

Mountain: *A Cautionary Tale*

Episodes 1 – 26 of a Serialized Novel by D. P. Benjamin



For further episodes not included in this series, the entire story is available in two volumes in paperback and e-book formats on Amazon.com as well as the Barnes & Noble online bookstore or through the author's website bookstore at benjaminauthor.com

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Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 1: Rowboat

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From “The Count of Monte Cristo” and “A Tale of Two Cities” in the 1800s to works like “In Cold Blood” and “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” in the mid-20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serials. The following is the first episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope our readers enjoy this limited weekly segment. Each episode can also be found at HighCountryShopper.com as they are released each week.

“Mountain: A Cautionary Tale” is an alternative history covering the period 1936-1941. The story is a mystery with elements of the paranormal. It’s the saga of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and a colossal enterprise gone terribly wrong. Seeking to blunt the impact of a nation-wide economic depression, a U.S. government public works project employs thousands to erect an enormous artificial mountain range on the Colorado/Kansas border. Many unemployed find work with the project. Circumstances draw others there. Threatened by a wealthy recluse who takes possession of the mountain and its resources, a handful of misfits foment a revolution as America is drawn into the global chaos of World War II.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

*Smoky Hill Reservoir, Kansas
September 22, 1936*

Everyone felt the earthquake. The tremor rolled through town at dusk. Dogs howled, dishes fell, and windows fractured. It interrupted the film at The Bijou, and it shook the Monte Vista Tavern. Drinks were spilled and bottles shattered, and the bartender had just finished sweeping the debris when he looked up to see Gideon Dixon standing in the doorway.

Gideon had felt the earthquake too, and he knew something about its power because he’d just come from the Smoky Hill Reservoir where he was in his rowboat floating on the water—until he wasn’t.

The old fisherman’s coveralls were caked with mud, and he trailed a grimy track across the wooden floor. A battered hat perched precariously on his ancient head, its floppy brim only partly corralling the chaos of his snowy-white locks. He reached the bar, mounted a stool, paid for a beer, and drank it slowly as a dozen patrons surrounded him and urged him to speak.

“What say, old son?”

“Where you been, Dix?”

“Did you fall in?”

The tavern crowd continued to clamor until the old fisherman finished his beer, swiveled his stool around, leaned both elbows on the bar, and told his tale. Soon people on both sides of the mountain were repeating the story.

Early that morning, before first light, Gideon had driven his wagon along the dirt road which led to Smoky Hill Reservoir. The road was a luxury. Once the way had been no more than a cow path—a narrow, meandering track leading, not to the reservoir, but to the free-running Smoky Hill River itself. For years he’d traveled this direction to reach the river. Then three years ago everything changed.

First the road was widened, then the way was barred for six months as massive trucks and heavy machinery arrived to carry workers and material. The aim of this frenetic activity was to reach the river. Their mission, to construct a dam.

When the dam was completed and the



river water impounded, a fence appeared, its daunting razor-wire stretching across the prairie, east and west for miles, leaving only the north-south road unobstructed.

Next came the signposts.

That morning he’d kept track of his progress along the roadway by counting the newly erected poles. A week ago, there’d been three poles, spaced equal distances apart, tall slivers of newly minted metal, set in concrete. Now there were six, and someone had bolted a square of plywood to each pole. There were as yet no lettered signs, although Gideon could guess what was coming.

It was, he surmised, only a matter of time before the road would be lined with “no trespassing” notices. Which meant one thing. Sooner or later the gap in the barbed wire fence would be filled by a locked gate and his access to the water would be barred. But that morning, he reached the fence and found that a gate had yet to be installed. Steering his team through the opening, the determined old timer started down toward the reservoir, wondering what he would do when the signs were up and the gate was padlocked.

Reaching the water’s edge, the old man pulled his rowboat from the wagon, slid the modest vessel over short grass to the water’s edge, and anchored it in the shallows. He unhitched the team and led them to a meadow where he hobbled both mules and left them to graze beneath a stand of willows. It was not yet daylight when he hoisted anchor and set off.

Gideon wasn’t a young man. His hair was no longer dark. His beard was sparse and white, but his back and arms and legs remained strong, and he rowed expertly and with the kind of youthful enthusiasm that only the anticipation of a day spent fishing can muster. Pointing his rowboat toward the rising sun, he used both oars to scull smoothly over the placid water. He was rowing for a place he knew well, a secret spot near a point of rocks. Beneath the rocks flowed the hidden waters of the Smoky Hill River—its concealed channel roiling deep below the surface and still untamed. Forming the life blood of the reservoir, the river had gouged a sweeping curve into the malleable Kansas mud and shaped an underwater cove, a secret place where catfish congregated in the cool moving water.

At the rocks, Gideon feathered his stroke, let the boat glide to a stop, seated the oars, and dropped anchor, playing out all twenty feet of line. The air was quiet, the water tranquil. The line twitched as the anchor dug bottom. The anchor bounced once—twice—then held as the boat swung gently, tugged at the line, and drew it taut. All sure signs that he was where he wanted to be, on the right spot, directly above the

unseen current. The Smoky Hill River had once flowed freely, its unbridled progress meandering through willow trees, coursing over sandbars and across mud wallows, carving a deep, natural waterway in the short grass prairie. But the mountain people took away his river, the river where he’d fished for sixty years with cane poles and seines and throw lines baited with chicken guts. They’d taken away the river where he’d hauled in catfish as long as your arm, fat as barn owls. The mountain people had dammed the Smoky Hill. They dammed his river and he damned them.

“Smoky Hill water was needed for their mountain,” they said.

“River weren’t no account anyways,” they said.

“Naught but a muddy creek,” they said.

Gideon cursed their troublesome hides, and he was spoiling for a fight.

But his wife calmed her volatile husband and asked, “Why not fish the reservoir—why not fish the big water?”

So, Gideon built a fine little rowboat following blueprints clipped from a magazine, and he worked his lathe to carve two stout oars with wide blades. He used his forge to fashion iron oarlocks and pins. Sitting in the boat in the front yard, the untrained sailor flailed the oars until he learned to row and, on the bow, he painted the name “Elisabeth” in honor of his smart and faithful wife who’d not lived long enough to see him launch the rowboat.

On the morning she died, he’d been awake for hours, pressing a cool cloth to her forehead. At sunrise her fever broke, and she opened her eyes. Enclosing her delicate white hand in his rough suntanned fingers, he promised he would think of her every day. When the dawn birds began to sing, she felt the sun on her face and turned toward the open window.

“Is it Spring?” she asked, and then she was gone.

Even when her graceful fingers grew rigid and cold, he remained at her side in the cane chair, in their bedroom, holding her hand. He held on until the neighbors arrived with the pine coffin and lifted Elisabeth up and lowered her in. He bowed his head and flinched with each hammer blow as they nailed the lid and he stood in the doorway when they carried her to the buckboard.

It was ten miles to Smoky Hill Cemetery, a hot morning, unseasonably warm for April, everyone said so. The others rode, but he followed on foot as the mules plodded uphill over the rutted road. The rough journey caused her coffin to bump side-to-side against the wagon’s wooden walls—much like the motion of his rowboat sculling crab-wise over the big water.

Thinking back to that April day, years

ago, when he’d walked behind Elisabeth’s lonesome coffin, Gideon sighed.

God, he thought, how I miss that sweet woman and, more than any day spent fishing, I’d rather be by her side than all the tea in China.

It was a phrase Elisabeth had once uttered, and he wasn’t certain he was remembering it correctly. But, recalling the advice of his dear-departed wife as his rowboat floated beneath the September sky, he removed his hat and looked straight up in the direction of Heaven.

“I’m here, Dear-Heart, and fishin’ the big water. Just like you said I should. Fishin’ and thinkin’ of you every day and always. Amen.”

Alone on the water, he sat for a moment while the boat rocked gently. Elisabeth was three years gone. He leaned over and looked lovingly at the bow where he’d painted her name. He sniffed, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and replaced his hat.

While dawn blossomed, bathing sky and water in a vivid patina of red and gold, he set up two fishing poles with both lines hugging the bottom. He might catch a bass down there, but it was the deep-water channel cats which he coveted most, and he salivated at the thought of cornbread-battered catfish frying on his cabin stove.

When Elisabeth died, he’d sold the house, retreated to the Kansas prairie, and taken up residence in an old sod cabin. The roof leaked and the west wall was crumbling, but he welcomed the distraction of making repairs. With two small windows, a stout door, sleeping bench, wood stove, rough table and chair, and no electric lights, the single room was rustic and snug as a cave. It suited him. A bruin’s den was just what he and his heavy heart and his irascible temper required. After a month spent brooding in his isolated cabin, he’d plucked up his courage, loaded up his rowboat, and gone out to fish the big water every week for going on three years.

Three years, Gideon sighed as his thoughts returned to the present.

Elisabeth was gone, their former home abandoned, nothing left but memories—memories and fishing—and that day the fishing was slow.

By noon it was sweltering and he had nothing to show for his morning except two diminutive catfish swimming in his creel bucket. Not nearly enough for dinner, so he let the small fish go, pulled anchor, and rowed further until he reached the middle of the wide reservoir. The bottom there was too deep for his anchor, but untroubled by current or wind, the rowboat bobbed tamely in place while he re-set the poles.

At three o’clock, the bite was on, and he caught five more squirming catfish, all keepers. As the afternoon wore on, no clouds troubled the sky and the autumn sun continued to shine brightly on the man in the boat in the middle of the water. He ate an ordinary sandwich and a fine apple and pulled up three beers which were cooling over the side.

After emptying the third bottle, he belched contentedly and reeled in his lines. The rowboat rocked rhythmically as a warm breeze began to blow. Growing drowsy, Gideon pulled on an oar to put the wind astern. Then he seated the oars, tucked himself beneath the rowing bench, and stretched out. With his head in the bow on a coil of damp anchor line and his feet pointing toward the stern, he tilted his hat down and closed his eyes, content to let the wind carry the boat. With any luck it would blow him back to his mules.

The wind blew toward the west that day. Years ago, when the prairie was a level expanse, it had blown the other direction. The mountain changed that.

The old man tipped his hat back, opened one eye, and peered at the pile. There’d been no reason to look at it earlier. For three years the thing had simply been

there, a fixture, like the prairie, like the sky. Its official name was The Kansas Steel Range, but to Gideon it was ‘the pile’ or if he felt charitable, ‘the mountain.’

The disagreeable mountain was ten miles beyond the reservoir, squatting on the prairie, stretching across the eastern horizon. Gideon had watched it grow in stages.

Over the course of many months, tons of scrap metal had been piled upon the prairie to create a vast artificial mound. Then the mound was shaped into a broad-based pyramid, low at the fringes and high in the center where its most distinctive and most contrived feature, a single silver peak, pierced the clear blue sky.

Because of the mountain and that unnatural eyesore’s profane desire to create the reservoir, the Smoky Hill River no longer ran free. Under the influence of that unholy pile, the wind blew west. Now, not content with stifling the river, reversing the wind, suffocating the prairie, and blocking the sky, the mountain folk were putting up signs.

Some folks called it progress. Some said the prairie had been tamed, but Gideon doubted it. He believed the prairie—though scarred—would someday reclaim its domain. He’d seen it around his cabin. Turn your back, let down your guard, and the prairie was nibbling away.

Visualizing the mountain’s demise, the old man closed his eyes.

Three hours later, Gideon Dixon awoke to find that the big water had mysteriously disappeared. He must have slept soundly for he neither felt the tremor that rattled the town nor sensed the pull of the swirling vortex which gripped the once placid reservoir. While he slept, Smoky Hill Reservoir had drained completely away, grounding the rowboat and stranding him far from shore in a vast mud pit. By the time he slogged back to his wagon and retrieved his mules, night owls were stirring, and the distant peak of the Steel Range reflected silvery light beneath the autumn moon.

Gideon carried his gear and the catfish. He left the boat.



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 2: Morning Glories

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By DON BENJAMIN

The Kansas Steel Range
September 23, 1936

At midnight, deep in the bowels of the Kansas Steel Range, the telephone rang. “Captain Hershel?” the voice asked. “Speaking,” the sleepy man responded. “Be advised,” the voice continued. “Message follows.”

There were a series of clicks. After a pause, Hershel received orders to assemble a crew, obtain two, fifty-pound boxes of dynamite from the Mountain armory, load men and explosives onto a truck, and proceed with haste to Smoky Hill Reservoir.

Proceed with haste in the dark with dynamite, Hershel thought as he hung up the telephone, that’s a fine way to run a railroad.

He telephoned the motor pool, the armory, and the crew barracks and got things rolling. Then he made coffee and thought of his father. A railroad brakeman all his life, his father used to get up early, make the morning coffee, and entertain his son with the same irreverent poem:

I’m not allowed to run the train,
Can’t steer or ring the bell.
But let the damn thing jump the tracks,
And see who catches hell!

Smiling at the memory, he carried his cup to the bathroom, turned on the tap, and urinated while it ran. It took time for the hot water to reach his billet deep inside the Mountain. After shaving, he showered, then wiped steam from the bathroom mirror and regarded himself as he combed his thinning hair. Captain Malcolm Hershel was a stout man, fit for his age, graying at the temples, with a trim mustache. A veteran of The Great War, he was a retired army officer, respected by his men who continued to address him by his former rank.

Within an hour, he’d supervised the loading of the dynamite and joined his crew as they began their journey. Their route surprised no one. Like everyone else in the Mountain, Hershel had felt the tremor yesterday and, like everyone else, he’d heard the rumor that a subterranean fissure had opened up and emptied Smoky Hill Reservoir. The river was gone too. Hershel was no geologist, but that sounded like baloney. A genuine earthquake might cause the river and the reservoir to disappear. But the modest tremor which rattled dishes in his stark bachelor billet was unlikely to have caused enough damage, subterranean or otherwise, to suck a lively river dry



and drain a hundred-acre lake. Whatever had caused the vibration, he suspected it wasn’t natural. Something else was going on and that something else was the source of the baloney.

Though he had orders to hurry, the curious captain halted the truck on a bluff overlooking their destination. It was a clear night and the gibbous moon was riding high. From the lofty bluff, Hershel should see the moon’s reflection on the surface of the distant reservoir. And yet, below in the moonlight, he saw only a dull gloss of prairie grass and an enormous black hole.

So, he thought, the rumors are true.

The reservoir was empty, which was unusual. But the fact that the big water was gone failed to explain why the captain—accompanied by a rookie driver, two dozen roughnecks, and a truckload of explosives—had been sent out here in the middle of the night.

The hastily assembled midnight crew had been ordered to drive to the southern campground. The question of why they’d been dispatched remained unresolved and, whatever the reason, Hershel suspected he wasn’t going to like the answer.

Forty minutes later, when the truck reached the isolated campground, the captain had only to see who was waiting there to have his answer. Clearly, they’d been summoned to this isolated spot to do something disagreeable.

As the advancing truck bounced down the steep access road, the vehicle headlights illuminated a cluster of men waiting below. When the truck bumped to a halt, Hershel could discern four figures. Two were burly men who wore uniforms of the Mountain Regiment. The other two were dressed in matching gray suits and these he recognized as De Soto Valdez, his unctuous rival, and Petterson, Old Man Hendrix’s oily surrogate. The soldiers wore holstered pistols. Petterson held a lantern. Valdez had a knife.

“Rogue’s gallery,” muttered Hershel.

“Huh?” asked the driver.

“Never mind. Keep the headlights on,” Hershel ordered.

The captain picked up his oversized canvas bag, wishing he’d remembered to bring his revolver. Then he opened his door and started to climb out of the high-wheeled truck.

“Turn off your damn lights!” shouted Petterson.

“Captain?” asked the driver.

“You heard the man,” said Hershel. His voice reflected the measured calm of a field officer, a tone designed to reassure his men that—despite appearances—their commander remained in charge. Stepping down, the captain clutched his bag and made his way across the uneven ground, halting just short of the waiting men.

“You’re late,” said Petterson.

“Says who?” asked Hershel. He ignored Petterson and grudgingly acknowledged the presence of the Mountain’s other explosives expert. “Valdez,” he intoned the name in two extended syllables like a physician describing a fatal disease.

“Captain,” said Valdez. The arrogant man had sheathed his knife, but his greeting was coldly formal and it did not escape Hershel’s notice that Valdez made a point of starting, then suddenly failing, to touch the edge of his broad-brimmed hat. It was a fleeting gesture—perhaps a subtle insult—the movement made all the more bizarre by the deformity of the man’s hand.

Missing digits, Hershel thought. An occupational hazard, no doubt.

“You understand your work needs to be completed before daylight,” Petterson said.

“Those are my orders,” Hershel replied as he glanced over his shoulder. “And here we are.” Hershel’s crew had climbed out of the canopied truck bed and descended the ground to cluster in a group behind their captain. For a heartbeat the two groups stared at one another.

“Your move,” Hershel grinned.

“Your men need to go with my guards and pick up lanterns. My men will show you where,” Petterson said.

“Follow the soldiers,” Hershel told his crew.

When everyone else was out of earshot, Petterson led Hershel and Valdez aside. The three walked ten yards into the unoccupied campground to sit at a rough wooden table.

“So, you called us out here for a picnic?” asked Hershel.

While Hershel’s men were put to work filling and trimming lanterns, Petterson turned up the wick on his own lantern and whispered cryptic instructions. There were four huge pipes in the middle of the reservoir and their boss, Old Man Hendrix, wanted those pipes destroyed. Petterson laid out a map of the pipe locations and a diagram of a single pipe and said nothing more. Throughout Petterson’s presentation, Valdez, who’d taken out his knife again and seemed to be carving something into the tabletop, remained silent.

“Are all these so-called pipes the same?” Hershel asked as he squinted at the documents. Clouds had obscured the moon and he could barely make out the blueprints by lantern glow. “And, for pity’s sake, how about shedding a bit more light on the subject?”

“All the pipes are identical and, as for light, the Old Man’s orders are to use lanterns only,” Petterson replied.

“Flames and dynamite, that’s a fine idea,” Hershel muttered.

“Pardon?” Petterson asked.

“Reinforced concrete I see,” Hershel studied the diagram, his uncompromising tone suggesting he had no intention of repeating himself.

“A problem?” asked Valdez without looking up.

“Nothing enough dynamite won’t solve and I brought plenty.” They’d told Hershel to bring two boxes. He’d loaded twice as many, just in case. “You never know, right?”

Neither man responded.

“I don’t suppose,” Hershel continued as he rolled up the documents and placed them in his canvas bag, “you’d care to tell me the reason.”

“What reason?” asked Petterson.

“The reason for blowing up the barn door after the horse is gone.”

Petterson blinked. Apparently, the analogy was lost on him.

“You have your orders,” Petterson growled as he stood up and returned to his truck. Valdez remained behind, his grinning, pock-marked face glowing in the light of Petterson’s abandoned lantern.

Hershel watched Petterson go, then he turned to Valdez.

“Is this your mess I’m cleaning up?” asked the captain.

“What do you think?” asked Valdez.

“I think one of your nitro charges set off in bedrock yesterday felt nothing like an earthquake.”

“To you maybe,” Valdez said, his craggy features twisting to form a hideous grin.

“And I think your fake earthquake had nothing to do with sucking the Smoky Hill River underground and emptying the reservoir.”

“You interest me,” said Valdez. “Anything else?”

“I think these so-called pipes are morning glory spillways.”

“Of course. Spillways for the flood controls, no?” grinned Valdez.

“Flood controls,” Hershel scoffed. “You want to control a flood, you put your spillway on a forty-foot tower so when the lake rises your emergency outlet is at the top, where it belongs. Do you see any towers?”

“No towers,” Valdez agreed.

“So, I think there’s only one reason to put a cluster of gaping morning glory spillways at the bottom of a reservoir.”

“And that reason is?” Valdez prompted.

“I think they’re there to steal the water.”

“And I think, amigo,” Valdez grinned, “that you think too much.”

“Force of habit for those of us with half a brain,” Hershel continued and he noticed Valdez stopped grinning. He also noticed that the diminutive, but wiry man, had yet to sheathe his knife. “Why do you suppose the Old Man has chosen me for this job instead of your extremely talented self?” the captain wondered.

“You are too kind,” said Valdez as he stood languidly up, folded his knife, and sheathed the weapon. Straightening his tie, the unhurried man adjusted his suit cuffs. “Perhaps Senor Hendrix felt this was a job for a field man.”

“Perhaps,” Hershel noted. “And perhaps the truth is you don’t want to get your fancy gray suit dirty.”

“Hasta la vista,” said Valdez. “On my way to Heaven, may I meet you coming down.”

“Likewise,” the captain grinned.

Hershel watched Valdez’s receding form until the small man’s outline vanished in the shadowy darkness. Then he picked up the lantern and expanded its pool of light in order to read what the crazy old devil had carved on the tabletop:

Lo que la sangre desca, lo toma.

Except for casual phrases, Hershel’s Spanish was rusty, but he’d seen the sentiment before and—although its meaning continued to elude him—he recognized the literal translation:

What the blood desires, he takes.

Shrugging, the captain gathered up the lantern and his bag, then crossed the picnic ground to organize his crew. He had no more contact with the four rogues. After the soldiers unloaded the last of the

lanterns and extra tins of kerosene, they joined Peterson and Valdez in their truck and drove away. Hershel was glad to see them go. The last thing he needed was the Old Man's toadies hanging about, especially if those unwelcome trespassers were armed.

Petterson's information had been deceptive and mostly useless. One glance at the map had told Hershel what needed to be done and his conversation with Valdez had confirmed why. He and his crew were expected to destroy evidence that the Mountain was stealing water—a grievous sin in a region where water remained a scarce commodity. For a fleeting second, the captain entertained the idea of disobeying his orders. But he suppressed his scruples in favor of seizing the opportunity to accomplish what Valdez seemed incapable of doing. He had no doubt that, where the task of destroying evidence was concerned, Valdez had been the Old Man's first choice. But it was equally apparent that the pompous rascal had been unable to work out how to find the targets in the dark. So, the Mountain leadership had been forced to call the clever captain.

Knowing his success would annoy Valdez, not to mention rankling Petterson, Hershel pressed forward with his plan. The map indicated that the pipes—he corrected himself—the spillways were in the middle of the reservoir. The openings would be clustered about a central point and the key to finding them was to locate that center. Valdez knew nothing about improvising in the field or he would have realized the solution. But there was the difference: Valdez was not a field man and Hershel was.

As soon as Petterson and the others were out of sight, Hershel dispatched his truck with orders to drive around the reservoir and drop a man with a lantern at three key points. While the truck made its rounds, the captain gathered the remaining crew in a circle, explained his plan, answered questions, and issued further orders. He told them all they needed to know, but purposely omitted any mention of his spillway suspicions.

As far as his men were concerned, their mission was to unclog some pipes. As his crew made ready, Hershel spent twenty minutes double-checking the contents of his canvas bag and reexamining Petterson's documents until the truck returned. Then he carried his bag and a lit lantern to the edge of the mud pit which had once held the waters of Smoky Hill Reservoir. He directed his steps toward the flagpole he knew would be there. Reaching the expected pole, he put his bag down, then raised and lowered the lantern several times while staring intently at the opposite bank.

"Come on, Roswell," he muttered.

"You need me, Captain?" asked Roswell who was standing beside him.

"Sorry, Joe, you're on this side of course. I meant your brother."

"No harm, sir. Even our ma couldn't tell me and Roland apart in such a darkness."

Joe Roswell was right. The clear sky had vanished behind a suffocating layer of clouds. It was two o'clock in the morning and undeniably dark. No moon, no stars, a black sky, an empty lake.

"Show your light, man!" Hershel shouted. There was no chance that Roland Roswell on the far bank could hear, but Hershel shouted anyway until, at last, a light appeared in the far distance.

"There, Captain!" the nearby brother yelled.

"Good!" said Hershel. "Now, let's get ours up."



Mountain — A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 3: Mud

From the *Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the first episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope our readers enjoy this limited weekly segment. Each episode can also be found at HighCountryShopper.com as they are released each week.

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By DON BENJAMIN
*Smoky Hill Reservoir, Kansas
September 23, 1936*

Joe Roswell knotted the halyard to the lantern's handle then hauled away, carefully guiding the glowing lantern up the flagpole. Captain Hershel watched until their lantern was in position. Then he turned his attention to the dark reservoir, scanning the distant shoreline in all directions, looking for the other lights. Roland's light was directly across from them on the north shore and there should be two more, one east and one west. Joe was searching too and he offered his binoculars to his captain, but Hershel waved them away. For his plan to work each lantern burning atop its flagpole must be visible with the naked eye. So, he peered into the darkness a moment longer to be certain that all three distant lanterns were readily discernible.

When Hershel was sure of his dispersed lights, he summoned his search crew.

"Markers are up, men! To me now, quick as you can!"

Four men hurried forward and knelt beside their captain. Each man wore a miner's helmet, the wick unlit. The lead man carried a lighted lantern. The next two clutched stout branches freshly cut from shoreline willows. The last man had four unlit lanterns packed in canvas bags, along with two wrapped tightly in place across his chest and two more secured around his waist.

"Joe has walked out several yards already and the mud is not deep." Hershel informed them. "But prod with your poles as you go. And Bill, trust the others to do the prodding, you keep your head up and navigate. Jimbo, mind those lanterns, it won't do to break one."

"Yes, Captain."
"Now, Bill, we're counting on you. Keep this flagpole and the far one straight across



lined up as you go forward. You'll be going south to north, understand? Go straight until the east and west lights. See them? There and there. Keep going straight until they align with your shoulders. That'll be your center-point. Then everyone light-up your helmets and work together in circles until you hit pay-dirt. And remember, be careful. Those pipes you're seeking are deep and we don't have time to be fishing you out. Any questions?"

"No, Captain," the men answered in unison.

"Good lads," said Hershel. "Go fast and go careful. And good hunting!"

Hershel watched his men move swiftly in single file down the steep bank and into the mud. Instantly, their shapes were lost against the murky background of the empty reservoir. Only the intermittent flash of their single lantern marked their progress and soon that vacillating beacon was lost in the darkness as the line of advancing men blocked their leading light. When the lantern disappeared, Hershel smiled. Not seeing their lantern was a good thing. It meant they were maintaining their heading, keeping their line in good order, and going straight. Satisfied, the captain sat down, leaned his back against the flagpole, stared up at the glowing lantern, closed his eyes, and prayed to God to look after his men and that Petterson's map was accurate.

If the map was correct, the spillways were clustered around a central point and the key to locating that center was the alignment of the flagpoles. There were four flagpoles placed at exact intervals around the reservoir bank. To the casual observer their purpose might seem obvious, but Hershel doubted if the poles had been placed there out of patriotic zeal. They were markers plain and simple, or at least they had better be. He was counting on the accuracy of the markers, the native wisdom of his men, and the shallowness of the mud. Otherwise, this job was going to be impossible.

Hershel hadn't been part of the army of

workers who constructed Smoky Hill Reservoir but, like other new recruits in the Mountain's Science and Engineering Unit, he'd been obliged to read about the work in project reports. In most respects it was a classic operation. The Smoky Hill River had been temporarily diverted and project bulldozers had set to work scraping the Kansas prairie down and down and down until they reached a layer of sand and gravel, a kind of native cement. Once this deep and relatively solid lakebed had been established, the dam was erected, the Smoky Hill was returned to its original channel, and the reservoir rapidly began to fill.

Hershel had read the project reports as a recruit and he was certain those reports had made no mention of any extracurricular pipes. As soon as Petterson handed him the diagrams and Hershel saw the telltale funnels extending down below the lakebed, he understood. The standard method of flood control was to build a tall hollow intake tower with an outlet at the top. A top outlet would siphon off excess water and prevent the reservoir from cresting the dam.

Instead of installing the usual device, Mountain workers had drilled through the solid lakebed and inserted four wide circular morning glory spillways at the bottom. The concrete tubes forming the spillways were wide and round at the top and tapered at the bottom, resembling funnel-shaped morning glory flowers. The four broad outlets were positioned at the center of a concentrically sloping lakebed and they straddled the river channel to generate maximum drainage. Opening two spillways would rapidly swallow the river. Opening all four would take everything else.

It had been a long morning and there was still much to do. Hershel kept his eyes closed and was soon asleep.

While he slept, he dreamt that his plan had worked. He dreamt that the men had used the lantern markers to find the central

axis. Locating the center using the lantern markers was an exercise in basic orienteering and a bit inexact, but he was confident the men could do it. He dreamt that from the central axis the men had explored the lake bed in ever widening circles. A twenty-foot-wide concrete funnel was not exactly a needle in a haystack and, far from missing the spillways, the searchers would be fortunate not to tumble into one. He dreamt that the men had been cautious, that they'd used their probing sticks until their targets—four broad, deep depressions in the otherwise shallow mud—were discovered.

His men were out there following orders, searching in the dark for indentations in the mud. Hopefully they would accept the notion that their intended targets held nothing more than ordinary concrete pipe. His plan might work, if his men contained their curiosity and providing no one fell into a gaping glory hole.

Hershel muttered in his sleep. Joe Roswell, who sat on the bank nearby, thought he heard the word "glory" and presumed the captain was praying. In reality, Hershel's slumbering brain was beginning to dissect the morning's events. He focused on the picnic table. After a single glance at Petterson's documents, followed by his conversation with Valdez, Hershel knew one thing for certain: there'd been no earthquake. The river and the reservoir were gone, not because some mythical earthquake fissure had sucked them away, but because somebody, somewhere had deliberately opened the spillways. And the motive behind all this drama was the theft of water.

