

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

By Tim Wintermute

INSTALLMENT 17

ONE CONDITION

Jemma Lu didn't take up Howdy's offer for a ride on his motorcycle. It wasn't that she was afraid of motorcycles. No, asking her to take a ride on his bike was how it all started the first time. After all these years Howdy ought to have come up with a new line. Not that she would have fallen for it if he had. He might be the Sagebrush Shakespeare but she wasn't interested in more drama. Besides, she had a lunch meeting of the FRED X selection committee that Rich Best had persuaded her to serve on. Since, she'd also agreed to chair the meeting on condition it would be held at her office, she couldn't very well miss it.

"Did you say yes?" Rich had repeated after she finally relented and agreed.

"Yes."

"That's a yes to yes?"

"Really, Rich, can't you take yes for an answer?"

"I just wanted to make sure."

"You're lucky because if you had asked me again I would have said no."

If only Rich had asked again, Jemma Lu thought as she watched him and Desmond Goswami, the other members of the selection committee, enter the front door of the Picketware Building, a three story brick structure occupying an entire block in downtown Picketwire. Her desk was in the mezzanine overlooking the main show room. She watched them as they walked toward the rear where the stairs and elevator were. Jemma Lu wondered if they would take the stairs or the elevator. She always took the stairs even when she had been on crutches from knee surgery a couple of years before. Unfortunately, she couldn't see the elevator doors or the stairs from her perch so she could only guess, which one they took. After waiting several minutes for them to appear she knew they had opted for the elevator. Taking the stairs was faster, even on crutches. When they arrived at Jemma Lu's work space she waved them toward chairs on the other side of the desk.

"I sure get a kick out of taking that elevator of yours, Jemma Lu," Rich said. "What an antique. And Stan, that's the old gentleman who was operating it," Rich explained to Desmond. "He's such a card. You know, I ride the elevator every time I come here just so I can hear his jokes. Desmond says this is the first time he's ridden in it."

“This is the first time I’ve been above the main floor,” Desmond said. “I’m curious as to why you haven’t replaced the elevator with one that has automatic controls.”

“We could replace the elevator but we couldn’t replace Stanley.”

“I see,” Desmond answered. Jemma Lu knew that he didn’t, really. Not yet, anyway. But there was no rush, though. A whooshing sound made her turn to a vacuum tube that ran up through the floor of the mezzanine next to her desk. It had been used for sending and receiving messages and documents at Picketware before the advent of computers. Still, not everything can be reduced to digits and attached to an email so they kept the tubes. Jemma Lu heard a whoosh and a glass container popped out. Inside was a bag with Sue’s *Pretty Good to Take Home* printed on it. She placed the bag on the table, put the container back in the tube and closed the hatch and it immediately disappeared with another whoosh.

“Here’s your *Better Than Most Burger*, Rich. Well done as you requested,” she said passing it to Rich, who sat across from her. “And this is your bowl of *Some Like it Hotter Chili*,” she said to Desmond. After handing them all plates, napkins, forks, knives and spoons that she took from the top drawer of the mammoth oak desk they were all seated around, she took out half a Rocky Ford cantaloupe that would be her lunch.

“Thanks for lunch,” Rich said before biting into his burger.

“Yes,” Desmond added, looking around as he dipped his spoon into the bowl of chili. “I see you have adopted the open office plan.”

“Adopted?” Jemma Lu said. “We’ve never had individual offices. There wasn’t even an office desk for the first fifteen years and that was more than a hundred years ago. Then my great grandparents had this made. The date and initials of the man who made it for them is carved right here.” She ran the fingers of her right hand across the carved initials on the top of the desk. “It was big enough for both of them to use at the same time. In fact, anyone who needed a desk used it.”

“It’s called hot desking,” Desmond said. “That’s when different people use the same desk on a rotating basis. It’s quite an innovation.”

“I don’t know that anyone thought of it as an innovation even a hundred years ago. Not that we’re against innovation as long as it meets a real need.”

“Necessity is the mother of invention,” Rich offered.

“And desire is the father of a lot of orphans,” Jemma Lu replied. “Picketware isn’t in the business of producing orphans so we don’t sell something to people just because they want it. They may not get what they want but what they do get they need.”

“Desmond, you said a rotating desk is a hot innovation?” I wish I’d thought of that one.” Rich said.

“I think what Desmond meant is that a hot desk is when different people use the same desk on a rotating basis not that the desk rotates,” Jemma Lu said.

