The Second President

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Abstract

"SOMEONE’S LOOKING for you, Annie.” “Looking for me?” I looked up from the flat I was painting for the last scene of the Mad Woman of Chaillot. I had sticky gurp up to my elbows, all over my stiff jeans and sweater and even in my hair...
Her voice had not shown it much.

“Jim? . . . You need a break, I think.”

“That’s all right. We’ll be there within an hour and I’ll buy you a good steak dinner.”

“I’m not hungry, really, Jim.”

“Well, I am.”

“Would you like to have me drive for a while?”

“I told you I could drive all day. I just want to get to Spencer City by tonight and then we’re set. I’m hungry, though. Then I’ll give you a good steak dinner. I’m OK.”

Jim’s only conception of a good dinner was a steak dinner and he always ruined it with the cheap catsup kept on restaurant tables.

The road turned and turned and sprung out onto the prairie, where the far-off sad sun was almost gone, and an evening coldness was slipping over the brittle plane of grass.

Down the road, behind them now, back up in the glen about a hundred yards down the creek was the willow they’d made a playhouse, over a deep piece of sod that jutted right out over the water, where they’d swept the dirt like a floor with her doll-house broom, and hidden things under the biggest root that was the entrance step, too. Perhaps it was still there.

That was eighteen years ago. But it was behind them now. The car kept on in a straight, concrete line with a stripe down the middle.

It had really been very strange and silly of her and she was glad she had not made herself look foolish to Jim. Yes, she was.


The second president

“SOMEONE’S LOOKING for you, Annie.” “Looking for me?” I looked up from the flat I was painting for the last scene of the Mad Woman of Chaillot. I had sticky gurp up to my elbows, all over my stiff jeans and sweater and even in my hair. “I’m not fit to see anyone. Besides everyone I know in the state is either here in the workshop or next door in rehearsal.”
“Over there in the doorway, standing near the drill.”

I saw him. His hair, his skin and his eyes were all the same color—honey brown. He wore khaki pants and a wool shirt that had been washed in boiling water. I guessed he was about twenty years old. He stared at me as if he were looking through a one-way window.

“Him?”

“Him.”

I put my paste brush back in the bucket and climbed over sets and tools to the door.

“You were looking for me?”

“Yes. You see, I have never seen a woman work as hard as you are working. What is your motivation?”

This was more like an inquest.

“Motivation? Well, I guess I just do it ‘cause it has to be done. . . . And I guess I like it.”

“I would never work as hard as you are working unless I was absolutely sure that I knew my purpose.”

Each word he spoke seemed to get more than its share of enunciation. Somehow that irritated me.

“Well, O.K. if that’s the way you feel about it. I’m building flats cause I want to learn to build flats. If that’s O.K. with you.”

“It makes very little difference to me. I simply wondered. Are you going to be a set designer in the future?”

“A dietitian.”

“Then you are wasting your time.”

Harder than Rabbit Ears Rock. I’d only met him twenty seconds ago. Maybe he was some sort of a time and motion study. He just stood there at military “at ease” and stared at me.

“I guess I’ll go back to my unmotivated work. It has to be done tonight.”

“Stay and talk to me.”

“Is that a command?” He didn’t lift a hand or change the tone of his voice. But something about this stranger made me feel he had the power to direct a division of he had to.

“I had hoped you would stay on your own will, but if you will not—it is a command.”

Now I felt myself bobbing around on the end of his yoyo string.

“If we stand here they’ll call me back to work.”
"We'll go up to the lodge," he decided just like that.

We started up the path. I pretended to search for chipmunk holes. I could feel his eyes studying my profile. Part of me said, "Stare him down." But then part said, "Just pretend you don't notice him." So I looked for more chipmunk holes.

"What is your name?" His voice was actually an octave lower than a fog horn. I should have asked his motivations.

"Annie. Annie Adams."

"Are you related to the President?"

"President of what? Oh, John Q. Gee, I never thought of that. Mom came from Texas, Pop from New York and they met in Colorado. Then they picked Minnesota for their home state. That's all I know about my ancestors."

We seated ourselves on a bench in front of the fireplace.

"What are you doing at the Steamboat Springs Summer Theater?" My question had nothing to do with polite conversation. I was curious. This man didn't act like the other boys around here.

"I'm employed by Dick Randolph whose ranch is a quarter of a mile from here. Your director asked Dick if some of his men would try out for walk-ons, I guess he called it."

"Did you get a part?"

"Of course. I was very good. I am Second President. I have memorized the part. It is small but I haven't the time for anything more."

Lordy, that was almost more than I could take.

"You and yourself are pretty fond of each other, aren't you?"

