



The Train From Yellow Lake

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Firstly, this is a story about loss, hope, and fantastical places.
Secondly, this is a story about flying and skillfully prepared beverages.
Lastly, this is a story about goblins.





Dr. Hilary Dunton had an exceptional imagination. I am not sure how he disembarked from the train. Needless to say, he came up with a more elegant solution than the moonlit silhouette.

As the train flew off the cliff the arch of its path reflected on water below. The silhouette in the moonlight jumped from one of the cars. For a moment, both train and silhouette fell in silence. The train's engine hit first. Titanic forces transmitted back up through each compartment. Box-cars crumpled. The silhouette had barely reached water when the chain of reactions arrived at the first of the tanker cars.

The disoriented silhouette could only find upwards by the light above him. Shadows danced, diffuse and patterned in the choppy water. Seaweed brushed against his ankles. He kicked his way nearer to the surface and felt an intense wave of heat. He swam away from the train's wreckage but, hungry for breath, surfaced far too close.

Gasping the acrid air, the back of his neck began to blister. Flaming chunks of metal floated yards off. Ducking back underwater he moved on, closing his eyes and pushing forward with frantic strokes. He swam, head first, into some half-sunk wooden debris. Only rushing adrenaline kept his distorted vision from closing in altogether. He clawed for purchase, hands shaking. The fire raged close by, but here the water was frigid. He struggled, cold and alone.

“Is he awake?”

His vision swam. A crowd of faces waved in and out of sight.

“Step back, step back.”

A handlebar moustache and beak-like nose came into focus as other faces withdrew.

“Can you hear me? Can you respond to this?” a voice asked. He tried to move his lips and was surprised to find that he couldn’t. The world grew dim and, again, disappeared.

The next time he awoke no one appeared above him. Thoughts came slowly. His body radiated pain. With some effort he raised his head, propping an elbow on straw that lay beneath him. The room that surrounded him was similar to the straw bedding. Walls bent inwards above his head in igloo fashion. Their surface was dull and earthy. The mustachioed man sat opposite him on a victorian armchair, reading a book.

“So, where did you come from?” he questioned, not looking up from his book.

“I came from a place called Yellow Lake.”

“Never heard of it,” replied the mustachioed reader. Then in one movement he rose from his seat, shut the thick hardcover, and stroked his chin. He crossed the room in a stride, extending his hand.

“Dr. Hilla-rry Dunton, at your service,” he said, moustache bouncing with each drawn-out syllable.

“Trama,” the prostrate man responded, weakly reaching up to shake Dunton’s hand.

“And your friend?” questioned Dunton, flourishing the hardcover in the direction of some feet sticking out from a lump of blankets. The lump appeared to be snoring quite heavily.

Trama slumped onto his back, one hand still in the firm grip of Dunton’s enthusiastic handshake.

“That,” said Trama, “must be Action. I wasn’t sure if he made it.”

“hmmm... I seeee,” said Dunton, peering down at Trama’s face while twirling one end of his moustache. “Now I’m sure you’re very tired, and probably anxious to know just where you are. All in good time, all in good time. Our first order of business: tell me about Yellow Lake.”

The House On Stilts

They lived in a house on stilts. On a knoll above the lake, nestled in some pine trees. It was quiet and far from civilization. They were all smart and young and had a healthy amount of restlessness. They woke up early and worked hard. They stayed up late passing time idly.

The house on stilts stood on one end of the long, skinny lake. The lake was surrounded by tall grass dotted with oaks. The grass was surrounded by a steep wooded hillside. All these parts together formed a valley known as Yellow Lake.

One year before he soared off a cliff aboard a train, Trama first arrived at Yellow Lake. When Trama first arrived at Yellow Lake, leaves were just beginning to change color. Until the leaves fell, the water would reflect the yellow color for which the area had been named.

Trama's first sight of the house on stilts came from an outlook on the ridge surrounding Yellow Lake. Trama stood with five others, admiring the view and catching his breath. He watched a gust of wind make its way across the grass which lay ahead. An unpaved road followed the breeze up from the fields, under Trama's feet, and over the ridge.

"I bet that's it. That's the house on stilts!" said a blond boy, pointing across the valley. The boy spoke to no one in particular. Trama remembered

that the boy's name started with a 'C'.

"Yup, that's it, Casper," replied a short, stocky girl. She punctuated the sentence with an enthusiastic chuckle. She had a memorable name. Her name was Tommy.

Trama looked where Casper had pointed. He could make out the shape of a house rising above trees. Six acquaintances squinted at their new home. They had spent seven miles together. Otherwise, they were strangers to one another. Until the outlook, their hike had passed in near silence.

