

RIVER
AN AMERICAN DREAMING

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Three things happened that strange July morning.

One: Neema Smallwood woke to find herself sitting up in bed, singing a song she had never heard in a language she didn't know but somehow understood.

Two: She was flapping her arms like wings, knocking over the glass of water on her bedside table.

Three: The water spilled—down the nightstand, onto the floor, under her bed.

She knew she was singing inside the mind of a hunter, guiding him straight to her so he could kill her. And yet, she felt no urge to stop.

When the song ended, she looked down. Her bedside table was dry. The floor was dry. Her glass of water was full.

It must have been a dream.

But then, it happened again.

Three days later, jogging along the East River, a song struck her like a blow to the chest. She staggered to the railing, gripping the metal as the melody poured out of her. Again, the words came in a language she didn't know but fully understood. This time, the song was about a buried river that sometimes surfaced, driving everyone mad.

A woman—a fellow jogger in dark blue leggings, a Yankees cap, her legs taut and gleaming—paused beside her.

“You okay?” she asked.

Neema couldn't answer. She couldn't stop singing. Didn't want to. The sounds were too beautiful to suppress.

The woman hesitated. Should she shake her? Call for help? Instead, she listened.

Neema sang of forests where giant porcupines, deer, owls, and people wrapped in deerskin played together. Of an ancient hero who had banished a colossal snake in the shape of a river. Of a woman adorned in feathers who changed the fate of those she touched with an ancient bone. Of a time before time, when floods weren't sent by an irascible god but simply arrived.

Of a caribou who wouldn't stop singing, even though she knew her song would lead the hunter straight to her.

Professor Kurt H. Adler, Rhinelander University's fabled archaeologist-on-wheels, sped through Washington Square Park on his motorized wheelchair. His red-rimmed glasses of supernatural size caught the golden evening light, while his unruly mop of brown hair pointed toward the humid mid-August sunset.

Running ahead of him was Harry, his ten-year-old son, clad in a full entomologist's outfit—khaki shorts, khaki shirt, khaki hat—and wearing the serious expression befitting his “profound profession.” Trotting beside him was Poe, their spirited two-year-old toy terrier and an undeniably fierce squirrel hunter.

Kurt caught up with them at the chain-link fence enclosing the park's controversial excavation site beneath its most legendary tree: the Hangman's Elm. This three-hundred-year-old English Elm—one of the oldest in New York City—was renowned for its gruesome (albeit fictional) past. Supposedly, some twenty people had dangled from its branches, a myth conjured by General Lafayette's overactive imagination but debunked by Kurt himself in a scathing academic paper that cemented his reputation as Rhinelander's resident myth-buster.

A new myth now shadowed the park: Kurt's dig. An excavation that wasn't supposed to exist. Not if Rhinelander University had its way. The institution treated Washington Square Park as its *de facto* campus, plastering its skyline across brochures and business cards. Not if Parks Department architect Ambrose C. Hudswell—who ranked archaeologists just above sewer rats—had gotten his wish. But the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission had other ideas, halting the radical reconstruction of the park before it began.

To Kurt, the \$20-million redesign was unnecessary at best. Sure, the potholes, benches, and fences needed sprucing up, but realigning the fountain by a few feet just to match the arch and Fifth Avenue? Ludicrous. The charm of the park was its unpolished, bohemian disarray. But the city wanted more tourists—because what else did Mannahatta need if not more crowds?

Landmarks' intervention had bought the park a temporary reprieve. Preliminary excavations unearthed small relics—shards of yellow ware from kitchen bowls and pitchers—finds Kurt liked to imagine had driven Hudswell and his development-hungry crowd to fits. Good for the shards.

One discovery stood out: a mid-17th-century copper-alloy ring with red glass insets, belonging to an African woman. Found beneath the Hangman's Elm, it was the spark that set everything in motion.

Kurt produced a key, but Harry snatched it first, unlocking the gate and bounding into the pit, Poe scampering behind. Kurt followed, rolling down the ramp he had personally designed and patented: the AER, or Archaeological Earth Ramp.

