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Reunion

by T.S. Weddell

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"No."

"What?!"

The clink of glassware and the smoky buzz of conversation in the small Washington, D.C. tavern where they had gone at Marion's suggestion to get "A drink. You know ... a drink?" flowed around them unheeded as Indiana Jones stared across the table in astonishment.

"You heard me, Jones. I said no."

Indy leaned back into the leather padded booth and blew the hair up off his forehead with a long bemused sigh. Had he been of a mind to make it a contest, this day would have won hands down as the most frustrating one of his life. First, there had been the loss of the Ark--his Ark--to those two infuriatingly implacable government stonewalls, Eaton and Musgrove. And now, in response to what he had thought was a romantic proposal that they find the nearest justice of the peace and make things legal between them right away, had come Marion's totally unexpected refusal.

"But, Marion," he said, taken off balance by this blow to his ego, "I love you!"

Marion downed her drink with a seamless practiced gesture and sighed. "I love you, too, Indy. You know that. But things aren't that simple."

"What do you mean?" he protested. "We've found each other again after ten years. I love you and you say you love me. What could be more simple than that?"

Marion shook her head. "My life didn't go into a state of suspended animation just because you left me. Things have happened since then."

"Hey, look, I understand about all that," he said magnanimously. Of course there had been a lot of men in Nepal and maybe even some before that. Indy didn't like the thought of that very much, but he thought it best to forget about it. Lord knows, he hadn't exactly been celibate in the meantime himself.

"No, you don't understand," Marion said. "I can't let us rush into this. There's something I..."

She paused, and when she began again, she seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "Look, Indy, I'm not turning you down flat. There's somebody I want you to meet first. Afterward, you can ask me again--if you still want to ask me."

She stared at him across the table with her fathomless, inscrutable gaze. Indy had never been able to tell what was going on behind those liquid brown eyes of hers; not when she was a precocious woman-child of fifteen, not now.

And she wasn't telling. For the first time, Indy came to the uneasy realization that he had indeed quietly assumed that, whatever she had been doing physically in the last ten years, she had kept her emotions sacrosanct, like the proverbial Sleeping Beauty, waiting for his return. It had never occurred to him that there might be something in her past that could not be as simply overlooked as the nameless forgotten men in Patan.

"Well?" Marion finally said.

Without a word, Jones drained the rest of his drink and turned to signal the barmaid.

"We'll want to get to the railroad station as soon as possible," he said after he had settled the tab, "and find out when the next train leaves for ... where is it this person you want me to meet lives?"

"Auburn, Illinois," Marion said calmly.

Jones rose and offered her his arm. "Then Auburn it is."

Lulled by the rhythmic ratchetting clatter of the heavy wheels on the tracks, Jones stared out the window at the ever-changing panorama of brown-stubbed fields as the train plunged ever deeper into the heartland of the midwest. The overnight train from Washington to St. Louis--the Red-Eye, as experienced rail travellers were wont to call it--was not a popular run, and only a few other passengers shared the car with them. Across the aisle, a middle-aged man in a loud plaid suit, who had gotten on early that morning in Akron, sat reading a copy of the Christian Science monitor, his salesman's leather sample-case at his feet. Down at the end of the car, a harried-looking young mother, laden down with bags and bottles, attempted to simultaneously feed her baby and amuse her fretful two-year-old, while a third child, a boy of about four, kept up a constant whining litany of, "Are we there yet?" until Indy, who was usually fairly well disposed towards children although as a rule he didn't go mushy over them, would have cheerfully chucked the little tyke out the nearest window. Jones shook his head--kids! He was vaguely sympathetic toward the woman's plight, but he was much too pre-occupied with his own problems to give it more than a passing thought.

Beside him, Marion dozed, her head nestled into the hollow of his tweed jacketed shoulder. She had been awake much of the time since they had left Washington late the previous afternoon, finally falling asleep as the first grey fingers of dawn had overtaken the westward speeding train. Jones had not slept at all.

