

GHOST TOWN

The Whiterock Incident Part 1: The Journal

by
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Six persons have gone missing in as many weeks. In most places, this information would hardly raise an eyebrow, but in Whiterock, South Dakota, a farming town with a population of a scant eight hundred people, it draws much more attention. My name is Ethan Drew and I'm an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I'm being sent to Whiterock to investigate the disappearances. The bureau thought that our presence in the community would trigger the perp to flee, so I'm being sent in under cover. Coming from a rural background myself, I have been hired as a farmhand for one Doctor Victor Tesla, a former New York researcher for the military. Ten years ago, he was fired and moved to the country; he bought a farm and removed himself from the academic world. Much speculation has gone into what led to his departure, and why he would go to such extremes to get away from it, but that is not what my investigation will be into. I know little of the area, or the people there and there is not much information on the case. I also haven't made any connections yet. I only have one thought on the matter: everybody's a suspect. These are my notes, beginning upon my arrival in Whiterock, on Monday, June 17th, 2013.

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The dew glistened in the early morning sun as I drove down the straight, narrow road. It had been at least two hours since I'd seen another car. The prairie was a sight of beauty: waves of green growing wheat stretching as far as the eye can see. The only things breaking the horizon were the houses and barns of the farmers; they are stewards of the land, simple folk in their own right, as dedicated to their work as to their religion. Mainly Lutheran's here, mixed with a few Presbyterians and Catholics, but all are descendants of northern Europe. Swedes and Finns, they dot the land with their farms and pastures, towns and wheat. Only a few rivers break the fields, snaking their way towards Canada, their waters slowly moving along in the late spring. The spring Chinooks have given way to the still calms of the prairie summers. The intense heat will ripen the wheat, turning it from the grass green I see now to the amber waves we sing about.

A day's drive west of Minneapolis, two hours south of Fargo, and a stone's throw from both the Minnesota and North Dakota borders, Whiterock, South Dakota sits in a valley along the Bois De Sioux River. A curious notion for a prairie, Whiterock is surrounded by a fifteen square mile, ten thousand acre forest formed by the artesian wells along the river. The forest, itself a local legend for all the goblins, imps, pixies, and demons that hide behind the trees, has always remained a beautiful sight in the flat prairie. The dark green trees rising above the horizon reminded me of the skyscrapers of my new home, however, I feel this natural jungle will be much easier to navigate than the concrete one. Instead of all manners of people walking about, I see deer, elk, moose, geese, loons, fox, minks, birds, and many other forms of animals living in harmony with their peaceful forest.

I turn my car onto the old forest road, the only paved trail and the only path for cars, through the woods. Narrow and winding, it's the only way to and from Whiterock. Dr. Tesla's farm is on the edge of the woods, on the other side. I could easily bypass the forest, but I want to see the village first. Wild animals watch as I slowly move down the road, like they know this is my first time on the old road and I don't belong there. Like my journey here, there are no cars, no humans. There isn't enough life on these roads to fill a city bus. That's why I left the country the first time. My brother was content to run the farm, but I wanted the bright lights of the city. My car finally breaks through the forest walls and enters Whiterock.

Immediately, I notice that the only paved road in the town is the old forest road; everything else is covered with gravel. The houses are simple, rambler styles, most of them are a single story—nothing flashy, only survival. Children run around in bare feet, chasing each other with sticks they pretend are guns. There aren't any adults supervising them; they know the only real danger would be to wander into the woods, and they've heard enough ghost stories to never do that. Sure, most have scraped knees; bruises here and there, but wrestling with your friends and swashbuckling with tree limbs will do that. At night their mothers will draw them a bath, tell them to be

more careful, and smile because they know the next day it will happen all over again.

I finally catch my first glimpse of adults in hours. Several well-worn pickup trucks sit outside a building in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. The sign indicates that it's Dale's Café and Treats, ice cold soda pop, steaming hot coffee, fresh baked confections, homemade ice cream, and breakfast served all morning. I can't begin to imagine the need for that sign. A pair of bicycles sit just beyond the entrance. Through the window I can see the patrons, big men, wearing dirty t-shirts and jeans, their heads covered by baseball hats, sitting at the tables shaking dice cups and laughing: their version of social networking. I remember from my younger years that the stories being told are the local gossip, bragging about how big one's cow has gotten, or how much their tractor is able to pull.

