

It was hot out, enough that Colin felt the pavers of the riverwalk radiate heat up through the soles of his shoes. **Calliope** walked just beside him, carrying a parasol whose stem rested her on her right shoulder like a drill rifle. It wasn't quite right for the time, but he seemed to like it, so she seemed to go on carrying it. The riverwalk drew closer to its namesake. Colin turned to look **Calliope** in the face. She was a little flushed from heat and the walking, strands of her red hair clung by sweat to her temples and cheeks. She was about to say something, but Colin was running late.

With a grunt he pushed her into the freezing water.

Calliope slid stern first down greased wooden rails until the ropes holding her ran out of slack. She then swung in the current to come roughly abeam the riverbank. Colin tugged at one of the lines, and, satisfied they would go on holding, he trudged through the snow back to his cabin. He extinguished the lantern by his bedside, then grabbed the Mochila - a leather satchel packed with letters and parcels - from its special hook near the door. Finally, and carefully, he wrapped a handful of oily rags around the end of wet, slim branch he'd found just outside, and lit the rags by his stove, whose fire he promptly smothered. Holding the rag-torch as if it were a live, venomous snake, he scuttled out of his one room home, locking it behind him.

Stepping aboard *Calliope* he opened a door at the base of her boiler and slid the torch in among a collection of seasoned logs and dry twigs. They lit at once. Colin warmed his hands by the growing fire for a moment before closing the door. About ready to slip lines, Colin patted his right hip to verify the presence of his .45 Caliber Heckler & Koch USP, and felt under the bench seat just behind him to do the same to his Colt AR-15 rifle. He had never needed either, but it was better to have and not need. He next checked the sun-bleached temperature and pressure gauges on the boiler. It would be awhile before she had a working head of steam, but he was headed downstream, and so could drift along until she was ready.

The last lines restraining *Calliope* plopped into the river. Colin poled her free from the bank with a long oar, then paddled her to the center of the channel where the current was strongest. Her 30 foot hull, made of pine with oak floors and stringers, was slim and cut through the water well whether coasting or churning upstream. It had been painted white years ago, but wood, revarnished for watertightness but not again painted, showed through in splotches all around.

Colin slid off his bench and settled onto the floor, his back resting against the port side of the hull. It was too cold this morning for birds to be out, aside from the faint hiss of building steam, the world was silent.

"It's funny, what you miss only when it's gone." **Calliope** mused, reposing on the little boat's prow.

"Come again?" Colin asked.

“People used to travel very far and spend so very much money to get this kind of peace and quiet, but people today would give anything to hear an airliner go over or a car go by. I mean to say you miss what you don’t have.”

“How would you know that? Know what people used to do?”

“You must have heard it somewhere.” **Calliope** concluded, with a half smile.

Colin stood. “You must be cold.” He observed.

Calliope looked down at the thin summer dress she wore as if it noticing it for the first time. “I suppose I should, but I’m not.”

Colin touched his hand to the side of the boiler. “Well you are getting warmer. Or doesn’t it work that way?”

Calliope stepped down from the prow and walked languidly to Colin at the boat’s midsection. “I suppose that’s up to you.”

“Then I will leave that out. I wouldn’t want your comfort associated with this old thing’s ability to keep a fire.”

“Don’t slight me, Colin.”

Colin sighed, **Calliope** smiled. Ignoring her, Colin again checked the pressure gauge. It read roughly 100 PSI, good enough. He turned a stainless steel wheel on a pipe running off the rear of the boiler. This opened a butterfly valve, allowing steam to flow into *Calliope*’s 20 horsepower, twin cylinder reciprocating engine. The hot steam pushed the cylinders up and down; during their travel, they acted on a crankshaft which drove the propeller shaft itself without reduction gearing. After a few jerky cycles the engine oil warmed and the whole apparatus ran smoothly, generating a metallic tick with each revolution - a sound whose absence when underway always made him feel uneasy. Colin passed his eyes over every valve and seal, making sure that what leaks there were had not grown untenably large. The brass, wood, and iron machine had to be close to 300 years old now. Colin’s predecessor, Doug, claimed to have seen a builder’s plate with a date of manufacture. *Calliope*’s hull, boiler, and other running gear was probably 150 years old, constructed for some wealthy hobbyist around the salvaged engine. She couldn’t have been built for a commercial, practical purpose, Doug, something of a historian, had sworn up and down, citing things like outboard gasoline and electric motors. A working boat, back in the day, would have had one of those. One had to go back to the past’s past to find a time, other than now, of course, when craft like *Calliope* had worked for a living.

