

*Installment Three: from Canada back to Neespaugot*

VII

In the mountains below the Artibonite River, the boy lost his trackers. At the riverbank he stooped to clean his sticky hands and knife. He dried both on his sweat-soaked breeches. Then, he set out for the border with Spanish Hispaniola. Charles had no choice. He was the only one Veucq still owned and could legally punish. Melba, Long Rib and the retarded Nero had gone north to catch a boat. Charles had escaped east. The plan was to reunite in Montreal.

On the third day of his flight, the boy stumbled out of a gorge, smack into a trio of Spanish gold-seekers in the Cordillera Central. Drunk but hospitable, they offered the boy food. He didn't understand their language. They laughed at his fear and giped about the dried blood on his trousers. "Santo Domingo," they repeated often over the following week. "Montreal," he answered sheepishly. "Santo Domingo," they smiled, and patted his back with effusive amicability.

They stopped at the fortified walls of sultry Santo Domingo but did not enter. The fellow called Pedro dismounted and left the road to relieve himself. Antonio threw a coil of spliced rope around his shoulder and took his machete "a causa de serpientes" and followed Pedro into

the trench. Luca stayed with the mules and brandished a toothless grin at Charles. Luca gave the boy the creeps.

Luca cupped his crotch and made urinating sounds. "Vas!" He tossed his head in the direction of the others. Charles did not have to relieve himself, but he preferred the others' company.

The boy disappeared down the escarpment. A moment later a cry rose out of the ravine. Luca smiled his rat's grin at the mules. He spat into the dust and scratched his cheek and waited. Finally, Pedro and Antonio appeared over the ridge, carrying the unconscious boy, naked save the ropes binding his ankles and wrists. Antonio hoisted him over his mule's rump, and the three miners entered the town, heading straight away for the slave market.



Maitre Gras's periodic letters appraised Melba of Veucq's manhunt for her son. "He is a driven man. No amount of money is too much. His energy, for the worst of human motives, would seem to be as transformable as sugar into rum."

Veucq had converted his former lust and greed into an all-consuming desire for vengeance. At first he did the tracking himself. Eventually, he hired others to do it. He was

determined to retrieve, dead or alive, the boy who had shorn his testicles and nailed them to the rum vat.

Monthly, Maitre Gras wrote to Melba to appraise her of both searches underway to find Charles, the lawyer's and the monster's. Veucq was paying out a fortune to bounty hunters who either disappeared with the money or dragged back the wrong boy. Such was his obsession that he would go all day without food or water, waiting on his porch for news from this or that rider. He anticipated their reports with the same hope or dread formerly reserved for one of Maitre Gras's budget statements. And, with each disappointment, the sugar baron broke into terrible fits of anger and teeth gnashing and arm exercises with a quirt on slaves' and beasts' backs.

"Now to the monster's monster. Veucq's frustrations have finally sought outlet in the building of a torture device. The hideous engine was hatched like an egg in his barn last spring. Since then it grows at leaps and bounds, seems to feed off its creator's obsession with it. The giant structure can pluck out arms, tear off legs, skin-alive, disgorge, decapitate, disintegrate, and crush into powder while collecting the viscera in a fine wicker basket. But the engine is much too complicated, uncoordinated, untenable, muscle-bound. Its peculiar capabilities play tug-of-war like four mongrels pulling at the same shirt. Often, nothing works. The fool tries it out on small, medium and large animals, usually crippling the poor beasts only. Surely, his monster will be the death of him."

Not an hour passed that Veucq wasn't reflecting on the nuts and bolts of the awesome engine to which he hoped to condemn Melba's son. He spent more time pounding nails into

planks, tying off rope, sharpening blades and arranging and rearranging its pieces than in supervising the quotidian goings-on of his vast plantation. He spurned food and sleep.

When no more room existed for both the monster and the proper instruments of his sugar trade, out went mashers, cutters, vats, and containers for the elements to eat. And still the monster grew. Veucq enlarged one wall and elevated the roof. And still it grew.

"Its embellishments poke from the refinery's walls and windows like fuzzy insect hairs," wrote the lawyer. "All Port-au-Prince speaks about the monster and its mad creator. I am stupefied by the amount of energy and imagination that he wastes on the infernal contraption. His torture has become his pleasure."

As for the lawyer's search for Charles, it had turned up nothing either. The boy had dropped off the face of the earth. "I am sorry, but I have spent the last of the money with which Jean had entrusted me to find and liberate your son. I do not know what further I may do."

Melba wrote back with a request. "I want to know when *he* dies!"

Yes, she too was obsessed with vengeance. Veucq had been her physical and psychological torturer for 20 years, had murdered her daughter and was bent on feeding her son into a machine. Now as much a symbol as a flesh and blood man, Veucq encapsulated the white world, what it had done to her, her family, her people and her homeland. She didn't have the means to track him down, so her only recourse was to follow his death from afar, to see if it fit his crimes. Moral justice -- did it or did it not exist?

"I assure you, he suffered in the end," wrote Maitre Gras, announcing Veucq's death. "Yes, he lived much longer than expected -- seven years beyond Jean de Meunier -- no doubt

kept alive by his obsession. But there is not only victory in longevity. In the end, he died miserably, alone, a pariah, his sugar plantation in ruins, your son still a fugitive."



The traveling from Port-au-Prince to Montreal had been slow with an indolent young daughter and an idiot son. But eventually Melba Blue Jay and her two children had reached Ville Marie de Montreal where their new master, Jean's cousin Pierre-Guy de Meunier, awaited.

The French settlers in Ville Marie de Montreal were a more tolerant and accommodating people than the New Englanders or the West Indian slave traders. Closer to the Jamestownians, they practiced subtle domination of the Native peoples instead of rifle-butt subjugation. The underlying logic was more political than humane; an Indian helped is an Englishman scalped. Either way, the displaced Natives of Hochelaga, the original Indian village on the sight of present-day Vieux Montreal, were treated rather decently in their settlement, their children taught by missionaries to read and write French.

