

## THE STATION CHANGE AGENT

The dirt road winds unevenly from where Les Bumberton parked his car off the interstate. He steps carefully on the clay surface, avoiding the squishy parts formed by a soaking rain the previous night. He can't risk getting his black winged tips caked in mud or his suit pants splattered with the stuff. His colleagues would razz him mercilessly. At 35 he is the youngest chief deputy the squad has ever had and his older charges rarely miss an opportunity to point out his youthful shortcomings. "Your menu is on your tie"... "Your dinner date said to pick her up at eight (don't keep your mom waiting)"... "Tweeting is what birds do." He chaffs at the ribbing, but never lets on. He is counting on his first assignment to prove he is more than a kid in a blue suit, matching tie, and monogrammed boxer shorts.

The road eventually passes in front of a small path on the right, marked by a sign with a drawing of a child's toy train and the words "Choo-Choo" painted under it in block letters. His superiors told him his assignment was in the desert. But he arrived late last night and the darkness masked the giant mountains and scraggily underbrush he now sees as he moves down the path.

He comes to a train station resembling an old fashioned Spanish mission and immediately recognizes it as his objective. It consists of two one story buildings connected by a hallway. The walls are made of stucco, the pale brown color matching the landscape surrounding it. Les pauses at the solid oak door and uses his reflection in the glass window to make sure his best side precedes him into the building.

Snippets of laughter and chatter greet him as he enters the station. A large painting covers one of the walls from floor to ceiling. It appears to be of a woman with a lot of men standing around her. He leans back to get a better view of it when he spots something flying at him from the corner of his eye. He jumps out of the way of a soccer ball as it hits the door and bounces onto the floor and into the arms of a young boy.

“Sorry, Mister.” The boy turns and drops the ball on the ground kicking it into the main room where a group of other youngsters pounce on it. They poke and shove each other as they try to kick it at a net painted on the wall in the main waiting area. People line the sides of the station, some standing and watching the game, others seated in muted conversations with one another.

“Hey, stop, you shouldn’t be—” Before Les can finish a woman charges at him her hand extended, her words sounding like a train whistle growing louder with each approaching step.

“Hellloooo...” Les raises his hand expecting impact only to feel the soft hand of a woman in his. “Welcome...welcome...I’m Morna Millner. Sorry about the ball. Must have felt like you were entering hell there for a moment.” She raises her eyebrows and leans into him. “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” Les opens his mouth, but she slaps his arm before he can speak. “That’s Dante...from his Inferno. Just kidding. I can assure you, this is not hell.”

“What is this painting? It sure looks like hell.”

“That’s Mother Earth.” Morna pats her chest with her hand pointing to the painting with the other. “It is breathtaking, don’t you think? Done by an environmentalist who ran out of canvass. So I gave him the wall.”

“What’s it about? Who are these men...and that car?”

“The men in suits are pimping her...to the grubby little men in the SUV...coming home from a hard day’s work, no doubt.”

“That’s crass.”

“But true.” Morna reaches up and musses his bushy brown hair causing a wad to stick up straight like the crest of an enraged cockatoo. Les pats it down with the palms of both hands.

“My name’s Les Bumberton and I’m on official business” He gathers his composure.

“You must be the station agent.” He steps aside as a soccer ball flies by him.

“The station change agent, underline change.” She stands tall with her hands on her hips as though posing for someone painting her. .

“I don’t understand. This is supposed to be—”

“A train station, I know. But it’s so much more. Now we give the east/west riders a choice.”

“But they have a choice. They can go either east or west.” Morna’s eyes widen.

“What kind of a choice is that, Mr. Bumberton.”

“Please, call me, Les, Ms. Millner.”

“Okay, Les. And please call me Morna.”

“And that should be the only choice they have, Morna. East or West.” He folds his arms and leans against the wall. “Morna. That’s an interesting name.” There’s something about Morna that causes him to drop his guard. She is tall and thin with long blond hair that falls carelessly on her shoulders. She isn’t wearing any makeup and a small white apron around her waist seems to be the only noticeable fashion accessory. Yet, there is an upbeat, enthusiastic glow about her that makes Les want to know more.

“My parents said when I was born my life was like the morning of a whole new day for them. So they named me Morna—short for morning.”

One of the ladies standing against the far wall with a small group suddenly raises her hand.

“Morna, Morna...can I see you over here for a moment?”

“Excuse me,” she says her blond curls brushing her shoulders as she hurries toward the woman. Les takes his cell phone from his pocket and speed dials a number. He holds his hand over his face so he can’t be heard.

