

# **The Onion Legacy**

a historical novel

by

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## BOOK ONE: Melba Blue Jay

*A sedentary life is the real sin.*  
Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (1888)

### I

I never met my Great Aunt Della, who died the year I was born. Everything I know about her came from secondary sources, namely my mother. Della had been a teacher, suffragette, lifelong critic of racial injustice and storyteller. She loved recounting family folklore. That her tales were unsubstantiated doesn't make them untrue. However, I suspect Ma may have transformed some of them like a Chinese whisper.

Ma said Della had once been the most beautiful woman in New England. Typical Ma hyperbole. All the same, I did happen on a high school photograph of my aunt from 1898, and it's true she had something of the features and allure of a modern day cover girl. Still, if back in the early 1900s there had been beauty pageants, I doubt even the most liberal-minded northeasterner would have voted for a colored woman for Miss Massachusetts.

Della believed that history was made up of two kinds of people, movers and mopers. The story of the world, according to her, was an ongoing battle between those who wanted to change things and those who calculated to keep everything the way they thought it had always been. "Bigotry begins with people sitting on their butts," she was fond of saying. A person had to

push, haggle, innovate, create and do whatever it took to force positive change in his own life and that of the world. Its opposite, misoneism (definition: fear of change) was the devil talking.

Della had her own hit parade of historical movers. Here in North America, she liked Metacomet, Lewis and Clark, and Ma's grandfather Joseph "Archy" Archung-Finlay. Heroes from the great age of navigation included Columbus, De Soto, and James Cook. During the Dark Ages her heroes lived in a region called Septimania in Southern France. She claimed that all the learning, wisdom and tolerance in Europe in 700 AD were stored there, in the hands of Saracens. She was on her way to Septimania when she died.

Alas poor Della, she was a looker, a person of color, a mover and a sufferer. Her expectations, like her brown good looks, were ahead of their time, maybe even out of step. She expected history to move faster than it does. She demanded immediate change to the prejudice that poisoned her life. Her struggles with injustice and her own personal demons led her down the slow path of disappointment, repudiation and solitude. She was a mover who eventually became a moper.

Anyway, this is what she had to say about our ancestors.

She dated our family tree to 1470 England. That was the year a scheming maid named Grechen Griffin came to work in the household of Sir Calvin Tovey. Sir Calvin was the scientific head of a notorious body of planners and plotters called Star Chamber. The assembly was filled with tyrannical nincompoops and sycophants, though Sir Calvin himself was highly accomplished, in fact one of London's great scientific minds of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The scientist purportedly slept a mere three hours a night, with one or two 15-minute catnaps during the day.

Little time was lost dining and entertaining, so dedicated was he to his work on rudimentary calculus, dynamics, fluid mechanics, the color spectrum, plans for a reflecting telescope, alchemy, history, theology and his sex drive.

One of Sir Calvin's most enduring "principia naturalis" states that a sexually aroused scientist who spends a good twenty hours a day in his study will eventually hop his maid. Grechen Griffin proved plucky, playful and obliging. She allowed the brilliant lecher to feel her upside and down, backside and forward. He hopped her thrice a day, during breakfast, lunch and dinner, betwixt a trip to the chamber pot and stowing a meal. If the 50-year-old scientist had to stop working, he might as well satisfy all his needs and urges at once. A quarter of an hour later, Sir Calvin was back at his philosophiae naturalis.

Mounted flies take more time about it than did the mating mathematician and chambermaid. Their roundelay was all refrain, a quick hoot and the birdie flew. While his little "gimlet" (as Grechen called it) flubbed about in her "quantum quiff" (as Sir Calvin called it) both were busy calculating. Sir Calvin thought about physics. Grechen machinated about the trap she would spring on her distinguished and influential patron. Though she had no education whatsoever, she knew how to pull the wool over a genius' eyes.

"Your kindness, t'would be unlike this wretched chamber woman to piss against the sun. My rotundity be but the labor of your rosy ramrod," she told the distracted natural philosopher.

True, she was with child. And yes, the child may well have been Sir Calvin's. Then again, her pregnancy could have been the doing of any number of the Master's callers who ended

up taking the long way out of the Tovey house, through Grechen Griffin's quarters.

Whomsoever the father, the bastard was born in 1471.

Grechen saw to it that her son secured the education and privileges of a blood Tovey. When he came of age, the stout and surly Francis Griffin received the same tutoring as Sir Calvin's legitimate children and entered King's College in 1490, where he studied natural philosophy. He received poor marks, but Sir Calvin pulled strings. Francis was graduated and eventually accepted into fine society.

Francis Griffin's most practical education came from his mother, and it was under her tutelage that he excelled; his real flare was for deception and villainy. He set his mind to sinking the Toveys and replacing them. What he lacked was the necessary affair to chain around their necks and drown them. Then, in 1498, his prayers were answered.

