

John Hanson Mitchell

An excerpt from the novel INDIAN SUMMER

Chapter Three – Divinity

Journal Entry: January 6, 1962

This is Twelfth Night. Mary-Louise says on this night, the animals can talk. She told this story to Bulkeley:

“Once upon a time there was a very rich king who had everything a king could want including a beautiful young daughter. But he was a wasteful king and he taxed his people and squandered his wealth until his towns became poor and his riches dwindled and he found himself with only an old castle at the edge of a dark wood.

“One day the king decided to go hunting by himself. So he filled his pockets with potatoes and left the castle gates and entered into the forest where nobody dared to go. The trees were large and dark there, and in the sombered undergrowth terrible things lived, bears and eagles and wolves. The king found no game and after he had walked for a while he sat down under a vasty tree to eat his potatoes. But no sooner had he sat himself down then a mighty bear appeared, ‘How dare you sit under my honey tree?’ it growled. ‘I’m going to have to eat you now.’

“The king offered up his potatoes. But the bear spurned them. The king pleaded with the bear and finally it said, ‘If you give me your daughter in marriage I won’t eat you.’ The king agreed. Then the bear showed the king the way out of the forest and said he would come for his prize in seven days.

“The king went back to his castle. He had no intention of allowing his daughter to marry a bear. So he locked all the doors and gates and placed his daughter in a high tower above the courtyard. On the seventh day a marvelous golden carriage appeared outside the gates. The king was impressed, and admitted the carriage and a handsome prince emerged and introduced himself as Henri de Bern, Prince of Boisvert.

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The king, being impressed by such frivolities, admitted the prince and even ordered a feast in his honor. But that night, after the jongleurs has fallen silent, the Prince and the king's daughter fell into conversation. The Prince told the young lady stories of his country, of springs and greenwood and magical lakes where water sprites lived. And when, towards dawn, the Prince offered to take her there, she went with him.

The king heard the heavy gates swing open and leaped from his bed to the casement window. He saw the carriage with his daughter, and as he watched, he saw the carriage turn toward the dark forest."

Bulkeley was worried by this story.

"Come on back now, Hannah," my mother used to say when she would see me drift off from the dull conversations on our front porch. "We're not so boring that you have to daydream so."

They were. They all were, Wiley W. Wright III not the least. On the surface this whole town was so boring and so flat that people there actually thought my family was interesting. All they knew is that we were a little different and that my father had been to Harvard and had come back here, to his family's summer place, and turned himself into an orchardist, and then a truck farmer, and then finally in his latest, most entirely boring iteration, a dairy farmer.

The town knew my mother read books and never put up food. They knew I read more books than my mother and listened to funny music and didn't date the doltish boors of this doltish town, except for Wiley, and then only because he was occasionally, although rarely, entertaining.

They knew my father hated shoes and walked barefooted from April to November and sometimes wore a necktie to milking.

They didn't know that he drank whiskey and that he smashed furniture in Mum's bedroom sometimes and that the two of them slept apart for God knows how many years and that my father preferred the back room – his so called study – to any bedroom on earth.

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The only one who wasn't boring was my old grandfather who retired to this place in 1949 to brood over his books under the elms beside the main house. I used to sit beside him cross-legged on the grass, braiding daisy chains while he held forth on life and literature and the failures of the modern poets.

Ours was one of those New England families in decline. One of my Barnes forebears who held land on Scratch Flat had produced among his many offspring one business genius, a man named Rodgers Barnes who made too much money in the paper business in Maine in the mid nineteenth century. He was an intensely moral, upright Puritan type who produced three dilettantes by way of children, one of whom was my grandfather. Grandpa had studied medicine and even practiced for a while before he gave it up to follow his first love, which was the study of Romance languages. He held a few teaching posts, did some translations, and then, in his dotage, became obsessed with the breakdown of language and poetry. He grew his hair, moved to one of the many outbuildings on the farm and ended up speaking in gibberish, a combination of several languages which no one understood except me and that only because I was too young to know what he was talking about anyway.

He would occasionally get swept into his own reveries and stand up in front of his chair in the yard, cane aloft, spouting passages from Dante to passing cars. When he took to peeing off the front porch in full view of the road, my parents packed him off to a nursing home in Concord.

After I got my license I was the only one who would visit him. I used to tie his favorite old dog to a rope and take him down with me. We two would pad down the clean washed halls to the darkened room at the end of the building where grandpa lived in banishment. He would make a great fuss over the dog and merely glare at me with his terrible, predatory eyes. I do believe he ranked me with the conspiracy that imprisoned him. He loved old books, strong black coffee, and enjoyed a taste of whiskey as much as my father, I used to sneak him little half pints now and then which he would drink from a paper cup by the half light of his heartless metal-framed window. After just a few sips he

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would loosen up and begin his rants.

