

You were smiling

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You were smiling

Kirsten Withagen

To Felipe & Nikki
&
With special thanks to Wendy

You were smiling is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The novel is pure entertainment and should be perceived as such.

*I saw a vision,
Some kind of apparition.
But it felt so real, so free.*

*I had a conversation,
A faint deliberation.
For who now could it be.
For anyone but me.*

Stu Larsen - By the River

1

It seemed as if the good kind of excitement died the year I was born. That year, 1861, the war with the Union had just started and had made its way to our small town on the Mississippi River. I don't remember anything about it at all, of course. I was too young. But my grandmother loved to recount the stories of the good old days before the war started.

"Oh, the time before the war, Adeline," she would begin all of her stories to me, "life here was exciting!"

We would sit in our small farmhouse at the kitchen table that could hold up to eight people, with one chair left for visitors, and my grandmother would let out a deep sigh and stare dreamily at the cobwebbed ceiling. She loved telling me about those days. And I absolutely loved listening to my grandmother's old stories. I wish I could have lived through them all myself. I would fantasize about them all the time, only interrupted by my mother bugging me to do chores.

"Adeline?" my mother called out while I was sitting outside with my back against the barn next to the house, with my head in the clouds and a book in my hands. She came striding out through the kitchen door looking for me. I turned my head around the corner.

"Yes mother?"

She took a few more brisk steps towards me.

"Could you run over to Ruth's and buy some bread? I fear we are all out."

She reached her hand out to me, holding a few coins. I took them and nodded reluctantly.

"Sure."

I dragged myself towards the same door my mother had come out of and walked through the narrow kitchen into the dark living room. My grandparents' bed stands in the corner, half closed off by a torn sheet to give them the illusion of privacy. There was a welcome breeze in the room coming through a cracked window next to the door. I climbed up the stairs and walked into the first bedroom and tossed my

book on the bed I share with my two sisters. The only other bedroom is occupied by my parents.

I then headed back downstairs with the money my mother gave me in one of my dress pockets and set off for the village center. The street in front of our farmhouse is narrow, paved with bricks and leads to the village square. In the middle of the square stands a large wooden gazebo with a beautiful red roof with a bell on top. It rings when the weekly market opens for business on Saturdays or when something bad or exciting happens in the village. I've only heard it on Saturdays. The pavilion rests on five wooden beams and has no walls, so you can see through it. It keeps the worst of the rain and wind out, though mostly it offers shade against the blazing southern sun. Surrounding the gazebo are several shops, houses and beautiful trees. And just around the corner stands the old wooden barn where our village meetings are held. The streets around the village square are lined with wooden cottages. The villagers that live in them come out to do their shopping at the market on Saturday or at the local shops, walk their children to the village school or talk quietly to their friends, and then return to their homes and stores to do chores or their daily jobs. It's a dull life in a sleepy village, where nothing has really happened since the war. Time has stood still.

As I entered the bakery close to the village square, the ringing of the bell on top of the door interrupted Ruth's conversation with another woman. I gave them a weak smile and swayed back and forth on my feet until it was my turn, pretending not to listen to them.

"Absolutely despicable, indeed," the woman at the counter was saying. "But what can be done? Arthur won't let us take matters in our own hands."

"Yes, but just as well, in my opinion," Ruth answered. "I remember the riots vividly. They destroyed the front window, you know. It was a scary night."

The woman nodded.

"I'd imagine so. But it's so wrong for you and all the others to have become victims when none of it is your fault."

Ruth handed her some bread and her change and sighed.

“Let’s just hope we’ll get some good news at the next village meeting. Arthur isn’t letting the matter go. He knows it’ll at least cost him his next election as mayor.”

The woman put the money in her bag.

“You really think he’s only doing it for the election? Not because it’s the right thing to do? We all know Mrs. Wilkes wasn’t right in the head when she gave that mansion to her servants. I suspect she was drugged by them.”

Ruth shrugged her shoulders before answering.

“Arthur and Mrs. Wilkes were quite close. He was even present at the reading of the will. He might not want to cross her. No need to upset the dead.”

The woman’s eyes grew large and she nodded again, as if she had first-hand experience of upset ghosts.

“I’ll see if I can speak to Arthur before the meeting. I’ll see you there next Tuesday!”

She walked towards the door where I was still trying to pretend I hadn’t heard them.

“Adeline, how can I help you?”

I walked towards the counter.

“Just the regular loaf of bread, please.”

I handed her the money my mother had given me. From behind her, my best friend Daisy walked into the bakery.

