



SHOOT
THE
horses
FIRST

histories

LEAH ANGSTMAN

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CASTING GRAND TITANS

*A*gatha Acton discovered the moss in 42-Lot the day the Know-Nothings started Bloody Monday and stopped the immigrants from voting. It was in all the papers, even the headline of the *Council Bluffs Bugle*, for which same-day news was a novelty. A Monday in 1855 at 6:14 p.m. in the middle of her father's Iowa field, twelve inches from the boundary of 43-Lot where it butts to B-Half. Coordinates 41.67, -91.52, north of Oakland Cemetery and the Goosetown Bohemians, and east of Prospect Hill, off Governor Street. She pulled up her dress and dropped to her knees in the dry prairie soil and came within an inch of it, her eyes wide, one pupil nearly touching it. Her clothbound sketchbook fell open beside her where she'd noted the coordinates, and, with a sharpened stick of paper-wrapped coal, she wrote more tiny letters in the margins of an already-filled page.

Spreading prostrate growth habit, pleurocarpous. Unbranched. Little mounding in the colony. Nonvascular cryptogamic bryophyte. Scraggly appearance. She hypothesized that this appearance would be gone in spring, however, when the production of spore-bearing capsules made the stems leafy green. *Individual stems terete, moderately spaced.* Yet, it wasn't just feather

moss. She held her magnifier and studied the lanceolate-ovate, and they were toothed along their entire margins, the leaf surface golden yellow. The ground around it brimmed with flora, despite the dry soil and harsh, sunny conditions. Ferns and dandelions, *Achillea millefolium*, *Agastache foeniculum*, and *Anemone cylindrica*. The nutrients must have been coming from the moss, or somehow being held in by it and spreading to the plants around it.

She'd never seen anything like it. Its vibrant yellow-green had been hidden beneath the shade of a clump-formed Prairie Dropseed that had taken over the whole area. But beneath it was a new moss. Her insides swelled like they were pumped with air, and she dragged her fingers through the crumbly soil. What a beautiful little creature.



A shrill, offtone bell on the Mechanics Academy rang forty whole seconds before the big bell in the cupola of the Capitol. As if the girls weren't restless enough. Their single wooden bench lined the western side of a shack from wall to wall, and the makeshift shop tables came up to the girls' necks when they were seated. Thigh to thigh, they sat. Dorothea picked at her chip of charcoal until it blacked her fingers. Another girl flicked her soil samples at Mary on the end of the row.

Agatha sighed. "Remember Legislature is in session. Mind your voices in the halls."

She wasn't talking about her own classroom. She had been relegated to a twelve-by-twelve room left over from when the contractors built the great Capitol, the first building of the State University of Iowa. Which also happened to be where the Senate and First General Assembly met when they were called to session, so the students had to tiptoe by a chamber of arguing men that spanned the entire second floor between a forest of Corinthian columns, and past the main-floor chamber where the district judicature held court. Agatha's shack had been hastily constructed as a breakroom for the contractors. They'd forgotten windows. It was a black box where she lit candles just to see the bryophytes and cryptogamae that the girls couldn't yet identify. No one could ever see the colors in the dark. No one could count spores or flowers or find her way to the water bucket that hung on the back of the door. The place was meant to be temporary, to have already been demolished. In one corner, a wooden crate spilled over with gardening tools the professors' wives had donated, bent and rusty and half useless. Had there been

windows, she would have looked out at the Capitol, the center of the budding campus, in the space above this wooden crate. Instead, she smashed her shins on it repeatedly in the dark. Agatha couldn't blame the girls for being through the door before the official bell sounded. She stared out after them, standing with the door propped to unstuff the room, and hoped they remembered to keep quiet in the halls. The coat-tails of Dr. Yves Jolliet swept around the corner of the Capitol. His office had a window.

"Wait for your chaperone!" Agatha called behind the girls.

Another man, their chaperone, came around the building to greet them, and she closed the door and sank back into the dark, walking to the shop tables and bringing a candle against the twelve halved potatoes, lying upright, their white centers covered in tiny mosses. Anne's looked probed to death. Coleandra's was oddly black, somehow contaminated. Dorothea's had been knocked over in her rush for the door, but on its underside was unsanctioned mold. Agatha groaned and sat on the long benchseat and thought about beans. If they were still at \$2.25 per bushel, she couldn't buy them, again, for the third week in a row. She needed beans and she needed cornmeal and she needed to see her feathered moss in her field three miles from here. The darkness got to her. The school had hardly started session, and she was already maddened by the heightened sense of smell in the unventilated room. Rotting potatoes and iodine and hot soil and standing water in glass dishes that would have brought in mosquitoes were it not unseasonably cold for autumn. Frost crunched beneath her feet some mornings.