Pierre-Guy de Meunier (profession: trapper) built a separate cabin for Melba Blue Jay, Long Rib and Nero, and left them alone much of the time to plant and hunt for themselves. All

he asked in return was that Melba Blue Jay welcome him into her furs whenever he returned from trapping.

In the following years, Long Rib turned into a treasure. The girl's small black eyes were charged with a stubborn goodwill and sharp generosity. She had plain features and ill-fitting joints, was a head shorter than her mother, but had battled gravity to a standstill, walking stooped but walking, rebounding from a youth of constant malady and weakness. The girl had grown strong in all ways. She managed the chores, cooked, fished and hunted (she was a dead shot) and had taken on Nero's care.

After being a wise pupil at the missionary, Long Rib became a teacher. Her straight black hair tied into a bun, donning a stiff dress, she lectured white and Native children in a stone and timber room alongside the church refectory. She was centuries ahead of her time in developing reading and writing skills in the mentally handicapped, having a mental retard to see to at home. She would never marry.

The poor apoplectic Nero, hump-backed and stub-armed, only slobbered. "Nero!" Guy de Meunier hooted, shaking his head at the idiot who blathered and flounced through his sister's patiently crafted exercises. "My cousin was a great one for names, no?"

Pierre-Guy died of pneumonia in the summer of 1708, leaving Melba his farm.

The following autumn, Melba was evicted from sleep by the dissolving dream of her long lost son. It was an agony without an end. Soaked in sweat she groped to the cabin window and lifted the fur. Morning was still hours away. Long Rib lay uncovered on her pallet bed, next to

Nero, his misshapen head lolled to a side, his mouth a gaping tragedy. Melba covered them both, lifted the latch and went outside to relieve herself.

Millions of celestial fires burned in the arching night. The cool air dried her sweat. She shook out her moccasins for bugs and slipped them on. As she neared the woodpile, the same large animal she had seen two nights previous bolted and made a branch-cracking retreat into the forest. She peed and returned to the cabin, where Long Rib stood on the porch, rifle in arm. Melba chuckled. Her daughter made a perfect picture of a proud Coatman. “Was it that wolf back digging in the vegetable patch?”

“It’s not a wolf. It’s more a cross between a wolf and a bear. It has a most unusual color. Almost blue.”

“When it returns, I’ll get off a clean shot.” Her daughter had become a pious catholic, with scant regard for the spirit of what she blasted.

Melba went inside and returned with her leggings and a knife. Long Rib was puzzled. “You leave now? You can’t go after a monster like that with a knife.”

“I don’t intend to stab it. I’m going to talk to it.”

“Talk to it! Mother, you aren’t thinking well. Look, I’m coming too.”

“No,” ordered Melba, stopping the time to touch her dear daughter’s cheek. “I go alone.”

## VIII

Though 48 years old now, Melba had maintained her strength. Once each fortnight she made retreats into the wilderness. Three or four days of meditation and exercise. She cleaned her teeth three times a day with stream silt and wintergreen. She took care of her back and sat out her menstrual cycle, which still was upon her. But time was passing exponentially now. The law of diminishing returns was upon her. Her freedom and eventual return to her homeland would depend on how long she could remain vital both physically and emotionally. If the blue beast was indeed sent as a sign to her, she meant to seize her chance.

The animal was not hard to track. It lumbered through wood and underbrush, stopping now and then to look back at its pursuer. In the plains, it left a trail of twitching prairie moths hovering a foot off the high grasses and thistles. Its path was straight, proving that the creature had a solid idea of its destination.

She spotted it again at the foot of a knoll, its blue coat shining with dew and sunlight. It traveled with a timber wolf's gait, gangly, elegant and deceptively swift. It stood over three feet to the shoulder, its long muscles covered in shag, its snout as pointed as a pike's. Like her, it was probably imported. Whoever owned such a creature was someone she wanted to meet.

When Melba reached the base of the high ground, she sought the animal's froth on the ground. Finding none, she did not believe it mad with disease. The dog stared back at her from the top of the knoll, curling its long coil of a tail. It was waiting for her. It had fetched her for a purpose.

The animal wended into a valley the Cree Indians called *Mishian* or Little Rain. It disappeared into a spurt of hemlock trees that masked a deeper grove of dogwood. Melba

smelled smoke. Further on, she found a small campfire, with the animal already beside it, stretched out on a rust-colored cloth, a man's cape by the look of it. A roped bundle of clothes was propped against a boulder. A pipe and pouch of tobacco were posed on the rock's table. The creature eyed her for a moment, before turning its head and ignoring her, as if it knew that its task was completed.

Then, from the bushes appeared another exotic creature of the two-legged variety, pulling up violet breeches and dragging a bum foot with the aid of a white cane.

"Madame," he said, "I am somewhat chagrined at your, well, *inopportune* arrival, but no less honored and grateful for your presence."

Before her stood a handsome fellow of waning years, silver-haired and quite tall even without the genteel, red high heels on his feet. He sported a leather jerkin, silk cravat, stained vanilla leotards. A black and white handkerchief poked like a magpie from his threadbare vest. His vesture, speech (French) and comportment made her think of the Versailles viziers Jean de Meunier had described. Only the wig was missing. And the white skin. This man was black as a plum.

"My dress confuses you, I see," he said, though it was up to debate as to who was in fact more confused. "Allow me to introduce myself. Moot Court at your service." He bowed. "Do excuse me but are you French or Cree?"

"You have hurt yourself," she answered without answering.

He laughed, but at what, she did not know. “My apologies, Madame. I was just thinking that we made a rather odd pair, the two of us, a white lady dressed Native and a Native dressed like a buffoon.” His charm disarmed her.

He caned to a place near the fire, explaining that he had injured his ankle.

“I’m not surprised,” she said. “This land isn’t much suited to high heels.”

His self-mocking chuckle furthered the subject.

