

The Hitchhiker's Guide to Puzzles

By Scott Dutton

The rain pricked Jason's skin. The fir tree did little to protect him as he attempted to flag down a ride. In the haze of the rain, Jason saw the lights of a pickup truck rolling around a hill. He stepped onto the edge of the road and stuck his thumb out. As the truck slowed to a stop beside him, Jason quickly climbed into the truck, tossing his backpack behind the seat as he closed the door.

"Thanks. Much appreciated."

"Some storm, eh?" The driver laughed softly. A small modulator on her choker gave it an electronic voice.

"You again?" Jason asked, taken aback as he buckled himself in. He recalled her saying she'd been in an accident that damaged her throat. "Mary, was it? Are you following me?"

"You looked like you needed help." Mary smiled as she pulled back onto the road. Her red hair and shades were vivid

and welcome contrasts to the storm's gloom. "How've you been? Still trying to decode that letter?"

"Yes...My girlfriend knows I love puzzles, but this one's quite vexing." Jason frowned.

"The instructions. Remind me."

"There're eight churches. At each one, I'm supposed to ask the pastor a question. They answer yes or no, and I mark a one or zero in the correlating box."

"How many do you have left?" Mary glanced at him.

"Last one." Jason sighed. "Three years, Mary. Three years, and I've never been given a puzzle this difficult."

"Haven't you done a scavenger hunt before?"

"Once, but that involved buying certain items. Tedious and expensive. Never tried putting Avigail through that."

"I think it's cute you play these games with each other."

"Cute?"

"Yeah!" Mary chirped. She turned the windshield wiper onto a higher setting. "It keeps your relationship fresh and interesting, and you learn more about each other."

"Well, we started dating because we both loved puzzles."

"So, where's the next destination?" Mary asked, looking at a street sign.

"Next town over. Cavalry Chapel."

A half hour later, the storm had passed. Jason left the church where Mary had dropped him, and walked back to her truck. He never looked up from the paper.

"What's it say?" Mary asked, leaning towards him as he climbed in.

"00101010," Jason replied. "I don't get it. Is this binary?"

Mary laughed as she pulled the sheet from his hands.

Jason watched as she wrote numbers over each box and handed it back. "Add it up."

"Forty-two?" Jason looked puzzled. "As in forty-two from the Hitchhiker's Guide to the..."

Jason facepalmed. "Oh, Avigail. You cheeky..."

Mary watched him. "What do you suppose it means? Do you have something to decode?"

Jason pulled an envelope from his pocket and shook out a decoder ring.

"So, these letters that are scrambled... The last part of the instructions say I separate the answer into two parts, and alternate to unscramble. So, I'm guessing it's four up for the first letter, and two down for the second. Then four and two and so on."

He worked through the scrambled letters until they made sense.

"Pier of Coast Road, Westport. Another address?" Jason looked puzzled. "Is this the end, or is there more?"

"Let's find out."

The two found themselves at the Fisherman's Boardwalk, a pier that overlooked the Westport Marina. The sun dipped low, marking the scenery and the bobbing fishing fleet in a golden glow. The sky matched Mary's rose-tinted glasses, and salt permeated the air.

"Now that the end is so near... I don't really want it to stop." Jason sighed as they stepped out of the truck.

"Aw, don't be sad," Mary said. "Everything comes to an end eventually. But just because one door closes, doesn't mean another doesn't open."

"You're right." Jason smiled. "You're right. Thanks, Mary."

The sea breeze blew in hard and Mary reached up and pulled off her red hair. Jason gasped as the wig dropped to the ground, revealing short, brown hair. Mary removed her glasses and the voice modulator and looked him dead in the eyes.

"Avigail!?" Jason shouted, taking a step back.

"It's me, alright." Avigail chuckled. "You did well."

"W-what's the meaning of all this?"

"Well..." Avigail gazed over the ocean. "I wanted to play one last game with you before starting a new chapter of my life."

"New chapter? I don't follow."

Avigail reached into her jacket pocket and bent on one knee. She stared at him and produced a ring.

"Jason Fullier, will you marry me?"

