

BACKPACK ADVENTURES

Episode 14

“The Waterfall Ghost”

Summer leaned back in her wheelchair and peered around a thick wooden bookcase. She could see her mother talking intently with the gray-haired storeowner, Mr. Witherspoon, as they joyfully examined a huge leather-bound book. Summer understood their fascination with the old book—she had found her own treasure in the floor-to-ceiling shelves that lined the shop, Witherspoon’s Antiquarian Relics, a bookstore filled with musty manuscripts and antique books.

Summer clutched a tiny tract no bigger than a credit card. *The Ghost Inside the Waterfall: A Lowell Legend as told by Mary O’Riley* read the mysterious title. As Summer read the few yellowed pages, she was captivated by the story of a textile mill girl who drowned in the waterfall at the factory town of Lowell on September 13, 1853. Her ghost was supposedly seen inside the waterfall in the days after her death, floating in the spray. Summer had been looking for adventure ever since they first arrived in Boston two days ago for neurological tests on her spine. Investigating this girl’s legend would distract her while waiting for the test results.

Summer ducked back behind the heavy bookcase. Her mind was racing. She typed “Lowell, Massachusetts” into the keypad of her custom made backpack computer and discovered it was a couple hours from Boston. Mom will never make the trip outside the city, Summer thought, but I could go there by myself with the time travel feature of my computer. I’ve never done that before. I wish Travis were here!

Summer, along with her stepbrother, Travis, and four friends who made up the Backpack Club, had vowed never to travel alone with the powerful device

which they called the BPC. But what if she could save a life? What if she could change the past for the better?

Summer glanced at the back of the store. A sign read “Ladies Room” on a wide oak door with a transom above it. That would give her some privacy and she could go and return without losing any time. Her mother would never miss her. She pressed a button that started the motorized wheelchair rolling.

“Mom, I’m going to the bathroom,” she called as she pushed the heavy door ajar. Summer slid the lock on the door and nervously typed “September 15, 1853, Pawtucket Falls, Lowell, Massachusetts” into the keypad. As her finger hit the last command, Summer had a sense of dread that she was sending herself right into the falls. Too late! The rainbow light sparkled, enveloping her in colors as a rushing sound filled her ears.

The rushing turned into a roar and the colors seemed to crystallize into tiny drops of water that clung to Summer’s golden hair. Summer realized with relief she was not *in* the waterfall, but very near it on a grassy area by a grove of maple trees. She watched water from the Merrimack River cascade over rocks in a series of falls.

As impressive as the river was, Summer was astounded to see she was in a large town that reached to the water’s edge. The wooded area she sat in seemed to be a city park.

Huge five-story buildings lined the farther bank, and upriver Summer could see locks and canals that fed river traffic to the massive factories. Long rows of two story buildings were interspersed with the factories and everywhere

people bustled along the roadways and canal bridges, moving between the buildings and the railroad tracks that lined the streets.

Suddenly the sound of young girls' voices startled Summer and she turned in her chair to see a group of mill girls running up from the riverbank and shrieking in fear. She remembered what had brought her here and dreaded what might be the cause of their screams. A tall girl of about eighteen with bright red hair and wide green eyes was screaming the loudest and running straight for Summer as if she didn't see her or her chair.

"Stop!" Summer shouted. "What's the matter with you?"

The redhead stopped in her tracks and eyed Summer suspiciously. The others gathered behind her, a mob with red or dark brown hair, wide eyes and dingy cotton dresses. None was as tall as the first girl. No one smiled at Summer.

"Well, miss, you'd be scared half out of your wits if you'd seen a ghost, now, wouldn't you?" the girl answered with a sneer. Her heavy Irish brogue gave her away as a recent immigrant.

"A ghost? Just now, today?" Summer started to argue with them, but decided she needed to pretend to have no knowledge of the ghost.

