

John Hanson Mitchell

An excerpt from the novel INDIAN SUMMER

Chapter Two - Totem

Journal Entry: 1966

Black Bear, *Ursus americanus*

Length to 6 feet. Height at shoulder, to 3 feet to 3 feet 5 in.; weight of adult males to 500 lb, rarely 600lb. Female smaller. Black or cinnamon with a white throat patch. Sometimes all brown, brown bear being merely a phase of black bear. Snout rather long, tail short. Flat-footed. Inquisitive. Not normally vicious but never really trustworthy if opposed. Teeth, I 3/3 C1/1 P 4/4 M 2/3.

E. Laurence Palmer
Field Book of Natural History,

"Get over heah you dumb you.."

Our farm hand, Pansy, was having trouble in the cow barn again. He always had trouble in the cow barn. There wasn't one of our fine boned little Jerseys that liked him. They swayed against him, pinning him to the boards, they refused to let down their milk, they slapped their tails in his eyes, and stomped his foot with deadly accuracy.

Poor old Pansy. He'd been around since before I was born, a state charge who was raised by the Sheridans across the road who took him as a boy from the orphanage, not because they wanted a child, they had plenty, but because they needed more free help on the farm. Pansy, his real name was originally P. Anson, or something like that, grew up to be a huge, shambling man with pale blue eyes and a thin shock of silky white hair. Sheridan never sent him to school, as required, and the only thing Pansy knew was farm work, and he was poor at that. Papa hired him away from Sheridan out of pity, gave him a furnished room that was once a studio of one of our eccentric aunties who fancied herself a painter, and, unlike Sheridan, paid him a stipend, plus room and board. Pansy was intensely loyal to us.

"Gimme a hand heah, Hannah, I'm getting nowhere with nothing."

I came over and hooked the machine onto Feisty, and then moved down the line, checking the girls. God, I hated that work. It was better when Papa imagined himself a market gardener. I much preferred weeding carrots in the hot sun to this hellish work in cow barns. My only consolation was that I knew it was coming to an end. No money in it, and Papa was talking about specialty crops.

"Strawberries," he was saying that summer. "We're going into strawberries next year. It's what the people want. Any damn fool can get milk.."

Pansy was a slow mover and not a great talker but he loved the local gossip.

"Heah about the highway coming through?" he asked.

This was old news by now, people had been talking about the highway for a year.

"Yes, I know about it." I said. "It's the last thing we need around here. Only good thing is it will make it easier to get out of this godforsaken town."

"You leaving again?" he asked.

Pansy had never been out side of Scratch Flat for all I knew. He didn't have a driver's licence and I do believe he was illiterate.

"Pest," he shouted. "Get ovah you dumb you." Darla hip-checked him into a stancion. "All my life I hate cows. Now your father's gotta have cows."

Out beyond the barn the traffic from New Hampshire was building on the Great Road. The roosters had ceased their crowing, the June sun was beginning to raise the flies over the manure piles, and from the four

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Scratch Flat farms there was a collective odor of fresh cut hay and tilled earth. I went out beyond the cow yard and looked up across the rising fields to the dark island of the hemlock grove, the all absorbing woods and the low ridge that crossed the northeastern boundary of our property. My whole world was contained there.

You can get here from Boston if you can handle country roads. There's a numbered highway out of Concord, the old Great Road, and if you don't mind getting stuck behind slow moving hay trucks, or dumb locals in beat up cars, you'll manage. No one ever knows they're passing Scratch Flat when they come through here, it's just a stretch of Great Road with the wide flood plains of the Beaver Brook to the east, the ridge with the hemlock grove above it, and the rolling fields of the farms west of the ridge to the town line at Groton. You would never know you had arrived at the center of the known world.

This square mile section of the planet has the curious habit of setting itself afloat above the currents of everyday life. It is seemingly well anchored in history, but its story is so tied up with Pawtucket legend and apocryphal European histories it's hard to know which is real and which is fantasy.

