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To Anastasia Alvarez: c/o The Union Pacific

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TO ANASTASIA ALVAREZ: c/o THE UNION PACIFIC

Dear Anastasia:

I write to you now meaning no harm while certain questions hang from me like a brakeman's keys.

The Union Pacific, I'm certain, has seen to showing you the world. I've been away from Carpston, but I returned. I sell insurance and serve on the city council. I don't ask for things made easy. I work hard. I have made much of the peace with myself that I'll have to make. Sometimes I take Wednesday afternoon off and make puppets with my kids and we have lavish shows in the basement. Most of my neighbors consider me an honest and useful person.

Honest and useful. I suppose that's what I am. Yes, I'm proud of being honest and useful. But the trains still come through Carpston, and I reach up and scratch where I'm getting bald and try to hold my breath until all the cars have passed. And I wonder, Anastasia. I wonder if all that dirt and noise and rattle is going somewhere to see you.

I hope this finds you well and happy. I have tried to fill in a little for you so that the questions make sense after all these years. We knew each other for such a short time. I hope also that the Union Pacific has been kind to you. I send this in the name of the sound of trains.

When I was twelve years old, I was in the Christmas play at the First Methodist Church of Carpston, Wisconsin. I played snow. My part was to lie round about the teetering shepherds, crisp and even, still and deep if possible. Down the back stairs to the right of the altar where the pipe organ was eroding the plaster walls with Sunday after Sunday of reverent rumbles, I went early and alone to where the choir robes were kept. There I was designed by the choir director beginning with a sheet pinned to my socks. Then I was covered with wads of cotton and fluffed out and swirled to a Bethlehem blizzard. To get the round-about effect, I carried a cotton drift in each hand and two lesser drifts were attached to my feet. The snow had to be mobile in this play, because the scene had to change quickly, and snow, shepherds, star and all had to disappear to make way for the more complicated and permanent manger scene.

Two hours later I felt my way up the back stairway without my glasses, following the frowning vibrations of the organ and was led behind the improvised curtain and drifted into position. Once the narrator was through, the shepherds dribbled onto the stage from three directions, and the star creaked its careful way across the heavens above.

Alfred Charles Podgorney, age thirteen with hair the color of fire damage and hands that flapped like incredible dying birds, felt he had to stand with one foot in the snow for realism. First my thigh, then my right kidney and then the soft drift between my shoulder blades supported his rag-wrapped foot while he blurted his lines. Finally Alfred buried his foot behind my ear, and his big toe came to rest with an even, strong pressure.

Alfred's droning and the star's uncoiled flight to the west became faint blurs to the throbbing in my head. Then into the interminable thumping glaze between my eyes, just as the star on the wire was multiplying in my brain to a brilliant burst, the word "Bethlehem" broke through, and Alfred pivoted on the rapidly cooling drift and headed off to follow his star. And as life rushed back into my head I saw over the brink just ahead in a shimmering pageant of reflections cut into tinsel strips waving together to form and dissolve in a glittering wind, Alfred Charles Podgorney and what he really was. I knew then as the blood returned to my head and washed it clean of the last glimmer, I knew in a spot just behind my throbbing left ear that theater would be unkind to Alfred.

Arrive Anastasia Alvarez. Your father worked for the Union Pacific Railroad you said. The Monon, The Nickle Plate, The Penn Central, The Chicago and Northwestern, The Great Northern, The Milwaukee Road all came through Carpston. I watched them religiously for thumps and rattles and clacks and other signs of having been somewhere else. But never the Union Pacific, Anastasia. Was your father a freight agent, a yard clerk, a conductor, a brakeman, a fireman, an engineer? What was your father anyway, Anastasia Alvarez?

Anastasia, I've found there is a great deal of difference between girls with dark eyes that dart like forest eyes behind willow lashes and girls with airy blue and gold marble eyes that roll slowly in goat's cream orbits. It must be unlucky to call two things so different by the same name. Anastasia, you were thirteen years old and had forest eyes standing there outside the fence.

