

THE GREAT DIVIDE

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HENRÍQUEZ

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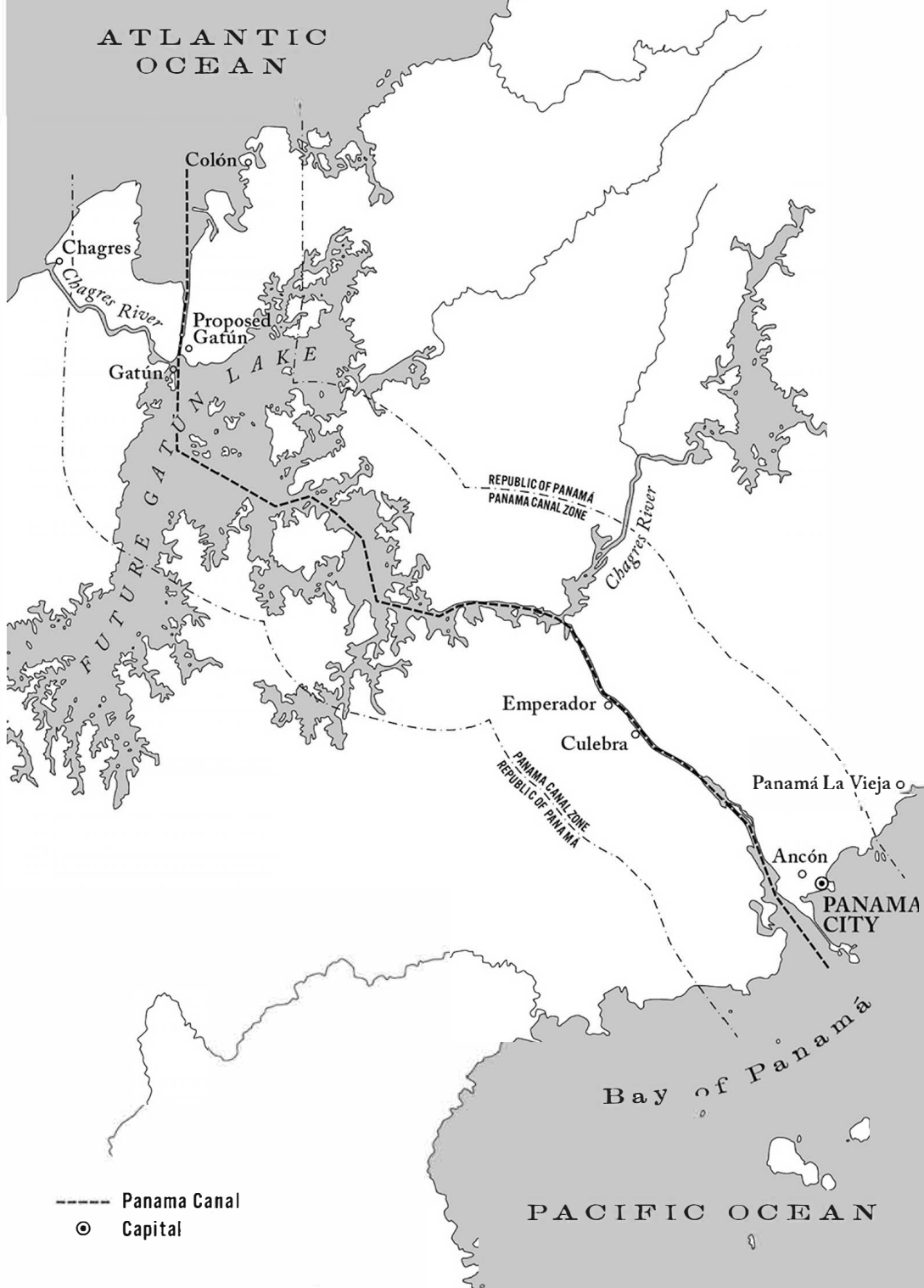
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Map

MAP OF THE PANAMA CANAL ZONE

· 1907 ·

SCALE: 10 miles



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J. M. GRASSLEY

Agent, I.C.C.

1907

SOMEWHERE OFF THE PACIFIC COAST OF PANAMÁ, IN THE CALM BLUE WATER OF THE bay, Francisco Aquino sat alone in his boat. He had built the boat himself from the trunk of a cedar tree that he had stripped and carved with nothing but a stone adze and a crooked knife, whittling it and smoothing it, running his hand over every surface and curve, whittling and smoothing again, until he had fashioned that single tree trunk into what he believed was the most magnificent boat on the whole of the sea.