“I found her...yes...young...about 30ish. This is the place. Get the squad over here as fast as you can.” His hand is suddenly tugged from his mouth as he hangs up the phone and places it in his pocket.

“Quick, we’re gonna’ line dance.” She removes the apron and tosses it on a side chair. She pulls the tails of her white blouse from her gray slacks and takes off her shoes. She yanks Les onto the dance floor with her.

“No, wait, I can’t we’re supposed to--”

“Dance. How right you are, and we shall.” Before he knows it, Les is in the middle of a line next to Morna. " 'Let us read, let us dance,' says Voltaire, the little devil.”

“But I don’t know how to, I--” Before he can react, the woman in front turns her back to the group.

“Now watch me, and I’ll show you the basic steps.”

The music plays. His steps are rigid, but soon the warm rhythms loosen his arms and legs, their movements flowing as though in response to the effects of sweet wine. His head bobs in time with the beat, his arms swing carefree around him. He giggles as he grapevines to his right, then his left, clapping his hands and turning in time with the others. He unbuttons his suit jacket, grabs Morna’s hand and spins her around him. He is breathless when the music stops, applauding and nodding at everyone else.

“I did it, I did it, I—” He catches himself and buttons his jacket as if responding to a recently-forgotten memory. Morna has left the dance floor and he quick steps behind her.

“Wait...Morna...we have to talk. Where are the benches...in the main room here? There has to be benches for people waiting for the train.”

“We took them out.”

“People will have no place to wait.”

“If the benches were there, they’d have no place to dance.” She retrieves her apron from the chair and twirls it around her head before tying it around her waist. “And that ...Les...would be far worse.”

Morna pulls Les by his arm down a corridor connecting the two buildings. She stops in front of a doorway. Les yanks his arm from her grip.

“Stop pulling me.” He smooths out the sleeves of his suit jacket. “The gift shop. I want to see the gift shop.”

“Here it is.” Morna jerks her head in the direction of the door. She purses her lips and half closes her eyes. “Only now we call it a ‘Share shop.’ ”

“What...?”

“C’mon, Les.” She gives him a hard shove driving him into the wall. “You know what people do with stuff they buy at gift shops. They stick them in a drawer and never look at them again. People share thoughts here...ideas...hope...” Morna arches her back and extends her arms in the air. “‘Hope is the thing with feathers—...That perches in the soul.’ Emily Dickinson...did she nail it or what?”

“But you make money from a gift shop, how are you—” In one motion Morna turns Les around and pushes him through the doorway. He stumbles forward as she slams the door behind him. People are seated around a long table. Two farmers in overalls sit hunched in their chairs, their sandy hair falling carelessly on ruddy faces, their hands rough from hard work outdoors. Another man in a business suit turns off his cell phone and places it in front of him. An elderly woman with gray hair tied in a bun and a loose fitting blue sweater knits quietly at the end of the table.

“I had this dream the other night.” A man seated in the center leans back on his chair. He is middle aged, his dark hair seasoned with strands of gray, his tan corduroy jacket unzipped and hanging loosely down the sides of his chair. “I was stuck in quicksand in the middle of nowhere, Couldn’t get out. This guy comes out of nowhere, pushing a cartload of stuff he’s selling.” A

couple, who had been looking out the large picture window at the platform and tracks adjacent to the room, turns and walks toward the man. Les folds his arms and leans in the corner.

“The quicksand is up to my arm pits now. I yell, ‘Hey, mister, I’m drownin’ here, help me.’ He looks at me and say’s ‘Sure, I got just the thing’. He reaches under his cart and he pulls out what looks like one of those long harpoon guns that you use to shoot whales.” The business man grunts; the couple looks at each other and shrugs. Les stares intently at the man. “He tells me I could take this gun, fire it at a branch on a tree close by. The hook at the end will fasten itself around it and I can climb out. I say, great and reach for it. He’s about to hand it to me when he pulls it back. ‘That will be 29.99,’ he says. I tell him my wallet is in my pocket buried under all this sand. I’ll pay him as soon as I get out.

“But he refuses. ‘Nope. Gotta’ have the money in advance. That’s my policy.’ And he turns and starts to walk away. The quicksand is around my neck now and I know I’m doomed. I call him an evil bastard. He turns and gives me this crooked smile. ‘As soon as word gets out you died from quicksand in these woods, everyone who comes here is gonna’ wanna’ buy my product. I’ll have to open a new factory, hire a hundred new workers to keep up with demand. They’ll take the money I pay them and buy food at grocery stores, shoes and clothes for their kids at the mall, gas to run their cars, and those people who run those businesses will have to hire more people to keep up. Now that’s a lot of good if you ask me.’ My head went under and next thing I knew, I was awake coughing in my pillow.” The young hay seed strokes his chin and is the first to speak.

