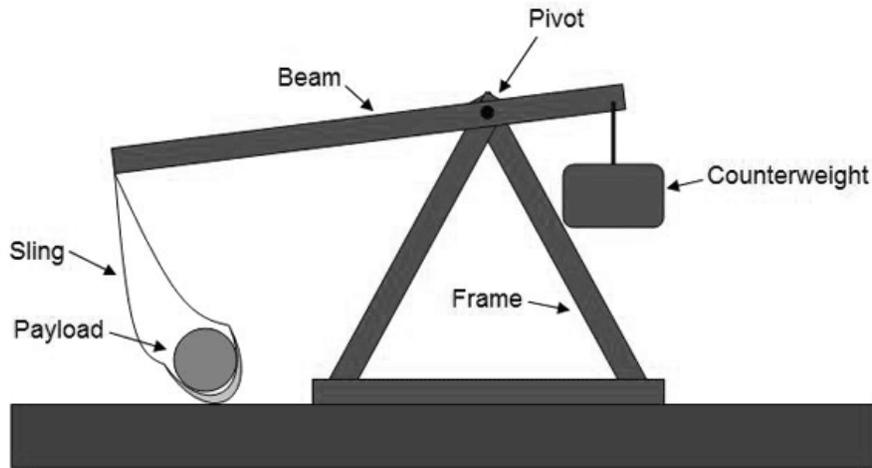


ONE



A trebuchet

Wine, as Galileo probably never said, is sunlight held together by water. This wasn't exactly the case with the pinot grigio served at the Bayside Tavern in Fish Creek but then Aida remembered the days when wine was something you only got in the county on Sundays, and at that you had to get on your knees for it.

In fact, much had changed in the 420 million years since the town of Fish Creek, Wisconsin had been part of a shallow tropical sea inhabited by crustaceans. Just next door to the Bayside, you could now buy arugula, goat cheese and six different kinds of pinot noir. With the *New York Times* available online elsewhere on Main Street, you could read up on acts of human depravity far beyond the larger metropolis of Sturgeon Bay.

Aida Madland had headed to town to re-charge her brain with something deep-fried and ponder the wisdom of her now full-blown rural existence. The new book was going badly. Spring was a horrible distraction. No wonder people went crazy. They spent months resigned to a frigid monochromatic life and then suddenly it was all over. Things started popping out of the ground unannounced. Life triumphed over entropy. Humans emerged from

their cocoons of polar fleece and re-discovered speech and flirting. All Aida really wanted was to tramp through the woods collecting ramps and celebrate spring's first edible offerings. She wanted to spend her day making soup, not a deadline. She wanted to play in the garden and roll in the dirt.

She'd also forgotten that you weren't supposed to go to a bar if you wanted solitude. No sooner had she settled in than she'd spotted Buddy Pfenniger — a very bad sign if you wanted to be left alone. It was only a matter of time before he'd engage her.

Aida watched Buddy toast his companion, a much younger man whose reddish hair seemed to have been combed with an eggbeater. They made amusing bookends. Buddy was all propped-up pomposity and the other fellow was a fine example of what steroids could do if you put them in your cereal every morning. His hyper-male physique was one that would score a direct hit with younger women looking to procreate — or otherwise have their transmissions worked on. Testosterone was indeed a fine thing if you needed a sperm donor or something requiring heavy lifting. Mostly, it was a reminder of why tribal warfare and risky behavior were God's way of thinning the gene pool.

Buddy preened and grimaced like an old circus chimp. Aida remembered that he'd recently remarried and moved into his new Italianate manse on Cottage Row. He'd piled on a few contentment pounds, and along with a new wife, had acquired an extra chin. As for the rosy porcine glow, it was no doubt due to prodigious alcohol consumption, high blood pressure or both.

Aida looked up to see Buddy as pink and animated as he'd been when she'd encountered him at the last zoning committee meeting. It was there that he'd bragged once again about having put the village of Fish Creek, Wisconsin on the map. She'd suggested that by today's standards he'd be labeled an eco-terrorist. People laughed but there were a few who remembered what he had done.

Buddy's major claim to fame some 30 years before had been converting a large single-family home in the center of town into 98

two-bedroom vacation units. Granted, it had been the sizable manse of a spoiled scion but Buddy had the distinction of presenting the town with an above ground 20,000-gallon septic storage tank — the largest ever seen in a community of 997 people. Much to everyone’s relief a community sewage plant soon evolved.

Still, she couldn’t think of Buddy Pfenniger as anything but Attila the Hun of Development, the Grand Poobah of pooh. The man who was to Door County farmland what Christopher Columbus was to the extinct Arawak of Hispaniola.