Two days before you came to classes that early spring, you arrived at the fence of the football field where our gym class covered the soggy earth like a meadow full of grounded seagulls. You were alone and deliciously curved like a plump peach ripened by the long train ride to market, Anastasia Alvarez.

Inside the fence we were going to play a game invented by the gym teacher, Carroll Caruthers, or “coach” to generations of ex-students in Carpston who had chugged and raved through puberty on his field. In his game an inflated canvas ball, nine feet in diameter, was placed in the middle of the football field. On each side of the ball twenty students waited for the beginning whistle blown by Coach. The object of the game was to push the giant ball to the opposite end of the field and then through the goal posts. There were no rules in the game—only an object. It was more ritual than sport.

Anastasia, you arrived just before the starting whistle. And as you pressed close to the chain-link fence to watch, Coach blasted his whistle once and then turned his back and ambled off toward his office.

But the game never really started when Coach blew the whistle. It started when he turned his back. Since there were no rules as to how the ball should be moved, and since we had all played “Giant Canvas Ball” for as long as we were physically able, there was no sense in going through the entire meaningless dance of offense and defense. Things like goals and the final score could be decided quickly and fairly just before the end of the class. But first there were more important things. There were grudges to settle, water spittings and pen stealings to answer for.

And also there was in our gym class sixty-seven pounds of Billy Plotz. Billy was short, and Billy was light. But Billy was brave, and once a week in our class his bravery was allowed by common consent to fill the football field. Billy would charge the ball and leap and scramble to a standing position on top and then lunge off with all 67 pounds into the opposing team. In our gym class we had agreed like round table knights that Billy’s consuming weekly grudge against the world came first.

On this particularly chill-less spring day with clovers poking their heads above the soggy turf, Coach blew his whistle and retreated. Billy flapped toward the ball intent upon its largeness, its inert, consuming size, while someone (Alfred Podgorney?) gave a low

whistle and pointed to the fence and Anastasia Alvarez. To the man we wheeled toward you, Anastasia, as Billy poised in ecstasy on top of the ball, his eyes rolled back. And then he launched himself in blind retribution into space above our team. With our backs to the ball like loose-order formation, we spread apart to better see the apparition at the fence, and Billy Plotz came spread-eagle into our midst, miraculously missing every man-jack and landing with a blind smack three inches into the warm, wet grass.

No one moved on either team (including the fallen angel Billy). All eyes were on the fence where the playful spring wind lifted and toyed with your light green dress and fluttered it up to your waist where it flapped like a giant mint moth sucking sweet light. With the back of one hand you brushed absently at it and stared back into our cage while we, like the moth, sought the fascinating light. And then instinctively, on the cloudy side of cunning, Alfred Podgorney put one foot up on the prostrate carcass of Billy and shouted toward the fence.

“Helloooo, sunshine!”

With the spell broken, both teams (minus Billy) began snapping each other’s jockstraps in a melee that included flips and cartwheels from the more talented, and whistles, tongue noises and grunts from the rest of us.

But you, Anastasia, as if you had found out what you came to find out, turned and floated off down the street where the lilacs forevermore smelled sweeter.

Anastasia, were you only practicing on Billy Plotz? Had the Union Pacific taken you places and shown you things we couldn’t even dream of there in Carpston, Wisconsin? Did your father send you to the fence outside our gym class to show us to you as we really were? How did we look to you and your Union Pacific that wouldn’t even send an engine through our town? You told me your father worked for the Union Pacific. Alfred Podgorney and the others didn’t know the Union Pacific from the Chatanooga Choo-Choo. But I suppose you knew that, Anastasia.

Just the other side of the Methodist Church where I’d had my vision of the real Alfred Podgorney and where the ravine dips down along side the railroad track, I caught up with you after your first day of school. You were carrying two heavy books against your warm belly.

“How’d you like the game the other day?” I asked. (Was one of

those books about railroads, Anastasia?)

"What game?" Your voice like bits of glass tossed into the wind.

"G.C.B., the Giant Canvas Ball game."

