

## THE LIQUID ELEMENT

Alida still had a fear of water. And that feeling was the core of her being. All these other way of encountering the world were related to a power that she associated with water.

“We were living in Macon, and the river flooded. Parts of the city stayed underwater for quite a while. We didn’t have running water for weeks. It was terrible. We were buying drinking water in the store. We were filling the toilets with water in from the fountain in the park. It was unreal.”

“I already had a respect for the river. But this was even more intense. It cut a knife deep into us. It told us who was really in charge.”

Alida described how the flood had engulfed much of the city. The impulsive Ocmulgee was replenished with the rains. It turned into a raging river. It could not be stopped. It spread everywhere. This force was incredible. Nothing could stand in its way as it overflowed everywhere. People were helpless against the onrush. The poor had it even more difficult. They had few resources to aid in their recovery. The flood only made the inequity in the city greater.

“When you don’t have much, it doesn’t take a great deal to destroy your way of life.”

Alida felt the change in her body. She was shaken to the core. She had to fight to survive. This was something new for her. The flood had shaped her body. It reminded her in a deep way of the power of nature. It would give you all its blessings. Then it would slowly take back its gifts. It would strip you down to nothing.

“We make our stand by the river. It gives us a sense of confidence. We find a place of power and protection. But then the river decides to assert itself. And it denies its blessings. It is a fickle lover, and we always have to be careful. “

In a dry season, a spark could turn the whole world to flame. It would flash before your eyes. This was something more frightening. It would take you in and suck you down. The currents were relentless. They would just rip you in half.

“I fear death by drowning. Once and for all these waters will engulf me. They will rain down on me. They will spin me around. Then I will be totally overwhelmed.”

Her breathing was halting. She explained the ancient compromise: “We have emerged with all the riches from an ancient sea. We are teeming with life. But the very waters which give us life are ready to engulf us. The flood is about to touch us from within.”

The lungs would fill up with fluid. We could not achieve the balance. We would literally drown in our own bodies.

Alida made an effort. She breathed deeply. She was taking the day back.

The oven was full of crackers and cheese. This was Alida’s meal. She did not eat a great deal. She snacked like a bird. She ate what she needed to keep herself going. This had always been her habit. She was not going to give herself over to food. She found what she needed. That was enough for her to survive

“I am feeling a little sluggish. I need to give it a push.”

Each step was an effort. She could not push buttons to make it any easier. She was making it all happen in time. She was embracing the flow.

“We are never that far from the waters. We are always trying to catch up. We sense that little trickle of the stream. We see the movement all around us. We are putting together a greater

picture. “

A single river could cover a continent. Alida knew this kind of sweep. She had never been defined by the flood. The world had given her a different route. She could hop a train and escape her destiny.

If she was returning to the ancient project of the waters, it was the promise of these passages in the stars. You only had to look up to see the majesty. Alida had learned a way to navigate this complexity. But it was all based on the liquid element.

The primitive geometry was coming alive in the ground. What did this mean? There was this noble trickle back and forth. The drip of a faucet. The water collecting in a puddle. The ringing sound echoing in the night. The slow water torture.

If you broke down all the lines of the universe to a point, what would it be? A drop of water. The ink smudged on a page. Getting down to basics.

I was viewing this great architecture. At its source, the liquid element was imbued with a massive power. All the understanding was contained in the water drop.

“When you combine all the elements, you are not left with an empty box. The cathedral is echoing a greater life. The transcendent call. Can you hear its tune?”

That restive train whistle was sounding through the night.

“Do you know who I am?”

This was a different way of seeing the heavens. It was all projected back in waters. The giant circulation system. It made its imprint on the continent. Every tiny stream was linked up in the great system.

“This is more than a structure. It is a system.”

We were all water. We were still flowing back and forth in the great river. But there was a plan. A map.

“Study this map. Make it part of yourself.”

We were always heading to the heart. The very soul of our project.

“What are these waters really saying? Who are they speaking to?”