"Don't bear the common dross, girl," he said when I told him Wiley W. Wright wanted very much to marry me. "Life should burn with a hard, gemlike flame. There in the deep heart's core, you will hear it."

After I met Tom Dublet, Grandpa's rants made sense to me. I told him about our meetings at the weir. I remember when I first explained to him what had happened and how I met Tom and his troop and how I sensed their presence everywhere on Scratch Flat even in normal, everyday life, he simply nodded and grunted and fixed my eye.

"'Time past and time future are all contained in time present' to quote one of your lesser modernists," he said.

"You're not surprised?"

"Maladicta questa light," he said, turning to the window. "Who placed me in the black hole of Calcutta, girl? You or your father?" He spun back to face me, "'That patch of blue, which prisoners call the sky'"

"I mean, Grandpa, I actually go there among those people from 'time past' as you say. I even eat there with them. And old Indian. Ralph Waldo Emerson's brother. A Puritan woman."

"Well what so strange about that?" he asked, "Better there than here. I can tell you that much."

He reached down for the dog's head, his boney hands groping through the fur. It was a Springer spaniel named Balboa and the dog was probably older than grandpa, hideous drooping eyes, tangled, liver-spotted hair, and always slavering on things.

"Man's best friend," grandpa mumbled sadly. "Companero" he said to the dog. "Da me la mano. Where'd you get this dog, girl?"

"He's yours grandpa. It's Balboa."

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"Oh yes, Balboa, ricordo. I remember you. I thought he died?"

"No that was Vasco da Gama." Grandpa named all his male dogs after explorers. "He died just before you came down here."

"Where am I? If I might be so bold as to ask."

"This is Hilltop House. It's place for old people to live."

"Oh yes. Father was in here yesterday, I believe. I was in the field when he came by with the dogs. I told him I wouldn't be coming up to the mill this summer, as he had planned. Giving up on all that, you know. Frankly I have no interest whatsoever in the function of business."

"When was this?" I asked. Grandpa's father died in 1916.

"Yesterday. I was up in the north field. He came up with the dogs and I knew he wanted to deliver one of his infernal moral pronouncements. Steeled myself, don't you know, I told him the news. I'd been thinking about it for quite a while in point of fact."

His hands went back to the dog's head. Balboa shifted on his haunches and looked over at me.

"I had a dream about the Kaiser last night. We were to meet on the football field, just the two of us. We were to put an end to this nasty business..." He glared at me again. "Who are you, if I might ask?"

"I'm Hannah Rodgers Barnes, your own granddaughter and I was born on Scratch Flat in the year of our Lord 1942."

"Je sais bien. Tu crois que je suis bete?"

"Mais non. Vieux peut'etre. Mais pas bete."

"You're Andrew's daughter. Boy never was any good. I could see that by his fifth year. I said to the Kaiser, these are but weasels, fighting in a hole. Blue sky above, green of the field below us. Dreamed in color

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again, and he was all decked in medals and leather boots, and I was in scuffed knickers."

He looked down at his pants and then looked up at me. He seemed a little surprised.

"Kaiser regarded me mit that haughty Germanic aire, and I knew then that the war was over, and I had got them better of him, see. When I woke up Marge was nursing Andrew."

He tried to stand up at this point. I helped him out of his chair, and he straightened himself and saluted the wall, eyes fixed at a spot just in front of him.

I do believe Grandpa had been dismissed from the Army on account of ill-health.

He sat down heavily, and his hand groped again for the dog. Then he stiffened and leaned toward me, ghostly blue eyes searching my face.

"Would you like a little bit of wisdom from an old man?"

"Indeed."

"Lasciate ogni speranza..."

Journal Entry: December, 1964

...although they kill a bear whenever they can... in the process of dissecting the carcass they endeavor to conciliate the deity, whose representative they have slain, by making elaborate obeisance's and deprecatory salutations...

When all the people are assembled in front of the cage, an orator chosen for the purpose, addresses the bear and tells it that they are about to send it forth to its ancestors. He craves pardon for what they are about to do to it, hopes it will not be angry, and comforts it by assuring the animal that many of the sacred whittled sticks and plenty of cakes and wine will

be sent with it on the long journey...

Sir James Frazer
The Golden Bough

In 1811 the freed slave Johnny Putnam and his common law wife Millie were living somewhere on the ridge on Scratch Flat on a poor piece of land granted to them by Josiah Barnes. One night in early winter their dog began crying pitifully and scratching at the door to be let in. Once inside it spend the night hunched at the back wall, whining and shivering. Putnam went out the next morning. In the fresh snow he saw that a large animal had circled the hut several times during the night. The tracks were plantigrade, very like those of a human being, but there were claws.