"That's my religion. I'm a Roman Catholic to please my parents. But three years ago I developed my own religion. This is the religion I live by. I believe that a man should worship himself. He needs no other guidance. With complete self confidence he can do whatever he pleases. Someday I will be great."

"Excuse me, please. I just have to get back to the flats."

I couldn't take another minute of it. This blonde made me feel like I should be stored in a looney bin. Someday I will be great. I was very good.

Yet, I couldn't quite figure out why I let him make me mad. And that made me even madder. Really, what should I care if this self-loving cowboy thought he made a great
Second President in the two-minute part? I shouldn't even care if he made a great First President.

I slid back the door of the work shop. There in the shop people were normal. They talked like human beings are supposed to talk. There was Josepi Zanelli, for example. He was our accompanist-composer. Extremely talented, but he never let anyone know it.

Josepi walked over to me. "Annie, did you meet him?"

I could tell he was doing everything but chewing paint rags to keep from laughing out loud.

"Joe, what was "It"?

"This thing you call "It" happens to be the grandson of the President of Italy."

"Grandson of the Pres..." That's all I got out. Joe covered my mouth with his big hand. When I finally convinced him that I would reduce the volume, he took his hand away and I whispered. "He's been telling you stories, too. When did he corner you?"

"I'm telling you the truth, Annie. The President is his grandfather. Just before the tryouts he found out I speak Italian, so we went off in a corner and caught up on the news."

"What in God's gray country would the grandson of the President of Italy be doing here?"

"Annie, he wanted to go somewhere on his own. Someplace where none would know who he was. I guess he wanted to prove to himself that he could do things on his own. So he chose ranching—the thing farthest from his past experience and his educational training. So here he is. Working for a dollar a day and potatoes—living in a three-sided shack. Straight from prep school."

"Prep school in Italy?"

"Nope. Papa Einaudi is head of the government department at Cornell. Luigi only gets to sunny Italy one month of the year. Oh yes." Joe was laughing inside again, "he thinks you have nice dimples."

"Go on, this boy doesn't think about anyone but Luigi Einaudi the third."

"Give the boy a chance, Annie. You know, all of us work to impress Annie Adams."

I laughed again and picked up my gurp brush. Spread the wheat paste on the canvas and smooth it down with a block of
wood. Spread the wheat paste on the—Joe was an awful big tease. But somehow I didn’t believe he’d make up a story like that about somebody’s hired hand.

“Are you still learning the flat builder’s vocation?”

I almost slipped into my bucket. I knew the baritone, but I looked up anyway. Now that I looked again—he did have a noble forehead and a Roman nose.

“This trade is hard to learn—especially when you are watched by a celebrity.”

Now he looked like Christopher Robin looking for a rabbit in the market place.

“Josepi talked.”

“‘A secret is that which you tell one person at a time.’ Seriously, I won’t tell a soul. I won’t even think about it.”

He smiled. That was the first smile I had seen. Very becoming. He mumbled something that sounded like “doily” spelled backwards.

“What was that?”

He looked around to see if he was being watched. “It was Italian. Literally, it translated to ‘Little Holes.’ You Americans would say—dimples.”

He sat down on the platform beside me. I offered him a smoothing block, but he turned it away.

“I worked very hard and very expertly all day.”

I just couldn’t figure it out.

I trimmed the canvas to fit the frame. Then I painted the flat with a prime coat and then with an over coat and finally I painted the decorations. All this time Luigi was telling me about his favorite topic—Luigi. It was as if it had been stored up under terrific amount of pressure and finally he just let go.

He started that night with a lecture entitled, “Why we Should Love and Admire Luigi.” He told me he spoke Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, English, and French. And understood German. He had received the highest grade in the nation on the four-year French final—after two years of French. He had sold several articles to a French literary magazine. Sports were for him, especially fencing, tennis, mountain climbing and distance running. Every sentence was like a letter of application.

This was the first of a series of lectures by Luigi Einaudi the third. For the next two weeks there was one every eve-
ning. Sometimes they were delivered as he watched me work with my flat, or as I strung beads for the Indian costumes. One night he laid one of his poems on the ironing board for me to read and I accidentally ironed right over it. He said a lot of Italian words which he refused to translate.

There were lectures on the Queen's palace in the middle of Rome. And one on mountain climbing in the Alps. Several dealt with his tennis match with Honey Warren.

One month of the year he rode to the King's beach in a big black car with a motorcycle escort. Eleven months he rode a second hand bicycle to the pond at the foot of Faculty Hill. One month of the year he was called Sir or Master. Eleven months of the year he was Lou or Dago. One month of the year he was the Prince of Italy. Eleven months of the year he was a poor kid who talked funny and read too much and thought too seriously about politics.

