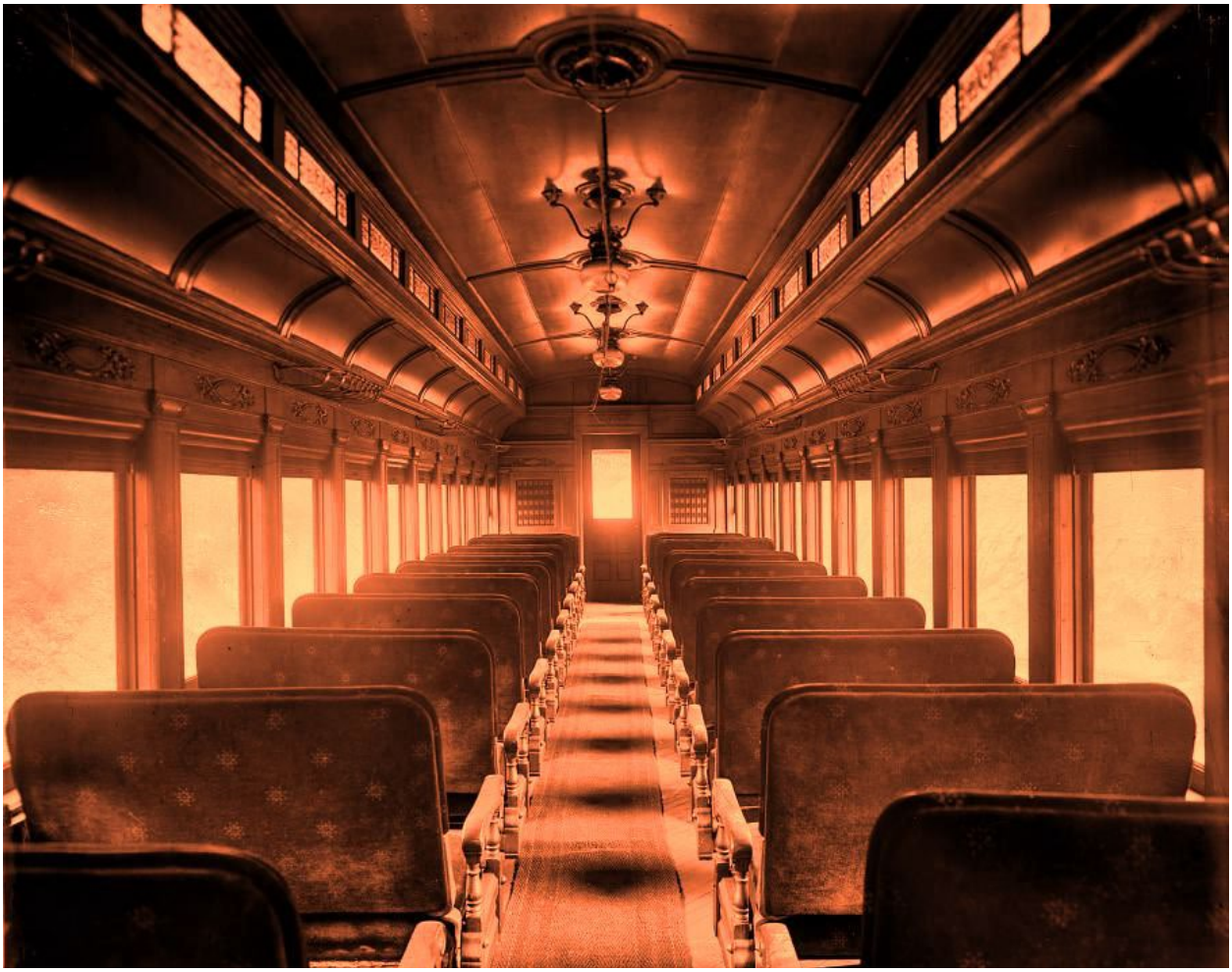
# *Mountain:*
## *A Cautionary Tale*

Episodes 1 – 12 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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*"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 drug 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.