“Then the next innovation in office furniture after the hot desk could be a desk that rotates. It would be like a lazy susan only I’d call it a lazy fred. You know I think it could be part of FRED X.”

“If you want to submit it for consideration you have to abstain from voting,” Jemma Lu said.

“Why?”

“Because it would be a conflict of interest for you to vote on your own submission. In fact, you should leave the room so that you don’t know who voted for or against it.”

Rich looked around. “What room?”

“Well, you can wait downstairs or you can ride the elevator up and down listening to Stanley’s jokes.”

“Stan’s my man,” Rich said. “But if I leave then what happens if one of you votes for my idea and one against? There needs to be three people voting so there won’t be any ties.”

“Good point, Rich,” Jemma Lu said with a smile “And since you can’t vote because of the conflict of interest there’s no other alternative than not to allow any member of the selection committee to submit an idea for consideration.”

“I agree,” Desmond said, then added sympathetically. “That doesn’t mean it isn’t a good idea, Rich.”

Rich sighed and sat back in his chair. Jemma Lu tapped a stack of paper on the desk in front of her and asked him and Desmond. “You met with everyone who submitted an application?”

Rich perked up and answered. “We sure did.”

“So together with what was submitted in these application forms we should have all the information necessary to decide who should present at FRED X.” After Rich and Desmond nodded, Jemma Lu continued. “Then let’s discuss them in the order that they were submitted. She picked up the top sheet from the stack. The first person submission is Clint Crowley.”

Rich looked at Desmond and then said to Jemma Lu. “We already sort of promised him that he would be included in FRED X.”

“Sort of promised?”

“After Clint pitched us his idea for Rent a Rancher it seemed like a no brainer. We did tell him he needed a little help with his presentation.”

“Knowing Clint he’ll need more than a little.”

“Desmond agreed to coach him, right, Desmond?”

Desmond nodded.

“Did you sort of promise anyone else that you met?”

“Let’s see,” Rich looked at the list then pointed at a name. “We didn’t promise Brady Barnes. I have to say, I like this Hooper idea of his where they hitch horses to special hitching posts and people can unhitch them by inserting their credit card and then ride them to where they want to go and then just hitch them to another post so someone else can use them. Desmond, though, has some doubts about it.”

“I question whether there is really any market demand for it,” Desmond said.

“If there’s a demand for shared bikes and even electric scooters then why not for horses?” Rich answered.

“Aside from Desmond’s point, which I think is quite a good one,” Jemma Lu said. “It seems to me that this business Brady proposes could be really dangerous. Riding a horse isn’t the same as riding a bike.”

“Brady covered that. Everyone who rides has to sign a waiver that says they won’t sue if they get hurt. A rider to ride, as he called it.”

“What if the horse is hurt?” Jemma Lu asked. “Nobody shoots a bike when it has a flat tire. I can’t vote for something that doesn’t have proper safeguards to protect the horses. I don’t see anything in his proposal about it. Did Brady tell you what they were when you met with him?”

“Well,” Rich squirmed. “He didn’t tell us.”

“We didn’t ask,” Desmond said. “We should have.”

“That’s okay. You saved Brady the embarrassment of having to admit that he hadn’t even thought about it.”

“I can see now that Brady’s idea isn’t ready for FRED X,” Rich said. “I’ll let him know that it needs more work.” He looked at Jemma Lu who was staring at him with one eyebrow arched and added. “A lot more.”

“You might want to tell him that successful entrepreneurs learn from their failures,” Desmond added.

“You can tell him that, but the Brady Barnes I know is a very slow learner,” Jemma Lu said, then with a forced smile said. “Anyway, that’s settled. Is there anyone else on the list of applicants who you sort of promised?”

“Brady’s the only one.”

“Then I guess there’s nothing else for the selection committee to do.”

“There is one more that we could consider who isn’t on the list.”

“I thought every idea that was submitted before the deadline was on this list?”

“So did I,” Desmond added.

“Technically, the idea was submitted before the deadline,” Rich said. “But there was a condition that we would have to agree to. That’s why it’s not on the list.”

“What’s the condition?” Jemma Lu asked.

“That he presents the idea only to you and that you decide whether it should be included in FRED X.”

“That means you and Desmond won’t be able to hear it or vote on it.”

“I guess that’s only fair since you didn’t get to vote on all the others except Brady’s. There’s another reason for doing it this way, though. He said that if we agreed to this he would cover all of our expenses plus another twenty five thousand dollar in prize money for the best ideas.”

