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## Strawberry Ghosts: Lore, Loss & Licentiousness in a 400-year-old City

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**Strawberry Ghosts**  
**A Scrapbook of Lore, Loss & Licentiousness in a 400-Year-Old City**

**Senior Project Submitted to the Division of Language & Literature  
and the Division of Social Studies of Bard College**

**By Ella McGrail**

**Annandale-on-Hudson, New York**

**May 2021**

**To Christian and Dinaw, for cracking the world open  
&  
To Sara and Grace, for helping keep it together**

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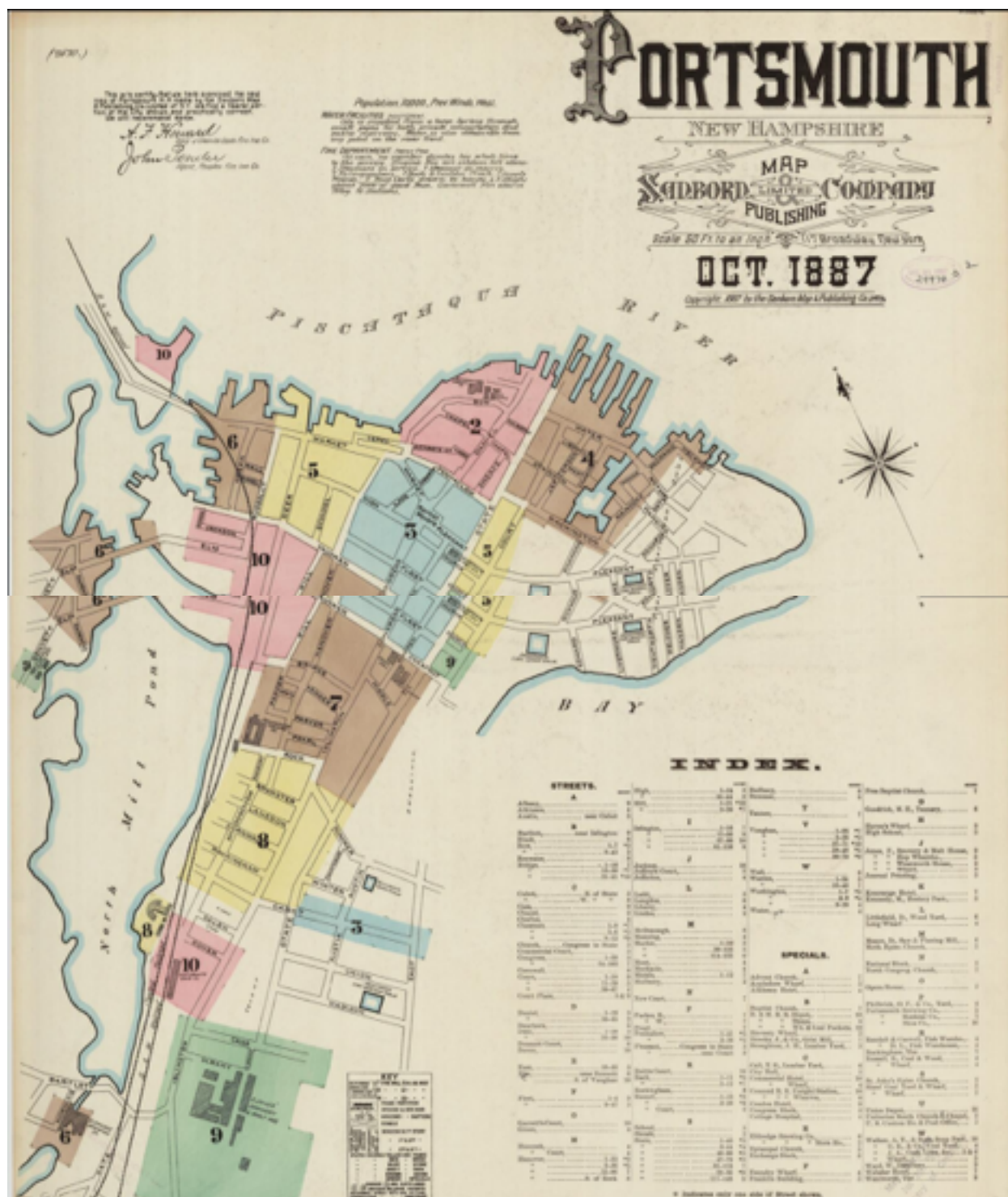
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This collection focuses on Portsmouth, New Hampshire and the surrounding area. Coastal New Hampshire is located on N'dakinna, which is the traditional ancestral homeland of the Abenaki, Pennacook and Wabanaki Peoples past and present. I acknowledge and honor with gratitude the land and waterways and the alnobak (people) who have stewarded N'dakinna throughout the generations.

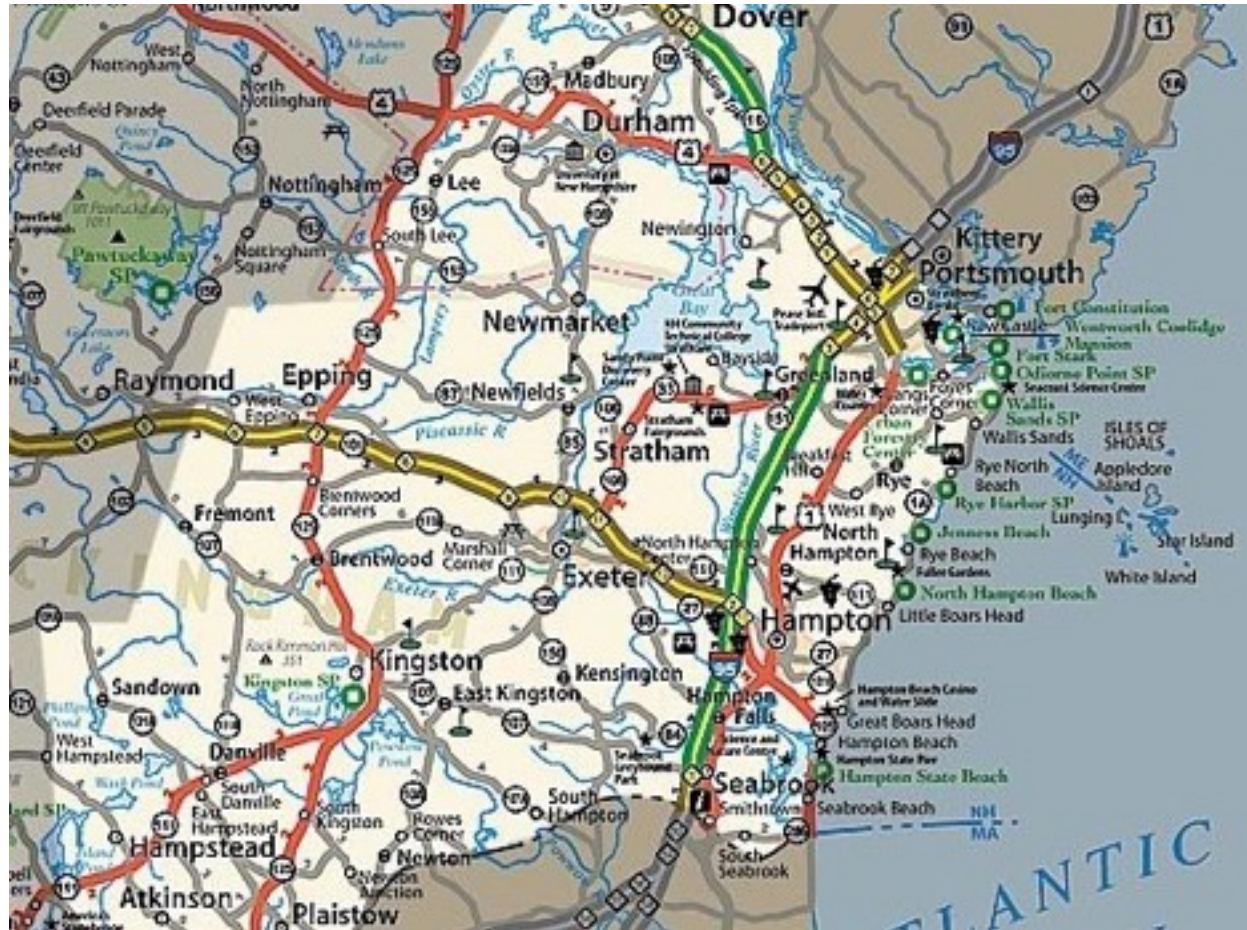
-Proposed Land Acknowledgement by the Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective in consultation with local Tribal leaders and Indigenous peoples elsewhere, specialized for the context of this piece



*Map of Portsmouth, estimated to be from 1782 (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)*







Map of New Hampshire Seacoast, 2016 (Courtesy of Granite Geek, a newsletter of the Concord Monitor)



### *Strawbery Banke Museum*

My favorite part of the museum was the holiday exhibition, where each house is decorated for a different era of New England Christmas and staffed with actors in period costume. We'd step from the early nightfall into 19th century parlors where children hung evergreens with pressed flowers, and 18th century kitchens where merchants' wives candied orange peel and ground cloves in a mortar. The dark nights and restless December wind lent themselves to the aura of time travel as we walked from house to house, wrapped in the scent of smoke and ginger and beckoned by each bright doorway into another century, another Christmas, and one Hanukkah at the Shapiro house.

We've stopped going to Strawberry Banke at Christmas to avoid crowds, but mom and I still like to walk there, mom with her camera and me with my hands in my pockets. There's still magic in walking between those brightly painted houses with their rusted keyholes and kitchen gardens, even in daylight, even grown up. We visit the Goodwin children's garden, dotted with a revolving cast of seashells and iron statuettes, and the pine tree bower at the Aldrich house where my high school choir once gathered to carol. There's always shade beneath the Pitt Tavern sign, where I imagine a sailor leaning as he finishes a pint of ale.

In summer the museum is open, and actors bustle through the lanes in aprons and waistcoats, lolling pipes in their teeth and hauling baskets of un-spun wool. The carpenter shop sports a half-carved mast and the kitchen shelves at the Goodwin Mansion are lined with gleaming pewter tumblers.

I took my grandparents there one day, since my grandfather shares and my grandmother tolerates my love of history. In a sea captain's household I asked the actor about his historical counterpart's involvement in the slave trade. Was it indirect or did he ever oversee human cargo himself? The actor explained that he didn't like to judge people who'd lived so long ago, in such a different world, as my grandfather nodded.

Portsmouth, city, Rockingham county, southeastern New Hampshire, U.S., across the Piscataqua River from Kittery, Maine, on the Atlantic coast. It is New Hampshire's oldest settlement, second oldest city, first capital, and only seaport. In 1623 a fishing settlement was built at the river's mouth. First called Piscataqua and then Strawberry Banke, it became a bustling colonial port.  
-Encyclopedia Britannica (accessed April, 2021)

"Strawberry Banke! If you read those words with a properly jaundiced eye, it is easy to detect paganism in them; they are suggestive of festivals, of Maypoles and other heathenish practices. And if there's one thing a good Puritan could not stand, it was a hint of fun, so the name had to be changed."

--Raymond A. Brighton, *They Came to Fish*

"Many times I have considered moving elsewhere. But I always come back here. I can walk from my house to beautiful woods or down to the river, I can ride my bike to the ocean, I can drive for 2 hours up to the mountains and lake country, or 4 hours to New York City. I have watched the arts community grow and change and I have so many memories here. It will always be my home, and sometimes I'm surprised at how fiercely I love it."

-Genevieve Aichele, Portsmouth, NH

"Every year two or three people write to ask me what the word "Piscataqua" means. I write back and promise to look it up. My mind wanders. I forget."

-Dennis Robinson, *Piscataqua: The Correctness of Use and the Meaning of the Word*

It's about sunshine filled days and warm nights outside.

It's about the restaurants, shops, hotels, activities and attractions that are welcoming you to kick off YOUR Summer on the Seacoast.

Enjoy a deal each day!

-[GoPortsmouth.com](http://GoPortsmouth.com)

Prince Whipple was brought from the coast of Africa to the colonial trading center of Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1760 when he was ten...In 1779, Prince Whipple was one of 20 petitioners who identified themselves as African men who were taken from their native lands "while but children and incapable of self-defense" now making a plea to the New Hampshire legislature for manumission and for the abolition of slavery in the state. The petition was tabled without legislative action.

-Valerie Cunningham, [blackpast.org](http://blackpast.org) (accessed May, 2021)

"...I found myself immersed in the histories of founding families, sea captains, merchants and craftsmen, but I could not stop wondering about the sisters, wives and mothers of these prominent citizens."

-Laura Pope, Introduction to *Portsmouth Women*

The city has gained recognition once again, this time from none other than National Geographic Traveler magazine. The prestigious periodical recently ranked Portsmouth No. 28 on its list of the world's most historic places, and No. 6 in that category in the United States.

-Shir Haberman, Seacoast Online: *National Geographic honors Portsmouth* (accessed April, 2021)

“Webber's friends and neighbors were not quiet about their concerns when Goodwin, then a Portsmouth police officer, befriended Webber in the last two years of her life. They said that as she distanced herself from them, Goodwin unduly influenced her to change her will to mostly benefit him.”

-Jennifer Crompton, WMUR: *Former Portsmouth officer loses woman's inheritance in court ruling* (accessed April, 2021)

“For many years now, I've wanted to have a long conversation with someone who has lived in Portsmouth since at least the early 1990s (or before) to ask them about what the city was like before the gentrification phenomenon. There are likely so many stories from this time about the bars, restaurants, shops, venues, etc. that used to operate in town, about what certain neighborhoods/areas were like, about the culture, and so on.”

-Max Pont, New Castle, NH

“New Hampshire's historic narratives leave contemporary audiences the impression that this area of New England was sparsely inhabited before European colonialists' arrival, and that the Indigenous inhabitants of N'dakinna (an Abenaki term for “Our Lands”) have disappeared. Although Indigenous peoples have suffered profound injustices from initial European contact until now, Indigenous heritage in this state prevails and Indigenous peoples continue to be an integral part of New Hampshire.”

-Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective Mission Statement, posted on their website (accessed April, 2021).

“I live in one of the richest areas on the seacoast... there are no blacks, but the area is filled with white republicans and I tolerate that. (Barely)”

-Gordon McColleston, Rye NH

PORTSMOUTH — The state epidemiologist and several members of the Task Force on the Seacoast Pediatric Cancer Cluster disputed the assertion that no such cancer cluster exists. Steve Kenda, a North Hampton resident and and past Republican candidate for state Senate and governor, is a member of the new Commission on the Seacoast Cancer Cluster Investigation. He stated in a recent op-ed that “there is no cancer cluster.”

-Jeff McMenemy, Seacoast Online: *State health official: Yes, there is a cancer cluster* (accessed April, 2021)

“It [Portsmouth] is far too freshly painted. Its charm works to blind you to its homogeneity; it can leave you absurdly unprepared for life.”

-Caroline Hinson, Portsmouth, NH.

“Portsmouth residents are its harshest critics and biggest fans all-in-one. We reserve the right to lament over the parking, development downtown, the skyrocketing home prices, the rowdy nightlife — while at the same time passionately defending it to any out-of-towners with disapproving preconceived notions. For all our griping, Portsmouth feeds something inside of us.”