“Hi, Adeline! Would you like to go swimming next Saturday? I don’t have to work at the market!”

Temperatures had risen above 90 degrees already, so I happily agreed to meet her. Between school, me helping out on the farm and her working in her parent’s bakery, we didn’t get to meet very often. And even if we did, there wasn’t much to do.

After dinner that night, while helping my mother do the dishes, I asked her if I could be excused from going to the village market.

“Daisy wants to go swimming. She doesn’t have to work in the bakery. Can I go too?”

I looked at her pleadingly.

“You may, but take your sisters. They could use a day off from working on the farm too.”

I reluctantly agreed to do so. I like my sisters but spending an afternoon without them would have been a welcome change.

“When I was younger, the whole family had to go to the village market to help. There were so many customers.”

My grandmother had walked into the kitchen and sat down on a chair, followed by my grandfather. I looked at her, eager for her to tell us more stories about the past.

“People would travel from afar to buy our crops and we would hear all the news about what was happening in their villages. It was wonderful.”

She smiled. I couldn’t imagine the market ever having been that exciting. Nowadays it’s just our own neighbors coming to buy their weekly food. Every week there are more sellers than buyers, so a prime spot under the shade of the gazebo is coveted.

“There would be hundreds of stalls with vegetables, livestock and cotton from the fields around the village,” my grandmother continued.

“The fields all belonged to the plantations. I’ve told you about all the extravagant plantation houses we used to have, haven’t I?”

I nodded.

“Like the one on the hill.”

My grandmother grunted in agreement.

“Like the one on the hill, indeed. We used to have so many more.”

I knew she had lost herself in her storytelling when she looked up at the ceiling and smiled.

“Most families arrived here centuries ago, from various European countries, and settled here in hope of a better life. With the earlier settlers now long gone, the urge to explore other distant horizons has vanished over time as well. Most families have been here for generations and will die here too.”

She paused and gave me a short look before continuing.

“The mansion on the hill is the only remaining proof of the wealth the old settlers found here. They realized that the climate was ideal for growing crops, so they became farmers and built large mansions overlooking the land to the east and the Mississippi to the west. Most of the houses they built back then have gone and only one still towers over us up on that hill.”

She paused again and swallowed hard. Speaking of those bygone days both excited and saddened her. The mansion she was talking about had a long driveway lined with twenty formidable oak trees leading up to the house. It was like an oasis glittering in the hot summer sun. The many windows were decorated with beautiful dark gray shutters

to keep the burning sunlight out in summer. The porch, which went all the way around the house, was roofed in by a magnificent balcony resting on four massive pillars.

“Back then, the grass around the house was always freshly mowed, the leaves on the trees always green and the grand mansion's white wooden paneling blinded you in the sunlight. It was a perfect place for parties. You could always see people dancing on the porch from sundown to sunup on Saturdays. But it also provided a retreat on lazy Sunday afternoons, when the residents would slowly sway back and forth on the porch swing, drinking iced tea and discussing the great social event of the previous evening. I met your grandfather right there on the dance floor, you know.”

She chuckled and my grandfather winked at her.

“It was a glorious time indeed,” he added. “With the fields to the north, south and east, the forest and the river to the west, it was hard for others to find our village. We were like a sovereign land, our lives uninterrupted by others. We were never kind to outsiders – they just force their horrible rules onto ye. And then the war began.”

My grandmother continued, looking down at the table, her face went into a frown.

“And the house ended up in the wrong hands. Because of that cursed Northern intruder and those disgusting servants, the place is weather-worn and deteriorated. Completely ruined.”

She slammed her fist down on the table.

“Well, it must be hard to keep the house up with so few people,” I said, trying to defuse her anger a little.

“Oh yes. There used to be hundreds of servants, but now it's just those two. They shouldn't be allowed to live there.”

I stared at my feet.

“Isn't Mayor Brooks looking into it? I heard he'll be saying something about it at the next meeting.”

I looked up at my mother hoping that my remark had reminded her of something. I had been pestering my parents to allow me to go to the village meetings for years, but they always said I was too young for politics. Yet when they came home at night, I sat on the edge of my bed, listening intently to what they said. Their raised voices and excitement always made me wonder about the important matters discussed at the meetings. Last month, while my sisters were asleep beside me, I crept to the door and listened to their conversation. I

couldn't hear every word they said but I got the general gist. Because listening in on my parents like this really made me none the wiser, I asked them every year whether I was finally old enough to join them. But now my mother simply replied, "I believe so." before going out to throw away the dirty water. I accepted my defeat.