"Aye, there in the river falls. 'Twas Bobbin, for sure," answered a tiny girl about nine years old who stepped forward. She was covered in dirt and wore no shoes. Her nose was crusted with mucus. The tall redhead looked at her with contempt and yanked her back.

“Mind your manners, Sheila, or you’ll be swimming with the ghost soon enough,” snarled the redhead through gritted teeth. The younger girl cringed and scurried away toward a low building beyond the trees.

Summer jumped when she heard the name “Bobbin,” for that had been the name of the dead girl in the tiny book she still clutched in her left hand. So there really had been a drowning! Was there really a ghost now?

“Who are you?” demanded the tall girl, her eyes glaring. A harsh cough erupted from her chest and she spat phlegm onto the ground and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Summer couldn’t figure out what she had done to make the girl so mad except having seen her scared out of her wits. The long-legged redhead looked dangerous now that she wasn’t screaming and it was clear that the other girls feared her. Summer had to think fast to keep control of the situation.

“I’m, um, Miss, um, Miss Summer, the owner’s niece.” Summer looked at the signs atop the building closest to her. “Miss Summer Lowell,” she added, reading the name of the factory and hoping that it would protect her somehow.

The girl straightened her back and stopped frowning. The other girls stepped back two paces and left the tall one standing alone.

“What’s your name and why were you going to run over me?” Summer noticed the tacit respect they gave her and decided to use its power.

“They call me Mary-O and I—we—meant you no harm. We just came to pay respects, so to speak, to Bobbin who drowned in the falls two days ago. She won’t have no proper wake nor burial since her body ain’t been found.”

“Two days ago? But I thought...” Summer hesitated. She must have gotten the days wrong! Mary-O was watching her, she mustn’t act confused. “I thought they would at least have a funeral. What about her family?”

“She’s an orphan like me. That’s how we got so—close. No one to care for us.” Mary-O put on a face of mock sadness that looked silly on her towering frame. “I told her not to swim in the river or I’d steal...”

Suddenly, her eyes went wide again. “That’s why I seen the ghost today! Bobbin said she’d come back as a water fairy if I ever...”

Now the other girls backed farther away from Mary-O. Summer could see the fear in their eyes as Mary-O’s hands flew to her mouth to stifle a cry of anguish. The others took off in the same direction as the little girl called Sheila and left Mary-O alone with Summer. Mary-O coughed again and started to choke on the phlegm. She caught her breath and used the hem of her dress as a handkerchief.

“Show me the place you saw Bobbin,” Summer commanded. Her wheelchair whirled into motion, giving Mary-O another fright. She was so overcome with fear she stumbled and fell backward, then rolled onto her stomach and started crawling away from Summer.

Summer started to laugh then remembered Bobbin. She had to know if there really was a ghost—or a body—in the falls. She watched Mary-O trail after the others.

Summer quickly found the path the girls had made to the river and carefully followed it closer and closer to the water’s edge. The roar of the falls

was deafening and in places the path was muddy and slick. Rocks jutted into the edge of the path threatening to snag a wheel. I'd better be careful or I'm going to be the one swimming with the ghost, she thought with a twinge of fear.

Summer peered into the water but could see no body or anything resembling a ghost. She felt the urge to call out to this poor, drowned, little girl, as if just saying her name might change the past. Yet, she felt self-conscious as if someone were watching her.

She looked behind her. No one. Nothing but the trees and tall grass of the park on this bit of undeveloped riverbank.

"Bobbin," Summer whispered hoarsely. She leaned forward, toward the rushing water, and spoke loudly. "Bobbin, are you there?"

The river washed away her words, drowning out all sounds but its own. Brown water swirled and eddied and leaped off the jagged rocks as the water roiled past the muddy pathway.

Summer lifted her hands to her mouth to shout out loud the lost girl's name. As she did, the tiny book flew out of her hand and she lunged forward to grab it. The wheelchair jerked and started sliding precariously toward the river. Summer tried to apply the brakes, but the slippery slope gave the wheels no traction. She clutched her backpack in her lap.