-Denise Wheeler, Greenland, NH.

## Winter

“My favorite spots are the cafes. From the old Breaking New Grounds (RIP) to Caffè Kilim, Kaffee Vonsolln, Book and Bar, The Works, Adelle’s (in Dover), and Lil’s (in Kittery), these were some of the main spots to hang out in high school and when visiting friends in between semesters in college, (and continuing to this day whenever I’m back in the area). I think there was a shared sense of community loss when Breaking New Grounds announced its closure in late 2018 (officially closing in early 2019), as this space was so central to people in the community for years. I have strong memories of walking past BNG in late December 2018 during my winter break and visiting the cafe daily, and every single day it was packed with people (often with lines out the door even in the freezing late December weather) visiting for what was likely their final time before the doors officially shuttered.”

-Max Pont

“One night in a blizzard I skied from my house over to South Cemetery. It was snowing so hard I could barely see. I stopped in the cemetery and felt the peace of 400 years wash over me. I was in the middle of a city and completely, utterly alone with nature.”

-Genevieve Aichele

“The feeling of absolute peace in the early morning that descends when you learned it was a snow day. I don’t think I have been able to appreciate snow like that ever since.”

-Caroline Hinson

### *Off Middle Road*

It had snowed heavily for two days, and in the blue tint of early evening the houses looked like ornaments wrapped in a nest of white padding, content to wait out the storm. I crunched along the street because the sidewalks were buried beneath mountains of plowed snow, on my way home from a friend’s house who lived off Middle Road, not far from my house at the time. It was calm now, the flakes falling steadily and straight down, but earlier wind had blown the snow into great drifts against fences and trees, so that to me it seemed the yards were full of frosty-backed whales sleeping peaceful in the gloaming.

I don’t know if it was coincidence or a flaw in communication that led three snow plows to converge on the quiet backroad intersection just as I was passing through it. All of a sudden they were coming from three directions, beasts ablaze with gold and orange headlights and snouts full of the snow that dared fall on the road. They circled me for a long moment, bulls in a ring, snorting and growling, then were gone as quickly as they arrived, leaving only their triplicate trails of salt and a silence more aware of itself than before.

## Babysitting, 2020

“Yes, hard though it may be to believe, Portsmouth, where Little Leaguers now play baseball, was once the frontier.”

-Raymond A. Brighton, *They Came to Fish*

“Legend says that David Thomson, the first New Hampshire settler, kept a Native American slave in 1623. Fifty years later, George Walton of New Castle had two Indian slaves, as did his neighbor.”

- J. Dennis Robinson, Seacoastnh.com: *What about the Indians?* (accessed April, 2021)

“If Indians were scarce in the founding days at Portsmouth, they had good reasons.... Surviving members of the local tribes were in no shape for war and understandably wary of all white visitors.”

-Robinson, Ibid.

*“That Her Majesty’s subjects, the English, shall and may peaceably and quietly enter upon, improve, and forever enjoy, all and singular their rights of land and former settlements, properties and possessions, within the eastern parts of said Provinces of the Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, together with all the Islands, Islets, Shoars, Beaches, and Fisheries within the same, without any molestation or claims by us or any other Indians and be in no wais molested, interrupted, or disturbed therein.”*

-Excerpt from the 1713 Treaty of Portsmouth between British authorities and Indigenous people of coastal New Hampshire, likely including the Abenaki and Pennacook  
Library of Congress, 1713treatyofportsmouth.com (accessed April, 2021)

“But exile is not the whole story, nor even a major story for those who remain. My ancestors chose to stay and merge, in the eyes of the Anglo-Americans, with our French neighbors.”

-Frederick Matthew Wiseman, *The Voice of the Dawn*

*“Abenaki Country Club offers a private facility rich in tradition and unsurpassed elegance. Abenaki is located on the beautiful New Hampshire Seacoast, surrounded by pristine woodlands, and cooled by subtle ocean breezes.”*

-“About Us” page on the Abenaki Country Club Website (accessed April, 2021)

*“We were not all killed off by disease or warfare and did not disappear with the colonization of this country. Many of us became the individual fibers of the weave that made the cloth of the United States and Canada. We are among you, working beside you in all walks of life. Unless we told you who we were, you would probably never know us.”*

-Homepage on the Cowasuck Band of the Pennacook Abenaki People Website (accessed April, 2021)



“Look at the snow,” I said to Aspen. She was already lurching forward from my arms to press her tiny hands against the sliding door. Her hair stood up like soft porcupine quills, and some of it stuck to the damp glass. She trailed her fingers through the mist our breath formed on the cold surface, spellbound by her power to make an impression on the world. Already this small miracle had distracted her from the snowy picture outside.

I hefted my niece on my hip and pulled back the sliding door, making my way carefully down the steps. Aspen threw back her ear-muffled head to find the source of the soft coldness now falling on her, and scrunched up her face when new flakes hit her eyes. She made a discontented sound that threatened to become a cry, but I persisted into our woods-ringed backyard, spinning gently so she could take in the view.

A blizzard had been parked over coastal New Hampshire all day, and the woods around my house were bathed in the silver light of sun through snow clouds. Flakes lay careful filigree across the empty limbs of the ornamental chestnut and coded the tall pines that ringed our property. Even the neighbor’s trampoline, just visible through the trees, held new gravitas in its cold white suit.

My brother and his wife were off on a winter camping trip to Vermont and my mother, their default babysitter, was spending the weekend caring for a friend who had just gone through chemo, but I had another two weeks of break before the next semester began, so I’d offered to watch the newest member of our family for a few days. I’d spent most of her life away at school, and welcomed our alone time. Aunthood was a role I took seriously.

We walked past the dormant flowerbeds and the bird bath shaped like a seashell with a mermaid lounging in it. With the shell full of snow, it looked like the mermaid was enjoying a

bubble bath. I went to the edge of the yard and let Aspen run her hands over the tiny pine cones of a young evergreen. Noticing a set of animal tracks leading into the woods, I knelt to examine them.

“Fox,” I said. “Or maybe a fisher cat.” Aspen grabbed a fist-full of snow and watched in fascination as it melted, then licked the cold water from her fingers.

I straightened and walked slowly along the tree line, looking into the woods for the thing that left its tracks in the snow. All the while Aspen twisted around in my arms, eyes wide and ravenous, her ever-reaching hands asking over and over, *what’s this?*

We came to the side of the house, where I saw that even the clothesline was gilded in a thin coding of snow. Aspen made an insistent sound and threw herself to the right, almost freeing herself from my grasp.

“What, you little monkey?” I asked, trying to secure my grip, then saw she was reaching for the holly bushes, which my mother had planted around our generator to block its gray industrial-ness from view. The holly berries were a smattering of blood against the deep green of the foliage, each one topped with a tiny cap of snow.

“No eating,” I told Aspen sternly, then crouched so she could examine the bush. She reached out to hold one of the berries, but pulled back when the movement knocked the snow from it. I thought she’d try again, but instead she leaned forward to peer inside the bush like there might be a treasure tucked inside. I did the same, even though I knew I’d look insane to anyone driving by; gazed into the tangle of curling green leaves and crimson winter fruits, all glinting in the white light of the afternoon. It was like looking inside a chandelier or a faberge egg, jewel-like and twinkling. I wondered at this new angle of the world my niece had found, but

the feeling was followed by a twinge of anxiety. How many more opportunities would she have to marvel at snow? Would there still be a recognizable winter by the time Aspen grew up?

Already they were so different from those of my childhood, when my Elementary School kept a shed full of sleds and there was always a fresh white hill for us to use them on. I remembered harder frosts, higher snow banks, later springs. Last year it hit 70 degrees in February, and we hadn't had a consistent snow pack in years. Days like today had become rare pearls in a string of muddy months.

After our sojourn around the yard I spread Aspen's giraffe blanket next to the gas stove in the living room and littered her baby legos over it. Her ears and cheeks were still pink from the outdoors, but the weather that had kissed the color onto her was already forgotten, usurped by the pastel blocks of the present moment. She reached for them with an excited gurgle.

Maybe it was that—the reminder that no conscious memory of this snow would remain with her, that made me think of the story.

“Did you know it used to always be winter here?” I pressed my forehead against hers, letting my lashes brush her cheeks. When I pulled away she was smiling widely, eyes trained on my face.

“Yes!” I said. “The people who lived here had to move south, because there was only ice and snow up here, and not enough could grow. Do you know why? Giants. Huge giants with icy breath that blew all the way to Vermont and New Hampshire.”

I blew into her face, making her giggle.

I wasn't told this story when I was a child. My bookshelf had been full of german witches and french slippers. I'd never thought to wonder about the folklore of the place I lived in, and never knew I was missing it.

“So one day, the native people asked their hero, Koluscap, to fight the giants. The winters had devoured their land, and Aki—that's their word for the earth—was sore from all the snow piled on her back. So Koluscap went walking in the woods, until the god of mist came to him and warned that the giants lived far, far to the North, and that while Koluscap was strong, the giants were also, and there were many of them. Koluscap told the mist god that he was determined to help his people, so the mist god told him to take four pairs of snow shoes on his trip.”

My journey to this story began when I took a course called Atlantic Early American History in my second semester of college, a period I was vaguely curious about if only because none of my high school classes had focused on it. According to the reenactments and museums I'd grown up with, American history began with the Revolution.

The professor, a serious-eyed woman who filled the blackboard with names and dates from memory, spoke about an active continent of international trade and brilliant technology long before Europeans even knew the Americas existed. She talked about the early frontiers where racial categories formed and reformed; women captaining ships and diplomatic crisis caused by pigs. She called the American Revolution a backwater event in a chain of much more significant uprisings, and as she described early slave-shipping patterns and chapters in settler-native conflicts, she pointed to Portsmouth, New Hampshire more than once. Every time I left

that classroom, I could feel the dregs of my assumptions dripping like cracked eggs down the back of my neck.

“Koluscap set out with his supplies and his snow shoes. On the first pair, he traveled through mountains ringed with pine trees and frozen lakes. When the first pair wore out he put on his second pair and traveled past the sea, which was steely gray and bobbing with ice. On his third pair of snow shoes the wind grew sharp and all signs of life disappeared. On his fourth pair, the wind and snow raged and there was nothing but icy darkness around him in every direction.”

It’s not that I hadn’t grown up with stories about home. I’d known my town was older than the thirteen colonies, and still held onto some of each chapter in its 400 years of history, from the sagging 17th century cottages to the grand colonial mansions to the sleek iron of the naval shipyard that provided submarines to the ally forces. I knew founding fathers had visited our inns and the underground railroad ran through our cellars and that the cherry trees along the mill pond were a gift for our hosting of the treaty negotiations in the Russo-Japanese war. Portsmouth presented as if its whole story were visible on the surface, in the very bricks we were so careful to preserve, but when I came home for summer break after that semester, it felt less like living in a historical site than the set of a play.

“Finally, after weeks of traveling, Koluscap saw a light up ahead. It was a strange blue light, and he knew it must be the flames of the ice giants, which give no warmth. Koluscap entered the village of the giants, and asked them to stop making so much cold and leave the southern lands to grow and prosper. When they refused, he challenged one giant to a wrestling match. He killed that giant, and challenged another and another, winning each match and killing

each giant that faced him. Finally there was only a hand-full of giants left cowering around their cold blue hearth.”

The absences in my education ranged from passive negligence to intentional removal. Among other crimes, they had made me an agent in the erasure of a whole people; “Abenaki” had only ever been the name of a country club I used to drive past on my way to school, before I attended a talk by a historian and member of one of the Abenaki Nations at the public library, and learned it was the name of the original people of this land. The meticulous violence of the unsaid had inspired my trajectory ever since, which is how I’d found *The Voice of The Dawn: An Abenaki Auto-history* during research for an essay on Native New England seafaring traditions. That was where I found the story I told now, and realized I would tell again.

“When Koluscap returned, exhausted but triumphant, his people welcomed him with gratitude and much celebrating. Late at night the mist god came to him to say well done, especially for not killing all the ice giants, because Aki needed the rest that winter brought. As the years passed, the ice began to melt and grass and trees began to grow here in the summers. Birds came, and then other animals, and finally Koluscap’s people. They have lived here ever since, for thousands and thousands of years, and they still tell the story of how the long winter ended.”

Aspen had spent the duration of the tale sticking legos together at odd angles, looking curiously up at me now and then. “Isn’t that interesting?” I asked her. “It was important that not all the ice giants die, because we need winter. The earth needs some time to rest, just like people do.” She smiled toothlessly at me and banged a purple block against the floor.



When I'd first read the story, it felt like being introduced to the place I'd lived my whole life. But there had also been a profound sense of loss. If only we'd never stopped telling stories like this. If only the new residents of this land had listened to the knowledge of the old, so much might have been different. We may have learned to be better stewards of the earth.

But the people in power hadn't valued this information, so carefully preserved through generations and through several other climate changes, and as a result less flowers were blooming in spring, the tide was creeping higher up the shoreline, and we were losing winter all together.

My generation was thus automatically conscripted to fight the fires and shut down the pipelines, with the mix of zeal and fatigue of any people fighting for their lives. It was a fight I'd known I would join for as long as I could remember, and one I'd learned we may not win at some point in my early teens. By the time Aspen was an adult we'd know whether we'd done enough.

I could hope she'd grow up with a lighter burden than I had, and as such would hold a different inheritance. The story I'd told her was given in the hope that there would still be a land for us to live on when she grew up, and that she could be a better member of it than our ancestors by remembering all its stories.

She yawned. Outside, cracks in the clouds were spilling clementine light on the snow through a filter of branches. The sky was a mix of charcoal purple and that same blazing orange. I picked up my niece and carried her once more to the screen door, let her smudge the glass again. I smiled as she grabbed for the rays of sunset and planted a kiss in her hair.

## Spring

“My birthday is in the spring and it would start to get warm and sunny enough to go to the beach. We would get my favorite Chinese birthday cake from Boston and spend the day there.”

-Ellen Blezinsky

One interesting thing about lockdown in spring and summer of last year is that it rendered some of the things and places that used to be special – like car rides to the beach, driving past the ostentatious faux-mansion homes along the shorefront – the only ways available to me to spend my time. So I drove them almost every single day, drove laps in my car and laps in my mind, and sickened myself of them for a little while, I think. This forces me to think outside the box when it comes to choosing my favorite place. I do think it still involves the sea, though—it has to. I love the way the air feels and smells (cold, briny) as you take a right at Izzy’s Ice Cream Shop and turn down the hill of Ceres Street, as you suddenly see the docks so close you feel you could touch them.

-Caroline Hinson

### *Apple Blossoms*

Spring’s small miracles are heightened as a child, when every year is a lifetime and the memories of a world where things grew is distant and dream-like. Bare branches that have only ever been bare suddenly sprout smooth brown buds, and from these, ruffles of color peak forth like the corner of a magician’s handkerchief. This was most visible in the apple blossom tree that grew on the far-left side of the playground, which the school authorities allowed to remain because its only climbable branches were unreachable by even the most pubescent ten-year-old. The buds were supple pink lollipops which unfolded into delicate white flowers that showered the playground in perfumed confetti every time the wind blew. For the few days of peak bloom, the tree was the center of our world. Girls would pick blossoms to adorn our fairy houses and to braid into each others hair, and the boys would tuck the flowers behind their ears and bat their eyelashes to get a laugh. It was a fort, a palace, home base during tag, any excuse we could come up with to linger under its canopy and press our faces into the sweet fronds, the scent of which would forever after mean childhood.