At 36 inches wide, with a 1:12 slope, it had become the accessibility standard for archaeological digs—smooth, sturdy, and as effortless as it was groundbreaking.

“Easy, fellows,” Kurt called, wobbling slightly as his wheelchair picked up speed.

Poe sniffed around with the frantic focus of a four-legged fire extinguisher, while Harry darted about like a wind-up toy, his energy inexhaustible.

It was the blue hour—Kurt’s favorite time of day. The sun clung stubbornly to its final moments, casting a reluctant glow. On humid August evenings like this, Kurt imagined mist rising—not from the city but from the bones buried beneath it: victims of long-ago yellow fever epidemics, interred under the park.

A sticky breeze carried the city’s evening symphony: *The Girl from Ipanema*, the distant thunder of Rachmaninov’s *Prelude No. 5*, a drum solo, Hare Krishna chants.

Harry and Poe zigzagged between two buckets of sifted soil and the excavation’s most absurd feature: a vacuum cleaner, its elephantine trunk coiled and waiting.

The site was a scatter of tools and treasures. A flashlight lay forgotten, its beam casting a dim, indifferent glow. A hand shovel rested with its metal tongue buried in dirt. Stacked crates held relics from the last student dig: a brass keg spigot, a green Dutch gin bottle, a cannonball, a squirrel skull, and the porcelain head of an 1860s doll.

A sudden burst of Poe’s barking and the eager beeping of a smartphone jolted Kurt from his musings.

Truthfully, he'd hoped for more. Not another African finger ring, remarkable as they were. More would likely emerge, given the mid-seventeenth-century Angolan settlement and the land grants awarded to groups of half-freed slaves who had lived here. But Kurt's ambitions stretched deeper in time. He longed for something older.

Nostalgia swept over him. Harry loved the thrill of discovery, just as Kurt had at his age. For Kurt, it had been fossils and relics, fragments of past lives, waiting to rewrite history's myths. Harry, unburdened by his father's hereditary disease, was firmly rooted in the present. He was captivated by what lived: worms, insects, all things that crawled, legged or legless.

The dig site teemed with creepy-crawlies, all destined for Harry's collection. He had rescued a jar from beneath the kitchen sink before his mother could claim it for jam, though the choice between raspberry preserves and bugs was not as simple as it seemed. The bugs would be exiled to Planet Terrarium in Harry's bedroom. Bug paradise! Sometimes, though, Planet Terrarium expanded, turning their apartment at 37 Washington Square Park West into a buzzing, crawling insectarium when Harry neglected his duties as keeper.

Kurt's thoughts drifted deeper. Beneath the excavation site flowed Minetta Creek, once a rich fishing ground for the Lenape, who had lived here for tens of thousands of years.

Sam "Two Feathers" Hummingbird, Jr., Kurt's assistant, had told him the Lenape legend of Minetta. According to the tale, the creek had once been a giant, evil snake, driving people mad until the Lenape hero Nanapush forced it into the form of a meandering stream. That had been at the dawn

of mankind. Now, Minetta was an underground trickle, surfacing only in heavy rains—sometimes flooding basements, including Kurt’s own.

The Lenape’s land was now a city park and a playground for millionaires, its waterway culverted into obscurity. Minetta’s presence pulsed unseen beneath Fifth Avenue, the Hangman’s Elm, and Kurt’s excavation, flowing onward toward the Hudson.

When Sam learned about the dig over Minetta Creek, his reaction had been anything but enthusiastic. In no uncertain terms, he demanded Kurt stop digging.

“Or else.”

“Or else what?” Kurt had asked, amused.

“Or else madness will rise again.”

Kurt had laughed it off.

A little more madness? Who would even notice?