Francisco sat holding his paddle across his lap. His knees were bent and his bare feet were flat on the floor of the hull next to his reel and a wooden bucket that he used to bail water out of the boat when too much got in. His net hung off the side.

Every day but Sunday, Francisco rose before dawn and walked to the shore and untied his boat from its post. He rowed through the waves and, when he was out far enough, he secured the knots on his net and let the net drop. Then he rowed again, slowly, listening to the water hiccup each time he pulled the paddle up through the surface and slipped it back in. He had to advance at just the right speed to create drag for the net. Too slow and the fish were not fooled. Too fast and they fled. It was a delicate balance, but Francisco had trawled in these waters for most of his life, and he knew what to do.

A breeze came from the east and ruffled the brim of his hat. Gently, the boat rocked side to side. He waited for the best moment to start. The water would tell him when. Francisco nudged the bucket with his foot, then nudged it back. Birds swooped overhead. He opened his hands and studied his rough, calloused skin. Once, a long time ago on a rainy afternoon speckled with sun, Esme had taken his hands in hers and turned his palms

up. There is a map, she had told him, in the lines of your hands. A map of what? he had asked. And what had she said? He always tried to remember, but he never could.

Francisco folded his fingers into fists and sighed. The ocean spread endlessly around him, glittering in the early sun. In the quiet, his boat listed and swayed.

His eyesight unfortunately was not what it used to be. Francisco squinted out at the horizon to the place where, supposedly, ships one hundred times bigger than his little boat would someday line up, waiting their turn to sail across Panamá. He sputtered a laugh. It was a ludicrous idea, impossible to believe. Every sailor and explorer who had ever landed on these shores had dreamed that ships would one day travel from ocean to ocean by way of Panamá, although exactly how they expected to get from one side to the other was anyone's guess. The spine of the great Cordillera Mountains, running straight through the isthmus, stood in the way after all, and of the many miraculous things Francisco had heard in his life, he had never heard of a ship that could sail through a mountain. So they would cut the mountains, they said, break the spine, and once that was done, the water from both oceans would gush forth from each end and join to create a way through. A delusional dream. Putting not one but two oceans in a place where for millions of years there had only been land. Who could believe such a thing?

Francisco lifted the brim of his hat and squinted harder, trying to see the phantom shapes of steamers and schooners and battleships and boats, all the vessels that they swore would come through. He looked, but instead of ships, all he could see sitting on top of the water was the brilliant blue sky. Perhaps the problem, he thought, was that a person needed faith to be able to see things that did not exist, to imagine a world not yet made. In addition to so many other things, Francisco had lost his faith a long time ago.

ON THE ATLANTIC SIDE OF PANAMA, AROUND THE MIDWAY POINT OF THE SIDEWINDING coast, a ship eased into port at Colón. It was a Royal Mail paddle wheel steamer with tall white masts that had sailed from Barbados carrying some twenty-three thousand letters down belowdecks and some eight hundred passengers up above. The passengers were men mostly, hailing from St. Lucy and St. John and Christ Church and every parish in between. They were dressed in their finest suits, standing shoulder to shoulder on the deck, packed in tight, clutching tin trunks and suitcases and feverish hope.

Among them, sixteen-year-old Ada Bunting sat on the deck with her arms round her knees. It was the first time she had ever been on a ship, and for all the six days of the voyage she had sat huddled behind two chicken crates stacked on top of a black steamer trunk, praying she would not be found. The morning she had left home, she had written a note on her old school tablet and propped it on the kitchen table where her mother would be sure to see it when she woke up. That she was going to Panama was nearly all the note said. Then, in the early dawn, Ada had put on her gardening clothes—tattered trousers and a button-up blouse—carried the canvas sack she had packed all the way to the wharf, and managed, amid the commotion and the crowds, to slip on board the ship without being seen.

For every waking hour, the chickens in the crates had clucked and bawked and screeched, and Ada found that if she shushed them, they only clucked more. She thought they must be hungry, so on the second day she crumbled a few of the crackers she had brought and dropped the crumbs in between slats of the crates and watched as the chickens picked them up with their beaks. That settled them somewhat. On the third day, Ada fed them

crackers again and listened as they made contented warbling sounds. On the fourth day, she shared some of the sugar apple she had packed, being careful to pick out the seeds first. On the fifth, she peeled back the lid on a can of sardines, and after eating most of them herself, licking the saltiness off her fingertips when she was done, she fed the chickens the rest. By the sixth day, all the food she had brought with her was gone, and the only thing she had to give the chickens was the same reassurance her mother always gave her: The Lord will take care. She had to believe that was true.