Dale's Café sits at the corner of the old forest road and Main Street. I turn onto the graveled Main Street and look at the old buildings there. There's a police and fire station, a grocery store, liquor store, bar, Lutheran Church, another bar, Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, another bar, hardware and feed store, the other Lutheran Church, the general store with gas pumps, and a grain elevator. At the end of Main Street, which dead-ends into the forest, are houses—just outside of one of them, a lady hangs clothes to dry in the hot morning sun.

I pulled into the parking lot of the general store. As I get out of the car, I can see how dead this town really is. I can't hear people anywhere. In the city, all you hear is people and the things they use. Pull into a gas station in the city and you hear cars, trucks, radios, people talking, and other things like that, but here, nothing. I listen to the birds and the breeze in the trees. The air is crisp and clean. As I walk into the general store, I take notice of how old everything is. Both the building itself and all the fixtures look to be at least fifty years old—even the cash register. I doubt it could pass a building inspection.

I look around the store and see that the clerk, a shaggy haired, unshaven boy in his late teens, hasn't taken his eyes off of two blonde girls, about sixteen, wearing bathing suits and shorts. They both have

beach towels draped over their shoulders and are deciding between the different kinds of ice cream bars in the cooler. Their hair and bathing suits are wet, and water pools on the floor around the sandals on their feet. The girls talk and giggle in hushed voices.

I make my way to the cooler and grab a bottle of Coca-Cola. Their drink selection is meager; there are not more than ten different kinds, only one cooler full. At a store like this in a city, there would be a whole wall of soda pop. I look over the store's limited selections and then get in line behind the girls to pay for my drink.

The shaggy haired boy scolds the girls for coming into the store dripping wet. He points to a sign on the door stating as much, and reminds them that to get service they need to be wearing shirts. He's not mad at them; his attempts to flirt are painful to watch. The girls play along with him though, more making fun of him than anything else. They invite him to the pool on the edge of town when he's done with his shift. He agrees as the girls pay for two ice cream bars and leave. I pay for my drink and walk out of the store, realizing that not once did the clerk look me in the eyes. Teenagers.

As I walk back to my car, I notice two more girls, dressed the same as the first two, one a brunette, the other black haired. All four girls are eating ice cream bars, yet I only noticed the girls pay for two. The blondes tell the other two about the clerk, and they laugh about it. They leave, deciding to go play volleyball at one of their houses, away from the swimming pool and the clerk. As the girls take off, I think about saying something. I joined the FBI because I feel a strong sense of right and wrong, and believe that people should do the right thing. On the other hand, I'm not about to blow my cover on the first day over one dollar's worth of ice cream.

I take a large drink from my Coke as I get into my car and head back towards the old forest road. Aside from the four girls, and the lady hanging her wash on the line, I haven't seen anybody out and about. I would think that it may be due to the disappearances, that maybe people are scared to be outside, but then why would four teenage girls be wandering about during the day? It's interesting that no one paid any attention to me. In a town this small, everyone knows everyone,

and I can't imagine that many strangers pass through here. There wasn't even a strange look at my presence there. I get back onto the old forest road and head out of town. The town breaks back into the forest. I chuckle to myself that this road looks identical to the route I took into town. At night, I don't think you'd know if you were coming or going.

I finally see the mailbox with Tesla written on the side and I turn into the yard. I'm stunned. The house is an old bonanza house—probably over one hundred years old. The house is two stories tall and sprawling, with a steeply sloped, red-shingled roof to keep the snow off, a porch that wraps around the entire house, and weather vanes on both ends. The house is white, with a dark red trim that's identical to the two large barns, bigger than any of the others that I've seen in the area. Other smaller barns sit around the edge of the farmyard, all classic red, all with the haylofts open. Two large machine sheds, red with white trim, sit at the northernmost point of the yard. The cattle, grazing in the shade of the west edge of the yard, don't even bother to look up as I drive in.

Random farm equipment is scattered around the yard and I'm relieved that I still recognize most. Its older equipment, though, and I've never been a good mechanic. It's not even nine in the morning and already hay is being unloaded into one of the barns. The bale stack on the wagon is too high for me to see who's pitching the bales, but I can see long, golden blonde hair flying around from behind. The family dog watches as I park outside the house, and the large black lab doesn't even bother to move from his post on the steps as I walk up.