The second most famous navigator of his day (after Columbus) was John Cabot. The previous year he had sailed from Bristol to Newfoundland in a whopping 11 weeks, a course record that would stand for a century. This success secured him the blessings of Henry VII of England as well as the financing for his second voyage to the New World. The navigator sailed from Bristol in May with five 50-ton ships. When his fleet fell behind the far horizon, not a man among them was heard from again.

Back in England, the Cabot catastrophe was the Challenger explosion of its day. It scandalized the court, put into question non-military exploration and became a cause for political positioning. Die-hard Yorkist plotters used it to undermine the Lancaster alliance, while certain ultra-nationalists played the racist card; Cabot, an Italian born Giovanni Cabot, was a Papists and

like all Italians no more trustworthy than a rat, the argument went. Aunt Della herself believed that Cabot was only half Italian, that he was also Libyan, born to an Arabic mother, and that his well-documented hatred of Mediterranean corsairs, the reason that took him to faraway England in the first place, was but a thinly disguised self-hatred of his African roots.

We'll leave that aside and return to 1498 England where a rumor was spreading around court that Cabot was alive and well and living a traitor's life in Spain. This nonsense permitted the reactionaries of Star Chamber to usurp sensible scientific thought and to purify the chamber of real scientists. They published a pamphlet stating that Cabot's disappearance was proof that the world was planar, not round, and that only the brash and foolhardy did not stay put in the middle of the Great Plate. Let he who would disagree with these findings avail himself before the assembly to make known his beliefs. The snare was set. The Griffins, relying on Sir Calvin's nitwit honesty, which had as much to do with pomposity as courage, waited for the master to step forward.

Sir Calvin did not disappoint. He strode into Star Chamber and showed great fortitude in not bending to the political wind of the assembly. He declared openly that the world was as round as his balls. After the uproar had died down, he continued, applying a numerical sense to Cabot's demise.

"Life," pontificated Sir Calvin, "is many pluses and minuses with no Greater Law save the law of probability. When Cabot last set sail, the odds of a safe return were even; alas, good luck lies in odd numbers."

Francis Griffin, egged on by the Yorkist imposter Lambert Simnel, leapt up. "But surely, Sir, even in numbers might we not count on a Greater Morality at work in the universe?"

"My dear Griffin," replied the master, "the Greater Morality is in the equation."

This heresy got Sir Calvin Tovey excommunicated. Then axed.

Heresy charges were not hard to make stick against the rest of his oddball family, either. His wife, Clare Tovey, a fine natural philosopher in her own right was forced to face the archdiocese tribunal and explain her scientific theory that white light could be dissected into its component particles, which sounded like so much hocus pocus to the fanatical ignoramuses. She was tried as a witch and burned.

Her first born, Wilham, could not control his compulsion to crawl out to the edge of the window-splay, undo his codpiece and beat the bush to let the birdie fly at passers-by, all while chanting alchemic equations. If flowers could reproduce by aid of the wind, why not people?

Wilham never did anyone any harm, argued his younger brother Gurnley. "He cannot even hit the street."

Nonetheless, the tribunal had him carted off to the madhouse and emasculated.

Gurnley himself was locked in the tower on trumped up theft charges. But in one of the most daring escapes in early Renaissance criminological annals, the scientist son of Sir Calvin Tovey flew from the parapets in one of his own inventions, a glider which he called an "aviavessel". From a far county, Gurnley Tovey vowed revenge against Francis Griffin, "that evil bastard who owed to my father his education, status and very existence." Gurnley hoped to drum up enough money to finance a squadron of "aviavessels" flown by mercenaries. Alas, no

revenge of the kind ever happened. His invention, like a genie's charm, failed him every time after its first and only success. He died in poverty.

Once the Tovey house had been emptied of Toveys, Francis Griffin was free to inspect Sir Calvin's papers. The villain copied the master's work and, little by little, using great astuteness and patience, let seep his plagiarism and forgeries into the scientific community. In this way, he rose quickly through the ranks of the science academy and, in 1515, almost 15 years to the day after Sir Calvin Tovey's head plopped into the basket, replaced him at Star Chamber as Sir Francis Griffin, royal counsel on scientific matters.

Like most men whose lofty positions have little to do with their capabilities, Sir Francis Griffin was more politician than educator or researcher. He had a genius for knowing who to butter up and who to chop down. Those chopped down were invariably the innovators and clear-thinkers, the true scientists. The upshot was that, although Sir Francis had never written an original word nor advanced his so-called "beloved" science in one iota, he became a pillar of the academy and ruled over scientific thought and procedure for better than half a century. When, like so many villains and tyrants in the centuries ahead, he passed away peacefully in his sleep in 1569, the academic world sighed with relief. English science and letters could at last start catching up on 50 lost years of movement.