“I didn’t know FRED X is going to give out prize money,” Jemma Lu said.

“That’s because we don’t have any money but if we did, we could, and we could if we agree to his condition.”

“Two could’s don’t necessarily add up to should,” Jemma Lu said, shaking her head. “This offer sounds like a bribe, to me.”

“Its not a bribe because Wiley said he would give the money whether or not we, in this case you, accepted his idea. All he wants is a chance to submit it to you in person.”

“I still don’t like it. There has to be more to it than that one condition.”

“Is that a no vote?” Rich asked.

“I think I should abstain. I’ll go with whatever you two decide.”

“In that case I vote yes,” Rich said. “What about you Desmond? Are you willing to let Jemma Lu hear this fellow present his idea and decide whether it should be included in FRED X?”

“I think I’ll abstain as well,” Desmond said, dipping his spoon into the bowl of chili.

“That’s one yes and no no’s, the motion carries,” Rich said slapping the table. Then taking a paper napkin he wiped off the greasy imprint that his bison burger stained hand had made.

Jemma Lu sat back in her chair and sighed. “Okay, but I just hope this fellow really has the resources to keep up his end of the bargain.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Jemma Lu,” Rich said, breaking out in a broad smile. “Because the fellow we’re talking about is Wiley Boone.”

A BETTER BATAMOCHI

Bruce looked at Jane out of the corner of his eye as he steered their blue Camry. He had discovered that driving could be relaxing rather than nerve wracking when you didn't have to dodge and weave through New York City traffic with one foot on the gas and one on the brake. You could actually use cruise control out here because you were actually cruising. It also gave him a chance to think about something other than avoiding a fender bender. "This is exciting," he said.

Jane turned and looked at him with surprise. "You're excited about meeting my Uncle?"

"What I mean is it's exciting to be involved in trying to solve a mystery, maybe even a crime, and your Uncle could provide us with some important clues."

"We're not detectives, Bruce."

"Speak for yourself, honey. Being a detective might be my real calling."

Jane laughed. "Your calling?"

"Don't laugh. If you were called to be a minister why can't I be called to be a detective? We could be a team. I catch the sinners and you save them."

"We are already a team," Jane answered. "It's called being married."

Bruce stared at the road ahead and muttered. "Do I need to do something other than you know?"

"What?"

"Fulfill my husbandly duties?"

"You mean you're doing it out of a sense of duty."

"No, I mean...". Bruce glanced at her and saw the teasing smile on her face. "Okay, so we can scratch off detective as my next career."

"Look, Honey," Jane said. "I want you to do what makes you happy, fulfills you."

"Before I met you I didn't even think about it."

"So you were happy until you met me, is that what you're saying?"

"Happy? No, what I mean is that I didn't know what happiness was until I met you so I didn't think about it." He slid his right hand off the steering wheel and onto her left leg. "Did I ever thank you for saving a wretch like me?"

"I didn't save you I married you," Jane said, giving Bruce a gentle punch on his right arm.

“You being a minister, I thought it was the same thing. A twofer. Although, if I was a Rabbi it would be like hitting the trifecta.”

“Silly. Besides, as you know, I didn’t decide to become a minister until after we got married.”

“In other words, being married to me drove you to God.”

“Drove me to God!” Jane finally exploded in laughter. There, she thought, you won again. If bantering was an Olympic event, Bruce would have a string of gold medals dangling from his neck.

“Did I say God? I meant to your Uncle Joji’s.” Bruce hunched over the steering wheel and peered out through the windshield as if they were driving in the dead of night rather than the middle of a sunny afternoon. It was an unsuccessful attempt to conceal the victory grin on his lips. “How much farther do we have to go?” He asked.

“We should be close.”

“Does anything look familiar?”

“Not particularly. I remember visiting when my grandparents lived here before my grandfather died. I saw Uncle Joji a few times when he visited my grandparents. I was just a kid. After my Grandfather died and Grandma moved in with us my Dad would drive her here to see Uncle Joji but I was never invited to go along. The only time I saw him after he moved back from Japan and into the house was at my grandmother’s funeral.”

“You said there was some sort of falling out between your Uncle and the rest of the family. You don’t know what it was about?”

“My parents never wanted to discuss it.”

“I guess it was a good thing you called first to see if he would agree to see you.”

“I didn’t think we should just show up at his doorstep.”