My heart pounds as I wait for someone to answer the door. I try to remember my cover story exactly. Having left my family farm since it wasn't big enough for all the kids, I moved to the city to try my luck there. I moved around from job to job, but none of them brought what the farm life gave me. I longed for the county: the peace and quiet, the smell of fresh cut hay and smoked pheasant. I loved watching the sunrise and seeing the fruits of my labor grow throughout the year until it was time to gather the bountiful harvest. Tending the cattle like they're your children, and letting your children run free, without the

cares or hassles of the city. I'm certain they'll buy the story, so long as I can keep up with the work. I've spent the past few years behind desks. This is my first solo mission, first field mission. I always workout, but a few days a week running and weight lifting is nothing compared to the grueling physical labor that's done on a farm.

The door opens and Donna Tesla ushers me into the house. Dr. Victor's wife, Donna belongs here. A pure Swede who happened to marry a German doctor, Donna also runs the farm. Standing an impressive six feet tall, with a powerful frame, Donna has a presence in the room that cannot be missed. Her pixie cut blonde hair hangs loosely around her face, accenting her sky blue eyes that give way to a tiny nose. Donna's handshake affirms that she's not to be taken lightly. Her tight, red and yellow sundress is a mix of modern and classic styles, homemade for sure, but none the less, very attractive for a woman in her mid-fifties. Donna escorts me to the sitting room where she brings me a glass of homemade lemonade.

The interior of the house is far more impressive than the exterior. Donna tells me that Victor had it remodeled before they moved in. A dark blood red is the main color, creating an unsettling feeling, like an East German castle or something from a vampire movie. The décor does not behoove a farm either, once again, East German castle. Display swords hang on a wall, above a large brick fireplace. A painting of a gothic cathedral draws instant attention. The portrait, which takes up almost the entire wall, is very dark, with a mist hanging in the air. The people in the picture having longing expressions, like they wish to get away from their location, get out of the portrait. Next to the painting is a freestanding suit of armor. Donna explains as I look over the armor that all the decorating was Victor's idea. She said it helps him to concentrate. It creeps me out.

Every inhalation in this room burns my nostrils. It took a moment to figure out what the pungent, heavy aroma was: pipe tobacco. Donna explains that Victor has smoked a pipe since he was in college and often smokes when he is thinking, however, I receive strict orders that if I'm a smoker, there are to be no cigarettes smoked in the house. I assure Donna I don't smoke as I look over the only family picture in

the room. Judging from Donna's age, I would guess it was taken around ten years ago. There's Victor and Donna, one boy and two girls. The men in the picture wear black suits with white shirts and dark red ties, while the young girls wear dark red dresses. Donna is wearing a black dress.

I take my first sip of the tart beverage as I sit down while Donna begins explaining the farm. Primarily wheat and soybeans, some corn for the two hundred head of cattle, hay, and a massive garden that contains just about every fruit and vegetable that can be grown at the northern tip of the Great Plains. The farm is Donna's as Victor spends his days working in a basement laboratory, trying to regain some of his glory that was lost when he was fired. Donna's assisted by her oldest daughter Michelle, a gruff farmhand named James, and now, myself. Her youngest daughter Madison helps when she can. With a sad tone in her voice, Donna tells me that Michael, their oldest child, has never set foot on the farm, as he's a doctor who was already in university when they moved here. The farm was purely Donna's idea. They had been frugal with their money and when Victor was fired, Donna talked him into making the move. She even picked the location and the land. She runs over fifteen hundred acres, a good-sized farm for the area.

I listen intently, hoping she gives something away. I'm bursting to ask a question but I can't. The position on the farm opened up because David Games, an old farmhand, was the first of the six to go missing six weeks ago. He was reported missing by Donna, who had called his sister, Martha. Apparently, from time to time, David would go on a bender and end up at Martha's apartment. That time, however, Martha hadn't seen him. At first, it was thought that he had gotten drunk and wandered into the forest, but as more people started to go missing, a different theory was constructed. Martha Grant, an old widowed school marm, was the last to go missing. However, Donna only talks about what I'm to do on the farm, which is shadow James for the first few days until I gain my bearings. I'll be working mainly with the crops and garden; the cattle are Donna and Michelle's to tend. I'm to stay in a spare room, eat with the family, and help myself to anything in the refrigerator or pantry.