The last bear in this valley was killed in 1772 by Charles Whitcomb. The following year, his family erected a stone on the spot to commemorate the event. In 1954 when the Massachusetts Department of Public Works was clearing land for a new highway, the current Route 2, workers discovered the stone in the woods. With a great deal of flourish and news coverage, the DPW moved the stone to another location north of the new road.

"On April 5 of this year, 1772,
Chrles (sic) W. Whitcomb
Killed a Black Bear
On this spot"

"This spot" is now six feet under four lane blacktop. Night and day, spring, summer, autumn, winter, the indifferent traffic passes over.

The earnest divinity student came by for me Saturday in his new car, a boring red thing with white-walled tires and a lot of cheap-looking chrome.

"So what do you think? Swift huh? This baby can do zero to sixty in eleven flat. But I've got to cool it for the first ten thousand," he said.

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We took a ride. First up the Great Road to Groton and then north through the winding back roads into southern New Hampshire. He had the top down, and as we spun under the green tunnel of the trees, the charge of cool woodsmelling air poured over us.

"Listen to her sing," Wiley said. He was shifting and adjusting things frenetically, his hands straying over knobs and levers and dials on the dashboard.

"Such lovely deep air out here in the woods," I said.

"I think she needs a little balance. There's some kind of shimmy. Feel it?"

"Reminds me of the woods when I was young and we used to go up with Mum looking for ground pine."

"Jimmy swore this was a perfectly tuned machine," he said.

"My brother so hated those outings," I said. "He used to drag along behind complaining."

"Feel that shimmy Hannah? I'm taking this in on Monday. What's this Saturday, right?"

"The only thing he liked was the chipmunk holes. 'Hole Mum, look Mum, hole.' he'd say. So incredibly tedious."

"I don't know whether I should even drive this now. You feel it Hannah?"

"Yes."

"It's just the balance."

"We used to go off there, Mum, with her little book on mosses, and Davy with his chipmunk hole fanaticism, and what I remember most was the smell of things."

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"I'm sure it's just the balance. Better not be the alignment."

"That rich earthy odor of duff and soil and leaves, and the trees overhead, it was always in autumn I think she would take us. An annual outing. It's a good memory I have. Not all my memories of this place are so bad, Wiley."

"What are rambling about?"

"I mean I don't always hate it here. In fact there was something in the smell of the woods that seemed so free from the constraints of everyday time. The odor of this earth was so intense. Just floating unhinged. Do you know what I mean?"

"What in Heaven's name are you talking about Hannah? I'll tell you one thing. I'm not putting all this money down for a dog with a shimmy. They're going to straighten this up Monday."

By now we had made a circuit, one of Wiley's regulars. He would always take his car up through Groton, swing through the woods and small farm country of southern New Hampshire, head east, and then come down through the orchards of Westford to the north side of Scratch Flat. We were about a half a mile from Prospect Hill, not far from the flat rock where Sir Hugh Sinclair carved his knight in effigy, when the car started to pull hard to the left. It was a truly exquisite day though, springtime in New England.

"This air," I said, "doesn't it just free you?"

"It's not the air, Hannah, I checked the air this morning, it was 52.3 PSI, right where it should be all around. `Less it's working on a flat."

"You've got a flat tire?"

"I don't know, maybe, I'll check?"

"A likely ploy you brutish boy. Take a good girl out to the woods and get a flat in the middle of nowhere."

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The car was beginning to wobble now. He slowed and pulled off to the side just west of Beaver Brook where it empties into Lake Matawanakee. I could hear birds singing, wood thrushes and ovenbirds. I wandered back into the forest while he changed the tire. About a hundred yards off the road there was a little knoll over the lake with hickory trees and very little undergrowth. I sat down and watched the leaves in the tree canopy. A little ghostly wind would come in from time to time and rustled the leaves, and the birds were whistling louder and louder. I could hear a towhee calling, coming closer and closer, and then I realized that it was no towhee.

"Bulkeley is run again," Tom said. "People looking everywhere for him. When they catch, they gone to put him down cellar again. Lock him up. You want to see him? Maybe talk little bit to him?"

Bulkeley and Mary-Louise were sitting on the ground in front of Tom's hut. The soil was beaten down and was strewn with wood chips, bark, and the detritus from Tom's chopping block. I could smell the strong scent of sun on hot pine wood. Bulkeley was picking up little bits of bark and putting them in his mouth. Traffic on the Great Road was quiet for once but there was a hay bailer working somewhere to the north, probably Frost's.

"Thou should's't not eat of that, my sweet," Mary Louise said. She gently took a piece of bark from him and placed it behind her.

"Not going back, you know. That's that." Bulkeley said. "I don't have to eat breakfast, if I don't want. And they can't make me. And if they want me to scythe the hay I'm telling Mama, and she's coming up here and she's taking me home, and I don't have to eat breakfast."

"Thy mother's not well, Bulkeley, she cannot care for thee now. You must go back and promise not to flee again."

