

# 1 Birch Bark Hat

*May 27, 1920*

Squatting on a crescent of rock jutting out from the creek's edge, six-year-old Celeste set down her collection of forest treasures while staring into the soft flowing gray-green water. Sniffing deeply, her nose filled with the scent of mud and new green as she wiggled her toes inside her shoes and looked up at her grandmother with hopeful eyes. "May I today, Gamma?" she asked.

Glancing at the houses on the hillcrest overlooking the creek, Gamma winced. News traveled fast in small towns. The ladies behind those glassy eyes would soon report them on the grassy slope, shoeless, sockless, skirts pulled up to their knees, splashing their feet, prompting yet another lecture from Myrtle on such dangers to her daughter's health. But none of that had ever stopped Gamma before, so she wrinkled her nose like a rabbit and nodded. Celeste's laugh gurgled in harmony with the stream as she unlaced her ankle-high shoes, pulled off her socks, rolled her canvas skirt above her knees and tiptoed into the creek, sucking small breaths at every step.

"Too cold?" Gamma asked, tucking the hem of her full length skirt into her waistband.

"Oh, nooooo," Celeste said, biting her lower lip as Gamma stepped in.

"Ouff! Is freezing! You make a joke of me!"

Squealing, Celeste clutched her sides, teetering in the water.

"Poof! What a pixie! Quick now, hand me the bark."

Still giggling, Celeste passed to her the long strip of birch bark they'd found on their walk through the woods and watched Gamma submerge it, gently working the edges underwater with her fingers, pulling and bending the bark to soften it. Lulled by the babbling water tumbling over the rock clusters, Celeste swayed to its melody.

"But in truth, I confess," Gamma broke the reverie as she lifted the bark out of the water, shaking off the drips: "To grandmamma, I make same joke, too."

Celeste cocked her head. "Here?"

"Ne. In Bohemia, where we live. Come close now. I measure."

Scooting over a rock, Celeste stood still as Gamma circled the bark around her head and marked her size by tearing a small notch in the bark. "But how will it stick?" she asked as they settled on the embankment.

“With notches.” Gamma answered, setting the bark on her lap to adjust her eyeglasses. “Six notches of The Bohemian Way.”

“Bo-MEEN-he-ahhhn,” Celeste slowly ventured, hissing with the water.

“Bo-HE-me-ahn,” Gamma corrected, positioning her fingers on the papery bark so Celeste could see. “One notch for each Way,” she said and recited them with each tear. “Truth, Courage, Openness, Curiosity, Creativity, Love.” She then offered the bark to Celeste. “Now you. Six notches on other side.”

Drying her hands on her canvas jacket, Celeste studied Gamma’s work before cautiously making her first tear.”

“Good,” Gamma nodded. “First for your Truth, which no one can know but you.”

Celeste blinked a few times before making the second tear.

“Second for Courage, to follow the whispers of your heart.”

Tentatively nodding, Celeste made the next tear.

“Third for Openness, to whatever comes your way.”

Feeling warmth in her chest, Celeste made two tears in quick succession, but Gamma kept up with her.

“Fourth for Curiosity of what beckons you; and fifth for Creativity in all you do.”

Celeste paused before making the last notch, feeling the roughness of the bark on her fingertips, her eyes twinkling. “Sixth for Love?”

Gamma smiled as her fingers ran down the row of notches. “Yah, sixth for Love; of yourself, first, from inside to out. These are the roots of our Bohemian Way, now notched in your bark hat for remembering always.” She then showed Celeste how to interlock the notches, creating a circle of bark, which fit her head perfectly. “Now you add some fluff,” Gamma pointed to the collection of forest treasures on the rock. “And a fine Bohemian Hat of ancient time you make.”

Sliding off the bank, Celeste stood in the water surveying her cache on the quarter moon rock: a long vine, a few squiggly-edged leaves, three feathers from the geese who visit the creek, moss from the north side of a tree, and their prize: a translucent snakeskin, which they’d almost missed in the slant of afternoon sun. Carefully unhooking the notches, Celeste laid the bark flat, grabbed a fat, pointed stick and began boring holes along its edge. “Is this how you made clothes in Bohemia?” she asked.

Gamma looked at her skirt and laughed. "With bark? Ne. We use fabric and thread, same like here." In her mind's eye she saw herself as a girl, furiously working her needle in the dim glow of hearth and oil lamp, days before her departure to America. "But I was the sewing machine," she said, looking at her worn hands. "These very fingers."

"Me too," Celeste added, stripping the leaves off a vine and holding it up. "And this is my thread! Like Bohemian of ancient times!"

"Like Bohemian." Gamma trailed off as her mind flooded with images of the family she'd left behind so many years ago in the mountains beyond Prague. When she was too young to realize what she was trading away. When all she wanted was to flee the pain her carelessness had caused. Recalling the row of ancient stone shelters built on the ravine's crest with a sweet water creek at its bottom, her crystalline eyes misted, making Celeste and the creek a lovely blur. How odd to find herself so far from home, yet sitting beside a similar creek, with a blue-eyed granddaughter of her own.

"But what *is* a Bohemian?" Celeste asked.

Startled, Gamma shook herself out of her memory. Here it was, finally, the question she'd been hoping to hear and waiting to answer. She cleared her throat. "A Bohemian is a person who was born in the country of Bohemia, like me."

"Near New York?" It was the only place Celeste knew other than Connecticut.

"Ne, ne. Much more far. Across ocean," Gamma said, sighing deeply. "But sadly, is no more. Last year, after big war, they change our name from Bohemia to Czechoslovakia. But for me, is always Bohemia: home of the Boii, ancestors of our blood."

Celeste blinked. She didn't understand what Gamma had said, but she liked the tone of her voice; it was her storytelling voice when they snuggled up close at bedtime. "What's an-*sess-tor*?" she asked, weaving the vine through the holes in the bark.

As the afternoon sun melted in the treetops, casting long shadows across the hillside, Gamma shifted her hips. "Olden family of long ago time."

"Who's *my* olden family?" Celeste picked up the snakeskin.

"The same as me, Boii Celts."

"Boy kelp?"

Gamma laughed. "T, not P - Celt. Who live east of Europe ..."

Celeste brightened. “Like Ede! She was born in Italy. That’s in Europe! She showed us on the school map.”

Gamma shook her head. “Yah, Italy is Europe, but our Celts first live more north and east, near the Mountains Caucasus and Caspian Sea. My grandfather tell many stories of how our first ancestors travel long long time to find a new home ... in the land now called Bohemia.”

“Like when you and Mama and Papa moved from New York?”

“Poofh,” Gamma blew the air. “If only so easy. Our ancestors have much harder, more dangerous journey. You like to hear?”

Widening her blue eyes, Celeste nodded as she carefully slipped the edge of the snakeskin under the threaded vine while listening to Gamma’s story of the Boii Celts’ journey through deserts, around mountains and across snowy steppes until they came to a wide basin of beautiful land with bounteous plants, animals, rivers and forests.

“Bohemia?” Celeste deduced.

“Yah. Home of the Boii.”

Holding up a feather, Celeste twirled it near her nose. It smelled wild. “What should I do with this?”

“How you like? Indian princess?”

Celeste smiled, and Gamma showed her where to bore the holes to hold it.

“But Gamma, where did they live? In a house like ours, or a castle?”

“Ha - a castle? Ne! In caves, I think at first.”

Celeste’s mouth dropped open. “Caves? With spiders and bugs?”

Gamma shrugged. “Out of wind and rain? Not so bad, eh? And what are castles? Big caves built by men.”

Celeste thought of the castle in her storybook. “So did they build a castle?”

“In time. But first a house with sticks, stone, mud and grass for roof.”

“Grass for roof?!” Celeste peeled in laughter.

“Yah. They use what the land give. No hardware store like your Papa’s to buy things. What they need, they make, from scratch, just like your hat.”

“Just like my hat.” Celeste repeated. “What should I do next?”

Leaning into the creek, Gamma drew a handful of musty-smelling mud. “Mud-glue for sticking,” she said, plopping it on the rock and swirling it with her fingers.

Celeste wrinkled her nose at the musty smell and picked up a stick to stir it. “But Gamma, with no stores, what did they eat?”

“What earth provide: animal meat, goat’s milk and cheese, plants from forest and field. Ah! Look!” Gamma pointed to a cluster of green across the creek. “The leaves, bouncing on the edge ... is watercress. In my creek it also grow. Quick now, get us some.”

Yanking up her skirt, Celeste splashed to the bobbing cascade of small, round, tender greens. Easily ripping a handful from the mound, she hopped back.

Inhaling its fresh, woody smell, Gamma nibbled a few leaves. “Mmmmm, spring smell. Try some, my little Bohemian.”

Sniffing, Celeste gave it a lick but wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like it.”

“Augh, the same, when I your age. But every day I must gather for supper.”

With the tangle of stems still in hand, Celeste turned back to her rock table and stretched out the watercress in a long string, tucking it around the snakeskin. “I love making birch bark hats,” she murmured.

“Is in your blood.”

“Making hats?”

“Making beautiful things. Making art. From everything, Bohemians make art.”

Celeste’s face opened wide. “Like what?”

“Beads, sculptures, paintings, cloth, with bright colors ground from stones and crushed flowers. And carving designs on boats, tools, bowls. Everything they see and touch, Bohemians can’t help but make more beauty, more art.”

Celeste had stopped working on her hat to watch her grandmother speak. She liked how Gamma’s eyes were sparkling. Then she sighed quietly, “I like Bohemia. Will you take me?”

“Oh yes, dítě. Is my great pleasure.”

“When?”

“At sixteen your Papa I took.”

Celeste’s eyes clouded. Sixteen seemed forever away.

Gamma laughed. “Seems long, but I have many pillow stories to say before we go.”

Celeste’s eyes popped open, remembering the strange and magical images on Gamma’s needlepoint pillows. “Like the singing goat, pooping little green hearts?”

“Yah, yah ... goat, green hearts and more.” Gamma lifted her arms overhead. “Like ancient ancestors, I call on Oghma, Bohemian god of wisdom, for guidance to tell you our history and the secret of heart’s content.”

Having finished mud-gluing the leaves on her hat, Celeste leaned down, washed her fingertips and sniffed them, making sure the mustiness was gone. “What’s heart’s content?” She asked.

Leaning forward, Gamma drew a circle around Celeste’s chest. “In your heart are special clues for the life meant just for you. But speaks not in words, so you must learn how to listen for its voice, quiet and clear. And when you do, it help you find your deepest truth, from inside to out, and the quiet happiness of a life fulfilled. This is heart’s content. This is Bohemian Way.”

Celeste looked up at the pinkish clouds and deepening blue sky, trying to understand. Then she picked up her decorated hat and laid it on Gamma’s lap.

“This is my heart’s content,” she said softly.

“The birch bark hat?”

“Making it,” she said, admiring the feathers, leaves, snakeskin and vine.

“Ah, making it! In you, the Bohemian blood runs deep.”

Sitting together, they silently admired the hat and each other as the sky’s pink faded to soft gray. Then Gamma tapped Celeste’s knee.