A winter evening in 1903, a young Oriental man tramped up Roselyn Street in the harbor district of Neespaugot, Massachusetts, and stopped under the snowy lamppost illuminating number 5. The proprietor, a colleague of his at United Shoe Machinery, had invited him for dinner to meet his unmarried, unengaged 18-year-old daughter. The young man hesitated at the rickety wrought-iron gate. It was the cornerstone that gave him pause. Its engraving had been vandalized. The only letters now legible were "NIGxORGE... BORN... MaD."

John Thomas Archung-Finlay looked at the house hulking in the brumal twilight. A rundown desolate place, the three-storied building was an architecturally eclectic piece of work, Gothic in the unpainted windows and front door, classic in the splintery porch columns and entablature, and perfectly Georgian and outdated in a Victorian neighborhood. The property had decidedly seen better times. But compared to John Thomas's own miserable flat near United Shoe Machinery, the Osborne house still looked like the Governor's mansion.

He made his way up the shoveled path to the porch and rapped the heavy brass knocker. He removed his cap and combed his fingers through his red hair. An attractive colored woman with shoulder-length gray hair let him in and led him down a long unlit hallway to a dusty, beat-up velvet portiere. He stepped into a gas-lamp lit sitting room where his colleague was setting a scuttle against the wall behind a potbelly stove. Two sprightly colored women rose from a settee.

"There he is at last! Johnny T!"

George Sylvester Osborne was a rakishly dapper middle-aged Mulatto in a purple housecoat with a gold pocket-watch and chain that bounced against his silver vest. His black

shoes threw back the luster from the candelabra overhead. John Thomas was used to seeing the gray-faced skiver covered from head to foot in soot, not clean and polished as a new tack.

Osborne's transformation into a gentleman made the younger laborer somewhat uncomfortable, but he took solace in the fact that at least his host's hands were their same old gnarled callused selves. Osborne scuttered over and patted him a little too genially on the back. Maybe he hadn't expected Johnny T to show up.

"My daughters Sarelle and Della."

They were charming ladies in wasp-waisted dresses, their frizzy hair bunned like rabbit tails. The eldest, Sarelle, took his coat. She was a tall homely spinster of 28, with coffee skin, copper hair, a blunt nose and kind, mare-like eyes. The second daughter returned to the settee but kept her pleasant regard on him. She was darker-skinned (the hue of sea kelp) and there was mischief in her almond eyes, an unambiguous sparkle in her beautiful smile. Regretfully as concerned himself, she already had a ring on her finger. She said that her husband was under the weather and wouldn't be joining them.

Both women, he learned, were educators, though the pretty one had given up her public school post three years before to tutor Marius Finlay's paralyzed grandson Charles.

The demure woman who had shown him in, returned with a decanter of claret and six crystal glasses. Osborne introduced his wife Melba.

"The only one missing now is my youngest." GS tossed an expression of impatience at his wife, who went out. "She ought to be down shortly." The wife's footfalls climbed a stairway. A moment later there was a shrill protestation from upstairs on the part of the missing

daughter. The abashed host tried to camouflage the ruckus with chitchat. "Interesting, isn't it, how not five years ago your dear father and I smoked cigars and quaffed sherry in this very room."

"I didn't know that," answered John Thomas, without really paying much attention to what he was saying. The ensuing awkwardness was a greater intruder than the high-pitched whining from upstairs. Finally, Osborne did his best to put certain tragedies behind them.

"At any rate, here we stand together again, Osborne and Finlay."

The nice looking one, Della, laughed ironically. "Except the Osbornes are black and the Finlays yellow."

Her older sister clucked disapprovingly. Della took up rubbing the rim of her drinking glass until the first humming of the crystal.

Their father tried to set upright his daughter's levity. "No one can ever reproach my Della for not speaking her mind. She takes after her grandmother, my mother. Prideful, if you follow me." And turning back to Della: "But you're right, dear." And turning back to John Thomas: "She's right, you know. We Osbornes and you Finlays *are* the sons and daughters of colored folk."

"Oh quit saying that!" reproved Della mordantly.

"Stop saying what, my dear?"

"Colored. You know I hate that expression. What color? Pink? Blue?"

Her father ignored her. "Did your daddy ever tell you how far back we Osbornes and you Finlays go?"

"Nope, he didn't," admitted the young man. "We never got the chance to spend much time together, father-son-like, if you know what I mean."

"Well, about a hundred years ago, my paternal grandfather, Captain George Osborne, was actually on the board of trustees of *Finlay Sons, Transporters*."

Della grunted. "Papa likes to show people the bright side of the moon. He conveniently forgets that the Osbornes and Finlays enriched themselves in the slave trade."

John Thomas was lost; Osborne, embarrassed. "There's no sense dwelling on that."

