

The Third Act of Theo Gruene
Talya Tate Boerner

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, without the prior written permission of One Mississippi Press LLC. Excerpts may be used for review purposes. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

One

It was an inconvenient time for a visitor, so Theo ignored the person knocking at his front door. Using stainless steel tweezers, he lifted the edges of the plant specimen and centered it over the mounting paper. Once he placed the brittle stem onto the glue, that would be that; there would be no shifting the delicate seed pod. The specimen would be preserved where he placed it for eternity. Concentration was a necessary skill.

Again, the knocking.

A storm had been building all morning so Theo told himself the howling wind was to blame for the noise. He placed the native columbine specimen onto the glue and then pressed it into place using the tip of the tweezer. Collected twenty years before his birth, it was in remarkable shape, with its pistils and stamens still intact. He read the tag that came packaged with it—*West Mountain, Washington County, Dr. Demaree, February 1930.*

Three more raps on the door—*rat-tat-tat*—rattled his mind. “Coming, coming!” Whoever was there wasn’t planning to leave. He would see to the uninvited caller and send them away.

Theo suspected it was Nita Johnson, who lived two doors down. Her husband had died several years ago, and since then, she’d made it her mission to check on him occasionally. “Just making sure you are alive in there,” she would say. Sometimes he invited her inside for a glass of iced tea or a cold beer. Theo wasn’t altogether unfriendly (or at least didn’t mean to be), but given the choice, he preferred solitude.

He opened the door with a flourish, fully prepared to explain his busyness to Nita, but instead of his neighbor, he was surprised to find a young girl standing there. She wore an oversized lime green raincoat, and her dark, luminous eyes appeared enormous through the lenses of her eyeglasses. She looked like a spring grasshopper.

“Well, now, what have we here?” Theo said, finding his voice.

The girl blinked but said nothing. Theo thought of the plant specimens waiting for him, the mounting glue thickening in the jar on his dining room table. He glanced along the sidewalk in front of his house, expecting to see the girl’s mother waiting nearby, urging her to *go on, speak up*, as she attempted to sell the World’s Finest chocolate bars, or raffle tickets for an Easter ham, or whatever Lafayette Elementary School was promoting for its next fundraiser. But there was no one else around.

He crossed his arms and continued taking in the child from head to toe. The hem of her raincoat dripped water onto his doormat.

“Can I help you with something? Are you lost?” She *looked* lost. Or confused.

“Actually, I’m a who, not a what.”

“Come again?” It was his turn to look confused.

“When you opened the door, you said, ‘What have we here?’ But I’m a person, not a thing. And the proper interrogative word for a person is *who*, not *what*.”

Theo frowned. *Was this kid for real?*

Again, his eyes swept the sidewalk and street in front of his house, but no one else was out on such a stormy morning. He thought of the television show *What Would You Do?* He watched it occasionally when he happened upon it, and it always left him wondering what his reaction might be to certain circumstances. This could be one of those situations. His first inclination was to shoo the smart-mouthed girl away, but in case John Quiñones was hiding in the hydrangeas growing around his front porch, he decided to play along. “Pardon me. I stand corrected. *Who* have we here?” Despite his eagerness to return to the plant specimens, Theo maintained a calm voice. By now, he was curious.

“The truth is, I missed my school bus by two measly minutes, and I can’t get back inside our house. I forgot my key, and it’s storming, and I don’t want to be struck by lightning.”

Theo had to listen carefully to keep up with her rapid-fire words.

“Would it be okay if I come inside and stay with you for a while?”

“Me? Well, no, I don’t—”

“My mom gets off work just before noon today, and I’ll go home then.” She swiped at her glasses with wet fingertips, further smearing the lenses. “I won’t bother you. I promise.”

Too late for that, he thought.

Shallow pools of water shimmered on the sidewalk leading from his front steps to the street. The fern he had successfully overwintered before returning to its porch hook just yesterday began spinning in the wind, its fronds whipping all around. Overnight, the March winds had blown in alright, bringing quite the quandary. He couldn’t invite a strange urchin child into his house. She could be a pickpocket or a scammer of some sort. But what if she wasn’t? He couldn’t leave her outside in such awful weather, hidden camera or not. “Well, I guess you better come inside. Let’s see if we can’t sort this out.”

The girl stepped into the foyer and slipped off her shoes. Her sockless feet looked cold, and her pale skin was tinged purple. When she noticed him frowning at the chipped blue polish on her toenails, she covered her feet with the rainbow-colored backpack she removed from her shoulders.

“Let’s start with your name,” Theo said, his interest in the child and her circumstances growing.

