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The Scrivener's Tale

Part I

Who I Am

“While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature.”

--Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener*

Introduction

Perhaps it is time, after these many years, to share my true tale, the details of which its last chapter can be found as told by a certain Wall Street lawyer with whom I had acquaintance in my final days. A lawyer who, by his good and placid nature, I did vex and yet who held out one compassionate morsel after another to me as I descended into my last hours of madness.

Alas! That good lawyer shall not benefit from the truth of my tale, as he is long-ensconced in a paradise that is equally placid and tranquil as the life he sought on Earth. Perhaps even now he presides over angelic equities or the divisions of the parcels of Heaven. But I feel I shall continue to haunt and be haunted until my story is shared and my guilt confessed—that I may save others the same fate.

As for me, I linger still within these halls of commerce and contractual obligation, locked in a reverie, the making of which is mine own. I linger not for fear of the wrath that one day awaits me, for in time I shall surely fade, disintegrate into that netherworld of darkness and fire. I ask for no forgiveness, for I deserve none; it is with aplomb that I accept my onus, I shall bear the brunt of my sins for eternity. I seek not the bliss that might have been mine, for I have eschewed all that was good, turning from my duties as husband and father, seduced by greed and passion, ruined by my darkest desires. Perhaps those with whom I have consorted linger still, reluctant as am I to enter finally into the place of fire and eternal torment. But I know not, for I see no others as I am now—an indistinct apparition.

What is torment, then, but this endless wandering, this constant reliving of the moments of one's life that might have been made to bear better fruit? Had I been but half

the man I sought to be, perhaps I should even now have been ensconced within the bosom of my family, surrounded by loving kindness, admired for my wisdom, beloved for my heart. But my heart is cold, empty, lonely and my spirit will not rest until I have expressed to you my story, this terrible tale of woe and worry—perhaps I need only to unburthen my soul before I sink into the eternal damnation which I have so willfully earned.

None can see me now, though I am heard, the clanking of my bonds, the moaning of my loss echoing in darkened halls, upon empty staircases in the dead of night. My shadow has been spied upon a certain corner on a certain floor, seated on the railing, rocking, lost in rue. Perhaps my tale will bring some sense, some salvation to those who dare to venture here, to take a walk with me and my regrets—may the keening of my voice act as a siren apposite a good and blessed life, luring those who listen away from the shoals of jagged rocks upon which their own souls would be dashed.

I shall tell you of my life and my death; of the lives I have touched and the deaths I have inflicted. Mine is a tale of unnatural obsession, of a man guided only by his own basest needs who, when finally within the grasp of salvation, of love and redemption, I could no longer remain to claim it, but of needs had to continue in my profligate ways, for in the trap which I myself had laid, the snare had been sprung and I its only prey.

So if you have espied my ghast, felt my icy breath, heard my echoing moans or sighs, then may you be prepared to receive this tale of my woeful indignation, my odious earthly deeds, my personal pit of ignorant passions and unfulfilled capacities. Welcome to the hidden recesses of my dark and cursed life, that you may not be alarmed at the vision of my wraith upon your banister.

Chapter 1: Out the Folded Paper

March 8, 1841

“Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring...”

--Herman Melville, “Bartleby, The

Scrivener”

I had worked at the dead-letter office nearly six years when Fate lay her hand irrevocably upon my life.

I had quickly become comfortable with my position there, opening and sorting lost letters and parcels. There were twelve of us in each office performing these necessary tasks. Baskets of “ghost” letters were brought in to our long table and placed beside each employee. We began by examining the outsides of the letters for postmarks, addresses or other written clues. Sometimes a letter would be misdirected merely because its author was unable to spell the name of its destination— “noo eyoka” for New York, as an example. It was our job to attempt to determine the proper direction for the parcel to go. If no evidence without solved the mystery of its destination, then we directed our search within, slicing strings or sealing wax to read its contents.

The office in which I worked specialized in letters with foreign postmarks—often the most difficult to decipher. My knowledge of languages—gained in my childhood training--stood me in good stead. England, the year prior, had introduced the Mulready envelope bearing the “penny black” postage stamp, increasing the number of correspondences from that Empire. Unfortunately there accompanied this development a corresponding increase in writers with more postage than knowledge, resulting in basketful upon basketful of misdirected missals. However, I had a gift for discernment,

and I was often able to make sense of addresses that, for others, were simply unintelligible.

That fateful day one such letter emerged from my daily catch of lost fish. Addressed simply to “Miss Priscilla Fall, Ellienoses,” this letter seemed to speak to me in some preternatural way. Before I even opened it, I found myself trembling as if at the mercy of some magical power—some power of prescience raised the hairs on my neck and arms. The address appeared to have been made by two separate hands—the name was written clearly and with a strong hand; the address was more of a scrawl, as though written by some unlettered servant. There was no return address, save what appeared to be a surname—Lusk—and the Mulready envelope indicated it had originated in England. The imprint on the cover showed a munificent Britannia astride an ocean reaching her arms toward Hindoos riding an elephant on one side, and Pilgrims greeting the Indians on the other. When I applied my blade to the flap and pulled, the letter sprung forth as if by its own volition. I was startled when a flash of something bright flew at me, struck my chest and landed neatly in my watch-pocket.