“Come now, put on shoes. Time to wear your hat home proud.”

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As the sun began setting Myrtle had been nervously scanning the hillside from her kitchen window and let out a big sigh when Gamma and Celeste finally appeared on the crest of the hill. Squinting in the waning light, she scrutinized their ambling figures and asked aloud: “What in heaven’s name is on her head?”

Martin rose from the kitchen table to peer through the window. Seeing his mother and daughter heading toward the house, he knew instantly. “A bark hat. Made one as a boy.”

Myrtle scoffed. “Where could you find bark on the docks of New York?”

Pulling his ear, Martin shook his head. “Every now and again Mother would take me to the country. When I was around Celeste’s age, we found a creek and made a bark hat together. Took all day.” Martin reached for a glass off the window sill and drew water from the kitchen tap. “She showed me how to curl the bark in the water as we stood in the creek.” He gently

inhaled, sucking air through his teeth, still able to smell the mix of grass, mud and bark from that day. “I loved that hat, but it got crushed on the trolley ride home. Never made another.” Keeping time with the jaunty step of his daughter as she crossed the grass toward the house, he recited: “Truth, Courage, Openness, Curiosity, Creativity, Love.” Sighing deeply, he returned to the kitchen table and opened his newspaper.

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“So did they live there forever?” Celeste swung her grandmother’s arm.

“Who”

“Our ancestors, the Bohemians.”

“For long, long time, until, one day, some strangers – warriors – attack them.”

“Meanies!” Celeste cried, thinking of the boy in kindergarten who smushed her painting.

“Big meanies! Who kill many of our ancestors and make the others run far away, to other countries. But some, they stay, hiding in the mountains until the warriors leave and it is safe again to live on the land they found. That is *our* family story, which I tell you, another day.” As they came to the house, Gamma released Celeste’s hand and shooed her in.

Holding on to her hat, Celeste carefully climbed the porch steps and ran into the kitchen, beaming. “Mama, Papa, look what we made today! A birch bark hat!”

Pushing aside his paper, Martin held out his arms, lifting his daughter to his lap. “Ah, you lucky girl. A Bohemian birch bark hat!” Closely examining her work, he named each treasure she’d used. “What a fine, fine job you’ve done, my dearest Celeste. Quite a talent you’ve got,” kissing her cheek with a loud smack.

Giggling, Celeste slid off his lap and crossed to her mother at the stove. “And Gamma said she’ll tell me all her story pillows and take me to Bohemia, when I’m older.”

Myrtle smiled, cooing in return. “Very nice, I’m sure, but you’d best go wash for supper. Martin, would you help her, please?”

As Celeste scooted off hand-in-hand with her father, Myrtle’s smile disappeared. Turning to her cooking pots, she vigorously stirred the soup, banging the wooden spoon against the tin sides. Stopping abruptly, she faced the table, “I won’t have it,” she spurted at Gamma, waving her spoon, “Filling my child’s ears with your Bohemian nonsense. She’s a modern girl in modern times who won’t be needing any silly past, so I’ll thank you not to talk about it, ever again.”

Gamma's jaw dropped then promptly shut as her eyes steeled on her daughter-in-law. "What you say, Myrtle? Celeste should have no past? You erase your family and now her father's, too? So she come from nothing? No heritage? No ancestors? No stories for learning?"

"Ancestors? Ancestors!" Myrtle retorted, waving her spoon erratically. "What difference did they make to me? Vile memories I spit on. She don't need that blackness, and I'll not have it rob her chance for a better life – better than yours or mine. Better than a shopkeeper's wife. She's my daughter and I say: speak no more Bohemian bile."

Gamma pushed herself from the table, face empty of emotion and stepped towards Myrtle. "What you ask I cannot do. Your child she is, but Martin's, too. In their blood is history, beauty, knowledge that long survives on earth. As mother, is your right to raise her as you want. But grandmother has obligation, too."

Myrtle coiled for a fresh retort, but Gamma raised her hand for silence. "Between you and me, Myrtle, is not right, I know. Is not easy, living under my roof all your married life; but this is the fate of our hearts, which we can fight or make right. Celeste is yours to raise, but in other ways, she is mine. So only this promise I make: Your wishes for her I will not undo. But my heart demand I answer true, any questions she may ask."

The firm arch of Gamma's eyebrow caused Myrtle to blanch and purse her lips. Squeezing the spoon in her hand, she opened her mouth to reply but shut it just as quickly, turning back to the stove as the bathroom door banged open and Martin and Celeste returned with hands and faces bright.

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## **2 SIXTEEN**

*May 27, 1930*

Leaning on her broom, Myrtle peered down the tree-lined street, watching Celeste meander across the Green, school satchel swinging, nose in the air, catching the sweet scent of linden flower now perfuming the town. "There she is," Myrtle said loud enough for her neighbor's ears. "There's my beautiful daughter."

Mrs. Harris stopped her sweeping, wiped her hands on her apron and squinted in the same direction. "Oh my, yes, hasn't she blossomed over the winter!"



Myrtle waved her arms to catch Celeste's eye. "Sixteen and nearly grown. Can you imagine? Where do the years go?"

Mrs. Harris shook her head. "Soon married with a brood of her own, and you a grandmother – ha ha! Any good prospects?"

"A few," Myrtle coyly twisted her head. "But we'll see what summer brings."

A block away, Celeste waved and hollered: "Mama, I'll be at church choir."

Myrtle nodded and ducked her head, returning to sweeping her walk. No longer interested in chatting, she wanted only to imagine the upcoming months, when her hopes and plans would finally converge. Never before had her dreams been so close to fulfillment. After years of false starts, slogging through the lower ranks of Gladdenbury's social fabric, she'd finally secured invitations to a selection of coveted summer parties that would place Celeste among the town's best set and win the most desired prize: an invitation to the Women's Club Fall Cotillion, where social merit was confirmed and rewarded with a proper introduction.

*The Cotillion*, Myrtle mused, sweeping harder. Where debutantes were presented and lifelong alliances forged. And, if the fates were kind, her own ascent up society's ladder, which had thus far eluded her anxious grasp. Although the season was weeks away, she could already smell the heady bloom of roses at the Conner's June soiree, feel the jazzy sway of the Club's midsummer dance and delight in the riot of hats at the August regatta. But the Cotillion! Ah, the Cotillion. If this one wish were granted, she would ask for nothing more. Her blood rushed at the thought of her daughter's prospects, so shiny, so bright, so far from her own tattered childhood. Everything she'd schemed for decades was now unfolding, and she couldn't wait for the festivities to begin.

"Excuse please, Myrtle?"

Myrtle's head jerked up at the old-country voice to see Gamma on the front porch.

"I like to make discussion with you. Please, you come soon?"

Myrtle forced a smile for Mrs. Harris's nosey eyes. As Gamma re-entered the house, Myrtle muttered, "Yes, your majesty," giving each step a hard sweep as she climbed the stoop. Leaving the broom by the door, she crossed through the parlor into the glass-walled conservatory where Gamma held court. The woody-green smell of the many plants assaulted her nose, along with a large frond of fern. Roughly pushing it aside, she heard a flutter of wings retreating from the six outdoor feeders and saw Gamma sitting on the wrought iron love seat, as she often did,

calmly needle pointing. “I’ve got a lot to do today. What do you want?” Myrtle asked, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

Gamma’s hands briefly stopped moving. “I have idea, for your agreement, something for Celeste; a promise made long ago, but now is time, I think. Please, sit.”

Myrtle perched on the iron chair across from Gamma, wincing at its cool hardness. “Go on then. Supper won’t start itself.”

Gamma cleared her throat. “Ten year ago, I promise to show Celeste our roots in Bohemia. This summer I like to take her, as I am well enough and she 16 – same as her father was.”

Myrtle’s entire body flushed. “Roots? What are you talking about? No old roots are going to tangle my girl’s shining future!” She couldn’t believe her ears nor stop her rushing mind. “You want to dismiss all my hard work for *this* summer’s plans? For some crusty old roots? What have they to do with our lives today? With *her life and future*?”

Myrtle’s upset exploded well beyond her sense of reason. But having broken with her own past long ago, she knew of what she spoke. The first of too many children, she’d cut her teeth on want for something better, something more, and learned young how to snatch it, like apples off a cart. What else could she do? With a worthless father and haggard mother, living in the stench of New York City’s Five Corners, polluted by fetid factories and savage people, she had no one to protect her from life’s wretchedness. It exhausted and shamed her to recall any of it, but she’d vowed to escape her mother’s washerwoman fate, and finally did, opting to roam the streets, searching for a smidgen of hope – when she spied young Master Howe, striding confidently in spats and spit-shine boots, posting notices for free tutoring. Fresh from college and eager to help those less fortunate, he was the sole heir to a small chain of hardware stores. From the moment Myrtle saw his softly tilted, handsome face and honest eyes, she recognized a means to a better tier of life where her old roots could be severed and her warehouse of want might be satisfied.

Clutching the cold, iron arm, Myrtle furiously shook her head. “No! You’ll not steal my daughter’s future. Not when it’s her time to rise.”

Gamma had anticipated such a response. “Hers – or yours, Myrtle?” she asked. “Celeste’s future include her past. She has right to know from where she come.”

“That makes no difference,” Myrtle sputtered. “This is where she was born, not Bohemia or Ireland or some filthy New York alley. This is what she knows, and all she needs to know, for the life she was born to live, with people more like her than we’ll ever be. Certainly more than backwoods strangers across the ocean.”

Myrtle finished with a huff, still full of fury. From her first day in Gladdenbury she’d kept a gloved finger in the social pie, setting her sights on the *doyenne* with five sons a few blocks away. The time had finally come to reap what she’d carefully sown, to claim her dream, if only as mother of the most promising young woman about to enter the town’s highest echelon. “No, Gamma, I won’t abide your wish. It’s been arranged. It’s ... all ... been ... *arranged*, and I won’t let anything change it. You can’t do that to ... to ... *her*. Not after all we’ve been through.”

Gamma slowly wagged her head. “We? Did Celeste help make this choice?”

“She’s *my* daughter,” Myrtle shot back, “and I know what she needs,” she popped up, spinning on her heel. “And I’ll not have you filling her head with your Bohemian religion.”

“*Ne!*” Gamma’s raised voice arrested Myrtle’s departure. “Is *not* religion. Is philosophy and history and art in the blood of her veins.”

Myrtle jutted her chin “So you claim. But what does Martin say?”

Gamma blinked calmly. This, too, she expected. “I ask your blessing first.”

“Well, I’ll not give it. And let’s just see what he has to say.” Myrtle flicked her skirt as she turned to leave.

Gamma called after her. “What of Celeste’s dreams and desires? Speak of those?”

Grasping the overhanging frond, her back to the old woman, Myrtle squeezed the foliage tight. “What can a child know at such an age?”

Gamma’s eyes narrowed. “Much as you – when first you see my son.”

Myrtle swiveled and locked eyes with Gamma, in mute defiance. After a long moment, Gamma spoke slowly.

“Her own heart voice she must know or have no compass to find her truth, for no one walks the same path.”