“So, what your dream is saying, good can come from evil.”

“How’s that possible?” The woman standing next to her husband places her hands on the back of a chair and leans forward. “Evil is evil. Period.”

The businessman picks up his cellphone and turns it on. “Yeah, but you have to admit. The guy made a good case. I mean, one accidental death can start a whole new market, create new jobs, bring prosperity to lots of people.” Les stands next to the man who told his dream.

“Human beings are both...good and evil and nothin’ can change that,” Les says. The woman at the end of the table stops knitting. She raises her eyebrows as she looks at Les.

“Why not?”

A lively discussion begins about the more fundamental question of how human beings should behave in the course of surviving and making a living. But Les finds there is no frame of reference in his head for such a discussion. Besides, what if his men catch him listening to such drivel? He hurries out of the room and finds Morna in the hallway.

“Morna, you got to stop what’s going on in ---” But she grabs his hand and pulls him into the main room where she pushes him on to a bench in the main area. She directs his attention to people in small groups talking animatedly about issues... conservatives, liberals, Christians and socialists, those against immigration, those for a more accommodating policy. Their heads turn in all directions as they listen, nodding and encouraging one another to speak up. The boys run among them kicking their soccer ball at the net painted on the side wall. Les shakes his head.

“I don't get what’s going on here.”

“They’re exploring new ways to find solutions to problems, even when they don't agree. She tussles his hair. “You know what they say...’Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can.’” Les pushes her hand away.



“And who said that, Millner comma Morna?”

“Nope.” She tweaks his nose. “Lincoln comma Abraham.”

Les wants to tell Morna that’s not how it works. To many, compromise is weakness. They’d rather break heads to make their point. But at that instant Morna stands like the queen of some fairy tale land...listening to the groups work out their differences...cheering on the boys relentlessly playing their game...observing people outside chatting with each other on the platform, carefree, content to be what they are in this microcosm of a world she has created. Her face betrays a vulnerability that makes Les want to hold her and assure her everything will be okay. But there is also a resoluteness that defies weakness and rejects the need to rely on anyone but herself.

Morna is about to say something to Les when she is interrupted by the sound of feet pounding rhythmically through the front door. In a few seconds a group of men appear in the main room. They are all dressed in suits like Les, the same color with matching ties and black winged tip shoes. One of them sees Les and walks down the hall toward them speaking loudly as he approaches.

“What the hell’s going on here? Looks like a terrorist cell planning something big.”

“The seniors are doing something for Incontinence Day next week, but that’s all we’ve got on the calendar so far.” The man eyes Morna up and down. “Is this her?”

“Yeah,” Les says nodding nervously. “I’ll take care of her.” He is practically nose-to-nose with Les. He is shorter and much older, his bald head shiny from perspiration, his moustache a mixture of gray and silver whiskers. He speaks slowly in raspy, make-my-day tones.

“Let’s get this pansy camp closed and out of here fast. We got to get back to headquarters by tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir...I mean...Holloway.” Holloway purses his lips in a weak smile, then turns to join the rest of the squad.

“Is that your boss?”

“No. That’s Holloway. I...I’m the boss.”

“Really? Sure looks like Captain Bullet-Brain is in charge.” He pulls her to the side as some of the men walk past and enter the Share shop.

“Look, Morna, we’re here to put the station back to the way it was.”

Les tightens his grip on her arm. “Soon, all these people will be put on the westbound train and sent home. There’s nothing you can do.” He expects her to try to wrench her arm free, shout her resistance to what is taking place. Instead, she playfully pinches his cheek with her thumb and forefinger.

“You know, we’ve been thinking about starting a language club to find letters and sounds that do a better job of expressing what people think and how they feel.”

“You’re no longer the station agent. You’ll be taking the next train back with me.”

“Station change agent. Imagine...all those emotions and ideas and only 26 letters to express them.”

Morna spends the next half hour saying goodbye to the people waiting on the platform for the westbound train. She mingles freely among them talking about how they first met and laughing about their initial reluctance to stay. They thank her for what she has done and the alternative she provided to the east/west trains.

“It’s something we won't forget,” a young woman says as she looks through her briefcase in preparation for her return to a previous life. A recent college graduate tells her how much she will miss the Share shopm and all she learned in there.

