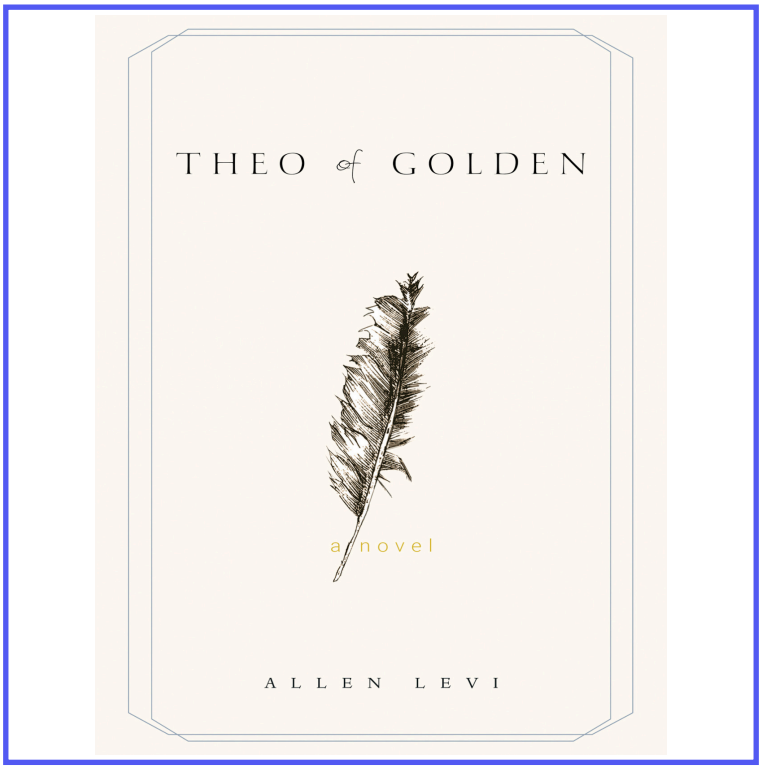


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To Cubby Culbertson,
as a token of gratitude for our long friendship
and a reminder, just between us, that you
promised to buy a hundred copies of the book
if I dedicated it to you.
Will that be cash or charge?

THEO of GOLDEN

“Ellen’s wilted halo.
Christmas shoes of Lamisha W.
Pill bottle of Bobbo.
Found feather of the absent jay.
October sky above the Oxbow.
Oceanscape at Biscopo.
The blues of Golden were plentiful that year.”

From a brochure announcing
an art exhibit at Zila Gallery

PROLOGUE

Theo was in Golden for only a year, from springtime to springtime. He arrived just before Easter, when the Boughery and the Promenade were an ocean of dogwood blooms and azaleas. When pollen settled like a lemon patina on every exposed surface in the city.

Over time, his friends would learn that he had a great fondness for rivers. Be it the Douro of his childhood, the Seine of his glory days, the Hudson of his retirement, or the half dozen others that flowed through his various hometowns, he had a riparian instinct that seemed to draw him toward moving water. Growing up in a maritime nation might have had something to do with it. Perhaps every son of Portugal has the sojourning spirit of Magellan in his blood.

Whatever the reason, it is not surprising that he chose to live beside the Oxbow when he was in Golden. From his back window, facing west, he could see it at any hour of the day. From just outside his back door, three stories up, he could hear it. Or so he said. At every place or any hour, with his eyes closed, he could feel it, could sense its determined pursuit of the gulf, its winding journey south, its glad march to the Atlantic.

Only a year. Not so long. But long enough to create a current of his own and to catch others in it. Without knowing it, a whole cadre — Asher, Tony, Ellen, Basil, dozens of others — was being carried along by the vortex that was Theo.

Floating.

Sailing.

Gathering mass and momentum.

Running to an ocean they knew little about at the time.

And looking back, all would have said — in praise of that old Portuguese man with the lilt in his voice and the hint of a smile constantly on his lips — ”our hearts,” to use the preacher’s words, “our hearts burned within us.”

CHAPTER 1

On his first full day in Golden, Theo woke early, pulled back the curtains of his hotel room, and looked out over the southern dawn. He had arrived the previous afternoon from his home in New York City, where winter, with a newsworthy late-season mixture of snow and ice, was in full fury. The flight to Atlanta (on a private jet) and the drive farther south to Golden (in a chauffeur-driven Lincoln Town Car) had transported him to a world of warmth, abloom in myriad shades of green, yellow, lavender, and pink.

