

The Hidden Truth of a City's Leader

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Plunk. I dropped the last fresh apple from the tree and moved the step ladder to the next. It was tedious and boring work, but I had to do it. My mother and I had come north to a small village called Acktonsville where my grandparents lived. It was harvesting season for their orchard, and they needed some assistance since there weren't a lot of employees and they didn't own any fancy machinery. It was all manual work. The Warners Orchard wasn't exceptionally large but produced enough apples for the village, a small area with around fifty-six houses and a few short apartment buildings where people stayed during the winter to see the scenery. There were also some buildings where people worked, and a lot of fields where other crops were harvested. The orchard had around 10-15 trees which had bright leaves and maroon trunks, and though the sights were beautiful, I still couldn't drive the dullness away from me.

My parents were divorced, and dad had already remarried. The divorce was a miserable experience, and I was always thinking of my parents going at it with each other when they thought I was asleep. Though my life wasn't exuberant, I was always in search of adventure and joy, which I found in novels and poetry books that I checked out from the library back home.

After I had finished the day's harvesting, I asked my grandfather if I could go to the village library. He nodded and called, "Carl! Take Jane to the library, will you?" A lean and lanky man wearing stained overalls came out from the petite shed where we kept the gardening equipment.

I needed some time to myself so I hurriedly said, “I can find my way to the library myself thanks,” and I was out the door, a backpack slung across my shoulder. I saw a text from my mom saying that I should be back by 8:00. Whew, I had almost an hour and I relaxed a little. It was a small village, so it was easy to navigate through the gravel roads. It was evening and few people were on the streets. The sun was just beginning to set, and I picked up the pace. I walked slowly and I passed a statue of someone, as well as a few stray dogs who were sleeping in the fading patches of evening sunlight.

As I reached the steps to the library, I felt an unrecognizable feeling about the statue I had just passed. Then I only had time to take in the sights of the library. It was a small brick building with faded doors that creaked when opened with even the slightest touch or action to open them. The bricks had some moss and fungus growing on them, and as I stepped inside, I noticed all the shelves did not seem very well maintained. The paint was peeling, and the screws seemed so weak that the slightest touch to them would send all the wood crashing down. The only source of light in the room was a small window on the roof that could not open.

I was greeted by a middle-aged stout woman with spectacles. She was dressed in a purple dress and shiny black boots, which clacked as she walked on the hard stone floor.

She smiled and asked, “Can I help you?”

“No thanks,” I said and walked to the first shelf in sight, trying not to seem rude. I pulled the first book off the shelf, *Plant Fertilizers*. That was not remarkably interesting. I pulled out the next, *How to Carve Wood*. I then noticed all the books were on either agriculture, crafts work, or fishing.

I turned and saw that the librarian was standing behind me and she asked again, “Can I help you?”

“Yes actually. Ms. Thimbles, where are the adventure novels?” I asked reading her name tag.

“Ah, yes,” she said, the smile and cheerfulness slowly fading from her face.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s just that we don’t have any adventure novels or any other books which are entertaining to read,” she sighed.

“Why?” I asked.

“All of those books were burnt to ashes after the fire that took place around 30 years ago. I was just a little girl back then and used to come to the library with my mother. It was truly devastating for me when a bolt of lightning struck the library and burnt it to a crisp. The event felt as if a part of me had been torn away. The library was my home away from home and it meant a lot to me. It was a true tragedy, and our mayor, Arthur W. Richardson, was planning to get the library rebuilt as soon as possible, but just as the plans on the subject were proceeding, he died mysteriously on the night of October 31. This was when a new mayor came along with no election or anything of the sort and he took over our village, as if it were a dog at the pound. He only offered enough funds for the little brick cottage that you stand in today. Though he gave enough for the building, he didn’t give any funds for actual books. He thought of this as some colossal joke, and we had to ask for book donations from the villagers to keep this place going,” Ms. Thimbles explained, looking like she was going to cry.

“Wow, that really does sound like a disaster for this village,” I said looking around the room and sitting down to search for a book that I would check out to pass time at my grandparent’s cabin.

Then I noticed a smaller book on the shelf which stood out from the rest. It glowed in the evening light that was streaming through the small window on the roof of the room. I slid it off the shelf and felt the cover, which had a pebbled texture and was inky black. I flipped to the first page and saw that the text wasn’t printed but handwritten! The writing was clear and legible and there was a date on the top right corner of the page. Jan 1, 1987. When I read it, I gasped, but then, realizing Ms. Thimbles was still behind me, turned it into a cough. Then I read the writing under the margin.