“Poppycock!” Myrtle released the frond, ducked under the leaves and stomped out, untying her apron as she strode.

Gamma sank onto her chair. “*Bolení hlavy,*” she sighed, listening to her daughter-in-law pound across the parlor, rip open the coat closet, slam the glove box and bang the front door behind her. Through the conservatory’s glass walls, she watched Myrtle flounce down the road toward town and their hardware store, hat bouncing with each step. Gamma shook her head. “Another headache,” she translated for the birds re-clustering around the feeders. She knew Myrtle would badger Martin until he agreed to whatever his wife demanded, if only to regain peace. That’s how it always was and this time would be no different – unless she put up a fight, a fight for her granddaughter’s right to choose her own life.

Turning back to her needlepoint, Gamma tried to concentrate on the pillow in her lap. It was a gift for their distant kin, depicting Celeste’s life and hopefully a map for her first campfire storytelling. She had not wanted to upset Myrtle, but time was not her friend. She’d learned first hand that too much could change too fast. But now supper would be smothered by angry silence. “And for what?” Gamma asked the birds. “A ticket to a dance?”

Had her husband lived, she’d still be in New York, running their three shops with closed eyes, for everything her husband knew, she knew as well, thanks to his blessed mother, Katrine. She’d hoped to do the same with Myrtle, despite their rocky start, until the sudden deaths led them to sell the stores and move to this town of glassy eyes and wagging tongues. Oh, how she missed New York’s quirky imperfections, so unlike this hamlet where everyone strived to be the same; Myrtle most of all. Why was she so willing to become whatever she thought they wanted in exchange for acceptance and status?

Gamma sighed again, putting away her stitchery. Truth be told, she had failed her own son with the same blindness now driving Myrtle; guilty of putting her own wants ahead of her son’s dreams. For that, she was deeply sorry. But it also was the reason she felt such urgency with Celeste. As the last of their Bohemian line, the girl was Gamma’s only chance to honor the vow she’d made so many moons ago. If Celeste did not come to understand their Heart Code, no one would be left to pass it on. So no matter the discord, Celeste deserved more than an invitation to a cotillion by which to measure her self-worth.

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Brusquely opening the door of their hardware store and finding it empty, Myrtle brushed past the shop’s counter and burst through the office door. Martin jumped in his seat, dropping his pencil.

“I refuse! Simply refuse!” Myrtle stamped her feet for emphasis. “To sacrifice my daughter to that old woman’s ancient faith. What can Celeste gain among those ... those ... mountain people?”

“Jeepers, Myrtle, lower your voice,” Martin cautioned, pulling off his green visor. He felt muddled by the sudden interruption after working on the shop’s accounts all afternoon, and he hated arguing with anyone, especially in public.

“Don’t you admonish me, Martin Howe, not after what I’ve been through. It’s not you who has to spend all day dealing with your mother’s foolishness.”

Rubbing his face, Martin sank back into his chair. “Sit down. Calm down. What’s the hoo-ha now?”

Pulling off her gloves, Myrtle perched on the chair alongside his desk. “If you don’t put a stop to it, she’ll ruin all our plans and our daughter’s future.”

Leaning back, Martin recalled a dozen instances of this same conflict flash through his mind. Since the move to Connecticut, his wife repeatedly clashed with his mother over the identical issue: Her lust for all things social, juxtaposed with his mother’s ideology. “What is it today?” he asked quietly.

“The plans for this summer, to introduce Celeste to the right people so she’ll have a chance – a chance I never had, until I met you. But times are different now. We must keep her on the right track.”

“What?” Martin was baffled.

“Your mother wants to take Celeste to Bohemia *this summer*. The most important summer of her life! When they’ll be choosing who to invite to the Cotillion! Everything I’ve worked for will piffle away!”

“The Women’s Club Cotillion? In the fall?”

“Yes, in the fall, but if she isn’t around this summer to make the proper impression, they won’t even know she’s alive. Don’t you see? We can’t miss this opportunity.”

Martin rubbed his face again. Twenty-six years ago it seemed like a good idea to move to this small town to escape their losses: first his newborn son, then his father, then his youth, abruptly shunted aside to become head of household with a grieving mother, an inconsolable wife and three New York hardware stores to run. Barely 22 before his father died and still a boy in many respects, he was well educated but apprenticing the family business, with all the serious

responsibilities still squarely on his father's shoulders. Only a few short years from his knock-about days on the docks of New York, dreaming of being a sailor like his Uncle Yazi, traveling the world with a yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum. But then he met Myrtle and quickly eloped for reasons that now seemed hazy, yet instantly changed his whole world.

"What did Mother say?" he asked.

Myrtle knew he would check her every word. "She said she promised to take Celeste to Bohemia when she was 16 – same as you – and wants to do it this summer, in spite of knowing what a sacrifice it would mean for Celeste's future." She quickly rose, leaning on Martin's desk, her face close to his, her voice quiet and intense. "Can't you do something? Convince her that next year would be better, so as not to jeopardize our daughter's chances? Besides, how can we afford it after the crash and talk of depression?"

Martin shook his head. "Father willed Mother her own money."

Myrtle whirled around, dropping in her chair, summoning forced tears. "I can't believe you'd let all my hard work slip down the drain."

Martin stared at her contorted face. When they first met, her frailty had captivated him. She seemed the polar opposite of his mother and grandmother, the two towering pillars of strength that dominated his life. Her fearful nature, adoring eyes and neediness gave him a cause. Myrtle was someone *he* could protect. So, despite his Mother's probing and his own gnawing doubt, he followed Myrtle to a justice of the peace and became a young husband with a soon pregnant wife, living in his father's ample house and enjoying his mother's meals as he tested the sails and riggings of life. But with his father's sudden death, he was called on deck and thrust the tiller before he even knew how to tie a proper knot. In that moment, trading New York for Connecticut seemed right, a place to begin anew. Before he truly knew his wife or welcomed the birth of his daughter; or held his breath through the "war to end all wars" or endured prohibition and the women's right to vote and the 1920's roar when Noel Coward's plays and Fitzgerald's books and Picasso's paintings ruled the day. Now, with Wall Street's debacle unhinging everyone's plans, Martin questioned what he'd done with his life. How changes he'd innocently set in motion nearly three decades before had come to impact everything he held most dear: his wife, his mother, his child, his heritage and especially – *especially* – the man he had hoped to become.

"We'll talk tonight," he offered, "and see what can be worked out."

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After supper, when Celeste slipped off to do her homework and Myrtle began washing up, Martin broke the tense silence that had shrouded their meal. Stirring his coffee, he quietly asked, “Mother, how long were you thinking to be gone?”

Myrtle gasped, turning from the sink with soapy hands dripping on the floor. “But Martin, it’s already settled. I’ve made the arrangements. We can’t cancel now.”

“Four weeks.” Gamma ignored Myrtle’s glare, stirring honey in her tea. “Six days on ship to London, then Paris and Prague, and six days back.”

In the corner of his eye, Martin saw Myrtle vigorously shaking her head. “You promised me.” Her voice shook. “There won’t be another chance like this. Think of Celeste’s future.”

Gamma nodded slowly. “Yah, Myrtle is wise. Think of Celeste’s future and the children she have one day. Who tell your grandchildren of Bohemian culture? Or will they know only Gladdenbury ways?”

Myrtle huffed. “You and that Bohemian piffle. It’s your answer for everything.”

“Myrtle...” Martin cautioned.

“What do you want from me, Martin? I’ve worked hard and long, and now you take it all away so she can traipse through the woods with...with...some hooligans across the sea! After all I’ve done to give our daughter the best possible life?”

Myrtle’s puffy face saddened Gamma. Too much weary discord. “Myrtle,” she began softly. “Is not your answer or mine that matters. Is the questions in Celeste heart and what she dream to follow.”

Martin’s head lowered and tilted to the left as he considered his mother’s words. Remembering his own trip to their homeland so many years ago, he’d never been able to explain to Myrtle how he felt among the Bohemian hills of their family’s settlement, where the air felt soft despite the hard life the farmers led. Where laughter rang clear among his aunts, uncles and cousins, who wished each other well no matter what road they took. Nor had he told her how he felt growing up in New York, surrounded by his mother’s varied friends who, like his Bohemian relatives, laughed and talked incessantly of questions and dreams. Where had his own dreams gone, he wondered? Did any embers of questions still hide in the recesses of his heart? Then he thought of Celeste. His body filled with unfettered love. Despite the losses, discarded dreams and

disappointments in the ten long years before his daughter's miraculous birth, he'd repeat every step again, just to see her smile.

Looking at his scowling wife, hands planted on her hips, and then at his mother's placid face, he realized it was probably too late for his own questions and dreams, but not for his daughter's. Downing his coffee, he squared his shoulders, faced his wife's glare and then his mother's attentive gaze.

"I think this is the time for Celeste," he said, enunciating the words that would reverberate for hours. "Take her, Mother. Take Celeste to Bohemia for as long as you like and show her all she needs to know." And silently, he finished the thought to himself: *"Maybe she'll do what I could not and follow her heart's call."*

✕

### **3 THE GYPSY**

*August 1930*

After six days of crossing the Atlantic, and four nights of London theater, and a sail across the English Channel, and a train to Paris for four more days of shopping, touring and dining, Gamma and Celeste were both near collapse as they trundled into a private sleeper on the overnight train to Nuremberg. Aroused in the blue-black, predawn light to change trains for the final leg of the journey to Prague, they crossed the German border into the foothills of the Bohemian Forest, where Gamma sighed deeply.

"Such green air smell!" She nudged Celeste, slumped on the seat.

"All I smell is stinky train," Celeste muttered, rubbing her nose as she hid under her coat. "How much longer will it be?" Then fell back asleep.

As the train chugged between the rolls of her beloved mountains, Gamma vigilantly watched as the countryside unfolded its sweet arms of boughs and streams. The gradual change from hills to plain, with glimpses of the Vltava River as they meandered through her homeland, warmed her heart and fired memories all the way to Prague.

"Is time now, wake up." Gamma shook Celeste.

Struggling and cranky, Celeste shuffled onto the platform behind Gamma, following a porter who transferred their luggage to a taxi, where she slumped again as Gamma gave



directions in her native tongue and the motorcar pulled away. Seeing her granddaughter's eyes closed, Gamma poked her. "*Dítě*, look and see."

Celeste opened one eye. "What?"

"Prague in early light. We not here again this hour." She then arched one eyebrow, and Celeste bolted upright.

Traversing through the streets, Gamma pointed out the monuments, museums and churches, the castle on the hill and all the people attending their early morning duties. Unable to follow half of what Gamma was saying, Celeste almost quipped: *the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker*. But she refrained from the flippancy and dutifully watched as the city awoke before her eyes in a soothing, cool wash of golden light. Soon they were in the countryside, riding in silence as the sun rose higher, banishing shadows from the few houses dotting the roadside.

"How far now?" Celeste asked, stifling a yawn. "And when can we eat?"

From her pocket, Gamma fished a dinner roll, wrapped in her hanky. "Eat this, but soon, more food than you can dream."

