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Holy Smokes

POMFRET

A Brief History of the Reasonably Energetic Whores of Sabbaday Falls, New York

(Excerpt from the cutting-floor rejects of the National Park Service's *Adirondack Oral History Project*)

Picture the Valley where I was born. Hold it in your mind's eye. Don't let your mind blink, because you'll miss it: a narrow Adirondack gash running north-south, set off by seven steep hills, as if the talon of some enormous prehistoric bird had carved up the earth when it seized its prey, and the Tehonawaka River that southward flows was but blood welling in the wound. Scoop up some river water. Blood yourself. Sure as my name is Avery Vadeboncouer, hear that bird cry!

According to the Valley's talkers, who consulted with ancient elders of the Tehonawaka tribe, who in turn claimed to have witnessed the event firsthand, the prehistoric bird carried its prey off to an aerie on Hun-

gry Hill, where it was devoured, and its bones — here my memory fails me; according to the talkers, there was some significance to its bones — were made perhaps into dice or cuff links or hair combs.

No matter! No matter! What difference does it make to you technicians and grammarians, with your good manners and your microphones and your expense accounts from the Park Service?

What actually matters — and where you should focus your historical attentions, in the humble opinion of Avery Vadeboncouer — is what that bird stole. Or more precisely, what little it left behind: an empty and perfectly inhospitable place, full of split granite as if it had once rained lightning, and surrounded by hills so steep that pockets of unmelted snow persisted until June where the sun didn't shine.

Hardly a soul believed the Valley could successfully host an overnight guest let alone a permanent settlement. But you heard it here first, straight from the mouth of Avery Vadeboncouer: even three hundred years ago, political considerations could overcome practical constraints. To force-fill the void so close to its northern French neighbor, the British colonial governor ran advertisements in news sheets from the *Universal Instructor in all Arts and Sciences and Pennsylvania Gazette to the Vir-*

ginia-Centinel [sic] promising free property to those willing and able to stake a claim. The ads drew a predictable mix of debtors, drifters, runaway slaves, troubled spirits, unquiet souls, common criminals, hustlers, conmen, pickpockets, speculators, sodomites, Frenchmen, Jesuits, and other sundry scoundrels.

The sufferings of those first settlers were legion. The river broke free of its banks on a regular basis and stripped topsoil to earth's bone. There were two stones for each clod of dirt, and the only consistent crops were ice and shadows. The barns of the village the settlers christened Sabbaday Falls were braced at unright angles against the abrading wind. Breeding was out of the question: women were in such notoriously short supply that Increase Devotion, Sabbaday Falls's first colonial administrator, repeatedly but unsuccessfully petitioned Buckingham Palace for professional public women supplied and paid for by the crown.

That first winter, when kind words shattered in the Valley's cold before they'd been half-launched from lips, wishing one's neighbor good morning was a wanton profligacy. The talkers claimed that Constable Churchward Storey collected fistfuls of such broken greetings and, taking aim at a rum-soaked vision of the return of that prehistoric bird of prey, hurled them into the seven

steep hills, prompting an avalanche that buried Sabbaday Falls under twelve feet of snow.

Doubt mars your handsome faces. You men from Away are sons of a different and darker age, when the Valley's greatness is but a distant echo, and your yardsticks and sentence diagrams can't always capture what the world knows. Truth be told, I was reluctant to meet with you. You'd never have guessed, but we talkers – oh, yes, not just the ladies have the gift for the gab — have always been a reticent bunch, deploying a special kind of silence known as *discretion*. Except you get us started, we give up words the way a miser gives up a coin: you must tear it from his dead cold mouth. We are garrulous solely for pay.

What's that you say? The Park Service will compensate me for my time? Well, why didn't you green eye shades say so at the outset and saved us some precious time? None of us gets younger. Pull up a chair. Pass me that bottle. Slip a pillow behind my head. You with the tape recorder, rub my feet. Sit for a spell. I'll tell you the world not how it is, but how it ought to be. And make that check out to Avery Vadeboncouer. V-A-D-E-B-O-N-C-O-U-E-R.