“These heels, which incite your glee, Madame, happen to be – or were anyway – de rigueur at the court of Louis Quatorze! Of course they are most inappropriate here! But I assure you, I had nothing else to put on my feet. I’m no hunter. No gatherer either. Wouldn’t know a snakeroot from skunk cabbage. Feet too tender to walk barefoot. I spent a whole day just trying to make a fire! Afraid I’ve forgotten how to be an Indian. Fortunately, there is Monsieur Bleu,” he said with an affectionate glance at the animal. “I would certainly starve to death without him.”

“I was wondering. What sort of animal is he?”

“O, *la*, Madame! The king of dogs! The most complete combination of wiliness, feistiness, meanness, grit and perseverance ever assembled in a living creature. Part Arabian stallion, part Siberian tiger! Bred and trained to out-savage the wildest wolf of tundra or frozen hinterland. Why, old Monsieur Bleu is none other than a Russian wolfhound. He has been my faithful companion through countless countries and three continents. This hairy fellow’s been shot, stabbed, lanced, clawed by Asian tigers, whipped, even sent flying by a bull elephant. He’s

tangled with a whole clan of Steppe wolves, been bear-mauled and cobra-stung. He has more lives than a rat's litter, and will surely outlive his master."

The dog merely grunted and wheezed.

Moot Court liked to talk. Before the morning was over, Melba knew his age (58), that he had almost died of pneumonia and hookworm, that, born a Mohegan, he had lived a good two-thirds of his life in Europe and Asia, mostly in France where he had been called officially to Versailles four times, making a hit with the long-lived Sun King. He showed her autographed copies of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Phedre*. A tireless conversationalist, he had no problem being an Indian who lived like a white man. "There is only one example of me in this far-stretched world, and I'm it. The living prototype of myself. Loyal to my own law and foibles. One day though we shall all be a great mix and need to find a word for it."

As Mr. Court expounded, he seemed heedless to nature, to the living going on in front of his eyes, to the lasso of thrushes whipping above the plain, to the quail's tubular chant, to the appearance of a great stag elk at the edge of the forest. He was aware only of her and occasionally the dog.

Melba began to have an inkling of what the gentleman Mohegan was really about, when he started questioning her about herself, her life and thoughts. She saw the unmistakable shine of eager carnality in his marble eyes, the mischievous shift of his lower lip, the prurient purpose to his probing. A hunter of women rode her shoulder. She had stumbled upon a professional philanderer.

Melba was more surprised than alarmed. It had been a long while since she thought of herself as someone desirable. Anyway, he was not a dangerous dandy. His engagement was more playful than predatory.

They reached the cabin by mid morning. Like a hobbled yearling, she carried him across the furrowed field, the dog cantering astride. Long Rib came out on the porch, holding her obscene younger brother by one hand, her rifle in the other.

Dog and dandy stayed for three weeks. Moot admitted to Melba that it wasn't the best time to return to town. "Maybe I'll let things settle down a bit."

"You mean you are on the run? That is why you had no proper shoes?"

"Only what I managed to flee with."

"Fleeing from an angry husband I suppose."

"Madame, I dare say you know that I don't believe in clairvoyance, but you do have a certain talent for getting straight to the point."

Long Rib mocked him. "Monsieur, I dare say, you aren't one for washing a plate, but you sure can talk!"

They took long walks in the afternoon, when the wind made incessant din through the forest. The sound, he said, was like the passage across the cobblestones of Paris of the armies of France.

"And you who have seen so much," she began. "What do you make of my life? Is it my lot to be denied my homeland? Am I a victim of fate?"

“Tah tah! Enough nonsense of the sort! Fate! What a lot of malarkey. Bad luck, yes. But luck is like the weather, my sweet quail. It changes. Life is a great weather report. It is all about highs and lows and electrical storms. Have you ever heard of the barometer? Marvelous instrument for measuring air pressure. Invented in England a mere 50 years ago. You are suffering a long depression of sorts, but the mercury will rise again. Depressions, by nature, are meant to be filled in. Be gay, Melba Blue Jay! Your fair weather shall arrive.”

She let him love her, for she had decided to know the pleasures of the body again. They loved in a clearing, free of the cabin and of Long Rib and Nero, she free to hold this stranger like a looking glass, searching for revelation, for some meaning to her ordeals.

He moved aside her furs, peeled her leggings and set his heat against hers. “I dare say, you have lived a life like old Monsieur Bleu here. But there’s no amount of injustice that can’t be put right with a little amour,” he winked. “Perhaps you have grieved long enough for your son. Over time, grief finishes by creating a compelling prison.”

“It’s the incertitude. It’s the not being able to return to the places where the spirits dwell!”

She lay on her back, looking up at his once strong chin, the neck muscles now sagging. His prominent nose. His bead black eyes burning with desire and energy. She liked him, liked his energy, and liked the effect of it on herself. As he entered her flesh he said, “Eh voila!” and smiled, as if proving a point. “Eh voila!” he repeated. He was proud of himself, and had the right to be. “*Nye!*” she cried out. Yes! In the words of her demolished people. *Nye!* She hugged him tightly and caught her breath.

He left shortly thereafter, limping beside his dog down the road, promising to be back for a visit in a few weeks. “In the meantime, Madame, whenever your spirit goes adrift, remember the phrase by Mr. Bacon in his **Novum Organum**: *They are ill discoverers that think there is no land, when they can see nothing but sea.*”

Two months later, the dog dragged its hindquarters onto the porch, scrawny and mange-eaten, its buckshot wounds oozing infection. For a collar, it wore a chewed-off noose. Melba tweezed out the leaden bits with a buck knife, made compresses with vine water, pinkroot and pipsissewa. She prepared a stew of thorn apple and dormouse.

The next morning, supplied with gourd, hardtack, a bow and plenty of arrows, she journeyed into the wilderness in search of Monsieur Bleu’s master.

It took her another fortnight to find the body. The dandy had been strung up to a shagbark hickory, sheared of his palace attire and his sex, which the lynchers had tacked to the tree. His putrefying corpse was black with flies.