As the taxi labored up a hill, Celeste heard bleating and looked out the window. "Look, Gamma, goats! Just like you said."

"Likely your cousin, going to pasture."

"But why go to pasture? There's plenty of grass right there."

"Grass, yah, but something extra they need. Remember Paris goat cheese?"

Celeste thought for a moment. "The savory sweet one?"

"Yah. Is by goats eating special things in pastures like ours."

"Like what?"

"Soon you see. And much more, too," Gamma added with a mysterious nod.

The taxi suddenly turned off the road and bounced up a rutted driveway, shrouded by tall pines, until the view opened onto a field of waving grain. In the distance, they saw a cluster of thatch-roof houses.

"Are we home?" Celeste asked.

"Home we are," Gamma answered with moist eyes.

As the taxi stopped, a whoop came from the barn and a bell rang out, followed by a swarm of dogs and people running from all directions, calling Gamma's name. "Bertra Vojen! ...

Bertra Vojen! ... Bertra Vojen!” were the only words Celeste understood as men, women and children of all ages rushed to greet them. Their words in a strange language tumbled past her like cartwheels of happiness as the clan clustered around, everyone talking, grabbing their bags, stroking their hair, touching their garments and pinching their cheeks. Gamma introduced Celeste to everyone, but she barely heard their names before she and Gamma were swept into the biggest house, where a table was piled with more food than Celeste had ever seen.

Gamma’s elbow nudged her. “See? Like I say.”

The aroma was intoxicating, teasing her nose with sweet and savory wafts. Without another thought, Celeste sat down and heaped a plate with sliced sausages and ham and fresh-baked bread slathered with butter and jam and a hard-boiled egg and a bowl of fresh berries doused with cream, while Gamma laughed and talked with her kin. Between bites, Celeste looked around the hearth room, as Gamma had called it. One big everything room surrounding the fireplace. She gazed across the blackened kitchen pots hanging from the rafters interspersed with bundles of drying herbs, leading her eye to the long window with a cozy seat – where she spied a cluster of needlepoint pillows and her heart leapt. Gamma’s story pillows! Warmth washed over her chest. Many were the same as they had at home, depicting the stories of Gamma’s life: her travel to America, her home in New York, their Connecticut house and Celeste’s birth. Oh, it felt good to see something familiar so far away.

Then she saw a pillow she didn’t recognize, one depicting a large green heart with a copper arrow piercing it and fat strings of tears gushing from its puncture wound. Although very much in Gamma’s style, it was unlike any Celeste had seen, and she wondered what story it told. Rising from the table, she walked toward the window seat for a closer look, when a gust of laughter erupted among her relatives. Turning, she saw Gamma holding out a package to an old woman and waving for Celeste to come.

“Celeste, meet my niece Lidia.”

Celeste blinked. The woman was much older than Gamma; at least much more wrinkly. Celeste’s confused expression made the others in the room laugh, and her face flushed hot with embarrassment.

“Yah, clear you see. Lidia older to me.”

Someone translated what Gamma said and Lidia scoffed.

“Still, she is niece,” Gamma continued. “Daughter of my eldest sister, who marry before I born.”

Celeste nodded, still a little confused, then turned and smiled sweetly at the old woman who viewed her with cold, narrow eyes.

Lidia nodded gravely as she inspected her young cousin.

“Now, she village elder. So to her we present our gift,” Gamma summarized as she handed the package to Lidia for unwrapping. Then she whispered into Celeste’s ear: “Maybe is time, you tell pillow’s story?”

Celeste blanched, shaking her head. It was too frightening to speak in front of so many people. Plus how could they understand? She spoke only English and maybe a little French. “I don’t think so,” she whispered back, then tugged at Gamma’s sleeve to ask about the crying-heart pillow. But when she turned to point it out, it had vanished. Leaving the group, Celeste looked all around the window seat but could find it nowhere.

Laughter burst out again as Gamma held up the new pillow, showing their Gladdenbury life: the creek, the church choir and their hardware store, centered around the town green. In her old language, with an exuberance of sounds Celeste had never heard before, Gamma told the story of each image. It made her feel a little homesick, and she forgot about the crying-heart pillow.

When Gamma finished, everyone applauded and began to depart, returning to their daily chores, leaving Gamma and Celeste to go up to their room, change out of their travel clothes, wash up and nap. A couple of hours later, they rose and dressed in slacks and sturdy shoes to walk about the farm.

“And the goat pasture?” Celeste reminded.

“Yah, if not too tired.”

“Oh, I’m not tired.”

But by the time they’d climbed the hill to the pasture, Celeste had to lie down in the middle of some wildflowers to catch her breath. The sweet scents enveloping her matched the delicate flowers floating around her face. “You did this everyday?”

“Um-hm, only faster; because the goats like to run.” Opening the paper sack she’d brought along, Gamma spread out a cloth napkin and placed on it cheese, bread and dried apples. “Eat some, you feel better.”

As they snacked, the sun began to wane and a light wind rustled the trees.

“You hear?” Gamma tilted her head. “Is forest name: *Šumava*.”

“Shoo-mava,” Celeste repeated, trying to memorize everything.

“Means: noise of trees in wind. Shooooooo-Maaaahhh-Vaaaaaa”

The sound washed over them, reminding Celeste of the ocean sucking at the sand, but soon she grew restless. “Shouldn’t we get back?”

“*Ne*, Over the hill we go now” Gamma answered, gathering up their picnic. “To meet old friend.”

Celeste brushed off her slacks. “A childhood friend?”

“First I know her mother – when I a young girl. And now I am friend with her daughter. Their Gypsy family come here every summer.”

“Gypsies!” Celeste interrupted. “Aren’t they bad people who rob and steal?”

“Celeste!” Gamma’s voice sharpened. “Every people have bad seed. But gypsies are feared because they are strangers, traveling place to place. My friend and her family come to *Šumava* every summer, long before I born. I meet her here, this very pasture, and learn much things. Things no one else could say.”

“Like what?”

Gamma squeezed Celeste’s leg. “Like you coming to us, four years before you born.”

Celeste face twisted. “Like a witch?”

“*Ne*,” Gamma shook her head. “Not spells. She has gift of Second sight, of prophecy, as does her daughter, who now we go to see. To hear story of our ancestors. The first Bohemians.”

“Why don’t *you* tell me that?”

“Because you hear better this way. Like London theater.”

Celeste giggled nervously.

“And *dítě*, listen well, for her talk is odd, but truth she tell.” Gamma said, standing and tucking the paper sack under her belt, then picked up her walking stick and led Celeste across the field. As they marched along, she pointed out the thistle and laurel and lavender that made the goat’s cheese taste so nice. Down a hill and across a stream and up the other side they walked as the sky darkened, giving Celeste a creepy feeling, until she saw a glow at the top of the path. Scuttling to catch up with Gamma, Celeste took her hand as they approached a circle of wagons.

Gamma paused and yelled: “Hooo Ahhhh!” Then nudged Celeste to sidle between two wagons into a clearing where a roaring bonfire danced.

“*Hooo Ahhhh!*” A gypsy woman answered, whirling her skirt as she came toward the sweet-faced adolescent and white-haired woman entering their camp. Nodding respectfully to the older woman, the gypsy grasped the girl’s chin, pulling her close and peering into her face before exclaiming: “*Ahh, yes. The cut of jaw, the lifted cheeks, the kind-filled eyes – is Vojen clan.*”

As twilight faded, the gypsy led Celeste and Gamma to the campfire, pointing to a log for them to sit on, then clapped the air, bangles clashing down both arms, bidding her family to join them. “*Brothers, sisters, come quick! As prophesized by our great Madre’ – God rest her soul – to our hearth the young one has arrived. From across the ocean she come, to learn her spirit roots. Behold – the beauty of Madre’s vision – sixteen years from birth.*”

The gypsy gazed at Celeste and then Gamma. Two peas in a pod, sharing a pale, round shape with high, ruddy cheeks and liquid blue eyes, one skin smooth and luminous, the other softly folded and powdered bright. As long shadows closed out the forest, the gypsy knelt, snatching a handful of dirt and raising it to the darkened sky. “*Oghma, Celtic God of Wisdom, tonight I beseech you: Silver my lips with your gift of words that I might persuade this young heart to hear and feel the story of her kin, upon whose great land we now sit.*”

Flinging open her hand, she slashed dirt into the fire, where it spit and snapped, doubling the flames’ height. Startled, Celeste jumped in her seat, spontaneously clapping until Gamma gently squeezed her hands quiet. Turning their attention back to the gypsy, they saw her standing alongside the fire, her arms lifted high, pointing long bony fingers as she spoke. “*Is story of long ago, before the rise of Greece or fall of Rome. Before the birth of Mohammed, Buddha or Christ. Before words were written or candles lit the night. Of a time after the icy north’s fingers withdrew their grip and left upon this land a magic dust.*”

With her lithe body in colorful garb, only gray streaks in the gypsy’s raven hair gave any hint of her age. Prowling the campfire with pursed lips, she arched a bushy eyebrow at Celeste. “*And south from here, in the land between rivers, this icy dust made a valley fertile. A hearty loam with minerals that proffered many crops: wheat, barley, sesame and flax. When news of this abundance spread, to that basin many tribes flocked for the promise of fruit and bread. To Mesopotamia the masses flew, and among them a noble group: the people of your ancient heart – the Celtic tribe of Boii.*”

A flash of recognition crossed Celeste's face as she looked to Gamma, who nodded and closed her eyes.

Spinning around the fire, her bangles tingling furiously, the gypsy suddenly dropped onto the log beside her startled young visitor. *"Your people, the Boii, journeyed to find a home to live in harmony. To grow crops and raise families and honor the divine Goddess from whom all goodness flowed."*

Standing in the shadowy edge of the campfire, a younger gypsy girl swayed, with a ruddy-faced baby on her hip. With narrowed eyes and pouting lips she scowled at her mother's embellished delivery of the old Bohemian tale.

*"Like many people of the time, the Boii were in need of new earth to call their own. Roaming south to east to north to west, with every sense awake, they watched for signs of what direction they should take."*

"What kind of signs?" Celeste interrupted in a clear voice.

Gamma's eyes flew open as the gypsy replied.

*"Oh, there are many kinds. Signs crawl below and fly above. A whispering breeze on the back of your knees. A fallen tree blocking your way. A prickle of skin when someone walks by, or a burning ear at the sound of a lie. Everywhere signs are waiting to be seen or heard or felt. Signs of change, signs of comfort, signs to snap alert. A tall, white bird standing in the creek told us of your birth long before your grandmother's letter reached our hearth."*

The baby's sudden cry turned the older gypsy toward the girl, visible by the fire's glow, her eyes seething and defiant. With a flip of her hand, the older gypsy dismissed her daughter and fussing grandchild and returned her attention to their guests around the fire.

*"Following the signs, the Boii were led; first to that Mesopotamian fertile basin between the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. But instead of harmony and health, the Boii found a valley distressed. Crowded with camps and quickly sprouting cities, bloated with people shouting in strange tongues and with scheming kings, demanding their will be done. Under such confines, the Celtic spirit withers, so the Boii moved on. To the north, along mountains they climbed, then west across vast open steppes until at last they come to this grassy plain, flanked by rivers and mountain forests. Only then did they feel the 'Ahhh' in their breast, confirming the land where their hearts could rest."*

Celeste interrupted once again. "Excuse me, but how could they know?"

