come close to spinning out of control.

Across from him, Rick grinned through a cigarette and slapped one of the wheel's support beams. He was a grizzled man in his fifties, affectionately called "old-timer" because of his decades on the road.

"Solid," he said. "Ready for some new revolutions."

"Rock solid," said Kevin, giving a thumbs up sign.

Kevin liked the weight of his responsibility, making sure that people could climb into the gondolas and rise into the sky, trusting their lives to both the steel and his operation. Most nights, when the crowds finally went home and the carnival lights dimmed, he had a little ritual. Rick would let him ride alone to the very top, then lock the wheel in place for a few moments. Kevin would sit back, legs stretched out, a glowing city or moonlit countryside stretching into the distance.

I'm on top of the world, he would say to himself.

He hadn't always felt that way.

—

Kevin was thirty years old, though most people thought he was younger because he still had the boyish good looks and easy slouch of someone barely out of his teens. He'd dropped out of junior college after a year and a half, bored by textbooks and fluorescently lit classrooms. His parents had sighed, shaken their heads, and said things like, "You'll regret this someday." Maybe *they'd* regret it, thought Kevin. He never did.

Instead, he left home and drifted. He worked as a stock boy, a roofer, a dishwasher, and a mechanic's assistant, but nothing stuck until he signed on with the carnival. He did so on a whim, tagging along with a guy named John, a fellow mechanic at a garage. John quit after only a month, but Kevin stayed. That was three years ago.

The pay wasn't great, but it was steady. What mattered most to Kevin was the sense of community shared among the workers. The carnival was a misfit's refuge for drifters, ex-cons, recovering addicts, and folks with broken pasts. People the world often shunned, yet in the daily routine of their comradery, they were family. They worked, they partied, they bickered, and they kept moving. Kevin loved the rhythm of it.

To save money, Kevin didn't rent a room in one of the trailers offered by the company. Instead, he pitched his tent behind them, using the communal shower and eating cheap food from the cook wagon. It was a Spartan existence, but it gave him a sense of freedom.

Perhaps for the first in his entire life, he felt like he really belonged.

—

Marcy caught Kevin's eye that summer of his third year working the wheel. She ran various game booths on the midway—ring toss one week, balloon darts the next—her voice scratchy from years of calling out to customers: *"Step right up and try your luck! Win a prize! Don't go home empty-handed!* She was a couple years older than him and carried herself with the confidence of someone who had no regrets about her choices.

She had bleached blonde hair with darker roots showing, a nose ring, and tattoos creeping out from under her tank tops. Her skin had that sun-leathered look common among carnies who live under open skies. Kevin thought she looked exotic, beautiful in a way that felt raw and untamed. Most of all, he loved the way she laughed, a free and guttural sound that cut through the din of the carnival. Sometimes, when the Ferris wheel was near the game booths, he could hear her, and it made his attraction stronger.

He'd always been awkward around women. He'd had one serious relationship in high school with a girl who was equally introverted, but their lack of passion caused their chemistry to fizzle. After that, he did some random dating, but nothing lasted. He could fix an engine, bolt a Ferris wheel, or patch a tent flap, but his tongue usually tripped when he tried addressing the opposite sex. With Marcy, though, he forced himself to try. A joke here, a question there, slowly building a connection between them.

One night after closing, they were sitting on overturned buckets behind the dart booth, sharing smokes. The carnival grounds were quiet except for the distant whir of generators.

"So, why'd you join up?" Kevin asked.

Marcy shrugged, blowing smoke toward the stars. "At this point, it feels like I didn't join. I just never left. I ran away

from Iowa when I was seventeen, hitched with a carnival, and here I am after fifteen years."

He knew there was more to her story, something she had run from, but he felt awkward about asking. Instead, he said, "Well, you definitely seem to like it," feeling lame for stating the obvious.

Her lips curled into something halfway between a smile and a sneer. "It's better than starving. And better for sure than going back."

Kevin nodded. "Yeah. Much better than going back."

Something passed between them, an understanding that neither of them had much else but this.

—

Kevin found excuses for being near Marcy. He'd swing by her booth before the gates opened, helping her line up prizes or restock darts. Sometimes she'd trade him free throws for fixing a loose hinge.

"Careful," she teased once. "You hang around too much and people will think you're sweet on me."

He flushed, mumbling something about just being helpful, but Marcy poked his arm and laughed in that way he loved.

They started eating together at the cook wagon, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the worn benches. They'd walk the grounds after closing, Kevin pointing out constellations overhead while Marcy rolled her eyes.

"You sound like some kind of philosopher," she said.

"Maybe," he replied, grinning. "A philosopher who can also bolt a Ferris wheel."

Late one night, leaning against the wheel's frame, Marcy suddenly poured out the story of her nuclear family.

The abuse she'd suffered at the hands of two different stepfathers and her mother's complicity. She claimed she had never told anyone else about it, and as he listened, the bond between them deepened. In turn, he shared the story of his own upbringing, how he never felt adequate compared to his older brother, the golden boy to his parents, living in his sibling's shadow until he felt invisible.

She listened intently, then suddenly surprised him with a quick kiss, her breath smelling of cigarettes. Kevin froze, his heart racing, but when she laughed at his expression, he found himself laughing too.

From then on, they were lovers, periodically spending the night together in his tent. But Kevin always sensed that she carried a quiet readiness to leave, no matter how close she seemed.

—

As months went by, Kevin's feelings for Marcy grew much deeper than infatuation. He thought about her constantly, even fantasizing about a future in which they would get married and share a trailer.

That dream crystallized when Johnny, the carnival electrician, married Lisa from the funnel cake stand. Kevin and Marcy attended the wedding ceremony behind the trailers, with a makeshift string of lights and a preacher for hire from the local town. As Johnny and Lisa finished their vows and everyone cheered, Kevin watched Marcy clapping joyfully, and he thought, *why not us?*

The idea wouldn't let him go.

—

When the carnival rolled into Albuquerque for the state fair, Kevin skipped breakfast and hitched a ride into town. He found a pawn shop off Central Avenue, its neon sign flickering even during the day. Inside, one of the glass cases glittered with rings, some with real gemstones, others just costume jewelry. Kevin's palms sweated as he chose a silver band with a large, bright stone.

"Good choice," said the middle-aged man behind the case. "That's a zircon and most people would never know it's not a diamond. Who's the lucky woman?"

Kevin blinked, his courage waning for a second. He was so far out of his comfort zone that he barely knew himself.

"Her name's Marcy. We'll see if she feels lucky."

"Well, I wish you the best possible outcome, young man."

They dickered over the price, and after purchasing it, Kevin felt like he was now on auto pilot with his plan. No turning back. That night, after set up, he found Marcy behind the dart booth. The sweat and dirt on her brow only made her more beautiful to him.

His throat tightened as he pulled the ring from his pocket. "Marcy," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Will you marry me?"

She looked at the ring curiously, then at him, giving no answer. Then she took it, slipped it into her pocket, and abruptly walked away.

Kevin stood there, thinking *you fool, maybe you ruined everything*.

—

Marcy seemed to avoid him the next day, and Kevin's fear that he had lost her settled into his gut. That night, after a long day

of keeping the Ferris wheel running, he was ready for his ritual. Rick gave him the nod, and Kevin climbed into an empty gondola. But just as the wheel creaked to life, he heard footsteps behind him.

"Hold up!" a voice called.

He turned. Marcy stood there, her hair messy from the wind. She'd applied makeup that had smudged around her eyes. Without a word, she climbed in beside him.

Rick grinned and started the wheel. Slowly they rose, the carnival shrinking below and Albuquerque stretching out around them, glowing like a field of stars across the high desert toward the Sandia Mountains.

At the top, the wheel stopped, the gondola swaying in the warm night breeze. Kevin's throat was dry. He wanted to speak, to apologize for messing everything up, for being the kind of guy who didn't know what to do around women, but Marcy just took his hand.

"Yes," she whispered.

Kevin blinked. "Yes?"

She leaned closer, her lips brushing his ear. "Yes, I'll marry you."

For a moment, Kevin thought his heart might burst. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight while everything else fell away. They kissed, slow and sure, and when they pulled back, they sat in silence, watching the city lights.

Kevin thought: *This is it. This is what it really feels like to be on top of the world.*

Alice and the Dagger

London, 1853

The morning fog was cold and sour, stinking of low tide. It curled in damp skeins over the Thames, swallowing the far bank so completely that the world seemed to end just past the water's edge. Sixteen-year-old Alice Larkin knew the smell by heart: rotting wood, fish scales, and the faint sweet stench of something dead in the mud.

The tide had gone out before dawn, baring the river's underbelly. Black mud flats stretched into the fog, shiny and treacherous, dotted with shards of pottery, broken bottles, and the occasional rib of a long-lost boat.