As he looked down at her sleeping face, Indy was reminded of another time, not long ago, when she had leaned against him in sleep on the great Air East Asia liner during the flight from Karachi to Baghdad. There had been a barrier between them then, the seemingly indelible weight of past betrayals. That barrier had fallen, torn down by the shared experience of the Ark and the nights they had spent together since then, nights of nonstop lovemaking and rediscovered tenderness. It had been like the early days of their love for each other ten years before, only better in that Indy no longer spent his time vacillating between the two extremes of being racked with guilt over what he was doing and succumbing to his passion for her. Now, he could forget about the guilt and simply concentrate on enjoying the passion.

But now the barrier was back between them, either the old barrier or a new one. And it was not the kind of wall he could simply batter down with his

fist or take a pickaxe to, much as his archaeologist's soul might want to do so. The thought made for some helpless feelings.

A strand of Marion's dark hair had worked loose from the knot at the back of her neck and strayed down onto one cheek, where it fluttered gently back and forth with the sleepy rhythm of her breathing. Indy started to brush it back, partly to make her more comfortable, partly to reassure himself that he could still do something so intimate as touching her sleeping face, but he withdrew his hand stiffly when he saw her eyes flick open.

"Morning," he said. "How're you feeling?"

She blinked and sat up, stretching travel-cramped limbs. "I've had better nights... and worse. What time is it?"

Jones checked his watch, remembering to adjust for the change in time zones. "A little past ten. We should be in Auburn in a couple of hours."

Marion dug around in her purse for a small compact mirror and proceeded to apply a discreet coat of lipstick and to repair the night's damage to her coiffure.

Indy watched as she worked. He didn't know but that he liked her better suntanned and windwhipped by hot desert air. Seeing her looking so grownup and sophisticated was rather a shock to his system. "Marion..." he began.

"Hmmm?"

He swallowed slowly and gave voice to the question that had been niggling at him ever since the previous afternoon. "This 'someone' you want me to meet...is this someone a he?"

Marion shut her compact with a snap and turned to him with one of her fathomless brown gazes. "Yes..." she said slowly, "he is."

She dropped her eyes and stared down into her lap, seemingly scrutinizing the fine details of her manicure. "After you ... went away, my father sent me to stay for awhile with my mother's sister and her husband in Auburn. That was when I ... where we met. I haven't been able to see him very often since then. Abner didn't approve ... thought I should 'forget' about it."

Indy nodded silently. He could understand it well. Abner Ravenwood, he had discovered to his detriment, was not a man who would take kindly to

sharing his daughter with another man. Evidently Indy's nameless rival had been no better able to stand up to the stern old man than Indy himself had been.

"Of course, it's been over three years now," Marion continued softly. "He may not even remember me." She fell to staring out the window, her face clouded in thought.

Indy didn't press her further. His head buzzed with a hundred urgent questions, but he let the matter drop. He would have his answers within a matter of hours--probably too soon for his tastes. He found that he was almost afraid to find out what awaited him.

They spent the remainder of the journey speaking of polite trivialities: politics, the weather--anything to avoid the more personal issue that hung between them.

It was past noon when the train pulled into the depot at Auburn. Marion stood waving her hat from the top step of the train, and her face brightened as a tall lean man just past middle age rose slowly from the wooden bench where he had been waiting and ambled across the platform towards them.

"Uncle Josh!" she cried with pleasure, leaping down the steep steps to throw herself into his sinewy arms. Indy trailed after, carrying their few small pieces of luggage.

"Sakes alive, Marion, it was good to hear from you!" Josh said, untangling himself and stepping back to get a good look at her. "After three years without a word, we were afraid you were dead."

"I know, Uncle Josh. I'm sorry," Marion said. "Abner's death left me stranded in Nepal without a penny. I had to... find work to earn my passage home." Her voice caught at the mention of her job in Patan. "I sent you two letters, but I guess the mails from Nepal aren't very reliable."

"You're home now--that's what counts," the old man said. "We were sorry to hear about Abner though."

A few seconds of uncomfortable silence passed until Marion exclaimed, "Oh, Uncle Josh--I'm sorry. This is Indiana Jones. Indy...my uncle, Joshua Gordon."

"Pleased to meet you," Indy said, with his most affable smile.

Josh returned the handshake and acknowledged the introduction with a terse nod. "Truck's parked out front," he said, turning to Marion.

They followed him around the side of the depot to the spot where an old battered Model A pickup stood in the shade of the wide front porch. Indy tossed their bags into the back and hoisted himself into the cab. Off they went, Marion perched on the seat between the two men.