“*Know what?*” The gypsy asked sharply.

“Their heart’s call?” Celeste asked, her rounded eyes sincere.

With chin in hand, the gypsy looked over the girl’s head into the eyes of Gamma, who smiled benignly, lifting her eyebrows in return. The gypsy shrugged, but felt a brief quiver in her chest. *“Is simple. In each heart lies the code for what your spirit seeks.”*

Celeste sat up taller, slightly raising her hand. “But what does it sound like?”

The gypsy grunted as she rose from the log, crashing one bangled arm against the other. *“No single sound, but to all - it feel the same. In here -”* The gypsy tapped her chest as her voice trembled. *“Where you feel - the sound of Yes.”*

Around the campfire, the other gypsies stomped in agreement as Celeste smiled weakly, glancing across the weathered faces.

With outstretched arms the gypsy whirled. *“And here is where the Boii heard 'Yes.' Among the seven hills of Prague and along the River Vltava, they made their home and found their truth and freedom to raise children and grow crops and work their crafts, sharing the secret of living from the heart – for two thousand years, or more.”*

A distant howling in the woods sent a shiver up Celeste’s back, but she would not unlock her eyes from the gypsy’s.

*“Artisans and honest traders, the Boii were known for vivid colored threads and joyous carvings in stone, bone and metal crafts of copper, iron, tin and bronze. But for one gift the Boii were most renowned: Masters of the Story Told.*

All at the campfire was very still as the gypsy spoke, save the cackling flames and wandering smoke. *“A skill so great, their stories traveled well beyond these hills, on the lips of travelers to lands far away, and scribed on papyrus by ancient Greek scholars.”*

Celeste’s eyes followed the gypsy pacing around the campfire three times, then standing still, looking to the sky. In a loud whisper, Celeste dared to ask: “Then why did they leave?”

Without moving a hair, the gypsy replied: *“Jealousy. Envy. Greed. Man’s worst enemies.”* She glared at the girl for a moment before softening. *“Fifty years before the Christ was born, a sulking unrest crept across these lands with swords, battles and bloodshed by marauding barbarians, hired by Caesar to vacate the land. Feeling the discontented winds, the Boii built fortified walls for protection, but was not enough against a sudden assault by warriors who savagely killed every Boii they could find. Those who survived scattered west and south,*

*toward France, Spain and Italy and perhaps farther still. But it is said, on this land, a handful remained, tucked safely away until quiet returned.”*

Sitting taller, Gamma pushed back her shoulders and raised her head, eyes dancing with pride. Celeste looked at her and quietly mouthed: “Us?” Gamma nodded as the gypsy strutted around the campfire.

*“As quickly as they came, the barbarians left, and save the pocket of Boii safe in these northern forests, the rest of the land lay fallow for many years until, from the east came the Slavic clans, who embraced the remaining Boii and lived peacefully alongside.”*

The gypsy slowed her pace, stopping in front of Gamma and Celeste. *“Through it all, the Bohemian spirit thrived, and in 600 A.D., when the Bohemian-Slavic mix rose to claim this land as their own, they named it Bohemia – Home of the Boii - and thus it remained, no matter what kingdom rose or fell, for thirteen hundred years, until ... until ...”*

“After war, was no more,” Gamma spoke in an icy voice.

Roiling her hands in pained discomfort, the gypsy silently invoked the smoky fire and wind to wash from her heart the final, soothing words. *“Yes, is so. Our Bohemia is forever gone but not the Bohemian Heart. For in these trees and soil the bohemian spirit still soars, passed by blood from grandmother to son to daughter and further still to children soon begotten. And with its people flung across the world, the Bohemian spirit thrives in distant lands, through all those who seek truth in the wisdom of their heart.”* The gypsy abruptly turned to address her tribe, while pointing to Celeste. *“And from the loins of this Vojen girl, a great Bohemian spirit will rise and travel forth, teaching many more the true wisdom that lies within each chest.”*

Suddenly exhausted, the gypsy twirled three times, clapped her hands and ended the story. Without another word, she clasped Gamma’s and Celeste’s hands and escorted them to the camp’s edge, where she stroked Celeste’s hair and kissed her forehead. Then gazing deeply into Gamma’s eyes, she raised her arm and shook her many copper bracelets before selecting six and offered them to her. As the bracelets exchanged hands, the Gypsy murmured something to Gamma that Celeste could not hear, and with a final nod, she abruptly left, leaving her honored guests to be guided home under her brother’s safe care.

The old gypsy slowly climbed her wagon’s steps and pushed open the door, where she found her sullen daughter sprawled on the bed with her baby suckling her breast. Swiftly the gypsy grabbed the girl’s arm and hissed. *“Daughter, you are disgraced by your tantrum tonight.*



*The campfire is now yours to tell the nightly tale, but this night was my destiny and right, prophesied by my mother two decades prior. To tell the Bohemian Tale you so despise because of the Bohemian man who gave you that child. Now, you too are forever tied to Bohemian blood and one day, mark my words, it is you who must do what I did tonight: to tell the tale to the last child of our young visitor. Yet you, so hateful of all things Boii, will likely detest her on sight. But caution what I say and be wiser than today, when that true Bohemian arrives - in forty years time."*

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#### **4 VOJEN VILLAGE**

*August 1930*

As the early morning light crept through the small, leaded windowpanes, Celeste awoke and bolted upright, startled and confused by the carved, wooden creatures rising from the ornate footboard. This was not her bed, nor did her room have rough-hewn beams overhead. As panic fingered her throat, she heard the smothered snore under the covers, the lullaby she'd slept to since birth, and slid back down, drawing the feather comforter to her chin, sighing. This was her grandmother's childhood home, one of a dozen thatch-roofed cottages clustered along a ridge in the Bohemian Forest, thousands of miles from her whitewashed Connecticut bedroom.

In the quiet, Celeste studied the thick veins of lead separating the small panes of wavy glass and the speckled plaster on the walls under the sloping eaves. She counted the dark, uneven beams across the ceiling and felt centuries of stories seeping from every crack and crevice. How many generations of her kin had slept beneath them? Did Gamma say the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, or was that something else? Everything she'd seen on this trip was so old she'd begun to lose track. But it didn't matter; the stories from all the years hugged her like soft, goatskin gloves.

Dozing off, her thoughts flashed to the gypsy fire, recalling the rolling, colorful skirts, clattering bracelets and clapping hands. She could still smell smoke lingering in her hair and hear the gypsy's lilting voice singing something about "the Vojen girl." Who was that, Celeste wondered? Her name was Howe.

Several snorts and sneezes erupted next to her. “Celeste?” Gamma muttered, emerging from the blankets. Clasp ing her grandmother’s flailing hand, Celeste helped her sit up, fluffing the pillows behind her. “Good Morning Gamma! Sleep well?”

“Mmgh. Smoke in my nose. Water, please.”

Celeste poured a glass from the pitcher on her side table and watched Gamma drink it down by small sips. “Good now.” Gamma handed back the glass. “And you? How you sleep after such foretelling?”

Celeste shook her head, “Foretelling?”

“What gypsy say. Your fate.”

“What do you mean? She talked of a Vojen girl, but I’m a Howe, like you.”

Gamma shook her head. “Howe I marry, but still Vojen, as you, too.” Pushing herself up to lean on the headboard, she saw Celeste’s doubtful expression. “Biology? Remember what your father teach you of the chromosomes? Father gives the X or Y for the child’s sex, but mother always X? So every child has mother memories. To your papa I give Vojen memories, and he to you. And to your children, you pass the same. Is how Vojens of Bohemia continue, no matter what name is last.”

Celeste’s eyes crinkled. “So the gypsy spoke of *my* children?”

Gamma touched the six copper bracelets on her arm. “All six.”

“For certain?” Celeste asked, afraid to touch the bracelets.

Gamma shrugged. “Nothing certain. Gypsy see, but is yours to choose, or not.”

Celeste fell silent, imagining six runny noses, twelve booted feet, and a dozen mittens for her to fetch and mend. It did not feel sweet.

As if reading her mind, Gamma patted her hand. “Is not just chores, *dítě*. Think of stories you have when old like me!”

“Is that why you love this place so much? The stories?” Celeste asked, looking at the carved wardrobes and burl ed bedding chest.

“Mmmm,” Gamma patted the covers to draw her close. As Celeste snuggled, Gamma stroked her hair. “With grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins . . . so many stories since time of Boii.”

“Really, Gamma?” Celeste interrupted. “Before Christ?”

“Long before.”

“But Gamma, why didn’t they fight the warriors instead of running away?”

“They not live all together. There were many villages along Vltava River. But at river Danube, where Valtava joins, is biggest settlement; where warriors first strike. Then word come up river ...”

“How did it come?”

“By running or on horse.”

“To get help?”

“No, to warn. The Boii not fight. They hide or run, hoping to keep alive.”

“But how did ... you, the Vojens, end up staying here?”

“Maybe we just stubborn,” Gamma said with a wink. “Or maybe someone sick or maybe the mama with child and could not run far. So they hide until birth, and by then, warriors gone. So we stay and build new home – far from river bank.”

Celeste silently counted in her head. “Nineteen hundred years ago?”

Gamma nodded.

“But how can you *know* it’s true? That Vojens are descendents of Boii Celts?”

“Ah. Story say my great, great, great grandfather dig in caves near here, high in hills, and find many things: fossils, pots, carved bones. But best thing he find make everyone believe: old silver coin. A Boii coin, with carved horse, made 75 years before Christ born.”

Celeste shook her head “They had money?”

“Everything, Celeste. Everything to make life good: food, art, trade. Maybe is why warriors came. Maybe they not like Boii happiness. So they came and kill, but soon leave and we still here, on river and hill.”

“Was it like that for you, Gamma? Growing up here?”

“Oh yah! Very happy. From everyone I learn good gifts.” Gamma patted the comforter. “But enough talk now. Is time to see and do. Up! Up!”

Scrambling out of bed, Celeste reached for her clothes, neatly folded on a chair.

“No. Today we dress Bohemian,” Gamma said, opening the chest at the foot of the bed and pulling out long skirts of many colored fabrics. “One for you and one for me and a kerchief for your hair, so it don’t get full of hay from working farm.”

“Working farm?”

“Yah, today your hands learn. Take these boots. City shoes can’t muck stalls.”

“Muck stalls?” Celeste hoped Gamma was kidding as she changed into a long, full skirt and white cotton top. By the time they entered the kitchen, everyone was gone, but a plate of hard-cooked eggs, toast and bacon waited for them, along with a pitcher of cool milk. Celeste poured herself a glass and took a big swig.

“Augh!” She gagged. “It’s spoiled!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha. Not spoiled. Is goat’s milk!”

Celeste swished her mouth with water. “Awful.”

“They don’t care, so long you don’t squeeze teats too hard.”

“What?”

