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**THE  
BEAUCARNE  
MANUSCRIPT**

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**PART 1**

## 16 July 2012

A DAYWORKER REACHES into the wall of the parsonage his crew's revamping and pulls a piece of history up, the edges of its pages crumbling under the fingers of his glove, and I have to think that, if his supervisor isn't walking by at just that moment, then this construction grunt stuffs that journal from a century ago into his tool belt to pawn, or trade for beer, and the world never knows about it.

If this works out, though, then I owe that dayworker my career.

In January, I wasn't exactly denied tenure, but I was told that, instead of continuing with my application, I consider asking for the extension I'm currently on. The issue wasn't my teaching—I'm the dayworker of Communication and Journalism, covering all the 1000- and 2000-level courses—it was that my publications aren't up to University of Wyoming "standards for promotion." See: get a book under contract, Etsy, and then we'll talk.

And, if you don't? Then all your schooling, all your dreams of being a professor, they're smoke, and you're out in the cold.

Until that random dayworker reached into that wall. Until what he found wrapped in mouse-chewed buckskin wound up in the hands of

Special Collections librarian Lydia Ackerman of University Montana State up in Bozeman, and she was able to read the scripty hand enough to glean a name from the very front page: “Arthur Beaucarne.”

It’s not far from there to me, that surname not exactly being common.

And, because technically that journal belongs to me—well, my father *then* me, but my father in his facility down in Denver’s not exactly *compos mentis*—Lydia Ackerman’s been sending me the digitized pages as they’re processed, the original being a century too delicate to handle. But I don’t think she does it out of kindness. It’s to keep me from showing up unannounced again.

“Etsy?” she asked when I did show up like that in May, breathing hard from the stairs. She was looking from my ID to me, to see which was the typo. It’s *Betsy*, really, I didn’t say, but a boy with a speech impediment in kindergarten . . . who cares?

“The *last* name,” I told her, as politely as I could.

So, I was led back to the workbench they conserve delicate literary artifacts on, was made to mask up, glove up, bootie up, and then sit like that through a lecture about the lignin content of old paper and the homemade inks of the late nineteenth century, and how this particular ink had aged into acid that was eating away the brittle old paper it was written on, meaning the individual letters collapse into hopeless crumbles from just the slightest breath—thus the case the journal’s enclosed in. It’s for humidity and temperature, Lydia Ackerman explained like giving a tour to second-graders, but mostly it’s to keep any breeze from punching those black letters from the pages, effectively erasing this amazing find from history.

“It’s also for *dust*,” Lydia Ackerman leaned forward to say in some sort of confidence, like “dust” was a profanity in this particular room. “Even *dust* weighs enough to make the letters fall through the paper.” To be sure I got how dire this all was, she heated her eyes up and raised her eyebrows.

"I'll be careful," I assured her, at which point she unlatched the glass case, both of us holding our breath behind our masks, I'm pretty sure, and, finally, I got to look directly at my great-great-*great*-grandfather's journal.

The workroom we were in smelled like my dad's chemistry lab on campus, sending me back to being ten years old, when I'd yet to betray him by choosing the humanities over hard science.

Sorry, Dad. Again.

I turned my back on chemistry, became an alchemist, yes, mixing facts with rhetoric and spin and encomium, all in hopes this or that speech will catalyze an audience, hopefully in what feels like a heartfelt way. Such is communication, which I long to enter into again with you someday, Dad—hopefully soon. I do get the reports from your medical team, after all.

But, as my great-great-great-grandfather says in his journal—okay, my *greatest*-grandfather—that's neither here nor there.

And, yes, okay, I'll admit it here in the privacy of this laptop: since I didn't inherit "science" from my dad, I'm here choosing to inherit journal-keeping from someone much deeper in my bloodline. Well, either "inherit" or "resuscitate"—I haven't kept my precious thoughts in a secret notebook since junior high, thought I'd outgrown that kind of stuff. Surprise, I guess? I'm still that awkward girl in seventh grade, except now the enemies I'm putting on my hate list are from my tenure committee.

But, Great-Great-Great-Grandfather, I know I'm nowhere near as practiced as you, with organizing my daily thoughts and recollections on the page. You were educated in the nineteenth century, when recitation was the order of the day. You could recite long poems and speeches, and I, who *teach* speech-writing, can barely remember a phone number.