Suddenly, a young girl, dressed in an absurd patchwork of cotton fabric remnants, jumped in front of Summer and grabbed the wheelchair, stopping it inches from the riverbank drop off. In her hand was the tiny book. Her long,

brown hair was slicked back and clean, her face covered with freckles, and a spark played in her lively brown eyes. Her body was wiry and lithe.

“Hello. My name’s Bobbin. If you don’t mind, I’d rather us not go swimming just now.” Her strong arms maneuvered the wheelchair onto another pathway as she continued to talk. “This very unusual contraption deserves a closer look. If you will allow me to roll you to my newest domicile.”

Before Summer could protest, Bobbin had her hidden in a large shrub that was hollowed out like a cave. It was perched on an outcropping over the water and Bobbin pulled a few branches over the opening, sealing them from view from the outside.

It took a moment for Summer’s eyes to adjust to the leaf-filtered light inside the shrub. She could see long thorns poking outward, but this space had been ingeniously cleared and she felt quite secure. The sound of the rushing water was near, but it was not so terrifying here.

Bobbin stood in front of Summer, her appearance even more bizarre in the shadowy light. But a great big grin seemed stuck on her face as if saving someone from falling into the river was an everyday occurrence. Summer took a deep breath and replied.

“Thanks for saving my life. You *are* alive, too, aren’t you?”

Bobbin pinched herself and let out a little yelp. “Never more so!”

“Well, those girls back there think you’re a ghost!”

Bobbin laughed out loud but started coughing like Mary-O. It took her a long time to catch her breath. Finally, she could continue.

“That’s my intention. Makes it easier to leave if they all think I’m dead.”

She drew a raspy breath. “I saw how you frightened Mary-O. Serves her right! Years ago, to be a Lowell Mill girl was a chance for a better life. But now... Let’s just say, I don’t take to letting Mary-O or her followers bully me. She threatens to steal my clothes when I go swimming just because she can’t swim. And she’s sweet-talked Mr. Farnsley into giving her my job. I work hard for my wages and I’ve been here four years longer than those newcomers. I’ve got seniority even if I’m five years younger than Mary.”

“Work? But you’re just a child.” Summer couldn’t imagine the type of job a slightly built girl like Bobbin could do.

“I’m thirteen, Miss, and I’ve worked my way up from bobbin tender to spinner to cloth maker. I’ve done about every job there is in Lowell factories. I’m better than old Farnsley, the mill overseer. I think he’s afraid I’ll make him look bad to the corporation’s owners. That’s why he sides with Mary-O and lets her boss all the girls. Didn’t used to be like that when my Aunt Ruth was here. But she’s been gone six months. Got a letter from her three days ago.” Bobbin’s face had softened when she mentioned her aunt and a gentle smile lit her countenance.

“Where did your aunt go?”

“California. May not be like ’49, but there’s still gold there and a fortune to be made by those willing to risk some comfort. She took her life savings and headed west by stagecoach. Me, I figure I’ll go by wagon train once I reach St. Louis.”

“So, you’re going to California? Oh, it’s beautiful! We flew to L.A. and visited Hollywood and of course, Disneyland. My brother went surfing at Pacific Beach when we vaca...” Summer stopped. Bobbin was staring at her.

“You flew?”

“Well, um, you see, that’s just an expression, yeah, that they use in California ...because its’ so hilly... you can see like a bird... people in California have a different way of speaking. Lots of slang expressions.”

Bobbin eyed Summer warily.

“You’re not Mr. Lowell’s niece, are you?”

“No.”

“And you don’t lie well, either, do you?”

“No.”

“Well, you best be glad Mary-O is so dense or she’d have seen you weren’t a Lowell heiress and pushed this contraption into the river. But then you almost did that yourself. Here. Here’s your book.” She tossed the tiny pamphlet into Summer’s lap.