As soon as the ship came to a stop, everyone rushed to get off. Ada waited till some of the swarm had cleared, but even when she stood up no one, thank goodness, paid the least bit of attention to her. People were too busy gathering their things and straining to see, past the sailboats and palm trees lining the shore, just what Panama looked like now that they were here. To Ada, the part of town she could make out past the end of the wharf looked a lot like Bridgetown, a row of two- and three-story wood-frame buildings facing a main street, shops with awnings and buildings with signs, and the fact that it looked so familiar was both a disappointment and a relief.

Cradling her sack in her arms, Ada shoved her way portside together with everyone else. The seat of her trousers was damp, but the trousers, which her mother had sewn, had served their purpose of helping her blend into the crowd of what was primarily men. She had seen only a few other women this whole time, and all of them were older than she was. Ada had worn boots for the trip, too, black leather boots that had been a gift from a man named Willoughby Dalton, who had been courting her mother for the past year or so. Every so often, usually on Sunday when he knew they would be at home, Willoughby limped slowly up to their door with a new offering in his hands—wildflowers or breadfruit or a small clay bowl. A few months earlier he had come with a pair of black boots. The boots were worn in the heels and the laces were frayed, but when Willoughby held them out, Ada's mother had taken them and said, "Thank you," as she did each time Willoughby arrived with a gift. And as he did each time, Willoughby said, "You quite welcome," and remained on the porch as though he were waiting to be invited in. It was always the same unfortunate dance. Her mother nodded and edged the door closed, and only when it shut all the way did Willoughby turn round again and walk home.

The ropes running up the masts snapped in the wind, and people jostled and shoved. When Ada came to the gangplank, she angled herself behind a man who had brought his own folding chair, hoping that the chair would shield her from the two white officers who were down on the wharf. At the base of the gangplank, they were shouting, “Labor train! Labor train that a’way!” and pointing toward town. People streamed off the ship headed in the direction the officers said, and it seemed to Ada that her best chance of going unnoticed was just to keep up with the flow. She had made it this far, but there was still a chance that one of the officers would think it suspicious, a young woman traveling on her own, and if they pulled her aside and learned that she had not paid, they would almost certainly put her back on the ship and send her home. Ada squeezed her sack to her chest as she stepped down onto the pier and walked past the officers. Even from behind the folding chair she could hear them talking. One of them said to the other, “Send word to the captain that the cargo has arrived.” She was sixteen years old, but she knew enough to understand that they were not talking about the mail.

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WHEN ADA STEPPED aboard the train, which was really nothing more than a chain of open-air wood-framed cattle cars, it was stuffed with passengers from the ship, people carrying suitcases and baskets and plants and crates. She pushed through to the back corner of the car and held on to a post with one arm. With the other she held on to her sack. Besides the sardines and the crackers and the sugar apples, she had packed two sets of underclothes, a dress, a vial of almond oil for smoothing her hair, a pieced cotton quilt she had taken from her bed, and three gold crowns. She wished she had thought to bring more food, but she hadn’t. She had a mind that outpaced her good sense, her mother always said, and there on the train, Ada smiled, hearing her mother scolding her in her head, hearing that particular tone. Her mother had no doubt seen her note by now, and Ada could almost hear her tone—much more severe—about that, too, about going off to Panama on her own like she had, even though it was with good reason.

Her sister, Millicent, was sick, in need of a surgery that they could not afford. As a seamstress, her mother did not earn much, and Ada would have gotten a job herself except that in Barbados these days, work was hard to

come by. But in Panama, everyone said, finding work was as easy as plucking apples from trees. If everyone else could go and pluck them, Ada had thought, then why shouldn't she? She would stay just long enough to earn the money for Millicent's surgery, then she would go back.

As the train started off, Ada peered at the faces around her, so many young men dressed in suits, all of them looking just as tense and expectant as she herself felt. Past the city, the train clanked over a low bridge and through leafy trees before emerging into a field wide enough to see the dark green mountains in the distance. When it rattled to a stop near a small town, a handful of people hopped down and walked toward a cluster of wood-frame buildings raised up on stilts. A man whose suit sleeves stopped short of his wrists looked out and, to no one in particular, said, "This where we to stay?"

A man wearing muddied khaki trousers and a blue work shirt laughed. "What you expect? A grand hotel?"

The man in the too-small suit pointed to the houses on the opposite side of the tracks, a row of neat buildings painted white with gray trim, and asked if they couldn't stay there instead.

The man dressed in work clothes chuckled again. "Them the gold houses." He pointed toward the camps. "The silver housing for us."