“When you milk them. Come, eat up, chores we have.”

~

For the next five days, Celeste ran around the farm learning everything she could. Milking goats and cows, cleaning stalls, tossing pitchforks of hay from the top of the barn to the animals below, hiking to the pasture with the goats and learning the names of all the trees and flowers along the way. She practiced the Czech language with her cousins as best she could because they didn’t understand her English, and they laughed at her bumbling pronunciation. Once, she spied the gypsy girl she’d seen at the campfire, on the far side of the pasture, and she ran to say hello, but the girl disappeared into the woods. Each afternoon, with trembling arms from carrying wood and pails of milk to the house, she rolled up her sleeves and cooked alongside Gamma for several hours, roasting chickens and lambs and potatoes and funny looking roots she’d never seen before.

“Kohlrabi and rutabaga,” Gamma said, then sent her scuttling to collect watercress from the stream.

Celeste loved how all the food they needed grew under their feet, and she adored the warmth of a newly laid egg in her hand. She even came to like the taste of goat’s milk, squirted directly into her mouth from a teat. One cousin showed her how to sling a stone and another how to stitch lace. She thought she might faint when they first set her on a horse without a saddle. “Hold with your legs” they shouted, slapping the horse’s haunches as she instinctively grabbed its mane and held tight, yelping as it cantered across the field. And every night, before she fell into an exhausted sleep, unlike any she’d experienced at home, she’d listen to someone tell a story about life or dreams or history. Even though she couldn’t understand what they were

saying, she liked the way they told it, particularly the elders, who were animated in voice and body as they spoke the tale. But when she was asked to tell a story, she always declined, afraid she had nothing interesting to say.

“Tell them about our town” Gamma suggested one night.

Celeste’s head dropped. “It’s not nearly as lovely as this.”

While it was too early to shear the sheep, one of the aunts taught her how to spin and card wool. An uncle showed her how to swing a scythe to cut the grass and told her she had such a good arm he’d gladly keep her on to cut the wheat. It made her more proud than any good grade she’d earned in school.

“Tinka’s my favorite,” Celeste confided to Gamma, snuggling in bed on their last night. “She’s always so kind to me, and I like how she sings to the goats, throaty and sweet. Do you think we can come back here again next summer? There’s so much more I want to learn.”

No words could have been sweeter to Gamma as sleep kissed their eyelids.

The next morning, Celeste did not want to get up so fast. She wanted to savor every second, every image, and every sound her body could absorb. “Gamma, growing up here, what did you like best?”

Rolling over, Gamma looked at Celeste’s face, tinged with sadness. “The same as you: learning new things.”

“What were your favorites?”

Gamma didn’t stop to think. “When my brother Yazi teach me slingshot.”

“I know how to do that now, too!”

“Yah, and then bow and arrow, to keep goats safe.”

Celeste’s eyebrows shot up, remembering the pillow with the arrow and heart. She pushed herself up. “Gamma, on our first day, I saw a story pillow, one I’d never seen before, with a golden arrow piercing a crying green heart, and I’ve been wondering what it meant.”

For an instant, Gamma froze, then drew her lower lip under her teeth. “Where you see this?” The sharpness in her voice surprised Celeste.

“On the window seat in the kitchen, with all your other pillows, on the first day. But when I looked for it again, it was gone. Did you make it?”

Gamma shuddered, feeling a chill in the warm room. “I’m ... I’m ... can’t say.” She continued haltingly. “Maybe some time ago, but ... unless I see, don’t know.” Her mind raced.

How could it be? That pillow was to be destroyed 20 years ago. Her sister swore she'd burn it after they agreed both had cried enough and nothing more could be said to erase the sorrow and shame of the mistake. After her sister died, she'd thought no more about the pillow – yet now it comes again. For why? By who? Gamma wanted answers, but not to tell Celeste. The girl did not need to know about this. Not now, when everything was good and fresh. Not knowing what to do, Gamma changed the subject.

“Do you know Auntie Mae taught me sewing? She want I be a dressmaker in Prague and escape the farm she could not.”

“But why would anyone want to leave?”

Gamma shrugged uncomfortably. “Farm not for everyone. Some like city life.”

“Then why didn't she go to the city?”

“Because when young, she too afraid, and then she marry and babies come and was too late. But she help everyone with wild hearts and itchy feet to find contentment outside here, wherever it may be.”

Celeste sighed, flopping on a pillow. “I wish I could stay here all my life.”

“Yah? What you like so much?” Gamma asked, relieved by the diversion.

Looking around the room, Celeste lifted her arms, trying to embrace it all. “I don't know. It just seems there is so much more laughter here than in Gladdenbury.” She giggled. “I never noticed that before: Glad-en-bury, where they bury all the gladness?” Rolling over, Celeste continued laughing as Gamma patted her back.

“A good, simple life, yah. Not so much want.”

Celeste looked up. “How do you mean, not so much want?”

Gamma opened her mouth, then shut it. This was the crux of her discord with Myrtle, and the town, for that matter. She didn't wish to put Celeste at odds with her mother; but the girl was nearly grown and would have to make her own decisions soon. Plus she had vowed to answer any question asked. “In Bohemia, needs are few. Good food. Soft bed. Strong work. Good eyes and ears to hear our heart's call and path. But in Connecticut, and many places, seems not enough. So much want for things outside ourselves. Things for flattery and social ... how you say? Status? Things to put on show. Make me weary.”

“But Gamma, what about all our nice things? The rugs and crystal and china and furniture Grandfather bought you? Those aren't bad, are they?”

“Not by themselves. My husband choose gifts to honor life’s beauty. Treasures we share, filled with good memory. But not for showing off. Not for outside admiration. Understand?”

Before Celeste could reply, the door jolted open, revealing a stout young woman carrying a tray with coffee and toast. “*Dobré rano, teto Bertro a sestřence Celeste*”

“Good morning Cousin Maya.” Celeste replied.

“*Děkuji,*” Gamma thanked her great niece as she placed the tray on the blanket chest. “Very kind. Tell your mother we soon be down. Much to see in Prague before the night train.”

Maya closed the door as Celeste poured the coffee, adding sugar and cream.

“I didn’t know Maya understood English.”

Gamma laughed. “She never let on, eh? Some girls hide smarts to not scare off marriage partner. But Maya is just quiet. She know several languages and has big dream for life.”

With bright eyes Celeste nodded, chewing a corner of crusty bread slathered with butter and a tart, red jam she’d come to love, thinking how some old-country ways were still the same in her life, too.

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In quick order they ate, bathed, dressed in their city clothes and rapidly packed their trunk and carpet bags. After three weeks of travel, it was their only day to enjoy Prague before catching the overnight train to Port Le Havre, where their ship departed tomorrow. With tears in her eyes Celeste bear-hugged and kissed her newfound relatives in their ancient village, then climbed into the rattling farm truck with cousin Maya at the wheel. Gamma spoke very little as they drove to the city’s train depot, where they would store their luggage until departure. At the station, Celeste supervised the storage while Gamma said goodbye to Maya.

Holding Maya close, Gamma kissed her hair before pulling back to look hard in her eyes. “Maya,” she said gravely. “Truth I must know. Did Lidia put crying pillow for Celeste to see?”

Maya’s mouth dropped open as she slowly shook her head.

“So, not burned? As my sister promise?” Gamma pushed on Maya’s knowledge even though she had been very young when the promise was made. But in their small village, secrets were hard to keep, and everyone knew the story. Lidia had seen to that.

Nodding, Maya answered haltingly. “Gramma Lidia kept the pillow. She promised to burn it as great grandmamma asked, but she did not. I ... haven’t seen it ... in a long time. I give my word.”

Gamma looked at her sharply, searching for truth in every expression on her face and body. Satisfied, she squeezed Maya's hands. "God willing, is gone for good. But if you see it, burn it and send me the ashes." She then slipped a small envelope into Maya's pocket. "For your help this week. Buy new dress, or books, whatever you like – and remember me."

Maya hugged Gamma, and the two clung to each other for a long time.

Having returned before they finished, Celeste stood at a respectful distance, examining the lace gloves Maya's mother had made for her. She'd never seen such delicate yet strong stitches. Maya called to Celeste as she climbed into the truck and saluted before turning the wheel and driving off. Gamma waved her hankie until she could no longer see any glimpse of the taillights. Patting her eyes dry, she pointed to the horse-and-buggy stand.

"Old Town Square via Wenceslas" Gamma ordered the horse squire.

"To the Astronomical Clock and Rathaus Town Hall," Celeste gleefully added. As the horse clopped along the wide avenue, Celeste consulted her map. "Charles Bridge is your favorite, right?" she asked.

"Yah," Gamma said, trying to brush aside her jumbled feelings and resume her role as travel guide. "King Charles the Fourth build it, in 14<sup>th</sup> Century."

"That's where you'd sneak off with Uncle Yazi on market days, right?" Celeste asked, but Gamma did not answer. The sway of the carriage overwhelmed her with memories; returning to the 1860's in the back of her father's wagon on their monthly trip to Prague market to sell their extra vegetables, goat cheese and woven goods. She was only eight on her first trip because most of her brothers and sisters were married and busy with their own households. Only brother Yazi, six years older, still lived at home with her. He was charged with teaching her the business of selling and buying, but he'd occasionally slip away to meet friends in other parts of the city and take her along. It was a heavenly time in her life, until she was ten and Yazi hopped a boat for Germany and all the world's ports. Even though he'd talked about becoming a sailor for as long as she could remember, it broke her heart when he actually left, and the very next market day, she ran off, finding her way to Charles Bridge, a massive structure lined with scary statues of saints and jammed with people strolling and selling wares. With blurred eyes she pushed her way through the crowd, past stalls and rank smells, to the middle of the bridge, where she leaned far over its rough, thick stone wall and wept into the river, calling Yazi's name.

"Gamma?" Worry tinged Celeste's voice.



Opening her eyes, Gamma smiled weakly. Some hurts never heal no matter how time passes. “Yah, to Charles Bridge. But enough; tell me, you remember Astronomical Clock?”

In perfect form, Celeste recited the mechanical marvel of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. “Not only does it tell time but shows the position of the earth, sun, moon, signs of the zodiac, time of sunrise and sunset and the day, week and month of the year. Oh, and the twelve apostles come out each hour. What do they do? Just zip around the clock?”

“Run fast before reaper bangs bell and cock’s wings flap and hour chimes.” Gamma said, tapping the map on Celeste’s lap. “Now look up. See my grand city with your own eyes.”

How much different it was from London and Paris, Celeste noted. London was gray and dour compared to Paris’ white-skirted style. But Prague was something much more. Like a fancy party dress with buildings washed in blues, pinks and tans, each donned with a red-tile hat. And singing a lovely, happy tune with wide avenues and curvy side streets and balconies dripping with pots of flowers and streaming ivy. Prague was a feast-laden table compared to the butler’s pantry of London and the dessert tray of Paris.