“I need to put a face with the voice!”

This was all deep within you. Alida could feel it churn. She took a breath. Another deep breath. This one was for all time.

She needed to see this thing in her head. Like a crossword puzzle.

“This is how the waters move. The tributaries and the deltas. The elemental movement of all time.”

How could these mud flows shape all the forces extending through the universe? What was the motivation?

“Alida, what is the motivation?”

“To know. To touch. To love.”

When the storms made the rivers impetuous, they wanted to possess. This was not an abstraction. The emotion was physical.

“Is the universe moved by jealousy?”

There were these empty pockets. The dark holes. Then there was this medium. And the world moved back and forth in this ether. It would spread so thin that it was barely there. Here the universe could find its pure motivation.

“What is the source of this jealousy?”

“A restive heart. A marriage of true minds from which she is excluded.”

How could the precedent originate in the consequence?

“There can be no motivation if it does not exist in someone’s head. There is a watcher of this whole story.”

Alida was the observer. She felt the mist and the fog and the terrible humidity and the outright downpour.

“How do all these things exist when there is no atmosphere?”

“Water is a basic element?”

“In what chemistry?”

“If you break things down too much, you lose the basic forces of the universe. Where is it all moving towards? Towards the heart. The greater love of the universe.”

“That seems contradictory to jealousy.”

“One can choose a jealous, possessive love. Or a liberating, pure embrace with the universe.”

“We are in the midst of a rain storm.”

“The rains are all around us.”

She was not feeling well. She was getting ready for the storm.

Alida found her heating pad. And she cuddled up in bed. The television was on, and she surrendered herself to a classic movie.

“Mr. Powell, you took it upon yourself to lead a rebellion against your captain.”

“Captain Long had become a tyrant.”

“And you took it upon yourself to make that determination.”

“We were an assembly of free men.”

“And it is the right of free men to make such an assessment.”

“It is not simply a right. It is a duty.”

“But Captain Long was the commander of the ship, and you violated his authority.”

“He violated his own authority when he showed extreme cruelty to his men.”

“A captain has to make decisions which are best for his ship. He is battling the sea, and she is a cruel mistress. You cannot just make your own rules when you are dealing with the sea.”

“You cannot just make your own rules when you are dealing with free men.”

“Captain Long derived his authority from the crown. As such, he represented the law of our land.”

“But he did not faithfully execute that law.”

“You took it upon yourselves to make that judgment. You risked the lives of all aboard simply due to a disagreement with Captain Long.”

“This was not a simple disagreement. He had violated the trust placed in him.”

“How is it your authority to make that decision?”

“Under the authority of our creator who made us all free men.”

“If everyone took it upon himself to make such a decision, there would be no freedom. There would be nothing supporting our joint efforts. There would only be anarchy.”

“Captain Long was acting in an irrational manner that threatened the very coherence of his command.”

“As his subordinates, you took it upon yourselves to make that decision. You did not have the authority to relieve him of his command. You needed to wait until the craft made shore.”

“There were grave doubts that we would have ever made shore if we had depended on the skills of the captain. We were facing great challenges.”

“Captain Long was still willing to meet those challenges.”

“He was damaging the morale of our crew in such a way that it threatened our ability to deal with the major challenges.”

“It is not really up to you to make that determination.”

“What would you propose? That we all go down with the ship. Then you could assess blame in an inquiry after the fact. We were protecting the ship. We were protecting the cargo. And we were protecting the men.”

“All those responsibilities were given to Captain Long. Why would you think that he was incapable of meeting his duties?”

“He was weakening his resources by the way that he was treating his men. He was making them incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities.”

“You are not assigned to make that decision.”

“I take it as the most important duty that I do. I have to assess the soundness of the orders given to me by my commander. That gives me the ability to effect his commands.”

“I understand that Mr. Powell. But your view of the law undercuts its very effectiveness. If you believe that every law is up to challenge, you can never do your duty. You are not of service to the crown.”