Colin slotted another log into the firebox and sat down fore of the boiler and funnel, so as to stay out of the wispy black smoke coiling up from the latter. There was little need to work the steering when riding the current like this, and he therefore enjoyed the luxury of wandering away from the craft’s tiny nerve center. Colin looked at the leafless trees going by on the riverbank, idly wondering how many he would need to fell and split on this run. The Post kept cordwood at its stations, but the distance between them never seemed to quite align with his fuel consumption.

“Do you hate me, Colin?” **Calliope** asked.

Colin looked back into the boat and found her now on the bench seat just across from him, drinking very hot coffee Colin had not brewed from a china cup and saucer he did not own and had never before seen.

He looked her in the eye, but said nothing for a long while. **Calliope**’s expression was entirely placid. “No. Whatever you are, I, well I don’t hate you.” He finally answered.

The young lady waved her hand over her coffee to cool it, sending a little cloud of steam Colin’s way. After taking a sip, she posed her next question. “Then why do you look away all the time? And we never do speak, not really. Nothing you’d call conversation. I think that you like to think of me. I exist, so you must, but you do not show it.”

“I don’t like what you mean. I reckon that’s the problem.”

Calliope leaned forward. “What do you mean, ‘what you mean’?”

“A man makes up something like you, it’s proof he’s accepted he’ll always be alone.”

“Didn’t you accept that when you took this solitary job?” **Calliope** wondered.

“I wanted to take the signing bonus and the first two years pay and go home. Shouldn’t you know that? Anyway, it turned out the bad year my parents had with the crops was the start of a trend. By the time I was ready I didn’t have anything to go back to.”

Calliope put a hand on his knee. “You still had your parents.”

“Pa drowned himself figuratively...” Colin mimed drinking a shot. “...and Mom drowned herself literally. In this same damn river, matter of fact. A good ways upstream, of course.”

“You ever think she had the right idea?” **Calliope** inquired, wistfulness in her voice and eyes.

“Oh is that what you’re about?” Colin scowled.

“Maybe. I hope not. I suppose I know this isn’t normal, but it’s not my fault. I wish it was, if it was I could stop it. As for... that other thing...” **Calliope** dipped a hand into the rushing water alongside the boat “...it’s only that you must be so tired, as I’m sure she was. When you think about what we’ve lost, can you blame her?”

“I never have blamed her. It’s not like there was any question as to why she did it. I understand it perfectly. All I wonder about is why the river? We had plenty of guns, and God, those have to be quicker.”

“Guns are quick, sure enough, but they’re messy. There’s a poetical quality to what she did, water gives life, water takes it away. Like ashes to ashes without the having to set yourself on fire.”

“I’m not sure she put that much thought into it.”

“I promise you she did.”

“How do you know?”

“Thinking about it, planning it, it’s almost more comforting than doing it - and the fact that I know that means you do to. It’s good though, that you can’t recall it now. That’s a good sign.” **Calliope** finished her coffee and pitched the cup and saucer into the river.

Colin mantled a bench and headed for the boat’s helm - a very small brass ship’s wheel - putting in a bit of corrective steering to avoid a sandbar he muttered: “Why are we talking about this anyway?”

“Well, selfishly, I find suicide rather charming.” **Calliope** shrugged.

Colin, who was now drawing off boiling water from a bleed valve to make himself some tangible coffee, stopped this task abruptly.

“How so?”

“You meet a lot of strangers on the river, in the little towns, and so forth. And you have to know so many of them are hiding their pain. If they weren’t, the bars wouldn’t be so full. Really that’s sort of sad, pathetic. If only, I think, they would stop hiding it, they would all recognize each other as fellow sufferers, and perhaps stop suffering, or at least hold each other up. You can’t say that somebody with noose burns around their neck is hiding any longer, it’s the ultimate show of vulnerability, and vulnerability, they say, is attractive. You know you can go up to a fellow like that and won’t find any meanness - they used all that up on themselves. I’d like to meet somebody, somebody entirely broken, right before they do it, maybe talk them out of it, but, no, why that, really? No I think it’s more that I’d rather they didn’t die alone. Because that’s just the thing, nobody deserves to die alone less than that sort of person, but of course they necessarily must, with rare exception.”

