

Evening Train

May 31, 1933

Kansas

The train lurched and Iris Hazelwood opened her eyes.

It was not a station stop, just another of those mysterious bumps familiar to regular railway passengers, and particularly recognizable to the hardy souls who traversed the remote landscape of America's vast western prairie. Iris was not such an experienced traveler and yet, after many miles onboard, she had become accustomed to the train's unexpected jolts and irregular motions.

Days ago, when the train first pulled out of Tucson, she had endured two hours of chaos as each new bump became an unwelcome shock, as alarming to her as a cannon shot. That was an apt metaphor because she seemed then to be at war with the railroad—fighting for every inch of territory—battling timetables, grappling for balance, foraging for food and drink, and longing for sleep.

Now, several hundred miles into her journey, she had at last made peace with the Union Pacific Railway and that company's lumbering Pullman cars. Between Tucson and Oklahoma she barely slept. Gradually, as her two days on the railway stretched into a third, she had become accustomed to the motion and was able to nod off for hours at a time.

Recalling those early days of her journey, she felt the moving railcar sway for a moment more before it settled into a steady rhythm. When it did, Iris closed her eyes again and slept.

After an hour a further jolt shattered her sleep but this time her eyes remained closed. She had been dreaming and her dream had been unsettling and echoes of it seemed to linger in the confines of the rolling railway car. Dreaming, she had heard an unearthly howl and she had the feeling that she had cried out in her sleep. Or had she imagined these things? Despite her disinclination to revisit her dream, she found herself unwilling to open her eyes. But the Pullman car swayed again and she felt her journal slide from her lap so she sighed, reluctantly opened her eyes, and bent down to retrieve it.

“Please, allow me,” said the man in the seat opposite.

The unexpected voice startled her. Why hadn’t she noticed him before?

Iris sat back while the man abandoned his seat and knelt to recover the errant journal. His movement was graceful. His hands were gloved. Crouching at her feet, he picked up the journal and offered it to her, his arm outstretched, his head bowed. Instinctively she looked beyond the kneeling man and then behind her. All the other seats were empty. She and the kneeling man were the only occupants of the otherwise uninhabited Pullman car.

She was traveling alone and should be cautious of strangers but something about the situation summoned her native confidence. Ordinarily a man crouching so near might seem a threat but somehow she was not frightened. Instead his kneeling there made her feel ridiculously regal, like a queen receiving a courtier.

“Careless of me,” Iris said. “Thank you.” She received the journal with a nod and then regarded the stranger as he rose. She sought to see his face but its features were hidden beneath the shadow of his broad-brimmed hat, not quite a sombrero but definitely not a Stetson. The man kept his head down as he brushed his trouser leg and resumed his seat.

“You are traveling far?” he asked without looking up. His tone was polite. She detected an accent, Mexican she decided.

“To Sharon Springs,” Iris answered, “Sharon Springs, Kansas.”

“Ah,” said the man with an air of recognition but still he did not look up to meet her gaze. “Business or pleasure, if I may be so bold to ask?”

“Family business,” she said without hesitation. She had been asked this standard ‘business or pleasure’ question three days ago when she boarded the first train in Arizona. And again she received a similar inquiry yesterday when she changed trains somewhere in Oklahoma and now she had answered a third time.

*Why repeat her ‘family business’ answer to strangers? Of what possible interest could—?*

“Me as well,” the man interrupted her thoughts. “My business is also with family and, I am sad to say, it is a death. I hope that your business is not so unfortunate.”

“A death you say? I’m sincerely sorry to hear it,” Iris said.

“You are too kind,” responded the man, “But for my manners, I am sorry. We have not been introduced.” At last he raised his head. “I am Miguel Jesus de Valdez and I am at your service.” Though he remained seated, his deferential nod seemed sincere as he added, “And I am enchanted to make your acquaintance.”

“I’m Doctor—um—” she couldn’t stop herself saying ‘doctor’ in time so she found herself attempting to amend her introduction by saying, “I’m Iris Hazelwood.”

“Mucho gusto. You are the medical doctor?” he asked with apparent interest.

“Afraid not,” she blushed. “I’m a doctor of—” she decided not to say ‘metaphysics’ and so instead she said, “A doctor of ideas.”

“There are such doctors?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“You can tell me one?”

“Tell you an idea do you mean? Oh my—where to begin?”

“At the beginning perhaps?”