I looked about to see if my co-workers had noticed the unruly object which had assaulted me, but none appeared to take heed. I glanced down at my watch-pocket and saw the glint of gold. Surreptitiously, I peeked into the recesses of the pocket and my fingers withdrew a perfect little band bearing a perfect round pearl. Swiftly I returned the treasure to my pocket, nearly certain I was undiscovered. Such a prize could only mean the letter contained a proposal of marriage, or a communication subsequent to such, sealing the bargain with a gift of jewelry. Many a young couple, after months of wooing and, having passed the scrutiny of parental approval, had begun this custom wherein the

intended bridegroom, armed with his future father-in-law's permission, sent to the lovely young lady a precious piece such as a necklace, or more often, a pearl ring.

My own history had made me quite incapable of sustaining such courtship. The mere thought of years invested in wooing some desirable nymph caused such consternation, such anxiety and anguish, given my previous experiences with women, that before I have even been introduced to such a creature I have sweated through my waistcoat with both dread and desire. My breath comes in gasps at the idea of having to stave off my desires for endless months while attending to the niceties of wooing and winning not only a young woman, but her father and family as well. Facing this enormous chasm of self-consciousness, I had to this point in my troubled life barely broached the idea of such formal courting, preferring instead to focus my attention on securing my place in the world. Though there had been a dalliance or two in my past, I feverishly denied myself any fantasy of fornication, lest the Devil take my heart as well as my soul. A sinner, I was certain that any such desires that led most to marriage could only lead me to damnation, lacking as I did the requisite patience of pursuit. I feared that any release of such pent-up passions would precipitate a cascade of actions and events that would ultimately result in ruin.

And yet before me lay the instrument of that ruin; I felt powerless to stop it. I experienced a flash of foresight, images of which I knew nothing at the time; I knew not its source, only that something preternatural was afoot.

With trembling fingers, I delicately opened the missive within.

“My dearest Priscilla,” the letter began. “I received news of your father's passing with great anguish—that such a fine and distinguished gentleman should pass so

suddenly and in the prime of his life! I trust your brother Daniel has your father's affairs well in order and that we shall still marry upon my return. Would that I were there now to provide you the comfort and care you must sorely need—if I could I would paddle across the Atlantic in a raft of my own making to be at your side in this dark hour. Bear up, my dearest, for we shall surely be together soon and I can soothe your wounded heart.”

The poor girl! I thought. And such a sweet name, like a spring flower, the very flower of womanhood, I supposed, perched on the edge of matrimony, about to open in order to receive her lover. My face flushed at the thought.

The letter continued.

My work here in England is nearly done, and I shall be returning to New York in a few short weeks. The ship is scheduled to leave Liverpool in mid- April. We have established trade contracts with several prominent London firms, and I shall be returning to Abbott & Archer in New York to finalize the details of these arrangements. I am saddened that your father will not be there to celebrate our successful business transactions, especially the lumber and land purchases there in Illinois, but rest assured that the proceeds due him will be forwarded immediately to Daniel on your behalf. He was right to advise us to broaden our interests, as the fur trade is declining, though still profitable. I shall be in New York only a few weeks, checking on our other investments upstate, and then I shall be en route via the Great Lakes. I expect to arrive sometime in July or possibly early August, should any delays arise.

I cannot wait to behold your precious face, and to embrace you as my wife, though we've met only briefly and that a long time ago. I received your

daguerreotype in your last post. What a marvelous invention! I bless your dear departed father for arranging such a sitting. You have grown into a fine young woman, your cream skin and dark hair haunt my dreams, dear. I have included my own portrait taken here in England that you may keep me close in your mind until I return to claim you. Your father was well pleased with the arrangement; and you shall honor him by honoring this commitment.

Something in my heart flared and reared its head. Was it the simple description of Priscilla that so ignited my heart? Was it the thought of her bereft but waiting to be wed? Even these many years later, I cannot say what torch was lit within me in that moment, nor by what hand. My breath caught in my throat as I continued reading.

I am enclosing a pearl ring as my part of that commitment. I eagerly await the day you become Mrs. Lusk.

Please send my kindest words of sympathy to your dear brother. I shall soon be by your side in all things.

Your devoted,

Julian L.

January 23, 1841, London

The “L” was written in a long, loopy style with a flourish at the end. It was clearly the same handwriting as the name on the envelope and greatly resembled my own hand when I allow it free reign. Folded within the pages of the letter was a small daguerreotype of Julian. When I beheld it, I nearly fell from my chair. He might have been my twin, we so strongly resembled one another. I hated him immediately.