Now, waking from a night of restful sleep, he stood inches from the window and breathed deeply, as if he might somehow inhale the freshness of morning through the panes of glass. He gazed admiringly at the first touches of springtime.

His eyes moved westward to the broad, meandering flow of the Oxbow River. A ribbon of fog hovered over the water.

From three stories up and through the dim light before sunrise, Theo recognized many of the landmarks he had studied in preparation for his trip: the cobblestone streets, the Iron Works, the old cotton warehouses, the antebellum oaks.

But three stories up was not nearly close enough for someone of his inquisitive disposition. He dressed comfortably, inspected himself in the mirror, straightened his collar and scarf, and turned off the lights. He hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door handle and took the stairs to the hotel lobby. He tipped his hat to the desk clerk and stepped out into the cool morning, eager to walk the streets before they became busy with foot traffic and automobiles.

Other than a coffee shop and a small diner, the businesses along Broadway were closed. Theo had the sidewalk almost entirely to himself as he began his walk.

He had no particular destination or goal in mind. Whenever he saw an object or sight that interested him — and he was a man very easily interested — he paused and lingered until his curiosity was satisfied.

He was, for instance, interested in the ornamental iron work on the facade of the corner building. Who made it? When? How?

He was interested in the composition of the bricks in the old but well-preserved building that now housed a college admissions office.

He was interested in the plaque that told the story of the median, called the Promenade, that ran down the middle of Broadway. (Wherever he lived or traveled, Theo made a habit of reading historic markers, something he was able to do proficiently in five languages.)

He was interested in a sculpture, of modern vintage, near the entrance of the university nursing school.

He took particular interest in a small bird that perched and begged for crumbs from a bench along the sidewalk.

Theo stopped, bent slightly at the waist with his hands clasped behind him, and whispered to the imploring creature. "I'm sorry, dear fellow, but I have nothing to give you this morning. Perhaps tomorrow? And stop complaining. Be glad you're not in New York today."

He picked up an empty beer bottle and put it in a nearby trash can.

At one point, he took out a small magnifying glass, a loupe, from his pocket to study a purplish azalea bloom.

And on and on.

Those punctuations of interest turned Theo's walk into a crawl. By the time he had gone a mere two blocks, morning traffic was steady, the sidewalks were beginning to buzz with students and businesspeople, and the parking spaces on both sides of the Promenade, which had been vacant earlier, were almost full.

But not to worry.

On this day, and for the foreseeable future, Theo had no deadlines, no meetings, and no obligations. He was at liberty to enjoy the carefreeness of unfettered flexibility and complete anonymity. He was a mere tourist.

He did not know a soul in the town.

Well . . . perhaps one.

He was not yet certain how long he would be there — weeks, months, longer? — but in very short order, he was pleased with the feel of his new temporary home.

First impression: a very pleasant place to be, and appropriately named.

Golden.

CHAPTER 2

As Theo concluded his stroll along Broadway, he returned to the small coffee shop he had passed earlier that morning. The aroma of caffeine hung like a scented cloud (and functioned as highly effective advertising) at the entrance to the business.

A painted windowpane next to the door identified the establishment in gold letters outlined in black:

The Chalice
Light Street and Broadway
Monday through Thursday, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Friday and Saturday, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.
Sunday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Once inside, Theo took a deep breath and scanned the room.

Standing, sitting, alone and in small clusters of various generations, ethnicity, and attire, people of all sorts had gathered in witness to the shop's magnetic pull.

A young man leaving the building with a cello on his back and a coffee in hand skillfully navigated the tables and the incoming customers with occasional whispers of "excuse me." He caught Theo's eye with a sideways glance, smiled, nodded, and spoke a greeting. Such a thing was unusual, even suspect, in the big cities where Theo had spent most of his life, but he reciprocated the gesture with a nod and a smile, then stepped toward the short line where orders were placed.

He sensed that he might become a regular there, an intuition that proved true for the year he lived in Golden.

If only the coffee is as rich as the ambiance, he thought.

That wishful possibility seemed unlikely.

Theo was used to the strong coffees of Europe — abatanado and café pingado in Lisbon, café con leche in Madrid, espresso in Bologna, café noisette in Marseilles. The American shops had often disappointed him, even in New York, where, for every excellent cup he'd consumed, he had endured a half dozen letdowns. His standards, he had been told, were rather exacting.