## The Lithobolia Conference, 1682

\*Warning: Self-harm is performed and described by one of the the characters in this story.

*“Lithobolia: or, the Stone-Throwing Devil. Being an Exact and True Account (by way of Journal) of the various Actions of Infernal Spirits, or (Devils Incarnate) Witches, or both; and the great Disturbance and Amazement they gave to George Waltons Family, at a place call’d Great Island in the Province of New-Hantshire in New-England, chiefly in Throwing about (by an Invisible hand) Stone, Bricks, and Brick-bats of all Sizes, with several other things, as Hammers, Mauls, Iron-Crows, Spits, and other Domestick Utensils, as came into their Hellish Minds, and this for the space of a Quarter of a Year.”*

-Richard Chamberlayne: *Lithobolia*, published in 1698 (accessed in *Colonial Horrors*)

The unexpected offensive began with a fury about 10 pm on Sunday night. As George Walton and several others returned to his house and tavern from a meeting with his neighbor, ‘they were all assaulted with a peal of stones..by unseen hands or agents.’”

-Dr. Emerson Baker, address given at the New Castle Historical Society, 2004. (accessed courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum)

“...The family had already decided who was responsible for the witchcraft. George Walton soon accused neighbor Hannah Jones of being a witch. This poor and elderly widow and her family had been involved in decades-long property disputes with the Waltons.”

-Baker, Ibid.

“Saints and sinners, they all had their day in court, even Captain Bryan Pendleton’s wife, and he was one of the magistrates.”

-Raymond A. Brighton, *They Came to Fish*

“The magistrates appointed militia officers; heard civil cases; ordered Elizabeth Phillips whipped and sent out of town for various misdemeanors including ‘cursing & swearing & entertaining loose fellows at unseasonable times in ye night.”

-Brighton, Ibid.

“Nor did Rachel escape unscathed. She was fined 5 shillings for ‘keeping bad ordr in her house on ye Lds dayes & othe times.’ At another session the widow was ordered by the magistrates to take a man into her house to keep it under control, a strange ruling itself when Puritan views of adultery are considered.”

-Brighton, Ibid.

“In seventeenth century New England, women were virtually excluded from the public arena, and because they had no voice or vote in public decisions, the records of their lives are scant or nonexistent.” -Kathleen A. Shea, Chapter on Bridget Cutt Daniel Graffort: *Portsmouth Women*

“I’ve always been interested in the women of Portsmouth several centuries ago. The Athenaeum, on Market St, has something called the ‘Ladies Reading Room’, or something to that effect, a pink room with soft seats in between the bottom floor and the elegant, high-ceiling library on the top floor. This room has always infuriated and fascinated me. It has, appropriately, portraits of several women; stern, collared, absolutely impenetrable. I regretted not reading their plaques. I don’t think I know anything about the women who ‘built’ the city while their sailors were at sea.”

-Caroline Hinson

It occurred to me, a few steps out the kitchen door, that they would probably think me possessed. Why else would a girl run into the night, right under the nose of her aunt, for no visible reason? They hadn’t seen the blood, or known it wasn’t enough. They didn’t know what I was, and even if they did, that wouldn’t explain why I ran. Even I didn’t know why I ran, except that running away is what you do when you’re under attack, even when the attacker is yourself.

I lost my coif alongside Israel Philbrook’s orchard, where it was snatched by the branch of an apple tree, but I didn’t care. I turned onto Great Street, not thinking of where or why but only away.

This stretch of the road was deserted and dark but for the flickering windows of a few leaning cottages, interspersed between wide stretches of garden, orchard and yard. The cool green scent of chive and mayapple emanating from the early-spring ground usually settled me, but I was long past their power to calm.

I tore down the dirt road, trying not to think what would happen when I inevitably passed someone—a sailor coming from one of the taverns, or worse yet, the night watchman—and nothing could’ve stopped me but the sight of Goody Pendleton at the foot of Meetinghouse Hill,

leaning against a hitching post, smoking a pipe. The casual impropriety of this magistrate's wife was dumbfounding enough that I skidded to a halt.

"Why, it's the Foss girl," said the Goody, taking another drag. "Fancy meeting you here."

I stood heaving for a few moments, then said, "Your husband doesn't smoke."

"No." She removed the pipe from her teeth and examined it. "Not joyless enough for him. This belongs to me. I'd never dream of stealing."

"Of course not," I started to back away. "No, I'm sorry—"

"Wait girl." The light mockery was gone from her voice, though I couldn't name the tone that replaced it. "What's the matter?"

I considered running again, but that was no real solution. It had been my only course of action before this bizarre one offered itself. "They think I'm possessed," I said carefully, "but I'm not. I just—I'm on the wrong path, and I don't know how to get off it."

"Mmm." The Goody made a knowing sound, as if being falsely accused of possession were a part of every young girl's development. "I see. Best come with me then."

She turned and started walking up the hill, with me following numbly. No doubt cavorting with Goody Pendleton, who'd not only been charged with public drunkenness but was now spending her evenings smoking in the lane, would do nothing to repair my now questionable reputation, but I had bigger concerns.

The houses were closer together on the hill, and a few people passed us on their way to Sherburne's Tavern or from Widow Webster's. Thankfully we didn't see anyone who would recognize me—it was mostly the transient population out at this time of night, sailors and

merchants who didn't care for pretenses of morality—though I caught a few of them studying me in a way that made me quicken my step.

I started to reconsider the wisdom of my actions when the Goody turned off the main road and slipped down an alley between Brewster's forge and a fence hung with fish nets.

I hovered at the edge of the road "Where are we going?"

The Goody looked back over her shoulder, her eyes catching a stray shard of lamplight. "Somewhere safe. But if you'd rather go back to your father's house I won't argue."

I hesitated for a moment, then followed her into the alley. The sharp scents of recently-heated metal and salt-soaked fibers overpowered my other senses, so that by the time Goody Pendleton beckoned me through a dim doorway I was too disoriented to pinpoint our location.

We were in a dark alcove before a staircase, and through the doorway to our right I could see two African seamen playing a game of cards with a watery-eyed fellow, probably a merchant from the look of his coat and boots. There were more crowded tables behind them, with lamps hung from the rafters and a fire crackling on the far side of the room. Two plump women maneuvered among the tables bearing trays of ale and platters of stew and pie. I recognized them: Mercy and Alditha Webster. This was Widow Webster's public house.

Goody Pendleton grunted her way up the stairs with me following, at this point certain I'd made a mistake but having neither the will nor the knowledge to get out of it. There was a landing not a dozen steps up, and the Goody pushed through the door on it. I stood in the doorway behind her, taking in my second shock of the evening.

The room was small, with a slanted roof and a chimney running up the far wall, but no fireplace. Light came from three lanterns hung from a beam, revealing a low table covered with



the remnants of a loaf of bread and a mostly empty jar of pickled herring. Around the table two chairs were arranged, as well as several linen cushions stuffed with straw. A mattress of the same material was pushed into the far corner. There was a ledge running along the edge of the ceiling and it was lined with brick-a-brack: dried flowers, seashells, stones, pine cones, dolls made from wish bones like the kind Aunt Patience used to make me, a few loose beads and tassels that looked to have fallen off fine garments, and a random assortment of other little talismans; a block of soap carved like a mermaid, a broken teacup handle. There were no windows.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised to see the Widow Rachel Webster, considering we were standing in her pub, but the sight of her with her boots off, leaning back in one of the chairs with feet propped on the table, was jarring, as was the fact that Elizabeth Phillips sat hunched on one of the cushions. While her back was covered by her shift I could still see traces of the whipping she'd endured three days before by the drawnness of her face. Father said she'd been charged with cursing in public, but Aunt Patience whispered that her banishment was the result of the gentlemen caught leaving her house late at night.

Both women looked up with mild interest as I came through the door.

"Apparently the Foss girl's been possessed," said Goody Pendleton, lowering herself onto the other chair. "I don't suppose either of you ladies are papists? I hear they do exorcism."

Widow Webster cackled. "Sometimes I wish it. At least then maybe I could squirrel myself away in a convent, not that they'd have me. What's the trouble then, child?"

I remained in the doorway. "What is this place?"

Widow Webster gave me a smile full of brown teeth. "Why, the banquet hall of the witches of course."

Elizabeth bristled at that. “I ain’t no witch, thank you very much. I’m a woman of God, tempted by the devil like any daughter of Eve.”

“Oh quit winging girl, nobody’s a witch,” said Goody Pendleton. “Witches and papists in one night—bet you my husband’s crossing himself a mile away.” She looked at me slantwise. “This is just a place where us ladies down on our luck come for company. You’re welcome to stay awhile, but they’ll be looking for you so you can’t stay the night. Lizzy’s hiding out here until the heavenly fathers of the meeting house cool off and forgive her indiscretions.”

“S’not fair,” Elizabeth said, scowling into her lap. “How else did they expect me to get by after Tobias?”

Elizabeth’s husband hadn’t come back from his last voyage—dead or absconded no one knew—leaving her as good as widowed at nineteen.

“You won’t earn yourself no second husband by sampling all the others,” said Widow Webster.

“Well it ain’t all about money, is it?” Elizabeth grumbled into her knees. “A girl gets lonely in these long winter nights.”

The Widow nodded knowingly, as if she’d sought out her fair share of such company. “Aye, that’s true enough.”

“I can’t ever imagine,” said Goody Pendleton, “getting lonely enough to want my husband in the bed.”

Widow Webster cackled again. Elizabeth scowled harder. “Wasn’t *your* husband in my bed, was it?”

That set both older women howling with laughter. I shrank back, which attracted Goody Pendleton's gaze. "Come in and close the door or get gone, girl. This is just a place for a bit of hen talk, nothing more."

I saw no reason to doubt her. Despite the widow's crack about witches there was nothing suspicious in the room besides a few disreputable women, and I could hardly say I was so different from them. All the same, there was an aura of the forbidden about the place.

I closed the door, and settled myself uneasily onto the nearest cushion. The room was warm despite the lack of a fire, and I realized we must be over the kitchen. The women were all looking at me expectantly. "You going to tell us why you're here?" said Elizabeth.

I fixed my gaze on the floor. "What do you usually talk about?"

The widow flexed her toes. "Oh, the same as what everyone talks of these days: George Walton's demon."

My stomach dropped into a dark place below my ribs. "You mean the Lithobolia?"

"You know what I mean, girl: the stone-throwing demon. Call it what you will. I heard it almost got Anne Gadley's baby while they were all sitting out in their meadow."

"How's that?" asked Goody Pendleton, helping herself to a chunk of bread dipped in herring.

"The daft girl brought the babe out in a basket when she took the men their lunch—Walton was helping her husband clear stumps for a new field—and the demon started hurling stones at them from the trees. Ben Gadley said Anne had barely snatched up the child when a stone the size of his head landed in the basket. Can you imagine bringing a babe around a man beset by devils?"

“He is her father,” Elizabeth said.

“Father or not, the bastard’s bad luck.” The widow must have caught me flinch because she winked at me. “Begging your pardon, child. Your father rents one of Reverend Moodey’s pews, does he not?”

He did indeed, and the Reverend Moodey had plenty to say about Rachel Webster. He had plenty to say about all three of these women, and anyone else who neglected to show up regularly on Sundays. My father said the Reverend was touched by God and believed everything he preached about the town sinners. When Widow Webster was fined five shillings by the council, he said it was about time.

“That hag needs reigning in,” he’d muttered over the bowl of stew I’d just served him.

“Oh but what they asked of her, William!” Patience had breathed, eyes glittering with delight at the scandal. “To take a man into her house! And they said nothing of marriage. What precisely—”

Father cut her off, saying he wouldn’t allow conversation at his table to be lowered to the level of Rachel Webster. God protect me, he would have conniptions if he saw me now.

“...think it’s that Indian woman,” Elizabeth was saying. “What is he doing with an Indian in his house, and an adulterous one too? She admitted her boy was conceived on a Sunday, you know. No wonder the devil stalks that house.”

“If that ain’t the pot calling the kettle black,” the widow muttered, taking a swig from a strong-smelling jug she’d had tucked behind her chair.

“Mary Agawam’s a good woman,” said Goody Pendleton. “It’s not her fault she got mixed up with that den of Quakers; Walton bought her after the war, and God protect anyone who gets in the way of that man’s property.”

“Then, you don’t think Widow Jones is doing it? Making the stones fly?”

Three pairs of eyes were suddenly on me in a gradient of disbelief.

“Hannah Jones, a witch?” Goody Pendleton shook her head disdainfully. “You couldn’t really believe that, girl?”

“That’s what the Reverend believes,” I said, surprised at their unanimous opposition. “He says she made a pact with the devil.”

The widow took another sip from her jug before offering it to Elizabeth, then leaned towards me. “Listen here, girl. I’ve known Hannah Jones since she was Hannah Walford and long before that Walton creature ever set foot on Great Island. She’s not fool enough to sell her soul for revenge, though God knows that gillie-wet-foot deserves a comeuppance. If you ask me, Moodey’s mistaking a miracle for a spell.”

“What do you mean?” I was utterly bewildered by her defense. Hannah Jones was as good as sentenced from the way I’d heard people talking.

“I say burn her,” Patience had told me that very evening, father’s great coat spread across her lap and a needle flashing between her fingers. “They may be Quakers, god help them, and land-grabbers besides, but witchcraft is witchcraft. She’s always had an odd way about her if you ask me.”

No one ever did ask Patience, but that didn’t stop her.

“I mean,” said the Widow, settling back in her chair, “that perhaps it’s an angelic hand that throws the stones. Walton is a thieving Dalcop trying to take land out from under a poor old woman. He’s beset by a curse and blames it on the neighbor most likely to wish him ill, never thinking it may be the Lord who is displeased.”

“You think the stones are a miracle from God?” I said. It was blasphemy, plainly stated as if she were commenting on the weather. “But that couldn’t be.”

“Why not?” asked the Widow. “The lord is mightier than the devil; why can’t he send out his servants to do similar bidding? It’s been done before, not that Moodey would admit it while there’s a chance he can throw someone on the pier.”

There was a burst of laughter downstairs then, followed by the calling of raucous voices. The widow stretched and reached for her boots. “I’d best see how the girls are getting on. You’re welcome for a while, girl, but you shouldn’t tarry long. They’ll be looking for you soon, and I don’t want them to find me harboring Lizzy here.” With that, the Widow took her leave.

Once the door had closed again I turned to Elizabeth and Goody Pendleton. “Do you think that too? That it’s angels making the stones fly?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Could be. Didn’t angels throw rocks at Babylon to bring its fall?”

“That was one rock,” said Goody Pendleton, “and one angel, and he didn’t throw it at Babylon, but you’re close enough. God is wrathful towards sinners, and George Walton is a sinner if bread ever rose.”