It hadn't been a solemn or uncomfortable hike. It takes a very particular type of person to want to be secluded at Yellow Lake for two years. Six of that type of person had just arrived. If it had been Spring or Summer, they might have started off their two years together with exuberant conversation. But they were a particular type of people, and it was a particular type of autumn day.

Trama watched an oak leaf tumble towards them. There were no oak trees nearby. The leaf must have arrived

on a very persistent gust of wind.

Tommy grabbed at the leaf and then turned away from the outlook. The group fell into step, single file, and continued down the road. A meditative start to their time at Yellow Lake had come as naturally as the breeze.

The group descended from the ridge. Woods gave way to fields. Casper wandered onto the soft grass bordering the road. All eyes wandered towards the house on stilts. As they approached, the house's strange details came into focus. Half a dozen sharply angled wooden stilts rose out of a pine grove. A few meters above the tallest pine, the stilts ended and the house began. The house had



lots of height and not very much width. Its roof was flat. The house's exterior was an explosion of strange curves, cedar shingles, and gratuitous porches.

Casper was so focused on the house that he almost walked into a wild goat. The startled goat bleated and took off into the fields. The rest of the hike passed uneventfully.

Soon the group had arrived at a clearing. Stands of oak trees stood on either side of them. At the far end of the clearing were six Yellow Lake graduates. The graduates sat on a fallen log, chatting boisterously. Trama and the other newcomers stopped, unsure of themselves. Shortly, the graduates grew quiet. One of the graduates rose and walked up to the new arrivals. He wore a serious expression as he addressed everyone in the clearing.

He said, "It is a Yellow Lake tradition that each graduate gives the newcomers a short speech on a topic of their choice. Graduates then walk down the road from Yellow Lake alone."

The serious faced graduate turned to directly address the new arrivals. He said, "I believe that great men are driven. I believe that drive is born of desire. And yet, though I have experienced desire, I am no great man. I hope to create something that is held in regard by others. Many years of routine and repetition are necessary to create a great thing-" he stopped to cough into his sleeve. Then he continued, "Years of repetition describes the path of great men. Years of repetition describes the path of mediocre men. I am not afraid of being unhappy, or of hard work. I fear only that my efforts will be of no consequence."

The graduate shuffled past Trama. He walked down the road without looking back. Casper began to clap, and the others followed suit. Opposite Trama and the other new arrivals, a girl stood up. She pulled out a notecard.

The girl approached them. She read off her notecard.

"There are many people on earth, and what I do here probably won't change many of them very much. There are many planets, and ours probably won't change the cosmos much. Existence may seem to lack meaning. But like atoms and planets, we interact. We attract and react and change. Atoms and planets are part of something, so..." she paused dramatically, "I suspect that we are part of something too."

One at a time, the four other graduates gave short speeches. Afterwards each walked down the road by themselves. Trama and the other new students were left alone. Tommy once again took the lead. The group walked past the clearing. In the gaps between oaken branches, the house on stilts

grew closer. Their view of the house disappeared. For a few minutes they were surrounded by pines. Then the house on stilts stood before them.

Another group of six stood in front of the house on stilts. The oldtimers and newcomers cautiously approached one another.

“Hi,” said one of the oldtimers. “My name’s Tim. Actually, if we could just go around and each say our name, that would be good.”

Trama, Brian, Tommy, Casper, Lucy, and Mira introduced themselves to Tim, Benny, Barbara, Jenny, Lucas, and Jose. Before the meeting could lapse into silence, Tim continued.

Tim said, “now, once you understand a few things about how we run stuff around here, Yellow Lake will start to make a lot more sense. The kitchen and bedrooms are in the house on stilts. Our classroom and workshop are up the dirt trail to your left-”

“And our brewery is over there!” chimed in a red faced, pot bellied fellow.

Tim gave an amused sigh and continued, “Every Thursday a guest lecturer visits. Every Sunday we’re resupplied with food and anything else we requested the previous week. The rest of the time, as I’m sure you all know, we each build or learn whatever we want. You’re all here for the next two years, my class has one year to go.”

The red faced fellow bellowed, “Now lets get drunk!”

The oldtimers let out a cheer. The red faced fellow ran off behind a spiral staircase. He reappeared hefting a keg. Precariously balanced on top of the keg were 12 mugs. The meditative hike gave way to a torrent of conversation. The fellow reintroduced himself to everyone as he handed out drinks.

“Benny, pleased to make your acquaintance,” said the fellow to Trama, handing him a mug full of beer. Benny and Trama clinked glasses.

“I’m looking for a brewing apprentice. You look like you might have a knack for it. Consider it,” said Benny. Tommy raised a hand. She was on the verge of saying something but remained silent. Benny hadn’t noticed her, and had moved on to another group of students.