“Can we start with the restroom? I really need to pee. Like really, *really* bad.” She began to squirm, dancing almost, crossing one leg over the other, as though the urge had hit her so suddenly she might not be able to walk another step without having an accident.

Good grief. What had he gotten himself into? “Right this way.” Theo rushed the girl through the family room toward the half-bath, just off the kitchen. After she disappeared behind the door, he heard nothing but the grumble of thunder rolling over his rooftop. Theo had not been expecting a morning thunderstorm any more than he had expected to find a young girl on his doorstep. Work had consumed him since the latest package of specimens had arrived from the university. Even the local newspaper and the weather forecast had fallen by the wayside. He had barely eaten during the past two weeks.

Soon, the toilet flushed, and he heard a rush of water from the faucet. Finally, the bathroom door opened. Having shed the green raincoat, she looked different, smaller if that was possible, a bit daintier.

She smiled. “Thank you. I feel loads better. I hope it’s okay that I left my raincoat on the hook behind the bathroom door. It’s drippy. Also, I used a hand towel to dry myself off a little bit.” She sounded relieved.

Theo nodded. “That’s fine. Now, how about we have a little visit?” He motioned toward the kitchen. She scampered to a chair and hopped into it.

“Could I possibly borrow some socks? Your floors feel completely frozen,” she said, staring at him with those huge bug-like eyes.

Theo sighed, looked at the girl’s naked toes, and then the oak floorboards running the length of the kitchen. Even though he was wearing his favorite old sneakers (as well as socks, thank you very much), he knew his floors were indeed cold. When he worked on herbarium specimens, he kept the downstairs temperature at precisely sixty-five degrees. Cooler temperatures helped preserve ancient plants.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.” Theo went to fetch a pair of white athletic socks from the clean pile he’d dumped on top of the dryer but had never gotten around to folding. “They’ll swallow your feet but should warm you right up,” he said, handing her the socks while experiencing the oddest out-of-body sensation. Something about the girl seemed familiar to him.

The girl thanked him and began pulling a sock over her left foot, her entire shin and knee disappearing underneath the stretchy fabric. She laughed at this, and he wondered about her age. She looked awfully young.

“Okay. How about I make you a nice cup of hot chocolate while we figure out what to do? Should we call your mother and let her know you missed the bus?” Theo disliked having his work interrupted, but relished having a problem to solve.

“Do you have any green tea instead?”

Green tea? What kid preferred green tea to hot chocolate? “I can probably rustle up a bag of Lipton, but it won’t be green.”

She pushed her glasses up on her petite nose. “That would be perfect, Mr. Gruene.”

The sound of his name coming from the girl’s mouth stopped him cold. He had never met this child—he was sure of it. He’d never purchased a box of Thin Mints from her, or seen her riding bikes with the other neighborhood kids. “How do you know my name?”

“It’s right there on that envelope.” She giggled and pointed at the stack of unopened mail collected on the kitchen table.

“Oh. Of course.” It was an obvious explanation; one he would have guessed if he’d not been completely thrown by her sudden presence. Now feeling antsy about a whole host of things—a precocious child at his kitchen table; the way her eyes had quickly scanned his mail; the fact that she was now wearing an article of his clothing—he pulled the stack of envelopes toward himself protectively, and straightened it. He didn’t yet know the girl’s name or age, but he knew she had no difficulty reading. She had even pronounced his German-derived surname correctly; *Green*, like her preferred tea.

Theo put the kettle on and then sat across from her. “Okay. Go ahead.”

“What would you like to know?” The girl’s feet didn’t quite reach the floor, and when she swung her legs back and forth, the toes of the athletic socks flopped against the braided rug.

He inhaled slowly, trying to sooth his nerves. “First off, your name. I think that would be a good place to start. Don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. I failed to introduce myself because I was dying to go to the bathroom. I’m sure you know what that’s like. It’s hard to concentrate under such desperate circumstances.”

“Well...I guess that’s—”

“Oh, you might be interested to know you’re almost out of toilet paper. I only used two squares, and you have fourteen squares left.”

He stared into the girl’s gleaming eyes. Like a withered plant needing a deep soaking, she was rejuvenating before him, her cheeks flushing rosy now that her feet had warmed.

“I have more toilet paper under the sink,” Theo said, although he had no idea why he was telling her. Good lord, he needed to get this girl back to her mother so he could return to work. With less than three weeks until the herbarium closed for spring break, he still had over fifty specimens to mount and log into the system.

The girl grinned as though a spare roll of toilet paper was the best news she had received in some time. “I thought you might have more, but I didn’t look. My mom says you should never ever open someone else’s bathroom cabinets.”