On the same branch dangled the other rope, tooth-cut, drawing into relief what was missing, the non-execution, the hanging of empty space. Moot probably never knew that final satisfaction, she thought, of seeing the dog bite its way to breath, life.

Melba cut down a corpse for the second time in her life. She buried him with his red high heels under a barrow of stones that took a whole day to collect. Then, she went home.

The great beast, half stallion, half tiger, that nothing could kill, recovered, regained the use of his back legs. It slept on the porch, ever watchful for whatever ill will might blow at the

door. One night he killed a wolf. Another, he chased away two prowlers. Bears no longer came foraging. Drunken trappers seeking sex stayed away.

The idiot Nero found comfort squatting beside the animal, petting it and calling it “Misser Blue”. The beast paid him little attention, but neither did he discourage Nero’s caresses and belly scratchings.

Only once did the dog seek entrance into the cabin, when it heard Melba scream out. It pushed through the door, seemed to regard with great interest the wriggling bloody infant crying in Long Rib’s arms. “Shoo, you!” hissed the young woman, taking a step towards the door.

Melba raised her sweaty head off the mat.

“No, let Monsieur Bleu stay.” The dog sidled to her voice and lay beside her pallet. “Behold your master’s son, Monsieur Bleu. He will need your absolute devotion and protection. Will you do that?”

The dog’s stoic lupine look answered absolutely.

## IX

Melba and Long Rib finished loading the pirogue. A sextant, gourds of drinking water, a pannier of salted rations, a fishing spear, canisters of powder and lead, knives, Long Rib’s musket, a month’s worth of steels and flints, bows and bushels of arrows, rope, blankets, and two

large sheets of oil linen to sleep under and hoist as a sail. What maps and scribbled notes Melba had made for the voyage were protected inside an oilskin bag.

The dog was already in the boat. Melba got in and waited for Long Rib to hand her the sleeping baby. Long Rib was anxious. “They will lock us up, torture and eat us with their English marmalade!” Melba ignored her. “Mother, the land of your ancestors no longer exists!”

“Daughter, the Coatmen can no more chase away the Great Spirit than my white skin can cover my Indian blood. Only oblivion can erase the spirit from the land.”

They pushed off the bank and started downstream. To anyone watching from the shore, they made a strange couple, a white woman in skins and leggings, and a swarthy Indigene in swamp boots and a starch calico dress from Rouen, France.

Melba steered them through a river darkened by thousands of ducks and geese. The dawn resonated with bird cries. The baby awoke, sat up to suck his thumb. The dog made a kind of living pen enclosing the child.

Long Rib manned the bow. Her gleaming paddle made smooth strokes in the steely water. Deer herded along the silver shores. Families of black bears fished.

“*Wemoo!*” Melba sang to the baby. “My light!” She called out to Long Rib: “Sweet daughter, I see the years of my youth making blossoms on withered branches!”

The disgruntled Long Rib made no response. She had been dreading this trip since her mother first started querying trappers the year previous. Long Rib had watched her note every idea about how to deal with the Champlain Valley. Those seasoned travelers had assured her mother that, with a minimum of portage, an inland route by water to the English colonies was

possible. But first she and her family would have to survive the Winooski rapids, a feat few had ever accomplished.

Long Rib resented her mother's obsession with getting back to Neespaugot. What was this town to her! The stupid place wasn't even there anymore, not as her mother knew it, anyway. And yet the woman had spent her entire winter preparing for a travel that likely would kill them!

Long Rib had found a sad but appropriate pretext for speaking her heart on the subject. Nero's death. One morning Long Rib had found her brother dead on his matting. She had shrouded his body in winding sheet and carried him, light as a windlestraw, to the moosewood tree behind the cabin. There, she had given him a Christian burial, she, alone, preacher, congregation, family, undertaker! Their mother was off following up her fantasy, seeking facts for a foray to the English colonies.

When Melba and the baby had returned a week later, Long Rib had set into her.

"Naturally, you were away! You are always away. For the last 15 years you have been away, giving attention to a phantom than to Nero or me. *I was the poor boy's mother!*"

"I loved him. I love you."

"No, you loved Therese and Charles, the healthy two, the beautiful two! Nero and I were *accidents.*"

"You were all accidents! It changed nothing for me. I loved you all equally. I feared more for the older two because their situation was more dangerous than yours."

“Of course! That’s why you went and had another accident with the first libertine....”

Long Rib’s voice trailed off. She had gone too far.

Her mother had not argued, nor tried to justify her relation with Moot Court.

“Believe what you want, daughter. But one is not free just because a former master declares it. I am still a slave. If I want to be free, I have to fight for it.”

“I don’t give a damn about your personal vindication, Mother. I just don’t want to be abandoned!”

“Abandoned?”

“Face facts,” she said cruelly, “in one way or another, you have abandoned all of us. Nero, me, Charles and Therese.”

The first night they camped along the Saint Lawrence River. The dog chased away a large but inoffensive bear. After another full day of travel, they came upon a gentle bay so plentiful with coots that even the toddling baby managed to nab one.

They made the Saint Jean River by the fourth day and battled its boils and swirls for the next six days. The weather turned inclement. Melba occupied herself much of the time with sheltering the child from the heavy spring downpours. When the sparkling vista of Lake Champlain at last appeared before them, Long Rib sighed dismally. “Now we are certainly into the heart of Mohawk country.”

The two women paddled into a sheltered cove. There, they made camp for the night. Without the choice of conifer wood, which created too much smoke, collecting kindling for a fire

took time. The air hung heavy with insects, waxed ripe with the musk of waterlogged wood and damp vegetation. Melba gummed the baby with mud to protect him from bites.

After eating, Melba rocked the child to sleep with whispered chants of Neespaugot. She fed a last log to the fire, closed her eyes, and drifted away to the sound of lapping water.