But why steal the water? And why the hell did Valdez carve his cryptic message on the tabletop?

The slumbering captain was turning these questions over in his dreaming mind when he was awakened by Joe's gentle nudge and the man's equally subtle announcement.

"Got 'em," he said



Mountain — A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 4: Setting Charges

From the Count of Monte Cristo and A Tale of Two Cities in the 1800s to works like In Cold Blood and Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the fourth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope our readers enjoy this limited weekly segment. Each episode can also be found at HighCountryShopper.com as they are released each week.

"Mountain: A Cautionary Tale" is an alternative history covering the period 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, the story is a mystery with elements of the paranormal. In Episode 3, a crew of men explored a muddy expanse in search of a hidden target. In today's episode, Captain Hershel deals with dynamite.

By DON BENJAMIN

Smoky Hill Reservoir, Kansas
September 23, 1936

Captain Hershel opened his eyes to see his determined searchers climbing wearily out of the mud and up the bank. Beyond the returning men he saw four points of light clustered around the middle of the reservoir, each point of light indicating a lantern, each lantern marking a target and, unbeknownst to the men, signifying a secret spillway. Thanks to Hershel's logic and the strong-willed obedience of his men, it'd taken less than an hour to locate all four targets.

Hershel sent the truck to retrieve the flagpole men. Then he assigned teams of four to carry dynamite boxes and shovels to each target. Each box contained raw, unfused dynamite—each stick individually wrapped in its own spark-proof covering. One man carried a lantern and two shovels, another pair conveyed one box apiece, and a fourth man carried a collection of blasting caps. Naturally, the lantern and the explosives were segregated from one another. Plus, for transporting purposes, dynamite and caps were to be kept strictly apart until each team's most experienced man combined them as a precursor to the coming pyrotechnics. As the assigned teams trundled into the mud, still others were dispatched with orders to erect their captain's sandbag shelter and place his detonation plunger inside.

Time advanced and when his crews were finished, it was Hershel's turn.

The captain ordered everyone into the truck. Then he shouldered his canvas bag and walked alone to the shoreline. The bag was heavy and the broad strap cut into his shoulder. It contained rolls of detonating cord, a handful of spare blasting caps, rope, extra canvas, and Petterson's map and diagram. Hershel didn't carry a lantern. It would be easy enough to follow the pathway his men had trampled through the mud. For a few heartbeats, he paused on the shore and peered forward into the darkness, committing to memory the spots where his men had left lanterns burning on the lakebed. As he studied the scene, memories cascaded into his thoughts.

Years of boredom and terror in the trenches of Belgium and France had pre-disposed the war-weary captain to circumspection. Haste spawned mistakes and mistakes were often redeemed in blood. Hershel had entered The Great War as a young man who was already cautious by nature.

That pitiless conflict had annihilated his comrades. Day after relentless day, soldiers who broke bread with him at dawn were dead by noon. Their faces became a blur, their names forgotten. The few who escaped the sudden slaughter of shrapnel and the cloying agony of gas were stalked and killed by disease.

The hourly spectacle of death refined Hershel's vigilance into something approaching purity. The captain had long ago

ceased to be governed by the ebb and flow of human emotion. His reactions had become intuitive. He appeared to be a person. He had, in fact, become an animal—testing the breeze, listening to the night, sniffing the air. Suppressing intellect, he was guided by instinct.

Returning his mind to the present, the captain stood stock-still, a frozen statue lingering on the reservoir's stranded shoreline, waiting as moments slid past, waiting until he was absolutely certain it was safe. At last, he surrendered to action and started toward the first lantern—trusting, as he advanced through the mud, that his men had heeded his orders to place their dynamite cargos far away from the lighted wicks. He'd sloshed twenty yards through the sucking mud when he became aware of a pungent odor and occasional crunching. He paused and then soldiered on, ignoring the unseen carpet of dead fish he was pulverizing with each step.

When he reached the first lantern, he raised and lowered the light to signal that he was in place. Then he heard an engine start and watched headlamp beams bounce over rough ground as the truck moved further up the bank. Hershel had ordered everyone a prudent distance away. Dynamiting was a tricky business. An errant spark, a puff of wind, a tank of gasoline, and things could quickly go terribly wrong. When he saw the truck stop and saw the headlamps switched off, the captain set to work.

The spillways were positioned just as the map depicted them: clustered around the middle of the Reservoir and nestled in a muddy depression about the size of a baseball infield. And, appropriately enough, just like infield bases, they were spaced an equal distance apart so their geometric arrangement made it a simple matter for Hershel to measure, cut, and splice four equal lengths of detonating cord to connect his charges.

He worked alone. This was standard military procedure. One man laid the charges and that man set them off. Working swiftly and skillfully, he slogged from site to site, connecting and playing out blasting cord, until he had implanted three targets with enough dynamite to reduce the hidden concrete spillways to dust. He was making good time until he arrived at the fourth target where he encountered something unexpected.

The first three targets had been muddy but otherwise unobstructed. The final target was different. Target number four was partially blocked by an abandoned rowboat—an unanticipated obstruction which was stuck in the mud precisely where he needed to place his final cache of dynamite. Unaware of the precision required, his men had placed their quota of dynamite a bit off target and no one had mentioned the boat. But why should they? Dead fish and abandoned boats were probably the most normal things they'd encountered out here in the dark.

Hershel tried, but there was no moving the boat. So, the resourceful captain knelt in the muck, scooped out a pocket underneath the hull, lined the pocket with canvas, and packed half the nearby dynamite into that space. Then he struggled to his feet, crossed the oars, strapped the remaining charges to the blades and handles, and left them resting on top of the problematic rowboat. It wasn't an ideal set-up and it wouldn't explode as efficiently as the other three charges, but it would do.

Connecting the detonator cord, the captain checked his watch and was about to tie off the charges and proceed to his shelter when he thought he heard a faint murmur of voices wafting across the lake-bed. Sound shouldn't carry that far. Nevertheless, he pivoted toward the spot and stared back toward the southern flagpole.

The darkness was complete. He could see nothing except the single elevated lantern, yet he was certain the men had dis-



obeyed his orders. He was certain the entire crew had left the safety of the truck and descended the hillside in order to return to the lakeshore. For a moment he wondered if they had moved closer out of concern for his safety.

Are they standing there to lend me moral support—albeit from several hundred feet away? He asked himself. Or are they merely curious?

Doubtless a combination of concern and curiosity had drawn the men to the shoreline and they had clustered closer to have a ringside seat. Probably they would never have a better chance to see a man blown up.

Regardless of their motives, Hershel had no time for further speculation. It was still dark, but finishing on time would be a near thing. Among the bizarre conditions attached to this weird assignment was the order that he must set off the charges and report to Hendrix in person before sunrise. He might just have time to do both, if he moved quickly.

The captain made his final splice, then spooled out thirty yards of detonator cord. He had just enough shock cord left to reach the sandbag shelter. The special cord was not exactly waterproof, but it was the best option in this wet mess. Unlike ordinary primer cord, the shock cord was a modern innovation. It was one of many novelties which the Mountain's fearless leader, Old Man Hendrix, famously conjured up whenever his scientists or engineers or carpenters ran across a problem they couldn't solve.

A rumor was floating around the Mountain that Hendrix—a known opportunist—had once worked as a federal patent clerk. In this position of trust, or so the rumors maintained, he'd exploited his situation by pinching thousands of pioneering ideas before they could be registered by their original inventors. Some believed the Old Man managed this by slightly altering an obscure element of each design, then manipulating the process to make certain

his application was processed ahead of the true owner's paperwork. Some believed Hendrix kept these stolen patents hidden away in a secret vault deep inside the Mountain. Unlike most of the gossip and mythology circulating around the Steel Range, the story of purloined patents was one rumor which Hershel believed.

Otherwise, Hershel had asked himself, how can one account for so many marvels?

Take, for example, the Mountain's efficient wind turbines. The devices were miles—or should he say kilowatts—ahead of contemporary machinery. Moreover, the Mountain Regiment was equipped with advanced flying gyro-copters and sophisticated weaponry which the captain had never encountered in any military arsenal. And then there was the shock cord—impervious to electrical current and radio waves and water resistant—an innovation about which Hershel's counterparts outside the Mountain knew nothing.

The captain's mind had begun to wander as he added a final row of sandbags to the top of his shelter and he chided himself for his inattention. A wandering mind was not ideal when one was about to blow something to kingdom come. He needed to refocus. So—as he'd done thousands of times during the Great War and hundreds of times during the uneasy peace which followed; as he'd done using the war's naked black powder and with peacetime's increasingly sophisticated dynamite—he took a deep breath and made ready by the numbers.

1. He split and stripped the shock cord.
2. He made certain the switch at the bottom of the plunger was in the off position.
3. He attached the cord to the plunger.
4. He pulled the plunger up to set the magneto spinning.
5. He reached down and turned the switch on.
6. He took a final look over the sandbags to make certain of his nearest charge.
7. He said a prayer, pushed the plunger down, and ducked.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 5: Report

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the fifth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering the period 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, the story is a mystery with elements of the paranormal. In **Episode 4**, Captain Hershel dealt with dynamite. In today's episode, the lord of Wolf Moon Manor demands answers from his exhausted subordinate.

By DON BENJAMIN

*Smoky Hill Reservoir, Kansas
September 23, 1936*

Captain Hershel's plunger ignited his blasting caps and colossal explosions sent debris hurtling skyward. Specks of pulverized concrete and atomized fragments of gelatinous mud and rotting fish filled the air above the Reservoir. Despite its magnitude, most of the chaos was invisible in the darkness, except for a twinkling canopy of smoldering embers which lingered for a heartbeat in the autumn air then vaporized.

Most of the unseen debris behaved as Hershel had intended it should. The greater part of the rubble flew straight up and fell straight back again to refill the blast craters. He'd laid four charges and had expected four vertical explosions. The blasts met his expectations, with one exception: he failed to anticipate that the nearest charge would rupture sideways and demolish his shelter.

The horizontal burst had been unexpected and, as Hershel lay in the wreckage of smoldering sandbags, the captain found time to reflect on his miscalculation. The highly trained explosives expert remained prone, taking inventory of fingers and toes, arms and legs, and listening to the shouts of men as they rushed toward him across the empty lakebed. His head ached, his nose bled, but his mind was clear and it held a single thought which was:

This, my boy, is what comes of laying charges in the dark.

Hershel was pulled from the wreckage, apparently uninjured, but stunned and completely drenched in wet brown muck. Someone handed him his mud-caked hat and what remained of his ubiquitous canvas bag and two men helped him back to the truck.

Miles away, on the outskirts of Sharon Springs, Kansas, the lord of Wolf Moon Manor was pacing. He was uncharacteristically restless, strangely agitated. The report from Hershel was overdue. It was bad enough that Valdez had balked at the assignment, a delay which jeopardized the

entire operation. He looked at the clock. It was nearly dawn. For a third time he sat anxiously down and telephoned the Sharon Springs dispatcher and for a third time he received the same response.

"Sorry, sir. No report and still no sign of Captain Hershel."

The irritated man was tempted to hurl the instrument across the room but he checked himself. What had become of his legendary tranquility? Abusing the telephone would accomplish nothing. Hershel's report would come when it came and not before. Feeling calmer, Glenn Solomon Hendrix, former Acting-Secretary of the United States Department of the Interior and present Director of the Kansas Steel Range Project, lightly cradled the receiver and started to pour himself another drink. But the snifter was empty, so he stood up, crossed to the bar, and refilled it. The hall clock struck five. A knock sounded at the library door.

"Come," Hendrix instructed.

His manservant Louis entered. "Captain Hershel, sir, he—"

"Show the blackheart in," interrupted Hendrix.

"Which blackheart, sir?"

"Hershel."

"Shall I tell the others to wait?"

"Throw the others out. I want Hershel only. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Moments later, Hershel was ushered in. He was covered in mud. He held a battered hat.

"You're late," said Hendrix. He stood at the bar with his back to the captain.

"Sorry, sir. No excuse."

"Report."

When Hershel hesitated, Hendrix grew impatient. "Are you injured?"

"No, sir."

Hendrix turned to regard his visitor. The tardy man looked a mess and an ugly bruise was beginning to discolor his cheek and the swelling had nearly closed one eye. Hershel was ex-military, an intelligent tactician and a clear thinker, a decisive field commander, respected by those he led. At the moment, however, this so-called "captain" was not in the field. Others may think of Hershel as a leader of men, but just now Hendrix considered him nothing more than an underling being called to account by his chief.

Hershel was exhausted and freezing and still in shock from the lakebed explosions. Though arriving late, he'd hoped for a better reception. He gazed longingly at the crackling fireplace and the comfortable chairs arranged nearby. Involuntarily he leaned toward the fire and a glob of mud slipped from his hat and onto the library rug.

"If you think I'm going to ask you to sit down, you're sadly mistaken," Hendrix growled. "Let's have your damn report and

quickly."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"Success, sir."

"Destroyed?"

"Yes, sir."

"No traces?"

"No, sir."

"Witnesses?"

"None, sir."

"You are certain of that?"

"Absolutely."

"And your men suspect nothing?" Hendrix raised an eyebrow.

"No, sir." And before Hendrix could ask, the captain added, "Absolutely."

"Good. Now be so kind as to get your filthy carcass off my rug and out of my house."

"Yes, sir."

As the captain passed into the hallway, Louis arrived with mop and broom.

"Never mind that now," said Hendrix.

"And I'm not to be disturbed."

"Very good, sir."

The instant Louis departed, his master placed the snifter on his desk, hurried across the room, and locked the hallway door. Then he crossed to the window and peered out. Below in the moonlight he could make out a procession of figures, several men walking down the Manor's broad driveway with Hershel bringing up the rear. To Hendrix's critical eye this ragged formation made the erstwhile captain seem less a leader of men and more like a shepherd.

"Typical," Hendrix sniffed. And, in that moment, he decided.

Hershel's men were simple souls who could be trusted to believe what they were told and forget the rest. If Hershel said these men knew nothing, it was probably true. Hershel was incapable of deceit and that was a problem. Even now, as Hershel tarried behind the others, he seemed to signal a separation between what his men did not know and what their captain suspected. By this time tomorrow, the men would be going about their business, not questioning what they'd been asked to do, but not Hershel. The inquisitive captain would be unable to let things rest.

Watching Hershel amble down the Manor's broad driveway, seemingly lost in thought as he trailed his men, Hendrix was certain the clear-thinking captain was already turning the morning's events over and over in that logical head of his. So be it. Unlike his crew and driver who would be spared, Hershel would have to be silenced. That would be a simple matter and moreover more efficient. A use could always be found for a gaggle of muscled men, far easier to sacrifice a single thinker. When it was light, Hendrix would telephone Petterson and make arrangements. Hershel's work was risky. It would be easy to arrange an accident.

With a final glance at the retreating men, Hendrix closed the curtains.

Far below, in the long driveway, Hershel had been thinking and following his men when he glanced back at the Manor and noticed the library curtains being closed.

Typical, the captain thought. The Old Man had been watching. He was always watching.

Alone in his room, Hendrix returned to his desk, sat down, refilled his glass, unlocked a drawer, and extracted a folder. He closed the drawer, leaving the key in the lock, laid the folder on the desktop, switched on the goose-neck lamp, and put on his spectacles. Reaching for his glass, he took a drink, sat the glass aside, and opened the folder. It contained a single typewritten page. He picked up the receiver and instructed the operator to connect him with the radio station. As the extension rang, he positioned the folder so as to be ready to read from the typewritten page.

Hershel and the others continued down the driveway toward the dirt road where the truck waited. By the time they reached it, rain was falling and a cold wind was blowing. While the men found places in the truck's cargo bed, Hershel was only too glad to climb into the front seat and accept a blanket proffered by the driver.

"What goes on up there in the big house?" the driver asked.

"No idea," said Hershel. "I'm just the dynamite man. Nobody tells me anything. Let's go. I want out of these clothes."

"Yes, sir," said the driver and the truck lurched forward. Hershel had no desire for conversation, but the driver continued talking. "Now, ain't that mornin' sky a grand sight?" the driver asked.

The sun was rising, but the captain didn't care. Hershel closed his eyes. His men had pulled him from the rubble, driven him to the Manor, walked with him up the long driveway, and waited while he went inside. He'd been stunned and he was cold and wet, but his mission had been a success. His orders to disintegrate the "pipes" had been carried out to the letter. He'd reported as much to Hendrix and had endured the Old Man's indifference. It'd been a tiring morning of Mountain nonsense and Hershel was more than ready to go home.

As the truck left the Manor and droned through the growing dawn, he pulled the blanket around him and tried to sleep. But there was still much to do and it was nearly eight o'clock by the time the crew had been returned to their rural barracks and the depot paperwork had been approved and signed in triplicate. There was quite a fuss when he handed back the burnt remnants of Petterson's map and diagram.

"What in the blind world am I supposed to do with this rubbish?" the debriefing clerk asked the weary captain.

"File and forget," was Hershel's response.



Mountain — A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 6: Magic

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the sixth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering the period 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, the story is a mystery with elements of the paranormal. In **Episode 5**, the lord of Wolf Moon Manor demanded answers from his exhausted subordinate. In today's episode, an expanding falsehood gathers momentum.

By DON BENJAMIN
*West of Sharon Springs, Kansas
September 23, 1936*

At last, it was just the two of them in the emptied truck, the driver and the captain bound for the Mountain. Hershel tried again to close his eyes, not to sleep this time but to think. His mysterious morning had ended, but his mind was racing. Earlier, at the Reservoir, he'd been functioning in command mode. Out there in the darkness, he'd been faced with a challenging mission, one which his arch rival Valdez had failed to complete, and so he'd set to work solving the problem. As long as he was in charge, issuing orders, and locked in imaginary competition with the absent Valdez, he'd remained focused. But now something was seeping into his thoughts, something heavy, something that felt like regret.

Much of what he'd been ordered to do that morning, what he had done, was probably criminal. Hershel understood that the spillways had been used to steal water and that Hendrix was anxious to cover his tracks and Hershel knew that he had been the instrument of that deception. But why use dynamite?

Hershel had been with the Project for years. As a result of that tenure, he'd been in a position to observe Acting-Secretary Glenn Solomon Hendrix from the beginning and he'd found that the acting title suited the Old Man. Even during his military career, the captain had never encountered anyone like Hendrix who was so completely on stage, always playing a part, always reciting lines that seemed a little too perfect. Hendrix was a bit too polished, like a well-oiled turd. There had to be a purpose behind the decision to blow up the drains. So, what was the Old Man up to?

Hershel closed his eyes tighter and tried to think.

A rabbit bounded across the road. The truck swerved. The driver cursed and Captain Hershel, who had been dreaming, awoke with an inspiration. His sleeping mind had unraveled the mystery and, given what he knew of Project history and the Old Man's motives, he'd managed to assemble the events that led inexorably from the construction of the Reservoir to his morning of destruction. And the story he envisioned went something like this:

In the early days of Steel Range construction, the Mountain obtains approval to dam the river and create Smoky Hill Reservoir with the understanding that water stored there is to be shared between the Project and other downstream users. The reservoir is constructed with four secret spillways. The spillways feed into a deep, broad manmade diversion channel which leads to somewhere inside the Mountain. Then the Smoky Hill River is returned to its old channel which flows directly over the spillways. As the reservoir fills, the spillways capture a small share of water and the channel also fills but it is sealed on the Mountain end with a cone valve or other pressure gate. Time passes. The Mountain is supposed to share, but Hendrix grows

impatient. For some reason he wants all the water and he wants it now.

Stealing water will be child's play for Old Man Hendrix who has convinced so many to support his mad scheme to erect a mountain range in Kansas and who has silenced his critics by doing just as he promised. The Mountain is a reality. Already Hershel and a thousand others are living and working inside the first stage of construction and the present erection is just the beginning. The finished Range will be much larger, so the key to understanding what is happening is to think big—like the Old Man does.

Hendrix is obsessed with his public image, so the goal becomes how to steal the water without anyone noticing. As long as the Smoky Hill River flows, the reservoir remains a shared resource. Therefore, Hendrix must first capture the river, then empty the lake. Hendrix approaches this challenge like a magician designing an illusion. The secret spillways are already in place, but a distraction is required, a bit of misdirection to make the trick work.

A diversion is required, but the Old Man doesn't seek Hershel's help. Instead, Hendrix calls on the Project's other explosives expert. De Soto Valdez is a nitroglycerin specialist, a detail man whose talent lies in using volatile chemistry to obtain meticulous results. To facilitate construction, he's been fracturing the Mountain foundation and its surrounding landscape with surgical precision for years. He's highly skilled and, best of all, he doesn't ask questions.

Valdez's assignment is to rig nitroglycerin charges to create an "earthquake" which can be accused of stealing the river and emptying the reservoir. Valdez's charges explode in the Kansas bedrock. While the explosion manufactures a tremor, someone in the Mountain opens the appropriate valves. In a twinkling, the spillways suck the river underground and the reservoir rapidly follows. Gravity takes command as water chases water down into a broad man-made channel which probably flows under the Mountain and into a hidden subterranean reservoir. And just like that, a free-flowing river and its reservoir are reduced to muddy memories.

Now, the final step: the river has been stolen, the reservoir has been emptied, the water from both has been secretly diverted beneath the Mountain, and the earthquake gets the blame. But the guilty spillways are still there and liable to be discovered. The Old Man knows that evidence connecting the Project to the vanishing water has to be eliminated. He orders Valdez to take care of it. Valdez demurs so the telephone in Hershel's billet rings at midnight and—

Boom! Presto! The thing is solved!

Stimulated by the success of his mental detective work, Hershel sat up and stared out the truck window. As autumn leaves fell from roadside trees and flitted across the road, the driver was talking some nonsense about the passing seasons, but Hershel ignored the man. The calculating captain was close—very close to understanding. Yet something troubled him and the constricted lens of the truck windshield and the driver's babble and the drifting leaves weren't helping. So, he slumped back in his seat, closed his eyes, and forced his mind to expand until at last, as the truck topped a rise and the Mountain loomed on the horizon, Hershel began to consider the morning's loose ends.

The way he saw it, he'd been dispatched to destroy evidence of water theft even though, in retrospect, that seemed a reckless idea. Faced with a challenging situation, he'd done his job. He and his crew had moved swiftly and with minimal light. The crew remained unaware of the spillways and he was certain their preparation work had been unobserved by outsiders. Nevertheless, as soon as the dynamite went off in the wee hours, there was no hiding the fact that something had been blown up, something big! Everyone who heard the



explosion—and that would be thousands of people—would have questions. Hershel found it difficult to imagine what answers the Old Man could possibly invent to explain that noise away.

And furthermore, why go to all the trouble of stealing the water in the first place? What was the point? So that made two loose ends which troubled Hershel: how to explain the noise and what to do with the stolen water? How was Hendrix going to manage the avalanche of unavoidable questions about the explosion? And what in the world did the Mountain intend to do with its bonanza of newly acquired water?

Given more time, the captain might have solved those puzzles, but his thinking was interrupted by the truck radio. The radio had been playing in the background—broadcasting inane music or maybe a weather report—but the transmission abruptly grew louder. When the volume blared, Hershel opened his eyes and instinctively reached out to switch the damn thing off. But he stopped with his hand in mid-air when he realized something important was coming. The driver sensed it too because he pulled over and stopped the truck.

The men exchanged a glance, then the radio commanded their attention with echoing sound effects and an anxious voice which declared, "Bulletin! Bulletin! Bulletin!"

When the echoes died away, another voice continued in a tone filled with calm authority.

"Here is a bulletin of interest to all listeners. Residents of Kansas and Colorado were awakened early this morning by a strong explosion in the vicinity of Smoky Hill Reservoir. The Kansas Steel Range Project has issued a statement regarding this incident. That statement reads as follows:

Citizens, the Kansas Steel Range Project sincerely apologizes for the disturbance and anxiety caused by this morning's explosion. As citizens are aware, less than twenty-four hours ago a seismic tremor registering 5.2 on the Richter Scale caused Smoky Hill Reservoir, a prime source of water for Mountain County, to drain completely as well as causing the river of the same name which fed the reservoir to revert to an inaccessible underground channel. Project scientists were immediately dispatched to the scene and they determined that certain explosive charges, if properly positioned in the lakebed, would re-seal the fissure which had drained the lake while also restoring the Smoky Hill River to the surface. Time was of the essence as any delay would make the task of correcting this natural disaster impossible. Consequently, the charges were laid and exploded early this morning. We regret to announce that the Project was unsuccessful in restoring either the reservoir or the river. The Project recognizes that the loss of this important water resource will present challenges to

the County and its citizens. The Project pledges to aid the County and its citizens in managing this situation by making available such water as it can spare from its own modest resources. As more information becomes available, the Project will notify its Flagship Station KSRP—1492 on your radio dial—as well as other broadcasting outlets and newspapers. Thank you for your patience, understanding, and cooperation. Signed, G.S. Hendrix, Project Director.

"You have been listening to a statement issued by the Kansas Steel Range Project and read to you in its entirety by your announcer. This station will broadcast further updates as they become available. We now return you to your regularly scheduled program—"

Hershel snapped the radio off. *That's some trick*, the captain thought. *Dear Citizen, we've stolen your water, but we'll dole some out to you, a dipper at a time—and for a price, no doubt.*

He began to feel ill. "How about that," said the driver. "So that's what we wuz up to. Wait 'til my wife hears about this, oh boy!"

"Congratulations," scoffed Hershel. "You and me and the rest of the boys, we have just performed a magic trick."

"No kidding. How so?" "We just ignited two-hundred pounds of dynamite to refill a lake that was already gone forever and recapture a river that was never coming back and blow the hell out of some sorry soul's rowboat. Oh mercy—let me out here. I'll walk the rest of the way."

The driver expressed his doubts. "You sure, Captain? Your one eye don't look too good and you know this is the middle of nowhere and you know it's gonna rain?"

"Thanks for the weather report," Hershel answered. He positioned the borrowed blanket so it covered his head and shoulders. Then he opened the door and got out, but before closing it he addressed the driver. "Do me a favor?"

"Yeah?" But Hershel didn't finish his thought. Instead, he shook his head and closed the door.

The driver watched as Hershel crossed the road. Then he started the truck, ground the gears, and drove on. But a few yards down the road he had a thought and slammed on the brakes. He checked his rearview mirror then opened his door and looked behind, but the captain had disappeared. "Shoot," he complained. "More than likely, I've seen the last of that damn blanket."

The driver was right. Hershel walked fifteen miles that day but in the opposite direction. He did not return to the Mountain. He was through with Hendrix and his parlor tricks. It was time to find someplace where the phone didn't ring at midnight and you weren't hauled out of bed to ram a stick of dynamite up your neighbor's behind, tell him it was good for him, and light it.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 7: Evening Train

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the seventh episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering the period 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, the story is a mystery with elements of the paranormal. In Episode 6, an expanding falsehood gathered momentum. In today's episode, a new character travels by passenger train.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

The Prairie
September 24, 1936

The evening 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. A trifle to hardy souls who traveled by train across America's vast western prairie. But Iris hadn't boarded a train for years and she was unaccustomed to unexpected jolts and irregular motions.

Each new bump was an unwelcome shock—alarming to her as a cannon shot. It was an apt metaphor because she seemed to be at war with the railroad. She'd begun her trip by battling timetables, grappling for balance, foraging for food and drink, and longing for sleep. Between Tucson and Oklahoma, she barely slept at all.

Then, gradually, as her two days on the railway stretched into a third, she'd become accustomed to the motion and able to nod off for hours at a time. At last, after several hundred miles, Iris made peace with the Union Pacific Railway and that company's lumbering Pullman cars.

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'd been dreaming and her dream had been unsettling. Echoes of it seemed to linger in the confines of the rolling railway car. In her dream, she'd heard an unearthly howl which had forced her awake with the feeling that she'd 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 Iris. Why hadn't she noticed him before?

She 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 other seats were empty. She and the genuflecting man were the only occupants of the otherwise uninhabited Pullman car.

A woman traveling alone should be cautious of strangers, but something about the situation summoned her native confidence. Ordinarily a man crouching so near might seem a threat and yet she wasn't frightened. Instead, his submissive posture 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, Spanish she decided.

"To Sharon Springs," Iris answered. "Sharon Springs, Kansas."

"Ah," said the man with an air of recognition and yet 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'd been asked this standard "business or pleasure" question three days ago when she boarded the first train in Arizona. Again, she received a similar inquiry yesterday when she changed trains somewhere in Oklahoma and now, she'd 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 De Soto Miguel 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 it necessary to amend her introduction by saying, "I'm Iris Hazelwood."

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

"Afraid not," Iris 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?" Valdez inquired.

"I'm afraid so," she said.

"Please—can you tell me one?" the stranger asked.

"Tell you an idea, do you mean? Oh my—where to begin?"

"At the beginning perhaps?" he suggested.

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

How old? she asked herself. At least seventy, she guessed, so thirty years my senior. Is he flirting? What an idea—a man his age—and yet does a man ever outgrow such inclinations?

Despite his advanced years, Iris was flattered by his attention and she experienced 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, virtuous manners. He might be a professor himself.

"Do you know the axiom?" Iris ventured, probing the man's understanding.

"Axiom?" he considered the word. "Axiom is 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?*

The two passengers made their menu choices, whereupon 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?

