

PRAIRIE INTELLECTUALS (PART TWO)

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With description, towards the end of the page: a vertical line drawn by the publisher, editors and a designer. If character, then bounding out a door into a snowstorm -- bouncing off a fence and starting over, repeatedly, the fence accepted.

The end of the page is not a fence, she said. Nor is it a gutter. A gutter requires two pages, bound. And only later, depending on how many lines.

Those marks in the snow—

She listened.

—they are letters, first, then words.

Yes.

Not footprints.

Figures.

Shhh!

All characters, when setting out, begin in snowstorms.

But if not snowstorms, coconuts.

Ha!

Someone proposed a toast, but the words were too slow and, confidence lost, petered out.

It was Peter who bounded out that door.

*

With description, abundant in summertime, the snow gone until it was once again expected.

Like the fence!

Nice.

Peter could be described as a farmer, someone who waits until the last minute to kill something then gathers it up and sells it. Sometimes for a lot of money, sometimes for very little. Or other times not at all, the state stepping in, like they do with publishers.

They could put houses there.

Then what would we eat? she asked.

Each other!

Nobody was hungry after that. Another toast, but—

*

Sun all day—then at dusk, the snowstorm. Dancers were leg-tired but giddy at the prospect of having to spend the night at the hall. The janitor, grumpy in his coveralls, bringing up cots from the basement, toilet paper...

A blanket cut into strips for towels. Peter took a piece and wore it like an ascot. He spoke with the musicians, their instruments asleep in their cases.

No one cared that their children were at home—the children would be safer there than at the hall.

The wind slammed against the rickety building, lifting the ceiling as much as six inches at the northeast corner. The revellers were aroused, for storms create excuses. The wind ensured that the drifts would be high enough to cover the windows.

Earlier, Mrs. Cavell snuck backstage and climbed the ladder to the attic. She took off her clothes and stretched her long, lean body over the hall's bearskin, thinking of Mr. Boychuck.

Mrs. Boychuck, meanwhile, was in the basement reading to Mr. Margold, Mr. Simpson and Mr. Lee a story from a collection edited by someone from their parts, a story she had read many times, one that everyone liked.

Except Mr. Simpson.

It was words that drove him out, nothing more, he said, crossing his arms.

Yes, but it was Hawthorne's story that inspired them, said Mr. Lee. Ann's first words, even before we know her as someone other than John's wife, are: "It isn't right to leave me here alone. Surely I'm as important as your father." Now compare that with Hawthorne's Faith: "Dearest heart...prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed tonight. A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she's afraid of herself sometimes."

Mr. Lee was a note-taker. For every new story he would start a new scribbler. "The Painted Door" had two scribblers "Young Goodman Brown" had four.

Mr. Margold? she asked. What do you make of Mr. Lee's comparison?

Margold was a recent arrival, taking over the bank after his predecessor, Mr. Hajnoczky, went to bed one night and never woke up. Both stories, he began, involve men leaving their wives with good intentions: John to check on his father, Goodman Brown to battle evil.

It is very Canadian to check on one's father, said Simpson.

And that's a criticism? said Mr. Lee.

Hush! said Mrs. Boychuk, turning to Mr. Margold.

Margold noted Simpson's features: his needy blue eyes, his fishhook nose, his wormy little mouth. Mr. Simpson is right, he said, it is Canadian. Everything is Canadian when in relation to something else.

John's a cuckold! Mr. Lee declared, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

If he is a cuckold, he would have watched from the closet, said Mr. Simpson.

And not froze to death, added Mrs. Boychuk.

*

The attic at the south end of the dancehall was least affected by wind. Only when it surged could she feel it, and only gently, like a breath. Lying there, she imagined Mr. Boychuck coming up the ladder. Instinctively he would take off his coat and throw it over her, only in Mrs. Cavell's mind he would start with his belt.

A ferocious gust.

Thoughts of Mr. Boychuck were always thick with description, and eventually they became too much. So she did what she could, whittling her bough down, ruining four steak knives in the process. After that, a sheet of sandpaper and a bottle of Verathane purchased at Lee's Hardware. Something she keeps between her mattress and boxspring. On this night she would not compare.

*

Readers familiar with Faith will know that she appears briefly in Hawthorne's story, while Ann is all over Ross's. Just as Flaubert declared, "I am Bovary," Ross could have said the same of Ann.

Ross was a homosexual, said Mr. Lee.

And a damn good one! said Mr. Simpson, sarcastically.

Whatever his orientation, it shouldn't matter, said Mrs. Boychuk. Again she looked at Mr. Margold.

For most of his life Margold could be described as homosexual. He was tempted to offer this, but Mr. Simpson smiled. It was a knowing smile.

Mr. Margold? asked Mrs. Boychuk.

It must have been difficult being a farmer's wife.

With people like Ross writing—yes, said Simpson.

*

A loud crunch, screams, and a man's voice rising. Though indecipherable, his inflections tell us that he is in charge.

Mrs. Cavell goes to the tiny square window used for motion picture projection and sees that the northeast corner of the ceiling is gone. In its place, a black triangle; and falling from that, what looks to her like feathers. She feels nothing, the snowstorm breathing down her neck.

But she keeps looking, and soon enough she sees him, not as he is today, but when they were children, running through golden grass, hoping to fall when he fell, the others racing off without them.

Do you like me? she would ask between breaths.

I have always liked you, he would tell her. Here, take my hand. I know where the grass is the longest.

*

Faith's ribbons were pink, while the door Ann painted was white. Why white, Mr. Simpson?

Why pink, Mrs. Boychuk?

Mr. Simpson raises a good point, said Mr. Lee. Wouldn't Faith's ribbons better denote purity if they were white? When I think of pink, I think of gender.

Margold imagined how a pink door would have gone over in a 1930s farmhouse.

Mr. Margold? asked Mrs. Boychuk.

Margold looked up and saw that the others were staring at him. I was just thinking—

—of a pink door, said Mrs. Simpson.

How did you know?

A loud crunch, screams, and Mrs. Boychuk leapt to her feet and raced upstairs, followed by Mr. Lee.

Mr. Simpson reached into his pocket and, taking his time, removed a slender paperback. I'm going to read you something, Mr. Margold. Something I wrote many years ago, when I was hired to teach at the college.

Margold resented Mr. Simpson's manner, his self-satisfaction.

Unfolding his glasses, Simpson asked, Are you in the mood for poem, Mr. Margold?

Margold shut his eyes and imagined a line from another story: *the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands.*

Mr. Margold?

Just give it to me straight, he said.