Now, where was I? Yes! The avalanche! For two solid months, not a single debtor, drifter, runaway slave,

troubled spirit, unquiet soul, common criminal, hustler, conman, pickpocket, speculator, sodomite, Frenchman, Jesuit, or other sundry scoundrel stirred from his buried lodgings. Instead, they passed that woman-free winter hand-crafting rudimentary horologes, which they called *time machines*. Because they spoke on the hour and thus more frequently than their creators, the time machines were widely considered *garrulous* and — for all their future utility — forever shadowed by the suspicion that they might be *artworks* and by definition frivolous and potentially yielding near occasions of sin.

You are doubtful that such a cramped, narrow and buried people, focused so on the passage of time, could ever have produced a Valley of famous talkers like myself. Well, I'll confess: talk's no native species.

But the Valley was so very bleak in those days that time's passage promised the first settlers a closer Eden, when what had graced the Valley before the bird's descent would again be restored. They were constantly muttering to themselves, *What lush growth was plucked out by the bird of prey? What beating heart? What unmentionable happiness?* These thin questions were what passed for prayer in those niggardly days.

And for all their meanness, these bony petitions were largely answered, though three hundred miles east. A

minor dispute in a cold alley in colonial Boston concerning a lady's virtue and a pocket watch led to an ardent Brahmin's unfortunate demise. The perpetrator fled. Because stealing a horse was considered worse than murdering a man, she trudged three months on foot through New England forests in the dead of winter. In her wake, she left two barns burnt from carelessness and four toes lost to frost. She limped into Sabbaday Falls on that April day when the crocuses first broke the snow crust and the scoundrels dug free from Churchward Storey's avalanche. She promptly collapsed into the spring-swollen torrents of the Tehonawaka River.

Figuring her drowned, dwellers of Sabbaday Falls poked her with sticks to push her body out into the icy current. Startled by her objections to this rough treatment, the townspeople hauled her ashore, washed and dressed her, and set her on display beneath the Witness Tree in Sabbaday Common in the spot known as the Squabble Hole where the Valley's first citizens gathered to air bad blood.

Such a rare sight was this necessary woman that despite her maimed feet, frostbit face, a patch of burnt scalp, and slack and burr-filled hair, the visitor was given a name for beauty that has lived to this day. Three men were killed in the fight for rights to deflower her.

Listen! You've come to me for the truth, grammarians: the winner of this Great Squabble was my great-great-great-grandfather (I may have lost track of his greatnesses), a man of infinite resource, fervently Catholic, pugnacious, taciturn, cultured, penurious, educated by the French Jesuits whose missions studded the ancestral lands of the Tehonawaka tribe, a man whose parents and provenance were unknown, as if his (my) ancestral line started here in the Valley, split off from granite by a lightning strike, but unfortunately saddled with the surname Smallcock (*Petitcoq*), God bless his soul.

A figure of outsized ambition if only modest manhood, motivated by post-coital consideration of the visitor's most prized possession (the disputed pocketwatch), Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock gratefully promised the visitor (known locally as Easter Lily) a hundred such contrivances, nay bigger, better versions, as plenty as the stones of the Valley. By the following morning, regret filled his soul like river water in a pail, but my great-great-great-grandfather so rarely opened his mouth to speak that he felt obligated to stand behind those few words that he uttered.

Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock therefore set to work building a waterwheel on the banks of the Tehonawaka to harness the river's power. Within weeks,

this crude water-powered manufactory cranked out the first time machine for his bride. (*Bride* being a loose term, as there was neither priest nor preacher in the Valley at that time, and Sabbaday Falls Constable Churchward Storey blessed the infelicitous union with the sanction of colonial law but his fingers crossed behind his back.)

Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock's genius for keeping time was lost on the visitor from Boston. You see, in those days, on account of the woman shortage, a reasonably energetic whore in the Tehonawaka Valley could earn in a week six months' average wages of a farmer, and Easter Lily was an unreasonably energetic lady. Within weeks, Easter Lily had amassed a small fortune consoling the raw wounds and hurt pride of Churchward Storey and every other man my great-great-great-grandfather had defeated in the fight to deflower her. Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock became infinitely less great, reduced to extracting rents for the use of his property equal or better to what he paid for his neighbor's breeding bull.

In a misguided attempt to win back Easter Lily's love with a Christmas gift, Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock sent to Boston for her sister. He figured the company might make his bride less *lonely* (his term) and the watchful presence of a family member re-instill any

residual sense of shame.

Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock badly miscalculated. Christmas Holly (some wags called her *Comocladia dodonaea*, the Christmas Bush, also known as Poison Ash and a relative of Poison Ivy) arrived by sleigh with a horsehair blanket over her knees and sleigh-driver's hand up her dress. The sisters promptly entered into business together. Their success drew *lonely* women in droves.

Enraged that his home had become a *henhouse* (his word), Smallcock abandoned his cabin. He loudly condemned the loss of respect for property, the rule of law and the sacred institution of marriage, which loss, he boldly predicted, would lead directly to market failure, stunted corn, a steep drop in the quantity and quality of Valley-made time machines, bowel irregularity, rickets, dissolute constables, social disease, and the general and widespread unraveling of the Valley's moral fiber.

The screeds he penned at the time were marvels: great sheets of catastrophically expensive vellum imported from Europe and covered in cramped script documenting each and every affront to those sacred marital rights in anatomical detail sufficient to make a whore blush like a Sabbaday sunset. Initially posted on the Witness Tree in Sabbaday Common (the only tree not felled

by Churchward Storey's avalanche, it has been said), the document was laboriously handcopied and delivered to every hamlet of the colony. According to the talkers, at least one version made it as far as the City of Boston, where the senior magistrate recognized from personal experience a signature form of fellatio peculiar to Easter Lily and dispatched an armed deputation to retrieve the fugitive from the henhouse. Unfortunately for the cause of universal justice, the magistrate's prized constables succumbed to the sisters' charms and reported back to Boston empty of hand (but with trousers full of the clap).

I am only telling you what I know: my great-great-great-grandfather inadvertently became the Colonies' first widely distributed pornographer. His posted broadsides served not only to spread the lonely sisters' fame, but also to sully Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock's good name, because in an era when grim, persistent silence was synonymous with authentic manhood, publication of my great-great-great-grandfather's great complaints and timeless grievances was viewed as decidedly effete and perhaps *homosexual* (had such a word existed at the time). A real man would have spoken with a musket.

Victim of these unintended consequences, Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock retreated into a society of eager malcontents, womanhaters, scolds, moralists,

wetblankets, sanctimonious bastards, professional politicians, and clockmakers (or *timekeepers*, as they were then known). None of this society was much given to idle chatter. They were an industrious, productive, handy and humorless bunch, but they harbored a secret pride: they had harnessed the two forces that had seemed incorrigible: time and the Tehonawaka.

Next the wind, some of them dreamed.

Next the women, thought others.

Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock only abandoned this bitter group when Easter Lily agreed out of an abundant grace (not to mention a sense of discretion) to give him a small cut of the (hen)house proceeds in return for glowering silence the rest of his days.

In the seasons that followed this happy bargain, the waterwheel turned, clocks were assembled, and a sweet sweaty cacophony pulsed day and night from the cabin high on Hungry Hill. Winter's privations couldn't resist the talkers' charms. Sabbaday Falls' time machines were distributed across the globe. Birth control was rudimentary. Bastards abounded. Those of legitimate birth were suspected of being boring (*dispirited* was the popular term). Smallcocks remained small and Devotions and Storeys kept to themselves. Eden had surely arrived again in the Tehonawaka Valley.