The following Saturday, my sisters Libby and Isabelle and I crossed the village to spend our free afternoon with our friends by the waterside, in a pool created by the overflow of the Mississippi. We met up with Daisy and her brothers and some other children from the village and quickly started a game of mud and water throwing. Suddenly, Daisy cried out "Who's that?"

There was an immediate ceasefire and we all looked up towards the suspension bridge on the north side of the river. A man was limping across the bridge towards the woods that separated our village from the river. He was tall, had dark hair and his clothes were torn and disheveled. We watched him until he disappeared into the trees and spent the rest of the afternoon whispering about him. Something in our village had changed.

After a nice afternoon swimming and playing with our friends, we walked back to the bakery with Daisy and her brothers. Ruth and her husband William were talking to Emily, the gunsmith's wife, whispering so loud it was hard not to listen even from a distance.

"This has never happened before!" Emily shouted under her breath. "No one ever moved into our village. Are you sure he's here to stay?" She stared at William.

"I heard him speak to Arthur, right at his door, asking for a house he could rent."

Emily shook her head.

"I don't trust him. The clothes he was wearing, the limp. He must be running from someone."

They stopped talking and finally noticed the six of us near the bakery.

"Go inside, Daisy, Daniel, John. I don't want you going out by yourselves again."

Ruth shoved Daisy and her brothers inside the bakery and gave me and my sisters a weak smile.

"You should be off too. Come on girls, I'll walk with you to Charlotte's house. She doesn't know about this strange man yet."

The last sentence made her eyes light up. She had some gossip and couldn't wait to share it. We followed her up to the blacksmith's shop where she knocked on the door. There was no answer. She knocked again.

"Charlotte?" she shouted, but nothing happened.

Suddenly the door to the left of the blacksmith's house opened.

"She won't come out," said an old lady with a red apron, standing in the doorway.

"They had another row. Philip came home from Gilbert's bar and we heard a lot of yelling and banging next door. Happens all the time. Poor Charlotte."

The old lady went back inside her house and Emily turned away from the door, looking concerned.

"Let's go home," she said, and we walked away from the blacksmith's door.

At home, the mysterious man was the subject of conversation as well.

"This is the first time since the war that anyone from outside the village has barged in here and started to meddle with us!" my grandmother exclaimed. "I don't like it one bit!"

She crossed her arms across her chest and leaned back in her old chair. "I heard he was all dirty, with torn clothes. And limping as well."

"Yes, Ruth said he might be on the run for doing something bad," my mother added.

"She won't let Daisy out on the streets alone anymore!" I chipped in excitedly. For once, something had happened in our village and I could contribute to the conversation.

"It's bad business when someone from the outside settles here or starts meddling with us," my grandfather said. "Mark my words. This man will stir up something bad. Just like the soldiers did in the war and that nasty man from the North who took over the newspaper. Oh, and that lawyer of course!"

"We should talk to Mayor Brooks about this at the next village meeting," I said, just to see if anyone would pick up the hint.

"I hope he doesn't show his face at the meeting," my grandmother exclaimed. "Imagine a stranger dabbling in our politics!"

I hung my head.

The streets were buzzing in the days after the man came to our village. At the market on Saturday, he walked around, buying groceries. "There he is," whispered Ruth under her breath to my mother. "He came to the bakery this week. Not much of a talker. He was in and out before I knew it."

The whole market threw glances at the man, as if they would go unnoticed. Emily joined us at our stall, trying to re-establish her importance after her failed attempt to speak to Charlotte at her house. "I heard he's a criminal, running away from justice. Who would look for him here?"

We nodded in agreement. Emily bought a few yams and some eggs from our chickens and looked at the man.

"At least he's improved his wardrobe."

He was indeed no longer wearing rags but was well-dressed and groomed.

"He could be a businessman, looking to open a factory. I heard they have a lot of those up north," Ruth suggested.

"If he's from that far up north, he's probably a spy. Seeing if we obey the Union's rules and all," Emily replied.

From a distance I saw Fred, our local journalist and village fool, making his way around the market and stalking around our new neighbor. When Fred saw we were looking at the man, too, he made his way over.

"Di'ya hea'? He settle' in de house 'round de corne'. Opposite de barn." My mother shot a look in the direction of the house.

"Really? Mayor Brooks let him have a house in the center of the village. We don't even know who he is! He could be dangerous!" she exclaimed.

"Well, if yer ask me, 'e could be Wild Bill Longley. Ye know, the serial kille' from Texas. Looks jes' like 'im! We need ter protec' our village. I promis' ter investigate 'im! I'll jes tell 'im I'm workin' fer the newspaper."