A moment later, 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. 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."

As the girl departed, 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. Completing this dexterous surgery, 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.



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 8: An Omen

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the eighth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering the period 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, the story is a mystery with elements of the paranormal. In Episode 7, Iris Hazelwood encountered De Soto Miguel de Valdez, a fellow traveler on the evening train. In today's episode, the train continues its persistent journey westward across the dark Kansas prairie.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

The Prairie
September 24, 1936

The train was running late and the day advanced as the two travelers ate in silence. Savoring her sandwich, Iris Hazelwood tried not to stare at the man sitting opposite her. For his part, Valdez devoured his meal, then turned to gaze at the passing prairie. There was little to see. She suspected he was being polite, patiently waiting for her to finish.

"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.

"I've only made this trip once," Iris answered. "What I mean to say is only once in this direction. To be precise, I'm making a return trip. I've been away for twenty-five years."

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

Iris was young in 1911, younger than the freckle-faced Harvey Girl. All those years ago she'd been traveling east on her way to Kansas City, bound for college. Leaving Sharon Springs behind that day had been a thrilling journey—her first trip alone. Excited to be going, she'd been blissfully unaware that she'd be away so long. She'd meant to come back to the farm at every term break, but before she knew it, she'd 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? Iris was unable to recall the reasons she'd stayed away.

While at school she'd tried to maintain connections with home. She'd posted letters to Alice, but the old woman was an infrequent correspondent. There'd been even less contact with Iris' brother who never answered. 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. She 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-five years, and in all that time, Ham had never answered her letters. Then abruptly he'd written twice. The first letter had reached her a few months ago on the day she was scheduled to rehearse her role as philosophy faculty marshal for the University of Arizona's graduation exercises. The envelope had arrived as a special delivery, coming to her doorstep in the early morning. Rushed for time, she'd slipped the letter into her jacket pocket and only found a moment to read it at noontime.

The message 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 more than two decades? Ham may be in need, but he's a stranger to me. He writes that the farm has fallen on hard times, but it was never much of a farm to begin with and he's never asked for my help before. Why go now? Do I miss my brother? Do I regret having stayed away so long?

She had to admit she did.

She should've gone back earlier—should've 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.

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 ultimate 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," Iris said aloud without meaning to.

Her fellow passenger was dozing, but Valdez 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'd spoken indiscriminately.

Best not to shout 'death' at someone, 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. "And I don't understand."

"It is liquor. I apologize if I have given offense."

"No, not at all. I understand the drink. I meant I misunderstood your comment regarding 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? 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—it 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 efforts 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 the weight of that emptiness. 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 she was in motion, but the impression was indistinct. The swaying car suggested 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 looked directly at her before its outline was lost in a fleeting blur of passing prairie. She had seen that look before.

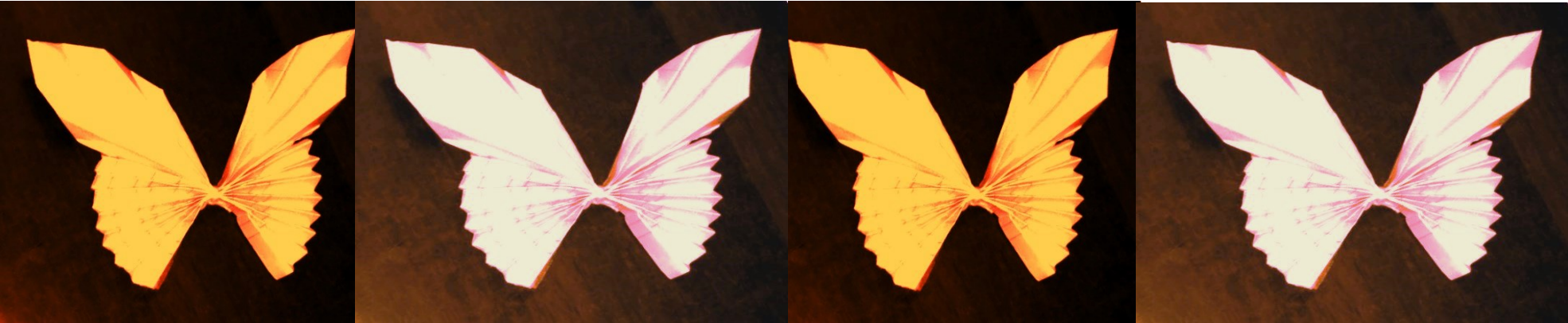
"Valdez?" she seemed to ask.

Iris stirred in her sleep, striving to wake but unable, as is the way of dreams, to open her eyes. At last, she surrendered to her dream and 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 freshman who had just embarked upon their study of metaphysics. "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'd been dreading a return to her girlhood home—a return to Kansas to face her past—but Valdez and the wolf had altered her perspective. The past had vanished. She would look to the future. She'd 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.



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 9: Homecoming

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the ninth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In Episode 8, Iris Hazelwood arrived in Sharon Springs, Kansas. In today's episode, she's stranded at the station.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

Sharon Springs, Kansas
September 24, 1936

The merchants of Sharon Springs stood in their doorways facing the street. They had no customers. It was well past closing time. But another rumor was circulating, so everyone stayed put and stayed open—just in case.

Every merchant on Front Street grabbed a broom, stepped onto the twilight sidewalk, and pretended to sweep. Their movements were so identical, they might have been choreographed. The sun had set, but it was still hot as blazes, everyone said so, and dust hung in the air. West Kansas needed rain, but there was no sign of it. The cloudless sky stretched tight from horizon to horizon, pale like wax and empty as a pocket.

The merchants swept in slow disinterested circles, nodding to townsfolk who loitered on the sidewalks. Every shop on Front Street offered an unobstructed view of the depot. In both directions along the tracks merchants were outside their shops, sweeping, surrounded by milling knots of townsfolk. No one spoke. No one shopped. No one could afford to. Those twin plagues, the Dust Bowl and the Depression, had hit Kansas hard, leaving the people and merchants of Sharon Springs with little to do.

And so—in obedience to the latest rumor—everyone had congregated on the sidewalks and watched the sunset, but they'd also kept one hopeful eye on the depot. Though unspoken, everyone undoubtedly shared the same thought. Everyone anticipated the arrival of tonight's evening train and each one prayed, after their own fashion, that the rumors were true.

As the darkness grew, the proprietor of Mumford's Emporium stopped sweeping and glanced toward the courthouse tower. He leaned his broom against the dusty wall, pulled out his pocket watch and wound it, then put the watch away and listened. The courthouse clock hadn't worked for years—not since April. Not since Black Sunday when a towering dust storm roiled across the prairie, blotted out the sun, and fouled the clockworks. But Holy Ghost was nearby and Mumford knew the Catholic chimes could be relied upon to strike the hour.

So, he listened.

Eight whole notes sounded, then the quarter hour.

As usual, he thought, the cross-state train is off schedule. Too many cows on the tracks. Too many dawdling passengers holding up progress as they gather up children and luggage and handbags and lunch pails. A bit more organization and a lot less—

As if to interrupt his unspoken critique, a locomotive whistle moaned in the far distance and stoic men and women—pious people—practical people not given to public display—gasped and took a step toward the depot. Their faces were wreathed in anxious smiles and their voices chattered in anticipation of “the great day” having come at last when the next trainload of Mountain workers would pull into town. An infusion

of replacement supplies and fresh workers was just what the town needed. Supplies meant more work was scheduled at the Mountain and that meant paychecks and paychecks meant strangers with money to spend.

Twenty minutes later, the evening train lumbered into the station. Bell sounding, wheels and pistons churning, brakes groaning, the locomotive glided to a stop. Couplings clattered as each trailing car halted. Then steam billowed into the darkening sky and there was a moment of hesitation as the crowd realized that the much-anticipated throng of workers was not on-board. Nor, judging by the dearth of freight cars, was the train delivering any appreciable quantity of supplies.

In fact, as crest-fallen residents stared at the lone passenger car, they expelled an audible sigh. Despite their hopes, only a single passenger detained—a stranger to be sure, but scarcely the harbinger townsfolk expected. Mumford retrieved his broom and debated whether to cross over to help the stranger with her luggage, but he decided that surely someone would be coming to meet such a well-dressed woman. So, he turned away, rolled up his awning, and locked up for the night.

His fellow merchants followed suit as they folded up sidewalk signs, collapsed awnings, and bolted their doors. Townsfolk dispersed, shaking their heads, and drifted away. The devout went to church. The rest went home.

Within minutes of the train's belated arrival, downtown Sharon Springs was deserted.

The train pulled out. An hour passed and no one came to collect the stranger so she sat on her trunk, rolled up her sleeves, and ate an apple. Iris Hazelwood, Ph.D., had arrived, but there was no sign of her brother and she was beginning to think her decision to return to this backwater town had been a mistake.

Iris must have dozed because the blare of the automobile horn startled her. It was pitch dark and an old Hudson sedan idled roughly alongside the depot. She could see its distinctive hood beyond the platform. Most of the vehicle was unseen, but its headlamps illuminated the empty rails and reflected in the windows of the shops beyond the tracks.

Iris stood up and waited, but no one came.

If that horn honks again— she frowned.

But, before she could finish the thought, a young man emerged from the Hudson, hurried across the platform, and extended his hand.

“Sorry fer bein’ late,” he apologized. “You’d be Dr. Hazelwood.”

“Yes,” she said. She was bone-tired. Three trains, three days plus three hours of extra waiting at the depot had tucked her out. “And it’s Iris—Iris Hazelwood.”

They shook hands. The boy introduced himself as Billy, then he stood stark still, apparently waiting for orders.

Now what, Iris wondered to herself. “Shouldn’t we—?” she began aloud.

“I gotta say I’m so, so sorry, ma’am,” said Billy. “You see there was a mix-up in the time—we’re in the Mountain Zone you know. Any-ways—welcome home.”

They shook hands again and the boy re-introduced himself as hired hand on her brother’s farm. They shook hands a third time, then he hoisted her suitcases and dipped his shoulder toward the car. “This way, ma’am, if you please. The Mister’ll be along with the truck directly fer your trunk.”

Iris looked doubtfully about. Surely leaving the trunk here, unattended in the dark



would be a mistake.

Billy followed her gaze, “It’ll be fine. Too big to steal, I reckon. This way. I’ll take you to the farm.”

“Nevertheless—” Iris began, but the energetic boy was half-way to the automobile.

Billy stowed the luggage, put the automobile in gear, and steered toward the street. As they wheeled through the deserted town, Iris smiled. Despite her exhaustion it tickled her to think that this boy—he couldn’t be more than fourteen—was allowed to operate a motor vehicle.

“Have you been driving long?” she asked.

“This rig?” answered Billy. “Not much. Drove tractors mostly, but now our spread is gone—” his voice trailed off.

After decades of no contact, her brother Ham had written to Iris about his “troubles.” Most of the ancestral farm had been auctioned off and little was left except the house and barn and a narrow strip of field.

According to Ham, the Mountain Project had taken the rest.

Ham’s letters had come as a surprise. First came news of Alice, then came her brother’s entreaty that she return home. Ordinarily, she’d have resisted, but her job in Arizona had grown stale and, it so happened that she was absolutely free to travel. So, she’d ridden three days on the train to see what could be done. It was, she’d decided, what a big sister ought to do and she’d smiled to think that her cantankerous baby brother might actually need her.

Years ago, when a much younger Iris was on her way to college, a buggy had come to the farm to collect her for the train. A weeping Alice had prepared a basket of treats to sustain her charge and made an unholy fuss over Iris. In contrast, Ham had merely leaned against the fence, his arms folded across his skinny twelve-year old chest, his demeanor broadcasting indifference. His gaze was focused somewhere in the distance. He pointedly refused to acknowledge that his sister was leaving, stubbornly refused to wave goodbye.

Iris smiled at the memory and she might have remained stuck in the past had a sudden motion of the sedan not pulled her back to the present. A stray yellow dog had sauntered onto the roadway and Billy had swerved the Hudson to avoid the dawdling canine.

“Town stray,” he offered as explanation. “Old as dirt and feared of nuthin’.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. “And was that man his master?”

“Didn’t see no man,” Billy declared, peering briefly over his shoulder to confirm his recollection. “Naught but a dog and the

dark.”

“I distinctly saw a man beckoning the dog,” Iris insisted as she too looked back. “But I may have been mistaken.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I wasn’t mistaken, she told herself. That was most definitely Valdez—or his double. No—I’m tired and conjuring up impossible images. What a silly and exhausted goose I am! Scolding herself, she smiled.

While he drove, Billy glanced at his passenger. Without warning, he’d received urgent orders to “pick up the Doctor at the station,” so naturally the boy had been expecting a male. But Billy was no fool and, the moment he turned off the ignition and saw her waiting at the depot, he had two thoughts: he realized she must be his passenger and he regretted honking his horn. It may be alright to summon a man in that crude way, but never a lady—and this woman was definitely a lady. He managed to steal three glances at her as they weaved through the town’s empty streets and each time he did, he found her smiling and he decided that he liked her.

“Are you a native?” Iris asked.

“No ma’am, I’m a Colorado trans-plant,” answered Billy, hoping he had used that unfamiliar term correctly.

“Where in Colorado?” she asked.

“Greeley.”

“I know it well. Named after the newspaper man,” Iris recalled.

“Yes ma’am. Horace Greeley—same as the next county down from us used to be.”

“An influential fellow.”

“Yes ma’am,” Billy agreed.

“But why do you say the county south of here ‘used to be’ Greeley County?” Iris was curious.

“No more Greeley County, ma’am. All Mountain County now. Since the Project.”

“I see,” said Iris thoughtfully, “A result of someone else’s influence no doubt.”

“Old Man Hendrix’s doin’ I reckon,” Billy said.

“The Kansas Steel Range Hendrix?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A bit of a recluse, I hear,” Iris suggested.

“Don’t know his religion,” said the boy. “He don’t dance, but I heard he gambles on the horses.”

Iris let the conversation drop and Billy, whom she sensed was capable of sincere empathy, didn’t press her. The two rode in silence for a time. She closed her eyes and grew thoughtful. The family farm was twelve miles outside Sharon Springs on Water Crest Hill but, even in the dark with her eyes closed, the way felt familiar to her. For better or worse, she was coming home.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 10: Trunk

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the tenth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 9**, Iris Hazelwood returned to her hometown of Sharon Springs, Kansas. In today's episode, she marvels at the changes in the once-sleepy village.

By DON BENJAMIN

Water Crest Farm, Kansas
September 25, 1936

When the travelers reached the farm, Billy carried Iris' bags inside and offered to take them upstairs, but she insisted she could manage.

"Goodnight, Billy, and thank you," she said as she placed a gloved hand on the banister.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said Billy. "Yer key."

"Oh, will I need a house key?" Iris asked.

"Fer the Hudson I mean."

"The Hudson—?" Iris did not understand.

"It's to be the doctor's automobile, the Mister says."

"Oh, surely not."

"Yes ma'am. It's yers to keep."

"Just as you say." She accepted the key. "Good night then."

"Good night, ma'am."

Iris ascended the stairs. Her brother had written to say that her old room on the second floor would be ready. She shuddered to think what "ready" meant to her careless brother. But she reached for the light switch and was pleasantly surprised to find the room spotlessly clean and much as she had left it more than two decades ago. She glanced approvingly at the roomy bed with one of their mother's quilts in place, the four-tiered chest of drawers, the mirrored dressing table, and small walk-in closet with a narrow door beside it. Hoping fervently, she turned the knob and discovered a full bathroom complete with sink, commode, and claw-footed bathtub.

"Heavenly," Iris sighed as she turned on the taps and filled the tub with steaming water. She'd been dreading what she might encounter in the wilds of West Kansas. When she left the farm all those years ago, this room held only a wooden stand with a wash basin and pitcher. There was no indoor plumbing then, so things were definitely looking up. Only one day back home and already she was in possession of her own automobile and this luxurious room. Apparently, her brother planned to accommodate her in a manner to which she could rapidly become accustomed. After a leisurely bath, she toweled off, slipped into her nightgown, and climbed into bed—only to sit bolt upright again with thoughts of her trunk. She sighed and closed her eyes—certain her anxiety would keep her awake.

But moments later, she fell instantly asleep.

The next morning Iris rose at dawn, got dressed, and walked downstairs. She was upset, but not particularly surprised, to find that her trunk had not arrived. Nor did her brother's absence trouble her. Such things were typical of Ham. The boy Billy had said nothing, but—probably and consistent with Alice's final reports—her troubled brother was still an irresponsible drunk. She would have a long talk with the younger Hazelwood when he showed up. Meanwhile she rummaged around in the kitchen.

Ham may be drinking, but she found no

evidence—no spirits, no empty bottles. Instead, she discovered an unexpected array of culinary staples in the icebox and a well-stocked pantry. Charmed by this abundance, she soon created a passable breakfast. There was no tea of course but she brought her own and she was just adding wood to the stove to heat a second pot when she heard a knock at the kitchen door.

"Good morning, ma'am," said Billy.

"The Mister?"

"Not here, ma'am."

"I see. Well, can you please telephone to have someone bring up my trunk?"

"No, ma'am."

"Meaning you don't know whom to call?"

"No, ma'am. Meanin' we ain't got no telephone."

Iris fed Billy, left the unwashed dishes in the sink, fired up the Hudson, and drove herself and the boy to town with the idea that the two of them would somehow wrestle with the trunk and rope it to the sedan. They were still six miles from town when they encountered the barricade.

"Can't get in this way," said the deputy. "Iron Mountain traffic has got the road clogged from here to the depot."

Looking beyond the barricade, Iris saw a fantastic tangle of automobiles, trucks, horses, and people. Nevertheless, she lost patience and protested that she was on an important mission to retrieve her traveling trunk.

"Matter of life and death, is it?" asked the deputy with an infuriating deadpan expression.

"Never mind!" growled Iris and she turned the Hudson around. "Another way into town?" she asked Billy.

"Yes, ma'am," said Billy who was beginning to realize that—just like the Mister—his sister had a temper. "But to keep from goin' long way 'round again we'd have to pass through the Manor pastures."

"Will that be a problem?"

"Depends on if the gate be locked and whether it be guarded."

"Guarded?" Iris scoffed. "Guarded?"

"May-be—"

"Hmm. Well, let's burn that bridge when we come to it. Where to?"

Iris followed Billy's directions until they reached a dirt road where the gate was open, although tersely-worded warning signs recommended that drivers turn back. Iris was undaunted and absolutely determined to get her trunk. She seldom obeyed signs and today was no exception.

"Well, for heaven's sake," she said as she looked both directions. "This is the same road that runs past the farmhouse, isn't it? So that makes it a public road. And what are the people who put up these ridiculous signs going to do? Arrest us?" She joked. She steered the Hudson off the pavement, through the gate, onto the rough road, and added with a lilt of sarcasm, "What will they do? Shoot us?"

"Depends—" said Billy and the boy grew ominously silent.

As the Hudson gathered speed, Billy glanced anxiously from side to side while Iris focused her gaze on the verdant pasture. She could see several handsome horses grazing near the road and a large building straddling the horizon.

"That's the Manor up there?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who lives there?"

"Old Man Hendrix."

"Oh," Iris responded, "that would be the



Steel Range Hendrix?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Our neighbor it seems."

"You might say—"

They drove on in silence until, after eight miles of rutted road, they reconnected with the pavement and headed back toward Sharon Springs.

"Funny thing—" said Iris as she watched the Hendrix Manor disappear in the Hudson's rearview mirror.

"Ma'am?"

"If Old Man Hendrix is so rich and can afford all those 'no trespassing' signs and can afford to build that big house and raise fine horses and have money left over to buy up every farm in West Kansas, plus build his mountain, how come he can't fix that road?"

"No idea, ma'am."

"I think I'll pay him a visit first chance I get and ask him."

"If you say so, ma'am," said Billy doubtfully. "We turn here for the depot."

In town, the streets teemed with traffic and the railway was equally jammed. All four train tracks were crammed with engines and boxcars, the round-house was busy rerouting locomotives, and the railroad yard overflowed with men and crates. Iris couldn't believe that so much had changed in less than twenty-four hours. Iris was anxious to get her trunk, but she was so perplexed by the town's unexpected transformation that she pulled over. Surveying the chaos, she spied a lone man who sat nearby. Planted in a rocking chair, the old soldier was situated beneath a shade tree, apparently watching the passing cavalcade. At least Iris supposed he was a soldier on account of his faded blue uniform.

"Excuse me," she shouted. "Can I ask you something?"

The old soldier stood up, removed his cap, and ambled forward. "At yer service, ma'am," he wheezed. Presumably the journey from his chair to the curb had winded him.

"I'm so sorry to have disturbed you. I—how shall I address you?"

"Ma'am?"

"Your rank."

"Sorry, ma'am, it's the heat you see."

Bewildered, Iris turned to Billy who leaned toward the open window and shouted at the old man. "She wants to know are you a sergeant or which-some-ever."

"Sergeant Roscoe Rule, 15th Kansas Militia Infantry, at yer service, ma'am." The man stood to attention.

"Sergeant Roscoe—"

"My friends call me 'rail-road' on account of my initials, if you please, ma'am."

"As you wish."

Questioning the veteran proved to be a halting enterprise, but Iris persisted and

learned that Sharon Springs had been all atwitter at train time yesterday—anticipating the arrival of the evening train—presuming it would carry the next great wave of Steel Range workers. But apparently yesterday's rumors were off by six hours, so few were on hand to witness the much-anticipated arrival. Starting with a special unscheduled train which came at midnight, the first wave of men, equipment, and material had been steadily accumulating all morning and the reenergized town was brimming with activity.

According to the sergeant, before sunrise two dozen men were seen surveying and pounding stakes and running lengths of twine at right angles to rough-out the parameters of a tent city. The tents would be erected on the outskirts of Sharon Springs—a temporary measure to house the latest blitz of incoming Project workers. By mid-morning freight wagons began arriving and tables were set up in the open field and five hundred imported men fell in line to pick up tents and cots and bedding, and then lined up again to eat lunch.

"I tried to join in the lunch line, sayin' I'd work my share, but was told-off by some rough-potato head what sez I'd be more likely to trip over my beard than be much use in their Mountain-work. But later that potato head come back and brung me a beef sand-wich so I reckon I kin't complain."

Iris thanked the sergeant then weaved through traffic, parked precariously, and left Billy with the Hudson while she walked six blocks to the depot with little hope of retrieving her trunk amidst the chaos. She need not have fretted. Seeing a lady approach, the burly workmen crowding the depot platform politely made way and soon she was standing at the station master's window.

"Your trunk is here, Miss," the station master assured her. "And I'll get the boys to roll it out for you."

"I had to park some distance away," shouted Iris over the din of the platform crowd.

"We shall roll it as far as necessary and it will be our pleasure, Miss," crooned the station master and Iris suddenly realized that the middle-aged man was flirting with her.

"We'll help, Miss!" shouted several workmen at her elbow as they clamored to volunteer. In the end, no fewer than eight men took up the task—four to carry the trunk and, apparently, four to supervise the endeavor. Muscling their idle fellows aside, they escorted Iris through the crowd. Upon reaching the Hudson, the enthusiastic men strapped the trunk to the sedan's broad roof. Flustered by the attention, Iris had Billy drive back to the farm and the boy grinned all the way home.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 11: Missing Person

From *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the eleventh episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

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By DON BENJAMIN

Sharon Springs
September 25, 1936

Billy was lavish in his praise of his passenger. This Iris Hazelwood—this Doctor Hazelwood was, he decided, a force of nature.

"You showed 'em, I reckon!" he observed with admiration.

Showed them? she thought. *I suppose this naïve boy thinks I threatened eight muscle-bound men into lugging my trunk six blocks in this heat. It wouldn't occur to him that I simply—what? Charmed them? Is that possible?*

As the Hudson left the pavement and started up the Manor's dirt road, Iris began to work out what must have happened. Sharon Springs had evolved from a sleepy settlement into a mushrooming camp town and in a camp town bristling with working men, any woman, even one such as herself—a maiden lady pushing fifty—was an attraction. She would have to be sensible and limit her visits to town until the present fervor died down. Her musing was interrupted when Billy slammed on the brakes.

"This can't be good," he said. Iris had been studying the pastures as she mused over her effect on the male population. Now she looked through the windshield and saw three men on horseback blocking the road. The nearest man dismounted and walked toward them, cradling a shotgun.

"Morning. Can I ask thy business?" Billy appeared too frightened to speak, so Iris chimed in, "Just traveling to our farm."

"Thou seen our signs I suppose." "I'm new in town and I didn't think your signs applied to neighbors," Iris ventured. "Neighbors," said the man as if he had never heard the word.

"The Hazelwood's at Water Crest," Iris clarified.

A crackling noise diverted her attention from the nearest man to the other riders and Iris saw one of them talking into what looked like a microphone. The crackling sounded again and the horse backed nervously until the talker reached down to calm the animal. Looking closely, she could see a braided wire leading from the microphone to a wooden control box strapped to the saddle horn. The modern radio seemed incongruous with the riders' western costumes, but Iris decided not to mention it.

"Understood," said the radio operator, "Let 'em pass."

The horses parted and Billy steered the Hudson through the gap.

"I reckon you come to Kansas jest in time," said Billy. He was clearly impressed with Iris' cool demeanor. "What was it you said you was a doctor of?"

Iris smiled. "I'm a doctor of ideas," she answered.

"Well, I reckon that'll do," grinned Billy. It took some effort for the two of them—a kid and a middle-aged woman—to figure out how to get her trunk off the Hudson. Eventually, they got a ladder and Iris emptied the trunk, handing all but her unmen-



tionables down to Billy to carefully pile on blankets laid out on the front porch. Next, the two of them managed to use a rope and a pair of two-by-fours to slide the empty trunk down into a wheelbarrow. Finally, by mutual agreement, rather than hauling the thing into the farmhouse, Billy wheeled the trunk to one of the sheds and left it there.

September 26, 1936
Water Crest Farm, Kansas

The next morning, Iris asked, "Is the Mister often away so long?"

"Not without I know where he's gone," answered Billy.

"Should I be worried?" she asked. "Dunno," was Billy's honest answer.

"Never missed him so long a'fore now." "Finish your oatmeal, please," she told the boy. "We're going to town."

As expected, the town of Sharon Springs was swarming with workers. Under ordinary circumstances the unexplained disappearance of Ham Hazelwood and his truck might have been front page news. But, in a town caught up with Mountain fever, Iris found it necessary to pay for a classified advertisement to inquire after her missing brother.

There was a long line at the front desk of the *West Kansas Independent*. To make matters worse, there was a logjam at the front of the queue.

"What's the hub-bub?" the man behind her asked.

"No idea," Iris admitted.

"It's an argument over a 'pos-trophy—whatever the hell that is," said the man immediately in front. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am—I meant to say whatever the heck it is."

"No need to apologize," Iris smiled. "I had a brother."

I had a brother, she chided herself. *Had a brother. Steady, old girl, Ham may turn up yet.*

"There, he said it again: 'pos-trophy," said the man.

"Ain't that old Dix up there raisin' a ruck-us?" inquired another.

"Come on, Gideon! Stand aside fer payin' customers!" shouted an agitated patron.

Up and down the restless line, there was general agreement that the man causing the delay should hurry up.

"Hell!" Gideon Dixon shouted. "Give 'em here! But I ain't payin' full-freight fer half-assembled work!"

"Tone it down, Dix," yelled one of the assembled roughnecks.

"Yeah," agreed another. "There's ladies

present!"

"Gang-way, you sheep!" roared Gideon as he pushed his way toward the exit, clutching an armload of pasteboard placards. Each stark-white rectangle was emblazoned with thick red capital letters. Iris tried to catch a glimpse of the writing as the fuming man rushed past, but she could only catch a single word—BOAT—followed by an over-sized question mark.

"Is that gentleman selling a boat, I wonder?" Iris posed the question to her line-mates.

"That weren't no gentleman," one informant declared. "That's our local crackpot whose boat got turned to splinters and now he's on a toot to make 'em pay."

"Oh dear," said Iris. "Who's he fighting with?"

"The Mountain," whispered the man behind her. "And the less said about that, the better."

When, at last, Iris reached the front of the line, she noticed that one of this man Gideon's posters remained face-up on the clerk's cluttered desk with a scrap of paper clipped to it. The word "Spoilt" was handwritten on the scrap.

"Is this what all the fuss was about?" Iris asked.

"Yup," said the newspaper's fussy clerk. "What's your business, Miss?"

"What's this about a boat?" Iris asked. "Nosey?" the clerk asked.

"Curious," Iris said. "I presume the missing apostrophe was the cause of the argument."

"Not my department," the clerk declared.

"WHERE'S MY BOAT?" Iris read the placard aloud. "That should be apostrophe-S, of course and—"

"Look, lady," the clerk interrupted, "would you like some friendly advice?"

"If it's friendly," Iris held her temper, "let's hear it?"

"Just this," the clerk's tone turned conspiratorial, "steer clear of this boat business. The Mountain doesn't care for Mr. Dixon and, between you and me and the lamppost, his days may be numbered."

"Sounds like a threat," Iris noted and she turned to the men behind her, seeking their support, but found most of them muted and avoiding her glance. Everyone except a broad-shouldered man in a mud-stained jacket. He nodded, smiled at her, and tipped his rather battered hat. He was a stout man, about her age and fit, with graying temples and a trim moustache. He was ruggedly handsome. Even a pair of bruises on his

cheek and in the corner of one eye didn't diminish his looks. She found she liked him instantly—something about his bearing.