Your expressions, gentlemen, again reveal the scourge of skepticism to which you beancounters are prone. You've obviously been soliciting advice from those who refer to me as Avery Vade-*bonkers*. But let me assure you truth's frozen on those dispirited bullies' lips as surely as words uttered in a Sabbaday winter.

Remind me how much you're paying me for my participation? Tell me again what riches I've been promised? Ah, yes. Now my memory recovers: it was a princely sum that would make my mother proud. Death may well be the wages of sin, but I would be the first to record the income on my 1040 tax return. I am an honest crook.

So, forgive my temper. What's your pleasure? I am at your service, gentlemen. Do you wish to hear how the talkers affixed an annex to the cabin on Hungry Hill to shelter those waiting their turn? How my aging great-great-great-grandfather generously equipped the annex with extra tools, so that the waiting men's idle hands might be turned to the production of parts for the manufactory's water-powered assembly of time machines? How that acquisitive old blood-bastard came to take substantial credit for the business enterprise, noting the sisters' success was largely possible only because of the time machines used to measure the units for sale — fifty-minute hours (with ten minutes to spare for douching

and a sponge bath)? Yes, there are stories still to be told, and tonight I am far from dispirited. Whatever you want to hear, gentlemen. Whatever you want to hear.

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You've suggested we talk about the Great Blizzard of 1788, when three inches an hour blew sideways and piled in drifts so high the johns had to dig down under their feet to access the door to the cabin on Hungry Hill. Breathing was out of the question: snow-choked lungs soon lined with a crust of frozen crud, and the storm was likened to a second Churchward Storey avalanche.

Despite the inclement weather, certain citizens (Devotions, Storeys and Smallcocks all) gathered on Sabbath Common under the Witness Tree. Faces wrapped in wool, heads swaddled in fur, bent double as if under a heavy load, they trudged hand in hand up Hungry Hill and burned the cabin and its annex to righteous ash.

A cold snap like none seen since the first winters in Sabbaday Falls set in after the Great Blizzard: gravestones cracked, tree limbs snapped, fires wouldn't catch, and the Tehonawaka River froze to its bed. Nonetheless, at least one john – an apostate descendent of Churchward Storey who had wandered off in the early part of the storm after satisfying himself on the talkers' charms – miraculously survived. He returned to Sabbaday Falls in the

spring claiming to have been deep frozen all winter in a snow bank downriver near where Easter Lily was first pulled from the Tehonawaka.

This particular resurrected Storey promptly renounced talkers. He became the first of the second generation of debtors, drifters, runaway slaves, troubled spirits, unquiet souls, common criminals, hustlers, conmen, pickpockets, speculators, sodomites, Frenchmen, Jesuits, and other sundry scoundrels to muster the presumption to call himself a *preacher*. (This custom was much followed in coming years, until by mid-20th Century there were more preachers in the Valley than people to hear their sermons, more preachers even than stones in the soil. In my humble opinion, they have proved themselves a virulent non-native and choking weed.)

He preached that the bird of prey had indeed returned to the Valley, or at least its spawn, disguised as spring flowers, a talking flock descended to pick this Valley's corpse clean.

"Hear their cry!" cried he. "May never another ring out between this Valley's walls."

Though no bones were found in the cabin's embers, Preacher Storey spread the word that the talkers had perished (in fact, bundled in bedsheets, they had escaped across the Tehonawaka in the dead of night). Overnight,

the sisters' trade diminished. Their age skewed older (Easter Lily was all of 105 years old at the time she quietly turned her last trick), few new women were called, and many consigned themselves to conventional wifery alongside a Storey or Devotion or Smallcock, a choice as inexplicable to the sisters as death (but far less mysterious). During this period, the suffering funks of the women of Sabbaday gave the Valley's constant northeast wind the name by which it is known to this very day: the Whore's Sigh.