“The law is like a well-oiled machine. If something goes wrong with the machine, you cannot expect the machine to continue to function. You cannot blame the machine. You have to fix the broken part.”

“You are telling me that Captain Long was a broken engine.”

“That is exactly what I am saying.”

“I do not like your analogy. Captain Long is a commander of the British Navy. He derives his authority from the crown. And he understands very well why he is the captain of a great ship. He not the engine of a malfunctioning machine.”

“Captain Long has accepted all the responsibility that goes along with commanding a ship. If he is unable to meet his duties, then the whole ship is threatened by his failures.”

“You are telling me that Captain Long’s disciplining of a few rebel men was sufficient to put his ship in jeopardy.”

“Captain Long disciplined his men in a capricious manner. He eroded the chain of command. And in so doing, he threatened the livelihood of his men.”

“What would you have him do when his men were conspiring against him? The captain found the leaders of the movement, and he disciplined them accordingly.”

“The captain created this conspiracy in his mind. Then he selectively punished those men whom he felt were planning against him.”

“What did you do as this plot was developing?”

“I did not see any plot. I followed the orders of my commander to the letter. But I observed how he was belittling his own command.”

“How was that?”

“He was punishing the very men that we needed to keep the journey going. We were facing a massive storm. And the captain was punishing three of his best men. He was making it difficult to deal with the storm ahead.”

“Those men were insubordinate. They threatened the smooth working of the ship.”

“I wanted to accept the captain’s assessment of the situation. I talked with the men. I reviewed what had happened. It became clear to me that the captain acted in an unwise fashion.”

“Then you plotted to remove him from his command.”

“Not at all. I talked with Captain Long. I explained to him that I concurred with his judgement. He had reason to punish Jenkins, Smith, and O’Brien. Only then did it become clear to me that their offenses were in Captain Long’s head. These were good men. And he had punished them needlessly.”

“You rose up against Captain Long, and you risked the effects of the storm.”

“I made the only decision that I could at the time.”

“And you imprisoned Captain Long in the brig.”

“If I had not done that, the ship would not have made it through the storm. I needed Jenkins, Smith, and O’Brien on board. Captain Long would have had them imprisoned for insubordination and mutiny.”

“Mr. Powell, you realize that you betrayed an essential trust by going against your captain.”

“I canvassed all the men. And they were all with. All except the other officers.”

“So you imprisoned Mr. Jones and Mr. Moore.”

“I had no choice. They were going to stand with the captain.”

“You violated your oath. You risked the ship. And you went against the crown.”

“I did the only thing that a free man could do.”

“You staged a mutiny.”

“I made a decision as first mate. It was the only possible decision to keep the ship afloat.”

“Despite your great decision, the ship lost its cargo and almost went down in the storm.”

“Captain Long had endangered the ship by his own actions. He knew the storm was coming. He had delayed in preparation.”

“You are taking responsibility for the loss of a valuable cargo.”

“We had no choice but jettison the cargo. We were taking on too much water. We were going to go down if we had not made that decision.”

“You lost the cargo.”

“I did what was necessary.”

“Captain Long claims that it was your inexperience which jeopardized the ship and the lives of the me, and ultimately led to the loss of the cargo.”

“I did what was right. I think that the crown would support me in the decision that I made.”

“Even though you went against your commander.”

“Captain Long had violated his command.”

“You personally made that assessment.”

“The other men on the ship agreed with me.”

“None of the other officers concurred with your judgment.”

“You were inexperienced.”

“I was the first mate. It was my responsibility to relieve my commander if he became incapacitated.”

“He was perfectly capable of commanding the ship.”

“His mental faculties were making it impossible for him to fulfill his duties as commander.”

“According to you.”

“According to the men who were under his command.”

“The other officers did not agree.”

“They were afraid of Captain Long.”

“Your enmity for Captain Long caused you to remove him as commander.”