"Ex-military," she said aloud as she turned back to confront the clerk. "Are you through dispensing advice or can we get on with our business?"

"Let's hear your story, sister," the clerk mocked.

The woman was half Iris' age and thin as a rail with her short hair done up in a Marcel Wave—which was all the rage. Using a curling iron was an acquired skill—a do-it-yourself option spawned by the economic depression. When the choice was paying the rent or eating or going to the beauty parlor—the rent and food won out every time. Iris considered the young woman again and decided to be charitable.

"Look," Iris said, "it's hot and I've been waiting a long time and you've been working your sweet head off, so let's call a truce."

"I will if you will," said the woman.

Iris explained that she wanted to take out a missing person's advertisement and confessed she had no idea how to word such a thing.

"Let's start with a description," the clerk suggested.

Iris was stumped. What would Ham look like after twenty years working the family farm?

"About average height I guess and—could you wait just a moment—?"

Iris rushed out to find Billy at the hardware store.

"Can you go over and give a description of my brother to the lady at the *Independent*?" she implored the boy.

"Such as?"

"Well, such as does Ham have a beard now? And what color is his hair? Does he walk with a limp? What was he wearing when you last saw him? Describe his truck. That sort of thing."

"Sure, ma'am, if you think it'll help." "I'm certain it will," Iris assured him.

She handed Billy a five-dollar bill to pay for the advertisement and she meant to follow. But, immediately after the boy left, she felt faint. It must be the heat or maybe it was the humidity. Naturally she'd experienced hotter days in Tucson. *It's a dry heat*, the Arizona locals had told her that when she first arrived.

Dry heat indeed, she thought to herself. *Dry heat is what you find inside an oven.*

"Do you need to sit down, Miss?" asked one of the hardware salesmen.

"Yes, please."

"Here we go," said the man as he helped her to the nearest resting place.

Iris sat on a nail keg and closed her eyes. A week ago, she'd been at the university in Tucson, boxing up books in her faculty office. In the hallway, she'd locked up and removed her nameplate.

Doctor Hazelwood, indeed, she thought. The title seemed pretentious.

Certainly, she had worked hard to earn her degree, but she hadn't mastered medicine or engineering or even law. Iris wasn't trained to heal the sick, uphold the statutes, or erect a bridge, nothing so practical. As for her field of study, the realm of metaphysics was sufficiently obscure to insure that, should Iris find herself adrift in a crowded lifeboat, she'd be the first to be elected overboard as superfluous to group survival.

Her faculty role was unrewarding and her brother's letter was tinged with despair and Iris felt she must do something—and that something didn't involve staying in the desert to teach. So, she'd boarded a train and found herself in Kansas in temporary possession of the family farm, but unable to locate—let alone help—her brother.

"A fine fettle of fish," as Alice used to say. Iris smiled, thinking how her old guardian used to consistently mangle one old chestnut after another. "In one brain and out the other," was another of Alice's classics and—

"I believe you're on my keg," said a voice.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 12: An Encounter

From the *Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 1800s to works like *In Cold Blood* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the mid 20th century, many seminal works of fiction began their lives as serial novels. The following is the twelfth episode of a novel written by local author Don Benjamin. We hope you enjoy this limited weekly segment.

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By DON BENJAMIN

Sharon Springs, Kansas
September 26, 1936

Feeling faint, Iris Hazelwood had taken a seat at the Sharon Springs hardware store. The nearest perch was a nail keg—an uncomfortable but nevertheless welcome option. She'd just closed her eyes and had been musing about her past life in Arizona when someone pulled her back to the present by asserting that she was sitting on *his* keg.

Iris opened her eyes to see a tall man in a gray suit. He wore glasses with smoked rims which obscured his pupils. He was of an uncertain age, but his skin was smooth and pallid, almost metallic, and so pale that it nearly matched his suit.

"If you don't mind," the man continued in a rich baritone voice. "I think you'll find this to be more comfortable."

Iris stared at the stranger for a moment more before she realized he was holding a chair. "Oh," she stammered. "Thank you." She sat on the proffered chair while another man in overalls swooped in and snatched up the nail keg.

"Sorry to disturb you, Miss. And forgive my being so forward, but I believe we are neighbors." The man introduced himself as Glenn Solomon Hendrix, director of the Kansas Steel Range Project and Lord of Wolf Moon Manor, the palatial estate visible from the back road to Sharon Springs.

"You'll have a time putting all that on a 3 ½ by 2-inch business card," Iris joked.

"Indeed," Hendrix said. He seemed on the verge of saying more, but instead he inhaled sharply and she caught a glimpse of her visitor's rather distinctive teeth. "You must excuse me," he added. "I'm in rather a hurry at the moment, but I would consider it an honor if you would join me for dinner at Wolf Moon Manor this Thursday evening. Shall we say seven o'clock? I look forward to your visit."

And just like that, Iris found herself an invited guest of the controversial entrepreneur who was seeking to single-handedly transform West Kansas from an expanse of drought-ravaged prairie into an unlikely economic enterprise. Hendrix and his multitude of laborers had already erected a massive artificial mountain range and electrical generating plant which, some say, was the envy of the modern world. Iris was about to enter the realm of someone who could well be described as West Kansas royalty and all she could think of was what she was going to wear to dinner.

Wolf Moon Manor, Kansas
October 1, 1936

On Thursday at a quarter to seven, Iris climbed into the Hudson with just enough time to drive herself to Wolf Moon Manor before the appointed hour.

She'd been dawdling in the farmhouse, trying to decide what to wear to dine at the Manor with the man of the hour. She'd spent more time deciding what to wear than dwelling on the propriety of going to the Manor at all. It was symptomatic of her

independent constitution that she gave no thought to social conventions in accepting Hendrix's invitation. In Kansas, probably, an unattached woman seldom dined alone with a gentleman—presuming Hendrix was a gentleman. Gentle or not, the "Old Man," as everyone seemed to call him, was certainly old.

How old? Iris thought. For the second time in as many weeks she found herself trying to guess a man's age. First Valdez—the mysterious traveler she either met or imagined meeting on the train—and now Hendrix.

Last names again, she critiqued herself. *Probably just as well, it would never do to call my elderly host by his first name. There, I have pronounced him elderly, and that judgment must inform my calculations. I judge him, therefore, to be about seventy—now, old girl, concentrate on your driving and watch the road.*

The moon was full and the evening remained unseasonably warm as she steered the Hudson along the dirt road, bordered on both sides by the Manor's broad pastures. After steering up a long, graveled driveway, past manicured shrubs and an acre of lawn, Iris cautiously nosed the sedan into a space near what she presumed to be the Manor's main entrance. With one last look at her visage in the sedan's rear-view mirror, she cautiously opened her driver's side door, taking care not to collide with the gleaming limousine parked there. She rang the bell and was greeted by Louis, Hendrix's plump and rather formal manservant.

"This way please, Miss," Louis intoned. "No wrap I see."

"It is rather warm," said Iris pleasantly. "Yes, Miss."

Iris was ushered into a spacious dining room and shown to a comfortable chair. In the center of the room, one end of a long table was set for dinner.

"The master will join you shortly," said Louis. "May I offer you a sherry?"

"No thank you, but a sherry with dinner would be splendid."

"Very good, Miss," said Louis as he bowed and disappeared into the hallway.

Left alone, Iris was stunned by an unexpected feeling of dread. She couldn't shake the sensation that she was being scrutinized. She shot a glance at the towering bookcases which dominated one wall of the spacious room. Was it her imagination or did she detect movement in the dense shadows which enshrouded the farthest corner?

The sensation of being watched passed quickly and she dismissed the notion as a trick of the room's impenetrable dimensions. On her journey from the front door down a lengthy hallway to reach the dining area, she'd gathered an impression of Wolf Moon Manor as a sprawling place, with its share of creaking floorboards and ethereal shadows. But, despite its gothic mystique, the Manor had no power to unnerve a doctor of metaphysics. The evening called for social, not spiritual, composure.

Iris considered her situation—a formal dining room, a formal table-setting—and she hoped her plum suit was the proper choice. She tried to decide whether or not she should remove her hat and wished she had worn gloves. But there was nothing to do but muddle through as she was. She glanced around the room. One wall was lined with an extended bookcase. She was tempted to explore the books, but dismissed that possibility in favor of examining other aspects of the spacious room.

The wall opposite the bookcases and the other two walls were covered with wide tapestries and several large paintings, all depicting buildings or other structures. The Eiffel Tower, Taj Mahal, various pyramids, The Great Wall of China, and other constructions she didn't recognize. Viewing this array, it was easy to guess that the occupant's interests tended toward the grandiose—a fitting display for a man who'd

managed to erect his own mountain range.

She was, of course, aware of the Public Works Administration project to build an artificial mountain range on the Kansas prairie. It seemed preposterous, but the newspapers were full of Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal and the new PWA was spinning out approvals as fast as schemes for new hydroelectric dams and other monumental projects could be hatched. Three years ago—on the strength of its potential to generate electricity using the latest in wind-turbine technology and with a popular promise to stimulate the regional economy by putting people back to work—the Kansas Steel Range Project had gained government approval. And, if the avalanche of workers and equipment and supplies periodically descending on Sharon Springs was any indication, Hendrix's fantastic scheme was firing on all cylinders.

She was just beginning to wonder how her impossibly-busy host found time to entertain when Hendrix arrived, greeted her warmly, and ushered her to table. Louis served the meal and—as there seemed to be no other servants—she suspected that the efficient man had cooked as well.

After dinner she and Hendrix adjourned to the manor's spacious study where her host proffered brandy, lit a cigar, and suggested a game of chess. Though she was put off by the room's masculine décor which brimmed with mounted animal heads and racked firearms—not to mention disliking the cigar—Iris accepted the drink and agreed to play.

Strange that Hendrix had presumed she could play chess.

Not generally a skill within the wheelhouse of your average doxy, Iris thought.

But she knew she was about as far from the average doxy as the black keys on the study's massive grand piano were from its ivory ones. Glancing at the piano now and then as they passed a tolerable evening of chess and polite conversation, she noted that—in keeping with its substantial surroundings—even that relatively delicate instrument seemed to exude maleness. By observation, there was nothing nearby or anywhere else in this manly manor that so much as hinted at a lady's touch.

It was nearly eleven when Louis saw her to the door and offered to escort her to her automobile. She said it wasn't necessary, but no sooner had the door closed behind her than she noticed a figure loitering in the darkness near the Hudson. It was a warm night, but a sudden chill ran through her.

"Hello," she called out but there was no response, so she moved closer and called again. "Hello?"

"This your automobile, lady?" came the curt reply. It was a man's voice and not a friendly one.

"It is." She decided to swallow her fear. "Hmm," the man lit a cigarette and Iris had the impression he had used some part of her Hudson to strike the match. "Better you don't park so close next time."

"Thank you, but I was extremely careful when I parked."

"If you say so." She continued walking forward as



she spoke until she reached the man. He seemed tall and possibly slim, although it was hard to tell because his figure was obscured by a stylized uniform—a double-breasted tunic and matching breeches flared at the thighs. The lengthy tunic and ridiculously ballooning breeches were chalk-gray while his cap, his gloves, and boots were deepest black. He leaned against her automobile with one foot on the Hudson's running board.

"Do you work here?" she asked, deciding she disliked this impudent fellow.

"You might say so. I drive the Old Man."

"You're the chauffeur then?" Hired help she decided—better put this one in his place.

"That's me. Petterson's the name. Best you remember it."

"I doubt that I'll forget meeting you, sir." She said in a tone that she hoped conveyed just the right mix of annoyance and superiority. "And best you touch your hat to a lady and take your foot off my running board unless you want me to drag you all the way to Water Crest Farm."

There was a moment of tense silence, then the man burst out laughing.

"Damn, lady," he chortled. "That Billy boy was right about you! A pistol he said! Hell, excuse my language. Not accustomed to having ladies on the premises. So, I'll shut my gob before you get all riled up and bid you good night and be on my way."

He tipped his cap and started to leave as Iris got inside the Hudson and started the engine. She jumped when he tapped on the window and, with some reluctance, she rolled it down.

"Oh, and don't you worry about where to park next time, because from now on I'm going to pick you up proper in old Bess here." He patted the limousine. "I'll come to Water Crest next Thursday at six sharp. Be sure you're ready. The Old Man likes his times tidy." Then Petterson walked away muttering to himself until his form was lost in the darkness, "A pistol." She heard him repeat. "Yes sir-ee. A pistol—"

Iris was still fuming as she drove home. *Next Thursday?* She thought. *Not likely I'll be getting into a conveyance driven by that oily creature or returning anytime soon to this masculine clubhouse!*

Mountain — A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 13: Shadows

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 12*, Iris Hazelwood encountered a mysterious neighbor. In today's episode, the lord of Wolf Moon Manor returns to his Mountain.

By DON BENJAMIN

Wolf Moon Manor
October 1, 1936

Standing at the dining room's broad window, Glenn Solomon Hendrix watched as the headlamps of Iris Hazelwood's Hudson angled down the Manor's lengthy driveway. He remained there, anticipating a glimpse of lights as the sedan reached the bottom, swung right, and bumped along the dirt road. But any hint of the automobile's progress was blocked by trees and the slope of the land.

Abandoning the window, Hendrix turned his attention to the bookcases.

"You can come out now," he addressed the darkness. "Come out, you old fool."

Gradually the form of Ham Hazelwood emerged from the shadows.

"You'll be wanting supper, I suppose," Hendrix growled.

"If it ain't a problem," said Ham.

"Oh, it's damn-well a problem, but I'll ring for Louis. I ought to lock you up again. This is the thanks I get for giving you the run of the place."

"Sorry—" Ham began, then paused. "Can I sit?"

"Sit," Hendrix said as he crossed the room to tug on the bell-pull.

Moments later, Louis appeared. "Sir?"

"A cold supper for our guest," Hendrix ordered.

"Very good, sir."

"And Louis," Hendrix added. "Not a word of this to anyone."

"Naturally, sir."

When the servant had departed, Hendrix poured himself a drink, then the lord of Wolf Moon Manor took a seat at the far end of the dining table.

"The question is," Hendrix began. His tone was icy. "The question remains," he repeated, "are you or are you not prepared to adhere to our agreement?"

Ham's answer was inaudible.

"Speak up," Hendrix demanded.

"I said, yes."

"Very well. Now, I wonder, how are we going to supply you with a backbone?"

"A what—?" Ham seemed confused.

"It's a metaphor, you lunkhead," Hendrix instructed his untutored guest. "What I mean is you'll need to pluck up your courage if we're to proceed. Can I count on you to keep your head?"

"My head—?"

"Never mind, I'm perfectly capable of doing the thinking for both of us." Hendrix grinned as Louis returned with a tray. "Isn't that so, Louis?"

"As you say, sir."

"Feed this scallywag. Then I'll need you to clear away and lock up. And notify Petterson that he's to drive me to the Mountain."

"What time do you wish to depart, sir?"

"I'll expect the limousine at the front door in twenty-five minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Having issued orders, Hendrix departed—presumably to gather yet another load of books and papers. Louis lingered in the dining room, tidying the table and rearranging furniture. Ham looked up from his meal.

"Don't it bother you?" Ham asked.

"I beg your pardon," said Louis.

"Cow-towin' to the Old Man," Ham clarified his inquiry.

"It's my job, sir," Louis declared.

"A crap job," Ham observed. "If you don't mind my sayin' so."

"Beggars can't be choosers," said the servant. "Can I offer you anything else, sir?"

"Got a gun stashed anywheres nearby?" asked Ham.

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Pity," Ham decided.

The two men shared a silent stare.

"May I know something?" Louis whispered.

"Ask away," said Ham. He could guess what was coming.

"My impression is that you feel you are a prisoner here in the Manor. And yet, with the Master gone each evening, you are certainly free to depart."

"You met my sister, I guess," Ham said.

"Indeed," Louis agreed.

"Would you want harm to come to her?"

"Of course not."

"You see my problem," Ham suggested.

"Ah—" Louis said. "I catch your meaning. We are, if I may say so, in the exact same boat."

"Hell of a fix," Ham sighed.

"The worm may yet turn," said Louis.

Then, in response to Ham's puzzled look, he added with a profound whisper, "Another metaphor, I fear. But take heart, sir, if it comes to that, you can absolutely count on me."

Enroute to the Mountain
October 1, 1936

As Petterson steered the limousine onto the broad highway, Hendrix sat in the plush interior of the lavish vehicle's passenger cabin. He was sipping brandy and reviewing a thick scrapbook of news articles, photos, notes, and mementos.

Everyone knew the story.

Beginning in 1931, persistent drought and severe wind erosion had devastated western Kansas. Clouds of debris tainted the sky and obscured the sun. In taming the land, settlers had plowed hardy prairie grasslands under and displaced native plants. The resulting farmlands proved no match for unrelenting dryness and unceasing prairie wind. Erosion devastated the soil. In the end, the topmost inches of western Kansas disappeared and folks took to referring to what remained of Sheridan, Wallace, Greeley, and Hamilton Counties as "The Big Empty."

By 1933, already reeling from hardships wrought by an economic depression which was enveloping the wider world, the unhappy region straddling the Kansas-Colorado border teetered on the brink of economic and social disaster. Farms and ranches failed and sold at auction for pennies on the dollar. Deprived of commerce, once-prosperous towns withered. Many people fled, a few remained and struggled on. When the survivors discovered they could not revive their fortunes through earnest toil, some turned to God, others to drink. The region continued to languish. With each dusty Kansas sunset, hopes sank lower until, the American high plains hit rock bottom.

Then it happened.

Word spread about something called the Kansas Steel Range Project, an improbable public works scheme to construct an artificial mountain on the prairie. Initially there was wide-spread skepticism, even resistance to the Project. Early on, the newspapers were filled with stories of violent clashes involving die-hard Kansans who refused to yield when their properties were seized in the name of the Steel Range.

In the end, hardships wrought by the weather and economic depression as well as the momentum of the Project proved too much for even the most out-spoken foes and resistance faded. By 1933, the bulk of opposition had yielded, although a few persistent rebels maintained that the Project had killed western Kansas. Some malcontents demonstrated their frustrations by committing petty crimes—knocking

over the Project's impressive marble boundary markers and vandalizing other property. In response, Hendrix, as project director, established a small security force which—of late and secretly—had continued to expand.

Under Hendrix's leadership, the landscape of western Kansas was rapidly transformed by the conception and construction of the world's largest man-made mountain range. Even the Old Man's harshest critics had to admit that the Project had resurrected fallow land and provided much needed work for the unemployed.

From his vantage point in the limousine, even in the dark, if Hendrix cared to glance that way, he could study the astonishing results of the rebirth brought about by the Project. The volume of work accomplished and speed of change was breath-taking. Even without looking, Hendrix smiled at the memory of donning a hardhat to symbolically shovel the first spade-full of dirt.

Three short years ago in Wallace County, Kansas, an undistinguished patch of earth, Latitude 39 degrees, 01 minutes North, Longitude 102 degrees, 02 minutes West, had been selected to be, literally, elevated from obscurity. This unremarkable spot had been the site of the original Mount Sunflower, once the highest point in Kansas. The butt of endless jokes, the original Mount Sunflower measured a mere 4,039 feet. It was a feature barely discernible in its home state and totally imperceptible from the bordering plains of eastern Colorado.

That, however, was the old Sunflower.

Since its insignificant days as a modest bump on the Kansas prairie, humble Mount Sunflower had undergone a radical transformation. It had become Sunflower Peak, a newly erected pinnacle which occupies the same coordinates as its predecessor, but towers 1,000 stories above the old. It was the first peak to be constructed in west-central Kansas and its erection was soon followed by the completion of two synthetic volcanic cones. Eventually, when completed, the ambitious Steel Range would boast four additional artificial elevations, all built from scratch, all man-made.

The entire Range was being manufactured from the ground up. First a huge hole had been dug to anchor an artificial foundation of low hills. Then workers piled dirt and scrap to construct terraces of ever-increasing height followed by the erection, on the uppermost terraces, of massive skeletons of worsted iron and glistening steel to form the underpinnings for even more grandiose structures.

The geometrically perfect Sunflower Peak and its adjacent volcanoes had been erected using familiar construction techniques employed in skyscrapers. Consequently, pylons had been seated in bedrock, steel girders riveted in place, and membranes of steel and iron added to form metallic skeletons.

The four additional mountains would be more massive structures consisting of piles of discarded metal of all shapes and sizes: whole railroad cars and lengths of track; massive bridge struts and solid building beams; wrecked automobile bodies; rusted trucks, trolleys, and buses; unused tractors and other farm equipment; and moth-balled ocean vessels—all these and other bulky scrap were being hauled to the Mountain site by train-load and truck-caravan. Once these scraps have been piled in place, rocks reinforced with slag and other industrial detritus would be added to form irregularly shaped mounds. All this to be overlaid with a thick deposit of soil and a



final layer of vegetation including alpine grasses, bushes, saplings, and mature trees.

Thumbing through background pages, Hendrix paused to examine a copy of the original Project brochure. The document was tattered and dog-eared. He carefully unfolded it and studied the writing. The paper bore stylized images of a mountain range and rising sun—powerful graphics overlaid with an elaborately lettered inscription:

AD ASTRA PER ASPERA.

This versatile Latin phrase, in addition to being the Kansas motto which appears on the state flag and the state seal, had also been adapted to serve as mantra for the massive public works project that guided the construction of the Steel Range. From the outset, the Kansas Steel Range Project had adopted the slogan for its campaign to raise funds, inspire public awareness, and recruit laborers, scientists, and other Project personnel.

AD ASTRA—to the stars,
PER ASPERA—through difficulties.

True to its motto, the Steel Range was moving the topography of Kansas closer to the stars. And, as for difficulties, the ambitious enterprise had seemingly overcome all obstacles. Soon the Steel Range would match the stylized drawing on the worn circular.

Flanked by two volcanic cones, Sunflower dominated the range. The volcanoes had been designated North and South. The other peaks would soon be erected, each named in honor of the four Kansas counties which would, eventually, be overlaid by the completed Steel Range: Mt. Sherman, Mt. Wallace, Mt. Greeley, and Mt. Hamilton. These remaining peaks were being rapidly raised with a friendly competition being conducted between the crews assembling each.

If the fools only knew, Hendrix told himself. Colonies of ants, hastening their doom. Heads down as they labor, ignorant of their fate.

With reflection and something akin to reverence, Hendrix closed the scrapbook before lowering the frosted glass which separated his plush surroundings from the driver's station.

"The back way, if you please," Hendrix instructed.

Just before his employer raised the glass, Petterson glanced in his windshield mirror. The rear compartment was lighted and he caught a fleeting glimpse of the Old Man's sardonic smile.

Something's up, the chauffeur thought.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 14: Cemetery

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 13*, the lord of Wolf Moon Manor returned to his Mountain. In today's episode, a new character searches for her mother's grave.

By DON BENJAMIN

Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 1, 1936

When the colonel asked for volunteers, the room grew eerily silent. No one seemed willing to share their rough drafts. Colonel Reginald Schulz, 312th U.S. Cavalry Regiment, Retired, had done his best to put the group at ease, but the awkward silence stretched onward. It was beginning to look as though this particular meeting of the West Kansas Literary Society was going to fizzle.

"Surely," the colonel suggested, "someone has a line or two to share."

Surveying the table, the colonel sought eye contact with his half-dozen charges. Testra Andrews, whom he considered his prize pupil, was absent—something about being called away to a distant farmhouse to perform midwife duties—an understandable obligation. Volunteer fireman, Robert Bliss, was also not present, the intrepid man and consummate storyteller having been called away to manage yet another barn fire.

For a fleeting second, the colonel wondered if the two incidents were related.

Gravid grist for a story there, he told himself. *Ah, well, back to badgering tonight's contestants.*

The colonel looked at each miscreant in turn. Mary Consul had her head down, her unseen journal apparently hidden in her lap. Mercedes Stowell's journal was just visible beneath her stubbornly crossed arms, but she too avoided his gaze. Richard Potts held his journal so tightly to his chest, the colonel wondered how the man managed to continue breathing. Richard's head was also bowed. Though the journals of Ardon Barnswallow and Helen Andrews were within easy reach of both fledgling authors, they each, in turn, shook their heads.

"Nope," Ardon mumbled.
"Not ready," Helen pleaded.
"Annabel?" the colonel addressed the group's newest and youngest member.

"Where to begin?" the young woman wondered aloud.

"I find it best to begin at the beginning," the colonel grinned. "And go on until you come to the end—then stop."

"Alice in Wonderland," Annabel guessed. "My stuff isn't quite that good."

"We're here to share," the colonel reminded everyone. "Not to judge."

"Go on, girl," said Margie. "I, for one, love your stories. Have you written anything more about the thrush?"

"I vote for the thrush, too," Helen pleaded and the others chimed in as well, asking the young woman to continue last week's story.

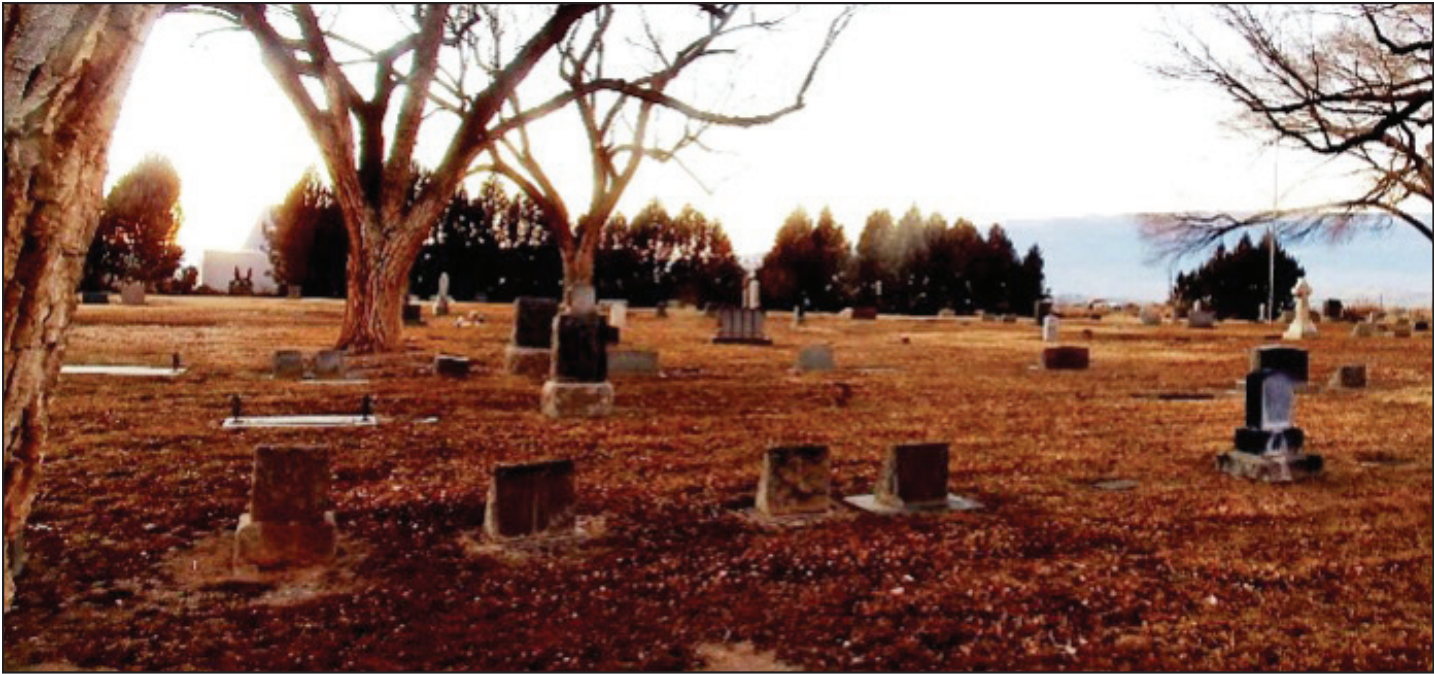
Ah, thought the colonel, it never fails to impress me how, even adults, love to have a story told to them.

"But I don't want to monopolize our time," Annabel said. "Why don't each of you read a paragraph or two? Then I'll share what I've written about my wayfaring thrush."

Gad zooks, the colonel thought. *What a consummate facilitator. Were she a man and my regiment still immersed in the Great War, I'd plant her firmly on the front lines and summon her to inspire the troops!*

"A capital idea," the colonel said aloud. "Who'll begin?"

In the wake of an enthusiastically successful group experience, while others sampled coffee and pastries and chatted contentedly, Colonel Schulz pulled Annabel aside.



"My dear," he beamed, "I can't thank you enough for injecting much-needed spirit and panache into our waxing assemblage! These past few weeks, you've been a god-send. I feared we'd have to disband and now the group is rolling smartly along!"

"You're too kind," she blushed. "I put our success down to your firm yet gentle leadership."

"My dear," insisted the colonel, "can you possibly be unaware of the impact you have on others? Or is it true what they say about angels?"

"The Bible says angels are immortal, but not infallible since they can only be in one place at a time," Annabel suggested.

"True," the colonel agreed. "But I prefer George Eliot's notion that 'The golden moments in the stream of life rush past us, and we see nothing but sand; the angels come to visit us, and we only know them when they are gone.'"

"And yet," Annabel laughed, "I myself ain't going anywhere."