I said nothing. That the devil may not be present at all on Great Island had never occurred to me, but the new translation these women presented hardly helped my own predicament.



Elizabeth yawned and crawled over to the mattress in the corner. “Sorry you can’t stay the night,” she said to me over her shoulder. “I’d share the bed, but if they catch me it’ll be a dozen lashes this time.”

“I won’t stay,” I said, but I made no move to go.

Elizabeth settled herself under the wool blanket while Goody Pendleton finished off the bread and herring and I studied the collection of trinkets along the ceiling. The Goody followed my gaze and said, “little tokens we’ve brought in over the years, to brighten the place up. It’s not just as three, you see. Rachel and I started meeting here after I was married and she had the pub to run, and neither of us had much time to chat anymore. This way it’s easy for her to nip downstairs and keep an eye on things. Goody Vaughan joins us sometimes, and Widow Goss.”

Two other women the council had charged with public drunkenness. I’d even seen Widow Goss in the stocks once, though I couldn’t remember what for.

“We’ve had a good part of the village in and out of here. Even Mary Agawam drops by now and again, though that poor girl hasn’t got much free time. I’d buy her and her boy off of Walton myself if my husband would have it.”

I said nothing, not knowing what I could say. My eyes lingered on the mermaid carved in soap, and wondered if the Reverend would call it idolatry.

“Your name’s Tacita, yes?”

I nodded.

The Goody swallowed her last bite of bread. “Tacita Foss, I found you running down the lane looking like more than a lithobolia was behind you not one hour ago, and now you’re more glum than when you came in. What’s troubling you, girl?”

I looked at the floor. “It’s silly.”

“No doubt. Out with it.”

I traced an eye in one of the floorboards. “It’s just—my aunt was talking about Widow Jones, and all the horrible things she deserves because she served the devil, and it made me realize, how wicked I am.”

I breathed in unsteadily. “Because I’ve been having the most horrible thoughts lately, that maybe, I don’t love God. I try, but I can’t.”

I braced myself for a slap, or a scolding—at the very least a hissing intake of breath, but the Goody just said “Why’s that?” in a voice I couldn’t read.

I remembered exactly when it started: six months before, reading my catechism. I’d realized the meaning of eternity, or rather I’d realized fully, for the first time, that the souls in Hell would never escape. Punishment forever.

The truth of it rolled over me like a fever, and I couldn’t fathom how anyone could be deserving of such a thing. How could it be that even people who were devoted their whole lives may still end up in such a state? And what of the masses who existed before Christ, condemned even when they’d never been taught the true way?

I’d mulled over the question for months, even posing it to Patience one night after the sabbath meal. She cut her eyes at me sharply. “It’s the will of God, Tacita. Desiring more explanation is the most vile hubris. Don’t ever speak such things again.”

That night I’d cried myself to sleep, knowing I’d shown her only a fraction of what was in my mind.

I prayed for forgiveness for my questioning, but I couldn't stop. Every time I chastened myself and willed my mind to accept God's plan, thoughts wound past my defenses like noxious mist: *If He is all powerful why does he allow such a thing as hell to exist? If He is forgiving while we live why an everlasting wrath when we die?*

I knew I'd have to do something to repent for my doubts, a resolution that increased in urgency when stones started flying at the house of George Walton. Here was a warning of what awaited me if I didn't take action, a sign of my adversary's strength. If the Devil could raise the earth on Great Island, he could easily claim my soul.

That was when I'd taken a pin from Patience's mending basket, and resolved to make a deep slash along my arm whenever evil thoughts came to me.

The pain was a relief. Perhaps my repentance could mean salvation. Perhaps God led me to suffer now so I would not suffer for eternity. I hid the rags I used to soak up the blood beneath my mattress, then burned them with my bleeding rags at the end of the month so Patience would never be the wiser. For awhile I sent up my thanks to God for the solution to my wickedness, and prayed that I could learn to accept his wisdom.

But the reprieve was short lived, I'd discovered tonight as Patience gleefully described her hopes for Hannah Jones's demise.

"I'd wager they'll do it in the town square. The council will want to make a spectacle of it and there isn't a big enough square on the island..."

I wasn't sure why, but her words ripped through the stitches of my makeshift-penance. I realized how foolish I was being. Had I thought mere cuts could save me from the fate of the

evil? Burning. That's what awaits those who deny God. I'd have to endure far worse to prove my hatred of my sin.

It was in that moment I'd thought how easy it would be to slip the poker from the scone and make as though I were prodding the coals of the fire. Once the tip was hot, Patience wouldn't be able to stop me from pressing it into my flesh, perhaps my face this time, since my arm's mutilation hadn't been effective. The temptation flickered through me for a moment, seductive in its ease and simplicity—and then was washed out by a hot wave of terror. I dropped my sewing and backed away from the fire, knocking my chair over.

"Goodness Tacy, what—" Patience said, but I didn't stay to hear her finish. I bolted out the door, fearing what I would do if I stayed.

But I couldn't tell that to Goody Pendleton, even if I could find the words. "I'm disturbed by damnation. I can't see the justice in it," is all I said. Then, not knowing quite why, I rolled down the sleeve of my right arm.

The Goody stared at the mess of red and purple that my flesh had been reduced to, taking my wrist in her hand and prodding gently at the scars. I winced, but didn't pull back. I imagined for a moment what Patience's face would've looked like if she'd seen my gruesome creation, and offered up thanks for her unobservant nature.

The Goody released my hand and eased back in her chair, eyes closed. She was silent for a long time, and I started to think I'd upset her and should go, but no sooner did the thought crossed my mind than she spoke:

"It's wicked to say so of a minster, but I've never thought our Reverend much gifted at locating the devil, especially now he think's he's found it in Hannah Jones."

She opened her eyes, but her gaze was set far beyond the meeting room. “I don’t claim to be a wise woman, but I’ve seen the work of the devil, and how he pulls folk down into the pit.

When my sister buried her third child before it saw it’s first summer, there wasn’t enough left of her to properly die. I’d speak to her and she’d stare at me with nothing behind her eyes. If I didn’t get her out of bed every morning and put wool and brush in her lap she would’ve stayed where she was until her body wasted to nothing, but her soul was already gone, in the ground with those babies, trapped in darkness.

Did you see that little Indian boy Henry Sherburne exhibited last year? He claimed the boy was the son of King Phillip, and made him dance in the tavern. He used to cry most of the time, but Sherburne would prod him with a hot poker when he wasn’t smiling. God knows where he got that poor child; God knows when anyone last showed him anything but cruelty. He was awful to behold towards the end—a dead-faced little puppet long past anything you’d call alive. Sherburne sold him down to Jamaica when folks stopped paying to see him.”

Focus returned to her eyes then, and she set them on me. “The devil waits in despair, Tacita. He builds the gray bogs that try and suck us down when the world grows too heavy. Whatever your query is with God, your salvation is already decided. That’s one thing you can learn from our Mr. Moodey. In the meantime, you’ve got to stop setting yourself up to fall into the darkness. That’s the surest damnation I know of.”

“I don’t know what this mad bat is on about,” came Elizabeth’s voice. She’d rolled over to face us, her head propped on her elbow. She looked at me with a combination of exasperation and compassion. “But you don’t think you’d be damned, do you? You’ve always been kind. God wouldn’t damn someone with a good heart.”

I blinked at the presentation, in quick succession, of two stances on damnation I'd never dreamed of. I'd never thought there were other stances, at least not among our congregation. Of course the Quakers and the Congregationalists thought differently, and the Indians, but we weren't any of those. We were *right*. We were God's purest followers. So weren't we all supposed to agree?

"I don't understand," I said. "What am I meant to do, accept that I don't love God? That's breaking the first commandment."

"I'm not saying you should accept it," said Goody Pendleton. "But you're being devoured by it, girl. Do you think God approves of the mess you've made of your own flesh?"

"It's my show of repentance."

"It's papistry, and a violation of the gift He's given you. Deal with your doubts how you will, but not like this. The Devil lies down that road." She pointed at me wrist.

I thought of how close I'd come this night to branding myself, and felt the truth of her words. Was the devil present in the seductive darkness that almost carried me into the fire? And even if not, would any good come of my self-abrasion, or would I only anger God further? It was possible. I was starting to think that a lot more was possible than I would've guessed two hours ago.

Still, I was afraid to ask my next question. "What about you, Goody? How do you cope with damnation?"

She sighed. Her face looked like it had been young not so long ago; the wrinkles new even if the weariness wasn't. The hair peaking out from her coif was rich brown streaked with

gray. “I don’t think I can satisfy you on that count, child. It’s not a subject I’ve dwelled on. Perhaps it’s best that way.”

I nodded, but my heart sank a bit.

“Damnation may be forever,” Elizabeth said, apparently having given up on sleep for now, “but even forever has to end sometime, doesn’t it? Everything ends.”

I expected Goody Pendleton to say something cutting, but she only chuckled. “Could be Lizzy, could be.”

Outside we heard the night watchman going by with his bell, *10 o’clock and all’s well...*

The Goody stood, stretching her arms. “You and I best be getting on, Tacita. You’re family’s probably panicked and my husband’s probably asleep.”

“Night then, Tacy,” said Elizabeth.

I remembered all of a sudden a day on the shore years ago when a bunch of us girls had been playing, and Elizabeth, five years older than me at twelve, picking me up by the shoulders and spinning me in a circle. I’d forgotten that day, or that we’d shared any childhood memories.

“Good luck, Lizzy,” I said, and saw her smile before the door closed behind the Goody and me.

The streets were darker and emptier now, but I felt safer. I wasn’t sure why; nothing had been answered, none of my problems solved. In fact I’d left Widow Webster’s with a whole new nest of questions, but somehow the addition of even more uncertainty made me feel balanced. Painful repentance, which before had seemed to be my only option, was now just one of several paths. I’d tasted a world beyond Patience’s gossip and father’s ferocity, and it had left hope in my stomach.

When we came to the meeting of Philbrook Lane and Great Street the Goody paused.

“You’ll need a story,” she told me. “Or else they’ll ask questions, and we can’t have them finding Lizzy.”

I’d been so caught in my other thoughts I hadn’t considered how I’d explain my sudden flight. I looked around, hoping to glean inspiration from the silent lane.

“Don’t panic,” she said. “I’ve already thought of something. Tell them you felt compelled by an unnatural force to run about town, but when you saw the church steeple the spirit suddenly left you. People have been blaming all sorts of strange happenings on the Lithobolia lately; they’ll hardly question you.”

I sighed with relief—even father could most likely be convinced of that. He’d probably be desperate to believe anything other than that his daughter had run into the night unprompted.

“Thank you, Goody. You’ve shown me much kindness tonight.”

“Not at all.” The Goody patted my arm, rather stiffly, then cleared her throat. “Off you go then.”

She turned towards the South Mill Pond.

“Goody Pendleton?”

She looked back. “What now?”

I fingered the edge of my apron. “Nothing, just—could I visit you again sometime, at the little meeting room?”

The Goody grinned. “Aye, that you may Tacita Foss, whether there’s demons chasing you or not.”



I watched until the darkness absorbed her silhouette, then noticed the frogs were trilling, their song drifting from the woods and marsh through the night air. They'd been silent since the first frost in September, asleep beneath the ice. Walking down the lane towards home I breathed in the mild air and brushed my fingers across the new leaves of the apple orchard, knowing that winter was over for now.

## Summer

“There are so many beautiful places in this area, it's very hard to pick one. I love Odiorne State Park - cross country skiing there in the winter, with the snow and the ocean and the deep blue sky, or walking on the woody paths in summer, harvesting St. John's Wort and other medicinal flowers, But it's also a place of great sorrow for me, because my friend Valerie Blair was murdered there in 1982. It took me a long time to go back, almost 10 years, but I still love it.”

-Genevieve Aichele

“My favorite spot is the beach. Each summer I try to spend my weekends there. My parents always worked, so I would take my sister to the beach and we would play in the water, create figures in the sand, read a book, go to seafood restaurants, and get ice cream before we left. I was always so aggressive with the sunscreen, but would forget to reapply and I would get a burn.”

-Ellen Blezinsky

### *Rye Harbor Bridge*

I cross the bridge in every season, but in summer I do it barefoot. In summer we go there to jump. Like everything else in New England it's a negotiation with cold and rocks. Jump too early in the year and your limbs might freeze up when you hit the water. Jump too late in the tide cycle, you may get a spike of granite up your ass. On hot summer days when the tide is high bands of kids huddle on either side of the bridge, dashing across the street with salty footprints to watch their friends float to the other side. When the tide is going out I jump on the marsh side and let the current carry me under the echoing concrete to the mouth of the harbor, where the lobster boats bob like red and blue uncles. Sometimes when the tide is coming in I let it carry me into the marsh, where the water winds around islands of salt-slicked grass, heron nests and horse shoe crabs nuzzling the muck. Last summer we biked there from Wallis Sands Beach one evening as the sun sent sparks across the water. I dove to the bottom of the harbor even though I knew the eery green silence that waited there. I pried an oyster shell from the bottom and took it back to the loud blue surface. Still gilded in sea water and silty from the harbor floor, I held it up to the light, and felt brave.

## Pox Party, 1797

*There is a passage in the history of Portsmouth, at the close of the last century, to which I have never seen any allusion in print, that is, I think, worth preservation from being entirely forgotten; at least so far as it may be done in the columns of a newspaper. I refer to the time when in the months of May and June, 1797, the young ladies and young gentlemen went to Shapleigh's Island to receive vaccination for the small-pox. There are but few living, who, from personal recollection can recall the event, but others, of a later generation, still retain much that was related to them in former years, by those who were participants in it.*

-Charles Brewster: Rambles about Portsmouth, 1869 (Accessed through Seacoastnh.com)

“A horrible disease, and one that had no completely effective treatments in the 18th century. If you got it, you just had to gut it out, and hope for survival. But as R. Stuart Wallace, historian with NHTI in Concord explains, there was an inoculation. “These inoculations were basically a means of giving you a small case of smallpox, in the hopes that you would get through it okay, after two, three, four weeks, and then, having been seasoned, you’d never get it again.”

-Todd Bookman, NHPR: *On Portsmouth's 'Pest Island,' an 18th Century Quarantine Turned Into A Party* (accessed April, 2021)

“The public health snag was that after getting inoculated, patients were contagious. To alleviate the risk to the general population, people receiving inoculation were often sent to something called a Pest House.”

-Bookman Ibid.

*That little green isle in the Piscataqua, whose still life, at the present day, is disturbed only by its few inhabitants, and the travel to and from Newcastle was for the time a scene of great animation. The flower of the youth and beauty of Portsmouth were congregated there, and as nothing more unpleasant was experienced than the ordinary results from vaccination, a majority of them were perfectly well, and remembered the affair as little else than a holiday festival of the gayest description.*

-Brewster, Ibid.

“On Pest Island, they were relatively free, many for the first time. And, remember, after getting the inoculation, people were symptom-free for 10-14 days.”

-Bookman, Ibid.

“There was plenty of work to be done by slaves, servants and even children, such as Bridget and Margaret, on this large farmstead. There were cows to tend and milk, butter to churn, gardens to plant and apples to pick for the barrels of English cider needed to last the year. Corn, rye, oats and wheat were cut and dried and brought to the mill to be ground into meal. Hides were cured and dried in the tan yard to provide leather for boots and buckets. Bread and pies were baked in the wood-heated ovens of the bakehouse to provide for the large household.”