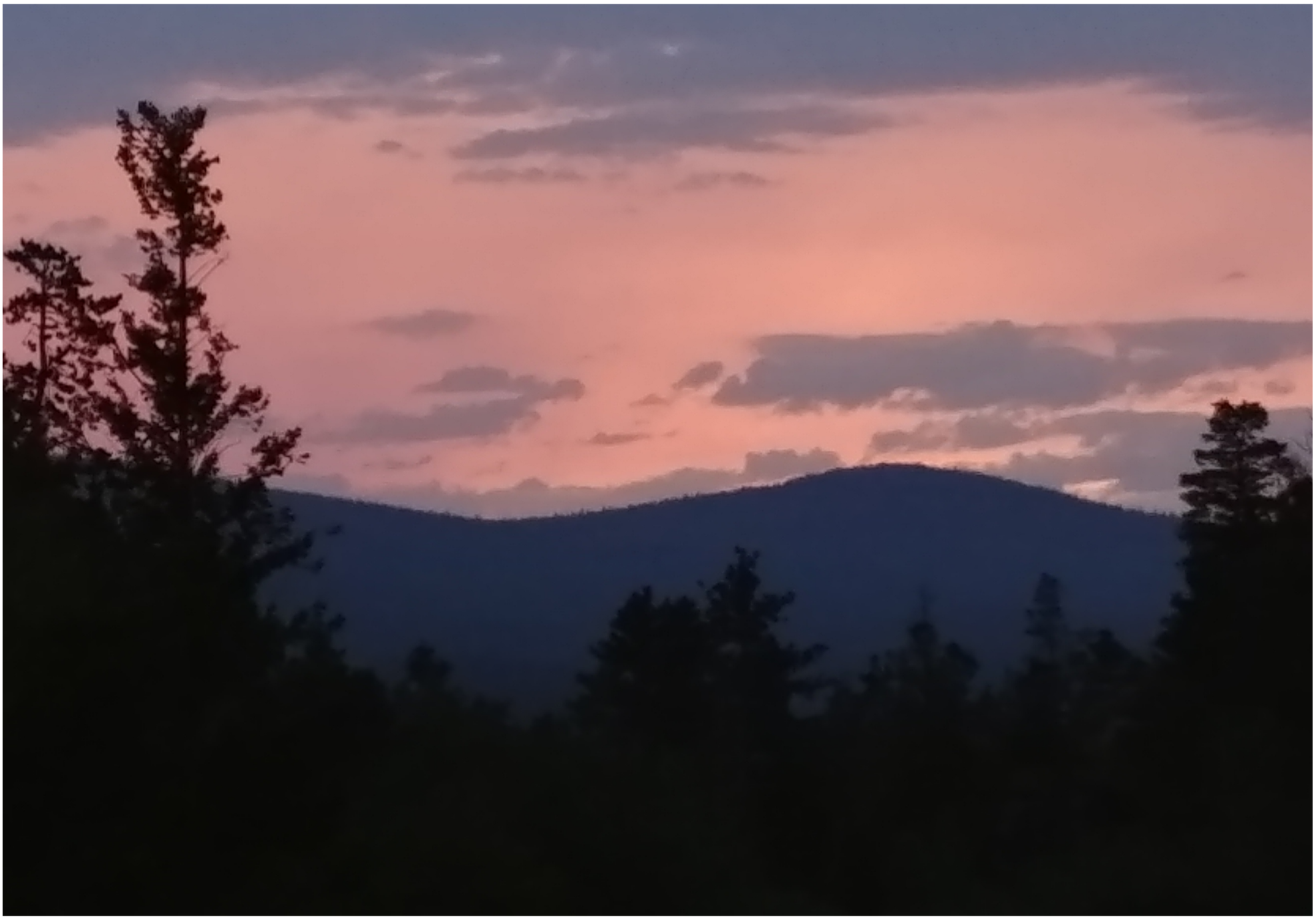
Visualizing the mountain's demise, the old man closed his eyes.

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 headlamps 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 headlamps 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 predisposed 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 disobeyed 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.

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**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."