"That," the colonel grinned, "is the best news I've had in years."

Walking to her automobile later that evening, Annabel Thrush paused beneath a streetlamp, sat on the curb, and added several lines to her journal. What her writing mates viewed as a simple story about a feathered thrush was really the opening stanzas of her heartfelt autobiography—an authentic tale of a bird and, in truth, a woman who was caged, then set free. A handful of vehicles passed by, including eight buses shuttling Mountain workers during the overnight shift change. But the occupants didn't seem disposed to interrupt the earnest author, so not a single horn sounded, nor did even one rude catcall reach her ears. It was as if she was invisible.

Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 2, 1936

Time seemed to melt away as Annabel labored beneath the streetlight with pencil in hand.

More restful than trying to sleep in the Ford, she told herself. *Anyway, she decided, the light's better here.*

After writing for hours, the young woman arose and stretched luxuriously. Emerging from the glow of the streetlamp, she glanced at the horizon. The autumn moon was riding high and, in the distance, she could see its celestial light bathing the sky and silhouetting the dark peaks of the Steel Range. Pausing to take in the view, she listened while the town clock struck the hour.

Am I too late? she asked herself.

Deciding five in the morning was as good a time as any, she stowed her journal in her rucksack, walked three more blocks to retrieve her old Ford sedan, and started uphill in the direction of the Smoky Hill Cemetery. There might be just time to make it.

Wrestling with the vintage vehicle's

wobbly steering wheel, Annabel fumbled with a road map as she drove through the predawn darkness. She'd decided to visit her mother's neglected grave and it was important that she reach the spot before sunrise. She hadn't visited in years. As a youngster, she'd been in the habit of walking to the cemetery every week, in all seasons, to place on her mother's grave whatever flowers she could find. Beginning at age eight and continuing without pause until the eve of her departure for the Mercy Mary Writing Academy, her diligent steps had literally etched a pathway from cabin to cemetery. Now, all these years later, she was uncertain she could find the place. She remembered it was on a hill west of town surrounded by majestic trees. The map was no help. She needed directions and surely there would be someone to ask. But there was no one.

While backtracking on dark rural roads and nearly colliding with a yellow dog which appeared on the road, she lost her way and was running low on gas, when she rounded yet another bend and found the cemetery. A weathered sign was partially obscured by a forlorn jumble of tumbleweeds and, when those obstacles were cleared away, Annabel discovered a padlocked gate.

Deftly squeezing through a gap in the barbed wire fence, the slender woman walked the last quarter mile up a steep incline which might once have been a road. The oak trees were still there, festooned with autumn leaves and larger than she remembered. Beneath the colorful trees, she rediscovered the marble bench she intended to use as a landmark. Her mother's stone would be directly east of the bench. Dawn was breaking. She sat down in the dark and waited, as she had often done as a girl, for the sunrise.

When the sun came, Annabel was facing east and she became aware of an intense glare welling up behind her. It was an unexpected sensation, something she'd never experienced as a girl. Curious, she turned around and was amazed to see the uppermost spire of the Kansas Steel Range glistening in the morning sun. Though it was enormous and dominated the western horizon, she'd missed seeing it in the dark. She had, of course, heard of the ambitious Works Progress Administration scheme to erect an artificial mountain range on the Kansas prairie. She herself, along with her fellow would-be authors, had applied for funding from the WPA's creative branch, although they'd yet to hear from bureaucrats at the Federal Writers' Project.

She was aware of Roosevelt's ambitious strategies to deal with unemployment and economic chaos and she, who abhorred politics, applauded those efforts. But she'd forgotten that one of the President's pipe-dreams was situated so close to her girlhood home and that it was so incredibly big. The main peak had been fashioned of silvery steel and it was this striking feature

which reflected the morning sunlight. Sitting there alone, Annabel found the spire both beautiful and shocking. Beautiful because it soared majestically, like a fairytale castle, above the otherwise featureless prairie. Shocking because it seemed incredibly fragile—so impermanent that the slightest breath of wind might cause the thing to overbalance and tumble down upon her.

Struck with the irrational notion that the distant spire might topple, Annabel stood up, backed away, and used both hands to shade her eyes against the obstinate reflection. Moments later, she dismissed the notion and turned to seek out her mother's grave. It was then she realized she was not alone.

There'd been no vehicles parked along the road, so she'd assumed she was the sole living occupant of the rural cemetery. Yet here was a stranger kneeling nearby—his head only slightly taller than the gravestone beside him. The man didn't look up. Annabel had no intention of disturbing him and she trusted that he would likewise honor her privacy.

Leaving the man to his meditation, the young woman resumed her search, found her mother's stone, brushed dead leaves aside, and promised the crisp morning air that—although she had no firm plans to linger in Kansas—she'd make an effort to visit more often—rain or shine. As if to test her resolve, a brisk wind began to blow. Dislodged by the growing breeze, a whirlpool of leaves circled toward the spot where she'd last seen the man. The stone was there. The man was gone. Feeling curious, Annabel crossed the grounds and knelt to read the headstone.

"Elisabeth Dixon," she read aloud and noted the dates inscribed on the simple stone. "Three years gone," she calculated.

"Three," a voice echoed her own and she turned, expecting to see Elisabeth's mourner. Instead, she was engulfed in a veritable tornado of swirling leaves. She raised one arm to protect her eyes and instinctively reached out with the other. "Take my hand!" she shouted.

"No time!" the voice declared.

"Suit yourself," Annabel gasped as the growing wind stifled her breath. Leaving the mysterious man to find his own way, she descended the hill in a gale, tumbled into the Ford, and sat for a moment while leaves, sticks, and gravel orbited the vehicle and hammered the windows.

"Saints' trousers!" she exclaimed. "The end of the world, or what?" she asked.

Five minutes more of howling wind and punishing debris and it was over. Annabel waited a few heartbeats, then rolled down the driver's side window. Since returning to Kansas, she'd heard locals complain that the Mountain's lofty presence on the once-horizontal prairie had befuddled the weather. She hadn't given their complaints much thought. Now she understood.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 15: Breakfast

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 14*, Annabel Thrush searched for her mother's grave. In today's episode, she hunts for breakfast.

By **DON BENJAMIN**
Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 2, 1936

Annabel Thrush lingered near the Smoky Hill Cemetery. She might have driven away, but some inherent sense of duty compelled her to remain—in case the stranger needed a ride. She started the Ford, let it idle, and kept an eye on the locked gate. No one appeared. She watched for ten more minutes, then she noticed it.

Annabel switched off the ignition, stepped out, and crossed the road—the soles of her shoes crunching over handfuls of dried leaves and dislodged twigs. Sure enough, the padlock had been removed. The thing had been expertly severed—the dislodged pieces lying useless on the ground. No need to wonder who the surgeon was.

Returning to her Ford, Annabel took one last look at the open gate, half-expecting to see the burglar walking down. When no one materialized, she drove back toward Sharon Springs.

The young woman was feeling cold and sleepy when she passed a battered sign which promised a “Home Comfort” motor lodge could be found nearby. Since arriving in Kansas, she'd been sleeping in her automobile and showering at the high school where the Literary Club met. No one seemed to mind. She was petite enough to pass for a highschooler, so she'd marched into the girls' locker room like she belonged there. If her adolescent shower-mates had any qualms about her mature breasts, nobody voiced a concern.

She'd been content with her sleeping and bathing arrangements, but the “Comfort” sign struck a chord. Maybe she could do better. Locating the place, then standing, dusty and windblown, on the office carpet, the disheveled woman dug into her meager savings, paid for one night and slept until nearly dark.

When she awoke, she drove to the restaurant she remembered as a child and ordered a huge meal.

“Like to see a young woman who appreciates full eats. Passing through?” asked the waitress as she placed a generous slice of apple pie on the table and began clearing empty plates.

“Been here two weeks—believe I'll stay a while,” said Annabel. She surprised herself with that answer and was equally surprised to hear herself voice an improvised request. “Where might I find a local newspaper?”

“Say, if you're lookin' for a place to stay,” said the perceptive waitress, “can't go wrong with Aunt Mary's Cottages.”

Embracing the serendipity, the recent denizen of the Mercy Mary Writing Academy received directions to the like-named cottages and by bedtime had moved her things from the motor lodge into one of Aunt Mary's bungalows. The hut was snug and comfortable, but Annabel was plagued with doubts. She'd impetuously decided to spend more time in her old hometown, but then what? She had another year to go to receive an academy credential, but was already dreading the prospect of returning to campus. As the night dragged on, she tossed and turned through a crazy-quilt of troubled dreams.

Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 3, 1936

Next morning, the wind persisted. Famed, Annabel Thrush decided to set out in search of breakfast. She'd sampled the

nostalgic diner yesterday. She recalled eating there as a child. Looking for the sign as she drove to the diner, she almost missed it because she'd failed to notice last night that the “Prairie View” had a new name.

“Since when?” Annabel asked as she slid onto a stool at the counter.

“Since all that,” the waitress answered inclining her head in the direction of the front windows.

“Oh,” Annabel said and she surrendered her menu. “I'll have the Mountain omelet. Crowded today,” she observed.

“Crowded every day these days. We're twenty-four hours now with all them hungry workers and all them odd shifts and all that.” The waitress turned her head and shouted to the cook, “Tall omelet!” Then she turned back to her young customer. “Shoot, honey, we ain't been ‘the Prairie’ fer years. Guess you must be new in town.”

“Guilty,” smiled Annabel. She was starving and not in the mood for conversation and almost sorry she had come. The diner was packed and, as Sharon Springs' hungriest newcomer, she'd been obliged to squeeze in between two men at the front counter. It was a tight fit which left her balanced uncomfortably on a tall stool. Furthermore, it was warm inside and cramped and the man next to her could use a bath.

“Thought so,” continued the waitress. “I seen your Missouri plates. Surprised you didn't stay over there in the Ozarks where it's trees and leaves and all that.”

Annabel smiled and decided not to tell the woman that there wasn't a nickel's worth of difference between Missouri and Kansas. So, she was searching for something else to say when the cook shouted “order up!”

The waitress turned to go, then halted and paused to look outside. “Land sakes, we've been expectin' a storm and all that and here she comes.”

Annabel swiveled her stool around to look out the window. The intermittent wind had increased to a tempest, raising such a dense wall of dust that she could barely make out the tall blue letters on the diner's newly painted sign.

“Mountain Vista Diner,” scoffed the old man sitting beside her.

The otherwise silent man had stared briefly over his shoulder, following Annabel's gaze, then turned back to his coffee and mumbled, “Damn—damn Mountain.”

Annabel turned back too and stole a fresh glance at her neighbor. His boots and trousers were coated in dried mud. He wore a tattered jacket and a slouch hat. His face was a tangle of white whiskers and he gripped his coffee cup with two powerful gnarled hands. Annabel looked closer and noticed that his knuckles seemed to be bleeding.

“Are you hurt—?” she started to ask until she realized what looked like blood was nothing more than red paint. Nevertheless, this odd man unnerved her and he stank—circumstances which compelled her to scan the room for a vacant seat. Seeing no escape, she concentrated on her coffee and might have been content had the man not raised his voice.

“Mountain Vista? Mountain crap, I say! Damn sign! Damn Mountain!”

“Don't pay him no mind, honey,” said the waitress as she returned with more coffee. The old man emitted a growl and the waitress whispered to him, “Why don't you behave and drink yer coffee and all that and not bother this nice lady?”

Apparently undaunted, the increasingly agitated diner continued to bluster as two burly figures in immaculate suits put on their hats and rose from a nearby table. Annabel sighed with relief and was about to leave the counter to take their place when the old man grumbled something which might have been profanity, slid off his stool, and scampered out the door. The two men hurriedly settled their bill and rushed outside into the dust and wind. The waitress watched them go. In fact, everyone in the



place turned and looked out the windows and watched as the two men ran to their sedan, tumbled in, and started the engine.

“Run, Gideon!” shouted a diner. “Hot-foot it, Dix!” shouted another. “He's away!” yelled a third and the other diners cheered.

Annabel was watching too and she managed one final glimpse of the legendary Gideon Dixon before his form was lost in the dust storm. Meanwhile, the sedan with its two well-dressed occupants hadn't moved and steam was billowing from under the automobile's hood while the diners laughed and pointed.

“How do you suppose that happened?” laughed a diner.

“May-be they'll be missin' this,” chuckled another as he briefly displayed, then quickly pocketed, what Annabel recognized as a section of radiator hose.

“Sorry about all the commotion, honey,” the waitress shook her head. “That old coot's been comin' in here for years and just lately playin' cat-and-mouse with the Mountain folk. He's a harmless old coot, although he ain't been right in the head since his wife—you know—died and all that. Anyhow, more coffee fer you?”

A hardy breakfast and coffee helped immensely, especially the coffee. Annabel stepped outside, feeling much revived. It was nearly noon and the wind continued to blow, but she was determined to make the best of what remained of the day. The ambient temperature had plummeted—a dramatic climatic change. Like everyone else, she found herself more than willing to blame atmospheric anomalies and drastic shifts in the weather on the existence of the Steel Range.

Annabel glanced at the distant Mountain, studied the gloomy sky, turned up the collar of her cloth coat, and reached a practical decision. If the weather was going to continue fluctuating, she'd take steps to prepare for an unpredictable climate.

Setting out in search of a heavier coat, Annabel wandered down the block and into Beatrice's Trove, a second-hand shop. She poked around the clothing racks, discovered an appealing—though decidedly over-sized—garment, and purchased the huge coat.

“Big is a thing,” she told the proprietor. “Raccoon coats might make a comeback,” she ventured. “Anyhow, I may grow into it.”

“Suits you,” replied the proprietor who introduced himself as Jack. “Now, what about your old coat?”

Somewhat sheepishly, Annabel accepted the proprietor's suggestion that she donate her old threadbare coat to charity. The proprietor, a short bald man who wore a suit jacket with no tie and who was obviously not Beatrice, invited her to continue

shopping, took her old coat into the backroom, and left her wondering if someday she might return to see it on display.

The bell over the entry door jingled and a man popped in. He and Annabel exchanged a glance.

“Any men's coats for sale in here?” he asked as he removed his hat.

“Not that I noticed,” Annabel answered.

An awkward silence followed as she regarded the new customer. He was broad-shouldered, fit for his age, with graying temples and a well-groomed moustache. His face was rugged and kind, though blemished with a bruised cheek and scarred temple. He seemed to feel her appraising his visage because he offered an explanation.

“You should see the other guy.” He grinned and offered his hand. “Malcolm Hershel.”

“Annabel Thrush.” She shook hands. “Charmed,” he responded. “Well, I reckon I'll try next door. Good day.”

Curious, Annabel looked through the store window and watched Mr. Hershel. Rather than walking next door, her visitor squared his shoulders and pointedly crossed the street where he confronted a well-dressed man. She couldn't hear what was said. But, even at a distance, the tone of the interchange was emphatic—as were Mr. Hershel's gestures. After this brief but fiery encounter, the man was apparently convinced to move along. Hershel watched him go, then walked briskly away in the opposite direction.

It was dry and cozy in the shop and Annabel decided to remain there, prowling amid the clutter, looking for nothing in particular. Eventually, she found herself standing in front of a muddle of old books arranged arbitrarily on a maze of shelves which covered one entire wall of the shop. Though disarrayed, the books were handsomely bound and they appeared to be quite old. Indeed, a hand-lettered sign proclaimed them to be “ancient” and pleaded with prospective buyers to treat them gently. Curious, she opened several volumes and confirmed that each had been published in the last century.

As Annabel examined and replaced each one, she thought of her own books, packed in boxes, left behind and languishing in an academy storeroom. Abandoning her books had been a deliberate act of separation. She had reasoned that being cut off from them, and thus removed from the temptation to embark upon some scholarly pursuit, would make her time away from Mercy Mary more restful. Instead, their absence gnawed at her and she felt lost without them.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 16: Two Stories/Kindred Spirits

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 15*, newcomer Annabel Thrush rubbed elbows with Gideon Dixon and Captain Malcolm Hershel. In today's episode, two more stories intertwine.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

Story One
Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 3, 1936

Deep in the recesses of Beatrice's Trove, a jumbled thrift store, Annabel Thrush was communing with a disorganized array of vintage books. Impulsively, the young woman reached out and began, with a tenderness which brought her close to tears, to carefully reorganize the venerable works. She established categories, righted leaning books, and arranged the spines evenly along the shelf edge. As she handled the books, she was struck by their material properties, for each was hardbound with a solid binding which contrasted pleasantly with their thin rough-cut interior pages.

Tater, the resident shop cat, strolled by, paused, and sat watching Annabel, his tail twitching in two-four time. After fifteen minutes, the animal yawned, seemed to lose interest, stretched luxuriously, and wandered away. Annabel remained at her post, laboring until her back began to ache, whereupon she selected half a dozen titles of interest and lugged them to a tattered easy chair. To her surprise and delight the proprietor brought her a cup of tea before he closed for an early lunch.

"Sorry to be so much trouble," Annabel grinned.

"No trouble," said Jack. "I appreciate you organizing them old books and I'm tempted to lock you in to see if you can organize the rest of this clutter, but I'll take pity on you and leave you a way out. Here's the shop key. Just lock up when you go and make sure the cat stays inside."

Annabel looked up as the bell over the shop door jangled and she couldn't help but notice that the exiting proprietor was wearing her old coat.

"Charity begins at home," she told Tater who'd reappeared as if he felt the duty of looking after the shop and its lone customer had fallen to him. To make certain his scrutiny was thorough, he sat on his haunches, reached up with a tentative paw, and climbed onto the young woman's lap. She stroked the small gray cat, sipped her tea, and opened the next book.

Annabel removed her billowing coat and stayed there for an hour, relishing her time among the books. None of the works she read that afternoon were momentous. There were, among the authors, no literary Titans. And yet, the plain typefaces and vintage illustrations held her interest. She was particularly captivated by the notion that the writers were communicating across time, seeking to have their thoughts remembered, though they themselves were long dead. She seemed to hear them calling to her across the decades. So vivid was her experience among the musty volumes in Beatrice's Trove that, by the time she was ready to depart the shop, she'd made a decision. Annabel had awakened that morning dreading her hiatus from the academy, but suddenly her path was clear. She knew how she would spend the coming months. She would write a novel.

Replacing the old books, Annabel donned her newly purchased coat, fished the shop key from the pocket of her dungarees, and headed for the front door—wondering how, after locking up, she was meant to return the key to Jack. But that particular dilemma seemed to resolve itself when she opened the door and encountered a matronly lady who was poised to enter.

"Here," Annabel said as she handed

over the key and sped on her way. "Be sure to lock-up when you leave," she advised her successor. "And please don't let the cat out!" she added as she rounded a corner. The woman had looked pleasant enough and Annabel might have stayed to chat, but—despite downing a giant breakfast—the intrepid young woman was again feeling decidedly hungry.

Time for lunch, Annabel told herself, *but first things first*.

A day ago, while passing through Sharon Springs, she'd noticed Mumford's Emporium and was intrigued by a sign in the window advertising shoulder bags. She owned a rucksack, of course, but that pegged her as a student. A true writer, in her estimation, positively had to have a shoulder bag—it was, she reasoned, part of the author's uniform. Before heading for lunch, she'd pop into Mumford's and spend two bucks and change on one of the bags. A steep price, but well worth it.

Reaching the emporium, she whisked past a man in a suit and dashed inside. Was it her imagination or was the conspicuous man the same one who'd exchanged words with Mr. Hershel—one of the frustrated individuals who, only this morning, had failed to apprehend Gideon Dixon?

Maybe, she thought. *But then again, maybe not. In my experience, fellows in suits all tend to look alike.*

The man was still there when she burst out of Mumford's with her brand-new acquisition draped over one shoulder. He'd crossed the street to lean against the building opposite.

Must be nice, she told herself, *to be well-dressed and have time to loiter about.*

She nodded at the man, who squared his shoulders and started to jay-walk just as the noontime siren sounded and a throng of men and women rounded a far corner. The unyielding mass of humanity literally engulfed the well-dressed stranger. A similar crowd abruptly appeared on Annabel's side of the street and she too was swept along.

"Where's the hurry?" she asked the nearest on-rusher.

"Terminal lunch," the woman answered.

"Ah," said Annabel. "Me too—like I have any choice in the matter."

"Welcome to the Mountain shift change," the woman laughed. "And, honey, my advice is you'd better go with the flow!"

So, Annabel let the surging crowd carry her toward the town's Terminal Cafeteria. Feeling somewhat over-dressed in her vintage raccoon coat and balancing her shiny new shoulder bag, she joined the ranks of workers clad in bib overalls, grubby caps, and dusty work boots. She'd heard the food at the downtown diner was to die for and, if that meant surrendering to a crowd, it was a small price to pay.

Story Two
Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 3, 1936

Two days after her encounters with Hendrix and Petterson, Iris Hazelwood drove herself into Sharon Springs, purposely avoiding Wolf Moon Manor by taking the long way around. It was late morning and the wind was chilly, but she was determined to make the best of what remained of the day. Iris frowned at the gloomy sky, turned up the collar of her cloth coat, and reached a decision which was certain to cheer her up.

She decided to buy a heavier coat. Exploring the town, Iris happened upon Beatrice's Trove, a second-hand shop with a disheveled array of bric-a-brac in its murky display windows—including what



might be women's clothing. Parking the Hudson, she tried the door and, finding it locked, was about to resume her walk when the door was suddenly flung open and she was nearly bowled over by an impetuous person.

"Here," said a voice from deep inside a cavernous coat which was clearly miles too large for its occupant. Before Iris could voice a complaint, the person thrust a skeleton key into her hand, pulled the shop door closed, and hurried away, shouting over one shoulder. "Be sure to lock-up when you leave," the muffled voice yelled. "And please don't let the cat out!" Upon issuing these commands, the mysterious vagabond rushed along the sidewalk and disappeared around a corner.

"Well!" Iris huffed. "Did you ever?" she asked no one in particular.

Befuddled by the encounter, Iris glanced along the sidewalk, hoping someone had witnessed the incident and hoping that sympathetic someone would come to her aid or at least commiserate with her outrage. But she was alone. Sighing, she stared at the key in her hand.

"Ah well," she shrugged. "When in Rome—"

Deciding to accept the odd happenstance as yet another peculiarity of life in a small town, she turned the knob and entered.

"Hello," Iris shouted. "Anyone? I'm merely a shopper who—well—I'll just leave the key on the counter here, shall I?"

As if in answer, a small gray cat appeared and seemed to regard his visitor with a critical eye.

"Will that be alright with you?" Iris asked the animal. A judicious "mew" seemed to approve of her plan to leave the key in plain sight.

Closely followed by the cat, Iris sorted through racks of used clothing, but discovered nothing in her size. Abandoning the idea of purchasing a more substantial coat, she browsed the cluttered aisles without a firm idea in mind.

Dangerous, she told herself, *to cruise aimlessly through a milieu such as this with no firm notion of what one needs or wants. Such purposeless meandering usually results in an impulsive and ill-advised purchase. A coat*, she reminded herself. *A coat is what I desire. Keep that in mind—*

Interrupting that thought, Iris suddenly remembered the over-sized coat worn by the careening person who'd invested her with the shop key and she wondered if that whirling dervish's ill-fitting garment had been acquired in the shop.

"Just my luck," she complained aloud. "That impetuous somebody apparently beat me to the rack and made off with the only thing in the place which was my size. I should probably leave."

However, it was calm and cozy in the

shop and Iris elected to continue prowling amid the disordered goods, killing time as she searched for nothing in particular. Moments later, she discovered a collection of old books neatly arranged on a maze of shelves. The books were handsomely bound and they appeared to be quite old. Adjusting her spectacles, she read a hand-lettered sign which proclaimed the books to be "ancient" and cautioned prospective buyers to treat them gently. A casual examination of one or two volumes convinced her that most had been written and published in the 1800s.

As Iris examined the venerable tomes, she thought of her own books, a veritable library, left behind and languishing in a university storeroom. Abandoning her books had been a purposeful act of separation. Naturally, she couldn't have dragged them along on the train trip. But, more to the point, leaving them behind had guaranteed she wouldn't be tempted to entertain some scholarly pursuit. She'd embarked on her journey with no vestige of academia in her possession, save her journal, and she'd written little since arriving in Kansas. She had reasoned that, having no books to tempt her would make her time away from the university more restful. Instead, their absence troubled her and she felt lost without them.

Impulsively, she selected a title of interest, consulted the front fly-leaf to ascertain the price, and left two coins on the counter, next to the shop key. Her business complete, Iris wished to depart, but found she was faced with the dilemma of how to leave the key inside while still locking the door behind her. Seeking a solution, she experimented—toggling the thumb latch and maneuvering the mechanism until it clicked shut from the outside—all the while making certain the shop cat did not escape.

"Surely Beatrice will have another key," Iris told herself as she made her way along the sidewalk. At the corner, she nearly collided with a tall man in a business suit.

"Beg pardon," she said. "Humph," the man said. "Manners," Iris suggested. "Humph," the man repeated.

Iris attempted to walk past, but the man seemed intent on barring her way.

"Sir," she intoned the word. "Do you find yourself incapable of civilized behavior?"

"Is this person bothering you?" A familiar voice sounded at her elbow.

"I rather think he is," Iris said.

"Then," her champion suggested, "I rather think this person had best to move along."

"Next time," the rude man growled, but he relented and backed away.

"Señor," Iris grinned as she turned to thank her former traveling companion.

"At your service," said Valdez.

Mountain — A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 17: Secrets

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 16*, Annabel Thrush was swept away by an enthusiastic crowd while Iris Hazelwood reconnected with an old acquaintance. In today's episode, Iris gathers supplies to enhance her writing and safeguard the contents of her journal.

By DON BENJAMIN

Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 3, 1936

Iris Hazelwood insisted that Valdez join her for lunch, but the man demurred.

"I regret that I must return to my work," he said.

"A raincheck, then," she suggested and she was amused to see the prim man study the sky.

"Ah—" he instructed himself. "It is a phrase. We might say—How would it go? A promise until later. I agree that we must indeed have lunch at a more convenient time. Until that happy day, I will bid you goodbye."

"Goodbye," said Iris, "And thanks again."

"Only too happy to help," said Valdez.

"Ah, here is my appointment. Forgive my haste, but I am a bit behind in my time. Enjoy your luncheon and your book." He touched his hat, reached for the handle of a small—nearly imperceptible door—and stepped inside.

My book, she thought. *Yes, indeed.* Picking up her pace, Iris held her newly acquired book to her breast. The title had intrigued her, the lengthy compendium of words nearly overflowing, as they did, the book's front cover.

Elements of Tachygraphy Illustrating the First Principles of the Art with Their Adaptation to the Wants of Literary, Professional, and Business Men—this meandering description was not so much a title as a call to action. Intended as a textbook for stenographers, Iris suspected that the vintage, leather-bound volume by D.P. Lindsley held treasures for someone, such as herself, who desired to maintain a confidential journal. Tachygraphy, she knew, was the lost art of rapid writing—or, if you will, shorthand. Greek and Latin authors had practiced it during the Middle Ages, initially to conserve resources when ink and paper were rare commodities. But, eventually, the skill of rapid writing became a way for secret societies to construct codes known only to a few.

Using tachygraphy, critics of medieval institutions—particularly the church, military dictatorships, and oppressive monarchies—could express their blasphemous, egalitarian, and traitorous thoughts without fear of exposure.

She would study Lindsley's methods and, if his approach was worthy of adoption, she'd employ her own private shorthand to fill the pages of her journal—conserving space as well as insuring that the contents remained secret. She hadn't planned on filling her journal with subversive thoughts, but it would give her confidence to know that she, and she alone, could decipher the contents. Though uncertain why, Iris was abruptly struck with the idea that, by all means, she needed to keep her writing a secret.

Her experience among the musty volumes in Beatrice's Trove had inspired her—so much so that, as she left the shop behind, she came to a decision. Iris had begun the day dreading her hiatus from the university, but suddenly her path was clear. She knew how she would spend the coming months.

She was already keeping a haphazard journal—periodically recording her thoughts. She'd expand her writing, become resolute, and keep a more faithful journal with one goal in mind: to compile those pages into a memoir. She realized

she'd be unable to finish the daunting task of writing a book in a single season, but she was determined to begin. Little did she suspect, on that blustery Kansas day, that her desire to write would coincide with meeting the undisputed spark of her life and mark the beginning.

The beginning of everything.

Iris had left the shop determined to further her writing career. Her chance encounter with Valdez only added fuel to her passion since her journal had been the focal point of their first meeting when he knelt to retrieve her fallen notebook.

This evening, she'd have much to add to her journal. In the meantime, she needed to visit the corner department store. At fifty, her eyes were steadily worsening and her adventure among the second-hand books had reminded her that her current reading spectacles failed to support close vision.

Without a stronger remedy, she told herself, *I'm in no condition to be reading a book, let alone writing one.*

Upon entering Mumford's well-stocked emporium, Iris made a beeline for a bin filled to overflowing with eyeglasses. Above the bin, on a pole, hung a tattered eye-chart and a tiny mirror. Trying on several pair, she stared alternately at the chart and the mirror, looking for a match. She was studying her bespectacled image when something reflected behind caught her eye. Intrigued, she impetuously shoved the glasses into her pocket, turned, and hurried to the next aisle.