The color rose to my face, and my ears began to burn. I greatly feared someone would observe my reaction to this particular piece of mail and inquire as to my condition, but all remained busy with their own correspondences and packages. I quickly retrieved several more letters from my bag and finding one with no return address and a completely illegible name and location, opened it as well. My timing was perfect, as the supervisor came around my side of the table at just that moment, looking over our work. I was able to bury the letter to Priscilla beneath the stack of other letters and pretended to be carefully studying the decoy I held in my left hand. Beneath the papers under my right hand, I could feel the stiff outline of the daguerreotype. The supervisor glanced over my work and moved on down the line. Gently, slowly at first, I inched the picture from beneath the papers and into my lap. I switched hands to read the decoy letter, and with my left hand in my lap, was able to secure the image and slide it into my front pants pocket. I would need to study it more in depth later. I worked through several more packages and lost letters before I uncovered the letter to Priscilla and neatly folded it back into its envelope.

A few moments later, the whistle blew for lunch break and I quickly managed to secret the letter beneath my vest. A plan had already formed in my mind, and the seeds of obsession were rooting themselves there. I left the building then and never again worked at the Dead Letter Office.

Chapter 2: Addressing the issue

The more I contemplated the image of Julian Lusk, the more I stewed in my juices. I paced my small room, thinking. Why, he was no different from me! How could it be that he had achieved what I could not? The only difference was likely in his parentage. Had I been raised in a lucrative business family, I, too, should have found his success. It was only a stroke of misfortune that my own parents had been struck down by an untimely accident when I was but six, leaving me, with my superior intellect and astute nature to be raised without filial affection or familial connections to greater opportunities. Why, I was no different from him! Indeed, why should I not *be* him? In point of fact, I already knew I was his superior, for I should never have let such a precious package leave my hand without proper marking to ensure it arrived at its destination. I became determined, then, that I must have Priscilla, that Fate had determined it to be so by placing her treasure in my hands. He had failed Priscilla by his negligence. I would not.

I know that you are a-wonder that I could be so swiftly moved to profess my love for a woman I had never met, never seen, never even written to. But I easily pictured her, pale-skinned and dark-haired, her face grief-stricken at the loss of so dear a father, but eager to be comforted by her fiancé, eager to become his wife so they could share the great comfort of the marital bed. My blood burned at the possibility of her, and equally, though more darkly, at the idea that Julian would soon be along to claim her. I had to get to her first.

I was certain in my mind that Priscilla had been promised to the wrong man— why shouldn't such a fine creature be mine? Without image or word, I was immediately in her thrall, and my desire for her grew by the minute. I suppose I could have considered

for a moment being grateful to Julian, for poorly addressing his letter or leaving so precious a communication to the vagaries of an underling. I should have held gratitude, too I suppose, for his preliminary work—he had completed all the wooing and now Priscilla was only a brief visit away from her wedding night—soon to be my wedding night!

At that thought, the surge of energy and passion that passed through my body had the power of a locomotive and I found myself moaning with the strength of it. In a moment or two, I brought my iron will to bear upon the weakness of my flesh and pushed such thoughts from my mind until I could find her. Then, and only then, could I release the pent-up beast upon the only moral ground available to a Christian man—the conjugal bed. I had the safety of my soul to consider, after all.

I spent the afternoon analyzing the letter. Priscilla Fall's father—apparently also a successful businessman—had recently passed away. Given the conditions of the Western frontier, it is possible he died from that most common of frontier ailments—the ague. Its fever and chills killed many, and those who did survive were never quite the same for having had the experience. Or perhaps he had been killed in a lumbering accident, or merely had suffered unexpected heart failure. She had a brother, possibly the eldest, named Daniel, who was obviously mature enough to take over his father's affairs. Likely, he would be the man, too, to whom I must address myself when I claimed the hand of fair Priscilla. A shudder ran through me at this thought—have her hand, I would, and more.

Her would-be husband, Julian—the devil Lusk—apparently worked for some sort of trading company with interests in Illinois—especially interests in lumber and real estate. It was evident from the letter that her dead yet beloved father had arranged the

marriage. There was no indication that she was averse to this arrangement, though such marriages were becoming more and more unusual, and it was clear she had been corresponding with that usurper, Julian. I was uncertain whether or not she and Lusk had met, but his formal tone indicated that if they had, he did not know her well. Her brother, Daniel, would likely enforce his father's wishes regarding the marriage of his sister to the successful businessman now skulking about in England.

I briefly entertained the idea of finding some passage to that ancient isle to seek him out and kill him, but for the mercy of my soul, I could not approve any desire for murder. I had to trust that the same Divine Providence by which I had come to love the still-faceless Priscilla would in time provide adequate circumstances whereby the Honorable Mr. Lusk would fail to arrive to make his claim to the would-be bride—at the very least until after I had successfully made my own. I gave little thought to what consequences such an event might create; I could think only of my precious Priscilla and the glorious union that awaited us.