She lit a candle and leaned over the microscope propped in the corner. Her grandfather's inheritance had gone toward its purchase, and she cherished it as if it were a child. She made the day's notes in her notebook, her moss spores under one plate, and the root system containing the residue of some sort of bacterium in its slow-moving last days. *Individual spores 8micm, globoid, papillose. Unchanged.* She'd have to gather a fresher root sample for the other plate.

She took up a copy of the *Bugle* she'd found in the foyer, flipped the pages to the local listings, and ran her finger down the columns of steamboat shipment prices and recent arrests, then the names of fugitive slaves who'd been caught and returned. She held the paper close to the light, sighed, then tossed it on the bench, blew out her candle, and stood there, feeling the dark wrap around her.

Walking out of the laboratory shack was meant to be intimidating, she estimated. Men had purposely made it so for her, stranding her out

there. When she stepped to the grassy walk where no one had bothered with cobblestones, she stood miniature in the shadow of the west side of the Capitol. Out of view, out of mind, out of earshot. Out of the matter. A slat was already coming off the wood-shingled roof, despite the Capitol being fewer than fifteen years old at the cornerstone. The porous limestone made the exterior look rough as its Greek Revival portico came into view around the side of the building, its Doric pilasters looming over her, Corinthian columns and scrollwork all the way to the lantern on the cupola modeled after an ancient Athenian monument. She walked up the limestone steps toward façade walls and through the double doors, past the inversely-rotated stairway, and down the hall. The door to a spacious office was open. She tapped on it lightly.

“Mr. President?”

University president Amos Dean looked up from a sheaf of papers. “Yes, Miss Arton.”

“Acton,” Agatha corrected, and she stepped into the room.

A creamy yellow paint ran from the top of the window to the ceiling, and beneath it, light oak wainscoting covered the lower portion of the walls. The office was bright, with a tall picture window facing the circle walk and Clinton Street beyond, and rows of copper wall-mounted lamps with frosted glass globes bearing flower patterns. *Bellis perennis* and a bastardized *Helianthus ciliaris*. They should have asked her to illustrate the pattern; she would have done a better job. A dark wood desk sat along one wall, with a chair on either side—a regal handcarved, high-backed wood for the president, and an insufficient wicker for his guests, the bottom sagging from the large rumps of self-important men. Two cloth-covered armchairs sat beside the window, beneath a hanging chandelier filled with glass light cylinders. Across from the desk, a full-sized fireplace heated the room. Agatha gave a shallow curtsy and tugged at the cane ribs of her dress. The room made her sweat, the sudden warmth after the cold dampness of the shack, and she, standing neck to toe and full-sleeved in black, save for one spruce of white lace lining the high collar of her starched, padded dress.

President Dean waved a hand for her to sit. “What grievances have you brought me?”

Agatha scrunched her nose and did not sit. She wished to remain as tall as she could, as commanding. “I request 73¢ added to the expenditures for more potatoes.”

“We’re already over budget, Miss Arton.”

She grimaced. “I’m asking for 73¢. I’m not asking for glass bottles.”

"I can't very well expand budgets for ladies' gardening when we are in want of two more professors." He gestured in the air as if swatting a gnat and went back to his papers.

"It's not gardening. It's botany," Agatha said sharply. "You'd grant it to Dr. Jolliet."

"Dr. Jolliet is a doctor," Dean said without looking up. "With a degree from Heidelberg. The natural history, philosophy, and chemistry departments are endowed and funded entirely upon the honor of having him here." He finally looked up, his feather dripping a spot of ink onto his desk as he held it in the air, then pointed it at her. "*His* family discovered this land. *His* doctorate is useful. You, my dear, have scarce earned a master's."

"I did not *scarce* earn a master's; I did earn one. With scholarship. Direct me toward a university that would grant me more abundance in chemistry, and I'll merrily attend." She stepped toward his desk, and he finally stood from his chair, much taller than she. Her control slipped. "I don't have a proper laboratory. The potatoes are rotting. I need glass experiment bottles that can't rot. *Instructions in Gardening for Ladies* is not an acceptable textbook for the girls. You promised me a lab if I taught women's sewing, and for gracious' sake, I'm teaching *sewing*. In the dark. With degrees in chemistry and botany. And with this early cold coming, what will I do without a stove?"

"There's no ventilation for a stove."