“Your mom sounds like a wise woman. How about we call her?”

“Oh, she is *very* wise, but I’m not allowed to call her at work. Not except in the case of a dire emergency,” she said, each word spoken slowly and wrapped in awe.

Theo scratched his eyebrow and thought about what to do next. He had the strangest feeling the girl would never leave. And he still didn’t know her name! When the kettle whistled, he welcomed the distraction of fetching her tea.

“Alrighty, young lady, here’s your tea. It’s very hot.” He placed the cup and saucer on the table in front of her. “Now you wait here while it cools. I’ll be right back. I need to check something.”

The dining room was his favorite room in the house; the oyster gray paint on the walls created a calm environment for working. He stirred the glue brush and was relieved the adhesive had not hardened in the jar. He allowed himself a quick moment to admire his earlier work. The columbine specimen was incredible. Theo peeked at the next specimen waiting in the stack of old newspapers. It was another wild columbine, perfectly unspoiled, with a mass of tiny, hair-like roots still attached to the plant’s stem.

“Mr. Gruene, are you doing arts and crafts?” The girl stood so near him he could smell the fresh aroma of strawberry shampoo emanating from her rain-dampened hair. She leaned over the walnut table and peered at the fragile specimen.

“Please don’t touch anything.”

“What are you planning to do with this dead weed?”

Theo swallowed the impatience building in his throat. “This isn’t a dead weed. It’s a dried native plant specimen. My job is to preserve it for future generations.”

“Oooohhh. I’ve read about the global seed vault in the Arctic Circle, you know, the place where all the seeds from the earth’s plants are stored in case civilization is completely wiped out by a cannibal galaxy or catastrophic climate change or a humongous asteroid, and we need to start over. But I didn’t know people like you store entire plants, roots and all.”

“I thought you were drinking your tea.” Theo folded the newspaper back over the specimen, feeling like their entire conversation had taken a Ray Bradbury turn.

“No, I’m letting it cool off. You made it too hot. Remember?”

Theo sighed. He’d specifically instructed the child to wait in the kitchen while her tea cooled, but evidently, she couldn’t follow the simplest directive. The clock on the antique sideboard began chiming. It was only nine o’clock, yet his day had already been derailed in an extremely weird way.

“Oh, cool. It’s a secret, isn’t it?”

He stared at the child, still confused about the turn his morning had taken. What was she talking about? “What do you mean?”

“This project.” She waved her hand over the stack of newspapers. “You’re working on a top-secret assignment that involves the survival of plant life in the event Doomsday happens.”

Theo chuckled. What a wild imagination this kid had! For a fleeting moment, he thought of his wife. Annie had been wildly imaginative too, and deeply concerned about the planet. Years ago, during an unseasonably hot summer, she had coordinated a neighborhood carpooling program in hopes of reducing carbon dioxide, or at least not adding to the problem of a depleting ozone layer. Even though Theo still knew very little about the girl who was studying the supplies arranged on his dining room table, he knew Annie would have taken to her instantly. The thought brought with it a familiar pang of loss. “I’m afraid my project is nothing quite so intriguing. I volunteer for the University of Arkansas, helping the herbarium preserve plants for future study.” He thought of the serene campus workspace and wished he was there, alone, his mind fully engaged in his work.

She cut her eyes at him. “If you say so.”

Theo led the girl back to the kitchen. He placed an ice cube in her still-steaming cup of tea and then went to the pantry to root out something for her to eat. She might be more forthcoming with information if he made the conversation more like school story time.

“Now then, why don’t we have a snack while you tell me your name and explain what stroke of luck brought you to my front door.” He placed a possibly stale package of peanut butter crackers in front of her and tried to remember when he had eaten last. Perhaps the entire morning was a hallucination brought on by a lack of protein.

The clock in the dining room chimed the quarter hour. Time was slipping away.

“Okay, I can do that.” She sat with a very straight back, flattened her hands on the table on either side of the teacup, and drew in a long breath, as though preparing to deliver important news. In the short time she had been inside, her hair had begun to dry to a rich auburn shade, curling and spiraling along her shoulders like a mass of vermicelli noodles. Again, he thought of the columbine waiting on his dining room table, its roots a tangled knot.

“Well, sir, my first name is Penelope.” She paused as though waiting for him to comment. When he said nothing, she continued. “I know what you’re thinking.” Again, she paused and stared at him, her eyes flashing.

"I doubt it," he said. Despite the girl's wide grin and charming dimples, the disruption of Theo's morning was ballooning into a case of indigestion. Why wouldn't the girl explain herself? He suddenly felt weary and wondered if he was missing something that should be obvious.