Arriving at Old Town Square, Celeste’s head spun back and forth across the wide plaza thronged with sellers’ stalls and townsfolk. Soon, her neck ached, craning up the block stone walls and spiky spires of Tyn Cathedral. But her greatest surprise was seeing herself in the faces of strangers walking by, mirroring her lips, eyes, cheekbones and chin. At home, her rounded features looked odd among her sharp-faced Connecticut neighbors, but in Prague she felt a cozy relationship with nearly everyone.

In one corner of the square, they found a man with deeply worn, cracked hands selling beautiful inlaid wood bracelets. Gamma bought three. Tucked in a doorway they found an old woman dressed in rags with a basket of ornate, batiked eggs. After a long conversation, Gamma bought the lot, basket included. The woman cried, patting Gamma’s hand before tucking the money deep into her skirt pocket and scurrying across the plaza.

“Imagine,” Gamma said, examining the eggs’ intricate designs. “Four months to make these Pysanky eggs, to pay her grandson’s schooling.”

Wandering from cart to cart perusing the vegetables, breads, bedding and fineries, Celeste lingered over purses and crystal jewelry before selecting a few souvenirs. In the middle of the plaza, in front of the looming statue of national hero Jan Hus, a man stood on a box orating

passionately to a small crowd. As hard as she tried to understand what he was shouting, Celeste caught only a word or two, unable to comprehend his passionate message.

As the sun rose higher, they climbed the Town Hall tower for a full view of Prague. Celeste laughed at the ant-sized people in the square below and marveled at the stretch of red roof tiles. “See the spires over there?” Gamma pointed across the Vltava River. “Is Prague Castle; where I most want to go as a child.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“We were farmers, Celeste. Only rich and powerful visit castles. But,” she added wistfully, “once a year doors opened for a ball in Spanish Hall.”

“So why didn’t you go then?” Celeste asked simply.

Gamma sighed. How could she explain to a child who wanted for nothing? Who was embraced by everyone? Who had only to speak a wish to see it granted? It was the difference between the old world and new. “At sixteen I leave Bohemia. If not, maybe one day I dance in Spanish Hall, but ... not likely for poor farm girl.”

It was nearly noon when they climbed down the tower steps. Celeste’s sundress floated as she ran to see the Astronomical Clock. Gamma caught up just as the cock flapped its wings and the noon bells chimed.

“Just as you said!” Celeste said. “Those twelve apostles whizzed by before the skeleton came out. But why a skeleton in a clock?”

“To remember life is fleeting. One day we also be skeletons, so enjoy what we can,” Gamma answered, looking at the thinning crowd and scatter of people opening lunch pails. She decided they would go to the café Kavarna Slavia, across from the National Theater, by the river where her brother used to meet his friends. “The café not built until 1881, ten years after I leave, and became most important place for news and discussion among artists and intellectuals,” Gamma explained as they wove through cobbled side streets and alleys toward the river.

Entering the café, Celeste was surprised by the triple-height ceiling and wall of windows flanking the L-shaped room. Like wide-opened eyes, the tall sheets of glass framed the river, the theater across the street and the never-ending procession of passersby. Already half-past noon, the café was crowded and buzzing as they waited for a table.

Gamma amused herself by looking at the seated people: some aristocrats, some laborers, some politicians. She could tell by their cut of clothes; a good mix of young and old with quite a

few students and artists. Smoke twined up to the ceiling as everyone ate, drank and talked, waving their hands in the air, tossing their heads, shaking a fist now and again. She was glad to see her people's zest for conversation was still as invigorating and substantial as their stews.

While Gamma watched the diners, Celeste explored the waiting area, drawn to a large bulletin board boasting items for sale, apartments to rent and situations wanted. Among the wall of messages, she found a large, colorful poster, glinting with gold. On it was a sketch of Prague Castle, encircled by dancing couples. Chewing the inside of her lip, she concentrated on translating its message. Then she spun on her heel, rushed to Gamma and pulled her to the poster.

"I think there's going to be a ball! At the Castle! In just a few days. *Středa*: that's Wednesday, right? Five days from today?"

Still flustered by Celeste's sudden scurry, Gamma tried to focus on the poster, studying it carefully.

Celeste could not wait for her answer. "*Pražský Hrad*: that's the castle, right?" She pointed to another word. "And *Španělský Sál*: Spanish Hall?" Celeste's voice cracked with exuberance.

Gamma placed a hand on Celeste's shoulder to calm her while fighting her own rising excitement and fluttering stomach. Slowly reading the poster again so as not to make a mistake, she translated each word aloud. "The Citizens of Prague Are Invited to a Summer Solstice Ball 8 PM Wednesday, 13 August 1930, Spanish Hall, Prague Castle." Gamma froze, afraid to move for fear the poster would disappear, like a dream upon waking. Turning to Celeste, she felt like a child at a shop window full of every delectable she craved. What a surprise to feel this way again so late in life; emotions pitching between dreamy desire and unfettered abundance. The same flush of excitement she felt when seeing Charles Dickens in a London pub and her first glimpse of New York City from the harbor and the ruddy, sweet face of her firstborn. Barely breathing, she stood stock still while Celeste saw confirmation roll across her face.

With a whoop, Celeste swung up her arms and twirled, her skirt swinging high around her knees. The café hostess looked up, frowning, and several nearby diners glanced in surprise. Grabbing her grandmother's shoulders, Celeste shivered all over, tapping her feet. "It's true then, isn't it? There is going to be a ball at Spanish Hall! Just what you've always wanted to do, and here we are, only a few days away. Oh, can we go, Gamma? May we, please? Oh don't you see

we must? The ball could change everything. It must be our fate! We could take a later ship, couldn't we? Oh Gamma, can we find a way? *Can We?* Please? Say yes, oh, *please-please-please say yes!*"

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## 5 THE HOWES

*August 9, 1930*

At the shrilling ring of the doorbell, Myrtle's hands jerked out of the wash water and nearly dropped a plate. Who could be calling? She'd made no appointments this evening. Looking out the kitchen window, she yelled to her husband, kneeling in the vegetable garden. "Martin, the doorbell's ringing."

"Well, answer it," he yelled back, without getting up.

She sniffed, giving her shoulders a shake. Of course she'd answer it. All she wanted was his speculation, a bit of chitchat. Ever since Gamma and Celeste departed for Europe three weeks ago, the house had been deadly silent. Martin seemed perfectly content reading and gardening when he wasn't at the store. But after several weeks of his terse comments: "Good morning ... nice meal ... love some coffee ... Good night," Myrtle would have welcomed even Gamma's silly prattle. Thank goodness her girl would be home in a week.

Wiping her hands on a striped linen towel, Myrtle removed her apron, laid it on the back of a chair and primped her hair as she walked to the front hallway. Taking a deep breath, she pushed back her shoulders and pulled open the door, ready to present her most chipper self – until she saw the telegram uniform. Her face dropped flat.

"What are you doing here?" She blurted, unable to conceal her upset. Telegrams were never good news. Telegrams were for deaths and tragedies. Her mind flew through a dozen ways her daughter could be in danger or harmed in a foreign land. Oh, why had she agreed to let her go? This must be a mistake. He's come to the wrong address.

"Telegram for Mr. and Mrs. Howe," the tall, clean-cut boy announced, holding out the yellow envelope and clipboard for her signature.

"No. You can't mean us. Just a minute." Myrtle halfway shut the door and called to the back of the house. "Martin, come this instant." Her cry carried out to the garden and beyond.

Dropping his trowel, Martin huffed up the back steps, roughly pulling off his garden boots at the porch door, and called back: “What’s happened?”

She came to him, her eyes wide and cheeks white, looking ghostly through the screen. “It’s a telegram,” she whispered hoarsely.

Martin recognized his wife’s distress but he was a practical man, a hardware merchant, anchored in the nuts and bolts of things; a man who dealt with facts as they came along. He softened his voice to calm her. “Where is it? What does it say?”

“I don’t know. I’m scared.”

“Awfff, Myrtle, I’m standing in my stocking feet and covered with dirt. Do you want me to track through the house?”

“No.”

“Then go get the telegram and bring it to me.”

The young man standing on the front porch listened to the Howe’s exchange. His summer job with the Hartford Telegram office had involved all sorts of reactions to his deliveries. In the wealthy homes, telegrams were a matter of course. His own mother used them as a primary means of communication, especially with her eldest son, who traveled the world on company business. It was a matter of convenience. At the Hartford Playhouse on opening night, telegrams poured in, were torn open on the spot and read aloud with joyous abandon while he waited for a signature. These well wishing messages always gave him a happy jolt, and the theater people were big tippers. But among the regular folk he’d noticed the fear a telegram could engender. More often than not, the news was good: a baby born or the time of someone’s arrival or word of an important discovery from far away. He’d seen all kinds of messages this summer. It was the most interesting job he’d ever had. But he didn’t like delivering bad news and wasn’t sure what was in the envelope he held.

Returning to the front door, Myrtle roughly pulled it open. She was not going to let Martin show her up silly. Snatching the yellow envelope, she slit it open with her fingernail and quickly scanned the page, steeled for a plunging knife to the heart.

“What?” She yelped. “They’re not coming home?”

Having brushed off his pants, Martin entered the living room.

Leaving the boy standing in the doorway, Myrtle turned to her husband. “I can’t believe this. What nerve your mother has!” She grasped the paper with both hands to read aloud. “All is

well. Stop. Delayed return. Stop. Attending Castle Ball Wednesday. Stop. Sailing from Antwerp Aug 16. Stop. SS Belgenland. Stop. Arrive NYC Aug 22. Stop. Archduke Stephan Hotel Prague. Final stop.” Looking at her husband with reddened cheeks and angry eyes, Myrtle yelled. “WHO does SHE think she IS?!?!”

The sudden shout caused the boy to jump. Peeking around the open door he saw Mrs. Howe snapping the telegram in the air as she paced across the room.

“I gave your mother permission to take Celeste to Europe for a month. A month! Right in the middle of the social season! She promised to be back in time for the Regatta. *The Regatta! The one event* where everyone who’s anyone attends and a *must* to secure an invitation to the Cotillion.” Myrtle stopped and turned to her husband, nostrils flaring. “But now Celeste is going to miss it for a *ball at Prague Castle? What nonsense!* And besides, if anyone should take Celeste to her first *ball*, it should be her own mother. Of all the nerve! I could just scream.”

Shifting nervously by the door, the boy waited for his clipboard to be signed, but the news brightened his face. This was Celeste’s home, the prettiest girl in town. Not that he knew her well. He’d only seen her once or twice since returning from boarding school. But they’d actually been introduced last June at the Presbyterian Tea. Recalling her shy smile and dancing eyes, he felt warmed. “Celeste is in Prague?” he asked, unable to stop himself and ignoring the rules of protocol. His boss had repeatedly warned him to remain detached, as telegrams can cause lethal reactions. But standing on Celeste’s doorstep compelled him. “My older brother’s in Prague right now, too!” he offered without thinking.

Myrtle was in such a stew she didn’t realize who was speaking. “I don’t care if the Pope is in Prague right now!” she addressed the air. “My daughter was supposed to be home next Friday and I ...want ...her ...home ...next ...Friday! Martin? Do you hear me?”

