

Karl Iagnemma
from *Detroit Girls*

Augustus Mayo spent his mornings in the library of his house on Rivard Street, reading novels by Dickens and Anna Jameson. He became irritated by Jameson's archness but settled into Dickens' prose for hours at a time, snow sifting past the frosted window, the sun a yellow smudge in the ash-colored sky. He had not been to his law office since the election, instead sending a messenger to alert the apprentice, Louis Tompkins, that he was recuperating from the campaign's rigors. In fact the prospect of practicing law seemed so mundane as to be unbearable. Augustus shut himself in the library, ignoring his wife's infuriatingly sympathetic questions; when Josephine departed for her afternoon calls he ventured into the parlor. Occasionally he was touched by the queer, dreamlike notion that he hadn't lost the election—that he had never run for office, that his life was precisely as it had been twelve months ago—but the moment would pass and dread would settle like a lead cloak over his shoulders. He could not bear to show his face on Jefferson Avenue.

On the third Monday in November Augustus received a letter from William Trowbridge. All morning he left it unopened on his writing desk, regarding the grey envelope with bitter satisfaction. It was a request for a meeting, Augustus knew, to woo him to the Democrat cause. The Democrats knew that Free Soil would likely join with the Whigs; shrewd politicians like Trowbridge were courting prized Free Soilers. Perhaps he would offer a position—ward inspector, or a seat on the board of water commissioners. Perhaps a governorship of the university.

At last he seated himself at the writing desk and opened the letter.

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November 17, 1854

To the Hon. Mr. Augustus Mayo,

Please accept my hearty congratulations on a battle well joined, and commiseration for the fact that there must be a first among equals.

Your most obdt. servant,
Capt. Wm. H. Trowbridge

Augustus held the letter above a candle flame until a black pinpoint swelled, then flickered alight. Then he opened the window and let the burning letter flutter into the drifting snow.

Why had he lost? Explanations assailed Augustus. He'd led a flawed campaign, he admitted at last. His handbills had been crammed with rhetoric—on property assessment, on the licensing of peddlers, on the eradication of houses of vice—so that the type appeared as dense as a swarm of piss-ants. And his speeches were larded with minutiae that caused onlookers to gaze into the middle distance, then finally look away.

Perhaps that had been the problem—his speeches? One Friday afternoon Augustus had found himself slouched beside an open window in Reuben Hay's saloon, hat tipped low to hide his eyes, as William Trowbridge addressed a crowd on the sidewalk outside. The man's words had painted a lurid portrait of Detroit: Woodward Avenue aswarm with foreigners, the Berthelet market deserted as crops moldered in the fields, the grand hotels on Jefferson and Grand River shuttered and lifeless. It unnerved Augustus. His own addresses had spoken to the hopes of Detroit's citizens: for less burdensome taxation, for improved public order and decency, for clean water and plentiful gas and swift transportation to wherever they wished to travel.

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But Trowbridge had spoken to their fears. What shocked Augustus was not the man's strategy—fear, after all, was as powerful as hope—but rather the crowd's response to his words. They listened, hushed, as Trowbridge's voice thundered over them, and at the speech's conclusion erupted in cheers that held an unmistakable edge of desperation. Sitting in Reuben Hay's saloon, listening to the frenzied applause, Augustus had first realized that he would lose the election.

Now he stood at the open library window as cold air sluiced around him. What, after all, had he expected? He was a lawyer, not a politician. He'd found success serving Detroit's great men, scribbling their contracts and deeds, and somehow he'd come to believe that he, Augustus Mayo, was a great man himself. As though proximity to greatness was enough to instill greatness in oneself. Ridiculous. He'd trusted that his clients would grant him their votes and influence; instead he'd learned that there were others more important than a lawyer in a wealthy man's life. The notion was obvious but August had hidden it from himself. He'd favored his hopes instead of listening to his fears.

Augustus shut the window and walked a slow circuit of the library. He took up an edition of *Summer Rambles*, then tossed it aside as the bells of St. Anne's tolled eleven. Eleven, and he had not yet shaved. Had not dressed or taken breakfast. He moved before the mirror, and despite himself felt a glimmer of satisfaction. If nothing else he was an attractive fellow. Full, masculine features, broad shoulders, thick through the midsection but not portly or obese. *Prosperous*. A magnificent brown mustache and lustrous crop of hair. He was forty two years old but could best any man of thirty. His voice was a resonant baritone, he looked better without a hat than with, his laugh was a

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mellifluous chuckle that set gentlemen at ease and caused young boys to stare in admiration.

Perhaps that was the problem? Augustus mused. Perhaps my hat?