~~The excavation site formed an L-shaped configuration, roughly the size of Kurt’s living room and dining nook. The “dining nook” section provided access to his earth ramp. At the bottom of the six-foot-deep pit, a metal pathway led to an elevated platform at the center. From there, Kurt could extend his reach with a nifty nabber—adding twenty-four inches to his arm span—or dig lightly with a shovel mounted to an arm gripper. The platform also served as his conductor’s podium; from it, he directed students—or Harry, when he was listening—like a maestro guiding an orchestra to acoustic heights.~~

~~routine. Leg braces had supported the president; wheels carried the professor.~~

~~While Rhinelander had made the excavation possible, it also worked against it. The university quietly backed Parks architect Ambrose Hudswell's efforts to shut the dig down. Rhinelander's relationship with the Village was predatory at best. Kurt, unaware that not everyone shared his encyclopedic knowledge of Fawcett, often joked that Rhinelander was like the sixty-two-foot-long anaconda Fawcett had claimed to see in the Brazilian jungle—a creature dismissed as pure fantasy but terrifying all the same.~~

As summer wound down, the excavation site's fate seemed sealed. With a flurry of Rhinelander activities planned for the post-Labor Day weeks, the dig was living on borrowed time. Labor Day Monday alone promised to be a logistical nightmare: President Llewellyn was coming to town to lead—of all things—a workers' procession down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square Park.

Only a spectacular find could save the site now. No archaeologist worth their salt would ever admit how much more time they needed, but Kurt knew it would take something monumental. Something big. Anaconda big.

"Look, Dad!"

Harry's excited voice snapped him out of his thoughts. The boy was beaming as he opened his hands to reveal a large, orange-dotted beetle crouched in his palm.

“That’s a big one,” Kurt said, leaning in. “What is it?”

Harry gave a lofty laugh. “Dad, it’s an American burying beetle. So rare, it’s—”

“Endangered...” Kurt finished.

“You bet! It’s not even from here. Its *science name*—”

“*Scientific* name...” Kurt corrected gently.

“—is,” Harry adjusted his khaki shirt for extra gravitas, “*Nicrophorus americanus*.”

“You really-*really* know everything, Harry,” Kurt said with a grin, using their favorite inside joke. The phrase—“really-*really*”—was their little code, a private signal that never failed to make them laugh, silly and happy.

The beetle unfolded its glossy black wings, shaped like slender, eight-fingered hands, and flew off. Kurt slipped an arm around Harry’s shoulders, feeling the warmth of the moment. It all felt good—simple, connected, right.

Then a whoosh broke the quiet above them.

Kurt tilted his head back and spotted the silhouette of a large bird perched on a branch just overhead.

A young red-tailed hawk.

Her tail feathers were still brown, signaling her youth. He’d seen her before, from his apartment window—one of the growing number of hawks finding a home in the city. Washington Square Park was an ideal hunting ground, teeming with squirrels, pigeons, and rats. But this was the first time he’d seen her so close, just an arm’s length away.

Slowly, she lifted her head, spread her wings, and launched into the air.

An intense hum filled Kurt's head.

His left eye twitched. A headache struck, sharp and immediate.

Above the park, the hawk soared higher, gliding effortlessly without a single flap of her enormous wings, moving as though carried by the sky itself.

"Dad?" Harry's voice was gentle. "Are you okay?"

Kurt blinked, bringing his focus back to his son's concerned face. "I'm fine, Harry. Didn't you see it?"

Harry didn't answer.

"Let's go home," Kurt said. "It's getting late. Your mom will be waiting. You and Poe go ahead—I'll catch up in a minute. I just need to give Sam a quick call."

Harry nodded and disappeared into the twilight, Poe trotting faithfully at his side.

Kurt sighed and rummaged through his satchel—a chaotic archaeological dig in its own right. Finally, his fingers found what he was looking for: one of the forensic bags from Rhinelander's Department of Anthropology, the kind reserved for the most significant finds.

Inside was an object.

Not too big. Not too small.

He cradled it in his palm for a moment, considering. Then, with a sinful, irreverent laugh he tossed it into the pit.