The eldest daughter agreed. "If Papa had wanted to go back that far, he would have. Now let's just keep things to a positive note, shall we? We don't want to bore the poor fellow."

"No, I'm not bored."

"There, you see!" smiled Della. "He isn't bored. And I wasn't meaning to be negative, just factual. But it's true," she said, looking at Archung-Finlay, "we mustn't forget that we do share a history."

"Yes," he proffered, happy to be back on positive ground. John Thomas, an idealist like Osborne, wasn't partial to controversy. He took it on credit that history and everything else in life had a natural tendency to improve.

"I admired your father," she continued like one of those gripping machines at the Shoe that caught some part of your clothing and cranked you in until the only way to save yourself was to undress and kiss your duds goodbye. "Truly, I don't care a hoot about his reputation. Do you believe, as I'm sure he did, that the need to move is a trait as obvious as skin color?"

John Thomas didn't have a clue what she was asking him. Osborne came to his rescue.

"Why, of course he does, dear! What moves, improves," said the father, who hadn't moved one inch in his whole life. Nonetheless, his mix-race genes collided and made him burn with motion. "Look at America, son. Where else in the world could a fellow like me be speaking to a fellow like you and both of us be Americans?"

Della tapped her billowed cheek in puckering protest. "Papa, don't get carried away with patriotism. Pluralism is fine provided everybody's equal. But you can't go hiding inequality behind a mask of pluralism and call it democracy."

"Oh tut tut!"

"No, Papa. Justice for our kind is a daily fight here in America."

"You exaggerate, Della. Things are more positive now."

"Things are not more positive! When last I looked, the only place of work in Neespaugot for a Negro or Chinese man was United Shoe Machinery, boring leather for army boots. I don't recall seeing any darkies on the Shoe's labor board either. Name a minority pursuing a business here in town."

"Your grandmother Lydia Freeman called the shots for *Finlay Sons, Transporters!*"

"But who knew it was her pulling the strings?"

Osborne had had enough. "Della, I say we return to more common issues."

"Common!" shrilled a voice coming through the portiere. "Did I hear somebody say common!" The last member of the Osborne family flurried through the curtain with a flushed flourish of indignation. "What is more common than the word common!"

Osborne arched his eyebrows. John Thomas looked as wan as someone about to be executed. "My youngest. Hattie Lawrence, this is John Thomas Archung-Finlay."

"Please call me Johnny T."

"I had such a time getting ready!" burst out the ingenue, ignoring completely the introduction, the guest and his familiarity. The young woman was wearing a taffeta dress with lace neckline that appealed very much to John Thomas, who tried not to ogle her ample bust. She was surprisingly petite compared with her mother and two sisters, all of whom were at least a head taller. She had an elegant facial profile buried under a thick layer of powder. She wore enough powder for all of them, making him wonder if she weren't ashamed of her complexion. Wasn't she somehow oblivious to the inutility of powder in the company of colored siblings who wore none? Finally, Hattie Lawrence deigned her gloved hand.

"Charmed, I'm sure," answered John Thomas, taking her dainty hand in his large bony one.

"So you're the fellow my father speaks about so much. He calls you 'Mr. Eligible!'"

"Now, Hattie, I say no such thing!"

"Papa says you plan to go to California, Mr. Archung-Finlay?"

"That's right, I hope to live there someday soon. My father said..."

"Who in his right mind would want to live in such a dreadful place!" interrupted Hattie Lawrence.

"What would you know about California!" fired back Della, obviously not holding her powdered little sister in great esteem. Sarelle paled. Osborne gave John Thomas a helpless shrug. Daughters. What can one do?

Hattie Lawrence, fingering the brooch of an io moth on her bosom, continued coolly and collectedly: "I know there are savages out there. I read it in a magazine."

"*I read it in a magazine!*" scoffed Della. "Those so-called savages are your people."

"Maybe yours, not mine," she smirked, sending her lovely older sister a smile full of buckshot. John Thomas looked down at his cheap shoes, issued free from United Shoe Machinery.

"All right, let's be nice to each other," begged Osborne. "We do have a guest tonight."

Their mother stuck her head through the curtain indicating that it was time to dine.

In the dining area awaited fricasseed lamb, dumplings, potatoes and carrots. There was a pitcher of town water laced with lemon. Hattie Lawrence occupied the chair farthest from the kitchen, her place since she was old enough to sit upright at table, it being the spot least likely to be turned to if something to eat, eat on or eat with was needed. She took up where they had left off. "California, Mr. Archung-Finlay, is not Neespaugot, is it?"

The guest glanced deferentially at the embroidery on his napkin: "The summers are never-ending, as are the opportunities, just ask President Roosevelt."

"I shall write him tomorrow."

Osborne grinned enigmatically into his glass. Della couldn't pass up an occasion to prick the preening snob.