Summer was embarrassed she had been caught in a lie. But how could she tell the truth? What would Bobbin think? The brown water poured over the rocks below them and the only sound in the bush was the chirping of tiny wrens.

“Bobbin, I’m sorry I lied to you. The truth sounds so far-fetched that I didn’t trust you to believe me. I was afraid if I told you the truth, you’d turn me in to the authorities. My story is just too unbelievable.”

“Well, I trusted you not to turn me in. Miss Summer, I’ve seen a boll of dirty white cotton become a piece of soft sky blue cloth that’ll last like iron. I’ve heard how Mr. Lowell went to England and memorized the plans for making the looms and came back and built better machines and started a whole new industry.” Bobbin stifled a cough and swallowed hard. Summer could see her chest heave as she tried to keep from coughing.

Bobbin cleared her throat and spoke in a hoarse, soft voice. “My mother, rest her soul, was a poor farmer’s daughter who became a Lowell factory girl and earned a living and learned to read and write. She went back home and married a storekeeper, my father. After they died, my aunt sent for me to come stay with her in Lowell. By then, the factories were hiring younger and younger girls. I was so tiny they called me Bobbin, but I was the best at keeping the machines running. I can see how they work and fix them when they break. People can’t believe a girl can work on a machine. Most people’s stories are unbelievable, Miss.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as the two girls faced one another. Summer felt the tiny book in her hand and remembered why she came here. She broke the silence.

“No more secrets between us, then. Tell me, Bobbin, how your ghost floats in the waterfall.”

A slow smile spread across Bobbin’s freckled cheeks. She pulled apart the bush and pointed to the center of a four-foot drop below a large boulder in the middle of the river.

“See that spot there. I found a crevice behind the falls that leads to a flat rock, a sort of miniature cave behind the water. The ledge is very narrow, so only someone very thin and small can fit there. Once I reach the flat rock, I can kneel upright and spread my arms into the spray. I imagine it looks like I’m floating. I tore my clothes to make it look like I was beat upon the rocks. Mary-O is superstitious. She’ll swear she’s seen a ghost!”

“Or a water fairy! You’re very clever, Bobbin!”

“I thought it out very carefully once Aunt Ruth left. I put a change of clothes here in this bush and all my money’s hidden nearby. I’ve food stashed near the train station and I know the schedule by heart. I’ll take the trains till I reach St Louis.” As she talked, Bobbin changed out of the tattered clothes into boys’ clothes: a pair of black breeches and a long sleeved gray cotton shirt.

“How did you get boys’ clothes?” asked Summer.

“Had my aunt send them. Here,” Bobbin said as she handed Summer a pair of scissors. “You can help me cut my hair like a boy.”

Summer reluctantly took the scissors and cut Bobbin’s long brown tresses just below her ears. Then Bobbin took a beat-up, floppy black hat and plopped it on her head. The effect was transforming. No one would believe the wiry youth was not a boy.

“Only one thing left to do, but we’ll have to wait till dark,” Bobbin said taking a seat on the dirt in front of Summer. “Looks like you’ve plenty of time to tell me all about how this chair moves by itself. And how you flew!”

Hours after the sun went down, Bobbin was still peppering Summer with questions about life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bobbin had already declined Summer's insistent offer to travel with her back to the future. She said she'd seen enough of the fickleness of machines to trust some little buttons to carry her through space and time. Instead Bobbin tempted Summer with excerpts from her Aunt Ruth's letter—visions of wide, open spaces and unspoiled vistas.

The clock tower on the Lowell Mill factory chimed midnight. Bobbin pulled the bush branches apart and the girls left their sanctuary. Summer was very hungry, but Bobbin seemed not to notice they had talked past supper.

"Now for the final farewell. I'm not scared for myself, Summer, but I do worry about little Sheila. Mary-O is so rough with her and she's not strong like I am. She's been sick a lot, too, like all of us, yet never feeling any better, even on the day off."