Shh! Listen! Do you hear it, gentlemen? There it is: a potent combination of distress, ennui, loneliness, desperation, and unspent seed. I suspect many of you are familiar with the sound. Am I right?

Again, the eye roll, the pursed lips! *That Vade-bonkers!*, you think. *Isn't he a crazy one, what with his jokes and jibes and outrageous tales?* But I speak the truth: the talkers' tale might have ended after the Great Blizzard with but a wind's empty breath, had no new generation of sisters filled the void.

Roundly rejecting the label *whore* (which you small gentlemen unfortunately favor) as a crude and unworthy epithet that failed to capture the range of services these sisters provided and conjured instead grim, hurried, nocturnal and mechanical acts from which one scurried

away as if they were one's own conscience, the new generation coined my preferred term (*talkers*).

In place of the rustic cabin and annex on Hungry Hill, the talkers announced grand plans for a communal fortified mansion named Fearing Bluffs. In hopes of their favor, every man in greater Sabbaday Falls but one pitched in to help. (That lone hold-out earned a name as a eunuch and even the few old widows in the Valley would not have him and livestock whinnied and kicked whenever he came around.)

Picture the talkers' castle: high above the Valley floor, on a pitch so steep the timbers seemed to lie against the slope of Hungry Hill, Fearing Bluffs was a dramatic sight. The front door opened into a soaring hall two stories high. In the parlor, cherubim hid among plaster leaves in the crown molding, and the crystal chandelier could be lowered for cleaning. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors masked the back wall and floor-to-ceiling windows graced the front so that johns could view the merchandise front and back without ever stepping foot within. The parlor boasted seven divans, two love seats, a ballet bar, red wallpaper, dozens of antique time machines, a twelve-person hookah, brass bowls of fresh cucumber water, a hobby horse, and a genuine confessional liberated from the local Catholic Church Our Lady of the

Narrows in a midnight raid.

And the talkers! Let's not forget the talkers! Unruly, untamed, impulsive, dramatic, they staked out claims in Fearing Bluffs' bold geography, and God forbid one of their sisters should breach the boundary of another's boudoir. Cat fights were common: blood on the floor, and shredded blouses, and hurled shoes, and put-out eyes. When they weren't fighting, the talkers went through cases of lipstick, oceans of lubrication, trunks of naughty undergarments, and white sheets sufficient to surrender a hundred battlefields. They were thespians all, accomplished actresses whose roles ranged from thundering sadists to the most innocent of schoolgirls. More than reasonably energetic, they routinely took on five men at once without breaking a sweat, and each man would leave not merely satisfied, but decimated, chafed, and ruined for any other woman for the rest of time.

The talkers inspired legendary devotions among their patrons: candlelit vigils, Herculean feats, epic poetry, and floods of red roses were not uncommon. Their fame and talent drew puritans, adventurers, sodomites, foreigners, moralists, libertines, herbalists, gerbilists, cheap imitators, painters of nudes, rough trade, girl scouts, sex liberationists, perverts, fetishists, and flashers. They inspired the construction of a gentlemen's railroad that ran from

Lower Manhattan to the depot at Sabbaday Falls seven times daily.

They were patriots and heroes. During the War of 1812, the talkers abandoned their political neutrality, and, just as Abraham Smallcock Jr. put the clock manufactory to work making gunparts for the young Republic, the talkers worked the local warriors' other weapons and dispensed not so much as a single British blowjob in all the years of the conflict.

Later, too, talkers harbored slaves on the Underground Railroad at Fearing Bluffs and dispensed freebies to sustain the fugitives on their journey northward. These couplings added some complexion to Sabbaday Falls still evident to this very day, not to mention an unexpected well-hungedness (if I do say so myself).