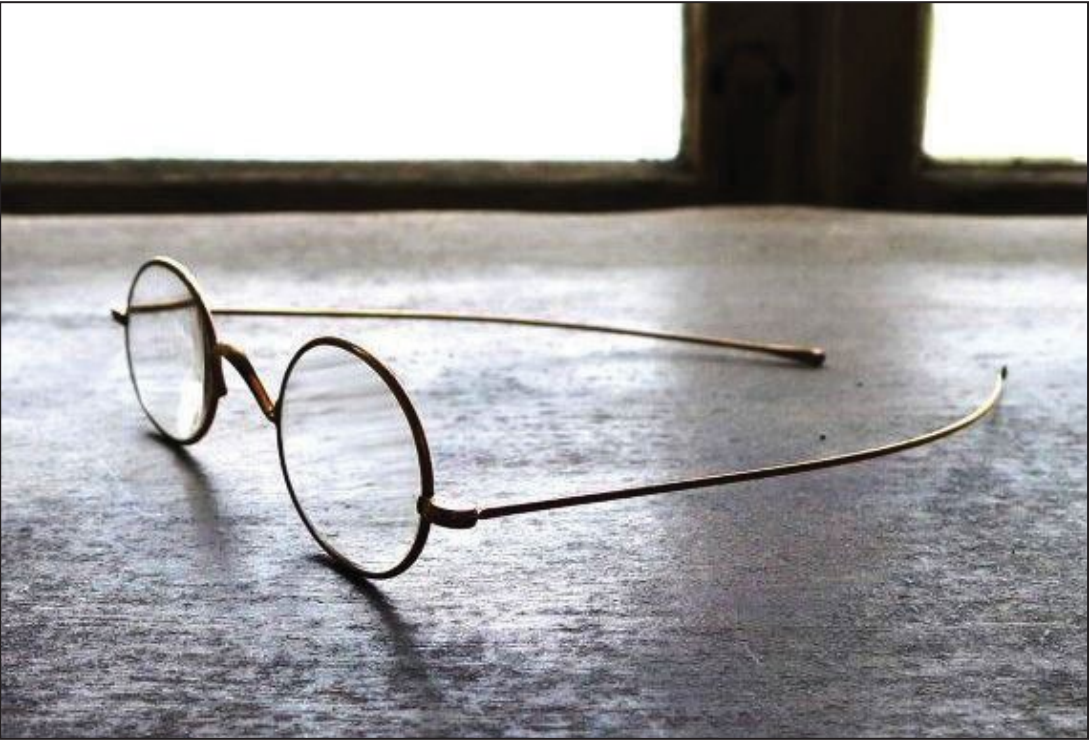
She was drawn to a stack of shoulder bags. Mumford, the ambitious proprietor, had a knack for purchasing odd lots of merchandise which he offered to customers at bargain prices. These fancy leather bags were but one example of the incongruous items displayed in his sprawling store. Never mind that Iris was the place's only customer. Times were hard, but that didn't stop Mumford from stocking a dizzying assortment of merchandise including animal traps, potted plants, apple corers, galoshes, and goose-down pillows.

The handsome leather bags were priced at "Only \$1.99." That seemed a bit steep, but Iris decided to examine one. Placing her newly purchased code book to one side, she explored the interior of the bag, finding it contained a generous set of compartments, all of which she opened. Inside one pocket she discovered two lined tablets, six lead pencils, and a sharpener. That settled it.

Iris wanted that shoulder bag.

And yet, it was an extravagance. She already had an old valise which was perfectly serviceable. The newer bag was modern and considerably more handsome, but it remained a luxury. In a desultory attempt to blunt her impulse buying, she forced herself to re-examine the bag with a more critical eye. She plumbed the depths of each compartment, searching for defects of workmanship. She repeatedly buckled and unbuckled the exterior clasps. Finally, she closed and latched the bag, then held it aloft testing its weight, an important consideration should she take it traveling and happen to place it upon the uppermost rack of a bus or passenger train. The thing also had a sturdy leather shoulder strap—it was, in many ways, absolutely perfect.

Eventually, Iris surrendered to her desire, placed the *Tachygraphy* volume in an ample side compartment, clicked the shoulder bag shut, and began to make her way to the cash-register. As she moved toward the front of the emporium, she noticed a young clerk who approached obliquely and began to shadow her. Her



overzealous examination of the shoulder bag must have attracted attention and, apparently, the clerk had been dispatched to keep an eye on her. She surmised the store had an overseer who monitored fishy customers. Usually, she recalled, such a watcher would be situated at a high vantage point behind a hidden window. As if to confirm her suspicions, the clerk paused in his pursuit of Iris and glanced at the ceiling.

Iris continued on toward the cash-register. As she walked, she tried, as overtly as she dared, to study the store's walls and ceiling in an unsuccessful attempt to locate the hidden overseer. She was willing to forgive the young clerk, who was merely following orders. Nevertheless, she remained uneasy with the notion of being secretly scrutinized by an unseen observer. A moment later, the clerk seemed to lose interest and drifted away.

Mumford was waiting at the register, drumming his fingers on the counter.

"Popular item," he commented as Iris presented the bag for purchase.

"Pardon?" Iris asked.

"Second such bag today," Mumford explained. "A stampede in this economy."

"I see," Iris said—although her tone suggested that she failed to grasp the gist of the proprietor's observation. Mumford examined her closely as he rang up the shoulder bag and wrapped it in brown paper. Then the man stood stark still with one hand on the package and the other clutching the pair of dollar bills Iris had placed in his hand. The wall clock struck the quarter hour and still Mumford stood.

"Ahem," Mumford cleared his throat.

"Yes?" Iris inquired.

"That'll be two bits more," he announced.

"Taxes?" She asked.

"Spectacles," Mumford answered.

"Oh." Iris blushed and retrieved the reading glasses from her coat pocket. "Sorry."

"Hmm," Mumford sounded doubtful and he looked toward the drugstore's copper-lined ceiling. Iris followed his gaze and noticed a small window next to one of the seams. Apparently, a watcher stationed there had seen her pocket the spectacles and had alerted, by some unknown means, first the clerk, then proprietor Mumford, that a shoplifter was on the prowl.

Iris was about to comment that she didn't appreciate being spied on. But she took a deep breath and decided to let it pass. Suppressing her remark, she found a quarter in her purse and completed the transaction.

"Thank you," Mumford said and, although he seemed reluctant to add the obligatory shopkeeper's invitation, he mumbled, "come again."

Iris doubted if she'd soon be repeating this particular shopping experience, tainted as it was by practically being accused of theft, not to mention being surreptitiously

surveilled and subjected to Mumford's icy bedside manner.

However, once outside, she elected to dismiss the incident. Her spirits revived, she freed her newly acquired shoulder bag and stuffed the brown wrapping paper into a trash can. Then the resolute woman strode confidently in the direction of her sedan, her new bag swaying in time with the brisk cadence of her steps. As she walked, a movement caught her eye and she noticed a man in a gray suit loitering on the corner. For a second, their eyes met and he quickly looked away. Though he'd taken pains to appear unconcerned, the man was obviously watching her.

This Mumford character, she thought, *such a bear for security.*

But not even the unwelcome scrutiny of a platoon of watchers could have dampened her enthusiasm for her new-found purpose. She smiled and said good morning to those she passed. The sun was shining, the wind had subsided, and it seemed to her that a new era was dawning.

Iris reached the Hudson and scampered inside, carefully positioning the bag on the front seat. Rolling down the window, she glanced over her shoulder, thrust her arm out into the sunshine, and swung into traffic. She was feeling happy and free and too preoccupied with her newly adopted role as author to notice that the man outside Mumford's Emporium had flagged down an automobile and that he and the driver were following.

As Iris drove, she glanced at the shoulder bag and became convinced that she might actually become a writer. She vowed to begin writing straight away. After lunch, that was. There was little chance she would write anything meaningful on an empty stomach. She decided against the Mountain Vista Diner, choosing instead to try the Terminal Cafeteria which Billy assured her served the finest chicken-fried steak in Kansas. She'd eaten a late breakfast however, so she had her cap set on a bowl of soup and a slice of bread.

As Iris crossed to the cafeteria, she made a firm promise to herself to begin writing the moment lunch was over and some vital shopping was completed. She marveled at the leisure with which she could contemplate the remainder of the day. She'd eat lunch and shop, then return to the farm. All that would put her at about three thirty or so—time for a brief nap. Upon awakening refreshed, she would definitely write. But, of course, she'd have to study the Lindsley text first.

Come to think of it, she may not actually get much work done today, but she'd be thinking about what to write as she ate. Completing the shopping and a nap would clear her mind of distractions and she'd be writing in no time. And she'd continue to write throughout the glorious autumn days which stretched before her.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 18: The Meeting

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In Episode 17, Iris Hazelwood envisioned the idea of compiling a secret journal. In today's episode, a chance meeting leads to an emerging friendship.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

Sharon Springs, Kansas
October 3, 1936

Iris Hazelwood walked to the cafeteria and paused outside. Looking into the broad window, she could see the place was packed with diners.

This used to be a sleepy little town, she thought. *When in the world did Sharon Springs get so lively and crowded?* Instantly, she knew the answer. The answer was the Mountain.

The Mountain's pervasive influence was plainly visible in busy streets, on crowded sidewalks, from the rooftops, from anywhere and everywhere in this bustling town. Given the throng of humanity, her prospects for a quiet lunch seemed improbable, but she was resolved. So, she took a deep breath, clutched her shoulder bag, thought of soup, and went inside.

After plodding through a slothful serving line, Iris reached the overcrowded dining area and somehow found an unoccupied seat. It was a small table with two chairs. She shoehorned herself under the table and sank into the narrow chair. Sitting with her back to the serving line, she immediately regretted her choice for she could sense the growing crowd flowing behind her and was uncomfortably reminded of the adage to never turn one's back on the ocean. She considered moving to the other chair to face the crowd head-on, but the press of diners was intense and she was obliged to remain where she was. Her table was next to a narrow aisle which placed her uncomfortably close to a seemingly endless parade of diners who barely edged past juggling trays and shopping bags as they searched for seats.

She decided she should eat quickly and escape but, as she endeavored to consume her soup, an enormous woman squeezed by and grazed her shoulder. The woman passed on, surveyed the hopelessly congested dining area, then turned and padded back toward Iris.

"Nothing," she whined to her companion. "Not a single blessed thing."

The proximity of this unhappy woman was unsettling. The frustrated diner stood at Iris' elbow, towering over her, and, though she had barely begun her meal, Iris had all but resolved to surrender her seat when the woman spoke again.

"Well? Are you finished?" she snorted. "People are waiting."

Thinking it was she who was being addressed, Iris was nearly on her feet when from behind she heard another voice.

"Sorry. You can certainly join me."

So poetic was that voice that Iris was compelled to turn around to seek its source, whereupon she beheld a lovely young woman sitting at a large table, smiling, and gazing politely up at the impatient diners. The young woman occupied a table for four that, though she had only coffee, overflowed with books and papers. Iris anticipated a scene. The irritated diners seemed poised to dislodge the young woman and snatch the space. But, before they could descend, Iris rose to her feet.

"Or perhaps," Iris heard herself saying in her customary firm and even voice, "the young lady would care to share my table."

Iris must have said this rather loudly and perhaps with the flourish of a noble gesture, because for an instant, the entire cafeteria fell silent and every head turned her way. The hovering women reddened, muttered, and frowned, whereas the youngster

beamed, deftly collected her things, and came to join Iris. She introduced herself and, just like that, Miss Annabel Thrush entered the life of Doctor I.W. Hazelwood and entered it to stay.

"I remember you now," said Annabel. "We almost collided at the Trove—sorry I was so boorishly rude on the sidewalk."

"Ah," Iris said as she recognized the sizeable coat draped over the young woman's shoulders. "You would be the lively pedestrian in the enormous raccoon coat."

The two shared a hearty laugh. "Now please," Iris insisted, "have a seat."

Iris regained her place and Annabel wriggled into the chair opposite her new benefactor. The young woman was twenty with braided hair the color of rich coffee and an angelic face which featured flawless alabaster skin, sky-blue eyes, and a delightful sprinkling of auburn freckles encircling both cheeks. As Iris watched, spellbound, with their knees touching under the narrow table, the smiling youngster managed to reassemble her books, papers, and coffee cup until she had packed her things neatly around the margins of Iris's coffee, soup, and crackers. Then the young woman squared her shoulders and sat there glowing.

It may be trite to describe someone as glowing, but there is no other way to say it, because the woman did glow while, for her part, Iris gawped and marveled. Iris wondered at Annabel's radiance, her total loveliness and exuberant charm. Iris had invited the young woman to her table partly to avoid a scene but also because Annabel was quite simply the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen.

Their talk was immediately comfortable, even intimate, like old friends. The young woman was a charmer. As the two chatted merrily, Annabel waved to the predators who had usurped her table and, without hesitation, they waved back. Sometime later, when the two women were about to leave, they stopped by the table, called her "honey," and said they hoped they had not been too much trouble. Apparently, they too were charmed.

That did it. In the crowded, noisy cafeteria, on that October afternoon, as the women fawned over her lovely companion, Iris was overcome with an unexpected sensation. Buoyed by a combination of maternal and sisterly affection, she and the young woman continued talking as the cafeteria began to empty until it was suddenly closing time and just the two of them together. To Iris, the experience felt like a warm reunion with an old, albeit rather lovely, comrade in arms.

And what was the topic of their conversation?

As unlikely as it seemed, the beautiful Annabel was also writing a book. She too had a notebook. Moreover, she had a dictionary and a thesaurus. She was on the cusp of earning her writing credentials from the Mercy Mary Writing Academy. On break from her studies, she'd been using a fountain pen, an ancient one, the kind that drank from an ink bottle, to fill her journal in a handsome flowing hand.

Timidly, Iris opened her new shoulder bag, intent on displaying her own writing tools.

"Ha," Annabel crowed. "This must be the day for coincidences. Look here!" she declared as she drew the older woman's attention to her identical shoulder bag.

"Oh my!" Iris exclaimed. "Two peas in a pod."

"Indeed," Annabel agreed. "What's inside yours?"

"Only pencils I'm afraid."

"How clever to think of using pencil so

you can erase and edit as you go."

Iris hadn't considered this point but agreed that it was clever. She might do that too, Annabel said. No, on second thought she loved the feel and sound of the passage of her pen over paper. It made her feel like Jefferson laboring away on the Declaration, or Marat in his bath, and so she would stick with ink for now. Iris decided the girl should have a pencil, just in case she wanted to experiment.

"I have plenty," the older woman said and handed her young companion a brand-new pencil, a non-sharpened virgin with a healthy pink eraser.

"That is so *hep!*" Annabel said and she said it with such conviction that the older woman instantly gained a new appreciation for the expression. In the perfect mouth of this lovely creature the mystifying speech of young people suddenly became something precious. To Iris, the meaning of contemporary slang had seemed unintelligible. Now, hearing the term in context, Iris understood with such visceral clarity that she began to feel that she really was hep.

What was Iris to write about Annabel asked?

Uncertain, the older woman hesitated, unwilling to divulge her untested ideas.

Annabel seemed to understand her companion's reluctance and smiled knowingly.

"You know," the younger woman said, "some of us have formed a writers' support group which meets regularly. You really ought to join us! Please say yes!"

"Well—" Iris began and she blushed like an adolescent.

"Ah," Annabel said. "Don't worry. We're all writing at various levels and in a range of genres. You'll fit right in."

That very evening, Iris joined the West Kansas Literary Society. Colonel Reginald Schulz welcomed the newcomer and the writing group took her in immediately, as malefactors on the run might harbor a fellow fugitive. By the time Iris joined them the little group of literary conspirators had been meeting for three months on one night a week in the damp basement of a local high school. As vehicles sloshed by, plastering

mud against the basement's precariously hinged half-transom windows, the group shared their work over coffee and cake. What the group made of Iris and Annabel can only be imagined.

Colonel Schulz had introduced Iris as Annabel's "big sister" and neither woman sought to correct the assumption. In fact, they decided, the sentiment was absolutely accurate. The two grew increasingly close. It soon became clear that their companionship was evolving into something indescribably precious. Whether Iris thought of the girl as a daughter or a younger sister or something else, the nature of their shared emotional attachment was mutual and their blossoming friendship took on all the characteristics of family affection.

Water Crest Farm, Kansas
December 1936

The search for her missing brother had nearly consumed Iris and she welcomed the solace of confiding her concerns to Annabel. Eventually, the two women became inseparable and it had taken little persuading for Annabel to relocate to Water Crest Farm where she found her own space in the sprawling farmhouse. The house was large enough to take the edge off the awkwardness of two women sharing the same space. Annabel settled in and soon established her own routine. Iris was content to share the house and Billy, who lived in the bunkhouse, took this new development in stride. In fact—like most males who came within Annabel's sphere—the impressionable teenager developed a sweet, yet unspoken crush on the charismatic young woman.

The three of them often spent evenings together in the farmhouse's broad living room, writing and reading, reciting poetry, singing, playing parlor games, and listening to the radio most nights—except Thursdays. On those nights, despite initial misgivings, Iris became a regular visitor to Wolf Moon Manor.

As 1936 drew to a close, the three denizens of Water Crest Farm looked forward to a prosperous new year—confident in the future and blissfully unaware of the tragedies which awaited them.



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 19: The Otter

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 18*, a chance meeting sparked a budding friendship between Iris Hazelwood and Annabel Thrush. In today's episode, a new character explores the Mountain's isolated interior.

By **DON BENJAMIN**
The Kansas Steel Range
January, 1937

It was two in the morning and Naif Hendrix was deep asleep and dreaming.

In his dream he is an otter. He is fearless. A strong swimmer he ventures far from shore, floating on his back in a vast blue ocean under a bright, golden sun. Feeling warm, he dives under. He touches the bottom and pushes up again, then continues to swim down and up until suddenly—at the lower arch of this repeating pattern—he finds that the bottom is unattainable. He turns and claws toward the surface, but his limbs fail him. Exhausted, he submerges into darkness, his hearing is muffled, his nose is swamped, his eyes burn, his lungs ache. He sinks like a stone. He is drowning.

In his sleep the boy struggled, tossed bedding, flailed arms, and forced himself awake. It was still dark and he was awash in his own sweat. That old dream hadn't troubled him for years and now, suddenly, it had come two nights in a row. Naif decided to face his fear. He rolled out of bed in his pajamas, crawled into his wheelchair, grabbed a towel from the bathroom, and began the long journey to the lake.

Deep inside the Mountain, deeper than even the fabled Eyestone dungeon, deeper than anyone suspected, was Prairie Lake a hundred-acre reservoir fed by Smoky Hill River. The lake was a secret. The river, which was also secret, had served as a steady inlet for months and vast quantities of lake water had been captured. There was, so far as the boy knew, no outlet—at least nothing which manifested itself anywhere outside the confines of the Mountain. As a result, the reservoir itself and several hundred storage tanks were well on their way to holding an inexhaustible supply.

Only a small amount of the water was needed for the daily use of Mountain dwellers and, despite promises, none was shared with outsiders. For what purpose the surplus was being accumulated was unclear. Naif knew only one thing for certain. He knew that the hidden waters of Prairie Lake manifested a fabulous place to swim.

The water was cold, of course. Nevertheless, he'd obtained one of his father's purloined inventions—something the stolen patent billed as a "wet suit." The fabric—if that's what it was—seemed to insulate him against the chill and, moreover, the stuff fit like a glove. So, he'd been concentrating on diving deep and regulating his breathing to stay on the bottom as long as possible. Last Christmas, he'd begged his father for a waterproof watch without much hope of the Old Man coming through and so he was surprised to receive a compact package containing a submariner's watch. The fact that he later learned someone else had been the source of the gift in no way diminished its value—although it did, in Naif's estimation, add greatly to the thing's mystique. Was anyone aware of the boy's fondness for swimming in the otherwise off-limits lake? If anyone knew or cared then surely his aquatic adventures, one of his few pleasures, would have been curtailed by now. Apparently, no one knew.

As he waited for the elevator, Naif glanced at the luminous dial on his submariners' wrist watch. He would have plenty of time to dive and practice before he had to report to work in Eyestone. Not that his



presence was essential to Eyestone's operation. But his absence would be noted and one thing might lead to another and his swimming might be discovered and forbidden.

When the elevator deposited him two floors below the Dungeon, he was as low as the device could take him. So, he began the challenging descent down a rough-hewn service tunnel to reach the platform he used as a staging area for his underwater expeditions. The reservoir was obviously artificial—a fitting complement to the Mountain itself which was the very essence of pretense. It was a contrived accumulation of water in a lake bed which was itself a contrivance having been blasted out of bedrock to form part of the substructure for the Mountain.

DeSoto Valdez had done the blasting—or so the officious man claimed. As for his thoughts about the Mountain, Naif had to check himself.

Have I taken to using that name? 'Mountain' might be as good a name as any for the place I've called home since my seventh birthday. Although I prefer 'The Rock.'

It was a phrase popularized by the dashing and irreverent and now absent Captain Hershel. It was also a phrase roundly discouraged by his father. That made one rousing endorsement and one companion condemnation which insured the younger Hendrix would adopt Hershel's version.

And yet, Naif told himself, the Kansas Steel Range is neither mountain, nor rock, nor anything natural. Like everything else which surrounds me, the Steel Range is counterfeit.

The service tunnel too was synthetic. And yet, as Mountain structures went, the reservoir and the tunnel were relatively primitive. Unlike the rest of the Steel Range, they had not been groomed for public viewing. The tunnel and the reservoir basin were rough and unpolished and the water was clear. Diving in, he liked to imagine he was exploring a natural underwater world which might, in its nether regions, contain sunken cities, pirate vessels, or undiscovered sea creatures.

As much as he loved anything in his constricted world, he adored the relative wildness of the reservoir. Moreover, he positively, absolutely loved to swim. He loved the freedom of floating and sinking and diving as his body, so limited and cumbersome on shore, became liberated in the water. His legs remained inert, but ceased to be impediments because he could propel himself smoothly and swiftly using his strong arms, shoulders, back, and upper torso. Such working limbs and muscles as he possessed, he'd strengthened and toned in hours of disciplined exercise. And

his lungs too were growing stronger.

This morning the adventurous boy planned to dive in and allow himself to sink, keeping one eye on his watch as he descended. He had set for himself the task of holding his breath underwater for three minutes, something of which people said Houdini was capable. Eventually, he wanted to push it to five minutes or more. He'd been practicing on dry land, purging his lungs, breathing deeply in and holding his breath for one minute, then two, then two and a half minutes.

When, at last, Naif reached the platform, he stripped, raised himself off the chair, and dove in. The water was freezing. The suit helped, but he was obliged to come back up and tread water for a while before he could manage to take in a decent breath. As he treaded, he looked back at his wheelchair on shore, certain he had remembered to set the brake. Then he looked to make sure the rope he had tied to the platform as a precaution was still in place. A year ago, he'd positioned it there as a way to climb back over the edge of the platform to reach his chair. He'd already tested its utility on short dives. Eventually, because it was a long rope, he'd added a weight and sent it further down into the lake so that it served as a lifeline which extended almost as deep as he was able to dive.

Almost. It was about six feet short of the bottom, but he felt braver knowing the rope was nearby. Convinced that everything was secure above, he bobbed upward, took a deep breath and ducked under using his arms to propel himself downward. He'd long since mastered the ability to keep his eyes open underwater and he glanced around as he descended, alternately consulting his watch and making certain he was diving parallel to the rope.

A cocoon of bubbles dislodged by his stroking arms enveloped him. His breath held and, with three more powerful strokes, he reached the bottom. He sat down and assumed a turtle position, leaning over to encircle his arms around his paralyzed legs and checking his wristwatch. Thirty seconds to go—

With ten seconds left, he relaxed and began to float upward. He felt his strength ebbing. In order to surface, he'd need to grasp the rope and pull himself upward, hand-over-hand. Ascending six feet, he reached for the rope, but felt nothing. He scuttled and spun around, thinking the rope might be behind him. But that had to be wrong. It should be on the shore side, against the rocks. He must be too far down. He used arm strokes to pull himself higher, but it was no good. He couldn't have missed it. The rope was gone.

His only option was to stroke his way to the surface. He ascended rapidly and his lungs were nearly bursting when his final upward stroke brought his hands into contact with the rope. He grasped it desperately and began to climb only to find that the rope was being drawn up from above. He was no longer climbing. He was, instead, being pulled from the water. Crouching awkwardly on the platform, the exhausted boy wrapped himself in his towel and shivered. He was not pleased.

"I could have made it," he scowled. "I would have been okay."

Captain Hershel was sympathetic. "What were you trying for?" he asked. "Three minutes."

The captain was astonished. He whistled through his teeth.

"Impressive." "Somebody moved my rope," Naif decided.

"That seems likely," Hershel agreed. "I found it neatly coiled up next to your chair."

"Coiled up—? I—well anyway thanks for—" Naif began then it was his turn to express astonishment. "Never mind the rope. What brings you down here in the first place?"

"Housekeeping," Hershel replied, "You think you're the only one who knows how to sneak in and out and around this Rock?"

Naif looked up then, studied the captain, and noticed for the first time that he was not wearing the standard issue Eyestone suit and tie. His hat was different too and a broad khaki band running diagonally across his chest suggested he was carrying something on his back.

Is it a satchel? the boy asked himself, but it was too dark to see. *What's the daredevil captain up to? Probably,* he decided, *I don't want to know the answer to that. I wonder if the man and I can come to an understanding.*

"Was you here?" the boy asked. "Was you?" Hershel answered and continued on his way, leaving the boy to dry off, get dressed, and find his way back.

A day later, Naif heard that Hershel had been killed in an explosion. He went to the chapel, lit a candle for the captain, unbuckled the watch, and left it on the altar. He would continue diving, but no longer indulge in the distraction of timing himself. He'd take fewer risks and stay close to the platform. The person who'd tried to drown him was still out there and, without Malcolm Hershel around, the boy would have to adapt. He'd continue to swim, but would be more cautious. He'd dive deep, hold his breath, but never trust again. From now on, he'd watch his back and keep one hand on the rope.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 20: Reunion

*Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 19**, Naif Hendrix met, then mourned Captain Malcolm Hershel. In today's episode, the elusive Gideon Dixon faces his sworn enemy.*

By **DON BENJAMIN**
*Kansas-Colorado Border Zone
January 1937*

Petterson parked the limousine, walked to the ruins of a concrete foundation, sat down, took out a cigarette, and turned up his collar. The day had dawned bitter cold, but the winter sun had broken through the clouds and the anticipated storm had failed to materialize. The temperature had moderated. Except for pockets of snow in crevices and amid the rubble, the day might have passed for something like a hint of emerging springtime.

Glenn Solomon Hendrix crossed the farmyard, then stood alone for a moment before pushing his way through the tangle of red cedars. Behind him, he felt the inquisitive gaze of his escort, two agents standing near the burned-out foundation of the main house.

Let those look-alike, stoic, broad-beamed men with their shoulder-holsters, their identical suits and fedoras, wait and wonder, Hendrix told himself. *That's what the gorillas are paid for.*

Hendrix entered the trees, found the familiar passageway, and made his way toward the shack. Though its roof sagged, the ancient building looked much the same as he remembered it. How many years had it been? He let his hand rest for a moment on the door-latch as he considered the delicious justice of it. He was still alive. The Old Man, they called him, if only they knew how suitable that label was. He was alive and this insignificant shack, the flimsiest structure on the abandoned farm, had also survived. The two of them had endured. They were persistent fragments of another time.

The rest of the farm, the sprawling house, the cook sheds, byre, cold-room, storehouse, barn, silo, pump house, stables, and cribs, had all perished in that long-ago fire. Most of the external stones which marked the site of the old well were detached and scattered so that only a single forlorn wall remained. Even the two-holed outhouse had dissolved into noth-

ingness.

Hendrix paused a moment more. Then, satisfied that his momentary reflection was motivated by curiosity rather than sentiment, he lifted the latch and entered.

Inside he found Gideon Dixon strapped to a gurney with his leg bandaged and an intravenous drip tube snaking into his bare arm. A young ambulance attendant, who'd been in the process of kneeling to stow his equipment, stood erect as Hendrix entered.

"He's sedated, sir," reported the attendant.

"Asleep?" Hendrix asked.

"Awake enough to kick yer skinny ass," the old timer replied without opening his eyes.

"Leave us," Hendrix told the attendant. He watched the young man depart. The bastard was an outsider and, as such, a potential witness. It had been a mistake to involve him, but eliminating him would compound that mistake. Unlike Gideon Dixon, the young attendant would be missed and a missing person would invite scrutiny—maybe even a search party.

That, Hendrix told himself, *would be incredibly inconvenient just now. Best to send the boy home to mother,* he decided.

The Old Man mused a moment more, then he knelt to examine the prostrate prisoner.

"How have you been?" he asked Gideon.

"Free."

"Hmm," Hendrix managed a tight-lipped smile before continuing his inquiry. "And how are you feeling now?"

"Trapped," Gideon sputtered. "Like a damn polecat down a well."

Hendrix allowed himself a broad grin. He'd forgotten the colorful speech of this cantankerous rebel.

"Who did this?" Hendrix asked indicating the old timer's leg.

"One of yer damn sharpshooters. Prob'ly they was aimin' at my head."

"You ran, I hear," Hendrix reminded the old timer. "The order of the day was dead or alive. You should count yourself fortunate."

"You damn buzzard," Gideon sputtered. "Mush-eared pirate! Fiddle-faced jackrabbit!"

"Calm yourself," Hendrix suggested. "It'll all be over soon."