Greetings, lucky finder of my diary. You must solve the riddle below to prove your trustworthiness, kindness, responsibility, as well as tactical thinking to me.

After you find the first clue, the second shall arise. Peculiarity and illusionary objects are what you will see, but they will lead you to the next part of this mystery. Hints or tips, I will not give other than: that on a metal podium in the middle of the street is where I live.

A.W.R

The initials were mysterious, though they did seem familiar. I tried to flip to the next page for the possibility of finding more information, but the rest of the pages seemed to be sealed shut. This mystery could lead me somewhere. It could add some adventure to my life. I was all in. “Found something you like?” asked Ms. Thimbles and I was so startled that I almost fell over.

“Yes!” I said, stuffing the diary in my backpack with my back to Ms. Thimbles. I then casually plucked a harvesting guide off the shelf and asked, “Can check this one out?”

“Sure, why not?” said Ms. Thimbles cheerfully and she strolled to the front desk. “That’s relevant for the season,” she chuckled as I checked out. I nodded and shuffled out the door trying to keep my pack as still as possible, so as not to give away the diary I was hiding.

As soon as I heard the doors creak closing behind me, I started running. My feet pounded the gravel, and my ears rang. Then suddenly, I saw the name Richardson flash by me, and I stopped. It was the plaque at the foot of the statue, the one I had passed on my way to the library. This was it! My mind clicked, this must be him, the guy who was planning on a new library being built! He must have been a great leader for them to put a statue of him practically in the middle of the road. The plaque read:

In Memory of Arthur W. Richardson “Richard”

Former Mayor and Local Councilor of Acktonsville

This just proved my point! He used to be the mayor, but then I wondered a bit more about his mysterious disappearance. Was he murdered? Did he leave on his own? Or maybe he just had a bad disease. These all might have been promising ideas, but I couldn’t prove a single one. Anyway, I was spending too much time on this mayor, and I had to get to solving this riddle. I took the diary out of my backpack and read the riddle again. While I was doing so, my eyes drifted to my watch, which showed 7:40. Yikes! I had to be home in 20 minutes! I started down the street again.

I slowed down when I saw a set of large mahogany gates which were ajar. Curiously, I looked inside and found that the doorway was empty, and the silence peculiar.

I took a step inside, feeling hardwood under my shoes. The house seemed covered in dust, and all the furniture and wallpaper were totally outdated. It was surprisingly large and spacious as well and I couldn't help wondering why I hadn't seen it before. I decided to explore since I still had around fifteen minutes before I had to be home. The kitchen had some wine glasses in it and a bottle of a substance I didn't recognize. It had a skull and crossbones on it and was painted cobalt blue.

The stairs seemed surprisingly steep, and I had to clutch the railing as I went up. Upstairs, there were around six more rooms and another set of stairs which I thought must lead to the attic. Entering the first room I found shelves, and shelves of trophies and awards. The people who lived here must have won a ton of stuff, but as I looked closer, I saw that all the trophies were political and so were all the certificates. Weird.

I went into the next room, right across from the hall. This was a regular bedroom with a bed and silk sheets, along with a mahogany dresser and closet. The dresser top was piled high with magazines and old newspapers, but I realized I didn't have time to read or even page through them.

Then there was a faint rustling and the whole house seemed to shake. The walls suddenly had cracks going down them and all the furniture was slipping down an awkward slope. The house was tilting! I jumped over the bed in one flying leap and tried to pry the window open and it gave way easily. I climbed down and jumped, landing on the ground running. I didn't look behind me until I reached my grandparents' little cabin. I was greeted by my mother and after a

hurried supper, I raced up to my room and looked out the window. The house that I was sure that I had just been inside was nowhere to be found.

I had a tough time going to sleep, since I was still trying to piece together the events of the day. Then, a few hours into the night, it occurred to me. It was so obvious. The house was an illusion, and it must have been the mayors. This would also connect to the riddle. The metal podium was the statue! That was the first clue and that was why I was able to see and explore the house. This would also mean that the mayor wrote the riddle! A.W.R translates to Arthur W. Richardson! That would also explain the awards and vastness of the home. But what was the next step? Thinking about this, I drifted off to sleep.