Within two blocks, Auburn's main street turned into a wide residential avenue that ran beneath arching elms and past large Victorian houses as it headed on out into the countryside. Indy leaned his elbow out the Model A's window, letting the sun warm his skin and the breeze ruffle his hair. The passing scenery looked so familiar that he might almost have been coming home to the small town where he had been born and raised, only a few hundred miles to the north, although he had not set foot there since his mother's funeral immediately following the Great War. Jones was a wanderer at heart, but after years of filling his eyes with the exotic sights of jungles and deserts, the sight of homely, fertile farmland put him oddly at peace.

He reached over and gently clasped Marion's hand, which had been folded in her lap. She started slightly at his touch but did not pull away. For a moment she turned to him with a soft smile, but abruptly she tensed and looked away as the truck began to slow.

"Here we are," Josh remarked as he turned the truck into a long dirt driveway that led to a white frame farmhouse with wide porches on either side of a single-story kitchen ell. He drove on past to the rear of the house, where the large back yard was shaded by a tall oak tree with a worn tire swing hanging from its lowest branch. Josh stopped the truck to let them out, then drove off in the direction of the large barn and its accompanying cluster of outbuildings.

Indy stepped down and looked around, taking in the shady farmyard and the flock of plump chickens pecking in the worn patch of dirt beneath the swing. It was already early October, but summer was having a last hurrah. The air was warm, and insects buzzed in the faded hollyhocks that lined the side of the house. In a pasture on the other side of the drive, a herd of black and white Holstein cows chewed and swished lazily, and two ancient sorrel draft horses dozed in the afternoon sun, rousing only to stamp an occasional back foot at a troublesome fly. The breeze off the pasture carried the smell of manure, but Jones didn't mind. It was a scent from his boyhood memories, making him feel young again.

The kitchen door swung open and an older woman stepped out onto the porch, her face wreathed in smiles.

"Aunt Min!" Marion cried and ran up onto the porch.

As the two women embraced, Indy studied the aunt. She was a handsome woman, an older version of Marion, with austere, finely chiselled features and dark hair that had begun to go to silver. Looking at her, it was easy to see what side of the family had given Marion her dark good looks.

"Welcome home, child," Aunt Min murmured, stroking Marion's hair. As the two of them drew apart, Indy noted with surprise that Marion was hastily brushing tears from her eyes. In all the time he had known her, Indy could count the times he had seen Marion cry on the fingers of one hand and still have a few left over.

Composing herself, Marion turned to Indy, who was standing at the foot of the steps holding their luggage and beginning to feel like a piece of excess baggage himself.

"Aunt Min, this is Indiana Jones." The next thing she said was rather cryptic. "I always told you he'd come back some day."

The aunt gave Indy a frank once-over that made him wonder if perhaps he had forgotten to shave or his tie was crooked. "Pleased to meet you, Doctor Jones," she said, her lips narrowing down into a thin, hard line. Indy decided that he could also guess from what side of the family Marion had gotten her temper. "Josh putting the car away?" Marion nodded. "You look pale, dear," Minerva continued. "Are you tired from your trip?"

Marion smiled weakly. "We were up all night."

"Then come inside. I'll make some lemonade. That ought to perk you up." Outside the door, Marion stopped, looking around anxiously. "Aunt Min, where's Woody?"

"He's out in the back field with Shep," Min answered. "The Western Union office didn't deliver your telegram until after lunch, just enough time for your uncle to get to the station to meet you, and Woody'd gone off for the afternoon by then. Otherwise, he wouldn't have missed your homecoming for the world. He hasn't forgotten you, child. Remember that old snapshot of the two of you together Josh took back during Christmas of '29? He has it upstairs in a frame beside his bed."

The older woman turned, her hand on the carved screen door. "I'm so glad you're back, Marion," she said solemnly. "Joshua and I love Woody, and we've been happy to keep him with us all these years, but we're getting old now. It would do our hearts good to see you and Woody finally

together, now that Abner's not around to ... now that he's gone." With a veiled look at Indy, Min led the way into the house.

Of course! it made sense, Indy thought as Minerva showed him and Marion into the front parlor. This Woody must be the one Marion had brought him here to meet. He could see it now: a summer romance with a cousin, a boy-girl sort of thing. And the parents saw Indy as a potential rival for their son's girl, which accounted for their chilly reception of him.