“I did the only thing that I could do. The other men on the ship all agreed with my decision.”

“These were men who had supported the mutiny of Jenkins, Smith, and O’Brien.”

“I have documented the abuses of the captain. He punished sailors without any provocation. He held food back from his men. He was intentionally cruel to his crew for no reason.”

“He was dealing with an unruly group of men. He needed to show them discipline.”

“That is not how the law works.”

“That was how he was interpreting the law. And he was representative of the sovereign on the high seas.”

“Whatever were his duties, he was not executing them in a faithful manner.”

“You took it upon yourself to make that decision.”

“I am an officer in the Queen’s Navy. I am tasked with making that decision.”

“It was not the correct decision.”

“Correct? I brought the ship back with all its crew.”

“You lost the cargo.”

“We were in a terrible storm.”

“You relieved your commander who could have helped you maneuver through that great storm.”

“That is not how it happened.”

“According to whom Mr. Powell.”

“As the Almighty is my witness, I have told the truth. If Captain Long is going to claim differently, let him. I have spoken!”

The court had little choice. Mr. Powell had taken upon himself to make a critical judgment while the ship was still under sail.

“Will the defendant stand?”

“Mr. Powell, you made an erroneous judgment in relieving your captain of his duty. You really had no authority to make such an assessment. If we allowed every subordinate the right to make such a determination, we would not have a Royal Navy. You have violated a fundamental trust. Are there any extenuating circumstances which might influence the court to lessen your

sentence? Would you like to ask the court for mercy?"

"I cannot ask the court for mercy. I did the only thing that a free man could do. I stood up for the truth. And the other free men on the ship supported my decision."

"Mr. Powell, you are completely out of order. This courtroom is not a place for your political diatribe."

John Powell looked completely defiant.

"Mr. Powell, on the twenty first day of December, you will be taken from your cell, and you will be hanged from the neck until you are dead."

Powell would still not yield. He was led from the courtroom by his guards. The sentence had been passed.

"They were afraid of a truly free man. He was someone who lived according to his principles. On that basis, he confronted the great storm."

Alida needed another entertainment.

Trevor Merchant had been sent to Germany after the war to assist with a reconstruction project. He left his wife in London, and he made the trip alone. It was his wife's father who had hired Trevor. Trevor was quite an ambitious guy even if he had to rely on the abilities of others. He missed his wife, but Trevor was too much of a playboy. In Germany, he lived the life of a single man.

Milena was a very poor woman. She was an actress. She once had wild dreams. She had even been in some movies. But the war devastated her. She managed to get by.

"I would really appreciate it if you could help me get some silk stockings. I know how the British have connections."

He used every connection that he had. He loved it when he watched her in her silk stockings.

"Why don't you come by? I might be able to get us a little coffee."

Trevor enjoyed all the comforts that Milena had to offer. This was his home away from home. He kept writing his wife, but that did not stop him from seeing Milena. And he continued to bestow all kinds of gifts on her.

There were times when Trevor talked about leaving his wife. But he relied on her for his job. So he couldn't just send her off in the world. He relied on her for his livelihood.

After he served his time in Germany, he returned home. He thought that he would never see Milena again. But she was a clever woman. She did what she could to escape Germany. And she made her way to London.

Trevor was back with his wife.

"Eva, is a fine woman. I can hardly keep seeing you."

"You told me that you didn't love her."

"I don't. But I work for her father's company. It would be a major scandal if she caught me having an affair. I would be tossed out on my fanny."

"Do what you have to do."

Every chance that he could, he would be back at Milena's. As he was wont to do, Trevor could not satisfy himself with one Milena. He met Rita, another lovely girl, on another job. She was a receptionist at a client's office.

"I see great things for you some day."

“I hear that you don’t get along so well with your wife.”

“We manage.”

For all his troubles with Eva, Trevor felt the need to make himself financially independent. He decided to switch to another company. In fact, he got a job with Rita’s boss.

Eva continued to argue with him.