Alice had an angular face that looked older than her age. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, revealing sharp cheekbones and eyes the color of amber. Ankle-deep in the muck, she had bunched her skirt high and tied it at her waist. Her fingers were cracked from the cold, but she worked the mud with a stick, prying free whatever the Thames would surrender. She found some frayed rope, a pewter spoon, and an iron spike that left orange rust streaks on her palm.

Every scrap was worth a small bit. Rope could be sold to a rag-and-bone man. The spoon would perhaps fetch a shilling from Bill Scully. All of it meant another day her family might keep from going hungry.

She had been mudlarking since she was eight, just one of hundreds of souls, many of them children, who combed the banks each day, gambling their lives against the river's moods. Sometimes the water rose quick and fast, cutting you off.

Sometimes it hid a sinkhole beneath its surface, and you were gone before anyone could shout your name.

Alice ignored the cold, the ache in her back, and the gnawing in her belly. She had learned at an early age that whining to others or an indifferent god had no effect. It was all about survival, and only the strong would make it.

A glint caught her eye, a pale object lodged near a large stone. She crouched and scraped with her stick until her fingers closed around something substantial. The mud was reluctant to give it up, but she tugged until it came free with a sucking sound.

It was a dagger. The blade, though blackened, was still intact, tapered to a sharp point. The handle was carved from either bone or horn, with marks that looked like ancient script carved deep into its surface.

Alice's breath fogged in front of her as she examined it closely. She had found knives before, but nothing like this. It was heavy and solid, the sort of artifact that had weight not only in her hand but in the world that had first produced it.

Then, as her fingers wrapped tighter around the hilt, she felt a preternatural shift in the fog. It thickened into smoke, acrid and stinging, filling her nose and mouth. The river suddenly appeared at high tide, and through it came a long, low ship, its hull dark, its prow carved into the head of some beast with teeth bared. A single square sail bellied in the wind, driving it forward.

It moved down the Thames toward the sea, water slapping at its flanks. Behind it, she could see buildings burning in the distance. The men who stood on the deck were tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in dark tunics, armed with swords as they surveyed the passing shore. One of them trained his eyes on Alice, a look of recognition lighting up his

face. She gasped and stumbled backward, breaking whatever spell had seized her. The vision faded, and the damp grey fog of London returned.

Her hand was shaking and her heart was racing. The dagger was warm now, almost hot, and it seemed to pulse in her grip, as though it were breathing with her. Was it cursed? She wondered if she should throw it back in the water, but her curiosity about its value was stronger than her fear. She wrapped it quickly in a torn scrap of cloth from her sack and shoved it deep inside.

—

That night, their one-room lodging in Shad Thames smelled of boiled cabbage, damp wool, and the odor of the sewer running through the street. Alice's three half-siblings were crammed together on wooden pallets, the youngest sniffling in the corner. The space was suffocating, but as the eldest child, she felt compelled to stay and contribute. Her older brother had fled their poverty a year earlier, and they hadn't seen him since. Alice was tempted to do the same, but where would she go? How would she support herself? Too many young women turned to prostitution to survive on the streets, and she rejected that darkness.

Her stepfather wasn't home yet, likely still at the docks, begging for work that wasn't there. Their mother, her skin stretched tight over her cheekbones, sat near a crude hearth, mending a shirt by firelight.

"What did you bring, Alice?" she asked without looking up, her tone showing her low expectations.

Alice emptied her day's finds onto the table: the rope, the spoon, a colored bottle, and a few scraps of copper wire. She didn't reveal the dagger. She was still unnerved about

what had happened when she held it, but she was determined to investigate its worth more fully. It was one of those discoveries that mudlarks dreamed of, potentially life changing. For now, it was her secret.

Her mother's eyes tiredly scanned the few scraps. "It'll do," she said, though they both knew it wouldn't.

Alice went to her corner of the room, hiding her bag with the dagger under some straw. Her plan for the next day was formulating in her mind when she suddenly heard the rattle of carriage wheels from the street outside. She went and peered through the shutters. The glow of gas streetlamps revealed a lacquered black carriage rolling toward the affluent West End, the spokes of its wheels flashing gold in the light. Inside, swaddled in fur and velvet, sat a woman with a man in a dark suit at her side. Cocooned inside their Victorian-era privilege, they looked at the city the way one looked at a painting: detached and safe. The woman's eyes slid across Alice as if she wasn't even there.

Alice's lips curled. She knew their type. Rich enough to never see the mud, to never smell the river up close, to never watch a baby cough itself to death because medicine cost more than a month's rent.

Alice recalled a day when she and a fellow mudlark named Nancy had skipped their scavenging and walked two miles to the West End. Though their cheap clothing made them stand out from the rest of the crowd, they explored freely. They strolled around Leicester Square and Picadilly Circus, then on to Covent Garden with its stalls of vendors selling hand-crafted goods. They stopped at a stand to get cups of tea, splurging with a few shillings, then sat at a nearby table. For a few moments, it felt like they were light years from the slums of Shad Thames. They fantasized with each other

about attending school and belonging to more affluent families.

Then a middle-aged woman dressed in a colorful brocaded dress came near their table. She paused and looked down her nose.

"Shouldn't the two of you return to the place you crawled out of?" she said disdainfully.

Alice felt fury surge from her gut.

"Go to hell, you miserable bitch!" she exclaimed. She rose from her seat with fists clenched, about to lunge at the woman until Nancy put a hand on her shoulder and restrained her.

The woman's head snapped back as if she'd been struck. She turned to the keeper of the tea stall. "Sir, quickly call the Bobbies and have them remove these urchins!"

The proprietor turned and whistled over his shoulder, and in the distance Alice and Nancy could see a police officer turn his head toward them. They needed no further prompting. They got up quickly and disappeared into the crowd.

Alice remembered the look on that woman's face when she'd been insulted, the way her head snapped back, and it still brought her a sense of pleasure. She saw again the smug face of the woman in the carriage that had just passed. Then she thought of the ship in her vision as she had held the dagger and it left her with a strange pull in her chest.

—

The next morning, she went to see Bill Scully. He was an institution along the river, having been a mudlark longer than Alice had been alive. His hovel by the river was stacked with jars of nails, broken clay pipes, beads, and buckles. He bought

and traded with scavengers of all ages, a man who was shrewd but fair. He invited her in, and Alice waited until his door was shut before she unwrapped the dagger.

Bill's one good eye went wide. "Christ Almighty," he muttered. He ran a finger over the letters etched in the handle.

"These carvings are runes. Where'd you find this?"

"Down past the bridge," she said. "Near low tide."

He leaned closer. "This is Viking work, girl. I've only ever seen drawings. A thousand years ago, they came up this river before London was the London we know. They burned and pillaged and took booty and slaves back with them."

Alice traced the runes with her thumb. "What do these mean?"

"I have no idea. Could be a name. Could be a curse. I know this is very valuable to the right people, but these things also carry their own luck, and often it's not good. Be careful. Be *very* careful."

Even as Bill spoke, Alice's mind wandered to the vision of those raiders, their ship sliding through the water, the firelight on their faces, the city trembling around them. And despite Bill's caution, she wondered what it would feel like to be feared rather than judged or ignored.

—

The next day, Alice said a warmer goodbye than usual to her mother and siblings before she returned to the shore. It was high tide, the river swelling nearly to the top of the embankment, its water brown and restless. Mist curled upward in slow, wraith-like shapes.

She had planned what she would do, resigned to whatever would happen regardless of Bill's warning. She

unwrapped the dagger, this time holding it in both hands, and the vision came almost instantly.

London lay before her but, as Bill had said, not the city she knew. The buildings were lower, the bridges narrow and crowded. Smoke smeared the sky and flames leapt from thatched rooftops. Church bells rang in warning, and the air was thick with frantic shouts.

Once again, a Viking longship surged downriver, its sail streaked with soot. Its crew were wild-haired, their eyes bright with victory. As they neared the spot where Alice was standing on the wall, a voice rang out, deep and warm with relief.

"Astrid! We thought we had lost you!"

Somehow, she knew their language, though she had never heard it before. Looking down at herself, she saw that she was dressed not in a ragged skirt but a leather tunic and fur leggings, a shield strapped to her back. The dagger now hung from her belt. Her arms were stronger, her stance solid, her breath steady.

The man who had yelled to her had a beard plaited with gold rings. He leaned over the gunwale as the ship slowed and veered toward her. "Come, shield-maiden! The sea is calling us home! We have more than enough spoils from this raid!"

It was a risk, but without hesitation, Alice leapt into the water, swimming toward the vessel. Rough hands seized her wrists, pulling her over the side until she landed on the deck.

The ship swung out into the middle of the river. Behind them, medieval London burned, its firelight dancing in the smoke. The men lifted their voices, shouting "Til Valhalla! Til Valhalla!" Alice, now Astrid, stood on the stern. She drew the dagger, lifted it high, and laughed, a fierce sound full of an exultation she had never known before. "Til Valhalla!" she screamed with the others.