That night some Mohawks came among them. They moved so silently that even the dog did not hear them. Melba saw them only after they already stood behind the campfire, like the silhouettes of creatures sprung from the flames. There were three of them, sharpened wood warriors whose intent remained a mystery. She gripped the dog by its nape and spoke.

“Good night,” she said in English.

None of them responded. She kept her calm. One of them came astride the fire, a man of powerful build though no older than her daughter. His cruel facial paint shone green and red in the cinder glow. His centerpiece of hair ridged his crown like the bristles between the angry dog’s shoulders.

He eyed her trappings. “English?” he grumbled.

“Yes, English,” she lied, glancing at her swarthy daughter, who slumbered on, one side of her face a compress of spittle and shoots.

“What do you far from English?”

“Trapping.”

“You trapper woman?”

Mocking chuckles came from the other side of the fire. She answered their condescension with bravado.

“We English women make poor squaws but good trappers. Have I not trapped this beast.” The dog fixed the Mohawks in its baleful glare.

“What manner the beast?” asked the nervous man.

“Half tiger, half stallion. The spirit of the Great Bear flows in his veins. No bullet nor arrow nor hangman’s noose nor snake or wolf pack can kill him.”

“How trap him you?”

“Magic.” She ordered the hound to stand. Its size, musculature and color awed the visitors.

“You give him?”

“He would eat you.”

The idea gave the warrior pause. “What you have give?”

She offered to each one of them a woolen cloth. They accepted her gift and thanked her. In turn, she asked them for information concerning her route, specifically how to confront the Winooski Rapids. The young men explained to her what they knew and then receded into the forest. But not before the one fellow warned her to stay west of the Connecticut Valley. “The east still dangerous to an English. Abenakis kill English.”

The lake was the size of a small sea. After two days of churning its iron waters, the women’s blistered hands could no longer hold the paddles. They put ashore at Grand Isle, covered the pirogue with bushes and made camp inland, away from the maddening mosquitoes and ticks.

That afternoon, Melba busied herself with a harness for the dog in anticipation of the portage. Long Rib wanted a bath and took the baby with her a short way from camp, to an inland stream bed. She set a blanket on the beach and put the baby down in the mild sunlight. She shucked her filthy dress and waded to mid-stream and soaped herself with a bar of scented lard. From the water she kept vigil of the baby. A beautiful boy, she thought. Brown and plump and brimming with good health. She came out of the water and shook herself dry. She bent and kissed the child on his black hair. The baby reached for the glistening jewels of water on her pubic hair.

“Now for my dress.”

She returned to the water with her dress and began scrubbing it with the lard and a stone. When next she checked the baby, Long Rib thought her heart would stop.

The giggling child was tapping at the muzzle of an adult wolf. The animal hunkered and pawed at the blanket. Long Rib shouted, splashed. The wolf regarded her with a yellow-eyed detachment, as if staring her down. Suddenly, another three wolves appeared from the left. Then, five more cantered from downstream. Nine wolves surrounded the child.

“Oh, God, help!” she stammered. She stood waist-deep in the stream, clutching her brow and trying to remember where she had left her rifle.

Melba and Monsieur Bleu heard Long Rib’s screams coming through the trees. The dog sprung up and sprinted towards the commotion. Melba grabbed her bow and some arrows and gave chase into the clearing.

She hit the stream slightly uphill and saw, down the beach, the dog throwing itself into the ring of feeding wolves. Her Louis was being devoured! It wasn't until she had come within a few feet of the fight, that she spotted him, hidden behind tall grasses, sitting upon the blanket, untouched, his cries drowned out by the sharp crack of canine rage.

Monsieur Bleu rose up with a wolf in his gullet and snapped it from the maul. Melba got off a clean shot, driving her arrow through its flank. She advanced towards the fight, tripping over the rifle. She picked it up and ran at them, hammering at more wolves, driving them off.

Her daughter writhed naked and horribly mauled. Well after the attack, Long Rib continued frenetically to ward off claws and teeth, until finally sinking into shock. Melba huddled her in a blanket and carried her to the stream. "Monsieur Bleu, stay with Louis!" The dog, chunks of his blue coat missing, limped to the baby and lay down.

Melba lay her daughter on the beach and stanching her wounds. Long Rib's face and skull were perforated in several places. Her arms and legs were lacerated to the bone. Melba feared for infection.

They stayed on Grand Isle for several days while Melba applied herbal pastes to her daughter's wounds and forced hot soups into her. Long Rib suffered a martyr's pain, developed a high fever. Her shredded skin grew scarlet with inflammation.

It took a week for the fever to break. She began to drink and eat solid foods again. One morning she woke, gritted her teeth, and declared that she had no intention of dying there. "What are the Winooski River rapids to me now!" She smiled through a mask of scabs.

Two days later they reached the part of the river that the Mohawks called *Blue Mist*. One moment the women were toiling under bright skies. The next, all turned somber, blanketed in a frosty fog that cut visibility to zero. Worse, a worrying rumble invaded the area, growing louder and more constant.

“What manner of cloud is this?” asked Long Rib, mystified by the phenomenon.

“It is not a cloud,” replied Melba. “The river makes its own vapor.” They were fast closing in on the rapids. “In two bends, we shall be in the river’s jaws.”

They rowed to the bank and tied down their gear. Melba ordered Long Rib to switch places with her. “I’ll take the bow.”

Long before the second bend, the roar of the river grew deafening. They could not hear each other’s words and resorted to signaling. No paddling was necessary, only steering. Melba set down her paddle. “*Ne sewortum,*” she told the baby, “I am sorry.”

She tied the child to the dog with rawhide. The explosion of water muffled Louis’ shrieks, yet his mother saw his mouth break apart, contort, his baby eyes filling with fright. The sight broke her heart, but it was the only way to save the boy if they capsized. She petted the dog on the head. “Take care of your master’s son.”