Fred ran off to his cabin by the river, presumably to grab a pencil and notepad.

The newspaper, though a good source of information, had gone through a change in the last few years. It used to be owned by a local businessman from a town near ours, but he died. The reporters

working for him couldn't afford to take over the business, so a rich man from a city up north took it over. He didn't care much about what happened here in the South and just wanted to make money out of his investment. One of his rules though, was that sensationalism and unfounded facts, or yellow journalism as he called it, was not to appear in any newspaper he owned. We only saw him once or twice in the old building that was used as an office and printing space, but whenever he showed up, half the town ignored him while the other half threw him dirty looks, as he was just another outsider trying to force his ways onto us. Because of his love of hard facts, his reporters had to turn over every stone and double-check every fact before printing their stories. As a result, most of the ink was spent on obituaries. You can't question the legitimacy of a printed article when the subject's heart has clearly stopped beating. I wondered how Fred would convince him to write a story on a supposed serial killer, without straying from the facts.

Weeks passed by and the interest in the strange man wore off. He kept to himself in his new home and only came out to go to the market or the shops, to walk around the village and to speak to Mayor Brooks on occasion. The talk of the village quickly shifted back to the usual topics, like the village market.

"Their crops aren't even any good," said Philip, our blacksmith, when he came to shoe our horse. I was holding the horse while my father stood by the barn door. "They're contaminated by their filthy, undeserving hands".

My father nodded in agreement.

"It's high time things changed around here. The only reason they have the best spot is because the Wilkes' helped build the market from scratch."

The topic of conversation shifted to the blacksmith's business and I lost interest. I had hoped for a little more excitement, but as summer drew closer, we were too busy at the farm and at school to pay attention to the newcomer. Fred's investigation had led to nothing, as Mayor Brooks had convinced him, and all of us, that the man was not a notorious criminal. James Lester Jr. was merely looking for a change of scenery and had found his way to our village. The mayor even went as

far as to say he had had some excellent conversations with James about the future of the village, including the mansion on the hill.

“He has tracked down the lawyer who read the will,” my father said during dinner, one evening before the meeting.

“I don’t think it will do much good,” my grandmother replied. “People up north shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place.”

“The meeting will probably be busy tonight, though,” my father continued. “With both the market and the mansion on the agenda.”

I had had enough. My patience was running out.

“Can I come this time? Please!”

After months of subtle hints, I was done waiting.

“What do you think, Thomas?” my mother asked my father. He let out a sigh and nodded. Finally!

Later that evening, while the sky was changing from bright blue to flaming red, we made our way to the barn where we held our meetings. My parents led me to one of the rows in the front so that I could fully experience the gathering. It was a good thing we were early – largely due to me waiting anxiously by the door for a while before we actually left – because, as my father had predicted, the barn was absolutely packed. Tonight the doors were not only left open to allow the hot spring breeze to give us a false sense of coolness, but also because they couldn’t close because of all the people present.

When everyone had settled in and the group had quieted down, the mayor officially declared the meeting open. I shifted to the edge of my seat not to miss anything and listened intently.

“Welcome everyone and thank you all for once again attending our weekly meeting. As you know we will start today with the matter of the coveted spots on the market. Now, like all of you, I know our village history and the story of the settlers. The rich plantation families built the beautiful gazebo to sell their goods and, with that, the market was born. Out of respect and tradition, we’ve never changed it and let the current residents have their prime spot at the market for years, but due to the events in recent years, some of you have said that this is unfair.”

Many nodded and grunted in agreement.

“We will therefore have to come up with a reasonable way to

distribute the stands. Anyone have an idea?"

I saw the audience looking at one another, mumbling words into each other's ears, but it was my grandmother who spoke out first.

"I believe we should give the best places to those with the best goods. We all know that the best space is being held exclusively by the bad apples in our community, and I don't mean the fruit!"

I knew what she was referring to. At my last visit to the market, my grandmother had swiftly steered me away from the stall owned by the family living in the large mansion, claiming that the vegetables and herbs were no good. They looked just fine to me, but I have to admit to being terrible at gardening and had good reason for leaving our vegetables in the more capable hands of my sisters. So maybe my grandmother had picked up on something I simply didn't see.

"Never buy anything from them, Adeline," she told me on the way home, after we'd bought our okra, yams, sweet potatoes and herbs elsewhere. "They've let the mansion deteriorate so badly. You can see what has happened to the beautiful white walls. Just imagine what it's like on the inside. With a house so unsanitary and filthy, and black hands like those, you know their vegetables must be rotten to the core."