As the longship carried them toward the North Sea, the city that would one day scorn her receded into the distance. For an moment, Astrid felt a tinge of wistfulness, but then relief and vindication lifted her spirits.

The dagger in her hand felt natural, and she gripped it with full acceptance of her new life.

Billy and the Long Road West

(Between 1854 and 1929, "orphan trains" transported 200,000 children from crowded Eastern cities to foster homes in the rural Midwest that were short on farming labor.)

The train pulled into Oakridge, Indiana, its whistle shrieking. Twelve-year-old Billy McCrae pressed his face to the soot-streaked window, wondering if this would be his final stop. He clutched his satchel containing the only things he had left from his life in New York: a frayed photograph of his mother and a tin whistle his father gave him before deserting him. That last abandonment had drained the spunk from Billy. It was why he hadn't resisted the aid workers. Any future was better than what he had.

Now he was one of dozens of children packed into this orphan train. They came from tenement alleys and city gutters, plucked by well-meaning reformers and shipped west to find "good Christian homes." The theory sounded noble, but Billy had heard stories of kids adopted by folks who saw them as free labor, not family. He knew it was a gamble, and he hoped he could avoid that fate.

The station was nothing more than a wooden platform next to a dirt road. Dust hung in the summer air. A couple dozen townspeople stood waiting, their faces carved by sun and hard labor. The representative from the Children's Aid Society herded the children off the train and had them stand in line for inspection. Billy watched as a tall, scruffy man in overalls approached him. At his side was a woman in a high-necked dress who looked like she hadn't smiled in twenty years. They introduced themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Culver.

Mr. Culver looked Billy up and down like he was examining a side of beef.

“Where you from, boy?"

“New York, sir.”

The man reached over and gripped Billy’s shoulder. “Strong arms for a city kid.” He glanced at his wife who nodded her approval. “He’ll do.”

The aid worker smiled and pulled out a file folder to start the paperwork. Billy said nothing. He knew better.

—

The Culver farm was three miles outside town, a ramshackle house surrounded by fields and a red barn that listed slightly to one side. Billy was quickly assimilated. His chores began before dawn and ended after sunset. He fed pigs, mucked stalls, and hauled water. He weeded rows of corn and beans, scrubbed floors, and chopped wood until his hands blistered.

"You work, you eat," Mrs. Culver had said the first night, sliding a plate of dry cornbread and boiled beans across the table. "You complain, you don't."

There were no schoolbooks and no kind words. Only work and silence, broken by the occasional barked order. Billy slept on an old mattress in the hayloft with a worn blanket and mice for company. He tried not to cry, but when he did, he muffled it with the crook of his elbow so no one could hear.

This was the outcome he had dreaded. Those awful stories he'd heard were now his reality, and soon he began to think about running away. But where would he go? He knew nothing about this part of the country, and the land stretched on forever.

On Sundays, the Culvers took him to church. His mother had taught him that Christianity was meant to instill

charity. Not in the Culvers. Their attendance wasn't out of faith but for the sake of their reputation. When it came to Billy, the townsfolk saw a quiet, well-behaved boy and nodded their approval. No one asked questions. No one could see the strap mark on his back from a beating he had taken when Mr. Culver was in a rage. No one sensed the disdain he harbored toward his keepers and their filthy hypocrisy.

Billy tried to find scraps of comfort where he could. In the face of a neighboring girl who smiled at him during church. In the farm dog that nuzzled his hand. In the orange streaks of sunset behind the barn. In the brief moments of stillness before sleep.

—

Time passed. Seasons shifted. Billy grew taller and stronger, his hands calloused, his shoulders broader. Now, when Mr. Culver got a menacing look in his eyes, Billy stared him down, the older man finally lowering his gaze.

The nights were the hardest. When the wind whistled through the slats of the barn, he would pull out the faded photograph of his mother. He remembered her final days before she succumbed to yellow fever. His father, unwilling to cope, withdrew into alcohol, spending so much time away that Billy learned to fend for himself on the streets. Sometimes he took out the tin whistle, but he never dared to play it. Sound carried on the northern plains.

One night, a storm rolled across the fields, shaking the barn to its bones. Billy huddled in the hayloft, listening to the thunder and trying to remember what his mother's voice sounded like. The next morning, after the rain cleared, he saw that one of the fences had fallen. Mr. Culver sent him out with nails, a hammer, and no breakfast.

While repairing the slats, Billy overheard Mr. Culver talking with a neighbor.

"That boy's worth three hired hands," the man said.

"And I ain't paid him a dime," Culver said with a laugh. "By all rights, he oughta be thanking me. I helped pull him out of the gutters."

That night, lying in the hay, filled with a burning rage, Billy made his decision. He was done thanking people for his chains.

—

He waited a week, watching and listening. He had long ago learned when the Culvers slept and when the trains passed through Oakridge. He hid bread crusts and an old canteen. Then, on a humid August night under a half-moon, he crept from the barn like a shadow, carrying nothing but his satchel.

He moved through the cornfields, ears tuned to every cricket and rustle. Then he followed the dirt road into town, keeping to the tree line. When he got to the depot, it was silent, but soon a freight train approached on its midnight westward run, its cars rumbling.

He ran with all his strength, reaching the last car as it began to lurch forward. He jumped and caught the ladder, his feet dangling for a terrifying moment before he scrambled up and pulled himself inside.

He collapsed on the floor of the empty boxcar, chest heaving, eyes stinging from the wind and relief. He didn't know where the train was going. He didn't care. It wasn't Oakridge. It wasn't the Culvers.

It was away.

—

One train, then others. They carried Billy across wide rivers, dusty towns, and golden hills. He learned to hide when the crew came by, to forage from crates, and to beg at stops when he dared. He met other drifters with lined faces and stories in their eyes. Some offered him food. Others tried to take what little he had. He learned quickly to stay alert, to move on, to trust others sparingly.

One day in Nebraska, he jumped off a train to avoid a railyard inspector and spent the night under a bridge. There, he met a boy about his age named Leo, also an orphan, who had run from a textile mill in St. Louis. He was thin with dark hair, his eyes filled with weariness beyond his age. They shared stolen apples and tales of the road.

"You think it gets better?" Leo asked.

Billy shrugged. "It *has* to."

“Well,” said Leo, “you have more hope than I do.”

They traveled together for a while, helping each other dodge authorities, scrounge for meals, and find safe places to camp. One morning, in a chaotic jump onto a moving train, they were separated. Billy waited at the next town, but Leo never arrived. That was the last he saw of him, and he felt the loss as if it had been a brother.

In the railyards of Denver, Billy met an old man named Tom who shared a can of beans and a quiet fire.

"You runnin' *from* somethin' or *to* somethin', boy?" Tom asked.

Billy stared into the flames, sobered by the reality of his life. "Both, I guess."

Tom nodded like he understood, then handed Billy a pocketknife with a smooth wooden handle. "You’ll need this more than I do."

Billy carried it from then on. He continued to follow the tracks westward, toward the promise of ocean air. Toward California.

—

In the Sierra Nevada foothills, Billy found work with a crew clearing trees for the railroads. The foreman didn't ask questions, just handed him an axe and pointed. The work was hard, but the pay was real. He stayed for many months, saving every dollar he could, eating like a wolf and sleeping under the stars.

He grew stronger, appearing much older than his age. He learned the rudiments of reading and writing from a retired teacher who wandered into camp and exchanged lessons for stories from the men. He claimed he was writing a book. Billy seized the opportunity, soaking up every word, every page.

One night by firelight, he wrote a simple letter to his mother, imagining that somehow she could read it. But he knew it was really for him; he just needed to say the words.

"Dear Mama, I'm okay. It's been a long time and New York seems so far away. But I still have your picture and I remember your voice. I've changed a lot. I've seen so much of this country and I'm not afraid anymore. I hope I make you proud. Love, Billy."

Eventually, he reached Los Angeles, then hitched rides north along the coast. The Pacific Ocean fascinated him, stretching out so wild and blue and endless. He stood on a cliff near Monterey, the wind in his hair, and felt something shift inside him. Not peace, not yet. But something close.

He got a job unloading ships at the docks, then as a stable hand outside of Salinas. Determined not to be like the

Culvers, he gave a tenth of his wages to a local church that assisted runaway children, hoping to offer other boys a fighting chance.

He still had the tin whistle. One foggy morning, standing on a beach near Salinas, he played it for the gulls and waves. No melody, just notes that were raw, imperfect, and free.

He was no longer a name on a train ledger. He was no longer the boy from Oakridge. He was Billy McCrae. A survivor who still had dreams for his future. The long road west had brought him to himself. And he wasn't done yet.

Epilogue

Billy took a job at a sprawling horse ranch outside of Watsonville run by a widow named Miss Adelaide. The property had been in her family for generations. She had sharp eyes and a no-nonsense business style, but she was fair, and she didn't pry into his past. She taught him to ride, to care for horses, to mend saddles and read the weather by the clouds. She treated him as if he truly mattered. Over time, she became like his lost mother, sharing her wisdom and love. He felt undeserving of her attention, but he allowed it to heal places deep inside him. Under the influence of her warmth, he grew into a young man.