Now I know what you're going to ask: "Old man Vadeboncouer, last of your kind, stooped and weathered and dried up like an old stick, lined and bound to your chair in a pitiless state institution under the care of morons and reprobates with hardly the imagination and creativity to accurately describe their own private parts, how do you explain this impossible phenomenon, that a little sisterhood in a narrow, cramped, ungenerous Valley hundreds of miles from the nearest city could possibly make such a success of its second act in that era before the

Civil War?” (Or something along those lines.)

Explanations have been proffered:

- the exceptional beauty of talkers;
- the fame and prominence of their best customers;
- the lure of the bucolic Valley;
- minerals in the soil;
- the looseness of the Valley’s morals;
- the superiority of the talkers’ technique;
- its Mesdames’ management skills;

•the habitual complaints about the shortage of women that continued long after balance between the sexes had been restored; and

• a quality of the oxygen we breathed, stiffened by the Whores’ Sigh, producing an infectious melancholy that can only be cured by compulsive copulation.

Me? I attribute the phenomenon to the same force that powered clockmaking in such an unlikely and remote place: the undulant, vagrant, spill-the-banks current of the Tehonawaka that runs through the veins of everyone Valley-born. You heard it here first, from the lips of Avery Vadeboncouer: we know no tides such as you have on the coasts. In the Valley, the only tides are the ebb and flow of silence and talk, silence and talk, year after year.

And that, gentlemen, is why — like clockwork — the

talkers’ 19th century heyday yielded to the first stirrings of a new silence. During several consecutive Christian Awakenings after the conflict (it seemed the Lord would allow no one whatsoever to get a good night’s sleep), Devotions, Smallcocks and Storeys again preached their way to power, using the bully pulpit to spread notions of “privacy” and “parlor talk” and “good manners” and “taboo” (which is of course just another nutty name for silence).

The Squabble Hole became a stage for piety contests. Storeys took on Smallcocks, Devotions challenged Storeys, Smallcocks called out Devotions. Knees were put to the test, hands were chafed raw with wringing, and protestations of unworthiness rang in the seven hills. Finally, a Preacher Smallcock declared these contests themselves unseemly, and spiritual differences were again taken behind closed doors for resolution, until, for the first time in its history, Sabbaday’s Squabble Hole was Squabble-free.

As the science of contraception developed in the early twentieth century, fewer children were born to the talkers, and their percentage of the Valley’s population waned. Dispirited folk prevailed. Other signs pointed to the end of an era: during the Roaring Twenties, every last inhabitant of the Valley — even the Devotions, Smallcocks, and Storeys — was a part-time talker, the din

made listening rare, and the market in talking crashed as surely as Wall Street.

By the time the Great Depression set in, a fetish for strong and silent film stars took hold that persists to this day. The radio priest Father Coughlin blamed talkers and Jews for the Crash. The gentleman's railroad ceased to run after a terrific wreck. And the day I was born, when my dear mother's labor pains produced seismic events up and down the east coast, a Last Great Christian Awakening stirred the Valley, as if the holy knew my birth spelled trouble.

Blame two men in particular for the Awakening: the Right Reverend Abraham Allcock (he dropped the SM in the Flapper era, despite his well-known predilection for the same among the talkers) and the priest derisively known as Father Featherweight (aka Abhor Storey), pastor of Our Lady of the Narrows Catholic Church. There was no love lost between preacher and priest, but they took common aim at talkers.

Men who sought talkers' company were hanged from the boughs of the Witness Tree. The stream of strangers from Away dwindled. Clock factories shuttered. My mother's secret admirers spirited me away on a moonless night before the holy men could come for me.

Under stern admonition from Father Featherweight

not to enjoy it, the Valley's Catholics engaged in murderous bouts of productive silent sex, love noises extinguished, giggles stifled, postures cramped, mechanical as pistons. The Right Reverend Abraham Allcock suggested prayer as a substitute for talking, arguing that it amounted to much the same thing, even as he struggled with his own garrulous urges, which he suffered with the regularity of a clock.