Six hundred years ago, long before Columbus was heard of, the Scottish seafarer, Sir Hugh Sinclair, fresh from the Orkneys, poled up the tributaries of the Merrimack River and set his mark in the image of a carved knight cut into a stone just north of the Beaver Brook marshes. The flat stone, with the punched hole armorial is still there, shield, wheel-pommel sword and all.

Before that a Pawtucket shaman who lived a thousand years used to inhabit the forested slopes of the ridge above Beaver Brook. Tom Dublet says this man could fly through trees and could transform himself into a bear if he so chose. He died about a hundred years before the English came. In fact it was his own people who killed him. The shaman was living in his bear being at the time, disguised as a young cub. One day he was feeding on grubs not far from the ridge where the hemlock grove is located when he was surprised by a group of Pawtucket hunters. Rather than kill him, the hunters tied a vine around his neck and led him

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to their village. He was placed in a surround of staves. When he grew up, he was told, he was to marry the daughter of the sachem of that hunting band, a girl of about fourteen named Squannah, who had fat rosy cheeks and almond eyes.

The bear man was fed well. He lived in a hut in the enclave and received the first servings of berries and corn, the bones of deer and whole raccoons and tom cods. All the while he could have changed himself into a man but he continued in his bear state, fattening comfortably. When he was two years old his marriage day arrived.

Squannah was reluctant to wed, she ran into the distant forest and hid for three days, But they came and got her and took her to the village and dressed her in feathers and shells and greased her body and her black braids with the fat of bears killed in the spring in their dens. They dressed bear as well. He wore a collar of braided vines and was led to the center of the village and tied to a stake. He growled and struggled and swiped the air, but all along he knew his fate. They shot hickory arrows fletched with sharp-shinned hawks into the flesh of his back, and they began to sing and shuffle around him in a dance, right heel, left heel, the drums throbbing slowly. Squannah was led out and set in front of him, and while the two faced each other, two warriors in masks came out and delivered to coup de grace to bear. He slumped over, they cut off his head, carried it to his hut and set it on a stone altar they had constructed. They placed berries and corn in his mouth and then locked Squannah in the hut with him. Three days later they carried his head into the forest. They dug a hole and then one of the bear priests broke off his lower jaw, placed it on top of his skull and then placed a flat stone over his head and jaw.

This much you will not see written in the traditional histories of this town. You must know Tom Dublet to hear this. But English records of this spot are thorough, having been set down at an early date in order to assure, by English law, that piece of world which belonged in fact to no person, would be forever England.

Tom Dublet knew better.

John Eliot, the so-called apostle of the Indians, established a Christian village here at Nashoba Plantation in 1645, but no one in our time has ever found the site. Tom Dublet, who knew Eliot personally, and who was converted by him in fact, says it is one mile southeast of his weir, at the northwest corner of the lake we call Nagog. In Eliot's time strange roarings emanated from the lake and the surround of hills. The English avoided the place. The Indians knew the sound was only the groans of the wood giant, Marshope, trapped inside the hill. There was a public swimming beach there in the 1950s, but a few years ago a boy drowned in the lake and the authorities closed the beach. It was not missed, no one wanted to go there after the drowning.

Even after the arrival of the English, there were Indian wars with Mohawks. During one of these wars, in 1650, just at the spot where Tom Dublet has his fish weir, Tom's father, John Thomas Goodman, was killed by Mohawks, who subsequently ate him during a ceremony to celebrate their victory over the non warlike Pawtuckets. English protectors took heed, rounded up the Christian men, women and children of Nashoba Plantation and put them under their protection near Concord until the Mohawks returned to the west.

They took the Christian Indians away again a few years later, during the war with King Philip, also for protection. But this time it was themselves they were saving since it was their belief that any person with reddish skin, whether Christian or heathen, was suspect. Be it said that the warring Indians under King Philip felt the same way about their brothers and sisters who had converted to Christianity. But all this is Tom's dilemma. How do you survive? How does one go about preserving a culture? A time? A place?.