Suddenly, the smell of burning tobacco gets much stronger. I turn and see Doctor Victor Tesla ascending a flight of stairs, longed stemmed black pipe in hand. A small and timid man, Victor wears formal, all black clothing that is well-worn and hangs loosely off his slender frame. His clothes give away his recent weight loss and his face looks peaked from recent stress. His slicked back hair is more gray than black as are his moustache and five o'clock shadow. Donna stands to kiss him as he reaches the top of the stairs, but he hardly notices her. I stand as Donna tries to introduce us, and I shake his weak and trembling hand. Victor comments that he has no time for idle chatter with the help, demanding to know if a package arrived for him in the mail. Donna hands him a small package off a table. Victor looks at the brown box, then walks to the kitchen, grabs two cans of Coca-Cola, and rushes back down stairs. Donna apologies for his rudeness, saying his work is very stressful and distracting. I can see the love for Victor in her eyes, and the frustration of his actions and inattentiveness on her face. Donna's not the type of woman who needs to be showered with attention, but she does demand to be noticed.

Donna was about to continue when Madison Tesla skipped down the stairs, sleep fresh from her eyes. Madison, at only fifteen, looks wise beyond her years. She is very short with her baby fat giving way to solid muscle. Dirty blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail that barely comes to the base of her neck and looks like it needs to be washed. Seductive blue eyes and a perfectly clear completion along with her thin red lips made her face look older than it was. As she passes me, I almost cough from the strength of her perfume. I wondered at first why a farm girl would wear so much in the morning before going out to do chores, until I got another whiff and realize that it's masking the faint smell of cigarettes. Her tomboyish grin holds back a mischievous smile and something tells me it'd be best to steer clear of her.

Madison was dressed in a wide-shouldered, tight, black tank top, and cut off jean shorts that rode low on her hips baring a strip of midriff, homemade for sure. Her outfit is possibly holdovers from last summer, possibly her style, but she definitely gives the appearance of being intent on raising herself. Donna scolds Madison for sleeping in, and for coming home so late the night before, which Madison doesn't

answer as to where she was or what she was doing. As Madison continues to get her breakfast, I can't help but notice how well she ignores her mother.

Donna rattled off the chores that she needed Madison to tend to and then she introduced us. Madison was almost at the door, putting on her black Stetson hat and matching cowboy boots, but she stopped to shake my hand. Her grip was vice firm and although she didn't say a word, she didn't need too; a look in the eyes and a wink from her confirmed that I should keep my distance from this woman trapped in a kid's body. Donna muttered, "Teenagers," as Madison bolted out the door.

As I head outside to find James, I can't help but think that in another life I would have been very content here. Outside of the strange décor of the house, this place seemed to offer a tranquility that just felt right. In the yard, I see the unmistakable green of a John Deere tractor moving about. It comes to a stop and James Marks climbs out of the cab. A tall and lank man, with his height augmented by a dirty brown Stetson hat and cowboy boots, brushed the dirt off his Levis as he looked my way and waved. Well into his forties, James had features that most twenty-year-old men would die for. With his white t-shirt hanging off his belt, I could see his chiseled abs, muscular chest, and broad shoulders that were all dripping with sweat. As he approaches, James puts a pinch of chewing tobacco in his mouth. He offers me the tin as we introduce ourselves and I decline before shaking his hand. James's grip is that of iron, boldly marking that I am to follow his commands without question. He takes off his hat to wipe his head with his shirt revealing his shaved head. A pleasant man, always with a story to tell or a joke to play, James is fiercely devoted to his work and takes great pride in a job well done.

We walk around the yard, in and out of the barns and machine sheds, with James telling me my responsibilities, and asking me if I know how to run the various equipment. He makes no reference to his prior charge, nothing to indicate that he knows what happened. The dog, Admiral, follows us everywhere, never taking his eyes off me. As James and I look over the garden, which is the size of a full city block,

I catch another glimpse of the wild blonde hair, this time behind a fence. James makes no mention of her, so I can only assume that the hair belongs to Michelle Tesla, the other daughter.

James points out what's planted where and shows me the list and schedule for how much irrigating each grouping of plants needs. James also informs me that I get to walk the garden everyday, pulling any weeds that I see. I get the feeling that the new guy always gets that job. At the cattle barn James shows me how to work with the cattle if needed. Donna and Michelle take care of all the milking, but we'll need to handle things when they're transferred to different pastures, something James says they do three times a year. They must be very careful not to over graze any of the pastures or they'll be ruined for the next year.

As we walk back through the yard, a rusty, old, flatbed pickup turns in from the highway. The markings indicate that it's from the feed store. The truck stops and Andrew Franks gets out and rushes over to James, who introduces us. Andrew's a strapping young lad, most likely around twenty with a solid frame, calloused hands, and shaggy, rust colored hair. He seems overworked, but doesn't mind. James provokes Andrew about the new motorcycle Andrew had just bought, seems James doesn't think the engine is big enough. Andrew has a smart assed comeback for everything James throws at him. They joke for a moment until Madison comes out from one of the barns.