“My father made you into what you are. And he can unmake you if he chooses. If I tell him that you are mistreating him, he can call your new boss, and you will be out of a job.”

“You would never try such a thing.”

“Watch me!”

The way seemed more than clear. He would have to get rid of Eva from his life. But she still held something over him. What could he do?

As always the n’er-do-well, he was bumbling his way through everything. He was still seeing Milena, but she could feel that she was on the way out. Once he broke from Eva, he would cast off Milena as well.

Trevor got in the worst row with Eva. She taunted him more than ever. His anger boiled. In a fit, he tossed her down the stairs. It was a terrible fall, and she did not survive. But he did everything that he could to make it look like an accident. He cleaned up anything that might be construed as a struggle. Then he pretended that he had been out of the house when the accident occurred.

Unfortunately, for Mr. Merchant, a dogged Inspector Dayton was assigned to the case. And he smelled a rat. He was going to use his skills to prove that Eva had been murdered by her husband.

“I wasn’t even in the house when the fall occurred. I was devastated when I learned what had happened.”

Trevor Merchant talked himself into a frenzy. Even Eva’s father believed him. And he helped him retain the best counsel.

There was one nasty piece of evidence that tied Trevor to the case. When Eva fell, she grabbed on to his jacket. Trevor was very careful to wrest that torn bit of his jacket from his wife’s hand. He made sure that the jacket was repaired. He had been very careful to hide the evidence.

After a thorough investigation, Trevor Merchant was charged with murder. Although most of Inspector Dayton’s case seemed to be circumstantial, the crown claimed that they had secret evidence which would damn the defendant.

Ewan Blair was a very capable defender. And he made short-shrift of most of the crown’s case. There was motive and opportunity. There was a claim that a simple fall would not have created as much peril to Mrs. Merchant’s wife. But Ewan worked on proving this contention wrong. He brought in experts. At this point, it seemed as if the crown’s case was falling apart.

Trevor Merchant had become the topic of all the tabloids. And Trevor was becoming a bit a celebrity with all the women in the city. They would line up to get a place in the court. They would flirt with him during the proceedings. Rita could hardly keep her man’s attention.

For all the hustle and bustle, Milena was not to be seen. She had dropped out of his life.

Trevor himself was becoming a little overconfident. He showed no remorse about poor



Eva. And he was using the courtroom as a nightclub to show off.

Ewan met with Trevor.

“You are doing a masterful job. The crown should have never taken advantage of my tragedy.”

“You may be fooling some of the people, but you are not fooling me. We are in trouble. More than you can know. They have a surprise witness. She claims that she has your jacket.”

Trevor ran through his mind about his jacket. He had gotten it mended. And he placed it back in his closet. He only wished that he was not in prison. Then he could confirm what he had done.

He told himself that he had nothing to worry about. He was in the clear. Nothing could tie him to his wife’s death.

There was now a woman in the witness box.

“Who is she?”

“I told you Trevor. She is the tailor’s assistant.”

“I don’t recognize her. What is she here for?”

The woman had a thick Cockney accent. Trevor strained to listen to her: “That man brought in a jacket for me. It had been ripped at the sleeve. A piece had been torn off.”

“The man that you are talking about is the defendant, Trevor Merchant.”

“That is the man. He came in with a piece which had been ripped off of that jacket. And he wanted me to sew it back.”

“Where did you get the jacket?”

“He left it. He never came back to get it.

Trevor leaned over and whispered to Ewan, “She is lying.”

“Don’t worry. I will take care of it.”

“Why do you happen to have it?”

The witness answered, “He never came to get the jacket. And I heard about the investigation.”

“Did the tailor have an assistant? I don’t remember any assistant.”

Ewan had prepared his cross-examination.

“You have been working as a tailor’s assistant for sixth month, correct?”

“Yes.”

“You no longer work there.”

“No, I found another job.”

“Were you not fired from your job?”

“I agreed to leave the job.”

“What prompted you to leave?”