I finished cleaning up in the cow barn and got my book and curled up on the swing of the front porch, but Mr. Wilely W. Wright III came by just as I was settling in. Reverend Wiley W. Wright III, as he would prefer to be known. He pulled into the drive and walked over to the front steps with that studied air of his and stood with one leg on the middle step. He had fairy blue eyes and blond hair, cut short, and he was wearing Bermuda shorts and loafers with no socks.

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"Came to tell you about my new car," he said. "I'm picking it up Saturday morning, and it's a gem."

"A gem," I said. "You mean it's made of stone?"

He didn't catch it.

"Impala, '58, rag top no less. Rio red, 348 tri power, 280, four barrel carb. Positraction rear. You'll love it, Hannah."

He spun the keys of his old blue Chevy, and looked over his shoulder as a fast-moving car wailed by on the Great Road.

"Dog," he pronounced. "Mine's got dual antennas, spinner hubs. White walls. And get this, Hannah, continental kit."

He paused for a reaction and went on without prompting.

"Power windows and seats. Wonderbar radio with rear speakers. I'm telling you this baby's going to give the guys down at Johnson's Dairy a run for their money. But hey, Hannah, you want to come out with me Saturday for a spin? You know. I'll have the new car. And I thought of you. You'll love it."

I hated cars, and Wiley knew it, but he was too limited to understand the depth of my revulsion.

Wiley W. Wright III was an earnest divinity student whose original sin was an unbounded fascination with cars. It was his announced intention to marry me; he would propose at least once a month, and once a month I would explain that I was not ready to marry but that when I was I would consider him. There was nothing wrong with Wiley and his good cherry cheeks and his polite behavior and his dashing, stylish clothes and his private moments on the front porch when he would lean forward and speak solemnly of "his mission." But ninety percent of the time he was tedious. He didn't listen to people. Even though he would tilt his head and fix your eye and nod in agreement, I knew he wasn't really paying attention -- probably thinking about cars. I knew him all too well. We

grew up together and I'd seen him kill frogs and throw snowballs loaded with rocks. One would have to be old and lonely to marry such a man. And anyway, there was the reality of Mary-Louise.

"Suspended by God," she used to say when I would share with her my thoughts on Tom Dublet's ability to bring us all together here in a singular place in a singular time. "The wonderworks of the Lord, child, and who are we to question how or why He suspends the time and causeth we two to come together here in this heathen's den."

Mary-Louise seemed to be at a remove from detail, she took everything in stride, as if all the things that were happening to us were part of some marvelous, unknowable tapestry that her God was weaving for his own unknowable entertainment. Her problem was that her acceptance of things that were beyond the doctrine of her people got her into trouble.

In the end they accused her of witchcraft.

The hemlock grove above our land was the place where Mary-Louise used to meet Nompenekit and Pokaunah, the bear. It was the place where Mingo used to hide while he tried to make up his mind whether to run away from Mr. Cogswell. It was the place I myself used to go to think in the years before I actually met Tom Dublet and his troop.

I went up there after Wiley left so I could get away from Pansy and my father. Whenever either of them saw me lounging around the porch they would always ask me to help them with something.

On the slopes on either side of the ridge, the summer sun had flooded everything to a near white out. Looking back over the terraced fields of my father's farm I could see the shimmering waves of light rising off the new crop of field corn, but ahead of me, in the dark hemlocks, all light seemed to have been absorbed. I waited outside for a few minutes, the sun on my back, and then I went in.

It was always cool in the grove even in summer and there was a special quality to the atmosphere there. Much of this I knew had to do with the fact that I knew by that time that this place had served as a retreat for the

various refugees of Scratch Flat for more than five hundred years.

There was a large tree almost at the center of the grove with a cleared space at the base. I sat down and leaned against its trunk. The air was dead still, one of those summer afternoons when nothing moves.

Outside the grove, even though they must have been yards away I could hear the occasional buzz of a fly, and somewhere over toward the lake, a lazy red-eyed vireo was calling. Other than that all time might have ceased beyond the confines of the dark circle of trees. Did I fall asleep? I never could tell whether I would sleep when he called. I only know that he only came, or I only went, when I was in a dreamy, free state of mind. I heard the flies, the call of the vireo, and then Mingo was there, leaning against one of the hemlocks, one foot propped against the trunk, a sassafras twig in his mouth.