The teakettle began whistling full blast from the kitchen, and Myrtle continued her tirade unabated as she stomped down the hall. Crossing to the front door, Martin silently reached for the clipboard and signed the confirmation line. Handing it back to the boy, he studied his face. “Are you a Meaden?” he asked. There were few people in town he didn’t recognize. Over three decades since opening the hardware store, he’d come to know all the families in town and the surrounding area. The Meadens were among the most prominent and their features were distinctive: strong chins, high foreheads, narrow eyes, with thick locks of black hair. A family long established in the insurance trade and excellent customers of Howe Hardware and Goods.

“Yes sir,” the boy stood straighter. “Ron Meaden, sir. Pleased to meet you.”

They shook hands.

“I haven’t seen you at school functions. How do you know Celeste?”

“Oh, no sir. I attend St. Andrews in New Hampshire, but I met your daughter at the church Social Tea last June. We were both servers.”

Martin Howe nodded, reaching into his pocket. “Well, thank you for bringing the telegram. Sorry for the fuss.” He handed Ron a folded dollar bill, and the boy’s eyes widened. He started to protest.

“No,” Martin interrupted “For all your trouble.” He winked.

Ron slid the bill into his pants pocket, touched his cap and said goodnight.

Watching the boy stride down the walkway, Martin called after him. “Ah, by the way, which brother is in Prague?”

“James, sir. The eldest.”

Martin nodded, waved and closed the door.

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By the time Ron arrived home that evening, supper was finished, but his mother kept a plate warm for him. Joining her son at the dining table, Estelle smoothed the tablecloth and gracefully lowered herself onto her chair at the end. She did not believe in the custom of sitting to her husband’s right. Born to wealth, she assumed an equal position on all matters of her household, taking the lead on most. Ron held the back of her chair as she rustled into place, adjusting her skirt and pearls. Then he sat to her right and began to eat.

A regal woman with gentle features, Estelle savored her youngest child’s gusto. There were so few days left to enjoy the mundane routine with him before he was gone again to school. She knew his future was better served by attending boarding school, but she missed him terribly. Not one of her four other sons or her daughter had been as attentive to her. Or perhaps it was she who had not been as attentive to them. But something about Ron tripped her heartstrings, like falling in love at first sight. “Not so fast, dear,” she mentioned quietly. “You’ll upset your stomach. Now,” she tapped the tips of her fingers together, “what happened today? Anything exciting?”

Ron’s eyes glowed as he finished chewing. “Celeste Howe is in Prague.”

His mother’s eyebrows rose slightly. “That pretty blond girl from tea?”

“That’s the one.” He could see Celeste’s rosy cheeks in his mind’s eye. “She’s there with her grandmother. They were supposed to return on Saturday, but they’re staying to attend a ball at Prague Castle.”

Estelle’s lips pursed as she nodded. “Of Howe Hardware, hmmm.” How curious to have Celeste’s name come up now, just when she’d been considering the list of potential debutantes for the coming season. She knew the Howes were excellent shopkeepers, but she had overlooked their young daughter. “How old is she now?”

“Must be seventeen, like me,” he replied. “She’ll be a senior this fall so, geez ... I wish ...” His mother waited for him to complete his sentence, but he chewed in silence, knowing his wish was ungrantable.

Estelle’s eyes softened as she appraised her tall son, still a bit gangly with stringy limbs, though his face was filling out. She most loved the thick fringe of lashes curling around his green eyes. Most unusual for a boy and as a baby he’d often been mistaken for a girl. “I wish you could stay home, too,” Estelle answered for her son. “I ache when you are away, wondering what you do each day.” Reaching over, she petted his arm. “And I long to hear your adventures first hand. But ...” she pulled back, folding her hands together on the table. “Your father and brothers were well-served by attending St. Andrew’s, both for Yale and business.”

Ron nodded, having heard the explanation repeatedly from his parents, uncles and grandparents.

“And with your squash abilities ...” His mother added before her voice trailed off, thinking of the hundreds of spirited squash matches she’d watched over the years. All of her children, even Beatrice, were mad about the game, but none was as gifted as Ron. As a pipsqueak he’d demonstrated a natural grace and unswerving deftness in smashing an unreturnable ball. Beatrice was the first to teach him and when Ron was seven and big enough to play his brothers, he beat them handily. Soon he was the undisputed champ in local tournaments. St. Andrew’s, which had spawned quite a few squash champions, was the very best place for boys who loved the game. As Estelle silently mused, she saw Ron looking down at his plate, chewing small bites of pot roast with slumped shoulders. Normally, she would correct his posture, but tonight she wanted a bit of cheer. “Let’s play the game,” she offered. “If you didn’t have to go away to school, what would you do instead?”

Ron sat up. “Make friends with Celeste Howe.”



“You like her that much from just one meeting?”

Ron nodded. “Mother, I think she’s the kindest girl I’ve ever met.”

“And what is she doing in Prague?”

“I don’t know. Her grandmother sent a telegram about attending a ball and taking a later ship.” Ron repeated, purposefully leaving out Mrs. Howe’s upset. “Isn’t James there now?”

Estelle nodded. “Do you know the Grandmother’s name?”

“No, but she’s Mr. Howe’s mother.” Of that he was sure.

Estelle nodded again. It should be easy enough to find out.

Clearing his dishes to the kitchen, Ron washed his plate and cup, setting them in the drying rack. Although his mother repeatedly told him to leave it for the day maid, he didn’t like adding to Maize’s work. As the only child left in the house, he had made friends with the maids, and learned a lot from them about the town and life and housekeeping things. ‘The muck gets stuck,’ Maize chided him one morning about dishes in the sink. Had Estelle known about these talks she would have fired her instantly. Maids may be seen but not noticed.

As it was still light outside, Ron decided to head over to the park. Sometimes he’d join a ball game or find an old friend hanging around the tennis courts or swings. Since going away to prep school, he’d found it hard keeping up with town friends. But every now and again, he’d meet one who’d introduce him to someone new. That’s what he always hoped for, the chance to make new friends.

Kissing Ron’s forehead before he left, Estelle went to her writing desk in the parlor. She felt a tingle inside, but wasn’t sure from what. All she knew was she wanted her eldest son to come home from his world travels and settle down. Perhaps tonight’s news could help that wish come true. Picking up a pen and sliding a piece of creamy white paper from her desk drawer, she sat down to compose. Once satisfied with her choice of words, she picked up the telephone at the edge of her desk and waited for the operator.

“Yes, Mrs. Meaden?” A dry voice inquired on the other end of the line.

“Hello Gertrude? Yes, Hello. I was wondering, could you tell me the name of Mr. Howe’s mother? Yes, of Howe Hardware. Bertra? Ahh, Bertra Howe. Lovely. Thank you. Now, would you kindly connect me with the telegraph office?” While waiting for the connection, Estelle lightly tapped her cheek with the end of her pearled pen. “Ahh yes, hello. This is Estelle Meaden. ... Ron’s mother, yes. ... Very well, thank you. I’d like to send a telegram. Yes. To

Hotel Archduke Stephan in Prague. Yes. To Mr. James Austin Meaden II. Yes. The message is: Neighbors Bertra Howe and granddaughter Celeste attending Prague Ball. Full Stop. No, that is all. He'll know what to do. Yes, thank you." Replacing the telephone receiver, Estelle tapped her fingertips on the polished burl wood, smiling as she stared off into the cooling evening air.

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## ***The Facts Behind The Fiction***

***The genesis of this story was influenced by two key facts. One is the actual tribe of people who were the original Bohemians (circa 2000 BC). The other is the modern day scientific investigation into the separate intelligence that resides within the heart.***

**Bohemian: A Brief History.** The word *Bohemian* holds iconic stature in our society. While evoking disdain in some, to others it is an ideal state of being, defined as: *a life unhampered by social convention, often artistic, with freedom to live as one chooses.*

**Where Did This Meaning Originate?** While used as a moniker for starving artists in 18th century Europe and a synonym for gypsy vagabonds, neither are the Bohemian beginning. The term was first recorded in 600 AD when the territory we now know as the Czech Republic was claimed by the Slavic people, who named it the *Kingdom of Bohemia* in honor of the Celtic tribe of Boii who first settled the land. The word Bohemia translates to "home of the Boii".

Archeological and Linguistic researchers confirm a thriving Boii culture in the area around 750 BC, and some speculate they moved into the territory as early as 3000 BC.

**Who Were The Original Bohemians?** *By description*, they dressed like modern day hippies in brightly colored garbs and ornamentation. *By profession*, they were highly skilled craftspeople and traders, among the first to create bronze out of tin and copper, among many other art forms. *By culture* they were independent and peaceful, expanding their families, businesses, and territory along the Vltava River, between Prague and the Danube River. *By lore* they were master storytellers whose tales traveled far, with some scribed by Greek scholars. And despite great population and political upheaval throughout Europe, their unique culture survived in that region until 50 BC, when they were attacked by a hired warring party (most likely Caesar's) and forced out of their homeland. Many fled west and south to Germany, France, Spain and Italy, where

Boii populations continue today, confirmed by DNA. Some may have “jumped the pond,” finding haven among the North Carolina Cherokee, where the “Celtic Axe” arrived to those Woodland Indians during that same timeframe. But it is also believed some of the original Bohemians must have stayed in their homeland, hidden away until the conquerors left. For how else would the land be named in honor of the Boii, 600 years after their supposed departure? The prevailing logic is when the Slavic people immigrated to the vacated Boii land along the Vltava River; the remaining Boii emerged from the mountains to share their heritage and customs with their new neighbors, creating a valued bond. As a result, the land was named and remained Bohemia until 1919, when the spoils of World War One changed its name to Czechoslovakia.

### **What do Bohemians have to do With Modern Science’s Study of a Heart’s Code?**

Documentation of the wide range of innovation the Boii Celt’s created with their natural resources proves them to be a society that valued creativity. The longevity and prosperity of their culture suggests they encouraged tribe members to explore and develop unique skills and interests. If the culture’s ethnology and folklore stands true, the original Bohemians represent the epitome of the universal ideal: “Follow Your Heart.”

Fast forward to 1990, when scientists began an investigation of a separate intelligence residing in the heart and theorized that each heart contains a unique life map called: The Heart’s Code. The theory began in early 1980 with the discovery of the mechanics of how atoms, cells and the heart stored coded information. That led to the question: could the heart cells learn and carry one’s personal code? This theory was further supported though extensive clinical observations of heart transplant patients who admit to having dramatically new interests, tastes and preferences that identically matched the donor of their new heart (whom they’d never met). There is also the fact that in a fetus, the heart begins to beat on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day ... 180 days before the brain is fully formed ... and no one yet knows what causes the heart to start. Universally, our soul’s wisdom has always been seated in the heart region, and, in a recent New York Times interview, TV host Dr. Oz considered the small white spot at the electrical center of the heart to be the soul.

Despite centuries of cultivating our brain smarts, many humans still cling to an ill-defined yet intrinsic stirring within our chest, believing it holds the magic potion for finding life's happiness. Science may now be catching up to our instincts, postulating a new revolution where the brain revolves around the heart, not the other way around.

Something, perhaps, the Boii Celts understood, long, long ago. ~