For there was no doubt in my mind that, owing to my uncanny resemblance to the said Mr. Lusk, I could quickly assume his identity in the mind and heart of the lovely and waiting Priscilla. The ring of pearl within my waistcoat pocket became as a rock of burning magma, radiating heat throughout my midsection and upward into my heart and throat, symbolizing as it did my intention to marry her and acting as the catalyst by which our bond would soon be sealed.

I merely had to find her true address—a skill at which I was already adept—and ride triumphantly to my wedding-day, where I could claim that sweet virgin as my own.

There were certain government offices where information could easily be gathered by a trusted United States employee. I would begin on the morrow.

Along the way, I must of needs discover all I could of Mr. Lusk and arrive before he departed even from England. Once I had my bride's location, I would have to take the risk of visiting New York and meeting Lusk's employers to learn more of his world, that I might make it my own.

Chapter 3: Growing up on the Potomac

1822-1834

Now I am a frugal man, and need little by way of luxuries. I eat simply, purchase good clothes and take care of them, and regularly have my shoes repaired. I had worked in the Washington City Dead Letter Office for nearly six years when Priscilla's letter arrived. Most of that time I saved my earnings, spending only what was needed to sleep indoors, by renting a room in a boarding-house. I knew not, exactly, for what I was saving, only that I had, for years, anticipated a grand opportunity awaiting for me somewhere in the future. For amusement, I would walk along the Potomac or sit in one of several parks reading discarded newspapers or simply watching passers-by. On clear evenings, I walked the darkening streets of Washington, despite the ubiquitous mud, observing the miscreants who haunt those selfsame streets, the drunks and the prostitutes—to remind myself of the wages of such sin. My work occupied me from eight in the morning until six each evening, six days a week, and on Sunday mornings I attended the Presbyterian Church on the corner near my room. Mrs. Buchanan, the widowed owner of the boarding-house, allowed me free access to her late husband's library and I often spent my Sunday afternoons or stormy evenings there reading the classics.

I had been raised, you see, in a strict academic environment. Orphaned at the tender age of seven when my parents were killed in a carriage-accident, I was placed into the foster care of a retired minister and his wife. On a modest farm along the Potomac River, upstream from the location of the newly founded Washington City, they operated an orphanage which provided all the material and intellectual needs of some forty boys,

as well as vegetables and tobacco for the residents of the federal city. It was like many such farms in Frederick County, and the good reverend's own parents had established the place in the 1780s. Each morning we saw the sun rise over Sugarloaf Mountain and the small undulating plain upon which the farm rested. The Potomac provided the transport of our products to market, as we were not far from Noland's Ferry. The expansive brick farm house sat no more than a quarter mile back from the Tuscarora Road, and in summer, Mrs. Graves operated a market stall by the front gate. Before moving to Washington City to work for the Colonel, the farthest I had been from the farm was Point of Rocks, a couple of miles upriver.

I have little memory of my life before the Graves's place—a vague sense of rose water and auburn hair that I assume was my mother; the smell of pipe tobacco and the image of a mustache was all I could remember of my father's appearance—that, and that he had been hobbled by an injury sustained during the Revolution. She was Cecilia, he, Byron. He had married late in life; Cecilia was nearly 30 years his junior. I only remember this because someone had once commented upon the fact—I have no recollection who. Apparently I, too, had been injured in the carriage upset, my small body thrown clear of the worst of the carnage and spared the plummet from road to river. It was from the hospital that I was taken to the Graves' *Mount Horeb Farm*.

Reverend Graves ran a strict house with equally strict schooling. No young man exiting from the Graves's tutelage could ever say he lacked for a proper education, nor from any lack of a Christian upbringing. It is to this early learning environment that I attribute my frugality and self-discipline. It was there that I learned Greek and Latin, as well as English, German and French, and studied history, theology, and mathematics. It

was this accoutrement of skills that later enabled me to earn my place at the Dead Letter Office.

Well I remembered the effectiveness that the application of a well-placed switch played upon my childhood ability to memorize and recite. The Graves's and their small faculty of learned young gentlemen—many former residents—brooked no disobedience and tolerated no mischief. Violations of the many rules were dealt with swiftly and the retribution always left a lasting impression on a young boy's mind and body. Long Sundays were spent listening to Reverend Graves lecturing from his pulpit, inculcating our spirits with the fear of God. We were very afraid of God. We learned firsthand the wages of even the smallest sin, and these practices forged us into well-groomed, well-spoken, self-disciplined gentlemen. The Reverend Graves did his best to ensure that we received daily reminders of God's power.

We had little contact with the fairer sex—Mrs. Graves was well into her fifties when I entered the orphanage, and aside from a Negro girl and her old mammy who helped cook and clean, we saw few other women. Women, according to Reverend Graves, were the source of all evil.