It was morning when I realized that I had left my bag in the large disappearing house. I planned to go there first thing after breakfast to grab it and I got there right around 8:30. I was worried it wouldn't be there and would disappear along with the rest of the house, but it was right there, lying on a dry patch of grass.

I picked it up and noticed everything was still in it. I felt the weight of the diary, but when I opened the bag, I noticed that it had been replaced by a large bronze key. I was disappointed, since I was planning to attempt to turn the page, but I guessed the key could also be a part of the mystery. The key was large, as big as the palm of my hand. As I rummaged through the pack, searching for another thing that may prove peculiar, I felt a piece of paper which hadn't been there before. I picked it up and read:

Come to the tree in the orchard with five rotting apples 10 minutes after dawn. Sharp.

I didn't know what this meant or what it would mean, but there was only one way to find out. I ran back home and set my alarm clock for dawn.

After doing so, I pondered more on the mystery, when I again remembered the point of the mayor's disappearance. I thought of the unusual bottle on the kitchen counter and the wine glasses. Then it occurred to me that the bottle had a symbol of a skull and crossbones to symbolize poison. This meant that the mayor had drunk poison wine that someone else had given to him. I also then realized that that must have been the other evil mayor, trying to take over his position! After I had come up with my theory, I got into bed and felt more confident about tomorrow morning.

I woke up to the trill of the alarm clock and shut it off rapidly. As I was getting dressed, I felt hesitant, but I knew I had to go, or I could cause some danger to the village if I didn't. The minute this thought entered my head, I dashed through the door running through the orchard.

I had already picked the tree with five rotting apples and when I got there, I glanced at my watch, it was 9 minutes after dawn. I had made it just in time. It was also great that everyone was asleep, since they had all worked hard in the orchard yesterday and I could have the time to come here. Then I heard a faint rustling in the bushes. "What?" I said, my voice trembling.

"It's not a what, it's a who!" said a voice so sudden that I stumbled and lay sprawling on the ground. An old man wearing a monocle and wrinkled brown coat stepped out of the shrubbery. His shoes were well polished, and his face was filled with excitement as he stepped out from the bushes. "It is I, Arthur W. Richardson," he announced.

“So, you didn’t die?” I asked the first question that came to mind.

“No, I died with a funeral and all, but I am a ghost,” he said calmly, moving closer to me. “You see that old hag Johnson Williams stole my position after poisoning me,” he said, his face turning red with fury. Then he cooled down a little and took the key from my hand.

He slid it into a keyhole on the tree trunk which I hadn’t noticed before. A small door swung open, and he crawled in, beckoning for me to follow.

Inside there was a small table with a small copper box with a slight glow accompanying it. I looked at it questioningly and the ghost of Mr. Richardson explained, “This is the Box of Wishful Thinking, one of my most prized possessions and secrets. If a person touches it and asks for a wish, the box shall only grant it if it is benevolent and honest, and not just some frivolous request. This box should be kept in our village to turn it into a better place,” he said.

He continued, “If you are wondering how, it will do this, let me tell you. People of this village despise the new mayor and obviously one shall ask to get rid of him and they might also ask for better books in the library. I think so because when I was in power, they all loved reading, and the love of reading can never be destroyed. Now take it with you and make the world a better place my new-found heir. Go!” I was about to say something else when a blinding rush of dust came my way and Richardson was gone.

I had solved the riddle, and I had earned this. I was proud and was ready to make a difference. I was already incorporating my new plan of what I would do with the Box of Wishful Thinking, but in the meanwhile, I would leave it inside that old tree in the orchard for safekeeping.

When I reached home, I found my mom packing a large suitcase. “Oh, hi Jane, I was just wondering where you had gone, anyways, we are leaving today. Your little brother Jack is sick back home and we to go to take care of him.”

“Ok,” I mumbled, and dashed out the door before my mother could stop me. I had to get to the box and try to make use of it at this village before I left. I found the tree and found the key in a prickly bush around the back. I opened it, took out the box, and rushed it to the library. I found Ms. Thimbles and told her everything, from me stealing the diary to what the Box of Wishful Thinking did. She listened carefully and nodded with a grim look on her face.

“Will do,” she said. I was satisfied, though I knew I could have gotten credit, but then I saw our car on the driveway with my mom honking the horn. I dashed to the car and got in. As we were pulling out, I saw a glowing and transparent hand flash a thumbs up as we went by. I flashed one right back.