Rounding the ultimate bend, the river no longer seemed something that moved under them. Instead, it enveloped them, channeled high above their heads, a frothy and raging path upward, a direct route to paradise if they made an error. Suddenly, the world seemed to drop away, and they plummeted, clinging to their paddles, sweeping down a mountain of water,

pounded left and right and diagonally. The water poured in, blinding all but the dog, immovably focused on his solitary task of saving the child.

And then the river fell away, the mist lifted. Melba's water-blinded eyes opened upon smooth route. She ruddered them to the shore, unloosed the baby and began to cry. She clasped the child to her chest and cried uncontrollably. She noticed only peripherally the dog's climbing out of the pirogue and pissing. She felt Long Rib's embrace, and took her daughter into her arms. The three of them, mother, daughter, and baby remained huddled and sobbing for many minutes thereafter. They had survived the Winooski rapids.

## X

The dog mushed, Melba pushed, the harness held, the pirogue advanced across swamps, loam, bedrock and basin. She protected the bottom of the boat with the greasy gore of a deer's entrails, slurping down bites of its tongue for energy. They started three times up a scree-strewn rise only to thud down the steep incline. They followed the migration of birds, the animals scattering from the frictional disturbance of wood dragged against grit. Long Rib's scabs hurt. Melba's bowels gave her trouble. She had her period. Bleeding, cramping continually. Her knees ached.

Twenty miles in 3 days. Constants stops. Time to eat, to drink, to moan and groan. Yelling at each other and their task, a task bent on breaking them. But each morning opening

with renewed will. Their roiling feet sinking into bog. Burning bloodsuckers off their flesh. Meeting meadowlands. Mashing cat-o-nine-tails, kicking at frogs, wading into more bog, reeds, and water lilies. The dog suddenly no longer in front of the pirogue. Finding him almost drowned in his harness. They had made it to the meager origins of Mad River.

The Mad River rapids were a whimper to Winooski's roar, and they overcame them without difficulty. Then, the White River drew them but barely, having little current to speak of. A fat lazy river.

A windy morning. Sky the color of slate. Drawn across the western sky, clouds the pink of skinned meat. Suddenly, they were hearing a song. Its many-voiced melody drifted from downstream. "Listen," said Melba.

*"Canakisheun, weekchu? Wotone doddi gung-shquaws peormug."*

"What is it?" asked Long Rib.

*"Where are you going, my handsome young man? Going to a place where the beautiful girls fish."*

The last time Melba heard the song, she was nine and seated on her grandfather's lap, watching women of her tribe gut cod on Neespaugot's south bay. The memory leapt out and sat beside her in the pirogue. She felt her heart pounding. She was hearing her Native tongue for the first time in 32 years.

They rowed into the shoals and reeds, coming suddenly upon a group of Native women cutting up trout. Some panicked and dropped their catches, while others were too mesmerized to act.

“*Mud ger-tee wheezig,*” called Melba from the murky waters. “Do not be afraid. We come in peace.”

The women were Abenakis, northern cousins and allies of the Wampanoag. When they learned Melba’s identity, they entreated her and her children to be their guests, and led them back to their enclave.

A clan of fifteen families lived there, on the run from the English and Mohawks. Their leader Wamsut, face like mud, wolverine eyes bloodshot from drinking the pilfered stores of the white man’s whisky, spat words as if they had a bad taste, confusing pride and spite.

“Me, my clan, my nation, for us the war has never ended!” Boastful man, he was not yet born when the war had started. “You would go back among the Coatmen, woman?”

“To have our land back, yes,” answered Melba to his council.

“Is this your army? Two women, a baby and a dog? With what will you fight?”

“Laws. It is all the English understand. I will demand what is rightfully mine.”

The council stared at her in mute amazement. Wamsut took her for a mad woman. “You expect the English to throw up their hands and give in?”

Melba listened without anger, without defensiveness. When she could speak, she said:

“The spirit in one can defeat the greatest armies. I return home, and I will not stop fighting until I have my land again.”



They took up their paddles and made White River Junction in a lightning storm. Flash floods almost swamped the pirogue. At the English outpost, Melba traded trappings for stores. A drunken mountain man made a nuisance of himself until Monsieur Bleu showed his teeth.

The settlements increased mightily from there. The wide Connecticut swept them south through thick forests punctuated by numerous docks and outposts, then white church steeples and towns. Greenfield. Deerfield. Hatfield. Holyoke. They stopped at Springfield to trade for a dress for Long Rib, were stared at by the townspeople, objects of curiosity.

Five more days and they came within sight of the Atlantic, smelled its sweet brine, listened to the chatter of its gulls, terns, and cormorants. Melba leapt from the pirogue into the ocean. Seawater. The cleansing of salt.

That night Melba felt herself being swept away by an ocean of blue memories. She looked out with regret at the black horizon and its fleet of low-lying stars. “Once, during the war,” she said to Long Rib, “we captured a Mohegan who was defending the English. I looked this man in the eye and I asked him, ‘Why do you fight on the side of the English, against your cousins?’ He answered me without defiance, ‘It is easier to hate a brother than an enemy.’”

“I don’t understand such a mentality,” said Long Rib, turning over to look at her mother.

Melba sighed. “An Indian never forgets, daughter. When your great grandfather Ducksunne was your age, his Sachem Massasoit had refused to help the Mohegans and Pequots

in their battle with Rhode Island. This betrayal came back to haunt my Sachem. I begged Metacomet to go to the Mohegans and Pequots and apologize to them for Massasoit's mistake. But he wouldn't hear of it. 'A Wampanoag needs no help from *lesser* tribes,' he said."

"His pride was greater than his political savvy."

Melba shook her head. "No, his pride was the least of it. Metacomet thought as an Indian. An Indian deals alone with his grievances, and if the grievance is beyond his power, he forgets it. He takes one grievance at a time. When we attacked Neespaugot, it was to punish Neespaugot, not the entire colony. You see, an Indian has no notion of total war. The Indian mind cannot grasp the idea of genocide. Metacomet could not understand that whites from Biblical times onward have never been too proud to make alliances, with the devil if they must. They war like the wolf. They unite in order to devour. We Indians war like the mosquito, we bite in swarms and make individual retreat once our mouths are full. I knew we were doomed. But it did not have to be such."