“Look only to Genesis to see the subterfuge and destructiveness of women,” he often exhorted in his Sunday sermons. “How vile and cunning was Eve in her temptation of Adam!” It was because of Eve that we are all born as sinners, in total depravity; the reason that all children must be beaten regularly, to drive out the sinfulness. We learned to hate Eve for our cursedness.

There was one time when a traveling group came and set up an encampment in a field not far from the orphanage. I had been in the Graves's care for some seven years,

when the men from this group of wanderers came to ask for work. Their women and children stood waiting at the end of the lane leading to our front door in their colorful costumes, their feet bare, their heads adorned with brightly colored scarves and shiny jewelry that appeared to be made from exotic coins. The older boys in the orphanage—those above fourteen—were working outside on the grounds that afternoon and, as the weather was unseasonably warm, we were in our shirtsleeves. The older girls of the wandering troupe at lane's end whispered to one another behind be-ringed hands, looking at us and giggling. We had never seen such captivating creatures and we were all immediately smitten—despite the warnings regarding women. We stood, staring, until the Reverend came to the door, bellowing and uncharacteristically cursing, and ran off the entire group. But not before he had taken a full measure of our enchantment with the young ladies. That evening, despite the pain across my back and buttocks from the switching, I resorted for the first time to the sin of self-abuse. For many weeks afterward, I saw in my glittering mind's eye their dark eyes and hair flashing with jewelry and temptation—those exotic Eves.

In time, I learned to put the Devil's enticements behind me and worked hard to gain self-mastery over my sinful urges. I prayed fervently for the strength to resist my inborn sinfulness and reminded myself that all men struggled so—only Christ, as the only Son of God, ever lived a human life free of sin. I prayed often to Him to help me be a better man. I prayed, too, that I was one of the elect, that God had already chosen me among those to be redeemed—though we, none of us, knew who was and who wasn't. But by the time I reached my majority at eighteen, I felt confidence and pride in my self-control.

I left the Graves's then, securing a position as a tutor to a wealthy political family. It was here I was to be the instructor of letters and Latin to the family's two youngest boys, then nine and eleven years of age. It was here, too, that I was to be instructed in some of the ways of women and the world, and learned that my inner discipline was far more illusion than I had imagined it to be.

Chapter 4: The Colonel's House

1834

My employer after I left the Mount Horeb Farm had been a Colonel during the War of 1812 and lived now in a fine house not far from the Capital. His prowess in military and political strategy was widely known, and he hosted lavish social affairs throughout the winter, when Congress was in session. I entered into the Colonel's service near the end of summer, 1834, nearly nineteen years of age. The family had moved to the Federal City upon the re-election of their patriarch to Congress, and the boys had been well-tutored in their previous home.

The household consisted of the Colonel, a widower, his two boys, an older daughter, a dozen or so slaves, and several locally hired laborers. The daughter, whom I shall call Elizabeth, was a slight and quiet girl of sixteen. Elizabeth and I had little interaction in the first weeks of my employ, though when we did encounter one another, she often smiled, blushing, and demurely looked away. The quality of her upbringing was obvious—she was graceful and gracious, with delicate features and her father's fierce brow. She commanded slaves with the same firm yet courteous manner as her sire, and often curtsied when being introduced to a congressional member or other dignitary. She played the pianoforte and had a lilting singing voice. She often spent afternoons in the parlor reading or mastering some flourish of needlework.

Despite my position as a hireling, the Colonel and his children were warm and accepting people, and I was often treated as a member of the family. My sleeping quarters were in the house, tucked into the right rear corner of the building, behind the Colonel's study, the books of which I was given free access to. My room was simple

enough, yet lacked no creature comfort. I had a rather large bed, well-appointed, a highboy dresser for my personal effects, an armoire for hanging clothes and storing shoes, an easy chair, two oil lamps, and a small desk and chair. In one corner was a diminutive Franklin stove for warmth in winter. There was also a rocking chair in another corner and when I gathered the chairs together near the desk, I had the perfect area in which to tutor the boys. My room had two doors, one opening into the Colonel's study and another which led into the kitchen.

The household slaves were well-cared for and an addition had recently been built onto the main building for their comfort and domicile. The ell which housed the slaves branched perpendicularly to the main house and looked out upon a lovely bricked courtyard. There a large common table afforded outdoor meals in balmy weather, and several work tables provided space upon which to perform needed chores. The windows in the rear of the ell partook of the beauty of delicately tended gardens of vegetables, flowers, shrubs and trees which stood between the wall of the street and the dwelling. The most distant corner of the garden housed small shelters for chickens, rabbits and doves—both to serve as food and fertilizers of the soil. The Colonel's Washington City slaves had been carefully selected from the larger slave population at his country estate.

My charges, Henry and Walter, were quite boisterous boys, but I soon had them in tow. They were also quite bright, if spoiled, and soon their mutual competitiveness with one another had them fighting to best the other in the mastery of their lessons—a tendency I exploited to great advantage. It wasn't long before they rushed through breakfast to their studies, vying to best one another in Greek, Latin or the classics.