He was a direct descendent of Dante. He named in order all his ancestors who had made history. At present his grandfather had the second largest privately owned library in the world and the largest farm in Italy. His mother's father was a famous political scientist. Surely I had heard of him? Surely I hadn't.

"Annette," he said one night at Soda Creek. "I believe you have very little idea how it feels to be brought up with this ancestor fixation complex. We must act in this manner because of Grandfather. We must always show superior intelligence because of Grandfather. We must support the proper charities because of Grandfather. I want to be a person. A person who responds to his surroundings. I want to be spoken to because people enjoy what I reply. Not because they feel it is their duty."

I didn't say a word. I felt Luigi was saying something he needed to say. He wasn't exactly saying it to me. It was just a thought that had to be put into words.

On Tuesday of the second week of rehearsal the director decided he would start the session with the scene Luigi was in. But Luigi wasn't there. The production manager ran from the stage to the studio and from the studio to the stage. He waved his clip board and shouted a number of choice phrases. If the production manager was like this—think of the director's performance! Then there was no sound. We knew that Luigi was holding up the rehearsal. That meant
no break at eleven and rehearsal until the wee hours of the morning. Slowing down rehearsal was the greatest sin committed.

After half an hour Luigi sauntered in.

"Where have you been? You held up rehearsal for thirty minutes."

"Dick and I were bottling our rhubarb wine. We didn't have enough jars, so we——."

The production manager came to us. "Luigi, your acting days are over. The boss says you are out. Unless you can think of something good, you aren't to come back anymore. He says maybe he will give you a chance to explain after rehearsal."

That night there was no lecture. We just waited. Finally he said, "These evenings mean a great deal to me. Here in the workshop I am with people of my own age. People with educations similar to mine. People who talk about more than cattle."

"Tell him you were sick or that you just got done haying."

"I can not tell him that. That is not the truth."

I knew his mind was running twice as fast as mine.

Finally, I said, "Let me think, what would appeal to him as a director. A publicity stunt. Luigi, I've got it. It is very simple. All you have to do is to tell him who you——"

He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Ann, what did I tell you I was here for? To the boss, I am a cowboy who plays the Second President. He doesn't know my name. He still calls me 'Second President.' That is the way I want it."

"If you don't tell him, you won't be able to come back for the final production."

"I won't be able to see you, Annette."

We sat there ignoring the solution of the problem and concentrated on the consequences.

At a quarter of one the production manager came into the studio. Everyone had gone home thirty minutes ago. The director and the manager were just finishing up their business.

"Second President—the boss will see you now."

Luigi walked across the deserted work shop. The door closed. I could hear the director's booming voice. Too many dramatic lessons. Then I heard a low rumble. More shouting and pounding from the director. A short phrase from the
Second President. The duet lasted twenty minutes. Finally the door slowly opened. Luigi stepped blindly into the darkened room. He walked past me into the night.

“Luigi, wait for me.”

He started talking before I caught up with him.

“I told him. I had to tell him. He said that I couldn’t come back anymore. He said I’d have to find recreation somewhere else—at the American Legion Dance Hall or at the Cattlemen’s Bar.” Luigi was walking in a slouch. That was the first time I ever saw him without his military walk.

“Then I told him. I was weak, Ann. Weak. I told him who I was and who my grandfather was and who my great-great grandfather was. Weak, Ann. He kept saying, ‘Grand publicity. Fine feature story.’ Then he put his arm around me and said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me this earlier, son. I would have made you First President.’ It made me sick.”

“Luigi, you will be able to stay.”

“Ann, you do not understand how it is to struggle constantly with your ancestors. To worship them and follow their rules—yet, resent everything they had done for you. When a situation arises, what does Luigi do? He takes the weak man’s way out. He calls on his ancestors to save him. Weak.”

The Second President was broken. I couldn’t think of the right thing to say. We just walked along the path.

Finally, he said, “When a man worships himself and his god crumbles—what happens then? Then the man crumbles.”

Was this Luigi Einaudi the third? Where was the boy who was great and very good, according to Luigi? This was a Luigi I could understand. He doubted his own power. Human. He realized his imperfections and now he would—

But I was wrong. Suddenly he said, “But I have not crumbled as an ordinary man would. My belief in myself is too grand. I have inherited a fine mind and I myself have developed it. I used my superior mentality to keep my part in the production. Oh yes, Ann, did I tell you what else the director said. He confirmed one of my strongest beliefs. He said I was a very good actor. He said I played the part naturally and with great feeling. I knew it before. I am very good in this play.”