"So what do you have planned?"

"I'm going to leave this little note attached to my drowning dress and drop it on Miss Mary-O's bed while she sleeps."

"But that would be taking an awful chance." Summer's normally cautious nature recoiled at the idea of such a risky plan.

Bobbin shrugged. "I can be quiet. I want Mary-O to think twice before she torments Sheila again!"

"But if you put it on her bed, she might hide it and not even tell anyone."

Bobbin hesitated. She had been counting on Mary-O's superstitious nature, but she knew the bully was cunning and deceptive too. She might indeed hide the note and the dress. From what she had learned of her new friend, Summer was very smart and clever too. Was it worth the risk just to torment Mary-O? Even in the dim light from the quarter moon, Summer could see the ambivalence on Bobbin's face.

"Maybe there's another way to deliver the note," suggested Summer. "I have an idea."

C-r-r-r-e-e-e-a-a-a-k-k-k. The hinges of the massive wooden door groaned as Bobbin slowly pushed against the entrance to the main floor of the mill. Summer could hear the clock tower chiming the quarter hour. It had taken them fifteen minutes to navigate the shadowy streets leading from the park to the mill where Bobbin and Mary-O worked. They had seen no one since all the girls had a curfew from 10 p.m. until 4 a.m. when they went back to work. The maintenance crews had finished at eleven and the hour just after midnight was the quietest time in Lowell.

Bobbin opened the door just wide enough for Summer's chair and softly closed it behind them. The room was so dark Summer couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She was acutely aware of her other senses.

She could hear Bobbin's raspy breath. The smell of fabric dye, sweat and stale air filled Summer's lungs and a fine dust tickled her nose. Don't sneeze, she

thought. Please don't sneeze! Summer tried to breathe through her mouth. She could taste the chalky dust at the back of her throat. Summer leaned back, her hands on the buttons that guided the wheelchair, ready to flee. She sensed something massive looming in front of her in the dark. A tiny tapping behind her sent shivers down her spine.

Suddenly, a light flared as Bobbin ignited the gas lamp on the wall by the door. Summer gasped and Bobbin clamped her hand over Summer's mouth just before she screamed. Two feet in front of Summer was a ten-foot-high black iron machine with pieces like arms that extended over the narrow walkway on either side of the monstrosity.

Bobbin removed her hand and whispered over Summer's shoulder, "Sorry I didn't warn you about Grimm. That's what we call this little piece of machinery. Like something out of a fairy tale, isn't it?"

Summer's eyes grew wider still and she nodded silently.

"You can stay here if you like. The walkways are not very wide. This is the only lamp I'll light." Bobbin pointed up to the narrow clerestory windows just below the twelve-foot ceiling. "The windows up above are sealed shut and the dust coats them so badly no light can get in, so I figure you can't see from outside either, but no use taking chances. Besides, I know this place by heart."

"I'll follow you. I'll put my chair on manual so I'll be quiet."

Slowly, they made their way to the end of the huge looms. Bits of thread clung to the rubber wheels of Summer's chair and covered her hands as she pushed herself. The room seemed to be filled with endless rows of looms and

other machinery. Thick bolts of fabric were stacked at the ends of some looms. Baskets with spools of thread six inches in diameter lined the far wall, waiting to be woven into cloth.

The girls passed a wide metal stairway that led downstairs to the river level where barges unloaded huge bales of raw cotton into a basement processing room. Summer's eyes were drawn to the steep stairwell that yawned like the mouth of a cave, inky black with a cool, clammy breeze coming from it. It was much harder at this end of the building to make out the machines from the shadows and the murky light played tricks on Summer's eyes. She wanted to ask Bobbin how much farther, but she dared not make a sound.