When the man in the too-small suit looked puzzled, the other man said didn't he know? Everything in the Canal Zone—the commissaries, the train cars, the dining halls, the housing, the hospitals, the post offices, and the pay—was divided on the basis of silver and gold. Gold meant the Americans, and silver meant them.

At each new village or town, more men hopped off. The train emptied out. Ada had no idea where she was meant to go. At some point, a man standing near her inched closer and said, "What about you? You have someplace to sleep? Only white women allowed in the camps, you know."

Ada clutched her sack tight.

"I got a place you can lay your head, though." The man patted his thigh.

Ada turned to face him. "I would sooner lie down in hell." She let go of the post and walked to the other side of the car, and at the next stop, as soon as she could, she jumped off—at a place called Empire, according to the trainmaster who shouted it aloud.

THE OTHER MEN who had gotten off, too, walked out past Ada toward the camps. If it was true that she was not allowed there, as she'd been told, then she would have to make a camp of her own out in the trees. Tomorrow she would try to find work, but for now she was so exhausted that all she wanted was to lay her head down and rest. At home, she and Millicent and their mother all shared the one bedroom at the back of the house, and they each had a husk-stuffed mattress propped up on frames that their mother had built. It would feel so good, she kept thinking, to lie in that bed now, to stretch her body all the way straight, locking her arms over her head and pointing her toes. She would have to settle, though, for spreading her quilt out on the ground if she could find a clearing big enough to spread it upon.

A few steps into the forest, the air grew cooler, and it smelled of things alive. Ada heard slithers and crunches and whistles and taps. Everywhere she walked, the soft ground was covered by twigs and moss, flowering bushes and logs. She pushed aside fronds to find puddles and mud. There was no dry clearing anywhere she could see. The day darkened as she carried on, and she was so tired that she had a mind just to drop down in the brush when she spotted what looked like a boxcar among the trees. It was rusting and rotting, half hidden by vines and a veil of thick brush, its back wheels sunk in the mud, the whole thing askew. She stood staring at it for a time to see if anyone else was near, but she heard only the sound of animals rustling in the trees. She walked up closer and called out, "Hello?" When no one answered, she stepped all the way up to the open doorway, which was level with her head, and said it again. She reached up and knocked three times on the floor. Nothing still. *Well, the Lord will take care*, she thought, and she hoisted herself up inside and lay down.

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IN THE MORNING, the hiss and tick of insects filled Ada's ears. She sat up slowly and looked around, remembering where she was. Sunlight leaked through the seams of the wood boards, giving her enough light to see the whole inside of the boxcar now. There was not much to see except for cobwebs and clumps of stray leaves.

Ada had slept in the clothes she had worn on the ship, and now, in the soggy, thick air, they were so damp that they stuck to her skin. From her sack, which was next to her on the floor, Ada pulled out the dress she had

brought, a patchwork dress of brown and yellow squares, made by her mother, and changed into it instead. She stood up, tugged the sleeves down at her wrists, smoothed out the pleats over her hips. She stepped into her boots and spit on her palm, leaning down to rub the mud off the toes. Then she picked up her sack. A dry dress and clean boots were a start. Now she had to find food and she had to find work.



IT WAS RAINING lightly in the forest. A low mist clung to the air. *Somewhere out here*, Ada thought, *there ought to be food*. In the light of the day, she saw things she had not been able to see the night before: vines and creepers hanging from branches, leaves shaped like swords that were tangled with ferns. Everything everywhere was dazzlingly green. Olive green, jade green, emerald green, lime green, green lost in shadows, green lit by the sun. She walked through green curtains and over green carpets, hoping to find something she recognized—jackfruit or sea grape or pawpaw—and knew she could eat. Panama, she had heard, had bananas aplenty, and she peered up into the trees in case she saw any now. At home, it would have been easier. At home, Ada knew which trees bore fruit and which bushes yielded berries so ripe she could pop them with her teeth. In the garden plot behind their house they grew corn and arrowroot and cassava and herbs, and they ate what they grew or else they traded it with the neighbors sometimes, the best trade being when their mother gave away ears of corn for cherries that Mrs. Callender grew from a tree in her yard—the sweetest, juiciest cherries in all of Barbados, Mrs. Callender claimed—and when Ada ate them, she was certain Mrs. Callender was telling the truth. Ada’s mouth watered now thinking of those cherries. There had to be things to eat out here in the forest, and she could probably find them if she looked for long enough, but her stomach was clawing, and her dress, which had felt so good when it was dry, was now wet from the rain, and her boots were once again covered with mud, and she was impatient, which was one of her worst traits according to her mother, who said that Ada never waited long enough to let things come to her.