Trama talked with Casper and Tommy. Or maybe he was just talking to Tommy. Trama wasn’t really sure if Casper was talking to them. Whenever Casper said something it was completely unrelated to anything else. At one point Tommy asked Trama about his hometown.

Trama shrugged, “My hometown is nice. It’s a little small though.”

Casper was examining an oak leaf as he redirected the conversation. “You caught this, Tommy. Up on that outlook. This thing must have flown half a mile before you caught it.” Casper let go of the leaf and looked up at Tommy. “Is Tommy your real name?”

Tommy took the comment in stride. “Oh, Tommy is just the name I like. I’m a bit of a tomboy,” she said with sheepish pride. Now that she mentioned it, Trama did notice that Tommy possessed a certain attitude. Perhaps it was the way she carried herself. She had an agreeable but vaguely masculine quality. Trama instinctively liked her.

The new housemates exchanged pleasantries. The sky darkened and soon all twelve students were gathered around a campfire. As the night wore on, conversations blended together. Groups of two or three joined one another.

“And that’s how I got the Sigs to bring us a keg every month!” yelled Benny. He had accidentally attracted the attention of all twelve students. Jose retold Benny’s story to all the students. Benny drank beer.

“So the Sigs have this crazy brewer at their house across the lake. The guy knows his stuff, but he’s got a huge ego. One day Benny goes to the library looking for a book on barley or hops or whatever. Benny can’t find the book. He’s about to give up, and then he sees it sitting on a table. It was on top of a stack of really random articles-”

“Medieval weaponry guides,” interjected Benny, wiping beer from his mouth.

“Yeah. So at that point Benny guesses this guy might be some famous Sig brewing protege he read about. Someone named Action who destroyed a famous brewery with a crossbow.”

“I also knew he’s a jerk. What kind of person doesn’t put their books back on the shelf?” said Benny.

“Basically, Benny thought the guy might make good beer and be super defensive about it. He left a note in the library challenging Action to a brewing competition. Every month since then, Benny has been swapping his worst batch for this guy’s best stuff. Benny tells this guy that each month’s competition is ‘inconclusive.’ This guy thinks that Benny is taking him seriously. And the beer he gives us is pretty damn good!” Jose raised his glass. “to Benny!”

“To Benny!” cheered everyone as Benny chugged the rest of his mug. Benny used the toast as an excuse to make a speech. He gazed to-

wards the heavens majestically. There was a certain elegance to his slurred speech, “When someone drinks one of my brews, I want them to feel like buuurp-”

After belching Benny continued, “like a kid with candy. Food is about survivivalll. But a well prepared beverage, er... that’s adult candy.”

The reactions to Benny’s statement varied with each group member’s level of intoxication. Tim and Casper, both sober, shook their heads. Tommy, who was nearly as drunk as Benny, looked as if a wise man had just told her some universal truth. Everyone else laughed.

The rest of the night passed in much the same vein. The twelve students drank and danced late into the night. They thought very little about who they were or where they were going.

Trama awoke to the sound of someone knocking on his door. At least, he assumed it was his door. He was in a room he barely remembered entering. His backpack was sitting on a dresser. Trama had a hangover.

“Hello?”

Benny walked into the room. He was freshly dressed and clean shaven, but his face still had the same cheerful glow. “You missed breakfast Trama. It’s Trama right? Anyways, lecture starts in 20 minutes, just a heads up.”

“Lecture?” Trama said. It was Thursday.

Benny spoke quickly, “Yeah, your first lecture. Usually, first lecture, some history guy comes and gives a spiel on how this college was founded. They run through the history of our rivalry with the Sigs. Its basically a whole bunch of exposition that we could all do without. Luckily for you, history guy cancelled last minute. Instead we’ve got a sushi chef coming to talk about god-knows-what. Er, anyways, I’ve gotta go wake up your classmates.”

Trama lay in bed with a splitting headache. It was a good five minutes before he processed what Benny had said. He got out of bed and landed with both feet on a thick pane of glass. His room was on the first story of the house on stilts. Through the window in his floor, he could see the ground 50 feet below him. Still half asleep, he changed his clothes and brushed his teeth. He ran into Tommy and found himself following her down a dirt trail towards their classroom. He rubbed his eyes, opened them, and was sitting at a desk. In front of him was a tall man wearing a chef’s hat. All in all, it was one of the strangest ways he had ever woken up.

The tall man cleared his throat. “I am here to teach sushi. You may call me Sushi Man. To make sushi, two things are necessary: hard work,

and knowing what you want. The difficult part is knowing what you want. Today, we shall taste many pieces of sushi so that we know, when creating sushi, what we want.”