And now that she could hear him tossing around French terms, Aida couldn’t help but tune in.

“It’s called a trebuchet. *Tre-boo-shay*. I’m telling you Rogan, it *is* amazing. You gotta look into one.”

“Bloody ’ell, what’s it again?”

“*Tre-boo-shay*,” Buddy repeated slowly. “It’s a weapon. C’mon, if anybody would know, *you* would.”

“Can’t say I have, mate.” Rogan sounded irritated. Maybe he should have known what this thing was. It sounded like essential guy knowledge, especially for someone from Australia.

“Of course you know what it is,” Buddy insisted.

“I tell you, I *don’t*!”

“It’s what they used to launch stuff over castle walls. You know, stuff like rocks, hot oil, dead bodies with small pox. I used one last weekend at my brother-in-law’s. He’s got a place up by Eagle River.”

“You were launching rocks and dead bodies?”

“No, no, no! I was there for boys’ weekend.”

“Boys’ weekend?” Rogan’s eyes narrowed severely.

“We do it every year. We drink, we smoke, we shoot, we complain about women. All for fun, of course. Then we fling stuff. It’s like a catapult. You can buy one online and build it from a kit.”

“You’re dead cert ’bout that?”

“Yup. So first we did a bunch of melons, they explode like heads, you know. Then a bowling ball, then all of his ex-wife’s shoes. I’m definitely thinking about ordering up one of those.”

Aida pretended not to listen and pulled out a notebook to make a grocery list. There had been evidence of mice on the kitchen counter that morning. Was it better to seduce them with a last meal, or execute and fling them over the cliff? She liked stalking and hunting, just not the disposal part. Maybe a trebuchet was indeed the way to go. Would Main Street Market still be open?

Buddy’s voice shattered any plans for rodent control.

“Hey! You over there. You still mad at me?”

Aida looked across the bar. Was it time to practice some humanity?

“You turning me into the authorities anytime soon? I see you’re taking notes.” Buddy winked.

She peered at him over her reading glasses, contemplating a new list: *flabby, annoying, terrible comb-over*.

“You’re right, Buddy. I’ve been tracking your every move since February. Plus everyone you’ve been seen with. Your friend’s name is spelled how — ?” Aida looked straight into Rogan’s eyes, wondering if she’d see the back of his head.

“You know her?” Rogan looked slightly panicked. Women with notebooks in bars were either cops or other forms of bad news.

“She’s just yanking your chain, Rogan. This is Aida, my pal. We call her, ‘Aida, queen of darkness.’”

She raised her wine glass. “Why that’s the nicest thing you could have said, Buddy. I’m totally flattered.” It was certainly more clever than the proposed name for his dream real estate development — some horrible confection involving the words Cherry and Camelot.

“She’s a writer,” Buddy said, pointing with his beer bottle. “Love and romance and all that crap — right? My wife Tamara still wants you to autograph one of them for her.”

“Oh, you mean *books!*” Rogan sounded relieved.

“I’m afraid so,” Aida said.

“That’s fantastic!”

“Not really.” It was a subject she didn’t want to touch with a barge pole. Not now and not anytime soon. She was already having a hard enough time changing direction.

Buddy plundered his gums with a toothpick. “Yeah, my wife says Aida’s actually a little bit famous.”

It was true that in another life, she’d written trashy romantic potboilers. She had become good at it, so good in fact that she had a substantial following, even a fan-based website. But it had come to feel soulless and stupid and she was bored to death. When she’d mentioned to her editor she no longer wanted to write about drooling, sentimental love junkies, he’d suggested she go into hiding and carefully re-think her position. Or commit suicide. Romantically, of course.

“So is it the stuff they call chick-lit or something?” Rogan asked.

Aida closed her notebook. “Whatever you want to call it, I’m not doing it anymore. I’m working on other projects.”

“How come?” Rogan looked disappointed.

“I just didn’t want to write anymore of what Buddy just described as crap.”

“Hey, I didn’t mean to offend—”

“You didn’t,” she said.

“But it’s what you’re good at. How can you change what you do?” Buddy asked.

“*Did,*” Aida corrected.

“What was the name again of the last book you wrote? *Desire Under Fire* or something?”

“No, but that’s a great title, Buddy. A real keeper.” She certainly wasn’t going to tell him that her last novel had the louche title of *Rutting Moon*.

“So if you’re not doing books, you becoming a full-time tree hugger then?”

She ignored the bait. “I’m reformatting,” she said. That sounded vague enough. She wasn’t about to explain the premise behind the new project.