"True, out west there are no anthracite-coal strikes, Hattie Lawrence. My guess is that Californians don't miss any of their three daily hot water baths."

"Hush, you! Papa, she can be so vulgar with me! Don't you think so, Mr. Archung-Finlay?"

"Please, call me Johnny T," he repeated.

"I most certainly shan't, sir. I don't know you! You have a last name and it's what I'll use, strange and hyphenated as it may be."

"Don't pay any attention to her," suggested Della. "She's as phony as a two-dollar bill."

Hattie Lawrence swiped back at her: "I'm sorry Grover can't be with us tonight. It is so sad to think of the poor man bedridden with the white plague."

"You barn fowl!"

"Now daughters..."

The young man turned to give his condolences to Della but couldn't catch her eye and wasn't sure he wanted to, after the way he saw her looking at her younger sister.

"Don't tell me Della overlooked telling you her husband was dying," persisted Hattie Lawrence.

"She told me he was incommoded. I am terribly sorry."

"Don't be. Della is comforted by a pupil." She stressed comforted and pupil. "There's only one now, from what everyone understands."

"Eat your meal, Hattie Lawrence!" ordered Sarelle.

"Oh, I'm finished, big sister. I couldn't touch another bite of this delectable concoction of Mama's." By the look of her plate, she hadn't touched any of it.

"Mama, let her cook for herself from now on," seethed Della. "It would be a treat to see if she can locate the kitchen."

The silent gray-haired woman said nothing.

"Excuse her, Mr. Archung-Finlay," continued the shrew. "You'd never know that her grandfather had been an upstanding physician."

John Thomas was not quite sure how to hold that fish. "Ah, I think I've heard of him."

"Of course you have. Everyone in Neespaugot has. In fact, it's not hard to understand my sister when one thinks of *him* and his *scandal*."

"Hush, you, Hattie Lawrence!" cried Sarelle.

But the little pest, false twinkle and all, wasn't about to let him off the hook. "And your own grandfather, I believe, was a navy captain?"

"Well, yes. William Finlay."

"So where do those slanted eyes of yours come from?"

The others objected as one, but John Thomas himself calmed the waters. "No, it's all right. I see what you mean, Miss Hattie Lawrence. You're quite right, Captain Finlay was my father's adoptive father. Actually, my real grandfather was an herbalist in China. I'm half Chinese. But my mother's Irish," he blurted out. Then, with more restraint: "That's where this red hair comes from."

Hattie Lawrence laughed aloud. "I never asked for an explanation. One would say you were trying to sell yourself, Mr. Archung-Finlay." He rose to his own defense but she batted him back into place. "I must say to your advantage, you do have rather fair flesh and the red hair does detract from..." She looked at his eyes. "Your posture is upright and sure. There is of course your horrible hyphenated name and your father's reputation to contend with, but names and pasts can be changed...."

"And the brat's choices are limited," cut in Della.

Hattie Lawrence dropped her mask for a moment and trained every bullet in her gun at her sister. "Yes, if one is too choosy, she'll end up an old maid or married to a dying darky!"

And that was dinner. They moved on to the salon. John Thomas had never met a more impossible creature than Hattie Lawrence, and fell completely under her spell. So bewildered was he that he mistook it for love. He asked if he might call on her again. She said she would consider it.

Her mother prepared coffee ("for the adults" quipped Della) and a special bedtime concoction for Hattie Lawrence. As the youngest daughter sipped her beverage, she reflected aloud: "Archung-Finlay. That is a peculiar name. Could we consider the hyphen a bridge of some sort, as between cultures -- you have a slight bit of powdered sugar on your cheek, sir."

Osborne, thankful that his daughter had grown up for a moment, complimented her on the choice of metaphor. John Thomas, more concerned with concrete matters, made blind stabs with his napkin before answering. "My father told me that his real name had been Chung, and the AH

before it meant mister. But the immigration people ran them together. I guess it was simpler that way."

Hattie Lawrence regarded him with complete wonderment. "So if I am to understand, I've been calling you Mr. Mister Chung Finlay?"

"Well, y...yes." Her irony confused him.

That didn't stop her doing more thinking aloud. "It does seem a most ridiculous sort of thing to carry through life, this name of yours. Archung-Finlay, Archung-Finlay. To pronounce it sounds like a great lot of sneezing."

"Well, as I was starting to say, it's in memory of my father who..."

"Yes," she cut him off, "who hanged himself in the woods because his children and stepbrother ran him off. My word, let's not go into it! For the past four years all of Neespaugot has gossiped about nothing else!"

### III

Given the perilous nature of sea travel in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the disappearance of John Cabot's expedition was less a surprise than an expectation. The first marine chronometer for detecting longitude was still 250 years in the future, so sailors had to navigate by the stars, which

were often blotted by clouds. A ship could quickly find itself several hundred miles off course, irretrievably lost. Getting from point A to point B was a crapshoot.