Colin succeeded in filling his coffee pot with boiling water and added the grounds. “That’s godawful sad and so are you.”

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It was about dusk when Colin saw the gaslit Sibley pier appear from behind a river bend. He let go with four short blasts from *Calliope*’s whistle, which were almost instantly answered by the wail of a post horn. Colin closed the butterfly valve, letting the little engine fall silent, its noise replaced by the rush of surplussed steam up *Calliope*’s funnel, creating a thick cloud that lingered in the cold air.

As his boat drifted up the pier, Colin tossed mooring lines to a dockhand, who tied off the bow and then, with his help, pulled in and secured the stern. From a small shack glowing with stove-light strutted a paunchy, spectacled man - Sibley’s Post Warden. He gripped a post horn tightly with his left hand and brought to his lips, blowing another signal. That done, he cupped his hands to make a megaphone and shouted at the town fifty or so yards west of the river’s edge: “Packet just in under steam! In one hour she heads down stream!”

The little song was better than a dinner bell, and soon homes, hotels, bars, and shops begin to trickle their occupants toward the water, baying to pick up their love letters, sales

reports, checks, or magazines and send on the same. The Post Company's broadsides called this element of their service "the white ribbon" referring to the once-glistening hulls of their packet fleet, which, in their travels, bound up the river towns.

Colin stepped onto the dock and jogged the Mochila - containing containing express service post - to the Warden so that he might take out the few letters that were to be delivered or transferred here. The dockhand would heft the less important and bulkier materials which resided in a waterproofed compartment on *Calliope's* foredeck.

The Post Warden held back the crowd, focussing first on the Mochila.

"This is in order. Very good. Are you going to go into town?" He queried after extracting the items marked for Sibley.

"Yes."

"There shouldn't be much outgoing, we could turn you in a few minutes and beat the schedule." The Warden suggested.

"No, Sir. I have business in town I'm afraid. I'll pay you back by setting off early."

"I don't much care, it's your bonus you're throwing away if you run *just* on time."

"I'll be quick." Colin insisted.

"Right, right. Well these folks will ransack your boat if I don't attend to them now." The Warden grumbled, sending him off.

Colin did not move.

"I'll have your pay when you get back, Christ." The Warden acknowledged.

Colin patted his pockets to make sure he had enough for his objective, then set off.

The town of Sibley arrayed itself along a single road which retained a semblance of asphalt paving. It was busy now with people, horses, and much to the horses' chagrin, the occasional motorcycle - it was a good thing the roads were mostly ruined and gasoline remained precious scarce outside of towns, or the latter would put him out of business.

He knew Sibley well enough, and found the shop soon enough. The smell hit him as soon he stepped inside - it was just like the interior of the Mochila - old leather and sometimes damp paper. He heard the shopkeep shouting at a customer for smoking among the rare books and so avoided the counter. Surveying the shelves he attempted to divine their organization and quickly found they were simply alphabetical by subject. Ten shelves deep he found the P's, and his desired book.

The shouting at the counter ended, he took his purchase up. The shop's owner inspected it.

"Two ounces." She pronounced.

"The price in the window is one." Colin

"It's a medical text. Practical volumes are double."

Colin plunked two ounces of silver, in the form of quarter-ounce rounds, on the counter.

Taking his book, Colin ducked into a few other stores to top up on provisions, then made for the pier. There, a woman walking a large dog stopped him.

"Is that book yours or is it a parcel?" She asked.

"What?" Colin stammered.

"You're a Post Pilot, yes?"

"Yes." Colin nodded.

"Is it your book?"

"It is, yes."

The woman glowered. "They..." She began almost breathless "told us you were all illiterate and yet here you are reading that cinder block of a book."

"We can all read ma'am. Can't run old equipment like that without studying manuals."

"It also means you can you read our letters!"

"That's true, but we don't."

"Right, I'm sure!" She mocked.

"Tell me, ma'am do you have to send post?"

"Absolutely."

"How many carrier pigeons do you own?"

"None." The dog walker scoffed.

"Then you have no choice but to live with the fear of bored Pilots reading your letters."