The old man exchanged a greeting with the barista at the counter, placed his order, received his drink, and took a seat in a nearby armchair.

He was more than a little surprised at the quality of the espresso and nodded approvingly as the first sip rested on his tongue.

He studied the room: the customers' faces, their voices, greetings, and gestures; the

care with which the cheerful barista did his work; the activity from table to table.

But in short order, his attention was drawn to and fixed entirely on the artwork that covered the walls of the shop.

On the left, right, and rear walls were portraits, ninety-two of them in total, done in pencil on white paper and in black frames of three sizes. All had obviously been done by the same artist. And, as if to reflect the customers in the shop at that moment, the collection included a full range of humanity — age, race, and expression. Portraits and portraits and more portraits.

Even from the distance between himself and those framed faces, Theo perceived the richness of detail and delicacy with which they had been rendered. There was a quality to them, an aliveness, that would almost make one believe the people portrayed were spectators of the Chalice rather than mere adornments on the walls.

The old man's mind began to spin a fanciful vision: each of the ninety-two frames is a window. Each face depicted in the frames is standing outside the building, peeking in with amusement at the customers on the inside. At night, when the shop is closed, the faces in the portraits leave their frames, step inside the shop, mingle, talk about who and what they've seen or overheard that day, share stories, and then return home by opening.

He smiled at the colorful, if ludicrous, idea. Such things crossed his mind frequently.

He had the imagination of a poet.

But he had, too, the eyes and mind of a connoisseur. Though he was easily interested in many things, he was keenly interested in a particular few. Portraiture fell into that category.

And so, while he wanted very much to study each of the ninety-two drawings closely and slowly, he decided to wait for a more opportune time, when the shop was less crowded.

For now, he drank his espresso in small, deliberate sips. To do otherwise, in his mind, would have been disrespectful, even irreverent, to the barista's art. When he finished his drink, he took up his hat, sauntered out of the shop with glances to the left and right, and returned to the hotel.

Later that afternoon, following lunch and a nap, Theo walked to the river, strolled a section of paved pathway south to north, sat for a quarter hour with his face sunward, and then made his way back to the coffee shop. Aside from a few tables occupied by students, the place was empty.

There was no line at the counter when Theo stepped up to place his order.

"Welcome back," the barista said. "Twice in one day."

Theo was impressed that the man remembered him, especially given the number of customers who had been in the shop at rush hour earlier in the day.

"My dear fellow, you made a superb espresso this morning. Well done and thank you. Perfectly *je ne sais quoi*. I have returned for the encore."

The younger man chuckled. He didn't often hear French in the Chalice. "Well, thank you, sir. I will aim to make this one even better. If it's not just right, please let me know. My name is Shep. And you are . . .?"

Shep reached a hand across the counter. The old man grasped it in both of his. "My friends call me Theo. It is very nice to meet you."

Shep noted the precise enunciation and foreign accent in the old man's speech.

"And you as well. What brings you to Golden?"

"I am here on business. But right now I'm very interested in the portraits." Theo gestured toward the walls. "I noticed them this morning and am back to look at them more closely. Can you tell me about them?"

By then a group of four women had entered the shop and formed a line behind Theo.

"I'll be glad to, Mr. Theo, soon as I get a break. But here's something that will get *you* started. It might answer some of your questions. And I want you to tell me about you when we get a minute."

Shep handed Theo a local magazine, *The Gold Standard*. On the cover was a picture of the coffee shop, taken at the entrance through a fisheye lens that caught all three walls — left, right, rear — and most of the portraits. In the center of the picture stood Shep and another lean, slightly gray-headed man, dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a tweed jacket. The caption read, "The Art of the Chalice."

Theo opened the magazine, turned to the article, and began reading.

It began as a lark. A "what if?"

A "would you?"

A "maybe."

Coffee shop as art gallery.

But that is what the Chalice, one of the city's most popular downtown businesses, has become in recent months. Located at the corner of Light Street and Broadway, the Chalice is owned and operated by Shep and Addie Carlile, both natives of Golden.

They bought the unoccupied three-story building during the early days of the downtown renaissance and, for almost a year, spent weekends and free time renovating the ground floor. When the building was finally completed, they left their bank jobs, apprenticed at an upscale coffee shop in Atlanta for two months to learn the art of coffee, and eventually opened their doors to strong sales and five-star