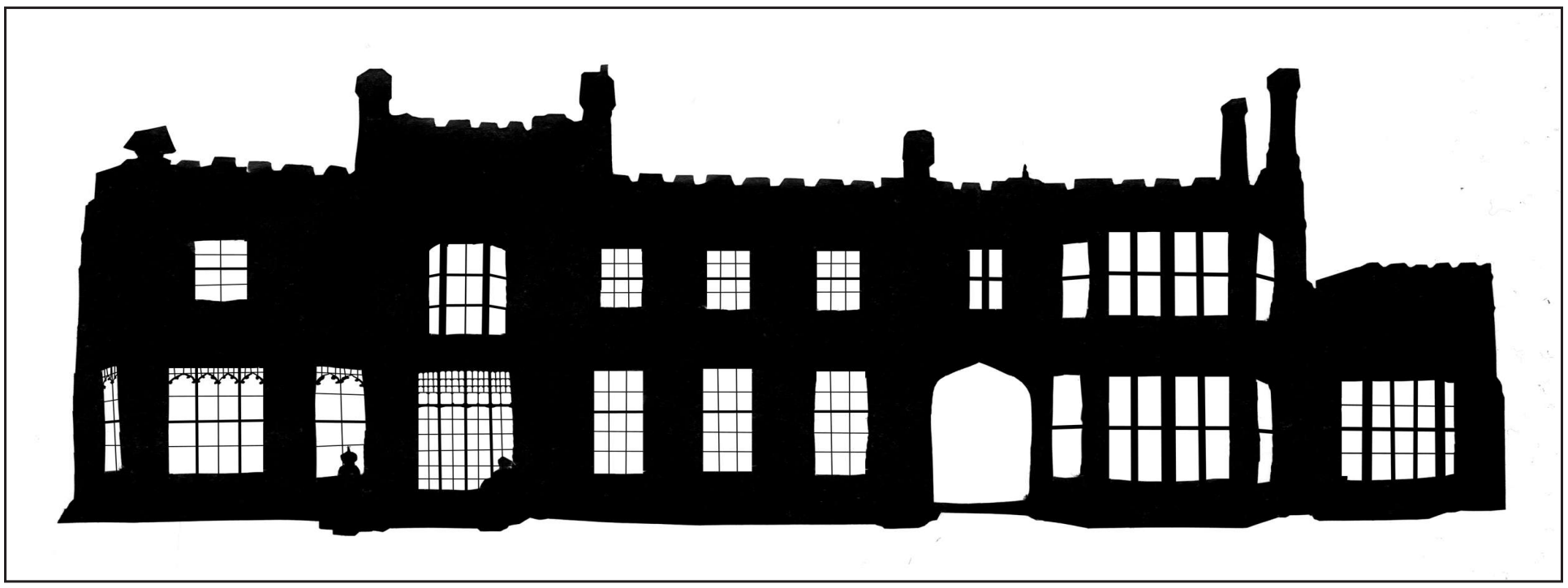
"Yes, sir," said the driver and the truck lurched forward. Hershel had no desire for conversation, but the driver continued talking. "Now, ain't that mornin' sky a grand sight?" the driver asked.

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.

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**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. "Ax—it 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.