The parlor was something out of Grant Wood, or that new young artist in the Saturday Evening Post, Norman Rockwell: lace curtains, dark flocked wall-paper, and heavy velvet upholstered furniture. Yet, surprisingly enough, the room was homey and inviting. A small spinet piano stood in one corner of the room, a stray shaft of sun-light from the west window illuminating its ornate scrolled woodwork. Indy wandered over and lightly brushed a finger over the ivory keys; it was very much like the one that stood in his study back home. The thought brought sadness; Indy had not realized before just how much he had been looking forward to taking Marion back to Marshall College with him, to show her his cozy little house with all his carefully gathered souvenirs of past digs.

Indy sank down onto a nearby horsehair sofa, his hat balanced gingerly on his knees, and stared at Marion, who was perched uneasily on the edge of a settee across the room. The more he learned, the more her purpose in bringing him halfway across the country puzzled him. Could it be a confrontation of two lovers? Some kind of contest? It wasn't like Marion to want to make him squirm, although he supposed he owed her that much. And why all the mystery? "Ask me again--if you still want to ask me." What was he supposed to learn here that would make him change his mind?

A clock on the wall ticked away monotonously, its brass pendulum swinging back and forth inside a glass case inscribed with the word "Regulator" in goldpaint. Dust motes danced in the shafts of sunlight that filtered through the parted lace curtains on the west windows. The silence was palpable.

The words, "You love him, don't you," beat helplessly inside Indy's mind, bursting for release, but his organs of speech felt paralyzed, as if some strange power had put a lock and key upon his will. When at last he forced himself to speak, the sound was harsh and rasping, as if his throat had been silted in by all the dust of Tanis. "Marion ... ?"

She jumped and turned to him with wide startled eyes. She looked nervous, almost afraid, Indy thought; at least she wasn't enjoying this any more than he was. She hadn't brought him here to gloat.

Before Indy could say anything more, Minerva entered carrying a tray filled with glasses and a large, moisture-beaded pitcher of lemonade.

Jones accepted a glass with polite thanks and waited until Min had taken a seat before he took a sip of the sweet liquid. It was cold and deliciously tart, but in his present state of nerves, it sat sourly in his stomach, burning like battery acid. He thought longingly of the flask of brandy in his hip pocket and sighed. A quick nip would take the edge off his tension and settle his stomach, but it would only confirm the aunt's already dim opinion of him.

Heavy boots thudded up the porch steps, and Joshua Gordon let himself into the parlor. "I'll have some of your good lemonade, Minerva," he said, pouring himself a glass and taking a seat in a large corner armchair. He leaned back and smiled expansively at his niece.

"Good to have you back here, Marion," he said. "I never did think it was a good idea, Abner dragging you off all the time to God knows where."

"Well, at least I got to see the world, Uncle Josh."

"Your telegram said only that Abner was dead, no details," Josh said. "How did it happen?"

"Honestly, Josh!" Min protested. "The poor girl's only just in the door. Don't go stirring up painful memories first thing!"

"That's all right, Aunt Min," Marion said. "I've had plenty of time to get used to it. Abner died in an avalanche. We had both been working up at his dig site, and he had just sent me back down to the village to get a notebook he'd forgotten. I was halfway down the trail when I heard the rumbling. I turned around to look and... the whole side of the mountain was gone."

"oh, Marion..." Minerva said sympathetically.

Marion shrugged. "It was quick. And he died doing what he loved best. Archaeology has never been the safest of professions," she said with a pointed glance at Indy.

"You said you found work in ... Patan, was it?" Josh asked. "What exactly did you do there?"

At her uncle's questions, Marion choked on her lemonade.

Indy remembered her defiant words to him back in the Raven Bar: "Guess how I lived, Jones? I worked here. And I wasn't exactly the bartender, understand?" Nothing to be ashamed of, under the circumstances, but he could tell by her reaction now and by the way she had ducked the subject earlier that in spite of her put-on toughness, it bothered Marion and bothered her a lot.

"She ran an inn," Indy interrupted, jumping in to the rescue. "Best inn in Patan, that is, 'til I burned it down." As one, Marion's aunt and uncle turned to look at Indy in polite amazement. "Of course I didn't burn it down on purpose," Indy hastened to add. "You see, I was in a fistfight with some Nazis, and there was this red-hot poker..."