She thought for a moment. Was this inquisitive stranger merely passing the time or was he seriously interested in her work? He had touched his hat when he introduced himself and then tilted his head back to reveal his face. He was not attractive. His head was large and smallpox scars mottled his dark complexion and yet he had a distinctive face with penetrating eyes, a broad nose, a fair mouth, and a neatly trimmed moustache.

How old? At least seventy she guessed, so thirty years her senior. Was he flirting? What an idea—a man his age—and yet did a man ever outgrow such inclinations? Despite his advanced years, she was flattered by his attention which caused her to experience an unexpected stirring of youthful passion. So she considered him again, was more charitable this time, and pronounced him ruggedly handsome. His long sideburns were streaked with a patina of luminous silver. He was probably someone’s grandfather or maybe a mischievous uncle. Good speech, well-dressed, good manners. He might be a professor himself.

“Do you know the axiom?” she ventured, probing his understanding.

“For the wood, no?”

She laughed and would have continued but a Harvey Girl arrived with a tray of apples and sandwiches. *Traveling has upset my clock*, she thought, *is it lunchtime already or is this meant to be supper?*

Valdez insisted on paying for both meals and Iris accepted the gesture.

Valdez?

Iris had fallen into the habit of labeling others by their last name, a protocol from her professorial days. *Are my campus days behind me now*, she wondered?

The girl returned with drinks.

“No wine I see.” Valdez frowned as he examined the choices.

“Not in Kansas, sir. We’re dry here. Tea or coffee only, I’m afraid,” said the girl who was freckled and clean and twenty.

“A pity,” he removed his gloves and reached inside his jacket to extract a huge wallet. It was then that Iris noticed his right hand was missing the uppermost joints of two fingers. The girl noticed too and, as Valdez paid and politely refused the change, he seemed to sense their interest for he addressed an explanation to both women: “A hazard, I regret to say, of my profession. God be thanked I still have my thumbs.”

The girl departed and Valdez produced a knife and motioned for Iris’ apple. “If I may assist,” he said.

She handed it over and he balanced the crisp fruit in one hand as he used the knife to section it into fours and carve out the pips and stem. This surgery completed, he handed the edible pieces back to Iris. Then he skillfully sliced his own apple, wiped the blade with his handkerchief, and folded the knife into his pocket.

It was a very sharp knife, Iris noticed.

The train was running late and the day advanced as they ate in silence.

“Do you travel much this way?” asked Valdez after the girl had returned to collect the empty cups, apple cores, and crumbled rectangles of waxed paper. At least Iris had surrendered a crumpled sandwich wrapping. Valdez had neatly folded his into the shape of a butterfly which he presented to the beaming girl.

“Only once, but what I mean is only once in this direction. I’m making a return trip you see,” she answered, “I’ve been away for twenty years.”

*My god, she thought, has it been twenty years? Yes—my last trip was 1911—so twenty-two years then. How the time has flown.*

Iris was young in 1911, younger than the freckle-faced Harvey Girl. All those years ago she had been traveling east on her way to Kansas City, bound for college. She left Sharon Springs behind on that day. She was thrilled by the journey—her first trip alone. She was excited to be going and blissfully unaware that she would be away so long. She had meant come back to the farm at every term break but before she knew it she had spent four solid years at the university without a single visit home.

Why not?

Was she distracted by the exhilarating freedom of campus life? Did she object to the rural limitations of West Kansas? She could not now recall the reasons she stayed away.

While at school she had tried to maintain connections with home. She had posted letters to Alice but the old woman was an infrequent correspondent and there was even less word from Iris’ brother who never answered her letters. At last, when Alice’s letters ceased to come, Iris too stopped writing and the farm faded from her consciousness.

So that was how it went. Iris left the farm and went to university and then on to more study and an academic career in Arizona. Iris never returned to West Kansas and her brother Ham and their guardian Alice stayed behind.

Twenty-two years and in all that time she had never heard from Ham. Then abruptly he wrote twice. The first letter reached her on the day she was scheduled to rehearse for her role as philosophy faculty marshal for The University of Arizona’s graduation exercises. It had come in

the morning when she was rushed for time and she slipped the letter into her jacket pocket and only found a moment to read it at noontime.

It was brief. Ham had written two lines containing the unvarnished news that Alice, their elderly guardian had died. Then a month later another letter arrived—this time a plea for his sister's help.

Ham's second letter sounded urgent and Iris wired back to say she would come. She made hasty arrangements and boarded the train. And the instant she took her seat in the Pullman car at the Tucson station she began to have doubts. So many doubts that, as the train pulled out, her mind overflowed with questions.

Why go back after two decades? Ham may be in need but he was a stranger to her. The farm had fallen on hard times but it was never much of a farm to begin with. So why go now? Did she miss her brother? Did regret having stayed away so long?