"You're funny."

"Not in the least."

"Well, I can tell you have a contemplative side, but yes, you are decidedly funny. You may not realize it."

Contemplative? Decidedly? Theo had never heard such large words come from a young person's mouth. Perhaps she was older than she appeared.

"Anyway, you're thinking, *my, what an old-fashioned name for such a modern girl*, right?" She opened the package of peanut butter crackers and scooted one across the table to him.

"Not really, but it is old-fashioned. I'll give you that." He didn't think he'd ever met anyone named Penelope, but he liked the name. It seemed to fit her. Theo ate half of the cracker in one bite, the saltiness waking his taste buds.

"I've been told I was named after my great-grandmother, but I believe I was named after Odysseus's incredibly patient wife. She was queen of Ithaca, you know."

"Well—"

"Mr. Gruene, do you remember Queen Penelope? She waited twenty years for her husband to return from the Trojan War. The war lasted ten years, and her king, who evidently was terrible with directions, took ten long years to get home. In the meantime, Queen Penelope resisted over a hundred suitors! Can you imagine?"

He knew she was waiting for him to respond to this soliloquy, but all he could say was, "No, I cannot."

She nodded. "Me neither. But she was definitely a faithful person." Penelope rested her elbows on the table, her chin on her hands, and dreamily blinked her eyes. Then, jerking upright, she added, "Names are super important, don't you think?"

Since his retirement ten years ago, Theo's life has been reassuringly predictable, each day unfolding much like the one before. And he liked it that way. He spent time on his herbarium work, ate lunch at Hugo's every Friday with his buddy, Winn, and if there was a Razorback game on (his favorites being baseball, basketball, and football, in that order), he watched it on television. Sometimes, he even attended a game in person. But that morning was certainly turning out to be unlike any he'd experienced in recent memory. He never would have imagined such a strange conversation transpiring in his kitchen. Theo reckoned he was completely losing it. He shut his eyes and waited for insanity to fully claim him.

Penelope signaled her continuing presence by abruptly clearing her throat.

She was still there.

"Anyway, I live on Josephine Street, just behind your house." She pointed to Theo's backyard, where, beyond his privacy fence, Josephine Street ran parallel to his.

This news instantly refocused him. "Right back there?" He stabbed the air with his finger. Through the canopy of the massive white oak tree growing in the center of his backyard, he could see the slate roof of the house behind his.

“Uh-huh. I mean, yes, sir.”

There was no way this girl lived in that house. The enormous house behind him belonged to Gloria Rice. Theo should have listened to his gut from the beginning! He held his tongue and refrained from disputing the girl’s information. She had finally begun talking, and he was determined to get to the reason for her visit.

“In two weeks, I will be eight-and-a-half years old—my birthday is September fourteenth. I’m in the fourth grade at Lafayette Elementary. I was allowed to skip third grade because I tested off the charts in math.” Penelope recited all this information as though she were repeating lines memorized for a school play. When she blinked her gigantic eyes, her long lashes practically brushed against the lenses of her glasses.

“Penelope, I’m curious. Do you have a last name?”

She laughed. “Of course. Everyone has a last name. Even famous people like Lizzo and Zendaya have last names.”

For a split second, he thought she had begun speaking in a foreign tongue. Then he realized she was likely referencing two people famous in her world, but not his. He would not let this quick-talking child distract him from the situation.

“Okay, so what is it?”

“Palmer. P-a-l-m-e-r. Palmer.” She answered as though participating in a spelling bee.

“Well, Penelope P-a-l-m-e-r, I may seem like a very ancient man to you, slow on the uptake and all, but I happen to know Gloria Rice owns the house behind me. That’s been her property for at least fifty years. And, unless you are Ms. Rice’s long-lost granddaughter or something, I highly doubt you live in the mansion behind me.” Theo wasn’t friends with Ms. Rice, but he had lived in the neighborhood long enough to know a thing or two about the homeowners immediately surrounding him. Especially someone like Gloria Rice, who frequently made the news for her philanthropic endeavors.

Penelope giggled.

“Now listen, I don’t know what sort of—”

“Mr. Gruene, I wouldn’t classify you as ancient! The Egyptian pyramids are ancient. Scribes used those clay tablets back in the olden days of Mesopotamia—now those are ancient. Can you imagine carrying a clay tablet to school in your backpack?” Her eyes glittered, and he realized she was waiting for him to respond.

“No...um...that would be heavy coursework.”