They came to a small room built out of stacked wooden boxes with dingy cloth remnant for a door. Bobbin pulled the curtain back and fastened it behind a nail in the wall. It was too dark in the room for Summer to see, but Bobbin walked in as if daylight flooded the space. In an instant she was out again, pulling the curtain closed. Even in the dim light, Summer could see the twinkle in her eye.

"I left my drowning dress and the note draped across the stool. This is my old office. Mary-O's got it messy as a pigsty. Hope it doesn't take her too long to find my message," she whispered.

"I'll bet she'll find it in the morning and you'll be long gone by then. Didn't you say you're catching the first train that comes through at three this morning?" Summer whispered back. She could barely hear the clock tower

chiming the half hour through the thick red brick walls of the mill. It was a muffled sound, but Summer heard a faint metal clink with each stroke.

“Here, I’ll push you so we can go faster,” offered Bobbin.

She rolled Summer’s chair quickly down the walkway while trotting behind her. As they approached the stairwell, Summer saw a tiny orange glow at the top of the stairs. Bobbin’s breathing was becoming ragged and she hadn’t noticed the strange light.

“Stop!” hissed Summer. Bobbin abruptly halted and the chair swung slightly to the left, the wheel locking on a metal bar that jutted from the machinery four inches from the rough wooden floor. Summer’s nose picked up a foul smell that seemed to come from the stairs. She sniffed as tears came to her eyes.

Bobbin leaned close to Summer’s ear and whispered, “That’s Farnsley, the mill overseer. He’s lighting his pipe with a locofoco, nasty smelling match! They should be outlawed, they’re so dangerous.”

Summer’s heart was pounding. Every sound seemed to be magnified, every smell intensified and her eyesight seemed useless. The orange glow seemed to dance in the velvety darkness of the stairwell.

Summer and Bobbin stood dead still, afraid to make a sound.

“Someone forgot to put out the last gas lamp,” Farnsley’s voice boomed across the mill. Summer watched as a middle-aged man with a scraggly beard stepped from the shadows, the stem of a pipe clenched between thin lips. “Likely trying to burn down the mill,” he muttered as he shuffled from the stairs.

Farnsley jerked his head toward the spot where the girls were trying to melt into the darkness. He squinted and his eyes became narrow slits. He peered into the dark.

“Who’s there? I can see you plain as day. Step forward and prove you’re not a thief nor a spy!”

Summer felt for the keypad to her backpack computer. Her heart was racing. She could hear Bobbin’s labored breathing.

“Bobbin. Hold on to me and I’ll take you to the train station.”

Summer felt Bobbin’s thin hand squeezing her left shoulder. She began typing in the new coordinates: Sept.16, 1853, 2:50 am, Lowell, Massachusetts train station. As she typed, Bobbin’s grip became even tighter. Summer could hear Farnsley’s shuffling gait drawing closer.

“It’s Bobbin, isn’t it? I knew you weren’t really dead, you little trouble-maker, but what’ve you got with you?” Farnsley lunged forward and grabbed at the wheel of the chair. “A-ha!”

Bobbin screamed, “No you don’t! You leave her alone!” She tried to move the chair, but the other wheel was stuck on the metal bar.

“That’s Bobbin’s voice all right!” shouted Farnsley with a wicked laugh. “You’ll wish you was dead when I get through with you!”

Farnsley laughed again, but a wheezing cough overtook the laughter and he let go of the wheel to take the pipe from his mouth. In that instant, Summer pressed the key to activate the BPC. Rainbow colored light danced across the

looms and blinded Farnsley who dropped his pipe and had to stomp out the embers to keep from catching the mill on fire.

Bobbin's face was flushed as she handed the conductor the ticket for the 3 a.m. train. She turned to Summer and started to say something when the train whistle blew and drowned out all her words.

Summer waved at the brave girl dressed like a boy who was heading west toward clear skies and freedom. Summer took the keypad in her hand and pressed the buttons to return to the bookstore.

"Yeah, I know, Bobbin. Most people's stories are unbelievable," she said to herself.