-Kathleen A. Shea, *Portsmouth Women*

*“Charlotte [and] I sit evenings looking in the fire wondering what you are doing till we are tired then we go to bed, get up at eight, sew all day, and then go to bed again. Good bye I remain your affectionate wife.”*

-Elisabeth Coues Spalding in letter to her husband. Portsmouth, November 30th, 1809

At the start of our second week of quarantine, Amity Whit suggested we swim naked in the river. It was full moon and high summer, the air laden with the scent of beach roses and salt. We picked our way through the rocks and tangles of wild violets, giggling, shushing, and hiking our underskirts to avoid dragging them through the tide pools. We were Portsmouth’s own troop of nymphs: bear shouldered and hair down, smiles winking wicked in the moonlight.

“Oh we can’t!” Gaspd Anne Lewis as we came at last to the shoreline. The river stretched out before us, quick and black and speckled with islands, some larger and some smaller than the one on which we stood. On stormier nights we could hear the waves crashing a mile or so upstream, where the Piscataqua rushes to join the Atlantic’s blue forever. We stood in mirthful knots, giggling still and casting glances at one another, trying to gauge who might have the nerve to go first. Amity gripped my arm and smiled at the sand, her gaul apparently exhausted from the initiation of this errand.

I looked out at the water. When I was little, my mother used to let me run around the yard in just my shift. The grass would tickle my ankles, and ants and beetles crawled up my legs. I’d clamber on top of the chicken coop and build houses out of sticks and leaves among the poplar tree’s roots, murmuring stories to myself about the little folk who might take up residency in them. At the end of the day I’d be scraped and sunburned, and mother would catch me up in her arms and call me her wild wolf cub.

I started to undo my laces. Amity let out a small gasp and immediately two dozen pairs of eyes were on me, full of shock and delight.

“Look at Lucy!”

“Is she really going to?”

I let my jump vest fall on the sand, quickly followed by my skirt, and walked to the edge of the water. The river nipped at my toes like a coconspirator, the curve of the shoreline a hungry-lipped grin. In one quick motion I pulled my shift over my head and tossed it to Amity, who caught it with a squeak. Without turning to see their reactions to my bare backside I stepped into the water, shivering, not from cold but from the delicious feel of the night air. With my clothes off the world seemed to take a step closer, the night wrapping around me like a second skin. I was a wolf again, but a cub no more.

A few more steps and I was waist-deep in the water, the current twining around my legs. I took a breath, and plunged beneath the surface.

I let myself linger underwater for a moment, working my arms to stay in place, but it was so pitch black that I began to think of sea monsters, so I found my footing on the pebbles and stood upright. The others had given up all pretense of secrecy and were yelling and clutching each other, a few even removing their jumps. Clemency Darling and Sara Foss left their shifts on the rocks and dashed into the water, squealing. About a dozen others, including Amity, came in with their shifts but removed them once the water was high enough to cover their breasts. The rest fluttered about in the shallows, splashing each other and swirling their skirts in the water.

I laid on my back, relishing the feel of the river on my skin, my girlhood, my scalp. The water felt even better than the breeze on my unbound flesh. It was like swimming in a bath of liquid pearls, wonderfully cool and slick.

I felt something poke my side and whipped around, but it was only Amity, her eyes glittering just above the water's surface, chestnut hair floating in tendrils around her face. I dived after her and soon we were all in a game of water tag, shrieking and stumbling in a merry tangle.

At last we tired ourselves out. I grabbed my shift from where Amity left it on the rocks and pulled it over my head, shivering now from the chill of the night. All the swimmers engaged in the difficult business of dressing wet bodies, shaking sand out of our jumps and helping one another with laces. As I tied Amity back into her underskirt, she looked out across the water to the black outline of Portsmouth, punctuated here and there with a late-night lantern.

“Lucy,” she said, “how will we ever go back?”

Even if he'd managed to sleep through our shrieking, Dr. Jackson couldn't fail to notice the dark circles under our eyes or the salt crusted on our skin. He was a man who missed little, but as we'd discovered over the past weeks, he was also indulgent almost past the point of belief. The only reference he made to our late-night cavorting was a wink and a half-smile accompanying his usual, “Good morning, children,” when he came to conduct our examinations.

We lined up down the middle of the long room we slept in, and approached him one by one as he pressed the back of his hand to our foreheads, checked our inoculation sight, and asked us a series of questions. The ancient matron hired to mind us sat in a chair to his right, nodding

and calling each of us by the wrong name. There'd been no concern that she would notice our absence last night.

"Lucretia Turner," Dr. Jackson greeted me when I reached the front of the line. "How are you this morning?"

"Very well sir, thank you."

"Good, good." He felt my forehead and rolled up my sleeve to examine the place where he'd injected me with smallpox.

Dr. Jackson had been bringing batches of Portsmouth folk to this island for several summers now, the result of almost ten years of pleading. At first the town didn't take kindly to the idea of having a plague installed purposefully into our arms, but the good doctor went door to door explaining that the dosage was too small to cause serious illness in most patients, and that we were far more likely to die from not taking the inoculation than we were from taking it.

It was really Bessy Seward who changed everyone's mind. After her oldest daughter died of the pox while they were visiting family in Boston, Mrs. Seward came home and demanded that she and the rest of her children receive inoculations. They say Captain Seward fought her on it at first, but she was relentless, and finally he allowed the doctor to perform the procedure on Bessy and their youngest child. When both of them healed nicely he allowed the rest of the children to take it, and finally received it himself in the meeting house with all the town councilors present. After that a bill was approved to renovate the meager hospital on Shapleigh's Island, where the sick had been sent in past outbreaks, and Jackson set up an inoculation clinic that very summer.

He started by taking whole families out together, but that proved too hard for those who didn't have servants to mind their fields and business, so this time he took all the youngest children along with a few women to mind them in May, and then the youths in June, which is how we'd found ourselves set loose on an island in early summer with only three adults as supervision.

"No body aches, fatigue, or soars?" Dr. Jackson asked me.

"No Sir," I said.

"Ah, how unsurprising."

My eyes darted to his face, but he only smiled kindly through his spectacles, as if he'd said nothing out of the ordinary, and made a note in his ledger. I curtsied and headed for the door, hoping the comment had been meaningless.

The island accommodations were cramped so we usually ate outside. I could see Clemency and Annie Short through the doorway, setting a pot of oats over a newly stoked fire, but then someone flew out of the adjacent room and pinned me to the wall with a hand clamped over my mouth. The hand was unnecessary. I knew my assailant, and a scream would've pleased him far too much. I bit hard on his ring finger.

"Ouch! Lucy," Asher Davis pulled his hand away, but his puck-worthy grin only widened. "I missed you last night."

"I don't intend to come every time you call me," I said, folding my arms and returning his pixie charm with a level gaze. "It would start giving you ideas."

"Oh Ms. Turner, I'm already full of ideas." His free hand, having not learned it's lesson, rose to my face again and smoothed along my chin. "They could not grow any wilder."



“All the more reason not to encourage them.” It was getting harder to keep my gaze steady as his fingers trailed down the back of my neck.

“Lucy,” he pressed his face closer to mine so our noses were touching. “Take pity on me, won’t you? Meet me tonight. I’ll be there until dawn.”

There were several things I might have done if Dr. Jackson weren’t in the next room. As it was, I pressed my forehead onto his for a moment before slipping out the door.

“Addie Phipps.”

“No, it’ll be Kate Norris.”

“This is a *horrible* game.” Nellie Ackerman was scowling at us. Amity and I rolled our eyes.

“Cool off, Nel,” said Amity. “We aren’t saying we *want* them to die. We’re just saying they *might* die.”

“Probably no one will,” I added around a bite of oatmeal, and it was mostly true. Dr. Jackson gave us all a little speech on our first day on the island, explaining the process. His black medical case was open on a low table beside him, the silver instruments and glass bottles of inoculant gleaming like teeth. He’d explained there was inherent risk in the inoculation procedure, but as healthy youths he had faith we’d all live to tell the tale, and never need fear the dreaded disease again.

“I’m just saying,” I continued, “that if it comes down to it, Katie Norris is my bet. She looks like she’s held together with string and prayers.”

“But Addie just barely made it through last winter,” Amity countered, scrapping the last dregs of oat and molasses up with her spoon. “Widow Brackett was telling my mother she almost got carried off by the vapors.”

Nellie shook her head. “God save you two. Between last night and this morning I can’t imagine you’re bound for salvation.”

“But don’t you see, Nel?” I put my bowl aside and sprawled out on the ground, barefoot once again and dressed in a pale gray skirt and brown vest that wouldn’t suffer much from grass stains. “We’re already in heaven.”

She could hardly argue. The river was jewel blue, its currents tangling on the surface in little rushes and curls, splashing onto the rocks at the shore. Across from us Maine was a riot of oaks and maples crowding all the way to the water’s edge, and on the island itself wild roses sprouted from their thorny abodes and dangled blush-colored plums in the morning sun. The grass where we lay was laced with pale asters and purple chicory, and the twisted ash trees and squat pitch pines provided ample shade. Plus, a pot of molasses had been sent from the mainland. What greater sweetness could Eden offer?

Amity spread herself on the grass next to me, the slated leaves of an ash tree playing across her face. “I’ve been thinking, maybe this is heaven.”

“I just said that.”

“No, I mean *really*.” Amity wove her fingers through the stem of an aster. “What if heaven is only as good as the joy we’ve lived? Maybe God gives us times and places like this because he wants us to have something to build heaven with.”

Nellie snorted. “You think God gave you Jack Phillips the other night?”

Amity's tranquility rippled, but the animosity faded quickly. "You know what I mean. Being here feels right. Meant, even."

"I know what you mean," said Clemency in a small voice, and I nodded. Even Nellie tilted her head in what could've been assent. This past week had been indulgence without gluttony, satisfaction without any feeling of sin. I felt like a pitcher growing ever deeper, ever able to take in more of an intoxicating drink. I was expanding, not exceeding, and if the sense of rightness in my chest wasn't god's compass then I didn't know what instinct I was meant to follow instead.

Clemency nudged Nellie with her foot. "If you were home, what would you be doing right now?"

"Washing day," Nellie said at once. "Thursday is washing day, so Chessy and I would have to carry water up from the well, then scrub all the laundry and linens and put hot irons on the stains, then hang everything on the lines and spend the rest of the afternoon making sure nothing went flying off or that Charlie and Felicity didn't put their dirty hands all over the sheets."

She spoke with such ferocity that the rest of us laughed. We'd all be living similar days back on the mainland, and even if every loaf was baked and pot scrubbed and chicken chased, there was always sewing to be done. I was so unused to a day without a needle in hand that I found my fingers twitching away from its nonexistent prick.

I didn't miss any of the housework. I didn't miss the house, which was empty during the day except for mother and me now that Miriam was gone. After my father died, mother remarried almost immediately and we moved from our farm in Greenland to my stepfather's

house in Portsmouth. My stepfather rented out our old farm until Miriam married two years ago and moved there with her husband.

I didn't really mind mother and I passing around each other in our daily rhythm, especially since Amity's yard was just beyond our fence, but the evenings were full of my stepfather.

Sometimes it felt like mother and I were the only two practitioners of a potato-worshipping cult, because a potato is precisely what that man reminded me of: bland, lumpy, and coarse. In the eight years he'd been married to my mother he'd never actually looked at me—he studied me, like an advertisement for a shaving blade he might consider buying. I was a convenience or a confusion for him, but never anything to spend much time or thought on. My mother received the occasional affectionate gaze, and more than occasional pats on the bottom, but otherwise got the same treatment as me. He never talked of anything but the nonsense he heard at the *Earl of Halifax* or the conditions for caulking—his trade. If he farted or burped and a guest were present he'd excuse himself, but if it were just mother and me he wouldn't say a word.

Despite all this, when he came home each evening I was expected to help mother set out his dinner and to hold his never-clean hand while he gave grace and to fetch his tobacco when dinner was through and sit on the floor by the fire while he sat in the good chair and mother sat on a stool, listening to him sniff and mutter to himself as he turned the pages of the Gazette.

I knew it was ungrateful to hate him like I did. Anne and Jeremy Goss's stepfather beat them and their mother on the daily, and everyone knew Emily Dennett's father had more than a wandering eye, but sometimes the only thing that got me through those long evenings was

picturing myself sticking a knitting needle right through his sallow cheeks. How my mum, who had a quick temper and a quicker laugh around everyone else, could stand him I'd never know.

After washing up from breakfast the four of us spent the rest of the morning playing hackstraws in the shade of the ash tree. In the afternoon a game of Annie Over was organized around the broken wall of one of the old hospital buildings, and when Zachary Quick tore his shirt down the middle clambering down the rough stone Jack Phillips and his cousin Ezekiel ripped the two halves the rest of the way off and ran away with them, calling challenges. The game devolved into everyone chasing either Zachary or one of the Phillips boys and ended with most of us laying in the grass, breathless and laughing.

At dinner Asher passed close by me and slipped something into my palm. I hung back from the crowd gathering at the cook fire to examine it. It was a sea glass shard, perfectly smooth around the edges and as green as a wave's underbelly. I spent the rest of the meal turning it over in my hand, and that night while the other girls were whispering about an act of mischief to top the previous evening's swim, I slipped out the door of our makeshift hospital.

The tell-tale white of my shift was covered by a shawl I'd borrowed from Clemency, or rather taken off the foot of her bed with every intention of returning. I eased down the two steps into the grass, where the asters now looked like budding stars. The ash trees hushed and shushed and the pines added their brittle gossip to the night chorus, under-laid by the murmur of the river.

I padded through the wildflowers, around the side of the building, and into the protection of the trees. It was harder to see in here, but the glinting of the river made navigation simple. I startled a gray squirrel foraging in the leaves, causing it to dash up the trunk of a sugar maple. I

wondered how the squirrel's ancestors had reached the island—did he have an ambitious swimmer in his family, or had his great grand squirrel caught a ride on a sloop?

Asher was waiting at the spot we'd found a few days before, a dry bank of marsh grass at the edge of the water facing down river. His dark hair was strung with moonlight and I was tempted to run my hands through it, but instead I settled myself next to him and pulled out the sea glass.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Did you find it here?"

He greeted me with his usual trickster smile, but it was dimmer than normal. "Not exactly. Me and the Phillips' took a dingy out to Lady Island the other night and I found it there. We barely made it back—the boat wasn't water tight and Jack broke the pitcher we'd been using to bail it out."

I grinned at the image, but let it fade quickly.

"What's the matter?"

Asher took the glass from my hand and rubbed its clouded face. "Will Livingston has a fever."

"Oh." I pulled the shawl tighter around myself, feeling an unfocused stab of guilt. "I know it's worrisome, but it's normal. Dr. Jackson said we're likely to develop symptoms; it doesn't mean anything worse will come of it." When he said nothing I added, "Are you feeling alright?"

"Fine, but what does that really matter?"

"Of course it matters." I frowned. "Why would you say that?"