“Seriously.” She offered him another peanut butter cracker, and he took it. “So, regarding Ms. Rice, she’s in Aspen. She goes there this time of year and stays through the summer. And no, I’m not related to her, and I don’t live in her mansion, but I sure wish both things were true. Don’t you?”

“Well, not—”

“My mom and I live in the guest house over the garage. We moved there on Valentine’s Day. It’s small, but it’s such a very nice place to live.” Penelope’s lips formed a perfect circle as she blew a stream of breath across her tea.

This news unsettled Theo. Even though he didn’t partake in gossip and rarely attended the occasional neighborhood get-together, he couldn’t believe he would have overlooked new neighbors

living only yards behind his back fence. Last year, an artist from Spain had lived there while teaching a course at the university. He had been a quiet fellow, who kept to himself, but still, Theo had known he was there.

“Have you ever visited Aspen? It’s in Colorado, by the way.”

“Yes, I know where Aspen is, and no, I’ve never been to that particular city.”

“Well, I am planning to go there. I want to travel all over the world.” She flung her arms wide as though holding an enormous globe. “I’m going to be rich and have my own airplane, just like Cardi B. I’ll jet around anywhere I want, any time I want. People will say, ‘Where’s Penelope off to now?’ and everyone everywhere will be extremely jealous. My plane will have a cool name too, although I haven’t thought what it will be yet.”

Theo stared at her but had no idea what to say to any of this, so he responded with the question at the forefront of his mind. “What exactly is a Cardi B?”

“Hellll-loooo? You’re killing me, Mr. Gruene. Cardi B is a famous internet sensation. An influencer with millions of viewers.”

“I see.” He didn’t see, nor did he care to see. He was confused just thinking about it. “So tell me again, why can’t we call your mother?”

“Because she’s a nurse, well, *almost* a nurse. Technically, she’s a certified nurse’s assistant. She has to leave her phone in her locker during her shift. That’s why. Anyway, it’s very nice to officially meet you, neighbor.” Penelope offered her tiny hand and grinned like she had saved that line for just the right moment.

“Well, yes. Welcome to the neighborhood, Penelope.” He wasn’t sure he meant the sentiment, given how she’d shaken up his morning like a cheap snow globe, but he shook anyway. Such a tiny little thing, her hand was as soft and slight as a ragdoll’s.

“Oh, and Mr. Gruene? You can have all these crackers.” She slid the remainder of the package across the table to him. “I have a peanut allergy, so I can’t eat them.”

He should have figured as much. It seemed the whole world was allergic to a host of foods he’d had no problem eating as a child.

Theo placed his empty teacup in the sink and stared out the window past his backyard to the apartment where the girl lived with her mother. The rain seemed to have already blown over, but even so, he couldn’t ask the child to return home. She had no way of getting inside. Also, wasn’t she too young to be home alone anyway?

When no other solutions came to mind, he suggested Penelope settle herself at the kitchen table and do some schoolwork. She nodded and ran to get her backpack, pulling out a textbook, an iPad, and a fistful of pens and pencils bound with a thick rubber band. She arranged everything in a neat row.

Theo returned to his plant specimens in the dining room. At first, he remained aware of Penelope in the kitchen, as she turned pages in a school book or adjusted her position in her chair, but after a while, she went stone silent, and he forgot she was there. Theo worked without interruption, completely losing track of time.

Eventually, a clear voice rang out, startling him back to the present. “It’s almost noon. My mother will be home soon, so I’m leaving now. I can let myself out.”

“Alright. I’ll help you collect your things.” Theo had forgotten about the girl, but he was still relieved to know she was leaving. By the time he walked into the kitchen, Penelope was already standing in the foyer.

“Thanks for letting me stay awhile. I’ll bring your socks back later if that’s okay. And don’t worry, I’ll take excellent care of them while they’re in my possession.”

Theo had plenty of socks and was about to tell her to keep them, but he lost his train of thought when he saw how ridiculous she looked. She wore the hood of her raincoat draped over her head, the legs of her jeans tucked tightly into the white athletic socks, and the socks pulled over her knees. He would credit her for one thing—she didn’t concern herself with her appearance, and he admired that.

“Maybe I can come back again when it hasn’t been raining,” she continued. “I’d like to play with your dog sometime.”

His dog? The dog had not been around all morning. “How do you—”

“SeeyalaterdearMisterGruene.” Before he could reply to Penelope’s mouthful of chirpy, blurred-together words, she was out the door and down the front porch steps, her green raincoat flapping in the early March wind. Amused, Theo waved a tired goodbye and watched her skip along the still-damp sidewalk until she was out of his eyesight. Overhead, a sapphire sky offered no trace of the earlier storm.