"Oh that," you said. "It didn't last very long, did it? What happened to that boy who fell?"

"He'll be all right," I said. "His nose has sort of a dent on one side and a lump on the other. But he'll be all right."

"Is that supposed to be a part of the game or something?"

I almost saw the thick book you were carrying, but you covered it with your arm in time and held it tight against you. Railroads, Anastasia?

"Not exactly. He was supposed to land on our team. That's the part of the game Billy added."

"I don't remember seeing *you* there." Had you practiced lifting one eyebrow at a time?

"I was there."

"My father works for the Union Pacific. Trains, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"How could you know? I just told you."

"I mean I know about trains. About the Union Pacific and a lot of other lines," I said.

"So what."

"So nothing. I just happen to know about trains, that's all. Are you trying out for the play next week?"

"No," you said. "It's so stupid." You turned off out of my way home, but still I followed.

"What's so stupid about it, anyway?" I said.

"The whole idea of being something you're not. That's what my father says. It's stupid to try to be something you're not."

"Well, here's where I turn, bye," I said. But as soon as I got around the corner I looked back through the new hedges and watched your dress sway in the long shadows where the new flowers were gathering the mud around them for the evening.

The school play that spring was to be done with a seventh and eighth grade talent pool and performed just before exams at the end of school. It was called "The Day the Woods Walked" with apologies to William Shakespeare. The scripts were stacked in the hall outside the eighth grade English teacher's room with a sign saying, "take one and try out." I took one. I saw Alfred take his. And, Anastasia

Alvarez, you I thought I already knew about.

Alfred and I found ourselves on either side of the gym facing each other early the first day of tryouts. The first day was really the only day, since stage hands, scenery painters, prompters and a variety of soldier, maid, and guard parts would be all that remained for the second day.

My name was called before Alfred's, and I walked to the stage. As I began to read, muffled coughing and shuffling came from the floor of the gym. I read the part of Mr. McDuff where he promises to do his best to stamp the hell out of that shuffling and coughing bastard Alfred, because Alfred had tried to screw him up again. At least that's the way I read the part, mentally substituting Alfred's bloated face (his mother made him drink three glasses of water every day because his skin was oily) for the face of that merely misguided Mr. McBeth.

"And when I get the chance, I promise my dead family to fix that dog McBeth and have his head sent to the taxidermist and his teeth all gleaming for a keychain. And if I fail may the ghosts of my children gnaw my worthless bones into bits too small to rise up again when that day comes."

As I finished, the silence in the gym murmured congratulations from the tumbling mats in the corner to the chicken-wire cage where the G.C.B. was kept. I turned to the eighth grade teacher (she was also the fundamentalist adapter of the play). She smiled and nodded, smiled and nodded and then wrote quickly and surely on her clipboard.

I'm in, I thought! The hell with you Alfred. I hope they let you paint the scenery or carry a tree. For Alfred, better late humility than an undeveloped character. And so I returned to fourth period social studies without even staying to watch Alfred paw the air like a trained horse counting its age. I didn't need to. Your arrival, Anastasia Alvarez, I felt had oiled the pulleys of my ascendant star, and it creaked not at all.

The following night after school the cast was posted outside the gym. I can't say I was disappointed. I wasn't. Neither was I depressed, or distraught or dismayed or down-hearted. I looked at the list and simply found drool running out of the side of my mouth. There it was: Mr. McDuff; yours truly; Mr. McBeth: Alfred Podgorney! I was the hero, of course, but Alfred wasn't a rock, and Alfred wasn't a tree. And furthermore, Anastasia Alvarez was listed as Mrs. McBeth!

Oh, Anastasia Alvarez, your father worked for the Union Pacific

you said. With its hot boxes, rolling stock and semaphores, where had the Union Pacific been with you? You told me your father thought acting was stupid!

I slurped and caught the drool before it ran down my collar. What else could I do? And I began to attend rehearsals after dinner.