Miss Adelaide had a grandson named Jasper who visited regularly. He was curious and full of wild ideas, and he and Billy became fast friends. They would often sit on a nearby bluff and talk about opening a ranch of their own one day.

"We could do it," said Jasper. "I *know* we could."

Billy would smile tolerantly. "It's a nice dream. But being on the road for so long has taught me to keep my dreams in check."

“I understand,” said Jasper. “But you don’t have to run anymore.”

Billy just smiled and nodded.

In the evenings, after chores were done, he relaxed on the bunkhouse porch, sipping cold lemonade and listening to the thrum of cicadas. Sometimes he whittled pieces of wood with the pocketknife old Tom had given him. The nightmares that had plagued him for so long were almost gone, like the scar on his back that had faded into his sun-darkened skin.

In the autumn, Miss Adelaide handed Billy a large envelope.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Your usual wages and something else," she said. "You’ve earned more than pay, Billy. You’ve earned a future." Inside was a deed to a plot of land inland, not far from Miss Adelaide's ranch. Billy stared at it, blinking in disbelief.

"Stay here as long as you wish, Billy. Meanwhile, get started on your dream. Maybe Jasper will join you. Grow something that’s yours."

Billy nodded, overwhelmed with emotion. He did something he had never done before, reaching over to hug Miss Adelaide. She didn’t resist, but simply patted him on the back.

He’d come so far. And there was still a long way to go.

Lucid Reunion

Dreams are the touchstones of our character.
- Stephen LaBerge

The sign on my office door says *John Longfellow, PsyD – Individual and Family Counseling*. I've been a psychologist for 20 years, helping people unravel their burdens and find resolution.

About three years ago, my enthusiasm flagged. Call it a midlife crisis, but listening to others grew tedious, especially with clients who took little responsibility for their healing. I nodded my head and kept appropriate eye contact, but I felt like a bobble-head toy. My wife noticed that I'd lost my passion.

"You're just not yourself," she said, kindly but with an edge of exasperation. "I don't have a prescription, but you need to find a way to connect with your old zest. You still have a lot of years ahead of you. *We* still have a lot of years ahead of *us*."

She was right. I needed a new spark, a fresh avenue of exploration.

That direction came unexpectedly. I was listening to a podcast on my way to work called *Wake Up Inside Your Dreams,* a fascinating overview of lucid dreaming. The host said, "It's possible to step into our minds with our eyes open. We begin to see the architecture of our fears and our longings. We realize that we've built every wall and horizon ourselves."

I've always had vivid dreams, but their meanings evaporate as I awaken. I knew a little about lucid dream theory, but the podcast spurred me to do further research. I

devoured everything I could find, from Jung's *Red Book* to LaBerge, Bogzaran, Holziner, Aspy, and every article archived by The Lucidity Institute.

I began to experiment in my own life, keeping detailed dream journals and using practices like reality testing and mnemonic induction. It paid off. I could stay longer in my visions, understand more symbols, and even translate a few simple lessons into my waking world.

But still, something eluded me, something deeply connected to that sense of joy I'd been lacking for so long.

Gradually, I integrated this new focus into my practice, becoming a guide for others in their nightly walkabouts. Word got out through the therapeutic community. New referrals sought me out for release from night terrors, recurring guilt dreams, or lost loves who visited frequently like ghosts. I taught them to stay calm and recognize the subtle distortions of the dream world: a light switch that doesn't work, a clock whose hands refuse to move, words that rearrange themselves when you blink. These are the cues, I told them. The seams of the dream world. Pull at them, and you can wake up inside your own story.

I never imagined the fullness of what my own subconscious was preparing for me.

It began one winter night after an exhausting day of sessions. I'd just finished with Claire, a woman haunted by a recurrent nightmare of drowning in a river that looked suspiciously like the one outside her childhood home. That night, perhaps still affected by her angst, I dreamed of a place I'd never been, an old train platform under a sky the color of brass.

It was still at first. No wind, no movement, just a suspended hush. The platform stretched endlessly in both

directions, lined with benches and antique lamps that cast faint halos of light. A few people milled about, blurred, like they were painted in watercolor.

And then I saw him in sharp focus.

Across the tracks, on a bench opposite mine, sat a boy. He was swinging his legs and rolling a toy car from the palm of one hand to the other. I didn't need to guess who he was. I knew instantly that I was looking at myself at eight years old.

The shock of recognition was almost physical. Inside the dream, I felt my chest tighten and my breath quicken. He looked exactly as I remembered myself. Thin, serious, with that same stubborn cowlick that refused to lie flat no matter how much my mother spat on her palm. He was wearing a red windbreaker I hadn't thought about in decades.

I called out his name—*my name*—but just as the sound left my mouth, a train thundered between us, all smoke and screeching metal. When it passed, the bench was empty.

I woke up with my heart hammering. The clock read 3:14 a.m. My sheets were twisted around me, damp with sweat. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and tried to tell myself what I'd tell a patient: it's just an image, a projection of memory, nothing more. But I couldn't shake the feeling that something in me had been waiting for this encounter.

The dream came again the next night.

This time the station looked older, like a faded photograph. The air shimmered with sunset light. The boy was there again, farther away, walking along the opposite platform. I shouted, but my voice came out thick, like a sound underwater. He turned his head slightly, enough for me to see his eyes. There was no surprise in them, only recognition and something else I couldn't name.

Then the scene shifted, as dreams often do. The tracks vanished. I was standing in a field outside my grandparents' farm, the one I hadn't visited since childhood. The boy was near the tree line, still holding that toy car. I started toward him, but the ground turned to mud. I slogged forward, desperate to reach him, until the earth pulled at my ankles like quicksand. Just before I sank, I woke up gasping.

By the end of that week, the dreams were nightly appointments. Sometimes I'd find the boy in places I hadn't thought about in years. The hallway of my elementary school, the corner of our old backyard where I set up battlefields for my toy soldiers, my childhood bedroom as sunlight streamed through the window. Each time, I was a step closer to him, but each time, something intervened.

The researcher in me cataloged every detail in a notebook: dates, colors, emotional tones. The therapist in me found it thrilling to be recording pure, personal data. But the man in me felt a form of grief. There was something I'd lost in the past, and it was still slipping through my fingers.

I began to see small echoes of those dreams in my waking life. A boy on the bus holding a toy car. A poster in a coffee shop showing a train speeding into the horizon. It was eerie enough that I called a colleague I trusted and explained what was happening.

"I hear you, John," he said. "Do you know Jung's theory of synchronicity?"

"A bit. Describe it to me."

"He said that sometimes events coincide in time and appear meaningfully related, but they lack any real causal connection. That sounds like what's happening to you."

I muttered an agreement as we hung up, but I knew better. I knew that my subconscious was breaching the border

between worlds, and I began to understand the exasperation of my patients. As one of them had said about his repeated nightmares, “If there’s a lesson here, just fucking teach it to me and get out of my mind! You’re driving me crazy!”

I tried all the techniques I taught others, but none of them stopped the dreams. If anything, the lucidity deepened. I could feel the texture of the air. I could smell dust and rain. I could hear my own heartbeat, quick and young, as if borrowed from the boy I pursued.

Three weeks in, the dream took a new turn.

I found myself in a park I knew intimately. It was where my father taught me to ride a bike. The grass was impossibly green, the air full of the smell of lilacs. I was astonished that my olfactory sense was so acute. My father wasn’t there, but the boy was sitting beneath a tree, his knees drawn up, that toy car in his hands.

For a moment I couldn’t move. After all my pursuing, it now felt wrong to approach him, like I was intruding on sacred ground. But the boy looked up, and I saw no confusion or fear in his face, just patience.

“You took long enough,” he said. His voice was clear and even, nothing ghostly about it.

“I’ve been trying to reach you,” I said.

He smiled, my own smile softened by time. “No. You’ve been trying *not* to.”

Those words cut through me. I wanted to ask what he meant, but he stood and started walking toward the swings, motioning for me to follow. The scene wavered, colors bleeding at the edges. I fought to stay asleep, to hold the moment.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "Because *you* finally are." And then he walked right up to me and handed me the toy car. I looked down and recognized it instantly, a Matchbox green Camaro that had been one of my favorites. Our eyes locked and he smiled in a way that filled my body with light and warmth.

"I lost this years ago," I said.

He shrugged and sighed. "You stopped looking."

When I woke, my hand was open, my palm warm, as if I'd been holding something small and solid. There were tears on my cheeks. For the first time in years, I didn't feel tired. I felt lighter, as though some long-frozen part of me had started to thaw.