Trama and the other students watched in silence as Sushi Man pulled bags of ingredients out of a large burlap sack. Sushi Man took a damp napkin and wiped down an old wooden table. He unfurled a long cloth with a flick of his wrist. A row of knives lay neatly on the cloth. Then Sushi Man began to assemble sushi. At any given moment each of his hands performed a different task. All eyes in the classroom fixated on his movements. Soon Sushi Man had twelve pieces of sushi in front of him. Each consisted of a small clump of rice and veggies with a delicate piece of meat laid on top.

Sushi Man put down the knife he was holding and wiped his forehead. Ten minutes ago, even thinking about raw fish would have made Trama nauseous. Still, despite his hangover, the sushi looked delicious.

Trama looked around the class. No one was getting up to grab a piece of sushi. Sushi Man seemed to sense the class’s hesitation and, again, became a whirlwind of movement. In a matter of seconds a piece of sushi lay neatly in front of each student. Sushi Man said nothing, but gestured with his knife that they should eat. Trama took a bite.

As Trama chewed, different ingredients presented themselves. Eating Sushi Man’s sushi was like hearing many musical instruments play a chord. It was very good sushi.

The class ate contentedly in silence. They watched as Sushi Man prepared another round of sushi. Only Tim’s sushi was untouched. Tim raised his hand. Sushi Man didn’t acknowledge him. After a minute, Tim spoke anyways.

“Um, excuse me, but what type of sushi are we eating?” said Tim. Sushi Man nodded at Tim as if this was a profound question.

Sushi Man responded, “this is sushi.” Chuckles ran through the classroom. Tim’s cheeks flushed. Sushi Man seemed pleasantly surprised that his words had been amusing. He served a second round of sushi. Trama and the others began to talk amongst themselves.

They were surrounded by a chalkboard and desks. They had no dishes or utensils. Many of them were hungover. Otherwise, though, the experience was similar to a meal at a fancy restaurant. Only Tim kept to himself. He had moved to the back of the room and ate in silence.

As Sushi Man finished passing out the fifth round of sushi, Tim

stood up.

“Excuse me, we’ve all enjoyed the sushi, but usually our guests do a lot more speaking. Couldn’t you tell us some detail about the sushi, or something?”

For a moment, Sushi Man was taken aback. Then a curious look lit up in his eyes. He quietly responded, “Ah, you want words.” Sushi Man’s tone of voice commanded the attention of the students. Sushi Man stood in front of them, briefly lost in thought.

Sushi Man said, “Sushi makes you feel a certain way, at a certain place and time. While consuming sushi, think about how you feel beforehand and afterwards. Understanding your state is necessary. That knowledge,” he searched for a word, “...normalizes. If you wish to rationalize sushi, think of normalizing your understanding of how sushi tastes.”

He stopped talking. The class looked at him expectantly. He looked upwards, over their heads, as if he regretted having spoken.

Then he continued, “Those were words. Perhaps they made sense, perhaps not. Maybe they will help you understand which types of sushi you like. Developing taste. Very difficult. Taste is necessary. Hard work is necessary.” As Sushi Man spoke, he cleaned and stored his knives with quick, practiced movements. The ingredients and a few pieces of sushi were left sitting on the table. Sushi Man began to move towards the door.

“Thank you. If you have me back, next time I will teach the California Roll,” said Sushi Man as he walked past the class and out the door. For a moment he was out of sight. Then he stuck his head back into the room, “Two things. Hard work. Knowing what you want.” And then he was gone.

Sushi Man was the topic of conversation for the rest of the day. Some thought he was a little crazy. Some thought he was a buddhist monk. Most were far more interested in sushi than they had been previously.

Friday morning Trama woke clear headed. He also had a clear and unexpected sense of purpose. It might have had something to do with what Sushi Man had said. He didn’t want to be Benny’s apprentice. He knew that there were lots of interesting things to learn about brewing. He wanted to know those things.

Trama wanted to fly much more. He liked the idea of building something that flew. He had always liked the idea of being a pilot. He had never acted on that desire and wasn’t quite sure where it came from. In fact, he had never been particularly sure of himself. He had faced his fair share of chal-

lenges and done his best to overcome them. He had followed circumstance where it led. Even ending up at Yellow Lake had been a matter of circumstance.

Trama lay in his bed. When he closed his eyes, he saw an oak leaf flying half a mile on the breeze. Something about that image made Trama sure of himself. He was surrounded by the things he needed to create something that flew. All the knowledge he needed was in the library. Materials could be shipped in. There was plenty of time. He knew what he wanted. Now all he needed to do was work hard.