“Sorry, Morna. You know we’d stay if we could,” she says. One of the boys gives her his soccer ball.

“Here, you can have it. Score one more goal for me.”

“I will.” She takes the ball and bounces it in front of her a couple of times before tucking it under her arm.

At that moment Morna hears a low rumble, causing a faint shake in the ground. A breeze lightly brushes the right side of her face. She looks down the tracks in the direction of the breeze and sees a cloud of smoke pouring from a stack, tapered at first then billowing into the sky like a black genie summoned from a giant lamp. An old steam locomotive comes into view, its boiler black as coal, its cab and wheels a fire engine red. A brass bell on top of the engine rings in response to someone pulling on its cord. It is followed by a tender car filled with coal and two long wooden cars, old and rickety, their faded red paint peeling and revealing bare spots of wood.

The train stops at the station with a hiss and high pitched squeal of the brakes. A rather large woman in her 40’s emerges from the cab and stands on the top step of the ladder. She wears tight-fitting jeans, a blue denim blouse, the shoulders and sleeves tan, and an open denim vest. Her dark hair is short and spiked, her eyes pools of watery excitement. She raises her arms in the air.

“Heck, I sure didn’t expect a welcoming party. My name’s Cass Noonan, but don’t expect a speech or a blessing; I’m not a politician or the pope.” Morna gasps at the sight of the woman.

“Professor Noonan.” The woman smiles broadly when she sees her. She hurries down the steps and embraces Morna.

“Morna. Morna Millner, my prize pupil.”

Morna holds her at arm’s length. “I have missed you.” She leans into her. ‘And we loved with a love that was more than love...’ ”

“Poe...I’m a sucker for that crazy bastard.”

Morna and Cass Noonan disappear into the station. Holloway darts to the cab, Les not far behind. They find a young person dressed in overalls and a striped engineer’s cap. A red bandana soaked in sweat is tied around his neck.

“Where’s the west bound train?” Holloway demands. “It should have been here by now.” The young man removes his cap and a shock of black curls falls from it. He wipes his forehead with his sleeve.

“Don’t know. I know it was ahead of us for a time. I thought it came and went by now.” Holloway shakes his head. He turns and sees a group of about 20 people filing out of the cars. They are a varied bunch, men and women, young and old, the kind who work at supermarkets, banks and call centers. One of the men, an older man in a plaid shirt and dungarees, approaches the two men.

“I heard you ask about the westbound train. I saw a train take a cutoff just as we rounded a bend about 30 miles up the track.”

“That’s impossible,” Holloway says. “Why would the engineer do that?” The man shrugs.

“Maybe it’s what the passengers wanted.”

Les and Holloway mingle with the members of the group to find out more about them. A young couple explains how they are Professor Noonan’s students, majoring in Changeology. The class is on a field trip to a location about 20 miles west of the station.

“What the hell is Changeology?” Holloway squints searching his brain for the term.

“It’s the main offering at the University we all attend,” says an older man with a gray beard and wire rimmed glasses.

“And what University is that?” The man looks at Les then at some of his fellow classmates. They all shrug.

“It’s...the University...that’s all we know. It seems every time they decide on a name, they change it. Kinda’ goes with the turf.”

Morna and Cass emerge from the station about 20 minutes later. Cass is putting on her vest while Morna hurriedly tucks her blouse into her slacks. Cass approaches Les.

“Uh, you’re Mr., Bumberton, the one in charge.” Holloway starts to say something but thinks better of it.

“Yes, but call me Les.”

“Call me Cass, Les. In between moans and other exhortations to the Almighty...” Cass looks at Morna. They both snicker at each other like a couple of kids with a secret.”...Morna here tells me you’re putting the station back to the way it was.”

“That’s correct,” Les says looking as serious as his photo ID. “And if you and your group are thinking of protesting, you—“

“Protesting...Protesting?” Cass throws up her arms. Morna turns to the group. “Did you hear that? Les thinks you’re here to protest the station.” The group is quiet for a moment, then breaks out into laughter, clapping their hands and stamping their feet, the resulting clamor sounding like rolling thunder echoing off the distant mountains.

“You mean, like trying to piss people off in three words or less, making it into a sign and tacking it on a stick?” A young man in tan trousers and a white sweater places one fist on top of the other and jerks them high in the air as he mockingly marches in front of the station. “Eat Shit Die...Eat Shit Die...” The other students get behind him chanting along with him until they break their stride falling into fits of laughter. An older woman wearing a purple tie-dye shirt runs up to a man leaning against the train car.

