LONG SHADOWS AT NOON

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WYOMING

When she called them ‘flyover states,’ her father responded, “Salute Ohio when you fly over it, then, Raissa; that’s where the Wright Brothers were from.”

With this, Shiloh Goldenhal was infected with a sudden small revelation: Nothing is superficial and everything is an iceberg.

She’d used the passively-dismissive term ‘flyover states’ while sharing details of the grander plan, her cross-country move from Manhattan to Seattle, where she had accepted a coding job with the University of Washington’s records department, initially tasked with spearheading the creation of a series of digital initiatives. Eight thousand dollars a month was not a bad entry-level salary by Seattle standards. She’d already flown over the flyovers three times, JFK to Tacoma, first time for the first round of interviews, second for a second round of interviews and to look at apartments and the third time to meet her new boss and explore city culture.

This fourth trip was to be her last and the ticket was one-way, because she intended that move to be no-looking-back.

She was 24 years old, an age at which most insanely intelligent people (her self-description, though perfectly accurate) may get swept away by such sudden small revelations.

But no revelation is small, is it? Because everything is an iceberg.

Being called ‘Raissa’ by her father was an iceberg. Raissa was her birth name, but she’d gone by Shiloh since the seventh grade. Shiloh meant ‘tranquility’ in Hebrew, its unsavory Civil War association notwithstanding. At the age of eighteen, she’d had her name legally changed and so drew battle-lines of separation between what the world expected of her (her parents foremost) and what she expected of herself. The move to Seattle the year after she’d graduated Columbia with a fast-tracked SEAS Computer Science Master’s was an integral phase to the distancing and a slice of the grander plan: Re-envisioning.

Although her mother had succumbed to the name change and started calling her Shiloh, her father continued to call her Raissa—also the name of his Odessa grandmother. Shiloh did not believe that her father’s hold-out was patriarchal or hormonal or a dismissal of her individuality. She’d done a serious (if wary) internet deep-dive into her father’s overall temperament and personality traits and concluded that his lack of ‘neurotypical experiences’ did not mean he loved her any less; he was simply unaffected by affectations like

choosing your own name. To him, she remained who she'd always been—his only daughter Raissa. It was not a lack of respect so much as a failure to grasp the fundamentals of what respect entails. When required to do so by his law firm or by social convention (and by relying on stagecraft) her father could imitate respect, but he did not often feel the need to fake it within his family unit.

When she recognized a similar mark on herself, she attributed it to her chilly and uncompromisingly urban upbringing, having lived with her parents and her big brother Ben in the same apartment building in the East Twenties for her entire life. To the manor born; to the manor bred—she genuinely believed this of herself. And everyone has private shadows, she thought—we're all the beast and the bard within. She viewed love as a symbiotic exchange, social instead of emotional, and only of value when mutually beneficial to the parties involved. This held true for her family as well as for her friends and superficial lovers; the connection she felt to them was not transactional; it was a device by which she could maintain her daily equilibrium, a survival hack to preserve a psychic state that a biologist might call homeostasis.

With the face you show the world, you could—if you wanted to—mimic the way the world thinks love is supposed to look; the way they want it to look, and nobody would be the wiser.

As far as she knew, flyover people didn't think about love in this way—or like this about meaningful intimacy and neighborly coexistence. Of course, her conclusions were tainted by a lifetime of clichés and sitcom stereotypes; in this paradigm, rural America was a place where interactions were grounded in church bingo and pancake breakfasts. But the idea fascinated her in the way that a beetle trapped inside a pickle jar fascinated her and led to a fundamental question: Are we made of something more substantial than the collective opinion that others have of us? Are we ultimately reactions rather than agency?

And then: Do people from Ohio and Nebraska, Kansas and Illinois really consider love a tangible emotion rather than a pragmatic mask, and have they simply learned by observation to fake empathies they don't really feel? Were Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, Marge and Norm Gunderson—even that dour 'American Gothic' couple—simply mimicking each other mimicking each other, turning typecasting into an infinity mirror?

It was entirely possible, she thought, because for every little kid in Decatur carving pumpkins with his buddies on the kitchen floor or camping out on the deck with girlfriends in My Little Pony tents, there was another Decatur kid with voices in his head telling him to shoot everyone at school. To Shiloh, this made their world even more peculiar and ineffably more fascinating.

By then she'd seen enough to know that Seattle attitudes tended to be more

suburban Decatur than Downtown Manhattan, but it was her father's flyover response and her own sudden concession to the iceberg that ultimately aroused her: Was there a bucket-list opportunity here, before the inevitable grind of job and life commitments kicked in? Was there an outlet to expend some youthful restlessness before inhabiting a tenure-track career in IT? What if she didn't simply wave at the Wright Brothers from 35,000 feet overhead, but instead, looked out of a ground-floor window to suss out what made people like them squirm inside their jelly jars?

And shortly, this became Shiloh Goldenhal's side-errand en route to the grander northwest terminus: A pilgrimage through the heart of the heartland.

For her fourth and final cross-country trip, she cancelled the Air Alaska ticket and booked a hundred hours on Amtrak, Penn Station to King Street on South Jackson street in Seattle, and with that, she set out to look for anything inside the frosty core of the Midwest that would serve her in Seattle, hoping to find something worth mimicking.

Her mother—wounded by the premise behind the entire move—was now baffled by Shiloh's new form of locomotion. Who has four days to kill on a train? But Shiloh believed that her father—in his default mode of impassive detachment—somehow understood.

The last thing she said to them both was "I love you," and then, to her father alone: "If you can't change a mindset, what if you can change your image of a mindset?"

Shiloh was good with words, just as good as she was with numbers, but too self-contained to be a blogger and too dismissive of pretense to call herself a writer. Her journal was cognitive therapy; a random, real-time manifesto filled with bites that perplexed or impressed her and also served as a curio cabinet where she kept revelations—some sudden and others harder won. And when she read the entries afterward, it was often like looking in a mirror for the first time:

On the sidewalk in front of Tal Bagels, out of the corner of my eye, I remember once seeing a dead leaf caught by a gust of wind, and for a brief second, I thought it was alive.

I had assumed that simply getting on that train, removing myself from my life, would prove to be the most insanely revolutionary thing I'd ever do. And like seeing animation behind a lifting leaf on a windy day, I was wrong.

And if I was wrong about that, maybe I'm wrong about everything.

In early October, at six in the morning, the train left Moynihan Hall; she slept most of the way to Chicago. There was a two-hour layover at Union Station,