Still, I'm a scientist at heart. I spent the morning journaling and cross-referencing symbols. The park. The train. The toy car. All anchors of memory, all pointing toward one obvious conclusion. The boy represented my unintegrated childhood self, the part I'd buried under professionalism and adult control. I regained my usual clinical detachment.

That afternoon, one of my sessions was with a middle-aged woman suffering grief after the loss of her mother. She told me how she kept dreaming of chasing her mom through endless corridors, never quite reaching her. Normally, I would have guided her toward strategies for confronting the dream figure. Instead, I said, "Maybe she's not running from you. Maybe she's leading you somewhere." She stared at me, wide-eyed, and nodded slowly, as if I'd just offered her a map.

In truth, I was offering one to myself.

The dreams didn't stop after that, but they softened. The boy would appear beside me now instead of across some impassable barrier. Sometimes we'd sit quietly together on a curb, a hill, or the roof of a house. He never said much. It was

like communion, and it lasted longer than any other dream experience I'd had, time rolling out ahead of us.

Changes seeped into my waking life. I started taking walks with my wife after dinner instead of falling asleep at my desk. One night she held my hand and said, "I like this new spring in your step." I called my sister, whom I hadn't spoken to in months. I even dug through an old storage box in the attic and found a Polaroid of myself at eight, sitting under that same tree in the park. My father had written on the back: *To my brave boy. Keep going.*

That night, the dream came again, but this time there was no boy. I was standing alone in the park, dusk settling around me, the air thick with that lilac scent. The toy car lay in the grass at my feet. I picked it up, turned it over, felt its weight. From somewhere distant, I heard laughter. It was mine, but younger. Then everything faded into light.

I woke before dawn, not startled this time, just awake. Truly awake.

Since then, my dreams have changed in tone. Sometimes the boy appears, older now, walking beside me through unfamiliar cities. On other nights, he's absent entirely, but I feel his presence like a hand at my back. I no longer chase him. We're walking in the same direction, a deep, lucid reunion between who I was and who I've become.

A few weeks ago, a patient asked me, "Dr. Longfellow, what happens when we master lucid dreaming and can control everything?"

I smiled. "I've learned in my own dreams that control isn't the point. It's more important to listen and let the dream speak its own strange language."

She nodded and looked down with tears on her cheeks.

These nights, when I drift toward sleep, I feel an exciting flicker of anticipation. I know that somewhere in that vast theater of my mind, a child version of me might still be sitting beneath a tree, turning a toy car in his hands.

But he's not waiting anymore.

The Hidden File

The sun slid behind the palm trees of Beverly Hills, painting the sky with a lavender glow. Sam Leeds sat alone in his late father's office, its tall windows letting in the final light. The room smelled of leather and cigar smoke, and it was eerily quiet.

John Leeds had been a towering figure in Hollywood, an old-school film producer who still used handshakes to build his empire. Now he was gone, dead at eighty-nine, leaving behind a legacy of memories. His mansion, surrounded by manicured lawns and marble terraces, felt deserted without his booming presence.

Sam rubbed his forehead. He was there to sort through his father's effects, and as he sat at the massive mahogany desk, his eyes scanned the walls. They were covered with photographs, some black-and-white, others in color. John laughing beside Bogart, leaning close to Elizabeth Taylor, and raising a glass with Jack Nicholson. More recently, John sharing a joke with Tom Cruise, standing at the Oscars with Scarlett Johansson, and shaking hands with Liam Neeson.

The old man had churned through three marriages with younger women. The second one, Sam's mother, wouldn't return for the funeral. She'd negotiated a hefty divorce settlement, then emigrated to France. Sam rarely saw her. His only sibling had died years earlier of a drug overdose, so he was the sole heir at age forty-eight, a middle-aged man with graying hair and a slim physique, quiet and reserved with those who knew him.

When a friend asked, "What are you going to do with all that money?" Sam barely flinched. The real question that

gnawed at him was, “What will you do now that your father’s voice is no longer in the room?” For decades, John Leeds’ disappointment had been like gravity pulling Sam down. His father never softened his disdain for Sam’s role as a Human Resources Director at a nonprofit. “Why don’t you just take the opportunities I’m offering?” he said with bafflement. “Step into the film business and claim a piece of Leeds success!”

Sam knew one thing for sure. Enduring his dad’s expectations was hard enough, but working with the old man would have been deadly. Over the years, Sam told himself he was immune to all the judgment, but the truth lingered in the wreckage of his own marriage and the erosion of his self-worth. His father’s shadow was stitched into the fabric of his life, a constant reminder that he had failed to measure up. Now, with John gone, he felt unmoored, like an orphan in middle age. He wondered if this freedom from criticism would mean new possibilities or just remind him of how broken he had let himself become.

He turned on the office lights and resumed his task, which felt like rifling through the nation’s cultural history. File cabinets stretched wall to wall, neatly labeled in his father’s blocky handwriting. The folders inside held contracts, letters, and correspondence from other titans of cinema. His father had been a hoarder of paper, distrustful of the digital world. “Computers crash,” John had once said. “Paper endures.”

Sam had been at it for hours, sifting the trivial from the historic, setting aside documents the Academy Museum might want. The work was tedious, but he knew it was important. He was about to shut one drawer when his fingers brushed a plain manila envelope wedged in the back. The only word on it was “PERSONAL.”

Even with his father gone, it felt like an invasion of privacy as he pulled it out and spread its contents on the desk. There were notes and letters, some yellowed with age, others crisp. Many were from celebrities expressing gratitude for their roles. One was written on a cocktail napkin, sealed with a kiss in red lipstick.

But then Sam found a single folded slip of paper addressed not to John, but to him. Inside, it said *Sam, if you ever find this, call this number*.

Beneath the line was a phone number.

Sam's brow furrowed. The handwriting was unmistakably his father's. The number had an unfamiliar prefix, so he googled it on his phone. New Orleans.

He shook his head. What had his father been hiding in Louisiana? And if it was important, why take the risk that Sam would never find either the file or the note?

He stared at the cryptic message, the air in the office heavy and still, until curiosity overcame his hesitation and he dialed. The phone rang once, twice, then clicked. A recorded voice said: *"Leave your message at the tone."*

Sam froze. After a short silence, he hung up and resumed his work, wondering what to do about this strange twist of events. The faces on the wall seemed to watch him, asking the same question.

Hours later, as he stacked folders into boxes, his phone buzzed with a text from the New Orleans' number.

Meet me here on the night of Mardi Gras.

Below was an address, which Google showed him was in the French Quarter.

What the hell?" he thought. Mardi Gras was only a few weeks away. His mistrust of his father's motives made him

want to destroy the note and block the number. Why leave this message in such a secret place? Why not share it sooner?

Sam's curiosity was certainly piqued. Should he risk keeping the appointment? Would it reveal something he needed to know? He sat in the hush of his father's shrine and whispered aloud, "What the fuck did you do, Dad?"

—

Mardi Gras was chaos incarnate. Brass bands blared from balconies, floats crawled down Canal Street, and crowds surged shoulder to shoulder in beads and sequins. Masks grinned at Sam from every corner, and feathers brushed his arms as revelers shoved past. The humid air was thick with the smells of sweat, alcohol, and fried food.

Parking had been sold out, so Sam used an overpriced Uber to get close to the scene, walking the remaining distance. The streets narrowed as he entered the French Quarter, the music a dizzying roar. He felt absurdly out of place. He was sober, wearing khakis and a conservative blazer while people of all ages danced around him in neon wigs and painted faces.

He used his phone to navigate until he found the address. It was a two-story Creole townhouse freshly painted in pastel green and lavender. Its wrought-iron balconies were strung with Mardi Gras lights and silk streamers.

Above the front door hung a painted wooden sign:

MADAME LEEDS —

Psychic Readings by Appointment.

Sam's chest tightened. His last name in bold letters in a city where he'd never lived. He climbed the steps and knocked. Once. Twice. Three times.

At last, the door opened.

A woman stood before him. She looked to be in her mid-fifties, tall and striking, her long black hair threaded with silver. She wore a fitted gown of emerald and gold, the kind you might see on a Mardi Gras queen. Her face was handsome, almost regal, her eyes piercing and familiar in a way that Sam couldn't place.

"You must be Sam," she said with the trace of a Creole accent. "Come in. I've been expecting you."

Sam hesitated, then stepped inside. The door closed behind him with a decisive click. The hallway smelled of incense and oiled wood. Candles flickered on small tables, casting warm shadows on the walls.

"Follow me," said the woman, parting a beaded curtain that led to a back room. Its walls were like a gallery. Paintings of saints hung beside voodoo masks, crucifixes, and heavy tapestries of gold and purple. At the center stood a round table draped in velvet, with two chairs opposite each other.

The woman gestured. "Please sit."

Nervously Sam lowered himself, his heart beating fast. "Who are you?"

She took the opposite chair, her dark eyes never leaving his. "My name is Samantha. And I know why you're here. Because of our father."

Sam blinked. "*Our… father*?"