Her entire adult life Aunt Della believed that some part of the Cabot expedition must have made it to the New World. She reasoned that it was unlikely that five of the Crown's best ships would break up all together on the high seas. They may have run off course and been smashed against coastal rocks, but such an event would have left a trace, and probably a few survivors.

That's what happened to the Lapérouse expedition from France, which disappeared in 1788, while circling the globe for Louis XVI. (That soon to be beheaded monarch was called the "immobile navigator" due to his passion for geography and naval matters yet singular failure to sail even once in his life.) Two hundred years later the fate of the *Boussole* and *Astrolabe* would surface among the coral reefs of Vanikoro Island (of Jules Verne fame) where French scientists uncovered the wreck and its artifacts. The natives of Vanikoro were still chanting the 200-year-old tale of the Lapérouse expedition and its survivors, who actually lived another 30 years on the island before attempting a last-ditch and doomed effort to escape.

Likewise, Algonquian lore from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century speaks of the sudden appearance among the Northeastern tribes of *wonnuxug*, white men. A Delaware song even recounts the story of a man named *Mayaniixkaleew*, *The Man Left Behind*. The chant goes:

*Mayaniixkaleew* what do you dream  
As you sit on the boulder  
Staring across the waves?  
Is it of a voyage home  
Like the birds of autumn?

Della theorized that *Mayaniixkaleew* was a member of the Cabot crew, maybe even the great navigator himself. This is the story she told Ma:

In the quiet of summer 1498, the Cabot expedition anchored 300 yards off the northern shore of today's State of Massachusetts, within the southern of two contiguous bays, in an area the Native peoples called Neespaugot, meaning *Twin Waters*. The landing party negotiated the shoals and beached their rowboats. An ocean of mono-green trees spread back as far as any of them cared to imagine. Thick, humid waves of azalea, jasmine, wild rose, pine, and brine had a narcotic effect on the mariners, who were used to smelling each other.

They debarked under heavens the blue of Delft porcelain. The fragility of porcelain adequately summed up the nervous condition of Cabot's personal guards: Evans, Hines, Cox and Turner. The foursome had the devil's own time of it stepping out of their rowboat in 50-pound Savoy suits of armor. They feared sinking waist deep in the muck and rusting to death, or disappearing altogether like cuttlefish.

The four of them came ashore clinking and clanking and causing myriad birds to snap their wings for flight. They cranked up their helmet flaps and visors and began ordering the men about. Twenty soldiers dragged onto the beach an assortment of blunt-ended bludgeoning swords, sharp sabers, toothy cutlasses, barbed daggers, crossbows, rifles and muskets, shields, cudgels, pistols, 8-foot lances and other incongruous fighting implements of that beef stew of arms known as the 15th Century.

Cabot, a portly man of 38, had a barbed beard and a voice deep as a troll's cave. He shouted at them to make less noise, but the guards ignored him. He removed his plumed cap,

scratched his head of snarled hair, and spat his resentment in the direction of the clangor.

“Walking kettles!”

Certain of the King's ministers had imposed the guards on him. Cabot suspected they were chosen not so much to protect him from savages as to undermine his project -- if need be, by assassinating him. They were hired killers serving some unscrupulous Yorkist bent on seeing that feudal power remained with the noblemen, someone like that treacherous little filth of a Francis Griffin. If Cabot never made it back to Bristol, it would be an embarrassment to the House of Tudor and a blight on further exploration for a long time to come.

Urgent whistling from the crow's-nests broke Cabot's morbid thoughts. Out beyond the natural breakwater, a score of birch canoes skimmed like water bugs into the south bay. Cabot ordered his men to retreat towards the tree line and prepare for a fight. But his four bodyguards were unable to make the forest, hindered as they were by their respective hauberks and armor. They had no recourse but to turn the one delicate and exposed part of their anatomies, their asses, away from incoming arrows and to face death with courage like the chivalric chaps they were. They poked themselves and their armory into the sand and became rigidly one with the sun-bleached chitinous exoskeletons of crustaceans and quahog shells of which that gritty shore was rich.

Naked as plums and colored all over in brilliant body tattoos, the Native people hauled their canoes on shore and spread their nets to dry on the sun-baked sand. Scalp locks sprouted from their shaven crowns like living beasts, and seemed to mock with every swish the sparkling

suits of armor taking root among them. Curiously, the Natives paid little attention to the guards, in fact ignored them completely.

"They take their bloody time about folding those nets," whispered a mariner close to Cabot.

"Do you believe them cannibals?" asked another.

"If cannibals they be, then methinks three of us be not but hors d'oeuvres for that rascally behemoth down yonder," said another.