His brow was furrowed and he wouldn't meet my gaze. "It's just got me thinking—why do we even bother?" He brushed the scab on his arm. "Assuming these don't kill us, what happens when Typhoid comes through? Cholera? Or an infection, or another war, or a horse accident or a million other things. And if we dodge all that, there's old age waiting for us at the end of the line. We'll never win."

"I don't understand anything you're saying," I said, exasperated now. "We've nearly made it to majority. Soon we'll be able to make our own lives, isn't that winning?"

"But what's the point of making our own lives, Lucy?" Asher thrust his arms out towards the water and let them drop. "When you know nothing you do will last; no one you love will live. This country was just born, but even it will have to die sometime. Rome fell. England's falling, or that's what everyone says. Why would we be any different?"

Think about where we are. We've spent the past two weeks dancing over bones. They used to bring people out here to die—they will again next time a disease comes through that Jackson doesn't have a needle full of puss for. Do you think those people were making dutch dolls and eating molasses? They died in agony, alone, and all so the folk on the mainland could have a chance of dying slower. Does everyone just forget that that's where we're headed? There's no such thing as victory, so why even fight? What's the point?"

"You're supposed to say God," I said dryly.

He shot me an acidic look. Then he hunched his shoulders and set his gaze on the ground. "I just don't understand how everyone goes on like their lives mean something when it's all gone so fast. I just...don't understand."

He looked at me then, and I realized he wanted me to have an answer. He wanted me to put his head on my chest and calmly set the world right again.

I wondered how long this had been his plan. Did all these thoughts come to him with Will Livingston's fever, or had he been mulling them over long before? Perhaps even as he'd caressed me this morning he was laying a bread crumb trail, and I'd followed it, licking up every last bit.

I didn't know what to make of him. Asher was training to take over his father's rope business, but he was always sneaking out to meet the Phillips' and get into trouble. He and I started catching each others' eye when I ran errands for mother on Daniel Street, where they'd be lounging on barrels, eating sugar out of paper cones or trying to spook a horse. There was always laughter in Asher's eyes, and when he'd catch sight of me, something even brighter. I'd never glimpsed this bewildering darkness before now, and I found I couldn't tolerate it.

I stood. "Well, if that's the case, I suppose I better go pick a good spot to be buried."

His eyebrows shot up. "Wait, Lucy," he grabbed my arm.

"Let go of me," I said, ice in the command.

He did, and sat stunned and silent as I pushed through the underbrush back towards the hospital.

I should have felt pity. When I'd denied him the hope in his eyes went out; a lamp in the wind. It wasn't his fault he was having these thoughts. Maybe he was even brave to have them, but the way he'd looked at me, as if I could open the world like a book and point to the passage he was missing, was too ridiculous. It didn't help that I'd wanted him so badly to touch me, when the thought had been so far from his mind.



On our first nocturnal rendezvous we'd rolled over one another in the prickly grass, stitching kisses over each other's skin; touching and licking and exploring. His moans of *Lucy* turned to relishing pronunciations of *Lucretia*. It felt like there was sunlight streaming out from inside me.

He couldn't have felt what I felt, and say three nights later that life means nothing. I should have been heart broken. I should have wished I could help him, I should've at least wished he hadn't done it. But I was just disgusted, and there was no room for anything else.

I didn't want to go back to bed, so I resolved to get as far from Asher as I could. For the first time the island felt claustrophobic. I made my way to the rocky beach on its northern face, where a series of flat stones jutted into the water. I crunched along the gravel until my feet complained, then hopped my way from stone to stone, until I was toeing the edge of the farthest one, facing the horizon where the river flowed from the seam of the sky.

I breathed in, and my mind eased a bit. My thoughts had space to move in the open air, anchored to me like kites but spinning where I could see them against the backdrop of the world. My anger began to cool, and I could find it in my heart to worry for the bewildered boy I'd left behind. Had he gone back to the boys barracks or was he sitting there still, gazing empty-eyed into the river? Pitiful though the image was, I didn't know what could be said to help him. Perhaps he'd learn to drink until he forgot the world didn't matter.

I thought about the bones he'd mentioned, the ones we'd been dancing on. I'd thought about them before, as the sloop bobbed down the river and the green patch we'd be spending the month on came into view. I'd shivered, thinking of all the people who'd come before to this

place knowing they would never leave. Did they beg the ferryman to take them back? Did they walk until the water covered their heads, rather than die stuck to their sheets by pox pustules? Perhaps someone had stood where I stood now, gazing back towards Portsmouth, where they'd left a lover or a child or a sister. Maybe the healthy and the sick had faced each other across the water, like the living and the dead across the width of the River Styx, knowing they would never again share a shore.

So why wasn't I afraid? Asher was right: at the end of our ephemeral existence sat a promise of pain followed by a silent darkness, the nature of which we could never divine. In truth it was worse for me than it would ever be for Asher. He would never bear the risks of childbirth.

I'd helped during Miriam's labor last winter. I'd seen a person I'd loved my whole life contort her face in shapes I'd never seen, and scream in a way that haunted my dreams ever after. Miriam assured me it had been more than worth the effort, but even with the weight of my nephew in my arms I wasn't so sure. It chilled me to think I might suffer the same ordeal one day. Strange to think I feared birth, but couldn't summon the same dread for death.

I wondered what would happen if Asher witnessed a birth. Would he look into the face of a woman he loved and think there are greater things to fear than mortality? Would he hold the new life in his arms and know the price that had been paid for it? Maybe then he'd find his victory, in the miracle of the fact that any babe could survive the terror of arrival.

It was miraculous, I realized, that I stood here now, nearly through childhood, in a country that had managed to survive its own improbable birth. I had a choice few lived to make: what to do with the years ahead of me. There would be limitations, of course, but I didn't have to

except them all. I'd never been able to muster gratitude for the fact that mother remarried, even though I knew she'd done it to secure my and Miriam's futures, but now I offered silent thanks to her and to God that my dowery would give me some leverage. I'd never have to marry a stupid man to survive.

I tilted my face towards the stars, wondering how I'd never reflected before on the privilege of my existence. People were constantly telling me I was lucky to be alive: old men visiting my stepfather who recounted tales of their war-torn childhoods and teenaged army service, old women who hailed mother in the market and sighed over me, reminiscing about their own babes who fell pray to pleurisy or scarlet fever before they could even walk on their own. Each tale of premature demise ended with the same admonition: *give thanks to God, girl, you're lucky to have made it this far*. I'd known I was lucky, and that in a year or two I'd reach an age of greater liberation. But the true implication of that freedom never hit me until now, licking through my blood like a thread of silver. Perhaps Asher had given me something this night after all.

The asters kissed the soles of my feet as I walked through the grass back towards the girls' barracks, but the lightness in my chest sunk when a voice came from behind me: "Tell me, Ms. Turner, when did you have the Small Pox?"

I turned to face Dr. Jackson, who was standing in the door frame of the boys' barracks with his medical bag in one hand, smiling pleasantly.

"When I was six. Sir." Before my stepfather's time, back when we lived in Greenland. Mother would be angry, but not forced to explain my absence.

"I see." He snapped his bag shut and descended the uneven stairs.

“How’s Will?” I asked.

“He’s a strong lad, he’ll recover. The fever isn’t high.”

“That’s good.” I squirmed inwardly. It seemed rude to scamper away now that I’d been caught, but I had no idea what he’d want from me.

He gazed at me over his spectacles. “I assume you’re aware you cannot contract the disease twice.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And I assume you anticipated that I would know the scars on your shoulders and chest were not from measles, as you claimed.”

“Well, I’d hoped you wouldn’t.”

“I see.” He began polishing his spectacles on his shirt, and I got the sense he was trying not to look amused. “But the question remains, why do it? Why receive an inoculation for a disease you can no longer contract?”

“Well, sir,” I made a half-hearted gesture at our surroundings, “who wouldn’t?”

He guffawed, then cleared his throat. “Pardon me. I wasn’t expecting that. But I quite see your point.” He replaced his spectacles and gave a shallow bow. “Good evening then, Ms. Turner.”

“Wait, Sir?”

He’d started to turn away, but paused, one eyebrow cocked with kindly expectation, to meet my perplexed gaze. “Why did you let me stay, if you knew all along?”

His expression wavered, like I’d surprised him again. His eyes drifted over my shoulder to the town’s lamp-flecked silhouette. “There was more inoculant than I could use; so many

people are still wary of it. I admit, part of me was curious to see what effect the injection would have on a survivor of the disease. Of course my first thought was to send you home but..." he trailed off, his eyes growing distant. "You see Lucretia, when you spend your life trying to convince others to let go of the past lest they die with it, you—or at least I—develop a desire to give them more than medicine."

A few moments passed. "What's that?" I prompted.

"I suppose, perspective." The doctor turned the handle of his bag absently. "Another point of view. Even a short journey can cast old beliefs in a new light." He seemed to return to himself then, and smiled ruefully at me. "So you see, while I knew you had no need of the former treatment, I still hoped you'd benefit from the later."

"I have," I said quietly, and felt the truth of it glowing in my chest. "Thank you." I flicked my gaze towards the east. "I don't think Asher has though."

I gave the doctor a brief sketch of our conversation, clumsily skirting around my more serious breeches in virtue, but he only listened attentively and nodded when I was done. "Thought can be a dangerous exercise, but don't worry, I think I'm equipped to help Mr. Davis out of his quagmire, though I do fear I'll have to resort to religion."

He bowed goodnight once again and started to take his leave, then paused and turned back around. "Mr. Davis didn't lead you into the weeds of the metaphysical as well, did he?"

"No, thank you," I said, restraining the desire to roll my eyes. He nodded again and walked off in the direction I'd indicated.

I watched him disappear into the trees, thinking of the first time I learned about the quarantine plan. I don't remember who told me or even where I was, only that I heard the words

*a month* and *alone* and knew it was something I wanted desperately. It wasn't just the thought of Asher and I away from prying eyes, though admittedly that was a factor. It was the prospect of no responsibility and no supervision; unfilled time. That was a luxury I'd never dared to dream of.

As I climbed the steps of the girls' barracks, the gratitude for this reprieve from reality mixed with the sadness that I'd never have it again. Unless.... well, moving towns had worked once before. I wondered, how are the islands of Boston Harbor in June?

## Autumn

“Fall in Portsmouth, and just New Hampshire in general, is iconic. There is a reason why tourists from southern New England, New York, and elsewhere come up to northern New England in Fall to see the trees that have changed into bright reds, yellows, and oranges. Specifically, though, a seasonal memory is making the annual pilgrimage to Applecrest Farm in Hampton Falls, around 25 minutes south of town, for apple cider donuts, apple picking, and stocking up on pies.”

-Max Pont

“Portsmouth ended October with its seasonal roar Saturday night and it was as if the Halloween muses tipped their heads to let their visions and stories spill out. The downtown became a wondrous frontier to be explored. The streets were full of strange creatures. Thrilling unknowns lurked around every corner. The sidewalks bulged with viewers, many of whom felt a fluttering of excitement typically reserved for opening presents. They strained their necks to see, and everything was so much that it burst beyond the frame of vision. The night was pierced with the shouts of delight, admiration and surprise. There was much clapping and laughter.”

-Denise Wheeler

### *Deadwick's*

I was in a long white dress and a fox mask. My mother wore a pink silk blouse with ruffled lace trim and a ghoulish crone mask. The trees were turning the colors of phoenix feathers and dry leaves skittered across the road like mischievous spirits, greeting the dawn of their favorite month. It was the first of October and we were helping host the opening of Deadwick's Ethereal Emporium.

The newest and most macabre member of the Pickwick's Mercantile shops was a candlelit jewel box tucked into an unassuming brick building on Sheafe Street. Everything was draped in black fabric to contrast the eery gleam of the merchandise: crystals and stones, jars of herbs and powders, charms and necklaces and teeth hanging from chains; statuettes of pagan figures, books on witchcraft and the a-cult, taro cards and talismans and the head of a crocodile that grinned knowingly at the clientele. Us costumed folk were the living vessels of the ambience, walking along the line of people waiting in the cold evening for their turn in the store. Our purpose was to look mysterious and serve cups of cider from a steaming cauldron on a hot plate. Though we'd been animated for the benefit of the prospective shoppers, they couldn't have been more delighted than I was to be one of October's own minions, in on the enchantment, part of the haunting.

## Missing Pages, 2009

“At the time of Judge’s arrival, there were fewer than eight hundred black men and women living in New Hampshire, and fewer than two hundred of them were enslaved...Judge’s new community of black men and women in Portsmouth never climbed above 2 or 3 percent of the population, and the majority of them lived and worked along the sea and the rivers.”

-Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*

At the time of her death in 1846, Dinah Whipple was the revered teacher of African American children in Portsmouth, New Hampshire but she was identified more prominently, at least according to the local white newspaper editor, as the widow of Prince Whipple. Prince had served in the Revolutionary War when he was the slave of William Whipple, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

-Valerie Cunningham, *Dinah Whipple (CA. 1760-1846)* (Accessed through Blackpast.org)

Farmington’s payout is one of 87 legal settlements agreed to by municipalities in New Hampshire following allegations of civil rights violations by police officers between 2010 and this year. The settlements cover a range of allegations, from the shooting deaths of citizens by police, to the use of excessive force during a chaotic arrest in Nashua, to police officers in small towns improperly detaining citizens.

-Todd Bookman, NHPR: N.H. *Towns Pay Millions to Settle Claims Against Police; Details Often Hidden From Public* (accessed April, 2021).

Half the estate’s value was in the slaves—Prince, valued at 400 pounds, and Diana with a child, valued at 300 pounds.

-Elizabeth P. Nowers, Chapter on Alice Shannon Hight, *Portsmouth Women*

“You must burn my letters as soon as you read them for I never wish to see them again.”

-Elisabeth Coues Spalding, Letter to her Husband. Portsmouth, December 5th, 1809

“The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. Given this, “it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp [these lives] again in themselves, as they might have been ‘in a free state’.”

-Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*

“As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing.”

-Saidiya Hartman, *Ibid.*



The day after my birthday, our basement flooded. Not that it had been much of a birthday: I'd slept late then shoveled in some of the pancakes my Dad made before going to work from 11am to 11pm. Still, the flood was an additional reminder that the universe had never given a fuck and wouldn't start this year.

I'd been dead asleep, still dressed in my scrubs when Mom started rubbing my shoulder. "Margo."

"Mom, stop."

"Honey, you've got to get up. The basement is full of water."

I felt a savage hatred for her in that moment. I wanted to hiss like a territorial baboon and fall back into my pillows.

I opted for begging over hissing. "Please, Mom, I had a twelve hour shift and I have to be up at six. Just please deal with it without me."

Her face looked drawn and tired in the harsh glow of my bedside lamp, her eyes blinking down at me blearily. "I'm sorry honey, but we need your help."

I should've just let her be, but I was too frayed. I threw my covers off and grabbed a sweatshirt off my bedpost. "Fine. Great birthday present. Thanks for the surprise party."

I didn't look up to see how that played out on her face. As I rummaged around the floor for a thicker pair of socks I heard her strained voice: "Your birthday was yesterday."

The shame was already metastasizing in my gut but I didn't let it reach my face. I just glared and ducked past her into the hall.