“And you said that he didn’t seem to object to us wanting to visit him.”

“No, and when I asked him if he could translate something from Japanese into English he said of course. It was like he was expecting that his niece, who he hasn’t seen in at least a decade, would want to come by for a visit.”

“With her husband. He does know that I’m coming as well, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. He asked if I was coming by myself and I told him you would be with me.”

“What was his response?”

“He said good.”

“Do you think he meant it was good that it wasn’t his brother, your father, or it was good that it was me, your husband?”

“I’m sure he meant it was good that you were coming with me because he wanted to meet you not that he wanted to avoid meeting my Dad. Does it matter?”

“Only if he meant that he was glad that he wouldn’t have to meet your Dad than he wouldn’t be disappointed when he met me. You know, that I wasn’t the guy he hoped his niece would marry.”

“Why on earth would he think that?”

“He might not be happy when he asks what I do and I tell him I don’t have a job. Probably afraid that I’m just a moocher.”

“Moocher? Like you married me so you could get your hands on my measly minister’s salary? You get more interest from your savings account than I’ll ever make.”

“Our savings account, not mine. I turned you down when you offered to sign a pre-nup, remember? And it’s not in a savings account, anyway. It’s invested. Wisely, I might add. But, no one knows about that except you and me.”

“And I wish I didn’t know.”

“Because you feel guilty about it. You had nothing to do with it. I made it all before I met you.” He paused. They weren’t bantering now. “Think of it as an inheritance from a past life. It’s like a nest egg.”

“If that’s what it’s like then it was a really big bird that laid the egg,”

“How do you know? I thought you didn’t look at the statements.”

“I don’t look at them. You told me how much you were worth when we were having coffee at Starbucks.”

“When I took you out on our first date.”

“I didn’t know it was a date and I insisted on paying for my coffee, which was actually a Chai tea. The point is that you tried to impress me by telling me how much you were worth.”

“Right, I did. I could tell right away that I’d made a big mistake.”

“I was going to get up and walk out but you wouldn’t shut up and I didn’t have a chance to tell you I was going to leave. I had to sit there and listen to you. Fortunately, you said you wanted to change the direction of your life and do something completely different that had nothing to do with making money.”

“And that’s why you agreed to go out with me.”

“Actually, I thought there was a pretty good chance that you were just feeding me a line.”

“You never told me that before. And all this time I thought you believed me.”

“I did believe you.” But it was a leap of faith, Jane thought.

“And here we are.”

“Yes, here we are.” Jane answered, smiling at Bruce. “Together.”

“I meant we’re here. We just passed the entrance to your Uncle Joji’s farm,” Bruce said, putting his foot on the brake.

“How do you know?”

“It looked like his address was on the mailbox back there.” Bruce backed the car up and stopped next to the mailbox. Next to the stenciled address were some Japanese characters that had been applied with a black brush. “What does it say?”

“It says Takemoto. I did learn that much Japanese.”

“I guess this must be the place, then.” Bruce turned the wheel and they drove over a cattle guard and onto the gravel drive. “Is that the farmhouse in those trees?”

“Yes,” Jane said. “Although when I was a kid it seemed a lot farther from the main road than it is now.”

“Everything is farther away when you’re a kid.”

They drove slowly on the road. Jane looked at the creek and the cottonwoods and then the red barn and the windmill. Not only were things farther, but everything was wider, deeper, larger and taller when she remembered when she was a kid. She looked at the corral near the barn and suddenly remembered riding a horse named Fiddlesticks when she was seven or eight. It was Uncle Joji who must have been visiting from Japan, who had boosted her onto the saddle then got on behind her. He let her hold the reins as they had trotted around the corral. That was the first time she had been on a horse. They had a couple of horses on their farm but her parents said she was too young to ride. She asked Uncle Joji not to tell them. That it was their secret.

As they pulled up in front of the house Uncle Joji got up from a chair on the front porch. He walked down the front steps as Jane and Bruce got out of the car. He looked exactly as she remembered him from the funeral only he was smiling now and wearing faded bib overalls and a white tee shirt. Jane, hesitated, not sure if she should offer to shake his hand or give him a hug and, if she gave him a hug should she include a peck on the cheek. It reminded her of having to decide what to do when passing the peace sign at Church. You tried to take your cue from the other person but what if they were waiting for you. It was like playing the game rock-paper-scissors. More than once she’d put out her hand at the same time the other person

embraced her in a hug. Uncle Joji cut off her thoughts by bowing. With relief Jane returned his bow and then introduced Bruce. When Bruce started to bow, Joji reached out with his right arm. It seemed to Jane that the smile on his face morphed momentarily into a mischievous grin as they shook hands.