She had to admit that she did.

She should have gone back earlier. She should have gone to Alice's funeral—would have gone had she not been immersed in graduation. A train ticket was expensive and money was tight and Iris was lucky to hold a tenured position. How would it look if she dropped everything, abandoned her responsibilities, spent her meager reserves and hopped on a train to rush home to Kansas? How would it look to leave when she had obligations in the desert?

After all Alice was not family.

And besides, even if Iris had gone to the funeral, what could she have done there? Crumple a fistful of dirt and sprinkle it on the old woman's coffin? That was a meaningless ritual. Death was *the* axiom. It was the philosopher's self-evident first principle, the most self-evident of all. The axiom of Death was irrefutable and final.

“Death,” she said aloud without meaning to. Valdez was dozing but he seemed to hear her because he raised his head and picked up the thread of their earlier conversation.

“My niece. The death is my niece,” he said. “I am her—how do you say it—at her baptism?”

“Her god father,” offered Iris, still chagrined that she had spoken indiscriminately. *Best not to shout ‘death’ at anyone, she thought, let alone a casual traveling acquaintance.*

“Si.” Valdez grinned “God-father. That is the very word. She is—I mean to say she was—my sister’s youngest one. A sad death.”

“Sad,” agreed Iris.

“The same as you,” Valdez commented as he discreetly removed a thin flask from his suit pocket and tilted it toward Iris.

“No thank you,” she said, “But I don’t understand.”

“It is liquor. I apologize if I have given offense.”

“No, not at all. I understand the drink. I meant your niece—you said ‘the same’?”

“Ah. With your permission.” Iris nodded and Valdez took a sip then replaced the flask. “I meant to say that your name it is the same as that of my niece, Avellano, you understand. Um—you would say ‘hazel’ as with your last name.”

“A coincidence,” Iris smiled.

“Ah—but how is the saying? Perhaps as a doctor of ideas you have heard of it?” Valdez stared out the window at the passing prairie, his lips moving, his gloved hand tracing the air, apparently composing a sentence. After a moment he turned to Iris and recited: “They say that, *a coincidence she is a miracle of which God desires to remain the anonymous author.* Do I remember the saying correctly? Ah, I am sorry. I see you are in need of resting.”

Despite her attempt to remain attentive, Iris was beginning to nod. “Yes, thank you. I am feeling quite tired, I’m afraid.”

“You must sleep,” he smiled, “I will stand the guard.”

“Obliged,” Iris mumbled as slumber overtook her.

When she awoke, the seat across from her was unoccupied. Valdez was gone and the long summer day was dissolving into dusk. Instinctively she glanced over her shoulder but the Pullman car was empty.

She felt that emptiness and it seemed to press upon her, as if her world began and ended with the dimensions of the vacant railway car. The darkening prairie outside was absolutely blank. She sensed that she was in motion but the impression was indistinct. The swaying car suggested that there was a locomotive somewhere ahead and there should be a caboose following behind but there was no way to know for certain. She took it on faith that she was on a train, on the prairie, in Kansas. She tried to remain alert but the rhythm of the train captured her and she closed her eyes again.

An hour later, she imagined herself awake but knew she was dreaming. In her dream she seemed to glance out the Pullman window and see a large wolf standing unexpectedly close to the rails. The animal’s gray head was down but it raised its snout and seemed to look directly at her before its outline was lost in a fleeting blur of passing prairie. She had seen that look before.

“Valdez?” she seemed to ask.

Iris stirred in her sleep, striving to wake but unable, as is the way of dreams, to open her eyes. At last she surrendered and in her dream she was transported back to her campus where she seemed to be regaling her students with an academic lecture.

“Valdez is a mysterious figure and a wolf is a powerful omen,” she told her class. “Taken together the man and the animal are messengers. Seeing a wolf—real or imagined—offers a glimpse of the future but the sighting can foreshadow vastly different fortunes. The same wolf can symbolize protection or danger and predict anything from the acquisition of wisdom to a descent into chaos. Are there any questions?”

In her dream a young man raised his hand and asked precisely what she imagined he would ask: “Will this be on the test?”

When she heard the conductor announce the next stop, Iris awoke and stretched luxuriously. She had been dreading a return to her girlhood home—a return to face her past—but Valdez and the wolf had altered her perspective. The past had vanished. She would look to the future. She had traveled far but this was not the end. Sharon Springs was merely a destination. Her journey was yet to come and it would begin the moment she stepped off the evening train.