“Marvin...come on...show them how we used to do it in the 60’s.” Marvin stands up straight, a tall, serious figure with scraggly gray hair and a full beard. He thrusts his fist in the air and marches toward the group. “Power to the people...Power to the people.” But he’s soon too winded to continue, trying to catch his breath as he places the palms of his hands on his knees. The woman in the tie-dye shirt looks at Les.

“He’s the real thing.” She points to his trousers. “He’s even got the bell bottoms to prove it.”

Cass takes Les by the arm and along with Morna leads him away from the group, whose members now take turns doing their best mocking representation of sidewalk protesting. “No, Les. We’re not gonna’ protest,” Cass says. “Go ahead and change the station back to the way it was. We don’t protest, we advocate.” Morna winks at Les.

The group from the station mingles with Cass and her students. The man who had the dream about the quicksand wants to know where they are going. Cass explains they are joining a group of native people who have set up a community in some nearby caves a short distance from the station.

“We’re gonna’ stay with them for a while, get some ideas on how they live and...who knows...maybe set up a station of our own farther down the tracks.” The line dance instructor asks about dancing. Cass tells her how interesting it would be to blend her line style with the native ceremonial dances.

The two farmers offer to help grow food. The woman, who was knitting in the Share shop, holds up her wears.

“I can help make clothes.” The businessman steps forward holding up his cell phone.

“I can send text messages...if anyone needs to.”

“Then, it’s settled,” Cass says. “You’re all coming with us.” She finds Morna and slips her arm around her waist. “Will you come?”

Morna puts her arm around Cass’ shoulders. “Of course, I will come. ‘No reason to stray is the best reason to go.’ ”

“Which famous person said that?”

“Milner comma Morna.”

Les sees Holloway emerging from the station with several of the other men. They are carrying batons, clubs and bats as if they are on their way to a street fight. Les intercepts Holloway before he reaches the platform.

“What are you doing?” Holloway’s teeth are clenched so tightly, his cheeks vibrate uncontrollably.

“Back off, pup. Let the big boys handle this. We’re gonna’ beat them silly then stick their sorry asses on the real westbound train when it arrives.”

“No, Holloway. Our orders are to put the station back to the way it was and to get these people on a westbound train. That’s happening. No need for violence.” Holloway steps closer to Les who takes a wide stance in front of him.

“You’re stirring up revolution, Bumberton.” Holloway is shaking, his face as red as the station roof.

“That’s an order.” Les shifts his weight from one foot to the other. The two men are nose to nose now in the kind of standoff the older agent is used to winning. But Les is startled by what he now sees in the man’s face and hears in his labored breathing: fear. Holloway gasps and tries to turn away as though by doing so he can deny it. But it’s too late. For the first time Les recognizes the cycle about to be played out in this operation like in so many others before it. Fear morphs into anger, then hatred and, ultimately, violence to be inflicted mindlessly on the easiest and the closest victims.

Holloway looks away. He drops his baton kicking the ground with his foot as he yells at the squad to follow him into the station.

“Way to handle the Boomer Brigade,” Morna says linking her arm with Les’. “Hate to disappoint ole’ Bullet Brain, but there are no Che Guevara’s here, though I thought he always looked good in his green fatigues and black beret.”



“Let’s get going, folks,” Cass calls out from the foot of the cab. “I wanna’ make sure we score a cave with a view.” Les walks Morna to the ladder.

“I guess this is goodbye.”

“That’s right, my brave knight in Brooks Brothers armor. I’m off to find a new horizon.”

“I’m curious.” He calls after her. “If you’re not looking to protest or start a revolution, what exactly are you looking to change?” Morna looks in the direction of Holloway, then back at Les.

“I think you know the answer to that question.”

The train is belching smoke now as metal and steam strain against one another in an effort to move. Cass leans out of the cab.

“Let our adventure begin,” she says, “and in the immortal words of...of...Oh, hell, I don’t know any immortal words. Let’s just get going.”

Les watches the train wind its way down the tracks. Morna leans out of the cab waving to him, her golden hair flapping in the breeze like a flag she proudly displays. The chatter of voices in the rail cars slowly subsides as the train pulls farther away. It soon disappears from view, swallowed by the majestic desert surrounding it. As Les turns toward the station, he senses something taking root in his mind. A feeling? A thought? An idea? He isn’t sure, but can’t wait to find out.

He claps his hands, lets out a yell and two steps his way back to the station.