Each night I peered out of Mr. McDuff's swagger to see you and Alfred passing a candle like a relay team's baton. When you had the candle, Alfred had one leg up on whichever prop was closest. When Alfred had the candle he dropped his leg while you piroetted in dainty concentric rings around him. Then you had the candle again, then Alfred, then you, then Alfred. All the while Alfred's right leg shot out and returned in classic Alfred fashion. It was all the same to him, shepherd or McBeth. Each time he pawed the scenery I thought I would throw up if it happened again, and each time it did happen again I was saved only by being inside Mr. McDuff.

After rehearsals at nine o'clock, the rule was that students had half an hour to get home. Alfred and I lived close to school. Anastasia, you lived more than half an hour away walking, because your mother picked you up right after rehearsals. I'm certain of this because at 9 o'clock Alfred and I both attempted simultaneous dawdles which were meant to include you and which both failed.

Anastasia, your father must have had a big Union Pacific pocket watch open when you got home. He liked things on time. He was a railroad man, you said.

And so because of the combined conspiracy of the Union Pacific and the P.T.A., Alfred and I found ourselves walking two consolation blocks together after a rehearsal.

"So what do you think of Mrs. McBeth?" Alfred asked me, and I thought I noticed his right leg break stride in a twitch.

"She remembers her lines," I said.

The night was bursting with understatement, with half-formed leaves, with lightly swaying streetlights, with the nub of a new May moon.

"I think she'll work out all right," said Alfred, trying not to say anything so I'd say something.

"Yeah," I said. "She hasn't forgotten any lines so far."

Alfred threw a rock at a streetlight, and I took a jump-shot over a low branch.

"Do you think she's done this kind of thing before?" he finally

asked.

"Well one thing's for sure."

"What's that?"

"She's got nice tits," I said slowly.

"Fifty cents says they're not all hers," snapped Alfred.

"And you're going to find out?"

"Sure, why not?"

"How?"

"There are ways," he said as if there was some mystical state of knowing he had passed through from 7th to 8th grade.

"Good luck," I said. "But watch out for her old man. He works for the Union Pacific, you know."

"How do you know?"

And then it was my turn.

"There are ways," I said, and then turned in at my house with Alfred and the leaves and the moon and the streetlight suspended each in its own way.

Anastasia Alvarez, did your father come for the first performance of the play? Did he see Alfred dying many deaths before his final one? Did he see that it was you that made Alfred prance and paw his way around the stage like a trained bear? Alfred looked at your chest and lifted his leg to regain his voice then spun into the castle wall and teetered the foundation of our illusion. You stood there calmly, even serenely, while a prompter groaned to hold the set up until help arrived. Did your father park his engine on a spur track nearby to come to see all this? Anastasia, were you there in my vision of Alfred in the Methodist Church, the very Alfred you teased in and out of destruction, who forgot sixteen lines in the second act, who fumbled the hot wax while trying to see into your blouse, who gaped unseemly at you while you stood with your painted red hands, whose voice cracked from dryness while he tried to mercifully die? Did your father still think acting was stupid? Was your father there wearing his Union Pacific patch to witness Alfred consumed by you and the stage? And you remember the play after the play, don't you? It was at one of the soldier's houses. There in the fragments of potato chips I remember the scene like this:

Outside on the patio Alfred finds a tennis ball. He steals Anastasia's scarf and knots the tennis ball in for a keep-away game. I am the other side with Anastasia in the middle. Alfred overthrows me and the tennis ball-scarf lands on the low roof and gets caught in the

rain gutter. I get a clothes-pole with a hook on it while Alfred gets a ladder from the garage. While I fish for the scarf, both Anastasia and Alfred go up the ladder to the dark roof. Ten minutes later Alfred comes down followed by Anastasia who is wearing her scarf. Alfred at the bottom of the ladder with his right foot on the last rung relates a detail-less story about how hard it was to find the scarf on the dark roof. Anastasia comes down. The cast minus one applauds the end of the scene. Finally, Alfred taps my shoulder and hands me fifty cents and walks away.