Predictably, the void drew the attention of the crown, and the state government announced groundbreaking for a dam at the southern end of the Valley, which was to be flooded to the brim. Ostensibly, the resulting reservoir was to provide much-needed post-Depression employment, but everyone knew it was meant to silence the Valley for the benefit of that great city to the south with the unending thirst, which – it was well known – had been creating its own homegrown whores (none of whom, it has been said, could hold a candle to a Valley talker).

Surveyors prodded the Valley end to end. An army of WPA laborers cleared brush. The Feds hacked down the Witness Tree and re-graded one of the seven hills. Confident as if reading a clock, the men in charge talked endlessly about what time it was: time for this improvement. Time for that change. We could thank them later.

Allcock's and Featherweight's ineffectual fumbblings in Albany didn't slow the government steamroller. The prayer vigils, invoked saints, bake sales, stern sermons, letter-writing campaigns, fire and brimstone, lit votives, cold prophecies, silent sit-ins, and holy condemnation in the name of Christ Jesus Our Lord all failed.

"Only a matter of time," the decisionmakers said. They might have added: *you brought it on yourselves*.

The holy men had no such reserve. The Right Reverend Allcock boldly declared, "You brought it on yourselves. We hold the talkers responsible."

"If you could eliminate the talkers," agreed Father Featherweight, "God's favor would again shine on the Valley."

Kangaroo courts convened. Once-proud talkers stepped off the sidewalks to let the holy pass. Encouraged by the men of God, a mob climbed Hungry Hill and burned Fearing Bluffs, which is why there's no evidence of it today.

My mother, Rua Vadeboncouer, was the first challenger, saying: "The holy men and their God have had their chance to stem the flood; give someone else a try."

No one mistook her meaning. By "someone else," Rua (from the Irish *Ruach*, signifying *spirit* or *breath*) meant herself. Although everything about my mother

(excluding only her wasp-sized waist) was generously proportioned—her voice, her gestures, her resentments and curses, her doe-eyes, her appetites, her ambitions, her breasts, her furies, her substantial booty, and even the labor pains which proceeded my birth—Smallcock blood ran in her veins, and she could be a trifle dogmatic on occasion.

Rua proposed a great public squabble. She represented Sabbaday Falls. Albany dispatched a lawyer to represent its interests.

The lawyer sat on one side of the stump of the late Witness Tree to which my Great-great-great-grandfather Smallcock had once posted his pornographic broadsheets. My mother sat on the other.

I was just seven years old at the time, but this marathon session is etched in memory as deeply as the bird's talons tore up the Valley floor. The scene was reminiscent of colonial days, when differences between neighbors were settled by publicly shouting at one another beneath the Witness Tree (or if the matter was between a man and his God rather than between neighbors, by sewing a scarecrow to receive the verbal abuse and filling it with winding sheets, greasy rags, buttons on which babies had choked, unlucky underwear, and handkerchiefs wet with tears).

My mother kicked off the contest. She cited the prehistoric bird and traced the rise of the Valley from cold obscurity.

The lawyer cited *progress*.

My mother flattered the lawyer's birdlike plumage peculiar to the male of the species, the education apparent in his diction, the cut of his suit jacket, and the generosity of his God-given gifts. She assured him he was no scarecrow or stuffed shirt.

The lawyer cited progress.

Never before and never again was there such an ocean of fierce and fabulous talk heard in this hemisphere. For eight long hours in that treeless moonscape denuded by the WPA, my mother cajoled, persuaded, teased, wheedled, sweet-talked, tempted, importuned, urged, beseeched, bullied, and beguiled. Even the holy men, worried that progress had become a new God, united behind her effort. Choruses from Our Lady of the Narrows and the Right Reverend Allcock's First Church of the Keepers of Time echoed every word my mother uttered.

But the lawyer of progress proved a eunuch of great ambition, not only deaf to the talkers' charms, but also a lukewarm spiritual enthusiast. The last great Squabble ended not with a bang but a whimper (or, more pre-

cisely, a Whore's Sigh). Progress happened. The dam was completed. Refugees streamed through the Valley's southern pass. Authorities pierced the temporary coffer dam, and floodwaters rushed down upon Sabbaday Falls.