She smiled and nodded. "John Leeds. He was my father also. Which makes me your sister."

The words hit like a fist.

Sam shook his head. "That's impossible. My father—he never—"

"Never told you? No surprise. That wasn't his style." She leaned forward, her voice calm and deliberate. "My mother was Flora Toussaint. She was a working girl here in

the Quarter for many years. John met her while producing a film in New Orleans. One night turned into many during the production. When she became pregnant, she wrote to him. Not for money, but simply to tell him that she would be keeping the baby. That baby was me."

Sam swallowed hard. "You expect me to believe—"

Her eyes narrowed. "Look at me. Really look."

He did. And there it was: his father's jawline, the same sharp cheekbones, even the shape of her nose. It was unsettling but unmistakable.

"My mother was proud. She asked for nothing," Samantha continued. "But John sent money anyway. Every month. The sums grew larger as he rose in Hollywood. He quietly visited us when he could. He made sure we were comfortable, but always in secret. He gave me the Leeds name, but it's common enough that he knew people wouldn't connect the dots."

Sam's mind was racing. His father, who had guarded the Leeds reputation so fiercely, had kept a daughter hidden for half a century. It seemed preposterous. Then his eyes fixed on a photo on a shelf behind Samantha. There was his father standing beside a woman and her child. Documentary proof.

"What happened to your mother?" Sam asked.

"She died ten years ago. Your father came to the graveside service since it was small enough to avoid publicity."

Sam shook his head. "Why now?"

"Obviously, he wanted you to know. He asked me to speak to you only if you made contact. And don't worry. Long ago, my mother signed a legal document saying that neither she nor I would make any claims on the estate. It's ironclad and I will honor that agreement."

Sam rubbed his temples, trying to take it all in. The noise of Mardi Gras thudded faintly outside, a reminder of the world still spinning while his own tilted on its axis.

Samantha studied him. “You look pale. Would you like a glass of water?”

“No,” Sam muttered. “I just… I don’t understand any of this.”

“You don’t have to. Yet.” She reached across the table, palm open. “There’s more you need to hear. Our father came to believe in my abilities, and he asked me to give you a reading if we ever met. I can already sense things about your future.”

Sam scoffed. “A psychic reading? You claim you can pick up vibes from me already?”

“You can believe it or not, but it’s what I do. It’s a gift. Being near you, I can sense that you have held yourself back from the real adventure life holds for you.”

Sam shook his head and chuckled. “Me? An adventurer? You’d have to know me to hear how odd that sounds.”

She smiled. “You came here because of a dead man’s note. You walked through this city on faith. You already have more courage than you admit.”

He stared at her hand, hesitating. The air in the room seemed charged, and the flicker of candles made his skin prickle. Perhaps this was the final act of John Leeds, the master producer, drawing his son into a story larger than himself.

Slowly, he reached across the table and placed his hand in Samantha’s. Her grip was firm and warm. She closed her eyes as incense curled around her like smoke from an unseen fire. Outside, the revelry of Mardi Gras roared, but in the back

room of Madame Leeds's studio, there was only the sound of two siblings breathing.

Samantha spoke again, her voice a whisper.

"I can see it now. Your father's revelation to you is only the first secret. Your future will seem even stranger."

Sam swallowed. If his future held something stranger than holding the hand of a sister he'd just discovered, then maybe strange meant liberating, even wondrous. He began to lean toward a belief that his life could truly change.

"Go ahead," he said. "Tell me everything you see."

The River Between: Recollections of Samuel Cranston, Recorded in 1907

(The most heavily traveled route from slavery to freedom involved crossing the Ohio River from Northern Kentucky into Cincinnati. Enslaved people called it "The River Jordan," symbolizing a perilous but hopeful journey. Cincinnati was a critical hub for the Underground Railroad, with numerous supporters, safe houses, and abolitionist organizations operating there.)

Well, sir, I can tell you about the Ohio River. It was the line between a man's bondage and his freedom. I reckon I know it better than most. I crossed it more times than I can count, though I didn't do it for myself till much later.

You ever stand by the water on a moonless night? You can't see but ten feet ahead. That's what it was like most nights when I carried out my mission. The cold air bit through my shirt, and sometimes the fog was thicker than smoke. You could hear the current whisperin', as if it was sayin' *Come on, come on, if you dare.*

I was still a young man then and belonged to the Clapp family in Boone County, Kentucky. Their property bordered the river. My mistress, Miss Ellie, she was a strange one. She was kind-hearted, I'll give her that, but troubled in her soul. She read her Bible every night and said she believed God made all men equal, but her husband surely didn't share that view. He was a harsh man who doled out his punishments without mercy. I recall seeing him tie one of our workers, Jake, to a tree and whip him without battin' an eye. I did my chores

quietly around him, never lookin' him straight in the face, lest he see what I really thought of him,

One evening, Miss Ellie knocked on the door of my room in the slave quarters, unusual for her to be out after dark. Standing in the doorway, she looked over her shoulder then back at me. "Samuel," she said, "The Lord's put something on my heart. There are folks who need help crossing that river into freedom, and you could be the one to do it. I can help make it possible and no one will suspect you."

I knew the risk she took in sayin' that to me. And I knew the far greater risk of what she was askin' me to do. But her words were a challenge that went straight to my heart. And she was right about no one suspectin' me. Like most slaves, I was invisible to white folks. I could be right in front of them and they would look through me like I was part of the scenery, like the fence posts or the smokehouse.

So I decided to accept Miss Ellie's challenge, though I was half-sure it would cost me my life.

—

First time I went, Mister Clapp was away on business and Miss Ellie made the arrangements. I used an old wooden rowboat stored in the barn, patched so many times it looked like a quilt. I took a young woman that night, and I thought my knees would give out from fear. Her name was Sarah, and she was holdin' on to a little sack like it contained her whole world.

"Are you sure you wanna go?" I whispered to her.

"Yessir. More sure than I ever been."

"Well, OK then."

I got her on board and pushed us off. There was no moon, the river runnin' its southwesterly course, the current softly ripplin'. I knew I had to row strong to the north to keep

the right direction, then look for a signal on the far shore. It wasn't easy, my back strainin' with every pull of the oars.

I could hear Sarah mutterin' quietly. I strained my ears and could make out the familiar words from Psalm 23, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." She just kept sayin' it over and over. I'll be honest. I'm a believer, but that scripture didn't make my fear go away.

Finally, I saw the lantern light Miss Ellie had promised. Three short swings. That was the sign. When we reached the bank, two men jumped from the dark and my heart leapt in my chest cuz I thought we'd been caught. Instead, they helped us out of the boat.

One of 'em, an older man with a gray beard, caught my arm and said, "You did good, man. You want something to eat?"

He handed me a piece of bread. It was the first meal I ever ate on free soil, and I swear it was the best thing I ever tasted, even if I wasn't free myself.

As they turned to lead Sarah away, she glanced back at me in the lantern light and said, "God bless you, sir."

Those words brought tears to my eyes, and after that, I kept goin'. Miss Ellie would let me know when someone would be waitin' by the river. Each time she and I conspired together, I grew in my courage and she seemed less troubled.

—

There was one crossing I remember more than most. Another moonless night, same as always, the river runnin' high with spring rains. I was standin' by the shore when I saw three figures comin' through the trees. A man, a woman, and a little boy wrapped in a shawl too big for him.

The man said, “You Samuel?”

“That’s me,” I told him. “We best move quick.”

We climbed into the old rowboat, the little boy clingin’ to his mama’s dress, eyes big as moons. When he whimpered at the cold, I told him, “Hush now, son. We gotta be very quiet.”

Then I pushed off. The current grabbed us right away, strong and mean. I pulled at those oars till my arms burned. The only sound was water hittin’ wood and the boy’s small breaths.

Halfway across, I saw the lantern signal on the far side. But just then, I saw another light behind us movin’ closer. And then came a loud voice.

“Who’s out there? Show yourself or suffer the consequences!”

That’s a sound that’ll freeze the blood in your veins faster than a winter wind. I hissed at my passengers to get down. The woman dropped flat, coverin’ the boy. The man hunkered low. I bent to those oars like a madman.

Then came the gunshots. The first one seemed to crack the dark clean in half. The second one hit the water right behind us. I heard the boy cry out, and I prayed under my breath, “Lord, give me the strength to get us there!”

The signal lanterns were now hidden, so I had to go by memory, hopin’ I could keep us all safe. And then came the sweetest sound of the boat scraping against the shore.

“Out,” I said. “Go quick!”

Two men appeared from the dark, one tall, one short. I could barely make them out in the starlight. The shorter one said, “You Samuel Cranston?”

"Yessir. Miss Ellie sends her regards.”

“Name’s John Parker. You did good. Quickly now, follow me. There’s a safe place nearby.”

We worked together to drag the small boat behind some bushes, and God was with us. The boat that had pursued us veered into the darkness, swept away by the current.