"Where's Tom?" I asked.

"He's at the weir today, sent me here to fetch you down."

He came over and sat in front of me.

"Mess of problems back there, today. Cogswell on a ramp," he said.

Cogswell had beaten him again because he had failed to finish weeding the squash in the homelot. Mingo and Cogswell's children, Adam and Eve, were great friends and would often undermine the strict bylaws of the old man whenever they could. The three of them had quit the garden that day and had snuck off to the lake below the ridge to cool themselves.

The old man kept everyone at work, his own children and his slave alike, in fact he drove the children harder than he drove Mingo and beat them as readily. Mingo was relatively well-treated. He slept in a loft of his own above the summer kitchen, and he ate at the table with the family and sat by the big fireplace on winter evenings. He shared the stolen pleasures with Cogswell's children.

All three had been staffed when their transgression was discovered, the girl and boy in private. Mingo in public.

"But they be his children," said Mingo, "and that's his right. I'm Mingo the African, and ee'n though he done buy my body, he do not own my soul."

"You're a freeman in the end," I said.

Mingo had been thinking about running away for a number of years, but he didn't know where to run to, nor what he would do with himself once he was free. He had a way of engaging in dialogues with himself in order to think things through. "If Mingo leaves this place, where will he eat?" he would ask. Then he would proceed to answer, posing new questions and difficulties, and also new opportunites. "I leave this place, no man shall beat me no more, not ever. Not Cogswell, not nobody." "What will you eat Mingo? I say." "I will catch the rabbit." "What about the wintertime, Mingo?"

Tom Dublet had told him he could free himself from Cogswell if he could get the money since there was a standing law in his time that permitted slaves to buy their freedom. But this introduced an even more complicated issue. He couldn't figure out how to get the money since to get paid he had to get free time, and idle time to Cogswell was Devil's time. Mingo worked more or less steadily for Cogswell, except on winter evenings.

Mingo was about my age, and about my size, small for a man, and I never saw skin like his on Negroes around here. It was as smooth as velvet and there was not an ounce of fat upon his body, he was all sinew and muscle. But he was as gentle as a deer and a thinking man in the end. He danced and jerked and played the fool, but down in the root of things he lived with conviction.

We went down the hill to the weir after that and helped Tom fish. The spring run was still on and periodically, as the fish would come up against the woven basketry of the rig Tom had stretched across the stream, Mingo and I flipped them up onto the shore and put them in a basket Tom had given us. Later he would filet them and dry the meat on racks outside his hut.

Mingo was standing waist deep in the water while we were talking, and he had stripped off his shirt.

"Poor Eve get whipped as well yesterday by her papa," he said.

He dipped under with his arms and flipped a tomcod up on the shore. I gripped it, and threw it in the basket, where it slapped around on the other fish bodies. I could see jeweled brook water pearling on Mingo's shoulders and back.

"She meet that man Enoch from over the Lawrence farm. They were kissing again, so say the Old Man. He whup her hard. She cry on my shoulder, and I said, 'stay clear o' me girl lest I get beat too'."

Enoch Pratt was a farm hand who lived over the hill from Cogswell on the Lawrence holding which was, in my time, the place owned by our neighbor Sheridan. The main house where he lived had burned in 1922. Up until that time it was the oldest house in the town.

"Someday Hannah Barnes, if there is a just God in heaven, Old Man going to get a bad turn."

"Don't count on it Mingo. If there is such a thing as a God, I don't believe he's fair-minded. God loves dirty tricks"

"Don't you say that 'round me Hannah. Brimstone rain down and hit me too, a just man."

"If you're a just man and there is a just God up in heaven, what are you -- who never whipped so much as an ox --- doing working as the slave for a man with a free hand with the lash?"

"They tell me, reading from the Book, ours is not to know the ways of the Lord, Hannah."

"That's so you'll keep on working for the Old Man."

"Stand back, Mingo," he shouted. "Here come the fire!"