Where we're also different: you were a pastor, and—this I did inherit from my dad—I'm more of a professional doubter.

I've worked my way through the first few days of your journal, though, and I'm coming to understand why Bozeman wants to pay to keep your writing in their collection. You were good, Arthur Beaucarne. *You* used my rhetoric and spin and encomium to come off sounding heartfelt, never mind the actual facts, but you had a documentarian's eye, too, didn't you? And a playwright's ear. You didn't have a camera, but you had a pen, and its nib was sharp enough to cut right to the center of the day, the year, the era.

You make your case better than I can, though. I'll paste in a news item from 1912, the year you disappeared from your church, and then showcase your more fleshed-out version:

"Is it happening again?" This is the question former cavalryman and current postal clerk Livinius Clarkson was said to be asking his patrons for the better part of Monday.

What L. Clarkson is talking about is the deceased individual found off the beaten path yesterday, out in the open prairie across the Yellowstone River, in the environs of Sunday Creek. Initial speculation was that this was some unfortunate who perished over the last winter, who was only just now thawing out due to last week's abundance of sunlight. This would explain the state of this person's remains. However, knowledgeable men involved with transporting the body into town assure the Star that this isn't frost burn or scavenging. They also assure the Star that while ice, when affixed to skin, can possibly remove it, this would seem to be something more pernicious and intentional.

This is cause for concern.

Are the Indians turning hostile again? If so, which ones? The Crow, the Nakota, the Ree? More farflung tribes like the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Snake? And, if this is a holdover from the depredations of older times, then what might be the cause of their ire this time? Does our government not provide them with

beef rations, and land that they leave fallow and untended, not interested in working it as God intends?

When pressed on the matter, L. Clarkson, himself no supporter of the Indian, averred that what he was concerned about instead was similarity to a rash of grisly discoveries he claims went on nearly four decades ago, in Montana's more lawless times.

As for that supposed rash of mutilations, the Star talked to an unnamed source in the later years of his long and storied life. Once a miner, among other and sundry occupations, this source remembers this country when it was "young and open." Scoffing at L. Clarkson's sensational claims, this former ore-worker, treasure hunter, stage-coach driver and occasional cowpoke, who was young when the so-called "mountain men" were in their dotage, remembers that as the great buffalo herds were collapsing some 40 years ago, there were motherless calves left bawling out in the night, until finally the men of "Milestown" as he still insists upon calling Miles City, went out and dispatched them in a single night, leaving the humps skinned as a warning to any more disturbers of the night's peace. Apparently they drew all the calves together by draping a buffalo robe over a large bull borrowed from a certain rancher, also nameless.

The hides they salvaged from these calves, being too small for a robe and too golden for the milliner, were initially stored on a pallet in a shed behind the old livery, until they got too scabby to work soft. At which point they were fed to hogs. This recollector of former times assures the Star that this spectacle is what L. Clarkson is inaccurately recalling, as a buffalo calf weighs about the same as a grown man, and, dead in the grass in the state they were both left, it would be easy to mistake one for the other.

Of note is that the two dogs that accompanied the party to collect this dead individual both expired overnight, each of them chewing at the skin of their own bellies. But of course there is no shortage of dogs here in Miles City.

The identity of the deceased individual is as of this date unknown, save that he was male, and possibly a traveler, as his unmarred face isn't known around these parts.

The service for him will be private.

That's the just-the-facts version from the *Miles City Star*, dated March 26, 1912—microfiche, yes. Now, here's what my *greatest-grandfather* wrote into his journal the evening before:

Yesterday evening, word started to percolate around town concerning a man found dead out in the sea of grass that surrounds us. Martha Grandlin, Skeet Grandlin's second wife (his first, deceased) was the first bearer of this savory tidbit, being certain to contort her face in cultured disgust, and to not give the secondhand account her full voice, I presume either to keep it from being a real occurrence, or to keep from exposing herself as one who thrills in carrying such morbid news around town. Martha, kind soul that she tries to be, was bringing by half a loaf of German bread and some jam she claimed were spare, and clutching the week's mail to her side in case one of Skeet's many and farflung correspondences should blow away into those same grasslands.