At the end of my second week there, the Colonel met with me one evening in his study to explain some of the rules of social behavior in Washington City. It was nearing October and the reconvening of Congress in December meant that many of the congressmen and senators were returning to the federal city and the social circuit that accompanied its convention. The Colonel wished to apprise me of both my place and my liberties. To that end, he described briefly the social events which took place frequently at the house. I was welcome to attend but needed to keep in mind my duties as tutor. He indicated that I should retire from the festivities early enough to obtain the rest required to fuel a busy mind in the morning. I was to avoid being seen in the alehouses, though he could recommend one or two which I might frequent with discretion, but should I need to satisfy any baser urges, I was to avail myself of the services of one of the slaves attached to the household, rather than be seen in the company of those unseemly adventuresses who frequented the public houses.

“I don’t encourage it,” he told me gravely, “but I understand that there are certain needs that sometimes must be satisfied. Be discrete and there’ll be no trouble.”

Immediately I denied any such inclinations, reassuring the Colonel that I had been raised in a devout Christian manner. I was certain he was offering such liberties as a test of my devotion to my faith and my worthiness as an instructor to his sons.

“Be that as it may, I shall look away from any minor transgressions as we have discussed here this night.” And with that, he poured me a brandy and offered me a fine Virginia cigar, both of which I accepted out of respect for the man. “You may find within yourself a certain...um... *fondness* for one or more of our girls,” he continued. “I, myself had a perfectly lovely distraction from my daily responsibilities in a girl, Sally.” He

ruminated a moment or two, drawing upon his cigar thoughtfully. “She was a good cook, too. Made the best ice cream.”

He sounded so wistful, I felt compelled to ask, “What happened to her?”

“Oh, in a moment of weakness, I allowed her to purchase her freedom. She had to leave her child, of course, but I have little expectation of Libby becoming the cook her mother was. The last I heard of Sally, she had gone to Wilmington and opened her own catering business. That was Sally, always enterprising.”

His demeanor shifted swiftly, indicating that there would be no more discussion on this topic. Instead our remaining conversation turned toward the instruction of the boys.

It soon became our habit to meet three or four times a week in his study following dinner, to discuss the day’s lessons or argue philosophy, until the brandy made us tired enough for sleep.

Typically, the day began early, shortly after sunrise, with the preparation of breakfast, usually Virginia smoked ham, fresh eggs, biscuits and coffee or tea. The kitchen was run by Dame, the eldest of the house slaves, and her daughter Lilah. Dame was an accomplished cook, one envied by many other households. It was rumored that she had worked for a time at Mount Vernon, hired out in her younger years to assist James Hemings in the preparation of lavish French meals for Jefferson’s many guests. She was a great mountain of a woman, a living testament to the quality and abundance of the fruits of her kitchen.

The house-servants—Celah and Lucy upstairs, and Molly downstairs, all overseen by Feba—were busy as soon as the residents arose from their beds, with changing and

washing clothing and sheets, dusting and polishing of furniture and floors. The three girls were Dame's youngest children by a slave who remained on the country estate. They were most energetic and strongly resembled one another, except for height. When they stood side-by-side, they recalled nothing more than precise stair-steps exactly one head apart—Molly, thirteen; Celah, fifteen; and Lucy, my age. Together they chattered and whispered, and kept the house scrupulously clean. Mirrors were washed each day, and fresh flowers in season were placed in vases round about.

Following breakfast, the boys and I retired to my room for several hours of study, reading, writing and debate. While we studied, the rest of the house flourished with activity.

After breakfast, servants then cleaned the kitchen and began preparations for dinner around noon, which might consist of roast beef, lamb, chicken or pork, vegetables steamed from the garden, potatoes or parsnips, and fruit in season. Dinner was often followed by a sweet dessert and tea or coffee, or lemonade on hot days. In the evening, there was tea around 6 p.m. with light sweet fare, and a light supper of cold meats, cheeses, and breads with butter around 9 or 10 in the evening. During the day, the slaves Roscoe and Lilah's husband Sam slopped the stables, cleaned the carriages, or repaired the livery. Benji, or Old Benjamin, tended the gardens and strapping Abraham shod the horses or fashioned other implements of iron, his ebony skin glistening from the constant heat of his employ.

Lincoln and Pharo, who was deaf but managed well in spite of this, ensured the windows were cleaned once a week, inside and out during clement weather, and inside only during cold or stormy times. These were the servants, too, responsible for various

errands. Pharo often acted as doorman, silent and stoic as a statue. Lincoln delivered important messages, and chauffeured the carriage.

Clothing was mended and laundry washed by Libby, a lithesome sixteen-year-old, and Dame and Lilah saw to it that bread was baked, and foodstuffs procured from various markets—the butcher, the grocer, the fruit-seller. Our environs were constantly abuzz with activity, but especially when the family planned a social event for the entertainment of Washington's elite.