As Andrew rushes over to her, I can't help but notice that Madison is no longer wearing her tank top but just a black, wide strapped, medium coverage bikini top. With as hot as it is in the barns I can understand why she wears something like that. The pair shares a kiss before ducking into the barn. I ask James about their age difference, but he says that in these parts, as long as the boy's had a proper upbringing, is respectful around the parents, and goes to church, no one will say too much. Not a full minute passes before Andrew leaves the barn, gets in the truck, and leaves. James speculates that they were making plans to meet sometime today at a swimming hole in the woods. That would explain why Madison is wearing a bikini under her clothes.

The rest of the day was quite unspectacular. I checked the garden for weeds, inspected the fence near the forest, assisted James with moving some hay equipment around, loaded bales, and changed the oil on a tractor. Donna brought us lunch: ham sandwiches, an apple, chips, and a can of Coca-Cola, which James and I ate under the shade of a tall, old, oak tree in the middle of the yard. Things will be slow around here until the wheat harvest, which gives me more time for investigating.

During lunch, I tried to broach the question of the missing persons, but James laughed, implying the woods held more secrets than we had time to talk about. I fear that the superstitious nature of these people may hinder my efforts to uncover the whereabouts of the six missing persons. By the end of the day, I was very ready for bed, having not worked this hard since I had left my parents farm. My final chore was to bring some tools in from the garden and hang them in the shed. I had put the final one in its place when I turned and saw something amazing.

Thick, curly, strawberry blonde hair fell to the middle of Michelle Tesla's back, while her bangs brushed the tops of her massive blue eyes. Long eyelashes stood out among the narrow elfish features of her face. Five foot, four inches tall with a medium build formed into a perfectly feminine hourglass shape that sits atop her long, shapely legs. Michelle moves with the fluid grace of a dancer or gymnast with a powerful and tone body that says she would excel in any sport.

Defiantly not a shy girl, Michelle introduces herself and shakes my hand while wearing only short, dark, tight, cutoff jean shorts and a black sports bra. Sweat glistens and drips off her clear, pale skin. Explaining she likes to escape the heat of the midday's sun, Michelle puts on a baggy, black tee shirt and tucks it into her shorts. For only twenty-two years old, Michelle has knowledge about farming and a work ethic that would rival most men near retirement.

We playfully banter back and forth as we walk towards the house for supper, Michelle promises to take me into town on the weekend and show me around. As we talk, I definitely feel that instant spark of attraction and connection. I've never had trouble finding a date, and

there's nothing that says I can't have a personal relationship, but I hope she's not the person responsible for all the disappearances.

Everyone else was already gathered around the supper table when Michelle and I enter the house. The smell of the meatloaf cooking in the kitchen permeates the air. Homegrown lettuce, squash, corn, and green beans are already set out. Milk sits in an unmarked glass jug, Michelle explains that it's from their cows. Madison jokes that we would be dining on Bessie tonight, a cow that she helped raise since it was born. I've never had a problem eating meat in the past, but it seems a tad bit morbid to know the name of the animal you're dining on. Donna brings out the meatloaf and the smell of it fills the room, absolute heaven. Nothing is better than home cooked food and Michelle says that they eat mainly home grown food here. Donna hollers down the stairs for Victor to come eat. We wait on grace until he arrives. Before sitting down, Victor rushes to the kitchen and gets a can of Coca-Cola. James leads the group in a quick grace before we all dig in.

Dining with us tonight is Ashley Miller, a quiet, timid girl, the same age as Madison. Tan and tone, Ashley's twin brunette braids break past her shoulders while her freckled face and narrow eyes make her look younger than she really is. I find it funny these two are friends, whereas Madison is a woman beyond her years, Ashley seems more a child, beneath her years. Madison wears only a red bikini top, much more revealing than the black one she wore earlier in the day, with short jean shorts while Ashley wears a yellow and pink one-piece swimsuit with baggy red gym shorts that come to just above her knees. The girls tell Donna that they will be going to the swimming hole after dinner tonight.

Before the events of the day can be hashed over, Victor stands, goes to the kitchen, grabs two more cans of Coca-Cola, and returns to the basement. He spoke not one word during the time it took him to eat two bites of meatloaf and to drink his can of Coca-Cola. Most teenagers can't down a Coke as fast as Victor can. As Donna watches him walk away, she holds back tears. She loves him far more than he deserves. Madison and Ashley are too busy in their own conversation