Hendrix stood up and surveyed the room. Though he fought the memories, they flooded back. For an instant, he was a boy again, huddled in the corner of this wretched shack, trying to stay warm in the dark dead cold of a winter night. A breeze rattled one of the shack's insubstantial windows. The putty intended to secure



the glass had been applied in a slap-dash fashion and that imperfect glazing had undoubtedly deteriorated over time. Years ago, the prairie wind had troubled the window panes. It was a sound Hendrix knew well.

The wind rose, then dropped. In the silence, Gideon spoke again, recalling his captor to the present. The old timer's tone, no longer defiant, reflected bitter resignation.

"Should'a knowed you'd find me," he muttered. "Surprised you come yerself. Don't you got no junior sidewinders to do yer dirty work?"

"They're all busy," said Hendrix and he inserted a pause for emphasis. "Busy hunting your accomplice."

"Accomp—?" the old timer began and then he halted, momentarily puzzled, until at last recognition dawned on his face. "You don't mean to say—?"

"Yes," Hendrix smiled broadly.

Gideon strained at his bonds, rattling the IV bottle.

"You son of a bitch—you leave that girl the hell alone!"

"Easy, Gideon," Hendrix cooed. "You've put me to a lot of trouble. Your young friend won't escape and it's time for you to go."

"Damn you!" Gideon bellowed as he struggled in vain against the restraints. "I oughta—ah crap!" The old timer fell back, exhausted, as he sought to catch his breath.

Hendrix was tempted to bait his prisoner further, but a glance at his pocket watch compelled him to change his mind.

"This is goodbye," he said, injecting into those three words as much venom as possible.

"I'll see you in hell you wall-eyed horny toad!" Gideon yelled. "Don't you never lay

a finger on that girl! You mangy greenhorn cross-eyed thunder-hound, you ringed-nosed..."

Gideon was still shouting when Hendrix closed the door behind him, stepped through the cedars, and into the Kansas sunshine. Seeing his employer emerge from the trees, Petterson stood up and started toward the limousine. As he walked, he noticed smudges on the legs of his uniform trousers.

"Bloody hell," Petterson proclaimed as he removed his matching jacket and found his coat tails similarly soiled. He continued cursing and swatting at his clothing while he approached the limousine.

Seeing his driver's irritation, Hendrix smiled. The pompous Petterson insisted on wearing his impractical chauffeur's uniform and the rough concrete upon which he'd been perching had retained a sufficient layer of soot to spoil his outfit.

Let this be a lesson, the Old Man thought. *A vivid reminder that the past is not only untidy but also indelible.*

As Petterson brought the limousine around, Hendrix dismissed the ambulance and its freckle-faced attendant, sent the younger agent back to his sedan, and signaled for the senior man to join him. Jenkins arrived and started to ask a question, but Hendrix silenced him. Moments later, young Dobson joined them, placed a can of gasoline on the ground, and walked back to his vehicle. When they were again alone, Hendrix spoke.

"Bill," he announced in a penetrating voice so as to be heard by the others, "it is left to you and me to clean up this mess. I need you to do two things. First, as soon as I'm gone, kill that old fool in there. Then burn the building and the trees. Burn it all."



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 21: Regrets

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 20**, the elusive Gideon Dixon faced his sworn enemy. In today's episode, Gideon Dixon takes stock of his life.

By **DON BENJAMIN**
Kansas-Colorado Border Zone
January 1937

Alone and trapped inside the isolated shack, Gideon Dixon clearly heard the details of his death sentence, and the doomed man couldn't help wondering to himself.

What's the point? Why in hell is Hendrix shoutin' for all to hear, includin' my miserable self, his hog-tied victim?

Gideon's thoughts were rhetorical, of course, because the old timer knew exactly what his conniving enemy was up to.

"Not enough to kill me dead," Gideon pronounced his conclusion aloud as if hearing the sound of his own voice might give him the satisfaction, at least, of having the final word on the subject of his demise. "Better to broad-cast it! Got to make me squirm! Well—you go to hell! Hear me out there? You go straight to hell and shake hands with the Devil!"

As the echoes of his protest died away, Gideon could hear the prairie wind nibbling at the margins of the shack's grubby windows. Even if he wasn't prostrate and pinned to the gurney, even if he was standing, he couldn't see out. The fly-specked glass, coupled with the denseness of the surrounding cedars, conspired to block daylight. Thus, the prisoner wasn't able to guess the time, as if knowing the hour mattered.

Gideon closed his eyes. Perhaps it was true that a creature on the cusp of death experienced a vision in which glimpses of a lifetime passed through the consciousness—flickering rapidly like home movie images projected on a vintage silver screen. Maybe, if he moderated his breathing and focused the last of his remaining energy, he might call to mind some vestige of his past. The memory of his dear late wife Elisabeth would be a comfort.

And yet, he couldn't bring her into focus. Too much had happened in too short a time and those newer and more vivid memories crowded out his desired reflections. Despite his intentions, Gideon's thoughts strayed to and lingered upon the more recent past.

Last October would turn out to be a time filled with omens and mystery. Months ago, Gideon had been on the brink of speaking to a young woman who, like himself, was visiting a grave at Smoky Hill Cemetery. Even before he was aware of the woman's identity and her vital role, it seemed prophetic to encounter her there at the final resting place of his late wife. He'd been standing at the young woman's elbow, about to speak, when a sudden wind whipped a swirling vortex of autumn leaves

into a frenzy, a voice spoke of time, and Gideon was lifted bodily into the air. When the wind died down, Gideon found himself in the passenger car of a train, sitting on a Pullman bench and face-to-face with what appeared to be the vague outline of a man.

"Where in the Sam-hill am I?" Gideon asked the apparition.

"The place of answers."
"Answers?"

"Yes."
"What the hell do I need with answers?" Gideon wondered.

"So many questions," said the specter. "But not the correct questions."

"What—?"
"No time," the phantom insisted. "This, I believe, is your stop. Until we meet again, remember this: *Lo que la sangre desca, lo toma.*"

The margins of the Pullman car dissolved into blackness and Gideon found himself back in his prairie cabin, awakening as if from a dream. The cemetery, the young woman, the train, and the specter—all had vanished.

His hesitancy to relate any of this to others was understandable. People already thought *old* Dix was touched in the head. Describing his experience at the cemetery would have confirmed those suspicions. Repeating things like that could get a person institutionalized. He'd nearly convinced himself that he'd imagined the cemetery, the woman, the train, and the encounter with the shadowy figure. He might have dismissed the entire episode but, on October 3rd, less than twenty-four hours after the cemetery incident, he'd been sitting at a dusty table fingering the note he'd found nailed to the door of his prairie cabin.

*Upstairs, Meyer's Rooming House.
Come alone, noon, tomorrow.
Lo que la sangre desca, lo toma.
—A friend*

Gideon's Spanish was marginal, but he'd heard the sentiment before.

What the blood desires, he takes.

Gideon was a wanted man—a man marked by the Mountain folks for elimination. He should have kept his distance, should have remained on the prairie. But the note had piqued his interest. No other combination of words could have compelled him to venture into Sharon Springs, let alone to search for a nearly hidden door, enter a condemned building, and mount the stairs of the abandoned rooming house. Yet there he was.

He heard the tower clock at Holy Ghost Catholic striking the hour. At the twelfth tone, he stirred and was about to leave when he heard the narrow street door open and the sound of footsteps on the weathered stairs. The footfalls paused on the landing and a distinctive voice welled up from below.

"I am behind in my time," said his visitor. "You might have given me up."

"I'm here ain't I?" Gideon responded. "And why ain't I surprised?"

"Why, indeed?" asked De Soto Miguel de Valdez as he topped the stairway and crossed the room. "You were expecting me perhaps?"

"Yer blood quotation give you away," said Gideon.

"I am flattered that you have remembered. May I sit?"

"It's a free country," Gideon suggested.

"So far—" came the cryptic reply.

"Well, what's so dad-burned important that you gotta call me up here in secret?" Gideon asked.

"It seems we have much in common," Valdez declared.

"Such as?"

"We are both asking questions of power," Valdez explained. "You are asking after your boat, I believe. Where is my boat? It seems that, in certain circles, your persistent signs have—how do you say—struck a chord."

"It seems so," Gideon agreed.

"Where is your boat and, therefore, where is the water? You have asked a bold question," Valdez suggested. "And a brave one."

"Are you here to blow smoke up my behind, or is there a point here somewhere?"

"Ah—you wish to know the reason for this meeting?" Valdez guessed.

"If it ain't too much trouble."

"Of course," said Valdez. "This will take a measure of explaining. But, if you indulge me, I will meet that challenge. What I am about to tell you I have yet to reveal to others. Therefore—you see—today will count as my rehearsal. Shall I begin?"

"Got me curious," said Gideon.

"That is well," Valdez observed. "Curiosity may have injured the cat, but I am certain the knowledge which I impart will—well—we shall see. In the event that I am unable to repeat my story, I trust you will pass the details forward."

As that October afternoon passed into evening, Valdez imparted a tale which stunned, angered, wounded, and inspired his audience of one. Having said his piece, the decorous man stood to attention, bowed, and took his leave.

Later that night, walking through the darkened streets of Sharon Springs, Gideon turned the revelations over and over in his mind. By the time he'd reached the outskirts of town and begun the long trek to his prairie cabin, the old timer had decided that—if even ten percent of what Valdez said was true—his world, indeed the world itself, would never be the same.

He had to tell someone, but whom could he trust? Plagued by indecision, Gideon dithered, and time slipped away. He thought of contacting the young woman, but after their blurry encounter at the cemetery, he



wasn't quite certain he'd recognize her again. He had a vague notion he'd seen her more than once and—more importantly—he harbored a growing suspicion that his Mountain followers had observed the two of them together. He might have sought her out, but Valdez had been vague about names and addresses. In the end, Gideon had been reluctant to place her in danger. The less she knew, he reasoned, the better. So, he didn't seek her out. Instead, he kept to himself, kept quiet, and returned to his routine of clandestine harassment.

Yesterday, Gideon had been posting protest signs when they ambushed him. As he labored on the shoulder of a rural road, he'd been cautiously listening for the approach of motor vehicles. How was he to know the odious Bradshaw brothers would suddenly appear, undetected, and on horseback? He had only moments to react and the chase was brief—his two unsteady feet were no match for the relentless pursuit of eight pounding hooves. In less than ten minutes, he heard the crack of the rifle and felt the burning pain in his leg as he tumbled headlong into the dust.

Now he'd been captured, and the end was near. Because of his stubborn silence, no one would ever know the extent of the Mountain conspiracy. No one would ever know the depth of Hendrix's iniquity. Alone in the isolated shack, unable to escape his captive agony, Gideon sighed, realizing how he'd squandered the time. Autumn had come and gone, winter was advancing, and he'd failed to share the knowledge which Valdez had revealed. Probably the Mountain henchmen were rounding up anyone suspected of possessing even a passing knowledge of the great conspiracy. The old timer had told the girl nothing, but that omission would fail to insure her safety. Valdez was probably already in custody—probably killed—along with everyone else even remotely connected. In a matter of moments, Gideon too would be dead, and the revelations would die with him.



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 22: Reckoning

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 21**, Gideon Dixon took stock of his life. In today's episode, a ruthless agent chooses to follow his orders.

By **DON BENJAMIN**
*Kansas-Colorado Border Zone
January, 1937*

When Glenn Solomon Hendrix summoned Bill Jenkins to within shouting distance of the isolated shack and ordered the veteran agent to kill the occupant, one Gideon Dixon, then burn the place down, the obedient man had nodded like an automaton. The Lord of Wolf Moon Manor had issued an unambiguous command and it was up to Jenkins to follow orders.

Agent Jenkins watched everyone drive away, the Old Man and Petterson in their limousine and young Dobson in his sedan. The utility truck, which Jenkins was instructed to drive back to the Mountain, was left behind. Jenkins remained motionless for several minutes. His orders were to wait until the others were completely out of sight.

At last, certain he was alone, the compliant agent picked up the gas can, carried it into the trees, placed it just inside the thicket, and walked to the shack. The old timer lay there, breathing heavily. When Gideon saw the agent enter, he tried to rise, but the straps restrained him, and he fell back helplessly. Jenkins drew his pistol and screwed the silencer in place. Gideon closed his eyes, sighed, and turned his head.

The old timer heard a subdued thud and presumed it was the muted report of the deadly weapon. He'd anticipated pain, possibly a loss of vision. When neither sensation occurred, he turned to face his executioner and found himself staring at two men—one on the ground and the other standing.

Jenkins was facedown and unmoving, while another man pocketed the pistol.

"Captain Hershel at your service," the new arrival introduced himself. "Now, let's see about unplugging you."

Moving closer, the captain reached down and touched Gideon's shoulder.

"It'll be all right," he assured the old timer. "I'm here to rescue you, but first I need you and our friend here to switch places."

Rapidly stripping the agent, Hershel freed Gideon and helped him out of his shirt and jacket. As the old timer began to unbuckle his belt, the captain decided there wasn't time to exchange trousers.

"Shirt and jacket ought to do it," he told the former prisoner.

"Best news I've had all day," said Gideon. "I'm right fond of this-here rodeo buckle."

After dressing the groggy agent, Hershel strapped the man onto the gurney. Without a twinge of conscience, he fired a bullet into the temple of the would-be assassin. Then he led the old timer outside and directed Gideon to a patch of dry ground beneath the dilapidated edge of an overhanging roof. After making certain the freed prisoner was in the clear, the decisive

captain returned to the cedars, grabbed the gasoline can, saturated the shack, and set it ablaze.

The captain was certain that Hendrix, ever the cautious supervisor, would undoubtedly have paused somewhere far up the road where he could watch for smoke as evidence that his orders were being followed. While the flammable shack and the thicket of surrounding trees burned, Hershel helped Gideon to his feet.

"We'd better make ourselves scarce," he told the old timer.

"Yer one cool customer, I'll give you that," Gideon commented. "I'm certain-sure that skunk needed killin' but how'd you know to burn the place?"

"Standard procedure," Hershel informed him. "Plus, I was hiding close by and near enough to hear the Old Man bellow his orders."

Thick smoke billowed skyward, forming an elongated black smudge against the crystal-blue sky. A satisfactory signal, Hershel decided. Enough to confirm to Hendrix, or anyone else watching, that Gideon Dixon had been dispatched and incinerated.

"We'll take the truck," Hershel said. "Can you shoot?"

"No worries on that-there account," Gideon assured him.

"This is yours then," Hershel decided. "A souvenir," he added.

Gideon fingered the pistol. Hershel watched with interest as the old timer examined the weapon's unusual grip. Hershel had it pegged as Russian and he wondered, briefly, if anyone else would recognize the connection between the grip's embossed star and the newest member state of the League of Nations. The captain didn't trust any aspect of the so-called Soviet Union.

I wouldn't, he reminded himself, trust a Russian as far as I could throw him and some of those Russians are plenty damn big.

"Not much to show fer a life," Gideon said, his eyes still fixed on the pistol.

"Not much to show even when he was alive," Hershel declared. "That particular Eyestone operative would have killed you without missing a beat."

"That I don't doubt," said Gideon. "Eyestone, huh?" Gideon shook his head as he repeated the name of the special, and supposedly secret, branch of the Old Man's Mountain Regiment. "Them bastards been months chasin' me. So, where do we go now?"

"Anyplace but here," the captain replied.

As they walked to the truck, Hershel noticed the old timer was limping, and no wonder. It looked like he'd been put through the wringer. His leg was bandaged, but it was a clean wrap with no visible blood, which suggested a sprain. Reaching the vehicle, Hershel stowed the empty gas can in the bed, then headed for the driver's side door. But the old timer grabbed the captain's arm and pointed to the ground, drawing attention to boot tracks in the snow-encrusted surface and the imprint of someone having



recently knelt there. With some effort, Gideon bent down and motioned to the captain to look underneath the running board. Hershel squatted and instantly recognized the problem. A wire ran the length of the truck's undercarriage from a point below the front seat until it reached the tailpipe.

"A surprise fer our Eyestone shooter, no doubt," said the old timer.

"No doubt," Hershel agreed as the pair stood erect and moved cautiously away from the trip-wired truck. "But how did you know to check for explosives?"

"And don't I know my old man?" he answered cryptically.

Gideon seemed to suggest, by this cryptic remark, that Hendrix was his father, an impossibility given that the old timer was seventy if he was a day and Hendrix was, so far as Hershel could determine, in his late fifties.

"I see you spinnin' that puzzle over in yer mind," said Gideon with a twinkle in his eye. "I said, 'my old man' and that-there is exactly what I meant. It's a puzzle for sure, but I got the key of which I'll tell you later. Meantime, I think my old man—yes, my old man—will be waitin' out there for to hear the noise of this-here fancy truck goin' boom."

Hershel told himself that his companion was correct. Just as Hendrix was undoubtedly watching from a safe distance for tell-tale smoke from the burning shack, he would be also listening for the explosion intended to kill his henchman.

No loose ends, Hershel thought.

The explosives were a standard agency set-up, threaded into the tailpipe and rigged to ignite when the ignition was switched on. Recognizing this, Hershel devised a plan. Remaining a safe distance away, he squatted again to make certain of his target.

"So, how you gonna—?" Gideon began, but the captain was way ahead of him.

"You may want to join me back here," Hershel suggested as he walked several paces away and positioned himself behind a pile of rubble which had once been the stonework of a water-well. "And bring your souvenir please."

The old timer followed, knelt beside the captain, and handed over the assassin's pistol.

"Yer eyes is probably better," the older man assured the younger.

Hershel nodded, steadied his aim on the lip of the well, and then—in the interest of accuracy—he removed the silencer.

"Won't do to miss," observed Gideon.

He was correct. Hershel had to do it in one shot, ensuring that the explosion would mask the report of the pistol. Otherwise, there would be one or more naked shots to account for, an anomaly which would surely bring the Old Man back to the scene of the crime. Hershel took a deep breath and took aim again, sighting firmly on the open end of the tailpipe. From that distance it would be like putting a bullet into the exact bull's-eye of a paper target, something the captain had done often enough on the practice range. He was confident he wouldn't miss, so he squeezed the trigger.

The explosion, even though Hershel expected it, was intense. In the echoing aftermath, parts of the dismantled truck clanged audibly against the stonework and rained heavily on all sides of the men. One of the flaming tires rolled their way, careening wildly and trailing smoke. It passed beyond their shelter, then wobbled to a stop.

"Now—" Hershel began as they both stood up. "What is that smell?"

"May-be burned rubber. May-be polecat," smiled Gideon as he buried his nose into the armpit of his borrowed shirt and jacket.

Deprived of the truck, the two set out on foot and headed west, toward Colorado. Gideon knew the country well and they made good progress until toward evening when the old timer began to lag behind and Hershel called a halt.

Secreted in a deep draw, they risked a small fire. It was bitterly cold, and they had nothing to eat, so they sat together in the growing darkness while Dix, as he said his friends called him, told his story. Afterward, sometime in the night, the old timer bled out from a leg wound, which Hershel had entirely failed to notice. Scraping a passable hole using his pocketknife and a tapered fragment of rock, the captain buried Gideon out there on the prairie, fully aware that he'd be unlikely to locate the spot again. Gideon's story would have to serve as his headstone.



Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 23: Gideon’s Tale

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In *Episode 22*, a ruthless agent failed to follow his orders. In today's episode, Captain Malcolm Hershel fires up his wire recorder.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

Field Notes and Transcription of Voice Recording
January 11, 1937: Border Zone
Captain Malcolm Hershel

The captain activated his recorder. "The following is my best recollection of the incident of 10 January, recorded one day after the fact."

He paused the recording, consulted his notes, then continued.

"As promised, when we were alone and relatively safe and rested, Gideon Dixon told me his story. For openers, he announced that Solomon Glenn Hendrix, founder of the Kansas Steel Range Project, my former employer, sadist, and murderer, was indeed his old man—which is to say his father. And yes, there is an age discrepancy, but Dix insisted that Hendrix had developed the ability to moderate, perhaps reverse, the effects of passing years upon his physical person. Whether he did so by manipulating time or through other means, the old timer could not say. All he knew was that Hendrix was using his offspring as laboratory subjects in some sort of unholy research to prolong life. Dix offered himself as evidence of Hendrix's appalling experimental success.

"Dix told me he talked to somebody from what he called *that cursed Mountain*. A foreign sounding name, which the old timer couldn't recall. He described the man as a sharp dresser, *all duded-up*, he said. This somebody pegged me as the dynamiter who blew up his boat. This somebody said I was sorry—said he thought Dix should know what was done to him as a child. Thought Dix ought to know there were more like him—his years and older. Brothers and sisters. All dead now. Dix told me he was the only old one left. *No more use*, he said, *for us old ones now that Hendrix has got his fresh meat coming in*.

"The somebody Dix mentioned had to be Valdez. Somehow the Mountain's nitro man got to Dix and divulged the secret that the old timer had been one of the Old Man's chief laboratory rats, a prime subject among a handful of children whose ages surpassed that of their father. But Dix had become expendable, and Hendrix was in the process of corraling fresh subjects and, as needed, he intended to begin *culling the herd*.

"Dix begged me to help and made me swear to find and protect the others—especially a young woman whose name he couldn't call to mind. From his description, I surmised he meant Annabel Thrush, the same young woman I encountered in a downtown secondhand store—the one being followed by an agent—an agent I sent packing. Precisely how many others, he did not know, but Hendrix had been prolific. If Dix was to be believed, over an unusually long span of life, the Old Man had sired scores of children by multiple mothers. The unfortunate mothers had a habit of disappearing as did their children, although a handful of progenies (himself a prime example) had been kept alive as toddlers in the captivity of a controlled environment for, as Dix put it, *investigational purposes*. Then—before they matured enough to recognize their situation—the toddlers were adopted out, turned loose to make their own way in the world, but closely monitored.

"Dix did not express it in these terms, but it seemed to me that Hendrix was op-

erating some kind of nature-versus-nurture experiment using his own offspring as subjects. At this point in his story, Dix began to despair. As an unwitting offspring of a monster, he felt betrayed and helpless, unable to identify, let alone aid his remaining siblings. Valdez had pegged the Thrush woman as one of his anonymous sisters. Dix didn't explain how this could possibly be so. He may not have had an explanation but I—thick as ever—failed to ask.

"Dix told me he'd begun his vendetta against the Mountain

over the loss of his fishing grounds, his boat, and his wedded memories. At first, he'd painted signs and knocked over granite boundary markers, but soon *Where's My Boat* signs started appearing on their own and undamaged boundary markers grew as scarce as hens' teeth. Accidentally his defiant actions had created a protest which had morphed into a movement which was fomenting into a revolution.

"Dix had disliked the Mountain and its maker in a general way. After Valdez set him straight, the old timer wanted to kill his unrepentant father. Then he moderated his revenge and replaced his anger with a more constructive mission. His goal became to discover and warn his kin. As to how he would ever identify and reach the rest of his disjointed family, Dix was completely in the dark. But when it came to solving this particular problem, I was way ahead of him. I had no doubt that the list of offspring slated for exploitation would mesh perfectly with Eyestone's inventory of surveillance subjects and that Dix himself would prove to be the missing target, Subject One.

"As Dix spoke, I mentally inventoried the other Subjects without revealing my suspicions to the old timer. Annabel Thrush is likely the sister whom Dix never knew, and the young woman is clearly the subject of Eyestone scrutiny. And another subject, Ham Hazelwood, his kid brother, is missing. The Hazelwood sister is undoubtedly also a subject for surveillance. Probing his understanding, I asked Dix if he was aware of the existence of Naif, who is closely watched as a member of Hendrix's inner circle. He claimed never to have heard of the lad but added that he viewed anyone affiliated with the Mountain as a collaborator at best—at worst, a traitor.

"My knowledge of Eyestone targets and the agency's procedures, coupled with Dix's startling information made my route to vengeance, and my justification for aggressively seeking it, crystal clear. So, I asked Dix a multitude of questions and took frenetic notes, covering several pages in my field notebook. The old timer answered all my questions and continued making fantastic claims, each new one sounding more bizarre than the last. I was incredulous and asked him to repeat his more outlandish statements. He did so, patiently at first, but began to lose patience with my skepticism. I will add those revelations to this narrative later, but only after corroborating them with other sources. I will need, for example, to talk directly to Valdez, presuming I can contact the elusive man without putting myself



and my work in jeopardy.

"Last evening, even in the dim light of a waning campfire, my occasional looks of disbelief must have been apparent because Dix abruptly halted his story and tried to convince me he was speaking the truth. He placed his face firmly in front of mine, held my gaze with his pale blue eyes, and challenged me to deny the astonishing resemblance between himself and Old Man Hendrix. The firelight muted his features, but I looked more closely, seeing beyond the beard, overlooking the wrinkles, until all at once my eyes widened and my brows arched.

"*You see it, don't you?*" he demanded. "I confessed that I did." "He gestured angrily in the dark in the general direction of the Steel Range, calling it *that damn mountain. Garden of Eden, some call it? Eighth wonder of the world? Hell-fire! Garden of Evil, I call it! It ain't no damn wonder! It's an abomination!*"

"Following this tirade, Dix uttered his most shocking revelation. Parroting what Valdez had told him, he described the Old Man's end game, a scheme so grotesque that I was at first unprepared to comprehend. The prairie wind had grown cold, and the darkness seemed to press upon us as the fire began to gutter. Chilled by the night and doubly chilled by Dix's revelations, I asked him to wait a moment while I gathered more fuel for the dying fire. Once the fire was blazing, I felt better.

"Poising my pencil, I bade him continue. According to Dix, Hendrix had built the Steel Range not to benefit the populace, not to generate electrical power, not to provide recreation for the masses, not even to glorify the works of Man. His sole and exclusive purpose had been to create for himself an impenetrable inner sanctum (my interpretation of the Old Man's intentions, Dix called it the demon's lair.)

"In short, according to Dix, the Kansas Steel Range Project was a hoax. The Mountain's picturesque façade disguised its true nature. Inside the artificial peak known as Sunflower lay a hidden chamber from which Hendrix intended to orchestrate no less a diabolical scheme than the destruction of the World!

"*If he has his way, he'll kill most everybody, every blessed soul*, Dix declared.

"Upon this pronouncement he paused for effect. It sounded preposterous and, in any other setting and under other circumstances, I might have dismissed the old timer's story as the ravings of a lunatic. And yet there I was, sitting on the dark prairie and in the company of a man who was the

spitting image of Hendrix.

"At last, Dix slept, exhausted from his exposition as I lay awake and considered the Hendrix whom I thought I knew and compared that image to the Hendrix revealed by the old timer's accusations. There was Hendrix, the cold calculating menace, who had coolly ordered Dix's death—which, if Dix is to be believed, meant the execution of his own son. There was Hendrix, the master manipulator, who'd convinced the American government to pour millions into his Steel Range scheme and who on a less grand, but no less devious level had months ago stolen a river and a reservoir. There was Hendrix, the cruel father, who impregnated and abandoned countless women, then imprisoned and hounded and experimented on his own children. And there was Hendrix, who mere days ago had plotted my own murder. And now there was the Old Man's son who had denounced Hendrix as not merely a monster but an uber-monster, a fiend intent on destroying the World.

"*And why not?* I thought. *The Hendrix whom I knew was capable of considerable evil. I assumed I knew him, but I had completely underestimated the depth of his iniquity. The Hendrix that Dix described was a thousand-fold villain, an egocentric creature devoid of empathy and perfectly capable of universal genocide.*

"Dix was a colorful character, but he wasn't a lunatic. He spoke plainly and with the unassailable credentials of an ill-treated laboratory animal seeking retribution. And everything he said made perfect sense to me. His information, unbelievable as it would have seemed to an uninformed observer, rang absolutely true when I placed it within the context of my years as an Eyestone agent.

"I considered the quasi-military training I had endured to join the agency, the unrelenting surveillance of Subjects Two through Eight, and Hendrix's preoccupation with secrecy. In hindsight, such activities suggested a potential for skullduggery on a breath-taking scale especially considering the alarming array of misfits, brigands, and psychopaths employed by Eyestone. I considered those within my immediate sphere: the odious Bradshaw brothers, the oily Petterson, the misshaped monkey Sewell, that old reprobate Wooten, the mysterious Naif, and countless other greater and lesser trolls. Yes, those who worked for the Project were a dangerous lot whose prospects for evil were legion."

And what, Hershel suddenly wondered, does that make me?

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 24: Family Tree

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 23**, Captain Malcolm Hershel began his wire recording. In today's episode, the captain accepts the challenge of a new mission.

By DON BENJAMIN
Field Notes and Transcription of Voice Recording
Border Zone: January 11, 1937
Captain Malcolm Hershel

The captain paused the recorder. Since walking away from his Mountain position, he seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time documenting his unsanctioned activities.