While you were on the roof, Anastasia Alvarez, where was your father? Was he racing toward the western plains pulling empty cattle cars, mindless of his home and family? Did the Union Pacific care where you were?

On the Monday morning after the play with still three more performances to go, summer arrived on a south wind. The football field was scattered with thousands of long-necked dandelions strung in a scrawl—last fall's message to the spring. And as we poured out of the locker room for the third period seventh and eighth grade gym class, we kicked and shuffled in the yellow dotted "i's" and crossed "t's." Following us came Coach and the giant canvas ball.

You were watching us and the dandelions from the fourth floor study hall window, weren't you? What did the dandelions say, Anastasia?

The giant canvas ball came to the center of the field in low bounds and lunges spurred by a hot tail wind. The teams split north and south, and the ball took its place with a final wallow, a big period in the middle of a message.

Coach blew his whistle and turned his back, and Billy Plotz came thumping up from the south, a legend of pumping legs and purpose. Billy reached the top of the ball clawing furiously and gained his feet as the lesser quarrels eyed each other below. Then Billy launched himself with the wind toward the north where Alfred stood at the rear of the pack gazing up toward the study hall window, back away from the action where dandelions waved as high as the tops of his sweat socks.

It was the wind that carried Billy, or it was the spring-fresh sap rising up his stunted trunk. But Billy caught an updraft of whichever and was lifted above us, gaining altitude for the first ten yards before beginning his blind downward glide path. We all spun away from the

day's grudges to watch the streaking Billy while the giant canvas ball lurched and started to follow wind-whipped through our midst.

Billy's head where the hair was streaking apart struck the gaping, gazing Alfred behind the left ear, and as the dandelions reached up to receive them both, the giant canvas ball came down and sealed them momentarily into the earth with its bulging equators before rebounding unattended toward the goal posts.

There is something in nature which collapses for a hole-in-one, for a tomato shaped like the perfect profile of Abraham Lincoln. At ten-fifteen that Monday morning we stared through the gap in imperative order to see the giant canvas ball incredibly bounce through the goal-posts and score, an unerring journey of fifty yards after leaving the bodies of Billy and Alfred kissed to the ground.

What did the dandelions scribble across our playing field, Anastasia? I looked up to the study hall window where Alfred's eyes had been riveted, and there you were. Did you push back your hair then, or did you wave to me? Did you know about the fifty cents, the first hot summer wind, the trajectory of Billy Plotz? What did you show Alfred from high up there on the fourth floor that held his eyes and set him up like a rube for the windy carnival man? Were there two warm spots on that window when you turned away, Anastasia?

Maybe then Alfred was granted a vision like the one I had at the Methodist Christmas play. Perhaps not. It doesn't matter, because Alfred never so much as tried out for a play again. I got most of the leading parts from then on. That windy Monday morning Alfred received a slight concussion and two cracked ribs, so probably either going out or coming to, there was a moment of great lucidity that revealed something. I'm not sure. Alfred, on doctor's orders, was not even allowed to continue as Mr. McBeth, so a soldier finished out the three remaining performances.

Billy Plotz fared much better. He started to grow then, and some years later I saw him get as many as fourteen points in a high school basketball game.

The giant canvas ball next appeared at our end-of-school dance. It was suspended high in the middle of the gym and covered with bits of broken mirror so swinging slowly it shot back the colored spot lights in dazzling dream-like rays. Around the edge of the gym we danced, Anastasia, you and I. And we drank orange soda.

But your mother picked you up afterwards, Anastasia. Where was your father? and when summer came and I looked for your house

and found it empty, I was bringing you a polished fifty cent piece on a new silver chain that cost me \$4.95. Your house was empty and the lawn was getting long around the “for rent” sign. I talked to a neighbor lady about you, and she said she never saw a Mr. Alvarez in the short months you were there. But then she said she never really asked either. Where was your father and that rattle and clank of trains that went everywhere?

What amazes me now—maybe you can explain it—is that a company as big and busy as the Union Pacific had enough time to send you at all, Anastasia Alvarez.