"The word is 'caribal'," corrected Cabot. "Cannibal is a misnomer. And the answer is nay. The Carib of whom Columbus spoke are far to the south. These heathens bespeak a certain artifice for the sea and its fishes, not the flesh of men."

"Whatsoever they may be, melord, they have made up their minds to beset Evans, Hines, Cox and Turner."

Having finished with their nets, the Native people surrounded the strange men of steel and made efforts at communication. The foursome brandished their swords.

"Set down your hairs, you panicky fools," yelled an angry Cabot.

"They would be heckling at them, is my opinion!" cursed a frightened soldier. "We are a woebegone lot of cowards to take it lying on our breast plates."

"Be still, you cackling hens!" ordered Cabot. "No one solicited your infernal opinions! It is evident they mean us no harm or we should surely be dead already. I shall have a word with these colorful fellows."

But before he could do so, the great howling cry of a thousand voices exploded out of the woods to their backs.

"Zounds!" cried a sailor. "We too are surrounded!"

Cabot stood, brushed the sand off his frock, straightened his girdle, and walked into the open, mumbling: "Tu autem, Domine, miserere nobis."



The Natives were more interested in getting their fish to camp than massacring white men. Both fish and Europeans wound up at the tribe's summer gathering place, a peaceful village of wigwams ringing a large pond deep in the forest. Women naked from the waist up prepared cod and flounder, roasted venison, rabbit, corn, squash, beans and corn bread.

They called themselves Wampanoags, and they were a hospitable lot, even helping Evans, Cox, Turner, and Hines out of their armor. De-mailed, the fearsome foursome looked more like plucked chickens, and smelled a good deal worse. Intestinally speaking, they had had a rough time of it back on the beach, the inside of the armor attested to that. The Wampanoags gave them herbal lards and ushered them straight to the dunging grounds.

This revered area, a tranquil ravine cleared of all poison ivy several hundred yards downwind of camp, shaded by elm, sycamore and maple trees, was rich in rose-leaves, assorted

vines, sage, elder, skunk cabbage, and wild spinach. T'would be no rump here mauled by paper. The cool brook bubbled by, narrow enough to straddle without getting wet one's moccasins or leg-plates. A Wampanoag showed how, abandoning his load to that natural flush and cleaning himself with handfuls of cool water and lards.

Following powwow and the feast, the Wampanoag chanted about the one great subject of summer, that is to say winter. As summer waned, Manitou wounded the Great Bear who set out to die in the South, sweeping a wave of smaller animals before him and trailing a thousand-mile swath of blood across the Great Woods. The White Winds followed and heckled the Great Bear to the banks of the Great River separating the living and the dead. There, on the shore of death, Great Bear gave up the spirit. The White Winds ceased, the sun returned, a tree sprung from the bear's carcass and sowed its seeds far and wide.

"We, too, must go south." Cabot drew an arrow in the dirt. "South."

South? His hosts grew silent and reflective. Danger lay to the south. The Narragansett did not like strangers. The Pequot were worse. But the Lenni-Lenape, known as the Grandfathers by the Eastern Woodland tribes which had sprung from them, were worst of all. "Lenni-Lenape! Lenni-Lenape!" Old Chief Catomicet split the underbelly of an enormous cod. Its cold eyes stared at Cabot long after its innards lay in a wicker basket.

The navigator remained undaunted. "I would find yellow stones." To make himself understood, he drew Cox's misericord and pointed out its gold hilt.

The subject puzzled Chief Catomicet. Red stones and green stones, stones that moved and stones which could talk, these were familiar stones, but not yellow stones. Moreover, it surprised him that the white men had crossed the Great Water to find something they already possessed where they came from. The hunter of deer in deer-country finds deer. The hunter of deer in bear-country finds only disappointment.

A few days later the expedition pulled anchor and set south. Over the next months it explored every estuary between Cape Cod and Delaware Bay wide enough to suggest a shortcut to the East Indies. Then, a day in autumn, along the banks of the Murderkill River in what is now the county of Kent in Delaware, a rain of arrows cut off the expeditionary force from its vessels. The Natives charged the mariners, who discharged their flintlocks, and the attackers disappeared in a massive cloud of gunpowder. In the clearing smoke, brown bodies littered the beach. The Europeans regrouped and reloaded. The tall marsh grass parted to the scalp with tomahawk-wielding Delaware and the ranks recommenced their discharge.

The battle lasted all day and, once the Europeans' firepower was exhausted, finished by hand-to-hand combat. At sunset some 6000 warriors lay dead or wounded on the beach and all but a few of the landing party with them. The sand ran sticky with gore and flies and mosquitoes. The Natives would call the beach *Wulueewuw Mohkw*, Blooming Blood.