"Mother, would it have really made a difference if the Mohegan and Pequot had joined the Narragansett Federation?"

"Daughter, if the Sachem had gone to Hartford, the English would now be living on remote islands off the coast of New England."

They caught the earliest tide, long before the sun had risen. Melba rigged a sail with a sheet of oiled linen and they caught the first wind. Against the terrified remonstrance of her daughter, she sailed them far out to sea, through mist and haze and bitter swells. They picked up the current, made shore by nightfall, started again in the morning. Off the coast of Rhode Island

bad weather forced them ashore, where they sat out the storm for three days. Moving again, bounced by the breaking wakes of British brigs bound for Providence, channeled between the coast and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, wisdom dictating that they put ashore at Dartmouth and travel north on foot. But Melba cast wisdom to the water.

“A fantasy has long sustained me, daughter. To return to Neespaugot the way I left it, by sea. Indulge me this pleasure.”

Crawling up the coast towards Boston. Images from youth, of scores of Wampanoag birch bark canoes off Neespaugot. Instead, crossing only heavy ships, many transporting human merchandise. Melba's heart was in her throat as the swell swept them past Misery Island, the prison and tomb of her mother and so many other Christian Indians who starved to death there during the war.

Neespaugot rose off the coastal bluffs. Even Long Rib felt her flesh grow chicken bumps at the sight of a town that had become a legend for her. The rebuilt fort rose on the cliff, its cannons making a horned crown. The golden church spire came into view, then the hundreds of white clapboard houses, like so many shells clinging to the rocky shoreline. Neespaugot. The harbor bursting with brigantines and barques. Long Rib had never seen so many masts, not even in Montreal.

“These people are too many!” The thought of their collective weight crushed the young woman's fragile morale.

“Everything will be all right, Long Rib.”

They surfed the breakers into a deserted shoreline two miles north of town. The beach of her ancestors. The place where the man responsible for her white skin had landed two centuries before. “We are home.”

“If home is a prison,” groused her daughter, caressing the dog’s head, “then, yes, I suppose we are.”



The next morning they walked along the same coastal road Ducksunne had taken to his death. Long Rib was so nervous that her jaw would not unclamp. She shook with cold. Louis slept in his sling, against his mother’s chest. Monsieur Bleu moved stop-and-trot, distributing stingy doses of urine.

Just before sun-up, they reached the town’s edge.

“Stay here with the dog. I will continue alone.”

Long Rib put on a brave face. “No, we have come this far together. I will see this through with you.”

Melba leaned over and kissed her daughter’s forehead. Then, they entered Neespaugot.

Though images of a destroyed town still burned in Melba's memory, she saw no signs of those times now. The town had risen from its ashes. All stood sturdy and freshly painted. The blacksmith's, the dry goods, the livery stables, the individual houses with their towers and weather vanes and portico entries. Gardens tidy. Barking dogs. The calling of the cocks. The lush flowered streets. The replanted trees rimming the Commons.

A gray dawn hung over the sleeping town. Melba and her children advanced up Cabot Street. They crossed paths with few inhabitants, a merchant couple setting up shop, some fisherman returning from the sea, a woman milking her cow. Melba remarked that the Puritan's dire raiment had given way to more colors.

Nearing the miller's, it dawned on Melba that she had not seen a single stock. Had the Puritans finally learned to stop publicly torturing those who were different?

"Something has changed here," she said to Long Rib, and went to ask about it; two bonneted young women were bartering eggs for cloth at the edge of the Commons.

"Where are gone the stocks?" she asked.

Stocks? Neither woman remembered having seen them in Neespaugot.

"So what public punishment does the Puritan now use?"

"Puritan?" The two women stepped back from the wild woman whom they obviously thought deranged. Melba tried to reassure them.

"I have been in the wilderness these many years, with no news of this place."

And so they told her. They had, in their young lives, seen fewer Puritans than stocks in Neespaugot. “*Those* people burnt themselves out with their witch trials, didn’t they, Grace? Personally, I never had none in my family.”

When Long Rib learned that her mother’s prosecutors were defunct, her step showed a renewed vigor. But Melba cautioned her to prudence.

“Those young women were talking about politics, not character, daughter. Your great grandfather had white skin, but he was a Native. Louis’ father had Native flesh, but he was a white man. This town may have erased the manner, but its heart is yet Puritan.”

Melba led her “army” to the courthouse. The town constable tipped his tricorn.

“Good morning to you womenfolk. Some beast you have there,” he said, eyeing the dog and women with suspicion. “Come to see *the head?*”

Melba did not understand the question and was too nervousness to try. She walked on. The constable ordered them to stop. He looked Long Rib up and down with little effort to disguise his contempt. An Indian in white woman’s dress, with scars that would never disappear.

“Much illegal sale transacted these days,” he said to Melba. “Do you have papers for this indentured servant?”

“Servant? She is my daughter!”

“Ah.” Melba’s skins, the sling she used to carry the baby, the wilderness in her braided graying hair. The constable’s despising conclusion was writ large in his cowish face even before bringing forth the words. “A half-breed, aye? Was her father an injun?”

“Her father, sir, was white. *I am Indian. One hundred percent!*” A barely controlled rage had driven all nervousness from Melba. She stared down at the man, whom she dwarfed. “Now, are we free to go?”

The courthouse, with its hall of records, was closed. They turned back into the square, where a sinister sight awaited. Now they understood the constable’s question about coming to see *the head*. Long Rib saw it first and threw her hand to her mouth. High atop a pole in the courthouse yard, against the leaden sky, sat a decayed, sea-blasted skull with much of the leather face still hanging from it.

“What kind of frightful place is this, Mother? They are worse than barbarians. They are cannibals!”