“Have you come for another secret riding lesson, Niece?” Joji asked.

“I know it was wrong of me to have asked you to lie to my Dad,” Jane answered.

“But I didn’t lie. I knew when you asked me to keep it a secret that he would never ask me.”

“Can I ask you why you knew?”

“You can ask me but it is your father, my brother, who has the answer. Now, why don’t both of you come inside. It has been a long time since you have been in the house where your Father grew up.”

Uncle Joji gave them a tour of the house. It was smaller than what Jane remembered. Are walls also farther away when you’re a kid? Upstairs, Uncle Joji opened a door and announced that the room was where her father and he had slept. Inside, there was a bunk bed, a dresser and a desk and chair under the one window.

“I remember the bunk beds,” Jane said. “I always wanted to sleep in it, but when I stayed over I slept in one of the beds in Aunt Kate and Aunt Winnie’s old room.”

“Your Dad had the lower bunk and I had the upper. I was older and so I got to choose first and I took the high ground. When he had grown tall enough for his legs to reach the bottom of my bunk he would kick me at night. He claimed he did it because I snored and he wanted me to turn over but I never heard myself snore so maybe he was just dreaming.” He closed the door and opened the door next to it that had been her Aunt’s room. Instead of a bunk bed there were two single beds separated by large dresser.

“I remember that when I stayed over Aunt Kate and Winnie’s dolls were still here and I loved playing with them. The dolls are gone, but everything else looks the same,” Jane said.

“There was no need to change anything except in your grandparent’s room, which is where I now sleep.” He pushed open a door that was half ajar revealing a room twice as large as the other two. The sun streamed in through several windows. It was empty except for a tatami mat on the hardwood floor. “As you can see, I removed all of the furniture. I sleep on a futon that I roll up and put in the closet during the day.”

“No more upper bunk,” Bruce joked.

“Yes, I have come down in the world,” Uncle Joji answered, looking at the floor and shaking his head slowly. Then, he looked up and said. “Now, we should go downstairs to the kitchen and I can serve you tea.”

After Jane and Bruce sat down at the large wooden kitchen table, Uncle Joji began boiling the water. He turned and asked them. “Would you like some Batamochi that I made?”

“Oh, yes, please, Uncle!” Jane answered clapping her hands like a little girl.

“Botamochi?” Bruce asked.

“It’s a rice cake, a sweet pastry,” Jane said, lowering her hands. “My grandmother made them. I wish I’d asked her to show me how she did it but...”

“Would you like me to give you a secret lesson?” Uncle Joji asked with a grin as the kettle began to whistle.

“Yes, that way if I ruin them no one will know,” Jane laughed. “Especially, this guy.” She smiled and nudged Bruce with her left elbow.

“What I want to know is what’s with these secret lessons?” Bruce asked.

“Uncle Joji is just teasing me about something that happened when I was a little girl. Sorry, Mr. detective, but it’s no big mystery. I’ll tell you about it later.” Looking at Uncle Joji she asked. “So Grandma taught you how to cook them?”

“No,” Uncle Joji said as he poured the hot water from the kettle into a teapot. “I learned when I was in Japan. When I came back and I moved in here I made them for her as a surprise the first time she came over to visit. She said that they were different than hers but she like them just the same. I could tell she said that just to make me feel good so I asked her if she would show me her way. We made them together right here in this kitchen and I have made them her way ever since.”

“Because Grandma’s way was better.”

“Of course,” Uncle Joji answered with a faint smile. Then he placed a bamboo tray with the teapot and round teacups on the table along with, a plate of Batamochi that had been warming in the oven. He sat down and poured the tea into the cups and passed them to Jane and Bruce. As he began to pass the plate of Batamochi he said. “You said that you wanted me to translate some Japanese words that you found on the side of a building in the ruins of the old Internment Camp?”

“Yes,” Jane answered. “We almost forgot. Bruce, can you show Uncle Joji the words?”

“We took a photo of the words on my iPhone.” Bruce said, putting down the Batamochi that Uncle Joji had just passed him and reaching for his iPhone from the breast pocket of his shirt.

“Please, eat your Batamochi,” Uncle Joji said. “You don’t need to show me the photo. I know what they are.”

End of Installment 17