"Yes, I'm well aware," she almost laughed. "And yet I'm only asking for 73¢ for potatoes—"

"Amos!" The voice came from behind her, and she jumped.

Dean's head snapped toward the door, and he smiled. "Yves." He splayed a palm.

"When is our rescheduled chess match, fat man?" Yves said jovially, and waltzed past Agatha, taking the room in swaying strides.

A fitted frock coat hugged him snugly, its lapels wide around his chest then cut away at the beltline, and its pin-buttoned tails down to the backs of his knees. A plaid double-breasted waistcoat came up to a high-collared white shirt that was wrapped around and again with a black ascot that tied in the front of the neck. His muttonchops waged war with the starched collar points. She imagined his hair was parted neatly on one side where it bunched around his ears, but it was lost beneath a shiny felted-beaverskin top hat that he didn't bother to remove indoors. His lips were likewise lost to an oversized mustache that wasn't waxed at the tips, but was pointed trimly. In his hand he held a cane,

for no purpose but that it suited him to do so. Agatha cleared her throat, then louder when she still wasn't noticed.

Yves whirled around, his cane following the movement. "Oh, I did not see you there."

"How terribly surprising," she muttered. A gold chain swung between two vest pockets and draped down to his plaid pants, a fob and watch dangling off a custom loophook in the vest, and she stared at it.

Amos Dean grunted and signaled to her. "Dr. Jolliet, Miss Arton."

"Acton," Agatha corrected defiantly.

Yves Jolliet chuckled and tapped his cane on the floor. "Ah! The ladies' gardener!"

"Oh, murder," Agatha snapped.

"Who are we murdering?" Yves said. "Count me in! I love a good murder. Really gets the blood flowing, don't you know!" He held the back of his hand up to his mouth and said to Dean, "I fear someone's already been murdered, by the looks of the funeral raiment." He dropped his hand, winked at Agatha, and turned again to Dean, pulling a piece of paper from the inside of his frock coat, then looking it over. "Amos, old fellow, I need \$12 for glass bottles." He laid the paper in front of the president.

Dean nodded. "I'll have them ordered today." A wooden stamper came through the air out of nowhere and landed on the paper with faint black ink. APPROVED.

Agatha made an indignant hmmp.

"And don't cack on that chess rematch," Yves said. "I might let you win this time." He pocketed the stamped paper for the financier's office and turned to Agatha. "I am rather remarkable at chess. Do you play?"

"I'm afraid not," Agatha said.

"Pity." He looked her up and down, not unkindly, but as if he were tucking something away for a memory down the road. "All that talent gone to waste on gardening." Yves tapped his cane again and smiled haughtily and walked out of the room, leaving the door open.

Agatha gently closed it and turned back to Dean.

He was staring straight at her, leaning back in his chair with his hands crossed over his generous stomach. "I'll see if the board will approve your potatoes," he said.

She nodded meekly and turned before she reddened. As she stepped into the hallway, she saw the young ladies being ushered by men down the hall in a group, distrusted to find the correct classroom on their own. Yves Jolliet's figure swayed away from her. She turned back into

the president's office. "It's Acton. My name is Agatha Acton. I understand your disregard for me, sir, but at least be a gentleman about it to my face." She slammed the door and stepped back into the hall. "Dr. Jolliet!" she called, then remembered the Legislature in session and put a hand over her mouth. "May I speak with you?" she said quieter.

He turned and yelled to her as he walked backward down the hall, "I'm late for testing enzymatic *Solanum lycopersicum* against drought conditions, but the party tonight?"

"Party?" she said too loud. "I received no invite to a party."

"The professors party at Nicking House. You don't need an invite. It's an opening gala for all professors. I'll bring cigars and sneak you off to Hotz & Geiger!"

"The brewery? I can't—"

"You must come! Everyone will be there. You'll be the gossip if you don't show."

"But—"

"Tonight, then!"

She sighed. "Tonight."

She couldn't afford to go to a party. The coach alone would be a week's pay. If she were caught anywhere near Hotz & Geiger, she'd be fired, no excuse taken. And supposing everyone knew where the Nicking House was? She didn't know where the Nicking House was. If she needed a coach to get there, then she couldn't buy beans. Oh, bother, what did it matter? She already couldn't buy beans. If everyone would be there, then she ought to show. Not because she'd be the subject of their gossip, but because she might be judged poorly if she didn't make the right decisions among the university professors, and then she'd be overlooked for a raise she desperately needed. She had to make the good impression, and it was regrettably more pressing than beans. So, what was one party?