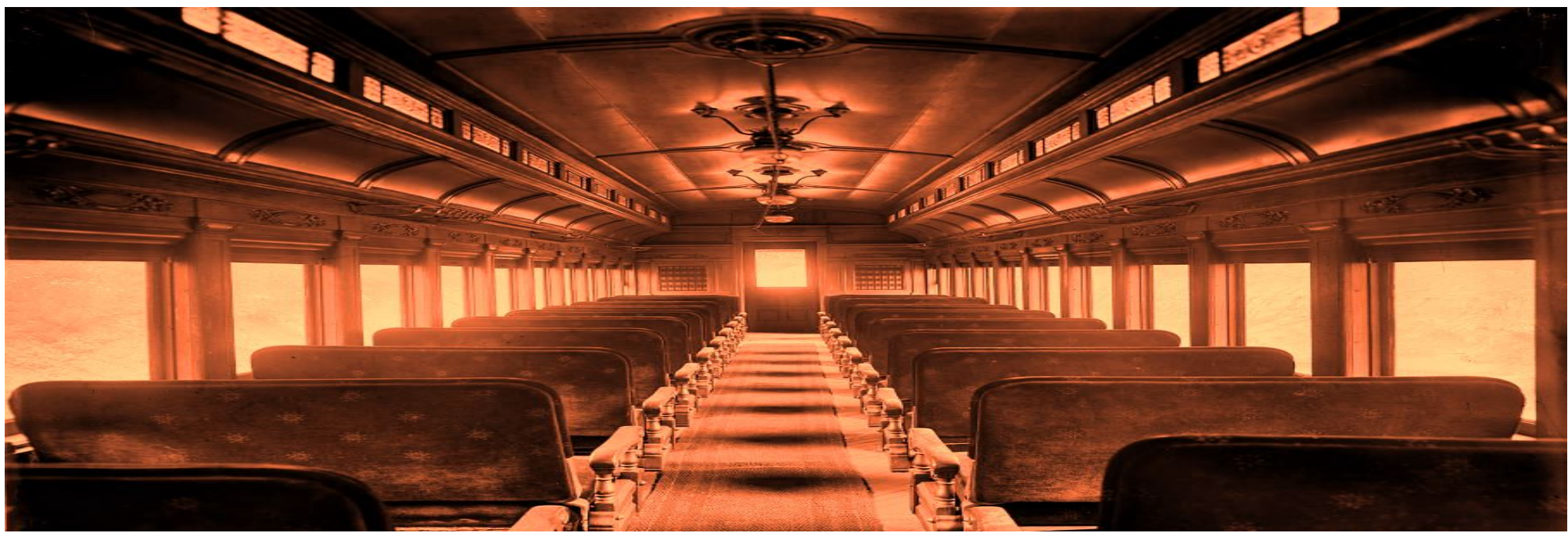
"Not in Kansas, sir. We're dry here. Tea or coffee only, I'm afraid," said the girl who was freckled and clean and twenty.

"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.

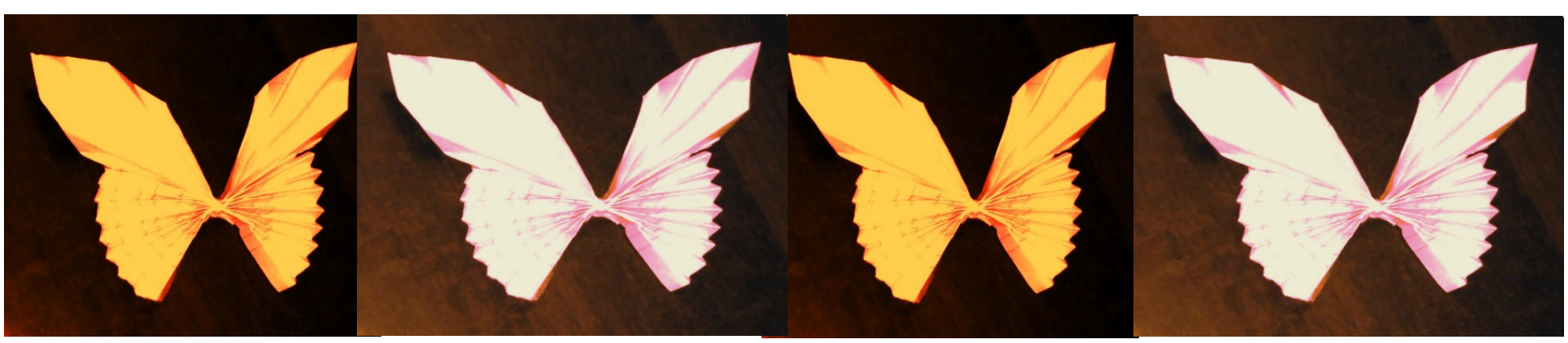
"Valdez?" she seemed to ask.

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 onboard. 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 detrained—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 tuckered 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.

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**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 railyard 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.

**Mountain: A Cautionary Tale** is an alternative history covering the period 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 10,** Mountain workers helped Iris Hazelwood retrieve her luggage. In today's episode, she expands the search for her missing brother.

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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 unmentionables 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 <u>had</u> a brother,* she chided herself. *<u>Had</u> 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 ruckus?" inquired another.

"Come on, Gideon! Stand aside fer payin' customers!" shouted a 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-assed 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 linemates.

"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.

"WHERES 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 Tal*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 rearview 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!*