According to Mrs. Grandlin, who held the tips of the fingers of her right hand to the hollow of her throat while pronouncing this, this poor man had had, there's no other way to say it, his skin removed "as if he were an animal!"

I ate the bread and jam in silence after Mrs. Grandlin's hasty departure, and considered whether a man liberated of his skin and left out in the grass was something that could still happen in this new century. Weren't such things supposed to be part of this new state's sordid past? And what would motivate someone to such an act? What could someone do to have such an act visited upon them?

The jam was huckleberry, with large chunks still remaining in

it, and I found that if I had the patience to leave it on the bread for a few minutes, the juice from the jam would soak in and soften it, with the result being almost in the cobbler family, though I could hold it in my fingers if I was careful, the crust being stiff from yesterday's oven. I had told myself when Mrs. Grandlin handed this treat to me that I would make it last the week, that it could be the prize at the end of my duties, but once I figured out the proper soaking time, I greedily consumed all of it in a single, shameful go. God was watching, as he watches all, but assuredly he would allow a broken old man this simple indulgence, would he not?

And thank you, Mrs. Grandlin. This midafternoon delight was unexpected. As, of course, was the terrible news. This is Montana, though, I told myself. It's where things like this happen, isn't it? Or, as some of my parishioners might joke, "It's where things like this happen, n'est-ce pas, Pastor Beaucarne?"

In spite of my protestations about any immediate French ancestry, still these Prairie Deutsche like to poke and prod, which is why I write this in King George's English, not the German I deliver my sermons in, as curious eyes could then read it. But of course my parishioners' aspersions about their good pastor's Gallic name is all in good fun, and if the victuals continue to flow, then this non-Frenchman can only be grateful.

As to who the unfortunate man found dead a few miles either north or west of town was or is, or will be upon identification, Mrs. Grandlin had not an inkling. Though the intensity with which she watched me while delivering this served as explanation why I had been her first stop. As the clergy parishioners come to me with their problems and struggles and concerns, it stood to reason that I might have heard news about a husband, brother, or son who had tragically gone missing.

I had no knowledge of any such missing husband, brother, or son, and surely my expression didn't suggest otherwise, but, infected

by Mrs. Grandlin's curiosity, I told myself to pay special attention. At the same time, not everyone feared to be on a drinking binge is actually drunken. Not everyone supposed to have taken work that pulls them suddenly away from home is actually earning a wage.

Eager about this find out in the grasslands, if for no other reason than that it broke the tedium, I buttoned my greatcoat over the new and persistent huckleberry stain on the surplice I had thrown on when Mrs. Grandlin knocked—my only one!—and made my way out the side door and down to the lodging house porch, bringing with my personage, as it's unavoidable not to do, a retinue of raucous dogs of every color, size, and temperament.

As I approached with them barking around my feet, announcing my arrival to the whole of Miles City, the whole of Montana, I took pains not to notice the shuffling and scraping that always precedes my arrival to such a low place. I would be similarly unaware of any bulges in the mens' jackets that could or could not be bottles and spirits, and I held out hope that I wouldn't have to draw close enough for their breath to scald my eyes.

"The limping reverend!" Willem Thomlinsen called out with all the joviality he could muster, referring to my gait, impeded as it is by the three toes on my left foot that predecease me. I would expect the same from a ten year old boy caught antagonizing the chickens. Thomlinsen calling me by that appellation—Reverend—was a long standing hallmark of our interactions, my silhouette evidently prompting whosoever I encountered in my doddering perambulations to make joke upon joke at my expense. Such is the price exacted by these black robes, I surmise. By this craggy, thin silhouette.

Though I would wish it otherwise, Thomlinsen's was a joke that had over the previous year spread through his companions like grass fire, meaning I also had to endure as greetings from all these lodging house regulars a round of "Pastor" and "Preacher,"

“Brother” and “Bishop,” and on into variations they had to mumble, as they had no real command of the terms, their childhoods spent in Quaker and Catholic pews so far behind them now as to be but fairy tales that happened to someone else.

“Father, Reverend,” Thomlinsen rounded it all up with, apparently having had more training than the rest.

The humor of the west knows no bounds, respects no boundaries.

