

## **SILVER LADY: Travels Along the River Road**

(excerpt)

### **DAY 19**

From the Captain's Log

Although the engine quit working, the water damage isn't as bad as it was after our first storm. This time, mainly small objects got scattered around and a little soggy: table lamps, flashlights, hoodies, and flip-flops. The storm hit while the Silver Lady was docked, but within minutes the moorings detached, and the wild river took us on a thrill ride downstream. One which none of us would dare repeat. After being tossed about for hours, the boat ran aground. And now we gaze at each other, tired, dazed, and waterlogged on a beach. We have no idea where we are. The opposing riverbank seems further away than usual. Festivities of the river gods must have gotten out of hand, as they've spewed their guts on the vessel. It appears we're all okay, but then I notice one of my five passengers is missing. Panic sets in despite our weariness.

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### **A Few Years into the Future: the Great Collapse and the Vanishing**

Heading down the mighty river on a sunny spring morning is a luxury houseboat, the Silver Lady. Cassie Navrone is at the wheel, although she isn't the boat's owner. It's the first day of a long journey. One moment, she's wide-eyed in anticipation, and the next, wistful. At first glance, her two long, mostly silver braids appear attached to her captain's hat. There are a few black strands mixed with silver, but not many. The hat's a little mismatched with her purple caftan. Following her cat, Jezebel's, recent demise, she applied for a temporary job as a houseboat captain. The day before, she completed a brief instructional lesson at the marina where the seventy-foot vessel has been docked. It's now her responsibility to drive the boat to its owner—almost two-thousand miles away.

Cassie is a retired teacher and doula. She's also a widow with a grown daughter, Melanie. Like many, Melanie only leaves home when necessary. Until now, Cassie had little going on, except for creating Qigong videos and having coffee once in a while with two friends. Truth be told, she didn't leave home much either. Now feels like the right time for her to do something new.

Many refer to what's been taking place as the Great Collapse or simply the Collapse. Cities have been seeing a dramatic spike in violence—especially gun violence. Daily mass shootings occur, especially in cities across the nation. There is chatter about the states turning into separate countries and getting rid of the now completely feckless federal government. Travel between states is permitted but strongly discouraged. Little doubt the sky-high prices and less availability of goods and services led to the now daily rioting and looting, especially in what many are calling the 'DSA'—the soon-to-be, Disunited States of America.

The most recent pandemic, three years ago, was caused by a virus more deadly than any previous ones. Its most virulent phase lasted only a year, but in that time, almost a billion people died. Deaths occurred in cities on every continent, though few places were immune. The virus infiltrated even the best-made masks. It struck mainly at night and became known as the Strangler Virus, as its victims woke up

struggling to breathe. Over half died within hours. The rest of the infected experienced such intense brain fog that they lost most of their long-term memories. While those infected could talk, walk, recall their names, and where they left their keys, few kept memories of their lives before the Strangler Virus came to town. Humankind hid for the first year, and a great many remained isolated for the next two.

Both climate change advocates and skeptics alike hoped climate change would magically go away during this time of resettling. Sadly, it was discovered that it was happening faster than anyone expected. If that weren't enough to grapple with, there's also, the Vanishing. People have vanished, by the hundreds, if not thousands. Here one moment, but gone the next. No one knows how much artwork has disappeared. Paintings and books vanish or disintegrate right before the eyes of their creators.

The exact number of missing artwork and people is unknown since the crisis continues. It is commonly believed that the pandemic is somehow connected to it, as it started happening after its much longed-for, but abrupt, departure.

Anxiety levels have reached new and alarming heights, but anxiety meds are as rare as rhodium. Hot spots are popping up at an alarming rate. It is in those places where the Vanishing occurs. Artists and poets—at least those in the know—continue to search for cold spots where creative works seem to last. Artworks aboard boats on freshwater lakes and rivers are safer, at least to some degree. The hope is that keeping works above water rather than on the ground level will help preserve them. Four of the six travelers aboard Silver Lady—except for Zona and Cassie—are artists or poets.

## 5 YEAR 2033

### Day 1

#### From the Captain's Log

I've always longed to write 'From the Captain's Log.' Another cross-off from my bucket list, though I'm not a real captain. You don't need a special license to operate a houseboat, but since I organized this journey, I'm proudly claiming the rank as captain of the eighty-foot Silver Lady. She isn't my craft. The owner, George Sherman, hired me to drive her home.

My father always navigated the river in various kinds of boats. A few summers of my youth were spent assisting him. I adore rivers and river travel. Guess that was enough to convince George of my capability.

She is a sleek and elegant lady—charcoal gray fiberglass with dark windows. When I first saw her, her bow resembled a face. Two window-eyes separated by a pinch of fiberglass for a nose, and below was a porthole-mouth. Her name—Silver Lady—was painted in large black calligraphy on her stern. She has the demure look of a lady aging well, sure of herself and where she's going. There are three levels. The house part includes two sections, with outside decks near the bow and a larger one on top. Living room, kitchen, small reading room/office, and a bathroom are on the main deck. There's even a fireplace in the living room—a fake one, of course. All five sleeping cabins are on the second deck. They're all the same size: cozy. Additionally, a chair and nightstand are included in the ones with single beds. An upper deck on the third level is great for viewing the river and riverbanks. The hardtop canopy, no doubt, a helpful shield from strong sunlight.