“You mean you’re not writing bestsellers anymore?”

“Not that stuff. But let’s talk about you. Any big plans in your life?”

“Yeah, Mr. P., tell us everything.” Rogan tore open a bag of potato chips with his teeth and began crunching loudly.

“I think Rogan should tell us what he’s doing?” Buddy said.

“Bloody ’ell, Mr. P, that’s a secret.”

“What’s a secret?” Aida asked, more interested.

“He’s buying himself something called a trebuchet,” Rogan said, diverting her question between mouthfuls.

“A trebuchet? What’s that?” she asked having already heard.

“Some sort of huge catapult he plans to rig up to impress his wife.”

“Forget it,” Buddy said, waving his hand. “Like I told you, Tamara would never go for it.”

Aida tried imagining the newly installed Madame Pfenniger having to put her foot down over the installation of a medieval siege weapon on Cottage Row. But then guns and ammo were now available to tourists at the boutique next to the bank so why not?

“And what about you?” she asked Rogan. “You, don’t sound like you’re from these parts. Do I detect a bit of down under, maybe?”

“That’s brilliant. How’d you know?”

“Oh, just a guess from the way you say *bloody ’ell*.” Aida was reminded of the guy from Adelaide she’d had a brief fling with on her way to Ayers Rock. Rogan could have been his genetic twin. He had a similar barrel-chested build, forearms the circumference of her thighs, the same freckled face and auburn hair in search of a comb. As a descendant of English immigrants who had fled the textile factories of Birmingham and ended up

chasing kangaroos in the antipodes, her lover had proudly informed her about the link between red hair and Neanderthals.

Aida had always wondered why he considered this questionable legacy a point of interest. After all, Neanderthals weren't all that cute: they had low foreheads, thick hairy bodies and a vocabulary of about seventy words. On the other hand, guttural speech wasn't necessarily a bad thing at certain moments.

"Ever been down under, sweetheart?"

Aida cracked a smile. "In a matter of speaking."

"Yeah?"

"I did the tourist trek a number of years ago. Met a guy from Adelaide and almost married him." It wasn't true but she was a fiction writer, or *had* been one, *n'est-ce pas?*

"Hey, Aida, tell Rogan about some of the things you write about," Buddy interrupted.

"I believe you already did."

"So how come you didn't marry the guy? You weren't arse over tits in love, or what?" Rogan asked.

"Something like that." It was time to redirect the conversational laser beam and interrogate Buddy. His new wife had clearly been his mistress and Aida wondered who'd made the biggest compromise. Was it true that when a man married his mistress he created a job opening?

"How's married life?" she asked.

Buddy shoved an elbow into Rogan and winked at her. "I haven't spent this much time not working in years."

"Yeah, it probably takes him all night to do what he used to do all night." Rogan looked pleased with himself.

Buddy blushed deeply, something Aida didn't think was possible for a man who made a living converting the countryside into time-share units.

She paid her bill and thought about going home. She'd start a fire and think about revising that first chapter on "Flirting." Maybe take out those references to bonobos and penis fencing.

Buddy and Rogan had resumed talking about trebuchets and her exit would hardly be noticed. Aida stuffed her notebook in the pocket of her coat and scanned the other patrons for hints of what she might potentially use for describing the chapter on mating rituals.

She thought of heading out just as a dark-haired man in his thirties in a leather jacket entered the Bayside. Noticing Buddy and Rogan, he avoided the bar, picked up a cue and started a solitary game of pool.

No way was he part of the local gene pool, she thought. Door County, Wisconsin tended to be heavily Scandinavian and there were so many Svens and Leifs and Eriks it was clear that the Vikings had conducted early raids. Body adornment in this part of the world consisted primarily of baseball caps, Green Bay Packers sweatshirts, and Levis. A bit of a gut was a manly thing — a testament to a well-trained liver and a diet of beer, brats and all things made from cheese.

Leather Jacket Man had another code all together and he played pool as if he were angry. Balls crashed and ricocheted off the sides but few sank. He was either drunk or a lousy pool player — or both, she thought. Even his appearance embraced a quirky duality: his leather jacket looked like something he'd used in a bullfight. The rest of him — from his dark cropped hair to his angular body — exuded an almost militaristic precision.

The pool player took a break from wrestling balls and leaned against the table, staring into space. If Aida had been looking for more material for another cheesy romance, which she wasn't, the Bayside was definitely the place to be.

Mostly, he looked like a very bad man — the kind that one of her heroines might have taken home and tamed by having him paint her toenails.