“I got in an argument with the owner.”

“The owner claimed that you were taking things from the customers.”

“Yes.”

“Was that a yes?”

“Yes.”

“You were also accused of trying to extort money from your customers based on letters and private items found in their clothes.”

“I was accused of all those things. But my boss had a grudge against me.”

“You did not do any of the offenses of which you were accused.”

“I did not!”

“Nevertheless, you agreed to leave your job.”

“I felt that I had no choice.”

“And you are equally sure that you are telling the truth with regards to my client.”

“As sure as I am about anything.”

“Those are all the questions which I have for the witness.”

After such an atrocious performance, the witness was lucky that she was not charged for perjury. It was a surprise that the woman had not been better investigated by the prosecution. Once she showed up with the jacket, she had easily been able to confirm all the suspicions of the inspector.

When the verdict was finally decided, Milena showed up in the courtroom. She was enthusiastic about the innocent verdict.

“Did you like my performance?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I did not do you right.”

“You are confusing me.”

She adopted the best Cockney accent, “I was not a good enough tailor’s assistant for you.”

Rita had been waiting for Trevor. He took her arm.

“You certainly did a wonderful performance.”

“You forgot something.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you want your jacket?”

“I think that I can buy another jacket with the insurance settlement from my wife’s accident.”

“Next time, push a little harder. That way she won’t have a chance to grab on to your sleeve.”

Milena’s comments were chilling.

Alida’s table was full of popcorn. She had popped it prior to the movie. And it was good and filling. She had found the perfect staple to sustain her. Ever since the floods, she had been drinking bottled soda water. It was now the stuff of life. All these elements made life possible.

“I love those last words of Milena. She really makes her point. Rita must jump halfway across the room when she hears them.”

Alida had taken her time on the witness stand. She understood how the right questions revealed the actual motive of the witness.

She again thought of the healing waters. They penetrated her being deeper and deeper. They warmed her being. She needed those powers. She was being pulled beneath the surface. She was giving in to her dreams. This was the liquid element giving life to everything in the world.

“And you knew that she couldn’t swim. That she was deathly afraid of the water. But you took her out in a row boat.”

“She was wearing a life jacket.”

“When her body was found, she was not wearing life jacket.”

“I told her to put on the life jacket.”

“She was not wearing the life jacket.”

“I remember her with the life jacket on.”

“You remember her wearing the life jacket because you cannot admit to yourself that she never put it on.”

“She was wearing the life-jacket.”

“But the water was choppy, and she wanted to return to the shore.”

“She never said that to me.”

“She couldn’t swim, but you kept rowing out in the water.”

“She said that she was fine.”

“But she was afraid of the water.”

“She never said a thing.”

“So you kept rowing further and further out knowing that she could not make it back.”

“She was in the boat with me.”

“But she got up from her seat and she tried to move around.”

“I told her to sit down.”

“But she didn’t sit down. And you only made her more nervous.”

“She needed to sit down.”

“You got angry that she wasn’t sitting down.”

“I didn’t want her falling in the water.”

“And she started to fall in the water.”

“I reached for her.”

“You realized that she would not be coming back with you.”

“I reached out for her.”

“But your hands were slippery. And you realized that all your problems would be solved if she did not come back with you. So you took out the oar and struck her with it.”

“She was afraid of the water. She couldn’t swim.”

“And she called out to you. But you didn’t do a thing. You knew that she was going down. You could have got help. But you never did a thing.”

“I panicked. I was afraid of the water. I couldn’t swim.”

“You swam back to the shore.”

“I wanted to help.”

“You brought the boat back to the shore. You told no one. You hid the boat in the trees. And you joined your friends as if nothing had happened.”

“Next time, when you push her from the stairs, push a little harder so she doesn’t have a chance to grab your sleeve.”

“Case dismissed.”

“We find the defendant guilty.”

“We find for the prosecution.”

“She couldn’t even swim!”

“I need some more water!”