He laughed aloud. He always closed his eyes tight and shook his head when he laughed, as if he were trying to get rid of something inside his head.

"I'm waiting," I said.

"Lord God going to strike, girl."

"Been waiting since I was sixteen years old. Strike me dead God." I raised my arms to the open sky. "If you're up there, strike me dead in my tracks."

"He going to get you when you want most to live," Mingo said.

He wasn't smiling anymore.

Fish gleamed in the water. Skin gleam. The running waters swirled and gurgled through Tom's weir. Forget-me-not, with its tiny blue eyes, winked among the bullrushes. Woodducks winged overhead, whistling. I looked down at Mingo waist deep in the brook. Bits of duckweed and the burrs of rushes had caught in his crinkly black hair. He was staring down intently into the dark waters at the weir, like an otter or a water snake. Then he darted, the flash of arms, a ripple of muscle across his back, his two hands groping in the sinuous currents.

"Mandinga!" he shouted and rose up from the surface with a struggling fish body. This was not, as far as I knew, the traditional way to catch fish at a weir. The Indians simply scooped them out with nets. But Mingo seemed to enjoy catching them individually.

"Let me try to catch a few," I said. I kicked off my shoes and started to undo my jeans and then changed my mind and waded in fully clothed.

A fish surged against the basketlike saplings of the weir. I plunged in and groped around for it, felt its slippery body and then lost it. Mingo

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grabbed beside me and missed it as well. He plunged again, straightened, and then slipped as he righted himself. I reached out and grabbed his arm but the two of us went over side by side into the stream.

For a minute we stood there, drenched. Then he dove in again and swam downstream a little, turned, and, standing shoulder-deep, fixed my eye without a word. I was waist deep at the weir, my shirt plastered to my body, and suddenly, under that wide, timeless sky, I felt self-conscious.

Journal Entry: 1966 HRB

In 1713 Capt. Joseph Vesey --- commanding a slaver sailing between St. Thomas and San Domingo --- took on board a cargo of 390 Negroes, including among them a boy of 14 of great beauty, alertness and intelligence. Vesey and the officers made a pet of the boy, taking him into the cabin, fitting him out in new clothes.... Arriving at San Domingo, Vesey had no further use [of him] and sold him with the rest of the slaves.

James Hamilton Jr. in *Negro Plot*, Boston, 1822

Bears are famous omnivores. The North American Indians who hunted, co-habitated, spoke with, danced with, married, and worshiped the black bear, knew all the food preferences of their fellow woodland traveler and would commonly take advantage of its feeding habits in order to facilitate meetings --- for whichever purpose. Though the black bear is primarily vegetarian, it will not refuse and always appreciates a hefty meal of meat, whether fresh-killed or carrion. Insects, small mammals and even a weak or wounded white-tailed deer are also consumed. Berries and other fleshy fruits, mast, including acorns, beechnuts, and pine seeds are staples. Honey and apples are considered a prime delicacy. Analysis of droppings, according to various articles in the *Journal of Mammology*, indicate consumption of the following plants in varying degrees and seasons: apple, blackgum, grape, chokecherry, greenbrier (winter) blueberry, hawthorne (summer) Oak, cherry, beech (autumn).

In winter they sleep.

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Traditionally bears destroy livestock, including calves, colts, piglets and shotes. They also raid beehives. Mammalogists, ever hopeful of vindicating the beast show scant records. But in this town there is a history of raids. To wit:

A T Newhall: 1660. Three shotes: Lst to bear

Jonathan Hartwell: 1676 Said complainant reported much growling & howling at homelot Thurs last. [April]. In the morning he found that a Varmint had dragged and half Consumed a bully calf, rending the Hindquarter all asunder in a most dispecable manner. [This could have been wolves since wolves were present in this town as late a 1710].

Barnaby Dodge: 1678 Bears kill for calf.

Barnaby Dodge: 1678 [autumn] Bears wreaked havoc in orchards and taking three shotes after having smashed through the walls of sty and cribbage.