The massacre was not over. Into the night, the Delaware attacked the vessels and managed to set three aflame. When they exploded, the last two ships also caught fire. The next morning, twelve survivors including Cabot and his garde du corps got pushed along at tomahawk edge through the icy marshes back to the village. There, they were bethumbed.

A sharp knife ill-used, says the Bard, loses its edge, but a blunt flint tomahawk even in the best of hands has hardly an edge at all. The men's thumbs required much bludgeoning. This ordeal lasted for hours and only began their woes. The soldier Evans had brought a European sickness with him, which infected Native children with evil spirits that the medicine man could not defeat. Evans was dragged to the beach and buried up to his neck in the sand for the crabs to eat his eyes out. To escape a similar fate, Hines opted for swimming back to England without thumbs. Cabot tried to dissuade Cox and Turner from doing anything foolhardy.

"Patience and faith, men. Bide your time. Another ship cometh a day."

"And that day we are dead!" answered the angry Cox. "You live with these devils. I'm for escaping. What say you?" Turner's hesitancy enraged him. "You would side with a bloody Italian Arab, one raised on goat's milk to play with astrolabes and quadrants, over a brother soldier in the service of His Majesty, King Henry of England!"

"I am as loyal to England as you, sir!" protested Cabot.

"You lie! You're a black papal spy and I should have put a knife in your pouch long ago as I was commissioned to do!"

Turner followed Cox into the woods. Cabot never saw nor heard from them again.

Cabot used his wits to save his life. He showed his captors how to make gunpowder and sharper tomahawks, taught the tribe the counting of Kalends, Nones, and Ides on a Julian calendar taken from one of the burning ships, and explained how to roll sevens and elevens at dice. Over a five-year span, he graduated from servitude to the status of honorary medicine man, which gave him many fine benefits.

His preferred benefit was women. Cabot fathered many children, strange beauties with light hair and fair flesh that sunburned easily. The eldest was called William Summer Squash.

The Delaware renamed Cabot *The Man Left Behind* and also *Namongwaatam*, the Dreamer. When the explorer-cum-medicine man wasn't poking his gimrod into a woman's wigwam, he sat languishing upon his coastal boulder, skimming stones and staring out at the cobaltic Atlantic which imprisoned him. He, a civilized man, had had enough of buckskin, smoky chants, and gnats. He felt that if he didn't attempt a return to Europe soon, he would fade off the scene like an echo.

In the summer of 1510, he set out for the north, letting his own mini-tribe of offspring be his thumbs. Cabot staked great faith in celestial justice. He believed that, after 12 years of suffering, he was due his salvation. He also played the odds. The farther north he went, the more likely he was to cross paths with an expedition from the Old World.

He and his New World family arrived at the mouth of the Hudson River on 2 September 1510. They made camp on an orange beach sheltered from the briny breeze by a series of copper, camelback dunes. Vermiform cloud clusters drooled like worms of destiny over the stillness of twilight.

His son William Summer Squash stumbled upon a strange sight, a straight line of 25 to 30 turds, loamy, fondant and phosphorescent, at the base of a dune.

"Father, come hither!"

His father hurried to the dune. "What ails you, my son? Are you with colic?"

"Not I, father, but someone. By heavens, the birds themselves lay not this runny foul mess. Pity the poor creatures their rotten intestines!"

"How old are these stools!" asked Cabot with a gasping realization. Natives, when defecating en masse, formed a circle like the ancient Romans so as to facilitate conversation. Only Englishmen shat shamefully in line like a firing squad.

"Six suns."

"A bad number. So be it. Lickety-split fetch your brothers and sisters, we must make haste!"

Imagine! After 12 years of dreaming of a return to his own civilization, the explorer found himself a mere senary of days from salvation -- and, unbeknownst to him, a salvation in the person of his own Venetian son Sebastian Cabot, future hero of the Rio de la Plata, who had taken up his father's calling of navigator. All points on the moral and historical map were aligned with Faith and Reason for the first and greatest rescue story in the history of the New World.

After another day's travel, Cabot and children made camp along the shore. The trail had been long and tiring, and they wanted to be robust when they caught up with the Europeans.

They haunched up to a hearty meal of roasted venison and fresh turnips. After eating, Cabot entertained a lusty desire to bathe. In high spirits, he waded into the bay.

He ought to have recognized at once the moon's grip around his ankles, the horizon's yank at his knees; by the time he did, it was too late -- mistress ocean had sprung her greedy riptide on him.

She had him in tow and was quickly drawing him towards her endless bosom. He thrashed around till he cramped.

The undertow washed him out beyond the breakwater, not a good place to be for a weak swimmer without thumbs. It was dark and his children could only listen, dreadful sorry, to his bubbling cries. His mane of curls fanned out on the water's surface, the four fingers of his right hand sunk below the waves, and silence once more ruled the desolate coastline.