It was a wondrous thing to see such a household at work. Under the Graves's care, there had been only us boys to see to all the daily tasks and there had been only the most basic of provisions. Here, all was glittering, lavish, extravagant and beautiful. The household servants all wore uniforms—smartly pressed and starched and clean. At first I found it discomfiting to be waited upon but soon came to accept my place in the order of things. I developed a great admiration for nearly all the slaves for their industriousness and courtesy. I soon found my favorite to be Libby, the little laundress, whose skin was nearly almond-colored. I often teased her and she soon became my pet; she was flattered by my attentions and it made me feel magnanimous to save her a sweet treat for when she came to collect my clothing to be washed or mended. Elizabeth, too, held her in special fondness, as they had grown up together and had once been playmates, being of the same age. In fact, she resembled Elizabeth with the same wondrous eyes and the firm set of her chin. I liked her, I think, because she too was an orphan of sorts. Though she had been born in the Colonel's household, after her mother gained her freedom to seek her fortune in Wilmington, Libby had no other known kin among the slaves.

Days when social events were planned were especially bustling, and deliveries throughout the day brought delicacies and extravagances such as French wines or Spanish olives or New England ice. Whole birds were roasted, fresh seafood procured from the closest docks, and ice cream was usually concocted for dessert. Pies and cakes and other delicacies were guarded carefully by Dame as they cooled on the kitchen windowsills through the afternoon.

By early evening, musicians would begin arriving with their instruments—usually set up near the pianoforte in the sitting room, where the furniture was pushed against the walls to make room for dancing. From there one could also hear the music in the dining room while eating or in the parlor across the hall, where the Colonel's guests mingled for drinks and conversation. The slaves Pharo, Lincoln, and Sam, dressed in bright red livery with white gloves and polished boots, greeted guests or served drinks on silver trays throughout the evening.

After the first gala event at the Colonel's home in mid-October, I became aware, through the gossip overheard, that there was more sin and scandal in Washington City than I could have imagined. It was apparent that many of our most illustrious gentlemen were sporting men, leaving their wives and families in their home districts so that they may more actively pursue the pleasantries of the capital city. Many of the attendees to these social gatherings were women employed as lobbyists, whose sole purpose was to convince congressional members of the merits of their employers' interests. Their "arguments" often consisted of entertaining their targets with the basest of activities, and the Colonel left strict instructions that all downstairs closets were to be closely watched to prevent any untoward dalliances. To be fair, these women were most often of a comely

and affectionate nature, but also shrewd and cunning in their manipulations. I was often amazed that their low moral character in no way diminished their beauty or their popularity, nor their acceptance into high society.

Conversely, many of the senators' and representatives' wives who were in attendance often flirted with any unattached men that may be about. Diplomats, ambassadors, male lobbyists, and other members of the Washington social elite were tolerated as companions to wives whose husbands, perhaps, neglected them, or daughters whose fathers' influence might be deemed esteemable.

During one such social event, I had become the target of a young socialite wife who had enjoyed too much wine. To avoid her, I ducked into the hallway behind the kitchen which led to the back stairs. A swinging door at the bottom of the stairs protected the space from view of the kitchen. There I encountered Elizabeth in the shadows, her face illuminated by a slant of light beaming in from around the door.

Startled at first, she turned and began to run up the steps. I caught her arm and shushed her, apologizing profusely in a whisper for frightening her. Quickly calming herself, she stood before me, shyly peeking at me from beneath her lashes.

"You'll not tell my father, will you?" she inquired.

"No, of course not, what is there to tell?" I asked.

"Eavesdropping," she whispered dramatically. "I'm not supposed to be eavesdropping."

"Oh, is that what you are about here in the hall?" I laughed, though my face had begun to burn and I was certain that my throat was on fire. "I...I only came in to avoid Mrs. P___."

Having been drawn into her pact of secrecy, I shared my own.

“Mrs. P___? Why, she’s a terrible flirt at these things. I’ve seen many a young man dodging her advances. Did she make you uncomfortable?” She peered up at me more boldly now, having seen my discomfiture, and no doubt noting my reddened cheeks.

“Ezra? Ezra?” Mrs. P___’s voice could be heard muffled through the door. Apparently she waylaid a cook or other servant. “Have you seen Mr. Bartleby?” we heard her inquire. I turned to step away from the door and nearly bumped into Elizabeth who was peering around me to peek through the doorjamb.

Standing there in the hallway viewing her lovely visage in the darkened portal, I felt my self-discipline waver. I took a step forward. She took a step back and encountered the staircase with her heels, falling suddenly onto the stairs. I grabbed for her to break her fall, but only succeeded in falling atop her, one knee to her right, the other buried in her skirt between her warm legs. I had gotten hold of her forearm and my hand was now firmly clutched around her wrist and pressed tightly against her bosom, held there by my own weight.

I immediately feared a disastrous consequence such as her father opening the hallway door or her yelping in fear, but none such occurred. Instead she lay beneath me a brief moment, panting slightly, her small mouth open, her eyes glistening. I felt my body responding to this sensual contact but quickly regained my feet and helped her up.