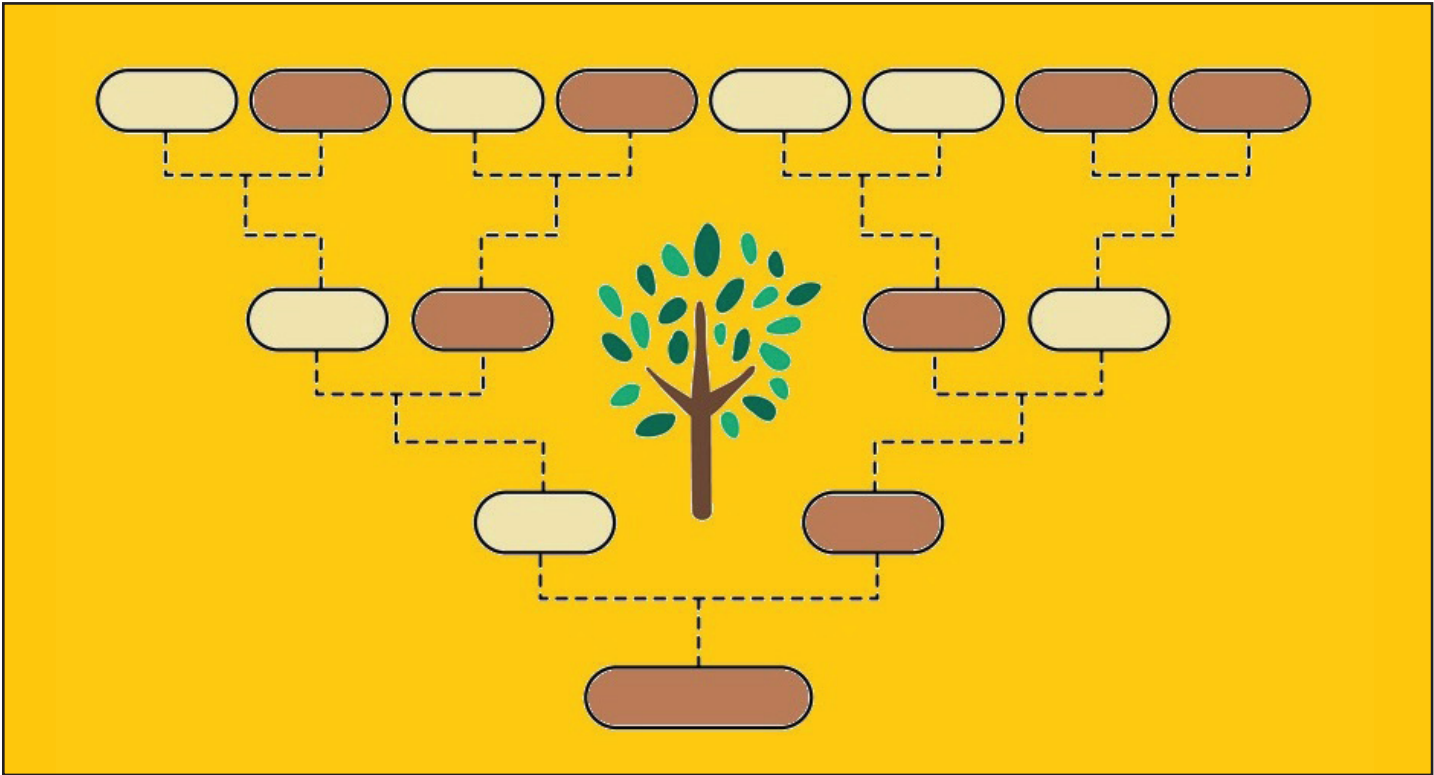
Old habits die hard, he told himself. Automatically, without thinking, and although he was no longer obligated to compile data for his Mountain masters, he'd been operating according to Eyestone protocol. He'd been collecting field notes and faithfully converting those notes into voice recordings using his dependable wire system. Eventually, he created a series of written transcripts. He was well on his way to documenting his encounter with Gideon Dixon when his thoughts conjured up a compelling question which begged for a suitable answer.

Given my now-dissolved role as a Mountain employee, he asked himself again, *where do I fall within the pantheon of Steel Range brigands, misfits, and psychopaths?* After a moment more of reflection, he reactivated his recorder and voiced his answer.

"I was one of the naive acolytes, like Valdez, who'd swallowed the whole of the Old Man's banana-oil about building a better tomorrow, improving upon Nature, and all the rest of it. Valdez had apparently gotten wise years ago and it was all hog-wash, I see that now. Even before Dix's revelations, I had my suspicions and Hendrix must have sensed my misgivings. Last October, he'd gambled by giving me a direct order to sabotage evidence at the reservoir and last week's so-called accident was his ace-in-the-hole. The instant I became expendable, Old Man Hendrix had hatched a scheme to cut me down. Mere days ago, if one of his henchmen hadn't disobeyed his supposed master, I would really have died. And, if I hadn't covered my tracks, I'd have been hunted down and Petterson or young Dobson could have been relied upon to finish that job.

"Dobson was thorough. Although I hadn't lingered at the abandoned farm to verify my assumption, I was certain Agent Dobson would have returned to the place in the wake of the fire and explosion. Arriving there, he'd find what he expected to find: a dilapidated shack and thicket of trees burned to the ground and a charred hole where the company truck used to be. Among the remains of the shack, he would have discovered a smoldering corpse. Not finding any trace of another body in the scattered wreckage of the truck wouldn't have dissuaded him from concluding that, consistent with Old Man Hendrix's wishes, his fellow agent had perished there. Dobson would have driven away to make his report. Hendrix and his remaining henchmen would declare the operation a success. By the time they realized what had really happened—assuming they ever did—Dix and I would be long gone.

"That night, as I listened, feverishly taking notes, nothing Dix revealed had seemed beyond the realm of possibility. What I couldn't swallow was Dix's belief that Naif was a villain. I knew the boy as a sincere and surprisingly rugged Mulatto and Hendrix's acknowledged son. So, de-



spite Dix's misgivings, I had a hard time believing the boy was a traitor. I was certain Naif was more than he seemed—confined to a wheelchair, yet surprisingly mobile, and working beside villains but keeping his hands clean and keeping his own counsel.

"I thought long and hard about Naif. As soon as Dix mentioned the boy, I recalled an incident last year when Naif showed up at my house one evening. I had walked away from my confining Mountain quarters and into a house of my own. Having unofficially resigned my position, I was exerting my independence and acting in ways which brought me to the Old Man's attention as an ex-employee who needed watching. Naif was aware of my departure, yet he chose to seek me out. He'd heard of my interest in wire transcription, the literal recording of sound and speech upon reliable metallic wire, as opposed to more impermanent hosts such as fragile phonograph records, flimsy grooved cylinders, or frail magnetic tape.

"Upon locating me, the boy asked for a demonstration, presuming correctly that my mechanisms for producing wire recordings were to be found in my garage workshop. I obliged him, although I wondered then and wonder still how he learned of my skill or how he managed to maneuver his wheelchair to surmount my graveled driveway, a steep stairway, and two locked entry gates to knock on my front door. For that matter, I also wondered how he'd managed to visit me undetected—perhaps his movements were in fact observed. That would explain much.

"After a tour of my workshop which included a demonstration of wire transcription, I invited the boy to stay for supper, not supposing he would agree, and was pleasantly surprised when he accepted. I threw two steaks on my outdoor grill, mashed some potatoes, and created a passable salad. I drank beer, he preferred wine, and we spent that evening discussing the attributes of his father's ambitious Project. He harbored no shortage of strong opinions about the Steel Range. He felt, for example, that the Old Man (whom he called, rather formally I thought, *Our Father*) had over-reached—not in constructing his ambitious mountain range but in seeking to establish a vast prairie preserve with its unmanageable plants and animals.

"A bit out of Our Father's league, this desire of his to manipulate and manage living creatures, he commented as he politely refused a refilling of his wine glass. *Steel and iron are more in his line. He is at his best when dealing with the inanimate, the solid. And these are his proper realm. He designed my chair, you know, and it is quite a versatile machine.*

"I hated to disillusion the boy about his father's prowess, but I am fairly certain that Hendrix is incapable of designing anything. He is not an original thinker. He is a manipulator who cajoles or bullies others into doing his bidding. As for the various innovations credited to him, I am convinced those pioneering ideas were drawn from an inexhaustible stash of patents which—if the rumors are to be believed—he stole from the original inventors. But that night I kept my opinions to myself.

"By the time we'd finished our meal, our drinks, and our conversation, the hour was late, and it was pitch-black outside. I offered to see Naif home, but he declined and left. Somehow, the boy surmounted the obstacles which lay between my house and the road, because a few minutes later I heard an automobile start and looked out the front window just in time to see a pair of taillights disappearing around the bend. Apparently, the resourceful invalid could also operate a motor vehicle.

"In that encounter and others since—including our brief meeting deep in the bowels of the Mountain when I rescued him from the depths of his father's stolen water—I found Naif to be a remarkably bright and likable youngster. I was never certain of his exact age owing to his withered stature, a result no doubt of his infirmity, the precise nature of which was also unclear. Much about him remained enigmatic. For instance, he was his father's son in many ways and in other ways he was Hendrix's polar opposite. Despite his physical limitations, the boy had his father's assured manner, but without the Old Man's disagreeable arrogance. Like his father he was a sociable charmer, but with none of the Old Man's predisposition toward manipulation. He, like the elder Hendrix, was supremely intelligent, but without the Old Man's thinly veneered condescension toward those of lesser intellect. Both were possessed of a dynamic drive to succeed but, unlike his father, Naif seemed capable of pursuing ambition in a way which I sensed would be tempered with mercy.

"Returning to last night on the dark prairie, as Dix spun his fantastic tale, my supposition that he and Naif were brothers caused me to guess that the youth and the old timer could be kindred spirits despite their dissimilar appearances. At first glance the connection seemed unlikely. Naif is a dark youth with kinky hair and a broad African nose while Gideon Dixon was a fair-skinned rogue, ruddy-cheeked, with wisps of auburn amongst his white hair and beard.

"I may have been musing over the contrast between these two unlikely step-siblings. Or perhaps I had been mesmerized

by other details of the old timer's incredible story or too intent on taking notes. For whatever reason, Dix suddenly clammed up. When at last he ended his story, I sat quietly for several moments staring into the embers of our dying campfire. The moon was riding high and in the distance a chorus of coyotes barked.

"Feeling it was my turn to comment, I summed up my reactions. I told Dix that—based on what he'd said coupled with what I already knew—I could only draw one conclusion. I had to conclude that the Subjects, everyone Eyestone had been shadowing for years, are all blood relations, but they don't know it.

"He nodded and, in his irascible style, added a succinct statement: *quite a pickle ain't it?*

"I further deduced the reason Eyestone has been keeping tabs on the Subjects and herding them here and there. I suggested the goal was to make these disparate members of a disjointed family tree congregate together in Kansas. But, I wondered, to what end? Dix admitted that he hadn't quite worked that out yet.

"But I'll tell you this, the old timer declared, *Naif—for better or worst—he's right in the middle of it and he's the key. Now, look, there's more to tell but I gotta rest. There's more but I can't get it out without resting a bit. Besides, it looks like you're plum out of paper.*

"In truth, I had filled my field notebook and had taken to scribbling notes on the folding money from my wallet. At his observation, I blushed, if such a thing had been possible in the dark and in the cold. Dix eyed my defaced money, then stretched out on the ground and issued what turned out to be his final words, which were: All I can say is— *My god ain't that moon and all them stars pretty? Anyway, all I can say is, don't spend it all in one place.*

"And with that, he went to sleep, never to wake. In the morning, before the sun was up, when I touched his shoulder to awaken him, he was cold and stiff as a prairie pond in winter. I buried him there and headed west. I didn't look back. Perhaps with a final glance I'd have noted a landmark, something to help me remember the spot. But it was dark so there would have been nothing to see. Nothing but the black prairie and the inky bulk of the Steel Range silhouetted against the fading stars. As it was, I walked on until the sun struggled up over the rim of the Steels. I looked back then, staring long and hard at the towering outline of Mount Sunflower, the demon's lair, and wondering how in God's name I was going to expose and cripple the mad power which resided there."

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 25: Undercurrent

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 24**, Captain Malcolm Hershel accepted the challenge of a new mission. In today's episode, Iris Hazelwood and Annabel Thrush compare notes.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

Kansas
March 1937

Iris Hazelwood, Annabel Thrush, and Billy Stroud had been living together at Water Crest Farm for five months. The search for Iris' missing brother had generated no plausible leads. Ham Hazelwood seemed to have vanished entirely.

Meanwhile, another individual had captured their attention. Comparing notes, Iris and Annabel discovered that each of them had encountered the same mystery man. On her first of many trips to the Sharon Springs newspaper office, Iris had exchanged glances with Malcolm Hershel. Annabel had met the distinctive man briefly at Beatrice's Trove. After asking around, they learned that this particular Hershel was a bit of a rebel who'd resigned from the Kansas Steel Range Project. Those who knew him spoke of him with reverence—calling him "Captain Hershel" and hinting that he was part of a growing cadre of malcontents.

An undercurrent of disenchantment was forming in West Kansas. Something was afoot in the Mountain. For a year, construction had been diminishing. Promised improvements and civic enhancements had gone unfulfilled. Workers who'd anticipated a lifetime of employment with the Steel Range Project found themselves back on the breadline. Idle men turned to gambling, drinking, and petty crime. Vandalism of Mountain properties was on the rise. In response, the Mountain security forces had evolved from a small platoon of watchmen into an ever-growing and well-armed militia.

Jurisdictional disputes with local law enforcement seemed to multiply daily. Elected officials were increasingly bypassed and systematically replaced, at regular intervals, by pro-Mountain bureaucrats. The project director, Glenn Solomon Hendrix, who was once a highly visible fixture in the region, essentially withdrew from public life and visitors to Wolf Moon Manor dwindled even as the Old Man continued to welcome Iris. He found her to be good company and seemed to relish her attentions.

Annabel was exhilarated by the hint of rebellion. For her part, Iris had decided not to stir the pot by throwing Hendrix's critics in his face. Their Thursday chats at Wolf Moon Manor had skirted local politics in favor of the Old Man sharing tidbits about his past life—tales which Iris, who was still searching for a topic to crystalize her writing, began to visualize as grist for her unpublished novel. Utilizing a personal code gleaned from methodology contained in a classic book on the innovative use of shorthand, Iris began to document her host's rambling tales. Much of what Hendrix told her was fantastic—some of it bordered on delusional. The man was an egotist, that much was certain, and given to exaggeration—making himself always the center of his eccentric stories. Still, she had to admit that he held her interest and so she continued her Thursday routine.

Springtime, however, heralded a change. Hendrix cancelled one of their Thursday sessions—claiming ill health. Then he cancelled another evening, citing the press of business. When a third consecutive cancellation occurred, Iris herself called a halt. The Manor's oily chauffeur no longer called for her with the Old Man's luxurious limousine and Iris consigned that phase of her life to the dustbin. No longer

would she spend her Thursday evenings as the particular and only guest of the lord of Wolf Moon Manor.

Iris took the change in stride. Hendrix had already shared much—every syllable of which Iris had faithfully recorded in her journal. She'd amassed a treasure trove of tantalizing details—enough grist to allow her to concentrate on transcribing her notes. So, the budding author devoted a full week of non-stop attention to her writing until she began to sense that something was missing.

"I've neglected my true family," Iris said one evening as she and Annabel and Billy sat around the kitchen table sorting garden seeds. "What do you say to a road trip? Annabel and I will set out first, making our way to Arizona to collect my books. Then, when we return, the three of us will drive to Missouri to retrieve Annabel's languishing library. It'll be a chance for adventure."

So, it was decided. While Billy managed the farm, the two women were to drive together to Arizona where Iris would give her final notice to the university, collect her books and other keepsakes, and sign some papers. Then they'd immediately return to Kansas and plot a second course to Missouri.

At the outset of the Arizona trip, Iris wanted to make an early start, but Annabel begged to visit Smoky Hill Cemetery. Ancestral graves were something Iris and her young friend had in common. Their mothers were buried on the outskirts of Sharon Springs: Mother Hazelwood in Saint Jude's and Mrs. Thrush at Smoky Hill. Annabel had never mentioned her father and Iris, mindful of her own secrets, had never asked.

Arriving at the cemetery, they discovered that an ambitious soul had propped the gates open and improved the road, so Iris was able to drive the Hudson all the way up. Iris waited in the sedan while Annabel knelt next to her mother's grave. Looking across the neglected grounds, the dormant grass just beginning to show signs of spring, Iris seemed to see her own form kneeling there. She daubed at her eyes wondering at the workings of a benevolent Universe which had thrown together two such motherless orphans as she and Annabel. As the older woman waited there in the quiet morning, she had just closed her eyes when Annabel tapped on the sedan window and Iris jumped.

"Didn't you see me coming?" the younger woman asked.

"Lost in thought," Iris explained. "Whatever that means," observed Annabel.

Thunder sounded and it began to rain as they left the cemetery. Soon it was pouring, and they missed their turn and got lost on a confusing network of rural roads. The rain ceased, but—even with the aid of bright spring sunshine—Iris couldn't find the highway, and they continued to meander in unfamiliar territory. Undaunted by the situation, her young companion watched the passing scenery, commenting humorously on all they saw including several hand-painted signs nailed to fence railings, telephone poles, and trees all asking the same puzzling question in bright red letters.

"There's another one," Annabel laughed as she read aloud. "*Wheres my boat?* What in the hell heck is that supposed to mean?"

"I wish you wouldn't swear," Iris frowned. The older woman was anxious to change the subject. She'd seen the signs before and she'd also encountered the local character who was the author. There was something unnerving about the man and his cryptic question.

"Saying *hell* ain't swearing," Annabel retorted. "It's in the Bible."

"Well, 'ain't' isn't in the Bible. And as for the meaning of these mysterious signs, I'd say it means someone did not pay attention in his punctuation class," Iris observed.

"How are you so certain the author is a him?"



"Stands to reason," Iris laughed, "since most men don't know their asterisk from a hole in the ground."

"That's a joke, right?" Annabel teased. "Anyway, I think I had a glimpse, not to mention a whiff, of the owner of these signs. I was having breakfast when two suits tried to corral the elusive Gideon Dixon. I also think that months ago I brushed elbows with him, or his double, at the cemetery."

"Hmm," Iris realized, "it seems like—as with Captain Hershel—we've both sighted the ghostly Gideon Dixon whose obsession with his missing rowboat has put him at odds with the Mountain. You've seen Gideon at breakfast and in the cemetery. I glimpsed his handiwork at the newspaper office, so I know he's the author of these irreverent signs which regularly appear around town and in the countryside. With or without an apostrophe, the question, *where's my boat*, has become a rallying cry for those who disagree with Mountain tactics and Mountain influence. In fact, given their shared viewpoints, it seems likely that our Captain Hershel and our boat-less Dixon are destined to—

"Stop!" Annabel interrupted. Iris slammed on the brakes, causing the Hudson to skid sideways on the muddy road.

"What is it?" "Look," said Annabel. She seemed to be pointing at a weathered sign advertising a horse for sale.

"What's so—?" "Look at the gate post," Annabel was whispering now. "Look and listen." The young woman carefully rolled down the window on her side. "There. Hear that?"

Iris listened, and heard a birdsong, a pleasant warble, like cascading water. Then she saw it, a smallish bird with a rust-colored head and puffy spots on a snow-white belly. No wonder Annabel was excited.

"Is that a—?" Iris ventured. "Yes," Annabel beamed.

It was a thrush, or more precisely a wood thrush, as Annabel breathlessly explained. On account of her last name, she'd made an extensive study of all-things thrush. It was early, she said, to see one with snow still clinging to the margins of the roadway. Ordinarily the thrush was not due in western Kansas until late April. Yet there he perched, warbling away while the two companions sat listening in their sideways sedan in the spring sunlight on the muddy road. Annabel was certain the bird's being there was an omen and so she turned her attention to the *horse for sale* announcement.

"It must be a sign," she said with feeling. Once Annabel had latched onto the idea that magic was at work, there was no dissuading her. The impetuous young woman opened her door and sloshed through the mud, apparently unconcerned about disturbing the supposedly prophetic thrush

which flew away. Iris pulled the Hudson off the road, stepped uncertainly into the mud, and followed. The gate was locked, but they ducked through and walked up a graveled driveway which led to an old farmhouse. While Iris knocked at the house, Annabel rushed around the property, presumably in search of the horse.

"Thirteen-hundred," the farmwife said in response to an inquiry about the horse, leaving Iris to contemplate the meaning of that figure.

"Are you quoting me the price or the horse's weight?" Iris asked.

"Everybody's a comedian," said the farmwife. "His name is Thirteen-Hundred, and the price is negotiable."

Iris had saved up twenty-dollars for the trip south, but she was reluctant to spend her entire bankroll on a horse—especially an unseen nag.

"How does ten sound?" Iris ventured. "Not as sweet as twelve," the farmwife countered.

They settled on eleven just as Annabel returned, leading an aged plow horse. "Can we keep him?" she asked.

"He's yours," Iris assured her. "Any idea how to get him back to our farm?"

"No worries," said Annabel who, with the agility of a circus acrobat, mounted the animal. "You drive—I ride. What could be simpler?"

"What indeed?" Iris laughed. "Your little sister sure enough knows her way around a horse," said the farmwife.

"Does she ever!" Iris beamed. As she drove behind the plodding horse, Iris re-evaluated her idea of traveling to Arizona. There was no need, she decided, to make the long drive. Instead, she would telephone her lawyer.

When she, Annabel, and the horse reached Water Crest Farm, Billy and Annabel set to work establishing quarters for Thirteen-Hundred while Iris made her call. The barrister agreed to accept her instructions authorizing him to sign anything that needed signing. He also took charge of notifying a Tucson moving company to pack up the contents of her old apartment, rescue her books from the university storehouse, and truck everything to Kansas post haste. And so, the Water Crest family—one horse richer—remained in Kansas.

The family held an open house to celebrate their new animal, inviting neighbors and townsfolk. When the last of the well-wishers departed, the pair sat on their front porch. Surrounded by jars of pickles, corncakes, pies, and a handmade horse blanket, they were sipping cider and taking in the view as the springtime sun sank behind the Kansas Steel Range.

"This is what I call living," declared Annabel.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Iris.

Mountain – A Cautionary Tale

A Weekly Serial Novel

Episode 26: Separation

Mountain: A Cautionary Tale is an alternative history covering 1936-1941. Set along the Kansas-Colorado border, it's the story of a misguided man, his star-crossed family, and an enormous public works project, gone terribly wrong. In **Episode 25**, Iris Hazelwood and Annabel Thrush compared notes. In today's episode, Iris embarks alone on an unexpected journey.

By **DON BENJAMIN**

March 1937
Kansas

A week after adding a horse to Water Crest Farm, Iris Hazelwood received word that her overseas uncle had passed away and she decided to travel to Wales. Just how an orphan managed to acquire distant relations remained a mystery to her.

Perhaps, she told herself, I am not in fact related to my Welsh family. Perhaps the cousins and uncle who visited me in Tucson are not connected to me by blood. Regardless, they made good company and made me feel loved. I'll be traveling alone and therefore will present little trouble. I wired that I'd pay for my room and board, and they wired back that they would allow no such thing. Perhaps I have stumbled upon my own greater tribe. In any event, I feel I must go. I didn't go when Alice died. I may never see Ham again. If there is even a slim chance that I will connect with family, I simply must go.

Leaving meant postponing—perhaps indefinitely—their trip to Missouri and the idea of separation was painful. When Iris broke the news of her hurried trip abroad, Annabel wept. But she regained her composure when Iris assigned her the task of tour guide, whereupon the young woman rushed to the library, acquired an armload of books on Wales, and regaled her friend with travel tips every evening during supper.

On the day of departure, Iris was planning to take the bus to Garden City to catch her early morning flight, but Annabel insisted on driving her to the airfield.

"You're full of surprises. But it isn't necessary," Iris protested.

"It is," her young companion replied and that seemed to settle the matter.

It was still dark and spitting snow when they left the farm and headed east. By the time they reached Oakley and turned south, the snow had increased and the distant Mountain, normally a spectacular sight at sunrise, was completely obscured by clouds. Iris grew anxious and began to wonder if her flight might be cancelled. Not only that, but it was over a hundred miles from Sharon Springs to Garden City and she hated to think of Annabel driving back alone in a storm.

As they trundled through the dark prairie, the once-straight road began to curve through a succession of rollercoaster hills.

As the Hudson topped a rise, the sedan's headlamps captured a glimpse of a gray form. Annabel slammed on the brakes and shifted into reverse.

Iris, who had been dozing, asked what was happening.

"Saw something," Annabel explained. "A dog maybe. Maybe a stray."

"Don't even think of adopting some forlorn prairie creature," Iris scolded. "We've got to press on to the airfield. No time for one of your mercy missions."

"Boy," Annabel laughed. "I never knew how cranky you are in the morning."

"For your information," Iris countered, "what I refer to as morning begins—in my experience—when the sun rises, not during the dark doldrums prior to sun-up. I—"

"Shh," Annabel interrupted as she rolled down the driver's side window. "Hear that?"

"Hear what?" Iris inquired. "Last time you heard something, we inherited a horse."

"Quiet," said Annabel. "I mean it. Listen."

Hearing alarm in her young companion's voice, Iris rolled down the passenger side window and leaned her head out the opening.

"Is that—?" she began.

"An engine idling in the dark," Annabel confirmed. "Somewhere behind us. And way too close for comfort."

Iris sensed that Annabel was about to leap from the sedan and confront whoever was following, but before she could admonish her young companion to stay put, a piercing howl permeated the pre-dawn darkness. Looking behind, the two women saw a pair of nearby headlamps ignite and watched with trepidation as the glowing orbs moved forward. Seconds later they breathed a mutual sigh of relief when the lights veered toward the shoulder, angled sharply, and reversed until two red taillights flickered briefly then receded into the darkness.

"Turned around," Iris suggested.

"After following us for Lord knows how long, in the dark, with their lights off," Annabel observed.

"Kids probably," Iris shrugged. "Adolescents out on a ramble."

"On a school night?" Annabel asked.

"Maybe not. Let's move on please," said Iris. "And I'd be most happy if you took another road home."

"Home by another way?" said Annabel as she pulled forward. "That's in the Bible, right?"

"Something like that," Iris agreed. "Just make sure you don't come back this way."

"No worries on that account," the younger woman assured her passenger as they topped yet another rise in the road and saw that the distant horizon was beginning to lighten. "Anyhow, here comes the morning."

An hour later, when they stopped for breakfast, the sun was shining brightly, and



the weather looked clear in all directions.

"Is this place part of the Sharon Springs outfit?" Iris asked the waitress.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean it's quite a coincidence having two Mountain Vista Diners in the same state. Isn't it?"

"Heck, I doubt it. Since that pile out there went up everything under the sun has the name 'Mountain' stuck on it. We used to be the 'Scott City Cafe' and across the street used to be the 'Prairie Bowling Alley.' Not no more—now it's 'Mountain-this' and 'Mountain-that' even though we're forty miles distant."

"I see," said Iris and, once the waitress was out of sight, she whispered to Annabel, "Sorry I asked."

Over bacon and eggs, they talked about Iris' overseas trip. Annabel dreaded flying because her mother had died in a crash, so they did not discuss the first leg of the older woman's arduous journey during which a small aero-plane would take her from Garden City to Wichita. Instead, they discussed Wichita where Iris would catch the train east to New York, then continue by steamship across the broad Atlantic.

As for the time in Wales, Annabel had placed visiting castles and lochs high on her list of things Iris should do and see. Iris had a list too, a domestic one, which included instructions for her young friend regarding paying bills, forwarding mail, and performing other household duties along with stern warnings not to open the door to strangers.

"Jeepers," complained Annabel as they resumed their journey. "It's not as if I'm only a child!"

Iris apologized and then changed the subject to how often they must write and how both would miss their daily routines and talks.

At the airfield, they stood outside the Hudson and embraced. They held one another a long time and Iris clung to Annabel as if her life depended on it. She hung on and could not help thinking.

This moment standing here embracing on the cold compacted sod of this airfield may be all we will ever have.

At last, Iris pulled away, held the girl at arm's length, and beamed at her.

"Look at you," she said.

Throughout their last week together, Iris had been anticipating the sweet sorrow which would accompany the moment of separation. She sensed that her going would irreversibly alter their time of exclusive affection and she lingered—a delay which made her last to board the aero-plane. As Iris stumbled into her seat, she must have appeared shaken because the passenger across the aisle stared at her with an anxious expression and felt compelled to mouth the compulsory mantra of the concerned citizen.

"Are you alright?" the woman asked.

Iris said she was.

"Baby sister, huh?" the woman speculated.

"Pardon?"

"The girl—she's your baby sister, right? I spotted the resemblance right off."

"Nothing wrong with your eyesight," Iris grinned and then, hoping to catch a glimpse of Annabel, she turned to look out the tiny window. But, unwilling to witness the takeoff, the girl had already driven away.

Iris sighed and buckled her seatbelt just as the aircraft vibrated to life. She closed her eyes and kept them closed as they rolled across the tarmac and bounced out onto the cold compacted-sod of the primitive runway. She felt the aero-plane pivot to face the morning sun, then held her breath as it seemed to hesitate there while the whirling propellers chopped the morning air until both engines were droning in robust unison. The engines revved and Iris gasped as the craft lurched forward. Pounding down the runway, it gathered speed, then levitated and climbed into the cloudless sky.

When they were aloft, Iris opened both eyes and peered again out the tiny window. Annabel and the Hudson were down there somewhere, but Iris could see nothing below except a broad expanse of endless gray prairie. She couldn't even see the Mountain. They were flying in the wrong direction.

Her failure to catch a final glimpse of her young companion would prove prophetic. That morning she had seen the last of Annabel. Their time apart would be less than a year but, when Iris next returned to America, she would find her chosen sister, their farm, and their fortunes much changed.