The family and I followed John through some willows, every step a miracle. Then we came to a small cabin with dim yellow light showing through its windows. A white lady opened the door. She didn’t ask no questions, just gave the woman a blanket, the man some bread, and the boy a cup of milk.

I stood by the door drippin’ sweat despite the cool night air, feelin’ like I didn’t belong anywhere. Parker looked over and said, “You’ve got great courage, Samuel. You crossed for more than one soul tonight.”

I told him, “They’re the brave ones. I just row the boat.”

He shook his head. “Every freedom journey starts with someone pulling the oars.”

—

I stayed with the Parkers till dawn, knowin' Mister Clapp was still away on business and Miss Ellie would cover for me. When the sky started to pale, John walked me back to the river.

"Do you ever think about staying?” he asked. “We could find you some work and help keep you safe.”

"I think about it every day,” I told him. “But I can’t just yet. There’s still folks on the other side dependin’ on me.”

He nodded. “Then God go with you, Samuel. And when you’re ready, this side’ll still be here.”

We stood a long while, watchin' the sun change colors on the water. Then I asked him, "You think we'll see it, John? The day when nobody's gotta sneak across this river?"

He said, "Maybe not us. But somebody will. Every crossing you make brings that day closer."

—

I reckon he was right. I kept rowin' that river till the war came and set us all free, at least on paper. I never did count how many I helped, but it was surely in the hundreds.

I outlived my wife, and my children scattered to other places further north. Now I sit by the river sometimes, my old bones achin', my hands twisted from years of layin' concrete for the growing city of Cincy. I listen to the Ohio whisper the same song it always has. A song of possibility and hope. Some nights I swear I can still hear the splash of oars, the soft cries, and the prayers whispered into the fog.

And I never forget that first passage. Sarah mutterin' that Psalm, and her face as she turned to me and said, "God bless you, sir." I often wonder what happened to her. Did she really find freedom, I mean real freedom for her soul, or just learn to survive in a country still full of hatred and racism? I pray for her and all the others I helped.

A little boy came by once while I was sittin' there on the riverbank. He was fishin' with a crooked stick. He asked me, "Mister, is this where the slaves came across?"

I told him, "That's right. This here's the place."

He looked puzzled. "Mama says people can't fly."

I laughed at that. "Sometimes they can. With a little help, a lot of faith, and a strong enough river."

He didn't understand, but that's all right. Someday maybe he will.

Confirmed, Not Conformed

Jason Merriweather stood near the communion table of St. Augustine's Episcopal Church. A shaft of late afternoon light cut through the stained glass, pouring a river of color across the marble floor. He'd always loved this hour when the sanctuary glowed with something close to holiness. Lately, however, its beauty only reminded him that he would soon be leaving.

At age 45, Jason was a tall, slim man with brown eyes and dark hair streaked with grey. He'd been rector for ten years in this grand old church tucked between the glass towers of downtown Boston. He'd buried saints and scoundrels, married lovers of every kind, baptized babies who now filled the Sunday school classrooms. He'd done it all with conviction that the Church, at its best, could somehow hold all the contradictions of justice and mercy, faith and doubt, God and silence. But that conviction had dissolved.

His loss of faith wasn't dramatic. There was no dark night of the soul, just a slow leaching away. The more he studied theology, the more he performed the same rituals week after week, the hollower it all felt. He had become an actor playing a role, and he'd always promised himself that if his calling seemed inauthentic, it was over.

That time had come, and he hadn't told anyone except his husband, Steve.

—

The first time he said it aloud, they were sitting on their back porch. It was a rare warm evening in early March. The city hummed below them, the lights of Beacon Hill scattered like spilled coins. Steve—five years younger than Jason, with

brown hair and blue eyes—was stirring a gin and tonic, the ice clinking softly. They'd been together for twelve years, married for six. One of the reasons Jason had chosen the Episcopal Church was its progressive stance that allowed him to serve openly. Steve worked in a lucrative tech job, approaching problems with the kind of logical clarity that Jason envied.

"I can't do this anymore," Jason said with a sigh.

Steve looked up, calm as ever. "The parish?"

"No. The collar."

Steve didn't flinch. He'd been watching Jason unravel for months: his insomnia, his short temper, his quietness at dinner.

"You mean you're leaving the priesthood?"

Jason nodded. "I don't believe it anymore. It's not just the theology based on such a narrow bandwidth of history and experience. It's the whole structure of the institution. We talk about giving ourselves away to the world, but we squabble over budgets and buildings. We preach inclusion, but if you dig to the core, we're still hoping to conform people to our creeds. I try to offer alternatives in my teaching, but I feel trapped. I'm done dialoging solely with Judeo-Christian scriptures. It's too exhausting. I need to break free."

Steve smiled gently. He was accustomed to his husband's sermonettes. It was one of things he loved about him. He reached over and took Jason's hand. "So what do you want to do?"

"I'm not sure. I've been looking at graduate programs to help make the shift. Some form of teaching maybe, or counseling, or perhaps work with a nonprofit."

Steve nodded slowly. "Okay. We'll figure it out. Whatever you need."

Jason gave a broken laugh. “It’s not that simple, is it? There’s still a mortgage. A pension. Health insurance. And there are good people I love here.” He paused and hung his head. “But I just can’t stay and pretend.”

“Then don’t,” Steve said. “We’ll find a way to get by. We always have. But go out doing something honest. Something that still matters to you.”

Jason didn’t know what that meant at the time. He had thought he would just quietly resign, send a letter to the bishop, then vanish into a new phase of his life.

But a week later, the vestry chair called him.

—

“Jason, we’d like you to teach the confirmation class this year,” she said. “The parents requested it. They think you’ll make it especially meaningful for the kids.”

He almost said no. His associate rector, Marla, had always been the one to take this task. But something inside him, some mischievous part, said yes. Maybe this would be that “going out with a flair” that Steve had suggested.

—

The first class met in a small room off the parish hall. Nineteen kids, ages twelve to fourteen, sat in a circle of mismatched chairs. They looked up at him with a blend of boredom and anxiety. He recognized most of them. He’d watched them grow up, seen them squirming in pews during Christmas Eve services, or making their way up the aisle for the weekly children’s message during worship.

They waited for him to distribute the workbooks used by previous classes entitled *Your Episcopal Faith*, but Jason had left those in his office.

"Here's how this is going to work," he said. "I'm not going to teach you what I think you should believe. I'm not going to tell you what the church says you need to accept to be confirmed. Instead, I want to know what questions you have about life, about faith, about God if you even believe in God. Anything that puzzles you or pisses you off."

A girl named Maya raised her eyebrows. Several kids exchanged glances.

"You're serious?" asked Connor, a lanky boy with a mop of dark hair.

"Completely. You're in charge here. What do you *really* want to know?"

The silence stretched out. Jason waited, comfortable with the discomfort. Finally, a girl named Zara spoke up.

"Is this a trick?"

"No trick. I promise."

"Because my parents signed me up for this," she continued. "I didn't exactly volunteer."

"Fair enough," Jason said. "Anyone else here under parental pressure?"

Most of the hands went up, along with scattered, nervous laughter.

"Okay, that's honest. What would make this not a waste of your time?"

Another pause. Then Connor spoke. "I don't know if I believe in God. Like, at all. Are we allowed to say that?"

Jason stood and went to the dry erase board. He wrote in large letters: *Do I believe in God?*

"Absolutely allowed," he said. "What else?"

The floodgates opened.

"Why do such bad things happen to good people, like my friend Sarah who lost her mother?"

"How do we know the Bible is true? Aren't there other holy books?"

"Is there really life after death?"

"Why are there so many religions if one is supposed to be right?"

"Can you be a good person without being religious?"

"Why does the church care so much about sex?"

"If God is love, why does hell exist?"

Jason wrote furiously, filling the board with their questions. When he had finished, he turned back to them.

"These are better than any curriculum I could give you. Each week, we'll take one question and explore it together. Not me lecturing you, but all of us thinking out loud. I want you to question everything, probe every possibility, follow your reasoning wherever it leads. At the end, if you choose to be confirmed, I want you to write down what you believe at this moment in your lives, knowing that those beliefs will probably change, and that's not only okay, it's necessary."

Maya spoke up, her voice cautious. "OK. But I've always been taught that confirmation is like agreeing to believe certain things?"

"Traditionally, yes," Jason said. "But I think that's backwards. I think real faith starts with honesty. It's hard to be honest if someone else is telling you what you're supposed to think."

A boy named Elijah who'd been quiet until then leaned forward. "Are you going to get in trouble for this?"

Jason smiled. "Probably. But that's my problem, not yours."

—

The weeks passed.

Instead of rote lessons, they had conversations. Messy, wandering, luminous conversations. Jason brought in poems, songs, and movie clips that riffed on the themes of their questions, and he encouraged them to do the same. They sat on the floor sometimes, surrounded by pizza boxes and laughter.