The two older folks' eyebrows rose ever higher as Indy told his tale of pint-sized German sadists, whizzing bullets, and Sherpa thugs--a tale incongruously out of place in a staid Midwestern farmhouse on a quiet autumn afternoon. Jones could see Marion grinning faintly in spite of herself and eyeing him gratefully as her flabbergasted relatives received a crash course in the Indiana Jones lifestyle. All thoughts of Marion's career in Patan were mercifully forgotten.

"...and so, after the inn burned down, Marion had to come with me to Egypt," Indy concluded, with a big smile at Josh and Minerva, who were by this time taking on a glazed look about the eyes.

"Egypt?" Min ventured, with a hint of trepidation.

Luckily, before Indy was obliged to explain about the Ark and his mission for the U.S. government, they were interrupted by the sound of a dog barking in the yard outside.

"That'll be Woody coming home," Min said, brightening.

At the sound, Marion's entire demeanor had undergone an abrupt transformation. She leaned forward in her chair and stared intently at the empty doorway, her muscles taut with eager anticipation and her face glowing with a loving light.

So that's how it is, Jones thought, his heart sinking within his chest. All along, he had hoped that his fears would be proved wrong, but it seemed that Marion really was in love with this cousin of hers. Indy supposed that this was his cue to do the noble thing and step aside. After all, it was the right and proper thing to do. He was too old for Marion, he could only offer her a continuation of her unsettled, peripatetic life with Abner, and, God knows, there was enough hurt and betrayal between them to last a lifetime. Let her start fresh with someone her own age.

And go back to his books, and his classroom, and his lonely, emotionally sterile life--having brief, uncommitted affairs with women he met in the course of his travels, or with a steady parade of eager young coeds with hero worship in their eyes; always looking for something he never quite seemed to find, never could find, because, he had learned in the past few happy weeks, what he had been looking for all along was Marion.

The hell he would! Indy told himself angrily, the old Jones spirit reasserting itself. He wasn't going to creep meekly away. He would give this farmboy, this Woody, whoever he was, a run for his money. Indy might lose Marion in the end, but he would damn well go out clawing and fighting. After all, no one had ever accused Indiana Jones of being noble. Indy set his jaw firmly and stared at the open doorway.

There was a clatter of footsteps on the porch, and the screen door banged open. A large tan and white collie dog bounded into the parlor, its toenails clicking excitedly on the hardwood floor.

"Uncle Josh, Uncle Josh--guess what! I found an arrowhead down by the creek!" a voice called out, brimming with enthusiasm. "Can I take the shovel back there tomorrow? Mister Thompson at school says that Indians used to camp around here. Maybe I'll find more...."

A brown-haired boy of about nine years old stood silhouetted in the doorway, holding out a flint object in his right hand. He stopped short, regarding the visitors with startled hazel eyes. A smile of recognition brightened his face as he spied Marion. "Mama...? Mama!"

He rushed across the room and threw himself into her outstretched arms. Marion held him close, cuddling the slender, suntanned little body and resting her cheek against the soft hair. She cast a poignant look at Indy over the child's shoulder, and in her brown eyes he could read the lingering pain of a lonely, scared fifteen-year-old, no more than a child herself, sent away in secret to face a long, heartbreaking ordeal alone.

"Oh, Marion ... oh, my God!" he whispered.

Gently, Marion disengaged herself and turned the boy around to face him. "Indy, this is my son, Ravenwood Gordon--Woody for short," she said quietly, in a tone that told him he could turn his back on this and walk away, and she would not do or say a thing to stop him, however desperately she wanted him to stay. He understood everything now.

Indy felt a strange burning congestion behind the bridge of his nose. He swallowed hard and blinked it away. Indiana Jones never cried, especially not in front of his...

Slowly, he rose and crossed the room, aware of Josh and Minerva's eyes on him. No wonder they don't think very much of me, he thought in passing. Well, that could change. Pausing only to stroke Marion's cheek lovingly, he eased himself down until his eyes were level with the boy's.

"Hello, Woody," he said, smiling softly. "I'm Indiana Jones ... I'm your father."

End

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