Be sure of this: I was an eyewitness to that day's terrible events. I watched my mother throw herself before the oncoming wave. (Many erroneously recall that she arrived on a surfboard, with a cigarette holder clenched between her teeth, and a dachshund under her left arm, but this is a pure and well-intentioned mythology.)

At first ankle deep, then knee deep, then retreating to Hungry Hill, Rua and her remaining sisters talkers cajoled, persuaded, teased, wheedled, sweettalked, tempted, importuned, urged, beseeched, bullied, and beguiled the relentless flow. Even the holy men preached at the floodwaters as if they could part them.

Were will alone sufficient, they'd have certainly succeeded. If the Valley yielded anything, it was because you worked for it. It gave nothing up for free. (*Ditto for its men*, my mother once quipped, quoting Easter Lily before her. Getting them to give up the least coin had always been a minor miracle.)

But neither the great talkers of Fearing Bluffs nor Sabbaday Falls' silent holy men could stem this particular tide. When the waters crested over her head, my mother

shot up from the depths with such force that she entirely cleared the surface. She swam to shore, pulled herself from the muddy water, and hauled off her dress. In sopping brassiere, black garters, naughty panties and spike-heeled shoes, she wrung every drop from her dress as if to show, people later commented, that she had nothing left to give.

Others were less lucky. A few talked until their throats filled. The holy hunched in prayer as the water washed over them. Today, the speedboats and jetskis that race across the reservoir's surface from time to time encounter these unusual shoals. Vessels flip and scatter their human contents.

At night, when the watercraft dock, the unquiet water is yet stirred by the Whore's Sigh. Haunted, the holy come back to feel small. Prayer skips off the reservoir's surface like a flat stone. In winter, certain cold snaps known as *holy smokes* cause the reservoir to freeze deep.

Again, you roll your eyes. You wink at your friends and make winding motions at your ear as if I am cuckoo crazy. Completely Vade-bonkers.

I should scratch your eyes out. Put a gouge in your face and make you bleed. It's you who are deluded. You think you can capture talk on your audiotape, but talk is vagrant and spills its banks. Check your pockets – are

they not empty? I have picked them clean.

You think you have come here to relieve my loneliness and make me feel important again. You say, Old Man Vadeboncouer, your words are a treasure, your stories invaluable, future generations will praise you for your cooperation.

You talk nonsense, green eye shades. You're not sure what you wish to be told. Your own stories are largely forgotten if ever you had any to speak of; you neglect them and they wither on the vine. Vines, snakes of wire, microphones, shushing, bleeping out of foul language, it's all the same. Technicians, grammarians, bean-counters, the lot of you, and not a talker among you, not a single soul capable of telling a tale. You are no more than another awakening of malcontents, womanhaters, scolds, moralists, wetblankets, sanctimonious bastards, professional politicians, and keepers of time!

Trust me on this, gentlemen: my years are longer than yours. The bird's outstretched wings are but a shadow cast, and your silence is no more than a passing affliction. Nature never loves a void. Surely it will be filled.

Ha, ha, ha. I had you going there, gentlemen. Some of you jumped back from my bedside. One nearly spilled my urine bottle. There's bite in me, no? Talk and noise? *Sturm und drang*? Ha, ha, ha. Stunned silence. I

love it. I think I drew blood.

Wait! Are you leaving? Have you heard enough?

So be it. Leave Avery Vadeboncouer to his bed. But be certain of this before you go: some of you silent ones, those who don't overvalue truth, whose waters run deep, you will be back. I may be old, but I am well-hung and not the slightest bit dispirited. I am the last of my kind. Avery Vadeboncouera is a necessary bird, and there's talk in him yet: you and me can make sweet noise all night. [X]