I considered her logic and agreed that she had a good point, and when I glanced back, I saw the girl and her father packing up their goods. Ignored by everyone, they sold nothing.

At the meeting, people glanced to the dark corner in the back of the room where the owners of the mansion stood quietly near the door of the barn. The girl opened her mouth to say something but closed it after a stern look from her father and curled her lips into a polite smile.

"Well then," the mayor continued, "I completely agree that we should put health and quality first and I therefore suggest that we will test the products of each stall at the market on Saturday and decide which ones are best. All in favor raise their hands."

Almost every hand in the room went up. I glanced quickly towards the back of the room and saw the girl and her father looking down at their feet. I didn't understand the fuss at all. Why not just walk to the next stall and ignore what the girl and her father had on offer?

My grandmother sat upright in her chair smiling.

“Finally, this village is starting to award those who deserve it instead of those who inherit it by devious means.”

The rest of the meeting continued in a similar vein. The plans for the Fourth of July were discussed (“We need to save a budget for next year. It’s the centenary!”), the single steam carriage we had to the town next to our village needed servicing (“It just stalled suddenly and threw me off! I landed face down in the dirt! Scraped my knee! Horses would never just stop working like that! Awful steam inventions!”) and the school needed a lick of paint before the children went back in the Fall. Hands were raised, yays and nays were shouted out, and decisions and divisions of labor were made. After a while, I made a game of counting the votes on each subject. A few years ago, our teacher, Miss Carter, who boards with different families while working as a teacher, stayed at our house. I told her about my ambition to become a teacher. Her only fear, she told me, was that I wasn’t too good at math, so I have been trying to improve that at every opportunity. Counting the votes seemed like a good way to practice but somehow I always got them wrong. Or at least I thought so, as no one else seemed to notice that the mayor often forgot to count a few of the votes. Maybe I’m worse at math than I imagined.

“Finally,” the mayor said, wiping the sweat from his brow (the barn had become hotter and hotter during the meeting, despite the sun having completely set by now), “I would like to update you on the matter of the mansion.”

The audience, who had almost melted in the heat and had slumped down in their chairs or sat down on the floor for the last half an hour, suddenly sat up.

“Many of you have asked me to look for the lawyer who read Mrs. Wilkes’ will to see whether or not the inheritance of the mansion is legitimate. Even more of you have expressed doubts whether or not Mrs. Wilkes’ ability to make decisions may have been affected by painkilling herbs and whether this was ignored by her carers to have Mrs. Wilkes make decisions she may not have been aware of.”

The mayor paused briefly.

"Damn shame, that beautiful house gone to the dogs," murmured my grandmother under her breath. Her face was in a frown, her lips were pressed together and she was grinding her teeth.

“I have located the lawyer,” the mayor continued, “and he will come back to our village to talk things over. However, it might take him a while to come. He hasn’t given us an exact date yet, seeing his travels will take about a month, he needs to make some arrangements first. Luckily, we will be getting some help from a newcomer in our village. I would like to introduce you all to James Lester Jr. He will speak to the lawyer on our behalf when he arrives, as an impartial party. In the meantime, he will take the position of principal at our village school, so as to contribute to our small community.”

The man I had seen walking into the village and at the market stood up from his chair at the back of the room. He walked towards the front of the barn and stood next to Mayor Brooks. He was no longer limping, and his exhausted, disheveled look had been exchanged for that of a confident, well-dressed man.

“Thank you, Mr. Brooks, for the introduction. I will indeed take the position as principal at the local school. I am very grateful for this opportunity. You’ll be seeing a lot more of me.”

The meeting ended and everyone was anxious to leave the hot barn and started to make for the exit. A quick glance to the back made me realize that the girl and her father had already left before the rest of us even got to their feet. A part of me found it peculiar that they hadn’t even tried to get a word in. Obviously, their vegetables and herbs would not be the best, so they would surely lose their place at the market. With that gone, there was no opportunity for them to sell anything. I understood that it might be hard to contend with the majority, but to just give in like that made me wonder. Perhaps they themselves realized that they didn’t deserve to have such an important place at the market.

Grandfather was extremely pleased with the outcome of the meeting. From a distance I could hear him talking to some of the other men and heard them speak of 'justice' and 'natural order'. And even though I hadn’t understood every argument and every decision, the fact that others found them logical reassured me. I don't know what life was like before I was born, but the way people speak about it makes me think it was the best of times. Usually progress is seen as a positive thing but around here, these last few years, it has seemed like it only sets us back. So, I was pleased with the fact that justice would prevail.