Long Rib broke down in tears, and Melba had no words of consolation to give her. She, too, might have cried if her daughter had not beaten her to it. The Coatmen had denied Metacomet his rightful voyage to *Cautantowwit’s House*. The poor man was still wandering in search of his head.

“Might I be of help?” A gaunt but kindly old gentleman with long thin moustaches and a velvet jacket with gold buttons had come to open his haberdashery shop. “You seem distraught. Is it the skull?”

“Yes, exactly,” answered Melba angrily.

“You have come to grieve over lost relatives, perhaps?”

“An entire nation, sir. We were just wondering why you have left that head up there. Are you still at war in these parts?”

The gentleman chortled, self-critically aware that the head was an anachronism.

“Philip’s skull was once a trophy to triumph and vindictiveness. Now, it is the vestige of another age”.

“Then why is it not brought down?”

“I’m afraid that it still makes amusement for passing pilgrims.”

“If one wanted to meet an Indian from these parts, where would one go?”

The gentleman smiled. “There are no more Indians in southeastern Massachusetts.”

Once the man had gone into his shop Long Rib saw an exit to their ordeal. “Mother, you heard him. No more Indians. What good is it to push your claim, if there is no one to inhabit the land?”

“Daughter, the people are here. They are in hiding, invisible. Just because the white man cannot see them doesn’t mean we cannot.”



Melba and her children moved along roads rumbling with settlers wagons. They traversed rolling farmlands where the dust never settled below the arched backs of black slaves toiling against the stony soil. They crossed covered bridges, drank from water wheels, and took

nourishment beside the Coatmen's cattle pastures. The forest had receded like a hairline. But they at last came into it.

They reached the Great Swamp the afternoon of the following day. Through that tangled terrain, the women took turns holding Louis while the other protected his face and eyes from the cutting branches. Melba expected to find white men on her people's land. Instead, with an astounded elation, she entered a place frozen in time. Wigwams and wickiups, destroyed 32 years before, still rotted about the ponds and marshes. Broken hatchets lay on the shores. Arrows and musket balls made somber decoration of the sycamore trees. But no white had encroached upon this place since the last battle. Her childhood paradise was funereal, but untouched. Free.

"Why have they left it alone, Mother?"

"Swamps are habitats of the devil, daughter."

"I can understand why their soldiers hated this place," said Long Rib.

"Oh, they hated it all right!" Melba laughed and deepened her voice into a Coatman's masculine grumble. "*These heathen are three parts vegetation, I tell you!*" They could never find us in here. Sometimes we were only inches from their noses."

"You talk about this swamp with reverence, Mother. To me, this place is repugnant. Everything is dead, or being choked to death. How could anything, much less people, survive in this clinging hell?"

“You think like a white, my daughter. You only see the appearance of things. If our people still exist, they have become the trees and vines and roots beneath our feet. Come, there’s a spot ahead where we can rest.”

The small glade basked in the last rays of day. Long Rib sat Louis on a fur and stretched her aching back. A brisant bird whistle broke the moist silence. Long Rib had not seen her mother leave, and was surprised to see her standing at the edge of the glade, whistling into the dense growth.

“What kind of animal danger need we fear, Mother?”

But her mother ignored her and kept whistling.

“I do not care for the smell of this place, either. Let us camp beyond this soggy bog.”

Her mother cupped her hands before her mouth and emitted a series of strident calls. The dog turned in circles. The baby fiddled with a sculpted stick figure.

“Louis will need to be fed soon,” called Long Rib.

“There! Did you hear?” cried Melba.

“Hear what?”

“Open your ears, daughter!”

But strain as she could, Long Rib heard nothing. Worry took root and spread into her thoughts like the tree-killing vines all about her. What if her mother were going mad? What if they could never exit this nightmare of vegetation? No sooner considered than the possibility became a probability. Her mother took off running deeper into the morass, followed by the dog.

“Mother! Where are you going? Don’t leave us here alone!”

Long Rib sat down with Louis and tried to control her mounting panic. Light and heat faded in the glade. The air cooled, thickened with swamp musk. The webbing of high branches darkened against the obscure sky.

Something heavy and powerful approached from the left. It smashed aside obstacles in its linear bash through the swamp. Long Rib stepped in front of the baby and loaded her rifle. The dog burst through a wall of dead brush, dragging behind it a long train of barbed prickles, thistles, and clinging swamp grass. Her mother appeared at the far end of the glade, beckoning. “Long Rib, come!”

Long Rib snatched up Louis and followed Melba back into the thick of the swamp.

Crepuscle. An unfathomable deep darkness. Long Rib could no longer see her way, and put her entire trust in her mother, who never vacillated nor erred. Their mother seemed to know every path and plant, every ill-placed log and bog.

“I am sorry to have run off.”

“Do not do it again. You know how I feel.”

“We have arrived,” she announced. But Long Rib saw only an impenetrable wall of vegetation before them.

“It is a dead end.”

“No. Look again.” Her mother stepped into the wall. Long Rib made haste to follow.

They came into a natural palisade larger than a farmer’s field. Several burning fires illuminated three longhouses the size of ships. All about were wetus, too many to count. A system of irrigation wheels turned in a canal dug from the bog. The smell of warm corn bread

made the air sweet, calling Long Rib's attention to the ovens. She caught glimpses of people who then became shadow. Her eyes focused. They really were before her, like a part of land you can pass all your life and never really see until your numb grip on routine slackens.

"*Aque*," they hailed, people clothed in Indian leggings and breeches, speaking her mother's native tongue. Yet, Long Rib saw few people who actually looked Indian. Most of the people who gathered round, welcoming, were black as cow's teats, their bony crowns tufted with hair like thick black moss. Her mother had found *a* people, but not *her* people.

"Mother, they are black! We have stumbled upon runaway African slaves."

"No, daughter. These people are the descendants of Massasoit and Metacomet and Cachotet the great Narragansett. Like us, daughter, they have done what was necessary in order to survive. They have hidden themselves in black skin."