At the front of the main deck, you'll find the driver's cab near the bow. One other person can sit comfortably next to the driver. While there are five small cabins, or sleeping quarters, the boat can sleep up to twelve, as a few cabins have double beds. If needed, you can use the beige sectional couch as two beds. I know technically, beds are berths on a large vessel, but it doesn't sound correct to refer to them as 'single berths' or 'double berths.' (While I'll try my best to use correct Captain Log terminology, I'm not going to sweat it.) Everything from the fiberglass to the furnishings is modern and stylish. No obvious stains or rips; no visible damage at all. Nothing appears broken, which I indicated on my checklist.

I had to inspect the entire boat before the passengers set foot on board since I will be held responsible if Silver Lady is the "worse for wear" when we arrive at her new home. George reassured me he doesn't expect his boat to be spotless after the long journey, but maintained as well as possible. While I'm aware of how to drive the River Road, I can't believe I signed up for such a lengthy trip.

Once all were aboard, I gave the five passengers the grand tour. I'd expected them to ask more questions. Afterward, I tried to tantalize them with the upcoming travel experience by describing the peaceful beauty of the river scenery. Who was I fooling? They knew this was my debut as captain; I'd been honest when interviewing them. I guess I was playing tour guide because I didn't know what else to talk about. After having socialized so little these past few years, I'd lost my ability to converse—at least in a relaxed way. Also, too, my nerves were on edge because of the gloom-and-doom talk of the Collapse. It could be the others felt the same.

The passengers consist of two couples and a young woman. While they are passengers, they're also crew-mates, as I may well need their youthful energy to help me swab the decks now and then. They've agreed to relieve me occasionally at the wheel. It was part of the deal, as I only charged them a nominal travel fee. For all that, I put them through a lengthy interview process. I initially planned to accept only women on board, but later changed my mind. I hope I don't regret my choices.

As I said, this is the largest group I've been around in a long time. I've avoided them ever since the last pandemic. Do the others feel anxious about socializing, too? If they've been getting together with family or friends, they're probably doing okay. I wouldn't be so off my game if I'd had more opportunities to socialize—not that I've been a total recluse. Maybe I'll ask them, but I don't want to pry. It often feels like I have marbles in my mouth. Self-consciousness is driving me nuts: Am I too friendly? Do I sound stupid? Have I already said something to annoy them? I'm worse than a teenager who has just smoked pot for the first time.

For two nights before we set sail, I didn't get any sleep. A zillion questions occurred to me. Of foremost concern: Will I feel like I'm living someone else's life? I can't help but want to observe them and try to figure out who each of them is, as well as their habits. This takes time and patience. Daily meditation should help relax me. If I remember to do it, that is. So often in the past, I've tried to make it a habit, a way of life, but failed in my attempts.

We've now docked for the night. For several hours, the scenery here along the upper part of the river was lovely, with many bluffs and tree-lined banks. We saw pre-historic-looking cranes and herons, plus a host of smaller birds. Trees closest to the water's edge seemed to watch and wave at us as we passed by. The area's serenity and simplicity reminded me of a classy woman at a party, not overly made up, and wearing a gown of simple design. If I was a poet, I'd write about the way the pink ribboned sky dipped into the river and floated down it like a wedding gown train. Maybe I'd rather paint sunsets. I'd sure love to capture this transient beauty.

But then we saw smoke above the tree-line and heard the familiar sirens. It must have been coming from a town a few miles away, but close enough to remind us how the world has changed. Violence lurks, even along the river. I can't wait to be cradled by the water; for it to both sing me its watery lullaby and rock me asleep. We all need a little nurturing in this difficult world—especially since the latest pandemic. Besides the pandemic, the Vanishing and the Collapse, there's now talk of war breaking out. I hope being on the river will help me, at least temporarily, forget about the pointless destruction. If this is a con job, it's a necessary one.

How I wound up here: The fear of the Strangler Virus caused many of us to only leave our homes when necessary. It subsided a little, only to be replaced with fear of a civil war. The absence of drinkable water is a significant factor. Bottled water is now a precious commodity, often available only to the wealthy. Violent social unrest erupted in the larger cities; nightly curfews were imposed in many. Gun shots and sirens can be heard day and night—despite the curfews. Some people dismissed what was going on, convinced it was fear-mongering. How could you dismiss what you were hearing and seeing? I sure couldn't. My nerves curtailed me from venturing out a few times. Still, I tried to keep up with routines: the daytime walks, making it to appointments, shopping for groceries—that is, when I didn't have them delivered. But I also lost a few pre-pandemic friendships.

After a couple of years of near seclusion, I decided that making Qigong videos, having occasional get-togethers with Janet and Sasha, and phone chats with Melanie, weren't enough. I was spending too much time watching the clock on my fake fireplace mantel. Changes needed to be made. Thus, I

became a houseboat captain. Aboard Silver Lady, I note time by the sun's rise and fall, only checking the hour and minutes when needed.