Barnaby Dodge: 1679 [spring] Said bear was shot, having first mauled to death JASON the haw ox. He was skinned and His Head was displayed onto a pole in warning to Fellow Bears. Meat distributed to Tom Indian and John seamam. [Dodge holding was at the northwestern edge of Scratch Flat beyond Forge Pond on the Westford line, which, in his time, was more or less a frontier. This is the same general area in which the Indian Nompenekit was last seen. As late as the nineteenth century, the tract was said to be "haunted" by dead Indians.]

J. Whitcomb: 1680 Killed bear raiding hogs.

J. whitcom: 1680 Kill three bare raiding orchards.

Anson Williard: 1682 Seen bear in cowyard

J Whitcombe: 1682 summoned to kill bear at Rafael Green but animal had slain two calve tearing throat of said: Was tracked to N. by NW to banks at Forge Pond, thence into the water, No sign thereof.

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R. Green 1682 Bear sign in cowyard.

R. Green 1682 shot 1st to bare.

J. Whitcombe 1690 Large bear reported rading orchards J. Cogswell, Seen in homelot Thurs, 25 April. Seen at Beaver Brook. the following monday. Was tracked by me, n. along brook. Lost. Tracks entered water.

From the journal of Tanbark Cooper, 1701 - 1711, Lytleton.

October 10, 1701: Went hunting today with old Jeremiah Whticomb and son Charles. A Very large Bear was spotted yesterday by Joel Proctor at the Groaten Ford. W. and I tracked said Beast to orchard w. of Cogswell wherein said bear did rake many trees with its claws and leave his droppings of excrement. This bear was very large it track did not appear again.

Novemer 5, 1703: Today I found a Hole underneath a fallen Tree at Williams on Hog End. There were many scraping and sign of Bear and I believe one is Asleep, even now.

November 10, 1703: Thomas Goodman sayes to me that in the Past his people would mark the Bear's Den where he sleepeth with a stick in Autumn. In spring they would return, when they were hungry and Dig Him Out.

November 20. Snow. I went to said Hole and did see yellow coloration in the fresh snow. Thomas Goodman sayes it is the Breath of the Sleeping Bear.

December 20, I marked Bear's Den with a stick today will check.

January 12, 1704 My Marker hath disappear but I placed Anothert Stick in front of the Hole. There is no yellowing of His Breath.

January 18, 1704 There is a warming trend. Wind in s. e and very warm as

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in the Spring and Bees are flying here and there. January, 19 Warming is on still and today C. Whitcomb and I went over to Bear's Den. Snow slushed and wet we found his hole and marks of yellow from his spirations. I replaced the stick.

February, 10 Today I walked to Hog End and went to William farm where the bears hole is located. His Hole was still there and also My Marker Stick untouched. A stench proceedeth from out of here and Williams hears noyse emanating but not I.

February 15 At Beaver Brook near J. Proctor's Today. I spoke with Thomas Goodman and he asked me about My Bear. I told him I had seen its hole five days past and he said that I Ought Watch more Carefully. now they will think about emerging and Test the Weather and if things be Propitious he says They Will Cease Their Sleep. He tol me also to be careful because in this season the bear is feisty and given to rages. Also hungry.

February 18. Yellowing breath still evident at the bear Hole.

February 22. Went to Bear Hole, Yellow snow. My stick There still.

March 2, 1704 Williams, C. Whitcomb and I prepared today to Dig Out Bear. With loaded guns and pick we proceed in a line with ox to the Den to dig Him Out and Butcher Him. On arrival we found many scratching and My Stick knocked over, but the yellow breath of snow was still in evidence. The Ground was too Hard to pick at and we Heard no Noyes.

March 4, We back to the Bear Hole today, but HE was not in evidence. In the old snow were His Tracks and also some fecal matter of his droppings. C. Whitcomb found some Tracks and followed but in due time he lost them. He said it was a female and Her Cubs.

March 11. I told newes of Bear to Thomas Goodman and he sayd "You must stay at its hole in the last days of his slep." J. Proctor sayes he thinks T. Goodman is in private Happy that I did not catch Him, although he will not say so, to us.