"They only say that to me. Mama's better now and they keep me anyway."

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Tom gave me a look.

"She's sick Bulk," I said. "She's really sick, and they can't take care of you at home, that's all."

"I take care of myself."

"You go back, Bulkeley Emerson. This time. You go back. Tell them you are sorry. Say a few prayers for them." Tom said.

Bulkeley was big, but he was not strong. He had flabby arms and shoulders, and his thighs were round like cheeses. His tufted, shaggy brown hair had bits of hay stuck in it. I picked some off.

"Been haying, Bulk?" I asked

"Yes."

"And you cut out?"

"I said I had to make water. Went over to the woods. Then I ran."

He started to laugh.

"I ran away from them, and they didn't even know." He was laughing harder now.

"They will know," Tom said. "They even know now."

"Show me, Bulk," I said. "Show me the place where you got away."

"No"

"Come on. Let's just go over there."

"Not me." He moved over closer to Mary-Louise. "Not going."

"What if I were to come with thee, my sweet. Would's't come then?"

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Mary-Louise asked. She brushed a shock of hair from his forehead.

"No... Maybe."

"I'll sing thee a ditty."

"Which one?"

"One of thy favorites, But I shan't say which till we get there."

"Tell me a story and I'll go."

"Which one, my sweet?"

"Tell me the one about the Wild Man of Greenwood and the day the fairies left England."

She changed her tone abruptly and leaned toward him squinting her eyes and tilting her head over with mock seriousness.

"Ye'll follow then?"

He looked at us all round, a little mystified, a little sad. And then we stood and walked west from the hut through a chestnut grove toward the poor farm where Bulkeley lived. The place was managed by a small, hard-working man named Green who had about twelve indigents in his charge. Some were old, some were crippled, some just poor, and a few were mildly retarded like Bulkeley. They lived there for free, but the farm, which was owned by the town, was supposed to hold its own financially, so Green pushed his charges. They were his only farm hands.

From the edge of the woods we could see over the half cut field. It was noon and in the shade under some elms on the far side of the field, a few men and women were lounging. They had brown jugs set among them, and baskets.

"Good switchel and bread if would like." Mary-Louise said to Bulkeley.

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"Hast thou not a strong thirst?"

"Yes."

"I bet you haven't eaten anything today, Bulk," I said.

"No because I'm not eating breakfast. And I told them that. It's my choice. If I don't want to eat, I don't have to eat and they can't make me. It's the one thing they can't make me do. Even if they lock me up again in the cellar, I don't have to eat. I am free to die from starve."

"He is right," Tom said.

"But hast thou not a vast hunger Bulkeley Emerson?"

"Yes."

"Well they've got your bread." I said. "If you're free, you free to either starve or eat. Either way. It's your choice."

"I can starve until I die if I wants to."

"Right. And you can eat too, if you want." I said.

"Nobody can stop me from eating."

"No. Not if you want to eat."

There was a noise behind us and I saw that Tom had gone pale. He put his arm out on a tree trunk as if to steady himself, and whatever it was that would catch him by the neck must have had a hold of him now. He looked in pain. He was squinting and biting his bottom lip.

"You go back now, Bulkeley Emerson, quick," Tom said.

We saw somebody stand up under the elms and point. Then two men came out into the hot light and walked determinedly across the open field.

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The wind had come up.

"You can go Bulkeley,"

"But if they lock you up again, you pray for them," said Tom.

The men were running now, and I saw a couple of older people come out and stand in the sun. They were crooked and bent and they were pointing to the edge of the field.

"Wouldn't go if I weren't hungry."

"It's all right now, we can go," Wiley said

Wood thrushes were calling behind me, and towhees were everywhere, wind hitting the trees.

"We can go now, Hannah," Wiley said. "Just a flat.

"You want to stop at Johnson's for some ice cream. I want to show some of the guys what a real machine looks like"

"Yeah, let's get some ice cream," I said.

The rush of cool woods wind, the car taking the turns easily, black top strewn with maple keys, the morning roads, this blond happy boy beside me in his all-American innocence, with his all American shades, amidst the all American land, and the rush of wind, and the spin and blur of passing trees, and the stream of woodwind, and the smell of deep moss. It was summer, finally, and all so confusing and so liberating that I began to sing.

"Sit down Hannah. Down. Get your dirty farm girl feet off my new seats there."

"Si non mi vuole, nolo mi tangere,"

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"Why do you have to always sing that stuff when we go out, and sit down will you. God if they only knew at Johnson's how weird you are. But I love it, Hannah. I love you. Marry me, and we'll settle down and be happy for the rest of our lives."

"Never," I shouted to the sky, still laughing and singing. "NEVER, NEVER, NEVER." I stood up again and held the windshield. "Mai. Mai voi a sposarmi. Mai. Mai."