"I am going to complain to the Warden!"

Colin nodded. "Please do."

The woman marched away, going the wrong direction.

Colin met the Post Warden alongside *Calliope*.

"What was that about?" He inquired, nodding toward the woman walking away.

"Just ignore whatever she tells you."

"Right." The Warden extracted three ounces of silver, again in rounds, from his pocket and handed it to Colin. "That's your pay. Standard rate, etcetera. Not much went aboard, like I figured, so we tucked in a 25th of a cord. It's good stock, three years seasoning."

"That's good of you. The less I have to use my axe in this damn cold the better." Colin replied, stepping into his boat.

"Good steaming, son." The Warden concluded, turning back to his hut.

The dockhand lingered, slipping *Calliope*'s lines unbidden. He waved a perfunctory goodbye then walked toward town. Colin tugged on his gloves - it was well below freezing now - and then opened the butterfly valve by a third and manned the wheel, gently guiding his craft into the center channel. There, he opened it all the way and, riding the current, got about twelve knots. Three split logs went into the firebox to make up for idling by the pier. At last Colin extracted a lantern and lit it, hanging it on a pole that put it just outside the

footprint of the hull so that if it fell somehow the wooden boat would be spared an *uncontained* fire.

Nestling himself in the boat's aft section, where the lantern and firebox provided light and the latter provided warmth he opened his new book. Out of the corner of his eye he watched someone douse the lamps on the dock as the town itself disappeared behind the woods. It started to snow. Colin was again alone, ostensibly.

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When Colin awoke *Calliope* was at anchor in a calm patch about twenty feet from the riverbank. He had called it quits around midnight, it was now a little after dawn. Consulting the boiler gauges he yawned and stood, putting four logs into the fire and stirring the embers around with a poker. She had grown a little cold, but kept steam, and would do alright. Colin next hauled up the anchor and poled back into the current. With the boat again comfortably underway, he took up the shovel usually used for shoveling out the firebox and dipped it in the river, washing away accumulated ash and soot. He dried the shovel off and balanced its blade on one of *Calliope*'s benches. He grabbed two chicken eggs from a straw-padded cubby and cracked them onto the blade, tossing the shells into river. The end of the shovel, two eggs quivering on it, was then inserted into the firebox. As the eggs fried, Colin cut two thick slices from a loaf of bread.

When he turned back to check on the eggs, he saw **Calliope**, wrapped in wool blanket, leaning against the port side of the boiler.

"You're..." Colin began, still focused on his breakfast "a hallucination."

"Am I now?" **Calliope** asked, tiredly, fidgeting with the frayed edges of her blanket.

"Yes. You are."

"Then what does the make you?"

"Well, according to that book I could be any number of things..." He gestured to the book he'd bought last night: *Introductory Psychology*. "Schizophrenic, psychotic, schizoaffective, manic-depressive... there's probably more. I'm not done reading."

"I'd rather be your friend than a hallucination, and wouldn't you rather be a Post Pilot than a lunatic?"

"It doesn't much matter what we'd rather be, that's what we are. It's all in there - definitive."

"And what does it suggest you do?"

Colin picked up the book and leafed through it until he found a rough answer: "Let's see, alright, 'talk therapy, medication, and possibly hospitalization.'"

"So, carrying those forward to nowadays, nothing, nothing at all. Also, you're burning those eggs." **Calliope** replied.

Colin yanked the shovel out of the firebox, rescuing the eggs. “Well, not entirely nothing. I could talk to somebody.”

“Who, a bartender? Not to say he’d understand, but if you kept buying he’d listen, or have you run out of town. You can’t go telling people you’re insane, Colin. Besides, you’ve got me to talk to.”

“No, that’s different, if I talk to you that’s gives you more power.”

Calliope sat down next to him. “Me? Powerful? Oh no. No. If I’m of your mind then I’m just as broken as you are. Wouldn’t it be better, like with the suicides, wouldn’t it better if we were just broken together.”

“This will only get worse. That’s what it says. These mental diseases are progressive. I just see you now, but what if I see a rocks where there aren’t rocks, or clear where there are rocks, and sink you? What if I start talking to all sorts of people who aren’t there? What if I do it in towns and somebody sees it? No. No. I’ve got to plug this leak before I sink.”

“But why? Colin. I know you know how to swim.”