They debated whether the Bible was literal or metaphorical. They talked about evolution, injustice, death, love, and sexuality. One week, Jason displayed a photo from the Hubble telescope on the wall, an image that showed distant galaxies spinning like fireworks.

“What kind of God would make this and call it good?” he asked.

They didn’t always find answers, but the questions were alive and compelling.

One day, Lila stayed after class. “My mom says we shouldn’t question too much,” she whispered. “She says that’s how people lose their faith.”

Jason looked at her gently. “Or maybe that’s how people find it.”

—

It wasn’t long before parents compared notes about what their children were discussing. Even though the congregation was mostly liberal, it had its limits. More conservative families raised alarms that the class wasn't using traditional materials. Father Jason was letting the kids question even the most basic doctrines. He'd told them it was okay not to believe in miracles, including the resurrection or that Jesus was the Son of God.

"That's not exactly what I said," Jason explained to one concerned mother. "I said different Christians interpret the resurrection and Jesus' character in different ways. Some literally, some metaphorically, and they need to figure out what makes sense to them."

"But that's relativism," the mother protested. "There has to be some cornerstone of truth."

"Does there?" Jason asked, then immediately regretted his honesty when he saw her face pale.

The senior warden called him in for a conversation. Harold was a kind man in his seventies, a retired attorney who'd been at St. Augustine's for forty years.

"Jason, I've gotten some calls," Harold said carefully. "People are worried about the confirmation class."

"I know."

"They trust you. You've been a good rector. A great rector, really. But they're confused about what you're doing with these kids."

Jason chose his words carefully. "Harold, they're at the age when they are just beginning to think critically on their own. Rather than shut that down, I'm helping them think for themselves. Ultimately, isn't that what we want?"

"Within reason," Harold said. "But confirmation is also about bringing young people into the full life of the church. It's about commitment."

"It's about honesty," Jason countered. "If we force them to affirm things they don't genuinely believe, we're just creating better liars."

Harold sighed. "I'm going to ask you to trust that these parents have trusted you. See it through. But Jason..." he paused, studying the rector's face. "...are you okay?"

The question landed with unexpected weight. Jason felt the careful walls he'd constructed begin to crack.

"I'm figuring some things out," he said finally.

Harold nodded slowly, and Jason wondered how much the older man understood.

—

The class continued to transform. They tackled questions of suffering with rawness that broke every platitude. When discussing the Bible's authority, a girl named Priya talked about how stories could be true without being factual, and the whole class leaned in, building on her idea. They debated morality without God, afterlife beliefs across cultures, and the problem of religious violence.

Jason facilitated rather than dictated. When students looked to him for answers, he turned the questions back to the group. What do you think? Why? What are the implications of that belief? How would you defend it to someone who disagreed? Do we even need to defend our beliefs?

At home, Steve noticed the change in him. "You seem lighter," he observed one evening.

"I do?"

"Yes. Even though you're planning to leave, you seem more like yourself than you have in years."

Jason considered this. "I think it's because I'm finally being honest. With them, at least. Maybe that's all I needed, a space where I could stop pretending."

“You're giving them something important," Steve said.

"Or taking something away. It depends how you look at it."

“No,” Steve insisted. “You’re giving them permission to be real. You and I both now how rare and vital that can be.”

—

Near the end of the Lenten season, most of the students had decided to write personal confirmation statements. They shared them with each other, giving feedback and enjoying each other's candor. He gave them the option to share their words on confirmation Sunday if they felt up to it.

And now, that time had come.

It was a clear day. Sunlight spilled through the tall windows of the sanctuary. All the pews were packed, partly due to the expectation that this wouldn't be a standard celebration. Steve was in the second row, smiling with encouragement. The bishop in her crimson garb sat next to Jason in the Presider's Chairs. Jason wore his usual white alb and green stole. He had thought he might feel nervous, but he was calm and confident as the service began.

After the usual liturgy of hymns, prayers, and readings had unfolded, he stepped to the pulpit.

"Before we move to the rite of confirmation," he said, "the students have some thoughts to share."

The congregation shifted, surprised.

"I asked these young people to write their own statements of belief. Not memorized doctrines, but what their hearts and minds tell them today at this stage of their lives. Some of them are willing to read excerpts to you.

Maya started things off. She stood at the lectern, her voice shaking slightly at first, then growing stronger.

"I believe in questions more than answers," she read. "I believe that doubt is not the opposite of faith but maybe a deeper kind of faith. I believe in being kind, especially when it's hard. I don't know if there's a God, but I believe in love, and sometimes I think maybe those are the same thing. I

believe that I'm going to keep changing my mind about all of this, and that's okay."

The sanctuary was stone quiet.

Connor followed. "I believe the universe is bigger and stranger than anything we can imagine. I believe in science and also in mystery. I believe that every person has worth, and that judging people based on who they love, or what they look like, or what they believe is wrong. I'm not sure about heaven, but I believe we can make heaven or hell right here by how we treat each other."

One by one, they came forward. Zara spoke about finding meaning in art and music. Elijah talked about his struggle with anxiety and how he'd found comfort not in prayer but in meditation and friendship. Priya discussed her Hindu mother and Christian father and how she wanted to honor both traditions without being bound by either. Joshua talked about how much the parables of Jesus made sense to him.

The statements were honest, searching, and deeply thoughtful. They didn't parrot anyone else's doctrine. They didn't claim certainty they didn't possess. Instead, they revealed young people wrestling with profound questions and coming to their own tentative and beautiful conclusions.

As Jason listened, he felt something shift in the congregation. The initial tension began to soften, moved by the sincerity of these young people's voices.

When the last student finished, the church was still silent. Then, slowly, applause began. It started with one person, then spread like ripples across water until the entire congregation was clapping, some people standing, others wiping tears from their eyes.

The bishop leaned over to Jason. "That was quite unorthodox."

"I know," Jason said. "I'm sorry if…"

"Don't apologize," she interrupted. "I think we just witnessed something sacred."

The service continued. The bishop laid hands on each confirmand, then they all shared communion if they desired it. The final hymn was sung and Jason gave the benediction.

Afterward, in the parish hall during the reception, Jason watched the confirmed students surrounded by their families. The kids were animated and proud. Parents who'd been critical approached him with surprised gratitude.

"I don't know what you did," one father said, "but my daughter actually talks to me about meaningful things now. I didn't think that was possible with a teenager."

Conner's mother hugged him, tears in her eyes. "He told me he wanted to be confirmed even though he has doubts, because you taught him that faith without doubt is just pretending. I never thought about it that way."

Jason accepted their thanks with grace, feeling the weight of his deception. They were praising him for authenticity while not knowing that he'd stopped believing in the very institution he'd encouraged their children to question.

After most people had left, Zara approached him. She'd changed out of her confirmation dress into jeans and a hoodie.

"Father Jason?" she said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Do you believe in God?"

The question landed like a stone in still water. Jason looked at her, knowing he owed her honesty.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I used to think I did. Now I'm not sure. I believe in love, in kindness, in the search for meaning. Whether there's a divine being at the center of it all, I'm genuinely open, but also uncertain."

Zara nodded, unsurprised. "I kind of thought so. The way you let us question everything, it seemed like you were questioning too."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not at all," she said. "It makes me trust you more, actually. Because you didn't lie to us."

After she left, Jason stood alone in the empty parish hall. Through the windows, he could see the city skyline, the Charles River, the ordinary Sunday evening traffic. Somewhere in that landscape was his future, a life outside the church. He sighed with quiet anticipation.

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That night, he and Steve sat on their porch, the city lights below them.

“So,” Steve said, pouring wine. “I don’t see how that could have gone any better. What do you think?”

Jason smiled, tired but peaceful. “They were brilliant. Honest. Braver than most adults I know.”

“And you? How are you?”

Jason looked out over the cityscape, the wind cool on his face. “I'm feeling peaceful. I think I did exactly what you suggested. I was honest and true to myself. I love you so much.”

Steve raised his glass. “And I love you. Here’s to what comes next.”

Jason clinked it softly. “To what comes next.”

They sat in silence for a while, the hum of traffic rising like distant waves. For the first time in years, Jason didn't feel like he was losing something. He felt like he was becoming something new, unafraid to live without a script.

Tomorrow he would send his letter to the bishop. He didn't know what the future held, but tonight, under the quiet night sky, he felt free.

He thought of those kids, their voices clear and unguarded, and he smiled.

Confirmed, not conformed.

Amen.

About the Author

Krin Van Tatenhove is an author, visual artist, and spiritual adventurer. He has worked as a cleric, community organizer, and director of a nonprofit. His 40 years of professional writing experience have led to countless articles and 19 books. You can freely download most of his words and images by visiting krinvan.com. In addition to his creative pursuits, Krin suffers from chronic wanderlust, always seeking new travel experiences to satisfy his gypsy soul. He is married, has four children, and lives with his wife and disabled adult son in San Antonio, Texas.