The water was already a foot deep and had the brackish scent of the marsh. I went slowly down the basement stairs, clumsy in my winter boots, and caught sight of Dad in the corner heaving a cardboard box into his arms. When he turned and saw me his eyes got big.

“Don’t step in the water Margo! I think it’s electrocuted.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing in it?”

“I’ve got galoshes.” He slogged towards me, carrying the box. “They’ll absorb any shock and I’m not touching the water. You stay on the stairs and carry things up.”

I almost buckled under the weight of the box when he handed it over, but managed to lug it back up the stairs. One thing that sucks about being in nursing school is you usually know exactly when you’re messing your body up, even when you can’t do anything about it.

Mom waited till I was up the stairs then brushed past me stiffly, clattering down the steps to help my father. We formed an assembly line, my parents carrying boxes and bins and furniture to the foot of the stairs and me dragging them into the living room, then stumbling back down for more.

We saved half of Dad’s Boston Globe collection and some of mom’s theater mementos, plus the Christmas ornaments and a few boxes of photo albums. We couldn’t lift the leather couch that didn’t fit in the living room but we’d meant to save for my first apartment, and a box of my baby toys had been sitting on the ground and was water logged by the time we got to it.

Mom ripped the cover off the box even though the water kept shocking her. She clawed at the cardboard until it gave way and pulled my baby book out from a nest of soaked stuffed animals. I started crying, and she climbed to where I was on the stairs and pulled me tightly against her chest, the damp leather between us.

We stopped when the water rose above my parents' galoshes, then sat on the stairs and waited to see how high it would get. Mom said I could go to bed, but I stayed. We didn't have to wait long. The flood slowed to a trickle a few minutes later, topping off at about two feet. Dad said we should all shower and go back to bed; he'd sleep at the top of the basement stairs so he'd hear it if the water started rising again. I made Mom shower first, then she laid next to Dad in the makeshift bed he'd built from quilts and couch cushions at the top of the stairs.

He rubbed her back. "Celeste, go to bed. I'm fine here." But she stayed with him.

It was already 4:36 when I fell back into bed, but I milked my remaining 84 minutes for all they were worth. When the alarm rang, I opened my eyes without moving and laid there for as long as I dared. Then I got up, put on fresh scrubs, and made coffee.

The warranty hadn't been up on our pump, so my parents spent the next few days passing the phone back and forth, trying to wrangle a reimbursement for our lost property out of the company, or at least a refund for the piece of shit. In the end we got a 200 dollar voucher for a new pump. When it came in the mail, Mom ran the glossy piece of paper under the kitchen tap until it was water logged, then laid it down flat on the counter and pulled it apart methodically using her middle and pointer fingers. She thought I was doing homework.

A week after the voucher arrived I was on shift at the nursing home, rubbing lotion onto Donny's feet while he read the newspaper. I don't think he actually read it but he definitely looked at it, and reacted to it, which was something. He'd been a professor of Civil War history at the University of New Hampshire for 45 years, and told me at least once an hour that there's a bench somewhere on campus with his name carved on it, along with the years he taught and a

message of thanks for his service. I always thought Dementia was a particularly cruel fate for someone who'd made a living off of history.

"They didn't even know it was a grave site, you know, then the developers started digging and found bones."

I glanced up from his flaking ankles. Most of residents got terrible dry skin in the winter, and the vast majority couldn't reach past their knees. "Where's that?"

"Right downtown, Chestnut Street." Donny jabbed the paper, which made the dry splat sound only newspapers seem to make.

I stopped rubbing and leaned back on my haunches. "They found bodies downtown?"

"Bones," Donny corrected, leaning down to show me the picture. "They're more than 200 years old, you know. Look here."

The picture showed a familiar looking dirt heap, and I realized I drove past the place every day. It was at the edge of one of the nice neighborhoods, right before the commercial district started. If I'd thought about the place at all, I would've assumed it was a construction site, bound to become another boutique or an Inn fashioned like the 18th century homes it sat among, some place that would have plaques about the history the previous building possessed before they'd bulldozed it.

The headline read: *Musical Hall Arts Festival to Raise Funds for Mass Burial Site.*

"Why didn't they know it was a graveyard?" I was pretty sure the place had been an accounting office before.

Donny leaned down like he was about to tell a secret. "Slaves."

Oh. My side of the paper sagged slightly. Donny shook his head. “Tossed ’em all in a pit without a marker. Disgraceful.”

He took the newspaper back from me and peered at the story below the picture of the pit. I squeezed more Jergen’s onto my palm and started on his left ankle.

I’d decided to fish Donny’s paper out of the trashcan before leaving, but he wasn’t done with it by the time I’d changed his sheets and given him his medication. Usually he’d have discarded the news section by now and moved onto the comics, but he’d gotten excited about an old Italian restaurant that was reopening and kept rereading the article over again. Instead I pulled into a fifteen minute spot at the top of Chestnut Street after my shift and walked over to the pit.

It was dark out, but mild for mid-October, and I didn’t bother putting my coat on over my sweater and scrubs. The pit was surrounded by mounds of dirt and a double ring of the gridded, orange plastic used to keep people out of places when putting up a fence is too much work. I couldn’t even see the pit itself beyond the mounds.

I suddenly felt like a rubbernecker, and was turning to go when I noticed a plaque mounted on a pedestal. I walked over and read the inscription. It described how during a construction project in October of 2003, thirteen bodies had been found at the site. DNA testing revealed they were of African ancestry. The Town Council appointed the African Burial Ground committee to determine how to properly honor the people whom our ancestors threw in a hole.

The background of the plaque was a sepia overlay of old documents, intended to be decorative rather than informative, but a closer look revealed they were runaway slave

advertisements and what looked like old bills of sale. Most of the script was faded or in archaic cursive I couldn't make out, but the first few lines of one advertisement read:

### **Runaway**

Girl of about 5 feet in height and 23 years of age, answers to the name of Chessy. Slightly inclined to the mulatto in color, with bushy black hair and a scar like an anvil on one temple. Had a set of good clothes and is very skilled at mimicry, may attempt to pass as a free woman. Absconded from the Ackerman household on April the 18th...

The rest was cut off. I wondered if Chessy really escaped, or if this decorative advertisement helped pull her back into bondage. The story it told was unfinished, not even properly started, just one page ripped out of a full life. Two hundred years later it felt open-ended, like this young woman may still be running through the woods somewhere, or sitting on a train platform, heart pounding, trying to look like she belonged.

I pulled my sweater tightly around myself, turning away from the plaque. The town mounts black-robed scarecrows with pumpkin heads on all the downtown lamppost for the month of October, and one grinned at me as I trudged back to my car, with satisfaction or scorn I couldn't tell.

Mom was sitting at the kitchen counter when I got home, hunched over her ancient laptop. The lights were off and the ethereal glow of the computer intensified the hollow parts of

her face, like the device was suckling power from her instead of from the cord plugged into the wall.

I switched on the kitchen light. “You’re going to kill your eyes doing that.”

She looked up at me, blinking. “How was work?”

“Long. Alright.” I opened the fridge and found a sub wrapped in paper with “MB” written on it in purple marker.

“Did you see the memorial they’re building downtown?” I asked, unwrapping the sub and sliding it into the microwave. Mom looked up again.

“Where’s that?”

“Chestnut Street, where they found the slave bodies.”

“Oh yeah, terrible isn’t it?” She pushed the laptop to the side and rested her cheek in her hand. “I think Natasha Banks is on the board for that. Why do you ask?”

The microwave beeped. “It just seems like it should be a bigger deal. It’s insane that the grave went unmarked for so long.”

“I think they’re doing more.” One of the post-it notes on the counter caught her eye and she leaned down to read whatever reminder she’d scribbled for herself on it. “Natasha said something about designing a 4th grade curriculum around it.”

I took my plate out of the microwave and noted what might’ve been disappointment in her eyes when I carried it past the counter towards the staircase.

When she’d rescued my baby pictures in the basement I’d felt something for my mother. It had been so long since I’d been able to feel anything towards her, let alone the boundless love

I'd had as a kid. But some of the old devotion surged up when I saw her claw at that cardboard box, desperate to save memories of me. It felt for a moment like the wall of static between us was penetrable. But it had just been a moment; not a beginning and not an end.

I sat down at my desk and unwrapped the sub, swiveling in my chair to gauge the state of the bedroom. It had always been too small, but might've been bigger if I ever put anything away. The owl stickers over my bed were a relic of middle school I'd never bothered to remove. The painting of a mermaid between the windows had been a gift for my mother from an artist friend. The only things that marked the room as mine were the clothes on the floor and the books piled on and around the overstuffed bookcase, which now leaned dangerously to the right. Dad kept saying he was going to fix it. My bed was unmade, and my backpack vomited a bouquet of folders and textbooks at my feet. It occurred to me that I had a Biology II exam in roughly thirty six hours, and probably couldn't afford another C.

School had followed a simpler formula before college. Autumn meant studying the Revolution and probably a field trip to Strawberry Banke. America was independent by Christmas, the slaves free by Valentine's Day, and WWII was always tinted with the levity of approaching summer. We learned the story of America in sync with the seasons, like it was as natural as the falling leaves and budding flowers.

Headlights flashed outside and I watched as Dad pulled into the driveway. I pictured him coming in, hanging the keys on the hook and crossing the kitchen to lean against Mom. Her arm would snake around his waist while his hand rubbed a circle on her back. They would say nothing. Mom would barely look up from the screen, and he wouldn't care. They needed so little to reach each other.



I took a bite of sub and wondered what I'd wanted from my mother tonight. For her to care more, that was for sure. I didn't want her to talk about a mass grave like it was a new crosswalk. But what beyond that? What was an adequate reaction to a hole filled with the enslaved bodies? Nothing I could ask her to give in our kitchen as I heated up my dinner, probably.

"Hey, Margo."

I moved my gaze from the window to Nina's wide brown eyes, which were looking at me expectantly.

"You never let me stare into space," I said, pulling another towel out of the laundry bin.

"Who needs space when you have me?" Nina pushed her cart in next to mine and reached for the bin of clean towels. "What's up with you?"

"Oh, thinking about the meaning of life." I put the folded towel on top of the stack I had going and reached for another. "And when I can get the hell out of here."

"Girl same." Nina folded three-times faster than me, and yet her pile still looked more even. "As soon as that clock hits eight I am gone. Darius said he'd order Shalimar tonight."

"I mean out of this city," I said. "And this state. I'm done with New Hampshire. It's an irrelevant libertarian triangle. If we seceded the rest of the country wouldn't even notice until the next Primary Election."

Nina's eyes got wider. "But the Primaries are the best! You know I met Hillary Clinton in a coffee shop? And Obama came to my little brother's high school last time." She was wearing long silver earrings that whipped around when she got excited.

Nina went to Great Bay and I was at UNH, but we were in the same year of nursing school and bonded over our shared hatred for advanced algebra. She'd invited me over to the apartment she shares with her boyfriend once for a *Grey's Anatomy* binge, and it had become a monthly tradition. The two of them lived in a housing complex off of Route 1 with a cracked parking lot and good cooking smells always coming from somebody's window.

I leaned against one of the hampers. "You really think you'll stay here forever?"

"Maybe not forever," Nina said. She had finished on towels already and was reaching for the wash clothes. "But I wouldn't want to live far away. Most of my family's in Boston; I want to stay close to them. I'd live down there but the taxes in Massachusetts are insane. Why, what's got you wanting to leave?"

I considered telling her about the grave and my mother's lackluster reaction to it, but it occurred to me how ridiculous that would sound as an explanation for wanting to move. There probably wasn't a place in the world, let alone a place in this country, that didn't have the equivalent of the Chestnut Street pit in their history.

"It's not like it's perfect up here," Nina went on, unbothered by my lack of a response. "It's white as fuck—no offense, and the prices are ridiculous, but I've got my friends, and I love being on the beach. I'm too spoiled to live inland now."

I sighed. "Your right. I should stop bitching."

"Where do you think you'd go if not here?"

I hadn't even thought that far. Running through the options in my head, I found myself in the same place as Nina: anywhere else would either be too far from family or too far from the beach.

“Another country would be nice to try for a while,” I said. “Maybe Spain or somewhere in Latin America so I could work on my Spanish. But I guess I couldn’t really stay away forever.”

“Home is funny like that,” Nina tilted her head thoughtfully. “It drives you crazy, but you can’t stay away.”

“Parents too,” I added.

She laughed.

“What’s this?”

Dad nudged the book with his foot. The coffee table was a battleground between my Bio notes and the latest batch of white pages he was editing. He’d been a free lance writer ever since the company he did PR for collapsed with the housing market, and worked the desk at Planet Fitness to make up the extra.

I had laid the book absently on the table as I pulled out my notebooks, but now I picked it up and ran my thumb over the title: *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*.

“Erica Armstrong Dunbar,” I said. “Have you read her?”

“No, never heard of her.” He reached out and I passed him the book. “Who’s Ona Judge?”

“She lived here, apparently.”

“Portsmouth?”

“Yeah, and Greenland.”

He peered through his reading glasses at the description on the back of the book. “Wow, she belonged to Washington? I always thought he was good to his slaves.”

I stared at him. “Dad, seriously?”

He looked at me over his glasses. “Is my boomer showing?”

“Just a bit.”

“All I mean is, he didn’t separate families or do any of the really terrible stuff other slavers did. Plus he freed all of them on his death; I’m surprised she didn’t just wait for him to kick the bucket.”

“So you’re saying he did slavery in the nice way?”

He put his hands up. “Okay, okay fair. But remember, that was a different time. It wasn’t considered to be so wrong back then.”

That I had nothing to say in response was a good example of why I’d gone to the library and typed “Slaves, Portsmouth” into the automated catalogue. I couldn’t let Chessy go, or the bodies in the pit that I had no names for. There was a feeling of culpability—natural white guilt, along with a more intangible sense of misdiagnosis. Something about the memorial plans felt off.

“What do you think they’ll say about us in two hundred years?” I asked Dad. “What horrible thing are we doing that they’ll say we thought was normal?”

He’d gone back to making notes, but looked up at the question, the lines around his eyes deepening as he considered. “Interesting thought. Factory farming will hopefully be a relic by then, and paying Vietnamese toddlers three cents an hour to make our underwear.”

I winced. “Please, just stop talking.”

“You did ask.”

“Yeah, big mistake.”

“What class is this for anyway? I didn’t know you were taking history this semester.”

“I’m not.” I looked down at the book’s cover. The titled overlaid a painting of a woman from the waist down, grasping the edges of her apron. Portraits of George and Martha Washington flanked her. I wondered why the artist hadn’t drawn her face. “The memorial they’re building downtown just made me curious. I never thought about there being slaves up here.”

“Mm, wasn’t just a Southern thing.” His eyes drifted back to the white pages.

I hugged my legs into my chest. “I’ve been thinking, maybe I’m wasting time. The dead are dead, right? Maybe I should be calling politicians or chaining myself to a Chick Fillet if I really want to make things better.”

His eyes flickered up to meet mine. “I think Ms. Judge might disagree.”