“Forgive me, young mistress,” I said. “I only meant to come to your aid.” I tugged my waistcoat and turned slightly away, lest my condition be revealed.

She fussed about her skirt, smoothing it with her pale hands. “Oh, it’s quite aright. I’ve only my own clumsiness to blame.”

We stood a moment more before she hastily bade me goodnight and retreated up the back stairs. I stayed a few moments in that darkened hallway, regaining my composure before returning to the party to bid my own goodnights. My socialite had moved onto more accessible prey.

Not long after, when the guests had moved on to another social affair, and the Colonel and I had finished our evening brandies and cigars, I lay in my bed, restless, my body yearning with memory at her touch. In due time, I drifted into sleep.

The moment in the hallway with Elizabeth haunted my dreams for the next several days and I had found myself making excuses to cross paths with her during the day. I saw her several times that week, and her grace and radiance seemed to illuminate all the dark places of my soul. Her countenance glowed in my mind’s eye and, one evening not long after, befogged a bit by the brandy, I found I could not sleep. I arose to stroll the gardens, hoping the air would clear my thoughts and invite me finally to rest. The weather was still holding onto autumn’s temperate mood; winter had not yet threatened to break upon us. The air was crisp and the stars clear above the now leafless trees.

To get to the gardens, I left my chamber through its rear door (next to the door to the back stairs), crossed the kitchen and exited the house into the courtyard. At the end of the courtyard was a gate leading into the garden, which wrapped around the west and north sides of the building. As I neared the gate, a figure emerged from the garden, carrying something. There was more light in the courtyard than in the garden proper, as

several whale-oil lamps hung suspended from wrought iron hooks set into the stone sides of the building. The small figure was that of my little Libby, who had been gathering some produce from the vegetable patch.

“Oh!” she squealed upon encountering me. “You frightened me, Master B!”

I thought briefly of the Colonel and Libby’s mother, Sally. Perhaps they, too, had met in the darkness of a evening stroll.

“I was going to take a walk in the garden,” I said. I looked at her in the moonlight. She was quite pretty, and she had a bewitching way of walking, something I noticed especially when she carried the laundry basket upon her hip. She was one of the girls whom the Colonel had said might be at my disposal, though I had eschewed this pursuit thus far. But that night, with Elizabeth blazing in my mind and my body, I found myself stepping in close to Libby and sliding my arm around her waist. “Come,” I whispered. “Walk with me.”

I felt emboldened by our fond relationship and her possible kinship to Elizabeth. “But I have to take these carrots to Dame for tomorrow,” she protested weakly.

“Here. Put the carrots down on this worktable and you can pick them up on your way back. It’ll only be a few minutes.”

With teasing reluctance and a pouty lip, Libby placed the armful of carrots on the table. Putting her head down to watch her feet in the darkness, she accompanied me through the wrought iron gate and into a far corner of the garden, where there was a bench beneath a great tree. My eyes quickly became accustomed to the darkness; I have always had excellent night-vision.

“Here,” I said. “Sit and let me look at you.”

She sat obediently and I moved closer to her face.

“I can barely see you. Here. Let me have a feel of you.”

She continued to sit obediently as I traced the shape of her face and her neck.

Soon, I had begun to explore beneath her chemise. She whimpered a bit in false protest.

Thus encouraged, I continued my explorations. I untied the chemise to reveal her breasts and mapped their contours and extrusions with my fingers, pinching and squeezing. Such a lovely feeling of fullness does a breast make in a man’s hand. So soft and yielding, the body of the girl gave way to my ministrations.

“Come, sit on my lap,” I encouraged her. “Feel what you have awakened.”

She demurely refused, continuing with her tempting façade of resistance. She must have been experienced at such things, to inflame my passions so. I played her little game and drew her close to me despite her resistance. I took her mouth to mine to quiet her and soon had her pushed up against the brick wall of the garden, my hands beneath her thighs and buttocks as she moved up and down against me. She squealed again when I penetrated her, so that I was forced to kiss her to muffle her mewlings of delight. When I found my own pleasure rising, I had to kiss her again to silence my own grunts of pleasure.

Afterward, I helped her to retie her chemise and arrange her clothing. In the darkness I brushed her face and found it was wet with tears of joy.

“Ah, my little Libby,” I cooed. “I, too, enjoyed our meeting this evening,” I assured her. “We shall do this again, soon, I promise.” She merely sat, still and silent, while I rubbed her shoulder with one arm.

“Come,” I beckoned for the last time that evening. “I shall walk you to your door.”

I guided her back through the little gate to the carrots waiting on the table. “Here, take these to Dame for tomorrow’s supper and all is well. See? I told you it would only be a few minutes. Be a good girl until I see you next.” I kissed the top of her fuzzy hair, and after repenting my sin in prayer, retired to a good night’s sleep.