Nevertheless, I demurred and endured, grinning a sheep’s grin at this camaraderie and acceptance, which is what I have to tell myself it is, every next time it’s happening again.

As to why I’d chosen to submit myself to this good willed badgering, it was that the porch of the lodging house was the catch basin for all news in and around Miles City. The gentlemen, or “denizens” if that’s the more telling description, of the long, swayed bench that I’ve been assured was salvaged from a previous, temporary incarnation of my esteemed church, were irreverent and oftentimes in one stage or another of intoxication, but resistance to observing the niceties of society meant that they functioned as guards at a post, such as it was, not letting anyone interesting pass unless and until they had shared the news of the day with them. In such a way are tolls exacted.

Knowing that any corpse found either north or west of town would come in past the lodging house, I knew then also that such a parade passing in front of the lodging house would have been subject to inspection and interrogation. It helped that Sall Bertram, the quiet Ulysses Grant of these regulars, had, until 1899, been sheriff of Custer County, and that the current sheriff had been his deputy, so was still beholden to his former superior officer. Which probably in no small way explains why the porch of the lodging house was outside the law, as it were.

But that’s neither here nor there, as I hear more and more of

my parishioners saying of late—a verbal trend that worries me, as it sweeps things under the rug that should be dealt with in the light, rather than let fester. But this concern itself is neither here nor there, I suppose. Even a preacher pastor brother bishop father reverend of fighting age during the war between the states can join this bold new century, yes.

After describing for these regulars in great and delectable detail the bread and jam I had, tragically, consumed all of, I asked them about the poor man found dead and exsanguinated to the west of town, asking of myself meanwhile if I wasn't, in own way, just as bad as Mrs. Grandlin. But no, I told myself. As shepherd of a flock, I needed to be informed on all goings-on that might affect that flock. It wouldn't do to look out over the Sunday morning crowd and have them whispering to each other about that of which I'm ignorant.

"The west?" California Jim spat in response, disgusted, answering the first of the two bluffs I'd built into my opening bid, for them to correct.

I've never inquired after the provenance of California Jim's name, but assume it has to do either with one or another gold rush or with another of his many former occupations.

"Ex-what, Preacherman?" Sall Bertram mumbled, leaning ahead to spit between his boots into a crack in the porch nearly crusted shut, from all the days he spends there.

"He had been bled, had he not?" I said with all false innocence, looking from one to the other, which prompted them, in turn, to look to each other.

"Your Lutheran god whisper that to you?" Thomlinsen finally said, which struck me odd, as I'd only proffered the possibility of exsanguination so as to be a babe in the fold for them, plucking at rumor and smoke, meaning they could correct me with the actual facts and thereby become authorities.

Men on in their years, whose sole job is to occupy a bench, like to feel important, I know. It's quite possible I suffer from a liturgical version of this myself.

"I suppose most of his blood did leak out when he were skinned like a hump," Thomlinsen said for them all, glaring me down as if challenging one so pure of heart to picture something so revolting.

If only he knew.

The depravity of man's heart knows no floor, and everyone in this hard country has a sordid chapter in the story of their life, that they're trying either to atone for, or stay ahead of. It's what binds us one to the other.

I wasn't there to publicize my own moral failings, howsoever, but to further hone Mrs. Grandlin's revelation. What I had so far, without asking directly, were "west" and "skinned"—and, now, possibly "exsanguinated," though that could very well be my misreading.

"To what end do you skin a person?" I asked.

"I seen a man filled with so many Indian arrows in him that he looked like a pincushion in a sewing parlor," Early Tate said, licking his cracked lips hungrily. "Sixty nine, it were."

"James Quail?" Sall Bertram either said or asked, it was hard to distinguish.

"Down on the trail," Early Tate answered with a shrug, yet holding my eyes, perhaps to see if I would challenge him on this.

The "trail" he spoke of was the deep ruts of the Oregon Trail, which he'd famously been a drover on in his twenties. In each retelling, his deeds and exploits become a little more grand, I should note.

I didn't doubt this pincushion man, though, "James Quail" or no. In the late '60s he spoke of, and into the bloody decade that followed, I had myself seen similar travesties, that still haunt me in my weaker moments, with only one candle remaining, the town