I rested my chin on my knees. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Ona Judge’s biography got pushed to the bottom of my backpack for a few weeks as I attempted to keep my Biology and Spanish grades above a D and take enough shifts to cover my next tuition payment. Halloween came, and with it the season’s final burst of tourists, who filled the seats of the Haunted Trolley Tour and strolled through the city’s many graveyards, taking pictures. I remembered a field trip in Elementary School when we’d gone to Point of Graves down by Prescott Park and made etchings of the headstones.

I wondered how the dead felt about their tourist attraction status. I’d always liked the way graveyards mixed into the city landscape, scattered among parks and backyards. People ice skate

at the South Street cemetery when it's cold enough, and walk their dogs through Point of Graves. I always thought it would be nice to be buried in a place where people walked and visited; a place people weren't afraid of. But the tourism felt different. I wondered if the Chestnut Street memorial would become a spot on the Haunted Trolley Tour, and what the tour guide who stood at the front wearing black lipsticks and a polyester corset would say about it. I wondered if Ona Judge had a headstone.

I pulled the biography out from under my Anatomy textbook two days after Halloween. I sat on the edge of my bed with it in my lap, knowing I had a Spanish quiz in the morning that I wasn't ready for, but found myself turning to the page I'd left off on.

I'd just read the part where Ona decides to run away. Apparently she belonged to Martha Washington, not George, and Martha planned to give Ona to her granddaughter, who was nineteen and newly married. Apparently the granddaughter was a notorious asshole with a creepy husband, and Ona had gotten used to having more independence during her time with the President's family in Philadelphia, so she made a plan to escape. As I read about her arrangements with free black friends and the night of truth when she slipped from the Washington's house to a ship bound for Portsmouth, I forgot about the Spanish Quiz. I leaned back against my pillows and followed her through the journey to her docking in Portsmouth, and ultimately to a job as a domestic servant:

*Domestic labor was the only opportunity that Judge had to carve out a meager living, and she grabbed it, quickly finding a position in a local home. Most black women, no matter their status as enslaved or free, engaged in backbreaking domestic labor that proved cruel to the human*

*body. They toiled in the homes of New England's white residents, cooking, cleaning, and tending to the personal needs of their employers.*

It went on to describe how these women usually lived in uninsulated attics and cellars. They tore muscles, broke bones and curved their spines hauling water along icy paths and leaning over vats of laundry. They worked with hot irons and burning lye; wood fires and bad-tempered employers for painfully long hours.

When I'd imagined Chessy's escape, I'd always pictured her with her arms wrapped around herself, the act of running the ultimate act of self-preservation. Judge had traded a life as a chamber maid, sewing and doing other work that, while exhausting, was nothing compared to what she faced as a free servant. I wondered at what could make a person do that.

"Margo?"

I jumped a little—I hadn't noticed Mom's footsteps on the stairs. She was leaning against the doorframe of my bedroom. "It's late honey, are you going to bed soon?"

"Probably." I looked back down at the book.

"Is that for class?"

"No, just curiosity." And other things, but I wasn't sure what to call them.

She took a step into my room, squinting at the cover of the book. "Looks interesting. But you've got so much on your plate these days, do you really have time to be doing extra reading?"

That got my eyes off the book. "Mom, I'm twenty. I can pick when I read."

She frowned at me. "I never said you couldn't." She looked like she was going to say something else, then threw up her hands. "You know what? Forget it."

She spun on her heel, closing the door behind her.

Donny didn't want his newspaper. He was staring out the window, which looked out over the millpond and the town hall. From May to October there was a Saturday farmer's market in the town hall parking lot, and even though Dad said farmer's markets are the death knell for the working class, I liked walking through the rows of white tents with their bins of vegetables and maple syrup and trays of fresh apple cider donuts.

There was no farmer's market today, only a sky like wet cotton and a half-frozen pond. Donny gazed at it, turning his wedding band around on his finger. "Low tide," he muttered. "Wouldn't be any ships leaving this afternoon."

"What kind of ships?" I asked, yanking the form sheet off his bed.

Donny tapped on the glass. "They used to build ships right along the river you know, before the shipyard got going. You'd have the rope making shop right next to the sailmaker and the carpenter after him, all in a row on Mechanic Street. The South couldn't compete with our navy; that was a key turning point in the war."

'The war,' I'd learned, was almost always the Civil War unless otherwise noted.

"They tried to build a submarine," Donny continued as I gathered the dirty sheets into the hamper. "And they did manage to blow up one Union ship, but there wasn't enough fuel to get back to the surface and the whole crew drowned."

He twisted in his chair to face me. "The world should've been paying closer attention, you know. The American Civil War was the first war of the modern era, and it's still the bloodiest war in our history. If Europe had seen what we'd done to one another with modern weapons, they wouldn't have been so keen to stir up World War I just to settle scores with each other."



“Too bad you weren’t there to tell them,” I said, tucking the new sheet onto the bed. “You could’ve changed history.”

Donny smiled. “Oh I don’t know about all that my darling. I was a darn good teacher though, they’ve got a bench with my name on it at the University.”

“Really?” I finished with the new sheets and came to stand next to him at the window. “That’s impressive. They must have really loved you there.”

“Not too bad, not too bad,” Donny smiled out the window. I wondered what chemical twist of fate had allowed him to retain all this information, but not the name of the woman he wore his wedding ring for.

“Slavery was long gone up here by the time the war rolled around. The blacks always had it better up here.”

There was a whole lot I could’ve said to that, but arguing regional accountability with an 85-year-old Dementia patient would’ve been a vanity project. Instead I went to his bedside table and started organizing his afternoon meds.

“It’s funny,” Donny continued, tapping on the glass again. “You could look at some parts of this city and almost think it was still 1864. Most places make it easy to forget how old they are, but not here. I like a town that wears its history right on the surface.” He turned to grin at me. “This town’s just like me—you can tell we weren’t born yesterday.”

I looked out the window and thought of the city like a lined face, the two hundred and three hundred year-old buildings as telling as the wrinkles around Donny’s eyes, the imitation remodels a sort of reverse botox. But for every headstone and preserved building, I thought, how many unmarked graves, unfinished stories?

Maybe some things were better left forgotten. The less Chessy appeared on paper, the more likely it was she'd escaped the people who would make her a line in a ledger, an asset in a will. I'd visited the library again, and even did a search in the automated town archives but couldn't find any other mention of her. But just because I couldn't read the end of her story didn't mean she hadn't gotten one, a good one I hoped.

The people in the Chestnut Street grave hadn't gotten a good ending, though. And now, just as they were being remembered, the rising tides were threatening to eat them up. I'd googled the memorial to see if there were any updates, and apparently the high water table was complicating the plan. Would it matter to these people, that the water was erasing them long after their contemporaries already had? Did their spirits linger, hoping the ancestors of their oppressors would give them some kind of justice before they too were drowned or driven away by the encroaching ocean?

Maybe the ocean swallowing the city would be justice. This place wasn't just built over bones, it was built *on* bones. It couldn't exist without them. The wealth that built the mansions was suckled from the ships built on Mechanic Street, trading crops and commodities farmed by slaves even if they didn't trade in human cargo directly. And today there was still profit in that legacy, people paying to learn about the past our historians so proudly preserved. We generated tax revenue from our haunted status, but failed to reconcile with our ghosts.

I realized then what had been bothering me about the memorial. It could be beautiful and respectful. There could be a funeral two hundred years late, and everyone in town could come, but it wouldn't change the fact that we were the legacy of that grave; only here at all because of the bondage its occupants endured.

“Maggie?” I looked up. I didn’t know who Maggie was, but it’s what Donny called me when he remembered to name me at all.

“Do you need something?”

Donny’s face was troubled. “Why didn’t the newspaper come today?”

“It did come, Donny. You said you weren’t interested today.”

“No!” He slammed his hand down on the windowsill. “I always read the paper, always! Check again, I’m sure it never came.”

By the time 7pm rolled around I was dragging my feet. Donny had gotten so worked up I’d had to call one of the doctors to administer a sedative, and there’d still been three hours of my shift left after that. I was so tired I’d forgotten mom was picking me up until I saw her sitting behind the wheel of my Subaru in the parking lot—her car was in the shop undergoing its second major surgery of the year.

I slumped into the passenger seat, thinking dully of the homework waiting for me that night.

“Rough day?” Mom asked. She had her winter coat on over her work clothes—it was finally starting to get really cold.

“Kind of, yeah.” I rubbed the base of my palms into my eyes. “One of my Dementia patients had a meltdown.”

“Was it that history professor you like?”

I nodded, trying to remember when I’d brought up Donny to her.

Mom leaned around me to check for traffic, then pulled out of the nursing home lot. “If I ever get to the point where I don’t remember your name, pull the plug on me will you?”

“Not funny.”

“I mean it.” She glanced at me sternly. “If I’m that far gone then I’m not me anymore. Plus, I don’t want you to have to deal with that.”

I frowned at her. “You’d still be you.”

“Not the important parts.” She stopped the car at the red light by the high school. “If I can’t remember my own kid, or any of my past, then what kind of life is that? I’d be lost.”

After she saved my baby pictures, Mom laid each one out on cookie sheets and rotated them over the stove with the oven on. The edges had curled inward as they dried so they looked like half-open mollusk shells.

I wasn’t sure what she’d done with them after that, but I imagined her leaving work on her lunch break to buy an overpriced album, and giving up an hour or two of sleep to kneel on the rug in her room, rewriting the smudged dates on the backs of the pictures in her crowded cursive: Margo’s first birthday: 1991. Margo, Age 3: Jenness Beach, 1994, before sliding each picture into its own sleeve.

There were no pictures of Ona Judge in her biography, but there were dates: Born in summer, 1773. Absconded from the house of the president, May, 1796. Had her first child, 1798, lost that same child, 1832. We were both a part of the memory of this strange little city, I realized, our stories interwoven with so many others who made this place what it was; the silences and missing pages as important to the narrative as the voices and records.

I looked at my mother, thinking about every imperfection I’d been holding against her.

I picked up her right hand, which was sitting on the gearshift, and squeezed it. She looked at me, surprised, and smiled. We stayed like that, her hand in mine, as we drove past wooden shutters and low stone walls, brick office buildings and oak trees and graveyards, each with its own story, some told, some untellable, some yet to be remembered.

“Portsmouth is like a good story: the setting is lush, naturally and historically, with plenty of interwoven back stories. Decade after decade, that setting is peopled with colorful characters. There are plots galore and activity – something to do every night. On most every walk you and I ever took we came across something to wonder over, something that delighted, intrigued or inspired us – from doorknobs to sunsets, from fairy gardens to gravestones. And then there were the stories beyond them.”

-Denise Wheeler

“I am on the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee for the Implementation of the Prescott Park Master Plan. Much of our work centers around preparing the park and surrounding area for the effects of climate change. Hurricane Sandy's surge height was 14 feet. Most of the city of Portsmouth is 16 feet above sea level and much of it is lower than that. With the right storm/tide combination, the entire city would be inundated. It's sobering. My health has also been affected by the abrupt weather shifts; I have asthma attacks and migraines. But at my age, I don't fear too much of this for myself. I fear for the next generation. What have we left for them?”

-Genevieve Aichele

“I think growing up in such a white area as an aggressively not-white person, I definitely am more cynical about living in NH. There's such a beautiful community of people of color, but it's never highlighted in the textbooks or in class. Growing up with so many white people definitely made me resent a lot of things and pushed me to explore American Ethnic Studies in college to figure out who I am in relation to the world and how I matter.”

-Ellen Blezinsky

“Restful, found a big piece of myself here – never been anywhere for long, here – 26 years...My future in this area is to live long enough to get my second Pfizer shot and see my oldest grandson graduate from Manhattan School of Music.”

-Gordon Mccolleston

“How has this place shaped me? Asking this question of a college student about to move away for good is guaranteed to be more emotional than usual. And it also makes me naturally focus on the good parts. It's certainly left me naïve, with quite a lot of work to do, both within myself and my responsibilities as a world citizen. The same bubble that angers me with its whiteness, its sameness, the dispensable clichéd jokes about country clubs and salmon shorts, has provided me with the impetus to ‘escape’, to learn in those big, dramatic, sometimes uncomfortable, many times beautiful ways, which I am grateful for. It also has given me a place that I dream about when I am sad. It's one of those places that can be infuriating when you're there for ‘too long’, but is painfully easy to love when you are away. It's a town that is easy to keep in your pocket.”

-Caroline Hinson

“Thus, as the Bear awakens, families are talking, sharing old lore, learning that they are not alone. As the [Abenaki] renaissance began at Missisquoi, it is spreading throughout our land, from Southeastern New Hampshire to Lake Between. New bands are forming in Western Vermont, in New Hampshire, and even in Maine and Massachusetts. No longer is the sound of drums and rattles muffled by hiding.”

-Frederick Matthew Wiseman, *The Voice of the Dawn*

## Note on Sources

This collection was made possible by the work of so many dedicated scholars, many of whom did the difficult work of uncovering stories of women, people of color, children, the poor, and others who are often left out of the written archives, and whom I've done my best to centralize. I've given full citations (listed below) for the sources I relied on most heavily to give these stories the weight of truth. The format of this collection was inspired by George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and is a poor imitation of Saunders' brilliant use of primary sources to invoke the past. I highly recommend it. I also wrote this piece with the wisdom of Saidiya Hartman's earth-shaking essay, *Venus in Two Acts*, in the back of my head, and hope that as I grow as a writer I can better live up to her example of balancing restorative historical imagination with respect for what cannot be known.

Others who's local scholarship I have relied on are Valeria Cunningham, J. Dennis Robinson, Emerson Baker, Frederick Matthew Wiseman, Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Charles Warren Brewster, Janice Brown, Laura Pope, Todd Bookman and I'm sure others whom I'm forgetting to name. They came from many directions and arrived at many different places, but I needed each of them to complete this project.

I am also indebted to Special Collections Librarian Cathryn Czajkowski at the Portsmouth Public Library for scanning the Spalding Letters for me, which is where I found Elisabeth Coues Spalding's many quippy letters to her husband. Thanks also to Thomas Hardiman at the Portsmouth Athenaeum, for giving me access to Dr. Baker's address to the New Castle Historical Society and helping me find the maps that set the scene for this collection. The Library of Congress also provided the transcript for the 1713 Treaty of Portsmouth and the copy of the 18th Century map of Portsmouth. The quality local reporting from Seacoast Online, New Hampshire Public Radio, and WMUR were also vital resources.

The source I treasure most is the first-hand testimony from friends, family and neighbors that breathed life into this project. Their voices illuminate the rich layers of this community, from its physical beauty to its distinctive residents to its checkered, often disturbing, but always intriguing, history. I am blessed to have had all of them in my life, and to have shared this place with them. My mother, Denise Wheeler, in particular was a huge partner in this project, sending me articles and books she thought might be useful, many of which became valuable resources.

And last but not least, I thank the land itself. The beaches and graveyards, tide pools and cafes, the brick and stone and maple; the woods and water that shaped me, raised me, and which carry the history I explore here.

We are living in a moment of urgency. The nation is reckoning with age-old but ever-present racism, an international pandemic continues to breed havoc and tragedy, and Climate Change is less than a decade away from becoming irreversible. As we question how to move forward, understanding the past has the potential to guide our present to a better future. To survive, we must heed the guidance of our ghosts.

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